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Iran, Stuck in Transition is another fascinating intellectual enterprise by prolific Durham College University professor Anoushiravan Ehteshami. This book is an analysis of various aspects of post-revolutionary Iranian politics. The angle that Ehteshami picked for his analysis makes it unique among the intellectual works in this area. He provides a nuanced portrayal of Iranian politics that casts light on how seemingly conservative and status-quo-oriented “social and political forces in a revolutionary environment” respond to the tides of change from within and without of the polity (p. 2). Ehteshami is convinced, and rightfully so, that Iranian politics today is a function of the state’s identity, which finds its roots in the Iranian historical past. For that matter, the author dedicates the first chapter of his book to a historical account of the formative milestones that have defined the bounds of the state’s identity. In this regard, Ehteshami clearly breaks from those modernist historians and political scientists such as Bert Frazier who reject the primordialist view of Iranian identity. However, the large swath of historical junctures covered by this chapter makes it subpar to the quality of the subsequent chapters. This chapter could have been better rendered had the author instead opted to write higher on the scale of abstraction and refer the readers to reference resources on Iranian history.

In chapter two, Ehteshami turns to domestic politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran. In this chapter, the author discusses how the post-revolutionary political discourse in Iran is defined by the legacy of the Iranian revolution (p. 34). Ehteshami points out the contradictions in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic (35-36) and how such contradictions constantly keep the system at the brink of legitimacy crisis (p. 37). In spite of this institutional weakness, Ehteshami argues, the Islamic Republic thrives on “the absence of clarity in [its] mission, persistent ideological ambiguities ... and the lack of durable political structures to manage elite and intra-elite competition.” The author explains that these seemingly negative attributes pave the way for the emergence of a number of independent and rival “fronts” and “associations” whose operation in the absence of disciplined political parties spawn great internal collaboration that defies “the intrusion by political outsiders” (p. 38). Such a configuration leads to factionalism — another feature of the post-revolution political system — where coalitions take place among various interest and/or principle factions in place of the formation of grand coalitions of political parties, Ehteshami argues (38). Going forward, Ehteshami provides a thorough historical account of post-revolutionary politics in Iran in its various phases. The optimal breadth and depth of this account arguably puts it among the best of such accounts in the literature. By tying this empirical account to his initial analysis, Ehteshami helps his readers grasp the operation of the dynamics he had identified earlier in political processes of the Islamic Republic. Ehteshami brings this well-documented chapter to an end by concluding that Iran is a “non-liberal democracy” — which he distinguishes from a pseudo-democracy — because its participatory elements and democratic procedures are meant to preserve unity rather than diversity/pluralism (p. 105).

In chapter three, Ehteshami walks the readers through the historical evolution of the Iranian political economy. The author correctly refers to Reza Khan’s reign as the outset of the Iranian national economy because the Iranian polity during the Qajarid era was too fragmented to be a host to a national economy (p. 117). Ehteshami refers to the top-down and state-led nature of the Iranian economy, which had centered around Reza Shah’s vision of a self-sufficient Iran. Therefore, from the outset, Ehteshami argues, it was “the state [that] led the creation of the modern economy of Iran” (p. 118). After the Second World War, Mohammad Reza Shah relied

on the West to rebuild the pummeled Iranian economy. This policy antagonized Islamist and nationalist elements within the polity, generating conflict that was resolved to the Shah's liking after the 1953 CIA-orchestrated coup. After regaining his throne, Shah signed the 1954 Agreement with the Consortium of Western oil companies, which dramatically increased Iran's revenue from the extraction of its oil by foreign companies. This oil revenue, Ehteshami argues, contributed to shaping Iran's political economy, which is still in effect to the present day (pp. 118-119). The fiscal autonomy resulting from the state's reliance on the oil revenue "institutionalized rentierism¹ as the form of Iran's political economy" while "[depoliticizing] social forces." This unprecedented context Ehteshami believes, carried the weight of Shah's "ambitious and transformational White Revolution" (p. 119). While Iran's economic progress following the Second World War was notable, it was the oil bonanza of the 1970s that consolidated a shift in Iran's political economy. To understand the dynamics of economic progress and development in the 1970s, Ehteshami argues, one needs to bear in mind Iran's "rapid integration into the global economy" and the state's struggle against "the traditional bourgeoisie, and their merchant and middle-class allies." Concomitant to these fast-track economic developments, a hasty socio-economic reform was underway that gave impetus to Iranian Revolution, Ehteshami maintains (pp. 121-129). In spite of the multifaceted revolutionary overhaul in the post-1979 Iran, the author argues, the rentier nature of Iran's political economy was preserved. Nevertheless, Iran's political economy underwent foundational changes due to the revolution, Iran-Iraq war, rounds of international sanctions, mismanagement, and corruption. In an analytical section, rich in empirical support, Ehteshami provides a thorough and compelling analysis of the significance and relevance of these elements for the post-revolution Iranian political economy.

In the last chapter, Ehteshami analyzes the regional and global implications of an overhaul that was introduced to the Iranian foreign policy after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Ehteshami demonstrates how pragmatism coupled with ideational imperatives introduced new priorities and role perceptions into post-revolution Iranian foreign policy. The author contends that Iran's historical struggle to preserve its distinct "identity... [in face of] invasion, devastation, and domination by foreigners" (p. 174) has made "independence" an integral component of the country's political/strategic culture. After a brief overview of the historical features capturing Iran's international relations in the earlier periods, Ehteshami reviews the historical junctures of Iran's international relations during the Pahlavi reign. Ehteshami's historical accounts are predicated on his assertion that securing the country's territorial integrity by strengthening the central government, building a capable military force, and establishing alliances was of the utmost importance for the Pahlavi kings. From there, the author analyzes Islamic Republic's international behavior over the decades, with an attempt to identify those themes in the Iranian foreign policy that tend to be enduring. The author believes that the "legacy of Iran's ancient past" is still relevant for "Iran's view of itself and its surroundings," a "geopolitical memory ... that provides a sense of pride and international relevance" (p. 251). In addition, Ehteshami gives credence to factionalist domestic politics, whose operation in Iranian foreign policy plays as important a role as ideology. Ehteshami refers to the "Look East" strategy as the core of Iran's anti-imperial stance and discusses how important this "historically, culturally, and geographically closer" realm has been to post-revolution Iran (p. 251). The author believes that the Islamic Republic's foreign policy is always in vacillation between "revolutionary idealism and political realism" (p. 257), yet he doubts that revolutionary ideological precepts are immutable components of the Iranian foreign policy-making. Instead, Ehteshami emphasizes that

Iran will, over time, fall back on its “personality” traits, which swirl around nationalism, skepticism of the West, non-alignment with sources of power/identity, and pursuit of regional hegemony (p. 253).

Iran: Stuck in Transition is brilliant, persuasive, and informed by a meticulous approach to elucidating continuity and change in politics. This is an excellent contribution to Iranian studies and an essential text for anyone interested in researching Iranian politics. This superb analysis of various aspects of Iranian politics is highly recommended for both academic and policy purposes.

Notes

¹ A rentier state derives all or a substantial portion of its national revenues from the rent of indigenous resources such as oil and gas to external clients.

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