

65. The role of religion, education and policy in Iran in valuing the environment

by
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Iran faces many environmental challenges, including air pollution in cities and sand storms exacerbated by progressive drying out of the land. As a result, the government now has more sympathy for environmental concerns and there are some active green non-governmental organisations. The picture is complicated by varying interpretations of the Qur'an advice on human responsibility for the Earth. School textbooks refer very little to nature and with a dominant Islamic political ideology. Little space is left to discuss the environment in the classroom.

Environmental concerns are growing in Iran, and of these, air pollution in Tehran and other large cities is probably the most urgent. Tehran is one of the ten most polluted cities in the world. According to the Office for the Control of the Quality of the Atmosphere, the number of polluted days in Tehran has “increased greatly during the last six years and reached its peak with 218 [non-standard and unhealthy] days in 2011” (BBC Persian, 2012a).

As a result, the number of days in which schools, offices and factories have had to close has risen, as have the number of deaths related to pollution (BBC News, 2010). According to the deputy health minister, some 4 460 people died due to pollution in Tehran in the first nine months of 2012 (Asgari, 2013). The former president, Mohammad Khatami, recently mentioned that “It is not acceptable to have atmospheric conditions that lead to a state of emergency and danger in Tehran and other large cities for two-thirds of a year ... the one person who can identify these most crucial issues and who can address them must step forward [as President]” (Khatami, 2013).

The main causes of pollution are population growth, migration to cities, the poor-quality fuels used by the mostly old cars on the road, industry, and most importantly, a lack of awareness and disregard of the environment. Economic sanctions have also made industry more polluting.

Air pollution is not the only problem. The Zayandeh-rood River in Isfahan dries up more frequently than in the past, as Foltz (2005) has described, and dryness has now penetrated areas once described as wet. For example Lake Urmia, situated in West Azerbaijan

province, is also now drying. This has sparked anti-government demonstrations and discussions at government and parliamentary level. Sandstorms are no longer limited to arid provinces, such as Sistan and Baluchestan, Kerman and Yazd in eastern and central Iran (Zakeri and Forghani, 2012; Omidvar and Khosravi, 2012). In 2012, sandstorms twice caused the closure of schools and offices in Tabriz in north-west Iran.

Government policies on dealing with these concerns have not always been systematic. Early Islamic governments in the 1980s paid considerable attention to rural development. They built roads to help rural people take their agricultural products to the cities. Ironically, this contributed to record rural–urban migration (Velayati, 2011).

Later, during Khatami's presidency, a vice-presidency for the environment was established, encouraging the growth and recognition of about 300 local environmental non-governmental organisations (NGOs). This increased the role of the media, academic journals and the press in discussing issues of sustainability. Khatami allocated a "Green Day" on which the use of private cars was discouraged, although in practice people did not welcome this idea (Foltz, 2005).

Policies in support of civil society, including the Environmental NGO Network, were however questioned during the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-13) in the name of economic development. Indeed, Parviz Dawoudi, a former vice-president, has stated that support for sustainability and environmental preservation constitutes "colonialism" (Godazgar, 2011). The policy change appears directly related to the high incidence of urban air pollution in Tehran in recent years.

Iran under the presidencies of Rafsanjani and Khatami had been praised for aiming to reduce the rate of population growth from 4% per annum in the 1980s to 1% per annum by 2013 (Foltz, 2005: 5). This policy has continued, and according to a World Bank report (2012), the population growth rate reached 1.11% in 2011. However, the former president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who called birth control "wrong and Western" in 2010, began to reverse the policy in favour of increasing population growth rate in 2012 (BBC Persian 2010, 2012b; *USA Today*, 2012). This new policy became even more inevitable when the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Ali Khamanei, publicly supported Ahmadinejad's view of population growth in October 2012 and declared that "One of the mistakes we made in the 1990s was population control. Government officials were wrong on this matter and I, too, played a part. May God and history forgive us" (Khamanei, 2012).

The Islamic government's disregard for the environment is also reflected in the state education system. Education in general, and religious education in particular, barely deal with these concerns. Of the 225 chapters written for Muslim pupils and 73 chapters produced for pupils belonging to the Christian, Judaic and Zoroastrian religious minorities in 2010-11, only three at the primary school level contain elements on the importance of the environment.

The environment or nature does not figure in the modern sense in the Islamic tradition. However, the Qur'an describes the Earth (*ardh*), its components and surroundings as signs of God (*ayat allah*) or as his gifts (*na'amat*).¹ Shi'ite jurists have interpreted these verses as addressing unbelievers (*koffar*), asking them why they do not believe in God even though they see these signs (e.g. Makarem-Shirazi, 2008: 153-8, 203-10; Tabatabaei, 2003: 91-139, 170-86). However, in the *ijtihad*,² these verses also have implications for contemporary understanding of the environment – *tanqih-i manat* in Shi'ite jurisprudence – and could mean that no one is allowed to change the environment (Earth) for the worse;

it is there for everyone of all generations and has to be valued and protected. Any damage to the environment may result in the peace of nature being disturbed. This would lead to “corruption on Earth” (*fasad fi al-ardh*), which is strictly forbidden under *Shari’a* law. This view has, however, never been adopted by Islamic or other religious education textbooks, the government, or Shi’ite jurists in Islamic seminaries.

Apart from a limited period during Khatami’s presidency, and to some extent during Rafsanjani’s presidency, post-revolutionary Iran – particularly under Ahmadinejad – has suffered from unfavourable policies for and attitudes towards the environment in general. Change in environmental practices will not happen without an increased awareness of the value of the environment among Iranian religio-political elites and people. As was mentioned above, Islam can be interpreted by the jurists in a way that it values the environment, at least instrumentally. If this interpretation of Islam is adopted by the Islamic government, it can also be reflected in the state-provided Islamic or religious education textbooks and curricula. This may lead to the contribution of Islamic education to the promotion of awareness and good practices towards the environment in most sectors of Iranian society. Aspects of these issues might be addressed during the presidency of the moderate conservative Rouhani in the years ahead.

Notes

1. “Who made the Earth a resting place for you and the heaven [atmosphere] a canopy...” (2: 22), or “He it is who created for you all that is in the Earth...” (2: 29) (author’s italics).
2. *Ijtihad*, in Islamic law or *Shari’a*, means an effort to understand or independently address an issue not explicitly covered in the Qur’an or Sunnah (the tradition of the Prophet). In Sunnism, the gate of *ijtihad* closed in the 9th century (3rd century of Islam), but it has remained open in Shi’ism.

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