

Political Islam's Relation to Capital and Class

Ardeshir Mehrdad and Yassamine Mather

The last three decades have witnessed a relentless growth of political Islam to the extent that it is an undeniable reality on the contemporary world stage. From the Middle East to North Africa and South Asia, the proponents of political Islam profess themselves 'seekers of justice' and aim their propaganda at the poorest and most deprived sections of society, rivalling traditional socialism. The formulation by the left of a strategy to respond to this challenge requires an understanding of these developments; outlined here are some preliminary theses, based on a necessarily limited consideration of the characteristics and peculiarities of Islamic movements.

From the 1970s onwards, as Islamic societies of the periphery were incorporated ever deeper into the world market, the centre-periphery crisis in these societies entered a new and qualitatively different phase. The fluctuating—but overall downward—trend in the price of raw materials (including, for most of the period, oil) on which these societies depend, speeded up the widening of inequality in social, economic and cultural development, the accumulation of foreign debt and the increasing inability of such states to control and restrain the spiralling crises they have to confront. The Iranian revolution of 1979—which saw the coming to power of the first Islamic government to place pan-Islamism at the centre of its political and ideological agenda—was crucial to the spread of 'political Islam.' From the beginning the Iranian government did whatever it could to directly influence the Islamist movement and take over leadership. Where necessary, the Iranian regime called on radical factions within Islamic organisations, it involved itself in an extensive network of terrorist and jihad-like cells, and embarked on a concerted drive to shape an Islamic international. Finally, it pursued an eight-year war with Iraq which was, above all, concerned with the export of the revolution by military means. The Islamic Republic of Iran is not alone today in exporting the pan-Islamist movement. Other states, such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, are also making active bids to take over the leadership of the Islamist movement, to influence its policies and to spread religious illusions and superstitions.

Throughout the Cold War, one of the major weapons of imperialist powers against liberation movements in Islamic countries was religion. In using religion to stupefy the masses and to denounce the opposition, imperialism was both resourceful and relentless; it used the religious weapon to provoke splits in the working class movement, to sabotage progressive and nationalist movements, and even to destabilise anti-imperialist governments or those allied with the Soviet Union.¹ In considering the effect of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the coming of George Bush Sr's 'New World Order,' with the outright colonialist policies of the USA and its allies, legitimacy for pan-Islamist movements is found in the provision of identity, prestige and pride.

Amid the ravages of war in Afghanistan and Iraq, then, political Islam is on the rise, with its supporters portraying it as the ideology of the poor and the dispossessed. They promise a better life for the disenfranchised, less inequality, and the



end of corruption through the rule of 'sharia'a' (the religious state). Yet, in Iran, almost twenty-six years after coming to power with similar promises, Islamic government has become synonymous with greed and corruption; super-rich clerics and their immediate families have replaced the corrupt Royal court and its entourage. What, then, is the basis of the political economy of Islamic fundamentalism? What is the relation between the promises of equality in the rule of sharia'a and the real politics of Islamic governance within the world capitalist order?

In its rebellion against the hopelessness capitalism has engendered, the pan-Islamist movement splits civil society at every level while leaving state structures intact. In the first instance every type of class-based organization is divided along religious lines. Islamic labour and peasant unions and guilds stand opposed to their non-Islamic equivalents. Fissured into Islamic and non-Islamic categories, the sub-groups glare at each other across an ideological divide that causes major transformation in the social class line-up. New, fundamentally non-class, blocs are formed; labour-power aligns itself with either 'Islamic' or 'secular' capital and the potential for progressive class action is systematically eroded. By denying class difference, or at least marginalising it and removing it from the immediate agenda, such a non-class-based social bloc, based on religious cultural unity, has no other way of surmounting the class antagonisms within it; sharia'a remains firmly on the side of unity and those who rupture it are considered worse than unbelievers.

The leadership of these movements feeds on mass activity; their power becomes more concentrated and unassailable in direct relation to their ability to bring the masses on to the political scene. The appearance of the masses in these circumstances signals not the

exercise of their collective will but rather their political disrobement, where the masses are reduced to the umma (family of believers) of the imam. Pan-Islamism in power politicises the whole of society and maintains it in a state of constant mobilisation. Paradoxically, however, this permanent politicisation tends to create its own opposite—through exhaustion comes depoliticisation. Once depoliticisation spreads to both camps in a society, with an atomised class formation and political base, the longer term potential for change and progress towards democracy is seriously weakened. The future for these societies is truly dark.

The working class is powerless not only because of its relative youth and political immaturity but also because it lacks an effective ideological base. The kind of Marxism-Leninism packaged in the 'Academies of Science' of the socialist bloc, in conjunction with various theories of the 'non-capitalist road to socialism', in no way served to unite the working class. In some countries, such as Egypt, the communist and workers' parties went as far as liquidating themselves and joining with the ruling party. In others, there was an inexorable process aimed at distancing the mass of workers from worker-based political organisations and systematic police repression. At a time when conditions for opposing the bourgeoisie were at their best, the working class remained weaker and more helpless than ever. This catastrophic balance between the two main class poles in society promoted not so much political paralysis as a vacuum—both of political representation and of legitimacy. In such situations, the voice from the minarets gains an ear.

The 'revolutionary Islamic movement' is a contemporary phenomenon, attached by an umbilical cord to the form of world capitalism that has developed in the last three decades. The social roots of the 'political Islamic movements' are, essentially, the uprooted—those who, for a variety of reasons, have been waylaid on the path of socio-economic development; and, to whom the new structures have brought nothing but bankruptcies and ruin. At every level the new 'Islamic movement' is the rising of those who not only see themselves as alienated within their own national boundaries, but also of those who think they have discovered the source of their destitution and bankruptcy outside these boundaries. 'Political Islam', accordingly, cannot confine itself to national boundaries; to aspire to set up anything less than a world Islamic power would be to acknowledge ultimate defeat. This is the logic behind the rejection of the legitimacy of all the civil and secular systems that sustain nation states, and of all international treaties and agreements between nation states. The Islamic movement may occasionally support tendencies aiming at independence and even isolationism yet it is emphatic in its rejection of nationalisms that counterpose the nation against the Islamic community.

The growing crisis and steady weakening of governments increased the intervention of global capital in the internal affairs of Islamic countries. This process reached a point at which the economic ministries of many Islamic countries turned into impotent operatives for the decision-

making centres of global capital, bowing to major and crisis-provoking restructuring of the socio-political life of their countries and presiding over policies that caused massive unemployment and attendant despair; chronic inflation ravaged meagre savings, acute housing shortages led to running battles between the guardians of cities and never-ending waves of migrants, and non-existent healthcare facilities effectively transformed hospitals into morgues. The savage demands of the International Monetary Fund and the credit limitations imposed by the World Bank forced peripheral governments to turn on their own people. What little remained of state largesse dried up; millions were made destitute, unprotected against misery, famine and disease. These were the people who carried Egyptian, Tunisian, Moroccan and Algerian pan-Islamism on their shoulders.

Perhaps more than in any other field, the rise to power of the pan-Islamist movement brings the societies it governs into conflict with their own material infrastructure. If the declared role of the state in all societies, including Islamic peripheral countries, is to ‘recreate the external conditions for production’, the pan-Islamist state tends towards multi-dimensional and permanent economic crisis. In particular, the ideological Islamic state cannot fully utilise the various levers with which most states regulate the economy - the law, money and force. Ideology limits and obstructs the workings of the laws of capitalism, including its fundamental law of value. Ownership is valid so long as religious tax is paid and it has been obtained by ‘legitimate’ means. An ideological element thus enters both into ownership and into the exchange of property. A property used for un-Islamic purposes (e.g. brewing) or for which religious tax has not been paid is illegitimate and cannot be exchanged. Commerce is also affected by ideology (some commodities, such as alcohol, ‘immoral’ literature or films, videos and many articles of clothing cannot be bought or sold).

On the question of money, this vital lever of state intervention in the economy faces a similar fate. Money essentially loses its function to fulfil the needs of production and circulation. Instead, the religious-ideological state uses money to answer its political and ideological needs. The volume of money in circulation is allowed to expand at an uncontrolled rate—dictated by political considerations. Consequently the money supply is no longer a stabilising but an anarchic element in the economy. This process allows huge quantities of money to accumulate in a few private hands, creating equity that then confronts the state, vitiating its control, and even determining its actions. Money is used to offset the contradictions between the ideological state and its material-economic base and, in the process, comes to function as its own antithesis—destabilising rather than stabilising the economy.

The use of force as a purely repressive tool in a Radical Islamic government is even more obvious in the economic sphere than in others. Force is not deployed as it is in a ‘normal’ capitalist state, to suppress the conflicts and contradictions between the various sectors of the economy and to paper over cracks so that conditions for the reproduction of capital are optimised. Instead, it is used to suppress the conflicts and contradictions between the economy as a whole and the ruling political power. The result is the creation of a complex web of non-economic structures, entwined with a parasitic and unaccountable structure of capital. A powerful defensive perimeter is built around this alliance, protecting it against both the ideological-material coercion of the state and against blind economic forces. This huge, mafia-like structure has, at one extreme, bazaars and mosques, and, at



the other, armed forces and religious courts.

In these societies, both internal and external capital fight shy of investment in long-term projects; domestic investment is discouraged by the fall in the rate of capital accumulation. A huge burden is placed on the gross domestic product and value-adding activities, which hinders the possibilities of capital accumulation in line with developmental needs. The impact on the state sector is decisive and disastrous. The effect on the private sector is less, but considerable; prompted both by the most efficient pursuit of profit and by non-economic considerations, the private sector tends to eschew productive investment in favour of playing the stock market, hoarding, speculating, buying and selling, real estate and land transactions. Such societies have sunk into a lumpen, get-rich-at-all-costs mentality, glorifying both money and violence, aggressive towards the weak yet simultaneously characterised by sycophancy and opportunism. Foreign sources of investment are even less likely to be found. The deliberate use of the economic weapon, including official sanctions, by core capitalist countries to control crisis-provoking Islamic governments acts as a barrier to the entry of international finance into these countries. Where investment does take place, it is highly calculated and of a politico-economic nature. Thus, Japan and Italy have tried to ensure their future supplies of oil in Iran by investing in petrochemicals or other strategic goods. But, even here, where they are securing their supplies against present and future rivals, advance payment has been extracted in the form of oil sales, itself fulfilling the need to secure oil



stockpiles.

Human resources, this most vital of all factors in economic development, are also exhausted under Radical Islamic governments. The productivity of manpower under capitalism is intricately linked with skill levels, education and research. A secular, scientific and experimental environment encourages development which, in turn, serves to refresh that environment. But the Islamic government crushes this through pressure on secular life (including schools, universities, scientific and research centres). Its ceaseless interference in secular life even forces many of those who already have skills to flee the country or to abandon productive economic activity. The Islamic state thus not only fails to recreate a qualitatively advanced workforce, but deskills the existing labour force, hampering the ability of the economy to expand.

In short, Pan-Islamism in power is ruinous for the economy. Though retaining capitalism as the dominant mode of production, capitalist development is slowed down in certain fields without being able to resurrect some pre-capitalist forms of production. Thus, the inherited economy is faced with both paralysing contradictions and internal anarchy and with the existent unequal development of international capitalism, now accentuated to breaking point. The sad reality is that even when the religious-Islamist governments are overthrown, the future looks bleak. What progressive and stable socio-political system can take root in a society mired in uneven development, polarized and depoliticised, where public discourse is populist or demagogic? How can a society which has fallen victim to pan-Islamism throw off this massive dead weight of cultural psychological trauma? What is to be done? Our purpose here is to issue an invitation—for a dialogue over one of the most vexed questions of our time. What are we to do about a blind and reactionary revolt of the downtrodden?

A child of our time and a product of the ruinous effects of advanced capitalism in Islamic societies of the periphery, Radical Islam confronts the left with its most difficult challenge: how to respond to a reactionary, grass-roots movement, arising out of desperation—a movement which destroys class, cultural and even psycho-social potential, leaving society disarmed and ill-equipped to meaningfully confront its own ruinous state. The actual response of the left has not so far been edifying; both in the region and at a global level, it is paralysed by a phenomenon that presents a contradictory challenge to its instincts.

There have been two basic reactions to Radical Islam—the first a policy of political alliance, the second of confrontation—with the aim of bringing about its ultimate destruction. With the end of the Cold War, the first response has faded. But, at its height, both left and right followed the hallowed doctrine of ‘uniting against the common enemy.’ Radical Islam was both anti-capitalist and anti-communist, so at no stage was it short of potential allies. On the left, there were different attitudes to the potential alliance. Believers in the ‘non-capitalist road to socialism’, for example, saw it as strategic and unconditional; for others, it was tactical, dependent in the longer term on the attainment of proletarian hegemony within the revolution. But, there were also perceived advantages in an alliance for capitalism, which was itself instrumental (directly and through client states) in bringing anti-communist Islam into being and encouraging its growth as part of its policy to contain the working-class movement.

In general terms, two main trends can be discerned in the way the surviving (capitalist) bloc and its allies faced Radical Islam. The first was to liquidate it ideologically; the second to combine



pressure and threats with appeasement and aid to force it on to a path of ‘reform.’ Both strategies had been practiced by the builders of the modern state in Islamic countries earlier in the century—by Atatürk in Turkey, by Reza Shah in Iran, by Bourghiba in Tunisia, in post-war Syria, and even in Pakistan (ostensibly an ‘Islamic state’). What is new is the vigour and scale on which these policies are being pursued today.

According to sections of the Iranian left, faithful to a highly formalistic, deeply rooted economism and a crude statism, any government that increased state ownership at home, and sided with the so-called ‘socialist bloc’ abroad, was a natural ally of the world proletariat, regardless of the degree of participatory democracy it permitted or the relations of production it established. State ownership was even identified as the criterion for ‘socialist’ transformation.

An alternative view, more recently in vogue, rightly rejects such statist economism, but only to replace it with another one-sided view, this time immersed in a cultural interpretation. Culture and ideology are considered the essential elements of Radical Islam, and also the route to its negation. One such interpretation combs the past in search of anti-orthodox-religious elements in national culture. One favoured source is Islamic mysticism, but there are also pre-Islamic movements, such as Manichaeism and Mazdakism. Egalitarian and humanistic elements in mysticism are brought in to confront official organised religion, and to create an alternative to it. In contrast, there are those who declare that there is nothing in national culture on which to build. This argument, made by many prominent thinkers of the ‘new left’, claims that democracy will never take root in Iran and similar societies unless cultural backwardness can be confronted. Total secularism and modernism is their solution for a free and democratic society and economic growth. These are both intellectual movements seeing culture as central and defining the task as the creation of a new one. The latter group claims to follow Heidegger but they are not particularly faithful to him, since they propose to build a new culture from scratch, rejecting all existing culture. The effect of such a strategy is to separate the intellectual from society and, despite their claim to articulate a radical left solution, they echo the liberal cry that it is not possible to have democracy, or take steps towards socialism, in societies on the periphery of world capitalism, especially in countries where a tradition based on religion exists.

Our argument is that Radical Islam is a reaction to the effects of particular forms of modernisation, not to modernisation per se.

This is not a trivial difference. For one thing, understanding it profoundly affects the strategies needed to overcome political Islam. Radical Islam is not a response to the modern state, modern culture or the separation of the religion and state, but rather to mass unemployment, destitution and hopelessness brought about by the modern state. It is not so much a reaction to the essence of modernism but to the ravages of advanced capitalism in a part of its periphery. Those thrown on to the rubbish heap of history claw at the nearest available ideology at a time when liberalism, nationalism and known forms of socialism are all sinking in a quagmire.

It is, therefore, imperative to imagine that any project must offer a fundamental solution to the political and economic crisis that can forestall the genesis and growth of such blind and ultimately destructive movements. It is also clear that any political solution must be accompanied by a cultural renaissance congenial to human feeling, intellect and thought. This requires nothing less than a full-scale ideological spring-clean for the left. The three major planks on which the pan-Islamist movement must be confronted are: the formulation of an independent and radical economic programme, the development of a coherent political platform and a thorough overhaul of its own system of beliefs and ideas about organisation.

While advanced capitalism is polarising the world into extremes of affluence and poverty that now transcend geographical boundaries, one can only talk of an independent economic programme that challenges neo-liberalism at every level. This means confronting the so-called structural adjustment policies of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, which are bringing about the destitution of millions. It is on this ground that the left must distinguish itself from the liberals who also seek to woo the masses breaking away from Radical Islam. Key sections of the economy need to be in public control (which is not necessarily the same as state control), the most suitable form within which the labour force can be directly involved in production, with a major input into meaningful decision-making. The producers must control the means of production not just in legal but in real political and practical terms. A balance must be created between central planning and decentralised workers’ control, and a system of social security must improve quality of life. These and other economic policies are crucial if the left



is to unite with, and mobilise its main social base, the downtrodden. Only with a radical programme addressing the root cause of mass destitution can the left attract its natural class allies away from the clutches of Islamic obscurantism.

The Islamic movement filled a vacuum created by the ideological feebleness of the two main social classes—the native bourgeoisie and the young working class—and we must confront the fact that the left, as it exists in these countries today, is singularly ill equipped to lead the implementation of the programme outlined above. A major rethink is necessary if the left is to fill this ideological vacuum before those who would promote bourgeois alternatives have produced new prescriptions with their already sharpened pens. Without such a rethink, the left can entertain no hope of truly representing the interests of workers, organising working-class struggles, and becoming integral to a genuinely mass force in those societies.

Notes

- 1 An incomplete list might include the following. First, the assistance given to the rise of Ekhvane Muslemein (Muslim Brotherhood) against Nasser’s regime in Egypt and the Ba’ath Party in Syria. Second, support for the Islamic Amal in Lebanon as a counterweight to the Palestine Liberation Organisation and progressive Lebanese leaders and parties. Third, the strengthening of the Fadaiyan-e Islam, and mullahs such as Ayatollah Khashani, in opposition to Dr Mossadegh’s government and the Tudeh (Communist) Party in Iran. Fourth, the massacre of half a million communists in Indonesia. Fifth, the mobilisation of semi-military parties and organisations in Afghanistan and the provision of unlimited support to their efforts to overthrow the Marxist government. In so using religion, the imperialist intelligence networks may rely on facilities provided by countries such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, or on their own agents sent directly, to create or to infiltrate religious groupings or parties. Their support can take different forms, but the important point is that they played a central Cold War role in increasing Islamic religious influence in Islamic societies. We see the grave consequences today.

An unedited version of this article can be found at *CRITIQUE: Journal of Socialist Theory*
www.critiquejournal.net/islam.html

