

‘Shia Democracy’: Myth or Reality?

By Sreeram Chaulia

The Other Islam

Discussions about the democracy-deficit in the Muslim world tend to conflate Sunnis and Shias as culturally homogeneous groups. Nuances about diversity within Islam only come up related to the regional variation in practices and political institutions (e.g. Middle Eastern Islam, North African Islam, South Asian Islam, Central Asian Islam and Southeast Asian Islam).¹ Some scholars make the distinction between Arab and non-Arab countries with regard to their political culture and regime type.² The unspoken assumption in studies proving the proclivity of Muslim countries toward authoritarianism is that sectarian schisms within Islam do not matter much when it comes to attitude and receptivity to democracy. Whether there are well-delineated differences between Shias and Sunnis in the way they conceive of – and construct – political authority has not been given much serious research. This is a surprising omission in contrast to the extent to which political scientists have debated the impact of the Catholic-Protestant schism

¹ The classic exposition of cross-national differences in Islam and its impact on society and politics is V.S.Naipaul’s book comparing Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan and Malaysia. Cf. 1999. *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions Among the Converted Peoples*, New York: Random House.

² Alfred Stepan and Graeme Robertson argue that the 31 Muslim majority but non-Arab countries are over-achievers for GDP per capita levels in terms of holding competitive elections, while the 16 Arab countries are under-achievers. Cf. 2003. ‘An “Arab” More Than “Muslim” Electoral Gap’, *Journal of Democracy*, Volume 14, Number 3.

on the evolution of capitalism and democracy in the Western hemisphere.³

Blindness to the Shia-Sunni divide in the literature on democratisation is likely to be the result of glossing over the smaller sect of Islam, Shiism, which claims no more than 15 percent of the world's Muslims. Most Western depictions of what is termed 'Islam' focus implicitly on Sunnism and Sunni political culture, except when the case studies of interest are Shia-majority countries (Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain and Azerbaijan). That there exists another Islam, Shiism, with its own identity and at least 200 million worldwide adherents, is largely bypassed. Perhaps there is something to 'Shia democracy' as a concept which might hold a ray of hope for furthering democracy in the Muslim world. If deep-set Shia-Sunni differences are theological, social and economic in nature, then one should expect non-random differences in their political culture and preferences too, which in turn might translate into differing orientation to regime types. The general framework of this essay is provided by Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel's theory that causation runs from values (culture) to institutions (democracy or authoritarianism) and that values differ systematically from culture to culture.⁴ If Shia and Sunni communities have systematically different cultures, they should *a posteriori* be different in their political infrastructures.

I

³ Seymour Martin Lipset hypothesised that until the advent of liberation theology in the 1960s and 1970s, there was a negative relationship between democracy and Catholicism. Cf. 1994. 'The Social Requisites of Democracy Revisited', *American Sociological Review*, Volume 59, p.5

⁴ 2005. *Modernisation, Cultural Change and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Shia Communities as Democratisers

Masoumeh Ebtekar, the first female Vice President of Iran under the reformist former President Muhammad Khatami, recently remarked that Shia gains through electoral means in Iraq will “encourage us (Iran) to open up, since we see a different example of governance but with similar mentality that is also Shiite.”⁵ This sentiment is echoed by the prominent Iranian dissident intellectual Abdol Karim Soroush’s thinking that as the Shia majority in post-Saddam Hussein Iraq comes to power, there will be a shift in “the overall balance among Shiites toward democratic legitimacy and away from the idea of clerical rule we see in Iran.”⁶ Historian Juan Cole buttresses this school of thought by noting that between April 2003 and January 2005, Shias underwent a remarkable development in legal thinking about democracy that is not new and that will outlive the contingencies in Iraq:

The ideals of elections, representation of the people, expression of the national will and a rule of law are invoked over and over again by the most prominent Shiite religious leaders. Unlike Khomeini in 1979, they are completely unafraid of the term ‘democracy’ and generally see no contradiction between it and Islam.⁷

The first full length treatment of the subject of Shias as democratisers has been given by Vali Nasr, another Iranian thinker, who extends the range of the projected democratic tide beyond Iran to Shia-populated parts of the Middle East and South Asia. The gist of his argument is as follows:

⁵ 2005. ‘Shiite Rule in Iraq Could Encourage More Democracy in Iran’, *New Perspectives Quarterly*, Volume 22, Issue 2, p.58

⁶ 2004. ‘If Shiite Majority Comes to Power in Iraq, it Will Enhance Democracy in Iran’, *New Perspectives Quarterly*, Nobel Laureates Plus, February 20th.

⁷ 2006. ‘The Ayatollahs and Democracy in Iran’, *ISIM Review*, Number 17, Spring Issue, p.34.

Shias are both an objective and a subjective democratic force. Their rise in relative power is injecting a robust element of real pluralism into the too-often Sunni-dominated political life of the Muslim world. Many Shias are also finding democracy appealing as an idea in itself, not merely as an episodically useful vehicle for their power and ambitions.⁸

Shias, unlike Sunnis, are supposed to be rebellious by nature and opposed to dutifully obeying authority that lacks legitimacy. Historically repressed and discriminated, Shiism's ideal was always to fight against Sunni injustices and tyrannical rulers. Since the origin of the Shia-Sunni split in medieval times, Shia *imams* (spiritual leaders descended from the Prophet Muhammad) invoked a fear of revolt among Sunni Caliphs and were countered with persecution, imprisonment and killing. To survive persecution in the Sunni-dominated Caliphates and Ottoman Empire, ordinary Shias had to hide their sectarian affiliations (*taqqiya*) and their *imams* escaped to Iran and India to seek refuge. The germs of anti-authoritarianism and protection of minority rights were thus, according to Nasr, inherent in Shiism from the very beginning (c. A.D 8th century).

The break Shias initiated from Sunnism centred on what they considered to be the morally just kind of political authority. In contrast, the Sunni understanding of worldly power concentrated on a preoccupation with order, not the quality of rulership. The theory of government developed by medieval Sunni jurists was to uphold any government as long as it maintained stability and order and protected the Muslim (Sunni) community. Shiism emphasised the substance

⁸ 2006. *The Shia Revival. How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future*, New York: W.W.Norton, p.180

and *quality* of a regime much more than its *form*, an important congenital characteristic that would resonate with the evolution of democracy in modern times. Imam Ali's political testament (*ahd*) and Imam al-Sadiq's instructions to the Shia Governor of Ahvaz, both of which entered Shia political culture by the 11th century, contain the patrimonial theory of just rule and fair treatment of subjects by kings. Respected *ulama* of the Safavid period (17th century) reiterated these themes with special emphasis on the rights (*haqq*) that subjects have against rulers. They stressed avoidance of tyranny, accountability and access of holders of temporal authority to subjects. To Mulla Baqir Majlisi,

if kings show gratitude for their power and domination and if they observe the rights of the subjects, their kingdoms will last. Otherwise, they will soon disappear. A king will remain while he is an unbeliever, but not while he is a wrongdoer. If a possessor of knowledge should act badly with his flock, his knowledge will soon be taken away; otherwise, it will be increased.⁹

The idealistic expectation of accountable and fair rulers in historical Shiism was revived by Ayatollah Na'ini of Najaf during the time of the Iranian constitutional revolution of 1906. He persuaded the Shia *ulama* of the time that while the world awaited the return of the twelfth *imam* (hidden from human perception), "the form of governance most compatible with Shi'ism is democracy-shaped and defined by a popularly ratified constitution."¹⁰ His contemporary and fellow constitutionalist, Sayyid Imad Khalkhali, wrote that "in our time, sovereignty is founded on justice, fairness, and the principle of

⁹ Chittick, W. 1988. 'Two Seventeenth Century Persian Tracts on Kingship and Rulers', in Arjomand, S.A. (ed.) *Authority and Political Culture in Shi'ism*, Albany: State University of New York Press, p.291

¹⁰ Milani, A. 2005. 'Iran's Peculiar Election. A Historical Perspective', *Journal of Democracy*, Volume 16, Number 4, p.27

equality, as is obvious from the Europeans.”¹¹ Mangol Bayat argues that Shia intellectuals of the modern era who employed Western ideas of constitutionalism, sovereignty of the people, liberal democracy and secularism, were in fact carrying on the long-established tradition of dissent in Shiism. Despite loud calls for Westernisation from as early as the mid-19th century, their thought was in spirit and form deeply rooted in the Shia norm of standing up to absolutist despotism.¹² It is noteworthy that pro-democracy trends such as these did not evolve with as much depth or sophistication in the history of Sunnism, a faith that spoke the language of rulers more than that of the ruled.

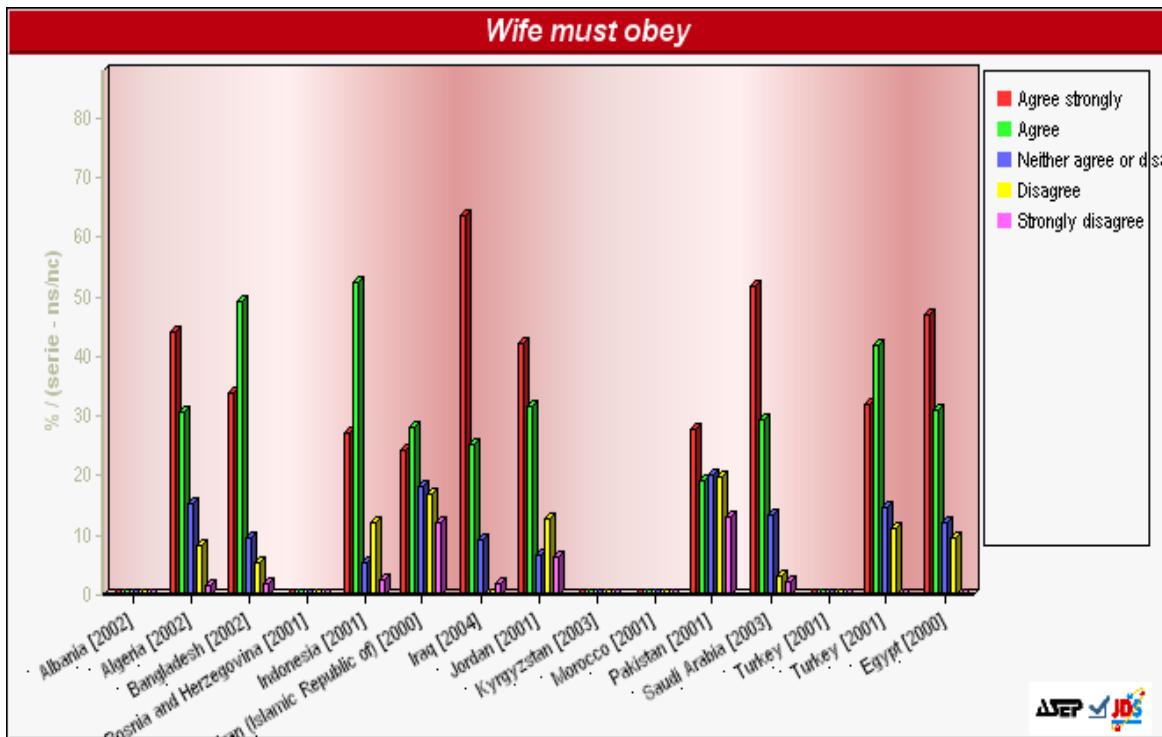
Besides the greater democratic tendencies in their political culture, Shiism is also known for allowing fairer gender relations than in Sunni society. Sexual inequality has been linked to the absence of democracy in the Muslim world without paying attention to the fact that Shiism is less conservative on this crucial issue than Sunnism. Steven Fish’s research posits that an unusual degree of female subordination is the main causal mechanism explaining why Muslim countries are democratic under-performers.¹³ The logic is that relationships in family and community may reproduce themselves at the political level. Patriarchy produces domination and intolerance as well as dependence on ‘strongmen’ in politics. Higher proportions of males to females in a society are said to feed into male aggression and frustration, which in turn invite repressive states. Isomorphism

¹¹ Dabashi, H. 1988. ‘Two Clerical Tracts on Constitutionalism’, in Arjomand op cit, p.339

¹² 1982. *Mysticism and Dissent. Socioreligious Thought in Qajar Iran*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

¹³ 2002. ‘Islam and Authoritarianism’, *World Politics*, Volume 55, Number 1.

between hierarchical gender relations and an unequal polity is quite plausible since “oppression blocks the oppressor’s own advancement and freedom.”¹⁴ Fish’s data set compares Catholic countries with Muslim countries and finds that in terms of female literacy, gender empowerment and sex ratio, the latter fare much worse. What would be interesting is a replication of the same data and measuring whether women in Shia-majority countries score better than women in Sunni-majority countries. At least on the measure of attitudes to women, the World Values Survey offers a lead about Shia-Sunni differences. The following graph compares responses to the question of whether wives should obey husbands from 15 Muslim countries, only two of which (Iran and Iraq) have Shia majorities:



Source: World Values Survey, www.worldvaluessurvey.org

Paradoxically, Iraq scores the highest proportion of those strongly believing that wives should be subordinated to husbands. Given the

¹⁴ Ibid. p.30

insecurity and warfare prevalent in Iraq at the time of the survey (2004), the rise in fundamentalist doctrines in the violent aftermath of Saddam Hussein's fall, and the backlog of decades of 'Sunnification' under the guise of secular Baathist nationalism, these results could be misleading. Iran, which is a more stable Shia state, has a much lower proportion of respondents believing that wives should obey husbands than Sunni countries at comparable levels of development (Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt). This figure is in spite of the deterioration in the condition of Iranian women under nearly thirty years of Shia theocracy. Albania and Bosnia are European Sunni countries, secularised after half a century of communist rule. Kyrgyzstan is another Sunni majority ex-communist country emerging from decades of coercive secularisation, not unlike Turkey. If all the 47 Muslim majority countries of the world could be surveyed on the same question and compared, meaningful conclusions might possibly be drawn. A more refined strategy could be to see whether women's status differs within mixed Muslim countries between Shia and Sunni components. In the absence of surveys of this nature, this study will be confined to theological and practical differences between Shias and Sunnis on gender equality.

Shiism owes its existence to a woman, Zaynab, who bore witness to Imam Husayn's martyrdom at the battle of Karbala (AD 680) and played a major part in Shia history and piety along with her mother, Fatima. Shiism "celebrates the strong characters and bravery of

female figures in a way that has no parallel in Sunnism.”¹⁵ For Sunnis, the Prophet’s wife, Aisha, is a venerable figure but only a jurist capable of committing error. In Shia popular belief, Fatima was sinless, representing the concept of the perfect human being (*Insan al-Kamil*), a position held by only a few throughout history. In the context of a culture where respect in society springs from association with religion, the honour for female foundational figures offers a theological opportunity to advance women’s rights. The centrality of women to the symbolic repertory of Shiism means that, at times, it “served as a means for empowering women and helped to promote a sense of gender-specific identities for women.”¹⁶ For instance, Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, the spiritual mentor of Hezbollah in Lebanon, depicted Fatima and her husband Imam Ali as a model couple as they shared the housework. To Fadlallah, woman is not inferior to man because of the example of participation in public affairs by Fatima.

All the reports of her socio-political activities show us that it is absolutely possible for women to enter the social and cultural life. Therefore, there is no obstacle for a woman to become a *Mujtahida* (interpreter of scriptures) and for people to follow her *Taqlid* (model of imitation).¹⁷

Shiite history records several female *mujtahida* and contemporary Iran has five of them, while there are no comparable Sunni counterparts.¹⁸

¹⁵ Nasr op cit. p.42

¹⁶ 2005. ‘Gendered Aspects of the Emergence and Historical Development of Shi’i Symbols and Rituals’, in Aghaie, K.S. (ed.) *The Women of Karbala: Ritual Performance and Symbolic Discourses in Modern Shi’i Islam*, Austin: University of Texas Press, Introduction.

¹⁷ Rosiny, S. 2000. ‘The Tragedy of Fatima al-Zahra in the Debate of Two Shiite Theologians in Lebanon’, in Brunner, R & Ende, W. (eds.) *The Twelver Shia in Modern Times. Religious Culture and Political History*, Leiden: Brill, p.210

¹⁸ Espinosa, A. 2005. ‘Zoreh Sefati on the Emancipation of Women’, *El País*, June 12th.

Lara Deeb's study of gender relations among Lebanese Shias shows how the examples of Zaynab motivate thousands of women to volunteer with social service organisations, seek formal employment and draw on her ideal of outspokenness in debates and dialogues about community development. In this way, modernisation of gender relations among the Shias owes to the existence of historical memory of female emancipation, a heritage sorely lacking among Sunnis.

One of the most controversial social institutions of Shias that outrages fundamentalist Sunnis is *Muttaa* or temporary marriage between women and men through mutual consent in which the 'wife' may leave the house against the 'husband's will. Shahla Haeri's study of this phenomenon¹⁹ reveals that it helps circumvent the strict segregation of the sexes in Islam which links to male frustration and aggression that generate authoritarianism. Female subjects of *Muttaa* emerge in Haeri's narrative as "agents in their own right, taking initiatives vis-à-vis men they fancy and proposition."²⁰ Legally, a woman entering into *Muttaa* is "freer than married and virgin women to negotiate on her own behalf, choose her male partners and exercise her own decision-making power. She is her own person, as it were."²¹ *Muttaa* reverses the customary Islamic relationships of subordination and domination, passivity and initiative between men and women and opens the potential for greater gender equality that Sunnism lacks. *Muttaa*'s misuse to exploit women after the 1979 Revolution has been

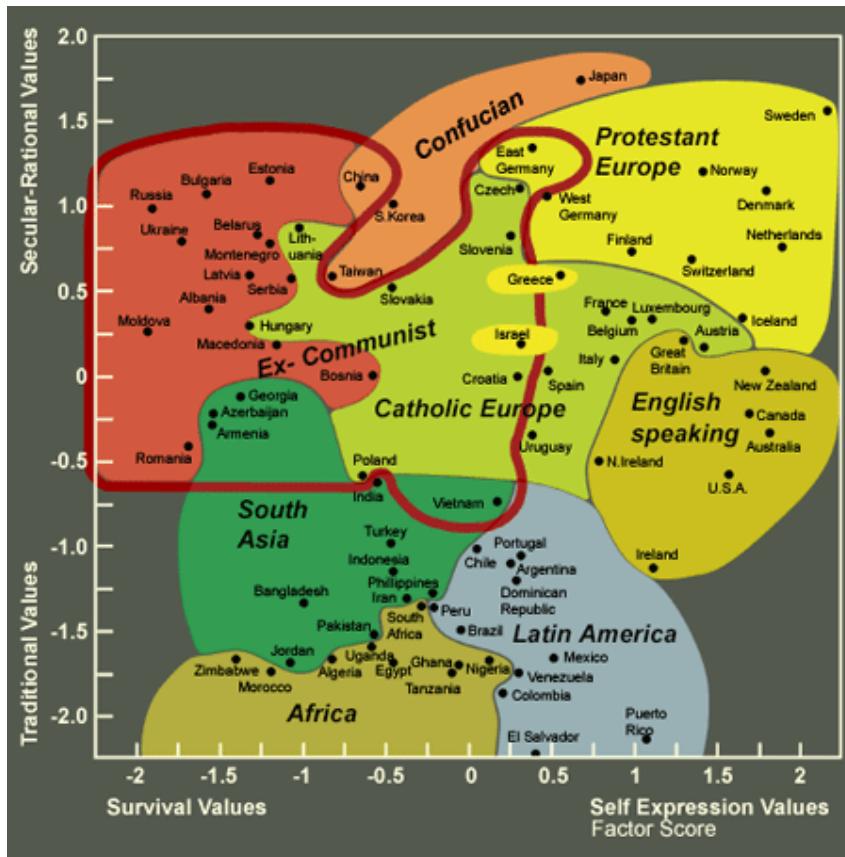
¹⁹ 1989. *Law of Desire: Temporary Marriage in Shi'i Iran*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

²⁰ Ibid. p.194

²¹ Ibid. p.200

rightly criticised by Muslim feminists, but as Haeri's interviews with women who have actually lived through this practice disclose, there are situations in which it has balanced gender relations. Western observers often comment on the nature of social control of women in Muslim societies and the rigidity of their social structures, but the semi-secret institution of *Muttaa*, which is widely practised among Shias around the world, makes such restrictive codes mutable and dynamic.

Tentatively, the preceding discussion implies that Shias are relatively more egalitarian in gender relations than Sunnis. For Inglehart and Welzel, the seedbed of democracy is laid when a shift occurs from survival values to self-expression values. The former include religious faith, respect for authority, obedience, strong family ties, respect for parents and male domination. The latter include individual autonomy and choice in decision-making, subjective well being, tolerance, ecology, quality of life and equality of women. Shias clearly outdo Sunnis in many self-expression values (although, in some, they are more or less equal between the two sects). In the Inglehart-Welzel Cultural Map of the World, Shia majority Iran is to the right of Sunni countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, Morocco, Algeria and Egypt on the survival-self-expression continuum. In fact, there is no other Muslim country that fares better than Iran on self-



Source: World Values Survey, www.worldvaluessurvey.org

expression values. Azerbaijan is the only anomaly as a Shia majority country that is weak on self-expression values. If the fact that it was another ex-Soviet satellite with a baggage of communist modernisation is accounted for, and provided that more data from all the 47 Muslim majority countries is factored in, the case for Shias as democratisers may be built on a firm statistical footing.

Shia Leaders as Democratisers

Shia theology and mass-level religious and social practice might favour democratic tendencies. What about Shia elites and their basic political orientations over type of governance? Can a pattern of difference be discerned between them and Sunni elites on affinity for democracy? This question is relevant because transitologists, rational

choice modellers and general theoreticians have all viewed the role of elites as critical for democratic change. Lipset has underlined the seminal importance of leadership's choice, perception, beliefs and actions in the process of democratisation.

Specific outcomes depend on particular contexts...on the abilities and tactics of the major actors. For example, Washington and Lincoln, Lenin and Gorbachev, Nehru and De Gaulle, each had a profound effect on the prospects for democracy in his time and country.²²

Samuel Huntington visualises a dialectic between agency and structure in the determinants of democratisation that requires mass level conditions favourable for democracy to be complemented by visionary leaders.

Democracies are created not by causes but by causers. Political leaders and public have to act...The emergence of social, economic and external conditions favourable to democracy is never enough...Some political leaders have to want it to happen...They cannot through will and skill create democracy where preconditions are absent.²³

In the Muslim world, authors have pointed out that individual agents and personalities have had an inordinate influence on regime types. Kamel Abu Jabar holds that in Syria, Lebanon and Jordan, the most significant political forces that make, break and shape democratisation processes are individual leaders and their personalities. Democratisation in Muslim countries usually takes a top-down approach and is viscerally tied to the outlooks of key figures who enjoy great legitimacy among the masses.²⁴ Shiism in particular has relied excessively on charismatic bellwethers, *Imams* and saints

²² Op cit. p.17

²³ 1991. *The Third Wave. Democratisation in the Late Twentieth Century*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, p.107

²⁴ 2003. 'Democratic Process in Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan', in Saikal, A. & Schnabel, A. (ed.) *Democratisation in the Middle East: Experiences, Struggles, Challenges*, New York: United Nations University Press.

possessing esoteric knowledge and privy to the implicit inner meanings of the faith (*batin*). Shia leaders have historically been revered as infallible (*maasoom*) and thus outside the cross-current of materiality and history. Since the 19th century, the highest religious authority in Shiism has been known as the *marjaiya* (source of emulation). To become a *marja*, a *mujtahid* (religious scholar) has to attain social popularity through an elaborate economic network of patronage that ropes in notables within seminaries and in the world of business and secular politics. Wealth and social connections, more than philosophical advancement, matters in the attainment of *marja* status. *Marjas* shape Shia public opinion through networks of representatives (*wakils*) around the world in a way that has no equivalent in Sunnism. Accordingly, attention needs to be paid to the political proclivities of these ‘Grand Ayatollahs’ in any deliberation on Shia democracy.

In contemporary Shiism, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani of Najaf (the holiest centre of Shiism) has been the *marja* with the largest popular approval since the death of his mentor Abol-Qassem Khoi in 1992. From confidential pilgrimage polling, it is estimated that “nearly 80 percent of Shiite worshippers follow Sistani...His annual income is between \$500 million and \$700 million and his worldwide assets exceed \$3 billion.”²⁵ Confined to Najaf under house arrest during the last decade of the 20th century, Sistani came to the fore after the American overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003. Nasr and others who are

²⁵ Khalaji, M. 2006. ‘The Last *Marja*. Sistani and the End of Traditional Religious Authority in Shiism’, Washington DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus 39, p.9

proposing Shia democracy as a real possibility rest their case primarily on Sistani's articulation of moderate politics that derives from a traditional "quietism." Sistani believes that the *ulama* should stay out of politics and that Islam's role should be limited to providing values and guidance for social order (*nizam al-mujtama*). Since involvement in governance could corrupt the *ulama* and their message, his "preference is that clerics mostly leave running the state to lay persons."²⁶ In one *fatwa* (binding ruling), he asserted, "The religious leadership has repeatedly stated that it has no wish to involve itself in political work and prefers for its clerics not to assume government positions."²⁷ This runs counter to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's construct of *velayet-e-faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurists) which sanctifies clerical authoritarianism in Iran. Sistani's insistence on downsizing the power of *ulama* is supported by the majority of Iraqi Shias, who rejected the idea of 'Islamic Government' in opinion polls conducted by Zogby. Although most Iraqis strongly agreed that "religious" candidates should become Iraq's future political leaders, Shias want (by 66 to 27 percent) a separation between religious and state authority. "It is only among the minority Sunnis that there is interest in a religious state, and they are split evenly on the question."²⁸

Many of Sistani's *fatwas* highlight democratic principles like representative and accountable government, the duty of citizens to

²⁶ Murphy, D. 2005. 'Iraq's Critical Sistani Factor', *Christian Science Monitor*, January 20th.

²⁷ Bazzi, M. 2005. 'The al-Sistani Factor in Iraq's Election', *News Day*, January 30th.

²⁸ Zinsmeister, K. 2003. 'What Iraqis Really Think', *Wall Street Journal*, September 10th.

vote and the right of Iraqis to determine their future over and above the prerogatives of the occupying US army. Nasr contrasts Sistani's political strategy from Khomeini's with a tinge of hope:

There were no fiery invocations of divine wrath of Khomeini-style denunciations of the United States as the 'Great Satan', but only calm arguments (sometimes backed by impressively large but peaceful street demonstrations) about pragmatism, rights, democracy and self-determination.²⁹

Babak Rahimi credits Sistani with a grand design to allow democracy to flourish by strengthening Iraqi civil society. Sistani's tremendous array of network organisations in southern Iraqi cities like Amarah, Basra, Karbala, Kufa, Najaf and Nasiriyah would

cultivate grassroots political participation to enhance civil society that would be independent from the state but dependent on the Shi'i citizens of Iraq...This could restructure the fragile southern Iraqi public life into a strong civic order, diminishing the all-pervasive state administration of society evident in the Saddam era...It can produce a democratic order in which public Islam is compatible with not only the principles of inclusion, competition and accessibility but also with the basic logic of democratic governance- namely accountability and popular sovereignty.³⁰

Sistani's efforts are expected to have a strong impact on Iran's domestic politics because he represents the Najaf School, which is emerging to take back its rightful place as the Mecca of Shiism from Iran's Qom School, some of whose leading lights supported theocratic absolutism. According to Soroush,

Najaf has been the revered centre of Shiite Islam for 1000 years; it is the most respected shrine. Qom seminary is barely 100 years old. Its most famous product, so to speak, was Ayatollah Khomeini, who led the Revolution that established the religious guardianship in Iran today. Yet, his was a fringe point of view, an exception among all the *ulamas* in Najaf and Qom alike.³¹

²⁹ Op cit. p.175

³⁰ 2004. 'Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and the Democratisation of Post-Saddam Iraq', *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Volume 8, Number 4, pp.14-16

³¹ 2004. 'Rise of Iraqi Shiites Threats Iranian Theocrats', *New Perspectives Quarterly*, Volume 21, Issue 2, p.27

Lebanon's moderate spiritual leader Ayatollah Fadlallah has been bitterly denounced by the Iranian regime for his religious credentials, but he too endorsed Sistani rather than Ayatollah Khamenei (Iran's current religious head) as the *marja*. Hezbollah and Amal, the two principal Lebanese Shia guerrilla movements-cum-political parties have also praised Sistani and have once again turned to Najaf for religious direction. To Nasr, they have adopted Sistani's mantra "one man, one vote" since "in Lebanon it would mean that the Shia, who make up more than two fifths of the population, would dominate government."³² In Bahrain too, the oppressed Shia majority have eschewed Khomeinism and revolutionary fervour and taken on democratic hopes after Sistani began to clamour for 'one person, one vote' in Iraq. They began to demand real democracy, which would mean a transfer of power to Shias as their numbers would warrant.

Among Muslim countries in which Shias are sizeable minorities, the Sistani effect has been most pronounced. In Saudi Arabia, the long persecuted Shias (10-15 percent of the population) demanded rights to be recognised as citizens and to practise their rituals without state interference. Shia voters turned out in large numbers for the restricted Saudi local elections in February 2005 amidst open comparisons with Iraq. One Saudi Shia intellectual put it this way:

What is happening today in Iraq raised the political ambitions of the Shi'ites that democracy and public participation are

³² Op cit. p.232

instruments capable of defusing internal disputes, so Shiites can attain their rights and aspirations.³³

In Pakistan (20 percent Shias), where Khomeini's appeal was always outdone by Khoi's (Sistani's teacher) and where Shias have strong traditional ties to Najaf, there are expectations that the struggle for minority rights and a Shia place in the political arena will pick up momentum. In Yemen (42 percent Shias), Sistani openly took issue with persecution of his co-religionists by the Sunni fundamentalist state and made a clarion call for pluralism and political equality.³⁴ In Kuwait (35 percent Shias), the minority sect turned out in big numbers at the June 2006 parliamentary election to defeat extremist Sunni candidates. Shia human rights activists in Kuwait also campaigned vigorously using Sistani's appeals for empowerment through the ballot box. One of them confidently commented how voters had been mobilised:

In constituencies where there are no Shiite candidates, Shiite voters will definitely cast their ballots in favour of liberal, independent and moderate (Sunni) candidates, in order to deprive the Salafists (Sunni fundamentalists) these votes.³⁵

One of the causal mechanisms identified by Huntington as determinant of the 'Third Wave' of democratisation is "snowballing/demonstration effects", wherein certain "lead countries" like Poland, Spain and the Philippines proved to their neighbours that democratisation can be a successful cure to many ailments in the body politic. New means of international communication facilitate this

³³ MacFarquhar, N. 2005. 'Saudi Shiites, Long Kept Down, Look to Iraq and Assert Rights', *New York Times*, March 2nd.

³⁴ Novak, J. 2005. 'Ayatollah Sistani and the War in Yemen', *World Press Review*, May 18th.

³⁵ 2006. 'Sunni-Shiite Battle for Kuwaiti Parliamentary Seats', *Middle East Online*, June 28th. URL: <http://www.middle-east-online.com/English/kuwait/?id=16851> URL Last Accessed: November 1st, 2006.

process of democratisation by power of example. Writing about the Arab world in 1994 during a phase of liberalisation in some countries that flattered but never led to democratisation, Pete Moore says,

The sad reality has been that, overall, the democratisation of Eastern Europe has had little impact in the form of a demonstration effect for the Arab World. At the societal level, differences in the relation to the state and lack of a sympathetic identity with East Europeans has proven an obstacle to the democratic contagion. In comparison to Eastern Europe, the events in Algeria and the ongoing experiments in Yemen, Kuwait, and Oman have received little world attention, but in the Arab context these phenomena have deep impacts.³⁶

Sistani's Iraq certainly fills this void in the Muslim world, especially where Shias are active. His model of politics and governance are inspiring domino effects and it is quite certain that the stability and consolidation of democracy in Iraq will matter to likely democratising currents in other Muslim countries. The very meaning of the term *marja-e-taqlid* is literally a "source of spiritual imitation" for Shias. This is turning out to be also true in the world of secular politics, with Sistani being looked up to as a guarantor of Shia rights and political participation around the planet. To sum up his contributions,

In one bold stroke, Sistani managed to launch, and garner popular support for a project that Muslim progressives have only ever dreamed of: establishing a democratic political order sanctioned and even protected by the clergy. by seeking to blend politics and faith into a rational system in which government is clearly the servant of the commonweal, and By advancing the idea that Muslims have the right to determine the nature of the government over them, Sistani and his colleagues have transformed a commandment previously confined to holy law into a pillar of a new democratic order. This brings to the fore an uncomfortable truth: traditional Shiite clerics, often dismissed as dogmatic medievalists intent on building a theocratic state, may well represent Iraq's best hope for a successful transition to democracy. As such, they have become perhaps the most important actors in modern Middle Eastern history.³⁷

II

³⁶ 1994. 'The International Context of Liberalisation and Democratisation in the Arab World', *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Volume 16, Number 3.

³⁷ Gerecht, R.M.2004. 'Ayatollah Democracy', *The Atlantic Monthly*, September, p.39

Counter Arguments to the Shia Democracy Hypothesis

So far, this essay has painted a rosy and highly optimistic picture of the potential for democracy in Shia countries and communities through interpretations of theology, mass values, social practices and elite inclinations. But there is much in favour of a more cynical view that Shia democracy is a chimera and is unlikely to materialise. Democracy in the Muslim world has only too often raised sky high hopes and then deceived. False ‘Prague Springs’ abound in past analyses of the prospects for democracy in Muslim countries, which were then taken over by events that consolidated authoritarian rule. Sean Yom balks at all the misguided feel-good predictions which ultimately failed to meet the test of reality.

Yet despite this enthusiasm, the icy reality is that nearly two decades after scholars heralded its rejuvenation, civil society has not yielded any results in pushing Arab states towards democratic transitions by undermining the foundations of their authoritarian institutions. Arab CSOs (civil society organisations) watched as liberalising reforms initiated in most countries during the early 1990s stalled within years, while several countries like Egypt and Tunisia backslid even further into autocracy, ending the decade with tighter restrictions on civil liberties and political pluralism.³⁸

The State-Mosque Concordat

A fundamental weakness that has often stalled genuine progress toward democratisation in Muslim countries has been the longstanding tradition of merging the religious domain with the political. Bernard Lewis, one of the sceptics on the feasibility of democracy in the Muslim world stresses this aspect as common to both Shias and Sunnis.

³⁸ 2005. ‘Civil Society and Democratisation in the Arab World’, *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Volume 9, Number 4, p.17

In Muslim theory, church and state are not separate or separable institutions. Such familiar pairs of words as lay and ecclesiastical, sacred and profane, spiritual and temporal, and the like have no equivalent in classical Arabic or in other Islamic languages, since the dichotomy they express, deeply rooted in Christendom, was unknown in Islam until comparatively modern times.³⁹

When they did become known in Iran, around the time of its constitutional revolution (1905-09), the old belief in blending religion with secular power did not completely die out. Although secular intellectuals based in secret societies were important to the drafting of Iran's first parliamentary system, they had to acquire broad support among ordinary people through the medium of the *ulama*, who were more troubled with threats to the Shia realm from foreign intervention and less with the Qajar dynasty's autocracy *per se*. The 1906 constitution granted broad powers of oversight to the *ulama* who would act as watchdogs so that all legislation was in accordance with Islamic law. Contrary to a liberal democratic "society of citizens" based on civic consciousness, the Shia *ulama* wished to retain Iran as a "society of believers" and succeeded to entrench themselves as power brokers long before Khomeini.⁴⁰ The *ulama*'s hostility to dictatorial monarchy in Iranian history is intimately tied to the former's understanding of their own superiority and divine right to rule. Hamid Algar reads political the mind of Shia clergy as follows:

The monarch was theoretically bound, no less than his subjects, to submit to the authoritative guidance of a *mujtahid* and in effect to make the state the executive branch of *ulama* authority. Throughout the Qajar period the ideal remained far from fulfilment and there was therefore a certain tension inherent in relations between the *ulama* and the monarchy. The participation of the *ulama* in the

³⁹ 2001. *The Multiple Identities of the Middle East*, New York: Schocken Books, pp.28-29

⁴⁰ Gheissari, A & Nasr, V. 2006. *Democracy in Iran. History and the Quest for Liberty*, New York: Oxford University Press

Constitutional Revolution was a sign that this tension had given way to open rupture.⁴¹

It bears reminding that, unlike in Sunni Islam, Shism accords the *ulama* a super-ordinate position in society. Nasr himself acknowledges this anti-democratic and elitist feature of Shia Islam:

As successors to the Twelfth imam, the Shia *ulama* enjoy a privileged spiritual status that their Sunni counterparts have never had. Sunni *ulama* are religious functionaries, learned in religious matters but no different from other believers. The Shia, by contrast, revere their *ulama* not only for their knowledge but for the link to the Twelfth imam that they represent.⁴²

In modern Iranian history, the *ulama* appeared “progressive” when they threw their weight against monarchical tyranny and “reactionary” when they ranged against modernisation and secularisation, but,

...in both cases, they were acting consistently with the preservation of their own power. During the Constitutional Revolution, they were led to support a modern constitution by their belief that it would further enhance their power. When this turned out not to be the case, they returned to their policy of fighting secularisation and government encroachment on their prerogatives.⁴³

The fact that Shia *ulama* have desired and preserved political power leads us to a very important counterargument to the Shia democracy thesis. Hamid Dabashi makes a profound reflection about the doctrinal paradox at the heart of Shiism:

Shi'ism is a religion of protest. It can only speak truth to power and destabilise it. It can never be “in power.” As soon as it is “in power” it contradicts itself.⁴⁴

Nasr et al build the case for Shia pro-democratic exceptionalism on the grounds that it has self-expression values, rebelliousness and

⁴¹ 1972. ‘The Oppositional Role of the *Ulama* in Twentieth-Century Iran’, in Keddie, N.R. (ed.) *Scholars, Saints, and Sufis. Muslim Religious Institutions in the Middle East Since 1500*, Berkeley: University of California Press, p.235

⁴² Op cit. p.68

⁴³ Keddie, N.R. ‘The Roots of the *Ulama*'s Power in Modern Iran’, in Keddie (ed.) Op cit. p.227

⁴⁴ 2005. ‘Ta’ziyah as Theatre of Protest’, *The Drama Review*, Volume 49, Number 4, p.91

criticism of authority as its defining feature. However, since the Safavid Empire held sway over Iran (1501-1722), Shias essentially stopped being the oppressed dissidents and resisters and were assimilated into the ruling establishment. The taste of political power and statehood ‘Sunnified’ Shias to a great extent as survival values of obedience to rulers and clergy took centre stage. The *ulama* and the lay population cooperated with the Safavid state because it was the first Shia territorial power in history. Officially endorsed *ulama* would confer legitimacy on any ruler who promoted Shia doctrine and gave them possession of religious taxes (*khums*). By virtue of the *ulama*’s high reverence among rural Shias, they would guarantee non-resistance and quietness from the population at large. This state-clergy concordat has always had debilitating results for democracy, because the masses would be ideologically tuned by the *ulama* to not think in terms of individual self-interests (and question authoritarianism) but rather for the interests of the ‘Shia realm’ as an organic whole.

Insufficient Modernisation

Realization in Iran by the late 1990s that “Islam is part of the problem and not the solution” yielded slogans for simple democracy in place of “Islamic democracy”.⁴⁵ More Iranians today want a plain republic instead of an ‘Islamic republic’, but the dice is still heavily loaded against the secularists precisely because of the hold of the *ulama* on the ordinary masses. The victory of ‘Islamic Socialist’ Mahmoud

⁴⁵ Gheissari & Nasr op cit. p.9

Ahmadinejad in the restricted 2005 presidential election in Iran was achieved through active *ulama* canvassing in the nook and cranny of the country and Ayatollah Khamenei's blessings. The vast majority of the poor from rural areas voted for Ahmadinejad, whose Islamist revivalism and purges of secular-liberal intellectuals aim to return Iran to Khomeini-era Islamisation of society and polity. The fact that Iran's modernised secular middle classes are still outnumbered by the 'religious middle classes' and the overwhelming numbers of the poor (about 40 percent of the total population) means that democracy may have to wait indefinitely for self-expression values to obtain Inglehart's socio-economic ballast (post-industrial knowledge-oriented workforce). Incidentally, Shias in Iraq and Lebanon are also poor and primarily located in rural settings. Shias are also overwhelmingly poor in countries where they are sizeable minorities like Pakistan and Bahrain. If one discounts Inglehart's "starting point" (basic values of a culture that stick to a people over time) premise as useless since Shias have been 'Sunnified' into obedience over the centuries, the low levels of modernisation among Shias worldwide does not bode well for democracy. Nor is there any sign that an independent class of Shias have Barrington Moore's "bourgeois values"⁴⁶, since their middle classes themselves are divided along moderate/extremist and conservative/liberal axes. Iran's 'old' urban middle classes, referred by some as the 'bazaar class' (merchants, artisans, shopkeepers journeymen and apprentices), maintain close ties to the *ulama* and fragment the bourgeoisie, thereby preventing them from allying *en*

⁴⁶ 1966. *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy. Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*, Boston: Beacon Press.

masse with rural capitalists or peasants. During phases of religious revival, as is currently occurring under Ahmadinejad, “the traditional middle class rally behind the Shiite clergy” and weaken the clout of the ‘new’ progressive middle class.⁴⁷ Shia faith, policed by the ever strong *ulama*, presents a structural barrier for inter-class coalitions that could swing the momentum in favour of democratisation as predicted by Marxist theories. Even those who are bullish on the likelihood of democracy in Muslim countries admit that the mass appeal of Islam as espoused by the *ulama* is a huge stumbling block to popular sovereignty. Mark Tessler and Eleanor Gao examine political opinion surveys in four Arab countries including Iraq and find that although a majority of citizens want democracy, many would like it to be ‘Islamic Democracy’. “The extent and ways in which Islam is incorporated into national political life” hold the clues to the democratisation deficit.⁴⁸

The Militant Alternative

Noah Feldman, a paradigmatic supporter of ‘Islamic Democracy’ as the elixir to reform the Middle East, urges a big caveat in the form of “the persistent power of Islam in the politics of the Muslim world.” Political Islam, he avers, “continues to attract followers today, despite rumours of its death or failure, and it still matters centrally in the Muslim world.”⁴⁹ An extreme form of political Islam, militant in method and objective, has existed in both Shia and Sunni societies

⁴⁷ Tien-Lung Liu, M. 1988. ‘States and Urban Revolutions. Explaining the Revolutionary Outcomes in Iran and Poland’, *Theory and Society*, Volume 17, p.199

⁴⁸ 2005. ‘Gauging Arab Support for Democracy’, *Journal of Democracy*, Volume 16, Number 3, p.93

⁴⁹ 2003. *After Jihad. America and the Struggle for Islamic Democracy*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, p.38, 41

with equal vehemence. Shias often joined anti-democratic Islamist guerrilla movements because of their promise of securing rights and justice through the barrel of the gun. Their appeal has grown in the later half of the twentieth century after the secular leftist revolutionary push lost its appeal among younger generation of radical activists or got subsumed by Islamist fervour. The earliest known Islamist terrorist group in Islam was the *Hashashin* (Assassins), led by the Shia Ismaili, Hassan-i-Sabbah (AD 1034-1124). Nasr casually accommodates Hezbollah into his Shia democracy thesis by dwelling on its acceptance of Sistani's ballot box path, but its presence as an extra-constitutional militant army in southern Lebanon has arguably dented rather than enriched democracy in that country. While it is true that Hezbollah has 'Lebanonised' itself since the 1990s and entered the Lebanese parliament through free and fair elections, its refusal to cede authority to the legitimate Lebanese army in its strongholds leaves the fragile Lebanese state weak in sovereignty and ability to regulate the country as an undisputed authority. A low capacity state with weak political institutions is detrimental to democratisation. As Jean Grugel's study on obstacles to democratisation in developing countries puts it:

States with insufficient capability will not be able to withstand popular pressure or complete necessary reforms. It is difficult for democratisation to occur without state capacity.⁵⁰

Hezbollah also impedes Lebanese democratisation by supporting Syrian strategic-military intervention in the country that culminated in the assassination of the former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005.

⁵⁰ 2001. *Democratisation: A Critical Introduction*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, Chapter 4.

The ‘Cedar Revolution’ which followed Hariri’s murder brought together popular civic action across sectarian divides with the aim of conducting democratic parliamentary elections free from Syrian interference. Hezbollah organised counter demonstrations to the Cedar Revolution and reopened old political fault lines that had driven Lebanon to civil war. The recrudescence of Shia-Sunni violence in Lebanon of late is a danger signal for the multi-religious compromise of the country. Hezbollah may have embraced the formal procedures of democracy, but there is no evidence that it cares for the rule of law, the rights of women and minorities, political and religious tolerance, and alternation of power. Steven Cook captures the essence of this militant movement-cum-social welfare organisation’s shallow commitment to democracy thus:

The real problem in Lebanon is not too much democracy but too little. Had Lebanon emerged from its spring 2005 “independence uprising” as a democracy, Hezbollah could not have continued to operate as an armed and thus autonomous faction.⁵¹

In Iraq too, violent Shia movements enjoy grassroots devotion despite Sistani’s overarching authority. One aggressive and authoritarian force is the 2-million-member ‘Sadr Movement’ led by the anti-democratic cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr. In April 2003, it organised a mob that killed moderate Ayatollah Abd al-Majid al-Khoi. After the killing, the mob surrounded the home of Sistani and demanded he leave Najaf forthwith. Only quick mobilisation of Sistani followers prevented Sistani’s expulsion or worse. Since the fall of Saddam Hussein, Sadr’s ‘Jaish al-Mahdi Army’ has had a hand in the horrendous sectarian violence or ‘dirty war’ in Iraq. Sadr’s radicalism draws on the

⁵¹ Cook, S.A. 2006. ‘Don’t Blame Democracy Promotion’, *The Washington Post*, July 29th.

frustrations of the disenfranchised Shia poor slum dwellers and incitement to hatred for achieving his own drive to power. Another anti-democratic force with a popular social base is the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)'s paramilitary 'Badr Brigade', which has bases in several Iraqi provinces. Its commander, Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, spelled out the strategy quite clearly:

First, have elections, in which Shi'ites under moderate leadership win an absolute majority; then use popular pressure and force transformation into a Khomeini-style Islamic republic.⁵²

Further afield, in Pakistan, Shia militant organisations like Tehreek-i-Jafria and Sipah-i-Muhammad match government-sponsored Sunni terrorist groups with firepower and violence, thanks to Iranian support. Like Hezbollah, they enjoy mass popularity among Shias, contest elections and send MPs to parliament, while simultaneously staging targeted revenge killings and disallowing moderate Shia voices from arising. Nasr's hypothesis of a rise in Shia self-confidence globally as a result of the democratic beginning in Iraq fails to specify why the rise will not be spearheaded by such anti-democratic groups rather than democratic ones. Part of the dilemma informing the choice of modes of struggle for the Shias is the brutality of Sunni subjugation. The militant mode of securing justice has not exhausted itself, notwithstanding Sistani's ascent, because Shias on the ground in Sunni-majority countries feel the need to deter Sunni impunity with force. Ironically then, unless Sunni countries democratise and improve their respect for civil liberties of minorities, it looks unlikely

⁵² Ericson, M. 2004. 'Dangerous Illusions of a Democratic Shi'ite Iraq', *Asia Times*, February 26th.

that Shias will replace the militant option with the unalloyed democratic one.

Opportunistic Democracy

If one scans the horizon, Shia political parties that do participate in elections and boast of representatives in legislatures across the world are all dual purpose entities that opportunistically combine politics with violent militancy just as Shia *ulama* opportunistically take occasional stances against authoritarianism. Nasr's entire thesis rests on the claim that Shias see democracy as a means to acquire power, but he is not as convincing that they want democracy as an end in itself. This is a fatal weakness because liberal outcomes with democratic substance can only obtain when there is "a transition from 'instrumental' to 'principled' commitments to the democratic framework."⁵³ Neither Iran nor Iraq, the Shia-majority states which have minimal democratic symptoms today, has made this transition yet. For democracy to become the "only game in town", Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan theorise that there has to be behavioural, attitudinal and constitutional consolidation of democratic values. Democracy will have to be "routinised and deeply internalised in social, institutional and even psychological life, as well as in calculations for achieving success."⁵⁴ That there is a militant side to achieving success in Shia politics which is not confined to some fringe radical part of the

⁵³ 1996. 'Is the Third Wave Over?', *Journal of Democracy*, Volume 7, Number 3, p.33

⁵⁴ 1996. *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation. Southern Europe, South America and Post-Communist Europe*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, p.5

spectrum means that democracy is nowhere near being the only game in town.

Hope that the predominance of the Shia *ulama* in politics is going to be clipped in Iraq and elsewhere due to the influence of Sistani is also under a cloud, thanks to his own actions of interference on the writing of the new Iraqi constitution. Sistani may be a democrat in political terms, but is an orthodox conservative on the primacy of Sharia law and its interpretation. Announcing that he will “supervise” the document that would set the rules of Iraqi politics in August 2003, Sistani declared,

The religious constants and the Iraqi people's moral principles and noble social values should be the main pillars of the coming Iraqi constitution.⁵⁵

Sistani vetoed the March 2004 Interim Constitution because it did not respect the Sharia. The final version of the constitution that he allowed reserves 25 percent of National Assembly seats for women but warns that no law can be passed that contradicts Islam's “undisputed” rulings. Interpreting this provision will fall to the Supreme Court, which the new constitution stipulates “may include clerics.”⁵⁶ The dualities and paradoxes in the constitution “give Sistani and future *marjas* the legal right to influence the policymaking and legislative process. Education and judiciary systems in particular are his target.”⁵⁷ While Sistani is not as politically ambitious as Khomeini,

⁵⁵ 2004. ‘Ayatollah Sistani in Quotes’, *BBC News*, URL: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3604810.stm. URL Last Accessed: November 6th 2006.

⁵⁶ Cited in Coleman, I. 2006. ‘Women, Islam and the New Iraq’, *Foreign Affairs*, January/February.

⁵⁷ Khalaji op cit. p.17

his tactic of leaving open the question of the scope and nature of Shia law in Iraq's state and society may create the space for Sadrists to go on the rampage and restrict women's rights legally. Until now, al-Sadr's vigilante cadres have been imposing stringent restrictions requiring women to wear full-length veils, forbidding music and dancing, and enforcing strict segregation of the sexes. In the future, Iraq's official police may be performing these tasks in conjunction with the ulama manning the judiciary. Conservative clerics who have gained great prominence in post-Saddam Iraq have "close ties to the Iranian clerics, who have proven "anti-women" credentials."⁵⁸ Whatever advantages women had in Shia practice relative to Sunnism can easily be nullified with the increasing parliamentary and street enforcement power of the *ulama* who receive military and financial support from Iran. Tehran is said to be funding al-Sadr with \$80 million a month and training his shock brigades in three camps run by Iranian Revolutionary Guards. "Behind al-Sadr's phenomenon and money are the most extremist and anti-democratic governing bodies in Iran."⁵⁹ In light of these facts, one is compelled to ask whether Soroush's sanguineness that democratisation in Iraq will democratise Iran is an inverted reality. Iranian *velayet-e-faqih* has less of a chance of succeeding in Iraq but the latter could still fall short of democratic rule because the elected representatives to legislatures may not enjoy total freedom to govern in all spheres of state purview. Muqtadar Khan

⁵⁸ Laskie, M. 2006. 'Iraqi Women Under Seige', San Francisco: Global Exchange, p.14

⁵⁹ Raphaeli, N. 2004. 'Understanding Muqtada al-Sadr', *The Middle East Quarterly*, Volume 11, Number 4.

lays out the worst case scenario of a “subtle dictatorship” that is not very far fetched:

In principle and on record, Ayatollah Sistani does not believe in theocracy, that is rule by the clerics. However his entire conduct since the US invasion of Iraq clearly suggests that he has no qualms about controlling, directing and even manipulating politics from behind the scenes. His clerical brigade will not participate in the government as his friends and colleagues do in Iran. They will delegate the menial aspects of governance to the secular elected leaders but the key elements will be determined by the Grand Ayatollah and his coterie of clerics.⁶⁰

Rahimi, who is upbeat that Sistani is the messiah for Shia democracy, still sounds words of caution due to the uncertainty redolent in Iraq's transition:

If Sistani manages to play a central role in drafting the constitution, and hence gaining monopoly of the judicial branch, the Ayatollah's influence could then threaten pluralism and inclusion as protected by the constitution. Certain democratic principles such as freedom of expression could come under the danger of puritanical notions of moral conduct, enforcing certain rules and values grounded upon a set of religious rather than civic values and norms. Surely, it would be difficult to recognise Sistani's call for stern codes of punishment for theft (amputation), adultery (stoning), and apostasy (death penalty) for converting from Islam to another religion as a positive contribution to Iraqi's future democratic judicial system in the protection of civil liberties.⁶¹

Even if Sistani resists the urge to be the *de facto* puppeteer of Iraq, he is 74 years old and his succession as *marja* is hanging in the balance. Qom-based Grand Ayatollah Kazem Husseini Haeri, a Khomeinist who is the religious adviser to Muqtada al-Sadr, is one of the contenders. If he wins the power struggle and comes out on top, *velayet-e-faqih* and the Iranian model is more likely to triumph in Iraq. Individual personality as an independent variable in democratisation has temporal shortcomings, unless certain democratic norms are

⁶⁰ 2005. ‘Have Iraqis Voted for a Dictatorship?’, *Daily Times*, February 13th.

⁶¹ Op cit. p.16

institutionalised by the visionary leader so that they outlive him. In hindsight, Khomeini accomplished an institutionalisation of clerical rule that survives to this day in Iran. Whether Sistani can likewise institutionalise a non-interference norm in Iraq through personal reticence remains to be seen.

The Resource Curse

Up to now, the two sides of the Shia democracy thesis have been juxtaposed using multiple theories of democratisation for evidence and countervailing evidence. However, one major rival explanation for the democracy deficit in the Muslim world remains that can totally negate the relative merits of Shiism over Sunnism that Nasr et al have accentuated. Michael Ross performs careful statistical tests and concludes that “oil and mineral wealth tends to make states less democratic.” The mechanism at work is the “rentier effect”, wherein governments derive sufficient revenues from the sale of oil, do not tax their populations much, and the public in turn “will be less likely to demand accountability from-and representation in-their government.”⁶² Resource richness may also permit governments to spend more on internal security and so block the population's democratic aspirations (“the repression effect”). Relevant to our purpose is the empirical reality that three Shia majority states- Iran, Iraq and Bahrain- are virtually single-product economies. In Ross' index of top 25 oil reliant states, Bahrain comes 3rd, Iraq is 12th and Iran is 17th. Azerbaijan, which does not feature in this index, is the

⁶² 2001. ‘Does Oil Hinder Democracy?’, *World Politics*, Volume 53, Number 3, p.328, 331

other Shia majority authoritarian state whose oil export revenues are expected to touch \$160 billion by 2025.⁶³ If the concept of ‘rentier state’ is extended to mean a state that derives a large fraction of its revenues from external, not just mineral-based, rents, then Lebanon, the fifth Shia-majority state gets 15 percent of its GDP (\$ 2.7 billion) from overseas workers remittances. It ranks as the 9th largest recipient of remittances in nominal terms among developing countries and as the 7th largest relative to the size of GDP.⁶⁴ If rentier states have anti-democratic properties, then it would not matter whether they are Shia majority, Sunni majority or have some other religious makeup. Ross’s tests include many non-Muslim states that are single-product economies and ends up with the same results. The only hitch in completely eschewing religion as a determinant of democracy is that Ross’ regression results include Islam (Muslim percentage of a state’s population) as a control variable and it is also a significant predictor of regime type (beta coefficient of -.018). Its effect is weaker than oil (coefficient of -.034) and mineral (coefficient of -.0459), but is nonetheless an indicator that Islam cannot be excluded entirely as a cause of authoritarianism.⁶⁵ This returns us to square one about whether Shia Islam is more conducive to democracy than Sunni Islam.

The Potential-Reality Gap

⁶³ Schleifer, Y. 2005. ‘Azerbaijan Oil: A Mixed Blessing’, *Christian Science Monitor*, December 30th.

⁶⁴ 2004. Beirut: Association of Lebanese Industrialists. URL:

http://user1041620.wx19.registeredsite.com/ALI/Get_Articles.asp?ArticleID=271

URL Last Accessed on November 8th 2006.

⁶⁵ Ross Op Cit. p.341

In conclusion, one finds that there is more than a grain of truth in the Nasr school of thought that Shias are systematically different from Sunnis in their theology and social mores and that this also spills over into political attitudes and behaviour. The fact that Iran, for all its democratic deficiencies, has a population that effusively participates in elections, believes in the efficacy of their votes to affect politics, and has grown to understand the fundamental logic of democracy like no Sunni country stands testimony. Iran is not a democratic state, of course, with sovereignty vested in God and the Guardian Council of Islamist jurists. However, whatever promising democratic elements it has is unmatched in Sunni countries (with the exception of Turkey, which can be better categorised as a ‘secular’ rather than a ‘Sunni’ country). Despite the setback of Ahmadinejad’s election, some Iran specialists take hope in a new ‘post-revolutionary and post-reformist secular democratic and republican paradigm’ that “is still in the making.”

If the reformists still invest some hope in the “latent capacities” of the existing constitution, secular republicans focus on the untapped capacities of civil society as a way out of Iran’s political impasse. This strategy implies the need to form broad democratic fronts (combining civil society forces, intellectuals and democratic parties) – an approach tested in practice in some east-central European and Latin American countries.⁶⁶

One of the well known causal mechanisms for the democracy deficit in Muslim countries is the failure of secular and Islamist oppositions to unite due to the authoritarian regime’s cooptation and divide-and-rule

⁶⁶ Mashayekhi, M. 2005. ‘A New Era for Iran’s Democracy’, *Open Democracy*, URL: http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-irananddemocracy/election_2607.jsp URL Last Accessed on November 4th 2006.

devices.⁶⁷ Pro-democracy Iranians are realising the futility of allying with (or winning over) the *ulama* since Islamic democracy has been tried and tested and turned out to be a diminished form of democracy, a thin veneer for “Mullahcracy”. In no other Muslim country except Shia Iraq has the public rejected clerical rule as strongly as in Iran (a 2003 public opinion poll shows 70 percent Iranians opposed *velayet-e-faqih*).⁶⁸ There is similar potential for democracy in Shia-majority Lebanon and Azerbaijan, although it often withers due to internal conflicts.

The gap between the potential for Shia democracy and reality is immense. The obstinate interference of Shia Islam in political power since the Safavid dynasty upends the traditional Shia obligation to question and limit authority. Absence of modernisation among the generally penurious Shias also weakens the socio-economic basis for democratisation. The continued viability of *jihad* culture among Shias facing oppression also steals the ideological limelight from gradualist democratic pathways. The current division in popular sympathies between Muqtada al-Sadr and Ayatollah Sistani in Iraq is one illustration of the larger malaise of recourse to violence to achieve justice for Shias. Opportunistic adherence to electoral democracy to grab power and then freeze the polity in a semi-authoritarian condition is another hurdle that bespeaks of the weak internalisation of democratic culture.

⁶⁷ Fish Op Cit.

⁶⁸ 2003. ‘Iran’s Public Opposition to Clerical Rule at 70 %’, *United Press International*, May 8th.

The external dimension of democracy promotion and how it might propel Shias to democratise has an oxymoronic function. On one hand, the rise of Sistani and his demonstration effects on the entire Shia realm was facilitated by the US invasion of Iraq, but on the other, the long US occupation of Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein has also nurtured the mercurial advent of anti-democratic Sadrists and Badrists who are making stabilisation of the new order doubly difficult as if Sunni *jihadi* terrorists were not enough to keep the trouble stewing.

There also remains the bigger question of whether the Shias, 15 percent of the world's Muslims, can erase the democracy deficit in the entire Muslim world through the power of their example. With what certitude can the proposition that Shias are a 'subjective' force for democracy that can democratise not only themselves but Sunni Muslims work out? There are no guarantees that the Shia awakening will not lead to even tighter restrictions on civil liberties and political freedoms by Sunni fundamentalist states like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan that constantly fear armed uprisings by Shia minorities. Nasr's dream of Shias as both an 'objective' and 'subjective' democratic force could end as just that- a well-intentioned pipedream.