

# The Green Movement and the Role of *Ruhaniyyat*

## by Hasan Yousefi Eshkevari

By *ruhaniyyat*, I mean the institution of Shi'a 'ulama (Shiite clerics) that was created roughly in the twelfth century to represent the occulted Imam (known as the *Mahdi*, "the guided one") and to lay claim to his general vicegerency (*niyabat-e amme*). It was during the Savafid period (16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries), and with the active support of Savafid kings, that the institution of *ruhaniyyat* was consolidated as a powerful social force. The main role of 'ulama in Islam has been to take care of people's religious affairs, i.e., to issue fatwas, to lead the prayers, to preach, and sometimes to work in the capacity of judges to implement religious commandments. The abovementioned institution, since its inception, and particularly after the Savafid era, has always played a dual, religious-political role.

In the aftermath of the revolution in Iran, and the establishment of an Islamic Republic based on the idea of *wilayat al-faqih* (guardianship of the jurist), *ruhaniyyat* has entered a new historical phase that is marked by an unprecedented turn in which the religious and spiritual personality that was played by a *ruhani* becomes a "king-like" figure.

In the broad scope, we can divide members of the post-revolutionary institution of *ruhaniyyat* into three groups:

The first group, who believed in the principle of *wilayat al-faqih*, was actively involved in building the foundations of the Islamic regime and is still either involved or actively supporting the base (Ayatollah Khomeini, Khamenei, Noori Hamadani, Friday prayer leaders, and others). The second group, in spite of the fact that they do not find the idea of an Islamic regime in the time of occultation attractive, have chosen apathy and silence (Ayatollay Vahid Khorasani, Systani, and others). Their implicit support of the current Islamic regime, as well as the former secular regime, can be interpreted in light of their long term interests. The last group constitutes of the opponents of the current regime. We can distinguish two sub-groups here: (1) Those who have been traditionally critiques of the regime, and (2) those who have left the establishment and become critiques.

Critical comments leveled by the third group against the regime do not necessarily originate from their concerns with modern values like democracy and human rights; rather, they criticize the establishment's behavior on the basis of their religious values and principles (the late Ayatollahs Shariatmadary and Montazeri, as well as Ayatollah Sanei, Musavi Ardebili, Safi Golpaygani, and finally Hashemi Rafsanjani who had joined the group just recently).

We can easily determine the relationship that exists between each of the abovementioned groups and the Green movement on the basis of their stand against the regime. The first group opposes the movement, the second chooses apathy, and the third group, for the most part, supports Greens.

The important question is what kind of role the third group will choose for itself in the future. It would be, of course, disappointing if they choose to remain faithful to any version of the idea of wilayat al-faqih, or even worse, to think of themselves as a “privileged” group when it comes to politics and governance based on their religious affiliations. Having said that, and even if we assume that this group will choose to play within the framework of democracy, the first and second groups will pose serious problems for the future of the movement. The first group, since they have experienced the sweet taste of power and wealth, will use all their power and dispatch their public base forcefully to stand against the establishment of any version of a secular system in Iran. The second group too, because of their deep suspicion of democratic ideas and in order to defend the tradition, will not be easily persuaded to support a secular alternative.

Therefore, we might conclude that a reform in the existing system towards a more democratic system is the most viable, most appropriate, and the least costly way that is foreseeable for the near future. Such reforms, hopefully, will gradually convince the public and the democratic-leaning groups committed to ruhaniyyat of not only the benefits, but also the necessity of a secular system compared to the current theocratic rule. Furthermore, one hopes that in such a case even traditionalists will eventually give in to pursue their interests within the limits of a secular framework. In the case of failure to ~~the~~ reform and the future collapse of the regime, it seems that the most viable option would be a moderate Islamic regime without the central doctrine of wilayat al-faqih. This would be an alternative system of governance that is committed to the basic principles of democracy, akin to the one that was promised by Ayatollah Khomeini when he was in exile in Paris. The early draft of the constitution that Ayatollah and his aides actively pursued early on to be put to a national referendum could provide a common ground for the initial level.

Such a proposal does not mean that we have somehow given up on the ideal of democracy for Iran; rather, it reflects our doubts that a fully secular state is feasible in the contemporary Iranian society in which ‘ulama are significant players and continue to be so in any alternative political setting given their strong public base.