

Revisiting the Iranian Intellectuals' Views of Modernization in the Constitutional Era from the Standpoint of Political Theology: A Case Study of Akhundzadeh and Mostashar Al-Dowleh

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Abstract : Many of scholars of Iranian Constitutional thought have insisted that there are two main approaches to the problem of modernization in Iran: 'radical' or 'revolutionary' and 'conservative' or 'reformist'. In the schema of this taxonomy, Mirza Fatali Akhundzadeh is commonly regarded as one of the most prominent figures of the first camp whose position implies a fundamental inconsistency between the principles of political modernity and Sharia. Conversely, Yousuf Khan Mostashar al-Dowleh, represents the opposing camp, who defends the claim that not only is the modern legal system as the basis of political modernity not inconsistent with the teachings of the theological-political hardcore of Iranian common sense or the divine laws of the Sharia, but that, in the final analysis, there is even a fundamental concord or affinity between them. The proponents of this taxonomy have chiefly relied on historical analyses, whether intellectual or social. Our contention is that a serious confrontation with this disagreement from the standpoint of political philosophy - particularly the old emphasis on the theological elements as the necessary constituents of any effectual political thought - is illuminating as it can reveal aspects that are not recognizable from a purely historical point of view. From this perspective, to become an effective truth, political modernity requires winning a spiritual battle because the modern political regime, like any other regime, should be persuasive according to its spiritual principles and values as its theological prelude. Now, the spiritual battle has its own strategy and tactic. In what follows, we shall try to show that the presumed conflict between Akhundzadeh and Mostashar al-Dowleh can be emphatically doubtful if we turn our eyes to the meaningful distinction between a shared modernist strategy and multiple modernist tactics. In short, we first argue that what is very important in understanding these two strands of modernization thought, and specifically these two prominent figures of the Constitutional era, is to reflect on their positions and writings from the point of view of their shared modernist strategy, i.e., to make a crack between the 'spirit' and 'the body' of revealed religion. Both of them strategically defend the 'spirit' of revealed religion against its 'body', but tactically there is a difference: Akhundzadeh do it openly and Mostashar Al-Dowleh covertly. Therefore, we argue firstly that both of them have belonged to the same front in the theological-political battlefield. Then we show that the question is not an opposition between a "revolutionary" and a "conservative". Both of them are subversive: the former is unmasked, and the latter is masked.

Keywords : Akhundzadeh, Mostashar Al-Dowleh, modernity, strategy, tactic, political theology, spirit, body

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