Since the landslide victory of Mohammad Khatami and his reformist government in Iran’s 1997 presidential election, Iran has justifiably garnered much attention once again. If successful, the new reform movement will constitute a political experience as significant as the 1979 Revolution. Today’s is a unique religio-political experience unfolding from within a fundamentalist theocracy two decades old. Although this reform movement is still evolving, its points of departure from the ruling theocratic regime are evident. Political change is driven by a variety of factors—social, economic, cultural, international influences, etc.—and the recent political reform movement in Iran is no exception. Social problems associated with the rise of a new generation, economic crisis and uncertainty regarding nationalization or privatization, political factionalism and power struggles, Iran’s relative isolation internationally and the pressure of globalization all set parameters for the emergence of this reform movement and have been rather extensively discussed. Nevertheless, these studies view the reform movement as an exclusively political phenomenon and do not explain how a dogmatic, ideological, religious milieu has produced from within such a popular democratic language and outlook that cries for nothing less than “pluralism,” “human rights,” “civil society,” and “rule of law.” Addressing this question, this paper examines this recent shift in Iranian political discourse from the vantage point of a shift in religious discourse. From the mid-nineteenth century onward, five major patterns of political behavior and political discourse are traceable in the modern history of Iran:
Forough Jahanbakhsh

the traditional patrimonialism of the Qajar era, democratic parliamentarianism of the Constitutional era, modernizing autocracy of the Pahlavi era, revolutionary ideology of the Islamic Republic and finally the recent democratic pluralism of the reform movement which is still in its incipient stage; the pre-democratic experience.

The Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1906-1911 has been commonly recognized as a nationalist and a democratic revolution. It was the expression of Iran’s political awakening at the turn of the century. It aimed to eliminate the traditional patrimonialism of the Qajar dynasty, based on the personal authority of the king over his subjects and their expected servility, and instead establish a modern parliamentary system of government able to overcome Iran’s economic, social and political backwardness and incorporate it into the international system of modern sovereign nations. The revolution succeeded, a modern Fundamental Law was written, the monarch’s power was restricted and a parliament was set up. The political ethos of patrimonialism, however, was not completely eradicated.

Although Reza Shah—the first Pahlavi monarch—came to power through the approval of the parliament that deposed the last Qajar king in 1925, soon after consolidating his position he turned to an autocratic mode of rule. Throughout the Pahlavi era (1925-1979), the regime consistently exercised arbitrary power. Neo-patrimonialism emerged, this time empowered with a modern bureaucracy, a centralized military force and “modernization” as its legitimizing ideology. Democratic parliamentarianism that had gone into abeyance was revived only for a brief period under the premiership of Muhammad Mosaddeq, the nationalist Prime Minister who led the Oil Nationalization Movement of Iran (1951-1953). After the fall of Mosaddeq’s government by a royal coup d’état aided by the CIA, Muhammad Reza Shah’s (the second Pahlavi monarch) absolutism was restored.

In response to the Shah’s autocratic rule, a new political discourse emerged during the 1960s and the 1970s that may be termed the “resistance discourse.” This discourse was by nature anti-dictatorial, anti-establishment and—being a discourse of its time—was primarily an ideological discourse whose parameters were set by the contingencies of the liberation movements of Third World countries during the Cold War. It was highly inspired by the anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist trends of the time. Under these rubrics of resistance, two militant political movements were at work in Iran: one with a Marxist Communist-oriented ideology and another with a revolutionary Islamic ideology.

I ideological Discourse of the Revolution

Due to factors beyond the scope of this paper, the revolutionary Islamic ideology turned out to be the most effective at mobilizing masses and leading the
Revolution of 1979. Its success was, however, ostensibly related to the charismatic leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini and its appeal as a homegrown ideology. Borrowing ideological categories and the revolutionary jargon of Marxism, Ali Shariati, the prominent religious intellectual of the time, masterfully created an effective ideological discourse accessible to the people, and promoted it in familiar native idioms and religious symbols. This provided the intellectual component necessary for mobilizing support for Ayatollah Khomeini’s leadership. Although Shariati was known for his anti-clericalism—his ideology accorded no privileged position to the clergy—his ideologization of Islam inadvertently set the stage for domination of the clergy after the revolution, and helped the clerics justify their status as the true interpreters and ideologues of the revolutionary Islamic ideology. This ideological Islamic discourse promoted, among other things, social justice, political freedom, and a participatory representative type of government. The democratic ideals of the constitutional movement were somehow revived. The tide of events after the revolution, however, moved the political direction of Iran toward a clerical neo-patrimonialism in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The first draft of the constitution presented by the Revolutionary Council—modeled on the 1958 constitution of the French Fifth Republic—envisioned a democratic government with no superior position reserved for the clergy. However, the constitution produced by the cleric-dominated Assembly of Experts, ratified by a national referendum in 1979, established the first clerical government of its kind that granted the mandate of the jurists, the *velayat-e faqih* based on Ayatollah Khomeini’s interpretation of Shiite theory of political authority. Khomeini believed authority should be vested in the *fuqaha*, successors of the Twelfth Imam as the true interpreters of the Shariah. Ostensibly, this theory claims a very prominent position not only for the *fuqaha* but also for Shariah, or *fiqh*. Institutionalizing this *fiqh*-based understanding of Islam in the Constitution opened the gate to clerical supremacy, and aided the clerics’ seizure of political power in post-revolutionary Iran. The *fiqh*-based understanding of religion and politics in general has served as a legitimizing ideology of clerical rule, and has shaped and directed much of the political language and behavior of the post-revolutionary Iran. Because the top institutions of religion and politics are one and the same, the religious and political discourses have become inseparable. The dominant religious discourse, based on an ideological understanding of Islam, is by its very nature militant, exclusivist and populist; it demands unquestioning obedience and conformity to its ideological elite—the clergy. The politicization of religion has made post-revolution political discourse in Iran equally stifling. This political ideology—a mélange of traditional patrimonialism, modern institutions of representative government, charismatic leadership and Shiite political theory—adopts a discourse that enjoys the same
characteristics of the ideological religious discourse. Hence, it has consistently felt threatened by, and sought to hinder, the process of true democratization.

**Intellectual Challenge to Ideological Islam**

If politics are determined by religion in a religious society like Iran’s, there must be a logical link between change in political discourse and shifts in religious discourse. In order to understand the former we need to know how and when the latter occurred. While the common perception is that since the reformists came to power in 1997 a new religious reform is also unfolding, the reality is that the political reform movement is one auspicious fruit of a religious intellectual reform movement already at work at least one decade prior to the 1997 political watershed. The intellectual and theoretical changes necessary for understanding, accepting, and disseminating the democratic ideals of reform had already taken place. The twenty million voters who cast their vote for President Khatami were not simply supporting him in hope of a better social and economic life; their act was also an expression of revolt against the ideological understanding of Islam that had ruled their lives for more than twenty years. This could simply not happen if the theoretical foundations of the legitimizing ideology of Islamic rule were not shaken. Earlier on, there were several social and economic problems that could generate such a widely popular movement for change. But it never happened because the regime’s legitimizing ideology, which was so closely related to the people’s religious convictions, was not yet questioned. This of course, was the most difficult step for the people to take without the guidance of a capable leadership—a intellectual rather than political leadership.

During the decade prior to the 1997 election, a steadily emerging new trend of religious intellectualism challenged untouchable doctrines of this stagnant ideological understanding of Islam. Since the mid 1980s, educated religious individuals outside the political power structure have debated issues such as rationalism, pluralism, tolerance versus violence, rejection of non-critical and blind emulation of the fuqaha, critical analysis of the ideologization of religion, rights versus duties, and reconciling religion and democracy. The newly emerging trend of religious intellectualism led by Abdolkarim Soroush found its own forum in 1991—the journal *Kiyan*—after facing government-imposed difficulties in publishing such materials in *Keyhan-e Farhangi.* One can argue that
the point of departure from the ideological religious discourse and the move toward an epistemological religious discourse, which became the gateway to democratic discourse, came when Soroush published a series of articles on his theory of “Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowledge” (*Qabd va Bast-e Te’urik-e Shari'at*) between 1988-1990.³

This theory had rightly targeted a very sensitive yet fundamental aspect of the prevalent religious understanding—its epistemic foundations. Arguing that any understanding of religion is humane and thus time-bound, Soroush’s theory successfully launched the thesis that no understanding of religion is ever sacred, absolute or final. It laid the foundation of an epistemological pluralism that is the basis of any democratic pluralism. Of course this thesis of multiplicity of readings of religion, then taboo, had dramatic implications for the totalitarian religious and political power of the clergy, notwithstanding the fact that at the beginning the clerics either had not fully understood its implications or had simply underestimated its power. This theory, and many related ideas written about and elaborated upon, became the turning point in the current religious discourse and nourished the mind and the language of the generation that was to bring about the political reform movement in the late 1990s.

It should be mentioned that secular intellectuals also made contributions to the criticism of totalitarian rule and welding religion and politics together, for which they were punished with various restrictions, imprisonment and even death. The secular discourse, however, remained absolutely marginal if not ineffective for several reasons. In deeply religious Iranian society the secular discourse did not enjoy a strong following. It was seen by many to be westernized, alien, and even anti-revolutionary, anti-Islam and directed by foreign interests. But more importantly, secular discourse hardly went beyond criticism; it failed to provide alternative solutions from within the Iranian tradition. In other words, the secular intellectualism of post-revolutionary Iran failed to provide leadership for reform very much for the same reasons that it failed in the pre-revolutionary period. Moreover, it was exceptionally disorganized this time.

The post-revolutionary religious intellectualism proved capable not only of shaking the underpinnings of the religious-political establishment, but also of providing an effective alternative. It produced a discourse of religious pluralism that would easily yield to political pluralism. Religious intellectualism offers a non-ideological understanding of Islam that when translated into political discourse will only support democracy and political pluralism. It advocates an order in which the dignified position of religion will be restored while politics will be run solely by rational scientific methods of administration.
Epistemological Discourse vs. Ideological Discourse

Among the salient features of this new religious discourse are some that stand out in contradicting the dominant ideological discourse. In the new epistemological discourse religion is defined by its core element, i.e. “religious experience” and religiosity by being the free pursuant of these inner spiritual experiences. While in the ideological understanding—a fiqh-based understanding of Islam—religion is seen primarily as a set of laws that regulate people’s religious and social behavior. Religiosity, accordingly, is reduced solely to observation of these laws and performance of prescribed rituals, i.e., outward practices.

Giving Shariah such a central role requires a class of interpreters to offer official interpretation and judge the correctness of peoples’ behavior. Thus, the clergy enjoys a position of privilege by which it arrogates for itself the supreme position in politics as well. In contrast, by removing fiqh from the center of religion and replacing it with “religious experience,” the new religious discourse recognizes not only plurality in the heart of religion—because “religious experience” is plural by nature—but also multiplicity in interpreting religion. As such, eliminating the need for one official interpretation removes the need for an official class of interpreters.

Moreover, extending the privileged positions of fiqh and fuqaha into politics has naturally overwhelmed religion with extraordinary claims and has raised high expectations by the people. The ideological discourse has a maximalist understanding of religion. It insists that the Shariah offers the comprehensive plan for felicity both in this life and the other including providing economic and political plans. The new discourse, however, has a minimalist understanding of religious laws pertaining to social life and questions the efficacy of the Shariah for governing the society. Advocating rationalism, it also prefers rational administrative platforms for governing the society that are to be implemented by qualified individuals elected on the basis of their capabilities, not on an a priori right.

In contrast to an ideological understanding of religion that views people as duty-bound individuals responsible for fulfilling their religious duties by participating in public and political affairs, the new discourse views humankind as right-bound creatures and insists on the natural rights of humankind. Human beings are entitled to certain rights that are prior to their religious orientation, including the right to decide how to govern their affairs. The new religious discourse emphasizes the role of reason and rationality versus revolutionary emotionalism and blind imitation. Notwithstanding its serious criticism of fiqh, the new discourse does not reject fiqh. Rather it desires to limit its unduly augmented scope. To do this, the new discourse has to challenge the entrenched idea that Islam has primarily a political mission and that the Shariah is sufficient
for political management.

In the politically and ideologically charged atmosphere of the Islamic Republic, no one could perhaps put forward these daring questions in a better and more effective manner than Soroush did. He masterfully theorized why *fiqh* and *fuqaha* were unfit for political rule, though he has for the past decade paid dearly for this adventure. Drawing upon his theory of “Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowledge,” Soroush began to deal with some specific topics that had more immediate practical messages. In a lecture delivered in 1989, he questioned the practice of *taqlid* (emulation of the *fuqaha* by public), particularly in its political embodiment, and denounced it as an obstacle preventing free and rational investigation of social and political issues.

He followed this theme in another controversial lecture delivered in 1993, which aroused the anger of high-ranking jurists who considered his sayings blasphemous. His final and more direct blow to the clergy and its self-appointed position in politics culminated in two other lectures delivered in 1994. When published a few months later in *Kiyan*, the lectures generated an acrimonious debate in both intellectual and political circles heightened by warnings coming from some radical Ayatollahs including the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamanei. Soon after, the clerical opposition accelerated and induced an organized mob’s attack on Soroush, disrupting his lectures and threatening him with death.

In 1994 and 1995 he published some other articles on themes such as “Religious Democratic Government”, “Our Expectations of Religion”, “Maximalist Religion, Minimalist Religion”, “Ideologized Religion and Religious Ideology”, and “Religious Pluralism.” As these topics suggest, he questioned the ideological understanding of religion and its totalitarian grip on political power. Consequently, he was repeatedly called to the Department of Security and Information for hearings, was barred from public lecturing, was removed from his academic positions, received death threats, and was physically assaulted by hooligans. When he returned to Iran just prior to the 1997 elections, after roughly a year in unofficial exile, authorities confiscated his passport. Only after the newly elected government exerted pressure on authorities was it released. Although these restraints and problems persist today and have forced him to remain outside Iran, the intellectual movement he has set in motion has had lasting imprints on Iranians’ understanding of both religion and politics. The religious intellectual trend he inaugurated has fostered ideas of religion, humankind and politics so fundamental that they cannot be swept aside by either polemical debates or political coercion.

The boost the religious reform movement received after Khatami’s election was much expected. Khatami himself is among very few contemporary clerics who have shown an active interest in reconstructing religious thought,
and have contributed to the new religious intellectual movement. Another reformist is Mohammad Mojtabah Shabestari, a cleric with a theological training background from the seminaries who gradually separated himself from the traditionalists and joined the religious modernists’ camp in the second half of the 1990s. Engaging in rational theological debates, he also published articles in *Kiyan* on topics such as reason and revelation. His hermeneutical ideas also supported the possibility of multiple understandings of Islam. Advocating rationalization of the political order as a necessary step towards modernity, he questioned the jurisprudential reading of Islam and making it the base of government. Although Shabestari has more or less followed the same line of arguments as Soroush and has become a popular figure of the religious intellectual movement the hard liners have not harassed him. This is, among other reasons, mostly due to the fact that he is part of the clergy and his criticisms will be taken as friendly. Soroush, on the other hand, is a lay religious intellectual, a breed for which the clerical establishment has shown zero tolerance.

Prior to his presidency, Khatami demonstrated his intellectual inclinations. While serving as the Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance from mid 1980s to 1992, he supported intellectual, artistic and cultural enterprises that, by the standard of other ruling clerics, were very liberal. By the time of his forced resignation in 1992 a good number of books, translated materials, and intellectual journals like *Kiyan*, had received publication permissions from his department and were widely distributed all over Iran. Khatami’s intellectual contribution to the reform movement has been in the area of history of political thought. Surveying the medieval theories of political thought and political ethics, he investigated the causes of decline in Muslim political thought. He also searched the Muslim historical heritage to find rational elements in the politics of the past that could be useful for politics of today.

### Popularizing the New Discourse

Perhaps the most concrete indication of the close association of religious discourse and political discourse is evident in the fact that a good number of close associates of President Khatami, including Saeed Hajjariyan, who has founded the quasi-political party *Jebhe Musharokat* (the Participation Front), belong to the “Kiyan circle,” an intellectual circle that used to meet regularly and was led by Soroush. Soon after the landslide victory of the reformists on 23 May 1997 election—referred to in Iran as Nahzat-e Dowom-e Khordad—*Jame`eh*, the first reformist paper of its kind was published by two close associates of Soroush: Mahmoud Sahmsolwaezin, the editor in chief of *Kiyan*, and Mohsen Sazgara, another influential member of the Kiyan circle. Akbar Ganji, a disciple of Soroush and the director of his publishing house, began his journalistic activi-
ties and published the new weekly paper of *Rah-e Naw*. It was no wonder that these individuals and many others like them became the promoters of President Khatami’s program for “political development” (*tawse`eh siyasi*). In the absence of political parties in the Islamic Republic, the intellectual circles and journals such *Kyan* had functioned as quasi-political parties preparing the intellectual foundation and a discourse for political change. The reformist press that grew under Khatami—thanks to the open-mindedness of his first minister of the Department of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Ata’ollah Mohajerani, who issued publishing licenses for reformists—simply carried on the task of its small predecessor. The foundation for reformist writing and publishing had already been laid, and there were many religious and political reform issues to fill their pages. Expressions such as, “new interpretation of religion”; “different understandings of religion”; “pluralism”; “religious democratic government”; “rationalism”; “people’s sovereignty”; “human rights”; “tolerance,” and so on that had been taboo in the not very distant past now became very common elements of the reform discourse. Added to these ideas were two slogans of Khatami’s government, “the rule of law” and “civil society” that the press disseminated among all sections of society. The reformist papers contested the neo-patrimonial rule of the clergy to the point of publishing, among other critical analyses, the views of one of most senior *fuqaha*, Ayatollah Kho’i, rejecting the theory of *velayat-e faqih*.

These activities were by no means acceptable to the hard-line wing of the Islamic Republic that holds authority over the military, judiciary, the Council of Guardians, the Expediency Council—of course all being under the office of the Supreme Leader. In the last five years the hardliners have succeeded in curtailing activities of the reformist government and the parliament through a number of constitutional channels and sometimes by forceful coercion. Ironically, the judiciary uses the very same reformist axiom, “the rule of law,” to exercise its power to close down the reformist press, and imprison their editorial boards and other intellectual and national dissidents. One of the most recent examples is the case of Hashem Aghajari, a university professor and a veteran of Iran-Iraq war. After publicly criticizing the clergy for demanding absolute obedience from the public, he was charged with blasphemy, tried and sentenced to death by one of the notorious courts. The news created an upheaval among university students. Public demonstrations in protest against the decision of the judiciary and its policies became so widespread that was about to create another bloody unrest like the students’ uprising in the summer of 1998. Once again, the hardliners pacified protestors by threatening a more severe crackdown and promising to re-examine Aghajari’s case.
A Reflection

The epistemological, democratic religious discourse succeeded in de-legitimizing the ideological religious absolutism and its peer political absolutism. Yet, the political reformists in power have so far achieved only partial success in democratizing the political culture of Iran. The political reform movement of Iran has still a long way to go in institutionalizing democracy; not only in the sense of overcoming practical challenges imposed on it by the conservatives also in the sense of working out the details of its ideal form of government that is to be based on popular sovereignty (mardom salari). Although the heterogeneous front of political reformists (known as Jebbeh Dowom-e Khordad) has been inspired by and has adopted some democratic jargon of the new religious discourse, it will be a mistake to think that all individuals and groups identified with the reform movement necessarily subscribe to all ideals of religious intellectualism. It is very clear to insightful observers that even some of the well-known figures of political reform such as Abbas Abdi, Muhammad Reza Khataim, Abdullah Noori, Mohsen Kadivar, Yusufi Eshkevari, Hashem Aghajari, et al do not share the depth and the scope of interest for reform envisioned by leading religious intellectuals like Soroush. Moreover, their ideal form of government could radically differ from what religious intellectualism proposes. For instance some like Saeed Hajjariyan and Mohsen Kadivar argue for preserving the existing political system of velayat-e faqih but democratizing it through revising certain conditions envisioned in its Constitution for limiting the Leader’s power, a type of government called velayat-e mashruteh (Constitutional Guardianship of the Jurists) or nezarat-e faqih (Supervision of the Jurists). This resonates with monarchical constitutionalism in which the monarch reigns but does not rule. In contrast, in Soroush’s blue print of religious democratic government, clerical rule of any kind has no place or legitimacy in any way. For him, normative autonomy of political management from religion is not only descriptive but also prescriptive.

Alongside its day-to-day challenges, the current political reform movement should have long-term vision both at practical and theoretical levels. It is expected to be intellectually much more courageous in breaking with jurisprudential political theories of the conservatives, particularly now that the new epistemological and hermeneutical religious discourse has provided the flexible theoretical framework for building a new order. It will be instrumentalism and sheer short-sightedness if some of these politicians entertain the idea that the hard-earned achievements of religious intellectualism was useful only to bring The failure of Khatami’s government is not the end of political reform in Iran.
about the “Nahzat-e Dowom-e Khordad,” granting fame and positions to certain individuals—opportunists and non-opportunists alike. The reform movement began very well but could not fulfill all of its potential. It made so many political compromises and allowed theoretical concessions to the extent that even some of the hard-liners dare to call themselves reformists. The compromises mean that the golden opportunity for a peaceful political transformation that had the unwavering support of the people has been lost. Although all political reformists advocate reform and change, they are divided on their definitions and goals. As mentioned above there are still some who do not want a radical change in the nature of the political system which is deeply interrelated with certain religious institutions. Moreover, power struggle and ideological nuances constitute other sources of confusion within the political reformist front. It was this uncertainty, among other reasons, that weakened Khatami’s governments to bring about decisive change. In 1998 when Soroush in a public letter to Khatami urged him to take action and warned him about the consequences of his compromising policies that would lead to resurfacing of absolutists and their regaining of strength, many did not like his criticism. Both religious and non-religious supporters of Khatami thought it would be a matter of time for him to fulfill their democratic aspirations. Time has proven the opposite.

Whatever the reasons for the failure of Khatami’s government, it is definitely not the end of political reform in Iran. Nor does the domination of religious conservatives mean the end of religious reform. More important is that Iran is well into a process of transition from fundamentalism to post-fundamentalism.

Notes

1. While the terms Shariah and fiqh are not, technically speaking, exactly the same, in this paper they are used interchangeably. This is done to retain the closest possible sense of the current religio-political language of Iran, for in Persian the term fiqh is used not only for the science of jurisprudence but also refers to the Shariah, the body of the Islamic law.


3. See Keyhan-e Farhangi 5, No. 2 (1988); Keyhan-e Farhangi 5, No. 4 (1988); Keyhan-e Farhangi 5, No. 12 (1989); Keyhan-e Farhangi 6, No. 4 (1989); Keyhan-e Farhangi 6, No. 5 (1989); Keyhan-e Farhangi 6, No. 9 (1989); Keyahn-e Farhangi 7, No. 1 (1990).

4. This section is drawn on a number of Soroush’s arguments presented throughout his works. For some of these themes see: Abdolkarim Soroush, Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); A.K. Soroush, Mudama va Mudiriyat [Tolerance and Administration], (Tehran: Serat, 1997); “Essentials and Accidentals of Religion,” “Maximalist Religion, Minimalist Religion” reprinted in his book Bast-e Tajrubeh-e Nabavi [Expansion of Prophetic Experience],
Forough Jahanbakhsh

(Tehran: Serat, 1999); “Qara’at-e Fashisti az Din”[The Fascist Reading of Religion] in Rawshanfekri va Dindari [Intellectualism and Religiosity], (Tehran: Serat, 1997); “Religious Discourses in Contemporary Iran” in A’in-e Shahriyari va Dindari [The Etiquette of Ruling and Religiosity], (Tehran: Serat, 2000.)

5. For a detailed account of Soroush’s idea of religious democratic government see: F. Jahanbakhsh, Islam, Democracy and Religious Modernism in Iran (1953-2000): From Bazargan to Soroush, Ch. 5.


10. All these articles which first appeared in Kiyan, were later reprinted in his book Mudara va Mudiriyat.


