

The Future of the Marjaya

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Articles & Testimony

The current form of religious leadership over the Shi'ite community, marjaya, was founded in the 1830s when Mohammed Hassan Najafi became the first transnational Shi'ite religious authority (marja) in Najaf, Iraq. Najafi created a universal patronage network through which he received religious taxes and endowment incomes, and appointed religious representatives from Shi'ite cities in Iraq to India.

In the 16th Century, Shi'ite jurists (mujtahids) had established a new conceptual theory describing the relationship between community leaders and Shi'ite worshipers. According to the theory, each worshiper should either reach the highest educational level in Shi'ite jurisprudence (ijtihad) or follow a living person who has attained such a level. The theory of 'following' (taqlid) was intertwined with another significant theory, which permitted Shi'ite jurists to receive religious taxes on behalf of the infallible and hidden twelfth Shi'ite Imam. It is believed that this Imam will return at the end of time to establish a just global government. Thereafter, a new form of Shi'ite leadership emerged that both provided the monarchy with legitimacy and was protected by it, but was also financially independent from it.

Ever since, the marjas have been the highest religious authorities in Shi'ism and are followed by a large number of Shi'ite worshipers on mainly juridical issues. While there is no theological justification in classical Islam for a clerical class, today's clerical establishment is the principal religious institution in the Muslim world, and especially in the Shi'ite world. As Mohammed Arkoun (a late modern scholar of Islam) said, "Islam is theologically Protestant and politically Catholic." In contrast to the papacy and the Catholic clerical institution, the Shi'ite marjaya is quite a recent establishment that was only started about 200 years ago. Another way in which the marjaya differs from the papacy is that the marjaya does not need to be in the hands of a single person. The most important difference, though, is that unlike in the papacy, the marjaya's authority is personal and not institutional.

Before the 1830s, the Shi'ite leadership was utterly local. Each region had jurists whom the lay people followed, to whom they paid their taxes, and from whom they received religious and juridical advice. The modern world -- especially modern telecommunication and transportation -- transformed local Shi'ite leadership into a transnational institution.

The 21st century will witness a new form of religious authority in the Shi'ite community, which is neither local nor transnational. The emergence of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the confluence of religious and political authorities in Iran was a fundamental turning point. However, the absence of Ayatollah Ali Sistani (B. August 4, 1930) and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (b. July 16, 1939) from the scene would be a benchmark for the new era.

Politics of Marjaya in the Modern Time

In theory, Shi'ite jurisprudence tasks a marja with issuing a fatwa, or a religious ruling, but leaves their followers to decide on the applicability of God's order to specific cases and subjects. For instance, if a marja states that drinking wine is forbidden, it is his follower's duty to make sure that the liquid inside the glass is not wine but water. Followers should ask their marja only general questions and are responsible for applying his verdict to specific cases on their own. In practice, though, followers ask their marja advice on specific issues and circumstances. Thus, the marja's religious authority has expanded from jurisprudence to politics and society.

A significant turning point was Mirza Mohammad Hassan Shirazi's 1891 fatwa that forbade the use of tobacco. This fatwa was a response to Nasser Eddin Shah Qajar of Iran granting the British Imperial Tobacco Company the exclusive rights to produce, sell, and export all of Iran's tobacco in return for annual royalties. Later, the Shi'ite marjas in Iraq -- who were predominantly Iranians -- intervened in Iranian affairs by supporting either the pro- or anti-constitutional movement. The founding of Qom Seminary in 1921 was regarded as a necessary step in creating a powerful clerical establishment inside Iran and decreasing the influence of Iraq-based marjas' over Iranian society and politics. The Shi'ite marjaya, however, continued to remain a transnational entity. Religiously, a marja's fatwa is valid for his followers, regardless of where his followers reside.

Since the marja's authority was transnational and he was not limited in terms of the subject matter he could issue fatwas on, he was free to meddle in politics -- especially the politics of countries other than the one in which they resided. This was deeply problematic. Although the founding of Qom Seminary in the early 20th century partially solved this problem for the Iranian government, it did not fix it indefinitely. The emergence of the Islamic Republic and the repressive policies of Saddam Hussein against the Shi'ite community and its clerical establishments in Iraq diminished the political influence of Iraqi marjas in Iran.

Although the Islamic Republic was not able to completely resolve the tension between the clergy and the modern state, the regime's control over the clerical establishment in the region stole much of the Shi'ite clergy's freedom in political affairs. The Islamic Republic has made its clergy the richest in Shi'ite history and enabled them to have access to government and non-government resources that was denied to them in the past. By legitimizing its banking system, the Islamic Republic paved the way for marjas to use banks instead of accumulating cash in their houses. The Iranian regime has also provided exceptional opportunities for clergy to get involved in business. The Internet has also opened the door to a new world for marjas. These modern forces are shaping a new era in Shi'ite leadership.

Characteristics of the New Leadership

The first feature of the new era in Shi'ite leadership is that religious authority is separate from political authority. By this, I do not mean secularization or a separation between government and religious institutions. Separation, in this case, means that those clerics who do play a political role and assume political positions are not necessarily marjas or mujtahids. Hassan Nasrallah in Lebanon and Muqtada Sadr in Iraq are examples of ambitious clerics who did not study Shi'ite jurisprudence in seminaries enough to be considered a mujtahid.

Consequently -- and this is another feature of the new era -- marjas' views on politics have become less important than before. This separation mainly started in the 20th century, when spokesmen and groups promoting Islamic ideology tried to differentiate themselves from the traditional clerical institutions. An example of this trend is

Mojtaba Mir Lohi, known as Navvab Safavi, who founded Fadaian-e Islam, the first fundamentalist Islamist group in pre-revolutionary Iran. There were many other militant clerics in Pakistan and the Shi'ite Arab strongholds who were more comfortable working with lay people than the clergy. Their desire to mobilize people differed from that of the marja: while the marja represent the most conservative side of the religious spectrum, the militant clerics' organization and ideology were motivated by radical political action. Khomeini was a historical exception.

From this separation, another characteristic emerges: the eclectic approach of followers to the marjas they followed. In the past, a follower followed his marja on all issues on which that marja had an opinion. Many political and non-political reasons have led today's followers to selectively obey the opinions of their marjas. For instance, many practicing female worshipers follow a marja on numerous religious issues but do not follow him on those fatwa which suggest discrimination against women, such as polygamy or the wearing of the hijab. Many worshipers also distinguish between private religious issues and public issues that a marja is not necessarily an expert on. For example, in Lebanon many Shi'ites follow Ayatollah Sistani on issues related to prayer, fasting, hajj, marriage, and divorce, but not on politics. On politics and social issues, they might listen to Hassan Nasrallah, Khamenei, or other political leaders. Therefore, the relationship between marja and follower has greatly changed, and the follower is not a passive practicing worshiper. Today's followers, especially women, have much more agency in reshaping the relationship between their community and its leadership.

Another aspect of the new era is that a marja's financial resources are no longer confined to religious taxes. In the past, marjas collected religious taxes and endowment incomes, and stocked them in their own houses or those of their representatives. This money was then distributed among the clergy or spent on building and running madrasas, mosques, charities, and so on. Today, marjas can benefit from government aid. They have the economic advantage to run businesses, make investments, and import and export goods. In the past, a marja's popularity and following was based on his financial capability. Today, this is no longer the case. Khamenei, for example, is the richest marja in the Shi'ite world -- not because of his ability to attract followers, but because of his access to government resources. If Sayyed Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, former chief of the Iranian judiciary, claims to be a marja and opens an office in Najaf, it is not because of his ability to create a vast network of patronage for himself, but rather because tremendous business opportunities were provided to him by the Iranian government. This fundamental change makes marjas more independent of their followers but also more dependent on the economic frameworks set up by governments.

However, marjas have lost their monopoly over religious institutions. Not only does the Iranian government fully control Iran's clerical establishment (and partially Iraq's) and other religious institutions, but in the future there will be many religious institutions that marjas will not be able to have any control or supervision over. Influential non-marja clerics, government agencies, radical lay Islamists, and other type of people will be able to run religious institutions without relying on arrangements with marjas, allowing for dozens of forms of authority parallel to the authority of the marja to emerge.

The marjas will remain the representatives of conservative Islam. Due to the ever-changing nature of the Shi'ite community's social policies, forms of religiosity are constantly evolving. When the religious discourse of the marjas becomes less attractive to the upper-middle and upper classes, educated women, and the youth, these groups will invent their own religiosity. Reformist discourse created by religious intellectuals, which reemphasizes spirituality and morality over jurisprudence and theology, would consequently be more appealing. However, the marjas will still be a model to follow for millions of Shi'ites who adhere to an unreformed version of Shi'ite jurisprudence. As in Judaism and Christianity, where the orthodox and the catholic respectively continue to live as they have done for centuries alongside several other forms of Christianity and Judaism, conservative Islam -- crystalized in traditional clergy -- will also survive alongside other forms of Shi'ite authority.

In the new era, marjas will need to act more within the framework of the nation-state. If Sistani does not react to Iranian politics or Bahraini politics, it will be because the marja's ability to influence other governments or peoples has been significantly reduced. The marjas would prefer to be quietist; otherwise they will be influential only in local politics. Despite the fact that globalization and the Internet would enable marjas to proselytize for their marjavia throughout the world and attract followers and religious taxpayers no matter where they live, the marja institution will ironically become more local. Globalized communication tools allow more jurists to claim marjavia, and the pluralism of marjavia and its competitive nature would be quite unprecedented. The age of the universal marja who could monopolize religious authority is over. Marjavia does not survive by inheritance. When a marja dies, his office will continue to run his charities and other organizations for a while. His assets would not be transferred to a new marja; therefore, every marja must build up his marjavia from the beginning. This enables more people to take the path of marjavia without the need for being the protégé of a previous marja.

Over the next few decades, the tension between Shi'ites and Sunnis will become a major element in reshaping the politics of the Middle East. Shi'ites in eastern Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Pakistan, and Turkey will play a bolder role in the political dynamism of their own country. This change of status coincides with the decentralization of the Shi'ite leadership and a significant reduction in the role of marjas, who represent mostly conservative Shi'ites and influence their religious practices more than their social and political behavior. In the future, non-marja authorities will play a greater role. It will be interesting to observe how these authorities -- the Iranian government (amongst others), clerical figures who lack high religious credentials, lay Islamists, and reformist religious intellectuals -- will play a wider and deeper role in politics of Shi'ite community.

Mehdi Khalaji is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on the politics of Iran and Shiite groups in the Middle East. ❖

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