

Review

Reviewed Work(s):

Maqālātī dar jāmi'ah-yi shināsī-yi siyāsī-yi Īrān (Articles on the Political Sociology of Iran)

by Ervand Abrahamian and Soheyla Torrabi-farsani

Review by: Maziar Behrooz

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The last person Buchta interviewed was the Shi'ci cleric Salehi-Najafabadi. Salehi-Najafabadi is also a critic of the present regime and is a proponent of the idea of *vikālat* rather than *vilāyat*, arguing that the leader of Iran was not to be legitimized by God alone, but had to be elected by and subject to the people. In his books, Salehi-Najafabadi criticizes tendencies in Shi'ism that lead to isolation from the Sunnis. He is a crucial figure in the Islamic unity discourse, more so than many of the others interviewed by Buchta. In this part of the book Buchta also describes the efforts made by Khomeini's successor, Ayatollah Khamenei, with regard to Islamic unity.

Buchta has conducted extensive field research; he has talked to a surprising number of people whom one would hardly imagine ever giving interviews to foreigners, men like the proscribed Ayatollah Montazeri. This is one of the great assets of the work. Another is that he introduces to a Western audience Iranian thinkers who have hitherto been unknown. They spoke quite openly with him and Buchta quotes a number of very interesting statements. He does not, however, introduce some of their most interesting ideas; Eshkevari and Soroush, at least, are known for ideas other than the ones presented by Buchta.

Nevertheless he provides an excellent introduction to three of the leading opposition thinkers of post-revolutionary Iran. Not much attention has been paid to the three of them in Western research. Buchta also clarifies and identifies many of the political constellations, networks, and persons at work in Iran today along with their ideological leanings.

On occasion the question arises: what were the criteria for his choice of these people to interview? There are many other opposition thinkers in Iran as well, and why should we only get to know the views of Soroush, Eshkevari, and Salehi-Najafi? Without doubt Bazargan, Yazdi, and Sahabi are prominent figures in Iran's political landscape, but it might have been of interest to know the perspectives of other political factions as well. No members of the so-called technocrat elements in government were sought out. Since they are thought to be the pragmatic force within the regime, their views might have shed some light on the unity project. But apart from that minor failing, more works like Buchta's are needed by students of Iran. Many experts are unable to travel to and in Iran and do the fieldwork necessary to provide any insight on the political situation there. Iran's policies, the political groupings that make those policies, and the figures that make up those groupings cannot be readily understood when analyzed from afar. As a hands-on piece of field research Buchta's work is a very useful tool and an important source for foreign analysts of Iranian politics.

*Katajun Amirpur*  
*University of Bamberg*

***Maqālātī dar jāmi'ah-yi shināsī-yi siyāsī-yi Īrān*** [Articles on the Political Sociology of Iran], Ervand Abrahamian, trans., Soheyla Torrabifarsani, Tehran: Shirazeh Publications, 1997, 254 pp. + index.

The works of Ervand Abrahamian comprise some of the most important historical studies on the modern history of Iran. While it is hard to imagine how any

student of Iran can obtain a clear picture of modern Iranian society without reference to Abrahamian's numerous in-depth studies, his work is just beginning to find its way into the Persian-language world. One can only make an educated guess as to why Abrahamian, a native of Iran, has been neglected for so long by the large and very active Iranian community of translators. Political considerations and the fact that the author has a left-wing approach to history, or that he braves researching politically sensitive subjects, are perhaps among the reasons for the long neglect. The collection under review is the first translation of Abrahamian's work in Iran, and will undoubtedly partially fill the gap felt by his absence.

The work translated here is a collection of five articles published in journals or as book chapters. The articles are studies on the social history of Qajar Iran, the Constitutional Revolution of 1906–1909, and the working class and political developments of the 1940s. A brief preface by Kaveh Bayat, the publishing company's editor, introduces Abrahamian as the author of *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (which has yet to be translated and published in Iran even though it has been cited by many Iranian historians). The author's approach is presented as one with some shortcomings but the conclusion is that the collection is nevertheless useful for students of Iranian society. This approach seems to have become the standard manner of presenting works that have previously been difficult to publish in Iran. Indeed, the book's publication is a lesson in how "unwanted" works can see the light of day in Iran. The text of the translation is a professional treatment of the original English articles.

The common theme of the collection is the social history of Iran in different periods. Among the articles three stand as classic works. In "Oriental Despotism: the Case of Qajar Iran," Abrahamian compares two hypotheses put forward by Marx and Engels on the nature of despotism in the Middle East. He views Marx's hypothesis as better corresponding to Qajar Iran in the nineteenth century and goes on to analyze the fractured nature of that society and the means by which the state exerted control. This article is essential in any study and teaching of nineteenth-century Iran and can provide a solid theoretical base for comparing Iran to Ottoman society of the same period.

The second article, co-authored with Farhad Kazemi and entitled "The Non-revolutionary Peasantry in Iran," deals with the evident lack of widespread political activity among Iranian peasants. The study attempts to answer such key questions as why there has been a lack of widespread rebellion among Iranian peasants, or why urban-based political movements have been unsuccessful in establishing a firm base among the peasantry. The article identifies the presence of a weak state, the formation of a crucial dissatisfied middle peasantry, and the existence of an interactive relationship among different peasant communities as being the factors common to other revolutionary movements (Russia, China, and Yugoslavia) where the peasantry had played a decisive role. The absence of the second and third elements in Iran are presented as the reason for a lack of radical, nationwide revolutionary movement among the peasantry in Iran.

The third article, "The Strengths and Weaknesses of the Labor Movement in Iran, 1941–53," is a study of a crucial phase in the movement. During this period of relative political freedom and parliamentary activity, the labor movement moved out of the shadow of Reza Shah's authoritarian rule and entered an era of political activity and trade union organization. Iran's Communist party,

the Tudeh, was also established at this time and played a pivotal role in organizing labor, particularly oil industry workers. The article gives a brief history of the labor movement prior to 1941, then moves on to analyze its development during the period under study. It attempts to show the strengths and the weaknesses of the movement during the period. Among the movement's strengths, the author notes the rapid growth of the movement, the existence of real economic dissatisfaction, and the ability of the Tudeh to provide organizational and political leadership. Among its weaknesses was its inability to match the power of the military, which remained loyal to the shah, and its relatively small numbers (only ten percent of the adult population at its peak).

There is no doubt that the translation of this collection of Abrahamian's articles is a welcome addition to the field of Iranian studies in Iran. It is my understanding that *Iran Between Two Revolutions* is also being translated and, depending on the political atmosphere, may be published soon. This means that at long last, the Persian reader may be exposed to Abrahamian's critical thinking about modern Iranian society and politics.

*Maziar Behrooz*  
*San Francisco State University*

***Parliamentary Politics in Revolutionary Iran: The Institutionalization of Factional Politics***, Bahman Baktiari, Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1996, ISBN 0-8130-1461-1, 282 pp. appendix, notes, bibliography, + index.

Bahman Baktiari's book is a well-written and researched description of the parliamentary politics of revolutionary Iran's Majlis. This work is significant mainly because it focuses on a political institution that has received neither sufficient nor appropriate attention from the Western academic community. While the politics of revolutionary Iran have been analyzed from many different angles by a variety of experts, studies on the Majlis are rare, and none cover the role, nature, and politics of this institution chronologically from its beginning to 1994.

The author examines the dynamic political nature of the Majlis in three different dimensions. First, he discusses the impact of this institution on both the domestic and foreign policies of Iran since the 1979 Revolution. Second, Baktiari reveals how the factional alignment and interaction of political groups in the Majlis reflect a similar pattern of behavior in other power centers in the country. Finally, he describes how major national and international political events have influenced the role and nature of the Majlis in contemporary Iranian politics.

This 282 page book consists of six chapters, in addition to the introduction and conclusion sections. In the first chapter, Baktiari outlines the historical criteria for a comparative study of the Majlis by describing the Iranian political environment and the role of the Majlis from the era of the Constitutional Movement at the turn of the twentieth century to the end of the Shah's regime in 1979. The next chapter concentrates on the remaking of the parliament after the Islamic Revolution and the First Majlis (1980–84). The third chapter covers the Second