




Theocracy vs. Democracy

The metamorphosis of political thought in post-revolutionary Iran



Sovereignty in modern and traditional thoughts

- Modern democracy and theocracy share a common central premise which is the idea of sovereignty.
- Abrahamic tradition defines the sovereign God in terms of His power to establish the law, to suspend it and to make an exception of Himself.
- Modern democracy promotes the idea of a government of the people, by the people and for the people. Thus, after a sovereign God comes the sovereign nation, or the people.




Constitutive relationship between political theory and theology

- Western democracy is contingent upon an idea of a departed personal God whose sovereignty is handed down to natural law and the human self.
- Historically and theoretically speaking, the political process of democratization in the West accompanies a specific theology, the theology of the departed God.




Methodological assumption

- To the extent that the metamorphosis of the idea of sovereignty in the West contrasts or resembles the intellectual developments in other parts of the world, one may apply it as a heuristic device in understanding the latter.
- I study two rival theories of statehood in post-revolutionary Iran by exploring the political-theological corollaries of each theory and underlining ways in which these theories open, or foreclose, a horizon for the emergence of the people as the new sovereign.




Argument

- Ayatollah Khomeini's theory of the Islamic State, the absolute mandate of the jurisconsult, extends, and even delivers, the sovereignty to the jurisconsult.
- As such, Ayatollah Khomeini's theory injects pragmatism into the Islamic body politic and the autonomy of jurisconsult gives a secular twist to the *raison d'être* of the Islamic Republic.
- All along, however, this doctrine rejects the sovereignty of the people and, as such, stays undemocratic.




Argument

- In contrast to both Khomeini's authoritarianism, and the Western notion of democracy predicated on the departure of God, Abdolkarim Soroush wishes to hand over God's sovereignty to the people while upholding the presence of God in human's spiritual life.
- The fulfillment of this allegedly impossible task, however, requires some theological innovation in Islamic thought as a prerequisite. Such an innovation would probably embrace a non-sovereign God.
- Soroush's theoretical paradigm carries the seeds of such a theology-to-come.
- As such, he promotes an indigenous idea of the democratic Statehood.



Khomeini's first theory of the Islamic Statehood, sovereignty of God and the maximalist concept of religion

- The maximalist concept of religion: God's providence has already provided the blueprint for the entire legal system as well as the necessary socio-political and economic directives and the ethico-theoretical heuristics necessary for implementing proper Islamic governance.
- The claim that they have epistemic access to God's plans for the human community came to justify the jurisconsults' quest for acquiring and maintaining political power throughout the century.



Khomeini's *first* theory of the Islamic Statehood

- Two decades before the revolution, Khomeini argued that God has given the jurisconsult "the same powers that he gave the Prophet In regard to ruling, judging and the settlement of disputes...[and] the collection of taxes and the development of the country."
- The Islamic government differs from secular forms of government in that in the former "the power of legislation is confined to God . . . and *nobody else has the right to legislate.*"

Khomeini's *second* theory of the Islamic Statehood

- Khomeini's theory of *Velayat e Motlagheh ye Elahiyeh ye Faghih* (the absolute divine-like mandate of the jurisconsult) breaks the exclusive sovereignty of God and entrusts the jurisconsult with the *power of initiating, and not just interpreting or implementing* Islamic law.
- Khomeini's jurisconsult is a sovereign proper, whose ability to initiate laws surpasses the limits of the traditionally known divine law.

Expediency, Pragmatism and Secularism

- According to Ayatollah Khomeini's doctrine the ultimate concern of the jurisconsult has to do with the pragmatic preservation of the Islamic State.
- The pragmatist logic of Maslahat (expediency) gives a secular twist to Khomeini's conception of what is an Islamic State. Khomeini's jurisconsult initiates laws with an eye toward the pragmatic success of the administrative State.
- In such a setting, Islamic law becomes merely a means to safeguard the everyday goals of the State such as security and socio-political and economic progress. Henceforth, for Khomeini Islamic law follows the logic of instrumental rationality and inadvertently embraces secularism with open arms.

Relevance and failure of Khomeini's political theory

- Khomeini's theories on the Islamic state are important because they break the taboo of the exclusive sovereignty of God and testify to the inadequacy of a maximalist conception of Islam.
- While the failure of Khomeini's first theory of the Islamic State exposes the flaw in the maximalist idea of Islam, the undemocratic characteristic of his second theory proves that unless the complete passage of sovereignty to the people takes place, Iranians will not enjoy democracy and the human rights.

Soroush's idea of the Religious Democratic State

- According to Soroush's minimalist idea, so far as the essence of religion is concerned, Islam has absolutely nothing to say about the management of the everyday life of human beings. Soroush's Islam is minimal in the sense that "it offers human beings only a way of living a spiritual life."
- The dignity of human life and its morality are extra-religious concepts to which theology should attune itself. For Soroush, universal moral values like justice and freedom are not essentially religious. Rather, it is Islam that must regulate itself to these values.



The unsacred religious understanding

- religious knowledge finds its very content in interaction with other human, and thus, secular understandings. As such, religious understanding is essentially unsacred and historical.
- As democracy and universal human rights are nowadays considered prerequisites for a humane, ethical and dignified life, it is the responsibility of Moslems towards truth and morality to understand their religion in a way that it is compatible with democratic tenants of social praxis or existence.
- The minimalist concept of religion, nonetheless, implies a minimalist idea of God.



Soroush's non-sovereign God

- The minimalist concept of religion, nonetheless, implies a minimalist idea of a non-sovereign God.
- A minimalist religion has no normative and even no informative content. Theoretical characterizations of such a God are necessarily contradictory.
- The God of Islam, that Soroush's prayers and tears are for, has nothing to contribute to the *rational* way of social life



Comments on Soroush's Research Program

- Soroush's narrative opens a horizon for alternative ways of thinking about God, the people and their sovereignty. Nevertheless, the crucial point concerns the degree to which Soroush's mystical, and to some extent, postmodern, idea of God would properly resonate with the intellect of the masses and become effective as a material force for social change.
- As the history of religion in general, and of mysticism, in particular testifies, the non-sovereign God of Soroush has a very long way to come to the masses' commonsense; it might indeed never come. But Iranians do need democracy now and at the very present moment.
- Does not Soroush's research program unjustifiably privilege the idea over the practice?