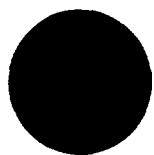


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Robin Wright, a former Middle East correspondent for the Sunday Times of London, is author of In the Name of God: The Khomeini Decade. She now covers world affairs for the Los Angeles Times.



Iran's Greatest Political Challenge

Abdol Karim Soroush

Robin Wright

Almost a generation after Iran's revolution, a new debate has erupted in the Islamic Republic. The issues most associated with the 1979 uprising against 2,500 years of monarchy—empowerment and the role of Islam in a modern state—are being reopened to new interpretation and controversy. The debate reflects a key turning point for the world's only modern theocracy. Over time, it has the potential to lead both Iran and the broader Islamic movement in whole new political directions. It may even open the way for a popularization of an Islamic reformation.

In its simplest form, the debate centers on a single question: are Islam and democracy fully compatible? Can political pluralism be adapted to one of the only major monotheistic religions that offers rules by which to govern society as well as a set of spiritual beliefs? Are individual human rights, equality, and choice compatible with a faith whose name literally means "submission"?

At the heart of the debate—which flourishes everywhere from campuses to coffee houses, seminaries to newspaper offices—is the work of Abdol Karim Soroush, an unassuming academic in Tehran who emerged from the revolution but now represents its greatest internal political challenge. He has so angered Iran's leaders that during celebrations last year marking the seventeenth anniversary of the American embassy seizure Iran's top cleric spent more time castigating Soroush's ideas than berating either the "Great Satan" (the United States) or the "Zionist entity" (Israel). Soroush's following among students, intellectuals, civil servants,

technocrats, and, most important, the clergy is now sufficiently widespread that he has also increasingly become the victim of threats and physical assault, including beatings in lecture halls by thuggish young ideologues from Ansar-e Hizbollah (Supporters of the Party of God), a group linked to the regime's hard-liners. Since the attacks began in June 1995, he has also repeatedly been "interviewed" by internal security and intelligence officials, and his lectures are now banned by the government.

Islamic, Not Fundamentalist

Soroush is actually the pen name of Dr. Hosein Dabbagh, Iran's leading philosopher. He originally took the name, the two parts of which are the names of his now-grown children, years ago when he began writing poetry. Abdol Karim means "servant of God," while Soroush means "angel of revelation." Although deeply versed in Islamic law and tradition, Soroush is not a cleric. Yet he is so shaking the foundation of a faith that claims a billion followers that he is now widely compared to Martin Luther, Christianity's maverick, sixteenth-century German reformer.

The comparison stems from Soroush's work over the past decade challenging 13 centuries of traditional thinking in Muslim societies, particularly about political and human rights and Islam's role in the modern world. By questioning the absolutism or rigidity of current practices, not only in Iran, he is establishing conditions for a groundswell of political change as well as religious reform—again, not just in the Islamic

Republic. Like a small but growing number of thinkers in Iran, in the neighboring Arab world, and in other countries in the 70-nation "Haven of Islam," Soroush is in the process creating a worldview that is genuinely both Islamic and modern—in effect, establishing a way to be Islamic without being fundamentalist.¹

His most timely writings—for Iran's immediate future and for the broader relationship between Islamic countries and the West—may be about democracy. The Middle East has resisted the kind of political change that has swept eastern Europe, Latin America, Africa, and Asia since the 1980s. Predominantly Muslim countries from Indonesia in the Pacific to Saudi Arabia on the Persian Gulf, from Sudan in East Africa to Nigeria on the Atlantic Ocean, account for many of the world's remaining totalitarian governments. Because democracy has been slow to penetrate many Islamic countries, the post-Cold War conventional wisdom contends that the next round of threats and confrontations will pit the Islamic world against the West.

In a quiet book-lined office in downtown Tehran, Soroush refutes both aspects of that judgment. "Islam and democracy are not only compatible," he explains during the first of several interviews over a three-year period. "Their association is inevitable. In Muslim society, one without the other is not perfect." An unassuming figure who speaks softly in a host of languages, including English, the diminutive scholar constructs his arguments with a methodical, almost mathematical logic—all written out in longhand on yellow legal pads. Although his supporters established a website under the codeword SERAJ, which is Persian for "light," to disseminate his work, Soroush does not even type, much less use a computer.

In simple form, his argument is based on two pillars. "The first is that to be a true believer, one must be free," he says. "To become a believer under pressure or coercion

will not be true belief. And this freedom is the basis of democracy."²

A similar logic applies to the universal application of human rights. "The idea of human rights lies outside religion because it prefigures belief," he continues. "In order to follow a particular religion, the freedom to exercise that option must be open to you." And the only form of government that ensures human rights is democracy. With some reflection, Soroush tells students in the drab classrooms of Tehran University, "In the Muslim world we have talked only of duties, not of rights. In modern civilizations, however, believing in God is not a duty, but a right."

The second pillar centers on human understanding of sacred books. The texts of the Bible, which Muslims accept as the precursor to Islam, and the Koran do not change, but Soroush contends that interpretation of those texts is necessarily altered by the changing human condition and the passage of time. "In Islamic democracy, interpretation of religious texts is always in flux. There is not a single, inflexible, or infallible interpretation. Interpretations are also influenced by the age you live in. They evolve with time," he explains. "A fixed interpretation would block evolution and effectively smother religion. It would also limit or confine the individual's freedom to interpret religion and limit the development of the [religious] state and society."

And interpretation is not limited to the clergy. Everyone is entitled to an interpretation, he says. Some understandings may be more scholarly than others, but no interpretation is inherently more authoritative than another.

The Right to Believe

"No one group of people has the exclusive right to interpret or reinterpret religion. That is something to be abolished. In Islam it is the right of all people to believe in Allah and in the Koran, and it follows then that they all have an equal right to their

own justifiable understanding of Islam,” Soroush says. “No understanding of religion is considered the final or most complete understanding. There is no official interpretation. There should always be a plurality of interpretations. The [ideal] religious state should protect the conditions for this freedom. It is neither its right nor its duty to impose a particular understanding on the people. Religious interpretation is thus pluralistic in nature—and this pluralism should be widened. A religious state informed by pluralism is closer to democracy than the religious state that is not.”

Soroush shies away from specific applications of his thinking to contemporary Iran. “I will be better served if I do not get entangled in such political affairs,” he says, with a knowing chuckle. Even without spelling out their implications, his theories alone are sufficiently controversial that colleagues say his wastebaskets at Tehran’s Research Institute for Human Sciences, where he served as dean until a government squeeze forced him to cede the title, are picked through. “Let other people,” he offers, “draw the implications and consequences.”

They are profound. Soroush’s writings establish the rights of individuals in their rela-

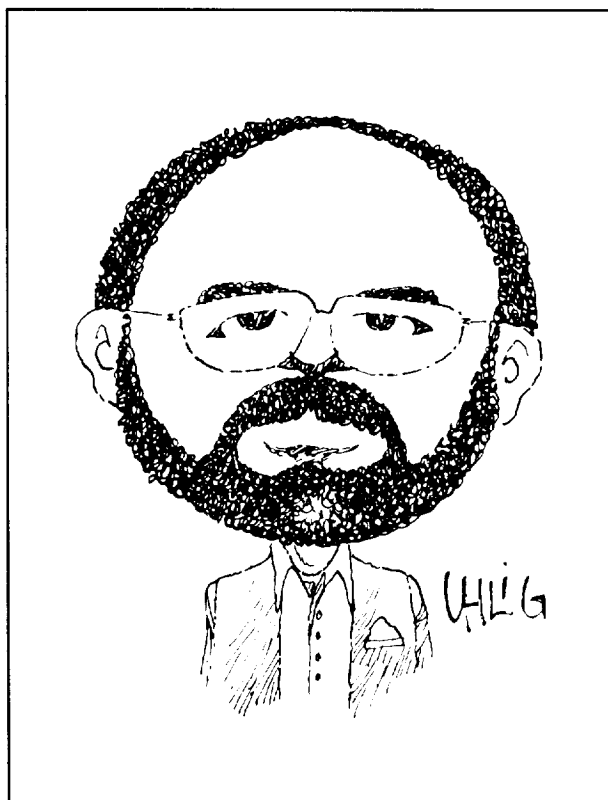
tionships both with government and with God. His writings also open the way for the majority—from the bottom up—rather than the clergy at the top to define the ideal Islamic state, which comes into being because of popular will and consensus, not imposition, he says.

Soroush goes even further, arguing against Islam as a political ideology. “Religious ideology should not be used to rule

a modern state, for it tends toward totalitarianism,” he contends. “The use of religious ideology in governance also blocks the growth of religious knowledge.” People are religious by personal choice, not because of government conduct or rules.

Again echoing a theme central to the Christian Reformation, which triggered the Protestant break from the Roman

Catholic Church, he distinguishes between the roles, powers, and responsibilities of mosque and state. While acknowledging that religion is by nature political, he rejects bringing religion deliberately into politics as the prerogative of a powerful elite. Although it provides guidelines for administering a society, Islam does not dictate rules or provide a blueprint for modern governance, Soroush argues. Moreover, he continues, because it effectively



Abdol Karim Soroush

vests power in an elite, theocracy contradicts Islam's basic tenets.

An Evolving Religion

Yet unlike Luther, Soroush is not abandoning the core values of the faith, which he thinks can and should influence government. "An ideal religious society cannot have anything but a democratic government," he contends. As interpretations or understandings of Islam evolve, *Sharia*, or Islamic law, can even be the basis of modern legislation. "*Sharia* is something expandable," he explains, as soft music plays in the background of his office. He sits at a round oak table surrounded by neat piles of books. With genuine excitement, the normally deliberate pace of his voice picking up, he adds, "You can't imagine the flexibility of *Sharia*. And in an Islamic democracy, you can actualize all its potential flexibilities." Soroush sees Islam as a religion that is still evolving.

He also sees no contradiction between democracy and a religion that means submission. "Just the reverse," he says, a smile growing across his face. "If you freely surrender or submit, this does not mean that you have sacrificed your freedom. You should be free as well to leave your faith. It is a contradiction to be free in order to believe—and then afterward to abolish that freedom."

Soroush openly rejects theocracy as a viable form of government. The ideal Islamic society is ruled not necessarily by mullahs or sheikhs but by secular leaders. Yet he does not preclude the clergy from having a role in government. He argues instead against elitism and rigid rules that give clerics special status or rights that put them above the law. "In [an ideal] religious society, no personality and no *fatwa* [religious decree] is above criticism," he says. Clerics must be as accountable as all others and subject to removal from political office by the broader population.

Of all his theses, this last may have the most serious implications for the current re-

gime, for it effectively undercuts the legitimacy of its ultimate authority—the *valiyat-e faqih* (supreme jurisprudent), a position held for a decade by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and since his death in 1989 held by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. It also implicitly challenges the powers of top bodies, such as the Council of Guardians and the Council of Experts, two groups heavily weighted with clergy who vet legislation and candidates for parliament and the presidency, and who generally act as moral checks on the regime's appointments and behavior.

More Than an Isolated Irritant

Not surprisingly, the ruling mullahs view Soroush with both contempt and alarm—especially because he was once considered a member of the regime's inner circle. His roots and upbringing perfectly fit the revolutionary profile. He was born in 1945 to a lower-middle-class family living in the southern suburbs of Tehran. His religious education began in secondary school, but he had a passion for the sciences, from mathematics to chemistry. He earned a degree in pharmacology, after which he fulfilled his compulsory military requirement by serving in the army. During the monarchy, he worked briefly in a laboratory concerned with food products, toiletries, and sanitary materials in Bushehr. He then worked in a pharmacology laboratory in Tehran until going to London for graduate work in analytical chemistry and the philosophy of science and, he says, "to become familiar with the outside world."³ His first book on Islamic philosophy, *The Restless Nature of the World*, dealt with the constant flux of the universe and with time as a fourth dimension of the material world; it reportedly received Ayatollah Khomeini's personal approval.

Soroush was among the thousands of young intellectuals who returned to Iran during the revolution. Already recognized as a pious thinker, he was one of seven men appointed to the Committee of the Cultural Revolution when the new Islamic regime

closed down all universities to conform curricula, faculties, and formats along Islamic lines. This period of his life is the most controversial, for hundreds of faculty and staff were purged from Iran's universities. Soroush says that his role was to vet curricula and books, and that he argued often and forcefully not to exclude non-Islamic works, particularly from the West. The development and growth of Iranian society and culture required interaction with the outside world and its sciences.

Later, during lectures he gave in Western countries in the 1990s, encounters with exiles led to bitter accusations about Soroush's affiliation. He quit the Committee in 1983 after the universities reopened. He then began to teach the philosophy of science, the philosophy of history, and the philosophy of religion and modern theology at the University of Tehran and two other smaller institutes of higher education. While he was still in favor with the revolutionary regime, Soroush also gave lectures on Iranian television on Rumi, a popular medieval Persian poet.

The Turning Point

The turning point in tension with the regime began as Soroush's thinking evolved and moved into increasingly controversial areas. His following started to expand beyond academic and intellectual circles and to penetrate the mainstream of society, from youth to women, from civil servants to the clergy, the spearhead of the revolution. Soroush steadily became more than an isolated irritant. As the pace of political change escalated globally in the late 1980s, he became emblematic of a broader movement for new political and religious freedoms that had begun to take root in the Muslim world.

His audience expanded further in 1988, when he began holding weekly lectures on Thursday evenings at mosques in north Tehran. Spillover crowds grew so large that they often could not be accommodated. In 1991, a group of supporters founded the

magazine *Kiyan*, which means "source" or "soul," as an outlet for his bimonthly columns. He has been a prolific writer, and a popular one. Many of his more than 20 books—which have such titles as *Wisdom and Subsistence* and *The Story of Love and Servitude* and cover everything from Persian poetry to the history of ideas—have gone into multiple printings. At a national book fair in the mid-1990s, an anonymous supporter contributed enough to make all his books available at half price. Even critics concede that his writing in Persian is so poetic it draws readers on literary merit alone. Although he speaks so softly it is often hard to hear him, students say the same about his lectures.

The government has been particularly worried about Soroush's appeal among the young, a generation that grew up with the revolutionary regime and has no memory of the monarchy with which to compare it. Dissatisfaction runs deep over soaring costs, limited job opportunities for the young, chronic shortages of affordable housing, and stiff social constraints, including few entertainment outlets and a virtual ban on unmarried men and women mixing in public outside of professional encounters. Despite a troubled economy and the difficulties of getting visas to travel to the West, hundreds of thousands of young Iranians of all classes have gained access to the outside world with the proliferation of satellite dishes that introduced them to everything from *Baywatch* and *Oprah* to assorted American soap operas and an Asian knockoff of VH-1, the rock video channel. Iran's parliament banned satellite dishes in 1995, but many were merely covered or concealed.

Rising discontent with the status quo at home has led Iran's universities to become hotbeds of debate. In the face of limited political options, the bold thinking of intellectuals and reformers such as Soroush is welcomed as offering fresh ideas—and perhaps eventually the inspiration for an alternative to the current system of governance.

Soroush's popularity was visible at Tehran University's School of Theology in late 1994, when students waited in the halls just to see him when he appeared to teach.

The Regime's Squeeze

The regime's squeeze began gradually. Six years of Thursday evening lectures at various mosques ended in 1994 as Soroush lost access to venues that had been considered safe from intervention. Invited by students in Isfahan to give a special lecture in June 1995, he encountered a series of setbacks. The university refused the use of its facilities, forcing the students to rent a hall. Then the lecture was disrupted by pro-regime militants. Chairs were thrown. Physical contact led to minor injuries among the students. Soroush escaped to a basement where the militants later found him; he was attacked and his clothing torn. The lecture had to be aborted.

On two other occasions, Soroush was physically injured, his clothing ripped, and his glasses stolen, and again he was forced to flee. After a particularly brutal attack at Tehran University in October 1995, an episode in which Soroush and several students were badly injured, dozens of his supporters organized a protest at the university—the first of its kind since the revolution.

Officials also began to speak openly about him. Queried at a press conference, Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati accused Soroush of hindering Iran's ability to conduct its foreign policy. By dragging "scholastic" issues into public forums, Velayati said, the philosopher "weakens the foundations of national independence and harmony as well as the state" and "harms the people's national and ideological foundations."

Just as he had originally tried to avoid attention from the popular and foreign media, the reclusive Soroush had also long sought to avoid direct confrontation with the regime. But this time he responded angrily in a letter to a Tehran newspaper:

Is it logical to accuse me of these things when my speeches are stopped and prohibited by beating me and tearing off my clothes? I am a person whose only opportunity is to write and publish an article every two or three months in a specialized magazine with limited circulation.

How is it that [officials'] efforts to strengthen the national and religious beliefs of the people are not getting anywhere and only this writer, with his broken pen and shut-up mouth, who has no freedom of expression and no personal security, has succeeded in casting a dark cloud? God knows that not even sorcerers have such powers.

Whenever a selfless truth teller starts speaking out of pain and for the sake of religious reform he is stripped of his reputation, freedom, and security and nailed so hard with curses, accusations of heresy, and threats in mosques, newspapers, radio, and television that he is unable to move in any direction. And they do not stop at that either. They then send misguided individuals to attack him in broad daylight so that after breaking his reputation they could snatch what is left of his half-alive body.

The campaign against him carried ominous broader implications, he warned:

A government and a country cannot claim virtue or honor if its academic community and artists are oppressed, intimidated, and treated as criminals for expressing their views, and live in fear and insecurity and are scared of exercising their intellectual and artistic talents and see their lives, work, and reputation attacked by hooligans.

The pace of persecution escalated in early 1996. Young armed men cut him off on his way to give lectures. He also received many death threats warning him to end the

classes he taught at Tehran University. In an open letter last year, Ansar-e Hizbollah charged that Soroush was not propagating philosophy but “secular and vulgar temptations” that undermined the Islamic state.

“Soroush through his deviant and illogical ideas has led the community of young university people from the terra firma of certainty to the whirlpool of doubt and confusion,” it said. “Global arrogance and Zionism—a.k.a. the United States and Israel—have reached the conclusion that if they want to attack the foundations of the Islamic ruling system of Iran they can find no sharper weapon than his ideas, ideas whose falseness has been proven time and time again in the history of the Muslim nation of Iran... We are not prepared to sell out the ideas of the revolution to secularism or sell the blood of our martyrs.” As controversy swelled, the state-run university subsequently cut back his classes from four to one, and the number of his students from 250 to less than two dozen.

Over a period of several months, Soroush was also summoned to a series of meetings with intelligence and other officials who, according to his supporters, formally banned him from teaching; ordered him not to write about certain key subjects, notably the legitimacy of the supreme jurispudent; and ordered him not to leave the country. He was also told not to discuss the restrictions.

A Catalyst for Change?

Again, Soroush fought back, this time with an open letter to Iranian president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. “I am mourning the death of a university in which learning is dead and the birth of barbarism is being celebrated,” he wrote.

The Ministry of Information, with threats and restrictions and frequent summons, has limited my activities and encroached upon my human rights and helped my opponents both in word and deed. How long will the intellectuals of

this land have to endure the law-breaking activities of these pressure groups and sit silently and tolerate unfitting behavior and threats? As a result of the impudent acts of these impudent people, I have lost my job security and my life is at risk.... This country has reached a point that a professor in order to attend his class has to prepare himself to die.

In 1996, with limited options at home and his life at risk, Soroush chose to take advantage of what he called a “compulsory opportunity” and accepted invitations to speak in Turkey, Egypt, England, Canada, Australia, and, over the course of a month-long tour, the United States. During his ten-month journey, his audiences remained predominantly either Muslim student groups or Iranian; he turned down high-profile meetings with prominent individuals and at prestigious venues such as the Council on Foreign Relations, in part due to fear of being tainted by contact. In April 1997, he returned to Iran to continue his work.

With his return, the debate is almost certain to flare up with new energy, especially as Iran turns a political corner. Ayatollah Khomeini was the singularly dominant influence during the revolution’s first decade. Over the next eight years, or two presidential terms, Rafsanjani was the pivotal political figure, often attempting to moderate the revolution’s early excesses and improve Tehran’s relations with the outside world. In the end, however, he was held in check by the religious conservatives who are strongly favored to take control after the May 1997 presidential elections—and who are most opposed to emerging Islamic reformers like Soroush.

As a philosopher who is most often found buried in his books or in writing his lectures, Soroush is unlikely to ever represent an alternative political force in Iran. He expresses no interest in dabbling in politics at any level. His focus is far broader, his time frame more the centuries and less the

moment. But he reluctantly acknowledges that his work could prove to be a catalyst for change, which may make it difficult to avoid the spotlight—and its potential repercussions. ●

Notes

1. Interview with John Voll of Georgetown University's Center of Christian-Muslim Understanding, as cited in Robin Wright, "Islamist's Theory of Relativity," *Los Angeles Times*, January 27, 1995. "Fundamentalism" is actually misused in describing the current Islamic activism. The term first emerged at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries in association with Protestant fundamentalists who advocated political and social passivity—to accept one's lot in life and not push for change in the temporal exist-

ence; improvement would come in the afterlife. Islamic activists are just the opposite. Similar to Liberation Theologists of the Catholic Church, they advocate using the tenets and values of the faith to better one's temporal condition, not to accept injustice—and not to wait. In recognition of the difference, foreign policy specialists both inside and outside government are increasingly dropping the term "fundamentalist" in favor of the term "Islamist."

2. All quotations of Soroush are from interviews conducted by the author between November 1994 and March 1997 in Iran and the United States.

3. Biography of Abdol Karim Soroush, July 1996, published on SERAJ, a London-based website run by Soroush disciples. See also Valla Vakili, "Debating Religion and Politics in Iran: The Political Thought of Abdolkarim Soroush," Council on Foreign Relations, New York, 1996.