

THE CONFRONTATION OF POP CULTURE AND REVOLUTION: IRAN CASE

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Abstract

The world community is undergoing a fundamental shift or transformation in social and cultural order. A transformation from modernism to post-modernism. This can be seen from the growing trend of pop culture: film, fashion, video, music, communication, technology, and others. Responding to this global transformation, Iran seems to be trying to ward off the pop culture attack. Iran saw that it could threaten the principles of its revolution. Iran's refusal received a negative response from Iranian society, especially young people. A group that can be said to have been born from the womb of post-modernism. Various criticisms and resistances were also shown to the Iranian revolutionaries who were very firm in upholding the principle of wilayat al-faqih. This research is focused on reading and examining the phenomenon of resistance of the Iranian youth to the government and religious authorities using a qualitative approach. Furthermore, the author also highlights the extent and how the Iranian Revolutionary Guards ward off the global pop culture epidemic, in order to secure the principles of their revolution. This research shows that the trend of pop culture is an alternative for resistance to the authorities of the Revolutionary Guards and strengthens the position of the reformist camp. In addition, the panic of the revolutionary guard to maintain the status quo has trapped them in repressive actions that are contrary to the spirit of the revolution itself.

Keyword: *Iran, Revolution, Pop Culture, Confrontation*

Abstrak

Masyarakat dunia sedang mengalami pergeseran atau transformasi mendasar dalam tatanan sosial dan budaya. Sebuah transformasi dari alam modernisme ke post-modernisme. Hal ini dapat dilihat dari trend *pop culture* yang berkembang: film, *fashion*, video, musik, komunikasi, teknologi, dan lain-lain. Menanggapi transformasi global ini, Iran terlihat berupaya menangkal serangan *pop culture* tersebut. Iran melihat hal itu dapat mengancam asas-asas revolusinya. Penolakan Iran mendapat respon negatif dari masyarakat Iran, terutama golongan muda. Golongan yang bisa dibilang lahir dari rahim post-modernisme. Ragam kritik dan perlawanan pun ditunjukkan kepada golongan revolusi Iran yang sangat teguh memegang prinsip *wilayat al-faqih*. Penelitian ini difokuskan untuk membaca dan menelaah fenomena resistensi generasi muda Iran terhadap pemerintah dan otoritas keagamaan dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif. Selanjutnya, penulis juga menyorot sejauh mana dan bagaimana garda revolusi Iran menangkal wabah *pop*

culture yang mendunia, demi mengamankan prinsip-prinsip revolusi mereka. Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa trend pop culture menjadi alternatif bagi perlawanan terhadap otoritas garda revolusi dan meneguhkan posisi kubu reformis. Selain itu, kepanikan garda revolusi mempertahankan status quo membuat mereka terjebak pada tindakan-tindakan represif yang bertolak belakang dengan spirit revolusi itu sendiri.

Kata kunci: *Iran, Revolusi, Budaya Pop, Konfrontasi*

Introduction

Iran's revolutionary spirit was confronted by the rapidly growing popular culture there. The revolution which initially promised a major transformation for the political, social and economic life of the Iranian people, after 4 decades tends to stagnate and limit itself to global developments. The exclusivity of the Islamic Republic of Iran has received criticism and resistance from the public, especially young people as a group that is responsive to cultural and political dynamics. The confrontation of these young people turned out to have implications for the principles of the revolution, and even transformed the social and cultural system of Iranian society. Young people who are not involved in the Iranian revolutionary movement have a strong ambition to inhibit the ideological expansion that tends to be repressive.¹

So far, research on the Iranian revolution has focused too much on Western hegemony over post-revolutionary Iran and Shia propaganda in the Middle East conflict. The issue of Iran's domestic dynamics is not as much attention to the two topics above. The trend of existing studies can confirm the lack of attention to the dimensions of popular culture and the millennial generation. First, there are many studies that pay attention to the issue of Western hegemony over Iran.² Mikail, for example, points out that the fluctuations in the Iranian government since the 1979 revolution are caused by Western hegemony on the one hand, and national interests on the other. Second, studies that pay attention to the dynamics of Shia both in the Middle East and global regional

¹ A. Kemal Riza, "Menakar Ideologi Republik Islam Iran: Kontestasi Antara Ideologi Dan Pragmatisme Dalam Politik," *Al-Daulah: Jurnal Hukum Dan Perundangan Islam* 7, No. 2 (2017): 279–301.

² Meirizon Alizar Ali, "Iran Revolution, Economic Struggle and Independence Under The Pressure," *Jurnal Hunafa: Studia Islamika*, Vol. 16, No. 1, p. 54-77, 2019; Kiki Mikail, "Iran di Tengah Hegemoni Barat (Studi Politik Luar Negeri Iran Pasca Revolusi 1979)," *Tamaddun: Jurnal Kebudayaan dan Sastra Islam*, 13 (2), 2013.

contexts. Ilahi points out that the historical emergence of Shi'ism was a political feud which later shifted to a theological feud.³

In particular, this research answers how popular culture is an implication of dialectical modernity with the spirit of the Iranian revolution which tends to be ideological and conservative.⁴ This discussion provides a critical-holistic view of the dynamics of the Islamic Republic of Iran, as well as negates a single and narrow perspective.

This research is based on an argument that the Iranian revolution, which at that time was able to give global influence, is today facing challenges and resistance from the people themselves. The status quo and anti-establishment shown by the Revolutionary Guards made people demand changes in all aspects. The confrontation of young people through pop culture, such as music, film, and media is a collective awareness of hegemony and creates a resistance to the revolutionary guard through a series of artistic and creative communication attributes.⁵

Discussion

Pop Culture and Revolution

Today, the world community is going through a friction and fundamental transformation in culture. It is obvious, because at the end of the 20th century, the life's paradigm went upside down, the value system, and the beliefs of the people are deprived of their cultural roots, and the society environment is changing rapidly into a new form. According to experts, thinkers and philosophers, the world community in entering the 21st century is undergoing a fundamental shift in the field of culture. Modernist thought, stream and culture are slowly falling apart. Along with this process of destruction of modernism, we, are entering a new era, postmodernism.⁶

³ Naldo Helmys, "Ekspor Revolusi Islam dan Identitas Republik Islam Iran," *Andalas Journal of International Studies*, Vol 5 No 2, 2016; *Mohammad Takdir Ilahi*, "Syiah: Antara Kontestasi Teologis dan Politik"; Muhammad Anis, "Pemikiran Politik Syiah: Perspektif Wilayah Al-Faqih", *Jurnal Maarif*, vol. 10 no. 2, 2015.

⁴ A. Kemal Riza, "Menakar Ideologi Republik Islam Iran: Kontestasi Antara Ideologi dan Pragmatisme Dalam Politik," *Al-Daulah: Jurnal Hukum Dan Perundangan Islam* 7, No. 2 (2017): 279–301.

⁵ Yusar, "Perlawanan Kaum Muda Terhadap Hegemoni Radikalisme Agama Dalam Bentuk-Bentuk Budaya Populer", *Jurnal Ilmu Sosial Mamangan*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2015.

⁶ Udjianto Pawitro, "Fenomena Post-Modernisme dalam Arsitektur abad-21", *Jurnal Itenas Rekayasa*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 2010, p. 41.

The cultural construction resulted by the improvisation of the modernism values transformation into postmodernism is addressed by middle-class Muslims by integrating Islam and modernity. Popular Islamic culture, according to Weintraub is the edge of modernism that further emphasizes the visual and physical aspect. While in the theological sense, popular Islam emphasizes the flexibility in understanding and actualizing the teachings of Islam, while keeping in the *shar'i* corridor.⁷

The popular Islamic outbreak is spreading holistically and massively worldwide. Countries with a majority of the Muslim population, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Tunis and others are deeply affected. We can see how the Muslim perceptions of Islamic values are transformed today. The way a flexible and inclusive Islam is highlighted, just like in fashion, da'wah communication pattern, media, and many others.

The revolution that burst out in 1979, was a part of the great history of human civilization. Many think that the Iranian revolution has a lot in common with the revolution occurred in Bolshevik, Russia 1917 and the French revolution in 1789. The difference was only in the dimensions of movement. The Iranian revolution was driven by a moral-spiritual ideology by carrying the *ulama'* as the *move motivator revolutionary*.⁸ Ayatollah Khomeini is the main actor, or the man behind the gun that moves people on overthrowing the Shah's regime.

Iran's revolution power shake shook so many countries, particularly the Middle East. At the same time, most of the countries in the Middle East are also under authoritarian rule and dictatorship. Riza Sihbudi explained the predominance of Iran's revolution, first, a transformation from kingdom into a republic. Second, a fundamental transformation in social, economic, and political order. Third, the revolution combined modern and traditional ways. And last, this revolution was done without any financial support from other countries.⁹ It is not an exaggeration to say Iran's Revolution as *one of the greatest populist explosions in human history*.¹⁰

⁷ Andrew N. Weintraub, "The Study of Islam and Popular Culture in Indonesia dan Malaysia", in Andrew N. Weintraub dkk, *Islam and Popular Culture in Indonesia and Malaysia* (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 3.

⁸ Noor Arif Maulana, *Revolusi Islam Iran dan Realisasi Wilayah-I Faqih*, (Yogyakarta: Juxtapose, 2003), p. xii.

⁹ Riza Sihbudi, *Biografi Politik Imam Khomeini*, (Jakarta: Gramedia, 1996), p. xi.

¹⁰ Richard Cottam, "Inside Revolutionary Iran", in K.K. Ramzani, (Blomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 3.

Ayatollah Khomeini considered as the most responsible person in defining Iran's constitution. *Wilayat-i faqih* as the national principle of the Islamic Republic of Iran initiated by Khomeini. *Wilayat-i faqih* is a concept of statehood that's never been applied to any country before. With this concept, Khomeini has put the social and political roots of the people on the religion mission.

At first, *wilayat-i faqih* was exaggerated as a national principle that is well established and brilliant. But, as the modernization waves are increasing, also with the global transformation, most Iranian begin to question this concept's reliability and validity. The internal clash between pro-revolution group and its opponent was inevitable. The revolution group that insisted to keep the values of *wilayat-i faqih* tend to be repressive and anarchist. For them, if Iran is not welcoming modernization, then Iran will not be able to compete on the international stage.

Most of the resistance movement shown by the counter-revolution through popular media such as, criticism through music, movies, hate speech on social media, and others. In addition, a lawsuit against the mandatory regulation of hijab was also demanded by Iranian women through a demonstration that occurred on late 2017 ago. Of these cases, the majority is commanded by Iran's younger generation. The point is, they want and demand equal rights and freedoms in the public space as perceived by young people in other parts of the world.

Resistance to The Revolution Status Quo

The rise of the Iranian youth resistance phenomenon towards the *wilayat-i faqih* governance can be analyzed through Asef Bayat's thesis titled Post-Islamism. In this thesis, Bayat referred Iran as a country that succeeded in sparking a revolution but without social movements. These conditions, according to Bayat, are in reverse with Egypt, which has a progressive social movement, but never had a revolution.¹¹ This Bayat thesis is of course written before the Arab Spring era, while Egypt hasn't reached the culmination of the struggle toward the revolution in 2011. Even though technically the revolution can take place in Egypt, it is essentially a power struggle through military coups that to this day still have not generating the essential change.¹²

¹¹ Asef Bayat, *Making Islam Democratic: Social Movement and The Post-Islamist Turn*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 9-10.

¹² <http://ismes.net>

The revolution without the dynamic social movements in Iran generated a top-down and minimal participatory space. A group of ruling elite that has access to power is deeply involved in the standardization of moral standards for all Iranian society. In short, the pattern of the *wilayat-i faqih* regime tends to be antithetical to all popular Western or the U.S. popular cultural products. This narrative has been openly propagandized since the era of Imam Khomeini, who called America “the Great Satan”. In fact, some groups of revolutionaries supporters are more interested in focusing on internal political reforms after the Shah's regime rather than continually blaming the United States.¹³

Some events that are shown the negative side of the revolutionary group happened lately, like a ban on Nikan Khosravi, a metal musician who are always expressing their social critics with the band, Confess. One of their songs which harshly criticize the government called “I’m Your God” has angered the front of the revolution defenders (conservative). The ban suddenly brings a negative reaction from various circles. Thus, Nikan Khosravi has to seek refuge and deported to Turkey.

Same thing happened to Marjane Satrapi, an artist and director whom expressed resistance towards the conservative group through a product of popular culture; film. His movie titled “Persepolis” which is adapted from his autobiographical novel describe describes the dictatorship and authoritarianism of the rulers in the early days of the revolution. The youth resistance missions against government pressure are clearly shown in every plot of the film. Iranian authorities view these artistic products as a danger to power, youth power and art are two crucial things in transforming society.¹⁴

Furthermore, about the attitude of Iranian women dress that has been set very tight, also began to get resistance. Since the end of 2017, Iranian women from various cities continue to protest voicing their freedom in dressing, especially the issue of hijab. Iranian women feel that the conservative group has been dictating and strictly regulating the way they dress. The wearing of the veil that is inconsistent with the will of the authorities will be detained by the moral police who are on patrol at all times. A one to two months imprisonment or fine are the consequences that

¹³ Ibid.,

¹⁴ Faisal Irfani, “40 Tahun Revolusi Iran 1979 Geliat Musik Bawah Tanah Iran 40 Tahun Pasca-Revolusi”, <https://tirto.id/geliat-musik-bawah-tanah-iran-40-tahun-pasca-revolusi-dhAU>

they must accept. Iranian women really are in a special category that continues to be subordinated.¹⁵

The climax of Iranian women's anger was provoked by the action of a young woman, Vida Movahed who took off her hijab during a rolling rally. Suddenly the action encouraged at least 28 other young women to do the same. For them, fighting to be allowed not to wear hijab is not a struggle for a piece of cloth, but a struggle for their dignity. Because for them, the hijab has become the most prominent symbol of discrimination. Masih Alinejad, a former Iranian journalist who migrated to the United States and campaigned for freedom of dress, told Iranian women that "If you cannot choose what to put on your head, they will not let you rule over what is in in your head." The important role of women in the revolutionary period did not make them escape from double standards and get a fair and equal position.¹⁶

The struggle against the hijab is closely linked to regain control over their own bodies, rather than questioning the validity of the hijab itself. It concerns the right of women to choose how to dress. Their views are not much different from the views of most Islamists around the world who, despite viewing the hijab as a religious obligation to every Muslim, the practice of hijab should not be forced by the state. Thus, the demand for freedom of dress focuses more on the struggle of Iranian women to get out of the inferior circle which is justified by naqli arguments.¹⁷

The conservative, exclusively conspicuous religious practice that grew in Iran ultimately had a significant impact from the postmodernism flow. The urban or the middle class has become the target of the stream. Meanwhile, Iran's religious climate maintains its idealism towards the values contained within the *wilayat-i faqih*. In fact, a variety of resistance either openly or underground from a massive counter-revolutionary group still takes place. In short, counter-revolution youths in Iran are subject to the dominant Western culture, even using these cultural codes to delegitimize power to their own political traditions.

Nikan Khosravi, Marjane Satrapi, Vida Movahed, and other Iranian youths are counter-revolutionary exponents who today is still continuing to fight through popular cultural products.

¹⁵ Mai Yamani, *Feminisme Dan Islam: Perspektif Hukum Dan Sastra* (Bandung: Nuansa Yayasan Cendekia, 2002).

¹⁶ Nasir Tamara, *Revolusi Iran* (Jakarta: Sinar Harapan, 1980).

¹⁷ M. Sadik, "Kedudukan Wanita di Iran: Mengungkap Pandangan Ulama Sy'iah", *Jurnal Hunafa*, Vol. 2 No. 2, 2005, p. 131-144.

They are a young generation who can be affected by popular culture that cannot be dammed in the middle of the era of information disclosure so rapidly control the world. No matter how hard the conservative group in Iran has restrictions and limitation, there will always be resistance.¹⁸ The harder the restrictions, the harder their resistance. Quoting Khosravi's phrase at metalinjection.com, "I'm from Middle East, God Damn it! I was born in a war zone!"¹⁹

Conclusion

In fact, the Iranian Revolution has really made a big difference for the world. The idealism of the state built by Iran has left many countries in awe, but there are also many who are opposed and fret about Iran's policy. The emergingness of the Iranian revolution is increasingly coming into conflict with its own people. The contradiction is an implication of post-modernism that demands social and cultural transformation of the citizens of the world. The emergence of post-Islamism in Iran is inspired by an educated and progressive middle-class generation post-revolution. An urban young generation movement to get out of the system of *wilayat-i faqih* which is considered repressive and authoritarian is categorized as an element of post-Islamism in Iran. Those who are always critical and demanding freedom which is more open since the beginning of the revolution are the forerunners of a group that today are called reformists, although the spectrum is still very wide.

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¹⁸ <http://ismes.net/2018/01/arab-spring-di-iran/>

¹⁹ <https://metalinjection.net/interviews/iranian-band-confess-breaks-silence-on-their-arrest-for-playing-metal-current-safety-metal-musicians-who-reached-out>

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