tion of the nuances of Iranian policy will, if heeded, contribute to the ability of US policy makers to make sound decisions.

*Hidden Iran* is one of those books that should be read by policy makers, government analysts, academicians, and students alike. It will be most useful as the United States revisits its Iraq policy (and its Iran policy) and considers engaging Iraq’s neighbors. It will also be beneficial to Iranians as they consider engaging the United States.

*Charles G. MacDonald, Department of International Relations, Florida International University, Miami, Florida*


*Reviewed by Ali Akbar Mahdi*

Since the election of Mohammad Khatami as the seventh president of Iran in 1997, Iranian youth and women are perceived as two major sources of social change in Iran. It is believed that these two groups were largely responsible for Khatami’s 1997 presidential victory, as well as his re-election in 2001. Young students also were involved in protests and riots following the forced shutdown of the *Salaam* newspaper in July 1999, resulting in a confrontation between government forces and students in several major Iranian cities.

Ever since these events, however, the Western media has generated reports describing the disenfranchisement of the Iranian youth in the Islamic Republic and its political implications. Most of these reports anticipated another political upheaval. Reform was deemed inevitable, and the clerics were regarded, and still are, to be on their way out of power.\(^1\) The conclusion drawn from these reports by Western governments, especially by the US government, was that Iranian youth are the most likely agents either for forcing the Iranian regime to change its behavior or changing the regime itself. This conclusion led the US government to revamp its Persian radio and television programs produced for Iranian audiences. Radio Liberty’s politically-focused discussion forums were transformed into a youth-oriented program renamed *Radio Farda* (Tomorrow’s Radio), which is headed by the author of *Tehran Blues.* Voice of America was also transformed by the addition of numerous programs designed for Iranian youth and operated by younger Iranian-Americans. The objective behind these changes was to reinforce the Iranian youth’s affinity for American culture and resentment of the Islamic Republic. Youth access to satellite TV and the internet was believed to be the primary reason for the waning influence of the religious elite. It was assumed that young people were ready to change the face of the country by initiating another revolution.\(^2\)

As the Iranian government succeeded in clamping down on the political protests of the late 1990s, and Khatami’s disappointing second term ended with the election

---


of conservative Mahmud Ahmadinejad in 2005, the content of these Western reports changed: the politically active Iranian youth now became less idealistic, less proactive, and more interested in their immediate pleasures and gains. Drugs and addiction among youth became rampant, prostitution spread widely, and alienation characterized urban youth. New reports from Iran are filled with discussions of a new youth culture of indifference, indulgence, and self-annihilation. The two books under review are the latest publications in this genre.

In *Tehran Blues*, Basmenji seeks to offer "a factual, objective, impartial, and fair picture of the youth movement in Iran." The book is a journalistic account of youths’ deeds and thoughts regarding post-revolutionary Iran. In 11 chapters, Basmenji discusses the historical contradictions in which Iranian youths have found themselves — the ups and downs of the student movement, the emergence and transformations of the Islamic Republic, the ironies and fallacies of the Islamic Republic and its ideology, the Pahlavi regime and its downfall, the reformist movement and its constituencies, the Iranian economy and its effect on the political developments on domestic and international relationships, the suppression of dissent and lack of political freedom, the generation gap and youths’ newly developed underground culture, the problems of drugs and prostitution, and the election of Ahmadinejad as president.

While full of lively vignettes, stories, cases, and quotations, the chapters in *Tehran Blues* are disconnected, and they do not follow a logical order. The author, a journalist who was born and raised in Iran, offers an accurate account of Iranian society, history, and culture. The chapters are descriptive, easy to read, and full of enlightening commentaries on personalities, events, and trends. The only problem is that they do not segue into one another. They move from history to economics to politics and then to sociology. The book would have benefited from a systematic design either along a historical or theoretical line. In addition, an explanatory model of the author’s choice could have provided a more meaningful framework for the analysis of the multitude of facts he presents.

Roxanne Varzi’s *Warring Souls* is also a combination of vignettes, stories, cases, and quotations, but possesses an academic orientation and a theoretical posture. Hers is a post-modernist ethnographic study of the religious aspects of Iranian culture as they reproduce themselves through images, media, and war. Varzi is interested in the Islamic Republic’s project of Islamization, especially as it relates to secular middle-class urban youth. She examines how power, war, media, education, and cultural objects were used to accomplish this task. Her interrogation of war images in educational materials, public spaces, and the cinema throughout a seven-year period is accompanied by an ethnographic examination of youth in Tehran in the late 1990s. She establishes a focus group of students from the technical Sharif University in order to understand how they “consume their public space and private culture.” She meets with them regularly, discussing films, ideas, and issues — asking them to keep a journal. The latter becomes a major focus of her observations, most of which are reported in a fictionalized manner in the book. Varzi also interviews a host of cultural characters and artists, examining their views and works relative to issues of cultural production.

Varzi attempts to show how Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s Islamization project succeeded in the first decade of the life of the Islamic Republic and how it unraveled in the second. Khomeini’s success was based on the utilization of the Shi’a notion of martyrdom and the Sufi notion of *bikhoti*, defined by Varzi as “self-annihilation.” The embedded poetics of Sufism in Iranian culture made it possible for Khomeini to mobilize Iranians for his revolutionary religious visions, Islamization of the Iranian culture and society, and participation in the Iran-Iraq war. There is, Varzi believes, “a key tension in Islamic Iran between *bikhoti* (self-annihilation) and the notions of khod-sazi and khod-shenasi (self-help or self-construction). The two concepts would
Varzi’s analysis of Iranian culture and creative application of Western theories bring to the fore mystical, mythological, historical, and sociological characters of Iranian culture and psyche. Her engaging language weaves the dispersed narratives of her subjects with diverse Persian cultural designs, psycho-historical elements, and literary traits into a sophisticated cultural portrait. She makes insightful points about the contradictions in Iranian culture and society. Yet, although Warring Souls is more scholarly guided and theoretically focused than is Tehran Blues, it lacks a coherent conclusion, as it moves from ethnography to discussion, poetry to mysticism, and abstract visualization to concrete observations. The book could also have benefited from a copy editor familiar with Persian literature, preventing minor factual and numerous transliterations errors like “Makmal” instead of Makmal, sazandegi instead of sazandegi (construction), ghurbzadegi instead of ghurbzadegi (Westoxification), Mehdi for Mahdi (12th Shi’a imam), Layla in two places and Leili in others, zuhr khaneh instead of zurkhaneh (traditional sports center), Khareh instead of Karkheh (names of rivers), Khamenei on page 222 for Khameini, gesehaye for gesehaye, and dorui (two-souls?) instead of durui (two-face).

Varzi’s interpretive application of classical allegories to contemporary Iranian politics and the revolution is courageous and interesting. Yet, they do not offer a convincing explanation for the political machinations involved in the revolutionary transformation of Iran. Shahadat (or martyrdom) is not equal to a state of being bi-khodi (selflessness). While in theology the former refers to physical death, in Sufism the latter refers to a transcendent state of being marked by detachment from worldly temptations and materialism. Its mystical translation as “self-annihilation” by the author, if not incorrect is at best problematic (or “slippery” as she acknowledges herself) because even as “a state of being of no effect” (one of the meanings of the word in English) “annihilation” does not equate with the mystical notion of “bi-khodi” (or “az
"khod bi-khod shodan" as it often appears in Persian literature), which implies a higher state of being. The word bikhodi in Persian has two basic meanings: "mystical trance," and "inappropriate or irrelevant." The latter is commonly used. Rarely in common usage, or common mind, is it used mystically. Even in the mystical literature, its usage is more often in the form of "bikhod" (selfless) rather than "bikhodi." My quick search of the word "bikhodi" in a small sample of voluminous Persian mystical literature produced the following frequencies: four times in both Hafez's and Nizami's works, nine times in Attar's, one time in Abu Said A'bil Khair, and 34 times in Rumi. In none of these cases does the concept imply physical death or "martyrdom."

This kind of abstract interpretation of history and socio-political transformation runs the risk of either ignoring or downplaying the political machinations within society and the processes of negotiation and articulation between various religious, political, economic, and social groups at any historical moment. The objective realities of political transformation are no less important in the theoretical understanding of historical transformation than the cognitive transformation of individuals.

Though uneven in their methodologies and theoretical approaches, both books provide a picture of Iranian youth in crisis: experiencing unemployment, hopelessness, insecurity, high rates of depression/psychological distress, high rates of female suicide and runaway, cultural and religious alienation, obsession with the Internet and Western culture, and inability to start life independent of parents’ support. In response to these social problems, young people are engaged in private mixed sex parties, underground music, the widespread use of drugs, fun and pleasure beyond socially recognized boundaries, and alternative forms of spirituality (e.g. "cool Sufism" discussed by Varzi).

Both works confirm Western reports of the Islamic Republic’s suppression of civil liberties, including freedom of expression, restrictive codes of conduct imposed on youth/women, and excessive measures for controlling public and private behavior. Both offer data in support of recent theoretical studies marking a contradictory trend of simultaneous secularization and institutionalization of Islam in Iran. Both make it clear that Iranian urban youth are alienated from their theocratic government and recent religious restrictions. The highly educated ones make every effort through legal, illegal, and sometimes dangerous means, to leave their motherland in hopes of finding a better life abroad. Tired of being controlled by the elderly religious elite, the Iranian youth live a double life of public obedience and private defiance.

Both authors also show the failure of the Islamic Republic in its cultural projects, especially in the creation of a new generation of youth uncorrupted by the influences and socialization of the secular Western culture. Rightly, both authors attribute much of the confusion experienced by the youth to conflicting pressures on youth from a dogmatic state ideology with a policy of dividing citizens into khodi (in-group, assumed to be loyal to the regime) and ghayr-e khodi (out-group, assumed to be opposed or indifferent to regime), a strong historical identity reinforced by secular tendencies among Iranians, and the attractive Western cultural and technological products along with their behavioral implications.

Though more cautious than others, both authors remain hopeful that Iranian youth will change the face of the country toward a more democratic future. However, these and similar studies provide no clue as to how Iranian youth will get from here to there, and fail to address the recent setbacks and zigzags in Iranian politics. As mentioned earlier, since 1997 the world has been reading about Iranian youths’ resentment of their theocratic government, affinity for Western culture, and determination for change. Yet, the election of Mahmud Ahmadinejad and the subsequent decline in student activism, along with the rise of drug use and political apathy among youth, have cast doubt on much of the characterization of Iranian youth and the predictions about their near-term political tendencies.
A major problem with most recent reports on Iranian youth is that they are not representative of Iranian youth at large, in that they narrowly focus on sparse field observations of the major Iranian cities, especially Tehran. These observations are often random and not based on systematic study. Unfortunately, systematic studies of youth are often conducted by government agencies that are equipped with sufficient resources but sullied by political biases and agendas. Youth reported on in these books are mostly urban, educated, and secular. The majority of youth involved in the Basij, the Sepah, and other armed organs of the regime, as well as those living in rural areas and small towns are ignored. A cursory look at the demographic profile of the armed forces (formal and informal, and in all units affiliated with the government) indicates that many of their members are youth drawn from rural towns and villages. These young people should be considered as well.

Dr. Ali Akbar Mahdi is Professor of Sociology at Ohio Wesleyan University. His latest book (co-authored with Elton L. Daniel) is Culture and Customs of Iran (Greenwood Press, 2006).


Reviewed by Djavad Salehi-Isfahani

To say that the publication of a book on Iran’s social classes in 2006 is timely is simply to note that more than any other time this year, Iran is the focus of international attention. This book makes an important and timely contribution to our understanding of the internal dynamics of Iran’s society. The question the authors pose, and the book’s subtitle, is “Did the Revolution Matter?” Their short answer is that it did not, at least as far as the class structure is concerned. Their long answer, which takes the reader through much painstaking manipulation of census employment data, shows that the Revolution brought about deep changes in employment structure during its first (the “Khomeini”) decade that were reversed during the subsequent period of “rejuvenation of capitalism.”

The book’s greatest merit lies in its empirical approach to the study of class and labor. The theoretical discussion is brief and to the point, confined to one chapter, where the authors explain their neo-Marxist approach modeled after Erik Wright.¹ This approach expands the traditional bipolar structure of capitalist versus working class based on the ownership of means of production to take into account the important role of human capital in modern capitalist production. A useful chart (p. 30) describes how the three concepts of ownership, authority, and skill are fused in this framework. Empirically, they describe the class structure in Iran by four main social classes: capitalists, the petty bourgeoisie, the middle class, and the working class. Each is then divided into sub-categories, such as modern and traditional, public and private sector, etc.

Mapping the census data on occupational categories into these four classes can only come at the cost of some heroic assumptions, which can stretch one’s credulity. We read on page 88 that, “in 1976 there were 182,000 capitalists in Iran.” Among these are all types of employers, including small employers, such as bicycle repair shop owners, who predominate. In 1976, for example, the average number of employees for 97% of establishments was less than two (p. 90). Unpaid family workers (about half of whom were moved from this category in 1976, to the category “unspecified” in 1986) count as petty bourgeois.

The empirical work is confined to census data from 1976, 1986, and 1996, which is unfortunate, as important changes have occurred since the last census. For exam-