
Iran's Long History and Short-Term Society

Homa Katouzian
*Oxford University, UK**

ARTICLE INFO*Article history:*

Date of submission: 27-04-2019

Date of acceptance: 21-07-2019

JEL Classification:

B10

A14

N10

Keywords:

Iran's Long History

Term Society

Iran

ABSTRACT

Iran has a long history and a short-term society. It is a country with thousands of years of history, the great variety of every aspect of which is at least partly responsible for the diversity of opinions and emotions among its peoples. It is an ancient land of the utmost variety in nature, art and architecture, languages, literature and culture. When the Greeks (from whom European civilisations descend) came across the Iranians first, Persian Iranians were ruling that country as the Persian empire, and they called it 'Persis'. Just as when the Persians first came into contact with Ionian Greeks, they called the entire Greek lands 'Ionia'. To this day Iranians refer to Greece as Ionia (=Yunan) and the Greeks as Ionians (=Yunaniyan). Thus from the ancient Greeks to 1935, Iran was known to Europeans as Persia; then the Iranian government, prompted by their crypto-Nazi contacts in Germany, demanded that other countries officially call it Iran, largely to publicise the Aryan origins of the country. This meant that, for a long time, almost the entire historical and cultural connotations of the country were lost to the West, the country often being confused with Iraq, and many if not most mistakenly thinking that it too was an Arab country.

1. Introduction

In some historical sense Iran is a wider cultural region than Persia. Originally, Iranians were more of a race than a nation, the Persians being only one people among many of them. Apart from the country that is called Iran today, Afghanistan and Tajikistan also belong to the wider Iranian entity in historical as well as cultural terms, and the Iranian cultural region is even wider than the sum of these three countries, extending to parts of north India, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, the Caucasus and Anatolia. Persian is only one of the Iranian languages, there having been many others, of which Kurdish, Pashto, Ossetic and a few local languages in Iran

* E-mail address: homa.katouzian@sant.ox.ac.uk

still survive as living tongues; while other, non-Iranian, languages are also spoken in Iran, notably Turkish and Arabic. On the other hand, other varieties of Persian are spoken both in Afghanistan and Tajikistan, such that the people of the three countries can understand each other in conversation as well as literary communication. And many more Persian dialects are spoken in Iran.

'Farsi' is the Persian term for the Persian language, but its use in contemporary English is unnecessary and confusing. Unlike 'Persian', 'Farsi' has no cultural or historical connotations, and hardly any English-speaker would have heard of 'Farsi literature', or would be able to locate it if they did. To a large number of Europeans, Persian is a language of culture and literature, but very few would know of Farsi even as a language. Persian is a much more meaningful English term and should be preferred to Farsi.

Persian literature is the most glittering jewel in the crown of Iranian history and culture, the greatest single contribution of Iran to human civilisation, and the collective product of countless poets and writers, both native and non-native Persian speakers. Persian poetry in particular, famous the world over through the works of Rumi, Hafiz, Khayyam, Ferdowsi and Sa'di, is one of the most elevated poetical legacies of humankind, and includes stars that are unsurpassed by any other literary tradition. Iranian architecture, ancient as well as medieval, represented by such historic monuments as the pre-Islamic Persepolis and the post-Islamic Congregational Mosque of Isfahan, is one of the world's major architectural legacies. Persian miniature, modern painting and mosaic designs - spanning more than a thousand years of visual art - while related to other artistic traditions, are unique in their distinct Iranian identity. Persian carpets in their great variety are the most advanced and most exquisite artworks of their kind. Iranians have been much better at poetry, arts and crafts, religion, mysticism, myth and legend than of reason, science and social institutions.

Archaeological evidence of early civilisations in Iranian lands go back several thousand years, but the country's written history dates back to over 2,500 years ago when the Persian king Cyrus the Great founded the first world empire, stretching from central Asia to Cyprus, Egypt and Libya. This was the culmination of almost two millennia of the movement of Aryan tribes to the Iranian Plateau, most likely from the steppes of northern Central Asia. There were many

of them, including Scythians, Parthians, Alans, Medes and others, of which the Persians eventually founded the Persian empire in the region and beyond.

2. The Short-Term Society

The Persian empire was often in conflict with the Greeks, but managed to run a large imperial state, which, unlike in Greece, concentrated all power in its own hands. It was a legacy that, in its essentials, was to remain up to the twentieth century and beyond. This concentration was a source of strength for the state as well as weakness, because it could exercise arbitrary power over the society, but for the same reason the society often saw it almost as an alien force, and perennially revolted against it, most notably in the eighteenth century, or failed to defend it effectively against foreign invaders, for example Muslim Arabs in the seventh century. The fall of the state was invariably followed by a period of chaos which ended in another absolute and arbitrary state.

Thus, while the country was ancient, the seat of several empires and creator of a rich literary and artistic tradition, there was a fundamental antagonism between state and society throughout Iranian history, putting aside few brief exceptions. The state tended towards absolute and arbitrary rule; the society tended towards rebellion and chaos. One of four situations normally prevailed in Iranian history: absolute and arbitrary rule; weak arbitrary rule; revolution; chaos – which was normally followed by a return to absolute and arbitrary rule.

Traditional Iranian revolutions were intended to overthrow the existing ruler and state rather than abolish the system of arbitrary rule, which, until the nineteenth century, was believed to be natural and therefore unavoidable. The general cycle of arbitrary rule–chaos–arbitrary rule did not mean that no change occurred in Iran's long history. On the contrary, because of the short-term nature of the society, change was more frequent than in European history, and, contrary to long-term changes in Europe, history could and did repeat itself. What persisted as the norm in Iranian history was the arbitrary nature of state power which justified and was justified by the rebellious nature of society.

The state's independence from all social classes, which accounted for its extraordinary power, was also the main source of its weakness and vulnerability. Since it was not dependent on any

social class it therefore lacked a long-term social base such that when the state was in trouble they would rally behind it. And since the right of succession was not guaranteed in any law or entrenched custom, any rebel could replace the reigning ruler once he had managed to overthrow him. All this gave rise to the 'short-term society': although long and eventful, Iranian history lacked long-term continuity but consisted of a series of connected short terms. A man could be a humble person this year, a minister in the next, and lose his life and possessions not long after that, without any legal trimmings. The short-term nature of the society was both a cause and an effect of the absence of a long-term aristocratic class and social institutions.

Chapter 1 details the peculiarities of legitimacy and succession in Iranian history, while chapter 2 offers a comprehensive analysis of the features and characteristics of the Iranian short-term society, its causes, implications and consequences.

3. Iranian identity

Although ancient and medieval Iranian empires sometimes included even more diverse peoples than at the present time, a quality and characteristic of Iranianism (Iranian-ness or *Iraniyat*) always distinguished the country from the neighbouring lands and peoples. It was not nationalism in any modern sense of the term, but consciousness of a social and cultural community which made the country and its peoples different and distinct from Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Turks, the Chinese and Indians.

The factors which bound them together and determined the shared identity of Iranian-ness have not been the same throughout the ages, although some of them have always played an important role in it. Three factors have been most important in this since medieval times. One is the Persian language as the lingua franca and the medium of high literature and culture which often went beyond Iranian borders and even became the official and cultural language in other countries such as Mogul India. Another factor is Shii Islam which is unique to Iran as a state, is followed by the great majority of Iranians, and has aspects and implications that are deeply ingrained in the Iranian culture since ancient pre-Islamic times. The third factor is territoriality, the fact that despite territorial expansion and contraction through the ages, which for many

centuries led to the formation of several states in Iranian lands, there was a fairly distinct Iranian territory at least as a cultural region.

4. Ancient Persia

Iran is much older than its three millennia of written history. There is evidence of civilisation in parts of the country that in a few cases go back several thousand years. The Iranian nomads who were to give their name to the country wandered into it for more than a thousand years before one of their groups, the Persians, founded the first Persian empire in 550 B.C. There are rich, complex and elaborate myths and legends that originate in the earlier periods, before the Medes founded the first Iranian empire, which in turn was overthrown and replaced by the first great world empire, founded by the Iranian Persian Cyrus the Great.

Ancient Iranian myths are vast, varied, rich and colourful. They originate in the old Indo-Iranian traditions which are themselves represented by ancient Indo-Iranian cults. Later developments of Persian mythology have given rise to a body of myth, legend and legendary history which are assumed to have been gathered in the *Khodaynamag* during the Sasanian period. This has been lost but post-Islamic accounts based on it contain the whole or parts of the ancient pre-Islamic myths and legends. Their best known and most complete source in New (i. e. post-Islamic) Persian is *Shahnameh* (The Book of Kings) which exists in Ferdowsi's rendering of the book in Persian poetry.

Shahnameh is made up of three cycles, Pishdadiyan, Keyaniyan and the Sasanian. The first cycle, beginning with the dawn of man and the kingdom of Pishdadiyan, is pure mythology. The next cycle describes the Iranian kingdom of Keyaniyan, the long story of a heroic age in which myth and legend combine to produce an ancient epic, the exploits of Rostam, Sohrab, Siyavosh, Esfandiyar and so many other heroes and champions. The first two cycles of *Shahnameh* are centred on Eastern Persia whereas the third cycle is centred in the South and West. It mixes history with legend in providing an account of the history of the Sasanian monarchy, the last Persian dynasty before the Arab conquest.

Turning to history, Cyrus the Great founded the Achaemenid dynasty and first empire and is known for his humane treatment of conquered nations. This empire lasted for over two centuries until it was conquered by Alexander the Great in the fourth century BC. A fairly long period of Greek rule and settlement was followed by the rise of another Iranian empire, that of the *Parthians* who were the first to become neighbours and rivals to Roman empire. The Irano-Roman conflict continued as before when the Sasanian empire replaced that of the Parthians in third century AD. They made Zoroastrianism, an ancient Iranian cult, their state religion. Zoroastrians identified three 'states' for existence: first, a state of harmony and bliss, followed by 'the mixed state' containing both good and evil in the present world, which would be eventually brought to an end by a saviour, resulting in the third state, that of permanent bliss. Heaven, hell, reward and punishment in the next world are quite similar to the Abrahamic religions of the Middle East which it pre-dates. The Zoroastrian orthodoxy was challenged in the third century by Mani, the prophet of Manichaeism, a hybrid form of Zoroastrianism, Christianity and Buddhism. This was suppressed but later had a considerable impact on post-Islamic Persian Sufism. The Mazdakites also challenged Zoroastrian orthodoxy in the sixth century AD, but they too were suppressed, especially as they launched an egalitarian social movement.

5. Mediaeval Persia

In AD 651 the Sasanian empire was overthrown by Muslim Arabs. This was a fresh force combining an egalitarian and monotheist faith with the spiritual force of a revolutionary movement facing a vast, but archaic, exhausted and conflict-ridden empire which was not energetically defended by its own people. It took two centuries for all Iranians to convert, by which time the first autonomous Persian states came into being. During that period, Iranians made considerable contributions to the emerging Islamic culture and civilisation as administrators, literati, scientists, physicians, and so on. Various Persian states emerged in the former Sasanian territories until the twelfth century when they were all conquered by hordes of incoming, mainly Turkic, nomads from Central Asia who formed the vast Seljuk empire. This was followed by the Mongol devastations of Iranian lands in the next century, and they in turn

were followed by various Turkic states in the fourteenth century. All this while, however, Persian was the language of culture and administration as well as the *lingua franca* in many non-Iranian lands such as Anatolia, Turkistan, western China and west India, later stretching to the whole of the sub-continent and, at times, beyond it to Indo-China.

Classical Persian Science, arts and literature emerged and flourished in this period. In the golden age of Persia, there appeared scientists, philosophers and mystics such that Ibn Khaldun, the great mediaeval Arab historian and sociologist (before sociology) said that the Persians thus proved the Prophet of Islam's saying that 'If learning were suspended in the highest parts of heaven the Persians would attain it'. They included such towering figures as Khawrazmi (Algorismo), Razi (Razes), IbnSina (Avicenna), Biruni (al-Bituni), Sohravardi (al-Sohravardi) and Ghazali (Algazel). Poetry flourished such that it has seldom done so profusely anywhere in the world. There were very many masters of classical Persian poetry but the four great stars compare well with any that world history has to offer: Ferdowsi, author of the above-noted rich and sophisticated epic *Shahnameh*, Rumi, probably the greatest mystic poet of all time, Sa'di the matchless lover and Muslim humanist almost three centuries before Erasmus and the rise of Christian humanism, and Hafiz, whom Goethe admired above any other poet. Chapter 7 looks at the entire nexus of classical Persian literature through the great variety of its form and substance, introducing its various literary genres and briefly discussing the major poets and writers as well as the different styles which they applied to poetry and prose literature. Chapter 8 focuses on Sa'di's love poetry, introducing its four categories and showing their uniqueness as songs of earthly human love – or the love of the flesh - in classical Persian literature, and solving the enigma surrounding the gender of the beloved in his poetry.

In 1501 the Persian empire was once again reunited under one banner as 'The Gurded Domains' and the Shi'i branch of Islam was made state religion. This was the Safavidempire which peaked in the early seventeenth century under Abbas I and fell to Afghan rebels in 1722. There followed decades of civil and foreign wars.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century the Qajars founded a dynasty and brought relative peace to the country. But time was not on Iran's side, and she became subject to an acute Anglo-Russian rivalry for imperialist domination, subsequently dubbed the Great Game, which robbed

the country of full independence and sovereignty. This was the origin of modern conspiracy theories among Iranians, which are still held strongly by virtually all shades of political opinion: they developed the habit of attributing sometimes even the slightest event in their country to the machinations of foreign powers, and saw themselves as helpless pawns in the chess games of outside players. Chapter 9 describes, discusses and interprets the reaction in the Qajar period to the previous Safavid or 'Indian style' poetry, and how this led to the emergence of neo-classical Persian literature or '*Bazgasht-e adabi*', and the poets and writers who most contributed to its rise and progress.

6. Modern Iran

The intellectuals looked for a remedy and eventually located it in law. They pointed to the fact that, unlike in Europe, the state had never been bound by any law outside its own will and had therefore exercised arbitrary power over the society. The Constitutional Revolution of the early twentieth century was intended to establish government based in law as well as modernise the country along European lines. But the fall of the arbitrary state resulted in chaos rather than democracy, as it had done throughout Iranian history. Using a chronographic approach, chapter 3 analyses in detail the causes and nature of the Constitutional Revolution, how and in what ways it differed from European revolutions, and why it did not succeed to establish constitutional, much less democratic, government in Iran. Chapter 11 reviews the events and ideas of the period through a study of Poet-Laureate Bahar's life and poetry in the constitutional era, while chapter 13 lays bare the chaotic trends which followed the revolution, through an analysis of the period's literature as politics.

It was from the Constitutional Revolution that modern and modernist literature emerged and new forms, ideas and subjects, including modernist poetry and modern fiction, increasingly began to flourish. Apart from chapters 11 and 13 cited above, chapter 12 offers the first study in English of the works of IrajMirza, the great humourist of the period. Chapter 14 presents an analytical discussion of Jamalzadeh's entire fictional oeuvre, supplementing the author's various books and articles on SadeqHedayat published elsewhere. Chapter 10 is a review of Persian literature, modernist as well as modern, including poetry and fiction in the twentieth

century. The book ends with chapter 15 which contains a literary, psychological and social appraisal of the life and works of Forugh Farrohzad, the iconic Persian woman poet of modern times.

In 1921 Reza Khan Pahlavi's coup brought the chaos to an end, and by 1926 he had managed to found the Pahlavi dynasty. The coup was helped by a few British diplomats and military officers on the ground, but the British government did not have a hand in it. It resulted in a dictatorship which within a decade led to the restoration of the ancient arbitrary rule, while at the same time steps were taken to modernise the administration, transport, industry, and education. The modernisation drive laid the foundation for later developments in the twentieth century, but at the time it benefitted only a small minority of the population.

In the twentieth century, modern Iranian elites, deeply influenced by European nationalist ideologies, rediscovered and romanticised ancient Persia as the country's Aryan, glorious, almost perfect past, and blamed the contemporary backwardness on Arabs and Islam: without the Muslim conquest, they believed, Iran would now have been on a par with Western Europe. This became the state ideology under the Pahlavis (1926-79). But, true to the tradition of state-society antagonism, not only traditionalists but even the secular and modernists later turned towards Shi'i Islam as a faith and /or an instrument with which to confront the secularist and arbitrary rule of the second Pahlavi, Mohammad Reza Shah. The revolution of February 1979 became fully Islamic only through the power struggles that followed its triumph. Since then, Aryanist ideological nationalism has once again become popular among modern and secular Iranians as a familiar product of the age-old state-society conflict. Chapters 4 and 5 cover in detail the main features of politics and anti-politics in the Pahlavi era through studies of the life and work of two of the most outstanding and least representative intellectual politicians of the period; while chapter 6 lays bare the causes and nature of the Iranian revolution of 1979, once again explaining its basic differences with European revolutions, and showing its analytical affinities with the Constitutional Revolution despite the otherwise obvious differences between them.

Modern nationalism also had important implications for the vexed question of Iranian identity. Pan-Persian Aryanism inevitably led to the downgrading, sometimes even denying, of

the multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic nature of Iranian society since its very foundation, leading to deep resentments, and sometimes animosity, towards the state as well as Persian speakers. Yet, not only did describing Iranians in terms of a single pure race fly in the face of historical as well as empirical facts, but, more importantly, it also ignored the Iranians' remarkable capacity and potential to receive, absorb and adapt foreign cultures, from Babylon in the sixth century BC to America in the twentieth century. Indeed, this is the secret of the richness and continuity of Iranian culture and civilisation despite historic interruptions and perennial revolutions.

The 1941 Allied invasion of Iran led to the abdication of Reza Shah and accession of his son Mohammad Reza. Once again chaotic politics returned to Iran. The Tudeh party, a popular front led by Marxist intellectuals, was the best-organised movement with a reformist programme under constitutional monarchy. For a while it brought hope to many modern intellectuals but it was followed by disillusionment when later in the 40s it turned into a Stalinist communist party. The end of that decade saw the movement for the nationalisation of Iranian oil led by Mohammad Mosaddeq as leader of the National Front who nationalised the oil industry and was elected prime minister. This was a patriotic democratic movement which primarily aimed at the attainment of full independence and democracy. But it did not manage to reach a settlement with Britain and was overthrown by a coup that was organised and financed by American and British governments, and manned by Mosaddeq's domestic opposition. Aspects of the Tudeh history and oil nationalisation are covered in chapter 5, on Khalil Maleki's life and work.

The 1953 coup eliminated the National Front and the Tudeh party from politics and established a pro-Western dictatorship that lasted until 1963. It was then that Mohammad Reza Shah also eliminated his regime's social base - i.e. the political and religious establishments - and renewed absolute and arbitrary rule following his White Revolution. The most important principles of the White Revolution were a land reform and women's vote. Although elections were not free, this was nevertheless a positive step towards the promotion of women's rights. The land reform benefited some of the peasants, but it excluded many, and resulted in the rapid decline of agriculture, helping to burgeon towns and cities with rural migrants.

The state-pocketed oil revenue explosion of 1973-1974 ironically had very negative consequences for the regime. It greatly enhanced its sense of self-confidence and the political repression. But more was to come. The oil price revolution almost immediately led to a massive increase in public expenditure. As both state and private incomes rose sharply so did consumption and investment expenditure, fuelling demand-pull inflation. At the same time, since the supply of many products ranging from fresh meat to cement could not be sharply increased from the domestic sources, supply shortages developed in the midst of financial plenty. Imports could not relieve the situation adequately partly because they would take time to purchase, but mainly because of limits to the existing delivery facilities. The state blamed the soaring inflation on the business community's profiteering and led a punitive campaign against it.

7. The revolution

This state of affairs brought all the strands of opposition, liberal, leftist, Islamist, indeed virtually the whole of the society together against the shah and state, and when he tried to loosen his grip slightly in response to President Carter's call for the extension of human rights in the world, the revolutionary movement, led by the charismatic and uncompromising Ayatollah Khomeini, overthrew his rule in February 1979.

The revolution did not conform to European revolutions because of the arbitrary nature of state and society. The most obvious difference was the fact that it was a revolt of the whole society rather than (as in Europe) a rebellion of the lower against the upper classes: no social group or political party stepped forward to defend the state. Later, the emergence of the Islamist state puzzled many, including Western and Western-inspired analysts and commentators who had expected a 'progressive' outcome à l'Europe.

The reason why they found the revolution 'enigmatic' or even 'unthinkable' after the event was that they had based their expectations on their knowledge of Western history and society. Whereas, Iran was a short-term society, normally subject to absolute and arbitrary rule, and therefore inclined towards disobedience and rebellion. Not even the upper classes could be

described as the state's social base which, in that case, would have had some share in power, and rallied to the state at times of adversity.

References

- Katouzian, H., (2010). *The Persians: Ancient, Medieval and Modern Iran*, London and New York, Yale University Press, paperback edition.
- (2007). *Iranian History and Politics: the dialectic of state and society*, London and New York, Routledge, paperback edition.
- , &Sa'di, (2006). *The Poet of Life, Love and Compassion*, Oxford: Oneworld.
- , (2004).The Short-Term Society: A Study in the Problems of Long-Term Political and Economic Development in Iran', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 40, 1, January 2004.
- , Sadeq H., (2002). *The Life and legend of an Iranian Writer*, London and New York: I. B. Tauris, paperback edition.
- Lambton, Ann K. S., (1953). *Landlord and Peasant in Persia*, Oxford University Press, London, New York and Toronto.
- The Cambridge History of Iran*, vols.1-7, various eds., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1968-1991.