The Politics of the Ulama:
Understading the Influential Role of
the Ulama in Iran

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Abstract: Although the ulama have lost their traditional roles in many parts of the Islamic world as a result of the modernization process of the social and political structure, the Iranian ulama not only have played a pivotal role in many important events in the recent history of Iran, but also emerged as the most powerful socio-political class since the Iranian revolution of 1979. In this article, I aim to understand major factors that facilitate the development of the ulama as the most powerful political actor in Iranian polity. Drawing on the analysis of two highly crucial historical events (the Constitutional Revolution and the Iranian Revolution of 1979), I point out four major factors for the development of an influential ulama class: The reconstruction of Shi'i Islam for the rule of the ulama in the absence of the Hidden Imam, the political and economic independence of the ulama from the state, the close relationship between the ulama and the urban middle class, and the weakness of the central governments.

Key Words: Iran, Ulama, Shi'i Islam, Constitutional Revolution, Iranian Revolution.

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Introduction

Although the ulama played a crucial role in the operation of major institutions (e.g., education, judiciary, jurisprudence, and the administration of waqfs) in the Islamic world throughout its history, the role of the ulama has weakened in many parts of the Muslim world, particularly in the Sunni world, since 19th century as a consequence of the modernization and secularization processes. As a result of the weakening role of the ulama in public, Islamic activists who mostly had a secular educational background generally began to act in the name of Islam, produced a strong resistance against the secularization process, and represented Islam in various fields (e.g., media, politics, education) in many parts of the Islamic world. However, in contrast to the Sunni world, the Iranian ulama not only produced a strong resistance against the ruling regimes aiming to secularize Iranian society, but also played a leading role in almost all important events in the recent history of Iran and the establishment of an Islamic regime through a revolution.

In this article, I aim to understand main factors leading to the emergence of the ulama as the most powerful class in the Iranian polity. I provide a general historical overview that illustrates the influential role of the ulama in Iranian politics from the Safavid Empire to the Iranian Revolution of 1979. However, I particularly focus on two significant historical events to understand main factors in the construction of the ulama as a powerful class: The Constitutional Revolution of Iran (1905-1911) and the Iranian Revolution of 1979. My aim is not to examine these two events in details, but to use them as empirical/historical evidence in the understanding of the influential role of the ulama. Based on these two historical facts, I then point out four main factors playing a key role in the construction of the powerful role of the ulama: (1) the reinterpretation of of Shi'i Islam that opened the way for the rule of the ulama, in particular the shift in the dominant understanding of religion from the Akhbari School, which suggests that the tradition of the Prophet and the Imams is enough to understand religion for believers, to the Usuli School, which promotes the necessity of complete obedience to the ulama in the interpretation of religious resources not only for religious affairs but also for worldly issues such as political ones (2) the weak central

state, (3) the close relationship between the ulama and Iranian people, particularly the bazaaris (the merchants, craftsmen, and workers of bazaars[1]), and (4) the economic, politic, and geographic independence of the ulama from the state.

In the beginning, I need to emphasize that the role of the ulama in Iranian society was highly complicated and contradictory throughout its history because, in contrast to a common expectation, the ulama were not united in their reactions to political issues. There were different fractions within the ulama class that developed diverse interactions with other political actors such as the state elites, the people of the bazaar, and the intellectuals. However, this article mostly engages with the ulama who actively produced a strong political resistance to the secular elites and their modernization projects aiming to secularize Iranian society.

A Historical Overview of the Impact of the Ulama over Iranian Politics

In the early years of the Safavid Empire (1501-1736), the presence of an ulama class was not noticeable in Iran. Shah Ismail (1487-1524) as the founder of the Safavid Empire conveyed Shi'i scholars from the Arabic-speaking world after he established Twelver Shi'ism as the official religion of the Safavids as a reaction to the Sunni structure of the Ottoman Empire.[2] A class of Shi'i ulama thus gradually developed in Iran. In the Safavid Empire, the relationship between the Shahs and the ulama was based on mutual utility. While the role of the ulama was to provide religious legitimacy for the claims of the Safavid Shahs (i.e., being the shadow of God (Zil Allah) on earth, the representatives of the Hidden Imam, and the descendants of one of the Twelve Imams), the Shahs protected Shi'i ulama and provided economic and ideological power for the ulama.[3] The ulama controlled religious taxes, enlarged waqf property, and greatly increased

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[1] The bazaar, the traditional marketplace at the center of Iranian cities, played important role in the economic and political life of Iran.

[2] Sena Karasipahi, "Comparing Islamic Resurgence Movements in Turkey and Iran," *The Middle East Journal,* Vol. 63, No. 1, 2009; John Foran, *Fragile Resistance: Social Transformation in Iran from 1500 to the Revolution*, Westview Press, 1993.

[3] Nikki R. Keddie, "The Roots of the Ulama's Power in Modern Iran," *Studia Islamica*, no. 29, 1969; Nikki R. Keddie, "Iran: Change in Islam; Islam and Change," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 11, no. 04, 1980.

their influence over Iranian society through regulating some major institutions (e.g., education and justice) under the rule of the Safavids. In this period, the ulama generally refrained from confronting the Safavid Shahs. However, when the power of the Safavids weakened, some of the ulama began to question the right of the rule of the Safavids and claimed the rule of the ulama in the late years of the Safavids.[4] Particularly Muhammad Baqir Behbahani (1706-1791) harshly criticized many Shi'i ulama and played an effective role in the emergence of a new understanding of religion, which was the Usuli School, prioritizing the role of the ulama in the interpretation of religious resources in the absence of the Hidden Imam. Thus, the competition between the ulama and the rulers began in the late period of the Safavids as a result of the decline of state power and the emergence of the Usuli School.

After the collapse of the Safavids, the Shi'i ulama were marginalized within Iranian society under the rule of the Sunni Afghans and then Nader Shah (1736-47) in the first half of the eighteenth century. Particularly, Nader Shah aimed at weakening the role of Shi'i Islam in Iran and increasing the impact of Sunni Islam. Many of the Shi'i ulama therefore escaped from Iran to Iraq because of Nader Shah's pressure.[5]

In the beginning of the Qajar dynasty (1794-1925), similar to the Safavids, the Qajar shahs supported the ulama and strengthened their influence in Iranian society. However, in the following years, the ulama became very active against the Qajar dynasty because of Qajar Shahs' modernization and secularization projects under the impact of the British and Russian imperialism. One of the important characteristics of the Qajar period was that the Usuli School expanded its impact and established its dominance over the Akhbari School among the ulama. This shift can be seen easily in the activities of the ulama, particularly in the conflict between the Qajar shahs and the ulama in the course of the Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911)).

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[4] Nikki R. Keddie, "The Iranian Power Structure and Social Change 1800–1969: An Overview," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* Vol. 2, no. 01, 1971, p.310.

[5] Azar Tabari, "The Role of the Clergy in Modern Iranian Politics," *Religion and Politics in Iran*, 1983, p. 48.

The Ulama and the Constitutional Revolution

In the beginning of the 20th century, Iran under the rule of the Qajar dynasty experienced a constitutional revolution between 1905 and 1911. The constitutional movement was the result of the coalition between the ulama, the intellectuals, and the bazaaris. This coalition was constructed to resist shared enemies, which were the Qajar dynasty and its foreign supporters, rather than on a consensus about a shared future. In this coalition, the role of the ulama was to mobilize ordinary people and to produce legitimacy for the uprising; the intellectuals were the source of theory; and the bazaaris were financial supporters.[6]

One can ask why the ulama supported the transition from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional system although they resisted many reforms that were made for the sake of modernization. One of the basic aims of the ulama was to hinder the social and political processes weakening the role of the ulama in Iranian society through restructuring major institutions such as education and judiciary. Thus, for the ulama, a constitutional system was a good opportunity for them to reverse the situation. According to the ulama, a constitutional monarchy was better than an absolute monarchy in terms of the concerns of the ulama.[7] For the ulama, there were three kinds of governments: (1) the rule of the Imam, (2) an absolute monarchy, and (3) a limited and constitutional form of government. The rule of the imam was impossible because of his occultation. In a constitutional government, the power of the shah could be restricted, and the territory of Islam thus could be protected against the infidels and a tyrannical rule. As a result of this reasoning, for the majority of the ulama, constitutionalism was the best government in the absence of the Hidden Imam and it was a religious responsibility for the ulama to participate in the constitutional revolution.

On the other hand, one needs to take into account that the ulama were not homogeneous in terms of their approaches to the

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[6] Ervand Abrahamian, "The Crowd in Iranian Politics 1905-1953," *Past & Present*, no. 41, 1968; Nikki R. Keddie, "Iranian Revolutions in Comparative Perspective," *The American Historical Review* Vol. 88, no. 3, 1983.

[7] Abdul-Hadi Hairi, "Why Did the ʿulamā Participate in the Persian Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1909?," *Die Welt des Islams* Vol. 17, no. 4, 1976.

constitutional monarchy. There were also anti-constitutionalist ulama led by Shaikh Fazlullah Nuri. According to Shaikh Fazlullah, Shari'a did not have any legitimate basis of constitutional system because of the equality of all religious groups and the establishments of the secular courts.[8] However, the anti-constitutionalist movement of Shaikh Fazlullah Nuri was not successful to convert a large number of the ulama even if it destabilized the action of the ulama.

There were five important organizations in the making of the Constitutional Revolution: the Secret Society (Anjuman-i Makhfi), the Secret Center (Markaz-i Ghaybi), the Social Democratic Party (Hizb-i Ijtima'yun-i Amiyun), the Society of Humanity (Jama'-i Adamiyat), and the Revolutionary Committee (Komiteh-i Inqilabi).[9] The Secret Society, founded by the ulama and the bazaaris, was the most active and important organization in the revolutionary process. The Secret Society had a close relationship with the leading ulama, in particular Muhammad Kazim Khurasani.[10] The aim of the Secret Society was to open a House of Justice (Adalatkhaneh), reorganize the customs, create a just tax structure, and to implement the Shari'a.

Protests and demonstrations leading to the emergence of the constitutional revolution began in the April of 1905. The ulama played a key role in the mobilization of the people against the Qajar Shah and Russia by effectively utilizing religious language, metaphors, and tools in the form of manifestoes, fatwas, letters and treatises against the Shah. For example, a passionate preacher mobilized the people of the bazaar against a Russian Bank which had purchased a religious school and cemetery.[11] He stated that Russians not only wanted to destroy Muslim trade and finance, but also their schools and cemeteries. The agitated crowd then destroyed the Bank in an arson attack. Similar to this example, the ulama made the

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[8] V. A. Martin, "Shaikh Fazlallah Nuri and the Iranian Revolution 1905–09," *Middle Eastern Studies* Vol. 23, no. 1, 1987; Mansoor Moaddel, "The Shi'i Ulama and the State in Iran," *Theory and Society* Vol. 15, no. 4, 1986.

[9] Ervand Abrahamian, "The Causes of the Constitutional Revolution in Iran," *International Journal of Middle East Studies,* Vol. 10, no. 03, 1979.

[10] M.M. Farzaneh, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution and the Clerical Leadership of Khurasani*, Syracuse University Press, 2015

[11] Abrahamian, "The Crowd in Iranian Politics 1905-1953," p. 131.

crowds to believe that Islam was under attack by western powers and that the shah cooperated with Russia.

As a result of the ongoing protests and demonstrations against the Qajar dynasty, the shah had to declare the transition to the constitutional monarchy. The ulama occupied a large number of seats in the first parliamentary assembly (Majlis), which was established in October 1906, and played an important role in the making of a new constitution.[12] According to the second article of the new constitution, all laws must be compatible with Islam. The ulama established a committee to check and approve the compatibility of all laws with Shari'a. Although Shah Mohammed Ali abolished the parliament in 1908, he had to accept constitutionalism because of fierce protests. The second majlis met in August 1909; however, the constitutional alliance was divided into two groups in the new majlis because of the conflict between the intellectuals and the ulama: The Moderate Party (Firqeh-i I'tedal) led by the ulama and the Democratic Party (Firqeh-i Demokrat) led by the intellectuals.[13] The ulama obliterated the Democratic Party in a short time because, according to the ulama, the Democrat party was consisted of heretics. Thus, the ulama had increased their power and become one of the most powerful political actors in the constitutional period. However, Britain and Russia abolished the parliament in 1911.

In the course of the First World War, the Qajar rulers tried to be remain neutral; however, Iranian territories were invaded by the Ottoman, Russian, and British forces and turned into a battleground. In the aftermath of the war, with the help of the British government, Reza Shah Pahlavi, which was Ministry of War, seized the capital in 1921 and made Ahmad Shah Qajar ineffective in political realms. In 1925, the National Assembly declared Reza Shah Pahlavi as the new Shah of the Imperial State of Iran.

The Ulama and the Iranian Revolution of 1979

The Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979) was the most challenging period for the ulama in Iranian history. Although Reza Shah collaborated

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[12] Keddie, "Iranian Revolutions in Comparative Perspective."; Abrahamian, "The Crowd in Iranian Politics 1905-1953."

[13] Keddie, "The Causes of the Constitutional Revolution in Iran."

with the ulama in the early years of his rule (1921-1927), after consolidating his power, he tried to eliminate the power of traditional classes such as the ulama and the bazaaris in Iranian society because of his aim at creating a modern/secular society.[14] In the period of Reza Shah, the process of modernization and secularization gradually decreased the impact of the ulama over Iranian society. The ulama lost the control over the educational and judicial systems. The Pahlavi dynasty also promoted pre-Islamic Persian values and identity to weaken the role of Shi'i Islam in the construction of Iranian national identity.[15] In the reign of Reza Shah, the state did not refrain from using torture and executions to repress any kind of political dissent. For example, Reza Shah passed a law and enforced everyone, with the exception of the leading ulama, to wear western clothes. Those who did not obey this law were brutally punished. The ulama mostly abstained from confrontation with the heavy-handed regime and remained silent in their reactions to political issues in the reign of Reza Shah.

Reza Shah had to abdicate the throne in favor of his son Mohammad Reza Shah (1941/1979) after the Anglo-Russian invasion of Iran during the Second World War in 1941. After the long years of suppression under Reza Shah, in the new period, Iran had experienced a number of reforms leading to the increase of social and political freedoms. Although these reforms also led to the increase of religious freedom, the majority of the ulama did not welcome many reforms and produced a powerful and effective resistance to the Shah regime in this period at grass roots level.

In the early 1960s, the Shah initiated a series of reforms including land reform, equal rights for the religious minorities and women's right to vote, which was advertised the White Revolution by

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[14] Mohammad H Faghfoory, "The Ulama–State Relations in Iran: 1921–1941," Vol.19, no. 04, 1987.

[15] Peter G Lewis, "The Politics of Iranian Place-Names," *Geographical Review* 72, no. 1, 1982; Mehrdad Kia, "Persian Nationalism and the Campaign for Language Purification," *Middle Eastern Studies,* Vol.34, no. 2, 1998; Nilou Mostofi, "Who We Are: The Perplexity of Iranian-American Identity," *Sociological Quarterly*, 2003; Farideh Farhi, "Crafting a National Identity Amidst Contentious Politics in Contemporary Iran," *Iranian Studies,* Vol. 38, no. 1, 2005.

the Shah regime, to westernize Iranian society.[16] Although many segments of Iranian society were in support of the reforms in the beginning, the unsuccessful results of the reformation process united many segments of Iranian society against the Shah in the following years.[17] Particularly the land reforms had serious social, political, and economic consequences. The aim of the Shah was not only to weaken the power of the landlords and the ulama by seizing the lands which they managed, but also to establish a loyal peasantry of the regime in the countryside by distributing the lands of the landlords and religious institutions (e.g., waqfs) to landless peasants. However, the expectations of the shah did not take place and it produced many unintended consequences because of the lack of a fair redistribution policy. As part of the land reforms, the lands of landlords and religious institutions were divided into many small parts and sold to the peasants at a lower price. The land reforms affected almost nine million people, which was the forty percent of the Iranian population in the 1960s. They were freed from their landlords and became independent farmers. However, only a very small number of these rural people really benefited from the land reforms and received a considerable amount of arable land. Many peasants received a small size of land, which was not enough to meet the basic needs of their families. More importantly, a large number of peasants could not receive any land. Thus, the land reforms produced many landless peasants who lost their homes, jobs, and life security. These people migrated to the urban areas and big cities, particularly Tehran, in the hope of establishing a better life and began to live in the slums of cities in the 1960s and 1970s. However, they had to live with many deprivations and challenges such as the lack of permanent job and income, the lack of livable housing, unhealthy environments, and so on. Thus the white revolution of the shah regime produced an urban poor class who were not happy with the results of the reforms. In the following years urban poor people were going

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[16] Rouhollah K Ramazani, "Iran's 'White Revolution': A Study in Political Development," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 5, no. 2, 1974; D Ray Heisey and J David Trebing, "A Comparison of the Rhetorical Visions and Strategies of the Shah's White Revolution and the Ayatollah's Islamic Revolution," *Communications Monographs*, Vol. 50, no. 2, 1983; Eric J Hooglund, *Land and Revolution in Iran, 1960–1980*, University of Texas Press, 2014. Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*. Cambridge University Press, 2008.

[17] See for the details, Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, pp. 123-154.

to be very active against the shah regime in the course of the Iranian revolution of 1979.

The land reforms also increased antagonism toward the regime among the landlords and the ulama. The most powerful resistance to the reforms came from the ulama because the ulama controlled a large amount of lands through religious institutions such as waqfs. The rent income of these lands were used for the expenses of the the ulama, students, and religious institutions. Therefore, the ulama mobilized people against the ruling regime and played an active role in the emergence of mass demonstrations and protests in 1963. In addition to the land reforms, the ulama also used the close relationship of Iran with the US and Israel under the rule of Mohammed Reza Shah in the aftermath of the Second World War and other reforms such as the enfranchisement of women in their protests and propagated that Islam was under attack under the rule of the Shah regime. However, these protests were violently suppressed by the security forces. For a large number of scholars, the white revolution paved the way of the Iranian Revolution of the 1979 because the white revolution produced many unsatisfied people with the policies of the state and increased social, political and economic unrest throughout the country.

One of the most important unintended consequences of the White revolution was the emergence of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1902-1989) as the leader of the opposition movement in the 1960s because of his relentless rejection to the secularization and westernization project of the shah regime.[18] As a result of his activities in the events of 1963, he was arrested and put in prison for a few months. Then he was sent in exile and went to Turkey, Iraq, and finally France. Although he was in exile, he maintained his leadership in opposition to the Shah regime until the Iranian revolution. According to Khomeini, it was the responsibility of Muslims and Islamic scholars to overthrow an oppressive government and to replace it with an Islamic government. In the view of Khomeini, Islamic scholars/ulama had the same authority as the Hidden Imam had because only Islamic scholars could interpret religious texts and the

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[18] Moaddel, "The Shi'i Ulama and the State in Iran."; Foran, *Fragile Resistance: Social Transformation in Iran from 1500 to the Revolution*.

application of Sharia in the occultation of the Hidden Imam. Ayatollah Khomeini also published a book in 1970 and suggested a new government system ("Wilayat al-Faqih") in which the supreme power was vested in a small number of the ulama. Although "Wilayat al Faqih" was totally a new ideology or new invention, it became popular over time because of its dissemination by the ulama.[19] Thus, it can be noticed that the impact of the Usuli School over the ulama because the tradition of the Usuli School provided Ayatollah Khomeini with the religious legitimacy for his ideas, including "Wilayat al Faqih" in the absence of the Hidden Imam even if there were many usuli ulama who did not agree with him in terms of "Wilayat al Faqih."

Mass protests and demonstrations were part of Iranian society in the 1960s and 1970s. However, the chain of events that opened the way for the end of the rule of the Pahlavi dynasty and the emergence of an Islamic regime started in the summer of 1977 and continued until the February of 1979. In the summer of 1977, slum dwellers protested the demolishment of slums. During these protests, security forces killed a number of people. In the following months, crowds protested food prices and shortages. In the fall of 1977, almost all social gatherings turned into protest movements against the government because people were in a kind of quest for an opportunity to protest against the government.[20] For example, the Goethe Institute of Tehran organized cultural nights to read and explore poems; however, these nights turned into a massive protest movement in a short time. These nights became highly popular and attracted a lot of interest from the media and people. Intellectuals, writers, and students participated in these nights and used this opportunity to criticize the shah regime.[21] In the December of 1977, almost all universities were closed because of massive protests on campuses. Tehran shopkeepers also protested the government and

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[19] Shahrough Akhavi, "Contending Discourses in Shici Law on the Doctrine of Wilayat Al-Faqih," *Iranian Studies,* Vol. 29, no. 3-4, 1996; Hamid Mavani, "Ayatullah Khomeini's Concept of Governance (Wilayat Al-Faqih) and the Classical Shi'i Doctrine of Imamate," *Middle Eastern Studies,* Vol. 47, no. 5, 2011.

[20] Foran, *Fragile Resistance: Social Transformation in Iran from 1500 to the Revolution,* pp.364-384.

[21] Jerrold D. Green, "Countermobilization as a Revolutionary Form," *Comparative Politics,* Vol. 16, no. 2, 1984.

its economic policies by using the opportunities of religious rituals of Muharram.

The Shah regime made a very strategic mistake by publishing a newspaper article about Khomeini in Daily *Ittila'at* in January of 1978. This article claimed that Khomeini was not originally an Iranian, but Indian, and that he was also an agent of British Imperialism. As a reaction to this article, harsh demonstrations broke out in many cities, particularly in Tehran and Qum. Madrasa students, bazaaris, ordinary people actively participated in protests. In February, the ulama started demonstrations for the "martyrs" who were killed in the previous demonstration that occurred in January as part of Islamic morning ritual on the fortieth day of a death. In these demonstrations, protestors destroyed the symbols of the regime and western influence such as movies theaters and liquor stores. Also, the slogan of "death to the Shah" was heard in these demonstrations for the first time.[22] Security forces controlled the cities by tanks and killed more than one hundred people.

The ulama continued to use the regular fortieth day intervals for the martyrs of each protest and thus kept the crowds in an active mobilization against the Pahlavi dynasty by protesting the regime through public ceremonies, demonstrations, and commemorations. One of the greatest tragedy of all these protests occurred in the August of 1978. About four hundred people were perished in a fire while they were watching a movie in a theatre. The doors were locked from the outside and the local police and fire department arrived the place four hours later. The regime in particular the SAVAK was commonly held responsible even if there are different claims.

The brutal repression of protestors by the regime produced a strong sense of solidarity among the ulama led-crowds and allowed the ulama to call on jihad against the new Yezid. The ulama also taped demonstrations and the brutal behaviors of security forces and disseminated tapes all over the country to arouse the masses. At the end of the month of Ramadan (the first week of September), almost a half million people were calling for the return of Khomeini and shouting the end of the Shah regime, getting rid of America,

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[22] Foran, *Fragile Resistance: Social Transformation in Iran from 1500 to the Revolution*, p. 379.

and the establishment of an Islamic regime in Tehran streets. The Shah regime declared martial law; however, large crowds came together to protests the regime again on Friday (September 8th). Security forces ordered protestors to disperse, but they sat down on the ground. Then, security forces fired the crowd. More than four thousand people were killed at the end of the day,[23] called "Black Friday"[24] or "Bloody Friday."[25]

Mass demonstrations and protests started in the religious days of Muharram (December 1978) again. Although the regime increased pressure over protestors, huge demonstrations were organized in Iranian cities. For example, more than two million protestors in Tehran, seven hundred thousand protestors in Mashed, five hundred thousand protestors in Isfahan marched in streets and called for the abolition of the Pahlavi dynasty and establishment of an Islamic regime. Despite mass killings and massacres, demonstrations and strikes continued. When the shah understood that it was not possible to stop protestors, he appointed Shapur Bakhtiar as Prime Minister and fled the country on January 16, 1979. The next day, Khomeini announced the formation of the Council of the Islamic Revolution from Paris. On January 19th, more than one million protestors came together on Tehran streets and declared:

> "We declare the Shah to be dethroned and remove him from power, which he and his father seized by force.... We... demand the establishment in Iran of an Islamic order and of a free Islamic Republic."

The Iranian army wanted to hinder Ayatollah Khomeini to return the country and therefore took the control of the airport on January 24th. However, millions marched on Tehran streets and called for the return of Khomeini. On February 1, 1979, Khomeini returned to Iran with a big victory after his thirteen years of exile. Approximately, four million people were on the streets to meet him from the airport to Tehran. On February 5th, Khomeini appointed a provisional government and state employees declared their adherence

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[23] E. Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, Princeton University Press, 1982, p. 516.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Foran, *Fragile Resistance: Social Transformation in Iran from 1500 to the Revolution*, p. 394.

to the provisional government. On February 11th, Prime Minister Bakhtiari escaped Iran and the Iranian radio announced:

> "This is the voice of Tehran, the voice of true Iran, the voice of the revolution. The dictatorship has come to an end."

In the first election, the ulama-led political party established the majority of the parliament and drew a new constitution which provided the ulama with an excessive power. The ulama immediately organized a referendum and put the system of "Wilayat al-Faqih" into practice. In the new system, the ulama supervise presidential and parliamentary elections and check any law passed in the parliament. Thus, a new stage in the history of Shi'i Islam began after the Iranian Revolution. The ulama have been at the center of the state and controlled the major organs of the Iranian society and state since the revolution in 1979.

Major Factors in the Development of the Ulama as a Powerful Class in Iranian Polity

What can we learn from the Constitutional Revolution and the Iranian Revolution about the influential role of the ulama in Iranian history? In this part of the article, depending on these two important historical events, I examine four important factors that shed light on the influential role of the Iranian ulama.

(1) First, the reinterpretation of the Imamate doctrine of the Shi'i Islam is one of the essential factors in the construction of the powerful role of the ulama in Iranian politics. Shi'i Muslims believe that the caliphate belonged to Ali, Prophet Mohammad's cousin and son-in-law, and his descendants (Imams) after the death of Prophet Mohammed. They also believe that Islam was not revealed to the Prophet at once; rather, it was a continuing process with the imams. The imams were therefore infallible, the way of salvation, and an imitable model (marja al-taqlid). In Twelver Shi'i Islam, there are twelve Imams, but the twelfth imam, Mohammad Mahdi (869-present), is in occultation. Therefore, there is not any legitimate authority on earth. But, the question is to whom the rule belongs in the absence of the twelfth imam.

In this context, although I provided a little background while examining two historical cases, one needs to focus on the competition between the Usuli School and the Akhbari School in order to understand the active participation of the ulama in political issues and their increasing impact over Iranian politics in the post-Safavid period. While the Usuli School suggests that the ulama are necessary in the interpretation of the religious sources, the Akhbari School defends that the tradition of the Prophet and the Imams is enough guidance for believers until the appearance of the twelfth imam.[26] The Usuli School has gradually increased its impact and established its domination in Iranian society in the early 19th century, particularly after the Safavids. With the domination of the Usuli School, the understanding of "marja al-taqlid" (source of imitation) and ijtihad became important sources in the interpretation of religious texts. According to this school, every believer should follow a "marja al-taqlid" because the ulama can only interpret the will of the Hidden Imam and religious texts. Believers can choose their own marja. Although there are usually different marjas at the same time, some marjas (or one marja) become prominent figures over time. Ayatollah Khomeini was one of the most prominent marjas in the 1960s and 1970s.[27] Thus, the dominant ideology in Shi'a was that the legitimate successors to the Imams were the ulama as the religious leaders of the Shi'i Muslims.

The doctrine of the Usuli School not only covers religious affairs but also includes political issues. The ulama behave as the representative of the Hidden Imam and an alternative political authority to Iranian shahs. Hence, the doctrine of the Usuli School provides an incredible power for the ulama in Iranian society because the ulama have priority over the state rulers. According to the Shi'i ulama, the Qur'anic notion of ulu'l amr only refers to the Twelve Shi'i Imams; however, if it is impossible to access the infallible imams, believers have to obey the ulama.[28] It is not obligatory to obey state rulers if they don't act in line with the will of God, the

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[26] Keddie, "The Roots of the Ulama's Power in Modern Iran."; Moaddel, "The Shi'i Ulama and the State in Iran."

[27] Jacqueline S Ismael and Tareq Y Ismael, "Social Change in Islamic Society: The Political Thought of Ayatollah Khomeini," *Social problems*, 1980.

[28] Vanessa Martin, "Religion and State in Khumainī's" Kashf Al-Asrār"," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, 1993.

Prophet, and the Hidden Imam. One can understand the Constitutional and the Iranian Revolution in the context of this doctrine because the ulama effectively used this theory against the Qajar and Pahlavi dynasties. According to the ulama, the Qajar and Pahlavi dynasties did not rule the state in accordance with Islam, and they were tyrannical, unjust, and oppressive. Many of the leading ulama denied the legitimacy of the shahs, and claimed that they had a religious right to resist them and to rule the state. They also mobilized the crowds in the name of the Hidden Imam against the shahs. The crowds believed that they fought with the ulama under the command of the Hidden Imam against the Shah regimes.

The Shi's Islam also provided the ulama with effective religious means, rituals, symbols, and ideas to mobilize the crowds against Iranian rulers toward the emergence of a polity under the rule of the ulama. Particularly, the idiom of Shi'a Islamic martyrdom is a historical, cultural, political, and religious symbol which facilitates the mobilization of the crowds. The ashura celebrations were shifted from a religious idiom to political opposition. The crowds came together in the mosques, were agitated with stories about Ali and Hussain, and then believed that it was a religious responsibility to revolt against the rulers which carried out anti-Islamic policies. While Iranian shahs were always identified with Yazid, the governments were identified with the Umayyads. These methods were the central theme of the protests during the Constitutional Revolution and the Islamic Revolution.

(2) The second important factor in the emergence of the ulama as a powerful class is that the ulama had organic, financial, and geographical independence from the state in Iran. The religious affairs of the ulama were not under the authority of the state, but the ulama had their own authority and hierarchal organization. The state elites and rulers were not able intervened in the decision making process of the ulama and the flow of order within the hierarchy of the ulama. Besides, the location of the leading ulama was not in Iran, but the shrine cities of Iraq, particularly Nacaf. Thus, the Qajar and Pahlavi

rulers were not able to prevent the leading ulama from resisting the state because they were out of the control of the state.[29]

The ulama were also not dependent on the state in terms of their financial affairs.[30] The collection and distribution of zakat and khums taxes belonged to the Ulama. Furthermore, religious endowments (waqfs) were also under the control of the ulama. Therefore, the ulama didn't have to obey the government as a result of their economic independence. The financial sources of the mosques and religious schools were not the state, but the people of the bazaar. The sources of religious taxes were also the people of the bazaar. There was thus financially a close relationship between the ulama and the bazaaris. As a result of this relationship, as we saw in many cases, the ulama defended the interest of the bazaaris against the central government and foreigners.

Mosques were also not under the control of the state, but the ulama. There were more than than thousand mosques in Iran before the revolution 1979. The ulama reached into every neighborhood and village through these mosques. Ordinary people were connected to the ulama through these mosques which were not only a place for worship but also the meeting spaces for a collective action and massive mobilization. The independent hierarchical structure of the ulama provided them with more flexibility and allowed them to disseminate orders to ordinary people easily through independent mosques.

(3) The close relationship between the ulama and the bazaaris (to put it in another way, the middle class or urbanites) played a significant role in the construction of the significant role of the ulama in Iran.[31] The bazaar was a place in which landowners sell their products, craftsmen manufacture their goods, and merchants trade their merchandise. Mosques, religious schools, and waqfs

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[29] Keddie, "The Roots of the Ulama's Power in Modern Iran."; "Iranian Revolutions in Comparative Perspective."

[30] Mansoor Moaddel, "Ideology as Episodic Discourse: The Case of the Iranian Revolution," *American Sociological Review*, 1992.

[31] Abrahamian, "The Causes of the Constitutional Revolution in Iran."; "The Crowd in Iranian Politics 1905-1953."; Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*; Foran, *Fragile Resistance: Social Transformation in Iran from 1500 to the Revolution*; Keddie, "The Roots of the Ulama's Power in Modern Iran."; Keddie, "Iranian Revolutions in Comparative Perspective."

were also located in the bazaar. Thus, the bazaar was the economic, social, and religious center of typical Iranian cities. In addition to the physical closeness between the ulama (the mosque) and the middle class (the bazaar), there was also a strong mutual economic, political, and ideological dependence between the ulama and the merchants. While the merchants were dependent on the religious services of the ulama for some services for their businesses (e.g., endorsing written contracts, handling justice, and legitimating their dealings), the ulama needed the financial support of the merchants for the financial needs of religious institutions (e.g., mosques and schools).

Furthermore, the people of the bazaar and the ulama in general were hostile to the state rulers and the western powers during the Qajar and Pahlavi dynasties because of the state policies in favor of the interest of the imperial powers. The Iranian economy under the impact of imperial powers (i.e., Russia, Britain, and then the US) worsened the financial situation of Iranians. Thus, the ulama and the bazaaris needed each other in order to suppress the state rulers. While the bazaaris cooperated with the ulama in order to curb western economic influence, the aim of the ulama was to curb secularization and modernization. This situation led to the emergence of a strong alliance between the ulama and the people of the bazaar in order to continue their own traditional positions and privileges in Iranian society against the Shah regimes and western powers. In the course of almost all protests taken place in the Shah regimes, there was a close relationship between the ulama and the bazaaris. The ulama behaved as the representatives of the bazaaris against the shah regimes and expressed the anti-governmental and anti-foreign interests of the bazaaris. The merchants, in turn, collaborated with the ulama in protests by participating in protests, closing down their stores in strikes, and supporting protestors financially.

(4) In Iranian society, the relationship between the ulama and the state rulers in terms of power dynamics had been like a seesaw since the collapse of the Safavid Empire.[32] When the state weakened, the ulama increased their impact over Iranian polity and played an

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[32] Abrahamian, "The Crowd in Iranian Politics 1905-1953."; Keddie, "Iranian Revolutions in Comparative Perspective."

important role in the development of oppositional movements against the state rulers. However, when the state was powerful, it was able to restrict the oppositional activities of the Ulama. The ulama mostly were obedient to the powerful state rulers.

During the reign of the Qajar Shahs, the state in general was weak because of the lack of a powerful central army and bureaucracy. The weakness of the central governments in the Qajar period was one of the important factors leading to the increase the power of the ulama. The ulama gained more recognition than the Qajar rulers and enhanced their power in Iranian society. As a result of this situation, the ulama were easily able to mobilize the crowds in Iranian cities during the Constitutional Revolution because of the weak the central government in the reign of the Qajar dynasty. After World War I, Reza Shah began the process of centralization and modernization in Iran. He established a central army and bureaucracy and kept them under his own control. He also improved secular education and judiciary system. As a result of this process, the power and influence of the ulama declined in Iranian society. The oppositional movements in the 1960s were suppressed by the central government and the leaders of the ulama were exiled. However, in the 1970s, the state was not able to control demonstrations and uprisings. Martial law, mass arrest, a number of executions, and fires on demonstrations were not effective to keep Iranian people in their home because people believed that it was possible to overthrow the shah regime.

Conclusion

Even though the ulama had very influential roles in the traditional structure of a Muslim society, secular institutions replaced their numerous roles in many parts of the Islamic world under the impact of the modernization process. However, the Iranian ulama have gradually increased their influence in Iranian politics since the Safavid Empire although there was the flux and reflux of the power between the ulama and the monarchic rulers. Particularly, under the rule of the Qajar and Pahlavi dynasties, the ulama keenly participated in political activities and produced a strong resistance to the modernization processes that curbed the impact of Islam over Iranian society. The ulama also played a prominent rule in the making of the Iranian revolution which led to the emergence of an Iranian polity

based on the rule of the ulama.

This article attempted to understand the main factors in the development of the ulama as the most powerful class in Iranian society and showed that there are four main factors which played a crucial role in the increase of the power of the ulama in Iranian society. First, Shi'i Islam, particularly the increasing impact of the Usuli School on the ulema, provided legitimacy for the rule of the ulama because of the belief that the rule belonged to those who could judge and govern in accordance with Shi'i Islam in the absence of the Hidden Imam. The ulama thus perceived themselves as the representative of the authority of the Hidden Imam. This kind of understanding of religion made the ulama feel obliged to intervene in political issues and provided the ulama with an enormous power to mobilize Iranian people against the Shah regimes in the name of the Hidden Imam. Second, the ulama were autonomous from the state in terms of their financial affairs and hierarchical relations. Many of the leading ulama lived in the holy cities of Shi'i Islam (i.e., Karbala and Nacaf), which were outside of Iran. As a result of the financial, geographical, and hierarchical independence, the ulama were not under the control of the Iranian state. Third, the ulama had a close relationship with ordinary people, in particular the people of the bazaar. This situation allowed the ulama to gain public support in their resistance against the Shah regimes. Finally, the weakness of state power also played an important role in the emergence of the ulama as a powerful social class. While the ulama were not very resistant against the powerful central governments (e.g., the periods of the Safavids and the Reza Shah), the ulama produced a strong opposition to the central governments. Particularly, in the late period of the Pahlavi Dynasty, the ulama made people believe that it was possible to overthrow the regime. They also offered an alternative regime based on the rule of the ulama. The ulama were able to turn minor and isolated demonstrations into ulama-led mass mobilizations against the Pahlavi regime and replaced it with an Islamic regime based on Wilayat al-Faqih (the rule of the ulama).

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Ulemanın Siyaseti: İran'da Ulemanın Etkin Rolünü Anlamak

Öz: İslam dünyasının geleneksel toplum yapısında ulema oldukça önemli roller üstlenmiş olmasına rağmen, modernleşme süreciyle birlikte İslam dünyasının büyük bir bölümünde ulemanın toplum içindeki rolü azalmış ve ulemaya ait rollerin büyük bir bölümü seküler kurumlara devredilmiştir. Ancak İslam dünyasındaki genel gidişattan farklı olarak İran uleması dinin toplum içindeki rolünü kısıtlayan modernleşme sürecine güçlü bir direniş göstermiş ve 1970'lerin sonlarında İran devrimi ile birlikte "Velayet-i Fakih" üzerine kurulu yeni bir rejimin inşasında oldukça etkili bir rol oynamıştır. Bu makalede İran tarihindeki iki çok önemli tarihsel olay (1905-1911 Meşrutiyet Devrimi ve 1979 İran Devrimi) incelenerek, ulema sınıfının İran'da oldukça

etkili siyasi ve sosyal bir aktör olarak ortaya çıkmasında etkili olan etmenler incelenmiş ve dört temel faktöre ulaşılmıştır: (I) Şii İslam anlayışının ileride geri dönmesi beklenen Gaib İmam'ın yokluğunda ulema yönetimini mümkün kılacak şekilde yeniden yorumlanması, (II) ulemanın devletten bağımsız bir yapısının olması, (III) ulema ile şehirli orta sınıf arasındaki yakın ilişki sayesinde ulemanın güçlü bir toplumsal desteğe ulaşması, ve (IV) merkezi hükümetlerin zayıflığı nedeniyle ortaya çıkan otorite boşluğu.

Safavi İmparatorluğu'nun son dönemlerinden itibaren İran ulemasının din anlayışı değişmeye başlamıştır. Özellikle de ulema arasında Ekberi okul yerine Usuli okul etkinliği arttırmaya başlamış ve yeni yetişen ulemanın din anlayışı Usuli okula göre şekillenmiştir. Ekberi okula göre, müminler Hz. Peygamber ve on iki imamı rehber alarak doğru yolu bulabilir. Ancak Usuli okula göre ise ulema Gaib İmamın temsilcisidir ve dinin doğru bir şekilde yorumlanması için ulema gereklidir. Bu durum sadece dini konularda değil siyasi ve sosyal hususlar dâhil olmak üzere hayatın her alanını kapsamaktadır. Çünkü yönetim Gaib İmamın hakkı ise Gaib İmamın temsilcisi veya vekili olan ulemanın kendini siyasi alandan uzak tutması beklenemezdi. Böyle bir anlayışın neticesi olarak Safaviler'in son dönemlerinden itibaren ulema aktif olarak siyasi ve sosyal meselelere ilgilenmeye ve şekillendirmeye başlamıştır. Böyle bir din anlayışı aynı zamanda insanları harekete geçirebilmek için inanılmaz bir güç de sağlamıştır. Bu din anlayışındaki değişimin neticesi ve etkisi ulemanın aktif olarak katıldığı başta 1905-1911 arasındaki Meşrutiyet Dönemi ve 1979 İran devrimi olmak üzere her olayda açık ve net olarak görülebilir.

Ulemanın devlet yöneticilerine güçlü bir direnç gösterebilmesinde önemli faktörlerden biri de ulemanın hem coğrafi açıdan hem de mali açıdan devletten bağımsız bir yapısının olmasıdır. Önde gelen ulemanın büyük çoğunluğu Şiiler için kutsal sayılan Kerbela ve Necef gibi Irak topraklarında bulunan şehirlerde yaşamaktaydı. Bu nedenle ulemanın önde gelenleri devlet yöneticilerinin etkisinden uzakta idi. Ayrıca mali açıdan da ulema devlete bağımlı değildi. Ulemanın ve dini kurumların geliri ya vakıflardan ya da esnaf gibi şehirli orta sınıftan gelmekteydi. Dolayısıyla mali açıdan devlete bağımlı olmak yerine şehirli orta sınıfa daha bağımlı idi.

Bu durumun neticesi olarak ulema ile şehirli orta sınıf arasında karşılıklı güçlü bir iş birliği ve dayanışma vardı. Ulema gibi yerli esnaflar da Kaçar ve Pehlevi hanedanlarına yabancı sermayenin etkisi altında politika üretmeleri nedeni ile genel olarak karşı idiler. Özellikle Kaçarlar döneminde İngiliz ve Rus şirketlerinin Kaçar yönetimi üzerindeki etkisi nedeni ile yerli esnaf mali açıdan oldukça zor durumda kalmıştı. Bu nedenle ulema sadece dinin toplumsal etkisini azaltmayı hedefleyen modernleşme projelerine değil aynı zamanda yerli esnafı da zor durumda bırakan siyasi ve ekonomik politikalara da direnç göstermiştir. Bu durumun neticesi olarak da ulema

ve esnaf arasındaki güçlü bir dayanışma oluşmuş ve ulemanın güçlü bir toplumsal taban bulmasına olanak sağlamıştır.

Ulemanın güçlü bir aktör olarak ortaya çıkışında önemli faktörlerden bir tanesi de siyasi aktörlerin zayıflığı neticesinde ortaya çıkan otorite boşluğu ulema tarafından iyi bir şekilde kullanılmıştır. Özellikle Safaviler'in çöküşünden sonra Kaçarlar güçlü bir hâkimiyet oluşturamamış ve ulema siyasi alanı şekillendirmeye çalışmıştır. Rıza Şah Pehlevi döneminde olduğu gibi siyasi yöneticilerin güçlü olduğu dönemler de ise ulema genel olarak siyasetle ilgilenmekten uzak durmuştur. Ancak siyasi otoritenin zayıfladığı 1950'lerden itibaren yeniden siyaset ile ilgilenmeye başlamış ve 1970'lerde rejim değişikliğine giden devrim ile siyasi alana tamamen hâkim olmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İran, Ulema, Şii İslam, Meşrutiyet Devrimi, İran Devrimi