

Mirdamad Yo.S.,
Akbarov M.H.,
Mammadov S.A.

Women's socio-political status in Iran after revolution of 1979

The Persians and Islamists have had different approaches towards politics, and found alliance with the Western world or based their power on the laws of Sharia (at the time of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini). Persians have practiced Shia Islam for centuries, although they have preserved some of their preceding cultural identity, therefore there was some partition between Islamic-Iranians (Islamists) and Persian-Iranians (Persianists) from the 1906 Constitutional Revolution. The 1979 religious revolution established the Islamic Republic of Iran; it was a rejection of Persianist identity, so the Islamists felt to be marginalized which forced them to take action against the Shah of Iran. Khomeini saw the Shah's political relations with the US as keeping Iran from its Islamic destiny, so he was speaking about a just regime without the government serving its own interest. Islamic cultural and social capital was gained through the practice of Shia ideology and the laws of Sharia through networks of mosques and religious gathering centers which maintained and promoted the Islamic ideology. Women came out of seclusion and played an important role (anti-Shah rallies and demonstrations, pamphlets, using weapons, inspiring family to fight) in the 1979 Islamic Revolution which ended the Pahlavi dynasty. Khomeini's interpretation of the women's status and role is unique in comparison to other Islamic thinkers as he greatly and intensively endorsed women's political rights and their participation in the revolution as a religious duty, so within the context of the Revolution, he was a feminist in his own religious way.

Key words: Islamist, Islamic cultural capital, Khomeini's rhetoric, Pahlavi regime, Iranian revolution, women's role in the Islamic Revolution, revolutionary activities, post-revolution feminism, leftist groups, right wing political organizations, post-revolution movement, post-war reconstruction, global feminism.

Перси й ісламісти мали різні підходи до політики, тому або знаходили об'єднання із Західним світом, або засновували свої повноваження на законах шариату (в період правління Аятоллаха Рухоллі Хомейні). Перси дотримувалися шиїзму протягом століть, незважаючи на те, що вони зберегли деякі зі своїх попередніх культурних цінностей. Таким чином, з моменту Конституційної Революції в 1906 році відбувся деякий поділ між ісламськими іранцями (ісламістами) і персидськими іранцями (персіаністами). У результаті Релігійної революції в 1979 році була утворена Іранська Ісламська Республіка; це стало відкиданням перської нації, тому ісламісти відчували себе відчуженими, що спонукало їх прийняти заходи проти шаха Ірану. А.Р. Хомейні розумів політичні відносини шаха зі США як метод утримання Ірану від його ісламської згуртованості, тому він говорив про простий режим без уряду, який служував тільки своїм інтересам. Ісламська культура і соціальна перевага була досягнута за рахунок втілення в життя шиїтської ідеології і законів шариату через мережі мечетей і центри релігійних зібрань, які підтримували і пропагували ісламську ідеологію. Жінки вийшли із ув'язнень і зіграли важливу роль (протишахські мітинги і демонстрації, листівки, застосування зброї, наснага сім'ї на боротьбу) в ісламській Революції в 1979 році,

яка поклала кінець династії Пахлаві. Інтерпретація А.Р. Хомейні щодо статусу та ролі жінок є унікальною порівняно з іншими ісламськими мислителями, оскільки він величчям і широким чином підтримував політичні права жінок і їх участь у Революції як релігійне зобов'язання. Таким чином, у рамках Революції він був феміністом у процесі свого релігійного діяння.

Ключові слова: ісламісти, капіталь ісламської культури, риторика А.Р. Хомейні, режим Пахлаві, революція Ірану, роль жінок в ісламській революції, революційна діяльність, післяреволюційний фемінізм, ліві групи, політичні організації правого крила, післяреволюційний рух, післяреволюційна перебудова, глобальний фемінізм.

Персы и исламисты имели различные подходы к политике, поэтому или находили объединение с Западным миром, или основывали свои полномочия на законах шариата (в период правления Аятоллаха Рухоллы Хомейни). Персы придерживались шиизма на протяжении веков, несмотря на то, что они сохранили некоторые из своих предыдущих культурных ценностей. Таким образом, с момента Конституционной Революции в 1906 году произошло некоторое разделение между исламскими иранцами (исламистами) и персидскими иранцами (персианистами). В результате религиозной Революции в 1979 году была образована Иранская Исламская Республика; это стало отвержением персидской нации, поэтому исламисты почувствовали себя отчужденными, что побудило их принять меры против шаха Ирана. А.Р. Хомейни видел политические отношения шаха с США как метод удержания Ирана от его исламской сплоченности, поэтому он говорил о простом режиме без правительства, которое служило бы только своим интересам. Исламское культурное и социальное преимущество было достигнуто за счет претворения в жизнь шиитской идеологии и законов шариата через сети мечетей и центров религиозных собраний, которые поддерживали и пропагандировали исламскую идеологию. Женщины вышли из заточений и сыграли важную роль (противошахские митинги и демонстрации, листовки, применение оружия, воодушевление семьи на борьбу) в исламской Революции в 1979 году, которая положила конец династии Пахлави. Интерпретация А.Р. Хомейни относительно статуса и роли женщин является уникальной по сравнению с другими исламскими мыслителями, поскольку он величавым и широким образом поддержал политические права женщин и их участие в революции как религиозное обязательство. Таким образом, в рамках Революции он был феминистом в ходе своего религиозного деяния.

Ключевые слова: исламисты, капитал исламской культуры, риторика А.Р. Хомейни, режим Пахлави, революция Ирана, роль женщин в исламской революции, революционная деятельность, послереволюционный феминизм, левые группы, политические организации правого крыла, послереволюционное движение, послереволюционная перестройка, глобальный феминизм.

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Mirdamad Yo.S.,
PhD student at Khazar University
Akbarov M.H.,
PhD student at Khazar University
Mammadov S.A.,
PhD student at Khazar University

Since the Arab invasion of Iran, Persians and Islamists have articulated their identities differently within the world order of their time-having constructed divergent destinies. Reza Shah Pahlavi founded his authority on his Aryan identity and its superiority to that of the Semitic people, and thus allied with Germany. Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi understood the importance of a combined Persian – Western approach, and hence allied with the US. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini chose to base his discourse and power on the laws of Sharia to reestablish the Islamists' power and identity within the nation, and hence constructed an opposing destiny.

Although Persians have practiced Shia Islam for centuries, many have also kept on practicing countless aspects of their preceding cultural identity. During the nineteenth century, several Iranian kings sought to shift the nation's identity, but their attempts repeatedly encountered Islamic resistance.

A synopsis of the last century of Iran's historical narrative demonstrates that the nation experienced partition between Islamic-Iranians (Islamists) and Persian-Iranians (Persianists) from the 1906 Constitutional Revolution onwards. In 1979, Iran underwent a religious revolution which established the Islamic Republic of Iran and was a rejection of Persianist identity, a goal the Islamists had sought to achieve for decades.

The Islamists perceived themselves to be, and thought they were being presented, as a marginalized group and alleged this was an insult to their identity. This provoked them to take action against the Shah of Iran.

Banerjee best defines the emotional reaction of marginalized groups. According to him, "once groups perceive themselves as the "other" or marginalized group, they become angry and hostile. The group members get angry when they see themselves as the opposite of how they characterize their own identity" [1].

This anger was apparent in Khomeini's rhetoric and disposition. Khomeini saw the Shah's political relations with the US as keeping Iran from its Islamic destiny. In legitimizing his identity and the Islamic position, Khomeini noted: "The Iranian people have risen today to revive Islam and Islamic laws. Their uprising is unique in the history of Islam and Iran, for it is so deep-rooted and fundamental" [2].

"Our call is that we want a government which is sympathetic to the nation; we want a regime which is just. However, if we examine the nature of all regimes we see that, apart from that time when the government was a truly Islamic one, none of them has been just; they have all served their own interests. <...> Our country is amongst those which are ruled by extremists who want to destroy their homelands very fast and aggressively!" [3].

This rhetoric promoted the nature of the Islamic regime and its intention to save the nation from

destructive government. The Islamists felt vulnerable, as their power, prestige and identity had been destabilized. Islamic cultural capital was gained through the practice of Shia ideology and the laws of Sharia, as this provided them with power and status in the nation. To preserve and to promote their identity, Islamists converted their cultural capital to social capital through networks of mosques, temporary religious gathering centers, and common religious ceremonial gatherings where they talked about the Imams and their sacrificial acts and ideology. These religious institutions provided the Islamists with social contacts, information from religious leaders and inspiring speeches and practices. These institutions maintained and promoted the Islamic ideology. Khomeini used these institutions effectively to communicate his ideologies and build stronger unity.

It was through these institutions that Khomeini, in 1978, called for the unification of all other opposition in mass protest against the Shah.

Khomeini's promises and inspiring rhetoric became a great social force which ended the Pahlavi dynasty. Islamist women were praised many times by supreme leader Khomeini for their role in the 1979 Revolution.

Due to the importance of women's role in the Islamic Revolution and the increasing trend of women's political participation in the period after the 8-year Iraq-Iran war, we are also going to discuss these crucial periods of the development of women's political participation in the contemporary history of Iran.

During the time of the Revolution, women participated in anti-Shah rallies and demonstrations in large numbers. Who would have thought that women, who had been portrayed for so long in their traditional status, would come out of seclusion and onto the streets, not as sex symbols but as a political force? Women in towns and cities as well as in rural areas, from many social classes, the newly urbanized and those of established urban backgrounds all engaged in public political activity during the Revolution.

Women's role in the victory of the Islamic Revolution in 1979 was significant. It was characterized by their participation in nationwide demonstrations against the Pahlavi regime. They also participated substantially in rallies and demonstrations in favor of the Revolution afterwards. Many observers, including myself (I was sixteen years old at the time) noticed their increased sense of power and self-confidence, their expanded political consciousness, and the perception of greater respect many women experienced as a result of these activities.

Iranian women played a crucial role in the revolution, marching abreast with men, supporting their husbands and encouraging them to fight. One of the most vivid images of the Iranian revolution was a large number of women in black chadors marching in city squares and protesting against the Shah [4, p. 292–305].

Some of the women who were participating in political activities with men were arrested and, as political prisoners, they suffered many painful tortures which resulted in their martyrdom. As people continued to fight, resisting the government, Iran entered a new era of its history and the people's revolution began to emerge.

Despite their limited political knowledge, the women of this period participated in process of revolution, especially at the beginning of revolutionary activities in a variety of ways, some of which include:

1. Distributing pamphlets and spreading news.
2. Organizing charitable activities and fulfilling social needs such as helping the wounded and providing shelter for the conducting of revolutionary activities.
3. Participating in demonstrations and street rallies.
4. Helping obstruct the police.
5. Taking part in covert political activities.
6. Participating in armed fights, making and using weapons.
7. Taking part in political meetings and speeches.
8. Creating advisory groups.
9. Inspiring family members and close community to rally.

In fact, the role of women in the Islamic Revolution was of particular importance because if they had not participated, they could have played a preventive role, persuading their husbands and children and brothers not to take part. In this way the probability of a revolution taking place would have decreased.

The significance women's social and political participation had for Khomeini, as a religious scholar, and the way in which he interpreted the status and role of women, in comparison to other great Islamic thinkers were incomparable and at times unique. He praised women as "the lion-hearted ones whose great efforts saved Islam from the captivity of foreigners (and) who alongside men secured the victory of Islam" [5, p. 407]. He endorsed women's political rights as a religious duty: "Women have the right to intervene in politics. It is their duty <...> Islam is a political religion. In Islam, everything, even prayer is political" [6, p. 311].

"The Shah's prisons are filled with brave women. Our women have come to fight in the street rallies holding their children in their arms, undaunted by the tanks, cannons and machine guns. The political meetings women hold in various cities are not negligible. They have played a valuable role in our fight" [7, p. 516–521]. "Which honor is higher than that of women's manifestation of resistance, when they were first in line against the Shah's monarchic regime, and after its annihilation against the world superpowers and their dependents, a resistance and valour that has not been demonstrated by men throughout history?" [8]. "You, brave women, were and are the pioneers in this victory (the Islamic Revolution). You encouraged the men. We are all indebted to your bravery" [9].

Perhaps it is because of these statements on the significance of women's participation in politics and society that "Khomeini is until today criticized heavily, even by those in the Middle East for putting many restrictions on women and making sure everyone abided by the gender norms, but within the context of the Revolution; he was a feminist in his own religious way" [10].

Post -Revolutionary Feminist Movement.

The participation of millions of veiled women in the 1979 revolution was clearly demonstrated their inner desire to take part in social-political developments in their country. Their participation was demanded by Supreme Leader Khomeini and backed by many intellectual mullahs. However a few fundamentalist clergy advocated that women should stay at home, and from their perspective their departure from home contradicted the ideological interpretation of women's position in Islam.

From 1978 to 1988 no tangible feminist activities took place due to the 8-year long Iran-Iraq war. The country experienced the unprecedented wartime unification of all political and non-political factions, which diverted all their attention to war issues and left very little attention was allocated to women's problems.

The few existing anti-regime political groups from left and right did not specifically focus on women's issues either. Furthermore, most of these organizations were based in foreign countries and privileged by their host country's financial and political support. They nevertheless began a new campaign against the newly established Islamic Republic along with monarchists.

The leftist groups included:

- 1) The Women's Awareness Unit;
- 2) The Women's Fighters affiliated to the Iranian Communists Union;
- 3) The Women's Fighting Committee affiliated to the Paykar Group;
- 4) The Democratic Women's Group affiliated to the Toodeh Party;
- 5) The Women's Revolutionary Union affiliated to the Communist Party of Laborers and Farmers;
- 6) The Women's Union affiliated to the Communist Party of Laborers and Farmers;
- 7) The Women's National Unity group affiliated to the Iranian Communists Union;
- 8) Women's National Unity, affiliated to Fadaey-an-e Khalgh (People's Devotees);
- 9) The Women's Commission, National Frontier;
- 10) The Association of Women Lawyers [11], etc.

The core objectives of these leftist groups were to launch and maintain an anti-imperialist campaign in the support farmers and laborers. They demanded equal wages, equal job opportunities for both sexes, the elimination of polygamy and the practice of temporary marriage, etc. They publicly denounced and continued to challenge the establishment of an

Islamic regime in Iran through their own publications and other media they had access to. Publications of articles related to women's issues were part of their political struggle against Islamic Iran.

The second decade of the Islamic revolution (1989 to 1999) and the shock ideological defeat and collapse of international communism weakened the political base of leftist groups in Iran and all round the world. Right wing political organizations and monarchist parties, who were supported by the Western powers, began a new campaign against Iran's Islamic culture and unjust traditional views on women which had been intensified through the establishment of an Islamic political system. Some scholars of the right considered the collapse of the monarchy the end of feminism in Iran [12].

By the end of the Iran-Iraq war and beginning of post-war reconstruction following the death of the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Grand Ayatollah Khomeini, a new era of cultural attack by the West began by targeting particularly Iran's gender policies. Undoubtedly, feminism has been and still is one of the means foreigners use to devalue Iran's Islamic cultural, social and political concepts. Most feminist activists in Iran deny being influenced the international feminism to guard themselves against the accusation of being connected to anti-Islamic foreign powers.

But despite this, the positive impact of global feminism has been one of the best things to benefit the feminist struggle in Iran. In addition, most domestic feminist magazines and publications have openly acknowledged the inevitable influence of Western feminism on the Iranian women's movement. Various journals and associations with feminist objectives have been run by Iranians living abroad for decades. They have begun to criticize women's inferior conditions and the quality of their socio-political status in Iran. Their opposition and criticism are periodically published in feminist journals such as *Woman's Voice* in Sweden, *Kankash* in America, *Pooyesh* in Sweden and *The Other Half* in America.

The following are some of the various anti-Islamic Revolution feminist organizations currently active outside the country:

1. Foundation of Iranian Women Researcher in America.
2. The Ghalam International Association in Sweden.
3. The Iranian Studies Foundation in America, supervised by Ashraf Pahlavi.
4. The Iranian Culture Foundation in France.
5. The Association of Iranian Women in Los Angeles.
6. The Iranian Association in Sweden.
7. The Independent Society of Iranian Women in Vienna, Austria.
8. The Iranian Women's Organization (SZA).

Inside the country the post-revolution movement has emerged from many decades of struggle within and against the state by women loyal to the ideals

of the Islamic Revolution. Women who participated in the revolution were angered by the new regime's suspension of the 1967 Family Protection Law, which was won through great efforts by women's rights activists in the era of the Shah. Angry at these developments, women bombarded the four female deputies elected in 1980 to the first legislature (or *Majlis*) of the Islamic Republic with demands for redress, and especially the restoration of the Family Protection Law. Due to these persistent complaints and the advocacy of women parliamentarians, the Third *Majlis* (1988–1992) enacted some modest improvements for women in matters like child custody and divorce, but nothing in comparison to the statutes which were in place before the revolution.

Many recent women activism has revolved around the pursuit of two goals: increasing women's collective social participation and achieving equal legal rights. The Sixth *Majlis* (2000–2004), which took office at the peak of the reformist movement's power, boasted 13 women members. The previous Parliament had 14, but unlike their predecessors, the new female deputies entered office with the intention of changing the law in favor of women. Along with male reformist allies, they formed a Women's Block to push their agenda. In December 2002, 11 of the women parliamentarians submitted a bill to the *Majlis* that would impose a moratorium on executions by stoning of women accused of engaging in extra-marital or premarital sex. Stoning and other forms of "Islamic punishment" are written into the 1995 penal code, and although their practice has not been routine, they have stood as a powerful emblem of the backwardness and violence of the Islamic Republic's legal system both inside and outside Iran. The bill was not approved [13].

In February 2004 Iran's reformist period ended as the conservatives "regained control of Parliament". Confronted with a Seventh *Majlis* hostile to civil society and women's rights, women activists braced themselves for a regression in women's situation.

However the women's movement has not stopped working, even during the conservative era. Prior to the 2009 electoral campaign a new wave of collective activism had already brought women's demands for equal rights onto the political scene. Following a growing trend of women's press and women NGO activity since 1998 and some street demonstrations in 2004 and 2005, a number of organized and focused collective campaigns began to take shape from 2006 onwards. The largest, most grassroots and influential of these has been the One Million Signatures Campaign to change discriminatory laws [9]. Other campaigns and coalitions have included: the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign, the Women for Equal Citizenship Campaign and Mothers for Peace [11].

Despite the peaceful and transparent nature of the Iranian women's movement, many women's activists have faced state repression such as smear cam-

paings by the state-run media, beatings and arrest by the security forces. In the five years prior to the 2009 presidential election, over 70 women were arrested and taken to Evin Prison and charged with “disruption of public opinion”, “propagating against the state” and “endangering national security”. While most of these detainees were released on bail in a few weeks, some were sentenced to several years in prison [13].

All of these efforts contributed to visible change in the gender politics espoused at the 10th presidential election in 2009, which distinguished it from previous races. For one, all three candidates running against Ahmadinejad promised to address demands raised by the coalition of women’s groups and include women ministers in their cabinets should they be elected to political office. In short, both in symbolism and in content the tenth presidential elections signified considerable progress in gender politics in Iran. This progress can be mainly ascribed to years of slow but persistent efforts by women at consciousness-raising and feminist interventions in the cultural and political arenas.

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