THE REVIVAL OF NATIONALISM AND SECULARISM IN MODERN IRAN

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Abstract

Iran is currently facing a time of demographic and ideological change. As the post-revolutionary generation has emerged into political awareness, there has been a revival of interest in democracy, nationalism, secularism and constitutionalism, and a heterogenic protest movement has gathered strength – particularly among young Iranians. This working paper aims to investigate these ongoing trends of secularisation and nationalism, as well as the response of the government. While the younger generation is not yet able to compete on a political level with the élite of the Islamic Republic, they do have potential, in the next decade, to establish a new ruling class able to change the political landscape of Iran.

Introduction

In the last three years, the main focus of the international community and the media dealing with Iran has been the nuclear issue and Iranian foreign policy. Despite the relevance of these two elements, there is another important aspect which, in the next two decades, could have a crucial influence over the future of Iran. This new aspect is related to Iranian civil society and its ongoing radical change. The last 18 years have seen the emergence of a new generation in Iran, along with a renewed social, political and cultural awareness: new ideas related to democracy, nationalism, secularism and constitutionalism are again gaining momentum and support. This situation, it is argued, might lead Iran towards an 'Enlightenment' phase. In this process, values based on secularism and nationalism, which were endorsed by Iranian intellectuals before and during the Constitutional Revolution of 1906 (*Mashrooteh*), partly abandoned following the 1953 coup d'état and the fall of Mosaddeq, and then fully abandoned after the 1979 revolution, are now again at the heart of the public debate.

Currently, the Islamic Republic is facing a time of important domestic generational change, which might alter its political future. Of Iran's 75 million people, almost 50 million are under 40 years old (see Graph 1),[1] and a portion of this demographic has adopted and elaborated ideas related to secularism[2] and nationalism,[3] trying to achieve political goals such as democracy and freedom. Many of the ideas adopted by these young people, who were born during or after the 1979 revolution, are quite far from the Shi'i Islamic ideology propagated by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.[4]

This working paper aims to investigate the revival of nationalism and secularism in Iran, an ideological trend that re-emerged in the late 1990s and continues still. However, it should be pointed out that ideas related to nationalism and secularism are not something new in the intellectual history of Iran. Already in the mid-nineteenth century, notable Persian intellectuals such as Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani and Akhundzadeh, after being in contact with the liberal and constitutional ideas of western thinkers and after a reevaluation of Persian history and philosophy, were able to develop new political thought based on secularism, nationalism and constitutionalism. Their ideas

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[1] 'Iran Demographics Profile 2014', *Index Mundi*. Available at http://www.indexmundi.com/iran/demographics_profile.html (accessed 23 November 2015).

[2] Secularisation is understood in this paper either as the decline of religious beliefs or the marginalisation of religion in public life. On the concept of the secular and secularism in Middle East see Ali M. Ansari, *Iran, Islam and Democracy: The Politics of Managing Change* (2nd Edition) (London: Chatham House, 2006), pp. 7-18; Nikki R. Keddie, 'Secularism and the State: Towards Clarity and Global Comparison', *New Left Review* 226 (1997), pp. 21-40.

[3] On Iranian Nationalism see Ali M. Ansari, *The Politics of Nationalism in Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[4] On the secularisation process in Iran and the decrease of religious participation see Gunes Murat Tezcur, Taghi Azadarmaki and Mehri Bahar, 'Religious Participation among Muslims: Iranian Exceptionalism', *Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 15/3 (2006), pp. 217-232.

influenced the ideological basis of the 1906 Iranian Constitutional Movement and the first secularisation efforts of Iranian society. The second generation of Iranian secular intellectuals, such as Sadeq Hedayat and Ahmad Kasravi, also referred to these icons. What seems to distinguish today's revival of nationalism and secularism in Iran is that it is not guided by specific intellectuals, but instead has become a national and widespread trend among different social groups at different levels.

The first section of this paper will analyse the resort to nationalism and secularism as symbolic sources that have affected new political trends, particularly in the last 18 years (1997-2015). It will give illustrative examples, which draw attention to the revival of these values within civil society, in particular among young Iranians. The second part will examine the responses and strategies adopted by the Islamic Republic of Iran, seen as a peculiar hybrid regime, in order to deal with these developments. The last part will focus on hypotheses regarding the future outcome of the ongoing ideological challenge to the Islamic Republic élite, in light of the significant demographical change taking place in Iran.

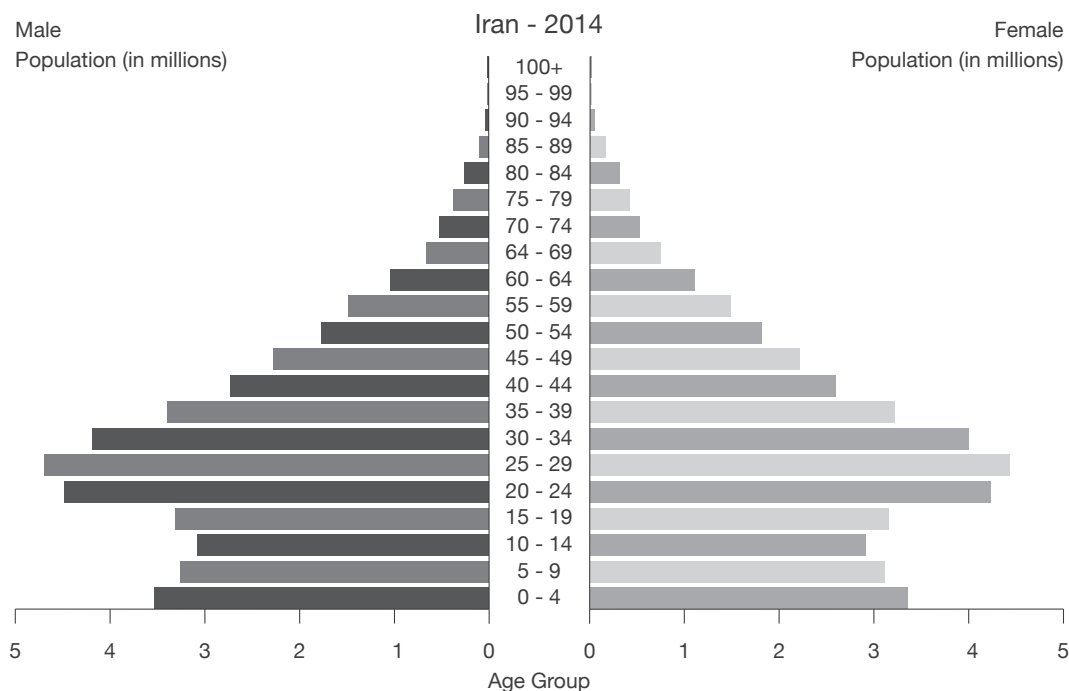## 1997 and the Rise of the New Post-Revolutionary Generation

1997 could be considered an important date for the political emergence of the new post-revolutionary generation. That year, almost 15 million young Iranians born in 1979 turned 18, becoming new protagonists of the political, social and economic arena. Two moments indicate their appearance in the Iranian political landscape: the victory of reformist Seyyed Mohammad Khatami during the 1997 presidential elections, and the massive peaceful demonstrations held in the largest cities of Iran in November 1997, following the qualification of the Iranian national football team for the 1998 World Cup.

Many of Khatami's twenty million voters belonged to the generation born in 1979, which was critical of the policies of the Islamic Republic and placed in him hopes for change. These expectations soon turned into disappointment however, as Khatami proved to be an integral part of the Islamic Republic and fulfilled no more than the most timid reforms.

The demonstrations did however indicate to the regime that a new social force had come into being, one that was able to stand up against repression. In fact, immediately after the victory of the Iranian football team against the Australian, millions of young Iranians took the streets to celebrate. For the first time in 18 years, young men and women were dancing together in the streets, cheering and listening to music, challenging restrictive Islamic laws. That day, on several occasions, the *Basij* tried to intervene and intimidate the demonstrators, but they had to withdraw due to the large number

of young people in the streets. That was a fundamental moment for the post-revolu-tionary movement in Iran.[5] Just two years later the 1999 students' uprising erupted, followed by another episode in 2003 that then developed into the Green Movement of 2009-10.[6]

Graph 1. Iran Population Pyramid 2014

Male
Population (in millions)

Iran - 2014

Female
Population (in millions)

	100+
	95 - 99
	90 - 94
	85 - 89
	80 - 84
	75 - 79
	70 - 74
	64 - 69
	60 - 64
	55 - 59
	50 - 54
	45 - 49
	40 - 44
	35 - 39
	30 - 34
	25 - 29
	20 - 24
	15 - 19
	10 - 14
	5 - 9
	0 - 4

5   4   3   2   1   0   0   1   2   3   4   5

Age Group

Source CIA World Factbook, 2014. https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html

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[5]   Regarding the role of sports, in particular the importance of the national football team in the young opposition movement, see Lars Rensmanna and Pejman Abdolmohammadi, 'Soccer breeds nationalism and anti-regime protests in Iran', *Monkey Cage*, 15 June 2014. Available at: http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/06/15/soccer-breeds-nationalism-and-anti-regime-protests-in-iran/ (accessed 23 November 2015).

[6]   On Khatami's period and the dialectic of reform see Ali M. Ansari, *Iran, Islam and democracy: The Politics of Managing Change* (London: Chatham House, 2006), pp. 141-176; Olivier Roy, 'The Crisis of Religious Legitimacy in Iran', *Middle East Journal* 53/2 (1999), pp. 201-216.

The Symbolic Sources of Nationalism

Latent trends towards Persian nationalism re-emerged and came to the fore around the end of the nineties. With the entry of post-revolutionary generations into the socio-political arena, nationalism also began to grow among those older generations that had started to regret their involvement in and/or support of the 1979 revolution.

The first example is the impressive revival, particularly among today's youth, of interest in the history of pre-Islamic Persia and of Zoroastrian philosophy. Renowned national symbolic figures such as Cyrus the Great (*Kurosh-e Bozorg*), Ferdowsi, Kaveh Ahangar, Arash Kamanghir, Rostam, Siavush, Babak Khorramdin and Ario Barzan have become popular among young Iranians, and referencing these symbolic icons for political purposes has become common, especially on the web.[7] Moreover since the end of the nineties, Islamic names such as Ali, Mohammad, Mahdi, Ruhollah and Hossein have been partially replaced by Persian names such as Kurosh, Dariush and Shirin, and there have even been reappearances of very ancient names of notable Persian women, such as Artimis and Atusa.[8]

Visiting historical pre-Islamic sites, such as Persepolis and Pasargad, has also become more widespread in the last 18 years, with one example being the tomb of the poet Ferdowsi, who is considered one of the icons of Persian patriotism.[9] Situated in the ancient city of Tus (nowadays inside the city of Mashhad), its popularity has grown significantly in the last two decades. In 2012, following the growth in number of visitors, the opening hours of Ferdowsi's Tomb were extended.[10] According to a state survey,

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[7]   See for example *Pars Daily News* (available at www.parsdailynews.com), *Iran Zamin* (available at dooroodiran.blogspot.co.uk), *Kaveahangaar* (available at www.kaveahangaar.blogfa.com), *Parsiandej*, (available at http://parsiandej.ir/), *Ostoreh* (available at http://ostoreh.blogfa.com), and *Cyrus the Great* (available at http://www.cyrusthegreat.net/id6.html). See also Sālār Saif a-Din, 'A Look at the Fundamental Concepts of Nation, Nationality and Nationalism', *Persian Gulf Studies Centre*. Available at http://www.irane7000saale.com/pdf-Iran-7000/PGS/6-PGS-Papers/4-Iranian-Nationalism.pdf.

[8] The following articles comment on the growth of the use of Persian names instead of Islamic ones. 'Asamiye Jadid va namahnus baraye kudakane iran' (The use of new and strange names for the Iranian children), *Mrasadi*, March 2011. Available at http://mrasadi.ir/39/; 'Name Irani ya Arabi?' (Persian names or Arabic names?), *Rasekhoon*, February 2011. Available at http://rasekhoon.net/article/show/206051

[9] *Shahnameh* is an important source for Persian mythology. It consists of many epic stories in which Persian heroes and kings fight to establish prosperity for the well-being of the world. Ferdowsi, who wrote *Shahnameh* three and a half centuries after the Arabic invasion of Persia, tried, through these epic tales, to exalt Persian national identity and patriotism. See A. Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings* (translated by Dick Davis) (New York: Viking, 2006); Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis, *Persian Myths* (trad. in Persian, Abbas Mokhabber) (Tehran: Markaz, 1994). Ferdowsi is seen by Iranian nationalists as one of the icons who preserved the Persian language and culture. See for example the blog *Sepahe Javidan* (available at http://sepahe-javidan.blogfa.com/post-32.aspx), and NameFarsi.com, which has specific list of Persian names without including Islamic ones (available at http://www.namefarsi.com).

[10] 'Sahat-e bazdid az Aramgah-e Ferdowsi Afzayesh yaft' (Visiting hours to the tomb of Ferdowsi extended), *Mehr News Agency* (2012). Available at http://www.mehrnews.com/news/1631716 (accessed 23 November 2015).

the number of visitors increased by 22% in the last year, and there were 51,591 visitors over the Nowruz period in 2015 compared to 42,328 over the same period in 2014.[11] As Mashhad is also a holy city for Shiʿa Islam, hosting the Shrine of Imam Reza (the eighth Imam of the Twelver Shiʿa), the competition between these two nearby sites seems almost symbolic.

Satellite TV and the web have also undoubtedly been playing a role in the spread of nationalist and secularist ideas among Iranians, particularly among the youth. There are several blogs, as well as Facebook and Instagram pages, dedicated to the history and philosophy of Ancient Persia and critical towards Islamism.[12] One of the most watched TV shows on Persian satellite channels is 'Sarzamine Javid' (The Eternal Land),[13] hosted by Bahram Moshiri. Moshiri's main focus is revisiting the history of Islam and its relation with Persian culture and civilisation, and in the last 15 years he has managed to attract thousands of Iranians viewers.[14] Moshiri firmly brings into question several stereotypes of Shiʿi Islam, focusing instead on historical facts and evidence that revaluates Persian patriotism. Moshiri's influence reaches not only young people, but also part of the older generation that participated in the revolution and today feels marginalised and dissatisfied by the Islamic Republic.

There is also a new trend, particularly among Iranian youth, of conversion from Islam to Zoroastrianism. Despite the lack of official statistics (as in order to avoid state persecution there are no public conversions), several indicators seem to suggest that a significant number of young Iranians do not consider themselves Muslims. Many of them are either becoming atheists or secretly converting to other religions – especially Zoroastrianism, Bahaʾism and Christianity, but also Buddhism. These conversions are not registered so available statistics still consider 90 per cent of Iranians to be Shiʿa Muslims, but according to a survey conducted among the Persian diaspora in Europe in June 2015, half of the interviewees between the ages of 20 and 40 said they were not Muslim. Willing to speak only off the record, they primarily identified with the options 'atheist', 'agnostic' or 'other religion' (in descending order by denomination, Zoroastrian, Bahaʾi and Christian). Meanwhile, 35 per cent of those who claimed to be Muslim said they were essentially non-practising (see Graph 2) .[15]

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[11] 'Visitors to the tomb of Ferdowsi in March this year increased by 22%', *Islamic Republic News Agency* (2015). Available at http://www.irna.ir/fa/News/81553547/ (accessed 23 November 2015).
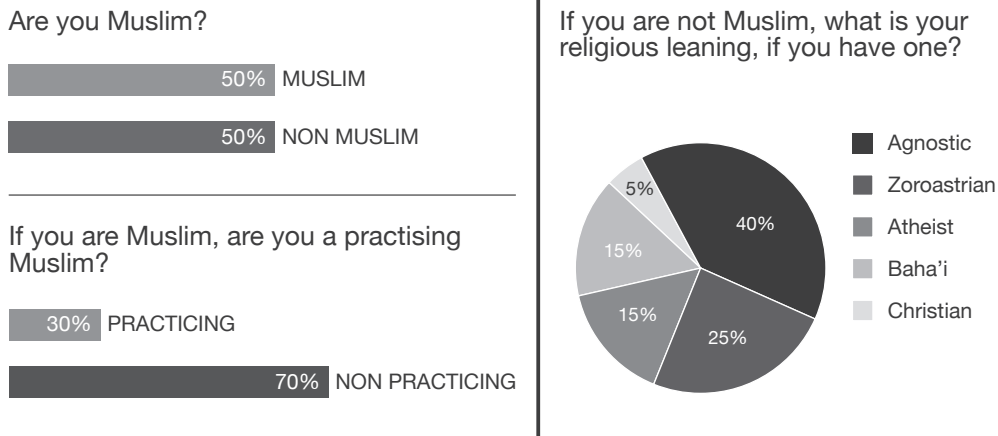
[12] Examples of such Facebook pages include: *Iranian Zartoshti* (available at https://www.facebook.com/IranianZartoshti?fref=photo); *Man Iraniam , Faghat Ye Irani* (available at https://www.facebook.com/OnlyIran.JustIranian?pnref=story); and *Farhang Nejadeh Iran Kohan* (available at https://www.facebook.com/FarhangNejadehIranKohan?pnref=story; https://www.facebook.com/kurosh.parsi.5?fref=ts).

[13] TV show available at http://www.bahrammoshiri.com/home/?page=audio_archieve.

[14] Bahram Moshiri's Facebook fan page has 162,705 members. Available at https://www.facebook.com/Bahram-Moshiri-121076271037/ (accessed 19 November 2015).

[15] See Pejman Abdolmohammadi and Barbara Gianessi, 'Iran Wonders: Astride tradition and innovation', *East Journal* 60 (Rome, 2015), pp. 52-53. It should be noted that conducting these sorts of surveys within Iran is difficult because of the tense political atmosphere.

Graph 2. Interviews with Iranian Citizens on Religion

Are you Muslim?

50% MUSLIM

50% NON MUSLIM

If you are Muslim, are you a practising Muslim?

30% PRACTICING

70% NON PRACTICING

If you are not Muslim, what is your religious leaning, if you have one?

- ■ Agnostic
- ■ Zoroastrian
- ■ Atheist
- ■ Baha'i
- □ Christian

Source: Pejman Abdolmohammadi, Barbara Gianessi, 'Astride Tradition and Innovation', EAST 60 (July/August 2015), p.52.

The level of mosque attendance in Iran also decreased significantly during the post-revolutionary period. According to the World Values Survey, Iran has one of the lowest mosque attendances compared to ten other important Muslim countries (see Graph 3).

Graph 3. Religious Belief and Participation in 10 Predominantely Muslim Countries

- ■ Religious People
- □ Weekly Mosque Attendance
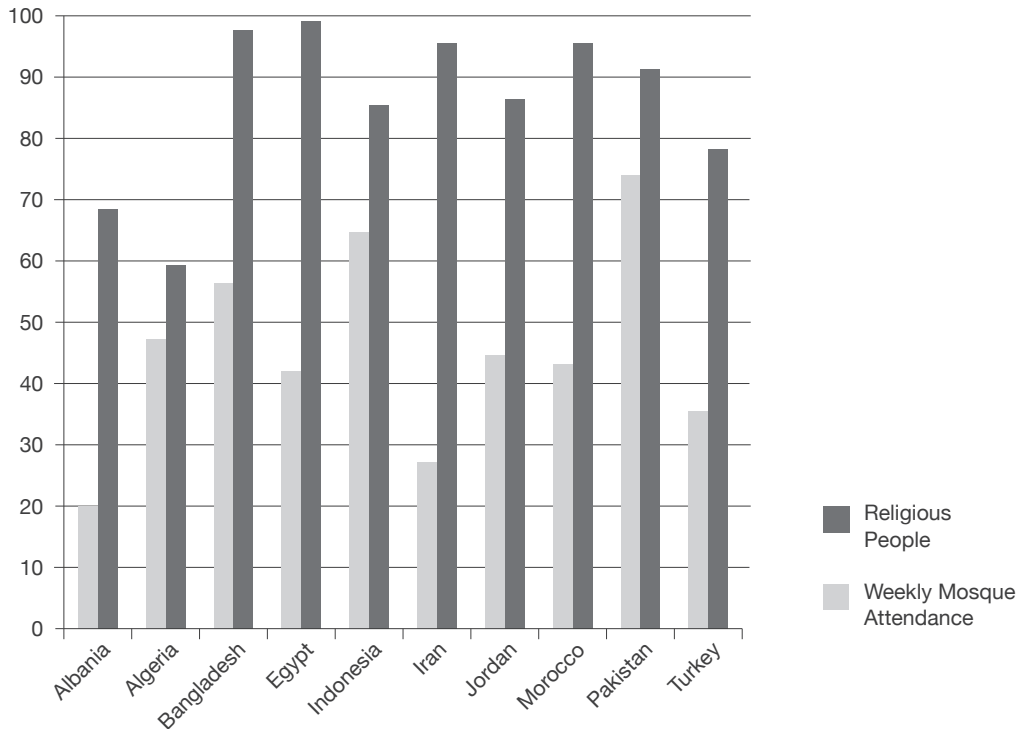
Source: Murattezcur, Azadarmaki and Bahar, 'Religious Participation among Muslims: Iranian Exceptionalism', Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies 15/3 (Fall 2006), pp. 217–232.

The results of this survey have been interpreted by Tezcur, Azadmarki and Bahar:[16]

> Two possible explanations can be put forward to explain the low levels of mosque attendance in Iran: (1) the Shiʿa traditions that do not value communal praying as much as does Sunni Islam, and (2) the extensive politicization of religion under the Islamic Republic, a factor that may have led to disenchantment with religion among some Iranian citizens. The second explanation is based on the insights generated by the supply-side theories of religion. By all relevant criteria, religious life in Iran exhibits monopolistic characteristics. Therefore, it can be hypothesized that the heavy regulation of religious belief leads to a decrease in religious participation.

These new developments are supported by evidence coming not only from the business and fashion world, but also from widespread cultural icons. The representation of Farvahar (one of the symbols of the Persian religion) and of icons linked to Persepolis or to the tomb of Cyrus are now common in young Iranians' jewellery and clothes,[17] and some even get tattoos portraying ancient Persian icons such as Cyrus or Kaveh.[18] This is interesting not only because tattoos are normally prohibited by orthodox Islam, but also because the resort to patriotic symbols seems to express a combination of nationalism and secularism.

Many young couples also now decide to celebrate their weddings with Zoroastrian rituals. Although they officially comply with Islamic traditions, in private more and more young Iranians prefer to declaim original Persian texts rather than Islamic ones.[19]

Another example of the revival of nationalist sources can be noticed in the daily use of language. New generations (and others) tend to replace Islamic and Arabic words with more Parsi[20] (Persian) terminologies. For instance, the use of '*Dorud*' (authentic Persian), instead of the Arabic '*Salam*' for 'hello', could be seen as a nationalistic stand. A similar example is the preference of '*Sepas*' over '*Motshakeram*' to say 'thank you'. These are just two of many examples showing this new trend that seems to suggest an implicit preference of Persian language and culture over the Arab-Islamic influence.

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[16] Tezcur, Azadarmaki and Bahar, 'Religious Participation among Muslims: Iranian Exceptionalism', pp. 217-232.

[17] Some interesting jewellery models can be seen on *Jazzaab* website, available at http://www.jazzaab. ir/news_detail_11459.html (accessed 11 November 2015). Persian icons and jewelry being sold online can be seen on the shopping website 'Iranian Shop', available at http://www.iranianshop.ir (accessed 23 November 2015).

[18] 'Namad-e Jensi dar Khalkubiha-ye Iran' (Sex symbols in today's tattoos), Akairan.com (2015). Available at http://www.akairan.com/health/bimari-behdasht/2015623103931.html (accessed 23 November 2015); 'Khalkubi ya Tatoo yeki az olguhaye farhang-e biganeh bein-e javanan-e Iran' (Tattoos of foreign culture amongst the Iranian youth), Dana.ir (2015). Available at http://dana.ir/News/402902.html (accessed 23 November 2015).

[19] Sultan Wedding Organization, 'Aqd-e Irani- Aqd-e Asil-e Ariay' (Original Iranian weddings), YouTube, 16 June 2015. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bot6Z0WD-w4 (accessed 23 November 2015).

[20] The very use of 'Parsi', instead of 'Farsi', confirms this cultural trend. Parsi is in fact the correct denomination of the Persian language, although in the last decades it has been widely known as Farsi. This is due to the fact that the Arabic language does not have the letter 'P'. After the arrival of Islam to Iran the letter 'P' was replaced by the letter 'F'.

Another element to consider is the renewed emphasis on Persian celebrations.[21] In the last few years, many Iranians have started to celebrate festivities which have Persian pre-Islamic origins. While Nowruz (Persian New Year) and *Chaharshanbe Suri* (The Festival of Fire) were celebrated during the eighties and nineties – despite the attempts of the Shi'i clergy to diminish their importance, they were considered too deeply rooted within Iran to be abandoned – less widespread festivities, such as Sade and Mehregan, were almost abandoned. One of the arguments raised by this new nationalism, as a critique of Shi'i Islamic culture, is that the latter is characterised by an emphasis on mournful events, on martyrdom and on the spirit of sacrifice. According to nationalists, ancient Persian culture was instead based mainly on the celebration of happiness and life.

Rituals related to Nowruz underline this latent competition between Iranism and Islamism. One of the traditions is the preparation of the so-called 'Haft Sin', a table-top arrangement that often includes an important book. While many families use the Qur'an, many others prefer the Shahname – considered to be the most important piece of Persian literature. In the last few years, the use of the Shahname in the 'Haft Sin' has significantly increased.[22]

The revival of nationalism emerges also from artistic trends in modern Iran. An important part of Iranian artistic landscape is poetry. In the last few years, Tehran has hosted several poetry festivals, which served as a platform for a cultural élite critical of the political power. Many of these new poets criticise the Islamic Republic, resorting to nationalistic symbolic language. Hila Sadiqi,[23] Mohammad Reza Ali-Payam[24] (known as Halu) and Mostafa Badkoobei are just some of the most notable modern poets who represent this new trend. Their poems have become very popular among Iranians, also because their performances during these festivals have been broadcast on the web. All of them have been prosecuted by Iranian courts and sentenced to some years in prison.[25] Nevertheless, their videos continue to be watched on the web and have become very popular.

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[21] Ali M. Ansari, *The Politics of Nationalism in Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[22] State website Magiran.com published an article expressing concern over the omission of the Qur'an from the Haft Sin by many Persian satellite channels. 'Proje-ye Hazf-e Quran az Sofrehaye Haft sin' (The Project of Qur'an Removal from the Haft Sin), *Magiran.com* (2012). Available at http://www.magiran.com/npview.asp?ID=2471249 (accessed 23 November 2015). A Facebook post about putting the Shahname in the Haft Sin is available at https://www.facebook.com/ausiranian/posts/10200715029396515.

[23] For a relevant Hila Sadiqi performance in Tehran, see Ali Ka, 'Zane Irani, Hila Dadiqi' (Iranian woman Hila Sadiqi), *YouTube*, 13 June 2011. Available at https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=TbN2oa-6TIFs (accessed 23 November 2015).

[24] For a performance of Ali Payame about religious backwardness and the role of the Shi'ite Islamic clergy, see 'Dad-o Fariad Konid, Beizeye Eslam Shekast!' (Let's be worried, the principle of Islam has been damaged!), *Babak Delnavaz*, 11 January 2013. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nuvGukfz0e4 (accessed 23 November 2015).

[25] See 'Shaher-e zan-e Irani-ye Mahruf be Zendan Mahkum Shod' (Popular Young Poet Sentenced to Prison), *International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran*, 23 August 2011. Available at http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2011/08/hila-sedighi/; 'Mohammad Reza Ali-Payam Shahere Mahrufe

In his poems Badkoobei,[26] the most nationalistic of the poets, clearly combines patriotism and secularism in order to critique those in power. For instance, he praises Rostam, the mythological Persian hero of Shahname, and criticises the removal of the national symbol of the lion and the sun from the Persian flag, which was replaced after the revolution by an icon representing the word Allah. Also Simin Behbahani, a prominent Iranian poet, dedicated one of her last poems (entitled 'Har Gez nakhab Kurosh' (Never Fall Asleep Cyrus)) to Persian national icons, combining them with demands for democracy and freedom.

The same is true for rap music, which is a new phenomenon permeating the younger generations.[27] In the last 10 years, many young people have secretly created underground music groups, mainly pop, rap and hip-hop, and the state news agency has run several articles expressing the concern of the Islamic Republic élite regarding the rise in popularity of underground music groups.[28] Some of these rap groups celebrate national and nationalist icons such as Cyrus the Great, or refer to the ancient glorious history of pre-Islamic Persia,[29] while others focus more on current social issues. A similar trend is taking place in the Persian movie landscape. For instance, in Jafar Panahi's 'Offside', the chant 'Ei Iran', strongly associated with Persian nationalism, has been censored by the authorities. Another example is the renowned graphic novel 'Persepolis', by Marjan Satrapi, which illustrates the history of the revolution of 1979.[30]

These nationalist and secularist trends emerged more visibly in 2009, during the Green Movement, which was mostly composed of young men and women belonging to the new post-revolutionary generation. Although the movement was a heterogenic reality, on the ideological level it divided in two main groups: the secularists and the Islamic democrats. The first group called for the creation of a secular democracy in Iran, while the second one wanted an Islamic democracy. Nevertheless, both groups shared several demands: the institution of a democratic state in compliance with the rule of law; the separation of religion and politics; freedom of expression; and the protection of all minorities.

Irani bazdasht shod' (Mohammad Reza Ali-Payam: Popular Poet Arrested), *Iranian.com*, 15 August 2012. Available at http://iranian.com/main/2012/aug/mohammad-reza-ali-payam-popular-poet-arrested.html; 'Mostafa Badkoobei va Hila Sedighi ra Azad Konid' (Free Mostafa Badkoobei and Hila Sedighi), Facebook community page. Available at https://www.facebook.com/Free-Mostafa-Badkoobei-and-Hila-Sedighi-163090070419402/ (accessed 23 October 2015).

[26] For one of the most relevant performances of Badkoobei in Tehran, see The Freedom Messenger, 'Mostafa Badkoobei', *YouTube*, 19 June 2012. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LE3c-JqrQC8E.

[27] *Iranrocker* (available at http://iranrocker.blogfa.com/post-64.aspx) is an example of a blog focusing on this kind of music.

[28] 'Roshd-e Gruh-haye musiqi-ye zirzamini zange khatari baraye mashulan' (Growth of underground bands alarms officials', *Mehr News Agency*, 2014. Available at http://www.mehrnews.com/news/2505267/.

[29] The song 'Kurosh Bidarsho' (wake up Cyrus) is an interesting example. See Seravin, 'Kourosh Pashoo', *YouTube*, 27 June 2011. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dx1olkmu-3U.

[30] Although both movies have been censored by the Iranian State, it is important to highlight that the majority of Iranians know them or have at least heard about them. Panahi's movies and documentaries are particularly popular among Iranians.

Expressions of nationalism and secularism can be seen in two widespread political slogans launched during the anti-governmental demonstrations: '*Esteqlāl, āzādi, jomhurye irani*' (Independence, freedom and Iranian Republic) and '*Nasle ma āryast, din az siāsat jodast*' (Our lineage is Aryan, we want the separation of religion and politics). Reaching the secularisation of the state through the separation of the religious and political spheres was, in fact, one of the main demands of the secular group of the Green Movement. As shown by the first slogan, they asked for the replacement of the 'Islamic' Republic with an 'Iranian' Republic, which should be fully democratic and based on Persian, not Arab-Islamic, values. In the second slogan, the reference to the Aryan origins of the Persian people, far from being a racial reference, is instead a sort of coded message to communicate that the secular-progressive part of the Green Movement intended to reevaluate the real origins of the Persian people, antecedent to the Islamisation of the country.[31]

All these elements could be interpreted as a reaction to the promotion of political Islam by the Islamic Republic, demonstrating at the same time how Iranians are using nationalist icons for political purposes. As the ruling state is based on Shiʿi Islamic ideology, the use of Iranism or nationalism against Islamism could be interpreted as a cultural and political criticism towards the ruling élite. In the different examples mentioned above, nationalism and secularism find a common expression, mostly around demanding more democracy and freedom. It should be emphasised that the aforementioned use of nationalist icons constituted, with the exception of the Green Movement, mostly non-organised action, which indirectly expressed political messages.

Secular Demands, Freedom and Happiness

After the repression of the Green Movement, new generations continued to promote their grievances and demands through new means of communication. The web, despite censorship exercised from the state, became a 'virtual square' where young Iranians exchanged ideas and points of view, facilitating the growth of a huge undercover movement made up of heterogeneous ideas.

This protest movement is progressive and non-violent, laying claim to the respect of personal freedoms and the separation of religion and politics. It includes not only Islamic reformists who participated in the Green Movement, but also a new generation that claims to respect civil liberties and aspirations such as freedom and happiness. This became evident on several occasions, especially during the summer of 2011, when many young Iranians organised a water gun flash mob in one of Tehran's parks through social networking forums. This was immediately labelled as a serious offence

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[31] The study of these symbolic sources is worthy of a more systematic and in-depth examination based on the methodology of content analysis. See Klaus H. Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology* (California: SAGE publications, 2013). Regarding the symbolic use of myths, see also *Cassirer Ernest, Language and Myth* (translated Susanne K. Langer), (New York: Dover Publications, 1953) and Pelayo Maria Garcia, *Los mitos politicos / The Political Myths* (Alianza Editorial, 2007).

by the ultra-conservative ayatollahs, who defined these young people as 'unbalanced guys provoking scandal within the community and disturbing other citizens'.[32] Many politicians, especially inside Parliament, have harshly criticised these young men and women for this unauthorised social gathering and for their promiscuous interactions that broke Islamic law.[33]

This was not a singular event. Earlier they had organised carnival-themed flash mobs in some areas of the capital, and on 21 January 2012 a group of young people known as 'longhairs' gathered for a flash mob in Tehran, challenging Iranian authorities, which had forbidden parties and public rallies. The so-called 'longhair' group had already met in January 2011 in Mellat public park, inspiring criticism and rage from the religious ultraconservatives, who defined them as 'violators of Islamic morals' since they were doning haircuts that were 'too western'.

This harsh criticism led young Iranians to publish a political manifesto on the web, asking for the respect of their right to happiness:[34]

> 'We, too, have the right to happiness and beauty. We are tired of all these limitations and obscurantism; we want to live and have fun like all the other young people in the world. We express our joy of living and playing, while you have sexually assaulted us in prisons; we stomped our feet on the ground with our shoes for fun, while you used your boots to step on us; on our heads we put gel for the hair, while you beat them with truncheons, we take position against your tanks bought with our money, while you try to fight our pens bought with our money, you are the ministers and we are the people, you are the pure ones and we are the infidels!'[35]

Another initiative worth noting is the recent campaign against the compulsory veil launched on Facebook, '*Na be hejabe Ejbari*' (No to compulsory Hijab),[36] which quickly gained over 66,000 supporters. This campaign, calling for freedom of choice for women in deciding whether or not to wear the hijab, was endorsed not only by secular women, but also by Islamic ones and even by several Iranian men. The support for this campaign illustrates the new generation's call for the separation of Islam and the state, regardless of religious belief.

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[32] See 'Le pistole ad acqua inquietano l'Iran', *Corriere Della Sera*, 6 August 2011. Available at http://www.corriere.it/esteri/11_agosto_06/le-pistole-ad-acqua-inquietano-l-iran-viviana-mazza_b70d29f0-bffc-11e0-a13e-1a638a1f4d09.shtml?refresh_ce-cp.

[33] 'Dastghiri-ye Shomari az javanan dar Tehran be dalile Ab-bazi' (A number of youths arrested in Tehran for 'water games'), *Radiofarda.mobi*, 2011. Available at http://www.radiofarda.mobi/a/24283523.html.

[34] Roberto Fabbri, 'Iran, i giovani protestano su Facebook: «Abbiamo diritto alla felicità»', *Il Giornale*, 9 August 2011.

[35] '*Jang-e Tofang-e Abpash dar Tehran*' (Water gun fight in Tehran), Facebook community page. Available at https://www.facebook.com/waterwarteh.

[36] '*Na be hejabe Ejbari*' (No to compulsory Hijab), Facebook community page. Available at https://www.facebook.com/na.be.hejab.ejbari?fref=ts

One of the recent peaceful initiatives happened in 2014, when a group of Iranians posted on the web a video of them dancing and singing on a roof in Tehran, to Pharrell Williams' famous song 'Happy'. They have been consequently arrested and obliged to make a public statement rejecting what they did, as it was considered a violation of the Islamic Republic's moral codes. It was the youth's first attempt to move physically from the underground sphere into the open.[37]

The Islamic Republic's Reaction to the Revival of Nationalism and Secularism

The Islamic Republic is a sophisticated political model that could be defined as a peculiar hybrid regime.[38] It is neither a pure authoritarian system nor a pluralistic political regime. This means that the Islamic Republic has the potential to intercept both political trends and the values of civil society and to develop a certain level of accountability.

The first strategy, common to many other regimes, is the resort to the use of force. Since 1997, many young bloggers, civil right activists and poets have been arrested and imprisoned.[39] At the same time, public demonstrations such as those of 1999, 2003 and 2009 all went through a phase of physical repression by the state. After the 1979 revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini and his Islamic revolutionary allies tried on several occasions to undermine Persian culture and traditions, defining them as anti-Islamic. One of the most striking examples happened in the first months after the 1979 revolution, when a group of Iranian Shiʿi Islamists, guided by clergyman Hojjatoleslam Khalhali (appointed as Head of the Revolutionary Courts by Ayatollah Khomeini) tried to demolish the historical site of Persepolis, near Shiraz. It was only thanks to the intervention of local people, and of the governor of Fars province (Nosratollah Amini), who had a nationalist background, that Persepolis was saved from the revolutionary forces.[40]

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[37] 'Free Happy Iranian', Facebook community page. Available at https://www.facebook.com/freehappyiraniansong

[38] On the theory of the Islamic Republic as hybrid regime see Pejman Abdolmohammadi and Cama Giampiero, 'Iran as peculiar hybrid regime: Structure and Dynamics of the Islamic Republic', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 42/4 (2015), pp. 558-578. See also Khajesarvi Qolamreza, *Reqabat-e siasi va sobat-e Siasi dar Jomhuri-ye Eslami-ye Iran* (The political competition and political stability in the Islamic Republic of Iran), (Tehran: Markaz-e Asnad-e Enqelab-e Eslami, 1382/2003); Houchang E. Chehabi, 'Religion and Politics in Iran: How Theocratic Is the Islamic Republic?', *Religion and Politics* 120/3 (Summer 1991), pp. 69–91; Arang Keshavarzian, 'Contestation without Democracy: Elite Fragmentation in Iran', in Marsha Pripstein Posusney and Michele Penner Angrist, *Authoritarianism in the Middle East* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005), pp. 63–88.

[39] Data regarding political and civil prisoners and arrests from *Raha News* (available at www.rahanews.org) and *The Human Rights Activists News Agency* (available at www.hra-news.org).

[40] 'Nostatollah Amini, yeki az nejatdahandegane Takhte Jamshid dargozasht' (Nosratollah Amini, one of the rescuers of Persepolis, dies), *Save Pasargad Committee*. Available at http://www.savepasargad.com/2009-April/amini.htm.

But these measures are only part of the wider governmental approach. In the last 18 years, a part of the Iranian political élite has begun to take into account the shift in the values of Iranian society. Politicians have been timidly changing their political positions to intercept these new nationalist and secular trends in order to gain more popularity in the political arena.

The most meaningful example of this tendency might be represented by former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (particularly during his second mandate, 2009-2013). Ahmadinejad often made reference to nationalist Persian icons,[41] celebrating for instance Cyrus the Great. It was during his presidency that Iran had the opportunity to host the Cylinder of Cyrus the Great in Tehran for six months, in agreement with the British Museum.[42] Furthermore, Esfandiar Rahim Mashai, one of his most loyal collaborators as well as the head of the presidential office, declared in one of his speeches that the time had come to go back to the 'Maktabe Irani' (Iranian School), overcoming the 'Maktabe Eslami' (Islamic School).[43] This idea openly contrasted with Ayatollah Khomeini's doctrine, based on Islamism and the idea of the *umma*.

Another important example has been the representation of the nuclear programme as a nationalist project. The Iranian political élite compared the nuclear programme to the nationalisation of oil companies carried out by Mohammad Mosaddeq, one of the most important icons of Iranian modern patriotism and secularism. This also shows how Ahmadinejad's entourage and his administration have tried to exploit nationalism for their own political interests.

On the other hand, the pragmatists, led by former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, and the reformists, led by former president Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, together with current president Hassan Rouhani, have been trying to intercept the secular trend. From 1997, Khatami's support of the so-called 'civil society' (*jame'eye madani*) and the promotion of civil rights started to address the more secular demands of the new generation, which asked for more freedom and pluralism.

The government has proclaimed several times its willingness to abolish censorship of the web and to give women access to sport stadiums. These are two recurring subjects and grievances of society and these timid openings emphasise the willingness of the pragmatist faction of the Islamic Republic to appear more accountable regarding the secular demands of civil society. Rouhani's speech of July 2013 about happiness and the obligatory veil is particularly interesting:[44]

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[41] See Ali M. Ansari, 'Iranian Nationalism Rediscovered', *Middle East Institute*, 29 January 2009. Available at http://www.mideasti.org/content/iranian-nationalism-rediscovered?print=.

[42] 'Namayan de-ye Majles az Ahmadinejad be dalile tajlil az Kurosh shekayat kard' (Iranian MP criticises Ahmadinejad for praising Cyrus the Great', *Payvand Iran News*, 9 September 2010. Available at http://www.payvand.com/news/10/sep/1173.html.

[43] 'Mashai: Hadafe ma az in pas moharrefie maktabe Iran ast va na Maktabe Eslam' (Our aim is to promote the Iranian School rather than the Islamic one), *Parsine News*. Available at http://www.parsine.com/fa/pages/?cid=23721

[44] 'Rohani: Hejab ra Eine Efaf nakonid' (Rohani: Don't mix the Hijab withe women purity), *Bahar News* (2013). Available at http://www.baharnews.ir/news/13212/ (accessed 18 October 2015).

'Being pure for women is something that goes beyond wearing the hijab. If a woman does not wear the hijab in compliance with our principles it does not imply that she is impure. Before the revolution, there were many women not wearing it, does it mean they were impure? I recommend not comparing the use of hijab to human purity. I am well aware that several women do not completely respect the hijab, but I also know that this does not imply their lack of purity... Some people think that when a young man and woman go out together, have a walk in the mountains, go to parties or walk together in the streets, this could somehow harm public morality. The truth is that what threatens public morality is something else. These ideas have political and ideological origins. Be sure that the denial of happiness is not among the founding principles of the Islamic revolution. There is no slogan of the revolution that goes against young people's happiness.'

These new efforts are exemplified by two important institutional and cultural projects. The first is the strengthening of the Academy of Persian Language and Literature, which over the past decade has started to promote a process of 'purification' of the Persian language from the influences of foreign languages. In the last few years many foreign terminologies have been gradually substituted by new Persian terms. The Presidency of the Academy is currently held by Gholam Ali Haddad Adel, former Speaker of the Parliament, as well as a conservative politician close to the Supreme Guide Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

A second important project is the production of a historical film about Cyrus the Great. This project has been promoted by the government, under the direction of Mashud Jafari. The title of the website which publicises this project is 'Mehremihan'.[45] The word '*mehr*' ('love', in Parsi) has a symbolic pre-Islamic origin, and the same can be said about the term of '*mihan*' ('nation', in Parsi), instead of '*vatan*', which is more linked to an Islamic background. This usage of patriotic terms is something new in the Islamic Republic's political language and it demonstrates a clear trend toward Persian nationalism.

Conclusion

In order to gain a better understanding of the future of Iranian domestic affairs, there are at least three important elements to consider. Firstly, Iran is going through a revival of nationalism and secularism at different levels within society, which is difficult to measure precisely but which seems stronger among the youth. Secondly, this new trend has not gone unnoticed by the Islamic Republic, which has been trying to deal with it both through violent repression and through more political means - a precarious balance which lasts to this day. Thirdly, Iranian society is now profoundly divided on the demographic level: on the one side the over 60s and on the other one the under 40s.[46]

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[45] See *Mehremihan.ir*. Available at http://www.mehremihan.ir/rooydad/94-farhangi/2085-kooroshk-abir-film.html

[46] 'The Revolution is over', *The Economist*, 1 November 2014 (Special Issue), p. 6; Jared Cohen, 'Iran's Young Opposition: Youth in Post-Revolutionary Iran', *SAIS Review* XXVI/2 (Summer - Winter 2006).

The intermediate generation is less numerous, considering that about a million people belonging to the 40-60s age group lost their lives in the Iran-Iraq war. A part of this age group is integrated within the Islamic system, whereas another part left the country and is living abroad.

For demographic reasons, the younger generation is not yet able to compete on a political level with the current élite of the Islamic Republic. At the moment, there seems to be no new political and social project and this lack of leadership and organisation became evident during the 2009 Green Movement. The leadership of the movement was monopolised by Mir Hossein Mousavi, Mehdi Karroubi, and other reformist leaders, who were an integral part of the Islamic Republic itself and did not belong to the new generation. However this demographic does have the potential, in the next decade, to establish a new ruling class able to change the political landscape of Iran.

Thus the generational dimension might become the third factor which could influence the fragile equilibrium between the political élite and civil society. We are left with several questions about the future of Iran. What will be the outcome of the new political and social élite entering the political scene? What are the limits of the flexibility of the Islamic Republic, and might a new crack down and more widespread repression be imminent? Or will the new generations be free to become more politically active, to organise more effectively, and in time to replace the current élite?

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