
International Affairs

The Co-optation of Socialism by Shia Islamism

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Introduction

Shia Islamism, characterized by its fusion of Shia Islamic theology with a political ideology, has emerged as a dominant force in shaping the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East and most especially Iran, today. Olivier Roy (1994), a prominent scholar of political Islam, defines Islamism as a modernist, reactionary political movement that seeks to introduce Islamic norms and values into the public sphere. Thus for Shia Islamism, the aim of its political project is the implementation of Shia Islam as the foundation for all spheres of life, be it public or private. However, Shia Islamism stands out amongst the various Islamist strains due to several unique elements, particularly its centralized & hierarchical adherence to the Shia clergy of Iran. In order to understand how this ideology came to exist in this manner, one must turn to its origins in 1970s Iran and the Islamic Revolution. In doing so, it becomes clear how the roots of Shia Islamism surprisingly mirrors those of the leftist movements of that period, specifically the Iranian socialists who were also rising in the wake of the Shah's weakening grip. This paper argues that the Shia clergy, otherwise known as the ulema, strategically crafted the reactionary ideology of Shia Islamism to neutralize the popular socialist tide that

challenged their traditional religious and socio-economic authority. Through a close inspection of Iran and the Islamic Revolution, this co-option and neutralization of leftism is seen in Shia Islamism's theologically based revolutionary foundation, its appropriation of socialist rhetoric, and its maintenance of a strict bourgeois clerical hierarchy. As a whole, this paper will demonstrate that the bourgeois ulema co-opted popular socialist principles and gave just enough concessions to the Shia masses to neutralize the threat of socialism and simultaneously obtain their consent to rule the emerging Iranian state.

Historical Background

Before delving into how and why the Shia ulema co-opted leftism for their own purposes, one must first seek to understand their unique socio-economic position within Iranian society. Historically, ruling Iranian dynasties have used the religious legitimacy offered by the ulema in exchange for protection and various economic and social benefits. Most notably by giving land endowments, the right to collect religious tithes, as well as the ability to regulate education and justice (Varol, 2016). This granting of land endowment, known as *waqf*, gave to Shiite clergy (both privately

and the larger institution) assets in the form of land and properties, which transformed them into a group of landowning bourgeoisie, whose material interests were vested in direct opposition to, and in the exploitation of, the Iranian peasantry. Floor (1980), in their exploration of the ulema's political disposition notes the following:

The working conditions of those peasants who worked land that was either the private property of religious leaders or waqf property administered by the ulema [...] were not better, and often worse, than those of the peasants working on the land of the landlords or the state (p. 502).

In conjunction with their bourgeois material interests, it is also crucial to understand that the ulema have long been intimately linked with the urban petite bourgeoisie, or *bazaris*, who were amongst their most devout supporters and provided the largest portion of the religious tithes that funded the ulema (Skocpol, 1982). As a result of their land holdings and the receipt of these religious taxes, the ulema was financially independent of the state and possessed tangible material and political interests that would soon come into conflict with the Iranian regime. However, the ulema was historically dominated by the apolitical *Akhbari* school, who argued against political involvement as they believed only the Imam in occultation could rightly combine religion and state. This Shia school was challenged and eventually usurped by the presently reigning *Usuli* by the end of the 18th century. Importantly, the *Usuli* school prioritized dogmatic obedience to the ulema in both religious and political matters, in the

absence of the hidden imam (Arjomand, 1984). Such political involvement began to be seen in the 60s when the ulema organized against the Shah's White Revolution, which sought to reduce their power by redistributing their land holdings to the peasants (Milani, 1988). It is through these mechanisms that, by the end of the Safavid dynasty in the 18th century, the Shia ulema had firmly cemented themselves and their faith in Iranian society, particularly in the city of Qom. Ultimately, it is this shift in religious thought that would cement and later pave the way for greater political involvement by the ulema at the head of a devoutly loyal populace, whose support would be obtained by crafting an ideology that made political participation a religious duty whilst incorporating popular leftist ideals. This theological shift would eventually provide the ulema with a platform to develop a political ideology, notably through incorporating socialism's revolutionary foundation.

The Iranian left had always presented the largest threat to the Shah's regime and so had been the primary focus of state repression in the 1960s and 70s. As such, despite leftist ideas being popular with the Iranian people, particularly urban professionals and the intelligentsia, their organizations had effectively been annihilated as a result of a sustained terror campaign by the Iranian secret police, the SAVAK (Moghadam & Ashtiani, 1991). Thus, while leftist organizations were rooted out, the ulema was able to consolidate and even expand their nationwide network of mosques, crucially increasing their influence. Alongside a lack of organization,

the Iranian left was also divided among numerous factions, such as the Tudeh, Fedayee, and the Mojahedin, each espousing their own ideological objectives and diverging opinions on the ulema-led opposition (Moghadam & Ashtiani, 1991). As a result of these factors, when popular demonstrations finally broke out in 1978, they were directed not by the leftist factions but by the clerics (Moghadam, 1989).

Theologically Based Revolution

Recognizing the popular mobilizing aspect of these leftist movements, specifically their revolutionary emphasis, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, leader of the Shia ulema, reappropriated this call under a Shia Islamic mantle. He did this by harkening back to the most foundational event in the history of Shia Islam, the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, at the hands of the 'despotic' and 'corrupt' caliph Yazid (Kramer, 1987). Khomeini purposefully drew parallels between Hussain's resistance to tyranny, and the current ulema-led resistance to the Shah, characterized as a modern-day Yazid. He also, in tandem, transformed the Shia concept of martyrdom from a "saintly act of accepting God's will, into a revolutionary sacrifice to overthrow a despotic political order" (Abrahamian, 1993, p. 29). In doing so, Khomeini presented revolution against the Shah, not just as a political duty, but simultaneously a religious one, emphasizing dogmatic subservience. Another way in which Khomeini and the ulema co-opted and exorcized the left from the head of the revolution was through influencing how the demonstrations against the Shah's regime

were organized. Following the first demonstrations in January of 1978, and the subsequent massacres that occurred, Khomeini encouraged demonstrations which took place every forty days in their honour, following the Shia custom of funeral memorials held forty days after one's passing, and echoing the traditional *ashura* memorial of Imam Hussain, held forty days after his martyrdom (Axworthy, 2013). In co-opting and repurposing the revolutionary foundation of the left for his own Shia Islamist ideology, Khomeini and the ulema secured their position at the head of the anti-Shah movement and ensured the marginalization of the Iranian left preventing the emergence of any leading role that could challenge the ulema. The appropriation of this revolutionary foundation is essential to understanding how the bourgeois ulema co-opted socialist tenets.

Adoption of Socialist Policies

The bourgeois ulema comprehensively adopted popular socialist measures within their ideology of Shia Islamism by basing themselves on the earlier groundwork laid by the Iranian sociologist Ali Shariati, whose work combined socialism and Islam. Recognizing the power and popularity of these socialist principles, they sought to incorporate them to erode any potential support for the Iranian left and to keep leftists who had sided with them within their anti-Shah coalition. Chief among these principles was that of anti-imperialism, which arguably served as the fundamental rallying cry of the Islamic Revolution (Moghadam, 1989). The clergy presented themselves as the sole defenders of the

Iranian people's sovereignty and honour, something the Shah was unable to do — being portrayed as a puppet of the West, more specifically, the 'evil' United States. Those opposed to the Shah saw their plight fundamentally rooted in oppressive western influence, which Khomeini and the ulema harnessed in their rhetoric to mobilize the people. Alongside anti-imperialist rhetoric, Shia Islamism also incorporated the idea of equitable state welfare, as Khomeini himself writes:

[The clerics] have a duty to struggle against all attempts by oppressors to establish a monopoly over the sources of wealth or to make illicit use of them. They must not allow the masses to remain hungry and deprived while plundering oppressors usurp the sources of wealth and live in opulence (1970, pg. 25).

To this end, the Iranian Islamic regime would implement nominal state subsidies to lessen the burden on the masses, all the while further impoverishing them through material exploitation. Ultimately, the inclusion of popular leftist principles in their Islamist ideology, like anti-imperialism and state welfare, was a calculated decision by the ulema to appeal to a people that had suffered terrible economic and social disparity under the old exploitative regime. It also simultaneously served to weaken the Iranian left, the only faction that presented a real, credible alternative to the clergy. In sum, by harnessing the anger of the people through a populist ideology with a veneer of socialism, the ulema were able to successfully defend their bourgeois material interests and even expand them following their seizure of the Iranian state.

Implementation of a Bourgeois Clerical Hierarchy

The final important aspect of Shia Islamism that allowed the clergy to cement their influence was their strict maintenance of a clerical bourgeois hierarchy for the movement. Drawing inspiration from Ali Shariati and leftist ideologies, Khomeini introduced a novel concept into Shia Islamism by positioning the ulema as the vanguard party for the Iranian people (Kaananeh, 2021). Khomeini used the aforementioned Usuli doctrine as a religious basis to justify his significant departure from the traditionally apolitical role of the Shia ulema. This transformation bore a striking resemblance to the Marxist-Leninist concept of a vanguard intelligentsia party. For Marxist-Leninists, the vanguard party, composed of the most class-conscious and politically educated of the proletariat, plays a crucial role in guiding the working class towards a revolutionary transformation of society (Lane, 2021). Traditionally, the vanguard party is theorized as being highly disciplined, centralized, and capable of both following orders and providing leadership to the masses (Lane, 2021). Khomeini's appropriation and perversion of this concept elevated the bourgeois ulema as the guiding force that would lead the Iranian masses through a complete religious and political revolution. By assuming this vanguard position, the ulema effectively thwarted potential socialist efforts to instill class consciousness among the masses, thereby safeguarding their own interests. This radical reconfiguration of the Shia ulema illustrates the extent to which Shia Islamism adapted and co-opted elements of socialist

ideology to shape its own revolutionary narrative and agenda. Establishing this hierarchical model remains fundamental to understanding how the ulema has maintained their power, both in political and economic spheres. By maintaining a strict clerical hierarchy, the ulema has retained control over Shia Islamism, maintaining a monopoly on the mobilizing capacity of the ideology.

Conclusion

The significant influence that Shia Islamism has had throughout the politics of the Middle East is undeniable. Its origins under Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution show how the ideology developed as a reactionary movement to counter the Iranian left and secure the socio-economic position of the bourgeois Shia clerics. This was done through a theologically based revolutionary foundation that harnessed the people's anger and made resistance against the Shah a political duty. Furthermore, the ulema adopted popular socialist principles, such as anti-imperialism and equitable state welfare, to maintain popular support and weaken any potential momentum of the Iranian left.

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Finally, the ulema established and maintained a strict clerical hierarchy within Shia Islamism that positioned themselves as the revolutionary vanguard party for the Iranian masses. Through this clerical hierarchy, the ulema has maintained strict control over Shia Islamism, unlike their Sunni counterparts. In view of this, the primary aim of Shia Islamism, which is to maintain the socio-economic advantages of the bourgeois ulema and prevent the Iranian left from gaining power, has been indisputably successful. In Iran today, despite their espousing of nominally leftist tenets, socialists are heavily persecuted, their organizations effectively eradicated or exiled, and trade unions remain explicitly outlawed (Nomani & Behdad, 2012). The Iranian masses continue to suffer the material exploitation that they had hoped to free themselves from with the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Instead, one exploitative bourgeois class has been replaced by another. It remains to be seen if the Shia ulema will be able to continue their dominance through Shia Islamism, or if their ideology will come to be harnessed against them by the same people who once believed it to be their salvation.

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