Superstition as Ideology in Iranian Politics

From Majlesi to Ahmadinejad

A superstitious reading of the world based on religion may be harmless at a private level. Yet, employed as a political tool, it can have more sinister implications. As this fascinating book by Ali Rahnema, a distinguished Iranian intellectual, relates, superstition and mystical beliefs have endured and influenced ideology and political strategy in Iran from the founding of the Safavi (Safavid) dynasty in the sixteenth century to the present day. The endurance of these beliefs has its roots in a particular brand of popular Shiʿism, which was compiled and systematized by the eminent cleric Mohammad Baqer Majlesi in the seventeenth century. Majlesi, who is considered by some to be the father of Iranian Shiʿism, encouraged believers to accept fantastical notions as part of their faith and to venerate their leaders as superhuman. As Rahnema demonstrates through a close reading of the Persian sources and with examples from contemporary Iranian politics, it is this supposed connectedness to the hidden world that has allowed leaders such as Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi and Mahmud Ahmadinejad to present themselves and their entourage as representatives of the Divine, and their rivals as the embodiment of evil.

Ali Rahnema is Professor of Economics and Director of the Master of Arts program in Middle East and Islamic Studies at The American University of Paris. His many publications include *An Islamic Utopian: A Political Biography of Ali Shariati* (1998, 2000); *Pioneers of Islamic Revival* (1994, 2006); *Islamic Economic Systems* (with Farhad Nomani, 1994); and *The Secular Miracle: Religion, Politics, and Economic Policy in Iran* (with Farhad Nomani, 1990).

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Preface and Acknowledgements

This book is the result of certain academic and intellectual questions and problems that gradually became puzzles and enigmas in my understanding of the debates conducted by certain twentieth-century Shiʿi reformers in Iran. My study of Shariʿat Sangelaji and ʿAli Shariʿati convinced me that, despite their differences, both men felt compelled at a certain point in their intellectual development to grapple with one towering religious figure of the past. In tune with their different temperaments, educational backgrounds, styles, degrees of scholarly thoroughness and religio-political agenda each engaged Mohammad-Baqir Majlesi as the symbol, architect and archetype of what needed to be reformed in Shiʿi Islam. From the works of these reformers, it seemed as though serious and meaningful reform of Shiʿism had to start with a critique of Majlesi. By 1997, it became evident to me that understanding modern Shiʿi reformism meant understanding Majlesi, who seemed to be its nemesis in the eyes of these early reformers. So the original idea of this book started with an interest in Mohammad-Baqir Majlesi's life, works, religious culture and politics, only to understand the arguments against and attacks on his colossal influence on popular Shiʿism. Needless to say that having started with the works of his critics, my reading of Majlesi was coloured by their criticisms.

The end of my study of Majlesi and Sangelaji overlapped with the flurry of news and rumours from Iran about supernatural observations, experiences, and statements among different segments of the society. Of prime significance was that from the latter half of 2005; the floodgate of reports in the media on such supernatural experiences was opened by a series of religious superstitious accounts pronounced by politicians in power. The taboo on un-nuanced, direct and public reference to religious superstitious experiences or so-called supernatural facts by men in positions of political and religious leadership was broken, which then seemed to liberate the repressed superstitious feelings of a segment of the population. It was also

important to me that the widespread and thorough reporting on religious and political superstition and the important social debate that it caused was almost entirely a domestic one, and the clerical and non-clerical critics of religious superstition came from different national political spectrums. As the heated debate continued, two ideas associated with it informed my original project.

First, was it possible and/or useful to trace certain key elements of the twenty-first-century resurgence in the debate on superstition in Iran to the ideas that Majlesi had so diligently and painstakingly compiled and propagated long ago? If so, were the reformists not justified in their obsession to confront Majlesi as the source of much deviation in the faith, lay bare his religious and political agenda and move on with reforming Shiʿism? Did not the deconstruction and dialectical transcendence of Majlesism lie at the core of Shiʿi reformism? Was not a proper and thorough settlement of scores with Majlesism the Achilles' heel of reforming Shiʿism? Majlesi seems to have coloured and moulded Shiʿism to such an extent that few from the ranks of the official clergy felt at ease criticizing him for fear of being accused of criticizing Shiʿism proper. Was society prepared for a first round of intellectual debate on Majlesism? Was Iranian society in 2010 so divided that part may feel insulted by the opening of such a debate while the other cast it aside as marginal and dated given the rapid sociopolitical transformations in the country?

Second, following certain reported remarks and practices of the president and his entourage since 2005, the sensitive concept of religious superstition had entered the public realm and come under sharp criticism by a wide spectrum of the Shiʿi clergy. For the first time in the history of the Islamic Republic, the topic of religious superstition, its various forms and manifestations, its perpetrators and the school of thought that propagated it, the political and religious goals of its advocates, its social and political consequences and the degree to which such superstitious claims had proper religious credentials or were rooted in solid Shiʿi proofs was opened up for debate and scrutiny. What seemed to have been lost in the debate was that the president's behaviour and utterances and those of his proponents were neither exceptional nor isolated cases in historical terms. Previous Iranian leaders and rulers had made similar claims to being connected with the hidden world and had engaged in similar superstitious practices. My search for such cases was not to be a thorough historical study of superstition among Iranian rulers throughout history, but a selected study that would examine and exemplify the degree of persistence of religious superstition among them. One object of this selective and anecdotal survey was

to assess the worldly political benefits drawn from such pious claims to supernatural connectedness. The other was to reflect on the impact and consequences of such claims on the rational capacity of the people who were expected to believe such quasi-religious superstitions. Did religious superstition act as a vehicle to numb the minds of the common folk in order to prevent them from independent reflection, keeping them resigned, docile and manageable?

Based on these two ideas associated with the superstition debate in Iran, the project spread from a study of Majlesi to include a short survey of the nature, prevalence and role of religious superstition during the reign of two monarchs and a president. One thread that weaves through the book is a reflection on the right to engage in rational and independent thought from a Shiʿi perspective and whether Shiʿism respects and promotes such a right. Can Shiʿism's deep commitment to justice as an inalienable right allow it to consider independent and rational thought as the prerogative and privilege of a few, or does Shiʿism inevitably consider independent thought as the religious, natural and human right of all Shiʿi? Majlesism and its present-day clerical and non-clerical followers in Iran argue that rational and independent thought by the common people is not only incompatible with Shi'ism but that it is its antithesis. Yet they arrogate the right to interpret and apply independent thought, which they label as dangerous to the common man, to themselves so as to impose their own manual of personal, social, political and religious behaviour on society in order to engineer the lives of the common folk. If people are to be denied the right to reason and to stand by their own deductions, their thinking would need to be replaced by something else. In the name of Shiʿism, a Majlesian or neo-Majlesian state would subsequently need to promote the antithesis of reasoning – superstition and irrational thought – to ensure the common folk's eternal subservience and loyalty. Majlesism as an anti-rational and pro-superstition school of thought fostered and promoted as state ideology, therefore, constitutes the nexus of this study.

In writing this book, I am indebted to many people. Yahya helped me out patiently with tracking down and finding relevant books. Once his student, always his student: in my mind, he was my imaginary thesis director to whom I felt responsible to provide a progress report each step of the way. Purandokht, the ever-graceful professional, facilitated my access to the rich library stacks. Anvar, the wise sage with an incredible breadth and depth of knowledge, read the part on Majlesi, applied his encyclopaedic knowledge base, unfaltering memory and scholarly method and provided me with sharp, insightful and specific comments and criticisms. Shahram

Ghanbari read parts of the manuscript and as usual provided me with his nuanced and useful comments. He prodded me to employ a standardized Farsi transliteration, convinced me that Arab-language scholars correctly use their own transliteration and Farsi-language writers should use their own. He helped me diligently with the laborious process of producing an appropriate Farsi transliteration for the relevant terms used in this book. I decided that a thorough Farsi transliteration, such as distinguishing between the short and long *alef* (A), would make the text too awkward to the eyes of most readers, and so decided on a partial one. The Farsi transliteration of Qur'an is Qor'an and that of Islam is Eslam. Even though I have adopted a partial Farsi transliteration in this text, I have continued to use the Arabic transliteration of well-established terms such as Qur'an, Islam, Shi'i and Imam. Where I have used Farsi transliteration of words such as *jahad* and *'olama*, which I thought may confuse or bother readers familiar with their Arabic transliteration, I have bracketed and placed the familiar Arabic transliteration, *jihad* and *ulema*, next to the Farsi transliteration when used for the first time in the text. My anonymous readers picked up the weaknesses in the text that I had ignored, leading to final changes and amendments in the introduction. Lisa Damon carefully read the new introduction and helped to improve it where it became too wordy. I discussed the original form of this project, different from the present book, with Charles Tripp in 2007. As usual, I am indebted to him for his encouragement, understanding and support.

Then there are those who hear bits and pieces of a writing project during different parts of its construction. I am thankful to Soraya, Mariam, Zahra, Reza and Lisa for becoming involuntarily subjected to hearing about this story, sometimes inquisitively, sometimes disapprovingly and sometimes in silence. Finally this book is dedicated to a people whose *Jesus* does not walk on water but *rises with the dawn*, teaching a tolerant Islam and a democratic Iran, and when gagged and chained in the lion's den, it is he who roars for his people against irreligious, oppressive and unjust rulers.