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## Introduction

### *Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini: A Clerical Revolutionary?*

Arshin Adib-Moghaddam

By all standards available, Ayatollah Khomeini was a giant of the twentieth century. The Iranian revolution of 1979, which unfolded so eclectically under his leadership, quite literally shook the world. As all giants of history, Khomeini left an indelible imprint on the consciousness of his people, a stock of shared memories that is constituted by nostalgia, reverence, utopia and loyalty on the one side and exile, tragedy, anger and rejection on the other. Comparable to the impact of other revolutionary leaders of the twentieth century – Lenin, Mao, Castro – Khomeini's era seriously affected both the personal life of the people he eventually came to govern and the trajectory of world politics.

By virtue of their gigantic projects, revolutionary leaders claim history in its entirety. Theirs is, by definition, a rebellion against the planetary order that promises to bring about universal, not relative, change. So, too, Khomeini in 1979 was not a reformist; he was not in Iran to compromise with the ancien régime of the Shah. He was there to define, once and for all, what he considered to be the ideal political and social order for human beings, that he thought applicable not only to Iran but throughout the globe. As he proclaimed from exile in Neauphle-le-Chateau at the height of the revolutionary fervour in that fateful winter of 1978/1979:

Great People of Iran! The history of Iran, even world history, has never witnessed a movement like yours; it has never experienced a universal uprising like yours, noble people! ... Our lionhearted women snatch up their infants and go to confront the machine guns and tanks of the regime; where in history has such valiant and heroic behaviour by women been recorded? ... Fear nothing in your pursuit of these Islamic goals, for no power can halt this great movement. You are in the right; the hand of God Almighty is with you and it is His will that those who have

been oppressed should assume leadership and become heirs to their own destiny and resources.<sup>1</sup>

Revolutionaries' strive to establish a new order in word and deed and are not satisfied with reforms or token amendments to the state and the socio-economic system in place. To that end, Khomeini targeted history from a radical standpoint. Also always concerned with legacy, memory and method, he was aware that the revolution had to be grandiose and performed as such. "It is important for the awakening of future generations and the prevention of distortions by partial opponents [*moqrezan*]," he wrote in a preface to a prominent book about him published three years after the revolution, "that fellow writers correctly analyse the history of this Islamic movement and transcribe the exact dates and motivation behind the demonstrations and revolts of Iran's Muslims in the various provinces."<sup>2</sup> Here and elsewhere, Khomeini spoke in momentous terms – world history, nobility, God, universality, heroism, Islam, greatness – these are the ingredients of his inflated discourse that were geared to the revolutionary momentum that Iranians were driving.

The preamble to the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran which was adopted by referendum on 24 October 1979, reiterated that message. It describes the revolution as "unique" in comparison to previous Iranian revolts such as the "anti-despotic movement for constitutional government" in 1906, and the "anti-colonialist movement for the nationalisation of petroleum" led by Mohammad Mossadegh between 1951 and 1953. "The Muslim people of Iran" learned the lessons of history because "they realised that the basic and specific reason for the failure of those movements was that they were not religious ones." As opposed to those previous disappointments, "the nation's conscience has awakened to the leadership of an exalted Authority, His Eminence Ayatollah Imam Khomeini, and has grasped the necessity of following the line of the true religious and Islamic movement." Followed by a long section on Khomeini's central role in leading the revolution headlined "The Vanguard of the Movement," it is further stated that Iran's "militant clergy, which has always been in the front lines of the people's movement, together with writers and committed intellectuals, has gained new

<sup>1</sup> Ruhollah Khomeini, "In Commemoration of the Martyrs of Tehran, October 11, 1978", in Hamid Algar (ed., trans.), *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini* (London: Mizan Press, 1981), pp. 240–241.

<sup>2</sup> Seyyed Hamid Rouhani (Ziarati), *Baresi va tablil az nehze Imam Khomeini*, 11th edition, (Tehran: Entesharat-e Rahe Imam, 1360 [1982]), no page number.

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strength (lit: impetus) under his leadership.”<sup>3</sup> Quite from the outset then there was no doubt about the importance of Khomeini to the legitimization of the revolutionary process in Iran. It is this centrality to the revolution that was spearheaded by Iranians from all walks of life which turned him into a personality and topic of intense contestation.

Giants, by virtue of their size, accumulate the power to entice and motivate, to destroy and rebuild. Revolutionaries move in absolute terms without much consideration for the fate of those that they consider an impediment to their radical ideas. There is a lack of grace and subtlety in the abrupt and bulky movements of revolutionary giants. So when Khomeini became embroiled in the revolution in Iran in 1979, it was inevitable that he would become a divisive figure. He was, after all, under the impression that his was a just battle in support of the oppressed against their oppressors. “What is important for me is resistance against oppression [*zulm*],” he proclaimed repeatedly. “I will be wherever this resistance is pursued the best.”<sup>4</sup>

In light of this dichotomisation of the world into a cosmic battle between justice and evil, the revolution in Iran, like other revolutions before it, created immense fissures. Even when Khomeini was adamant about keeping the unity of the revolutionary forces, when he appealed to the “various classes of the nation,” the students, religious minorities, scholars, professors, judges, civil servants, workers and peasants,<sup>5</sup> and declared himself the brother of all of them, he made clear that attacks by counter-revolutionaries “club-wielding thugs and other trouble-makers” may result in their killing.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, Khomeini deemed it permissible to kill members of the Iranian armed forces in self-defence, if they were directly responsible for the killing of demonstrators against the Shah or a major pillar of his regime.<sup>7</sup>

It was in that way that Khomeini’s discourse created an internal “other,” the counter-revolutionary menace that needed to be uprooted in order to cleanse the residues of the previous order in a grand effort to recapture a seemingly lost but realistically irretrievable history, in

<sup>3</sup> The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, retrieved from <http://www.iranchamber.com/government/laws/constitution.php>, accessed 12 October 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Ruhollah Khomeini, *Ain-e enghelab-e Islami: Gozidehai az andisheh va ara-ye Imam Khomeini* (Tehran: Moasses-ye tanzim va naschr-e assar-e Imam Khomeini, 1373 [1994]), p. 497.

<sup>5</sup> Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution*, pp. 252–253.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 248.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 314.

the case of Khomeini and his followers encapsulated in the quest for an “authentically” Islamic identity for Iran. However, death was not exclusive; it was not only the counter-revolutionary other that was threatened. Comparable to the discourse permeating the other great revolutions of modern history – Russian, Cuban, Chinese – the Iranian revolutionaries, too, blurred the boundaries between life and death in order to stress the momentous importance of the struggle at hand. After all, despite the wave of executions that occurred after the revolution, more Iranians supporting Khomeini died than those opposing him, not at least in the trenches of the Iran-Iraq war between 1980 and 1988. As such, the revolution claimed the lives of both self and other, revolutionary and counter-revolutionary, which explains why no Iranian remained untouched by the events. Despite repeated calls for a non-confrontational policy, Khomeini, as indicated, accepted death as an inevitability of the revolutionary process in Iran. As he proclaimed in an address to the Pope – who tried to mitigate the repercussions of the U.S. embassy takeover by Muslim students supporting Khomeini – including the threat of U.S. military strikes, in November 1979:

We fear neither military action nor economic boycott, for we are the followers of Imams who welcomed martyrdom. Our people are also ready to welcome martyrdom today. ... We have a population of thirty-five million people, many of whom are longing for martyrdom. All thirty-five million of us would go into battle and after we had all become martyrs, they could do what they liked with Iran. No, we are not afraid of military intervention. We are warriors and strugglers; our young men have fought barehanded against tanks, cannons, and machine guns, so Mr. Carter should not try to intimidate us. We are accustomed to fighting and even when we have lacked weapons, we have had our bodies, and we can make use of them again.<sup>8</sup>

Revolutionaries claim the individual in its entirety. Khomeini was not content to claim the consciousness of Iranians; his discourse targeted them all the way down to their bodies. As such, the Iranian revolution did not only engender new institutions that had never existed in human history in this shape and form before – a Supreme Jurisprudent (Vali-e faqih), a Council of Guardians (Shoray-e negahban), an Assembly of Experts (Shoray-e khebregan) – in addition, the revolution added to this formal “macro-sphere” of high politics very immediate “micro-norms” that were meant to reengineer Iranians within an increasingly Islamicised system. Khomeini’s vision of governance as a synthesis of religious,

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 285.

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moral and political ordinances was not without precedence in Iranian history.<sup>9</sup> Even the ancient kings of Persia, loathed by the revolutionaries because of their association with the ideology of the Shah, claimed the guidance of god (Ahura Mazda) in their cosmic dealings with their subjects and the world that they so stunningly dominated. But the innovative, if egregious, fusion of republicanism and (Shi'i) Islam that underpins the Islamic Republic of Iran until today is without precedence and did not limit itself to the sphere of high politics or the state. Rather the contrary; in truly modern fashion, the revolution, as it was pursued by Khomeini and his followers, reached all the way down to the subjectivity of Iranians. From mundane examples such as the emergence of the beard as a revolutionary symbol, the aversion to ties and miniskirts as manifestations of western decadence and the corruption of Iranian culture under the Shah to substantial and legalised curtailments of individual rights, especially for women, the moralistic discourse offered by Khomeini was not merely premised on political change, it was meant to produce the ideal *homo Islamicus*:

Governments that do not base themselves on divine law conceive of justice only in the natural realm; you will find them concerned only with the prevention of disorder and not with the moral refinement of the people. Whatever a person does in his own home is of no importance, so long as he causes no disorder in the street. In other words, people are free to do as they please at home. Divine governments, however, set themselves the task of making man into what he should be.<sup>10</sup>

The blind spots of and loopholes in this grand effort to reengineer subjectivity in Iran are obvious, which is why Khomeini's discourse created spaces of dissent and resistance where Iranians attempted to push back the gigantic intrusions into their individual preferences and daily lives by the state. It is within the sphere delineated by approval and rejection where the legacy of Khomeini is contested within Iran and beyond until today. But undoubtedly, Khomeini successfully supervised the institutionalisation of a new form of governance that has not existed in human history before and has survived a devastating eight-year-long war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq, a comprehensive sanctions regime spearheaded by the United States, and continuous military threats by Israel. Not unlike Khomeini himself, the political system in Iran proved itself steely,

<sup>9</sup> On the making of Iran's constitution, see also Asghar Shirazi, *The Constitution of Iran: Politics and the State in the Islamic Republic* (trans. John O' Kane), (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution*, p. 330.

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somewhat stoic and indomitable. Hence, after more than three decades, the Islamic Republic continues to be a stable if contested invention.<sup>11</sup>

## BIOGRAPHICAL TRAJECTORIES

There are a few constants in Khomeini's biography that reveal the tensions in his political thought which appears, at times, eclectic and paradoxical. How could Khomeini talk about the God "given right of liberty and freedom" that Islam guarantees and proclaim that "freedom is the primary right of humans" and tolerate the execution of political prisoners throughout the first decade of the revolution?<sup>12</sup> How could he write love poetry and constrain art and literature in Iran at the same time? What influences affected his political and social attitudes?

Some scholars have taken the short route to explain the tensions in Khomeini's thought. They argue that he was a cynical opportunist. He would say one thing to Iranians in order to secure their support for the revolution and do something else in practice. There is no doubt that Khomeini's utopian vision was implemented with a good deal of Machiavellian pragmatism. He had to navigate within a context that was not really Islamic in the sense he interpreted Islam, and was aware that he had to compromise – as he did at the beginning of the revolution – with other forces including the liberal-nationalist *Nehzat-e azadi-ye Iran* (Freedom Movement of Iran), led by the first Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan, and liberal technocrats such as Abolhasan Bani Sadr, who became the first president of the Islamic Republic.<sup>13</sup> But the adherence to a highly politicised, interest-based and state-centric interpretation of Islam in Iran was also due to his convictions as a cleric, religious scholar and theologian. In many ways, Khomeini was a *mujtahid* first and a revolutionary second; his radical messages were always also steeped in

<sup>11</sup> See further, Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *Iran in World Politics: The Question of the Islamic Republic* (London/New York: Hurst/Oxford University Press, 2008). On the dialectic between power and resistance in the country, see Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *On the Arab Revolts and the Iranian Revolution: Power and Resistance Today* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013) and Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, "What Is Radicalism: Power and Resistance in Iran", *Middle East Critique*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (2012), pp. 271–290.

<sup>12</sup> Mohammad-Hossein Jamshidi (ed.), *Andishey-e siyasi-e imam Khomeini* (Tehran: Pajoheshkade-ye imam Khomeini va enghelabe islami, 1384 [2005]), pp. 245, 246.

<sup>13</sup> Mehdi Bazargan and his cabinet resigned during the hostage crisis and in protest of Iran's deteriorating human rights situation at the beginning of the revolution. Abolhasan Bani Sadr was dismissed from the presidency in 1981 after being impeached by the Iranian parliament. He fled Iran into exile in 1981.

legalistic premises informed by his interpretation of the Shi'i tradition of *usul al-fiqh* (principles of Islamic jurisprudence).

As a consequence of that theological outlook, the *ulema* (clerics) occupied a central role in Khomeini's political discourse. In almost all of his major proclamations before, during and after the revolution, he stressed their centrality. For instance, in 1967 in an open letter to the Shah's Prime Minister Amir Abbas Hoveyda when he described them as "the guardians of the independence and integrity of the Muslim countries"<sup>14</sup> or in 1971 in a message to the pilgrims in Mecca, when he demeaned their "oppression" by the Shah and foreigners,<sup>15</sup> and their apathy in the face of tyranny which betrayed the legacy of "Imam Hussein's bloody revolt" against the Umayyad caliph Yazid in the seventh century AD.<sup>16</sup> After his return to Iran in 1979, he supported the involvement of the *mujtahideen* of the newly established "Revolutionary Council" in the cultural revolution with the aim to "Islamize" the universities in order "to make them autonomous, independent of the West and independent of the East [i.e. the Soviet Union]," to establish an "independent university system and an independent culture."<sup>17</sup> Undoubtedly, Khomeini gave a special place to what he occasionally referred to as the "clerical class."<sup>18</sup>

This should not come as a surprise. The clerical strata of Iranian society were the primary reference point for Khomeini throughout his life. His clerical worldview is one of the few constants that can be drawn from his biography. Surely, if Khomeini had been born an aristocrat tied to the ruling monarchs or into a working-class family, his views on Iranian politics would have been rather different. But his biography made it inevitable that there would emerge a clerical approach to politics, culture and society: He was born Ruhollah Musawi Khomeini on September 24,

<sup>14</sup> Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution I*, p. 192.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 197.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 205.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 298.

<sup>18</sup> It was Ayatollah Morteza Mutahhari, one of the closest clerical allies of Khomeini, who was adamant in stressing the centrality of the "clerical class" to the state and politics in Iran and who used the term even more forcefully in his influential books and talks at the famed Hosseiniyeh Ershad in Tehran, where he lectured together with Ali Shariati before the revolution. Mutahhari and Khomeini were particularly adamant about stressing that clerical leadership superseded intellectual leadership, whereas lay intellectuals such as Shariati were largely opposed to clerical governance. On Shariati, see the splendid book by Ali Rahnema, *An Islamic Utopian: A Political Biography of Ali Shariati* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998). On Ayatollah Mutahhari and his focus on clerical leadership, see Mahmood T. Davari, *The Political Thought of Ayatollah Murtaza Mutahhari: An Iranian Theoretician of the Islamic State* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), pp. 134–135.



1902, into a middle-class clerical family in the small town of Khomein. The family origin of his ancestors was linked to the seventh Imam of the Shi'i Imam Musa al-Kazim, which identifies the family as "Musawi Seyyeds" who claim descent from the Prophet Mohammed. His immediate ancestors had immigrated to Iran from Northern India, where they had settled from their original abode in Neishapur in North-Eastern Iran in the early eighteenth century.<sup>19</sup> His grandfather, Seyyed Ahmad Musawi "Hindi" (literally "the Indian"), was invited to the town of Khomein by a certain Yusef Khan during pilgrimage to the shrine city of Najaf in Iraq, where Ali, the first Imam of the Shi'i, is buried. Seyyed Ahmad was a contemporary and relative of Mir-Hamed Hossein (d. 1880), who authored several widely distributed volumes on disputes between Sunni and Shi'i in the traditional religious canon.

Khomeini's father Mostafa kept the religious tradition of the family alive and trained as a *mujtahid* first in Isfahan in Iran, and then in the *atabat* (shrine cities) of Samarra and Najaf in Iraq. In March 1903, just about five months into Khomeini's life, Mostafa was murdered under disputed circumstances. With such a prominent religious tradition within the family, there was no doubt that Khomeini would pursue the clerical path as well. His education commenced in earnest between 1920 and 1921 at the Mirza Yusuf Khan *madrassa* in Arak (previously Sultanabad), which hosted Sheikh Abdolkarim Haeri (d. 1936), one of the most preeminent religious scholars in Iran during that period. At this stage of his studies, Khomeini focused on logic and (Ja'fari or Ithna 'asheri) jurisprudence, and was firmly steeped in the clerical traditions of the day. He continued his studies in jurisprudence, gnosis, ethics, philosophy and semantics at the Dar al-Shafa in Qom, which was the principle centre of religious learning in Iran and a major pilgrimage site due to the Shrine of Hazrat-e Masoumeh, a daughter of Musa al-Kazim (745–799 AD). Khomeini was to forge a career in Qom that spawned four decades (1923–1962), over a period that turned him into an influential religious scholar and increasingly vocal political personality.<sup>20</sup>

The methodical lifestyle that Khomeini followed, signposted by praying, studying, lectures and teaching, may explain the discipline that many of his associates and biographers attributed to him. According to one

<sup>19</sup> See Hamid Algar, "A Short Biography", in Abdar Rahman Koya (ed.), *Imam Khomeini: Life, Thought and Legacy* (Petaling Jaya: Islamic Book, 2009), p. 19; and Baqer Moin, *Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), p. 2.

<sup>20</sup> For a recent introduction to Shi'i history and politics, see Hamid Dabashi, *Shi'ism: A Religion of Protest* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).



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observer, Khomeini adhered to a “systematic” daily routine, and even followed a particular method in his movements.<sup>21</sup> He would always step “on the minbar with his left leg first, pause and then commence his sermon.”<sup>22</sup> He would pay particular attention to the behaviour of his students, reminding them that “discipline and organisation” were central traits that would ensure success in their future life.<sup>23</sup> Sadeqh Tabatabai, one of Khomeini’s close supporters that accompanied him on the plane on his triumphant return to Tehran on 1 February 1979, adds in his recently published biography that Khomeini followed a careful dress code. In this particular anecdote, Khomeini made sure that his dark-blue socks matched the grey colour of his cloak, before he went to the mosque.<sup>24</sup> Tabatabai also indicates that Khomeini seemed to be a connoisseur of eau de toilette.<sup>25</sup> Beyond his disciplined demeanour then, there seemed to be whiffs of “worldliness” to Khomeini’s character. At the same time, the “vaticanic” lifestyle in Qom, compounded by his similarly routinized life in exile in Najaf (1965–1978), must have made an indelible imprint on Khomeini, entrenching his clerical world view.

Throughout his life, Khomeini felt more comfortable in the religious confines of his circles and rather anxious about the secular realities encroaching on them. In particular, Qom was his centre of the universe, the imperial Vatican of the Shi’i that was waiting to be awakened to the calls of revolution. The efforts of Khomeini to politicise Qom bore fruit when, in January 1978, demonstrators clashed with the Shah’s security forces. “The religious centre in Qom has brought Iran back to life,” he proudly proclaimed from the famed Sheikh Ansari mosque in Najaf. “The name of the religious centre in Qom will remain inscribed in history for all time. By comparison with Qom, we here in Najaf are dead and buried; it is Qom that has brought Islam back to life.”<sup>26</sup> It should not come as a surprise, then, that after the revolution Khomeini immediately settled in Qom and proclaimed himself a “proud citizen” of the town.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Rouhani (Ziarati), *Baresi va tahlil az nehzate imam Khomeini*, p. 29.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>24</sup> Sadeqh Tabatabai, *Khaterat-e siyasi – ejtemai-ye doktor Sadeqh Tabatabai, jelde aval*, vol. 1, (Tehran: Mo’aseseh-ye chap va nashr-e oruj, 1387 [2008]), p. 156.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., pp. 155–156.

<sup>26</sup> Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution*, p. 218.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Algar, “A short biography”, p. 24. In the meantime, the clerical links in his life were reinforced by his marriage to Qods-e Iran Saqafai (or Qodsi) in 1929, the daughter of Ayatollah Mirza Mohammad Saqafi. The marriage lasted until Khomeini’s death in 1989.

The turbulent period immediately after the establishment of the Islamic Republic necessitated his return to Tehran, but it is not too far-fetched to argue that Khomeini regarded Qom as the real epicentre of religious activism and revolution both in Iran and throughout the Muslim world.

This socialisation of Khomeini into a senior cleric whose world view emerged relatively independent from competing secular institutions was possible because of a functioning institutional infrastructure that abetted the clerical class in Iran at least since the Safavid dynasty (1502–1736), which established Shi'i-Islam as the country's main national narrative. It was under the Safavids, and in particular during the rule of Shah Abbas I (1571–1629), when the idea of Imamite jurisprudence in the Twelver-Shi'i tradition was institutionalised in the burgeoning *madrasas* and other educational and civic institutions sponsored by the state which were increasingly populated by senior Shi'i scholars recruited from all over the Muslim world, in particular from Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Chief among them was Muhaqiq al-Karaki (also al-Thani), a pivotal clerical personality that readily carried the torch of the state-sponsored Shi'ism institutionalised during that period. In his widely disseminated study, "Refuting the Criminal Invectives of Mysticism (Mata'in al Mufrimiya fi Radd al-Sufiya)," Al-Karaki established one of the most powerful refutations of the Sufi tradition in Iran and set the jurisprudential guidelines for the predominant authority of the jurist based on the Imamite succession.<sup>28</sup> As a consequence, the *usuli* (rationalist) school of Shi'i Islam increasingly dominated the seminaries and pushed back the followers of the traditionalist (*akhhari*) paradigm. Al-Karaki and other influential clerics emphasised the power of *ijtihad* or dialectical reasoning, and made a strong case in favour of the leadership of *mujtahids* whose divine decrees would be emulated (*taqlid*) by their followers.<sup>29</sup> As such, Al-Karaki's reinvention of a Shi'i orthodoxy based on a religious hierarchy dominated by a supreme jurist can be seen as one of the main precursors to Khomeini's idea of the *Velayat-e faqih* or the rule of the Supreme Jurisprudent.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> See further, Rula Jurdi Abisaab, *Converting Persia: Religion and Power in the Safavid Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), p. 24. For Karaki's writings, see Muhaqiq al-Karaki, *Jameal maqasid*, vol. 2 (Qum: Ahlol Bayt Publication, 1365 [1986]).

<sup>29</sup> See further, Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism: The Sources of Esotericism in Islam* (trans. David Streight), (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), pp. 138–139.

<sup>30</sup> For a full history of the idea of *marjaiyat*, see Abdulaziz Abdulhussein Sachedina, *The Just Ruler in Shi'ite Islam: The Comprehensive Authority of the Jurist in Imamite Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); and Linda Walbridge, *The Most*