

## IMPLICATIONS OF ALI SHARIATI'S POLITICAL THOUGHT FOR IRANIAN REVOLUTION

**N. Bano**

University of Management & Technology, Pakistan  
Klassiq8@hotmail.com

### ABSTRACT

*Dr. Ali Shari'ati emerged on the intellectual horizons of Iran in 1970's as a political activist. His political ideas are also considered as forerunner for the Islamic revolution having strong resonance within Iranian society even now. This paper aims at shedding light by critically commenting on how he transformed the political thoughts of Iranian people, particularly the youth, who brought Iranian revolution. Based on reviewing his political thoughts in Iranian context, it is concluded that Shari'ati declared, the "responsible intellectual" should strive to achieve such a revolutionary state where any form of imperialism, exploitation and capitalism find no place. It would end poverty, develop the economy and set up a society that is dynamic, just and classless.*

### Introduction

#### Political thought before Iranian revolution

Iran is no stranger to revolution. In the 20th century, Iran had three revolutions but the Islamic Revolution of 1979 was the most remarkable event and most remembered by the people.

Qajar dynasty ruled Iran until 1925 that underwent the first Revolution (constitutional revolution) in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Qajar period of domination was largely based on the support of two major European powers. The Great Britain and Russia were these two major Western bodies who introduced Western political ways in Iran. Nikki Keddie notes that the Qajar dynasty introduced "Shadow politics", a time when "real politics, often occurring not only, as in many countries, behind the scenes, but even beyond the seas." She comments the supreme economic and political destruction brought about by the West in this period.

A military man named Reza Kahn seized power in 1925 and overthrew the Qajar Shah to become Reza Shah Pahlavi. Nikki Keddie remarks that "as compared to the Qajars, Reza Shah acted with significant independence of foreign powers."

In 1941 Reza Shah was forcibly removed by the British and replaced by his son, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi. In the 1950s, a

major political crisis developed over control of the oil industry. The Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) remained completely free from Iranian governmental controls and monitoring.

"The frustration of Iranians grew as they were forced to pay high prices for Iranian oil, while the numbers of skilled Iranian workers dwindled."

The Shah's regime became increasingly repressive, vicious, corrupt, and profligate. The functional failures of his regime brought economic shortages and inflation. Shah's support for the increase in OPEC petroleum price may also be a cause of the decrease in his support by Western politician and media. His foreign policy eventually caused him the most trouble. It is within the social, political and economic climate of the reign of the dictatorial and Western-allied Muhammad Reza Shah that the revolutionary discourse within Iran began to take shape.

Iranian intellectuals have specifically being passionate in their urge for change within their country. Intellectuals actually play the role of the soldier of the pen and spokesmen of the nation living in crises. As Edward Said delineate an Intellectual in these words:

"The intellectual is an individual endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude,

philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public. And this role has an edge to it, and cannot be played without a sense of being someone whose place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to produce them), to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations”.

In the two decades i.e. 1960's and 1970's Sharīatī's personality has been figured out as the most influential one among the Iranian intellectuals. Sharīatī, who died in London in June 1977, was among those who were predecessors of Islamic Revolution in Iran.

His major aim was to make the Iranian Muslims aware of this fact that if they wanted themselves to be free from the foreign control, then they have to follow their own Islamic heritage rather than adopting the Western ideas.

#### **Purpose of study**

This paper will discuss Iranian intellectual Alī Sharīatī, one of the great thinkers of the pre-Revolutionary era of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the man who properly introduced the notion of “political spirituality” or revolutionary Islam.

As an intellectual Alī Sharīatī was very much aware of his social responsibility. All of his time spent in the propagation of religion, and transmission of Islamic ideas to the young generation. He waged a constant struggle against what he called the evil temper of the modern age and society, the withered root of which could be watered only by the renunciation of all things, by martyrdom, according to him.

This work mainly focuses to evaluate Sharīatī's political ideas and thought and implications of his thought on Iranian revolution.

#### **Significance of the study**

Sharīatī's historical significance should not be forgotten as many of his ideas are still workable today. He was an Intellectual whose ideas were ultimately directed to a

resurgence and revival of Islam and Muslim society. Sharīatī propagated his ideas during the days when the Islamic revolution in Iran was in process of being shaped up. Sharīatī's contribution to shape the ideologies concerning revolution will be remembered long not only because of their novelty but also because they precede the Islamic Revolution of Iran.

Sharīatī's Political ideas and thoughts influenced those intellectuals and young Iranians who played an active role in the movement of Revolution and hence, Sharīatī's role is a significant one in producing the idea of Islam as a dynamic force among a generation and a class of young Iranians who would otherwise have become even more alienated from Islam.

#### **Ali Shariati's political perspectives**

The main point in his political ideology is his attempt to redefine the terms of “Politics” and “Siasat” (the word used for politics in Persian). As per his perception “Siasat” deals with anarchy, endeavoring to reshape ideologies, institutions, conscience of a transitory society. Siasat does not have concern with the daily problems of government. It is a way to change, and welfare of human beings is at risk in Siasat. Politics, on the other hand, deals with man, the world as if it really is around him, his needs and demands that concern his present. To be more accurate we can say that Siasat moulds the public accord, whereas politics is moulded on it.

According to this new definition presented by Sharīatī, politics should be an affair of the enlightened and intellectual members of society as it is a struggle through hardships in pursuit of real happiness.

For Sharīatī, the “authentic intellectual” whether religious or irreligious – is one who sticks to the logical, societal and political struggle for revolution: “If you're not in the struggle, it doesn't make much difference whether you are in the mosque or the bar.”

Thus politics is a reference to “Being” and Siasat is of “Becoming”. Integrity of thought and practices and elevation of

character is the dire need for those who run the business of Siasat.

Sharīatī believed in “engaged democracy”. He suggested engaged democracy, in the following words: “In the absence of a charismatic leader, the leader may not be elected by popular vote, but “selected” by the “experts” who are trusted by people and he would not be responsible to the populace, but to “principles of guidance” according to which he has to move the society towards its higher goal”.

In Sharīatī’s proposed model of government there are two main leaders;

“a) A charismatic ruler;

b) A chosen ruler who is not responsible to the people, but nevertheless bound by Islamic principles.”

Sharīatī’s political theory focused on the point that a Third World country such as Iran requires a revolution that eradicates all forms of imperialism besides revitalizing the country’s culture, heritage and national identity.

Sharīatī also redefines ummat as the league of Islamist Humanists that can be equated to the League of communists in its endeavour to shape up a classless society. Sharīatī denounce the ills of the society as “imperialism”, class exploitation, class oppression, class inequality and also targets the “vulgar Marxism,” and “Clericalism”.

### Revolutionary Ideology

Shariati termed Shi’ism as a “Islamology” (Islamshenasi) that is a revolutionary ideology that transcends all aspects of life including politics. A true Islamshenasi is inspirational for a believer reinforcing in him the power to confront exploitation, repression, and social discrimination. He considered Shī’ism culture basically radical and compatible with the aims of the revolution.

Sharīatī infers that ruling class is using Shia Islam for their purpose. His project was to reclaim the “real” Shi’i religion. In his article **Red Shī’ism vs. Black Shī’ism** Sharīatī discussed the dualism in the past of

Shī’ah religion. According to him “Red Shī’ism” concern with social justice and salvation for the masses.

He considers “Black Shī’ism as the diverged form of the religion, which is out of touch with the needs of the masses and is leading by both monarchy and clergy, and came to be recognized in Iran under the influence Safavids”.

### Enlightened Souls

Sharīatī believed the free thinkers (the rushanfekran) responsible for carrying forth the revolution. Sharīatī added that the role of "Enlightened Souls" in directing their society to revolutionary change. In this respect, he highlighted the failure of the Western trained scholars’ influential connection with the peoples of the nations they claim to liberate or lead, with the resulting "gravest tragedy" in reality causative to further colonization.

Sharīatī argues that enlightened souls are those particular intellectuals who have an ability to identify the problems of their society and increase the awareness of the people to comprehend and resolve those problems.

According to Sharīatī, “An Intellectual is one who is conscious of his own 'humanistic status' in a specific social and historical time and place”.

Sharīatī’s description of an “Enlightened Soul” is noteworthy for its review of the revolutionary struggle. "If we believe as true free-thinking intellectuals, what must be our relationship with the society and what path should we follow?"

### Martyrdom as Revolutionary Weapon

Martyrdom according to Sharīatī is life and soul for revolution. An important aspect of Shi’te ideology is consisted of its promotion of the philosophy of martyrdom. It is a tradition followed by the heroes of history. In this regard, Hazrat Hussain’s martyrdom is exemplary, as an amalgam of true Islamic beliefs and a permanent sign of faith’s survival against oppression.

Martyrdom is “the protective shield” for future generations. It is essential for their growth and survival, as Sharīatī believes that Jihad has changed Shi’ites from passive guardians of the cemeteries to energetic supporters of Hazrat ‘Alī (R.A) and Hazrat Hussain (R.A), as torchbearer of truth: “In the permanent battle of history - everywhere and everyplace, all fields are Karbala, all months are Moharram, and all days are Ashura.”

Hazrat Hussain’s martyrdom is an “invitation” forever and to all to “die” when you cannot kill, when religion is modified, when protest is snubbed by the powers and whenever leaders mislead. As Sharīatī says: “It is an invitation to all ages and generations that if you cannot kill, die”

#### **Role of Ali Sharīatī’s Political perspectives on Iranian Revolution**

Although Sharīatī was not a politician but through his attractive eloquence, he fired the imagination of the younger generation and created a deep and enduring impact on all listeners. He actually targeted the young generation who were influenced by Western culture and alienated from Islam. As he was recognized the Western intellectual he used latest intellectual terminology for telling the young generation that, while Marxism and existentialism had failed to solve the problems of modern Man but Islam had the answer. He not only addressed the Iranian audience, but to impoverished and deprived masses all over the world. Ali Sharīatī’s contribution to the Islamic Revolution in Iran was two- fold.

First he created an awareness of Islamic valued and heritage among the Iranian middle class, particularly the youth of the country, which in course of time paved the way for the Revolution. From his early youth, Sharīatī directed his entire energy and enormous talent towards arousing people from the deep slumber into which they had fallen. It was his dynamic and progressive understanding of Islam which inspired the youth with fresh hope and firm

belief that return to immaculate and progressive Islam would inexorably bring revolution as well.

His second basic contribution was to make the people conscious of their deprivation and exploitation. His message rang loud and clears in educated and discriminating minds. He was certain that: “The necessary factor that would persuade a social class to arise in the feelings and awareness of being exploited rather than the mere fact of being exploited... class self-awareness is the factor which hastens the revolution”.

Obviously the role other Iranian leaders as Motahari, Taleqani, Bazargan and especially Ayatollah Khomeini could not be minimized who prepared the ground for the revolution through their writings and speeches. However Ali Sharīatī played a decisive role in making a success of the revolution.

Sharīatī is not well known as Khomieni because the Revolution movement was actually shaped up by the powerful leadership of Khomieni. Khomieni had appeared as outstanding leader as he audaciously attacked the regime and directly held the Shah responsible for all the evils besetting Iran. While confronting secular authority he did not restrict himself to criticism of just imperial measures but he also demanded the truly Islamic state.

On the other hand Sharīatī used the similes and analogy that mention the sufferings of the people at the hands of brutal oppressors in the past instead of confronting secular authority and making direct reference s to excesses of the Pahlavi regime. As he takes the Surah Al Rum as a parable illustrating the ways how the Islamic power was able to overcome super powers, the Sassanid’s and the Byzantine Empire. In this commentary, he refers to the verse “The Romans were defeated,” and he is of the view that the time has come now to defeat the super powers of the today’s world.

“Conditions today are very similar. In fact, not even the terminology has changed. East and West rule the world while the Muslims,

who are in the middle, are considered part of the Third World. Unfortunately, many intellectuals who have been overcome by the present superpowers believe that the survival of the Third World nations depends on their allegiance to one of these powers. Of course, such a position is contrary to the Islamic belief that Allāh is the Almighty and Omnipotent.”

In 1964 when Khomeini was in exile Sharīatī kept moving the revolutionary movement. As Khomeini has supplied the strategic and political leadership, Sharīatī has supplied the intellectual content for their commitment to the revolutionary movement. He did carry on his work in a substantial way. In the words of a foreign observer: “Sharīatī paved the way for Khomeini in the minds of many secular and intellectual Iranians”.

### Conclusion

He never ceases to be a revolutionist in his perception of dealing with the world. His works reflect the deep, thought-provoking and challenging ideologies. He clings to his desires and commitment to the cause of societal righteousness, but according to his own definitions. He always asks for “What ought to be” instead to be complacent on “what really is”.

He inclines to sacrifice according to the philosophy of Martyrdom originally adapted from the martyrdom of Hazrat Hussain (R.A). His is aggressive,

stimulating and revolutionary approach which originated from that strong religious and cultural background he came from. Some of his works give the impression that he was only concerned into the efficacy of Shi'a Islam for revolution and that his faith from his realization that it put forth the desired goals maximizing societal change and shape the society into his mold. The absolute paragon for him appears to be the Equal Society based on Marxist paradigm but the religion must be dominated to the realization of this goal.

Sharīatī deprecates imperialism and class inequalities as society's main long-term enemies, but he focused many of his polemics against "vulgar Marxism," that had been readily accepted by Iranian intellectuals and against conservative Islam, particularly the clerical assortment that had been promulgated by the ruling class for over twelve centuries in order to stupefy the exploited masses. Sharīatī affected a considerable number of revolutionaries through his political ideologies. It was result of his political ideologies that the youth at that time conceived an alluring image of Islam. In fact this phenomenon resulted in Khomeini's elevation from a religious leader to a revolutionary leader and spiritual head. Those who joined Khomeini to set up the Islamic ideology and Islamic state were affected by Sharīatī's innovative theories and thus Sharīatī can be regarded as the forerunner of Islamic revolution.

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