

Freedom and Development

Nassereddin Shah inaugurated the Dar-Alfonun, Iran's first technical school of higher education, on the fifth of Rabi al Awwal, 1268 AH (October 27, 1851). This event marked the birth of the idea of 'development' as we know it in Iran today. Our intense preoccupation with defining development, and how we might achieve it a full century and a half after the founding of the school, shows that we have not achieved development. We must try to find out why.

Here I do not wish to address the complex idea of cultural development. I hope that the vision and effort of our eminent thinkers will take the ambiguity out of the meaning of development. Instead I wish to put forth a general discussion of the cultural prerequisites of development, not the meaning of development itself. In my view, development is a form of desirable transformation in society. In its contemporary meaning, development is merely one form of transformation. Three points are essential to consider.

First, no transformation will be humane and productive unless people knowingly and willingly participate in the process of that transformation. Second, the active and willing presence of humans in the process of development requires that serious and established thinking be present in large parts of society. Third, sustainable and productive thinking in society has to be based, first and foremost, on freedom.

Thus we cannot expect any positive transformations anywhere unless the yearning for freedom is fulfilled. That is, the freedom to think and the security to express new thinking. The way I see it, development is a Western construct, and all those who seek development must become modern. This means that development as currently defined is a branch of the tree of modern civilization. If that civilization arrives, so will development.

Indeed, those who claim that adopting Western thinking and values is a necessary precondition of development are not misguided. Alongside Western thinking and wisdom, the Western temperament and ethic must also be adopted.

But I also believe that development, as conceived today, is only one form of transformation and evolution in human society, not the only and exclusive version of it. Certainly this transformation and evolution has

brought many benefits to humanity, but I believe that it has caused much harm as well. In looking at Western civilization and its idea of development, many realities have been overlooked and ignored with devastating consequences.

We who discuss development today cannot go back four hundred years to the time when the West started the journey in order to get to where it is today. Instead, the vast experience of Westerners is before us, and if we are thoughtful; we must choose our future path on the basis of this experience. This means that we must see the strengths and shortcomings of the Western experience to arrive at a better and more desirable choice.

Negating the exclusivity of progress in its current form, which has been called development, is not to deny the realities of modern civilization, and one can say with certainty that in any society that wants to advance, nothing instrumental will happen unless its people incorporate Western civilization's achievements, instead of trying to circumvent them.

This requires that we become familiar with Western civilization, to be in touch with its spirit, which is modernity. Those who are not familiar with this spirit will never be able to effect positive change in their lives. Thus the main criterion of transformation is incorporating Western civilization into one's own thinking, and the goal of this familiarity with the West understands the main tenets of modernity, which is hidden behind many appearances.

Sadly, nations such as we are still devoid of such understanding. As Abdulhadi Haeri has put it, we have yet to become familiar with the two countenances of Western civilization. Our encounter with the West has been mostly superficial. We have vacillated between the equally harmful extremes of either being taken in or entranced by the West, or loathing and rejecting it.

In my view the discussion of development requires a fundamental look at what Western civilization is and how we are related to it. If this debate begins in earnest, the debate on development will advance more rapidly and with greater certainty.

Why is it that a century and half after the creation of Dar-Alfonun, the mother of modern scientific schooling in Iran, we are still mired in the same question of what development is and why we have not achieved it?

The attempt to answer this important question must begin by relating another historical anecdote. On Friday, the seventeenth of Rabi al Awwal, 1268 AH (November 9, 1851), a mere twelve days after Dar-Alfonun was inaugurated, Nassereddin Shah had Amirkabir– the very man by whose vision and wisdom that school was conceived–put to death in the Feen bathhouse in the city of Kashan. In my view, the secret of our malaise lies therein.

Centuries of our history have been governed not by the effort and thoughtfulness of the people of this

land, but by autocratic and whimsical rulers, and because of the existence of authoritarianism and its central role in our society, our people have not had the opportunity to be active in their own society.

Freedom of thought, which is the highest emblem of being and the key condition of our presence on the stage of destiny, as well as the main impetus for growth and dynamism in life, has not been respected. In other words, the secret of our greatest historical problems, to borrow from Farabi, has been the dominance of deceit and craftiness on our destiny, a deceit that was already deeply rooted before the advent of Islam.

Rampant corruption in pre-Islamic, Sasanid Iran had brought the country to the brink of explosion. With the coming of Islam, the foundations of, deceit began to shake, but a mere forty years after the coming of Islam, in the period known as the Rashed Caliphate, authoritarianism of a more dangerous form came to govern the destiny of the Islamic community, for this time authoritarianism and tyranny adopted the guise of Islamic legitimacy.

As Islamic civilization came to replace Sasanid Persian civilization or other civilizations, it was expected that the political manifestations of those civilizations would also be replaced. Especially at the beginning of Islamic civilization, there was much hope in the new political environment. The legitimacy of concepts such as collective decision making, reconciliation, and the supremacy of the public interest was upheld by the behavior of the prophet himself and to some extent by the Caliphs who succeeded him, especially by Imam 'Ali.

A new horizon dawned over people. Had it been allowed to continue, it could have spurred serious thinking, and the Islamic community would have undoubtedly had a different destiny. But sadly, the dark shadow of tyranny began to dominate Muslims. Even more sadly, effort was put into passing this tyranny off as the pillar of the new way of life. The autocratic form of policy grew into a legacy, a relic that led to the decline and degradation of the civilization.

In such an atmosphere, reflection about subjects' political destiny was stifled, and the only thinker who managed to dedicate deep thought to philosophy, politics, and civic discourse was Farabi, the founder of Islamic philosophy, with whom the idea begins and terminates at the same time. After him, thought left the sphere of secular affairs, and because of the dominance of despotism and its consequences, deep investigation became focused strictly on esoteric and metaphysical phenomena, and we see that despite the advancement of knowledge about the supernatural, philosophical thinking on politics, society, and different social spheres became almost entirely dormant.

Alongside metaphysical philosophy, another form of thinking, namely Sufism and mysticism, gained currency, especially among the elite. And although Sufism can be viewed in some instances as a response and complaint to unpleasant and hapless circumstances, it was a wrong and ill-fated response. Instead of challenging the bitterness of extant political reality and looking for a way of

changing that reality through offering alternative realities and visions, Sufism, at least its extreme versions, resisted' the dominant political order by negating the relevance of politics and political' thought altogether.

As Farabi has said, many from this camp put forth the proposition that real understanding and salvation could only come from negating all that pertains to this world, including civil society. This means that by rejecting and staying away from politics, they left society in the bloodstained hands of autocrats. Instead of resisting injustice, they closed their eyes, even though they did not cooperate with oppressors.

At the same time, a sort of insularity and parochialism began to dominate Muslims, and this marginalized even Islamic philosophy, as esoteric and metaphysical as it was. What gained prominence as political thought was a theoretical–practical system, apparently the creation of the famed Shafi'ite theologian of the Abbasid period and the chief magistrate of Baghdad, Abolhassan al–Mawardy, who wrote the important book, *Al–Ahkam al–Soltaniyyah–Commandments of Kingship*.

The Hanbalid interpretation of al–Mawardy was later put forward in a book with the same title by Abu 'Ali al–Farra. These two books implicitly legitimized the extent of Abbasid authoritarianism and also proposed a system of laws based on Islamic thought for the governance of Muslim society, a society whose main pillar of organization was Islamic jurisprudence.

Yet religious law itself is dependent on thought, and does not in and of itself give form and function to thoughts. Where there is rational thinking in society, religious law will be vibrant, instrumental; and adaptive. Through rational thinking a juriconsult can develop a system of law which is adaptive, appropriate, and effective. Instead, the religious law that was supposed to be based on rational thought became the basis of its form and function.

Concurrently, a different form of political thought gained currency, which was in essence the revival of a previously examined pre–Islamic paradigm. Important thinkers such as Abolhassan 'Ameri and Moskuya helped bring back the preIslamic tradition of authoritarianism from ancient Persia. The work of Nezam al–Mulk and al–Ghazali (if the latter part of *Nasihah al–Moluk* could authentically be attributed to him) further solidified this thinking, turning it into one of the main obstacles of serious thought for Muslims.

This was a very unfortunate development, but even sadder was the fact that Muslims took their hapless fate as manifest destiny, as the ineluctable work of God and nature, and after this, people could not think beyond authoritarianism in the sphere of politics. People either submitted to this fate, or even if they thought of combating the extant authoritarianism, they could not find a mode of resistance other than force and the sword.

Confrontations in the world of ideas, instead of focusing on the roots of the authoritarianism, became enmeshed in factional squabbles. If a group found that the rulers protected their factional interests, they cooperated with them, and if their own interests were threatened, they fought with the rulers. The last

example of this was the symbiosis of senior Shiite clergy with the Safavid autocratic Shiite despots, as the former justified the latter's rule: Far less common in the history of our political thought is questioning the very nature of authoritarianism and searching for ways to overcome it.

From this general historical discussion I will now try to shed light on the problem of our own underdevelopment and why a century and half after the founding of the Dar–Alfonun, we are still on the first step. Again, transformation and progress require thought, and thought only flourishes in an atmosphere of freedom. But our history has not allowed human character to grow and to be appreciated, and thus the basic human yearning for thinking and freedom has been unattended at best and negated at worst.

In the past two hundred years we have encountered an additional problem, namely authoritarianism and dictatorship of a more dangerous and destructive character that took over our society. In this period, the hideous phenomenon of colonialism became widespread in the world, afflicting us with a colonialism dependent dictatorship. Dictatorship no longer appeared as one powerful tribe or nation dominating us, but came in the form of an internal authoritarianism, which was dependent on protecting the interests of a global colonist. Foreign colonist powers wanted to rob all our material and spiritual resources, propping up dictatorships as tame and complacent tools for the realization of their goals.

Unfortunately, because of what *has* happened to us, our temperament has not been trained to be receptive to freedom such that in the past half–century, every time the ground has been ripe for us to experience freedom, we have squandered the opportunity.

In the aftermath of August 25, 1941, when an atmosphere of relative freedom came about in Iran, social movements became confused and incapacitated, and opportunists tried to use this freedom to monopolize power. Foreign hands conspired to disallow the natural order of freedom from taking hold in society. This state of chaos, propelled by the treachery of some camps and the conspiracy of foreigners, created a situation that eventually led to the black *coup d'état* of 1953. Finally, the Islamic revolution came to our rescue, showing us the beautiful face of freedom once more.

Today, whatever supporters and critics think of this revolution, they should concede by virtue of fairness that Iran's Islamic revolution possesses two distinct characteristics. First, while in countries such as ours, anti–colonial struggles have often taken a militaristic form, in our case the authoritarianism that was supported by imperialism was not overthrown by the force of guns, but by the presence of the masses and the power of discourse and enlightenment.

And second, the revolution began its life with freedom, not suppression, so much so that in the first years after its victory, the revolution was even on the verge of descending into anarchy. But as despotism had become second nature to us through our dark past, we were unable to benefit from this freedom properly.

Undoubtedly, the foreign hand that over the past two centuries had overtly and covertly meddled in our internal affairs, did not sit idly by, and through conspiracy and its invisible agents, prevented us from becoming acquainted with freedom in a natural way, to learn its advantages, and to grapple with its challenges.

In our universities there were groups who took up armed struggle to overthrow the government. A destructive atmosphere took hold, making all parties suspicious of all others. It is natural that the revolution's leaders could not sit idly by lest the bitter experience of 1953 repeat itself. Thus, in running the country, extreme measures had to be taken to prevent a deep descent into anarchy.

At the same time, the extenuating circumstances after the revolution gave some the excuse to suppress freedom as the perceived source of dislocation in society, instead of understanding the historical obstacles to freedom.

They covered their closed-minded ways under the guise of religion, when in fact their religion was nothing but a series of mental and emotional habits, habits that would be questioned in an atmosphere of freedom where ideas encountered one another freely. Thus there were many who, instead of scrutinizing the roots and causes that led freedom to descend into anarchy and destruction, began to oppose freedom. Willingly or not, they saw religious and national interest as being opposed to freedom.

Destroying the atmosphere of peace in the name of freedom, and destroying freedom in the name of religion and national interest, represent two sides of the same coin, both symptomatic of the historical ailment that we suffer from due to centuries of despotic rule which has shaped our temperament and made it irreconcilable with freedom. In scrutinizing the source of our problems, we cannot blame solely the government.

Before that, we ourselves must learn how we can come to deserve freedom and rights. Today in universities, in our schools, and at home, we are incapable of exercising tolerance toward one another. Let us not doubt that unless we undergo an inner transformation, we cannot expect external forces to solve our problems for us. We have to understand that the experience of freedom does not come easily and that this issue has two fundamental tenets.

First, the effects of despotism have become second nature to us. We are all individually dictator-like in our own ways, and this unfortunate condition is evident in all strata and spheres of our society. And second, we want to experience freedom in a world that is dominated by grandiose powers who think only of their, own interests, interests that they view as being in conflict with the freedom of other countries, as they focus their immense political, military, informational, and economic power on protecting their interests. If the experience of freedom has encountered difficulties in countries such as ours, we should not disregard the conspiracy of outsiders.

Here we face a paradox. On the one hand, growth and progress are not possible without freedom, and

on the other hand, freedom will not materialize and last unless society is mature and progressive. What is to be done?

I believe that if we are fair and profound in our thinking, we will reach the conclusion that freedom has priority over growth. Of course, the road to freedom and liberty is replete with danger and difficulty. Again, what I mean by freedom is the freedom to think and the security to express new thinking, and instituting a protective system for the security of the free-spirited and of thinkers.

More important, I think, it is practically impossible to suppress thought, but if we live in an atmosphere of freedom, thought appears in a balanced and moderate way, and rationality becomes dominant, as the power to choose and the means of choice and progress become available to the people. But if freedom is absent, thoughts that will inevitably appear in the minds of thinkers will be driven underground, and may appear in violent and explosive form through the deeds of those who do not believe in thoughtful, peaceful discourse. It is necessary to explore the relationship between freedom and national security and the positive effect of the former on the latter, and the destructive effect of the lack of freedom on social stability.

The desired outcome is that the elite and thinkers reach a consensus that in today's world we must not search for a single Procrustean model of freedom for all nations. While the essence of freedom is the same, on the basis of their different social conditions and historical experiences, different nations may experience it in different ways, and choose different ways and priorities regarding the demands of freedom.

Second, let us try to create the proper atmosphere so that we can extend tolerance to one another more easily and share each other's view of freedom, share our minimal expectations and priorities, and base this on the rule of law, ensuring the survival and protection of freedom. It is in such an atmosphere that our progress will be accelerated, guaranteeing a brighter future for our people.

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