



The Politics of Recognition: The Barefoot of the Revolution and Elusive Memories

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A kite festival during the Iranian new year holidays in Mashhad.

AHMAD HALABISAZ/XINHUA/EYEVINE/REDUX

The Politics of Recognition

The Barefoot of the Revolution and Elusive Memories

Fatemeh Sadeghi

The victory of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the presidential election of 2005 came as a shock to many segments of Iranian society, particularly the reformists within the Islamic Republic who believed they had pushed aside such arch-conservatives for good. Ahmadinejad prevailed thanks to the massive participation of the urban poor in the election, along with the decision of the majority of the middle and upper classes to boycott the vote with no thought that their abstention would have such a consequence. Whereas conservatives boasted that Ahmadinejad's triumph proved the allegiance of "the people" to the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the

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reformists explained their failure in an entirely apolitical way. They said that Ahmadinejad won due to economic populism, which, for them, meant that the Iranian majority is culturally unready for democracy.

The 2005 election seemed to be a battle over memory in which hardliners loyal to revolutionary ideals and shaped by the hardships of the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988) were arrayed against representatives of collective amnesia, particularly, again, the reformists, who looked ahead to a future of economic liberalization and global integration. Those social strata that had been left behind in the post-war reconstruction saw in Ahmadinejad a man of people, as manifest in his simple rhetoric and plain clothing style. In voting for him they were reappropriating



Women wander in the market area of Mashhad.

WARREN CLARKE/OCULI/REDUX

the memory of the past and seeking to recover the political hegemony of the *mostaz'afin* (downtrodden) celebrated by the revolution. In return, Ahmadinejad promised “justice shares” (*saham-e edalat*)—direct apportionment of oil revenue to citizens—as well as various subsidies and cheap housing. In the course of time, the president’s agenda turned out to be crony capitalism taking advantage of the poor to form a new “regime class.” His administration ended with a stagnant economy, unprecedented corruption and high inflation that hit the most vulnerable the hardest.

But the battle over memory was far from over. It raged again in the presidential election of 2009, in which Ahmadinejad’s main opponent, former prime minister Mir-Hossein Mousavi, appealed to millions with an inclusive discourse of social justice that had room for the demands of the urban poor, war

veterans, youth, women and even dissidents oppressed since the outset of the revolution. Although conservatives pilfered votes to block Mousavi’s election, his campaign showed that social inclusion was not a mere demagogic slogan, as critics of Ahmadinejad occasionally posited.

Social exclusion—and denial that exclusion exists—are familiar across the world. But the unexpected rise of Ahmadinejad made the phenomenon particularly fascinating in Iran. The reformists, and some Iranian intellectuals as well, sought to explain it by reducing politics to “culture,” including lifestyle, ethics, religious belief and personal identity. The 2009 election and the subsequent Green Movement protesting the official result ought to falsify such arguments. Yet, ironically, even these events have been explained as an anti-politics of identity among the Iranian middle class and a reaction of

“secular” parts of society against the religious. Such explanations tend to disparage the opinions of the poor.

To investigate such presumptions, which were embryonic at the time, in 2007 some friends and I gathered life stories and conducted group interviews in a poor district called al-Taymour in the northeastern suburbs of Mashhad, the religious capital of Iran and the second-largest city in the country.¹ We were curious about any changes in the attitudes of the residents, particularly women, two years into Ahmadinejad’s first term. Most of the women we interviewed are religious, but their religiosity seems not to be the cause but rather the effect of sociopolitical and economic conditions. It also has a ritualistic aspect, indicating that it is part of a desperate politics of recognition.

Inclusive Exclusion

Al-Taymour is like a camp ringed with invisible fences. The geographic distance between this district and the central shrine of Imam Reza is not that great, but in every other way al-Taymour and Mashhad are far apart. No one outside officialdom calls the area by its formal name, Panj Tan-e Al-e Aba, or Five Close Relatives of the Prophet.

Its informal designation, al-Taymour, evokes Tamerlane (Taymour-e Lang in Persian), the fourteenth-century Uzbek conqueror who founded a dynasty in Khorasan and central Asia. This name indicates that the neighborhood was taken by force.

Indeed, the area was seized, not by foreign invaders but by Iranian rural migrants, who settled the district in the manner described by Asef Bayat as “the quiet encroachment of the ordinary.” The migrants took all the land on which their homes are built, along with the water and electricity supply, illegally. For years, the state refused to recognize the neighborhood as part of the city, so as to deny it services, but finally relented after numerous challenges from and some violent encounters with the inhabitants. In the Islamic Republic, naming seals the process of municipal recognition—hence the lofty reference to the Prophet’s family. Al-Taymour is officially included in Mashhad, but remains excluded in many ways.

Al-Taymour is classified by the state as *bafi-e farsudeh* (old texture), an idiom that gradually replaced the word “slum” in bureaucratic language after the revolution. Half-ruined dwellings line both sides of the sole paved street as well as the dirt alleys named after martyrs of the Iran-Iraq war. The government has offered loans at 9 percent interest for residents to spruce up their homes on the outside. The people can hardly afford the terms. In any case, al-Taymour has not aged in appearance; it has always looked the same.

In 2007, al-Taymour was inaccessible by public transportation. To get there one had to walk a considerable distance from the bus station on the main highway. A few residents have motorbikes or old cars that they use to carry passengers. There is now a rapid-transit bus line into the Mashhad city center, but its lengthy route and expensive tickets have only made it harder for residents to get around.

Despite the delay in recognition by the state, al-Taymour has always been under careful observation, because of its high unemployment and poverty rates, and because it is thought to be a center of drug trafficking, addiction and prostitution. Many undocumented Afghan migrants are among the residents as well. State agencies conduct regular surveys, censuses, mappings and vaccination campaigns. The birth rate, average income and many other social indices are carefully documented. Al-Taymour is highly visible, and the residents seem accustomed to it. Some of the people we met assumed that we were coming from yet another state organization, probably television, to ask them about their everyday problems. They often prefaced their answers with “in the name of God,” the phrase used in formal conversations in the Islamic Republic.

Inclusive exclusion means that all the official investigations look at each of the neighborhood’s problems in isolation. Each component of the grid of poverty, unemployment, drug addiction and crime, whether petty or organized, is studied separately in the laboratory of policymaking. In this way, the neighborhood’s demand for equality and recognition is kept so fragmented as to be inaudible to the state.

Living the Extraordinary

In a place like al-Taymour, what are elsewhere the activities of ordinary life—reading, travel, study, entertainment, making love, even prayer—are extraordinary indulgences that only a select few can afford.

The living conditions are similar to those of refugees. The large families of the neighborhood live in one-room hovels made of cheap leftover brick. There is a small half-kitchen in the corner. Except for a television set and a faded carpet covering the floor, the room is otherwise almost empty. Some homes have a yard with a bathroom in one corner and a heap of discarded building materials in another.

Most of the men of al-Taymour are temporary workers (*kargar-e sar-e gozar*)—porters, carpenters, painters, doormen or drivers. Hardly anyone has a steady job, often due to disability, criminal background, drug addiction or mental breakdown. Thus, the women of al-Taymour tend both to manage the household and to contribute to its finances by working as housekeepers, nurses and seamstresses or by shelling nuts, cleaning vegetables or simply receiving alms from charities or passersby. Working women are frequently exposed to sexual harassment on the job or on the street. They rarely report these incidents, however, for fear of losing jobs or inflaming the fury of male relatives or simply out of shame. In part for this reason, and also to save transportation costs, women prefer those jobs that can be done at home. Their access to the job market is very circumscribed.

Al-Taymour has no park or place of public entertainment. The only “amenity” is a half-constructed mosque erected at the inhabitants’ expense. The mosque looks very poor and offers no service except a Game Net set inside a dusty building and a

gathering place for men and women to participate in occasional prayer sessions and funerals. It has no library. It does not offer the computer classes or other activities that are organized by mosques in richer areas. At mosques elsewhere, the Basij, a mass revolutionary organization, leads inexpensive pilgrimages to other shrine cities like Karbala' in Iraq. In al-Taymour the mosque has no Basij section.

With no other means of entertainment, young boys hang out on alley corners or play football on a bare field. Young girls are deprived of these activities as well. They either stay at home, where they watch television or listen to music all day, or they go to school. But the rising cost of living and the expense of education induce many young boys and girls to drop out of school or university in search of work or marriage. Despite the infamy of the neighborhood, Islamic piety is the rule. The boys understand it is forbidden to smoke or to chase girls and the girls do not wear the sleek manteaux common in Tehran and other cities, at least not close to home.

Not everyone, however, appears to share the same views about displays of piety. During our visit, Ameneh, an illiterate woman whose husband has gone mad, asked about the manteaux, "What else will these poor kids do, if they are not allowed to even do this?" A heated discussion ensued. Unlike their mothers, many young girls wanted to wear the fashionable manteaux and, in fact, were doing so in secret.

Older women rejoined that even not wearing the black *chador* is *bi-hejabi* (immodesty).

Tensions between the generations filled the air, though they were repressed by the absolute economic dependence of the youngsters on their parents and the general destitution that leaves little room for lifestyle choices or the expression of personal taste. Nevertheless, many girls were obviously against early marriage and large families. Zahra, a university student in her twenties, who until then had remained silent, contended, "I don't want to have children at all." Sensing the gazes of the other women, she corrected herself: "Maybe just one, only for the sake of the elders. That's all. I wish to continue my studies to be somebody for myself. I don't like to drag my hand before others (*dastamo pish-e digaran deraz konam*, i.e., take money from them), even before my own husband."

The youth of al-Taymour seem to have experienced a quiet but decisive dissociation from the attitudes and ideas of their parents. Whereas the older generation still seems loyal to the egalitarian ideals of the revolution and is searching for that lost idyll, the young seem disillusioned. The aspirations of younger generations in al-Taymour are not substantially different from those of their counterparts in richer neighborhoods of Mashhad or Tehran. They are also looking for personal liberties and material comforts. Yet what is achievable for the middle class is pushed into the realm of imagination in al-Taymour. Many young men here favor action and adventure movies, whereas girls mostly prefer romantic television serials or Bollywood films. Like Zahra, girls might imagine a degree of socio-economic independence, but it is difficult to achieve. Many girls, despite having beautiful dreams, end up getting married early, often compulsorily, in order to decrease the economic burden on the parents.

Imagination, too, is a social construction. In al-Taymour, imagination is an extraordinary zone, a different kind of inclusive exclusion, particularly for the youth who might use it to escape grim everyday reality but find that reality always intrudes. The wall separating the dispossessed from the rest of the society is a challenge that all generations in al-Taymour face. Whether the young will be able to confront this condition in ways extending beyond "quiet encroachment" is yet to be seen.

Searching for Recognition

Khadijeh, a middle-aged woman who looks much older, has long been staying in al-Taymour. Her husband is a construction worker who fell off a scaffold and has been disabled and unemployed ever since. In this neighborhood, she gave birth to her nine children, the majority of whom still live with their parents in a small house thrown up overnight. Frustrated by her frequent pregnancies, she was provided by the government with a cheap tubal ligation, which she welcomed enthusiastically. I asked her about her husband's attitude toward the procedure. "Our master (*aghamun*) said nothing. Whatever I say he accepts," she responded,

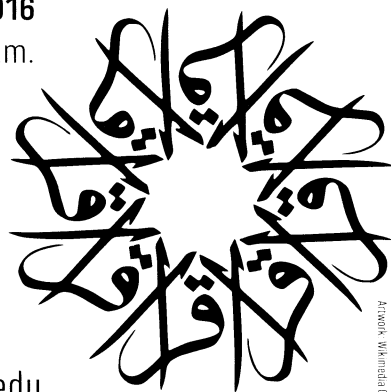
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while adding smilingly that she even chose the names of her children herself.

Notwithstanding her illiteracy, Khadijeh has a vivid mental picture of the socio-economic shifts that have taken place in post-revolutionary Iran. In a heavy Khorasani accent, she summed it up: "At the beginning [of the revolution], we were told to have more children. Islam needed more soldiers. So we did. Yet everything got expensive afterward, and we were left alone without knowing how to feed our children with the high prices. My husband was a worker; he was disabled and lost his job. Children are unemployed, too.... God knows that we are respectable people (*aberudat*). We did exactly what we were told [by the authorities]; we have given martyrs (*shahid dadim*), and yet nobody wants us any more. We are left out."

The "barefoot" who once were supposed to be the standard bearers of the revolution, and its main beneficiaries, have gradually become its enemies in the eyes of various factions of the post-revolutionary state, whether reformists or hardliners. Most of the residents of al-Taymour turned out to vote for Ahmadinejad in 2005. But Ahmadinejad turned out to be a symptom rather than the cure. In 2007, many people in the neighborhood were disappointed, and even felt betrayed. "No matter who we vote for, everything just gets worse—more expensive," Khadijeh said dejectedly. Others in the room vowed, "We will never vote again."

Elections are increasingly unrepresentative in today's Iran. It is not surprising that electoral politics would prove ineffective at transforming the life conditions of the underprivileged, as in al-Taymour, but it is equally unthinkable that the majority of the inhabitants would stop voting. Still, particularly for the older generations, the enduring strategy seems to be the politics of recognition. Strict discipline with regard to ritualistic piety like wearing *chador* and collecting money for the mosque is the main way to get recognition from the wider society and the government that pretends to track Islamic norms. The question is whether the politics of recognition can ameliorate crippling dispossession, particularly when piety and simplicity has been supplanted in reality by new standards of wealth and power, and the state is increasingly withdrawing from its social responsibilities toward the citizenry.

Is Revolution Useless?

Having listened to the complaints of the people of al-Taymour, I got the feeling that what they wanted to convey above all is that the world does not look at them as it used to. The world, in fact, has turned upside down, and they hardly recognize it. The question underlying all conversations, then, was: "How can we stand this world back on its feet?" In al-Taymour this question is inevitable but also unanswerable.

It is the same question that is stubbornly ignored across Iran today. The more inequality expands, the more it becomes unspeakable and unquestionable. What is at work is inclusive exclusion, wrapped in technocratic jargon that makes power

relations harder and harder to see. The anti-politics of identity does it best. Its major role is to normalize the upside-down world, justify stricter policing as a remedy for extreme inequality, discredit legitimate demands and attribute contentious movements to a "chaotic" revolutionary spirit that must be subdued if Iran is to remain stable. All the major political factions—the reformists, the conservatives and the pragmatists in between—as well as the better-off social strata agree on that set of prescriptions.

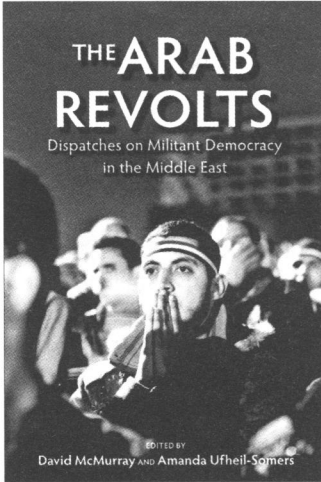
The well-known reformist political scientist Saeed Hajjarian, for instance, says that "normalization" of Iranian politics and society is the program of the current president, Hassan Rouhani. If so, then the last decade has made clear that systematic social exclusion remains a powerful concern without which "normalization" is impossible. One wonders if Iran is a more ideological society today than it was 30 years ago.

The Iranian revolution seems as exhausted as its barefoot champions. Social exclusion, however, remains a main challenge before contemporary Iran, one that transcends the debates over what is revolutionary or counter-revolutionary and over the meaning of the elusive past. ■

Endnote

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Dispatches on Militant Democracy
in the Middle East

EDITED BY
David McMurray and Amanda Ufheil-Somers

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Written for a broad audience of students, policymakers, media analysts, and general readers, *The Arab Revolts* reveals the underlying causes for the Arab Spring by extending analysis back over the last two decades to investigate some of the most important historical forces leading up to the recent insurrections.

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