Prophet AND THE PROLETARIAT

ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM, CLASS AND REVOLUTION

CHRIS HARMAN

Chris Harman

The Prophet and the Proletariat

(1994)

From **International Socialism Journal 64**, Autumn 1994.

Later published as a pamphlet by Bookmarks, London.
Downloaded from the International Socialism Archive at http://www.lpi.org.uk/.
HTML text originally provided by Marxism Online at www.marxisme.dk.
Marked up by Einde O'Callaghan for **REDS – Die Roten**.

Table of Content

[Introduction]

The politics of the Middle East and beyond have been dominated by Islamist movements at least since the Iranian revolution of 1978-9. Variously described in the West as "Islamic fundamentalism", "Islamicism", "integrism", "political Islam" and "Islamic revivalism", these movements stand for the "regeneration" of society through a return to the original teachings of the prophet Mohammed. They have become a major force in Iran and the Sudan (where they still hold power), Egypt, Algeria and Tajikistan (where they are involved in bitter armed struggles against the state), Afghanistan (where rival Islamist movements have been waging war with each other since the collapse of the pro-Russian government), the occupied West Bank of the Jordan (where their militancy is challenging the old PLO hegemony over the Palestinian resistance), Pakistan (where they make up a significant portion of the opposition) and most recently Turkey (where the Welfare Party has taken control of Istanbul, Ankara and many other municipalities).

The rise of these movements has been an enormous shock to the liberal intelligentsia and has produced a wave of panic among people who believed that "modernisation", coming on top of the victory of the anti-colonial struggles of the 1950s and 1960s, would inevitably lead to more enlightened and less repressive societies. [1]

Instead they witness the growth of forces which seem to look back to a more restricted society which forces women into purdah, uses terror to crush free thought and threatens the most barbaric punishments on those who defy its edicts. In countries like Egypt and Algeria the liberals are now lining up with the state, which has persecuted and imprisoned them in the past, in the war it is waging against Islamist parties.

But it has not only been liberals who have been thrown into disarray by the rise of Islamism. So too has the left. It has not known how to react to what it sees as an obscurantist doctrine, backed by traditionally reactionary forces, enjoying success among some of the poorest groups in society. Two opposed approaches have resulted.

The first has been to see Islamism as Reaction Incarnate, as a form of fascism. This was, for example, the position taken soon after the Iranian revolution by the then left wing academic Fred Halliday, who referred to the Iranian regime as "Islam with a fascist face". [2] It is an approach which much of the Iranian left came to adopt after the consolidation of the Khomeini regime in 1981-2. And it is accepted by much of the left in Egypt and Algeria today. Thus, for example, one Algerian revolutionary Marxist group has argued that the principles, ideology and political action of the Islamist FIS "are similar to those of the National Front in France", and that it is "a fascist current". [3]

Such an analysis easily leads to the practical conclusion of building political alliances to stop the fascists at all costs. Thus Halliday concluded that the left in Iran made the mistake of not allying with the "liberal bourgeoisie" in 1979-81 in opposition to "the reactionary ideas and policies of Khomeini". [4] In Egypt today the left, influenced by the mainstream communist tradition, effectively supports the state in its war against the Islamists.

The opposite approach has been to see the Islamist movements as "progressive", "anti-imperialist" movements of the oppressed. This was the position taken by the great bulk of the Iranian left in the first phase of the 1979 revolution, when the Soviet influenced Tudeh Party, the majority of the Fedayeen guerrilla organization and the left Islamist People's Mojahedin all characterized the forces behind Khomeini as "the progressive petty bourgeoisie". The

conclusion of this approach was that Khomeini deserved virtually uncritical support. [5] A quarter of a century before this the Egyptian Communists briefly took the same position towards the Muslim Brotherhood, calling on them to join in "a common struggle against the 'fascist dictatorship' of Nasser and his 'Anglo-American props'". [6]

I want to argue that both positions are wrong. They fail to locate the class character of modern Islamism or to see its relationship to capital, the state and imperialism.

Notes

1. Thus a perceptive study of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood could conclude in 1969 that the attempt at the revival of the movement in the mid-1960s "was the predictable eruption of the continuing tensions caused by an ever dwindling activist fringe of individuals dedicated to an increasingly less relevant Muslim 'position' about society." R.P. Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers* (London, 1969), p.vii.

2. Article in the *New Statesman* in 1979, quoted by Fred Halliday himself in *The Iranian Revolution and its Implications*, *New Left Review*, 166 (November December 1987), p.36.

3. Interview with the Communist Movement of Algeria (MCA) in *Socialisme Internationale* (Paris, June 1990). The MCA itself no longer exists.

4. F. Halliday, op. cit., p.57.

5. For an account of the support given by different left organisations to the Islamists see P. Marshall, *Revolution and Counter Revolution in Iran* (London, 1988), pp.60-68 and pp.89-92; M. Moaddel, *Class, Politics and Ideology in the Iranian Revolution* (New York, 1993), pp.215-218; V. Moghadan, *False Roads in Iran*, *New Left Review*, p.166.

6. Pamphlet quoted in R.P. Mitchell, op. cit., p.127.

Islam, Religion and Ideology

The confusion often starts with a confusion about the power of religion itself. Religious people see it as a historical force in its own right, whether for good or for evil. So too do most bourgeois anti-clerical and free thinkers. For them, fighting the influence of religious institutions and obscurantists ideas is in itself the way to human liberation.

But although religious institutions and ideas clearly play a role in history, this does not happen in separation from the rest of material reality. Religious institutions, with their layers of priests and teachers, arise in a certain society and interact with that society. They can only maintain themselves as society changes if they find some way of changing their own base of support. So, for instance, one of the world's major religious institutions, the Roman Catholic Church, originated in the late ancient world and survived by adapting itself first to feudal society for 1,000 years and then, with much effort, to the capitalist society that replaced feudalism, changing much of the content of its own teaching in the process. People have always been capable of giving different interpretations to the religious ideas they hold, depending on their own material situation, their relations with other people and the conflicts they get involved in. History is full of examples of people who profess nearly identical religious beliefs ending up on opposite sides in great social conflicts. This happened with the social convulsions which swept Europe during the great crisis of feudalism in the 16th and 17th century, when Luther, Calvin, Munzer and many other "religious" leaders provided their followers with a new world view through a reinterpretation of biblical texts.

Islam is no different to any other religion in these respects. It arose in one context, among a trading

community in the towns of 7th century Arabia, in the midst of a society still mainly organized on a tribal basis. It flourished within the succession of great empires carved out by some of those who accepted its doctrines. It persists today as the official ideology of numerous capitalist states (Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Pakistan, Iran etc), as well as the inspiration of many oppositional movements.

It has been able to survive in such different societies because it has been able to adapt to differing class interests. It has obtained the finance to build its mosques and employ its preachers in turn from the traders of Arabia, the bureaucrats, landowners and merchants of the great empires, and the industrialists of modern capitalism. But at the same time it has gained the allegiance of the mass of people by putting across a message offering consolation to the poor and oppressed. At every point its message has balanced between promising a degree of protection to the oppressed and providing the exploiting classes with protection against any revolutionary overthrow.

So Islam stresses that the rich have to pay a 2.5 percent Islamic tax (the *zakat*) for the relief of the poor, that rulers have to govern in a just way, that husbands must not mistreat their wives. But it also treats the expropriation of the rich by the poor as theft, insists disobedience to a "just" government is a crime to be punished with all the vigour of the law and provides women with fewer rights than men within marriage, over inheritance, or over the children in the event of divorce. It appeals to the wealthy and the poor alike by offering regulation of oppression, both as a bulwark against still harsher oppression and as a bulwark against revolution. It is, like Christianity, Hinduism or Buddhism, both the heart of the heartless world and the opium of the people.

But no set of ideas can have such an appeal to different classes, especially when society is shaken by social convulsions, unless it is full of ambiguities. It has to be open to differing interpretations, even if these set its adherents at each other's throats.

This has been true of Islam virtually from its inception. After Mohammed's death in 632 AD, just two years after Islam had conquered Mecca, dissension broke out between the followers of Abu Bakr, who became the first Caliph (successor to Mohammed as leader of Islam), and Ali, husband of the prophet's daughter Fatima. Ali claimed that some of Abu Bakr's rulings were oppressive. Dissension grew until rival Muslim armies fought each other at the battle of the Camel resulting in 10,000 deaths. It was out of this dissension that the separation of the Sunni and Shia versions of Islam arose. This was but the first of many splits. Groups repeatedly arose who insisted that the oppressed were suffering at the hands of the godless and demanded a return to the original "pure" Islam of the prophet's time. As Akbar S. Ahmed says:

> Throughout Islamic history, Muslim leaders would preach a move to the ideal ... They gave expression to often vague ethnic, social or political movements ... The basis was laid for the entire schismatic gamut in Islamic thought from the Shia, with its offshoots like the Ismailis, to more temporary movements ... Muslim history is replete with Mahdis leading revolts against established authority and often dying for their efforts ... Leaders have often been poor peasants and from deprived ethnic groups. Using Islamic idiom has reinforced their sense of deprivation and consolidated the movement. [7]

But even mainstream Islam is not, in its popular forms at least, a homogenous set of beliefs. The spread of the religion to cover the whole region from the Atlantic coast of north west Africa to the Bay of Bengal involved the incorporation

into Islamic society of peoples who fitted into Islam many of their old religious practices, even if these contradicted some of Islam's original tenets. So popular Islam often includes cults of local saints or of holy relics even though orthodox Islam regards such practices as sacrilegious idolatry. And *Sufi* brotherhoods flourish which, while not constituting a formal rival to mainstream Islam, put an emphasis on mystical and magical experience which many fundamentalists find objectionable. [8]

In such a situation, any call for a return to the practices of the prophet's time is not in reality about conserving the past but about reshaping people's behaviour into something quite new.

This has been true of Islamic revivalism over the last century. It arose as an attempt to come to terms with the material conquest and cultural transformation of Asia and North Africa by capitalist Europe. The revivalists argued this had only been possible because the original Islamic values had been corrupted by the worldly pursuits of the great medieval empires. Regeneration was only possible by reviving the founding spirit of Islam as expressed by the first four Caliphs (or, for Shiites, by Ali). It was in this spirit that Khomeini, for instance, could denounce virtually the whole history of Islam for the last 1,300 years:

> Unfortunately, true Islam lasted for only a brief period after its inception. First the *Umayyids* [the first Arab dynasty after Ali] and then the *Abbasids* [who conquered them in 750 AD] inflicted all kinds of damage on Islam. Later the monarchs ruling Iran continued in the same path; they completely distorted Islam and established something quite diferent in its place. [9]

So, although Islamism can be presented by both defenders and opponents as a traditionalist doctrine, based on a

rejection of the modern world, in reality things are more complicated than this. The aspiration to recreate a mythical past involves not leaving existing society intact, but recasting it. What is more, the recasting cannot aim to produce a carbon copy of 7th century Islam, since the Islamists do not reject every feature of existing society. By and large they accept modern industry, modern technology and much of the science on which it is based – indeed, they argue that Islam, as a more rational and less superstitious doctrine than Christianity, is more in tune with modern science. And so the "revivalists" are, in fact, trying to bring about something which has never existed before, which fuses ancient traditions and the forms of modern social life.

This means it is wrong simply to refer to all Islamists as "reactionary", or to equate "Islamic fundamentalism" as a whole with the sort of Christian fundamentalism which is the bastion of the right wing of the Republican Party in the US. Figures like Khomeini, the heads of the rival Mujahedin groups in Afghanistan or the leaders of the Algerian FIS may use traditionalist themes and appeal to the nostalgia of disappearing social groups, but they also appeal to radical currents produced as society is transformed by capitalism. Olivier Roy, referring to the Afghan Islamists, argues that:

> Fundamentalism is quite different (to traditionalism): for fundamentalism it is of paramount importance to get back to the scriptures, clearing away the obfuscation of tradition. It always seeks a return to a former state: it is characterized by the practice of re-reading texts and a search for origins. The enemy is not modernity but tradition, or rather, in the context of Islam, of everything which is not the Tradition of the Prophet. This is true reform ... [10]

Traditionalist Islam is an ideology which seeks to perpetuate a social order which is being undermined by the development of capitalism – or at least, as with the version

promoted by the ruling family in Saudi Arabia, to hark back to this order in order to conceal the transformation of an old ruling class into modern capitalists. Islamism is an ideology which, although it appeals to some of the same themes, seeks to transform society, not to conserve it in the old way. For this reason, even the term "fundamentalism" is not really appropriate. As Abrahamian has observed:

> The label "fundamentalism" implies religious inflexibility, intellectual purity, political traditionalism, even social conservatism and the centrality of scriptural-doctrinal principles. "Fundamentalism" implies rejection of the modern world. [11]

But, in fact, movements like that of Khomeini in Iran have been based on "ideological adaptability and intellectual flexibility, with political protests against the established order, and with socio-economic issues that fuel mass opposition to the status quo". [12]

Yet there is often a blurring of the differences between Islamism and traditionalism. Precisely because the notion of social regeneration is wrapped in religious language, it is open to different interpretations. It can mean simply ending "degenerate practices" through a return to the forms of behaviour which allegedly preceded the "corruption" of Islam" by "cultural imperialism". The stress then is on female "modesty" and the wearing of the veil, an end to "promiscuous" mixing of the sexes in schools and workplaces, opposition to Western popular music and so on. Thus one of the most popular leaders of the Algerian FIS, Ali Belhadj, can denounce the "violence" against Muslims that comes from "cultural invasion":

> We Muslims believe that the most serious form of violence we have suffered is not physical violence, for which we are ready ... It is the violence which represents a challenge to the Muslim community by the imposition of diabolical legislation instead of the *sharia* ...

> Is there any violence worse than that which consists in encouraging that which God has forbidden? They open wine making enterprises, the work of the demon, and they are protected by the police ...
>
> Can you conceive of any violence greater than that of this woman who burns the scarf in a public place, in the eyes of everyone, saying the Family Code penalises women and finding support from the effeminised, the halfmen and the transexuals ...
>
> It is not violence to demand that woman stays at home, in an atmosphere of chastity, reserve and humility and that she only goes out in cases of necessity defined by the legislator ... to demand the segregation of sexes among school students and the absence of that stinking mixing that causes sexual violence ... [13]

But regeneration can also mean challenging the state and elements of imperialism's political domination. Thus the Iranian Islamists did close down the biggest US "listening" station in Asia and seize control of the US embassy. The Hezbollah in the southern Lebanon and Hamas in the West Bank and Gaza have played a key role in the armed struggle against Israel. The Algerian FIS did organize huge demonstrations against the US war against Iraq – even though these lost them their Saudi funding. Regeneration can even mean, in certain instances, giving support to the material struggles against exploitation of workers and peasants, as with the Iranian Mujahedin in 1979-82.

The different interpretations of regeneration naturally appeal to those from different social classes. But the religious phraseology can prevent those involved recognising their differences with one another. In the heat of the struggle individuals can mix the meanings together, so that the fight against the unveiling of women is seen as the fight against the Western oil companies and the abysmal poverty of the mass of people. Thus in Algeria in the late 1980s, Belhadj,

> made himself the voice of all those with nothing to lose ... Conceiving Islam in its most pure scriptural form, he preached strict application of its commandments ... Every Friday Belhadj

> made war against the entire world, Jews and Christians, Zionists, communists and secularists, liberals and agnostics, governments of the East and the West, Arab or Muslim heads of state, Westernised party leaders and intellectuals, were the favourite targets of his weekly preaching. [14]

Yet beneath this confusion of ideas there were real class interests at work.

Notes

7. A.S. Ahmed, **Discovering Islam** (New Delhi, 1990), pp.61-64.

8. For an account of Afghan Sufism, see O. Roy, **Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan** (Cambridge, 1990), pp.38-44. For Sufism in India and Pakistan, see A.S. Ahmed, **op. cit.**, pp.90-98.

9. I. Khomeini, **Islam and Revolution** (Berkeley, 1981), quoted in A.S. Ahmed, **op. cit.** p.31.

10. O. Roy, **op. cit.**, p5. A leading Islamist, Hassan al-Turabi, leader of the Sudanese Islamic Brotherhood, argues exactly the same, calling for an Islamicisation of society because "religion can become the most powerful motor of development", in *Le nouveau reveil de 1'Islam*, **Liberation** (Paris), 5 August, 1994.

11. E. Abrahamian, **Khomeinism** (London, 1993), p.2.

12. **Ibid.**

13. *Who is responsible for violence?* in **l'Algerie par les Islamistes**, edited by M. Al Ahnaf, B. Botivewau and F. Fregosi (Paris, 1990), pp.132ff.

14. **Ibid.**, p.31.

The Class Base of Islamism

Islamism has arisen in societies traumatized by the impact of capitalism – first in the form of external conquest by imperialism and then, increasingly, by the transformation of internal social relations accompanying the rise of a local capitalist class and the formation of an independent capitalist state.

Old social classes have been replaced by new ones, although not instantaneously or in a clear cut manner. What Trotsky described as "combined and uneven development" has occurred. Externally, colonialism has retreated, but the great imperialist powers – especially the US – continue to use their military forces as a bargaining tool to influence the production of the Middle East's single major resource, oil. Internally, state encouragement – and often ownership – has led to the development of some large scale modern industry, but large sectors of "traditional" industry remain, based on vast numbers of small workshops where the owner works with a couple of workers, often from his own family. Land reform has turned some peasants into modern capitalist farmers – but displaced many more, leaving them with little or no land, so forcing them to eke out a livelihood from casual labor in the workshops or markets of sprawling urban slums. A massive expansion of the education system is turning out vast numbers of high school and college graduates, but these then find insufficient job opportunities in the modern sectors of the economy and place their hopes on getting into the state bureaucracy, while eking out a living with scraps of work around the informal sector – touting for custom from shopkeepers, acting as guides for tourists, selling lottery tickets, driving taxis and so on.

The crises of the world economy over the last 20 years have aggravated all these contradictions. The modern

industries have found the national economy too small for them to operate efficiently, but the world economy too competitive for them to survive without state protection. The traditional industries have not generally been able to modernize without state support and they cannot compensate for the failure of modern industry to provide jobs for the burgeoning urban population. But a few sectors have managed to establish links of their own with international capital and increasingly resent the state's domination of the economy. The urban rich increasingly lap up the luxury goods available on the world market, creating growing resentment among the casual workers and the unemployed.

Islamism represents an attempt to come to terms with these contradictions by people who have been brought up to respect traditional Islamic ideas. But it does not find its support equally in all sections of society. For some sections embrace a modern secular bourgeois or nationalist ideology, while other sections gravitate towards some form of secular working class response. The Islamic revival gets sustenance from four different social groupings – each of which interprets Islam in its own way.

i. The Islamism of the old exploiters: First there are those members of the traditional privileged classes who fear losing out in the capitalist modernisation of society – particularly landowners (including clergy dependent on incomes from land belonging to religious foundations), traditional merchant capitalists, the owners of the mass of small shops and workshops. Such groups have often been the traditional sources of finance for the mosques and see Islam as a way of defending their established way of life and of making those who oversee change listen to their voices. Thus in Iran and Algeria it was this group which provided

the resources to the clergy to oppose the state's land reform programme in the 1960s and 1970s.

ii. The Islamism of the new exploiters: Second, often emerging from among this first group, are some of the capitalists who have enjoyed success despite hostility from those groups linked to the state. In Egypt, for instance, the present day Muslim Brotherhood "wormed their way into the economic fabric of Sadat's Egypt at a time when whole sections of it had been turned over to unregulated capitalism. Uthman Ahmad Uthman, the Egyptian Rockefeller, made no secret of this sympathy for the Brethren". [15]

In Turkey the Welfare Party, which is led by a former member of the main conservative party, enjoys the support of much of middle sized capital. In Iran among the *bazaaris* who gave support to Khomeini against the Shah were substantial capitalists resentful at the way economic policies favored those close to the crown.

iii. The Islamism of the poor: The third group are the rural poor who have suffered under the advance of capitalist farming and who have been forced into the cities as they desperately look for work. Thus in Algeria out of a total rural population of 8.2 million only 2 million gained anything from the land reform. The other 6 million were faced with the choice between increased poverty in the countryside and going to the cities to seek work. [16] But in the cities: "The lowest group are the hard core jobless made up of displaced former peasants who have flooded the cities in search of work and social opportunity ... detached from rural society without being truly integrated into urban society".[17]

They lost the certainties associated with an old way of life – certainties which they identify with traditional Muslim

culture – without gaining a secure material existence or a stable way of life: “Clear guidelines for behaviour and belief no longer exist for millions of Algerians caught between a tradition that no longer commands their total loyalty and a modernism that cannot satisfy the psychological and spiritual needs of young people in particular”. [18]

In such a situation even Islamic agitation against land reform on behalf of the old landowners in the 1970s could appeal to the peasants and ex-peasants. For the land reform could be a symbol of a transformation of the countryside that had destroyed a secure, if impoverished, way of life. “To the landed proprietors and the peasants without land, the Islamists held out the same prospect: the Koran stigmatised the expropriation of things belonging to others; it recommended to the rich and those who ruled according to the*Sunna* to be generous to others”. [19]

The appeal of Islamism grew through the 1980s as economic crisis increased the contrast between the impoverished masses and the elite of about 1 percent of the population who run the state and the economy. Their wealth and their Westernized lifestyles ill fitted their claim to be the heirs of the liberation struggle against the French. It was very easy for the ex-peasants to identify the “non-Islamic” behavior of this elite as the cause of their own misery.

In Iran likewise the capitalist transformation of agriculture embodied in the Shah’s land reform of the 1960s benefitted a minority of the toilers, while leaving the rest no better off and sometimes worse off. It increased the antagonism of the rural and recently urbanized poor against the state – an antagonism which did no harm to Islamic forces which had opposed the land reform. So when, for instance, in 1962 the Shah used the forces of the state

against Islamic figures, this turned them into a focus for the discontent of very large numbers of people.

In Egypt the "opening up" of the economy to the world market through agreements with the World Bank and the IMF from the mid-1970s onwards substantially worsened the situation of the mass of peasants and ex-peasants, creating enormous pools of bitterness. And in Afghanistan the land reforms which were imposed after the PDPA (Communist Party) coup of 1978 led to a series of spontaneous risings from all sections of the rural population:

> The reforms put an end to the traditional ways of working based on mutual self interest without introducing any alternative. The landowners who had been dispossessed of their land were careful not to distribute any seed to their sharecroppers; people who traditionally had been willing to provide loans now refused to do so. There were plans for the creation of a bank for agricultural development and for setting up an office to oversee the distribution of seed and fodder, but none of this had been done when the reforms actually took place ... So it was the very act of announcing the reforms that cut the peasant off from his seed supplies ... The reform destroyed not just the economic structure but the whole social framework of production ... It is not surprising, therefore, that instead of setting 98 percent of the people against 2 percent of the exploiting classes, these reforms led to a general revolt of 75 percent of the rural areas. [And] when the new system was seen not to be working [even] the peasants who had initially welcomed reform felt they would be better off going back to the old system. [20]

But it is not only hostility to the state that makes ex-peasants receptive to the message of the Islamists. The mosques provide a social focus for people lost in a new and strange city, the Islamic charities the rudiments of welfare services (clinics, schooling, etc) which are lacking from the

state. So in Algeria the growth of the cities in the 1970s and 1980s was accompanied by a massive increase in the number of mosques: "Everything happened as if the paralysis in education and Arabisation, the absence of structures of culture and leisure, the lack of space for public liberty, the shortage of homes, made thousands of adults, youth and children disposed for the mosques". [21]

In this way, funds which came from those with diametrically opposed interests to the mass of people – from the old landowning class, the new rich or the Saudi government – could provide both a material and a cultural haven for the poor. "In the mosque, everyone – new or old bourgeois, fundamentalist, worker in an enterprise – saw the possibility of the elaboration or realization of his own strategy, dreams and hopes". [22]

This did not obliterate the class divisions within the mosque. In Algeria, for example, there were innumerable rows in mosque committees between people whose different social background made them see the building of the mosques in different ways – for instance, over when they should refuse to accept donations for the mosque because they came from sinful (*haram*) sources. "It is rare in fact for a religious committee to accomplish its mandate, fixed in principle at two years, with the harmony and agreement recommended by the cult of the unity of the divine which the *muezzins* chant without cease." [23] But the rows remained cloaked in a religious guise – and have not stopped the proliferation of the mosques and the growth in the influence of Islamism.

iv. The Islamism of the new middle class: However, neither the "traditional" exploiting classes nor the impoverished masses provide the vital element which sustains revivalist, political Islam – the cadre of activists who propagate its

doctrines and risk injury, imprisonment and death in confrontation with their enemies.

The traditional exploiting classes are by their very nature conservative. They are prepared to donate money so that others can fight – especially in defence of their material interests. They did so when faced with the land reform in Algeria in the early 1970s; when the Baathist regime in Syria encroached upon the interests of the urban merchants and traders in the spring of 1980s; [24] and when the merchants and small businessmen of the Iranian bazaars felt themselves under attack from the Shah in 1976-78 and threatened by the left in 1979-81. But they are wary of putting their own businesses, let alone their own lives, at risk. And so they can hardly be the force that has torn societies like Algeria and Egypt apart, caused a whole town, Hama, to rise in revolt in Syria, used suicide bombs against the Americans and Israelis in Lebanon – and which caused the Iranian Revolution to take a turn much more radical than any section of the Iranian bourgeoisie expected.

This force, in fact, comes from a fourth, very different stratum – from a section of the new middle class that has arisen as a result of capitalist modernisation right across the Third World.

In Iran the cadres of all three of the Islamist movements that dominated the politics of the first years of the revolution came from this background. Thus one account tells of the support for the first post-revolutionary prime minister, Bazargan:

> As Iran's educational system expanded in the 1950s and 1960s, even wider groups of traditional middle class people gained access to the country's universities. Confronted with institutions dominated by the older, Westernised elites, these newcomers to

> academia felt an urgent need to justify their continued adherence to Islam to themselves. They joined the Muslim Students Associations [run by Bazargan etc] ... upon entering professional life, the new engineers often joined the Islamic Association of Engineers, also founded by Bazargan. This association network constituted the real organized social support for Bazargan and Islamic modernism ... Bazargan's and Taleqani's appeal [depended on] the way they gave the rising members of the traditional middle classes a sense of dignity which allowed them to affirm their identity in a society politically dominated by what they saw as a Godless, Westernized and corrupt elite. [25]

Writing of the People's Mojahedin of Iran, Abrahamian comments that many studies of the first years of the Iranian Revolution have talked of the appeal of radical Islam to the "oppressed", but that it was not the oppressed in general who formed the basis of the Mojahedin; rather it was that very large section of the new middle class whose parents had been part of the traditional petty bourgeoisie. He gives breakdowns of the occupations of Mojahedin arrested under the Shah and subject to repression under Khomeini to support his argument. [26]

Although the third Islamist force, the ultimately victorious Islamic Republican Party of Khomeini, is usually thought of as run by the clergy linked to the traditional *bazaar* merchant capitalists, Moaddel has shown that more than half its MPs were from the professions, teachers, government employees or students – even if a quarter came from *bazaari* families. [27] And Bayat has noted that in their struggle to defeat the workers' organizations in the factories, the regime could rely on the professional engineers who worked there. [28]

Azar Tabari notes that after the downfall of the Shah very large numbers of women in the Iranian cities opted to

wear the veil and lined up with the followers of Khomeini against the left. She claims these women came from that section of the middle class that was the first generation to undergo a process of "social integration". Often from traditional petty bourgeois families – with fathers who were bazaar merchants, tradesmen and so on – they were forced into higher education as traditional opportunities for their families to make money declined with industrialization. There were openings for them in professions like teaching and nursing. But "these women had to go through the often painful and traumatic experience of first generation adjustment":

> As the young women from such families began to go to universities or work in hospitals, all these traditional concepts came under daily attack from "alien" surroundings, where women mixed with men, wore no veils, and sometimes dressed according to the latest European fashions. Women were often torn between accepted family norms and the pressure of the new environment. They could not be veiled at work, nor could they leave home unveiled.

One widespread response to these contradictory pressures was "a retreat into Islam", "*symbolized by deliberately veiled women demonstrators during large mobilizations*". Tabari claims this response stood in marked contrast to that of women whose families had been part of the new middle class for two or three generations, and who refused to wear the veil and identified with the liberals or the left. [29] In Afghanistan, Roy notes:

> The Islamist movement was born in the modern sectors of society and developed from a critique of the popular movements that preceded it ... The Islamists are intellectuals, the products of modernist enclaves within traditional society; their social origins are what we have termed the state bourgeoisie – products of the government education system which only leads to employment in the

> state machine ... The Islamists are products of the state educational system. Very few of them have an education in the arts. On the campus they mostly mix with the Communists, with whom they are violently opposed, rather that with the *ulama* [religious scholars] towards whom they have an ambivalent attitude. They share many beliefs in common with the *ulama*, but Islamist thought has developed from contact with the great western ideologies, which they see as holding the key to the west's technical development. For them, the problem is to develop a modern political ideology based upon Islam, which they see as the only way to come to terms with the modern world and the best means of confronting foreign imperialism. [30]

In Algeria the most important recruitment ground for the FIS has been among Arabic speaking (as opposed to French speaking) high school and university students, and that wide section of youth that would like to be students but cannot get college places:

> The FIS draws its membership from three sections of the population: the commercial middle classes, including some who are quite rich, a mass of young people who are unemployed and excluded from higher education, forming the new lumpen proletariat of the streets, and a layer of upwardly mobile Arab speaking intellectuals. These last two groups are the most numerous and important. [31]

The Islamic intellectuals have made careers for themselves through their domination of the theological and Arab language faculties of the universities, using these to gain control of many of the positions as imams in the mosques and teachers in the *lycees* (high schools). They form a network that ensures the recruitment of more Islamists to such positions and the inculcation of Islamist ideas into the new generation of students. This in turn has enabled them to exert influence over vast numbers of young people.

Ahmed Rouadia writes that the Islamist groups began to grow from the mid-1970s onwards, receiving support in the universities from Arab speaking students who found their lack of fluency in French kept them from getting jobs in administration, areas of advanced technology and higher management. [32] Thus, there was, for instance, a bitter conflict with the principal of Constantine university in the mid-1980s, who was accused of impugning the "dignity of Arab language" and "being loyal to French colonialism" for allowing French to remain the predominant language in the science and technology faculties [33]:

> The qualified Arab speakers find access blocked to all the key sectors, above all in industries requiring technical knowledge and foreign languages ... The Arab speakers, even if they have diplomas, cannot get a place in modern industry. For the most part they end by turning towards the mosque. [34]

The students, the recent Arab speaking graduates and, above all, the unemployed ex-students form a bridge to the very large numbers of discontented youth outside the colleges who find they cannot get college places despite years spent in an inefficient and underfunded educational system. Thus, although there are now nearly a million students in secondary education, up to four fifths of them can expect to fail the bacalauriate – the key to entry into university – and to face a life of insecurity on the margins of employment: [35]

> Integrism [Islamism] gets its strength from the social frustrations which afflict a large part of the youth, those left out of account by the social and economic system. Its message is simple: If there is poverty, hardship and frustration, it is because those who have power do not base themselves on the legitimacy of *shorah* [consultation], but simply on force ... The restoration of the Islam of the first years would make the inequalities disappear. [36]

And through its influence over a wide layer of students, graduates and the intellectual unemployed, Islamism is able to spread out to dominate the propagation of ideas in the slums and shanty towns where the expeasants live. Such a movement cannot be described as a "conservative" movement. The educated, Arab speaking youth do not turn to Islam because they want things to stay as they are, but because they believe it offers massive social change. [37]

In Egypt the Islamist movement first developed some 65 years ago, when Hassan al-Banna formed the Muslim Brotherhood. It grew in the 1930s and 1940s as disillusionment set in with the failure of the secular nationalist party, the Wafd, to challenge British domination of the country. The base of the movement consisted mainly of civil servants and students, and it was one of the major forces in the university protests of the late 1940s and early 1950s. [38] But it spread out to involve some urban labourers and peasants, with a membership estimated to have peaked at half a million. In building the movement Banna was quite willing to collaborate with certain figures close to the Egyptian monarchy, and the right wing of the Wafd looked on the Brotherhood as a counter to communist influence among workers and students. [39]

But the Brotherhood could only compete with the communists for the support of the impoverished middle classes – and via them to sections of the urban poor – because its religious language concealed a commitment to reform which went further than its right wing allies wished. Its objectives were "ultimately incompatible with the perpetuation of the political, economic and social status quo to which the ruling groups were dedicated". This ensured "the liaison between the Muslim Brotherhood and the conservative rulers would be both unstable and tenuous". [40]

The Brotherhood was virtually destroyed once a new military regime around Abdul Nasser had concentrated full power into its hands in the early 1950s. Six of the Brotherhood's leaders were hanged in December 1954 and thousands of its members thrown into concentration camps. An attempt to revive the movement in the mid-1960s led to still more executions, but then, after Nasser's death, his successors Sadat and Mubarak allowed it to lead a semi-legal existence – provided it avoided any head on confrontation with the regime. The leadership of what is sometimes called the "Neo-Islamic Brotherhood" has been willing to accept these restraints, following a relatively "moderate" and "reconciliatory" approach, getting large sums of money from members who were exiled to Saudi Arabia in the 1950s and prospered from the oil boom. [41] This has enabled the Brothers to provide "an alternative model of a Muslim state" with "their banks, social services, educational services and ... their mosques". [42]

But it has also led them to lose influence over a new generation of radical Islamists which has arisen, as the Brotherhood itself originally did, from the universities and the impoverished section of the "modern" middle class. These are the Islamists who were responsible for the assassination of Sadat in 1981 and who have been waging armed struggle ever since both against the state and against the secular intelligentsia:

> When we speak of the fundamentalists in Egypt, what we mean is a minority group of people who are even against the Moslem Brothers ... These groups are composed mainly of youth ... They are very pure people, they are prepared to sacrifice their lives, to do anything ... And they are used as the spearheads of the different movements because they are able to undertake terrorist actions. [43]

The Islamist student associations which became a dominant force in Egyptian universities during Sadat's presidency

"constituted the Islamicist movement's only genuine mass organisations". [44] They grew in reaction to conditions in the universities and to the dismal prospects facing students if they succeeded in graduating:

> The number of students rose from slightly less than 200,000 in 1970 to more than half a million in 1977 ... In the absence of the necessary resources, providing free high education for the greatest possible number of the country's youth has produced a system of cut rate education. [45]

Overcrowding represents a particular problem for female students, who find themselves subject to all sorts of harassment in the lecture theatres and overcrowded buses. In response to this situation,

> The *jamaa al islamiyya* [Islamic associations] drew their considerable strength from their ability to identify [these problems] and to pose immediate solutions – for instance, using student unions funds to run minibuses for female students [giving priority to those who wore the veil], calling for separate rows in the lecture theatres for women and men, organising course revision groups which met in the mosques, turning out cheap editions of essential textbooks. [46]

Graduating students do not escape the endemic poverty of much of Egyptian society:

> Every graduate has the right to public employment. This measure is actually the purveyor of massive disguised unemployment in the offices of a swollen administration in which employees are badly paid ... He can still manage to feed himself by buying the state subsidised products, but he is unlikely to rise above the bare level of subsistence ... Almost every state employee has a second or a third job ... Innumerable employees who sit all morning at desks in one or other of the countless ministry offices spend the afternoon working as plumbers or taxi drivers, jobs they perform so inadequately they might as well be filled by illiterates ... An illiterate peasant woman who arrives in the city to land a job as a

> foreigner's maid will be paid more or less double the salary of a university assistant lecturer. [47]

The only way to get out of this morass for most graduates is to get a job abroad, especially in Saudi Arabia or the Gulf states. And this is not just the only way out of poverty, it is, for most people, the precondition for getting married in a society where pre-marital sexual relations are rare.

The Islamists were able to articulate these problems in religious language. As Kepel writes of one of the leaders of one of the early Islamist sects, his position does not involve "acting as a fanatic for a bygone century ... He is putting his finger – in his own way – on a crucial problem of contemporary Egyptian society". [48]

As in Algeria, once the Islamists had established a mass base in the universities, they were then in a situation to spread out into a wider milieu – the milieu of the impoverished streets of the cities where the students and ex-students mixed with a mass of other people scrabbling for a livelihood. This began to happen after the regime clamped down hard on the Islamist movement in the universities following the negotiation of the peace agreement with Israel in the late 1970s. "Far from halting the *jamaa*, however, this harassment gave them a second wind ... the message of the *jamaa* now began to spread beyond the world of students. Islamicist cadres and agitators went to preach in the poor neighbourhoods". [49]

Notes

15. G. Kepel, The Prophet and the Pharoah, Muslim Extremism in Egypt (London, 1985), p.109.

16. See, for example, K. Pfeifer, Agrarian Reform Under State Capitalism in Algeria (Boulder, 1985), p.59; C Andersson, Peasant or Proletarian? (Stockholm, 1986), p.67; M. Raffinot and P. Jacquemot, Le Capitalisme d'état Algerien (Paris, 1977).

17. J.P. Entelis, Algeria, the Institutionalised Revolution (Boulder, 1986), p.76.

18. Ibid.

19. A. Rouadia, Les Freres et la Mosque (Paris, 1990), p.33.
20. O. Roy, op. cit., pp.88-90.
21. A. Rouadia, op. cit., p.82.
22. Ibid., p.78.
23. Ibid.

24. For an account of these events, see D. Hiro, Islamic Fundamentalism (London, 1989), p.97.

25. H.E. Chehabi, Iranian Politics and Religious Modernism (London, 1990), p.89.

26. E. Abrahamian, The Iranian Mojahedin (London, 1989), pp.107, 201, 214, 225-226.

27. M. Moaddel, op. cit., pp.224-238.

28. A. Bayat, Workers and Revolution in Iran (London, 1987), p.57.

29. A. Tabari, Islam and the Struggle for Emancipation of Iranian Women, in A. Tabari and N. Yeganeh, In the Shadow of Islam: the Women's Movement in Iran.

30. O. Roy, op. cit., pp.68-69.
31. M. Al-Ahnaf, B Botivewau and F. Fregosi, op. cit.
32. A. Rouadia, op. cit..
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.

35. In 1989, of 250,000 who took exams, only 54,000 obtained the bac, Ibid., p.137.

36. Ibid., p.146.
37. Ibid., p.147.
38. See R.P. Mitchell, op. cit., p.13.
39. See Ibid., p.27.
40. Ibid., p.38.

41. M. Hussein, Islamic Radicalism as a Political Protest Movement, in N. Sa'dawi, S. Hitata, M. Hussein and S. Safwat, Islamic Fundamentalism (London, 1989).

42. Ibid.

43. S. Hitata, East West Relations, in N. Sa'dawi, S. Hitata, M. Hussein and S. Safwat, op. cit., p.26.

44. G. Kepel, op. cit., p.129.

45. Ibid., p.137.
46. Ibid., pp.143-44.
47. Ibid., p.85.
48. Ibid., p.95-96.
49. Ibid., p.149.

Radical Islam as a Social Movement

The class base of Islamism is similar to that of classical fascism and of the Hindu fundamentalism of the BJP, Shiv Sena and RSS in India. All these movements have recruited from the white collar middle class and students, as well as from the traditional commercial and professional petty bourgeoisie. This, together with the hostility of most Islamist movements to the left, women's rights and secularism has led many socialist and liberals to designate the movements as fascist. But this is a mistake.

The petty bourgeois class base has not only been a characteristic of fascism, it has also been a feature of Jacobinism, of Third World nationalisms, of Maoist Stalinism, and Peronism. Petty bourgeois movements only become fascist when they arise at a specific point in the class struggle and play a particular role. This role is not just to mobilise the petty bourgeoisie, but to exploit the bitterness they feel at what an acute crisis of the system has done to them and so turn them into organised thugs prepared to work for capital to tear workers' organisations apart.

That is why Mussolini's and Hitler's movements were fascist while, say, Peron's movement in Argentina was not. Even though Peron borrowed some of the imagery of fascism, he took power in exceptional circumstances which allowed him to buy off workers' organisations while using state intervention to divert the profits of the large agrarian capitalists into industrial expansion. During his first six years in office an specific set of circumstances allowed real wages to rise by about 60 percent. This was the complete opposite to what would have happened under a genuinely fascist regime. Yet the liberal intelligentsia and the Argentine Communist Party were still capable of referring to the regime as "Nazi Peronism", in much the same way that

much of the left internationally refers to Islamism today. [50]

The Islamist mass movements in countries like Algeria and Egypt likewise play a different role to that of fascism. They are not primarily directed against workers' organizations and do not offer themselves to the main sectors of capital as a way of solving its problems at workers' expense. They are often involved in direct, armed confrontation with the forces of the state in a way in which fascist parties rarely have been. And, far from being direct agents of imperialism, these movements have taken up anti-imperialist slogans and some anti-imperialist actions which have embarrassed very important national and international capitalist interests (e.g. in Algeria over the second Gulf War, in Egypt against "peace" with Israel, in Iran against the American presence in the aftermath of the overthrow of the Shah).

The American CIA was able to work with Pakistan intelligence and the pro-Western Middle East states to arm thousands of volunteers from right across the Middle East to fight against the Russians in Afghanistan. But now these volunteers are returning home to discover they were fighting for the US when they thought they were fighting "for Islam", and constituting a bitter hard core of opposition to most of the governments which encouraged them to go. Even in Saudi Arabia, where the ultra-puritan Wahhabist interpretation of the Islamic *sharia* (religious law) is imposed with all the might of the state, the opposition now claims the support of "thousands of Afghan fighters", disgusted by the hypocrisy of a royal family that is increasingly integrated into the world capitalist ruling class. And the royal family is now retaliating, further antagonising some of the very people it encouraged so much in the past, cutting off funds to the Algerian FIS for supporting Iraq in

the second Gulf War and deporting a Saudi millionaire who has been financing Islamists in Egypt.

Those on the left who see the Islamists simply as "fascists" fail to take into account the destabilising effect of the movements on capital's interests right across the Middle East, and end up siding with states that are the strongest backers both of imperialism and of local capital. This has, for instance, happened to those sections of the left influenced by the remnants of Stalinism in Egypt. It happened to much of the Iranian left during the closing stages of the first Gulf War, when American imperialism sent in its fleet to fight on the same side as Iraq against Iran. And it is in danger of happening to the secular left in Algeria, faced with a near civil war between the Islamists and the state.

But if it is wrong to see the Islamist movements as "fascist", it is just as wrong to simply see them as "anti-imperialist" or "anti-state". They do not just fight against those classes and states that exploit and dominate the mass of people. They also fight against secularism, against women who refuse to abide by Islamic notions of "modesty", against the left and, in important cases, against ethnic or religious minorities. The Algerian Islamists established their hold on the universities in the late 1970s and early 1980s by organising "punitive raids" against the left with the connivance of the police, and the first person killed by them was not a state official but a member of a Trotskyist organisation; another of their actions was to denounce *Hard Rock Magazine*, homosexuality, drugs and punk at the Islamic book fair in 1985; in the Algerian towns where they are strongest, they do organize attacks on women who dare to show a little of their skin; the first public demonstration of the FIS in 1989 was in response to "feminist" and "secularist" demonstrations against Islamist violence, of

which women were the main victims. [51] Its hostility is directed not just against the state and foreign capital, but also against the more than 1 million Algerian citizens who, through no fault of their own, have been brought up with French as their first language, and the 10 percent of the population who are Berber rather than Arabic speakers.

Similarly, in Egypt, the armed Islamic groups do murder secularists and Islamists who disagree strongly with them; they do encourage communal hatred by Muslims, including pogroms, against the 10 percent of the population who happen to be Coptic Christians. In Iran the Khomeini wing of Islamism did execute some 100 people for "sexual offences" like homosexuality and adultery in 1979-81; they did sack women from the legal system and organise gangs of thugs, the Iranian Hezbollah, to attack unveiled women and to assault left wingers; and they did kill thousands in the repression of the left Islamist People's Mujahedin. In Afghanistan the Islamist organisations which waged a long and bloody war against the Russian occupation of their country did turn their heavy weaponry on each other once the Russians had left, reducing whole areas of Kabul to rubble.

In fact, even when Islamists put the stress on "anti-imperialism", they more often than not let imperialism off the hook. For imperialism today is not usually the direct rule of Western states over parts of the Third World, but rather a world system of independent capitalist classes ('private" and state), integrated into a single world market. Some ruling classes have greater power than others and so are able to impose their own bargaining terms through their control over access to trade, the banking system or on occasions crude force. These ruling classes stand at the top of a pinnacle of exploitation, but those just below are the ruling classes of poorer countries, rooted in the individual

national economies, also gaining from the system, increasingly linking themselves into the dominant multinational networks and buying into the economies of the advanced world, even if on occasion they lash out at those above them.

The suffering of the great mass of people cannot *simply* be blamed on the great imperialist powers and their agencies like the World Bank and the IMF. It is also a result of the enthusiastic participation in exploitation of the lesser capitalists and their states. It is these who actually implement the policies that impoverish people and wreck their lives. And it is these who use the police and the prisons to crush those who try to resist.

There is an important difference here with what happened under the classic imperialism of the colonial empires, where Western colonists manned the state and directed repression. The local exploiting classes would be pulled two ways, between resisting a state when it trampled on their interests, and collaborating with it as a bulwark against those they themselves exploited. But they were not necessarily in the front line of defending the whole system of exploitation against revolt. They are today. They are part of the system, even if they sometimes quarrel with it. They are no longer its inconsistent opponents. [52]

In this situation any ideology which restricts itself to targeting foreign imperialism as the enemy evades any serious confrontation with the system. It expresses people's bitterness and frustration, but evades focusing it on real enemies. This is true of most versions of Islamism, just as it is true these days of most Third World nationalisms. They point to a real enemy, the world system, and on occasions they clash bitterly with the state. But they absolve from

responsibility most of the local bourgeoisie – imperialism's most important long term partner.

A recent study of Khomeinism in Iran by Abrahamian compares it with Peronism and similar forms of "populism":

> Khomeini adopted radical themes ... At times he sounded more radical than the Marxists. But while adopting radical themes he remained staunchly committed to the preservation of middle class property. This form of middle class radicalism made him akin to Latin American populists, especially the Peronists. [53]

And Abrahamian goes on to say:

> By "populism" I mean a movement of the propertied middle class that mobilizes the lower classes, especially the urban poor, with radical rhetoric directed against imperialism, foreign capitalism, and the political establishment ... Populist movements promise to drastically raise the standard of living and make the country fully independent of outside powers. Even more important in attacking the status quo with radical rhetoric, they intentionally stop short of threatening the petty bourgeoisie and the whole principle of private property. Populist movements thus, inevitably, emphasize the importance, not of economic social revolution, but of cultural, national and political reconstruction. [54]

Such movements tend to confuse matters by moving from any real struggle against imperialism to a purely ideological struggle against what they see as its cultural effects. "*Cultural imperialism*", rather than material exploitation, is identified as the source of everything that is wrong. The fight is then not directed against forces really involved in impoverishing people, but rather against those who speak "foreign" languages, accept "alien" religions or reject allegedly "traditional" lifestyles. This is very convenient for certain sections of local capital who find it easy to practice the "indigenous culture", at least in public.

It is also of direct material interest to sections of the middle class who can advance their own careers by purging others from their jobs. But it limits the dangers such movements present to imperialism as a system.

Islamism, then, both mobilises popular bitterness and paralyses it; both builds up people's feelings that something must be done and directs those feelings into blind alleys; both destabilises the state and limits the real struggle against the state.

The contradictory character of Islamism follows from the class base of its core cadres. The petty bourgeoisie as a class cannot follow a consistent, independent policy of its own. This has always been true of the traditional petty bourgeoisie – the small shopkeepers, traders and self employed professionals. They have always been caught between a conservative hankering for security that looks to the past and a hope that they individually will gain from radical change. It is just as true of the impoverished new middle class – or the even more impoverished would-be new middle class of unemployed ex-students – in the less economically advanced countries today. They can hanker after an allegedly golden past. They can see their futures as tied up with general social advance through revolutionary change. Or they can blame the frustration of their aspirations on other sections of the population who have got an "unfair" grip on middle class jobs: the religious and ethnic minorities, those with a different language, women working in an "untraditional" way.

Which direction they turn in does not just depend on immediate material factors. It also depends on the struggles that occur on a national and international scale. Thus in the 1950s and 1960s the struggles against colonialism and imperialism did inspire much of the aspirant middle class of

the Third World, and there was a general feeling that state controlled economic development represented the way forward. The secular left, or at least its Stalinist or nationalist mainstream, was seen as embodying this vision, and it exercised a degree of hegemony in the universities. At that stage even those who began with a religious orientation were attracted by what was seen as the left – by the example of the Vietnamese War against America or by the so called cultural revolution in China – and began to reject traditional religious thinking over, for instance, the women's question. This happened with the Catholic liberation theologists in Latin America and the People's Mojahedin in Iran. And even in Afghanistan the Islamist students

> demonstrated against Zionism during the six-day war, against American policies in Vietnam and the privileges of the establishment. They were violently opposed to important figures on the traditionalist side, to the King and especially his cousin Daoud ... They protested against foreign influences in Afghanistan, both from the Soviet Union and the West, and against the speculators during the famine of 1972, by demanding there should be curbs on personal wealth. [55]

In the late 1970s and 1980s the mood changed. On the one hand there was the beginning of a global wave of disillusionment with the so called "socialist" model presented by the Eastern European states as a result of the killing fields of Cambodia, the mini-war between Vietnam and China, and the move of China towards the American camp. This disillusionment grew in intensity in the later 1980s as a result of the changes in Eastern Europe and the collapse of the USSR.

It was even more intense in certain Middle Eastern countries than elsewhere in the world because the illusions had not merely been a question of foreign policy. The local

regimes had claimed to be implementing nationalist versions of "socialism", based to a greater or lesser extent on the East European model. Even those on the left who were critical of their governments tended to accept and identify with these claims. Thus in Algeria the left in the universities volunteered in the early 1970s to go to the countryside to assist in the "land reform", even though the regime had already repressed the left student organisation and was maintaining police control over the universities. And in Egypt the Communists continued to proclaim Nasser as a socialist, even after he had thrown them into prison. So disillusionment with the regime became also, for many people, disillusionment with the left.

On the other hand, there was the emergence of certain Islamic states as a political force – the seizure of power by Gadaffi in Libya, the Saudi-led oil embargo against the West at the time of the Arab-Israeli war of 1973, and then, most dramatically, the revolutionary establishment of the Iranian Islamic Republic in 1979.

Islamism began to dominate among the very layers of students and young people who had once looked to the left: in Algeria, for instance, "Khomeini began to be regarded by layers of young people as Mao and Guevara once had been". [56] Support for the Islamist movements went from strength to strength as they seemed to offer immanent and radical change. The leaders of the Islamist movements were triumphant.

Yet the contradictions in Islamism did not go away, and expressed themselves forcefully in the decade that followed. Far from being an unstoppable force, Islamism has, in fact, been subject to its own internal pressures which, repeatedly, have made its followers turn on one another. Just as the history of Stalinism in the Middle East in the 1940s and

1950s was one of failure, betrayals, splits and repression, so has the history of Islamism been in the 1980s and 1990s.

Notes

50. For an account of this period see, for example, A. Dabat and L. Lorenzano, **Conflicto Malvinense y Crisis Nacional** (Mexico, 1982), pp.46-8.

51. M. Al-Ahnaf, B. Botivewau and F. Fregosi, **op. cit.**, p.34.

52. Phil Marshall's otherwise useful article, *Islamic Fundamentalism – Oppression and Revolution*, in **International Socialism 40**, falls down precisely because it fails to distinguish between the anti-imperialism of bourgeois movements faced with colonialism and that of petty bourgeois movements facing independent capitalist states integrated into the world system. All his stress is on the role these movements can play as they "express the struggle against imperialism". This is to forget that the local state and the local bourgeoisie are usually the immediate agent of exploitation and oppression in the Third World today-something which some strands of radical Islamism do at least half recognise (as when Qutb describes states like Egypt as "non-Islamic").

It also fails to see that the petty bourgeoisie limitations of Islamist movements mean that their leaders, like those of movements like Peronism before them, often use rhetoric about "imperialism" to justify an eventual deal with the local state and ruling class while deflecting bitterness into attacks on those minorities they identify as local agents of "cultural imperialism". Marshall is therefore mistaken to argue that revolutionary Marxists can follow the same approach to Islamism as that developed by the early, pre-Stalinist Comintern in relation to the rising anti-colonial movements of the early 1920s. We must certainly learn from the early Comintern that you can he on the same side as a certain movement (or even state) in so far as it fights imperialism, while at the same time you strive to overthrow its leadership and disagree with its politics, its strategy and its tactics. But that is not at all the same as saying

that the bourgeois and petty bourgeois Islamism of the 1990s is the same as the bourgeois and petty bourgeois anti-colonialism of the 1920s.

Otherwise we can fall into the same mistake the left in countries like Argentina did during the late 1960s and early 1970s, when they supported the nationalism of their own bourgeoisie on the grounds that they lived in "semi-colonial states".

As A. Dabat and L. Lorenzano have quite rightly noted, "The Argentine nationalist and Marxist left confused ... the association (of their own rulers) with the interests of the imperialist bourgeoisie and their diplomatic servility in the face of the US army and state with political dependency ('semi-colonialism', 'colonialism'), which led to its most radical and determined forces to decide to call for an amid struggle for 'the second independence'. In reality, they were faced with something quite different. The behaviour of any government of a relatively weak capitalist country (however independent its state structure is) is necessary 'conciliatory', 'capitulationist' when it comes to meeting its own interests ... in getting concessions from imperialist governments or firms ... or consolidating alliances ... with these states. These types of action are in essence the same for all bourgeois governments, however nationalist they consider themselves. This does not affect the structure of the state and its relationship with the process of self-expansion and reproduction of capital on the national scale (the character of the state as a direct expression of the national dominant classes and not as an expression of the imperialist states and bourgeoisies of other countries)." **Conflicto Malvinense y Crisis Nacional**, **op. cit.**, p.70.

53. E. Abrahamian, **Khomeinism**, **op. cit.**, p.3.

54. **Ibid.**, p.17.

55. O. Roy, **op. cit.**, p.71.

56. M. Al-Ahnaf, B. Botivewau and F. Fregosi, **op. cit.**, pp.26-27.

The Contradictions of Islamism: Egypt

The contradictory character of Islamism expresses itself in the way in which it sees "the return to the Koran" taking place. It can see this as through a reform of the "values" of existing society, meaning simply a return to religious practices, while leaving the main structures of society intact. Or it can be seen as meaning a revolutionary overthrow of existing society. The contradiction is to be seen in the history both of the old Islamic Brotherhood of Egypt in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, and in the new radical Islamist movements of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s.

The Muslim Brotherhood grew rapidly in the 1930s and 1940s as it picked up support from those disillusioned by the compromises the bourgeois nationalist Wafd made with the British, as we have seen. It was further aided by the gyrations of the Communist left under Stalin's influence, which went so far as to support the establishment of Israel. By recruiting volunteers to fight in Palestine and against the British occupation of the Egyptian Canal Zone, the Brotherhood could seem to support the anti-imperialist struggle. But just as the Brotherhood reached its peak of support, it began to run into troubles. Its leadership based themselves on a coalition of forces – recruitment of a mass of petty bourgeois youth, links with the palace, deals with the right wing of the Wafd, plots with junior armed forces officers – which were themselves moving in different directions.

As strikes, demonstrations, assassinations, military defeat in Palestine, and guerrilla warfare in the Canal Zone tore Egyptian society apart, so the Brotherhood itself was in danger of disintegrating. Many members were indignant at the personal behaviour of the general secretary, Banna's brother in law Abadin. Banna himself condemned members

of the Brotherhood who assassinated the premier Nuqrashi. After Banna's death in 1949 his successor as "supreme guide" was dismayed to discover the existence of a secret terrorist section. The seizure of power by the military under Nasser in 1952-4 produced a fundamental divide between those who supported the coup and those who opposed it until finally rival groups within the Brotherhood ended up physically battling for control of its offices. [57] "An all-important loss of confidence in the leadership" enabled Nasser eventually to crush what had once been a massively powerful organisation. [58]

But the loss of confidence was not an accident. It followed from the unbridgeable divisions which were bound to arise in a petty bourgeois movement as the crisis in society deepened. On the one hand, there were those who were drawn to the notion of using the crisis to force the old ruling class to do a deal with them to enforce "Islamic values" (Banna himself dreamt of being involved with the monarchy in establishing a "new Caliphate" and on one occasion gave backing to a government in return for it promising to clamp down on alcohol consumption and prostitution [59]); on the other, there were the radical petty bourgeois recruits wanting real social change, but only able to conceive of getting it through immediate armed struggle.

The same contradictions run right through Islamism in Egypt today. The reconstituted Muslim Brotherhood began operating semi-legally around the magazine **al-Dawa** in the late 1960s, turning its back on any notion of overthrowing the Egyptian regime. Instead it set its goal as reform of Egyptian society along Islamic lines by pressure from within. The task, as the supreme guide of the Brotherhood had put it in a book written from prison, was to be "*preachers, not judges*". [60] This meant, in practice, adopting a "*reformist Islamist*" orientation, seeking an

accommodation with the Sadat regime. [61] In return the regime used the Islamists to deal with those it regarded, at the time, as its main enemies – the left: "The regime treated the reformist wing of the Islamist movements – grouped around the monthly magazine **al-Dawa** and on the university campuses by the Islamic Associations – with benevolence, as the Islamicists purged the universities of anything that smelled of Nasserism or Communism". [62]

Egypt was shaken by a wave of strikes, demonstrations and riots in all its 13 main cities in January 1977, in response to the state putting up the price of bread and other main consumption items. This was the largest uprising in the country since the 1919 nationalist revolt against the British. Both the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic Associations condemned the rising and sent messages of support to the state against what they called a "Communist conspiracy".

For such Islamist "reformism" what matters is changing the morals of society, rather than changing society itself. The stress is not on the reconstitution of the Islamic community (*umma*) by a transformation of society, but on enforcing certain sorts of behaviour within existing society. And the enemy is not the state or the internal "oppressors", but external forces seen as undermining religious observance – in the case of **al-Dawa** "Jewry", "the crusade" (meaning Christians, including the Copts), "communism" and "secularism". The fight to deal with these involves a struggle to impose the *sharia* (the legal system codified by Islamic jurists from the Koran and the Islamic tradition). It is a battle to get the existing state to impose a certain sort of culture on society, rather than a battle to overthrow the state.

Such a perspective accords neatly with the desires of the traditional social groups who back a certain version of Islamism (the remnants of the old landowning class, merchants), with those who were once radical young Islamists but who have now made good (those who made money in Saudi Arabia or who have risen to comfortable positions in the middle class professions) and to those radical Islamists who have lost heart in radical *social* change when faced with state repression.

But it does not fit at all with the frustrated aspirations of the mass of the impoverished students and ex-students, or with the mass of ex-peasants who they mix with in the poorer parts of the cities. They are easily drawn to much more radical interpretations of what the "return to the Koran" means – interpretations which attack not just extraneous influences in the existing Islamic states, but those states themselves.

Thus a basic text for the Islamists in Egypt is the book *Signposts*, written by one of the Muslim Brothers hanged by Nasser in 1966, Sayyid Qutb. This does not merely denounce the bankruptcies of the Western and Stalinist ideologies, but also insists that a state can call itself Islamic and still be based on anti-Islamic barbarism (*jahiliyya*, the name given by Muslims to the pre-Islamic society in Arabia). [63]

Such a state of affairs can only be rectified by "a vanguard of the *umma*" which carries through a revolution by following the example of the "first Koranic generation" [64] – that is, which withdraws from existing society as Mohammed did when he left Mecca in order to build up a force capable of overthrowing it.

Such arguments went beyond seeing the only enemy as imperialism, and instead, for the first time, attacked the local state directly. They were very embarrassing for the moderates of the neo-Muslim Brotherhood, who are supposed to revere their author as a martyr. But they have inspired many thousands of young radicals. Thus in the mid-1970s one group, *al Taktir Wal Higra*, whose leader, Shukri Mustafa, was executed for kidnapping a high religious functionary in 1977, rejected as "non-Islamic" existing society, the existing mosques, the existing religious leaders and even the neo-Muslim Brotherhood associated with *Dawa*. [65] Its attitude was that its members alone were genuine Muslims and that they had to break with existing society, living as communities apart and treating everyone else as infidels.

At first the Islamic Associations in the universities were very much under the influence of the moderate Muslim Brotherhood, not only condemning the uprising against the price increases but even disavowing Shukri when he was hanged later in the year. But their attitudes began to shift, particularly when Sadat began the "peace process" with Israel late in 1977. Soon many of the university activists were embracing ideas in some ways more radical than Shukri's: not only did they turn aside from existing society, they began organising to overthrow it, as with the assassination of Sadat by Abd al-Salam Faraj's *Jihad* group in October 1981.

Faraj spelt out his harsh criticisms of the strategies of different parts of Islamic movement – those sections who restricted themselves to working for Islamic charities, those (the neo-Muslim Brotherhood) who try to create an Islamic party which can only give legitimacy to the existing state, those who base themselves on "preaching" and so avoid*jihad*, those who advocate withdrawal from society on

the lines of Shukri's group, and those who saw the priority as fighting against the external enemies of Islam (in Palestine or Afghanistan). Against all of them, he insisted immediate armed struggle, "*jihad* against the iniquitous prince", was the duty of all Muslims:

> The fight against the enemy at home takes priority over the fight against the enemy abroad ... The responsibility for the existence of colonialism or imperialism in our Muslim countries lies with these infidel governments. To launch a struggle against imperialism is therefore useless and inglorious, a waste of time. [66]

Faraj's argument led straight to a perspective of insurrection against the state. But this did not stop there being significant differences within his own group between the Cairo section, built round the prime objective of destroying the infidel state, and the other section in the middle Egyptian city of Asyut, who "considered Christian proselytism the main obstacle to the propagation of Islam". [67]

In practice this meant the Asyut group directed most of its fire against the Coptic minority (mostly poor peasants) – a policy which had already been followed with horrific success by the *jamaa* students earlier in the year, when it ignited murderous inter-communal fighting first in the middle Egypt town of Minya and then in the Cairo neighbourhood of Al-Zawiyya al-Hamra: "The *jamaa* did not hesitate to fan the flames of sectarian tension in order to place the state in an awkward position and to demonstrate they were prepared to supplant the state, step by step, so to speak." [68]

The Asyut section of *jihad* was, then, following a tried and proven method of gaining local popular support through a strategy of encouraging communal hatreds. This

enabled it briefly to seize control of Asyut in the aftermath of the assassination of Sadat. By contrast, the Cairo activists, with their stress on the state as the enemy, "enjoyed no networks of complicity or sustenance, and their isolated act – the assassination of Sadat – was not followed by the uprising of the Muslim population of Cairo so ardently sought by Faraj and his friends". [69]

Instead of the assassination leading to the Islamists being able to seize state power, the state was able to take advantage of the confusion created by the assassination to crush the Islamists. As thousands were arrested and many leaders executed, repression significantly weakened the movement. However, the causes which had led so many young people to turn to the Islamists did not disappear. By the end of the 1980s the movement had regained confidence and was starting to grow rapidly in some quarters of Cairo and Alexandria. This was coupled with an effective terrorist campaign against the police and the security forces.

Then in December 1992 the state launched a new and unprecedented campaign of repression. Slum areas in Cairo, such as Imbaba, were occupied by 20,000 troops with tanks and armoured cars. Tens of thousands were arrested and death squads set out to kill those activists who escaped. The main mosques used by the radical Islamists were blocked with concrete. Parents, children and wives of activists were arrested and tortured.

Again as in the early 1980s the campaign of state terror was successful. The Islamist movement was not able to, and did not even try to, mobilise support in the form of demonstrations. Instead, it moved to a totally terrorist strategy which did not seriously shake the Mubarak regime, even if it did virtually destroy the tourist industry.

Meanwhile, the Muslim Brotherhood has continued to behave like a loyal opposition, negotiating with the regime over the gradual introduction of the *sharia* into the state legal code and holding back from protests at the repression.

Notes

57. R.P. Mitchell, **op. cit.**, p.145.

58. **Ibid.**, p.116.

59. **Ibid.**, p.40.

60. Book by Hudaybi, quoted in G. Kepel, **op. cit.**, p.61.

61. **Ibid.**, p.71.

62. **Ibid.**

63. See quote in **Ibid.**, p.44.

64. **Ibid.**, p.53.

65. For details, see **ibid.**, p.78.

66. For a long account of Faraj's views in his book, **The Hidden Imperative**, see **ibid.**, pp.193-202.

67. **Ibid.**, p.208.

68. **Ibid.**, p.164.

69. **Ibid.**, p.210.

The Contradictions of Islamism: Algeria

The story of the rise and radicalisation of Islamism in Algeria is similar in many ways to that in Egypt. The Algerian dictator of the late 1960s and 1970, Boumediénne, encouraged moderate Islamism as a counterbalance to the left and to his historic opponents within the liberation movement that had ended French colonialism.

In 1970 the state initiated an Islamisation campaign under Mouloud Kassim, minister of education and religion, which denounced the "degradation of morals" and "Western influences" behind "cosmopolitanism, alcoholism, the snobbism that consists in always following the West and dressing half naked". [70] The Islamicists were able to climb on this bandwagon to increase their own influence, getting money from landowners worried about the agrarian reform to propagate a message which could appeal to the most impoverished layers in society:

> The theme of the integrists' propaganda was that Islam was menaced by atheistic and communist intrusion of which the agrarian reform was the bearer ... The integrists ... spread their own ideas in the most unfavoured neighborhoods, after building improvised mosques which were later made into solid constructions. Untouched by the agrarian revolution, workers and unemployed, discontented by their conditions, listened to the integrists. [71]

Then in the mid-1970s they got support from sections of the regime to undermine the left in the colleges: "Between 1976 and 1980 the integrists succeeded, with the connivance of the regime, in reducing to nothing the influence of the Marxists". [72]

In the early 1980s a section of the regime continued to look towards the more "moderate" versions of Islamism to

bolster itself. The minister of religious affairs until 1986, Chibane, hoped to build such an Islamist tendency, and to this end helped the Islamists to get money for building mosques from industrialists and commercial interests. [73] But this could not stop the development of radical interpretations of Islam which rejected the regime. Thus in the city of Constantine, one study tells:

> Integrism replaces among large sections of Constantine opinion the traditional conceptions by the popularity of a new Islamic vision standing for a resurgence of the Community of the Prophet. This integrism gets its strength from the social frustrations which afflict a large part of the youth, those left out of account by the social and economic system. [74]

The strength of this interpretation of Islam was such as to be able to force the ministry of religious instruction to employ its people as *imams* (preachers) in the mosques rather than those who accepted "moderate" views.

The regime was losing control of the very mechanism it had encouraged to deal with the left. Instead of controlling the masses for the regime, Islamism was providing a focus for all their bitterness and hatred against those leaders who harked back to the liberation struggle of the 1960s but who had grown into a comfortable ruling class. The economic crisis which hit Algerian society in the mid-1980s deepened the bitterness – just as the ruling class turned back to the Western capitalists it had once denounced in an effort to come to terms with the crisis. And the Islamist agitation against those who spoke French and were "corrupted by Western morals" could easily become an attack on the interests of "*the small but influential stratum of highly educated technocrats who constitute the core of a new salaried and bureaucratized class*". [75]

The regime began to turn against the Islamists imprisoning certain of their leaders in the mid-1980s, with the regime's head, Chadli, accusing the *imams* of "political demagogy". [76] The effect, however, was not to destroy the Islamists, but to increase their standing as *the* opposition to the regime.

This became clear in October 1988. All the bitterness against the ruling class and the regime exploded in upheaval very similar to that which was to take place in Eastern Europe a year later. The movement, beginning as a series of spontaneous strikes in the Algiers area, soon turned into massive street clashes between young people and the police: "The people, like a freed prisoner, rediscovered their own voices and their sense of liberty. Even the power of the police no longer frightened them." [77] "The insurrection of October 1988 was above all a revolt of young people against their conditions of life after a quarter of a century of military dictatorship." [78]

The revolt shook the regime to its core. As in Eastern Europe all sorts of political forces that had been repressed now came out into the open. Journalists wrote freely for the first time, intellectuals began to speak openly about the real condition of Algerian society, exiled politicians of both left and right returned from abroad, a women's movement emerged to challenge the regime's Islamic family law, which gave women fewer rights than men. But it soon became clear that outside the Berber speaking areas the Islamists were the hegemonic force among the opposition. Their influence was in many ways like that of the "democrats" in Eastern Europe and the USSR in the following year. The tolerance shown to them by sections of the regime in the past, and the support they continued to get from some powerful foreign states (for instance, finance from Saudi

Arabia) combined with their ability to articulate a message that focused the bitterness of the mass of the population:

> By their number, their network of mosques, and their tendency to act spontaneously as a single man, as if obeying the orders of a secret central committee, the Islamists appeared as the only movement capable of mobilizing the masses and influencing the course of events. It was they who would come forward as the spokesmen of the insurgents, able to impose themselves as future leaders of the movement ... Not knowing who to talk to, after quietening its machine guns, the regime was looking for "leaders", representatives capable of formulating demands and controlling a crowd as violent as they were uncontrollable. So Chadli received Madani, Belhadj, and Nahnah [the best known Islamist figures]. [79]

So influential did the Islamist movement, now organised as the FIS, become in the months that followed that it was able to win control of the most important municipalities in the June 1990 local elections and then the biggest share of the votes in the general elections of December 1991, despite being subject to severe repression. The Algerian military annulled the elections in order to stop the Islamists forming a government. But this did not stop the massive support for the Islamists creating near civil war conditions in the country, with whole areas falling under effective control of Islamist armed groups.

Yet the rise of Islamist influence was accompanied by growing confusion as to what the FIS stood for. While it was in control of the country's major municipalities between June 1990 and May 1991,

> the changes it brought about were modest: the closing of bars, the cancellation of musical spectacles, campaigns, at times violent, for "feminine decency" and against the ubiquitous satellite dishes that "permitted reception of Western pornography" ... Neither Madani

> [the FIS's best known leader] nor its consultative assembly drew up a true politico-social programme or convened a congress to discuss it. Madani limited himself to saying that this would meet after they had formed a government. [80]

What the FIS did do was show opposition to the demands of workers for improved wages. In these months it opposed a dust workers' strike in Algiers, a civil servants strike and a one day general strike called by the former "official" union federation. Madani justified breaking the dust workers' strike in a newspaper interview, complaining that it was forcing respectable people like doctors and professional engineers to sweep up:

> The dustmen have the right to strike, but not the right to invade our capital and turn our country into a dustbin. There are strikes of trade unions that have become terrains for action by the corrupters, the enemies of Allah and the fatherland, communists and others, who are spreading everywhere because the cadre of the FLN have retreated ... We are reliving the days of the OAS. [81]

Such a respectable stance fitted neatly with the interests of the classes who had financed the Islamists from the time of the land reform onwards. It also suited those successful members of the petty bourgeoisie who were part of the FIS – the professors, the established *imams* and the grammar school teachers. And it appealed to those in the countryside whose adhesion to the former ruling party, the FLN, had enabled them to prosper, becoming successful capitalist farmers or small businessmen. But it was not enough either to satisfy the impoverished urban masses who looked to the FIS for their salvation or to force the ruling class and the military to sit back and accept an FIS government.

At the end of May 1991, faced with threats by the military to sabotage the electoral process rather than risk a FIS victory, the FIS leaders turned round and "launched an authentic insurrection which recalled October 1988: molotov cocktails, tear gas, barricades. Ali Belhadj, the charismatic *Imam*, launched tens of

thousands of demonstrators on to the streets. [82] For a time the FIS took control of the centre of Algiers, supported by vast numbers of young people to whom Islam and the *jihad* seemed the only alternative to the misery of the society the military were defending.

In reality, the more powerful the FIS became, the more it was caught between respectability and insurrectionism, telling the masses they could not strike in March 1991 and then calling on them to overthrow the state two months later in May.

The same contradictions have emerged within the Islamist movement in the three years since, as guerrilla warfare has grown in intensity in both the cities and the countryside. "The condemnation of Abasi Madani and Ali Belhadj to 12 years in prison ... provoked a major radicalisation of the FIS and a fragmentation of its rank and file. The detention of thousands of members and sympathisers in camps in the Sahara spread urban terrorism and rural guerrilla warfare". [83] Two armed organisations emerged, the Armed Islamic Movement (MIA, recently renamed AIS) and the Armed Islamic Groups (GIA), which were soon getting the support of armed bands right across the country. But the underground movements were characterised by "internal dissension": [84]

> As against the presumed "moderation" of the MIA, which "only" executes the representatives of the "impious regime", the GIA opposes an extreme *jihad*, whose chosen victims are journalists, writers, poets, feminists and intellectuals ... since November 1993 killing 32 moderate Islamic *imams* and unveiled women ...

Fratricidal fights between the MIA and the GIA have led to dozens of casualties ... the deaths of seven terrorists are imputed to these quarrels by some people, but to the death squads of the police by others ... [85] The GIA accuses the historical leaders of the FIS of opportunism, treachery and abandoning their programme of the complete application of the *Sharia*. [86]

Notes

70. A. Rouadia, **op. cit.**, p.20.
71. **Ibid.**, pp.33-4.
72. **Ibid.**, p.36.
73. **Ibid.**, p.144.
74. **Ibid.**, p.145-146.
75. J.P. Entelis, **op. cit.**, p.74.
76. A. Rouadia, **op. cit.**, p.191.
77. **Ibid.**, p.209.
78. M. Al-Ahnaf, B. Botivewau and F. Fregosi, **op. cit.**, p.30.
79. **Ibid.**
80. J. Goytisolo, *Argelia en el Vendava*, in **El Pais**, 30 March, 1994.
81. **El Salaam**, 21 June 1990, translated in M. AI-Ahnaf, B. Botivewau and F. Fregosi, **op. cit.**, pp.200-202.
82. See the account of these events in J. Goytisolo, **op. cit.**, 29 March 1994. This is now the course recommended by the British big business daily, the **Financial Times** (see the issue of 19 July 1994) and apparently by the US government.
83. J. Goytisolo, **op. cit.**, 30 March 1994.
84. **Ibid.**
85. **Ibid.**
86. **Ibid.**, 3 April 1994.

Splitting Two Ways

The experience of Islamism in Egypt and Algeria shows how it can split over two different questions: first over whether to follow the course of more or less peaceful reform of the existing society or to take up arms; second over whether to fight to change the state or to purge society of "impiety".

In Egypt the present day Muslim Brotherhood is based on a policy of reform directed at the state. It attempts to work within existing society building up its strength so as to become a legal opposition, with MPs, a press of its own, control over various middle class professional organisations and influence over wider sections of the population through the mosques and the Islamic charities. It also tends to stress the fight to impose Islamic piety through campaigning for the existing regime to incorporate the *sharia* into the legal code.

This is a strategy which also seems to appeal to a section of the imprisoned or exiled leadership of the FIS in Algeria. In the first few months of 1994 there were reports of negotiations between them and a section of the regime, with a perspective of sharing power and implementing part of the *sharia*. Thus the *Guardian* could report in April 1994 that Rabah Kebir, an exiled leader of FIS, welcomed the appointment of a new prime minster for Algeria, the "technocrat", Redha Malek, as "a positive act" [87] – only two days after the FIS had denounced the latest package agreed between that government and the IMF. [88]

Some perceptive commentators see such a deal as providing the best way for the Algerian bourgeoisie to end the instability and preserve its position. Thus Juan Goytisolo argues that the military could have saved itself a

lot of trouble by allowing the FIS to form a government after the 1991 elections:

> The conditions in which it acceded to power would have limited in a very effective way the application of its programme. The indebtedness of Algeria, its financial dependence on its European and Japanese creditor, the economic chaos and the hostile reservations of the Armed Forces would have constituted a difficult obstacle for a FIS government to overcome ... Its inability to fulfil its electoral promises were fully predictable. With a year of a government so tightly constrained by its enemies, the FIS would have lost a good part of its credibility. [89]

"Islamist reformism" fits the needs of certain major social groups – the traditional landowners and merchants, the new Islamic bourgeoisie (like those of the Muslim Brotherhood who made millions in Saudi Arabia) and that section of the Islamic new middle class who have enjoyed upward mobility. But it does not satisfy the other layers who have looked to Islamism – the students and impoverished ex-students, or the urban poor. The more the Muslim Brotherhood or the FIS look to compromise, the more these layers look elsewhere, seeing any watering down of the demand for the installation of Islam of the Koranic years as betrayal.

But their reaction to this can be in different directions. It can remain passive in the face of the state, urging a strategy of withdrawal from society, in which the stress is on preaching and purifying the Islamic minority, rather than on confrontation. This was the original strategy of the Shukri group in Egypt in the mid-1970s, and it is the approach of some of the radical preachers who are aware of the power of the state today.

Or it can turn to armed struggle. But just as peaceful struggle can be directed against the state or against impiety alone, so armed struggle can be armed struggle to overthrow the state, or armed actions against "the enemies of Islam" among the population at large – the ethnic and religious minorities, unveiled women, foreign films, the influence of "cultural imperialism" and so on. The logic of the situation might seem to push people towards the option of armed struggle *against the state*. But there is a powerful counter-logic at work, which is rooted in the class composition of the Islamist following.

As we have seen, the sections of the exploiting classes which back Islamism are naturally drawn to its more reformist versions. Even where they find little choice but to take up arms, they want to do so in ways which minimise wider social unrest. They look to coups d'etat rather than mass action. And if this erupts despite them, they seek to bring it to an end as quickly as possible.

The impoverished new petty bourgeoisie can move much further towards a perspective of armed action. But its own marginal social position cuts it off from seeing this as developing out of mass struggles like strikes. Instead it looks to conspiracies based on small armed groups – conspiracies that do not lead to the revolutionary change their instigators want, even when, as with the assassination of Sadat, they achieve their immediate goals. It can cause enormous disruption to existing society but it cannot revolutionize it.

This was the experience of the populists in Russia before 1917. It was the experience of a generation of students and ex-students right across the Third World who turned to Guevarism or Maoism in the late 1960s (and whose successors still fight on in the Philippines and Peru). It is

the experience of armed anti-state Islamists in Egypt and Algeria today.

The only way out of this impasse would be for the Islamists to base themselves on the non-marginal groups among the urban poor today – among the workers in medium and large scale industry. But the basic notions of Islamism make this all but impossible since Islam, in even its most radical form, preaches the return to a community (*umma*) which reconciles the rich and the poor, not an overthrow of the rich. Thus the economic programme of the FIS puts forward as an alleged alternative to "Western capitalism" a blueprint for "small business" producing for "local needs" which is virtually indistinguishable from the electoral propaganda of innumerable conservative and liberal parties right across the world. [90] And its attempt to create "Islamic unions" in the summer of 1990 laid stress on the "duties of workers", because, it was claimed, the old regime gave them too many rights and "accustomed the workers to not working". The class struggle, it insisted. "does not exist in Islam", for the sacred texts do not speak of it. What is needed is for the employer to treat his workers in the same way the Koran tells the faithful to treat their domestic slaves – as "brothers". [91]

It is not surprising that nowhere have any of the Islamist groups ever succeeded in building a base in the factories even one tenth as strong as they built up in the neighbourhoods. But without such a base they cannot on their own accord determine the direction of social change, even if they do succeed in bringing about the collapse of an existing regime. Those on the margins of society can occasionally provoke a great crisis within an already unstable regime. They cannot determine how the crisis is resolved.

The Islamist groups may be able to provoke such a crisis in one of the existing regimes and so force out its existing leaders. But that will not prevent an outcome in which the ruling class, which has prospered beneath these leaders, does a deal with the less militant Islamists to hold on to power. And short of such a crisis the militant Islamists themselves face an enormous toll of deaths at the hands of the state.

It is this pressure from the state which encourages some of them to turn away from direct assault on the regime to the easier task of assaulting the "impious" and the minorities – an approach which in turn can bring them back closer to the mainstream "moderate" reformist Islamists.

There is, in fact, a certain dialectic at work within Islamism. Militant anti-state Islamists, after bearing the brunt of unsuccessful armed struggle, learn the hard way to keep their heads down and instead turn to fighting to impose Islamic behaviour either directly or through Islamic reformism. But neither imposing the Islamic behaviour nor reforms can deal with the immense dissatisfaction of the social layers that look to Islamism. And so new militants are continually arising who split off to return to the path of armed action, until these too learn the hard way the limitations of armed actions which are cut off from an active social base.

There is no automatic progression from seeing the limitations of Islamic reformism to moving to revolutionary politics. Rather the limitations of reformism lead either to the terrorism and guerrillaism of groups that try to act without a mass base, or in the direction of a reactionary attack on scapegoats for the problems of the system. And because each of the approaches expresses itself in the same religious language, there is often an overlap between one

and the other. People who do want to attack the regime and imperialism do attack the Copts, the Berbers and unveiled women. People who have an instinctive hatred of the whole system do fall into the trap of wanting to negotiate over the imposition of the *sharia* by the state. And where there are divisions between rival groups – sometimes so bitter that they start killing each other as "apostates" (renegades from true Islam) – the divisions are expressed in ways which obscure the real social causes behind them. If one upwardly mobile Islamist abandons the struggle, that only proves that he personally is a "bad Muslim" (or even an apostate); it does not in itself prevent another upwardly mobile Islamist from being a "good Muslim".

Notes

87. **Guardian**, 15 April 1994.

88. **Guardian**, 13 April 1994.

89. J. Goytisolo, **op. cit.**, 29 March 1994.

90. See the translation on economic policy in M. Al-Ahnaf, B. Botivewau and F. Fregosi, **op. cit.**

91. **Ibid.**, p.109.

The Iranian Experience

The Islamic regime in Iran dominates discussions on Islamic revivalism, much as the record of Stalinism dominates discussions on socialism. And often, even on the left, very similar conclusions are drawn. The Islamists are seen, much as the Stalinists were once seen, as the most dangerous of all political forces, able to impose a totalitarianism that will prevent any further progressive development. In order to stop them it is necessary for the left to unite with the liberal section of the bourgeoisie [92], or even to support non-democratic states in their repression of the Islamist groups. [93] It is a view that overrates the cohesion of Islamism and ascribes to it an ability to dictate historical events which in reality it does not have. And it rests on an erroneous understanding of the role of Islam during and after the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

That revolution was not a product of Islamism, but of the enormous contradictions that arose in the Shah's regime in the mid to late 1970s. Economic crisis had heightened the deep divisions which existed between sections of modern capital associated with the state and other, more "traditional", sections centered around the bazaar (which was responsible for two thirds of wholesale trade and three quarters of retail trade) at the same time as deepening the discontent of the mass of the workers and the vast numbers of recent ex-peasants who had flooded into the cities. Protests of intellectuals and students were joined by the disaffected clergy and spread to involve the urban poor in a series of great clashes with the police and army. A wave of strikes paralyzed industry and brought the all important oil fields to a standstill. And then early in February 1979 the left wing guerrillas of the Fedayeen and the left-Islamist guerrillas of the People's Mojahedin succeeded in fomenting

large scale mutinies in the armed forces, so bringing about a revolutionary collapse of the old regime.

Much of the rising movement had identified with the exiled Islamist Ayatollah Khomeini. His name had come to symbolise opposition to the monarchy, and his residence outside Paris had been the point of contact between representatives of the different forces involved – the *bazaaris* and the clergy who were close to them, the liberal bourgeois opposition, the professional associations, the students and even the left guerrillas. On his return to Tehran in January 1979 he became the symbolic leader of the revolution.

Yet at this stage he was far from controlling events, even though he had an acute sense of political tactics. The key events that brought the Shah down – the spread of the strikes, the mutiny inside the armed forces – occurred completely independently of him. And in the months after the revolution Khomeini was no more able to impose a single authority over the revolutionary upheaval than anyone else. In the cities various local committees (*Komitehs*) exercised de facto power. The universities were in the hands of the left and the Mojahedin. In the factories *shoras* (factory councils) fought for control with management, often forcing out those associated with the Shah's regime and taking over the organization of production themselves. In the regions inhabited by ethnic minorities – Kurdistan in the north west and Khuzistan in the Arab speaking south west – movements began to fight for self determination. And at the top, overseeing this process, was not one body but two. The provisional government was run by Bazargan, a "moderate" Islamist linked to modern sections of the bourgeoisie (he had founded the Islamic students' associations in the 1950s and then the Islamic Engineers Association). But next to it,

acting as an alternative centre of authority, was a revolutionary council nominated by Khomeini, around which coalesced a group of clerics and Islamist intellectuals with links with the bazaars.

The group around Khomeini were eventually able to establish near total power for themselves and their Islamic Republican Party (IRP). But it took them two and a half years of maneuvering between different social forces which could easily have overwhelmed them. For most of 1979 they collaborated with Bazargan in an effort to clamp down on the *shoras* within the factories and the separatist nationalist movements. They used Islamic language to mobilise behind them sections of the lumpen proletariat into gangs, the Hizbollah, which would attack the left, enforce Islamic "morality" (for instance, against women who refused to wear the veil) and join the army in putting down the separatist revolts. There were instances of brutal repression (the execution of about a hundred people for "sexual crimes", homosexuality and adultery, the killing of some left wing activists, the shooting down of protesters belonging to the national minorities), as in any attempt to restore bourgeois "normality" after a great revolutionary upheaval. But the overall balance sheet for the IRP was not very positive in the early autumn of 1979. On the one hand, those successes they had enjoyed in checking the revolution had strengthened the position of the grouping around Bazargan with whom they were increasingly at odds. As a study of Bazargan's movement has put it:

> One year after the fall of the Shah it was becoming clear that the better educated middle classes and the political forces they were supporting [ie Bazargan] were rapidly expanding their influence, being dominant in sensitive positions in the mass media, state organisations and especially educational institutions ... With the disintegration of the unity of the Islamic forces, the Islamic

> committees were not capable of having a large majority of the employees of the organisations behind them. [94]

On the other, there was a growing ferment that threatened to escape from the Khomeiniites' control, leading to a massive growth of both the secular left and the Islamic left. The left was dominant among the Students, despite the first wave of repression against it in August 1979. The *shoras* in the factories had been weakened by this same repression, but many remained intact for another year [95], and the workers' willingness to struggle was certainly not destroyed – there were 360 "forms of strikes, sit-ins and occupations" in 1979-80, 180 in 1980-1 and 82 in 1981-2. [96]

The IRP could only regain control itself by making a radical shift in November 1979 – organizing the minority of students who followed its banner rather than that of the Fedayeen or People's Mojahedin to seize the US embassy and hold its staff hostage, provoking a major confrontation with the world's most important imperialist power. Another study of this period says: "The fundamentalist student of the 'Islamic Associations' who a few weeks earlier had been looked on by their rivals as reactionaries and fanatics, were now posing as super-revolutionaries and were cheered by masses of people whenever they appeared at the gate of the Embassy to be interviewed by reporters." [97]

The shift to an apparently radical anti-imperialist stance was accompanied by radicalization of the IRP's policies in the workplaces. From defending many of the old managers it moved to agitating for their removal – although not for their power to be taken over by the factory councils, but by "Islamic managers" who would collaborate with Islamic councils from which the left and the Mojahedin were automatically excluded as "infidels".

This radical turn gave new popularity to the IRP It seemed to be putting into effect the anti-imperialism which the group around Bazargan had propagated during their long years of opposition to the Shah but which they were now abandoning as they sought to cement a new relationship between Iran and the US. It was also acting in accord with some of the main and most popular slogans raised in the months since the revolution by the growing forces of both the secular and the Islamic left:

> The taking over of the American Embassy helped the fundamentalists to overcome some of their difficulties ... The outcome helped those groups that advocated the sovereignty of the clergymen to implement their polices and take over the sensitive organizations that were manned and controlled by the better educated middle class. When the students who were loyal to the clergymen invaded the gates of the US embassy, those who had been identified as "reactionaries" re-emerged as the leading revolutionaries, capable of dumping the modernist and secularist forces altogether ... It was the beginning of a new coalition in which certain clergy and their *bazaari* associates were the leaders and large groups from the lower middle class and the urban lower class were the functionaries. [98]

The group around Khomeini was not just gaining in popularity, it was also creating a much wider base for itself as it displaced, or at least threatened to displace, the old "non-Islamic" managers and functionaries. In industry, the media, the armed forces, the police, a new layer of people began to exercise control whose careers depended on their ability to agitate for Khomeini's version of Islamism. And those who remained from the old hierarchies of power rushed to prove their own Islamic credentials by implementing the IRP line.

What the group around Khomeini succeeded in doing was to unite behind it a wide section of the middle class – both the traditional petty bourgeoisie based in the bazaar and many of the first generation of the new middle class – in a struggle to control the hierarchies of power. The secret of its success was its ability to enable those who followed it at every level of society to combine religious enthusiasm with personal advance. Someone who had been an assistant manager in a foreign owned company could now run it under state control and feel he was fulfilling his religious duty to serve the community (*umma*); someone who had lived in deep poverty among the lumpen proletariat could now achieve both material security and a sense of self achievement by leading a hizbollah gang in its attempts to purify society of "indecency" and the "infidel Communists".

The opportunities open to those who opted for the Khomeini line were enormous. The flight from the country of local and foreign managers and technicians during the early months of revolutionary upheaval had created 130,000 positions to be filled. [99] The purging of "non-Islamic" managers, functionaries and army officers added enormously to the total.

The interesting thing about the method by which the group around Khomeini ousted their opponents and established a one party regime was that there was nothing specifically Islamist about it. It was not, as many people horrified by the religious intolerance of the regime contend, a result of some "irrational" or "medieval" characteristic of "Islamic fundamentalism". In fact, it was very similar to that carried through in different parts of the world by parties based on sections of the petty bourgeoisie. It was the method used, for instance, by the weak Communist Parties of much of Eastern Europe to establish their control after 1945. [100] And a prototype for the petty bourgeois who

combines ideological fervor and personal advance is to be found in Balzac's Pére Goriot – the austere Jacobin who makes his fortune out of exploiting the shortages created by the revolutionary upheaval.

A political party based on organizing a section of the petty bourgeoisie around the struggle for positions cannot take power in just any circumstances. Most such attempts come to nothing, because the petty bourgeois formations are too weak to challenge the power of the old ruling class without a mobilization of the mass of society which they then cannot control. Thus in the Portuguese Revolution of 1974-5 the Communist Party's attempts to infiltrate the hierarchies of power fell apart in the face of a resistance co-ordinated by the major Western capitalist powers on the one hand and of an upsurge of workers' militancy from below on the other. Such attempts can only work if, for specific historical reasons, the major social classes are paralyzed.

As Tony Cliff put it in a major piece of Marxist analysis, if the old ruling class is too weak to hang on to power in the face of economic crisis and insurgency from below, while the working class does not have the independent organization to allow it to become the head of the movement, then sections of the intelligentsia are able to make a bid for power, feeling that they have a mission to solve the problems of society as a whole:

> The intelligentsia is sensitive to their countries' technical lag. Participating as it does in the scientific and technical world of the 20th century, it is stifled by the backwardness of its own nation. This feeling is accentuated by the "intellectual unemployment" endemic in these countries. Given the general economic backwardness, the only hope for most students is a government job, but there are not nearly enough of these to go round.

> The spiritual life of the intellectuals is also in a crisis. In a crumbling order where the traditional pattern is disintegrating, they feel insecure, rootless, lacking infirm values.
>
> Dissolving cultures give rise to a powerful urge for a new integration that must be total and dynamic if it is to fill the social and spiritual vacuum, that must combine religious fervour with militant nationalism. They are in search for a dynamic movement which will unify the nation and open up broad vistas for it, but at the same time will give themselves power ...
>
> They hope for reform from above and would dearly love to hand the new world over to a grateful people, rather- than see the liberating struggle of a self conscious and freely associated people result in a new world for themselves. They care a lot for measures to drag their nation out of stagnation, but very little for democracy ... All this makes totalitarian state capitalism a very attractive goal for intellectuals. [101]

Although these words were written about the attraction of Stalinism, Maoism and Castroism in Third World countries, they fit absolutely the Islamist intelligentsia around Khomeini in Iran. They were not, as many left wing commentators have mistakenly believed, merely an expression of "backward", bazaar-based traditional, "*parasitic*", "*merchant capital*". [102] Nor were they simply an expression of classic bourgeois counter-revolution. [103] They undertook a revolutionary reorganization of ownership and control of capital within Iran even while leaving capitalist relations of production intact, putting large scale capital that had been owned by the group around the Shah into the hands of state and parastate bodies controlled by themselves – in the interests of the "oppressed", of course, with the corporation that took over the Shah's own economic empire being named the Mustafazin ("Oppressed") Foundation. As Bayat tells:

> The seizure of power by the clergy was a reflection of a power vacuum in the post-revolutionary state. Neither the proletariat nor- the bourgeoisie was able to exert their political hegemony. The reason for their inability must be sought in their historical development which is a testimony to the weakness of both. [104]

Or, as Cliff put it of the intelligentsia in Third World countries: "Their power is in direct relation to the feebleness of other classes and their political nullity". [105]

It was because they depended on balancing between the major social classes to advance their own control over the state and a section of capital that the Khomeini group had to hit first at the left organisation and then at the established bourgeois organisations (Bazargan etc) before being able to consolidate their own power. In 1979 this meant working with Bazargan against the left to subdue the revolutionary wave, and then making certain gestures to the left at the time of the seizure of the US Embassy to isolate the established bourgeoisie. During the 1980s it meant another zigzag, allowing another Islamic figure linked to the established bourgeoisie, Bani Sadr, to take the presidency and then working with him to smash the bastion of the left, the universities. When the IRP suggested sending the Islamic gangs, the Hizbollah, into the universities to purge them of "anti-Islamic elements", Bani Sadr was happy to comply:

> Both the IRP leaders and the liberals agreed to the idea of cultural revolution through direct action by the people who were mobilised to march on university campuses ... For the liberals it was a means to get rid of the leftist agitators in the public institutions, the factories and the rural areas, so that economic and political stability could be restored to the country ...

> The gangs of the Hizbollah invaded the universities, injured and killed members of the political groups who were resisting the cultural revolution, and burned books and papers thought to be "un-Islamic". The government closed all universities and colleges for three years, during which university curricula were rewritten.[106]

Yet even at this time the Khomeiniites continued to preserve part of their own "left" image, using anti-imperialist language to justify what they were doing. They insisted the fight to impose "Islamic values" was essential in the struggle against "cultural imperialism", and that, because the left resisted this, it was in reality working for imperialism.

External events helped them to get away with these arguments. These were the months of the abortive US attempt to recapture the embassy by sending in armed helicopters (which crashed into each other in the desert), of Shiite demonstrations against the government of Bahrin, of pro-Khomeini riots in the oil rich Saudi province of Hasa, of the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by armed Sunni Islamists, and of the attempt by Saddam Hussein of Iraq to ingratiate himself with the US and the Arab Gulf sheikdoms by launching an invasion of Iran. The Khomeiniites could proclaim, rightly, that the revolution was under attack from forces allied to imperialism, and, wrongly, that they alone could defend it. No wonder Khomeini himself referred to the attack as a "godsend". The need for all out mobilisation against the invading forces in the winter of 1980-1 allowed his supporters to justify increasing their control, at the expense of both the left and the Bani Sadr group, until in June-July 1981 they were able to crush both, establishing a near totalitarian structure.

But why were the left not able to deal with the advance of the IRP? In retrospect, it is often argued that the fault lies with the failure of the left to understand in time the need for

an alliance with the "progressive", "liberal", bourgeoisie. This is Halliday's argument. [107] But, as we have seen, the liberal bourgeoisie under Bazargan and then Bani Sadr were united with Khomeini in the campaign against the *shoras* in the factories and the campaign to purge the universities. What divided them was who was going to get the fruits of their successes against the left. It was only when he finally found that he had lost out that Bani Sadr (but not, interestingly, Bazargan, whose party continued to operate legally but ineffectively) joined with the left Islamists of the People's Mojahedin in an abortive attempt to overthrow the regime.

The Khomeiniites were able to out manoeuvre the allegedly "liberal" section of the bourgeoisie because, after beating the left, they were then able to use anti-imperialist rhetoric to mobilize sections of the urban poor against the established bourgeoisie. They could play on the obvious gap between the miserable lives of the masses and the "un-Islamic" lifestyles of the well to do. The left could not resist this maneuver by lining up with the well to do Westernized section of the bourgeoisie.

The key to genuinely undercutting the Khomeiniites lay in mobilising workers to fight on their own behalf. This would have thrown both the allegedly "liberal" section of the bourgeoisie and the IRP on to the defensive.

The workers' struggles played a central role in the overthrow of the Shah, and in the aftermath there were major struggles in the large factories between the factory councils and the management. But once the Shah was removed, the workers' struggles rarely went beyond the confines of individual factories to contest the leadership of all the oppressed and exploited. The factory councils never became *workers'* councils on the pattern of the soviets of

Russia in 1905 and 1917. [108] And because of that failing they did not succeed in attracting behind them the mass of casual laborers, self employed, artisans and impoverished tradesmen – the "lumpen proletariat" – who the Khomeiniites mobilized against the left under religious slogans.

This weakness of the workers' movement was partly a result of objective factors. There was a division within the working class between those in the modern sector of large factories and those in the traditional sector of small workshops (many operated by family members or their owners). The areas that workers lived in were often numerically dominated by the impoverished sectors of the petty bourgeoisie: there were 750,000 "merchants, middlemen and small traders" in Tehran in 1980, as against about 400,000 workers in large industrial enterprises. [109] Very large numbers of workers were new to industry and had few traditions of industrial struggle – 80 percent came from a rural origin and every year 330,000 more ex-peasants flooded into the towns. [110] Only a third were fully literate and so able to read the left's press, although 80 percent had televisions. Finally, the scale of repression under the Shah meant that the number of established militants in the workplaces was very small.

But the inability of the workers' movement to take the leadership of the wider mass movement was not just a result of objective factors. It was also a result of the political failings of the considerable left wing forces that existed in the post-revolutionary months. The Fedayeen and People's Mojahedin boasted of meetings many thousands strong, and the Mojahedin picked up a quarter of the votes in Tehran in the elections of the spring of 1980. But the traditions of the Fedayeen and the Mojahedin were guerrillaist, and they paid little attention to activity round the factories. Their

bastions of support were the universities, not the factory areas. Thus the People's Mojahedin had five "fronts" of activity: an underground organization for preparing "armed struggle", a youth front, a women's front, a *bazaari* front and, clearly not the top priority, a workers' front.

What is more, the large left organisations had little to say, even when worker activists did join them. In the vital first eight months of the revolution they made only limited criticisms of the new regime and these consisted mainly of its failure to challenge imperialism. The People's Mojahedin, for instance:

> Scrupulously adhered to a policy of avoiding confrontations with the clerical shadow government. In late February when the Fedayeen organized a demonstration of over 80,000 at Tehran university demanding land reform, the end of press censorship and the dissolution of the armed forces, the Mojahedin stayed away. And early in March, when Western educated women celebrated international women's day by demonstrating against Khomeini's decrees abrogating the Family Protection Law, enforcing the use of the veil in government offices, and pushing the "less impartial gender" from the judiciary, the Mojahedin warned that "imperialism was exploiting such divisive issues". In late March when zealous club wielders attacked the offices of the anti-clerical paper **Ayandegan**, the Mojahedin said nothing. They opposed a boycott of the referendum over the Islamic republic and Kurdish struggle for autonomy. If the nation did not remain united behind Imam Khomeini, the Mojahedin emphasized, the imperialists would be tempted to repeat their 1953 performance. [111]

In August the Mojahedin kept silent when armed gangs attacked the Fedayeen headquarters, and they avoided challenging IRP candidates in the 1979 elections for the Assembly of Experts.

After the occupation of the American embassy, the left became even less critical of Khomeini than before. Khomeini,

> was able to split the left opposition completely. Khomeini now declared that all problems arising in the factories, among women and among national minorities were due to US imperialism. It was US imperialism that was fighting the government in Kurdistan, in Tabriz, in Torkamansahra and in Khuzistan. Women opposing Islamic laws were US and Zionist agents. Workers resisting *shoras* were imperialist agents.
>
> The Tudeh party fell in behind Khomeini's argument and backed his line. The biggest left organisations – the Fedayeen, the Mojahedin and the Paykar – also broke away from the struggle, abandoning the militant workers, the women and the national minorities, among whom they had some significant presence. [112]

The Tudeh (pro-Russian Communist) Party and the majority of the Fedayeen continued to support Khomeini until he had fully consolidated his power in 1982, whereupon he turned on them.

As time went on, the left compounded one mistake with another. While the majority of the Fedayeen dropped all criticism of the regime after the takeover of the US embassy, the People's Mojahedin eventually moved in the opposite direction, coming out in open opposition to the regime by the end of 1980 (after the regime's attack on its supporters in the universities). But its guerrilla strategy then led it to play straight into the regime's hands by joining with Bani Sadr to launch a direct struggle for power which was not rooted at all in the day to day struggles of the mass of people. When mass demonstrations failed to bring the regime down, its leaders fled into exile, while its underground activists launched armed attacks on key

figures in the regime: "The bombing of the IRP's headquarters in June 1981, which resulted in the death of Ayatollah Beheshti [IRP chairman] and many other leaders and cadres of the IRP, provided the *ulama* [i.e. clergy] with the excuse to unleash a reign of terror against the opposition unheard of in contemporary Iranian history. [113]

The left was uniting with a representative of the established bourgeoisie in a campaign of assassinations directed against figures who the mass of people saw as playing an anti-imperialist role. It was hardly surprising that the impoverished petty bourgeois and lumpen supporters of the IRP identified with its leaders in the onslaught against the left. These leaders found it easy to portray the left as working hand in hand with imperialist opponents of the revolution – an argument which gained even greater credibility a couple of years later when the People's Mojahedin joined in the onslaught against Iran waged by the Iraqi army.

In fact, the Mojahedin was displaying all the faults which characterise the radical new petty bourgeoisie in many Third World countries, whether it is organised in Islamist, Maoist or nationalist parties. It sees the political struggle as dependent upon a minority acting as a "vanguard" in isolation from the struggle of the masses. The battle for power is reduced to the armed coup on the one hand and the alliance with existing bourgeois forces on the other. With "leadership" such as this, it is not surprising that the most radical workers were not able to build the militant struggles in individual factories into a movement capable of uniting behind it the mass of urban poor and peasants, and so left a vacuum which the IRP was able to fill.

Not all the left were as bad as the Mojahedin, the Fedayeen majority or the Tudeh Party. But these constituted the major forces to which those radicalised by the revolutionary experience looked. Their failings were a very important factor in allowing the Khomeini group to retain the initiative and to rebuild a weakened state into a powerful instrument capable of the most bloody repression.

Finally, even those on the left who did not make mistakes on the scale of the Mojahedin, Fedayeen and Tudeh Party made mistakes of their own. They had all been brought up on Stalinist or Maoist traditions which made them search for a "progressive" section of the bourgeoisie or petty bourgeoisie to lead the struggle. If they decided a certain movement was of the "progressive" or "anti-imperialist" petty bourgeoisie, then they would dampen down any criticism. If, on the other hand, they decided a certain movement was not of the "progressive petty bourgeoisie", then they concluded it could never, ever, engage in any conflict with imperialism. They had no understanding that again and again in Third World countries bourgeois and petty bourgeois leaders who are pro-capitalist and extremely reactionary in their social attitudes have, despite themselves, been drawn into conflicts with imperialism. This was, for instance, true of Kemal Ataturk in Turkey, of Grivas and Makarios in Cyprus, of Kenyatta in Kenya, of Nehru and Gandhi in India, and most recently of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. This has often given them a popularity with those they are intent on exploiting and oppressing.

The left cannot undercut that either by extolling them as "progressive, anti-imperialist" heroes, or by pretending that the confrontation with imperialism does not matter. Instead the left has at all costs to preserve its own political independence, insisting on public criticism of such figures

both for their domestic policies and for their inevitable failings in the struggle with imperialism, while making it clear that we want imperialism to be defeated much more than they do.

Unfortunately, virtually the whole of the Iranian left flip flopped from one mistaken position to another, so that they ended up taking a neutral stand in the final months of the first Gulf War when the US fleet intervened directly to tilt the balance against Iran. They did not understand that there were ways of taking an anti-imperialist stance that would have strengthened the fight against the Iranian regime at home (denouncing the refusal of the regime to make the rich pay for the war, criticising the barbaric and futile "human wave" tactics of sending lightly armed infantry into frontal attacks on heavily defended Iraqi positions, condemning the failure to put forward a programme that would arouse the Iraqi workers and minorities to rise against Saddam Hussein, denouncing the call for war reparations as making the Iraqi people pay for their rulers crimes, and so on). Instead, they adopted a position which cut them off from anyone in Iran who remembered what imperialism had done to the country in the past and who could see that it would do so again if it got the chance.

The victory of Khomeini's forces in Iran was not, then, inevitable, and neither does it prove that Islamism is a uniquely reactionary force against which the left must be prepared to unite with the devil (or rather, the Great Satan) of imperialism and its local allies. It merely confirms that, in the absence of independent working class leadership, revolutionary upheaval can give way to more than one form of the restabilisation of bourgeois rule under a repressive, authoritarian, one party state. The secret ingredient in this process was not the allegedly "medieval" character of Islam, but the vacuum created by the failure of the socialist organisations to give leadership to an inexperienced but very combative working class.

Notes

92. This is the view put forward by F. Halliday, **op. cit.**. It was the view put forward in relation to Stalinism by Max Shachtman and others. See M. Shachtman, **The Bureaucratic Revolution** (New York, 1962), and, for a critique, T. Cliff, *Appendix 2: The theory of Bureaucratic Collectivism*, in **State Capitalism in Russia** (London, 1988).

93. The position of much of the left today in both Algeria and Egypt.

94. H.E. Chehabi, **op. cit.**, p.169.

95. For details, see A. Bayat, **op. cit.**, pp.101-102, 128-129.

96. Figures given in **Ibid.**, p.108.

97. M.M. Salehi, **Insurgency through Culture and Religion** (New York, 1988), p.171.

98. H.E. Chehabi, **op. cit.**, p.169.

99. The figure is given in D Hiro, **op. cit.**, p.187.

100. See ch.3 of my **Class Struggles in Eastern Europe, 1945-83** (London, 1983).

101. T Cliff, *Deflected Permanent Revolution*, **International Socialism**, first series, no.12 (Spring, 1963), reprinted in **International Socialism**, first series, no.61. Unfortunately, this very important article is not reprinted in the selection of Cliff's writings, **Neither Washington nor Moscow**, but it is available as a pamphlet from Bookmarks.

102. Still less did they represent, as Halliday seems to contend, "the strength of pre-capitalist social forces", **op. cit.**, p.35. By making such an assertion Halliday is only showing how much his own Maoist-Stalinist origins have prevented him understanding the character of capitalism in the present century.

103. As P. Marshall seems to imply in an otherwise excellent book **Revolution and Counter Revolution in Iran**, **op. cit.**.

104. A. Bayat, **op. cit.**, p.134.

105. T. Cliff, **op. cit.**

106. M. Moaddel, **op. cit.**, p.212.

107. F. Halliday, **op. cit.**, p.57.

108. Maryam Poya is mistaken to use the term "workers' councils" to translate "shoras" in her article, *Iran 1979: Long Live the Revolution ... Long Live Islam?* in **Revolutionary Rehearsals** (Bookmarks, London, 1987).

109. According to M. Moaddel, **op. cit.**, p.238.

110. A. Bayat, **op. cit.**, p.42.

111. E. Abrahamian, **The Iranian Mojahedin**, **op. cit.**, p.189.

112. M Poya, **op. cit.**.

113. M. Moaddel, **op. cit.**, p.216.

The Contradictions of Islamism: Sudan

Iran is not the only country in which Islamists have exercised power. In the last few years the Sudanese Islamic Brotherhood, the *Ikhwan al Muslimin*, has become the decisive influence in a military government through the National Islamic Front (NIF).

The Sudanese Brotherhood began in the 1940s as an offshoot of Banna's Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, but took on a life of its own with its own doctrines, after the crushing of the parent organisation by Nasser in the 1950s. The organisation originated in Khartoum University, where it battled with the Communists for influence over the students. This led to its first leadership emphasising the radical elements in Islamism. But in the 1960s a new leadership, under Hassan al-Turabi, succeeded in widening the base of the organisation, adding thousands of newcomers to its 2,000 hardcore members. "The membership also witnessed a significant diversification by the involvement of *ulama*, mosque *imams*, merchants, Sufi leaders and others, although the proportion of nonmodern educated elements remained small in the active membership". [114] In the 1980s it grew further, aided by the emergence (under state encouragement) of an "Islamic" financial sector: "The employment policy of the Islamic Bank, which favoured religious people, was helpful to *Ikhwan*". The Islamic institutions led to "the evolution of a totally new class of businessmen who became rich overnight" and "opened up avenues of economic mobility for many who would otherwise have been, at most, higher civil servants". The Brotherhood did not own the Islamic banks – they were financed by a combination of Saudi money and local capital. But it exerted enormous power by its ability "to influence loans and other advances to customers". [115] This translated itself into support for the

Brotherhood among some of the new rich and within the state machine itself: “The movement continued to be based on a hard core of activists, mostly modern educated professionals, but a significant contingent of businessmen (or professionals turned executives) started to acquire prominence”. [116]

In the 1986 elections after the overthrow of the Nimeiry dictatorship the Brotherhood’s front, the NIF, won only 18.5 percent of the total vote, most votes going to the traditional parties. But it picked up no fewer than 23 out of 28 of the seats elected by university graduates only, and it soon became clear it had enough support among a section of the urban middle classes and businessmen to be the natural ally of key figures in the armed forces. A coup in 1989 gave power to General Bashir, but effective power seemed to be in the hands of the NIF. And since then Khartoum has become one of the centres of the international Islamist movement, a pole of attraction to rival Tehran and Riyadh for the activists.

Yet the Sudanese Brotherhood’s rise to power has not been an easy one. It has repeatedly come close to losing many members and much of its support. And its tenure in power is not likely to be secure.

Turabi has sought to build the Brotherhood’s influence when his rivals have been in government by agitating among the students, the middle class and, to some extent, the workers – but he has then seized every chance of participating in government himself so as to increase the Brotherhood’s influence within the hierarchies of the state. This he first did in the early 1960s. The Brotherhood’s agitation among students helped precipitate the October 1964 revolution of students, middle class professionals and workers. It then used its position in the new government to

dampen down the wave of radicalization and to push for the banning of the Communists – so winning to it some of the conservative privileged groups.

It followed the same maneuver again after a military coup put General Gaafar al-Nimeiry in power in May 1969. He repressed the Brotherhood along with the traditional parties for a period. But its spell in opposition allowed it to rebuild some of the popular support it had lost while in government, taking the lead in agitation over student conditions and leading an unsuccessful student rising against the regime in 1973. Then in the late 1970s it seized on an offer from Nimeiry of "National Reconciliation" to join his regime, with Turabi becoming attorney general "in charge of the review of laws to make them conform to the *sharia*". [117] It was during this time that it used the development of the Islamic financial sector to get roots among the owners of capital. It was also during this period that it began to win over certain army officers.

Yet these maneuvers created continual tensions within the Brotherhood and repeatedly threatened its wider base of support. The original cadres of the Brotherhood from the early 1950s were not at all happy with its leader's cultivation of sections of the traditional elite and of the new rich. Turabi's methods did not seem at all to fit the original notion of an Islamic vanguard which they had held as radical students in the 1940s. He seemed, to them, to be watering down Islamic ideas in order to gain respectability – especially when he set out to recruit women, supported them having the vote and produced a pamphlet asserting that "genuine" Islam should give them the same rights as men.[118] To the dissidents it seemed that he was simply out to pander to the secular middle classes. On top of this Nimeiry was someone who was notorious for his non-Islamic behavior – particularly his drinking. A group of

older members preferred the radicalism of someone like Qutb, and finally split away to form an organization of their own linked to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. [119]

Collaboration with an increasingly unpopular regime began to undercut the Brotherhood's wider support. The early 1980s saw a growing wave of popular agitation against Nimeiry, with student demonstrations in 1981-2, a strike by rail workers in 1982, mutinies by southern troops in 1983 followed by strikes of judges and doctors. Through this period the Brotherhood became the only force outside the regime itself supporting Nimeiry, and began to fear being destroyed alongside the dictator when he eventually fell.

Then Nimeiry took a last gamble. He announced the immediate introduction of the *sharia* into law. The Brotherhood had no choice but to throw their weight behind him. For more than 30 years the "return to the *sharia*" had been their answer to all of Sudan's problems. It was the single, simple slogan which connected their brand of reform with the Islamic traditions of the mass of people outside the urban middle class. And so they began agitation to support implementation of the *sharia*, in the face of resistance from the judges and much of the legal system. A million people joined a Brotherhood demonstration for an international conference on the implementation of the *sharia*, and Brotherhood members helped man the special *sharia* courts set up by Nimeiry.

This increased the Brotherhood's pull among certain traditionalist circles, especially when the courts began to pick upon certain prominent people and expose their corruption. And the new power it exercised increased its attraction to those in the state machine looking for promotion. But while making the Brotherhood popular among some traditionalist sections of the population and

more influential among those who ran the state, the measures also massively increased resentment against them elsewhere. It upset those who were seculist or supporters of non-Islamic religions (the majority of the population in the south of the country) without being, in reality, able to improve the conditions of the Islamic masses. The myth of the *sharia* was that of a new legal system which would end all injustices. But this could not be brought about by any reform that was merely a legal reform, and least of all one introduced by a corrupt and unpopular regime. So all the new law really meant was a resort to *sharia* punishments, the *hudud* – amputation for theft, stoning for adultery, and so on.

In the 1960s the Brotherhood had been able to build itself among the urban intelligentsia in part because it down played this aspect of the *sharia*. The Islamic orthodoxy accepted by Turabi was to "skirt the issue by insisting the *hudud* was only applicable in an ideal Islamic society from which want had been completely banished". [120] Now, however, the most tangible evidence that the *sharia* was changing the legal system became the use of such punishments, and Turabi did a 180 degree turn, attacking those who claimed you could not impose morality on people by legislation". [121]

Associated with resentment against the *sharia* courts was resentment against the Islamic financial sector. This had enabled some members of the middle class to move upwards into important business sectors. But it necessarily left many, many more disappointed:

> Resentment was created in the business community and among thousands of aspirants who believed the main reason they were deprived of the benefits of the new system was Ikhwan favouritism ... In the end, allegations about Ikhwan's abuse of the Islamic banking

> system were the single most damaging liability that emerged from the Nimeiry era and discredited them in the eyes of large sections of the population. [122]

Finally, the Brotherhood's alliance with Nimeiry over the *sharia* forced it to excuse everything else he did, at a time when there was a growing agitation against him. Even though Nimeiry, under US pressure, finally moved against the Brotherhood just before a popular rising overthrew him, it was too late for the Brotherhood to be identified in any sense with the revolution.

It survived, to take greater power than ever into its hands within four years, because it offered to those army officers who had finally turned against Nimeiry something no one else had – thousands of active members prepared to back them in their bitter civil war against non-Muslim rebels in the south of the country and in their repression of discontent in the towns of the north. The coalition of secular forces that had led the uprising against Nimeiry were paralysed by their opposed class interests, unable either to focus the discontent into a movement for a complete transformation of society, including massive redistribution of wealth and the granting of self determination to the south, or to crush it. This allowed the Brotherhood increasingly to offer itself to the army officers as the only force capable of imposing stability, showing its strength visibly by organising a large demonstration against any concessions to the southern rebels. So it was that in 1989 when the military seized power once more, in order to pre-empt a proposed peace agreement between the government and the rebels, it connived with the Brotherhood.

In power, however, the Brotherhood has known only one answer to the problems that face the regime – increasingly severe repression wrapped in religious

terminology. In March 1991 the *sharia* was reintroduced together with the *hudud* punishments. The war in the south has now been matched by repression against other non-Arab communities, including the Fur and the Nuba, despite Turabi's claims, when in opposition, to oppose any form of Islam based on Arab chauvinism. Typical of the repression against those who oppose the war in the south were the death sentences handed out two years ago to a group of people in Dafur for "inciting war against the state and possessing weapons". One man was sentenced to be hanged and then his body to be publicly crucified. [123] In the run up to elections in trade union and professional bodies there were reports of intimidation, arrests and torture. [124] Even some of the traditionalists who supported the campaign of Islamisation are now on the receiving end of repression. The regime has been tightening its grip on Sufi sects "whose sermons are believed to be nurturing popular discontent" [125], and most people blame the regime and the Brotherhood for a bomb attack on a Sufi mosque earlier this year which killed 16 people.

Repression has not, however, provided more than temporary stability to the regime. There were a series of riots in the towns two years ago as a result of shortages and price increases. Initial gestures of defiance to the IMF have been followed by an Economic Salvation Programme based upon "economic liberation" which "involves many policies previously advocated by the fund" [126], leading to new negotiations with the IMF. This has led to a sharp decline in living standards, further discontent and further riots.

Meanwhile, the regime is isolated internationally from the other major Islamic regimes: the Brotherhood fell out with Iran by lining up against it in the first Gulf War, and with Saudi Arabia by supporting Iraq in the second Gulf War. Presumably because of this it has tried to present itself

as a pole of attraction to Islamists elsewhere who are disaffected with these two countries and with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood – even though Turabi's own policies have been, for 30 years, a long way from the radicalism these Islamist groups espouse.

Yet the Sudanese Brotherhood itself is under enormous pressure. "There are rumours that the NIF might split in two, with the zealots being sidelined and the relatively more moderate faction joining the conservative wings of the Umma Party and the DUP [the two main traditional parties]. There are divisions between the NIF's older generation who are prepared to accommodate with the secular parties and the younger and uncompromising zealots. [127]

One final point is worth making about Sudan. The rise of the Brotherhood to power there has not been because of any magic powers on its own part. Rather the cause lies in the failure of other political forces to provide the way out of the progressively deeper impasse in the country. In the 1950s and the 1960s the Communist Party was a stronger force than the Brotherhood. It had competed with the Brotherhood for influence among the students and built up a following among urban trade unionists. But in 1964 and 1969 it chose to use this influence, not to present a revolutionary programme for change, but to enter non-revolutionary governments, which then turned on it once it had calmed down the wave of popular agitation. It was, in particular, its support for Nimeiry in his first years that gave the Brotherhood the chance to take the lead in university agitation and undercut the Communists' base.

Notes

114. Abdelwahab el-Affendi, **Turabi's revolution, Islam and power in Sudan** (London, 1991), p.89.

115. **Ibid.**, pp.116-117.

116. **Ibid.**, p.117.

117. **Ibid.**, p.115.

118. For his position on women, see summary of his pamphlet in **Ibid.**, p.174. See also his article, *Le Nouveau Reveil de l'Islam*, **op. cit.**.

119. Affendi, **op. cit.**, p.118.

120. **Ibid.**, p.163.

121. **Ibid.**, pp.163-164.

122. **Ibid.**, p.116.

123. Amnesty International report, quoted in **Economist Intelligence Unit Report, Sudan**, 1992:4.

124. **Ibid.**

125. **Economist Intelligence Unit Report, Sudan**, 1993:3.

126. **Economist Intelligence Unit, Country Profile, Sudan**, 1993-4. Turabi himself has been keen to insist that "the Islamic awakening is no longer interested in fighting the West ... The West is not an enemy for us". *Le nouveau Reveil de l'Islam*, **op. cit.**

127. **Economist Intelligence Unit Report, Sudan**, 1993:1.

Conclusions

It has been a mistake on the part of socialists to see Islamist movements either as automatically reactionary and "fascist" or as automatically "anti-imperialist" and "progressive". Radical Islamism, with its project of reconstituting society on the model established by Mohammed in 7th century Arabia, is, in fact, a "utopia" emanating from an impoverished section of the new middle class. As with any "petty bourgeois utopia" [128], its supporters are, in practice, faced with a choice between heroic but futile attempts to impose it in opposition to those who run existing society, or compromising with them, providing an ideological veneer to continuing oppression and exploitation. It is this which leads inevitably to splits between a radical, terrorist wing of Islamism on the one hand, and a reformist wing on the others. It is also this which leads some of the radicals to switch from using arms to try to bring about a society without "oppressors" to using them to impose "Islamic" forms of behaviour on individuals.

Socialists cannot regard petty bourgeois utopians as our prime enemies. They are not responsible for the system of international capitalism, the subjection of thousands of millions of people to the blind drive to accumulate, the pillaging of whole continents by the banks, or the machinations that have produced a succession of horrific wars since the proclamation of the "new world order". They were not responsible for the horrors of the first Gulf War, which began with an attempt by Saddam Hussein to do a favour for the US and the Gulf sheikdoms, and ended with direct US intervention on Iraq's side. They were not to blame for the carnage in Lebanon, where the Falangist onslaught, the Syrian intervention against the left and the Israeli invasion created the conditions which bred militant Shiism. They were not to blame for the second Gulf War,

with the "precision bombing" of Baghdad hospitals and the slaughter of 80,000 people as they fled from Kuwait to Basra. Poverty, misery, persecution, suppression of human rights, would exist in countries like Egypt and Algeria even if the Islamists disappeared tomorrow.

For these reasons socialists cannot support the state against the Islamists. Those who do so, on the grounds that the Islamists threaten secular values, merely make it easier for the Islamists to portray the left as part of an "infidel", "secularist" conspiracy of the "oppressors" against the most impoverished sections of society. They repeat the mistakes made by the left in Algeria and Egypt when they praised regimes that were doing nothing for the mass of people as "progressive' – mistakes that enabled the Islamists to grow. And they forget that any support the state gives to secularist values is only contingent: when it suits it, it will do a deal with the more conservative of the Islamists to impose bits of the *shariah* – especially the bits which inflict harsh punishment on people – in return for ditching the radicals with their belief in challenging oppression. This is what happened in Pakistan under Zia and the Sudan under Nimeiry, and it is apparently what the Clinton adminstration has been advising the Algerian generals to do.

But socialists cannot give support to the Islamists either. That would be to call for the swapping of one form of oppression for another, to react to the violence of the state by abandoning the defense of ethnic and religious minorities, women and gays, to collude in scapegoating that makes it possible for capitalist exploitation to continue unchecked providing it takes "Islamic" forms. It would be to abandon the goal of independent socialist politics, based on workers in struggle organizing all the oppressed and

exploited behind them, for a tail-ending of a petty bourgeois utopianism which cannot even succeed in its own terms.

The Islamists are not our allies. They are representatives of a class which seeks to influence the working class, and which, in so far as it succeeds, pulls workers either in the direction of futile and disastrous adventurism or in the direction of a reactionary capitulation to the existing system – or often to the first followed by the second.

But this does not mean we can simply take an abstentionist, dismissive attitude to the Islamists. They grow on the soil of very large social groups that suffer under existing society, and whose feeling of revolt could be tapped for progressive purposes, providing a lead came from a rising level of workers' struggle. And even short of such a rise in the struggle, many of the individuals attracted to radical versions of Islamism can be influenced by socialists – provided socialists combine complete political independence from all forms of Islamism with a willingness to seize opportunities to draw individual Islamists into genuinely radical forms of struggle alongside them.

Radical Islamism *is* full of contradictions. The petty bourgeoisie is always pulled in two directions – towards radical rebellion against existing society and towards compromise with it. And so Islamism is always caught between rebelling in order to bring about a complete resurrection of the Islamic community, and compromising in order to impose Islamic "reforms". These contradictions inevitably express themselves in the most bitter, often violent, conflicts within and between Islamist groups.

Those who treat Islamism as a uniquely reactionary monolith forget that there were conflicts between the

different Islamists over the attitude they should take when Saudi Arabia and Iran were on opposite sides during the first Gulf War. There were the arguments that led the FIS in Algeria to break with its Saudi backers, or Islamists in Turkey to organize pro-Iraqi demonstrations from Saudi financed mosques during the second Gulf War. There are the bitter armed battles which wage between the rival Islamist armies in Afghanistan. Today there are arguments within the Hamas organization among Palestinians about whether or not they should compromise with Arafat's rump Palestinian administration – and therefore indirectly with Israel – in return for its implementing Islamic laws. Such differences in the attitude necessarily arise once "reformist" Islam does deals with existing states that are integrated into the world system. For each of these states is in rivalry with the others, and each of them strikes its own deals with the dominant imperialisms.

Similar differences are bound to arise every time there is a rise in the level of workers' struggle. Those who finance the Islamist organizations will want to end such struggle, if not break it. Some of the radical young Islamists will instinctively support the struggle. The leaders of the organizations will be stuck in the middle, muttering about the need of the employers to show charity and the workers forbearance.

Finally, the very development of capitalism itself forces the Islamist leaders to do ideological somersaults whenever they get close to power. They counterpose "Islamic" to "Western values". But most so called Western values are not rooted in some mythical European culture, but arise out of the development of capitalism over the last two centuries. Thus a century and a half ago the dominant attitude among the English middle class to sexuality was remarkably similar to that preached by the Islamic revivalists today (sex outside

of marriage was forbidden, women were not supposed to bare even their ankles, illegitimacy was a taint people could not live down), and women had fewer rights in some respects than most versions of Islam grant them today (inheritance was to the eldest son only, while Islam gives the daughter half the son's portion; there was no right at all to divorce, while Islam grants women that right in very restricted circumstances). What changed English attitudes was not something inbuilt into the Western psyche or any alleged "*Judeo-Christian values*", but the impact of developing capitalism – the way in which its need for women's labor power forced it to change certain attitudes and, more importantly, put women in a situation where they could demand even greater changes.

That is why even in countries where the Catholic church used to be immensely strong, like Ireland, Italy, Poland and Spain, it has had to accept, reluctantly, a diminution in its influence. The countries where Islam is the state religion cannot immunize themselves from the pressure for similar changes, however hard they try.

This is shown by the experience of Iranian Islamic Republic. Despite all the propaganda about women's main role being as mothers and wives and all the pressure to drive them out of certain professions like the law, the proportion of women in the workforce has grown slightly and they continue to make up 28 percent of government employees, the same as at the time of the revolution. [129] Against this background, the regime has had to shift its stance on birth control, with 23 percent of women using contraceptives [130], and on occasions to relax the strict enforcement of the veil. Although women are denied equal rights with men when it comes to divorce and family law, they retain the vote (there are two women MPs), attend school, get a quota of places in university in all disciplines

and are encouraged to study medicine and to receive military training. [131] As Abrahamian notes of Khomeini:

> His closest disciples often mocked the "traditionalists" for being "old fashioned". They accused them of obsessing over ritual purity; preventing their daughters from going to school; insisting that young girls should be veiled even when no men were present; denouncing such intellectual pursuits as art, music and chess playing; and, worst of all, refusing to take advantage of newspapers, radios and televisions. [132]

None of this should really be surprising. Those who run Iranian capitalism and the Iranian state cannot dispense with female labour power in key sections of the economy. And those sections of the petty bourgeoisie who have formed the backbone of the IRP started sending their daughters to university and to seek employment in the 1970s precisely because they wanted the extra salaries – to enlarge the family income and to make their daughters more marriageable. They have not been willing in the 1980s to write these off in the interests of religious piety.

Islamism cannot freeze economic and therefore social development any more than any other ideology can. And therefore again and again tensions will arise within it and find expression in bitter ideological disputes between its proponents.

The Islamist youth are usually intelligent and articulate products of modern society. They read books and newspapers and watch televisions, and so know all the divisions and clashes within their own movements. However much they may close ranks when faced with "secularists", whether from the left or from the bourgeoisie, they will argue furiously with each other – just as the pro-Russian and pro-Chinese wings of the apparently monolithic world

Stalinist movement did 30 years ago. And these arguments will begin to create secret doubts in the minds of at least some of them.

Socialists can take advantage of these contradictions to begin to make some of the more radical Islamists question their allegiance to its ideas and organizations – but only if we can establish independent organizations of our own, which are not identified with either the Islamists or the state.

On some issues we will find ourselves on the same side as the Islamists against imperialism and the state. This was true, for instance, in many countries during the second Gulf War. It should be true in countries like France or Britain when it comes to combating racism. Where the Islamists are in opposition, our rule should be, "with the Islamists sometimes, with the state never".

But even then we continue to disagree with the Islamists on basic issues. We are for the right to criticize religion as well as the right to practice it. We are for the right not to wear the veil as well as the right of young women in racist countries like France to wear it if they so wish. We are against discrimination against Arab speakers by big business in countries like Algeria – but we are also against discrimination against the Berber speakers and those sections of workers and the lower middle class who have grown up speaking French. Above all, we are against any action which sets one section of the exploited and oppressed against another section on the grounds of religion or ethnic origin. And that means that as well as defending Islamists against the state we will also be involved in defending women, gays, Berbers or Copts against some Islamists.

When we do find ourselves on the same side as the Islamists, part of our job is to argue strongly with them, to challenge them – and not just on their organizations' attitude to women and minorities, but also on the fundamental question of whether what is needed is charity from the rich or an overthrow of existing class relations.

The left has made two mistakes in relation to the Islamists in the past. The first has been to write them off as fascists, with whom we have nothing in common. The second has been to see them as "progressives" who must not be criticized. These mistakes have jointly played a part in helping the Islamists to grow at the expense of the left in much of the Middle East. The need is for a different approach that sees Islamism as the product of a deep social crisis which it can do nothing to resolve, and which fights to win some of the young people who support it to a very different, independent, revolutionary socialist perspective.

Notes

128. This was the quite correct description of the ideas of the People's Mojahedin provided by the section of the leadership and membership who split away in the mid-1970s to form the organization that later took the name Paykar. Unfortunately, this organization continued to base itself on guerrillaism and Maoism rather than genuine revolutionary Marxism.

129. V. Moghadam, *Women, Work and Ideology in the Islamic Republic*, **International Journal of Middle East Studies**, 1988, p.230.

130. **Ibid.**, p.227.

131. **Ibid.**

132. E. Abrahamian, **Khomeinism**, **op. cit.**, p.16.