A Research on the Relationship Between Religion and Politics in Iran and Its Effects on the Social Movements

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How to cite this paper: Abbas Kharabi Masouleh. (2024) A Research on the Relationship Between Religion and Politics in Iran and Its Effects on the Social Movements. Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science, 8(6), 1313-1323. DOI: 10.26855/jhass.2024.06.001

Received: April 30, 2024
Accepted: May 28, 2024
Published: June 26, 2024

Abstract

The present research deals with a chain of social events in Iran, which mainly have both political and religious characteristics. These series of events are essential constituents of many social movements and developments in Iran. Without understanding these main factors, a realistic analysis of these social events cannot be presented. This social trend started after the arrival of Islam in Iran, which has continued with its consequences until now. In this period, we witness the efforts of the Safavid kings in harmonizing the Imāmīyyah Shi'a religion with politics, which itself has deep roots in the history of Islam immediately since the death of the prophet Muhammad as to the Succession of the Prophet and leadership of the Islamic community. This effort conducts a research on the religious grounds, the role of religion, and the relationship between religion and politics in establishing the Safavid Empire. Then, with an analytical approach, the research deals with the results of the relationship between religion and politics from pre-modern Iran to today.

Keywords

Iran, Safavid State, Shi'ite thought, woman, life, freedom

1. Introduction

With the fall of the Sasanian Empire and the arrival of Islam in Iran in 637-651 AD, the relationship between religion and politics entered a new phase. After the arrival of Islam in Iran, the first independent Iranian establishment that ruled over the entire country as a powerful and independent empire was the Safavid dynasty, which was established in 1501 AD with Shi'ite ideology (Meirison et al., 2021). Since the establishment of the Safavid dynasty was a turning point in the relationship between religion and politics in Iranian history, examining the religious background of the origin of this dynasty can help us in further studies and understanding the reasons for many political and social interactions that became the basis for the current conditions of Iran and led to new views about the relationship between religion and politics. From the Safavid era until the end of the Qajar period, the schools of thought that shaped political currents in Iran were studied by Western orientalists such as Joseph Arthur Comte de Gobineau, Henry Corbin, Toshihiko Izutsu, and by Iranian thinkers such as Sayyid Jalal al-Din Ashtiyani and Sayyid Hossein Nasr (Pourjavady, 2019). Shiite jurisprudence has presented a socio-political understanding of Islam, from which a wide range of absolute political authoritarian to compatibility with a kind of political secularism can be inferred, in the period known as the Age of Absence or Occultation (Hashemi, 2018; Tamimi Arab & Maleki, 2020). In Defense of Democracy with a secular approach, Ayatollah Naini, one of the eminent Shiite jurists and clerics, in one of his works entitled Tanbih al-Ummah Tanzih al-Melah (alerting the nation and translating the religion), considers public opinion as a necessary condition for any kind of political state. Each of these views and their interactions with their
own definition of man and the relationship between man and the state provides special social conditions for different groups of society such as women, men, ethnic and religious minorities.

What is certain is the fact that the religious structure of the Safavid era, which gradually reached establishment and transition from the 16th to the 17th century from the initial efforts of the founding period, and after that it functioned as an institutional theocracy structure in the context of the Safavid society, was a regular structure with specific functions. The intertwining of religious and worldly duties, which did not have clear boundaries, became a remarkable feature of this structure. Especially, this trend peaked when a part of the religious structure officially began to operate as an administrative complex. This activity put the religious structure in front of a big exam, an exam that was caused by the intellectual nature of Safavid thought and the intellectual dimensions of the religious structure. In such a situation, the science of jurisprudence had a completely social role because it expressed the rules of actions of the believers, and the ruler sought social order based on the implementation of these rules. Therefore, the religious structure explained and defined the relationship between the political structure and the social structure from the perspective of religion. Determining the boundaries of religion and the distinct border between religious concepts and worldly affairs has always been ambiguous and controversial. This issue becomes more complicated when the study of history shows that religion has sometimes played instrumental role and supplied the language of political legitimacy and of context. That is why we see some researchers waver in confusion when determining the essential role of religion in some social and political phenomena. This research aims to shed light on the intertwined traces of religion and politics in this period of Iranian history, and also on the ambiguities of the border between religion and worldly affairs in the formation of an ideological establishment like Safavid rule.

In order to present an organized research, in this effort, the relationship between religion and politics is divided into two parts before and after the modernization of Iran. In both periods, Shi‘i ideology played a decisive role as one of the religious sects of Islam. The peak of Shi‘a influence in Iran began before modernity and with the establishment of the Safavid State. Though the present essay is mainly concerned with the concept Shi‘ism and its role in the Iranian social-political today position, the concept of homeland (Vatan) along with traditions left over from ancient Iran has always been one of the constituent aspects of Iranian characteristics and until modern Iran was considered one of the main national components of Iranian identity. After the fall of the Sasanian Empire, the reconfiguration of the homeland, from its pre-modern Perso-Islamic meaning to modern Iran, has been performed through a kind of characterizing the reality of the homeland as a female beloved in the minds of Iranian people (Najmabadi, 1997). This characteristic of nationalism intensified at the end of the Qajar dynasty and with the constitutional revolution and the entry of Western modernity into Iran entered a new stage with Pahlavi modernization. The elements of Islamism centered on Shi‘i thought, nationalism, and modernism are so interwoven in the national identity of Iran that without considering this interweaving, the reality and origin of today’s social movements in Iran cannot be properly understood.

Considering the decisive role of Shi‘ism in Iran after Islam (Hakyemez, 2021), this effort tries to discuss the relationship between religion and politics, with a focus on the spread of Shi‘ism as far as it led to the establishment of the Safavid dynasty, afterwards the research with a critical approach would deal with its effects on today’s social situation of Iran and also today’s Iranian people’s understanding of the relationship between religion and politics, the responsibilities of the government and also the role of women in it. The historiography method of this research is based on the selection of those series of events that show the most important role of the relationship between religion and politics in shaping Iranian history after Islam. The role and influence of Shi‘i thought among the people of Iran is undeniable, especially with the decline of the role of other Shi‘i branches due to the invasion of the Mongols in the 13th century (Mir Ahmadi, 1984). And this importance is more understandable with the emergence of a completely ideological Shi‘i state, namely Šafavīd. Therefore, we will first discuss some of the origins of this dynasty in Iran which have mainly political and religious characteristics.

2. Shi‘i thought and politics in Iran

Shi‘a literally means to follow and befriend sincerely. In Islamic society, this word refers to those who followed Ali, the cousin of the Prophet Muhammad, and consider him to be the rightful successor of the Prophet. Shahristani writes in the definition of Shi‘a:

Shi‘a are the followers of Ali who consider the right of Imamate and governorship to be his. They believe in ‘Tawallā’ and ‘Tabarrā’, and some of them apply ‘Taqiyyah’, which means hiding religion during danger, and persecution. Some of them, like Zaidiyya, disagree with this applying (Shahristani, 1982).
Shi’ism spread in Iran during a certain period of history, i.e. the establishment of the Abbasid state and also the influence of Iranians in the Islamic state of the caliphs due to specific political reasons and its dividing into different branches also has its own reasons (Eqbal Ashtianian, 1979). Historical studies clearly show that without a correct understanding of the roots of Shi’i ideology and its role in the protest movements of Iranians against the Islamic Caliphate, it is impossible to understand the social and political contexts of the emergence of the Safavid Empire. Although the emergence of some social problems and the spread of corruption among the Sassanid rulers paved the way for the entry of Islam into Iran, since the middle of the third century AH, we have witnessed the confrontation of the Iranians and their resistance against the rulers of the Islamic caliphs. These confrontations often appeared in the form of religious and ideological oppositions, and Shi’a thought was the most important element of these movements. Kisa’iyyah, Qaramateh and Ismā‘iliyyah, etc. can be mentioned as the most important of these movements, which sometimes formed dynasties in Iran and made it more and more difficult for the rulers of the Islamic Caliphate to fully control the lands of Iran. In addition to political movements, which sometimes led to military confrontation with the central authority of the Islamic caliphate, we witnessed intellectual movements and the emergence of thinkers who tried to justify the legitimacy of the Shi’a School against the dominant thinking of the authority, i.e. Sunnis. Thinkers such as Ibn Babuyeh (d. 381 AH), Sheikh Mofid (d. 413 AH), Tusi (d. 460 AH), and Tabarsi (d. 548 AH) tried to propagate and justify Shi’a thoughts and left their own works (Khansari, 1925; (Ton-e-kabuni, 1873).

Zaidiyyah were the followers of Zayd Ibn Ali and started their struggle against the Umayyads in Medina. Instead of Imam Mohammad Baqir, Zaidiyyah considers his brother Zaid, who was a revolutionary figure, to be the successor of the fourth Imam of Shi’a. Although Zayd, the leader of the Zaydi sect, was killed in 738 AD/121 AH, his followers later started movements in different regions of Hejaz, Iraq, and Yemen, and today Yemen can be considered the center of their power (Razawi Ardakani, 1982; Nubakhti, 1982). Although they rebelled many times in Hijaz against the caliphs, they achieved the most success in Yemen and succeeded in forming a state from the ‘Alawi family in those areas. In the second half of the 3rd century and the beginning of the 4th century A.H., the Zaidiyya started movements in the south and west of the Mazandaran Sea and in fact, gave a special characteristic to the religious movements of this period. It is almost from this time that the struggle of Iranians against the caliphs takes on a more religious form of Shi’ism and Shi’ism becomes a political religion.

Imāmīyyah is the general name of the sects that believe in the Imamate of Ali Ibn Abi Ṭālib, the cousin of the Prophet of Islam after him and his descendants. After the death of the fifth Imam of the Shi’a, Muhammad Baqir, they accepted his son Jafar Ibn Muhammad, nicknamed Ṣadiq, as the sixth Imam. They consider the sixth Imam of the Shi’i to be the founder of Shi’i jurisprudence. Some Shi’i believers hold that after the sixth Imam, his son Musa bin Ali, known as Kazem, is his rightful successor. But some others consider another son of the sixth Imam, Ismail, to be his successor, and in this way, another division called the Ismā’iliites emerged among the Shi’a. The Ismā’ili sect is also divided into other branches. However, Imāmīyyah Shi’a expanded and gained power in Iran in the 7th century AH after the defeat of their rivals, the Ismā’iliyya. This sect led many movements from the 7th to the 9th century AH (Eqbal Ashtiyani, 1979).

Al-Buyeh movements, which started in the northern regions of Iran and took control of a large part of its west in 933 AD and succeeded in capturing Baghdad, were the early promoters of Shi’a in Iran and effectively deprived the Abbasid caliphs of political power. The Shi’i movements in Iran before the establishment of the Safavid state, which ultimately led to the formation of this dynasty, can be divided into three periods, the Shi’i movements in the Mongol, Ilkhanate, and Timurid periods. Below is a brief overview of some of the most important periods before establishing the Safavid Empire.

3. The field of establishment of the Safavid Empire

In 1220, Genghis Mughal was able to capture Bukhara and Samarkand and then the entire Mawara’-Nahar region. These conquests were accompanied by a lot of killing and destruction, and naturally, they faced different cores of Iranian resistance. At the beginning of these resistances, there was no religious aspect and it was only a kind of struggle against the foreign enemy. Jalaluddin, who was the last king of Kharazmshahs, led this struggle and inflicted a severe defeat on the Mongols in the Parwan Plain near Kabul. But in the next stage, he was defeated by the Mongol army and had to retreat. In this retreat, Jalaluddin returned to Iran and led another front against the Mongols. He was able to control the regions of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia. In the regions of Fars, Kerman and Iraq Ajam also accepted his rule and in this way, Jalaluddin was able to inflict a severe defeat on the Mongols again in 1228. But
these wars, which gradually took on a state of erosion, led to the disintegration of Jalaluddin’s forces in it was against the Mongols. Studying the course of resistance of Iranians against the Mongols shows that this trend gradually takes a political and religious form and is shaped based on religious ideologies such as Jihad against the infidels.

After that, most of the movements against the Mongols were led by religious leaders, the most important of which was the movement known as Sarbedaran (People being hanged). This movement with the name of Sarbedaran showed their determination against the enemy to the point of hanging their heads, and it was completely based on religious ideology, which means sacrificing one's life for the sake of faith or martyrdom (Smith, 1982). The existence of contents such as Jihad, the uprising of the oppressed, and the oppression of the oppressors in the Shi‘i school, which was gradually institutionalized due to the opposition between its followers and the rulers of the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties, was also very effective and motivating in the struggle of various Shi‘a groups against the Mongol rulers. Of course, the most important feature of this movement, besides being religious, is that it was popular among various social classes. In other words, it was the kind of socio-political movement that different classes of people from farmers and the poor participated in it. The socio-political nature of this movement can be seen as a result of the country's economic disorder, economic inequality, and financial corruption of the ruling system. The religious feature of this movement, which gives it a religious-political characteristic, was first of all the result of the people's will to return to the beginning of Islam and the revival of pure Islam, and second, it was the result of the people's desire to dismantle the official rules of the rulers, i.e. Yasa. The continuation of the social resistance of the people against the Mongol rulers emphasized the role of the element of belief in these resistances and the Shi‘i thoughts, which also had a history of resistance against the caliphate of Sunni Islam, found a special place in these movements. Gradually, Sarbedaran’s territory expanded from the West to Damghan, from the east to Jam, from the north to Khabushan, and from the south to Tartshiz. They were the followers of Shi‘a leaders of the Imamíyyah, and despite the splits that arose between them, they all respected the Shi‘a Imamíyyah and mentioned the names of the twelve Imams in their sermons. In their governance, they tried to preserve and implement all Shi‘a traditions (Pigulevskaya et al., 1967). Finally, the Sarbedaran government was collapsed in 1380 AD/782 AH by Timur.

The movement known as Sadat of Mazandaran was another Shi‘i movement that emerged in the north of Iran and it can be considered as a consequence of Sarbadaran and influenced by it. This movement was started by a person named Qawam al-Din Marashi in 1350 AD/751 AH until 1360 AD/762 AH. The Sadats of Mazandaran rebelled against the rulers of that region many times and in 1360 AD/762 AH established the government of Sadat Marashi of Mazandaran. Although Sadat Marashi’s government was overthrown by Timur in 1392 AD/795 AH, they were able to settle in Mazandaran and northern areas of Iran after Timur.

In Gilan, the people under the leadership of Seyyed Amir Kia Sadat Shi‘a organized a Shi‘a uprising and fought against the rulers of the time. Of course, Sadat of Mazandaran also helped them. In 1369 AD/771, they installed the establishment of Sadat Gilan in Lahijan. Their movement lasted until 1592 AD/1001 AH. Sadat Gilan, also known as Bani Kian, ruled these areas for about two hundred years (Nasir al-Ddin Mar‘ashi, 1968; Nasir al-Ddin Mar‘ashi, 1976).

During the Ilkhani period under the rule of Holakukhan, the spread of Shi‘ism was slow and Shi‘a surrendered to Holakukhan’s troops one after another. To consolidate his power against Barka Khan and the ruler of Egypt, Holakukhan made an alliance with the Eastern Christian powers (Arnold, 2006). The first Mongol ruler in Iran who converted to Islam was Takudar, who took the name Ahmad. During his reign, he tried to reduce the tensions caused by the religious differences in society as much as possible. Spuler considers the reason for Takudar's conversion to Islam to be political and believes that he converted to Islam to prevent Muslim attacks, especially in Egypt, which threatened their government since the time of his father Holakukhan (Spuler, 2007, p. 82). He insisted on this policy and even encouraged other tribes such as Tatars to convert to Islam. This policy of his was strongly opposed by his relatives to the point where he was killed by his nephew Arqum with the conspiracy of some people. Arqum, who took over the government after killing his uncle, supported Buddhists and Christians. But Arqum also soon faced internal rebellions, which eventually overthrew his state. Then, Shi‘ism faced many ups and downs in terms of expansion and finally achieved significant development during the rule of Qazan period.

Qazan not only became a Muslim himself but also declared Islam as the official religion of Iran. Qazan, who took the name, Mahmoud, went to mosques, participated in Quran sessions, and respected Islamic rituals. This period can be considered the most important period when Mongol rulers were influenced by Islamic culture and converted to Islam either for political reasons or based on belief. By his command, many mosques were built and religious teaching centers were established in all parts of the country. During his period, coins were minted with religious themes and...
all his decrees started with Bismillah. Although Qazan himself adopted Sunan, Shi‘a was also respected in his rule.

The importance and respect of the Shi‘a in his time was so great that he chose governors for Baghdad from among the ‘Alawites (Ayati, 1967). During his visit to Iraq, he visited the graves of Shi‘a Imams and provided endowment lands to Shi‘a in cities such as Tabriz, Kashan, and Isfahan.

During the time of Qazin’s brother, Uljaito who was known as Khudabandehe, Islamic thoughts were considered respectfully. With his encouragement, many Mongols converted to Islam (Ibn Batuteh, 1980). Uljaito first chose Hanafi and then Shafi‘i and finally became Twelver Imam Shi‘a and by his order, the names of the twelve imams were engraved on the coins. After some time, Khudabandehe announced Shi‘a as the official religion of the country, and thus, with the conquest of Iraq by the Mongols, the Shi‘a got an opportunity to spread their thoughts even more and encourage the spread of Shi‘ism. In fact, the seizure of the center of the Islamic Caliphate by the Mongols became a hope for the Shi‘a to establish an independent Shi‘i state in the future. Although this progress of Shi‘a faced problems with the coming of Godbandeh’s successor, Abu Saeed who tried to prevent the spread of Shi‘ism, it became the basis for the formation of the Safavid Empire based on Shi‘ism.

During the Timurid period, which included the 8th and 9th centuries AH, Shi‘ism faced new developments. The movements of the Timurid period had more or less the same characteristics as the movements of the Mongol and Ilkhanid periods, that is, they had a religious character and also had the presence of the common people in them. One of the most significant of these movements was called Harufiyeh. Timur was aware of the potential and importance of the Shi‘ism among the people of Iran, so from the very beginning, when he was crowned in Balkh in 1369 AD/771 AH, four ‘Alawites placed the crown on his head. Since he visited the graves of Shi‘i Imams in Najaf and Kazem in the conquest of Iraq, even the suspicion of his being a Shi‘a was raised. Timur was able to suppress and control many local governments. He managed to capture Iraq, Syria, and parts of present-day Turkey in 1394 AD. When Timur captured Damascus and Aleppo, he supported the Shi‘a there and introduced the capture of Damascus as a form of revenge against Yazid’s generation and Hussein’s bloodlust (Ibn Hisham, 2000). Supporting the Shi‘a politically had many achievements for Timur. With this policy, he was not only able to unite the Shi‘a of eastern Iran, i.e. Khorasan, but he was also able to dominate Egypt.

Despite this political and religious alliance between Timur and Shi‘a in the beginning, gradually we see confrontations between Shi‘a and Timur. The first tension happened in Howeiza in 1381 AD/783 AH, the origin of which was the Mar‘ashian movement of Mazandaran, which later influenced another movement called Mashashian. This movement reached its peak in the Safavid era and then declined. The second uprising occurred in Isfahan in 1387 AD/789 AH, the result of which was the killing of the rebels. The third uprising took place in 1392 AD/794 AH in Estrabad under the leadership of two ‘Alawis. This uprising led also to the encirclement of the rebels and their massacre except for two ‘Alawis. Another one of the most significant uprisings was the Harufian movement.

This sect was founded in the second half of the 8th century AH by the followers of Shi‘a Imâmîyyah under the leadership of Faḍlulla Naimi Estrabadi known as Harufi. Faḍlulla Harufi turned to asceticism and piety from his youth and traveled to different parts of Iran and other Islamic lands at that time. The center of his activity was Isfahan, but he finally settled in Tabriz. Harufians believed in esoteric signs and secret letters and believed that all the sciences of the world exist in the form of codes and signs in the Qur’an and their experts tried to discover these secrets (Ritte, 1962). Gradually, their opinions took on a political characteristic and protested against Timur’s rule, and they actually became a political sect. Harufians penetrated not only in Iran, but also in Ottoman Turkey and Syria. The Harufiyah sect had a great influence on a group called the Bektashih in the Ottoman land, whose effects can be seen later in the Safavid dynasty.

Another Shi‘i movement in the Timurid period was the Ahl al-Haq or Ali Allahan movement. This sect, which was one of the branches of Shi‘a Imâmîyyah, spread a lot, especially in the west of Iran, and Qazalbashan was also one of their branches. Qazalbashan later played the most important role in the emergence of the Safavid dynasty (Mohaddeth, 1982). The teachings and customs of the Qazalbushans were very similar to another Shi‘i sect, the Ismā‘îlis. They believe in the divinity of Ali, the first imam of the Shi‘a, and they even considered Ismail, who was the founder of the Safavid dynasty, to be an embodiment of Ali.

After the Timurid period and when the foundation for the formation of the Safavid Shi‘i state was created, Shi‘i movement was going through a special and important period in Iran. The main focus of the theories of Sivori, one of the western Iranologists, about the Safavid dynasty is the belief that the Safavid dynasty’s rise to power in Iran is the result of years of patient ideological preparation by the Safavid organizations (Savory, 1954). In fact, the Safavid dynasty came to power with the help of Shi‘a and based on Shi‘i thinking. Shi‘ism not only played an important role...
in the establishment of the Safavid state, but it was also very effective in the continuation of this empire. Many religious elements such as mysticism, Sufism, belief in following the promised Mahdi can be found in Shi‘ism, which were not only effective in the emergence of political movements, but also played a kind of instrumental role in advancing the political goals of that time. Many of the early founders of the Safavid dynasty were known among the people as those who had attained high positions of mysticism and Sufism, and also had the authority of the Promised Mahdi, and had a special social status and respect. Therefore, these social situations gave them suitable and significant opportunities to advance their political goals. The early founders of the Safavid dynasty were intellectually influenced by Shi‘ism mysticism and Sufism (Tabatabaei, 2018). In Islamic thinking, where mysticism has a special place, the tendency towards mysticism is called Sufism. Suf means woolen garment and because Sufi sheikhs wore this type of clothing, they were known as Sufi (Qushayri, 1995; Ghani, 2010). There are many opinions about the origin of Sufism in Islam.

Some consider it to be the result of pre-Islamic thinking such as Zoroastrianism. Another group considers it to be the result of Christianity or the works of Plato’s thoughts. Some consider it influenced by Indian and Buddhist thoughts. But some also introduce Sufism as the direct teachings of Islam and think that it has derived from the character of the Prophet of Islam. Nicholson did some research on the non-Islamic elements of Sufism in Neoplatonic philosophy. He also considers the interpretation of Muslim mystics, which is based on monotheism, to be effective in the emergence of Sufism. According to him, understanding and interpreting the unity of existence from monotheism in Islam can be the origin of Sufism (Nickolson, 1979; Nickelson, 1996).

4. Establishment of the Safavid Empire

The early Safavid movement started in Ardabil, which is located in the northwest of Iran. At the beginning of the 14th century, Ardabil was a small city and somewhat far from the traffic route. Therefore, at first glance, it did not seem that Ardabil would become the command center of a revolutionary movement. However, the remoteness and insufficiency of this city caused privileges for the early leaders of this movement, who wanted to attract as little attention as possible from the rulers of the time. In the outskirts of Ardabil, there were mountains, swamps, and dense forests of Gilan, which could play the role of an impenetrable shelter for this movement.

The origin of the Safavid family is attributed to a person named Firoozshah Zarin Kolah. But the genealogy of this family is still under a shroud of fog and in mystery. Hinz considers Firoozshah to be a Yemeni immigrant and therefore attributes his race to Arabs (Hinz, 1967). Others attribute their primary race to the Turks, and some consider them to be of pure Iranian descent, that is, Aryans. There are several opinions about the genealogy of this family. Some even believe that because the Safavid rulers based their state on a specific ideology, they tried to keep it in ambiguity and mystery so that this ideology would not be questioned (Savory, 1984). With all these uncertainties, among the Safavid ancestors, a person named Sheikh Ṣafiuddin can be introduced as one of the founders of the Sufi method, whose tomb was respected as a shrine by their followers for many years in Ardabil. Shah Ismail I, who was the founder of the Safavid dynasty, was a descendant of Sheikh Ṣafiuddin.

Shah Ismail I as the founder of the Safavid Empire started his movement by enjoying the special beliefs of the Sufis and relying on his special religious status among the people. After entering Tabriz and being crowned, he declared Imāmī Shi‘a as the official religion. He entered Dar al-Sultaneh in Tabriz and leaned on the throne. Thus, the sermon was read in the name of twelve Shi‘ī Imāms. To express his devotion to the Prophet's family, Shah Ismail ordered coins to be minted with the words La ellāh ila Allāh, Ashhad ann Muhammad Rasullullah and Ashhad ann Ali Wali Allāh. On the other side of the coins, Shah Ismā’il's name was engraved with titles such as ‘Adel, and in fact, the connection between Shi‘ism and politics was manifested on both sides of the coins, and it started a special period of the relationship between religion and politics in Iran. This is despite the fact that historians have written that at that time, two-thirds of the people of Tabriz were Sunnis, and even the Qazalbashans, who played an important role in the rise to power of Shah Ismā’il I, prevented him from formalizing the Shi‘ī religion. But Shah Ismā’il I declared the official religion of the country relying on the sword and killing the opponents of Shi‘ism (Ālam Ārāye Ṣafavi).

In this way, though the founders of Safavid dynasty succeeded in promoting their political goals by relying on people’s religious beliefs, when they came to power, they tried to align the religion of the general public with their policies, even with the force of the sword. Therefore, the relationship between religion and politics in Iran entered a new phase in this period of history, the effects of which can be found in the fate of this society years later.

Although the authority and a great part of the success of the Safavid dynasty is due to the deep dependence of politics and religion together in the structure of that state, the relationship between politics and religion can be seen
in this establishment in three different periods. The first period begins with the political and religious approach of Shah Ismā‘īl I and along with it creates some innovations and changes and leads to the influence of Shi‘ī thought in the society. The second period is the peak period in which religion and clergy in Iran enjoy a special power and authority and it continues during the reign of Shah Tahmasab I. This period also includes the years of Shah Abbas I’s reign. The third period is faced with the gradual decline of religion, that is, the period that started from the middle of the reign of Shah Abbas and led to the abandonment of many religious officials and their removal from important positions. Perhaps the belief that the Safavid rulers enjoyed the proxy of the absent Shi‘ī Imam during the Occultation Time and also the shadow of God on earth should actually subordinate politics to religion, but the ups and downs in the relationship between politics and religion indicate that during the Safavid dynasty, sometimes religion and sometimes politics were subordinate by the other and this relationship has not had a uniform trend.

5. Political power and the influence of clerical institutions

Thus from then on, the Shi‘a religion was recognized as a part of Iran's cultural identity, and even after the fall of the Safavid dynasty the Shi‘a and the institution of the Shi‘a clergy played an important role in coming to power, dismissing, or determining the power of the next rulers. Since then, although the relationship between religion and politics in Iran was faced with many ups and downs, religion, centered on Shi‘ī thought and based on jurisprudence, played a significant role in Iran's social situations and political movements. The study of Iran's contemporary history reveals that the institution of the clergy with its religious role has not always been in line with Iran's national interests and the realization of equal rights for Iranian women and men. The clerics sometimes played a role not only as an agent and means of influence and interventions of foreign powers but also as the most important factor in the spread of patriarchy and the weakening of Iranian women's rights.

The combination of religion with political power in Iran and the influence of the clerical institution in the social affairs of the people gradually led to the spread of a culture mixed with extremely religious tendencies and prejudice, which was strongly supported and propagated by the clerical class. The depth of this extremism and religious prejudice could be obviously observed in the social conditions of Iranian women's lives in pre-modern Iran and in the documents that have come down to us from the Qajar dynasty. With an overview of the social life of Iranian women in the nineteenth century, we could see how with the spread of patriarchy the influence of the jurisprudential culture of clerics deprived women, who make up half of the country's society, of their individual and social rights and provided limitation with them in different aspects of life such as education, choosing the conditions of marriage, occupation, and economic independence. Bibi Khanum Astarabadi who was an outspoken and prominent Qajar woman wrote:

Behind the closed doors at homes, prohibited from everything in life, education, training, and social life, women were regarded as mindless like infants; they were confined to the burdens of household work and childbearing, and were considered the slaves and servants of their husbands. Then, she compared their situation with Western societies and noted that this situation originated from Islamic custom (Sedghi, 2007, p. 6).

6. The beginning of modernity and modernism in Iran

Despite many obstacles, Iranian women spontaneously made many progress in various cultural fields and left behind various achievements. The establishment of private educational organizations for women, publication of magazines that dealt with women's issues, and participation in some political and freedom movements were among the activities in which Iranian women tried to prove their identity and presence (Sedghi, 2007). The origin of these social movements can be seen as a result of the prevalence of a kind of secularism in Iranian society, which became common in Iran from the end of the Qajar dynasty along with Western modernism, and gradually modernity and modernism became part of the cultural components of Iranians along with nationalism and Shi‘ī Islam. The culmination point and central core of this evolution can be seen in the Iranian people's constitutional revolution movement during the years 1906 to 1911. Although the clergy were supporters of the constitutional revolution at first, when they saw its results as detrimental to the interests and influence of the clergy, they opposed constitutionalism and demanded legitimacy instead of constitutionalism. They saw the parliamentary system based on democracy and national will as opposed to their religious influence in the society. Therefore, in the end, they imposed the presence of some jurists in the National Parliament of that time to the constitutionalists to supervise the approvals of the laws and to prevent
the laws that, from their point of view, were incompatible with Islamic legitimacy. Thus, in the process of Iranian democratization, the clergy gave the first blow to this trend and from the very beginning prevented the development of democracy in the country.

The starting point of official secularization in Iran coincided and corresponded with the establishment of the modern state Pahlavi dynasty in 1925. During the weakness of the Qajar dynasty, Reza Khan, who was the commander of the imperial guard and the minister of war, consolidated power amid the chaos of tribal insurrection, Soviet and British penetration, and the corrupt rule of Qajar. He proclaimed himself the new king of Iran and ruled the country autocratically while launching a massive modernization and secularization similar to what was being conducted by Kamal Mostafa Ataturk in neighboring Turkey. In this period of history, we witness indeed the surface structure of modernization in Iran by building the infrastructure of a centralized and modern state, with new roads, railways, a modern education system, a bureaucracy, banking system, and a conscript-army. Analyzing this process of modernization illustrates the fact that from the top-down a particular lifestyle was imposed ideologically by the society with little or no negotiation with people.

The most considerable criticism of this modernization process is that it did not accommodate democracy, the idea that had been tried to put forward by the elites of the constitutional revolution. It was a policy that contributed to desecularization of politics among people by informing opposition to the state and generating a social reaction with religious characteristics among different segments of the society. Of course, with the removal of the first Pahlavi in the events of the First World War in 1941 and with the coming to power of the second Pahlavi Mohammad Reza Shah, the people of Iran witnessed a relative democracy for a short time, but with the toppling of the government of Mohammad Mossadegh, which was done with the penetration of foreign countries such as the United States and Great Britain, a political dictatorship again dominated the society. During the Pahlavi dynasty, the ruling political dictatorship provided an opportunity for the clerical oligarchy to form a front against political oppression with a religious and anti-imperialist characteristic in the context of the society, which finally led to the revolution of 1979 and Iranian society witnessed a period of political Islamism from the top of the pyramid of the power.

7. The illusion of utopia under the rule of jurisprudence

The state established after the revolution under the title of ‘Islamic Republic of Iran’ was based on the theory of jurisprudent of leadership and was transformed into the absolute jurisprudent leadership in the next revision. The theory theorized by Ayatollah Khomeni was not approved at that time by all Shi‘i jurists such as Ayatollah Khoei and Ayatollah Shari‘atmadari. However, the theory reached full political power after the revolution. The performance of the theory was a complete manifestation of the fusion of religion and politics in Iran.

From the middle of the first half of the 20th century, a complete historical cycle could be seen in the relationship between religion and politics in Iran, a circular process that within about two decades after the 1979 revolution changed into its direct contrast or in the viewpoint of the philosophy of sociology into its anti-thesis. In this period, the Islamic government defined its foreign policy based on issuing the Islamic Revolution to other Muslim countries, and established its domestic policy based on the spread of a religious lifestyle, compulsory veil for women in offices and public places, setting up moral security police in the streets, severe censorship of public media, the compilation of students' textbooks based on religious ideology, strict control over the press, severe punishment of political opponents from long-term imprisonment to execution, Ideological selection of university professors, complete control over the political and social activities of university students, and the divine sanctification of the establishment. They even established institutions called the headquarters of the Cultural Revolution to Islamize the universities, especially, focusing on the humanities fields to remove the secular concepts from the textbooks and present the humanities fields according to their ideological beliefs. This effort was met with strong opposition from Iranian intellectuals, but they monitored the professors' lectures and controlled the Syllables and the lesson topics as much as they could. In this system, an institution was formed under the name of the Guardian Council, whose members are directly or indirectly elected by the leadership. The main responsibility of this institution is to monitor the approvals of the parliament and prevent any law that, from their point of view, conflicts with Islamic rules. This parliament also directly supervises the election of parliamentarians, and according to a law called discretionary supervision, the election of presidential candidates must also be done with its permission. This law practically makes the republican system ineffective.

Despite all these efforts of Islamization from top to bottom, in the first decade after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, a reform movement with a new intellectual paradigm among the elites arose while theorizing an indigenous form of political secularism. The transformation could be significant in the history of Iran because this trend towards
secularism arose organically and natively from the context of Iranian society and with the experience of a totalitarian religious government it is actually a movement from the bottom up.

After almost half a century of the Islamic Republic regime, we are witnessing new social movements by the new generations of Iran, whose main focus and primordial core is the freedom and rights of women. The current movement of the Iranian people is rooted in several social movements that they resorted to many times during the past four decades to carry out reforms, movements such as turning to ballot boxes, civil protests, etc. However, despite all this, the ideological structure of the regime did not allow any changes and reforms, and finally the protests took the form of revolution and demands for regime change. The potential of this movement existed in Iranian society and it was strengthened especially after the movement known as the Green Movement, but it was actualized with the murder of a young Iranian Kurdish girl named Mahsa Amini by the moral security police and it appeared as a nationwide public movement. Although at the moment it is too early to conduct a sociological analysis of the movement, by analyzing some components of the slogans propounded in it, it could be considered as a precursor of great social changes in Iranian society. One of the most important slogans heard from this movement is ‘Woman, Life, Liberty’, each of these components is inspiring and expressing the demands of today’s generation of Iranian society and each of them has a relationship to secularization.

The first word of this slogan is ‘woman’, which is discriminated against in Islamic jurisprudence. In Islamic jurisprudence, the inheritance share of a woman is half, the blood money of a woman is half, the validity of a woman’s testimony is half, and women are deprived of many other social and individual rights. This word in the slogan expresses the fact that Iranian women and today’s generation do not accept such gender discrimination that originates from traditional Islamic jurisprudence and want a fundamental revision of their human rights.

The second word is ‘life’, which completely refers to the worldly life and expresses the fact that the Iranian people’s expectation from the government is only to manage their worldly affairs and not to interfere in their religious beliefs to guarantee their life after death. The expectation of the Iranian people today from the government is a secular administration that maintains the country’s borders, provides internal security, establishes social justice, education, and public health, distributes equal social opportunities, defends social freedom, and helps promote the public culture of the people and defends national interests.

The third word is ‘liberty’, which, in addition to political freedom, refers to social freedom, which means freedom of religion and thought, freedom of writing and expression, as well as freedom of criticism, i.e., pluralism, the pluralism that covers the ethnic diversity of the Iranian people, religious differences, gender differences, and various social minorities. This interpretation of freedom in traditional jurisprudence, which is based on classical theology, is controversial and unacceptable among jurists. Therefore, such social demands are incompatible with the jurisprudential thinking of the clerics and have created serious tensions between the people, especially the new generation, and the government. The experience of the past half-century proves that the answer to such demands can only be fulfilled by a secular and democratic system, and the ideological structure of the current establishment is not capable of aligning with the people’s demands, and it is not possible to make reforms to this extent in it.

8. Conclusion

In the history of Iran after Islam, the emergence of the Safavid dynasty is an important turning point. After centuries of foreign rule, Iran again became an independent and powerful country in the east of the Islamic world and rises to compete with the Ottoman Empire and rejects the Ottomans as a ruler over the Islamic world centered on Sunnah. How the Safavid dynasty took root in Iran and how the Safavids came to power, and what events and factors led to their reign, the answers are different and can be investigated from various dimensions. The study of this period of history shows that after the arrival of Islam in Iran, we witnessed the influence and impact of the two phenomena of religion and politics in the country. Of course, this mutual interaction between religion and politics in Iran was centered on Shi‘ism, and some elements in Shi‘i thought such as Jafari’s jurisprudence also played a significant role in this interaction. This mutual influence entered a new stage before the formation of the Safavid government and finally led to the establishment of this dynasty which was basically based on Shi‘a ideology, and with its emergence, Shi‘a entered a new stage in the history of Islam. The relationship between religion and politics, which was both the foundation and sustainer of this dynasty, reveals many social aspects of this relationship. Perhaps the spread of Sufism and the expansion of the belief in following the promised savior and the consolidation of Mahdism thought are the most important consequences of this interaction. The religious dimensions of this current can be researched separately, but its socio-political aspect is considered in this research and it is tried to take into account the relationship between
religion and politics and the role of religion in the emergence and promotion of political goals.

Examining the course of this relationship indicates that, despite the role of religion in forming and directing social movements, it is not possible to present a specific paradigm to determine the degree of influence of each religion and politics on the other. Because in this relationship, religion and politics enter into a transaction with each other, where sometimes religion follows politics and sometimes politics follows the other, and actually one cannot be recognized as the basis and model of the other. Therefore, in this relationship, religion loses its originality as an independent source of inspiration. As we have seen, despite the important role of religion in the rise to power of the Safavid dynasty, wherever the political goals were not compatible with the religious goals, the role of religion in politics declined. Even in the periods when religion and the clerical system had high authority, the inspirational aspect of religion found only an instrumental role. The importance of this issue increases when we pay attention to the interpretability of religion. This feature causes religion to be exposed to different political interpretations, from the most fundamental to the most libertarian understandings based on political requirements. On the other hand, the achievement of the rulers to divine positions and sanctity hinders the effective role of the people in politics, and the progress of political goals in the society takes from the pyramid of power.

After the revolution of 1979, the relationship between religion and politics in Iran entered a new stage in such a way that a turn from the process of top-bottom Islamization to a trend of secularism from the bottom to the top can be witnessed. This movement is in line with fundamental changes in the type of political establishment according to the complete separation of religion from government. The most important reason for the tendency of Iranians towards the separation can be found in the fact that not only did the nature of Shi’ism itself emerge from a political dispute after the death of the Prophet of Islam, but its expansion and sustainability were also completely political among Iranians. Therefore, it lost its spiritual nature as a religious belief. On the other hand, since the political frameworks of Shi’ism in the form of the theory of jurisprudent leadership are not in accordance with the requirements of the modern world, therefore, the complete separation of religion from politics seems more necessary.

Acknowledgement

My appreciation to the following organization for their valuable support of this research: I am thankful for the facilities provided by studierendenWERK BERLIN studentisches Leben Beratung Barrierefrei Studieren that enabled the successful execution of my education.

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DOI: 10.26855/jhass.2024.06.001 1322 Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science