

shah was in search of a philosophy for his ill-fated Rastakhiz party, he, too, insisted that it be “revolutionary, authentically Iranian, neither Eastern nor Western and rooted in the mystical dialectic of shi’ism” (p. 14).

This is a thought-provoking, informative, and well-documented book (with eighty-five pages of endnotes). It deliberately keeps away from abstract theorization. What sets it apart from previous studies of intellectual history is its scope and attention to detail and contextualization, both local and global. It makes a persuasive case for not only how ideas came about and captured imaginations but also how they impacted politics and the state at certain points in time and contributed to events taking the shape that they did. Other than occasional inconsistencies in transliteration and spelling of names, this is highly readable and a major contribution to the field.

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Iran: Stuck in Transition, Anoushiravan Ehteshami, London: Routledge, 2017, paperback, £26.82 ISBN-10: 0-415-71085-5, ISBN-13: 978-0-415-71085-5, 296 pp.

In a crowded field of often uneven scholarship on contemporary Iran, Anoushiravan Ehteshami has once again produced a masterful analysis of the Islamic Republic’s politics, political economy, and international relations. *Iran: Stuck in Transition* is nuanced, thoroughly researched, and well-written. One of the main strengths of the book is the comprehensive scope of its coverage, examining, in great detail and with keen insight, Iranian domestic politics, economics, and international relations under the administrations of Presidents Khatami, Ahmadinejad, and Rouhani. Throughout, Ehteshami observes, despite its increasing securitization and its many contradictions, the Islamic Republic system has proven itself to be remarkably flexible and also resilient.

In addition to a robust introduction, the book is comprised of four substantive chapters. The Introduction lays out the book’s main thesis. The Islamic Republic, Ehteshami posits, in a highly complex and complicated system has managed to survive and persevere despite significant missteps on the part of many of its stewards and, more consequentially, severe systemic contradictions. In the process, the political system has been stuck in transition, torn between the theological impulses of its founding principles on the one side, and its equally enshrined republican and democratic tendencies on the other. In the contradiction between the two tropes, the theological impulse has repeatedly emerged as dominant, despite the fact that no less of an authority than Khomeini made the claim that the affairs of the state, and the building of a functioning republic, took precedent over religious, Islamic affairs.

Ehteshami calls the Islamic Republic's constitution "an ideas hodgepodge." According to Ehteshami, the system that has emerged is unique in having features that are restrictive of political space and at the same time are highly democratic. Candidates are pre-selected based on a highly restrictive vetting process. Once they pass the vetting threshold, however, the elections are highly contested and, for the most part, are freely and fiercely fought. On balance, the Islamic Republic has established a political system that is neither necessarily just nor free. Its economic system is based on state capitalism and corporatism—hardly innovative or high-performing—and it has been able to break away from reliance on the export of hydrocarbons.

Ehteshami also highlights three features of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy as particularly salient: the country's leadership views Iran as a regional power; more than any other factor, Iran's international relations have been shaped by security concerns; and the Islamic Republic has consistently pursued a foreign policy that is "counter-hegemonic."

These features of Iran's domestic and international politics are developed further in subsequent chapters, beginning with a relatively brief but detailed discussion of the process of modern state formation that started in earnest with the first Pahlavi monarch in the 1920s. In setting the historical stage for the book's primary focus, Ehteshami masterfully recounts the historical legacy of state-building in Iran under the two Pahlavi monarchs, followed by the revolution in the late 1970s and then the establishment of the Islamic Republic in the 1980s.

With the context thus explained, Ehteshami devotes three subsequent, lengthy chapters to the politics, economics, and the international relations of the Islamic Republic. Much of the focus of chapter 2, on the politics of the Islamic Republic, is on the systematic contradictions that have plagued the system since its establishment. To start, Ehteshami argues, the Islamic Republic is reliant on a constitution that inheres not one but two sets of internal contradictions: the contradictions between the Islamist-legalist components of the constitution with its non-religious, secular elements; and the contradictions between the constitution's democratic and non-democratic elements. These contradictions have fostered the structural weakness of the state and have tested its legitimacy.

While political participation remains central to the legitimacy of the system, the system remains in a perpetual state of unease, some of its main objectives unfulfilled. The impulse to control flows of information into the country has not kept the Iranian public from being highly informed and networked. The economy, the subject of chapter 3, continues to remain dependent on hydrocarbons despite efforts to the contrary. And Iran's ostensibly revolutionary foreign policy, discussed in chapter 4, impedes moves to normalize relations with neighbors or the United States, many of whom often have less-than-savory intentions of their own.

These contradictions and shortcomings, Ehteshami demonstrates, do not lend themselves to easy fixes. The system's contradictions run deep and involve multiple state institutions and structures. In fact, the core problem of the system, according to Ehteshami, is the *faqih* order. So long as the *Velayat-e Faqih* position remains

intact, tensions inherent within the system, especially between its theocratic and democratic elements, will not be resolved.

There are other systemic problems with the structure of the Islamic Republic, not the least of which—as is repeatedly highlighted in the book—is the incompatibility of democratic republicanism with clerical centralism, which, Ehteshami demonstrates, was settled when clericalism was placed at the heart of the state. Additionally, after forty years, the system still has not figured out how to properly institutionalize and accommodate political parties. Not surprisingly, a fair amount of personalism continues to characterize the politics of the Islamic Republic. Given the weakness and vulnerability of political parties, social and family networks have emerged as platforms for political mobilization. In the absence of parties, voters and activists alike pick coalitions on the basis of personalities, revolutionary slogans, ideologies, neighborhood and community, and kinship and ethnicity.

My one reservation about the book is that the sources in the bibliography have the author's first name and then the last name instead of the standard last name-first name format. But in terms of substance, use of sources, breadth and depth of coverage, and veracity of the analysis, this is a solid work of scholarship. *Iran: Stuck in Transition* exemplifies the best of Ehteshami's scholarship. It is meticulously researched and heavily referenced. Any serious study of contemporary Iran must necessarily take into account Ehteshami's arguments and analyses here.

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