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# Tehran's Own Worst Enemy

A theocratic regime has made Iranians less observant. The number of clerics in parliament has diminished greatly since the revolution. Reuel Marc Gerecht reviews “Democracy in Iran: Why It Failed and How It Might Succeed” by Misagh Parsa.



Shiite Muslims inside a mosque in the Golestan Province of Iran. PHOTO: ERIC LAFFORGUE/ART IN ALL OF US

By *Reuel Marc Gerecht*

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It's easy for scholarly books that go against the Zeitgeist to slip by unnoticed, but it would be a mistake to overlook Misagh Parsa's "Democracy in Iran: Why It Failed and How It Might Succeed." This fine book shreds the dominant narratives about the Islamic Republic as Mr. Parsa analyzes the titanic struggle under way in Iran between theocracy and democracy. Along the way, the author shows why gradual reform—the leitmotif for Western supporters of “pragmatic” Iranian president Hassan Rouhani and of the Obama administration's nuclear deal—is unlikely.

Mr. Parsa, a professor of sociology at Dartmouth, digs deep into Persian primary material often ignored in Washington policy discussions, intelligence analysis and journalism. He also mines data from other authoritarian countries to compare and contrast those that have transformed peacefully with those that have changed more violently but still democratically (Indonesia) or erupted and returned

to dictatorship (Egypt). Mr. Parsa's careful scholarship leads him to one overarching conclusion: A peaceful evolution to a more humane system in the Islamic Republic, let alone a more democratic one, isn't in the cards.

Mr. Parsa argues convincingly that Iran is instead moving toward greater internal oppression and foreign wars, which will produce ever more convulsive internal dissent. As evidence, he lays out a series of ironies that highlight the dysfunction in Iran. A revolution for the common man has produced a vast empire of corruption among an all-powerful elite as society has become more stratified than under the Pahlavi dynasty. A ruling clique that saw universities in revolution against the shah is now perpetually at war with higher education—which, despite Islamized curricula, keeps producing rebellious students.

A theocratic regime has made Shiites less observant: Few attend the ever-shrinking supply of functioning mosques. The numbers here are striking: Mr. Parsa relates that “a Revolutionary Guard commander, Zia Eddin Hozni, recently announced that about 3,000 of the country's 57,000 Shiite mosques, or only 5 percent, were fully operational during the year.” As of 2012, nearly half of them “lacked clerics and prayer leaders.” In a clerical state, fewer and fewer young men want to become clerics, Mr. Parsa's statistics show. Young women from traditional families are declining to take mullahs as mates. (Even at the end of the Soviet Union, the communist elite never lost their cachet as marriage partners.) Clerics trying to tell citizens to behave properly have been beaten severely. Their desire to serve in parliament has waned, as has the people's willingness to elect them. In 1980, 60.7% of the deputies in the Majles—the Iranian parliament that rubber-stamps the theocracy—were clerics. After the 2016 elections, their number had declined to 5.5%.

Mr. Parsa highlights how the regime is its own worst enemy: In religion, economics and culture, the state heavily intrudes, politicizing the personal and apolitical. How Iranians dress and socialize, what they read, write and watch, how they practice their faith and whom they recognize as religious authorities—areas where believers could once exercise considerable individual discretion—have all been subject to intolerant state oversight. Beyond oil and gas, the once mostly private economy has been increasingly divvied up among the clerics and their allies. “The relatively high level of state involvement in so many aspects of Iranian society has forced the state to rely on continuous repression to maintain power,” Mr. Parsa writes. This violent politicization has diminished social cohesion, eroding any common ground that might allow Iran's opposing factions to come together in pursuit of peaceful reform. “The result in the long run,”

Mr. Parsa concludes, "is likely to be a movement to transform the political system through a disruptive,

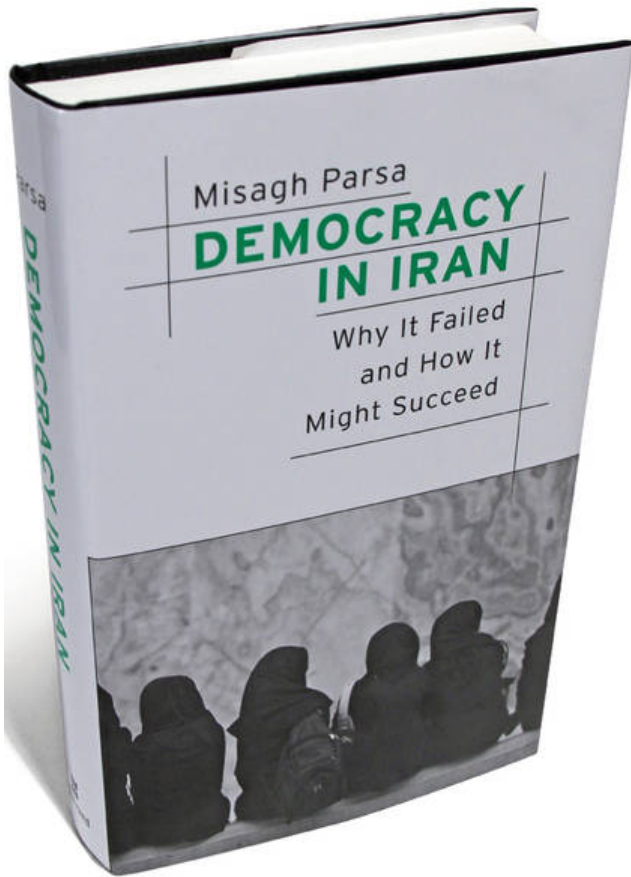


PHOTO: WSJ

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#### DEMOCRACY IN IRAN

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By Misagh Parsa  
*Harvard, 406 pages, \$45*

revolutionary route.”

In 1978, it took a year for opposition to the shah to radicalize and openly seek revolution. In 2009, after a bitterly contested presidential election that brought millions onto the streets in Iran’s major cities, dissent radicalized within one week. Yet this pro-democracy Green Movement still failed, and one of the reasons why is that its leadership—especially the presidential candidates Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi —were unprepared to back an assault on the system that they had done so much to build. Mr. Parsa suggests that inevitable future eruptions will have a leadership more in sync with the people.

Mr. Parsa gives credit to the prowess of the coercive institutions of the state, especially the Revolutionary Guard Corps and its lower-class thugs in the Basij, the regime’s morality police-cum-Brownshirts who saved the day in 2009. But the author questions the solidity of the guards. The theocracy’s indispensable praetorians have become in

part a draft army and also a massive business enterprise. Even though the 2009 insurrection was put down, supreme leader Ali Khamenei fired several Revolutionary Guard commanders when they failed to show sufficient resoluteness against protesters.

Mr. Parsa's book isn't a stylistic tour de force, though it is mercifully free of most of the jargon that now cripples so much academic writing. While anyone curious about Iran will find it illuminating, for those working in government or the foreign-affairs community, it is mandatory reading. Although Mr. Parsa barely discusses U.S. policy toward Iran, his book is easily the most important work in English on the Islamic Republic since the revolution. He sagely casts doubt on those from Jimmy Carter to Barack Obama who have been naive about the regime's potential for reform. The book is a comprehensive refutation of the Obama administration's hopes that increasing commerce with Iran would moderate the regime and that it was safe to put an expiration date on the regulation of Iran's nuclear program.

Moderation and reform among Iran's ruling elite aren't coming. Another popular pro-democracy rebellion is. Those who value freedom for Iran's citizens and security for the rest of the world can only hope that Mr. Parsa's counter-revolutionary prediction is validated sooner rather than later.

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