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Role of *Ulama* in Iranian Society

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Abstract

Although the ulama played a crucial role in the operation of major institutions (e.g., education, judiciary, jurisprudence, and the administration of waqfs) in the Islamic world throughout its history, the role of the ulama has weakened in many parts of the Muslim world, particularly in the Sunni world, since 19th century as a consequence of the modernization and secularization processes. However, in contrast to the Sunni world, the Iranian ulama not only produced a strong resistance against the ruling regimes aiming to secularize Iranian society, but also played a leading role in almost all important events in the recent history of Iran and the establishment of an Islamic regime through a revolution and emerged as the most powerful socio-political class since the Iranian revolution of 1979. In this paper, I aim to understand major factors that facilitate the development of the ulama as the most powerful political actor in Iranian society. Drawing on the analysis of two highly crucial historical events (the Constitutional Revolution and the Iranian Revolution of 1979), I point out some major factors for the development of an influential ulama class: The reconstruction of Shi'i Islam for the rule of the ulama in the absence of the Hidden Imam, the political and economic independence of the ulama from the state, and the close relationship between the ulama and the urban middle class.

Key Words: Iran, Islam, Revolution, Shi'i, Safavids, Ulama

Introduction

The Ulama of Iran are committed to the inspired and noble cause of Islam. Their political and social struggle is a source of inspiration to all Muslim nations and oppressed masses of the world.¹ Shi'ite Muslims constitute the vast majority of Iran's population. When the Safavids established Shi'ism as the official religion in Iran, in the sixteenth century they endowed the religious institution with great wealth, and from the seventeenth century onward the ulama had their own sources of income and were, therefore, less dependent on the state than in most Sunni lands. The country had independent ulama alongside monarchy. In the long period of turmoil that followed the fall of the Safavids in 1722, the Shi'ite ulama of Iran maintained

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their institutional continuity. By the time of the Qajar's the two centres of traditional authority, ruler and ulama, existed independently of each other. During the 19th century, doctrinal developments within Iranian Shi'ism led to the ulama assuming a greater role in religious life. Since then a Shi'ite believer has had to choose a source of emulation (*Marja*) from among the *mujtahids*.² During the Safavid period, the *mullahs* enjoyed every kind of freedom and benefits. The Safavid accession of the throne in Iran was more due to *Mullaism* or their religious fervour than to anything else. Naturally, they favoured the *mullas* and *mullaism* became a paying concern. In the beginning, they confined their activities to their legitimate sphere of religion but later on they began to interfere in every sphere of life. The Safavids took the *mullas* into their confidence and invested them with powers which they had never enjoyed before.³ One of the distinguishing features of Iranian political history is the political role played by the Shi'i ulama in the political events of the country. In virtually all the historically significant events, the Tobacco protest movement of 1891-1892, the constitutional revolution of 1906-1911, the oil nationalization movement of early 1950's, the violent protests of 1963 against the Shah, and the revolution of 1979 the ulama were actively involved. Such unusual political power, unparalleled among their intellectual counterparts in other Muslim countries, has aroused the interest of many historians and area specialists and has led them to probe the sources of ulama power as well as the causes of these predominantly oppositional role in politics.⁴

Historical role of Ulama in different aspects

The Shi'i *ulama* (clerics) hold a significant position and very important status in the socio-political life of Iran. The ulama were maintaining the religious education institutions, the role of these institutions in Iran is multidimensional, the religious education students and scholars have played their role in each and every field be it social, economic, political or religious. Providing education to the people of Iran and outside is the main function of seminaries. Seminaries provide the manpower to the government, ulama, and experts in religion, and other think tanks are prepared in the seminaries that run the Islamic revolution in Iran. The seminaries in Iran have never known themselves as an institute separate from people. This

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institute knows itself as the inheritor of the prophets; like the prophets, they are involved in preaching and propagating the religion of Islam by spreading divine knowledge through education and rebelled against the oppression from the heads of state. Since the formation of seminaries, they propagated the teachings of Islam explained and forwarded by the Shi'a imams as their mission. Nowadays the students of the seminaries travel to different parts of Iran and the world to disseminate the teachings of Islam, and particularly on special occasions such as in the month of *Ramadhan*, the first ten days of the *Muharram* and the last ten days of the *Safar*.⁵ Their primary goal is to guide people through lectures, public sessions, and private consultations. The scholars of the seminaries also maintain their contact with the people through various means. Presently almost all the seminaries have their separate propagation centre (*Dar-al-Tabligh*) deals with propagation. Those who qualified to propagate, travel to different countries and cities including within Iran also and remote villages throughout the year.

The seminaries are responsive to the domestic and foreign changes that occur in the society and the world. In this regard, the revolution of 1979 is an example in which the scholars and students of the seminaries were at the forefront. The movement against the oppression and anti-Islamic policies of the Pahlavi's was started under the direction of the Ayatollah Khomeini the leader of the seminaries of Qom. Ayatollah Khomeini believed that being silent towards the anti-Islamic activities of the government was not permissible. The movement started with his famous speech in the *Madrasa-i-Fayziyah*⁶ close to the shrine of Fatima Masooma in Qom, he opened a new chapter in the history of Iran. Other scholars of the country, along with the people of Qom, announced their support for him. This epochal uprising was eventually spread from Qom to cities across the country, and all of these movements were under the leadership of the scholars of the seminaries. Many scholars and students were imprisoned, exiled or lost their lives. This lasted for fifteen years when the uprising of the masses and scholars became victorious in 1979. After the revolution the seminaries especially the seminaries of Qom remained active in every field, during the Iran Iraq war, the scholars and ulama played a very important role. Their presence was heart-warming for other forces of Iran, and many scholars were martyred. The awareness of the seminaries of Qom with respect to the national and foreign developments and changes, and

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the dedication and firm stand showed by the students and scholars of the seminaries against the oppression and injustice had always been a source of comfort and inspiration for the masses.⁷

The Iranian revolution was one of the most important events that take place in the Middle East. That replaced a dictatorial monarchy with a theocracy based on the Guardianship of the Islamic jurists or *Vilayat-e-Faqih*. The revolution was in a part of conservative backlash (strong negative reaction by a large number of people). The ulama considered the regime of shah as oppressive, brutal, corrupt and extravagant. *Shia* clergy (ulama) have had a significant influence on the majority of Iranians, who have tended to be religious, traditional and alienated from any process of westernization. The revolution completely transformed one of the region's largest and most influential countries and had far-reaching implications for both Iran's neighbours as well as the world at large. The clergy first showed themselves to be a powerful political force in the opposition to Iran's monarch with the 1891 tobacco protest boycott. This action was led by the ulama headed by *Shirazi* and allied to the merchants. It was the most impressive of their protests which forced the cancellation of this monopoly. The tobacco protest marks the beginning of the agitation for a constitution. Later on, the constitutional revolution was sustained by an alliance of intellectuals, merchants, and ulama. When *Nasir u din Shah* sold the right of buying and selling all tobacco raised in Iran to an English company, the Shi'a Muslim clergy in protest of this monopoly, proclaimed the prohibition of use of tobacco.⁸ After the constitutional revolution (1905-11), the ulama had lost much of their prestige, but they still held certain rights and privileges which they could not easily be deprived of. They could not be dislodged from the offices which they had held from generations. Teaching profession was their monopoly. The dispensation of law and justice was also in their hands. Some taught in the primary schools in the villages and city mosques and some of them were leaders of prayers, *Marsykhans* or reciters of Karbala tales or preachers. While others were in various degrees of prominence such as interpreters of the law, judges of civil and religious cases. They held courts in their houses and decides disputes according to the Quran and hadith. With the exception of the Maktabas of Mallas which were in a miserable state of affairs, there was no local school on modern lines. Well to do people did not think much of these Maktabas and sent their sons for education to Europe. The first

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graduates of the foreign universities had a great opening in their backward country. But instead of improving their own careers they took top social service. They fought against the reactionary mullahs, who opposed them at every step they took towards the improvement of the country.⁹ The founder of the *Pahlavi* dynasty Reza Shah, fearing the power of ulama, used all efforts to check their influence and weaken their privileged position. And replaced Islamic laws with western ones, and forbade traditional Islamic clothing, separation of sexes and veiling of women.¹⁰ The years between 1921- 41 should be divided in to three stages. The first period 1921-25, coincides with Reza Shah's attempts to consolidate his power as prime minister of war. In this period the influence of ulama increased enormously, due to Reza Khan obedient attitude towards them, and also to their resistance to the establishment of a republic. In this struggle, the Reza khan followed the traditional policy of dividing and bribing influential religious leaders. Also, he reassured the ulama of his respect and promised to consult them in state affairs. When he gave up his intention of establishing a republic the ulama tended to support him for his struggle.¹¹

With the fall of the *Safavids*, most of the Shi'a ulama left Isfahan for Shi'a holy cities of *Najaf* and *Karbala* in Ottoman Iraq. Here the *ulama* became increasingly literalist, interested more in transmitting religious knowledge than in encouraging interpretative reasoning, *Ijtihad*. Now Iran was ruled by the Qajar who were *Shia*. *Aqa Muhammad Khan* had conquered most of Iran by 1790. He was succeeded seven years later by his nephew, *Fath Ali Shah*, who frequently patronised the ulama under the rule of *Fath Ali Shah*. The ulama consolidated their position; they administered vast religious endowments, *waqfs*. They also collected religious taxes: *khums*, one-fifth of profits and *zakat* (alms) 2.5 percent of income. They used these funds to run educational, social and charitable institutions as well as theological colleges. The ulama conducted Shariah courts which dealt with personal and family matters. They enjoyed high esteem among the masses.¹² During the period 1905 to November 1911, the ulama were actively involved in political life, something they were not to repeat as much by an urge to expand their socio-political domain at the expense of the secular authority as by economic gain. For the next decade, the ulama were far less politically active, partly because normal

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life was disrupted by the First World War (And other things).¹³ Reza Shah while consolidating his rule 1921-25, recognized the need to compromise with the existing religious culture and with the ulama. He generated goodwill for himself he secured the support of eminent Shi'a ulama or leaders such as *Sayyid Muhammad Bihbihani*, *Sayyid Abul Qaim Kashani*, *Sayyid M Sadiq Tabatabai*, *Sheikh Abdul Karim Hairi Yazdi* and *Ayatullah Sayyid Hassan Mudaris* in abolishing Qajar rule and declaring himself as the new king. Reza shah's rapport with the ulama or the mutual trust between Reza Shah and ulama, however, soured in 1928 when his wife adequately, as pretext to subdue the clerical establishment.¹⁴ He perpetuated the royal tradition of funding seminaries, paying home to senior *Mujtahids* and undertaking pilgrimages even to *Najaf* and *Karbala*. He granted refuge to eighty clerics who fled Iraq in 1921. He encouraged *Abdul Karim Hai'ri Yazdi*, a highly respected *Mojtahid*, to settle in Qom and to make it as important as *Najaf*. *Hai'ri* who shunned politics, did more than any other cleric to institutionalize the religious establishment. It was in these years that the public began to use such clerical titles as *Ayatollah* and *Hojat al-Islam*. Reza Shah also exempted theological students from conscription. He even banned the advocacy of any ideas smacking of "atheism" and "materialism". In the words of a minister and textbook writer, "the aim of Elementary Education is to make God known to the child".¹⁵ Soon after ascending the throne the Reza Shah created a national civil and a police force. He centralized and modernized the state. His policies accelerated the pace of economic development, enlarging the size of modern middle classes: secular teachers, lawyers, doctors, engineers, technicians, civil servants etc. He considered the ulama the ill-equipped to deal with the problems of modern times, and steadily curtailed their power in their traditional fields of law, education and religious endowments, *waqfs*. This contrasted with his behaviour before he became monarch. Then he had courted the ulama and taken their views seriously. For instance, when he was overseeing the drafting of a bill for military conscription in the early spring of 1925.he listened to the clerical leaders. He agreed to exempt clergy and theological students from conscription. In addition, he promised to preserve the greatness of Islam and the ulama leadership so that in carrying out their convictions and intentions... they would not met obstacles. Thereafter the government reduced the power of *sharia* courts run by the

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2nd February 2019, www.conferenceworld.in

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ulama. The law of *sharia* courts of 1930 restricted them to marriage, divorce, guardianship, and deciding only the innocence or guilt of the accused. While Reza Shah Pahlavi lost ground among the clergy, he gained popularity among civil servants, merchants and commercial bourgeoisie. Having enhanced his popular standing, the shah tackled the ulama on their most secure base: the *waqfs*, religious endowments, the prime source of income and social prestige for the clergy.¹⁶ Reza Shah is often seen as a great “reformer,” “modernizer,” and even “secularizer”. In fact, his main aim in establishing new institutions was to expand his control by expanding his state’s power into all sectors of the country into its polity, economy, society, and ideology. The legacies he left behind were by-products of this single-minded drive to create a strong centralized state.¹⁷ During the Reza Shah period, the clerical establishment experienced a dramatic decline in its power base. While the number of theology students decreased from 5984 during 1924 to 1925 academic year to 784 in 1940 to 1941. The number of state-run schools rose from 74,000 in 1925-26 to 355,500 in 1940-41. One of the important aspects of the Reza Shah’s attack on the power of the ulama was his effort to establish a secular system of law codes and courts without ulama participation. This effort was carried out largely under the direction of justice minister *Ali Akbar Dawar*. He gradually minimized the *sharia* codes. He introduced separate legal codes, in 1925 commercial code, in 1926 a criminal code, and in 1928 a civil code respectively. The ulama were excluded from *sharia* courts. The new code system eventually cost the clergy an important part of their traditional livelihood: their fees from judicial activity paradoxically, this disestablishment seems to have prepared the ground for the enhancement of the prestige of the ulama. As they lost wealth and power, they gained popular influence.¹⁸ In 1936 the secularization of the judiciary was further emphasised by legislation that required judges to hold a degree from the Tehran faculty of law or from a foreign university; and judge not holding such a degree was required to pass an examination in order to continue in the employ of the ministry; and many of the ulama left the judiciary at this point.

The Pahlavi shah’s made a conscious and systematic effort to exclude clerical control of Iranian society; the clergy were excluded from their traditional spheres of control in such areas as the judiciary and education. The clergy’s opposition to the shah’s policies was

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2nd February 2019, www.conferenceworld.in

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crucial also to the revolution of 1979. This is to say that the Iranian society is still traditional and takes the clergy into consideration. However in the past Shi'a clergy had gained the success only when the bazaar had supported it (from a financial point of view) that happened on the occasion of the tobacco boycott in 1892, of the constitutional revolution of 1906 and in the revolution of 1979.¹⁹ In 1936 the secularization of the judiciary was further emphasized by legislation that required judges to hold a degree from the Tehran faculty of law or from a foreign university; any judge not holding such a degree was required to pass an examination in order to continue in the employ of the ministry; and many of the ulama left the judiciary at that point. Each successive step meant a further erosion of the power of the ulama.²⁰ Religion, which has deeply affected every aspect of Iranian society, was a key subject of confrontation between tradition and modernity. The advocates of new institutions and westernized circles scorned religious faith and found it the cause of the backwardness of society. They believed that since the west had achieved progress when it got rid of religion, Iranians should do the same. For the traditionalists, on the other hand, Islam was a comprehensive and complete way of life.²¹ During the Reza Shah, religion and clergy, more than ever, were undermined. Unlike his predecessors, from the Qajar dynasty, he was powerful enough to introduce institutional changes in Iranian society and to substitute religious institutions with secular ones copied from the west. He restricted the clergy to mosques and religious seminaries while excluding them from education and judicial system, which traditionally were the domains of clergy. Public performance of religious festivals, which are very important to the Shi'a, was also limited.²² One of the key reasons for the confrontation between the clergy and Pahlavi dynasty in 1930's was strong institutional interests which included taxation and the monopoly of 'economic capital'. In the process of modernization and state building in the 1930's Reza Shah started reform education, the judicial system, and taxation. In all of these, he managed to seriously weaken the clergy as a rival source of social authority.²³ Isa Khan Sadiq writes that the ulama were all-powerful before 1925. They lost their influence and prestige the day modern education took root in Persia. The modern educated people could no longer support the worldly priest and his personal interest. Other factors that reduced the importance of

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ulama were: modern dress code, examination of the clergy, religious courts lost their prestige, that the ulama could not claim to be the only persons who knew and could interpret the Arabic law, the fact that the clergy could no longer enjoyed the sole privilege of conducting and recording public transactions, all these and many other factors contributed significantly to decrease the influence of the clergy and consequently the fanaticism of the faithful.²⁴

The ulama have laid emphasis on *taqlid* because it provides the ultimate basis for their authority. This authority finds its expression in different forms. The ulama try to exercise their authority over a common man from cradle to the grave. They claim that it is their religious duty to perform different functions assigned to them by God. Two major classes in Iran are the ulama and the *Bazar* i.e. the clergy and the merchants from ancient time these have been two important institutions which determined the course of political development in Iran. They both were highly organised and had a network that functioned across the country. They also constituted the commercial and spiritual core of Iranian society. The merchants or *bazaris* were highly religious and paid *zakat* (alms) to the ulama, making them financially sound. The clergy suffered great losses and found themselves economically insecure as there was a great fall in the revenue of these merchants after the lopsided socio-economic programme by the shah. Consequently, the clergy was deprived of a huge income from the bazaar which caused a rift between the clergy and the shah. The ulama channelized its resentment against the Shah to the masses thus building it finally into a popular movement. They possessed a powerful and primitive system of alternative communications to counteract the officially controlled media. They even used the sacred medium of the Friday sermons in the mosques. In this period mosques became important centres for political education and accommodation. The end of Reza shah's fifteen-year long dictatorship brought relief and joy to many in Iran, including ulama. People suffered so did the theological schools dependent on leasing out *waqf* properties. Yet it was important for the long term health of the *waqfs* that they should remain adequately endowed. To this end, the new shah reversed the rule which allowed the *waqf* properties to be sold commercially. He also amended the 1911 education law to help improve the management of religious schools. He wanted to show the ulama that he cared for religious institutions. Yielding to clerical pressures he revoked his father's bans on Shi'a passion plays and pilgrimage to Makah. He even instructed government offices to

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observe the prohibitions during the fasting month of *Ramadan*; it was a highly visible step. The changed circumstances emboldened many urban women to appear veiled in the streets. Aware of the absence of active support for him among any segment of society, the young shah wanted to win the sympathies of the ulama, the one group in daily touch with the masses.²⁵

In light of this context, controversial events and policies deemed significant to the development of ideological as well as hermeneutical approaches to Islam will be touched upon. In the pre-revolutionary era, the process of westernizing and secularizing Iran took place as a result of the Iranian leadership being taking over by Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1921. The measures initiated by Reza Shah including establishing a strong army, a centralized bureaucracy, a non-religious judiciary, and a secular education which ultimately diminished the status of the ulama by depriving them of certain privileges such as the banning of Muharram ceremonies and restricting the use of clerical dress code in the public space. These policies were more associated with modernism than with modernity indicating a triumph of westernization over a modernization program that carefully sought to retain the socio-cultural character of the nation.

However, Jalal Al-Ahmad maintains that the rural areas were not infected yet by this disease and that it still represented the source of wisdom in Iran. It was rather the city which embodied *Weststruckness* the most since formal secular education was imposed by the state and *Westoxic* Iranians always tried to assume a European character. Al-Ahmad was concerned and deeply disturbed by the blind imitation of anything Western in origin. He looks at those Iranians who had attained Western learning from abroad and how they are alienated from their culture that would willingly or unwillingly turn them into agents for the West and further weaken the socio-cultural character of Iran.

The Islamic Revolution and Beyond Historical Foundation of the Islamic Revolution to date, Iran is recognized as one of the oldest democratic systems in the Middle East with a constitutional-based government that dates back well over a century. The foundation for this governmental structure was established between 1905 to 1911 when the Iranian people participated in a Constitutional Revolution that pitted the population against the autocratic

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power of the despotic kings. Although the result of this popular revolt ended in the establishment of a parliamentary style government known as the *Majlis* (Parliament), the actual power essentially transferred from one dictator to another. Having not fully resolved this centralized power structure in 1911, the Iranian population would rise again a half-century later in order finally end the oppressive dictatorship preventing them from reclaiming the democratic ideals laid out in the 1905 revolution. This time, the revolution – known to the world as the 1979 Islamic Revolution – would fundamentally change the parliamentary form of government envisioned by the people into a hybrid religious based theocracy where a Supreme Leader was the unchallenged ruler of the Islamic Republic.

The Islamic Revolution generally traces its roots back to the beginning of the 1963 White Revolution when Shah Pahlavi initiated far-reaching reforms in Iran meant to modernize the country. These reforms, however, created a large disparity between upper and lower classes and also alienated most of the religious elite. The Islamic Revolution, as understood by the West, began on March 22, 1963, when Iranian government security forces (SAVAK), under the control of the Pahlavi regime, unexpectedly attacked and killed students at the Faizeyyeh Madrasa in Qom. In response, Ruhollah Khomeini (Ayatollah Khomeini) delivered a sermon two and a half months later on June 2, 1963 (Day of Ashura) at Faizeyyeh accusing the Shah of collusion with Israel and warning the regime of its pending collapse. Two days later, the government arrested Khomeini and took him to Tehran in order to stand trial for treason. Angered by his arrest, Khomeini supporters wearing white shrouds representing their willingness to die – immediately took to the streets in violent protest, setting fire to movie theatres, banks, and government buildings. In the ensuing clashes with government troops, several hundred protesters died after security forces opened fire on the growing crowds. Unfortunately, this government response led to the quick demise of the movement as many Iranians became disillusioned with the extreme measures taken by the government. The 1963 uprising was effectively noted as the critical incident leading to the rise of the 1979 Islamic Revolution.²⁶

Conclusion

4th International Conference on Multidisciplinary Research

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2nd February 2019, www.conferenceworld.in

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The Clerics (Ulama) hold an important position and a very special status in the Shi'i system and the Iranian society. Their special status emerged only after the declaration of Shi'ism as state religion of Iran in 1501. The declaration of Shi'ism as the state religion was a turning point in the nature and development of Shi'i thought and jurisprudence. The elevation of Shi'ism to the status of national religion in Iran brought a great change in the status of the clerics. The undeniable role of the Islamic ideology, however, has already been proved by the Constitutional Revolution (1905-11), nationalization movement (1951-52), the uprising of 1963 and finally the appearance of Islamic Revolution (1978-79) after all attempts made under the Pahlavi dynasty towards modernization, westernization and secularization of the country during last century. In the pre-revolutionary era, the process of westernizing and secularizing Iran took place as a result of the Iranian leadership is taking over by Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1921. The measures initiated by Reza Shah including establishing a strong army, a centralized bureaucracy, a non-religious judiciary, and a secular education which ultimately diminished the status of the ulama by depriving them of certain privileges such as the banning of Muharram ceremonies and restricting the use of clerical dress code in the public space. The Iranian Revolution of 1978-79 was one of the most important events of this century. It destroyed a very old and powerful monarchy and established a totally different socio-political system and culture. Without any doubt, the clerics played a decisive role in uprooting the monarchy by providing national leadership and presenting the burning issues facing the people in the Islamic mould. They were able to play their role because of their special status that they enjoy under the Shi'i systems after the occultation of the last Imam.

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