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Iran: Covid-19, Secularisation and the New Imamate
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In late December 2017, the Islamic Republic of Iran had entered a new phase of its history, with the beginning of demonstrations and public space occupations that continued, sporadically, throughout the country in the following months and years, despite a succession of targeted crackdowns. Different from the Green movement of the summer 2009 (a series of public protests against President Ahmadinezhad's deemed fraudulent re-election), these social movements have affected diverse regions and social classes hitherto globally loyal to the 'system' (*nazm*) inherited from the 1979 revolution; moreover, they spread out in broad daylight, even in state media, revealing the dissensions within the politico-religious apparatus.

Since the invasion of the shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad, on December 28, 2017 by a crowd who invoked Reza Shah, the founder of the Pahlavi monarchy (1925–79), protest developed against the state, the Guide 'Ali Khamenei and the Guardians of the Revolution. Even Iran's military intervention with Bashar al-Assad, in 2012–18 was frontally attacked. Iran's non-management of the Covid-19 pandemic, in early 2020, and its consequences for the country further aggravated this legitimacy crisis. Raising uncertainties, one year ahead only of the end of the presidency of Hasan Ruhani, weakened by the sanctions of the Trump administration, they have triggered the multiplication of openly alternative forums. Conversely, even if more discreetly, they have also cast light on the capacity of the 'system' to adjust, if not to mutate.

The Polemics

Admitted late, on February 19, by the Ministry of Health, the arrival of Covid-19 was astounding since, its first notable outbreak being the holy city of Qom, it quickly gained political and religious circles, before the lethality of the virus tripled, in Iran, in March. From the outset, the official statistics were contested, by the WHO among others, which reported 80,000 cases at the end of that month. Quickly also, the elective powers (the parliament, municipalities) and certain public agencies, often quite free from the official line since late 2017, rose up against the denial of the executive. The alarm came from deputies of the Majles (the parliament of the IRI, 23 of whose members tested positive in early March), worried about the spread of the pandemic in their constituencies, in the lack of massive testing and containment measures. As often in contexts of natural disasters since the November 2017 earthquake in Kermanshah (a prelude to the contestation of that winter and of the following years), the Red Crescent played the part it has played since that date, warning of the impact of the millions of displacements that would be caused, from the affected regions, by the celebrations of Norouz (the Iranian New Year, celebrated at the spring equinox) followed closely, this year, by those of Ramadan.

As elsewhere in Islam, but all the more so here because of the role attributed to Qom in the spread of the pandemic, the debate soon stumbled over issues of calendar celebrations, linked to those of the attendance at mosques and sanctuaries. Can one speak here of a Shia particularity, with religious authorities sacralising the health authorities by submitting to their verdict, while in the Sunni 'minority' (between 8 and 15% of the population, depending on the origin of the statistics), religious law was taking precedence? This is far from the case in a country with divided elites, including the Shia clergy. A country whose government has long given the impression that it is tongue-in-cheek in the face of the pandemic, decreeing short periods of closure of schools and universities, and 'individual confinement' that was little respected until its gradual suppression from April 11. Certainly the Ruhani administration, having prohibited collective prayer on February 27, ended up imposing the closure of sanctuaries on March 16, approved by the Supreme Guide. (They had unsuccessfully exhorted holy places to limit the number of their visitors, but the Curator of the tomb of Fatima Ma'sume in Qom, Seyyed Mohammad Sa'idi, had kept the doors open, invoking the 'healing power' of a pilgrimage.) However, the voices raised in both Shia and Sunni clergies to approve of this measure often accompanied their fiat with sharp criticism.

Select Few Players

A first explanation for such dissensions lies in the unpopularity of the Rohani administration in the spring 2020, in the aftermath of the harshly repressed demonstrations of December-January against the brutal rise in the price of petrol at the pump (which was supposed to fill the state coffers, emptied by the sanctions, while fighting against cataclysmic air pollution). The government also had its sights set on the February 21 legislative elections, which were ultimately won hands down by the Conservatives, thanks to a record abstention rate. The tripling of fuel prices had dealt a severe blow to the religious economy of a 'pilgrim society', depriving the government of the support of many minbars. Now dominated by the Conservatives, the regime reacted in the last week of February by releasing its cyber-police on social networks and banning the printing and distribution of printed newspapers on 30 March. Weakened, Rohani ultimately accused the population of being responsible for the outbreak of the pandemic.



Figure 2 : Portrait of the nurse as an 'angel of mercy', anonymous painting, on <https://khamenei.ir> (28 février)

An authority as inescapable as discussed, the Supreme Guide 'Ali Khamenei took position by recalling the President's responsibility in the struggle against Covid-19. Endorsing his decisions with regard to the attendance of mosques, sanctuaries and cemeteries, Khamenei was quick to increase his influence as a tribune. First of all by advocating the internalization of the rituals of Ramadan (even the personal retreats, *e'tekaf*, in mosques were postponed), if not the acceptance of the 'option of pilgrimage at a distance and link by image' (*emkan-e ziyarat az rah-e dur va ertebat-e tasviri*), via television and the social media, defended by the main national Shia sanctuaries. Also by playing an active part in the draft sanctification of the medical personnel involved in the struggle against the coronavirus (the nurses in particular, promoted from the end of February to the status of 'angels of divine mercy'). In a Shia clergy centralised on a plurality of personalities of reference, and whose sanctuaries take advantage of their autonomy in terms of income, the bridle was left to the curators of the latter to weigh on the government for obtaining the abridgement (ultimately granted) of the confinement and of the measures of closure — of cemeteries especially, for the 'martyrs in need of service' (*shohada-ye khedmat-talab*) dead of the coronavirus. From this viewpoint, the pandemic affected one public practice of the late 2010s, viz. the sanctification of the great dead of the 'Defence of the Sacred Places' of Iraq and Syria, a practice on which the Shia clergy and the Sepah (the 'Legion' of the Revolutionary Guards) counted to rebuild their legitimacy at the local level of Iranian society.

Games of Scale

It is at this level, around the large bazaars, a major city/countryside interfaces, that the recruitment of large numbers of supporters of the Islamic Republic has been played out since 1979, through the intimate interaction between the clerical institution and the male sociability taken in hand by the Guardians. The sanctifications of the great dead of Iraq and Syria was expected to tighten the bonds and to reflect on the communities and their territories (more than the cult of the martyrs of the Iran-Iraq war had done thirty years earlier). Now it was on this local and regional scale that many of the tensions which divide up the Iranian clergy, whether Shia or Sunni, were expressed. One used to oppose a limited number of hegemonic institutions, on the one hand, to the local and regional, sometimes ethnic imams on the other, the latter subjected to varying pressures from one region, sometimes from one district to another, due to a great diversity of socioeconomic and ecological situations, and to the growth of radical religious currents. In the many forgotten outskirts of the 'development' (*torvse'e*) of the 1990s-2000s, or regions hit by the ecological disasters caused by the latter, a number of imams have been, since the early Ruhani, denouncing these situations, publicly attacking the politics of the centre and the Guardians' management of many economic issues.

The 'corona' crisis was no exception, even if the repressions of recent years have sometimes left their mark. Thus in Zabol, in Sistan, the head of the (Shia) Islamic Missions, *Hojjat ol-eslam* Mohsen 'Arefi, a frequent public accuser of Tehran's regional policy, wisely waited until May 12 to organise the prayer vigils of Laylat al-Qadr (a night of the last decade of Ramadan) in the mosques of his district. Barely further south, however, in Baluch land, the most charismatic (Sunni) Imam of Zahedan, Mowlana 'Abd ol-Hamid Esma'ilzeyi — a vote catcher for Ruhani in 2013 and 2017 — contested the results of the legislative elections of February for his city, demanding a recount of the votes, without obtaining it. In this context, the virus became for him a 'divine warning, the result of tyranny, corruption, confusion'. And his vitriolic *khotbes* (Friday sermons), sometimes followed throughout Iran, denounced over and over again the un-Islamic funerals imposed by the health services. Getting angry at the 'destruction of the planet', the result of short-sighted development policies, he was surfing on recurring concern, in a region hard hit, for two decades, by the drying up of the cross-border lake system known as Hamun, due to overexploitation of the Hilmand River's waters. A concern increasingly dominant, too, in the social movements of Iran as a whole.

Meanwhile, the deep state was continuing to transform . . .

From this viewpoint, the impression of a discrepancy between the authorities' discourse and popular practice must no doubt be tempered — if only to take into account the diversity of attitudes of the former in time and space, as well as the capacity of notables with local roots, whether elected or not, such as the deputies to the Majles and the imams, to grasp the air of the times and to reflect the fears and the expectations of their constituencies. The same is true of the differences in position between Shia and Sunni religious authorities: indeed, as might be expected it was the latter who showed the most vocal on the funeral ritual imposed by the Ministry of Health; however, as has been suggested, regional political, even electoral contexts may have fuelled some of the positions taken. (It should be noted, for instance, that contrary to the Imam of Zahedan, the Kurdish Muslim-Brother movement of the Society for Preaching and Reform, officially active since 2002, did not discuss any of the recommendations of the Ministry of Health.)

One thus takes benefit of contextualising possible cleavages between authorities/populations or Shia/Sunni Islam. More decisive for the near future may show the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on the evolution of the deep state in Iran, in two opposite (though not necessarily incompatible, as often in Iran) directions. On the one hand, the Guards are now finding themselves on the move at a time when, purified from 1989 to 2019 by a decennial successions of purges and massive waves of retirements, they appear more homogeneous than ever. Since May 28, the new parliament is presided over by General Mohammad-Baqer Qalibaf, a former police chief renowned for his security approach to the social movements. Since 2016, moreover, Iran has been equipped with a political apparatus parallel to IRI's, made of local, regional and national assemblies entirely derived from and controlled by the Sepah. Such concentration of political authority may explain the relative serenity that Guide Khamenei was able to show this spring.

On the other hand, however, the crisis has allowed a number of more or less autonomous actors to make their voices heard, including public agencies that have become shelters for academic intellectuals. Within these agencies (as we have seen with the Red Crescent since November 2017), this intelligentsia has been endeavouring to re-impose a culture of the public good, based on coordinated sets of technological knowledge — from seismology and medicine to transport engineering, with extensive recourse to the social sciences. Admittedly, its influence remains modest despite the brief permutation of hierarchies made possible, in early 2020, by the authority conquered, for a time, by the Ministry of Health. However, it has played a significant role in the secularisation of the debates on a matter such as public security — finding from place to place powerful, if unexpected, allies among local and regional imams, an institution that the social movements of the past decade, followed by the current crisis, have helped to put back at the centre of the political-religious chessboard.

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