Islamic Government and Its Detractors: Religious Opposition to the Islamic Republic of Iran

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Though the Islamic Republic of Iran has received generous media attention as of late, the intense religious debate within the country and the greater Shi’i community is in need of further research. Traditionally, the Shi’a sect of Islam is known for being politically quietist, and their leaders have tended to provide mainly religious rather than political guidance to their followers. In fact, they often considered themselves lacking an imam—a divinely guided religious leader with the authority necessary to lead the community—and therefore also lacking a qualified leader for any type of Islamic, Shi’i government. That all changed with the writings of Ayatollah Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution of 1979, in which a Shi’i religious government was installed in Iran and has been present ever since. Though Khomeini receives much of the focus—especially because of his principle of welayat al-faqih (the Guardianship of the Jurist), which places a religious scholar as the head of state in Iran—surely there must be critics within the religious establishment who have disagreed with his interpretation. I undertook this project because of how little research has been done into these religious dissenters in the Shi’i community who criticize the government of Iran.

In order to complete this project, I first carried out the background research necessary to find prominent, Shi’i religious leaders who have criticized the Khomeini style of religious government. I have chosen to focus on two in particular: Ayatollah ‘Ali Al-Husseini Sistani in Iraq, and Ayatollah Hussein-Ali Montazeri, the recently deceased cleric of Iran. As I wanted to find informative primary sources, I translated from Arabic two essays from Sistani and sections from a two-volume Arabic book of Montazeri. In addition to these primary sources, I read a number of secondary sources to gain a better understanding of Iranian political history, Shi’i conceptions of religion and authority, the attitudes of Arab Shi’a towards the Iranian revolution (especially in Lebanon and Iraq), and the scholarly debate concerning Khomeini and the legitimacy of his argument.

The results of my research revealed a vibrant debate within the Shi’i religious community concerning Ayatollah Khomeini’s views on Islamic governance, and a significant base of Shi’i dissenters who do not favor a government like Iran’s. Ayatollah Sistani in particular is quite democratic in his writings: not only does he favor direct elections for government officials in Iraq, but he also advises religious leaders to take an extremely limited role in the Iraqi government. Similarly, my research into the writings of Ayatollah Montazeri revealed a nuanced and moderate view concerning the role of religious leaders in Islamic government. Though Montazeri would keep Khomeini’s idea of welayat al-faqih (which, again, puts a religious leader as head of state), he would prefer that this leader be elected. Before his death, he was also a tireless advocate of press freedoms and political activism in Iran, becoming a symbol of the 2009 protests. In sum, my research revealed that not only are there religious leaders who criticize the Iranian system, but these leaders are also strong advocates for democracy.

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