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THE ORIGINS OF THE REFORMIST FACTION IN IRAN:
THE POLITICAL ISOLATION AND IDEOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION
OF THE ISLAMIC LEFT IN THE 1990s

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Abstract: *This article attempts to comprehend the process of moderation of the Islamic Left – the progenitor-faction of the Reformists. In the changed global context and socio-political landscape of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the 1990s, the Islamic Left could not rapidly adapt to the new environment which diminished their appeal among the constituency. The erosion of public trust enabled the Right to push their rivals aside using the Guardian Council as a political filter, and soon the Left found themselves on the margins of mainstream politics. However, during this enforced isolation, they managed to reassess their post-revolutionary experience, and their political platform underwent a significant transformation. The new think-tanks and intellectual circles, most notably the Center for Strategic Studies and the “Keyan” circle, played an instrumental role in this process. Within this intellectual infrastructure, a new religious and political discourse emerged, providing argumentation for a rethinking of R. Khomeini’s legacy from the standpoint of republicanism. Then the elitist language and vague ideas of this discourse were politicized and disseminated through the network of like-minded media. The slogans of the “New Left” gained wide support among the youth and the urban middle class, who advocated the development of political pluralism and the continuation of the course of economic liberalization and detente, which had begun during the tenure of the President A.A. Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989–1997). These strata formed the core social forces that ensured the victory of Mohammad Khatami in the 1997 presidential elections, and then supported the Reformist “May 23rd Front”.*

Keywords: *Islamic Republic of Iran, factionalism, political history, Islamic Left, Reformists.*

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In the absence of a proper party system, factionalism lies at the heart of the interplay between the main political camps of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Along with the intricate state structure, factionalism delineates the contours of intra-elite competition and decision-making. Although there are no conventionally accepted designations of these factions, due to their fluctuant and accommodative ideological stances, presently, the IRI political spectrum is generally divided into four sectors: the Ultra-Conservatives, the Conservatives, The Moderates (Pragmatists), and the Reformists. It should be noted that such composition is a result of the IRI political evolution since 1979 which has witnessed ideological differentiation, shifting alliances, and alteration of factions’ political platforms. In particular, members of the now-Reformist faction have undergone by far the most profound transformation, switching from bellicose Islamists in the 1980s to conciliative Democrats towards the end of the 1990s.

This article explores the political genealogy of the Reformists with a focus on the process of moderation of their progenitor-faction – the Islamic Left. We outline the Islamic Left's political path, conceptualize their political isolation, and examine the intellectual network that harbored their ideological transformation.

THE SPLIT WITHIN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLICAN PARTY AND THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE AFTER THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR (1980–1988)

In the course of the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the ensued period of a power struggle between various groups of the anti-Shah coalition, the Islamists had forced their political rivals out and gained full control over the Islamic Republic. However, the actual governing experience and adjustments of the new state soon proved to be a bone of contention among the post-revolutionary elites with the Parliament (Majles) being the main arena of ideological and political battles between rival camps. Concurrently, competing policy visions lead to the formation of the left and right wings of the Islamic Republican Party, which was created immediately after the Revolution and served for the Islamists as a bulwark against other groups.

The Right chiefly represented the interests of large bazaari traders and higher clergy, opposed state interference in the economy, advocated the protection of private property, and were committed to strict observance of Sharia norms in the socio-cultural sphere. The Left mostly attracted the middle-rank clerics, radical student revolutionaries, and lower classes. They promoted more egalitarian economic policies, favored government redistribution of income, espoused less puritanical views on socio-cultural life, and argued for the export of the Islamic Revolution [Ravandi-Fadai, 2001, p. 71]. Apart from diverging opinions on economy and politics, the factions differed in their theological views as well. The Right adhered to a traditional reading of *feqh*¹, while the Left championed more dynamic and flexible interpretation. Furthermore, both flanks tried to legitimize their economic programs from the standpoint of Islamic law, accusing each other of supporting “American (capitalist)” or “communist” Islam respectively [Ayatollahi Tabaar, 2018, p. 207].

The endless debates over the land reform, taxes, state control over foreign trade and other economic issues had led to a stalemate between the right-dominated Guardian Council and the left-leaning Majles which virtually brought functioning of the state apparatus to a halt [Dunaeva, 2013, p. 33]. The competing factions were so intractable, that Ruhollah Khomeini, the Supreme Leader, often had to interfere himself to set the wheels of the state machine in motion. Eventually, R. Khomeini decided to suspend the activities of the IRP at the suggestion of then-president and party secretary Ali Khamenei and Majles speaker Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani on June 2nd, 1987 which was tantamount to the party's effective dissolution [*Movafeqat*, 1987].

The organizational separation of the IRP opposing flanks into the right-wing Combatant Clergy Society (CCS) and its left splinter Combatant Clergy Association (CCA) along with the end of the deadly Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) and the death of R. Khomeini (1989) provided the opportunity for recalibration of foreign policy and shifts in domestic power alignment.

In broad terms, the end of the 1980s could be characterized as the beginning of the “rationalization” of the legacy of the Islamic Revolution. Iran's leadership had gradually moved from revolutionary utopianism and radicalism to more realistic and pragmatic political practice both in internal affairs and in interaction with other countries. In this vein, the devastating Iran-Iraq War had a sobering effect on the proponents of the export of Revolution, while the most radical groups were pushed aside or eliminated in the post-revolutionary turmoil [Kozhanov, Bogacheva,

¹ *Feqh* – muslim jurisprudence, the science of interpretation and application of the legal, moral, ethical and practical tenets of the Qur'an and Sunnah by competent legal scholars.

2020, p. 153]. Furthermore, Khomeini's interpretation of the *velayat-e faqih* concept – a founding doctrine of the IRI – also gained a more mundane perspective. The utmost importance was now placed on the expediency of the state system even to the detriment of Islamic ordinances, with the Supreme Leader's religious authority yielding precedence to his political function.

After the death of R. Khomeini the state system was headed by the right-wing tandem – Ali Khamenei became Khomeini's successor, while A.A. Hashemi Rafsanjani replaced him as President. The main task facing the new leadership was to restore the country's economy after the Iran-Iraq War so the course of stateization, which prevailed in the 1980s under the predominance of the left wing of the IRP, was replaced by a course towards building a market economy. Rafsanjani's administration formulated the First Five-year Development Plan (1989–1994) which provided for *inter alia* liberalization of internal and external trade, export capacity growth, inducement of foreign investment, partial privatization, the establishment of free-trade zones, and refusal to subsidize unprofitable enterprises [Mamedova, 1997, p. 96]. After months of controversial disputes in the Majles, the Plan was eventually adopted in January 1990 and laid the legal basis for the country's new economic program.

Rafsanjani's party fellows from CCS, though initially supportive of the reforms project, became wary of the detente foreign policy amidst the United States' international hegemony after the collapse of the USSR. Moreover, they perceived the President's course as a deviation from the ideals of the Revolution and soon took a more conservative and increasingly reactionary stance particularly during his second tenure (1993–1997), putting the matter of expediency of alliance with the Conservatives into question for Rafsanjani.

Given that almost every action of the government was beset by an outburst of disaffection on the conservative side, the integrity of the reforms was inevitably sacrificed to the transient demands of the inter-factional struggle and political trade-off. The results were corresponding to such halfway reforms – the privatization process proceeded slowly and was limited to the sale of ordinary shares to private investors and large funds while maintaining state control, and a short period of increased economic growth ended with the onset of the debt crisis in the mid-1990s [Hakimian, Karshenas, 2005, p. 69, 74].

THE EXPULSION OF THE ISLAMIC LEFT

The Left too were opposing the new economic policy. They feared that large bazaar traders would be the main beneficiaries of economic liberalization which in turn would strengthen the positions of the right. Moreover, they felt particularly bitter about obtaining outside loans, for they were convinced that this would increase the foreign debt and therefore undermine Iran's sovereignty [Shadlu, 2007, p. 220].

Although leftists tried to get a foothold in the altered state architecture as an opposition party by criticizing Rafsanjani and his policy, their efforts were to no avail. Before 1989 they used to rely on their good standing with Khomeini and his younger son Ahmad for furthering their interests but with the change of leadership they lost this vital asset, while the 1989 constitutional amendments abolished the key executive post of prime minister held by the prominent leftist Mir-Hossein Mousavi almost for a decade. The loss of protection of the all-powerful Khomeini translated into arbitrary actions of the conservative Guardian Council against the Left. Previously, the Guardian Council had been instrumental for Khomeini's followers in keeping their rivals – particularly the secular-minded liberal nationalists of the Freedom Movement of Iran – away from political offices immediately after the Revolution. However, after the death of Khomeini, the same strategy was deployed against the Left with the Council turning from a mere religio-legal control tool into a fully-fledged political filter [Maleki-Ahmadi, 2015, p. 82].

For the first time, the Council was unleashed against the Left in the run-up to the Assembly of Experts elections in 1991, when a number of heavyweight leftists were not allowed to participate. This in turn prevented the Left from presenting a full list of candidates and prompted them to boycott the elections altogether [Shadlu, 2007, p. 259]. The majority of the seats in the third Majles (1988–1992) were controlled by the Left and they were preparing to compete in the upcoming elections of 1992 under the aegis of the Combatant Clergy Association but faced an unprecedentedly massive wave of disqualifications of their candidates by the Guardian Council. This wave hit even some of the sitting parliament members with a total of 39 lawmakers banned from running, including the Majles Speaker Mehdi Karroubi [Sarabi, 1994, p. 97]. Prior to that, the Left were also ousted from the judiciary – the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Abdolkarim Mousavi-Ardebili resigned in 1989 and the Prosecutor General M. Mousavi-Khoenihā abandoned the office in 1991. The dissatisfaction of the Conservative Right with a less rigid and more open cultural policy led to the resignation of Culture minister Mohammad Khatami in 1992. Therefore, from 1989 to 1992 the Left had lost all the significant posts in every branch of power and found themselves on the margins of politics.

Although the Right did exploit the Guardian Council to banish their rivals, it was the erosion of their social basis that determined the political marginalization of the Islamic Left. Iran had undergone dramatic social changes since the Revolution – the population had almost doubled from 33.7 million in 1976 to 60 million in 1996 with 60% being under the age of 24 due to the high fertility rate immediately after the Revolution, while the literacy rate had risen from 47.5 to 79.5% [Tazmini, 2009, p. 43]. The successful family-planning program and the mobilization of female volunteers for government initiatives enhanced the presence of women in the public sphere, including the labor market [Bahramitash, 2004, p. 39]. Economic liberalization fostered a new middle-class and in a broad sense gave Iranian society pluralistic impetus, while rapid urbanization created a more inclusive, consumeristic, and cosmopolitan urban culture, especially in Tehran during the tenure of Gholam-Hossein Karbaschi (1990–1998) [Bayat, 2013, p. 40]. All this resulted in the formation of an overwhelmingly young, educated, and restless social force alienated by ossified revolutionary sloganeering of the Left.

In the global context due to the decline of socialism and proliferation of liberal ideas in the post-Cold War era, the Islamic Left had lost their appeal and were no longer seen as progressive forces. On the contrary, exhausted by the toils of the war and economic hardships, the Iranians saw leftist politicians as reactionaries opposing the normalization of relations with the West and hindering the country's reconstruction. Their radical anti-imperialism and insistence on a centrally-controlled economy were incongruent with people's aspirations and diminished their popularity and public trust, which in turn enabled the Guardian Council to brush them away.

Thus, after the 1992 parliamentary elections, the Left were condemned to political marginalization, which prompted them to reflect on their post-revolutionary experience, place their political track record under scrutiny and optimize their ideological framework.

THE IDEOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION

In order to return to mainstream politics, the Left needed to develop a more attractive program with an emphasis on the republican component of the IRI in order to regain the electorate's sympathies and mitigate the political filter in the form of the Guardian Council in the long run. The new intellectual circles and think-tanks played a key role in the process of ideological transformation of the Left. Most notably, the ideological contours of the "Modern" Left were shaped by the new religious discourse of the "Keyan" magazine and findings of the Center for Strategic Research.

“*Keyan*” magazine. In 1984 Mostafa Rokhsefat and Reza Tehrani together with Mashallah Shamsolvaezin at the suggestion of the head of the “Keyhan” Publishing House Seyyed-Hasan Shahcheraghi founded the monthly “Keyhan-e Farhangi” with a focus on culture, literature, and philosophy. The fateful moment for the periodical came in 1988–1990 when it published the series of essays “Theoretical Contraction and Expansion of Shari’at” by Abdolkarim Soroush, dealing with his theory of epistemological rethinking of religious knowledge [Jahanbakhsh, 2001, p. 142]. The discontent of the ruling conservative clergy, which saw such innovative interpretation of Islam as a direct threat to their power, and the popularity of these ideas among the staff resulted in a conflict with the management after which in June 1990 the activity of the magazine was suspended for 15 months and the editorial office was dismissed [Baqeri, 2009, p. 102].

In September 1990 the embattled journalists from “Keyhan” found shelter in the “Ketabnemun” magazine held by M. Rokhsefat [Hallaj, 2018]. They changed the name to “Keyan” and published their first issue in October 1991. Alongside A. Soroush the magazine published the articles of Arash Naraghi, Alireza Alavitabar, Mostafa Tajzadeh, Mohsen Armin, Morteza Mardiha, Said Hajjarian (under a pen-name Jahangir Salehpour), Mohsen Sazgara, Hossein Ghazian, Akbar Ganji (under a pen-name Hamid Payedar), Ebrahim Soltani and others, who would later make up the first cohort of the Reformists. The articles dealt primarily with the interrelation of tradition and modernity, and the conjunction of religious knowledge and social order. In one of its last issues “Keyan” conducted a poll among the readers, according to which each copy of the magazine was read by an average of five people – given that the circulation of the later issues (1996–1997) reached up to 40,000, the audience of “Keyan” totaled 200,000 people, which is a very impressive result for a cultural-philosophical outlet [Shamsolvaezin, 2013].

With that in mind, “Keyan” was much more than just a popular magazine – it was an intellectual circle for an exchange of ideas and views on history, theology, and philosophy. It was a dynamic forum free of dogmatism, acting as an interlink between various groups and circles [Khojaste-Rahimi, 2007]. It is in these forums that the renewed religious thinking postulating compatibility between Islamic and modern liberal values was forming².

The Center for Strategic Research. In 1989 the President Rafsanjani founded the Center for Strategic Research (CSR), which technically served as a subordinated governmental think-tank, responsible for analysis and development of strategic projects in the field of economics, politics, international relations and culture. In practice, however, the Center enjoyed considerable autonomy, while the results of its work, according to Rafsanjani, were of little value to the government [Mosahebe, 2015].

Rafsanjani put Mohammad Musavi-Khoeniha, the ideological mentor of the Islamic Left students, at the head of the CSR³. Khoeniha invited the leaders of the Office for Consolidating Unity and most of the members of the Imam Khomeini’s Line – the political student bloc which consisted of participants of the US Embassy seizure in Tehran (1979–1981). As a result, the CSR had brought together young intellectuals of the disenfranchised Islamic Left, who would later become prominent strategists and activists of the Reformists: Said Hajjarian headed the Department of Politics, Abbas Abdi – the Department of Social Development, Alireza

² The word “renewed” is used to underscore the continuity of the Reformist discourse and the rich tradition of Islamic rationalism in Iran.

³ Initially, Rafsanjani intended to appoint A. Musavi-Ardabili as the head of the CSR, but the latter refused and founded the reformist-leaning Mofid University, which would later come to be known as one of the top Iranian universities in the modern humanities.

Alavitar – the Cultural Department, Mohsen Kadivar – the Department of Religion, etc. [Mirsepassi, 2010, p. 134].

It is difficult to say what exactly Rafsanjani was guided by when he created the CSR. In an interview on the history of the Center he claims that the main rationale was to keep the Left within the bounds of the Revolution, prevent further radicalization, and preserve their dignity [Mosahebe, 2015]. However, if we take into account the further political history of Iran, then in retrospect the creation of the Center looks like a far-sighted embodiment of the principle “keep your friends close to you, and your enemies even closer”. In any case, regardless of whether the Center was a mere sinecure for the ousted Islamic Left or a kind of Rafsanjani’s reserve in case of a deterioration in relations with the Conservatives, the CSR became a real thought forge for the Reformists-to-be⁴.

The research activities at the Center provided the Left an opportunity to critically rethink the Islamic Revolution and its outcomes. They published their findings in books, brochures, and articles, including the “Rahbord” magazine, the chief editor of which was Seyed Ata’olla Mohajerani. Perhaps the main research project that formed the backbone of the updated political platform of the Left was “Political Development” by S. Hajjarian, which entailed the gradual democratization within the existing system. This project, however, was not limited merely to replacing autocrats with democrats, but stipulated a fundamental rethinking of Khomeini’s legacy from the standpoint of republicanism and opted for the creation of large-scale democratic infrastructure, while the reference to Khomeini lent legitimacy to the project and protected (for a limited time) the New Left from accusations of trying to overthrow the regime.

While the members of the “Keyan” circle were devoted to the philosophical argumentation of the possibility and necessity of reforms, the attention of the CSR members was focused on the development of a specific political strategy to ensure the embodiment of what they believed to be the true goals of the Islamic revolution – freedom and equality. However, this discourse of the New Left, which was formed among the cultural and political elite, required an informed and receptive audience. In this regard, in the formation of the Reformist faction the media played an important role in politicizing this elite discourse through their publications, which touched upon the problems of the country’s everyday life.

Other Media. When the Islamic Left faced massive disqualification of their candidates ahead of the 1991 Assembly of Experts elections, they were struck by the refusal of the newspapers operating at the time to publish a statement by the Combatant Clergy Association with a criticism of the Guardian Council’s actions [Farhi, 2003, p. 155]. It became obvious then that the faction needed its own newspaper to promote its views, and in February 1991 the “Salam” daily was established by M. Mousavi-Khoeniha. Although in its publications, “Salam” criticized Rafsanjani’s liberal course and called for following the “line of the Imam”, it also drew attention to the violation of the constitutional right of citizens for political participation by the Guardian Council, and thus promoted pluralism and democratic values in the public sphere at the same time [Shadlu, 2007, p. 267].

The other outlets that were instrumental in the popularization of the emerging Reformist discourse were the “Serat”, founded by A. Ganji, M. Sazgara, and Mohammad-Taghi Banki in 1988; the “Bayan” magazine, founded by Ali-Akbar Mohtashamipour in 1990; the Tehran daily “Hamshahri” run by G.H. Karbaschi; the “Asr-e ma” that came off the press in 1994 and was led

⁴ Since 1992 to 2013 Hassan Rouhani had presided over the CSR. Eventually during his tenure the democratic debates in the CSR were limited and the research focus shifted to social issues. After the 1997 presidential elections the Center was transferred to the Expediency Council headed by the former president Rafsanjani and served as the main intellectual base for the fledgling centrists.

by M. Armin, S. Hajjarian and Behzad Nabavi, and the liberal “Iran-e Farda” magazine, which was affiliated with the Freedom Movement of Iran.

The feminist periodicals made a significant contribution to the promotion of Reformist discourse as well. Shahla Sherkat, who had been in charge of the “Zan-e Ruz” magazine under the auspices of “Keyhan” since 1982, left in 1990 amidst the shake-up of the editorial staff, and in February 1992, together with Rosa Eftekhari began publishing the monthly “Zanan”. This periodical focused on socio-political, legal, and economic issues affecting women’s rights. “Zanan” was a pioneer of modern secular as well as Islamic feminist thought in Iran [Fazaeli, 2017, p. 40].

Another magazine worth mentioning was headed by the future Reformist President Mohammad Khatami himself. After his resignation from the Culture Ministry in 1992, Khatami decided to publish the “Ayin” magazine⁵. However, “Ayin” soon turned into an intellectual circle of Khatami’s like-minded associates, including among others S. Hajjarian, Mohammad-Taghi Fazel-Meybodi, Hadi Khaniki, Mohammad Shariati, and served as the campaign headquarters for Khatami during the 1997 presidential elections [Nagofteha, 2005].

Thus, these outlets created an environment in which the elitist language and vague ideas of civil society, accountability, rule of law, democratic freedoms, tolerance and pluralism gained a specific socio-political orientation and were disseminated among the public [Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2019, p. 182]. Harking back to the original slogans of the Revolution these ideas corresponded with the interests of the youth and the middle classes, and received widespread support from the population. This in turn ensured a deafening and unexpected (even for M. Khatami himself) victory of the converged New Left and Rafsanjani’s Pragmatists in the 1997 presidential elections and the establishment of the Reformist “May 23rd Front” coalition. The formation and electoral victory of the new faction was an expression of the collective hope for progressive socio-political changes from within and the manifestation of the common civil endeavors of the Iranian society. Initially incited by the new religious thinking of Islamic modernists, Rafsanjani’s liberal economic course, and the Islamic Left’s self-reinvention in the 1990s, this pluralistic drive constitutes the backbone of republican reform aspirations that continue to reverberate in Iran to this day.

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⁵ Although Khatami did obtain the appropriate licence, he was too caught up in a 1997 presidential campaign, so the first issue of this magazine was published only in 2003 under a new license in the name of Khatami’s brother and the Mosharekat Party’s General Secretary Mohammad-Reza Khatami [Mahname, 2003].

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