

The Last Great Revolution: Turmoil and Transformation in Iran

Robin B. Wright. New York and Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000. 335 pages.

Robin Wright's *The Last Great Revolution* reflects her 27 years of study and observations of Iran's cultural and political transformations. She interviews thinkers, parliamentarians, administrators, and average people on the streets as she portrays the radical shift in Iran since the 1979 Islamic revolution.

Wright starts with her "Personal Odyssey" as an introduction. She describes her first encounter with Iran after the revolution at the airplane in a detailed way. Indeed, she wants her book to "help outsiders to see what is there not just what [they] want to see." She distinguishes this book from her previous ones, because this time, instead of giving only her own impressions, she lets Iranians "speak for themselves about their ideas, experiences, dreams, and frustrations." After the introduction, she provides brief information about the geography, religion, and population of Iran.

The first chapter analyzes the revolution as the Last Great Revolution of the modern era, that will stand along with the French and Russian revolutions. Wright explains the reasons which made the Iranian revolution suitable and unique. First, the *Shi'ite* character of Islam demands a faithful fight against injustice and tyranny. Secondly, Iran has a long political experience that has not come under any colonial power. Thirdly, Iran is heir to a great civilization that had a role in shaping the world. Finally, it is between the West and the East as a meeting point of cultures, which gives the opportunity for revolutionary ideas to reach the people from both directions. To sum up, Wright makes it clear that quest for empowerment in Iran did not ascend from heaven unpredictably in 1979. She notes that everything was already set for an upheaval.

Wright's important analysis in this chapter is inspired by Brinton's classic work, *The Anatomy of Revolution*. Brinton argues that "Revolutions are like fevers". Wright examines the Iranian revolution in three phases.

The initial phase, "raging of temperature and other extreme conditions, including delirium" symbolizes the time of Ayatollah Khomeini between 1979-1989, which includes the formation and domination of the "Government of God", the war against Iraq, the conflict with the U.S., the hostage crisis, and the support for Hizbollah in Lebanon. The second phase, "the breaking of temperature, long and fitful convalescence, often marked by a relapse or two", starts with the presidency of Rafsanjani, which took place from 1989 to 1997, when efficiency became a more important qualification than piety. Throughout this period, conservatives became dominant in parliament, though Iran made the first attempts to take a role in the New World Order. Third phase, "recovery and restoration to normal health", begins with the victory of Khatemi for the presidency in 1997. At this phase, strong demands for reformation in law, civil rights, and local elections started to be voiced in the political realm.

The second chapter, "*Islamic Reformation*", is basically built on the interviews with Abdul-Karim Soroush, a well-known Iranian thinker. In this chapter, Wright analyzes the intellectual basis of the reformation taking place recently. Soroush is a good choice for understanding the current socio-political transformations, since he is a key intellectual who symbolizes the reform and change in today's Iran. Wright introduces him as a thinker who started to challenge the untouchable core of ideas at the heart of the revolution. For Wright, Soroush (Martin Luther of Iran for some and also for Wright) is boldly reconciling Islam and modernity. Wright sees the Muslim world as "a last bloc hold-out against the democratic reforms that have swept the rest of the world." She is very enthusiastic to see Iran as a good exception but she does not go into detail exactly about what makes the Muslim bloc a "hold out" against democracy. Is it because "the Muslim bloc" finds both tyranny and Islam compatible or is it because the western powers keep interfering with the Muslim countries?

Soroush argues that besides Islam, the real objective of the revolution has been modernization and empowerment of the masses. According to Soroush, 1990 marks the real beginning of revolution since it is the time when intellectual changes began to affect political changes. He sees the election of Khatami, the reformist president, as a fruit of the reform movements.

The third chapter, "*Voices From Cultural Revolution*", starts with a quote from Khomeini: "There is no fun in Islam." This ironically suites the chapter where we observe great eagerness on the part of the Iranian

Muslims to have fun "Islamically". The chapter explores a wide spectrum of cultural life in Iran. Wright talks about culture from the media to the movie sector, from cultural centers to art museums. She interviews a number of people who shape the cultural life of Iran. The isolation of Iran from the West was one of the main goals of the revolution, as Wright notes, but, even a glance into the lives of Iranians is sufficient to prove how the revolution failed to reach this aim. Seeing the popularity of American products and art works in the cultural life of Iranians, now, one cannot help thinking that the "Great Satan" became a beloved, funny guy for Iranians.

Wright talks about intellectual life in Iran in the sense of freedom and censor. Censor is not new for Iranians. During the Shah's time it was also a part of public life. Wright points out the challenge of the intelligentsia to the government with an open letter, namely "We are Writers", which was signed by 134 writers against censorship.

The fourth chapter, "*Men are from Tahrán Women are from Isfahan*", takes its title from a parody, *Men are from Mars Women are from Venus*, which is one of the best selling books in Iran. The chapter is mainly about gender relations and the role of women in Iran. Wright seems impressed with the growing number of women in government, politics, and education after the revolution. Currently, over 40% of university students and two third of government workers are women. Compared with the Shah's time this is a great improvement in the status of women. Wright also seems affected by feminist movements and the growing demand for modernization and democracy. She makes an effort to draw a balanced and fair picture as she can. However, in some parts of the book, she could not maintain objectivity. For instance, as a Westerner, she finds a lot of things unusual, unimportant, even ridiculous.

The fifth chapter is entitled as "*Love, Marriage and Sex in the Islamic Republic*". As a reporter, Wright succeeds in attracting her reader to the subject of Iran. In this chapter, the author deals with the growing population and the Iranian success at family planning. For example, between 1993-1998, 280,000 vasectomies were performed in clinics in Iran and the nationwide number of children born to the average woman had dropped from 6 in 1986 to 2.7 children in 1998. In 1999, the U.N. gave its highest population award to the health minister of Iran who has been the architect of Iran's innovative program in family planning.

"*Islamic Landscape*", the sixth chapter is more like a tourist guide of Iran. Wright talks about Tehran, Qom, Shiraz, and the Caspian. The most interesting part of the chapter is how the Iranian government treats

Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians. Christians and Jews seem happy with the religious freedom that revolution gives them. Furthermore, they even describe themselves as more religious than before.

In the last chapter, "*Whither the Revolution?*", Wright considers revolution as a continual process. By portraying two rival demonstrations that took place in 1998, she tries to show the current situation of the revolution. The first one was on November 2, two days before the anniversary of the revolution. This demonstration was organized by the Office to Foster Islamic Unity – a coalition of student groups from fifty campuses all over Iran. The students were demonstrating more freedom and justice. They did not see America as a "Great Satan" and they carried Khatami's words that ask for cultural exchange and dialogue. The second demonstration was organized on November 4 as the annual and real anniversary of the revolution. However, it did not seem as natural and spontaneous as the first one. This time the speaker talked about America as a national enemy and a danger for the regime. Wright diagnoses these two rallies as the "microcosm of Iran at the crossroads". She adds, "two decades after the revolution, Iran's youth and their demonstration had become a defining force in the country's political climate."

Wright ends the book with an overall final assessment by comparing the goals of the revolution and its achievements. She thinks that Iran got mixed marks and failed to reach some of its goals within this period of 20 years. Yet overall she thinks that the revolution deserves credit because it brings the opportunity to change: "[the] revolution is not likely to survive in its current form." She also stresses that Iranians took bigger steps in defining a modern Islamic democracy and contemporary theocracy than any other Muslim country.

Wright's vast knowledge and deep observations about Iran are really impressive. She begins with giving the whole picture of revolution and gets specialized through the chapters and ends with analyzing the present situation. Wright finds change unavoidable for the Islamic Republic because it could not stay firmly against the winds that blow from the modern world, but she also says that the theocracy is still strong, and she hopefully predicts that the Islamic Republic will meet at a point with the modern world and democracy.

Yes, the winds are strong as Wright says, but the Islamic Republic is not as strong as she thinks. Firstly, I would like to raise some questions about the Islamic character of Iran. The Revolution in Iran was made by a

heterogeneous group of movements, united on toppling the Shah. It is not clear as to what sort of system was intended by the majority of the people supporting Khomeini. Also the approval of the constitution did not reflect the real and objective decision of Iranians. They wanted to get rid of the Shah and the old system of tyranny that was not answering their needs. They were demanding more freedom to practice their religion, freedom of speech, and a better standard of living, but were they all enthusiastic for an Islamic Republic?

Secondly, one can argue that the Republic is not truly rooted in Islamic values. For example, the oppressive character of the Republic is at odds with Islamic values. The censors, bans, and a bunch of restrictive rules are the products of the new Republic that tries to impose an Islamic life on the community who was not sure about this new lifestyle. You couldn't, for instance, make art Islamic by covering the legs and head of a bronze statue in the Modern Art Museum. This forcing is contrary to the spirit of Islam. Islam attaches importance first to the faith and individual rights. Islam disciplines the individual's life before establishing a state. An Islamic society may be formed in a natural way through this process by the increase of Islamic consciousness in the community. This consciousness is a prerequisite for an Islamic state. The absence of this natural process, consensus, and Islamic consciousness are reasons why Iran needs to be changed in a fundamental way.

Wright is right to see Iran at a crossroads. One of the roads in front of Iran is more isolation from the modern world by oppression of reform movements with the power of the clergy. That does not seem to be possible since a country cannot go too far by suppressing its own people. The second road, socio-political transformation and meeting of theocracy and modernity in a common point, therefore, seems to be the most possible alternative for the future of Iran.

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