

Razmandegan-e Eslam and the Friday Prayer Leaders' Policy Council, and on individuals' non-governmental but politically influential activities, such as Mohsen Rafiqdoust's attempts to provide the Revolutionary Guards with funds and equipment before the Revolutionary Guards Ministry was established. Regardless, *Post-Revolutionary Iran: A Political Handbook* is bound to elevate the quality of scholarship on political life in Iran by serving as an empirically solid platform on which to build research.

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A Political Prosopography of the Islamic Republic

Postrevolutionary Iran: A Handbook, Mehrzad Boroujerdi and Kourosch Rahimkhani, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2018, ISBN 978-0-8156-3574-1 (hbk), 896 pp., 22 illus.

In the Islamic Republic, writing about politics, more so participating in politics, is a knotty affair. The representation of the state as a self-reproducing regime by researchers and intellectuals has its corollary in high officials themselves characterizing Iran's political order as a bounded and self-purposed system. The "*nezām*" is not just a category of political analysis, in other words, but also a category of practice, a category which individuals inside and outside of the Iranian government deploy to engage in politics.

Scholars habitually conflate the two modes. The result is a folkish functionalism. Our methodological approach is often to look at an outcome, ask "cui bono?," and assume backwards that the internal workings of the Iranian state, the intention of political elites, the organizational charts of authority-making, and the resources of government institutions somehow interacted, even if inefficiently, to arrive at an observed effect. We all too easily move from proclamations to policies to end products without checking the pathways in between. In sum, we rarely open up the black box of the state. With the publication of *Postrevolutionary Iran: A Political Handbook*, we no longer have any excuse to be so lazy.

Boroujerdi and Rahimkhani provide these reams of biographical and organizational data not to fit the entire Iranian state apparatus into one more abstracted category of a typological set—be it sultanistic, rentier, predatory, hierocratic, hybridized, hydraulic, or theocratic-republican—but rather "to understand the practical functioning of Iranian politics" (p. xvii). They point out that any grand method of examining

Iranian statecraft is bound to fall flat in overall explanatory power, whether the esoteric Kremlinology of factions and personalities, the conjuring of ideology and doctrine as the prime mover of the political world, or the bestowing of anthropomorphized agency to clashing yet coherent organizations.

So what do we do with this tome? The temptation, as always, is to cherry-pick our pet theories from the tangled mass. It would be easy to do so with the data gathered here from open sources, but of course it would be even easier to assert our priors without such data in the first place as a possible corrective. Better to test our assumptions and find out where we have been glaringly wrong.

For instance, contrary to claims that the new political elite of the Islamic Republic emerged from a scattered array of provincial origins, the authors show that a disproportionate number of the members of powerful organizations such as the Guardian Council hailed from Tehran and Isfahan. Does this finding extend to other organizations such as key ministerial branches or military officer cohorts, we can ask? Alternatively, do shared cohort experiences predict later political affinities? A glance at Table 132, “Individuals Involved in the Takeover of the United States Embassy in 1979,” shows that later positions held by the young revolutionaries, from Abbas Abdi and Mohammad-Reza Khatami to Ezzatollah Zarghami and Mohammad-Ali Jafari, do not cluster together in any organizational or ideological fashion. An analysis and comparison of “career sequences” from this data may eventually supersede the ahistorical categories of “insider” and “outsider,” which, as mentioned above, are interchangeably used as both analytical tools to understand politics as well as rhetorical ammunition to influence politics.

As the mere existence of “big” data does not tell us how to use it, the content of the *Political Handbook* compels us to be even more cautious in any claim that spans over four decades. Here we have dazzling lists of elite biographies, organizational membership rolls, electoral processes, and kinship ties. Let us take the final section, for instance: a remarkable compendium of family names and filial linkages which invites the tech-savvy researcher to plug it all into a colossal network map. But as both network science and social anthropology have long warned, the presence of a tie between two nodes does not tell us much, other than that an association may exist. It is what flows over these kinship ties, rather than the structural layout of these ties alone, that conveys to us whether the network matters at all. Kinship ties may produce alliances, but they also may produce schisms as these networks interweave with other forms of social and political organization. They also may be irrelevant but enticingly open for any researcher to impute meaning to the association without additional evidence—similar to how Iranian political prisoners are often convicted as guilty “by association” with other actors via the simple presence of a network tie. Left schematically charted without any qualitative investigation, a network only gives the illusion of an explanation.

Luckily, we do not need to invent such methods. They exist and have been frequently used in the prosopography of other social and political forms, from the Roman Imperial army and the Soviet nomenklatura to European multinational corporations and US Protestant social registers. Opening up the black box of the

Iranian state does not demand the astronomical applications of technical manipulations of quantitative data. Indeed, this approach will likely hide more through sophistry than it reveals via causality. Instead, the innovative implication of the *Political Handbook* is that Iranian studies must combine our collective scholarly talents in the humanistic interpretation of the historical nuances of postrevolutionary Iran with the methodological tools of comparative historians and social scientists. By standing on this (voluminous) *Handbook*, we will be able to see farther, compare more fruitfully, attend to detail more analytically, and disassemble the unwarranted assumptions bound up in our shared accounts of, as the authors put it, this “novel form of political regime, remained unknown” (p. xvii).

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