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CONSTITUTIONALISM AND DEMOCRACY IN THE RELIGIOUS IDEOLOGY OF MEHDI BAZARGAN

Saeed Barzin

Contemporary Iran has been in the midst of great changes touching every aspect of its social heritage. One feature of this process has been efforts by its social and political thinkers to deal with the conflicting ideas which have legitimized their role in the socio-political arena. The tensions are numerous but the dominant ones include: forces of tradition favouring the status quo in opposition to those seeking change; indigenous movements working against external influences; efforts to develop a prosperous functioning economy against the magnitude of an underdevelopment which perpetuates poverty; and the arbitrary authoritarian rule of the state in the face of demands by various social classes for a right in determining their own destiny.

Although a lack of scholarly research on his ideas has at times obscured his position, Mehdi Bazargan (1908-) is without doubt an important figure within the ranks of modern Muslim thinkers, well known as a representative of liberal Islamic thought and a thinker who has emphasized the necessity of constitutional and democratic politics. The following sketch seeks to place Bazargan within the context of Iranian politics and to reconstruct the main themes of his ideology.

The Modern Islamic Tradition in Iran

It is possible to identify two main categories amongst those who have contributed to the development of modern Islamic political thought in Iran. The first, who come from a clerical environment, are naturally more familiar with classical doctrine, although they may be as original as others in their speculative attempts. The second group constitutes a more recent current in which lay intellectuals have taken the leading role in defining and expounding the religious creed. While the modern discourse of the former is generally understood to have been initiated in the mid-nineteenth century, the latter predominantly belong to the period after the Second World War, which has witnessed sweeping socio-political developments.

The revitalization of Islamic political thought in the nineteenth century was largely a consequence of the erosion of power of the ruling house of Qajar. The defeats suffered at the hands of the Russians leading to the loss of Caucasian territories (1813 and 1828), and at the hands of the British leading to the loss of Afghan territory (1857), were followed by an understanding and a compromise between the state and the clerical community. In return for supporting the declining establishment, the relative autonomy of the clerics was recognized, including—possibly most important of all—the right to

collect religious taxes.¹ Here the notion of a more centralized spiritual leadership as introduced by Sheikh Morteza Ansari (d.1864) was to be the decisive factor. Financial independence and greater centralized leadership revitalized the traditional Shi'ite notion that the state's exercise of power represented a usurpation of the right of the last infallible Imam, now in occultation. This newly-strengthened clerical position manifested itself initially in the Tobacco Rebellion (1892) and subsequently in the Constitutional Revolution (1906).

The Constitutional Revolution, however, spelled the beginning of a period of loss of influence for the clerical community for it brought about, among other things, two distinct and fiercely antagonistic positions within their ranks. Some high-ranking clerics, among them Sheikh Mohammad Hosein Na'ini (d.1936), defended the constitutionalist position; other senior clerics led by Sheikh Fazlollah Nuri (d.1909), on the other hand, defended the absolutist position. The differences here essentially concerned the issue of interpreting the role of government with regard to divine law. The constitutionalists called for a curtailing of the arbitrary exercise of power, which they saw as contradicting law as set by the divine. The absolutists, on the other hand, emphasized the need for traditional religious law (*shari'a*) as opposed to efforts to establish non-religious and modern social codes. Both positions, however, were to lose to the more dominant secular modernist *Weltanschauung* which emerged in the guise of nation-worship (*mihan parasti*) nationalism in the next three decades.

It is against this feeling of loss and humiliation that reforms within the religious teaching houses must be viewed, particularly the establishment of the more organized seminaries in 1920s by Sheikh 'Abdol Karim Ha'eri Yazdi (d.1937) in Qom. (The schools were to be the power houses for the clerical community in the next fifty years.) Furthermore, following the death of Ayatollah Mirza Mohammad Taqi Shirazi (d.1920), religious authority was divided between a number of men, and the majority of clerics either voluntarily took or were forced to adopt a quietist and conservative political position. Indeed, the position of activists such as Sayyed Hasan Modarres (d.1937) and reformers such as Mirza Reza Qoli Shari'at-Sanglaji was clearly marginal.

The radical change that ushered in the second phase of development in modern Islamic political thought occurred after the fall of Reza Shah. Two new classes of religious interpreters now emerged. On the one hand, we find a radical orientation, initially articulated by the Devotees of Islam (*Jedā'iyān-e Eslām*) and later by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The devotees expressed a fiercely anti-secular attitude, which Khomeini complemented with his idea of the Guardianship of the Jurisconsult (*velāyat-e faqih*) as the culmination

¹ For studies on the political rule of the 'ulamā', see Akhavi, S. *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Iran: Clergy-State Relations in the Pahlavi Period*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1980; Algar, *Religion and State in Iran, 1785-1906*, Berkeley, 1969; Arjomand, S.A. *Authority and Political Culture in Shi'ism*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1988; Avery, P. (ed.) *The Cambridge History of Iran*, Vol. 7, ch. 19 & 20; Browne, E.G. *The Persian Revolution of 1905-09*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1910; Enayat, H. *Modern Islamic Political Thought*, London, Macmillan, 1982; Hairi, A.H. *Shi'ism and Constitutionalism in Iran*, Leiden, Brill, 1977; Momen, M. *An introduction to Shi'ism*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1985.

of the process set in motion by Ansari one hundred years earlier. (This was noticeably in contradiction to the majority view of the clerics, who continued to support accommodation with the secular ruling establishment.)

At the same time there emerged the practice of interpretation by intellectuals distinguished by not belonging to the traditional Islamic seminaries. During the rule of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1941-79), activist-interpreters such as Bazargan, 'Ali Shari'ati (d.1977) and theoreticians of the *Mojāhedīn-e Khalq* Organization developed new images of Islam within an increasingly complex modern urban social setting. The discourse of these men is of significance in its radical departure in the use of source material, method of interpretation, issues of debate, language of presentation and audience, as well as the function of rhetoric. They were furthermore concerned with socio-political matters as much if not more than with the demise of religious thought in general.

The three basic movements of clerical conservatism, clerical radicalism and lay modernism maintained their orientation until the 1979 Islamic revolution, which introduced essentially different paradigms, where basic traditional positions were syncretized with purely modernist orientations with a subsequent blurring of the traditional boundaries.² Within this context, the position of Bazargan is of significance, for he was the first consistent lay interpreter of religious thought in Iran. Furthermore, he was to maintain his polemical activity for over five decades, through which he was to establish an entirely new tradition of religious interpretation. Moreover, as we shall see, his generally moderate and liberal political notions placed him in a distinct category of his own.

Bazargan's Political Activities

In the 1940s Bazargan's personal political position was a marginal one; but it became more central in the following two decades, and assumed even greater significance in the 1970s and 1980s. Furthermore, his political position tends to show a reasonable degree of consistency in representing a constitutional, democratic and liberal Islamic view.³ The roots of his position must be sought in his family and education. His father, Hajj 'Abbasqoli Tabrizi (d.1954) was a self-made merchant, deeply religious but not wholly traditional, and active in the bazaar guilds. Bazargan's education was privileged. The secondary school he attended, *Dār al-Mu'allimīn*, headed by the esteemed Abol Hasan Khan Foruqi, was one of the first modern schools in the country. At the age of nineteen Bazargan was sent to France at government expense, where he

² For a typical case of syncretism see the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, including the 1988 amendments of the Constitutional Review Council (Tehran, Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, 1993).

³ On the political activities of Bazargan see Bazargan, M. *Modāfe'āt dar dādghāh-e gheir-e šāleḥ-e tajdīd-e naẓar-e neẓāmī* (Belleville, Modarres Publications, 1977); Bazargan, M. *Showrā-ye enqelāb va dowlat-e movaqqat*, (Tehran, FML, 1982), and Chehabi, H. *Iranian Politics and Religious Modernism: The Liberation Movement of Iran Under the Shah and Khomeini* (London, I.B.Tauris, 1990).

studied thermodynamics and frequented the popular Catholic and Republican circles of the Third French Republic.

Bazargan returned to Iran in 1936 to enter government service and the teaching profession as a lecturer in thermodynamics, before moving into the private sector. But Iran's experiment with political tolerance (1941-53) ushered Bazargan into the political field. He began his activities in a small mosque association (*Qānūn-e Eslām*) and cooperated with the newly founded Islamic association of students. He was also instrumental in the creation and running of the Engineers' Union, became active in the Iran Party and, through the party, in the National Front where he was appointed by Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq to supervise the takeover of the newly nationalized oil industry.

With the 1953 coup and the arrest of the top National Front cadres, Bazargan directed his energies towards the establishment and running of the National Resistance Movement. Here he was elected as the executive secretary, a position that he maintained despite his arrests in 1955 and 1957. With the liberalization period in the early 1960s he participated in the reactivation of the Second National Front. At the same time, he took part in the clerical reform movement in order to establish a new religious leadership code after the death of Ayatollah Hosein Borujerdi. In 1961 Bazargan and a number of close associates formed the Freedom Movement of Iran (FMI) (*Nehzat-e Āzādī-ye Īrān*), in which Bazargan was elected as the leader and ideologue. However, the activities of the group did not last long, for as a consequence of criticizing the Shah's White Revolution FMI members were arrested and imprisoned. Bazargan was sentenced to ten years' imprisonment but was released, on a royal pardon, after three.

Following his release and throughout the 1970s, Bazargan kept a low organizational profile but was actively involved in a number of intellectual movements, including a dialogue with the clerics on the meaning of government, a critique of Marxism and an elaboration of a modern interpretation of Islam. With the relaxation of political controls in 1977, Bazargan re-entered the open political arena through the Society for the Defence of Human Rights. An established record of activism in Islamic and nationalist (*melli*) circles promoted Bazargan to the forefront of Iranian opposition circles and it was on this basis that the emerging leader of the revolutionary movement, Ayatollah Khomeini, appointed him as the first post-revolutionary Prime Minister. In February 1979 and in the hope of limiting and reforming the state bureaucracy, Bazargan formed his cabinet. However, his nine-month government represented the climax of the defeat suffered by the liberal moderates at the hands of the radical and revolutionary movement. Bazargan was forced to resign and to move back to the opposition. His greatest contribution to Iranian politics is nonetheless possibly evident in this period, when in the midst of violent conflicts with the ruling power, he guided the Freedom Movement of Iran towards the development and maintenance of a liberal paradigm.

The Freedom Movement of Iran

The Freedom Movement of Iran (FMI), the brainchild of Bazargan and his life-long associate Yadollah Sahabi was founded on 17 May 1961, at the height of the government's liberalization programme. The formation of the movement appears to have had a number of aims—most notably the desire to create a political organization with an Islamic identity added to the nationalist, constitutionalist and democratic credentials of the *Melli* movement, as well as a more radical position in the Iranian opposition.⁴ The weakening of the secular liberal current in the 1950s and early 1960s and the issue of leadership in the religious hierarchy after the death of Ayatollah Borujerdi were also relevant in this respect.

Bazargan was active in the leadership of the FMI both in its early days and as late as 1989 when, as a member of the three-man leadership committee, he was in charge of 'ideological affairs'.⁵ In this capacity Bazargan prepared all the main polemical pieces which orchestrated FMI policy in dialogue with the monarchists, the leftists, the clergy and the modernists. However, despite Bazargan's significant influence on the content and direction of FMI policies, it would be wrong to think of the FMI as a one-man band. In particular, a number of noted theoreticians and political figures, including 'Ali Shari'ati, Ebrahim Yazdi and Ezzatollah Sahabi were also to distinguish themselves in its ranks.

The activities of the FMI fall into several distinct periods corresponding to the general historical framework of Iranian politics. The organization became active in the 1960–63 liberalization period, but was suppressed from the arrest of its members in January 1963 until 1977 when it re-emerged within the framework of the new liberalization programme. In the first post-revolution cabinet the FMI and its associates had a majority of seats. After its fall from power in November 1979 it became a loyal opposition group within the Islamic Republic. The activities of the FMI must be seen within the Iranian frame of reference and within this context they have achieved a degree of success. For one thing, they have survived three decades of Iranian politics—sometimes as a loose association, at other times as a more organized entity. Moreover, they have been consistent in presenting a platform throughout the period. The FMI's ability to articulate a liberal Islamic orientation in emphasizing religious national identity and seeking limitations to the power of the state has been the hallmark of its success. Furthermore, in the decade following the revolution it has been the most successful group in legitimizing a liberal, democratic and constitutional paradigm.

The social background of the FMI activists points to a 37% modern salaried middle-class and a 34% traditional 'bazaar' social base, with most activists coming from the northern provinces of the country. Some 80% of the leading members have had university education (with an overwhelming

⁴ For details of the Freedom Movement see note 3 above, and also *Şafaḥātī az Tārīkh-e Mo'āşer-e Īrān*, Tehran, FMI, 1982, vols. 1, 3, 9, 11.

⁵ Ebrahim Yazdi supervised political matters and Mohammad Tavassoli was responsible for administration. Bazargan, M., interview, Tehran, 1990.

number in natural sciences—an indication of their élite formation).⁶ The combination of old and new, or traditional and modern, is a noticeable characteristic of the FMI's social position, allowing the movement flexibility in its public and populist appeal, as indicated in its successful campaign in the first post-revolutionary parliamentary elections where the FMI and its Islamic modernist coalition partners won the second bloc of seats after the ruling Islamic Republican Party.

The ideology of the FMI, mainly articulated by Bazargan,⁷ rests on two main premises: first, that the social identity of the people of Iran is more 'Islamic' than 'Iranian'; second, that constitutional and democratic government is preferable to the authoritarian modernism of the ruling establishment at the time of the Pahlavis or the Islamic authoritarianism of the Islamic republic. On the first point, the FMI argued that the national Iranian identity of the people was a relatively modern concept, while Islamic religious identity was historical and all-embracing. Furthermore, it argued that the element of consciousness was of more significance than material conditions in the formation of political opinion and that in the process of political mobilization greater attention should therefore be paid to public opinion. It also supported the participation of the clerical establishment in the political process. On the matter of popular participation in government, the FMI argued that tyranny had been the fundamental cause of political instability, economic underdevelopment, individual corruption, and moral and religious decay in Iran.

*Development of Political Thought*⁸

Bazargan's main ideas will be discussed in more detail below. An underlying feature of his style, however, which should be kept in view, is his quest to reach as wide an audience as possible through the use of Islamic-modernist arguments to address the ideology of the ruling political élite and dislodge their discourse. Here certain clusters of ideas show a high degree of consistency. Foremost among them is an emphasis on religious moralism, Islamic national identity, and innovative methodology in the interpretation of religious texts. At the same time a number of other less significant clusters of ideas are apparent. These include historicism, the 'scientific' interpretation of social relations, and historical analysis.

Prominent throughout Bazargan's writing is the goal of addressing social matters, not on the level of current affairs or political events, but rather on a

⁶ Chehabi, op. cit., p.87.

⁷ Between 1941 and the early 1990s Bazargan produced 79 articles, pamphlets and books, of which the following are the most significant: [1946] *Kār dar Eslām*, Houston, Book Distribution Center, 1978; [1947] *Rāh-e tei shodeh*, Houston, Book Distribution Center, 1977; [1962] *Mobārazeh-ye mazhabī, Mobārazeh-ye siyāsī*, n.p., 1981; [1963], *Modāfe'āt dar dādgāh-e gheir-e šāleh-e tajdīd-e nazar-e nezāmī*, Bellville, Modarres Publications, 1977; [1966], *Be'sat va Ideolozhī*, Houston, Book Distribution Center, n.d.; [1982], *Moshkelāt va mas'el-e avvalīn sāl-e enqelāb*, 2nd ed., Tehran, FMI, 1983; *Bāzyābī-ye arzeshhā*, 2nd ed., Tehran, FMI, 1985.

⁸ For a fuller discussion, cf. Barzin, S. 'Islam in defence of constitutionalism and democracy: a political biography of Iranian ideologue Mehdi Bazargan', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Exeter, 1992.

more abstract level with the intention of arming the reader with an analytical framework and an Islamic *Weltanschauung*. This elevates Bazargan's writing above mere journalism or descriptive penmanship to an analytic domain. Although the scope and range of Bazargan's writing and the body of work that he produced unquestionably point to the intention of formulating a political philosophy, however, his work falls short of this aim in terms of abstraction, consistency, coherence and elaboration. In this respect, it should be taken into consideration that he had no classical training in either traditional Islamic literature or the modern social studies. Furthermore, the continuous demands of political polemics consumed much of the energy that he might have directed towards such an enterprise. Although Bazargan certainly expressed a respectable structure of political thought, then, he can only be placed in the lower ranks of political theorists.

The developmental route of Bazargan's political thought corresponds, more or less closely, to the ebb and flow of Iran's political events, in particular with regard to the role of the state and the imposition of its arbitrary will on civil society. Bazargan's early intellectual roots are naturally in the traditional Islamic culture of the early twentieth century which had come (in the more educated classes) into contact with European thought. The first significant European impact on Bazargan however came in France, where for seven years he studied thermodynamics and, as has been noted, was close to the Catholic and Republican circles of pre-war France. It was as a consequence of this that he embarked on a critique of traditional Iranian religious culture. On his return to Iran, Bazargan came to confront, but accept with certain reservations, the modernist convictions as represented in the ruling cliques. From the fall of Reza Shah to the coup that established his son firmly in power, Bazargan maintained a consistent polemical and ideological critique of secularism, Marxism and traditional modes of thought whilst expounding a concept of an Islamic work ethic. The 1953 coup, however, deflected Bazargan's attention away from the currents of thought in civil society to deal with the issue of law, or rather the lack of it, in the state's arbitrary treatment of its citizens. During the liberalization of 1960-63, Bazargan returned to write on 'national Islamic identity' as the foundation of appeal to the masses and a means of socio-political mobilization. With his arrest at the time of the 1963 unrest, his defence at the court was a condemnation of tyranny as the cause of individual and social corruption. It is not surprising, then, that during the Shah's autocratic rule (1963-77) Bazargan returned to address the currents of thought in civil society rather than those presented by the ruling establishment. During this period he sustained a dialogue in defence of democratic government with sections of the clerical community, and following a coup in the *Mojāhedīn-e Khalq* Organization put forward an extensive critique of Marxist ideology. With the 1977 liberalization, Bazargan became active in emphasizing themes on human rights and during his nine-month government his distinct emphasis was the reformation and limitation of the state as the foundation of natural society. During the 1980s Bazargan's efforts were to legitimize the liberal paradigm of political intercourse in contrast to authoritarian conceptions of power.

Context

To understand fully the meaning of the political language that Islamic liberals, specifically Bazargan, have used in the undertaking for social influence and political power, the context of their discourse has to be identified. Essentially the Islamic Liberal discourse was, and has been, interactive with five currents of thought, each with discrete structures of social perceptions and political inclinations. The first group are the Modernists,⁹ who have enjoyed the dominant position for most of the modern period in dictating the form and content of social perceptions and who articulated their ideas through the Pahlavi state. The Modernist philosophy essentially portrayed a romantic notion of Iranian national identity with reference to ancient Iranian empires and the Aryan race. It also emphasized the Persian element of Iran's cultural mosaic in contrast to other minority elements. Furthermore, it was fundamentally a secular attitude produced by a European influence which had exercised authority through diverse fields, including the sciences, culture and philosophy as well as politics, from the nineteenth century onwards.

The second cluster of ideas which the Islamic Liberals addressed was that of the clerical community. There has already been reference to the general framework of development of contemporary Islamic thought in Iran, and the point has been emphasized that the clerical community, in both its conservative and radical guises, has been the main factor in determining the direction of the development of religious thinking. For the purpose of this study it is sufficient to point out that, as far as the Islamic modernists were concerned, the significant feature of the traditional clerical community—at least up to the 1979 revolution—was their conservative and reactionary political position. This quietist position basically evolved after the Constitutional Revolution and has called for a minimal political role for Islam in general and the clerics in particular. Furthermore the traditionalists have always been more at ease with authoritarian or élitist notions of government.

The third persuasion which the Islamic Liberals faced was that of Marxism.¹⁰ Marxism entered the domain of intellectual consciousness in Iran after the Second World War and went on to influence considerably the form and content of political thought at various social levels. Marxist ideas originally filtered through the pro-Soviet Tudeh party and later through a number of independent essayists and small radical organisations such as the *Fedā'iyān-e Khalq*. Mainstream Iranian Marxism owes much of its literature to cold-war polemics and the notion of the 'two camps' doctrine, as well as to non-Soviet dependency theory. However, the former is predominant. In the literature of Iranian Marxists materialism, revolutionary praxis, class conflict and imperialism are the dominant issues.

The fourth cluster of ideas addressed by the Islamic Liberals was the authoritarian notion of government which the ruling establishment has used in

⁹ On Iranian modernism, cf. Katouzian, H., *The Political Economy of Modern Iran*, New York, New York University Press, 1981.

¹⁰ For works by the Iranian left, cf. the publications of the Tudeh Party and the *Fedā'iyān-e Khalq* Organization.

defence and justification of rule.¹¹ The establishment has appealed, in diverse forms and configurations, to various traditional concepts (e.g. notions of historic Iranian kingship) and modern concepts (e.g. the subjection of political development to economic progress). The traditional concepts find their fountainhead in the 'idealistic' notion of the divine right of the sovereign as well as the 'realistic' notion of the right of the powerful to exercise authority. In turn, the modern rationale for authoritarian government has its roots in the post-constitutional decade when the failure of the constitutional and democratic movement led to a revision of the idea of the establishment of the rule of law through representative institutions, to a notion of the rule of law through a centralized and authoritarian government.

The last cluster of ideas which the Islamic Liberals have had to address has been that of the public audience. Indeed, the identification of the public social awareness, which the Islamists assumed to be religious rather than not, was a prominent factor in the formation of the structure of their political thought and perspective. The traditional culture of Iran has always been deeply impregnated with religious notions, and it was to this element that the Islamic modernists, including Bazargan, addressed themselves.

Religion

The concept of religion in the ideology of Iran's contemporary Islamic modernists must be seen within the context of the dominance of religious ideas over public culture and perceptions. As a rule, the popular mind in its traditional form has maintained a culture based on fatalism, which has been coloured by the tragic version of the lives of the Shi'i saints. It has, moreover, accepted myths which involve the intervention of these semi-supernatural beings in daily life and events. Although this religious culture has gradually lost its stronghold (particularly from the time of the constitutional period onwards) either through syncretic processes or by a clear capitulation to modern ideas, it has continued to exercise a significant influence on all levels of thought. In contrast to this trend, European-inspired secular thought has seen religion as the bastion of traditional society, the cause of backwardness and an obstacle to progress. Secularists have thus sought to undermine this habitual culture and its institutions, and to limit their influence. It is of no surprise then that vigorous efforts have been exerted to re-shape collective customs, extending from the Uniform Dress Code (1928) and banning of the veil (1936) to the change of the Islamic calendar (1976).

It was in response to the challenges of traditional culture (in its conservative and reactionary guise) and secularism (in its aggressive revisionism) that Bazargan crystallized his own ideas on religion. On the one hand, he had to confront what he saw as the 'distorted Islam of superstition, ritualism and individualism' in contrast to the 'original, vital, social and creative Islam'.¹² On

¹¹ For an interesting debate on the dynamics of authoritarianism vis-à-vis the Islamic world-view, cf. Tabataba'i, *Dar āmadī-ye falsafī bar tārikh-e andīsheh-ye siyāsī dar Irān*, Tehran, Bureau for Political and International Studies, 1988.

¹² Bazargan, *Modāfe'āt*, p.64.

the other hand, he had to bring under control the 'unchecked march' of secular thought eroding the traditional morality of the community. In his efforts to construct a religious vision in interaction with these two themes, Bazargan cultivated the idea of the evolution of religion. This theory maintains that religious thought has and will continue to go through an evolutionary process. Furthermore, this process has two currents: first, that of the divine prophets whose message was perfected with Muḥammad; second, that of the common people who continue to seek truth until they ultimately reach (at an unknown time in the future) a level of understanding comparable with that of the prophets. The message of the prophets is this: man is God's viceregent on earth, commissioned to exploit nature through enterprising labour in order to actualize his supreme qualities.¹³ This divine message, Bazargan claims, corresponds with man's own experience throughout history, where driven by natural instinct he has come to exploit nature and create a new environment through scientific work.¹⁴

We should note that the idea of the 'evolution of religion' allows the Islamic liberals a platform for the reformation of traditional thought, as well as the accumulation of modern ideas towards the creation of a construct where elements of the traditional and modern discourse are synthesized. This platform further allows the new interpreters of the faith considerable flexibility, widening their scope in the use of sources, methodology, interpretation and presentation. It further allows them to take a stand in contrast to both the secular and traditional platforms.

In this connection, an intriguing aspect of Bazargan's religious thought is his refusal to distinguish between the material and the spiritual. Indeed, he declines to accept the traditional all-powerful notion of an independent, unchangeable human spirit (*nafs*). In order to account for the Day of Judgment and resurrection, he goes so far as to offer the possibility of some form of genetic fingerprinting, whereby the activity of the individual is coded into his molecules, to be rebuilt through an infinitely long process on the Day of Judgment.

Bazargan's religious vision is that of man as the viceregent of God, armed with the weapons of rationality and science, interacting with his material environment towards actualizing his divine qualities. This vision was created and reinforced in contrast to a fatalistic conservative traditional world-view, as well as in competition with what Bazargan saw as the secular self-centred—and thus amoral—concept of man.

Natural Law

A major concept that Bazargan discussed in elaborating his Islamic ideological construct was that of natural law.¹⁵ The principle assumes that nature follows

¹³ For this argument, see works as early as *Rāh-e ṭei shodeh* (1947) and as late as the *Bāzyābī-ye arzeshhā* (1985), Vol.3, Discussion 25.

¹⁴ This theme was picked up by other Islamic modernists, notably the *Mojāhedīn-e Khalq* Organization, whose early ideological guide book *Rāh-e anbiyā', rāh-e bashar* (n.p., n.d.) was written under the direct influence of a chapter of Bazargan's *Rāh-e ṭei shodeh*.

¹⁵ See, for example, Bazargan, *Be'ṣat va Īdeolojīhī*, pp.95–106.

particular sets of laws which are established by God and the acceptance of which is the very meaning of the religion of Islam. Here the main political function of the argument is to negate the absolutist claims of the sovereign to authoritarian rule.

Bazargan came to the idea of natural law through a lengthy process. In the 1950s he elaborated the notion of the evolution of religion and the existence of mechanical sociological laws. In the 1960s and under the influence of the work of the American political scientist G.H. Sabine,¹⁶ Bazargan extended his ideas to a more general notion of natural law as the cornerstone of his ideological construct. In explaining what he sometimes calls natural law and at other times reality, Bazargan acknowledges that the foremost principle of his ideological construct is the very one that was introduced in the seventeenth century by Europeans and which constitutes 'the basis of all ideologies'.¹⁷ It is in the context of this concept of a universe regulated by laws that Bazargan stresses that the ultimate rule is not that of nature but of God. Bazargan maintains that if laws govern the state of nature then the existence of a first law-maker and regulator is necessary; and if this is accepted, then it becomes essential that the laws revealed by God to man are respected. For the observance of the divine laws would mean harmony with the creation and utilization of natural resources. In other words, on the basis that God has created the natural world, including that of men, Bazargan views religious laws as the very laws of nature. It is here that Bazargan finds the true meaning of Islam (submission). Submission to Islam is surrender to the laws of nature and the acceptance of the laws of nature is the very worship of the divine. Acceptance of the divine laws is realism itself.

It is interesting to note that from a political point of view the concept of the divine legislator acts as a two-edged sword. On the one hand, it is intended to limit the right of the sovereign in following his own desires in endorsing laws. On the other hand, it denies the right of the people to determine their chosen destiny. In later years this tension proved to be of significance when the clerics laid claim to the right to interpret the laws of the divine legislator and thus to the right to govern. It is of course true that the tradition of interpreting religious law (*sharī'a*) has been the most orthodox and widely spread of traditions within Islamic scholasticism. But Bazargan never saw the *sharī'a* as the true expression of religion. Indeed, he had been highly critical of the manner in which the *sharī'a* and jurisprudence had developed.¹⁸

The Islamic Labour Ethic

In his role of political ideologue, Bazargan elaborated the idea of the Islamic labour ethic in various forms and terms in the early stages of his writing and continued to emphasize it in later years. A study of Bazargan's work in the 1940s reveals a preoccupation with the problem of the general backwardness

¹⁶ Sabine, G.H. & Thorson, T.L., *A History of Political Theory*, Hinsdale, Dryden Press, 1973.

¹⁷ Bazargan, *Be'sat va Īdeolozhī*, p.96.

¹⁸ See Bazargan, M. *Serr-e 'aqab oftādegī-ye melal-e Mosalmān*, Houston, Book Distribution Centre, 1976.

of the country, the cause of which Bazargan thought to lie in public culture.¹⁹ He maintained that the roots of the problem were to be found in the absence of the modern work ethic in the national character and that if this character were to be altered, it would make the necessary difference in achieving social and economic progress. To introduce the necessary change, Bazargan linked the modern work ethic to Islamic beliefs and proposed the modern work ethic as a main element in the religion of Islam. He hoped thus to further the mobilization of the productive force through establishing a modern code of labour in Iran's underdeveloped society.

Bazargan's argument here is two-fold. First, he argues that labour plays the key role in determining the direction and content of human evolution. At the same time, labour is said to be a fundamental element in the Islamic perspective of life through which man creates his welfare, both materially and spiritually. The argument is significant in that it contains a basic juxtapositioning of the Marxist-influenced concept of history with the Islamic concept of deeds ('*amal*'). Bazargan pursues this argument through a terminological ambiguity, involving constant switches from the Marxian notion of labour (*kār*) to the Islamic notion of deed ('*amal*'). These terms are used in an arbitrary fashion without reference to their original context. In this way, Bazargan proposes a distorted Marxian view that labour shapes the mode of production which in turn shapes the formation of social organization. No place is envisioned here for faith in the divine, or for the piety of the worshipper. But the idea is followed up with the concept of deeds as the determinant of an individual's everlasting fate. Thus Bazargan hopes to establish the concept of labour as the factor determining both the spiritual fate of the individual as well as his social destiny.

Freedom of Man and Democracy

The idea of the freedom of man is a main element in Bazargan's Islamic ideology. He first gave detailed consideration to the issue in the 1950s following the royalist coup, but his most elaborate treatment of the subject came during his trial (1963) and subsequently when he framed his ideological construct in competition with rival ideologies in the late 1960s.²⁰ Following the Islamic Revolution, Bazargan relied on more or less the same themes to defend the idea of the freedom of man. However, it is interesting to note that throughout the period, there is a tendency to make greater use of religious symbolism and terminology. Bazargan's arguments in defence of the freedom of man, and subsequently the necessity of democratic government, basically addressed two different audiences and two set of polemics. The first was the position of the secular modernist authoritarian royalists, against whom Bazargan struggled while Mohammad Reza Shah was in power.²¹ The second position was that

¹⁹ On this, see *Kār dar Eslām*.

²⁰ See *Modāfe'āt* and *Be'sat va Īdeolozhī*.

²¹ For a review of the history of the concept of absolute monarchism in Iran see Tabatabai, S.J., op. cit.

of the authoritarian interpretation of government, as proposed by elements within the religious community, both before and after the 1979 revolution.²²

Bazargan's arguments on the freedom of man are fundamentally religious. His main argument utilizes the Qur'anic story of the creation of man:

'Upon knowing God's intention to create a viceregent on earth, the heavenly angels objected to the creation of the one who would make mischief and shed blood. But God taught Adam the nature of all things and placed him above the angels. Eblis (Satan) refused to acknowledge Adam's supremacy, tempted him and made him slip from the garden.'²³

Bazargan interprets the story to mean that on the one hand man is distinguished from other forms of creation by his knowledge, while on the other hand he is given freedom of choice (*ekhtiyār*) between the temptations of Satan and divine blessings. Thus, Bazargan concludes, freedom constitutes the foundation and key to man's life and progress. It is through this freedom that man is made to be the conscious, intelligent and creative being that he is.²⁴ Man's freedom of choice, *ekhtiyār*, is the subject-matter of traditional Islamic philosophy; but Bazargan pushes the point further, departing from the orthodox view by interpreting the principle to mean the necessity of the right of the people to exercise power of choice over the institution of government.

To consolidate his view, Bazargan refers to the golden age of Islam and the manner of government by the Prophet and early caliphs, whose rule Bazargan rather pragmatically interprets as having been 'democratic', in that they governed according to the wishes of the people, allowed criticism of their rule and established security for all. He also utilizes a number of Qur'anic concepts, most significantly that of consultation (*shūrā*)²⁵ to argue that the affairs of the community are to be conducted through consultation of its members. Government then, in the eyes of Bazargan, is the guardianship of people's wealth and affairs, extended by the people to the rulers in an act of trust.²⁶ However, government cannot be an absolute expression of popular will, for it has to function within the bounds of natural law. Bazargan's concept and understanding of freedom then is positive rather than negative, in the sense that freedom is not seen as the freedom of unrestrained movement of the individual and the absence of opposition to it, but 'as the positive creation of a social environment where, under the protection of law, the individual is capable of fulfilling his true and good nature.'²⁷

²² In the earlier period, i.e. the 1960s, this position was defended by men such as Sayyed Mohammad Hosein Tabataba'i, the author of *al-Mizān*, and later, in the 1980s, by Ayatollah Khomeini with his concept of the absolute guardianship of the jurisconsult.

²³ Indirect quotation, Qur'ān, II: 30-36.

²⁴ Bazargan, *Be'sat va Īdeolozhī*, pp.130-132.

²⁵ Qur'ān, III: 153 and XLII: 38.

²⁶ Bazargan, *Be'sat va Īdeolozhī*, p.116.

²⁷ Cf. the debate on positive versus negative liberty as articulated in Berlin, I. 'Two Concepts of History' in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford, OUP, 1958) pp.118-172.

Bazargan's notion of democratic government is a simple one: a government elected through popular elections, responsive to the people's needs, answerable to them and operating within the bounds of natural law as set by the divine. His main defence of this notion is best argued in the early 1960s (against the Shah's authoritarian rule) and in the mid-1980s (against the concept of the absolute guardianship of the jurisconsult as proposed by Ayatollah Khomeini).²⁸ In both instances Bazargan appeals to a number of arguments which could be categorized as follows: the condemnation of tyranny (*estebdād*) as the source of social instability; tyranny as the source of moral corruption; tyranny as the rejection of true religion; tyranny as the cause of underdevelopment; and tyranny as the negation of historic civil social institutions. While some of the arguments have a secular content (e.g. tyranny as the source of historical and political instability), all the arguments are presented in religious language.

This trend is strengthened after the 1979 revolution and in polemics with the ruling clerical order. To indicate that tyranny is a cause (if not *the* cause) of social and historic discontinuity, Bazargan puts forward the argument that tyranny is not desirable because it precipitates a gulf between the rulers and the ruled and thus brings about the weakening of the state and its inevitable destruction. Here Bazargan presents a simple cyclical concept of history, with despotism as the root of the downward movement. Taking into account the time that Bazargan put forward this idea, it is possible that he was under the influence of the arguments put forward by the liberal wing of the American establishment who maintained that third-world regimes should liberalize politically in order to obtain a wider social base and therefore greater stability in the face of communist-inspired threats. Indeed, it was under this influence, among others, that the Shah had liberalized a few years earlier.

Bazargan, however, believes that the greatest damage caused by tyranny is spiritual in that despotism destroys individual morality. The tyrant has no choice but to use deceit in rationalizing his authority, in particular by appealing to divine authority. Here the individual will either be an unconscious victim of the falsehood, or—even worse—accept the deceit in exchange for security of life and wealth. Once the victim of tyranny, the individual will then suffer humiliation, lose self-respect, and become a partner in deception. It is on the same line of argument that Bazargan repeats, with variations, a polemic of the constitutional period put forward by Sheikh Mohammad Hosein Na'ini (d.1936).²⁹ Na'ini describes tyranny as the arbitrary action of a ruler without consideration for others, and the treatment of the country as private property. To rationalize his absolute rule the tyrant ascribes to himself the attributes of God.³⁰ This argument is repeatedly pursued by Bazargan, resurfacing after the Islamic revolution when he insists that 'absolute kingship' can only be that of God and that the delegation of divine power is not

²⁸ See *Modāfe'āt; Bāzyābī-ye arzeshhā*, chapters 1, 2 and 4; and *Enqelāb-e Īrān dar do Ḥarakāt*, Tehran, FMI, 1983.

²⁹ Na'ini, M.M.H. *Tanbīh al-umma wa-tanzīh al-milla*, Tehran, Enteshar Publications, 1955.

³⁰ For a detailed study see Hairi, *Shi'ism and Constitutionalism*.

to the clerical body but to the people as a whole.³¹ In Bazargan's view, then, man is born free, with the capacity to choose between right and wrong in order to determine his spiritual destiny. To deny him this right through the imposition of an authoritarian state is the very negation of his divine qualities and therefore of the religion of Islam.

Social Identity

The issue of social/national identity has been at the centre of a great deal of polemics in contemporary Iran. The centralization of power in the shape of a modern state, and the subsequent weakening of traditional concepts of social identity (local, tribal, regional, religious etc.) has led to the emergence of new, rival, social self-perceptions. For most of the contemporary period, the modernists have had the upper hand in setting the form and content of this social identity under the banner of 'nation worship' (*māhan parastī*). This ascendancy represents the climax of the historic Iranian rivalry between the 'idealistic' religious theories of social organization (i.e. *khelāfat*) and the 'realist' theories of absolutist monarchy.³² It was against the ascendancy of the monarchistic theories, which assumed an anti-Islamic secular content in the twentieth century, that Muslim writers reacted with the theme of 'Islamic social identity'.

Bazargan's ideas on social identity form a cornerstone of his theories of political activism. A pamphlet on religious and political struggle³³ gives a more or less complete picture of his idea of religious social consciousness and Islamic identity as the ideology of appeal to the masses. Here Bazargan essentially argues that while the 'national Iranian' identity of the people is a relatively modern concept, the 'Islamic religious' identity is historic and all-embracing. Furthermore, with the aim of the political mobilization of the people, it is vital to utilize this religious element as a foundation of ideological constructs.

Bazargan argues that national (secular) identity emerged around the time of the constitutional revolution and as the result of contacts with Europeans. This modern identity, Bazargan believes, is a superficial imitation of Western concepts of nationalism which has failed to penetrate popular culture further than cheap literature.³⁴ Bazargan goes so far as to say that the historic notion of Iranian identity, as expounded in the literature of the epic poet Ferdowsi (d.1020) is but that of 'old tales'. In contrast, Bazargan points out, people tend to see themselves as Muslim first and 'Iranian' later. This religious identity is vertically (historically) and horizontally (socially) comprehensive.

This point in Bazargan's polemics harmonizes, rather conveniently, with his notions of democracy, for it builds on the premise that people's awareness of themselves as Muslims responds positively to democratic appeals for national unity in the face of tyranny and underdevelopment. The function

³¹ Bazargan, M. *Pādeshāhi-ye Khodā*, n.p., 1988.

³² See Tabataba'i, op. cit.

³³ The pamphlet, entitled *Mobārazeh-ye mazhabī va mobārazeh-ye siyāsī* (n.p., 1981), has no signature but is known to have been written by Bazargan.

³⁴ Bazargan, *Mobārazeh ...*, pp.13-16.

of Bazargan's discourse is to stand against the establishment and its non-Islamic notion of Iranian nationalism. He seeks religion as an indispensable foundation of social identity and as a factor that would differentiate his interpretation of historic development from that of the modernist authoritarian establishment. In other words, it was the problem of facing an audience, addressing an audience and attracting an audience against the secular modernist establishment which pushed Bazargan to this view. Mobilization of the people is a primary objective of any political group and Bazargan who wished to achieve this mobilization believed that he had to operate within the popular language, culture and logic.

The reform of the state

From the early 1940s Bazargan's political career was limited to his theoretical writings and some organizational responsibilities. With his appointment as the first Prime Minister of the Islamic Republic he was given the opportunity to transform his ideas into concrete realities. While in office Bazargan's strategy was a model of classical liberal thinking. On the one hand, he tried to limit the interference of government in civil society; on the other, he hoped to regulate government activity through administrative reforms.³⁵ To achieve these goals he had to confront the legacy of the former regime left in the form of its extensive bureaucratic-military machine. At the same time he was forced to face the extremist elements, of both right and left, who claimed the right to monopolize power and showed considerable political will in the pursuit of their aims.

The fundamental elements in the strategy of Bazargan while he led the Provisional Government were to limit the structure of government and to regulate it to bring its actions into accordance with existing or emerging constitutional laws. This goal was based on the perception that tyranny was fundamentally the malfunction of natural society. In the eyes of Bazargan, society in its natural form, left to its own accord and with the state acting only as a regulator and arbitrator between different components, presented the best form of social life. But in contemporary Iran, Bazargan believed, the state had come to dominate social life and to impose itself on all social domains.

Throughout his speeches during his nine months in office Bazargan repeatedly tried to convey these ideas, emphasizing the necessity of limiting the size and power of the state. In the language of classic liberalism, where the activities of the free market and private sector are seen as necessary conditions for guaranteeing the rights of the individual, Bazargan defended the private sector and condemned state intervention in economic affairs as a conspiracy by the state to impose itself on society. He saw minimum government and minimum state interference as good government and the natural conditions for human life and interaction. The role of good government, Bazargan maintained, was to interfere as little as possible in the social domain so as to allow events to take their natural course.

³⁵ On limiting the state, see *Showrā-ye enqelāb va dowleh-ye mowāqqat*, pp.24, 124, 186 & 200; for administrative reforms see *ibid.*, p.189 and 190-93.

The second element in Bazargan's strategic policy was to implement administrative reforms of the bureaucratic machinery. Bazargan believed that the machinery was unproductive and that it should be reformed so as to make it appropriate to the needs of Iranian society. This criticism of the state bureaucracy came from the perception that it had developed primarily as an instrument of coercion, which had failed to serve society or the Iranian people.

Bazargan failed in both of his main objectives, and his tenure in office could well be regarded as a strategic defeat for the liberal alternative. Bazargan and his liberal collaborators might have well understood the structural problems of Iranian society but they failed to articulate a realistic strategy that would maintain them in the face of political challenges and social demands. Limiting the power of the state, reforming the bureaucracy and regulating social relations might have been remedies for Iran's chronic history of tyranny and authoritarian rule, but they failed to meet the immediate requirements of Iran's underdeveloped political institutions and a populist movement dedicated to revolutionary violence. Bazargan's cooperation with a revolutionary movement in the hope of achieving power and implementing reformist strategies can have several explanations. Either he was not, in the final analysis, a political liberal in the comprehensive sense of the word, or he might have miscalculated the *Realpolitik* of the situation, in terms of the available opportunities and risks. Probably there is a stronger element of truth in the latter.

Conclusion

Bazargan is a founder of Iran's modern tradition of non-clerical religious interpretation, which has laid claim to the right of defining religious conviction. This position—which maintains the necessity of the socio-political participation of believers—has become increasingly significant, particularly with the establishment of an Islamic Republic in Iran. In this context Bazargan has been the ideological driving force behind the Freedom Movement of Iran which in turn has legitimized an Islamic defence of constitutionalism and democracy. Bazargan's contribution to Iranian politics has been made through the extensive works which he has produced and in which he has emphasized the themes of a religion based on natural law, the modern labour ethic, the freedom of man (as an individual and a social being), religious social identity, moralism, and the necessity of reforming and limiting state interference in civil society. Bazargan has represented these ideas within the Iranian intellectual climate of modernism, communism, traditionalism, authoritarianism and popular religious culture. What makes Bazargan stand out, however, in comparative terms, is his reformation of religious notions, allied with his efforts at legitimizing a constitutional and democratic paradigm in Iranian politics.