The Islamic Republic of Iran and the Idea of Secularism

Fariba Parsa

Introduction

How do the Islamic conservatives in Iran define the concept of secularism? And how do the Islamic conservatives use the concept of secularism to argue for the Islamic state? The word secular and secularism have become known among not only intellectuals in Iran but also among a large well-educated Iranian population. 1- Although we can find several translations of the word "secular" into Persian, 2- The word secularism used and pronounced as the English word in the academic debates- there are nonetheless different interpretations of secularism in Iran. 3- The debate about secularism is not new in Iran, what has changed is that since the beginning of 2000 is that there are large numbers of published works, with diverse interpretations, and a rise in the interest of Iranians generally about secularism. What is curious about this is that a large number of books and articles about secularism have published inside of Iran by Islamic conservatives.

Fariba Parsa has written this article during the period of her affiliation with Harvard University, Center for Middle Eastern studies. 2010-2012

FARIBA PARSA

Visiting scholar, Ph.D. in social sciences Universityof Maryland, Department for women studies. eMail: fparsa@umd.edu

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The Islamic Seminary of Qum and other religious and higher education institutions in Iran have published several books in which we can find the word secular included in the title. 4- The publications discuss secularism from its historical, political, philosophical and theological views. One may ask; is the enormous investment from the Islamic Republic of Iran in works discussing the idea of secularism showing that they perceive a threat from the new political interest in secular ideas? Are the ideological struggles of the religious academic centers attempting to respond to the intellectual need of secular ideas among religious

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and non- religious intellectuals? The Islamic conservatives criticize the idea of secularism within Islam and within the Iranian state. Their publications regarding secularism are unknown in the USA and Europe, and are mostly published within religious academic centers and religion studies at the universities in Iran. Some of the published works are Ali kamali Ardakani 5-, (my translation; A critique of secularism foundation, University of Emam Sedeq 6-, Department for Culture and Society, 2007. Sayed Mohammad Reza Hosseini Motlagh 7-, (My translation; Approval of Secularism, Approval Or Disapproval of Islamic Government, Persian Publisher, 2002), Shams Allah Mariji, (my translation; Secularism and the reasons of its foundation in Iran, Imam Khomeini publisher, 2001.

A very quick look shows that the afore-mentioned writers agreed that 1) secularism means separation of Din from Siaysat, (religion from politics) 2) secularism is anti- "Islam" and 3) secularism belongs to the European/Christian world. The political motive of debating the concept of secularism is to maintain the political power of the Islamic state in Iran. The political message is that Iranians must choose between Islam on one side and atheism on the other side, in regards to their society. The Islamic state claims that secularism exists in Europe because of the Christian religion and the corruption of the church.

The Islamic conservatives' publications about secularism during the period 2000-2010 are discourses that construct the political ideas of secularism and the Islamic State. Through this discourse the Islamic conservatives attempt to constitute the ideological belief that secularism is wrong, inappropriate and immoral for the Muslims in Iran and that the Islamic state is the right, appropriate and moral for the Iranians. The functioning of this discourse is the ideological battle against the risen interest of secularism in Iran. The key concept in discourse analysis is social antagonism. Antagonisms are understood as the clash of social agents with mutually constituted identities and interests. Laclau and Mouffe argue that social antagonisms occur because social agents are unable to realize their identities and because they construct an "enemy" who is deemed responsible for this failure. An antagonism is seen to occur when the presence of another prevents one from being totally his or herself (Howarth: 2000: 105). Social antagonism will exist when a group of people feel threatened by others. Thus, they construct a chain of equivalence that is in opposition to the discourses of the other group. The

original conception of social antagonism is the external enemy that prevents identity "A" from becoming fully constituted (Torfing: 1999:128). "Anti-A" negates the A. "Social antagonism is undoubtedly a double-edged sword, as it constitutes and sustains social identity by position a threat to that very identity." (Torfing: 1999:131) Therefore, social antagonism is, at the same time, the condition of possibility and the condition of impossibility of discourse systems of identity. In discourse theory this process of stabilizing and destabilizing the identity is understood as social antagonism. Ideological antagonism between "religion" and "secularism" has been articulated by the Islamic conservatives; This articulation defined "Islam" is ideologically anti the "European/American-Christians-secularism"; the enemy is not only "secularism", but emphasis is the "Western-Christian", which we can find in European countries and the USA. In the entire publication about "secularism" supported by the Islamic Republic of Iran, you cannot find a single word about secularism in Asia, countries such as India, Indonesia and Malaysia. The Islamic conservatives constituted the "enemy", the threatening "outside", the "secularism ideology" that oppose the Islamic state; this enemy is the "European/American-Christians-secularism"

Constructing the enemy: Secularism is a Christian and Western phenomenon

It is believed that the idea of secularism can exist with Christianity but not within Islam. Mohammad Hasan Karámalikí, Secularim dar Masihiyat va Islam, (my translation Secularism in Christianity and in Islam), claimed that one of the most important reasons for the idea of secularism is the religion of Christianity. Karámalikí argued that we can find in the Bible an emphasis on the separation of Christianity from the state, through the words of Jesus and through the Christian interpretations. For example, Karamaliki offered this bible verse and subsequent interpretation to support his claims: "Jesus was asked this question "Are you king of the Jews?" He asked my kingdom does not belong to this world. ,…. Some people wished Jesus should be their statesman but Jesus rejected it and he fled to mountain alone. (Karámalikí, 2001:33-36, my translation). " There is lack of Christian rule over the state and society, as there is no religious code of conduct that governs over politics. If a religion wants to be involved in society and within the state, should include some rules that believers could support and that shows engagement within the politics and the state. There is not any Christian law for the state." (Karámalikí, 2001:35-36, my translation)

Karámalikí explains that today one of the most common meanings of secularism in the Western world is the separation of religion from politics, state and society. In the West religion should not be involved within this world human such as economy, education, and rights. Religion should only be involved in relation to prayer, marriage and death. " (Karámalikí, 2001:15, my translation)

The economic corruption within the Christian churches in regards to morality was the reasons that people lost their religious beliefs, according to Karámalikí. (Karámalikí, 2001:57-60, my translation). He argued that the church as an institution and the priests as individuals had become the richest class in the society. The gap between the masses and the priests was very wide. He explained the rise of secularism within Christianity as the political reason for secularism. "The persecution of the people who criticized the corruption of the church by officials within the church, and the prohibition on scientists communicating the result of their research created the condition of separation church from the state. (Karámalikí, 2001:70, my translation) One of the differences between Islam and Western Christianity is that Chiristianity suffers from a lacking of lacking political philosophy. This statement has been formulated as a question; "Is there a lack of political philosophy in Islam like in Christianity?" Karámalikí formulated this query rhetorically and summed up his answer with 7 reasons to elaborate the Islamic political philosophy: (Karámalikí, 2001:125-141) Only God is the Governor. People are born free and equal and nobody can govern other people. (p.126) The religion of Islam and the Quran reject law and governing without God. The state and the constitution according to the Quran should be divine matter. (p.127) The Quran says to people that only God can decide who can guide the people. It also says that people should be loyal to their Guide, Walie Faqih. (p.130) The Quran includes law for human relation within the economic and social relations. (p.132) The Quran includes law about international relations, especially in regards to enemies, how to treat prisoners of war and how to behave towards non-believers, such as Christians and Jews. Islam has also laws about Jihad and how to defend oneself and religion (p.133) Laws concerning crime and punishment: Islam includes many laws that used in the trial. (p.135)

One of the most common reasons for mixing religion and politics is due to Mohammad's tradition and his actions. Mohammad governed an Islamic state in Medina. Mohammad's tradition is Islamic political philosophy. (p.140-141) Karámalikí quoted the Quran and Hadith to argue for all these 7 seven reasons, however I have only outlined the reasons that illustrate the main ideas of how he understood political philosophy of Islam. This political philosophy of Islam was the reason for opposition to the idea of secularism. Philosopher Niccolo Machiavelli (1469- 1527) interested Karámalikí, who claims that Abdol Karim Sorush has imitated Machiavelli, hence Soroush's ideas are not Islamic. Karámalikí wrote that Machiavelli replaced God-centered Christianity with Human-centered Christianity. He also wrote that Machiavelli believed that the goal of politics is to satisfy God; in reality, however, the human satisfaction in politics would also satisfy God." Machiavelli believed church and religion should be removed from society, countering the excuse that the clergy were better in politics than others. Machiavelli believed that politics should be separated from the church precisely in order to protect the church. (Karámalikí: 2001:79, my translation). Soroush expressed the same idea for Islam, confirmed Karámalikí. In sum, the concept of secularism was claimed to belong to the Christian religion and the Western philosophy of religion. Scholars such as Sorush who argued for religious pluralism are identified as imitating Western philosophy of separation church and the state and not representing Islam. Through identifying secularism being European-Christian political phenomena Karamaliki constructed the image of a stranger-enemy that scholars such as Abdol Karim Surush supports.

Myth and social imaginary of Islam and the Islamic State

According to Laclau and Mouffe, ideologies can also function as a myth, when defined as a reading of a given situation. A myth is a metaphor for an absent fullness i.e. a fullness which cannot be realized at present (Torfing,1999:115). A myth is thereby transformed into a social imaginary. A social imaginary is a horizon in the sense that it is not one object among other objects, but rather the condition of possibility for the emergence of any object (1999:115). The social imaginary gives some vision of a promised land or ideal society. The communist dream of a classless society, the dream of equal Islamic society and the dream of an Islamic democracy are examples of social imaginaries. The notion of myth and social imaginary conceptualize the ideological forms of discourse that aim to construct society and social agency as positive and fully sutured identities. What is important about myths and imaginaries is how their identity is given in their differentiation from what falls outside them.

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(Norval, 2000: 344). What did the Islamic conservatives suggest as the ideal social order? What falls outside that ideal social order? Myth and social imaginary are the two key instruments that show the immediate superiority of the group's ideological beliefs.

Constructing differences between a Religions state and an Islamic state

Normally we understand an Islamic state as a religious state. Conservative Muslims in their defense of the Islamic State of Iran, distinguish between a religious state and an Islamic State; "A religious state is according to Motlagh's definition

"A religious state is a state when only one religion gets political leadership and the leaders formulate the country's law and demand that all people should obey their religious law. This kind of religious state claims there formation is a result of God's message and they are in connection with God. They intervene in all social and individual life. Today there are such religious states that see themselves as holy and oppress all form criticizing the state . (Hosseini Motlagh, 1382: 19, my translation)

An Islamic state is not a religious state according to Motalagh . He argued that an Islamic state would not accept this kind of religious despotic governing, according to Hosseini Motlagh.

"Islam has a plan for how to run a country. Islam says only God can be the governor, laws that people formulate are not complete. We can ask who should formulate the laws of a society? May the people dictate the law? According to Islam people are not allowed to write law and only God can create perfect laws for the people. Religious states do not respect any rights for the people , but Islam says a good state without support of the people cannot be succeed. (Hosseini Motlagh, 1382:20, my translation)

It is not too difficult to find out that what Hosseini Motlagh called an Islamic State is exactly the religious state which he criticized. The only differences between an Islamic and a religious state is in which he pointed out was whether the government "respects the rights of the people". Motalagh identified the Islamic state as being the absolute Truth, and the nature of the Islamic state knows and respects rights of the people. He emphasized that a secular democratic state would not be accepted within Islam, because "the only state we can accept is one where God is the ruler

and the law has been formulated by him. Islam presents a state ruled by God. Every thing belongs to God and humans should answer to God for his/her actions. (Hosseini Motlagh, 1382: 21, my translation). Thus he is telling to people that they would be against Islam if they criticize the Islamic State and strive for secularism.

The idea that Islam is different from a general understanding of "religion" has been formulated by Saiyed Mohammad Reza Hosseini Motlagh , an Iranian Islamic conservative scholar who expressed in his book (Approval of Secularism, Approval Or Disapproval of Islamic Government, my translation) that: "People who defend the idea of separation of state from religion do not have knowledge of Islam". (Hosseini Motlagh, 1382, (2004) : 99, my translation). He argued that Islam has a law for every situation, for every time and every place. Islam gives answers to all society's problems and it has the best plans for running a society. (Hosseini Motlagh, 1382 (2004) :99 my translation). He uses examples to clarify his understanding of Islam, including issue for humans beings:

"Islam is timeless. Islam has law for all individual and social human relations. Islam even has laws for the most detailed and individual private issues, such as when should you cut your nail? Where? And how? How, where, and when you should brush your teeth? What kind of dental floss or hair brush should you use? How to use them? When to use them? What kind of material should your clothes be made of? What color should your clothes be? How should you put on your clothes? Etc….." (Hosseini Motlagh, 1382(2004):100, my translation). The myth of Islam was constructed to mean that the entirety of human life should be within the Islamic system. Hosseini Motlagh claimed that it is meaningless to defend a secular State in Iran when the majority demand an Islamic system for their society. Articulating meanings of "Religion", "Governance" and "Politics" Within an Islamic state and secularism

The Islamic conservatives constructed subjectivity of the Islamic state and the enemy of secularism through key concepts; chains of equivalences and constitutive outsides. A chain of equivalence constructs an outside that threatens the logic of the discourse in question; however when this differential system is confronted with an outside threat it will tend to emphasize the sameness of the threatened moments and thus create a chain of equivalence. Constitutive outside is constructed as the opposite, i.e., one that blocks the identity of the inside. In other words secularism opposes the Islamic State. The notion of logic refers first to the

rules governing a practice, institution or system of relations between objects, and secondly to the kinds of entities and their relation presupposed by the operation of such rules (Laclau, 2000, Howarth, 2006). For example, the logic of Islamic governing comprises a particular set of rules governing the Will of God. The organization of such an Islamic rule with interaction to the people is possible by establishing Islamic state institutions and the leadership of the clergies. Thus the logic of Islamic governance presupposes a set of subjects (the Islamic state institutions and the people), a set of objects (Islamic law and morals), and a set of relations between subjects and objects (duties and responsibilities). The ideas of secularism are threatening this leadership of Islamic governing by the conservatives. I analyze the debates on secularism to show the construction of chains of equivalence and the constitutive outside. In this section I focus on three main elements of the Islamic state and secularism; 1) Religion, 2) Politics and 3) Governance;

Religion within the Islamic state and secularism

The word Religion has been translated into Persian Din, but the word religion and Din are not the same. Asgar Eftekhari argued that within secularism one understands religious beliefs as a human object but within the Islamic state "Islam is not a human object but is a sacred attitude". (Eftekhari, 2008: 10).

Islam is different from other religions because Islam exists in each human's individual and collective life, according to Asgar Eftekhari, an Iranian professor in Iran, (Eftekhari, 2008). Eftekhari divides discourses on religion into two kinds (Eftekhari, 2008: 10); the first discourse has a secular attitude toward the meaning of religion; The secularists try to make religion a human object— the logic is that religious influences are suited to the condition of time and place. Religion is a tool for human beings.

The second discourse has a sacred attitude toward the meaning of religion; they try to focus on the issue of divinity. Religion attains meaning in relation to humans with the heavens. Humans get meaning within and inside of religion. Eftekhari emphasizes that human being have been created by God and the presence and influences of religion do not obey our will but God's. Eftekhari believes that we can talk about religion only in the sacred discourse. He concluded that Islam- unlike in other religions- exists in all humans' individual and collective lives. Therefore, according to Eftekhari,

Islam will legitimize a sacred system and not a secular one. In other words, Eftekhari's understanding is that in secularism, Islam would be a human object which is against the true Islam.

By creation of two confronting ideas of the meaning of religion Eftekhari constructed the outside, the enemy or the secularists' idea of religion; that is only a human object, which is not the true understanding of Islam. Chains of equivalences of the inside are "the true Islam and understanding of religion", the sacred attitude, and Islam existence in all humans lives. Eftekhari constructs the enemy of secularists exactly to argue for his logic of the Islamic state.

Politics within Islamic state and secularism

The concept of Politics is one of the main elements in the articulation of secularism. Politics has been translated to the Persian word Siaysat . If we look at the Persian-English dictionary for the word Siaysat we can find this definition: "to look after the land, to take care of, to give order to the masses, governing, to judge, justice, to punish and to guide." If we look at the word Politics at the Oxford Learner Dictionary we can find this definition: "the activities involved in getting and using power in Public life and being able to influence decisions that affect a country or a society. Derakh-Bash reminded us of Ayatollah Khomeini's ideas of the meaning of Siaysat (politics) as an argument that in Islam you cannot separate politics from Islam. He explained the word Siaysat with Ayatollah Khomeni's words;

"Politics means to guide the society in the direction which is good for the society and for the individuals. The prophet Mohammad got the mission to take politics out of society. Only the Imams and the Ulama have the capacity to do this job. They know what is good for society and for the people, and they guide the society exactly in the right direction (Serate Mostagim). (Derakh-sheh : 1386: 142-143, my translation)

Politics has been articulated as a way to govern and guide the people. Several Islamic conservatives claim "The only religion that rejects the idea of the separation of religion from politics is Islam." (Hosseini Motlagh, 1382: 2) they argue that Islam emphasizes the creation of an Islamic state because it has the capacity to run a state.

The Islamic conservatives argue that the political aim of Islam is to create a state that should be based on Islamic tradition. This Islamic political system has its foundation in the book of God, the Quran and the traditions of the prophet and it is built on

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truth and justice. (Jalal Derakh-sheh, 1386 (2007) : 143, my translation). Thus, Siaysat (Politics) means, according to the Islamic conservatives, to guide the society like prophet Mohammad. This understanding of the concept of Siaysat is different from the English word Politics because power is central to the definition of politics, but not to the definition of Siaysat.

Why do conservative Muslims argue that politics should be Islamic? One argument is that Islam includes values and morals within politics. Jalal Derakh-sheh focused on values and morals within the definition of politics. He defined values like this "Values are when people consider a range of good or bad, right or false behavior. (Derakh-sheh, 1386, (2007): 144, my translation). He explained that values and morals within politics can be studied through two ways: 1) realistic and power centered and 2) value and moral centered. " (Derakh-sheh, 1386, (2007): 144-174)

Politics for the secularists is realistic and power-centered according to Derakh-Bash. Through constructing the enemy's or the secularists' ideas of politics Derakh Bash articulates the chains of equivalences of politics within Islam. Deakh-sheh explained that the secularists' politics is the realistic and power centered Politics that create order and security, and prevent social turbulence and chaos. (Derakh- sheh, 1386 (2007): 144-145, my translation). Politics here is only a tool to keep the power. Within this understanding the important issue is power. Without power there cannot be any order or justice. Therefore to maintain the power of the state is more important than anything else in the society. Everything including, religion and morals, are only tools to maintain the power of the state. Derakh- sheh compared this kind of realistic and power centered Politics with the similarity of Machiavelli's philosophy of the state, that all belong to Western philosophy. (Derakh- sheh, 1386 (2007): 144-145, my translation). In this way he constructed the secularists' ideas of politics which he described completely different from the Islamic understanding of Siaysat (politics).

How is politics within Islam different from politics within secularism? Derakh- bash defined it like this; Politics in Islam is value and moral centered which is not about power; this kind of value and moral centered Politics in the words of Derakh-sheh created the condition of Justice and happiness, and guides human beings and society, which are the fundamental goals in life. (Derakh-sheh, 2007:

146, my translation) According to Derakh-sheh politics and morals (Siaysat and Akhlaq) are mixed together. A politician is a person who can guide human beings and human society to these values (Islamic morals). Derakh-sheh explained that Imam Ali's understanding of politics was exactly the same value and moral centered politics. This is the main argue of why politics and the State should be Islamic in Iran. (Derakh-sheh, 2007:146-174, my translation). The enemy, the outside, the idea of "non-Islamic" understanding of politics has been constituted, which the Islamic conservatives claim to find within "secularism"; is Politics defined as power centered and therefore, it develops to be immoral and without including good values of human beings.

Governance within Islamic state and secularism

In Islam God is the Ruler. However, God cannot rule over people directly, so according to Motlagh an Islamic government is needed to interpret God's will for his subjects. "God decides a leader for the people who should interpret the law". (Hosseini Motlag, 1382: 21, my translation) Hosseini Motlagh claimed that according to Islam God will guide the government and the leader and people may not be involved.

"The leader should have special qualification that people cannot judge and only God can decide whether the person is qualified or not. For example only a very few extraordinary people posses the qualifications needed to be the leader and only God can see and decide that he can be the leader. (Hosseini Motlag, 1382: 21, my translation 21)

How do we know that God is ruling a country? Motlagh did not explain how he would prove that God has decided a person can be the political head of a society. He claimed that ruling by God is only exists when the State and politics identify just parts of Islam. He wrote; According to Islam we should not follow a religion without state and not follow a state without religion. (Hosseini Motlagh, 1382: 98, my translation) Governing within secularism is done by the people and not by God; thus, the enemy of ruling by God is secularism. We can conclude, according to Hosseini Motlagh, if you defend the idea of secularism you are not following God. Hosseini Motlagh is telling to Iranian Muslims if you follow us you have followed God and His ruling.

Conclusion

The Islamic republic of Iran is struggling to achieve the failing ideology of political Islam through constituting threat of secularism against Islam. The Islamic conservatives argued for the rightness of the Islamic state by articulating an anti-Islamic political philosophy which they identify as secularism. They claim secularism is the European/American ideology which is antithetical to the ruling of God, possess a realistic and power centered understanding of politics, and religion within secularism is understood as a human object. These elements have been identified as the enemy. The Islamic conservatives articulated the elements of the Islamic state as the ruling of God, possess value and moral centered politics and religion is understood as a sacred attitude in all human life as the logic of equivalence and rightness of the Islamic state. This construction of secularism was used to demonstrate a threat to the Islamic state of Iran; through showing a threat from secularism to Islamic morals and values, the Islamic conservatives seek to argue for the rightness of the Islamic state.

This is a fact that frustrated, upset and angry Iranians see the Islamic state the cause to their problems and not the solution. The academic debates on the topic democracy in Iran have challenge providing to new articulation of the concept secularism in opposite to the Islamic conservatives' definition.

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The Islamic Republic of Iran and the Idea of Secularism   Fariba Parsa Visiting scholar, Ph.D. in social sciences University of Maryland, Department for women studies Fariba Parsa has written this article during the period of her affiliation with Harvard university, Center for Middle Eastern studies. 2010-2012 Fariba Parsa eMail: fparsa@umd.edu