# The Rise and Fall of Political Islam

## A Discussion with "Porsesh"

Question: What is your interpretation of concepts such as Islamic fundamentalism and political Islam? What is the difference between the two?

Mansoor Hekmat: I do not use the expression Islamic fundamentalism because I believe it is a calculated Right wing interpretation, which deliberately presents a misleading image of contemporary Islam and Islamic movements. What is real is the emergence of political Islam. In my opinion, political Islam is a contemporary reactionary movement; which has no relation, other than in form, to the late 19th and early 20th century Islamic movements. As for its social content and socio-political and economic objectives, this new movement is completely rooted in contemporary society. It is not a repeat of the same old phenomenon. It is the result of a defeated - or better put - aborted project of Western modernisation in Moslem-inhabited Middle Eastern countries from the late 60s and early 70s as well as a decline in the secular-nationalist movement, which was the main agent of this economic, administrative and cultural modernisation. The ideological and governmental crisis in the region heightened. With this political-ideological vacuum and the local bourgeoisie's confusion, the Islamic movement came to the fore as a Right-wing alternative for the reorganisation of bourgeois rule to confront the Left and the working class, which had emerged with the rise of capitalism. Even so, without the 1978-79 developments in Iran, these movements would still not have had a chance and would have remained marginal. It was in Iran that this movement organised itself as a state and turned political Islam into a considerable force in the region.

In my opinion, political Islam is a general title referring to the movement which sees Islam as the main vehicle for a Right wing restructuring of the ruling class and creating a anti-Left state in these societies. As such, it confronts and competes with other poles within the capitalist world, especially hegemonic blocs, over its share of power and influence in the world capitalist order. This political Islam does not necessarily have any given or defined Islamic jurisprudent and scholastic content. It is not necessarily fundamentalist and doctrinaire. This political Islam encompasses a varied and wide range of forces- from the political and ideological flexibility and pragmatism of Khomeini, to the rigid circles in the Right faction of the Iranian government; from the 'soft' and Western-looking Freedom Movement of Mehdi Bazargan and Nabih Berry's Amal, to the Taliban; from Hamas and Islamic Jihad, to the 'Islamic Protestantism' of the likes of Soorosh and Eshkevari in Iran.

Western powers, the media and their academic world have put forth the notion of fundamentalism in order to separate the terrorist and anti-Western veins of this Islamic movement from its pro-Western and conciliatory branches. They call the anti-Western sections fundamentalist and they attack fundamentalism so they can maintain political Islam as a whole, which for the moment is an irreplaceable foundation of anti-Socialist and Right wing rule in the region. The anti-Western currents, however, are not necessarily the fanatic and rigid factions of this movement. The most fundamentalist sections of the Islamic camp such as the Taliban and Saudi Arabia are the closest friends of the West.

Question: To what extent is the gaining of power by Islamists a sign of religious regression? Is this religious regression in these societies, a return to religious values and beliefs in personal and social life?

Mansoor Hekmat: I think that this not rooted in a revival of Islam as an ideological system. This is not ideological Islam, rather it is political Islam based on specific political equations. Clearly, with the rise of the power of political Islam, pressure to revive religious appearances in society intensifies. This, however, is a political pressure. The people sometimes yield to these pressures. This Islamic 'renaissance' is backed by violence and terror, which takes one form in Algeria and another in Iran. In Iran, quite the reverse, the reality is that the rise of political Islam and religious rule has caused a staggering anti-Islamic backlash, in both ideological and personal spheres. The emergence of political Islam in Iran has become the prelude to an anti-Islamic and anti-religious cultural revolution in people's minds, particularly amongst the young generation, which will stun the world with an immense explosion and will proclaim of the practical end of political Islam in the whole of Middle East.

Question: Some say the fall of the Islamic Republic will not be the last nail in the coffin of the Islamic movement, because other trends, particularly non-Shiites, could disassociate themselves from this defeat. Do you agree with this analysis?

Mansoor Hekmat: In my opinion, the Islamic movement in the Middle East and internationally will run out of breath with the fall of the Islamic regime in Iran. The question is not that Islamic Iran will be a defeated model, which others can disassociate themselves from. The Islamic Republic's defeat will arise within the context of an immense mass secularist uprising in Iran, which will touch the foundations of reactionary Islamic thought and not only discredit but condemn it in world opinion. The defeat of the Islamic regime will be comparable to the fall of Nazi Germany. No fascist can easily hold on to their position by merely distancing themselves organisationally and ideologically from this fallen pole. The entire movement will face decades of stagnation. The defeat of political Islam in Iran is an anti-Islamist victory, which will not end within the confines of Iran.

Question: You do not accept descriptions of countries like Iran as 'Islamic countries'. Why not?

Mansoor Hekmat: Any classification and labelling has a purpose behind it. Islam has been around in Iran for one thousand four hundred years and has obviously left its mark on certain things. But this is only one element in portraying this society - the same way that oppression, monarchy, police state, industrial backwardness, ethnicity, language, script, political history, pre-Islamic way of life, people's physical characteristics, international relations, geography and weather, diet, size of country, population concentration, economic relations, level of urbanisation, architecture, etc. are. All of these express real characteristics of the society. Now if out of the hundreds of factors that create differences between Iran and Pakistan, France and Japan, someone insists on pointing to the presence of Islam in some aspects of life in this society and brands all of us with this label - from anti-religious individuals like Dashty, Hedayat and you and I to the great majority who do not see themselves as believers and are not concerned about Islam and the clergy - then they must have a specific agenda. Iran is not an Islamic society; the government is Islamic. Islam is an imposed phenomenon in Iran, not only today but also during the monarchy, and has remained in power by oppression and murder. Iran is not an Islamic society. They have tried to make it Islamic by force for twenty years and failed. Calling the Iranian society Islamic is part of the reactionary crusade to make it Islamic.

Question: Do you see political Islam as a durable force in the political structure of Middle Eastern and North African Moslem-inhabited countries?

Mansoor Hekmat: Durability is a relative concept. Eventually there will come a time when the region will completely repel Islam and turn it into an antiquated phenomenon. Though it will still exist for people to watch, research, and even follow, it will in practice not play any part in people's lives. When this time will come, however, entirely depends on political trends in these countries and specifically the struggle for socialism and freedom. It is possible that still more generations will be forced to endure this Islam; and most definitely, some 'scholars' will see Islam as eternal. But there is nothing eternal and structural in the Middle East's Islamism. Progressive movements can close Islamism's chapter. The time to rid Iran of Islam can arrive very soon. In my opinion, the Islamic Republic and with it political Islam is in the process of being eradicated in Iran. If the political pressure of Islam and Islamism is eliminated, then the shallowness and emptiness of what is called the cultural dominance of Islam in a society like Iran will quickly become obvious. From being the stronghold of political Islam, within a few years, Iran will be the centre of and a leader in the fight against it.

In my opinion, terrorism is one of the forms in which political Islam will continue to exist in the region. The fight against Islamic terrorism will continue in the region after the victory of humanity over Islam for a few years. Sweeping away Islamic terror groups will require more time.

Question: In some earlier writings, you have largely linked the Islamic movement's renewal to the Palestinian Question and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Other participants in this roundtable discussion do not share your particular emphasis on this linkage.

Mansoor Hekmat: I think they have a static view of the issue. The issue is not only what problems and tensions have given rise to the Islamic movement. Although even within this limited context, the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Palestinian question and the presence of an ethnic-religious-imperialist 'enemy,' to which Arab nationalism and secularism have succumbed, is a main source of the emergence of the Islamic movement as an alternative claim to power. The more important question is: what direction would the dominant ideological, political and cultural trends in the 20th century push the Arab- and Moslem-inhabited Middle East, if there were no Palestinian question and Israel had not been created in this particular geography? How much could this region have had the opportunity to get integrated into the 'Western' world order, like Latin America and South East Asia, for example? How far could capitalism, technology, industry and Western capital - with all its administrative and cultural levelling and assimilating force - develop in the Middle East? How much could Islam like other 20th century religions become a recognised, modernised, moderated and absorbed strand in world capitalism's political superstructure? The issue is not whether or not the Palestinian question and this ongoing conflict have given rise to the new political Islam (though I think it has had a large share in it), but rather to what extent this conflict has prevented Moslems and Moslem-inhabited countries from integrating into the mainstream of the 20th century and the world capitalist system. How much has economic development, transfer of technology, integration into dominant Western culture, the development of the foundations of a capitalist civil society, the growth of Western-style political and administrative institutions, and the development of Western intellectual and cultural trends of thought (including secularism, modernism and liberalism) in these countries been hampered by the Palestinian question?

The process of modernisation, secularisation and westernisation of Islam-ridden countries had begun at the beginning of the 20th century and had, until the 1960s, achieved numerous results as well. The West, however, regarded the integration of the Middle Eastern society into the Western capitalist camp as unfeasible and unachievable because of the Palestinian question, a regional conflict that echoed a fundamental global polarisation during the Cold War, and because of its own strategic alliance with Israel. The real challenge to religious reaction can now only come from Socialism, but historically the rise of militant political Islam in the Middle East was the result of the defeat of bourgeois nationalism, secularism and modernism in these countries, which theoretically could and was even about to digest Islamism. Even if there was no talk of 'Islamic Protestantism', this process could have at least put Islam in these countries in the same position as Catholicism in Ireland. The condition for this bourgeois victory, however, was capitalist and industrial development and the transfer of technology and capital, which the West was reluctant to do because of the Arab-Israeli conflict in the Cold War context. Since the creation of Israel, the Middle East and its people have been perceived as evil in the West's political culture; they are among the main negative personages in the West's political culture. For the West, the Middle East is not like Latin America and South East Asia. It is a no go area. It is unstable, perilous, unreliable and hostile. Political Islam emerged in this black hole. If the question of Israel did not exist, the problems of Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Iraq would have been like that of Brazil, Peru and Mexico. Political Islam would still certainly exist, but it would have lingered on as a peripheral and sectarian movement and would not have entered the political centre stage in these countries.

Question: How do you define secularism? In a secular system, what are the limits of expression of religion and religious movements in the political and cultural arenas?

Mansoor Hekmat: Secularism must be defined as it is usually understood in everyday usage. Without attributing too much radicalism to it. Secularism means the separation of religion from the state and education, the separation of religion from a citizen's identity and the definition of a citizen's rights and responsibilities. Turning religion into a private affair. Where a person's religion does not enter the picture in defining their social and political identity and in their interaction with the state and bureaucracy. In view of this, secularism is a collection of minimum requirements. I, for example, cannot fit my entire stance regarding religion and its place in society into this concept. I do not just want secularism, but also society's conscious struggle against religion - in the same way that a segment of society's resources are spent on fighting malaria and cholera, and conscious policies are made against misogyny, racism and child abuse, some resources and energy ought to be allocated to de-religionisation. By religion I of course mean the religious machinery and defined religions and not religious thought or even belief in ancient or existing religions. I am an anti-religious person and want society to impose more limitations, beyond mere secularism, on organised religion and the 'religion industry.' If the law required religions to register as private foundations or profit making companies, pay taxes, face inspection and obey various laws, including labour laws, children's rights, laws controlling the prohibition of sexual discrimination, defamation, libel and incitement as well as laws protecting animals, etc. and if the 'religion industry' was treated like the 'tobacco industry,' only then would we approach a principled position on religion and the legal scope of its expression in society.

Question: Perhaps the difference is that de-religionisation can be interpreted or taken to mean the suppression of the followers of a given religion. How can one draw a line between this active anti-religious position with the violation of freedom of thought and expression?

Mansoor Hekmat: As I have mentioned, I am referring to organised religion and 'religion industries' and not religious beliefs. Anyone can have any beliefs, express them, publicise them and organise around them. The question is what regulations society puts in place to protect itself. Today society tries to protect children from the tobacco industry's advertising. The religion industry's advertising could be treated in exactly the same way. Smokers have all their rights and can establish any association and institution to advertise the benefits of tobacco and unite all smokers, but this does not mean giving a green light to the tobacco industry. The machinery of Islam and the other main religions (Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, etc.) are not voluntary societies of believers of specific ideas; they are enormous political and financial institutions, which have never been properly scrutinised, have not been subject to secular laws in society and have never accepted responsibility for their conduct. No one took Mr. Khomeini to court for issuing a death fatwa against Salman Rushdie; notwithstanding that inciting to murder is a crime in all countries of the world. And this is only a small corner of a network of murder, mutilation, intimidation, abduction, torture, and child abuse. I think that the Medellin drug cartels (Escobars), the Chinese triads, and Italian (and American) mafia are nothing in comparison to organised religion. I am speaking of a legitimate and organised struggle by a free and open society against these enterprises and institutions. At the same time, I regard believing in anything, even the most backward and inhuman doctrines, as the undeniable right of any individual.

Question: How much basis does the secularism and de-religionisation you are referring to have in Islam-influenced countries in the Middle East? To what extent can secularism be founded in these societies? Some talk about the possibility of remaining Islamic while also being secular. What movements are the sources of secularism in these societies and what are their chances of victory?

Mansoor Hekmat: I think the Left's intellectual fatigue and the blows which radical and critical thought and social idealism took from the mid-70s onward, have also afflicted many Left and well-wishing intellectuals with a regrettable tactical, stage-ist, gradualist and evolutionist view of the struggle for basic human ideals. A hundred years ago, the avant-garde humanity would have laughed at the proposition that human liberation could be achieved through priests, moderation of religion and the emergence of new interpretations from within the church. Today, sadly, 'professional scholars' and academics can prescribe that the Iranian woman can for now take secularism to mean the addition of a lighter shade of black to the officially approved colours for the veil. In my opinion, this overlooks the dynamics of revolution and change in society. Up to now, the world has advanced through upheavals - spectacular and swift transformations in thought, technique and social relations.

In my opinion, what is utopian and impossible is moderation of Islam and a gradual transformation of Islamic regimes to secular governments. And what is real and probable, and in the case of Iran, now inevitable, is the realisation of secularism through a mass anti-religious uprising, against existing governments and all the different interpretations and readings of Islam.

Question: What social force or movements could herald secularism in the Middle East?

Mansoor Hekmat: This should normally be the historical mission of newly emerged capitalism in these countries and bourgeois movements in the 20th century - the task of liberalism, nationalism, modernism and westernisation. For a period, it was assumed that this process was proceeding, albeit slowly, half-heartedly and partially. These movements, however, ran out of breath in the mid-70s, the Westernisation project failed and the political crisis heightened. Earlier, independence movements in

the Middle East had not established pro-West governments in the majority of cases. The fall of royal dynasties led to the appearance or emergence of military governments, which fell primarily under Soviet influence within the context of East-West confrontation. Capitalism and industry in the Middle East have generally spread through oppressive nationalist governments. Bourgeois civil society never formed. In the Middle East, bourgeois liberalism and modernism were not significant movements. Dominant nationalism, whether pro-West or pro-Soviet, has generally remained in a political coalition with Islam.

At any rate, secularism as an intellectual, political and administrative product of capitalist development did not appear in the Middle East. In my opinion, the region's bourgeoisie lacks any secularist agenda and is incapable of taking this type of position. Hence, the establishment of a secular system is the task of the Socialist and workers' movements. And in my opinion, the victory of the Left in the region, at least immediately in Iran, will make this an actual and realistic possibility. People want a secular system, and in the absence of a secularist camp on the Right, people will gather around the banner of the Communist Left which is ready for a fundamental struggle against religious rule.

Question: To what extent is it possible to introduce secularism in these countries?

Mansoor Hekmat: In today's world, with such a high degree of communication between its various parts, upholding an Islamic superstructure in such a vast region is impossible. It is not possible to stop the emergence of secularism in the Middle East. In my opinion, secularism is not only realisable, but also after the experiences of Iran, Afghanistan and Algeria, a need and demand of the people of the region. The problem is still fundamentally the Palestinian question. Just as this confrontation strengthens the reactionary religious factions in Israel itself and gives them much more power- disproportionate to their actual minor weight in people's culture and beliefs, it also adds to the lifespan of political Islam and Islamic identity in the opposing camp. The sooner an independent Palestinian state is formed, the quicker Islam and Islamism will be eradicated in the region.

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