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How Civil is the Green Movement in Iran?

By

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*I open my discussion with two quotations. The first passage is taken from a comprehensive interview with Mohsem Kadivar, one of the main religious speakers of the Green Movement. Although in a reformist mode, he explicitly defends the sheer extent of the Greens. 'I admit that some young people are oriented towards the West. But one should not give too much weight to that. The majority of my compatriots would not want a complete separation of state and religion. Neither would I. Iran is a country with Islamic traditions and values. More than 90 percent of our citizens are Muslims.'*¹ *The second quotation belongs to supporters of the Secular Green Movement, an open secular group that gives the following statement in favour of the secularist nature of the opposition movement: 'In our opinion, Iran's main difficulty...is to put the official religion in the constitution before and after the revolution.'*² *These two are the key points of my paper.*

Introduction

Since the June 2009 presidential election, some Iranians as well as non-Iranian observers – academicians, journalists and analysts – have rendered a variety of interpretations of what can be called the nature of the Green Movement. By the word nature, I am not tending to take under consideration the social basis of the movement, but rather survey its tendency, which is materialized either in aspirations and expectations of its supporters, or in the interviews of and statements issued by its leaders.

¹ <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,633517,00.html>

² <http://news.gooya.com/politics/archives/2010/01/099121.php>

What did the numerous crowd want when they were asking ‘where is my vote?’ What were the people searching for when they created the ‘Green Chain’? What shall we name these people? Can one easily label them as secular or religious? Or the request ‘give back my vote’ neither is religious nor secular? Perhaps by trying to fit these legitimate demands within the narrow frameworks of being religious or secular we are misunderstanding the real nature of the Green Movement?

What does Mir Hossein Mousavi - the main leader of the Movement - mean when he calls for the full enforcement of the Constitution? Shall we interpret this request a constitutional, religious or a secular one?

The background

The social basis of the Green Movement is constituted of four social strata, which have played important roles in Iran’s social and political spheres since the war ended between Iran and Iraq (1980-88). These groups, including students, women, labourers and reformist clerics, were always the bearers of the democratic tendencies and citizenship culture in the post-war Iran.

During the Construction Era under the presidency of Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-97) and the Reform Period under the presidency of Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005), the Iranian society witnessed the rise of dissident students, well-educated women, self-conscious labour force and clerics – who were reformist but royal to the system; all these people were armed with academic education and enjoyed the welfare granted to them by the government.

Although distinct regarding their aspirations and demands, these four social strata must be treated as interdependent. Despite the prevalent opinion that clerics were far distant from women and students were different from labourers in their political expectations, subsequent developments demonstrated that they have been able to make a unified and strong front against Iran’s conservative political system.

The opposition movement led by them made a landslide election victory in 1997, with the plan to change the system in a way to include more freedom and democracy. The conservatives backed by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei tried to disempower the Reformist State in various ways. They attempted to assassinate Khatami’s top political advisor in 2000, imprisoned several pro-Khatami journalists and intellectuals and suppressed student demonstrations at Tehran University and finally the Guardian Council took an unprecedented step of banning around 2,500 candidates – nearly half of the total – contesting for the Seventh parliamentary election in 2004.

However, despite of the ultimate lack of success of the movement, the ideas of democracy, reform and freedom stayed alive in the minds of the majority of those who shaped the Green Movement. During the presidency of Khatami they were looking for freedom for all, rights of citizenry and the rule of law, and protesting against discrimination on the basis of religion,

gender and ethnicity. How can one call these demands religious or non-religious? One needs to step beyond these divisions that make us misinterpret the reality of the reformists' demands. The Green Movement like the rest of the contemporary Iran's movements is a modern, new-middle class and civil movement and is much closer to the new role of Islam, which is contrary to its previous role as a political religion.

What do we mean by the word 'civil'? In retrospect, the experience of the countries that have encountered the question of how to compromise between religion and politics indicates that the elimination of religion from public sphere is not the appropriate solution. This conclusion is based on the fact that normally in these countries, it was possible to successfully transform religion, especially Christianity, from a phenomenon which was harmful for the national solidarity to a useful tool to establish national unity. So, religion could make a compromise between the religious sects, pacify the political sphere by containing the violence between rival groups, or play a vital role in the process of state building and nation formation.

Hence, the religion must part with its traditional role of being political, exclusive, and intolerant. However, in its new function, religion acted as a medium for the realization of the national reconciliation as happened in some countries that were suffering from either political rivalry or sectarian conflict. Although strange, in countries, such as the US and Indonesia despite the fact that society is religious (Christian and Muslim respectively), politics is treated as non-religious, but not *anti*-religious.

Politics is not religious because there is a legal division between religion and politics, in which political decisions, social plans and economic strategies are conducted independently. In these two countries, there is a close tie between democracy and what is called the 'civil religion'. Here democracy is viewed both as culture reconciliation and the ideal form of the political order, and now the new linkage between politics and religion is established. Civility of religion bore fruit in civility of politics. The combination of religion and religious/political plurality results in a style of religiosity which is called civil religion.

From a historical point of view, this interpretation of religion has had a close association with several concepts, such as patriotism, believe in the social contract, good citizenship, and priority of republicanism. That is why even non-religious systems require social and moral doctrines, under which the fundamental compromise inspired by the basic values of each society realized.

Islam vs. Islām

As the formal religion of Iran, Islam has occupied a very important position in Iran's history and has an open role in the process of state building since the Islamic Revolution (1979). Hence, since this time Iran has been experiencing a generation of what is called the political religion. However, the narration of Islam represented by the Green Movement is far more diverse from what we have experienced before.

One of the precious outcomes of the Green Movement was to verify the Islamic notions in light of the new developments that have occurred in Iran since June 2009. This verification has a background in the efforts of the Reformist clerics who had both experts in the Shia Jurisprudence and Islamic theology, as well as western humanities taught in Iranian universities.

Therefore, 'is the Islamic theology compatible with our new expectations materialized in the Green Movement'? If yes, this version of Islam is as Islamic as civil and is the opposite of political Islam, which is exclusive, suppressive, and violent. The ideal Islamic/Iranian version of civil religion would include both civic and political virtues, recognize religious plurality, redefine the relationship between religion and politics, and defend the idea of good citizenship – free and equal citizenship, which is loyal to the state and constitution.

Thus, the Green Movement's demands rather than being limited in the old-fashioned frameworks of being secular or Islamic are civil in a sense that people who are engaged in this movement are not tending to deconstruct the Islamic Republic, but want to verify it through resisting on their legitimate demands, such as free election, freedom of parties, citizenship rights and care for fellow citizen as a political virtue. Following the June 2009 election and as a reaction to the open suppression of the people by the regime, a number of the popular Iranian political figures prepared a proposal to ward off the hostility between the society and the regime. What they were seeking at that time, was a kind of a national reconciliation offered by the regime to abate the social unrest. But, unfortunately this proposal was not welcomed both by the society and some of the extremist figures.

Here, I am not analyzing the causes of the failure of this proposal, as is done tactfully by an analyst in an article called *The National Reconciliation, Reconciliation with the Nation*.³ What I am aiming at, is to remind that every successful effort for establishing the national reconciliation in Iran would be done when the voice of the civil reading of Islam would be listened. This reading is more democratic and moral rather than religious.

With regard to the combination of either slogans or/and statements issued by the leaders of the Green Movement, any interpretation of the secular or religious nature of the movement is doomed to fail. Majid Mohammadi in his article *Green Movement: Islamist or Secularist*⁴ encourages us not to identify the secularists as anti-religionists, because this analogy is same as identifying the pro-democrats as atheists. By the words 'secular' or 'secularist', he tries to distance himself from secularism as an ideology, which is anti-religious in a way and comes close to an interpretation of secularism, under which any religion, provided that is not harmful to democracy, has a place to manoeuvre. Inasmuch, secular is equivalent to civil and is a qualification through which we can recognize the Green Movement.

³ http://www.jomhourikhahi.com/2009/11/public_settlement.html

⁴ <http://www.gozaar.org/template1.php?id=1471&language=persian>

Any version of Iranian path to political reconstruction must start from religious reform, which began long ago but is now represented by the Green Movement. No one can pre-empt this movement on his or her desire, as it is a civil movement, based not on differences in the religion or belief of the Iranian citizens, but rather differences in their civic virtue or better to say, their social capital which is essential for flourishing democracy in Iran.⁵

Rather, I am going to note that a civil conception of Islam, and especially Shiasm, should not simply prescribe peaceful religious coexistence, but also *must* endorse individual autonomy, which means ‘individual dissent within’⁶ Islam, and examine the extent of freedom a Muslim has to question or revise his/her religion. Moreover, although humane, the perception of Islam as a source of personal identification is contrasted with the civil one, in the extent to which individual autonomy as a basic concept for democratic citizenship is absent. It is noteworthy that freedom of speech, education, association and choice as the legitimate demands of the Green Movement are part of individual autonomy.

Based on this, I want to argue in favour of the multicultural nature of the movement as well. For a civil movement, necessarily should embed diverse cultural tendencies within it, in a sense that it should be able to ‘represents different systems of meaning and visions’⁷ belonging to those who grow up and live within culturally diverse societies. Therefore, the first step for a social entity to be multicultural is to view human life from a ‘culturally structured world’ and believe that human life and social relations must be organized ‘in terms of culturally derived system of meaning and significance.’⁸ Moreover, a multicultural entity should represent values such as human dignity, autonomy, liberty and equality as well as those belonging to communitarian aspect of life, such as human solidarity, community and a sense of rootedness.

Addressing Iran’s long-lasting cultural diversity, which is represented in different ethnicities, languages and religious communities, the Green Movement should not only materialize these culturally different worlds, but also by protecting individual and communal values should develop a sense of belonging among all Iranians. For, as Parekh has correctly pointed out ‘the sense of belonging cannot be ethnic’ or religious or racial, but ‘must be political and based on a shared commitment to the political community.’⁹ And that is why I stated earlier that democratic citizenship as a sense of belonging and commitment to political community is at the core of the expectations of the Greens. Despite the accepted opinion that this movement emerged simply as a reaction to the fraud in the 2009 polls, a deeper look indicates that it is actually an invitation to

⁵ Will Kymlicka and Wayne Norman, *Citizenship in Diverse Societies*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.6.

⁶- Will Kymlicka, Reply to Modood, *Analyse & Kritik* (Dusseldorf), 15, (1993), p. 5.

⁷ Bhikhu Parikh, ‘What is Multiculturalism?’, In <http://www.india-seminar.com/1999/484/484%20parekh.htm>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

reconsider both the status of Iranian citizenship as a democratic notion based on civic virtues, and individual autonomy and some of constitutive principles of our political system.

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