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women, power and politics in 21st century Iran

T. Povey, E. Rostami-Povey, Ashgate, Farnham and Burlington, VT, 2012, 218pp., ISBN: 978-1409402046, £55.00 (Pbk)

Women, Power and Politics in 21st Century Iran brings together contemporary insights on the women's movement in Iran, particularly since the 1979 revolution that overthrew the Shah and resulted in an Islamic government. Written by women, the majority of whom live and work in the country, this anthology endeavours to counter mainstream Western representations of Iranian women as oppressed and subordinated, and instead to depict the modes of resistance and negotiation they have adopted. The editors frame this narrative in terms of women's struggle against orientalism and imperialism, and against traditional Iranian patriarchy.

'Indigenous' is a key term in the book; it is used to refer to the character of the Iranian women's movement that developed after the 1979 revolution, in contrast to the arguably less authentic movement that had been associated with the Shah's projects of westernisation and modernisation. In the first two chapters, Elaheh Rostami-Povey contests the notion that Islam and the Islamised state are the primary agents of Iranian women's oppression (p. 17). She describes women's activism after 1979 as 'diverse and independent from the state', in contrast to the 'state-sponsored' women's movement under the secular, pro-Western, Pahlavi Shahs in the 1960s and 1970s (p. 17). In her analysis, Islamic belief becomes the key dividing line between the pre- and post-1979 movements. However, by implying that Islam is the ultimate defining and determining frame for the 'indigenous' women's movement, her account appears to construct an essentialised, monolithic version of Iranian women's history, in terms of a binary opposition between the indigenous movement after the revolution and its inauthentic, pre-1979 Other.

Interestingly, four out of the twelve chapters are written by women who have occupied positions within the state. In Chapter 7, on women in the judiciary, Jamileh Kadivar, an ex-member of parliament, argues for the compatibility of Shia *fiqh* (jurisprudence) with women's rights, suggesting that *fiqh* has the capacity to be interpreted according to time and place. Elaheh Koolaei and Massumeh Ebtekar, the authors of Chapters 9 and 10, respectively, have also served within state institutions, the former as a member of parliament and the latter as the Vice President and Head of the Department of the Environment. Like Kadivar, they highlight the obstacles to women's political participation,

mostly within the state administration. Koolae registers the advances for women achieved by the reformist parliament of 2000–2004, where the small number of women MPs could often work in alliance with the male majority.

While we acknowledge the efforts of these women, we should also note that they have been given a voice by the state because they share a common politico-religious frame of reference with it. This tends to undercut the editors' description of the post-1979 Iranian women's movement as 'diverse'; it seems that certain forms of femininity and sexuality have been favoured by the Islamic state at the expense of others.

The book generally seems to overlook the state's significant role, not only in legitimising and institutionalising existing gendered inequalities, but also in constituting new ones. There are occasional references to the state, but explanations of women's oppression mainly focus on the role of tradition, *Urf* (social and cultural conventions) and family relations as the main obstacles to women's progress.

Other chapters focus more on the lives of ordinary women. Mehri Honarbin-Holliday, in Chapter 4, evocatively explores how female art students in Tehran construct autonomous spaces where, for example, they can draw from the nude. She sees this as part of a spectrum of resistance to both the domestic 'intellectual clampdown and Islamo-Iranophobia in the imperialist West' (p. 69). We should, nonetheless, note that the desire to avoid orientalist stereotypes of Middle Eastern women as passive may lead, on occasion, to an exaggeration of the extent to which particular groups may be politicised.

Khadijeh Aryan and Zahra Nejadbahram, both academics working in Iran, explore, in Chapters 3 and 5, respectively, the growth in women's participation in higher education, in employment and in decision making since the early 1990s. However, the connection they make between these developments and the 1979 revolution can verge on the simplistic. For instance, although the existence of the Islamic state has allowed more girls to enter education (p. 39), this does not necessarily mean that the revolution has particularly encouraged women's public participation, as both chapters argue. If conservative families have supported women's education, this is partly because they view the state as validating their own patriarchal beliefs and as guaranteeing the 'safety' of females.

In Chapter 6, Leily Farhadpour writes fascinatingly on the topic of women and the media, particularly in the 'reform era' (the term for the more liberal presidency of Mohamad Khatami, 1997–2005). She splendidly interweaves her personal experience as an independent journalist with the variable fortunes of the Iranian women's movement. Through reading her narrative, it becomes evident that it is difficult to distinguish between activists with a genuine belief in Islam's compatibility with women's rights, and those who have chosen the Islamic path as a way of bargaining with the patriarchal state. This points to a tension in the book's approach, given that it tends to associate Islam with 'indigenous' feminism.

The strength of this collection is its focus on Iranian feminism from an insider's perspective; it is a valuable source of locally generated information on women's achievements and struggles. What may be controversial is its attempt to establish an organic connection between women's advances and the whole period since the 1979 revolution, given that most of these achievements seem to be associated with the eight years of the reform era. It is undoubtedly true that, under Khatami's presidency, civil society initiatives were actively encouraged. Throughout the preceding period, however, state forces had been consistently hostile to citizens' initiatives. Moreover, from 2005 to 2013, under President Ahmadinejad, the growth of civil institutions was reversed. In this book, on the other hand, the reform era is seemingly made to carry the weight of the entire revolution.

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