

## **Religious Intellectuals and Political Action in the Reform Movement<sup>1</sup>**

Hamidreza Jalaeipour  
Tehran, Iran

### **Introduction**

On the face of it and within the context of contemporary Iranian politics, the category of "religious intellectuals" seems ambiguous and even paradoxical. On the one hand, there is still no consensus among the Iranian educated strata about who falls into this category. There is even no agreement about whether religious intellectuals constitute a cultural or political force. On the other hand, despite this ambivalence, the leading and influential role of religious intellectuals in what has come to be known as the Dovom-e Khordad Reform Movement are acknowledged by most observers and analysts. The purpose of this essay is to clarify this "ambiguity" by offering examples of religious intellectuals in different arenas and by discussing their role in and relationship to the reform movement. My point is that the category of religious intellectuals is not an undifferentiated category and the analysis of the differences that exist within the category is important for understanding the more prominent role some sections of religious intellectuals have come to play in the reform movement.

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## **Religious Intellectuals and the Reform Movement**

The first question to ask is how do religious intellectuals manifest themselves in the reform movement? It will be easier to answer this question, if a distinction is made between the "broad" understanding of the term and its more "limited" sense. In the broad sense of the word, all Muslim individuals (cleric or non-cleric) who are interested in, and reflective about, the ideas of Mehdi Bazargan, Ayatollah Mahmoud Taleghani, Ali Shariati, Ayatollah Morteza Mottahari and so on can be considered religious intellectuals. Since these leading Muslim personalities offered a critical reading of religious, social, and political institutions, and were intent on solving cultural, political, social, and economic problems through the realization of an "Islamic revolution," the Islamic-revolutionary discourse of 1979 is in important ways indebted to their intellectual activities (which in that era offered an ideological interpretation of modernity). Furthermore, after the Islamic revolution, despite increasing differentiation and disagreements in perspectives, still the relevance of the category of religious intellectuals in the broad sense of the word continued and continues. All intellectuals who are defenders of the authenticity of Ayatollah Mottahari's intellectual productions, as well as those insistent on the lasting and momentous role of Ali Shariati, or those interested in the works of Abdolkarim Soroush can be included in this broad category. However the category of religious intellectuals, broadly understood, is not the subject of this essay. It should be understood that not all religious intellectuals are supporters and promoters of the Dovom-e Khordad Movement. Some have been passive and indifferent towards the movement, while others have even opposed it. In fact, many of the conservatives opposing to the reform movement do not have any problems with the category of

religious intellectuals broadly understood and indeed consider themselves religious intellectuals par excellence. As such, it is necessary to give attention to the more limited meaning of the category and its manifestation among the most persistent promoters of the reform movement in Iran.

Some religious intellectuals, understood broadly, can be found among the more limited category as well. If we decide to identify these two types of intellectuals on the basis of important events, we can consider religious intellectuals of 1979 as the *leading* intellectuals while those engaging in intellectual activities alongside the reform movement as the *late* ones (emphasizing a non-ideological interpretation of modernity). Rather than congregating around prominent personalities, these *late* religious intellectuals can be found around three intellectuals focal groups or circles. The first circle congregates as forces identified with the Followers of Imam Line and with the intellectual-political productions of the writers for the journal *Kiyan*. The second circle engages in intellectual-political activities as national-religious forces and its productions are represented in the journal *Iran-e Farda*. And the third focal group is constituted by the intellectual activities of clerics and writers of the monthly *Naqd va Nazar* published in Qom. Of course there is diversity and lack of consensus within each circle. However, there are certain characteristics that differentiate these circles from each other as well (see the table at the end of this paper).

The existence of differences and distinctions does not cause the activities of any of these circles to step outside of what can be considered the sphere of action of religious intellectuals. This is because all these circles not only have religious concerns, but also attempt to critique the performance of cultural, religious, political, and economic

institutions from the point of view of modernity (and modern society). Instead of calling for a "revolution," they all also aim at "reform" and improvement of current conditions.<sup>2</sup> It can be said that the reform discourse that picked up speed after the election of Mohammad Khatami in 1997 is the result of intellectual interaction among these focal circles (and with other intellectuals).<sup>3</sup> At the same time, despite the presence of a variety of intellectual voices, it can be said that it has been the members of the first circle that have played a much more prominent role in the reform movement and accordingly have been under more pressure.

The more influential role of the first circle can be shown in reference to three events. First, in the stunning election of 23 May 1997 (when 20 out of 30 million ballots were cast in favor of Khatami), these intellectuals had a decisive role in convincing the electorate to vote for Khatami and in organizing his media campaign. The second focal group, on the other hand, was rather passive in the presidential election and encouraged its supporters to cast a white ballot. The third group also did not and does not believe in political activities and in the election did not explicitly support Khatami.

The second event was the emergence of the reformist press after the election, which ended up carrying much of the burden of the Dovom-e Khordad Movement. The activities of most of the influential newspapers (which reached circulation of more than a

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to point out that in the literature of these three focal groups there is also a difference in the usage of the term religious intellectuals. The first one uses the term *roshanfekr-e dini* (religious intellectual) repeatedly and explicitly. In the literature of the second group, the term "religious modernists" (*nogarayan-e dini*) is used more often than religious intellectuals. Finally in the literature of the third group the emphasis is on "new religious thinking" (*no-andishi-ye dini*).

<sup>3</sup> Note that the reformist discourse is not only the product of interaction among these three focal groups of religious intellectuals. It is the result of engagement with the works of other intellectuals as well. Thinkers and intellectuals such as Ezzatollah Fouladvand, Hossein Bashiriyeh, Baqer Parham, Daryoush Ashouri, Mohammad Ali Katouzian, Dariyoush Shayegan, Javad Tabatabai, and Ramin Jahanbegloo morade Saqafi have played an important role in shaping the reform discourse.

million), such as *Salaam*, *Jame'eh*, *Tous*, *Khordad*, *Sobh-e emrouz*, *Neshat*, *Mosharekat*, *Asr-e Azadegan* and *Bahar*, depended on the role and presence of these first circle intellectuals. This is while, due to various factors which included limitations imposed by conservatives on them, the level of activities of the second circle never went beyond the readers of *Iran-e Farda* (with circulation of less than 50,000). The newspaper *Entekhab*, which was closer to the third circle, despite financial support from the government and absolute security it enjoyed, was never able to sell more than 50,000 copies a day either.

The third event involved the elections for the sixth parliament in which intellectuals of the first circle again had an important role. In this election, which led to the loss of absolute majority on the part of conservatives in favor of reformist candidates, the list of candidates for Tehran's slots supported by the reformist press, was widely approved by the voters. This was despite the fact that the Guardian Council had already disqualified many of the well-known candidates closed to the religious intellectual circles. In short, all three events suggest the more influential role of the first circle of religious intellectuals. And perhaps it is because of this influential role that the conservatives have imposed the highest pressure in this group, closing their papers, arresting many of their most effective communicators, and preparing "judicial files" for most.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> A close look at the number and composition of prisoners in the past few years also suggests that pressure on the first circle has been more intense. During this period, intellectuals from the third group have essentially not had any prisoners. From the second circle, Ezzatollah Sahabi, Yousefi Eshkevari, and Ali Zeidabadi have gone to prison. But from the first circle, Abbas Abdi, Mashallah Shamsolvaezin, Hamidreza Jalaepour, Mohsen Kadivar, Abdollah Nouri, Akbar Ganji, Emadeddin Baqi, Javadi Hesar, Latif Safari, Mohammad Qouchani and... have gone to prison (and all their newspapers have been closed).

## **Cultural or Political Force?**

After establishing the political importance of the first circle of religious intellectuals, another key question arises. Does this prominent political role undermine the importance of religious intellectuals as a cultural force and turn them in a political force/party? If we refer to the literature of these religious intellectuals we notice that they do not perceive themselves as a political force/party and in fact emphasize the cultural aspect of their role. In a society of religious people, they understand themselves as carriers of the project of modernity. Rather than pursuing political and governmental positions, they are after strengthening and institutionalizing of the "public sphere." This is the sphere in which institutions, such as the press and independent associations, have been under extreme pressure from the conservatives (unfortunately mostly in the name of religion, revolution and martyrs). From the perspective of religious intellectuals, defense of religion is not possible in a society devoid of a public sphere for critique and analysis. They consider the implementation of religious values and codes through governmental power and force as detrimental to the influence and spread of religious and pious action. Instead they promote civil institutions as more effective vehicles for the support of religious values.

Despite this stated preference for cultural activities, the following conditions have imposed "political action" on religious intellectuals. First there is the fact that the institutions necessary for the livelihood of the "public sphere" are weak, and without minimum guarantees and security in this arena intellectual activity essentially cannot thrive, interact, correct and reform itself. Second, the policies of the conservatives in the past years had deprived the polity from a multi-party and competitive system to the point

that before the May 23 election even progressive political groups and tendencies were not seriously able to defend the "public sphere" and the need for intellectual activity. Accordingly, pressure groups benefiting from the silence of conservatives could attack various elements constituting the "public sphere" such as meetings, offices of publications and intellectuals in broad daylight and with impunity. Third, the hidden nuclei of violence engaged in the killing of secular intellectuals and threatening of many religious intellectuals as a means to create a chill in the "public sphere." The combination of these conditions forced religious intellectuals into political action in order to protect and strengthen the "public sphere" and intellectual life. In other words, in face of massive conservative pressure, they were forced to defend political groups, the press, and reformist politicians and candidates. Although their activities did not appear cultural, it was indeed pursued for the sake of protecting self-expression and society and as such it had important cultural implications as well.

### **Continued Importance of Religious Intellectuals**

After explaining the reasons for the imposition of "political action" on religious intellectuals, another question arises regarding the reasons for their continued importance in the Iranian political scene despite serious opposition exhibited by the conservatives. As is well-known, after their May 23 defeat, the conservatives, rather than attempting to reconstitute themselves as a powerful political force within the context of a law-abiding, progressive, forward-looking conservatives political party, have attempted to confiscate the political power of Khatami's government through methods based on "rights of

monopoly."<sup>5</sup> The pressures were even increased after their defeat in the sixth parliamentary elections to the point that some extremist sections of the conservatives accused religious intellectuals of "silently engaging in an overthrow" or being "new hypocrites"! It was during the same period that over twenty newspapers were closed en masse, writers were sent to prison, and Saeed Hajjarian, one of the most prominent religious intellectuals, was shot (he is still on wheelchair and has not returned to his daily activities). Despite these pressures, three factors can partially explain the continued success of religious intellectuals in the Dovom-e Khordad Movement.

The first factor is structural. The structure of the 60-million strong Iranian society is now more than 70 percent urban. Most of this population is young and educated, with more than 5 million holding college degrees or more. Such a society or structure can no longer be "molded" by conservatives into any shape or discourse. In fact, for such a society, particularly its educated strata, the reform discourse and objectives of religious intellectuals are much more appealing. Second in their critiques and analyses, the first circle of religious intellectuals are not after macro-prescriptions for the creation of an imagined utopia on earth. Even more than engaging in critique and analysis of prevalent discourses, they are interested in the analysis of discourses that were prevalent during their youth years. Unlike the conservatives, they are not intent on propagating a teacher-disciple model of relationship. They do not even hesitate to critique their own preeminent teachers and scholars. Such a discourse is naturally appealing to the educated and influential strata that are witness to societal problems (many of which are related to the utopianism of the official propaganda).

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<sup>5</sup> For a list of activities and events against the reform movement since the election of Khatami refer to Hamidreza Jalaeipour, *Dolat-e Penhan* (Hidden Government) (Tehran, 1379), pp. 339-374.



The third factor goes back to the background of the first circle of religious intellectuals. The median age for this group is around 40, which in comparison to the second circle is about 10 years younger. Put in a different way, during the Islamic revolution, the religious intellectuals of the first circle were mostly dedicated youth and students who made many sacrifices for the establishment of the Islamic republic and during the imposed war. As such, the conservatives cannot easily use the weapon and label of "*gheir-e khodi*" (outsider), deployed rather effectively against secular intellectuals and religious intellectuals of the second circle, to eliminate first circle religious intellectuals.<sup>6</sup>

It has been because of the above factors that religious intellectuals, despite intense conservative opposition, have been able to defend the "reform discourse" of the Dovom-e Khordad Movement, making its objectives appealing to an overwhelming majority of the Iranians. This is why they received the vote of confidence of the electorate in both the council and parliamentary elections.<sup>7</sup> The victory of the majority of the reformist candidates clearly showed that the Dovom-e Khordad Movement has been successful in deepening its discourse and objectives.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Of course it is more precise to say that the conservatives have so far not been able to eliminate them, as prediction about the future situation is rather difficult. This is particularly a concern these days when through the use of public media, religious intellectuals are accused of silently engaging in an overthrow and being new hypocrites. The surprising aspect of all this is that the more rational conservatives have also chosen silence. The sad side effect of this silence lies in its meaning. It suggests that the outcome of the 20-year conservative management of the society has been the "production of new hypocrites"! Apparently the extremists see the continued livelihood of the Islamic republic to lie in the complete suppression of religious intellectuals. Listen to the words of Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi: "We have reached a point where some using the name of national-religious intellectual claim that freedom must come first and these things are published in newspapers[...] if people accompany us they will go to a place where 'Arab ney mizanad,' where their fellow travelers went during the first years of the revolution." *Iran* 12 Mehr 1379.

<sup>7</sup> Despite financial and organizations weakness, the reformists have been able to influence the 5 million educated with their reform discourse and aims. This large educated stratum was able to overcome the weaknesses of the Dovom-e Khordad movement and spontaneously shape the vote of the larger public.

The objectives that have now taken root in the society can be summarized in the following manner:

- In the governmental sphere, all institutions must be responsible and accountable on the basis of the Constitution;
- At the level of polity, a multi-party and competitive system must become transparently instituted as soon as possible;
- In the economic sphere, special monopolies should be dismantled, large economic institutions should become responsive, and investments should develop institutionalized security;
- In the political cultural sphere, the patriarchal model of behavior should be transformed into a democratic one;
- In the scientific-university arena, conditions should be created in which research can be pursued freely and with security and offered to the public (hence strengthening the public sphere);
- In the religious sphere, the buttressing of religious behavior should not be based on force;
- In the individual sphere, more guarantees for the pursuit of individual rights and prevention of interference in the private lives of people should be instituted.<sup>9</sup>

Let me end by suggesting that despite the discursive achievements of the religious intellectuals, there is very little that can be deemed settled. It seems that until the multi-faceted and institutionalized strengthening of the "public sphere," the establishment of a

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<sup>8</sup> Of course to what extent these objectives can become actualized via the sixth parliament, reformist parties, or Khatami's government is another discussion outside the scope of this paper.

<sup>9</sup> See Jalaeipour, *Dolat-e Penhan*, *op. cit.*, pp. 167-197.

multi-party system in a transparent arena of politics, and the emergence of a legal and forward-looking conservative party that does not remain silent in face of pressure group violence, religious intellectuals will continue to operate under abnormal conditions. These conditions will continue to impose "political action" on this essentially cultural force as a means to protect the public sphere.<sup>10</sup> As such, it is not the activities of religious intellectual that must be seen as "paradoxical" but rather the conditions and characteristics of the Iranian polity itself.

### Characteristics of the Three Religious Intellectual Circles

Circles and Sub-circles	Name of Publications	Personalities and Writers	Approaches to the Political System	Political Orientation	Influence in Universities	Influence in Seminaries	Financial Source
<u>First Circle</u>  Sub-circle around <i>Kiyan</i> and <i>Dovom-e Khordad</i> Publications	<i>Kiyan, Sobh-Emrouz, Jame'eh, Tous, Neshat, Asr-e Azadegan, Bahar</i>	Soroush, Mojtahed Shabestari, Malekian, Shamsol-vaezzi, Tehrani, Alavitabar, Naraghi, Soltani, Mohammadi, Mardiha, Jalaipour, Ganji, Akbari, Ghazian, Kashi, Rezai, Mozzafar, Norouzi, Baqi, Qouchani...	Reformist	Social Democrat, Social Liberal	High	Low	Non-governmental
Sub-circle around <i>Salaam</i> and	<i>Salaam. Asr-e ma, Mosharekat</i>	Armin, Aghajari, Hajjarian,	Reformist	Social Democrat	High	Medium	Non-governmental

<sup>10</sup> Despite this conclusion, I am opposed to the use of the category of "religious intellectuals" as a political category for the analysis of the political sphere under normal conditions. For my more elaborate discussion of this issue refer to *Dolat-e Penhan*, op. cit., pp. 137-144.

<i>Asr-e Ma</i>		Abdi, Mazrui, Arghandeh- pour, Mirdamadi ...					
Association of Qom Howze-ye Elmieh Teachers	--	Meybodi, Abai, Ayazi, Mousavi Tabrizi	Reformist	Not clear	Medium	Medium	Non- governmental
Writers in <i>Khordad</i>	<i>Khordad</i>	Nouri, Kadivar, Hekmat, Farastkhah	Reformist	Social Democrat, Social Liberal	High	Medium	Non- governmental

<u>Second Circle</u>							
Sub-circle around <i>Iran-e Farda</i>	<i>Iran-e Farda</i> (bi- weekly)	Ezzatollah Sahabi, Eshkevari, Alijani, Rahmani, Zeidabadi, Saber, Rajai	Reformist and Radical	Social Democrat	Medium	Low	Non- governmental
Peyman Sub-circle	Bulletins	Habibollah Peyman	Reformist and Radical	Social Democrat	Low	Low	Non- governmental
Freedom Movement Sub-circle	Bulletins	Yazdi, Abdolali Bazargan	Reformist and Radical	Social Liberal	Medium	Low	Non- governmental

<u>Third Circle</u>							
Circle around <i>Naqd va Nazar</i>	<i>Naqd va Nazar</i>	Qanbari, Faqihi, ...	Reformist	Not Clear	Low	Medium	Government
Circle around <i>Entekhab</i>	<i>Entekhab</i>	Teh Hashemi ...	Reformist	Not clear	Very Low	Medium	Government