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978-1-107-00518-1 - Superstition as Ideology in Iranian Politics: From Majlesi to Ahmadinejad

Ali Rahnama

Excerpt

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## Introduction

The 1979 Iranian revolution culminating in the Islamic Republic of Iran was an untimely rooster that perplexed analysts, academics and journalists. In the late twentieth century, long after religion had been called the opium of the masses, Islam became the primary mobilizing force of a potent revolutionary ideology, which was to mark indelibly the subsequent three decades of world history. In search of labelling, understanding and naming the events in Iran, a flurry of Western neologisms were coined. Epithets such as fundamentalism, with a Christian genealogy, were excavated and soon became household terms designating this “new brand” of Islam. Islam was made out to be a uniform and undifferentiated monolith. This blanket concept, most suitable for rhetorical tagging, concealed the most rudimentary differences among Muslims. It placed the Sunnis and Shi‘is and their different subsets along with the mystics and Sufis, with their own multiple offshoots, and the modernists and traditionalists, only to mention a few, in the same jar and slapped a single label on it.

At the risk of schematizing, the encounter between nascent neo-conservative Western governments, taken off guard, and the Islamic resurgence can be outlined in a four-step process. First, Islam was homogenized; then the essence of this “undistinguishable mass” was identified as “aggressive and violent”; subsequently, it was attributed a “threatening” political goal and posture; and finally, “suitable” policies of containment, preemptive and punitive strikes were developed and employed to counter the perceived “danger” of this newly erupted Islam. This new encounter spawned its own vocabulary bringing into circulation terms such as “Islamofascism”, “jihadism”, “Islamism” and “takfirism”. The naivety of such politically motivated and sensationalist appellations can only be understood in the context of the variety of Islamic creeds and schools of thought. Back in the twelfth century, the Islamic scholar, Mohammad ibn Adbolkarim ibn Ahmad Shahrestani, had referred to more than 70 different

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Islamic schools of thought and sects in his classical work, *al-Melal va al-Nehal*.

Islam is a religion composed of a core of principles relating to belief; its orthodoxy and doctrine. The core principles are accompanied by rites and rituals of worship and a set of laws dealing with family, commercial and criminal affairs. This outer circle constitutes Islam's orthopraxy or the correct action and practice. To the modern-day average Westerner, who is constantly told that Islam is a political faith, a word of explanation is in order. Those Muslims who believe that the object and mission of the faith is to attain greater proximity to God through individual devotion, betterment and piety think of their religion as a personal act of belief. They look at this world as a transitory space and to the hereafter as the permanent abode. Real rewards are to be sought in the hereafter, through the proper following of the Shari'at (Shari'a) in this world. Concerns of this world, other than private religiously defined obligations, do not fall into the realm of religious responsibilities. On the Day of Judgement, each person is believed to stand alone before God and no one's good or bad actions are considered to be counted towards that of anyone else's. Individuals are responsible for their own religious or irreligious acts, which eventually determine their final abode of paradise or hell. Other than paying *zakat*, which is a personal devotional obligation, Muslims have no social, collective or political obligations. Spiritual Islam confines religion to the private realm and has no preconceptions or value judgements about the "correct" political, social and economic system.

#### POLITICAL ISLAM

In the aftermath of colonial expansion in India, North Africa and the Middle East, starting in the eighteenth century and consolidated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, colonized Muslims, whose world had been destabilized by a violent intrusion, sought to find appropriate responses to their predicament. To intellectuals and people of reflection in this part of the world, both clerical and lay, regaining political independence became a major preoccupation. Searching in their own repositories of knowledge and tradition, some came to identify a grand theory based on Islam. In Islam, they found a social, political and economic theory, as well as a plan for action. Political Islam, as we know it today, came to the foreground as a liberation theory and a political agenda for a particular purpose. Contrary to spiritual Islam, which was concerned with regulating the individual's private relation with God for primarily the

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hereafter, political Islam emphasized the here and the now. Its ideologues and theoreticians maintained that Islam had a sociopolitical theory, enabling Muslims to deduce appropriate courses of action in the face of different predicaments. In political Islam, temporal issues of social justice, equity and independence became as important as rewards and punishments in the hereafter. The responsibility of the good Muslim became first and foremost national, social and collective.

To generations of anti-colonial Muslims, Islam became a religion of resistance, protest and insurgence against the occupying forces. In the highly charged political atmosphere of rolling back colonial incursions, spiritual Islam became associated with apolitical Islam and was looked down upon as a collaborationist position, invariably playing into the hands of the colonialists. Yet great multitudes of Muslims continued to live out their private apolitical spiritual Islam. For the most part, they frustrated the hopes and aspirations of those who wished to transform abruptly the religiosity of the people into a colossal anti-colonial wave. Some 205 years after the British East India Company defeated Mirza Mohammad Seraj al-Dowleh, the Nawab of Bengal at Plassey, Algeria obtained its independence in 1962. For two centuries, the political Islam of intellectuals and political leaders kindled underneath the dry forest of spiritual Islam, never really catching like wildfire, yet constantly challenging the rule of the colonialists.

The political Islam resulting from colonial penetration was primarily grounded in a soul-searching quest to find out why the colonialists had won, what was the key to their success and how Islam, relying on its own resources, could make a comeback. This was an Islamic discourse in opposition to the colonial political economy, their rule and their local middlemen. It was therefore a discourse about ideals, which would put to shame the ugly realities of subjugation, exploitation, injustice and violation of national sovereignty.

Yet before Western colonization, other kinds of political Islam ruled over the Muslim world. Except during the Crusades and the Mongol invasion of the mid thirteenth century, Islam in power was not threatened by a non-Islamic religious, philosophical, political and economic system, against which it needed to rally the pious people. It had neither an insurrectionary nor an oppositional political posture, as it constituted the political status quo. It needed to convince the people that the actual existing state of political, social and economic affairs was a reflection of the ideal Islam. So it derived its legitimacy to rule and presumed prerogative to blind obedience from the Muslim people by claiming to be the genuine

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administrator of Islam and the defender of its values as was practiced by the Prophet.

Naturally, instead of looking into Islam to find a critical and dynamic discourse of change, protestation and reformation, pre-colonial political Islam sought to consolidate its rule by prohibiting and discouraging dissent. In their worldly endeavour, the pre-colonial Islamic rulers evoked Islam as a tool to justify and maximize their rule. The discourse and expectation of political Islam *in power* is very different from political Islam *in opposition*. In times of peace, the former seeks a docile, neutralized, stupefied and apolitical public, which would facilitate its hegemony and tenure. Political Islam in opposition, however, seeks an awakened, engaged, alert and politicized community, enabling it to rally a successful rebellion against the false, non-Islamic or anti-Islamic forces. In the process of both defending worldly political power and challenging a political status quo, in the name of Islam, the key issue of what constitutes Islam comes to depend on who speaks for the faith and whether they employ the faith as an offensive or defensive political tool. Political Islam, either in opposition or as a ruling power, holds that the object of the faith is to usher in, construct and maintain a preconceived type of society imprinted by Islamic values. The modality of how to attain this objective and the levers employed to attain and retain power in the name of Islam can vary. A standard blueprint addressing these issues does not exist.

This book focuses on religious superstition used as a tool by Iranian Shi'i political leaders to maintain their political hold on the people during the span of some 500 years. It seeks to investigate how superstition has been consistently cloaked in religious concepts, precepts and teachings to shape and numb popular behaviour and judgement in order to justify political hegemony and maintain power. The hypothesis that religion for temporal reasons has employed and spawned superstition and relied upon it to buttress its political, social and economic status applies equally to all three Abrahamic faiths. While superstitious ideas may have been equally common among Christians and Muslims up to the sixteenth century, it can be argued that due to the Reformation Movement in Europe, the intensity and prevalence of superstition as a religious discourse in the Christian world ebbed more dramatically and palpably than it did subsequently in the Muslim world. This book seeks to study how superstition as a religious discourse for political purposes, albeit with changes and mutations, has lingered on in Iran.

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BELIEF, RELIGION, SUPERSTITION AND POLITICAL  
SUPERSTITION

In this book, beliefs and practices found and performed on the basis of an irrational cause and effect relation is considered superstitious. It is said that among the Irish, if you hear a cuckoo on your right you will have good luck for a year. Once such a belief becomes popular and common, it becomes folkloric. It may have been a legend particular to Ireland, or it may have been an old farmers' or old wives' tale. Breaking a mirror, walking under a ladder, coming across a black cat or an owl and spilling salt are just a few of the commonly shared superstitions among the people of the world. In all these cases, ominous outcomes are associated with unreasonably established causes. These beliefs can be considered as myths and fairy tales, resulting from the fictive minds of their propagators, mistaking false cause fallacies for acceptable explanations of truths. In the folklores and fairy tales, irrational causal relations happen automatically and in an unmanaged or unengineered fashion. The cuckoo sings, the cat or owl appear and the salt is accidentally spilt. There is no intended intervention to control, manipulate and change the course of the natural order. According to these folkloric myths, the natural order is altered as a result of an accident, and those who believe it attribute predictability to an event that, due to its irrational foundation, cannot be predictable. This is accidental or autonomous superstition.

Belief in sorcery, witchcraft and all sorts of magic, both black and white, can also be considered as superstition. Yet this type of superstitious belief is different from accidental or autonomous superstition. In these cases, the believer is convinced that someone can alter and change the laws of nature through the manipulation of some sort of supernatural force. This type of belief is not accidental but induced or caused by humans. The human agency is believed to have a supernatural power or be capable of mobilizing and controlling such powers to disrupt or alter the course of nature or history. In this case, the outcome of events or situations is also believed to be alterable through an object. This type of superstition is based on human engineering, and even though it may be traced to the Celts, their religion and the druids, their priests, through time, this type of magical manipulation has become detached from religion and has attained an unreligious if not anti-religious status. Belief in the power of magicians, witches and soothsayers to effectuate supernatural acts is human-driven superstition.

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This work is not concerned with the above two types of superstition, since it is assumed that belief in them does not necessarily imply a false cause relation in which the outcome is attributed to the Divine or an intercessor in contact with the Divine. These folkloric, magical and basically none-divinely associated or ascribed irrational relations are certainly a part of the body of superstitious thought but do not constitute the type of superstition on which this study is focusing. The superstitious beliefs that this study is interested in can be considered as a religious subset of superstition. It involves belief in those irrational causal relations that are argued to be possible because of religiously justifiable arguments attributed to the interventionist agency of God or someone claiming some sort of representation, appointment, delegation or trusteeship from Him. Green may be considered by some as a colour bearing good luck. If the justification for it is not rooted in some religious explanation tracing it to some direct or indirect Divine will, plan or interpretation, it will not be considered as religious superstition. But if a priest or a clergy makes a claim to the luck-bearing property of the colour green, then such a belief will be considered as religious superstition and hence becomes a concern of this study.

Muslims articulate their belief in the existence and singularity of the Almighty by giving testimony that there is no God but God, and Mohammad is His Prophet. Muslims believe that the Qur'an is the word of God revealed to Mohammad. From the pages of the Qur'an, certain attributes of God can be gleaned. Among other attributes, God is believed to be eternal, the creator of the universe, the life giver and taker and the single Lord to be worshipped. He is most gracious and merciful. God is omnipotent. He has power over all things, and when He decrees something, it is done. He is omnipresent, seeing and hearing all things. God is omniscient, and nothing on earth or in heaven is hidden from Him. To Him belongs the dominion of heaven and earth, and He has no partner in his dominion. Nothing resembles God, as He is perfect, and nothing should be feared but Him. All will return to Him, and He shall gather everyone on the Day of Judgement. God is man's ultimate protector or helper. The order of the universe and natural cycles are His work and constitute signs for people who understand. God is the ultimate planner. Even when people take false gods, it is according to God's plan.

To Muslims, as to all monotheists, the ultimate cause of all things is God. Belief in God as the creator of the universe also implies the belief in God's natural order in the material world. The Qur'an reminds human beings that God created heaven and earth and all that is between them,

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“not for idle sport” or as a “pastime” (21:16–17).<sup>1</sup> Time and again, the Qur’an reiterates that creation is an orderly, systematic and carefully organized endeavour following the laws that the Almighty has set for it and synchronized it by. God invites human beings to reflect upon the methodical and precise operation of nature in order to see the signs of His glory. The Qur’an says:

He created the heavens and the earth in true (proportions): He makes the Night overlap the Day, and the Day overlap the Night. He has subjected the sun and the moon (to His Law): each follow a course for a time appointed. Is He not the exalted in power. (39:5).

According to the Qur’an, the earth has been “set in order” by God (7:56). He “regulates all affairs” in the universe, “explaining the Signs in detail” (13:2). It is the power of God that holds birds poised in the midst of the sky (16:79). God invites human beings to reflect on the perfect natural order that He has created as a proof of his omnipotence (2:164). He invites human beings in whatever condition they may be to “contemplate (the wonders of) creation in the heaven and the earth, (with the thought): ‘Our Lord! Not for naught hast thou created (all) this! Glory to Thee!’” (3:191). Despite the accounts of the Prophet’s earliest biographers, Muslims believe that, on the basis of the Qur’an, Mohammad’s only miracle was the recitation of the Qur’an, as he was incapable of reading and writing at the time of the revelations. This was the self-evident Sign from God for those “endowed with knowledge” (29:48–49).

God is the supernatural creator of the universal natural order. The human capacity to speculate over, understand and decipher the secrets of this natural order is also a God-given power. We have come to understand God’s rules of nature in this world through our reasoning. Yet we do not know of the natural flow of events or rules of nature in the hidden world, including the hereafter. Clearly, what is considered “natural” on earth could not be the same in the hidden world. What concerns us here is the operation of the temporal world. Only God has the power to contravene in the natural order that He has established in the universe and that human beings have gradually come to understand through their reflection and reasoning. The curiosity of human beings has motivated them to push for greater understanding of the universe and its laws as already defined and set out by God. God enjoined them to observe and think about creation.

<sup>1</sup> The numbers in brackets refer to the Surah and Ayah in *The Holy Qur’an*, (tr.) A. Y. ‘Ali (Hertfordshire, 2000).



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If, through some supernatural act, God were to intervene in His own natural laws, which have come to be the ones also understood and accepted by human beings in this world, the outcome would seem contradictory to human reasoning. Believers are convinced that God can intervene in the course of events in this world. Yet believers can also be convinced that God does not meddle with his own perfect creation. As the causality, modality and proof of any given claimed intervention remains beyond human understanding, believers could doubt the claim of other believers who maintain that they have witnessed God's agency. When human beings claim to have observed or witnessed an act of intervention by God, how can they convince others of their experience? Such claims remain only presumptions, as they can neither obtain God's explicit confirmation that a supernatural act resulted from His will nor can they be verified by any other means. The fact that God can transform or revoke the natural order that He has promulgated does not mean that He would do so. Why create the order to disrupt it? God is omnipotent; yet He warns that the creation of heaven and earth and all that is between them was "not for idle sport", as "a pastime" or purposeless (21:16–17; 3:191). He emphasizes that "We created them not except for just ends: but most of them do not understand" (44:38–39). The belief that the natural rules of this world could be tampered with, circumvented, outwitted, deceived, short-circuited and bent through the performance of certain mechanical rites, rituals or processes by evoking God's omnipotence contradicts the purposefulness, justice and, most important of all, God's signs of perfection and proof of omnipotence.

A superstitious reading of the world based on religion evokes God's supernatural powers and seeks to harness and manipulates them to undermine, distort and second-guess the orderly perfection of His creation for personal material ends in this world. A superstitious mindset seeks "special favours" from God in this world knowing that such demands are "exceptional cases". Demands for such favours are submitted to God or some holy figure who can secure God's power of intercession. The usual means of gaining special favours or expecting superstitious results is through the performance of "special" rituals, supplications or incantations. If the favours are granted every time that they are demanded, the attainment of supernatural results becomes a general rule, defeating the purpose of using God to outwit the natural order that He has created. The superstitious mind, in search of supernatural results expects God to violate his own rules arbitrarily and inequitably just for the sake and interest of an individual. It may be hypothesized that when the Qur'an speaks of those who do not



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understand that the world was created only “for just ends” (44:38–39), it may be referring to the superstitious.

It could be argued that, to the religious superstitious, creation may indeed seem like an “idle sport” and a “pastime”, a plaything capable of manipulation to obtain desired supernatural ends and results at will. The religiously superstitious subconsciously believe that those whom they call upon as intercessors to effectuate their “un-natural” wish have the power to call successfully upon and obtain God’s powers to intervene in the natural order. In other cases, religious superstition claims that the practice of certain rites, rituals, prayers or use of certain objects may produce exceptional or supernatural results. In both these cases, the religiously superstitious subconsciously believe that creations of God, animate or inanimate, can control and dictate God’s actions and powers. At this point, the monotheist can slip into polytheism.

Throughout history, numerous factors have been cited as the source of superstitious drives. Any combination of real or imagined fear, anxiety, desperation, helplessness and powerlessness, on the one hand, or excessiveness, on the other hand, can trigger superstition. The precariousness, arbitrariness and insecurity of life characterized by low life expectancy, high death rates, poor sanitation and health conditions; widespread plagues and natural disasters; ignorance and illiteracy; low levels of technology in agriculture; famine, malnutrition and poverty; and finally wars, violence, expropriations, lootings, despotic rulers and lawlessness in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period can be considered as the context in which superstitious beliefs flourished. Superstitious beliefs are argued to reflect “the hazards of an intensely insecure environment”.<sup>2</sup>

Superstition is argued to be caused primarily by the fact that human beings cannot “govern all their circumstances by set rules” and that their fortunes and well-being ascends and descends independent of their control.<sup>3</sup> According to Baruch Spinoza, an excommunicated Jew who was groomed to become a rabbi, superstition “comes to all men naturally” even though it is said to spring not from reason.<sup>4</sup> To Spinoza who lived in Amsterdam at the same time as Mohammad-Baqer Majlesi lived in Esfahan, superstition kicks in when “hope and fear are struggling for mastery”.<sup>5</sup> To Spinoza, Alexander of Macedonia was the perfect example

<sup>2</sup> K. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London, 1991), p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> B. A. Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise and Political Treatise*, (tr.) R. H. M. Elwis (New York, 2004), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4. <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

of a superstitious person. He sought the council of seers and fortune-tellers when he feared the outcome of a campaign. However, having defeated Darius the mighty Persian King, Alexander ceased to consult his soothsayers. But once again, after having been frightened by reverses, abandoned by his allies and fallen sick, he returned to superstition.<sup>6</sup>

Faced with unpredictable, unmanageable and gloomy private, social and political conditions, people turn to exceptional and supernatural measures and methods. Religion and men of religion as self-professed experts on God are the most obvious sources of consultation and solace. The extraordinary solutions demanded by the flocks are not materially within the power and capacity of the men of religion. Yet certain men of religion within all three Abrahamic faiths pretended to possess or were believed capable of mustering supernatural powers. They laid their claim to possessing and providing supernatural solutions on the account that they were the servants of God and therefore more familiar with His ways than others. Even if they did not believe this to be true, their flock pressed them to prove themselves useful and provide ready-made solutions. According to Spinoza, popular or superstitious religion, which he calls “heathen superstition”, is “summed up as respect for ecclesiastics”.<sup>7</sup> The process of sanctifying and adulating the ecclesiastics leads faiths to become “mere compounds of credulity and prejudices”, “carefully fostered for the purpose of extinguishing the last spark of reason”.<sup>8</sup>

It could be argued that for believers who feel that faith in God, the source and origin of all phenomena, is too abstract and impalpable a concept, superstition may act as a substitute to facilitate bridging the mental gap between the idea of God and feeling or sensing God. Such a bridge-building process could eventually lead to disbelief. The belief in predetermination or free volition, and even a combination of both, need not necessarily create a space for superstition. The pious could believe that God may intervene in the material world in mysterious ways. But such a position does not necessitate the belief that He is in need of agents or things in the material world to delegate his powers, in order to carry out His design, and to represent Him. The notion of intercession and the role of a holy personality as intermediary between human beings and God open the door to granting powerful agency to particular individuals, only indirectly in relation with and connected to God. When this Janus-faced being, the intercessor, becomes the object of adulation and is effectively and implicitly yet not officially and explicitly substituted for God, then superstition

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 4.    <sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 6.    <sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 7.