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Iran Today (Twenty five years after the Islamic Revolution

By

M. Hamid Ansari,

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The book under review , “Iran Today” is an out put of scholarly and intellectual deliberations on Iran held after quarter of a century of Iranian revolution at New Delhi under the banner of Observer Research Foundation, in March 2004. Former diplomat, well known authority on West Asia and distinguished fellow of ORF, Professor M. Hamid Ansari has edited this scholarly publication with a well analysed introduction. It is evident that the very purpose of conference had been to discuss evolving perceptions and to ascertain the direction and pace of change in present Iran. The editor feels that a deliberation of scholars from Iran and those who observe the Iranian politics from out side, would contribute a useful dimension to the whole analyses. And at the end, the publication of this book will further broaden the spectrum of social, political and diplomatic analysis on Iran. Undoubtedly, whosoever has even a little interest on Iran will certainly be thrilled to see the subjects like society and politics, foreign policy, women’s movement in Iran and culture covered with well analysed articles giving deep insights in various topics discussed at length by competent and renowned experts from different fields of study.

The happening of Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 has provided Iran with a new political identity. No wonder, since 1979, Iran has constantly been in news for one or another good or bad reason ranging from Iran - Iraq war, Iranian assertion at Mecca, Fatwa against Salman Rushdie, continuous war of World against US and West, advocacy of religious fundamentalism, reformists and hardliners struggle for power to the present election of presidency and latest nuclear deadlock with US and West.

Direct interference of the masses in historic events, is the most indubitable feature of a revolution. Prof. Ansari has firmly upheld that this certainly was true of events in Iran in 1978-79 and of the reaction of the populace to the Pahlavi autocracy and bad governance. It has been underlined that throughout the history of movement in Iran, the clergy class has played an active role supportive of public demands. Thus, Ayatollah Khomeini as a clergy leader inherited this older tradition and thus with the help of intellectuals and writers like Jalal Ale Ahmed Mehdi Bazargan, Ali Shariti and Bani Sadr succeeded in developing a powerful political philosophy and Islamic ideology which had been instrumental in the success of Revolution in Iran. With this background and understanding, it becomes easy to go ahead with chapters discussing Iran after Revolution which has changed the socio-political structure of the country and unleashed new social forces.

The very first article focuses on conflict and crisis between reformists and hardliners in Iran in the context of future of democracy. Whether Iran is witnessing end of 'reform' and closure of 'democratic' window of opportunity in political sphere ? This paper is aimed at challenging this view, arguing that the reform movement and the ideas it sought to represent and implement, need to be viewed in their proper social and historical context, revealing both the depth and strength of the movement which traces its roots to the Constitutional Revolution of 1906. The writer, A.M. Ansari has clearly stressed the need for moderisation in its political, economic and social dimensions and cannot be ignored by those who govern the country. In a historical context, he writes, " Reform among those Iranians who have sought to define it, entails the ability of a state to manage the change required by the transition of time and the challenges of modernity. States that fail to reform and to respond dynamically to their social and political environment become prone to decay, weakness and collapse." Why was the pace of reforms facing bumps under the able leadership of President Khatami? "The charges of ineffectuality have been plaguing President Khatami since the day of his election. Indeed few people believed he had a chance of victory, and then openly discussed whether he would reach his inauguration. People discuss democracy as a realistic aspiration, both attainable, to an extent which would have been unimaginable a quarter of a century ago. Khatami was able to effectively pursue the institutionalization of aspects of civil society, encouraging the growth of associations, student activism and a dynamic press", the writer underlines. There is an argument , supported by many within Iran that the return of the conservatives to power within the Majlis (Parliament) is an essential prerequisite to Iran solving its regional and international problems. Finally he concludes by saying that in future social opposition will be real, and history suggests that in such a situation, society will overcome the state.

Another article "The Rise and Fall of President Khatami and the Reform Movement " by Said Amir Arjomand is again interesting with elaborate discussion on former President, Khatami's Political efforts in pushing reform movement on the agenda of Iranian government and the all round explicit and implicit opposition from the hardliners and religious ranks and profiles in the Iranian Political System. The open support from conservatives to hardliners opposing reform movements had been astonishing to Khatami as President of Iran. This particular paper has first discussed the conflict between the reformers and the hard-liners as a feature of the revolutionary power struggle in Iran and secondly, examined the failure of Khatami's 'rule of law' programme and reform projects in the context of constitutional development of Islamic Republic of Iran since its creation in 1979. The reformers have been described as "the children of the Islamic Revolution", who were excluded from power, exchanged the revolutionary ideology for slogans of democracy and civil society and made a come back by capturing the Majlis in 2000. The political fate of Khatami and the Reform Movement has been scrutinised in the context of writer's definition of "constitutional politics" in contradistinction to routine politics. The writer has opined that the real fight between reformers and hardliners had been for 'true heir and successor' of late Imam. The hard-liners never accepted reformers as one who could talk revolutionary rhetoric and thus preferred to hear it from the mouth of Khomeini's true heir and successor. Under Khatami after 2000 in a reformist dominated Majlis more and more institutionalised struggles were taking place between the Majlis and the powerful Guardian Council on the one hand and between the Judiciary and the Press and the Majlis, on the other. "The paradox of Khatami's rule of law became evident when he and his supporters were seen

powerless in either making laws or enforcing them. Their law making power was blocked by the Guardian Council, and law enforcement by the clergy controlled judiciary". In fact fall of Khatami's reform movement has been termed as a struggle against the supreme leader and clerical elite. The result of Majlis election in February 2004 was an unmitigated disaster for the Reformist faction led by President Mohammad Khatami. The Reformist not only lost control of the Parliament but also demonstrated that they did not live up to their promises. Social changes in the post - revolution Iran is another area of study. Social policy has contributed a lot to the successful development in Iran. " Without a doubt, it is the social reforms that radically changed the Islamic Republic," and moreover, in the opinion of S. B. Druzhilovskiy, the political and ideological Islamic Revolution stimulated further development, adding social issues later on.

Foreign policy under Islamic Iran had been the most crucial policy and has attracted the attention of political analysts due to strong and constant opposition from the US and the West towards the Islamic regime. " The policies practiced by US in last 25 years have displayed quite a bit of hostility towards Iran and labeled the country as a major threat in the region". In the opinion of Brajesh Mishra, former Diplomat and National Security Advisor to Government of India, Iran soon after revolution, made it evident that revolution was an assertion of national independence and expression of indigenous political tradition and in its new foreign policy made a choice of " na sharghi na gharbi" (neither East nor West) which mirrored Indian policy of non-alignment. " In tandem with this foreign policy, Iran's new leaders adopted model of development based on self-reliance and economic justice which found a sympathetic echo in much of the developing world. At the end of 1980s some developments like the passing away of the late Imam, the end of the Cold War, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, and the ensuing Gulf War and finally the collapse of the Soviet Union are some of the changes due to which Iran's foreign policy changed to the extent that relations between Iran and its neighbours turned from confrontation and ideological war into peaceful relations. And the presidency of Khatami in 1997 was to some extent a response to the call for these changes in the internal and external arena. Khatami's foreign policy principles were based on, "dignity, wisdom and prudence, policy of detente, and 'Dialogue among Civilizations". President Khatami focused on the existing international realities and tried to preserve its security through a realistic outlook. The principles of 'Dialogue among Civilizations' is a realistic objective based on certain values, it elucidates some political, economic, and social realities that emerged in the post-Cold War era. It is value-oriented as it calls on societies and civilizations to abandon violence and hostility and instead turn towards tolerance and cooperation. In nutshell, while considering 'diversity of civilization', Iran accepts a pattern of peaceful approach instead of a model of confrontation and dispute both in foreign policy and international relations. It is very conspicuous that the theory of 'clash of civilisation' has been dismissed and the principle of dialogue among religions, cultures and nations at global levels has welcomed. After 25 years of revolution, Iran has also reviewed its regional politics more pragmatically. But Iran still lacked friendly relations with most of its neighbours. The attempt in recent years to defuse tension did not entirely remove regional distrust. Clearly, the Middle East is not what Iran wished it to be, and the impact of the Islamic Revolution has remained largely limited. Rather than the ideology of the Revolution, it was primarily the interests of the state that dictated Iran's regional policy. "Iran is usually not on the offensive, and it feels threatened no less than it threatens others".

Perhaps, without a few articles on Iranian women this book could have been an academic discomfort. The study of women in the Islamic Iran has caught world wide attention soon after the revolution. Perhaps, it is the Iranian dress code meant for women, that had been immediate source of attraction. The western media and intelligentsia has tried to project them as 'made backward' in the Islamic regime. In fact, the implementation of the Shari'a in the aftermath of the revolution has led to regression in women's rights. In the opinion of Azadeh Kian Thiebaut presented in a highly analysed paper, 'Women's Movement in Post Revolutionary Iran', paradoxically, the Revolution has increased social, political, cultural and economic activities of women, and has radically changed the self-perception of women who now reject traditionalist values and divine justifications for segregation policies.

Through their mobilization against Islamisation of laws and institutions, women have attempted to establish their authority in the family, as well as in political, religious, judiciary and other institutions. To this end, women activist have initiated the interpretation of Islamic laws and traditions. Women's new social, demographic and economic behaviour contributes to their autonomization and enhances their mobilization. As a result of that a women's movement has emerged in Iran whose demands have included the secularization of laws and institutions that would entail a separation between religion and state, reconciling Islam with modernity, codifying the equality of rights between men and women, limiting the state's intervention in the private sphere, tolerating political pluralism, and ending the violence that the Islamic state and its laws exert on people in general and women in particular.

The objectives of women's movements therefore, go beyond corporate ones to encompass the entire society. The last article on Indo-Iranian relations in the contemporary historical context is again a good piece of analysis written with the underlined importance of cultural proximity of India and Iran since unmemorable days. This article has focused cultural and social happenings in India and Iran by discussing contemporary politics. Hope, readers will find this book more interesting in the present changed scenario in Iran and the Gulf.