

Taking over a state by a religious movement was basically inconceivable to most outside observers

EXCLUSIVE

By Mohammad Memarian*

An emeritus professor at University of Tehran once told me a story. In the early 1970s, when he was an aspiring scholar, he had a teacher in the Faculty of Sociology of the University of Tehran, a notable sociologist and a landlord who owned large tracts of fertile land in northern Iran. One day, word spread that he was selling his properties at discounted prices. One night over dinner at his house, my professor asked him why. The teacher made a prescient remark, which I quote verbatim: “The oil money has disturbed the structure of this country; this country is pregnant with major events.” Needless to say, he sold all his properties and emigrated with his family from Iran just in time.

As insightful as his insider remarks had been, the deeply turbulent situation of Iran in those times was not entirely obscured to outsiders, either. An Egyptian scholar once told me that even in the heyday of the Shah’s reign, there were “minority reports” in his country, indicating the explosive sociopolitical conditions of Iran, exemplified by a certain Ahmad Bahaulddin, who warned Anwar Sadat’s regime, “The situation in Iran is very worrying, and it’s not even as remote-

ly stable as you might imagine.”

There was one more eminent example as well. In mid-1965, before 20,000 people at the National Stadium in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai proclaimed, “An exceedingly favorable situation for revolution prevails today not only in Africa, but also in Asia and Latin America.”

That’s the story with which Jeremy Friedman, associate professor of business administration at Harvard Business School, begins his book, ‘Ripe for Revolution: Building Socialism in the Third World’. In five thrillingly detailed and analytically vibrant chapters, he looks into the historical trends which turned five specific countries into fertile lands for sociopolitical upheavals: Indonesia, Chile, Tanzania, Angola, and Iran. Each country provides a unique case in its own right. In his last chapter on Iran, provocatively titled, ‘Opiate of the Masses, or Stimulant?’, he also charts the wavering evolution of the Soviet attitude toward the role which religion could play against imperialism and capitalism. The book will be published next week by Harvard University Press, which graciously granted me an advance copy.

In an exclusive interview with Iran



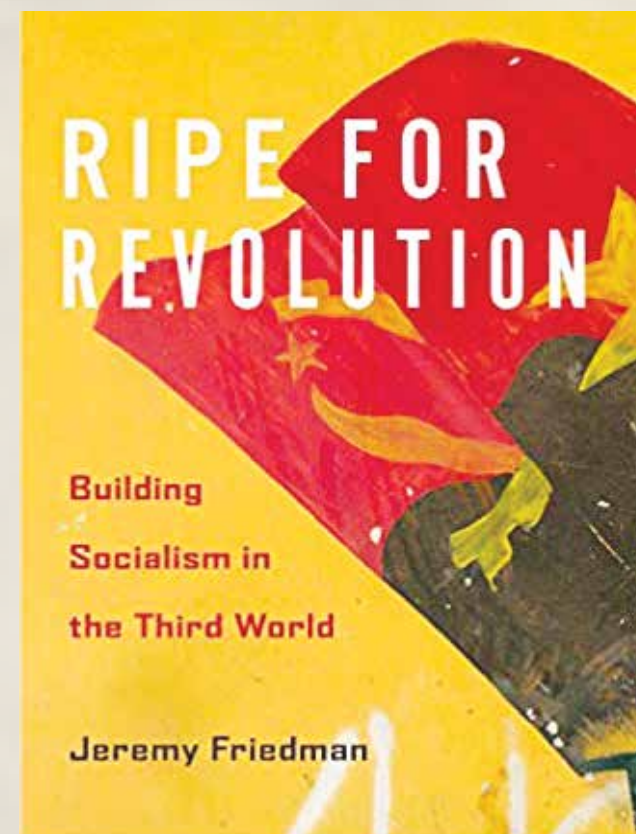
Jeremy Friedman, associate professor of business administration at Harvard Business School

Daily, Friedman elaborated on some of the core points of his chapter on a revolution which, in his words in the book, produced “one of the strangest outcomes of the Cold War: An anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, modernizing theocracy in the Islamic Republic of Iran.”

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Quote from the book:

“Chapter 5 looks at the Iranian revolution and how Islamism came to replace socialism as the anti-imperialist ideology par excellence in the Middle East. I argue that it was a result of two key factors: First, the failure of socialism in developing world to establish itself as a viable method for producing economic development, justice, and national dignity; and second, the growth of Islamism in response to the midcentury popularity of socialism as an alternative, and potentially superior, anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist ideology. In short, Islamism in Iran claimed to be able to succeed where socialism had failed.”



How do you see the role of “oil money” (and the Shah’s use of it) in making Iranian society ripe for revolution?

I think that the oil money impacted Iran in many ways, both domestically and internationally. In terms of Iran’s foreign policy, the oil wealth bolstered the Shah’s desire to make Iran the dominant power in the Middle East and a more important player on the world stage, which led to excessive spending on armaments and a greater role as the US “policeman” in the region, which exacerbated opposition. Domestically, the ability to rely on oil

wealth reduced the need to rely on local production and tax revenues, which also led to a flood of imports as Iranian production became less competitive, and created a damaging dynamic between those who benefited from the flood of oil revenues from the government and spent it on luxury goods, and the vast majority of the population that was left out. The slowing of the Iranian economy in 1977-1978, especially in the wake of the breakneck growth produced by the elevated oil prices following the OPEC oil embargo, therefore created economic pain in an increasingly economically divided country.

How was it that outsiders were so blinded to Iran’s condition, as you have mentioned in the case of the Soviet Union, which “like most international observers, was quite late to realize the seriousness of events in Iran”?

It is important to keep in mind that there had not really been, to this point in the 20th century, an example of a religious movement taking over a state. This was something which was basically inconceivable to most outside observers, especially to the Soviets who subscribed to a rather schematic view of history in which history did not move “backwards,” say, from capitalism to feudalism. Meanwhile, the Shah,

backed by an enormous military and the US and Israeli-trained SAVAK had quite effectively decimated the leftist opposition, which both the US and the Soviets saw as the likeliest source of political disruption. The Soviets, for one, also thought that, given the importance of Iran to the United States, Washington simply would not let the Shah fall, and indeed the Carter administration did consider the possibility of supporting a military coup to save the regime. One should not forget either that, as a rule, revolutions tend to surprise most observers as most people tend to believe in the perpetuation of some version of the status quo. Our natural biases tend to look for reasons to believe that it will continue.

In your opinion, why did the Arab states south of Iran, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar, perhaps to the exclusion of Oman, not happen to be fertile grounds for socialist aspirations?

In many ways, these states are not really comparable to Iran in terms of the size of their populations, the diversity of their economies, the ethnic diversity of their populations, and their levels of urbanization and educa-

tion. In many respects a country like Turkey was much more comparable to Iran, and indeed Turkey has had much more serious leftist politics at times, though those tendencies have been typically repressed. Iran also is closer to Russia and has long historical and cultural relations with it, especially in the northwest of the country where many Iranians had studied and worked in the Caucasus region, where they were often exposed to socialist thought and political activity.

How do you analyze the genesis and evolution of economic thought among Shia scholars? What motivated them to think about economics? And how was the socialist-Islamist theoretical encounter in pre-revolution years?

I am not an expert on Shia theology or jurisprudence. However, what is important regarding the socialist-Islamist encounter is that the push for socialism was built upon the disruption of lifestyle, society, and the economy that came from the influence of globalization and imperialism. This led to efforts in many parts of the world to use existing bodies of knowledge and modes of thought, especially those which were popular and well-established such as religion, to come up with answers. This can be illustrated by the many thinkers in the

Islamic world who sought to modernize Islam – and use Islam to modernize their societies in turn – in response to the overwhelming power of the European imperialists – think of Mohammad Abduh, Rashid Rida, and Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani, and later in places like Pakistan and Indonesia. Even within the USSR, there were those who wanted to use Islam to promote socialism, and thought it would be useful in making socialism popular by tying it to forms of local identity. In that sense, for those who, instead, wanted to modernize economics in order to save Islam (rather than use Islam to promote socialism) it was about using existing tools to respond to the new needs of society, and perhaps to prevent a slide into irrelevance or replacement, as evidenced by the experience of Ayatollah Taleqani in Tehran at the height of the Tudeh’s popularity among the youth.

You’ve described the creation of the Islamic Republic as “ironic” since Iran has been more “obsessed with the notion of foreign models” more than any country in the 20th century. Is it possible that some sort of frustration with the unfruitfulness of that aforementioned zealous obsession with imitation might actually be what triggered the Iranian society to improvise and innovate?

I think it was the failure of other models, or the perception of their inadequacy. See, for example, Khalil Maleki’s attack on the Soviet model, the opposition to Reza Shah’s attempt to employ the Turkish Kemalist model, the White Revolution and the Shah’s attempt to implement an American-advised modernization program. What all of these have in common is that they particularly antagonized the ulama.

You’ve correctly referred to the role of “core stories” of Shia Islam as distinctive tropes of the religion. It seems to me that the very concept of “Edaalate Alavi” (“Alid Justice”) served, or could serve, as an important common ground between socialist and Islamist aspirations. How did the Soviets approach such ideas?

The Soviets were divided on whether to see such uses of Shi’ism as potential indications that religious forces could be allies or whether it would ultimately serve reac-

tionary purposes, i.e., to reinforce religious authority and promote reformist alternatives to real economic transformation – essentially, a softer capitalism, instead of actual social control of the means of production. At a fundamental level, Marxism cannot accept the idea of justice from on high, because it doesn’t rely on morality or altruism, it relies on material interest. A religious concept of a just order, however, relies on the moral purity of the religious leaders. Ultimately, then, a notion of religious justice can serve as a way of preventing the proletariat from actually taking power.