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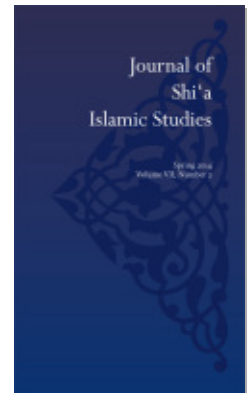
*Shi'ism and the Democratisation Process in Iran: With a  
focus on Wilayat al-Faqih by Ibrahim Moussawi (review)*

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*Shi'ism and the Democratisation Process in Iran: With a focus on Wilayat al-Faqih* by Ibrahim Moussawi, 2011. London: Saqi Books, 209 pp., £35.00. ISBN: 978-0-86356-470-3 (hbk).

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*Shi'ism and the Democratisation Process in Iran* by Ibrahim Moussawi analyses *wilayat al-faqih*, or rule of the jurisprudent, and its application in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The implementation of *wilayat al-faqih* in Iran by Imam Khomeini in 1979 came with a great deal of scrutiny and questions about Islam's compatibility with democracy. This publication aims to answer those questions while simultaneously challenging the idea that democracy is a strictly Western concept. However, Moussawi does not focus solely on the introduction of *wilayat al-faqih* in 1979 as he also provides a contemporary context of *wilayat al-faqih* by addressing the events that transpired in the aftermath of the 2009 presidential elections in Iran. By focusing on the Islamic Republic of Iran, Moussawi is able to display the way in which Iran's government fulfils Imam Khomeini's vision of *wilayat al-faqih*. In this book, Moussawi aims to answer some of the questions that *wilayat al-faqih* raises, such as its susceptibility to tyranny and absolute rule. In addition, he employs criticism from opponents of *wilayat al-faqih* and responds to their criticism by citing the works of Imam Khomeini and using the current government in Iran as a reference point.

In the introduction, Moussawi states that his goal is to challenge the idea that *wilayat al-faqih* is inclined to tyranny, making it impossible to fit together with democracy (14). Moussawi wants to test the idea that democracy is something that is imposed on nations by way of force, usually from Western hegemonic powers, as seen in Iraq and Afghanistan. Moussawi begins by introducing the reader to the principles of Shi'ism and *wilayat al-faqih*. He then uses principles such as *shura* to demonstrate the democratic nature of *wilayat al-faqih*. The topic of Iran's formal name as a republic is also discussed within the larger context of Islamism and

republicanism. Moussawi concludes his work by looking at the challenges that *wilayat al-faqih* faces in modern times.

In order to understand *wilayat al-faqih*, one must first understand the basic principles of Shi'ism, which Moussawi outlines in the first two chapters, both in isolation and in relation to *wilayat al-faqih*, respectively. Moussawi traces Shi'ism's evolution from its origins to the current post-occultation (*ghaybah*) period. He divides the history of Shi'ism into three phases: (1) before the martyrdom of Imam Husayn, (2) the pre-Occultation (*ghaybah*) period, and (3) the post-*ghaybah* period. In the pre-occultation (*ghaybah*) period, Moussawi says that 'a policy of political quietism was instituted,' beginning with the fourth Imam, Zayn al-'Abidin and continued by the fifth, sixth, and eighth Imams in the face of Umayyad and 'Abbasid repression (25). However, since the Safavid era, there has been a growing emphasis on politics in Shi'ism. The rise of the ulema during this period and during the time of Qajar rule elevated the status of *ijtihad*, expanding the authority of the Hidden Imam. He points out that all governments are deemed illegitimate in the Hidden Imam's absence; however, *wilayat al-faqih* is the exception to this rule because it is the only form of government that can exist in his absence. In fact, part of *wilayat al-faqih*'s legitimacy comes from the fact that it operates on behalf of the Hidden Imam. Moussawi also briefly mentions that there is not a unanimous agreement among the ulema in regards to *wilayat al-faqih*, although more attention could have been given to this subject in order to shed light on the difference of opinions surrounding political *wilayat al-faqih*.

The most significant feature of *wilayat al-faqih*'s ability to uphold democracy in the Islamic Republic is *shura*, which the author describes in great detail in Chapter 3. Despite contemporary debates on the compatibility of *shura* and democracy, Moussawi declares that equating democracy with *shura* is a mistake. *Shura* is not strictly democracy, but rather it is a form of democracy that is based on divine laws; therefore, it is prescribed from God's injunctions. Moussawi explicitly declares that *shura* and democracy are not one in the same, mainly because *shura* insists on the *hakimiyyah* of God, whereas democracy has no religious foundation. Not only does the fact that *shura* was practiced during the time of the Prophet provide it with religious legitimacy but so too do the Qur'anic verses in support of it, which are addressed. Despite what Moussawi considers to be the 'Qur'anic legislation of *shura*' (81), unanimity

does not exist among the Shi'a community on *shura*. Moussawi is not afraid to include the viewpoints of *shura*'s opponents, such as Ayatollah Mahmud al-Hashimi, who argues that *shura* is an innovation from the West bearing no trace in Islam (87). Throughout this chapter Moussawi is persistent in making sure that *shura* is not confused with democracy, making sure to emphasize the religious legitimacy behind *shura*.

In Chapter 4, Moussawi outlines *wilayat al-faqih*'s application of four primary Islamic principles: *shura*, *ummah*, *maslahah*, and *ikhtilaf*. Moussawi examines how each of these principles upholds the order of *wilayat al-faqih* in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Moussawi uses the examples of *shura* and *ummah* to show how these two Islamic concepts give *wilayat al-faqih* its democratic qualities. *Shura* councils such as the Expediency Council and the Council of Guardians represent the power given to *shura* in upholding the Islamic requirements of *wilayat al-faqih*. The second principle, *ummah*, is best implemented in Iran through the election of governmental positions such as president by the populace and the position of *wali al-faqih* by the Council of Experts. Moussawi notes that even the establishment of an Islamic government in Iran in 1979 is an example of the will of the *ummah*. *Ikhtilaf* (plurality) is also emphasized in *wilayat al-faqih* because plurality is inevitable among the *ummah*. Imam Khomeini was in favour of plurality because of its ability to bring the *ummah* together. However, this type of plurality refers only to diversity among the Shi'a community, but what about the non-Shi'a communities? Moussawi does not mention the role of religious minorities in *wilayat al-faqih* or their current status in the Islamic Republic of Iran, a topic that I believe deserves mentioning, especially in regards to the numerous minorities that exist in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Chapter 5 addresses the question of whether or not *wilayat al-faqih* leads to tyranny. Moussawi argues that contrary to belief, *wilayat al-faqih* does not lead to tyranny. The system of checks and balances within the Islamic Republic of Iran prevent the *faqih* from gaining too much power. In order to strengthen his argument, Moussawi provides counter-arguments from critics, such as those from Ra'id Qasim, an Islamic scholar, that claim that the *wali al-faqih* has absolute power, placing him above the constitution and on equal footing with the Hidden Imam. Moussawi argues against Qasim by pointing out that there are many 'safety valves' in place to keep the *wali al-faqih* in line. These include the Council of Experts, the constitution, and the scrutiny that the *wali al-faqih* is under

from the *mujtahidin* community. The *wali al-faqih* is subject to routine reviews from the Council of Experts, who decide whether or not the *wali al-faqih* is suitable to hold his post. However, it is the constitution that places the largest parameter on the *wali al-faqih*. He also argues that this role cannot be an example of absolute power because the *wali al-faqih* must answer to both God as well as the populace. In this chapter, only Imam Khomeini comes up as the prime example of a *wali al-faqih*; however, considering that Ayatollah Khamene'i has served as a *wali al-faqih* since 1989, I believe that more attention could have been devoted to his time in this role.

In Chapter 6, Moussawi aims to show how *wilayat al-faqih* is able to reconcile Islamism with republicanism, as this issue is a major point of interest because of Iran's official title as an 'Islamic Republic'. Moussawi calls into play counter-arguments from Iranian political analyst Muhammad Husayn Hafizian who argues that republicanism and Islamism are incompatible. In contrast, Moussawi analyzes republicanism to show that *wilayat al-faqih* meets all of the requirements required of a republic. These requirements include a government elected by the populace, a presidency with set term limits, and a ruler that acts as a legal and political ruler. By meeting these standards, Moussawi claims that the Islamic Republic of Iran rightly qualifies as a republic; however, it is also Islamic because its culture, politics, and military law are based on Islamic principles. Moussawi concludes this chapter by giving his readers some food for thought by stating that although he views republicanism and Islamism as complementary in the Iranian Islamic system, this opinion ultimately relies on one's understanding and definition of these concepts (161).

The book concludes by looking at the status of *wilayat al-faqih* in recent times, with President Khatami's presidency in Chapter 7, and the 2009 election of President Ahmadinejad and the reaction that followed from the Iranian people in the postscript. Moussawi moves away from the initial implementation of *wilayat al-faqih* in 1979 to provide the reader with an idea of how this system is holding up today. Since its implementation in Iran over thirty years ago, *wilayat al-faqih* has undergone a great deal of criticism and revision. However, the democratic space that is open in Iran as a result of *wilayat al-faqih* allows for new dialogue to emerge, such as the dialogue on women's rights. Moussawi argues that an example of *wilayat al-faqih*'s progressive nature is the legitimization of the 'right

of women to lead prayer' (174) such as in Ayatollah Sane'i's seminary in Qom which has earned him the title of the 'mufti of women.' This progressive nature has also allowed for a wide-range of new discourses to emerge. President Khatami (1997-2005) and the members of the reform movement were able to use this discourse to call for openness (*intifāh*) between Iran and the outside world. Despite Khatami's utilization of the new discourse, Moussawi is critical of his calls for reforms claiming that he was unable to follow through on many of his claims (181). Moussawi credits Khatami's failure to work within the confines of *wilayat al-faqih* to be the source of the Iranian people's disappointment with him. Although Moussawi did tie in Khatami's presidency with the book's argument, he also used this as a chance to issue his own grievances against Khatami.

How well is Imam Khomeini's vision of *wilayat al-faqih* holding up today? Moussawi aims to answer this question by including the 2009 *marwje-sabz*, or 'green wave' movement, in the postscript. The events following the 2009 presidential election of incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad over opponent Mir Hossein Mousavi were heavily scrutinized by the media. Many viewed the 'green wave' and the support of Mousavi as a threat to *wilayat al-faqih*; however, Moussawi refutes this argument. To the contrary, he states that Mousavi and his supporters were not aiming to undermine the system and that Mousavi even said that he needed to work within the confines of the Islamic Republic to be influential. Even though many of the reformists' demands were not met, Moussawi argues that many reforms still took place under Ahmadinejad's approval such as the increased participation of women in government (197). Moussawi credits these changes to the 'broadening of the boundaries of acceptable discourse' in Iran (198). As this space grows, so too will demands for change and democratic reforms.

Moussawi writes in a way that is easy for someone with a lack of expertise in Shi'ism to comprehend. Although a basic understanding of Shi'ism and *wilayat al-faqih* are helpful in understanding some of the concepts and terms that he mentions, it is not required in order to understand the subject matter. Moussawi includes counter-arguments from opponents of *wilayat al-faqih*, which makes the book a valuable resource to both critics and supporters of *wilayat al-faqih*. I would recommend this book to anyone interested in *wilayat al-faqih*, the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, or anyone looking to gain a better understanding of the intersection between religion and politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran.