

Florida Atlantic University

Authority and Political Culture in Shi'ism

Edited by Said Amir Arjomand

A Book Review Submitted To

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Book Review

Arjomand, Said Amir, ed. *Authority and Political Culture in Shi'ism*. SUNY Series in Near Eastern Studies. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988. 393 pp.

Beginning during the lifetime of the Islamic prophet Muhammad, Shi'ite clerics have consistently attempted to increase their authority in Iran and in the Muslim World. In *Authority and Political Culture in Shi'ism*, Said Amir Arjomand offers a compilation of essays, with primary sources in the second half of the book that document the institutionalization of Shi'ite authority over the last thirteen hundred years. His book also explains that while the Shi'ite jurors held varying amounts of power over the centuries, they never came to control politics and religion in a state until the advent of the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979.

In the early chapters, it is established that science and knowledge (*ilm*) were praised and were an important trait of the Imami leader. Arjomand adds to this that the Imamate was an immediate extension of the Prophecy [brought by Muhammad], so the Imams were believed to possess the knowledge of all the preceding prophets, except for Muhammad. Instead of following the Sunni conception of authority with a caliph, the Shi'ites followed an Imam, who came from within the ranks of the scholars (*ulama*). This difference between the Shi'ites and the Sunnis stems from the Shi'ite belief that the successor to Muhammad should have been Ali, instead of Abu Bakr because Ali had closer blood relations to the prophet. Was this a legitimate grievance or was it an opportune way for the Shi'ites to ignore the results of an "election?" That is a question for the reader to ponder.

In any event, the backbone of the Shi'ite religion did not become solidified until the disappearance of the Twelfth Imam. This was a major crisis for the Shi'ites since the Imam was considered to be proof of God on earth; his disappearance therefore threatened the credibility of the Islamic sect itself. This crisis was resolved, however, by the *ulama*, who claimed that the Twelfth Imam was in "Occultation until the end of time."¹ Consequently, there could be no Imams after the Twelfth Imam, leaving the *ulama* to rule in his name. Since the Imam allegedly held the knowledge and wisdom of Muhammad, this *ilm* transferred to succeeding *ulama* leaders. By this time, the Islamic religion had spread vastly, over a large territory in the Middle East, so religious scholars were already given more leeway to interpret Islamic law, than in previous times. Therefore, they were able to make the adjustment of interpreting Islamic law without an Imam.

While they were able to keep the religion vibrant and afloat, it would be some time before Shi'ism came to dominate in one state. In Iran, the young Safavid king Tahmasp attempts to make Shi'ism the official state religion by naming Karaki the "*Mujtahid of the Age*" and the "*Seal of the Mujtahidin*," giving him the authority to subordinate the *sadrs* and other Islamic factions in the state to Shi'ite command. However, his efforts were fruitless and resulted in the death of Karaki, most likely at the hands of the *sadrs*. Since the Shi'ites were not able to dominate the religious end of what had previously been Sunni territory, successive Iranian kings tried to increase the Shi'ite influence in the state. Arjomand explains that "with the support of the Safavid kings, a Shi'ite hierarchy of incoming doctors and their native trainees [were] accommodated

¹ Said Amir Arjomand, "Introduction: Shi'ism, Authority, and Political Culture," in Said Amir Arjomand, ed., *Authority and Political Culture in Shi'ism*, SUNY Series in Near Eastern Studies (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 5.

into the Safavid polity in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century to the sufferance of the clerical estate.”²

In effect, the Safavids, who supported Shi’ism were unable to control the religious policies within its borders. The best that they were able to do was to raise the status of the juror to “primacy ‘of the Age.’”³ Slowly, however, they worked to decrease the impact and the effectiveness of Sufism and Sunnism by increasingly allowing Shi’ite theologians to immigrate to important Iranian cities and naming them *shaykh al-Islams*.

With the next Iranian dynasty, the Qajars, the Shi’ite *ulama*, namely the jurors, were able to have increased autonomy within the state. This was because the Qajars lacked legitimacy as rulers of the state, so they needed the support of the *ulama* to legitimize their rule. As a result of this autonomy, Ammanat explains, they were able to consolidate their “socioeconomic base [which] in effect made them less dependent on the state patronage and more assertive in the pursuit of their own vested interests.”⁴ While their status rose, however, they were still unable to unite behind a single leader because of their primary allegiance to the Hidden Imam. Nevertheless, the Shi’ite quest for more authority persisted, with the *mujtahids* increasing their “juristic authority.”

With the growing influence of the Shi’ites, it seemed like only a matter of time before some form of unity arose. However, only for very brief periods of time in the course of Shi’ite history, with Sharazi and Ansari’s time being examples, have they been

² Said Amir Arjomand, “The Mujtahid of the Age and the Mulla-bashi: An Intermediate Stage in the Institutionalization of Religious Authority in Shi’ite Iran,” in Said Amir Arjomand, ed., *Authority and Political Culture in Shi’ism*, SUNY Series in Near Eastern Studies (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 81.

³ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁴ Abbas Amanat, “In Between the Madrasa and the Marketplace: The Designation of Clerical Leadership in Modern Shi’ism,” in Said Amir Arjomand, ed., *Authority and Political Culture in Shi’ism*, SUNY Series in Near Eastern Studies (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 105.

able to unite behind any one leader. The followers of Shi'ism (*muqallids*) basically aligned themselves with the *mujtahid* they desired. Not even the Iranian Constitutional Revolution in the first decade of the twentieth century united the Shi'ite ranks. The best that a juror could hope for was to be seen as more knowledgeable (*ilm*) than the other jurors, thereby increasing his standing among Shi'ite followers (*muqallids*).

While the Constitutionalist Revolution did not create unity among the Shi'ites, as the historical trend seems to be, the juristic authority of the *mujtahids* increased as the newly formed *Majlis* (parliament) incorporated them as the judges over religious matters in the Ministry of Justice. This authority, however, was short lived, as the Pahlavi era ushered in an age of secularization in Iran.

Not to be discouraged, the *mujtahids*, who were within the ranks of the *ulama* bided their time. Attempting to rid Iran of Western infidels who plagued Iran during the secularized period, Khomeini blended nationalist pride and concern for the infected state of Shi'ism in his successful attempt to overthrow the Shah in 1979. In the process, he asserted "a mandate of the jurist to rule."⁵ Arjomand explains that with Khomeini "having firmly rejected the idea of the separation of religion and politics as instilled by imperialist plotters, Khomeini argues that during the Occultation of the Imam, the right to rule devolves upon the qualified *ulama*."⁶ This increased the authority of the jurors like never before as the rulers of the political and the religious realm. Arjomand points out, however, that "Khomeini himself could not put forward any juristic argument [for their

⁵ Said Amir Arjomand, "Ideological Revolution in Shi'ism," in Said Amir Arjomand, ed., *Authority and Political Culture in Shi'ism*, SUNY Series in Near Eastern Studies (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 194.

⁶ *Ibid.*

leadership], and he justified his position on the purely pragmatic grounds of the necessity of maintenance of order in society.”⁷

Unfortunately, Arjomand does not complete his story. He does not tell about the impact of the Iran Hostage Crisis and of the Iran-Iraq war on Khomeini’s ability to consolidate power for the jurors. This is without question an unacceptable omission, as he strengthened Iran’s image in Iran and in the world for his defiance of American President Jimmy Carter’s demand that he release Americans taken as prisoners after the Islamic Revolution. Omitting the tale of the Iran-Iraq war from this book gives the reader the impression that the Iranian people supported Khomeini whole-heartedly because of his anti-Western policies and his advocacy of the rule of the jurors. However, the most likely reason that they supported him was because they rallied around the individual with the most authority when the war began. This type of omission is one of the major problems with books compiled with essays. The essays were designed to cover a certain focus without giving much credence to surrounding topics that influence the topics of choice. When presented as a whole, they are given more importance since they are trying to tell a larger story, but often times, as is the case here, many important facts and details, which are essential for the telling of the larger story, are nowhere to be found in the text.

With that said, the articles chosen for inclusion in this work were all very good, with the exception of the article on “The Evolution of Popular Eulogy of the Imams Among the Shi’a,” which appears to be excessively filled with quotes. One observation that comes to mind with this compilation is that since two of the seven articles in this compilation came from the editor, Arjomand, there is the possibility that he may have

⁷ Ibid., 197.

compiled this book in order to give his own articles more importance by surrounding them with articles that add further background to his own research. However, this is not necessarily a bad thing if it is true, and is in fact a clever idea.

As far as the sources used by the various authors, each of the articles primary documents and correspondences from various religious officials, while incorporating a small amount of secondary sources. However, there is the possibility that more secondary sources may not have existed for the topics they undertook. If one is inclined to follow in the footsteps of these authors, Mohammad-Taqi Danishpazhouh provides a useful annotated bibliography “On Government and Statecraft,” that may point the researcher in a direction for which they would like to study. At the same time, some of the documents Arjomand includes in the second half of this book are quite interesting, especially the inclusion of the “Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran.” Arjomand is correct in his assertion that the Preamble to the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran places “a great deal of emphasis...on the authenticity of the ideology of Khomeini’s movement in comparison with the earlier movements.”⁸

One more drawback that keeps the work from being better is that the selections often gloss over certain historical topics, such as when Lahidji says in “Constitutionalism and Clerical Authority,” “In any case, Tehran is conquered and the case of Shaykh Fadl Allah’s life is concluded with his execution.”⁹ The historian without much knowledge of Middle Eastern or Iranian affairs wonders how Iran was conquered since it is brought up

⁸ Ibid., 192.

⁹ Abdol Karim Lahidji, “Constitutionalism and Clerical Authority,” in Said Amir Arjomand, ed., *Authority and Political Culture in Shi’ism*, SUNY Series in Near Eastern Studies (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 150.

almost out of nowhere. Things that an Islamic historian or a specialist in Middle Eastern affairs may know, the non-specialist historian will not understand. So, while the book may offer some insight to non-Islamic specializing historians, Islamic historians will most likely not miss a beat in reading the narratives that are presented in this compilation. While there are some flaws with the work, as has been demonstrated, overall the work does its job of illustrating the rise of the Shi'ism in Iran and how the jurors came to power in the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Reading this book is a true delight, however, as the stories Arjomand has included in his compilation are non-biased, thus enabling the reader not to be influenced by any potential religious agenda.