

James Buchan welcomes two attempts to pin down Iran's past and present

Contributed by James Buchan The Guardian
Sunday, 22 November 2009

The Persians: Ancient, Mediaeval and Modern Iran by Homa Katouzian, Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs by Ray Takeyh

Iran has in abundance first desert and then history. Its written annals go back nearly 3,000 years, while a sort of parallel history, collected by Ferdowsi in the magnificent national epic known as the Shahnameh or Book of Kings in the 11th century AD, recedes into an unimaginable antiquity. A country that has been smashed over and over again by invasion and now by religious revival, Iran yet survives pretty much in the territories enumerated by Darius the Great in the rock inscriptions at Bisitun.

What thread runs through this heap of ruins and centuries? The British thought it had all to do with revenue, because revenue is what principally interests an imperial people. According to the last of the great British Persianists, the late Professor Ann Lambton, subsistence agriculture in an arid land could only support so much of a government and military apparatus without a resort to conquest. The sudden and urgent requirement for a modern court, army and bureaucracy in the 19th century strained the revenue system till it broke, and brought in train the constitutional revolution of 1906, the oil concession and, by extension, the modernising autocracy of the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-79) and the 1979 revolution.

For the Pahlavi shahs, Reza and Muhammad Reza, Iranian history was mostly Herodotus seen through the lens of European, and especially German, racial nationalism. Islam was a sort of foreign implant. For the Islamic republic, Iranian history is, on the contrary, the gradual assumption by a hereditary clergy of the prerogatives (leading prayer, holy war, government) of the Hidden Imam, the 12th descendant of the Prophet through his daughter Fatemeh. Not assumption, but usurpation, say the quietists. And so on, ad infinitum.

Homa Katouzian, an Iranian scholar long resident in England, is not daunted by these historical quarrels. A poet, and a superb critic of poetry, he brings to the story of his country a species of literary learning that is all but extinct outside Iran. Recognising, no doubt, that there is small appetite among western readers for the sectarian struggles of the early Shia, the revolving dynasties of medieval Khorasan and the civil wars of the 18th century, Katouzian devotes more than half the book to the period after 1906. Here he uncovers sources all but unknown to non-Iranians and still has time and breath for a close analysis of the disputed presidential election last June.

Katouzian shows traces of youthful European intellectual influences, such as Marxism and political economy, but they are no more than mud on a traveller's duster. The first he now finds quite useless. The Soviets misunderstood Reza in 1921 as comprehensively as Khomeini in 1979. As for political economy, Muhammad Reza's later agricultural policy or Ahmadinejad's subsidies and hand-outs are drawn from a world beyond the reach of mere intellect. It is the old revenue thing, but in reverse: not shortage, but futile superabundance.

What Katouzian has in strong measure is a peculiarly Persian dialectic, which is often illuminating, as when he shows that "traditional" women, at the 1979 revolution, became modernised while "modern" women were forced to become traditional, at least in public. "Through time," he writes, "this made it possible for women in general to make significant social strides." Iranian women are now more or less what Reza Pahlavi had in mind when he forced the wives and daughters of government employees to appear unveiled in 1936.

For Katouzian, what unites these 3,000 years of history and makes them intelligible is arbitrary government, short-term, violent and insecure. There was never a feudal system, or a hereditary aristocracy. What is permanent is impermanence. For all their frantic air of timelessness, institutions such as the Qom seminary rise and are destroyed in two generations. Tradition is manufactured as easily as modernity, and the only authenticities are His Excellency the Executioner and the mole on the Beloved's face.

State and society are at perpetual daggers drawn. When a state collapses by reason of its own weakness or foreign incursion, whether Achaemenid, Sassanian, Safavid, Qajar or Pahlavi, "society either supports its downfall or remains neutral". The fault of the Pahlavis was not that they were dictators, but that they weren't: that is, they alienated the modern social classes who might have acquiesced in strong dictatorial rule. The revolt of 1979 was not of the underprivileged but of all society. In a crowning dialectical twist, the novel element of the Islamic republic is not that half the population opposes it, but that half the population supports it.

Ray Takeyh (Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs, Oxford, £15.99) lacks

Katouzian's hauteur or suavity of manner, but then that would be intolerable in a scholar born only in 1966. Having lived since 1979 in the US, where he is now a state department adviser to the president, Takeyh is American in his history.

It was not an "unprecedented move in the history of Shiism" for the Islamic republic to defrock Ayatollah Shariatmadari. Sheikh Fazlollah Nuri, the most learned of the Tehran clergy at the time of the constitutional revolution, was hanged by his clerical colleagues. Nor was it primarily Britain in 1921 that brought the Pahlavis to power, nor primarily the US in 1953 that kept them there. (A moment's thought suggests that where the CIA and the Islamic republic agree on an interpretation of history, it is unlikely to be the very best.)

It is quite false to say, with Takeyh, that "like all ideologues, Khomeini was prepared to sacrifice a nation in the service of his ideals". Had that been the case, Khomeini would never have "drunk the cup of poison" and accepted the UN resolution to end the war with Iraq in 1988. These points are not trivial. If the US, like the Abbasids, is to recruit a Persian-speaking bureaucracy to handle a country it does not understand, then those men and women must supply what the US lacks, which is a notion of Iranian history.

That said, Takeyh's grasp of the last two decades in Iran is beyond praise. He plunges into the sea of verbiage, vanity, trivial domestic detail and outright falsehood that floods from the Tehran presses and surfaces with one or two pearls.

His great achievement is to show how the radical left of 1979 – authoritarian, statist, terrorist or thereabouts – was transformed into the Reformists of 1997 and the Mousavis and Karrubis of the June Days of this year in Tehran. Takeyh's portrait of Rafsanjani, for ever intriguing himself into a corner, would make a novel.

Even better, Takeyh examines the career of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and finds him not at all out of the ordinary. "A war generation," he writes, "with its imperial ambitions and austere Islamism, has come to power and is redefining the parameters of Iran's international relations and pressing its newfound advantages to their limits." Just evident in Takeyh (and also in Katouzian) is the fleeting hint that the Islamic republic is beginning to unwind its turban and shed other seminary luggage for a more workaday authoritarian nationalism.

As for US policy, it is perhaps fortunate that the Islamic republic is so inconsistent, even dilettantish, in its foreign relations. Takeyh argues that the US policy of containment, devised for the Soviet Union, does not work for a state that, for all its chaotic policies, is accustomed to regional power. The US policy has so far done little but eliminate Iran's natural predators, such as Saddam Hussein, the first Taliban emirate and the Wahhabi extremists. Takeyh proposes a new regional security pact that would unite Shia Iraq and Iran and the Sunni Arab states in a common interest. One wonders where, in that pleasant, ecumenical circle, Israel will take its seat.

James Buchan's latest novel, *The Gate of Air*, is published by MacLehose Press.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/nov/21/persians-iran-katouzian-guardians-takeyh>