

## **Khalil Maleki, The Human Face of Iranian Socialism**

### **Book launch**

Khalil Maleki was born in 1901, a few years before the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, and died in 1969, a few years after the shah's White Revolution of 1963; he would have been seventy-six in 1977 when the protest movement which led to the revolution of February 1979 began. Thus, in much of this long and eventful period, Maleki played a significant role in politics and society, as an intellectual, a political thinker, activist and organiser, and a communist turned socialist, believing in freedom, democracy and social justice, and pursuing these goals through peaceful means. And since he split with the Tudeh party in 1948 he almost constantly faced a barrage of abuse, libel and invective from that party, and later from other revolutionaries as well. He was thus a unique figure caught in a generally intolerant age, now jailed by rulers and now castigated by much of the opposition. It is only in recent times that his ideas and approaches are making inroads in the political attitude and praxis of some, especially younger, Iranians - both men and women. He was not generally known even in Iran from the late 1960s until the twenty-first century, the great age of revolutionary idealism and revolution.

The Constitutional Revolution of 1906 was first and foremost fought for the establishment of government by law as opposed to arbitrary rule, although various secondary programmes, notably modernisation, were also floated through the movement. And it was supported by virtually all the urban social classes (the peasantry being still apolitical): merchants, small traders, artisans, intellectuals, clerics, Qajar princes and notables, tribal leaders, etc. And although in many ways it was very different from the revolution of February 1979, the resemblance to the consensus of all social classes to remove the shah (and thus overthrow arbitrary rule) is uncanny.

Once Mohammad Ali Shah was deposed and exiled, however, conflict, chaos and anarchy began to replace his rule, quite like the aftermath of the fall of every arbitrary government

throughout centuries. The intervention in Iran of warring parties in World War I simply exacerbated the situation, since before it chaotic trends had already begun both in the centre and the provinces. Come the end of the War, Iran was on its knees, even in danger of being fragmented as it had done before in history; and most erstwhile revolutionaries were regretting it. A few, like the poets Mirzadeh Eshqi and Abolqasem Lahuti, were yearning for another revolution, but many if not most intellectual, nationalist and modernist elites hoped for a strong government which would stamp out the chaos and modernise the country virtually overnight. The young Khalil Maleki was one of their numbers, wishing for the establishment of a modern republic.

Various factors led to the emergence of Reza Khan, but once he appeared on the scene he proved to be the 'saviour' many educated Iranians had longed for. Even his establishment of a dictatorship went down well at first, to the extent that when he bid to become shah in 1925, he also had the support of the ulama in Najaf. He quickly brought general security and stability to the country and began a process of modernisation, in fact pseudo-modernism, since it was a case of straight copying from the West.

However, it did not take long for dictatorship to turn into the traditional arbitrary rule (estebdad) in a modern form, a 'one-man regime' as the shah himself described it, which increasingly began to alienate various social classes, so that when, in 1941, he had to abdicate in the wake of the Allied occupation of Iran, he had very few friends indeed left in the country. An example of his reforms was sending state students to study at European universities, from which at first Maleki benefitted, only to be returned to Iran before finishing his studies on the false charge of being a communist. And an example of the shah's arbitrary rule was the arrest and incarceration of a group of young men (later known as the Fifty-Three) in 1937, who included Khalil Maleki, on charges of belonging to a communist organisation which they did not.

Shortly after Reza Shah's abdication, the Tudeh party was formed by some members of the Fifty-Three and other democratic and anti-Fascist people, which resembled the resistance movements in occupied Europe led by popular fronts. Its membership ranged from Marxists through to social democrats, democrats and liberals. Maleki took a couple of years before joining the party, mainly because he did not trust some members of the Fifty-Three. And when he did, he began to lead the young party dissidents who were critical of many of the attitudes and policies of its leadership.

Once again the country was almost down on its knees in many ways, except that the occupying forces stopped it from falling apart or getting entangled in revanchist and factional struggles of the kind that was experienced after the revolution of February 1979. The Tudeh party was, to say the least, the best organised and, sometime later, the most popular party in Iran in spite of its internal disagreements. It organised (though not exclusively) the trade union movement, and its press and publications spread new political values and encouraged modern cultural and literary activities. Come the 1943 Soviet victory in Stalingrad, it became the strongest centre of social and intellectual activity. Maleki became one of its most famous and most popular writers, journalists and teachers, at the same time as he was also the elder member of the internal party critics.

The party's support for the 1944 Soviet demand for the concession of north Iranian oil which Maleki endorsed, put it in a difficult situation, but it made the biggest stir both inside and outside of it when its members demonstrated in support of the Soviet demand under the protection of the occupying Soviet troops. However, the internal party disagreements came to a head in 1946 when the party leadership supported the Azerbaijan Democrat's forceful declaration of autonomy which smacked of separatism, and delivered their own local party organisation to them as a result of Soviet pressure. Maleki led the opposition to that policy

which failed abjectly, and this provided the turning point, which ended up in the party split of January 1948.

The winds of Cold war had already begun to blow since 1946 and the Tudeh party split could have been an indirect result of that, although the splinters still had faith in the Soviet Union (though not the Soviet embassy in Tehran). But it did not take Maleki long before he saw through Soviet communism. By this time the Tudeh, having been banned in 1949, had become a fully-fledged Stalinist party to which the Soviet interest came first. Meanwhile, the conflict with Anglo-Iranian Oil Company had begun to flare up, which had as its background the great oil workers' strikes of the mid-1940s, the rejection of the Soviet demand for the North Iranian oil concession and the general dissatisfaction with AIOC's interference in the political affairs of Iran. That is how the National Front led by Mohammad Mosaddeq and the newspapers *Bakhtar-e Emruz* and *Shahed*, which supported it came into being. Maleki began to write in Mozaffar Baqa'i's *Shahed*, criticising British policy in Iran as well as the Tudeh party. But, his most remarkable contribution was his campaign against the extremely prevalent and popular conspiracy theory of politics.

Maleki had become a socialist who firmly believed in parliamentary democracy. Meanwhile the country was caught in fever over election rigging which was largely tied up with the struggle over oil. In 1950 General Razmara, the able and intelligent chief of the general staff, became prime minister and met Mosaddeq head on as the leader of the sixteenth Majlis opposition. In March 1951, a member of the Fad'iyan-e Islam (Devotees of Islam) assassinated Razmara, which was followed by the nationalisation of Iranian oil by the Majlis, and Mosaddeq's premiership in April 1951. He had the support of the leading political Mojtahed, Ayatollah Kashani.

Shortly after Mosaddeq's premiership Maleki, Baqa'i and their supporters formed the Toiler's party and soon became the strongest and most well organised party that supported the

nationalisation of Iranian oil and Mosaddeq's government. However, the argument over the oil dispute with Britain dragged during which, in February 1952, Mosaddeq eventually turned down the offer of the International Bank for mediation between Iran and Britain, and this led to the international boycott of Iranian oil. Maleki believed that this offer ought to have been accepted. Meanwhile Britain was trying to arrange Mosaddeq's removal by parliamentary means, and when the shah and Mosaddeq clashed over which one of them should appoint the war minister, the latter resigned and Ahmad Qavam replaced him. There was a public revolt called by Kashani and the strong Majlis minority which supported Mosaddeq, in which the Toilers party played a significant role and which resulted in Mosaddeq's return to power within a few days.

This was the peak of the Popular Movement (Nehzat-e Melli) as it was known then, but later developments led to its gradual decline, when Kashani, Baqa'i and some other leading figures in the Movement went over to the opposition and began to attack Mosaddeq. This was virtually inaugurated by a split in the Toilers party, most of whom, led by Maleki, formed the Toilers Third Force party, which gave critical support to Mosaddeq. Maleki had already put forward the theory of the Third Force, which was his elaborate formulation of independence from both Eastern and Western blocs. He was referring to countries that many years later became known as the Third World. Furthermore, he engaged in a thorough critique of the Soviet Union, not just as a totalitarian and expansionist state, but also as a 'state capitalist' country, something that had not yet been suggested by anyone else.

The oil dispute continued and Mosaddeq's government rejected Britain and America's final proposal for settlement in February 1953, which Maleki thought ought to have been accepted. Meanwhile, the Anglo-American powers were busy organising a coup against Mosaddeq, which was unwittingly helped by his decision to close the Majlis via a referendum, against which Maleki and some other leading figures had advised him. The first coup attempt of 16

August 1953 failed but the following attempt on 19 August succeeded. The Tudeh party which had castigated Mosaddeq as an American agent but had later somewhat toned down its vehement opposition to him, did not resist the much anticipated coup despite their repeated slogan that they would 'turn the coup into a countercoup'.

Mosaddeq and some Popular Front leaders were arrested, tried and imprisoned, Hossein Fatemi, the foreign minister, was executed, and Maleki was thrown in jail without trial together with many prominent Tudeh members and activists for a year. Within a couple of years the regime of the shah and General Zahedi had suppressed the Popular Movement and virtually destroyed the Tudeh party. They settled the oil dispute at least against the spirit of the oil nationalisation, resulting in the consortium oil agreement, which was opposed in the Majlis by Mohammad Derakhshesh, the teachers' union leader, whose long speech had been written by Maleki.

1953-1960 was a period of dictatorship; first led jointly by the shah and Zahedi, followed by the shah alone after he dismissed the latter in 1955. It was not a regime of absolute and arbitrary rule which commenced from 1963 onwards, so a certain amount of semi-legal activity was possible. Maleki tried hard both in person and in writing to rally the erstwhile leaders of the Popular Movement to organise themselves quietly and prepare for the opportunity which he believed would come, but they had been highly demoralised and would not be motivated. Maleki himself kept in contact with the core of Third Force activists and edited a social-cum-intellectual journal without a political overtone, to which several university professors contributed,

By 1960 the regime was in acute crisis. Inflation, large balance of payments' deficit, the Soviet Union's vehement propaganda campaigns against the shah, the election of John F. Kennedy to US presidency who had been openly critical of corrupt third world regimes including Iran's, not to mention the domestic discontent, impelled the shah to allow a certain

amount of opening up, declaring that the forthcoming Majlis elections were free. Quickly, some former leaders of the Popular Movement in addition to some others that they had invited declared the formation of the second National Front, but did not invite Maleki who, together with the core of Third force activists plus some newcomers, formed the Socialist League of the Popular Movement of Iran.

The new National Front which at first had a considerable following mainly on account of past associations with Mosaddeq did not issue a manifesto, simply demanded free elections, and set about to dissolve the National Front parties into simple members of the Front, which, by definition, excluded the Socialist League. They soon boycotted the elections which were largely rigged in any case, and the twentieth Majlis which had been thus elected was dissolved by the shah a couple of months later, in early 1961, a condition which Ali Amini had made for accepting the premiership.

The shah both disliked and feared Amini who was an able and independent-minded former minister and former ambassador to Washington, but he made him prime minister, both because the situation was desperate and because he thought that that was what the Americans desired. Amini's main programme was a comprehensive reform of the land tenure for which reason he had asked for the dissolution of the parliament as it was packed with landlords and their supporters. He also wished to trim some of the shah's powers. Maleki believed that the second National Front should not get into a life- and-death struggle against him but to turn themselves into a shadow government, because he argued that the fall of Amini without his being replaced by the Front would result in 'black dictatorship'. The Front did not heed his advice, and after the fall of Amini, a now self-confident shah launched his White Revolution in January 1963, which included land reform and women's franchise, followed by absolute and arbitrary rule for almost fifteen years.

Thus, for the second time the Popular Movement was defeated. Mosaddeq tried to intervene through correspondence to reform the second NF but they were ready to quit the scene and his intervention gave them the pretext for it. However, the Socialist League continued its activity until August 1965 when Maleki and three of his colleagues were arrested and convicted in a military court. Maleki was sentenced to three years imprisonment but was released after one-and-a-half years, largely due to the pressure on the shah by European socialists. He continued to write and translate books, none of which was allowed to be published under his name. He died in July 1969 at 68.

Maleki was a unique character in Iranian politics in many ways, including the fact that he was a very intelligent as well as a principled opposition leader who believed in dialogue and peaceful change, which led to his condemnation by the revolutionaries and persecution by the regime.

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