

A Fourth Wave of Something:
Democratic Transitions in Iran and the Middle East
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Western scholars often ask why the Middle East has so few democracies and whether a “fourth wave” of democratization is likely in the region. Such queries are usually accompanied by an implicit, Western definition of “democracy” as both secular liberalism and representation of the will of the people. However, contrary to many Western nation-builders’ hopes, over the last century these two characteristics almost never coexist in Middle Eastern nations. Regimes are either secular but authoritarian or democratic but illiberal. Examining the historical and cultural context of the Middle East, and Iran in particular, it appears that, while opportunities for future democratization do exist, in the short-term the Western conception of democracy is unworkable in the Middle East.

The legacy of colonialism and other interventions in the Middle East has led to secular government being associated with Western imperialism. In Iran, every secular, neo-liberal regime was installed thanks to external forces. The Pahlavi dynasty began his rule after British interests encouraged Reza Pahlavi to seize power in order to ensure the free flow of oil to Britain. After he refused to let British troops station troops in Iran during World War II, British forces occupied Iran, deposed him, and replaced him with his son Mohammed Pahlavi. Both of these regimes allowed Western business interests to come in and pump Iranian oil. They were also socially liberal, providing for universal education, women’s suffrage, and other benefits. However, the Pahlavi dynasty’s legitimacy was dependent on Western approval and aid, not on domestic support (as indicated by Shah Mohammed’s dissolution of the Iranian parliament--the main vehicle

for expression of popular political opinion). The shahs, Shah Mohammed in particular, used their secret police to intimidate, torture, and kill members of leftist groups as well as conservative religious leaders. The shahs' policies were secular and relatively liberal, but the regime's brutality and foreign entanglement left a bad taste in Iranians' mouths. Other countries in the Middle East have had similar patterns, from French and British colonies in Syria and Iraq, to the Baath Party's historical ties to the Nazis, to US support for Saddam Hussein, Hosni Mubarak, and other secular dictators. Secular government has therefore been associated with repression and being the West's patsy.

The democratic strains found in Iranian history are exceptional for the Middle East. Iran has had a parliamentary system (the Majlis) dating back to 1907. While the power of the parliament, as a Magna Carta-esque check on the shah's rule, has varied over time, the Majlis nevertheless serves as an example of a democratic institution native to the Middle East. Also Iran has had a sort secular, non-fascist regime: Mohammed Mossadegh's term as prime minister. Mossadegh was democratically elected and immensely popular, forging a nationalist coalition between the two groups most disenfranchised by the shah: communists and religious fundamentalists. While Shah Mohammed still held power nominally during Mossadegh's term, Mossadegh's popularity made it impossible for the shah to get rid of him. Both of these democratic elements of Iranian society, however, were destroyed through Western intervention. Mossadegh worried Britain and the US because he sought to nationalize the Iranian oil industry and cultivate ties with the neighboring USSR. Thus, Mossadegh's rule lasted only three years, ended by a coup d'état sparked by the CIA in 1953. The same year, in an effort to consolidate his power post-Mossadegh, the shah disbanded the Majlis and

gave himself complete control over the Iranian state. This careless disregard of Western nations' foreign policy for Iranian democratic institutions has sowed bitter seeds in the minds of many Iranians. For all the West's pro-democracy rhetoric, it appears that promoting neo-liberal economic policy trumps encouraging greater legitimacy in Middle Eastern regimes. As people under 25 make up more than 50% of Iranian society, few Iranians are old enough to even remember the Majlis or the Mossadegh administration. Thus, thanks to the Pahlavi dynasty and Western interference, important democratic strains in Iranian society have been largely erased.

With the downfall of Mossadegh's nationalist experiment, appeals to Islam are the only remaining basis for criticizing authoritarianism. Thanks to Islam's runaway success in the Middle East, the vast majority of Arabs hold Koranic values in common (though sectional and interpretative divisions remain). These common values function extremely effectively as rallying points for popular movement. Secular democratic norms do not have similar commonly-held roots in most Middle Eastern nations--and the civic society of the few exceptions has faded through years of authoritarian rule. Islamic political movement, on the other hand, has the benefit of existing institutions (mosques and religious authorities), and works to critique secular authoritarianism on two levels. First, many verses in the Koran (particularly the early verses, when Meccan authorities were persecuting the Prophet Muhammed and his followers) advocate resistance against injustice and inequality (especially economic inequality) and state that God's authority is above that of any state. Such verses justify struggle against oppressive, neo-liberal regimes. Second, since most secular authoritarian regimes in the Middle East enjoy Western support, striking back at those regimes is a way for Muslim revolutionaries to

“redeem” the Middle East from the indignity of colonization. The historical height of Middle Eastern power is called, after all, the Golden Age of *Islam*. Fundamentalist Muslims hope that adopting a conservative interpretation of Islam encompassing both political and private spheres would turn back the clock to this Golden Age (often seen with rose-colored glasses) and effectively erase the colonization of the intervening years and puppet dictators of the present day. The language of Islam has fueled robust revolutionary movements in almost every Middle Eastern country, in spite of (and, cyclically, because of) violent authoritarian attempts at repression. With its 1979 overthrow of the shah, Iran’s fundamentalist movement has been the most successful.

The factors leading to the Iranian Revolution were far more complex than revolutionary binary makes them appear to be. The bourgeoisie, who were disgruntled by the shah’s land reform policies, sparked the first riots leading up to the revolution. Members of the religious right joined them, irked by the shah’s anti-traditionalist stance and new licensure requirements for clergy. The chaos led the shah to crack down on his opponents, shooting hundreds of protesters and keeping his secret police busier than ever. The rampant human rights violations brought members of the left to join the protesters. The final straw was skyrocketing inflation, which forced the shah to cut social programs and welfare benefits. This brought the working class into the streets, costing the shah his last shreds of legitimacy and leading to his exile soon afterward. The protesters clearly had widely varying motivations for revolting against the shah. However, the revolution’s outcomes fit well into the secular dictatorship/theocratic republic dichotomy. When the time came for the Iranian referendum to determine the form of the next regime, a coalition of religious fundamentalists and the left wing united by Ayatollah Khomeini

won a supermajority, replacing the old secular regime with a government founded on Islamic law.

While the new government was a republic, it could hardly be called a democracy in any Western sense. Like many opposition-led government transitions, the immediate aftermath of the Iranian Revolution was authoritarian: jailing of dissidents, purging of women from governmental and academic positions, and strict prohibitions on anything remotely “Western.” While there are multiparty elections, candidates must be approved by the conservative Council of Guardians, half of which is hand-picked by Ayatollah Khomeini. Thus, it is difficult for reformers to get permission to run for office.

Nevertheless, the Iranian reform movement is active and has won some victories. The government has toned down many of its initial theocratic policies--clothing requirements for women have been partially relaxed, women have won the right to judge court cases and regained their professorships. Reform candidates won elections in 1997 and 2001. Only recently, after the September 11 attacks, US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, comments by President Bush denouncing conservative Iranian candidates, and other external influences, did conservatives gain back some ground. If in the future the West leaves Iran alone, it seems likely that reformers will be able to consolidate the Iranian republic into a fair, if illiberal, democracy.

Given the Middle East’s post-colonial historical context, a secular, Western-style democracy is never going to appear fully-formed like Athena springing from Zeus’ forehead. The secular state has been so thoroughly discredited through years of foreign exploitation and autocratic rule, the only realistic scenario for a fourth wave of democracy is by way of a theocratic system. If Middle Eastern nations actually upheld

Koranic ideals of equality and justice at levels comparable to those of the Golden Age of Islam, the region would have far improved levels of social and political equity and would be well on its way to cultivating democratic practices and discourse within Middle Eastern culture. Past institutions such as Iran's Majlis demonstrate that democratic governance is not incapable with the Middle East. Present efforts at reform in Iran show that the desire for political liberation and social justice is still active. The road towards democracy in the Middle East is simply not the same as that of the West's.