

Iranian Leftist Intellectualism and the Issue of Democracy

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Main Abstract of the Article

"From the emergence of Iranian leftist intellectualism in the 19th century to the present day, those who define themselves in one way or another as part of this family have also been active agents in the social and political life of our society. Returning to the Sartrean definition of the "committed intellectual," this group is a social exemplification. This pattern of intellectualism, which is also seen in the views of Émile Zola or Heinrich Böll, does not submit to the status quo and seeks to change it. The conventional leftist understanding of the intellectual is class-based, because in many cases, by distancing themselves from their own social class and in order to realize the interests of workers and other toilers, they enter into social action. In the leftist intellectual tradition, Marx's statement in the Theses on Feuerbach that "Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it," also means a call to action. A power-oriented perspective constitutes one of the characteristics of 20th-century radical leftist intellectualism, because changing the world in the mindset of these intellectuals is part of their *raison d'être* and identity."

Summary

The article "Iranian Leftist Intellectualism and the Issue of Democracy" by Saeed Peyvandi, with an analytical and historical approach, examines the relationship between Iranian leftist discourses and the concept of democracy from the Constitutional Revolution to after the 1979 Revolution. Defining a minimal threshold for the "leftist intellectual" as someone who ascribes to this identity, the author shows how in the Iranian leftist tradition, democracy has often been defined in connection with social justice, anti-imperialist struggle, and the primacy of the collective over the individual, and has rarely been understood as a universal principle of citizenship rights and an institutionalized mechanism of political power.

Reviewing various periods—from constitutionalist social democracy to the Tudeh Party, the radical left of the 1960s and 1970s, and revolutionary organizations—Peyvandi shows that a class-based reading of democracy—as an instrument serving a class or "the people"—has led to the formation

of a distinction between “formal liberal democracy” and “popular democracy.” In this framework, political freedoms and human rights were often reduced to a bourgeois category, with priority given to seizing power and achieving social justice.

Analyzing the performance of the left during and after the 1979 Revolution, the author argues that a significant portion of radical leftist intellectualism failed the test of democracy; because in the face of the restriction of freedoms and the establishment of a new authoritarian order, prioritizing anti-imperialist and justice-seeking discourses, it failed to take a decisive stance in defense of liberal democracy. Overall, the article is an effort to understand this theoretical and historical knot in the relationship between the Iranian left and democracy.

The full version of the article is available in PDF format:

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