



# Introduction: Modernity and the Emergence of Popular Politics in Iranian Kurdistan (Rojhelat)

The Kurdish Republic, which was established on 22 January 1946, was a turning point in the modern history of the Kurds in Rojhelat. Although short-lived, it had far-reaching implications for the development a democratic political culture and the national identity it nurtured in Rojhelat and other parts of the Kurdish territory in the Middle East. The Kurdish Republic marked the advent of popular politics in the Iranian Kurdistan. The emergence of the institutions of political representation, political parties, trade unions, civil defence organisations, women and youth organisations, and numerous other civic bodies signified not only the existence of a vibrant civil society and an active public sphere but also the entry of the people into the Kurdish political field (Vali 2011). The people were the ‘subject’ of popular politics in Kurdistan, which was expressed in terms of the articulation of popular demands for national rights and civil and democratic liberties in an expanding political field mainly defined by resistance to sovereign domination. The strategies of sovereign domination in Kurdistan presupposed the denial of Kurdish national identity and the suppression of its discursive representation, which, in effect, meant that Kurdish ethnicity and language were objects of sovereign violence, embedded in the founding act of the state and codified in its constitution—the ‘performative’ and ‘interpretative’ violence of the state respectively, to use Derrida’s analytics of sovereign violence (Derrida 1992). The violence against the Kurdish community was sanctioned by law, indicating that the

Kurds existed outside the law, consigned to a murky zone of ‘juridical indistinction’ where sovereign power had a profoundly violent profile (Agamben 2005).

The Kurdish community under Pahlavi absolutism was the site of the formation of Kurdish national identity, which flourished under Kurdish rule in the Republic. The prominence of Kurdish ethnicity and language in the construction and representation of Kurdish identity in popular discourse meant that the boundaries of the people and the nation overlapped significantly. They were indeed largely coterminous, often used interchangeably in popular discourse in the nascent public sphere and in the community at large. In practice this unity of the people-nation was expressed clearly by the nationalist character of popular politics in Kurdistan during 1941–1946. Throughout this period the constituent elements of Kurdish identity, primarily Kurdish ethnicity and language, defined the boundaries of a political field in which the encounter with sovereign power took place. The fall of the Republic did not mean the disappearance of the Kurdish people from the political field. Nor did the politics of restoration of sovereign domination and the new waves of concentrated violence and repression mean the end of popular politics in Kurdistan. On the contrary, the concept of the people was reconstituted in the public discourse in a distinctly nationalist mould, denoting the subject of national resistance to sovereign domination.

The identity of the people/nation was reaffirmed by its persistent quest for the recognition of its civic and democratic rights under the ‘redeployed absolutism’ presided over by the second Pahlavi monarch in the 1950s. The following three decades, from the 1953 coup to the revolutionary rupture of 1978–1979, saw a decline in and suppression of popular politics in Iran in general and Kurdistan in particular. Aside from the brief period preceding the introduction of the royal reforms, the so-called White Revolution, in 1962, there was hardly any manifestation of popular democratic politics in Iran. It was only in the revolutionary rupture and the resumption of popular protests nationwide that the people resurfaced in the national political field, asserting themselves as bearers of rights, demanding recognition and justice. The events leading to the revolution in 1979 witnessed the re-emergence of the people as the subject of popular democratic politics. In Kurdistan too the resurgence of the people and the assertion of its pivotal role in the political field followed the same general pattern as the rest of the country, with some notable exceptions related to the historical specificity of Kurdish national identity. Here the boundaries

of the political field were defined by Kurdish ethnicity and language, the objects of sovereign suppression and denial, and popular democratic opposition to sovereign power was articulated in the popular demand for the recognition of Kurdish national identity. I shall return to this point later in this study.

This brief account entails basic elements for the theoretical construction of the concept of the people/nation as the subject of popular politics in Kurdistan. The concept of the people is a political construct. It is constructed by the discourses and practices which define the terms and conditions of popular democratic opposition/resistance to sovereign power (Laclau 2007; Ranciere 1999). The people is the subject of popular democratic politics only in so far as it is the object of sovereign domination. It therefore owes its existence as the subject of popular politics to its opposition to sovereign power. The people as such is a counter-power, it is the other of sovereign, the constituent power, to use Negri's concept (Negri 1999; Vali 2017). The argument that the people is a product of popular democratic politics is also at the same time the affirmation of its modernity, its modern identity as a political force, internally differentiated by social and economic relations but politically united by its opposition to sovereign power. This historical connection with modernity also reveals the identity of the sovereign power in opposition to which the identity of the people is defined. The sovereign in question, the object of the people's opposition and resistance, is the juridical power historically associated with the constitution of the nation-state in Iran. In this sense therefore the emergence and the modality of the development of the people in Kurdistan were defined by the turbulent relationship between the Kurdish community and the Iranian nation-state after 1905, represented in terms of sovereign domination and Kurdish resistance. This relationship was articulated in the historical formation of modernity in Iran in its official guise: the discourse and practice of authoritarian modernisation (Vali 1998).

The emergence of the people and the formation of popular democratic politics in Iranian Kurdistan were defined by the historical specificity of the Kurdish community, and its interrelationship with the wider society in Iran. In this respect the decisive factor, the turning point in the relationship, was the advent of modernity in Iran, which culminated in the constitutional revolution, and after a lull lasting two decades re-emerged in the form of authoritarian modernisation carried out by Pahlavi absolutism. The historical specificity of Kurdish society, so deeply rooted in its class structure, was also influenced in no small measure by its complex

relationship with the Iranian state. The relations of domination affected the wider political and cultural structures of Kurdish society far beyond the immediate domain of class relations, but above all they defined the boundaries of the political field and the configuration of the political forces and relations within them. The relations of domination as such always reflected the changing relationship of sovereign power with the Kurdish community at large. Modern Kurdish history in Iran bears witness to this argument (Vali 2011).

In the constitutional era Kurdish society was marked by the predominance of rural over urban life and a near to total absence of popular forces in the political and cultural fields. The latter was dominated by the land-owning class, which, in collaboration with an underdeveloped and dependent mercantile bourgeoisie, defined and controlled the form and character of Kurdish participation in the new popular political processes initiated by the constitutional movement. The active participation of the bulk of the Kurdish tribal lords in the opposition to the constitutional movement and then in the failed attempts to restore Qajar despotism were more than conservative measures to safeguard their power and privilege in Kurdistan. It also signified the absence in the social structure of the Kurdish community of active forces to generate and engage in popular politics. In so far as the advent of popular politics and the active participation of ‘the people’ is concerned, Kurdistan lagged behind central Persian and Azeri provinces by a few decades. In fact, it was not until the fall of Reza Shah’s rule in 1941 that the people entered the political field in the Kurdish community and popular political process began appearing in main Kurdish urban centres. This process reached its culmination in the political and cultural conditions leading to the formation of the *Komalay Jiyanaaway Kurdistan* (Society for the Revival of Kurdistan) in 1942 and then the Republic in 1946.

That in the constitutional era Kurdistan lagged behind more developed regions of Iran in political and cultural terms signified more than just a historical hiatus, a gap created by the specific articulation of the sovereign power and the landlords’ regime in the region. The absence of the political and discursive conditions of the formation of popular politics also signified a rupture in the historical process of the formation of modernity in Kurdistan, setting it apart from the rest of the country in terms of its character and outcome. The historical character of modernity in Kurdistan, its process and outcome, I have argued elsewhere in my writings, was fundamentally different (Vali 1998). This was not due to its belated beginnings alone, but also, and more importantly, due to the specific process of the

formation and consolidation of the nation-state and national identity in Iran and its political and cultural effects on the Kurdish community. The advent of modernity in Kurdistan, in so far as it amounted to the use of reason in the social, economic, political and cultural organisation of the Kurdish community, coincided with the suppression of Kurdish identity and its forced expulsion from the discursive and political spheres. In this sense, therefore, modernity became publically identified with sovereign power and with a set of discourses and practices intended to secure sovereign domination over the Kurdish community, albeit in a more rational, calculated and organised manner.

This public perception of modernity, the identification of modernity with the forms of instrumental rationality associated with the authoritarian modernisation pursued by the absolutist state during 1926–1941, was common throughout Iran. In Kurdistan, however, there was a fundamental difference from the general public perception prevailing in Iran. Here, in order to ensure sovereign domination, the articulation of sovereign violence and forms of modern institutional rationality entailed in the discourse and practice of modernisation required the suppression of Kurdish identity. In fact, the systematic suppression of Kurdish identity was the dialectical nexus of the articulation of sovereign power and the landlords' regime in Kurdistan. It was, in other words, the intersection of the political-military-security relations of Pahlavi absolutism and large landed property and the associated rental relations of exploitation that ensured sovereign domination. The suppression of Kurdish identity was a strategic objective of the politics of authoritarian modernisation in Kurdistan in so far as it forged a direct link between modernity/modernisation and sovereign domination over the Kurdish community. This was the case at least after 1935, when the systematic suppression of Kurdish ethnicity and language was implemented to ensure the effective working of the policies of authoritarian modernisation and absolutist domination.

The suppression of Kurdish identity was the dialectical nexus of relations of domination and subordination which was presupposed and reproduced by the politics of authoritarian modernisation in Kurdistan. It was as such both a condition of existence and support of the politics of authoritarian modernisation pursued by Pahlavi absolutism. It informed the process and outcome of the politics of modernisation by defining the means and mechanism of sovereign domination in Kurdistan, including and especially the processes and practices deployed to impose sovereign Iranian/Persian identity on the Kurdish community. This specific feature of

sovereign domination in Kurdistan, which in effect set it apart from the rest of the country, had a decisive impact on the formation and development of popular politics, its subject and its locus.

In historical terms the advent of popular resistance to sovereign domination, reproduced largely by the discourse and practice of authoritarian modernisation carried out by the absolutist state, was also at the same time the genesis of the people as the subject of popular politics in Kurdistan. This was also true of the formation of the new Kurdish intelligentsia, which, unlike the traditional Kurdish intelligentsia, hailed from the ranks of the urban middle classes and was largely a product of universal education and the bureaucratic and military processes and practices associated with the modern centralised state and authoritarian modernisation. In this sense, therefore, both the people and the intelligentsia were products of specific popular political-cultural demands arising primarily from the suppression of Kurdish identity, more specifically the suppression of Kurdish ethnicity and language. Popular demands for the recognition of Kurdish ethnicity and the use of Kurdish language were expressed in terms of rights, both individual and national, thus constituting them as objects of popular protest and popular politics. The processes and practices ensuring this crucial transformation, however, required a degree of development of civil society and the public sphere, in the absence of which popular demands, especially the popular quest for the recognition of national and communal rights, remained dormant but alive, waiting to find expression in popular politics in the community.

This latter point refers to the crucial connection between the formation of civil society and the rise of popular politics, an essential prerequisite of the emergence of the people as the subject of modern politics. In Kurdistan this connection was complex. Given the suppression of Kurdish identity, here the object of popular politics, which was at the same time the object of popular resistance, had been effectively placed under the 'sovereign ban', to use Agamben's notion, and the popular demands for the recognition of Kurdish identity and rights were illegal (Agamben 1998). This meant that popular politics germinated outside the legally delineated domain of politics. It was unconstitutional, illegal and hence illegitimate. It continued to develop in and flourish outside the domain of law, acquiring a clandestine existence. This was the case before and after the Kurdish Republic. The development of civil society and the public sphere under the Republic was the foundation of the popular democratic politics, which

became the hallmark of its historical identity as an institution of government and self-rule.

The rise of popular politics under the Kurdish Republic was nonetheless seriously constrained by forces and relations rooted in the historical development of the Kurdish community in the economic, political and juridical frameworks of Iranian sovereignty since the early nineteenth century. The predominance of tribal landlordism in the political and military organisations of the Kurdish community and the political infancy and cultural incoherency of the urban social classes were both notable in this respect. They were both structural effects of the chronic backwardness of economic forces and relations in the Kurdish community, but their constraining effects always filtered through their diverse relationships with the sovereign power in the centre and almost always through the processes and practices ensuring its domination in Kurdistan. In this sense, therefore, the structural constraints of popular democratic politics in the Kurdish community always involved relations of sovereign domination. They worked in tandem through political and legal processes and practices grounded in pre-capitalist relations of production, ensuring the unity of the power bloc in the large landlords' regime in the country at large.

The structural unity of the internal-Kurdish and the external-sovereign constraints in the power bloc and their active participation in the political and institutional conditions of popular politics were clearly evidenced in the events leading to the fall of the Republic. The Republic, despite all its political-administrative and technical-rational deficiencies in governing, was a popular institution. It had the genuine support of the overwhelming majority of its people, whom it had helped to bring into the political process. After the fall of the Republic and the disappearance of the last vestiges of popular rule in Kurdistan, Kurdish people too withdrew from the political scene, returning to the safety of their homes, closing in on themselves in the ethnic confines of their community, where they could only hear the growling voice of their own anger and despair. But neither their withdrawal from the political scene nor their silence spared them the wrath of the sovereign. Sovereign power had already experienced the force of the people's sudden eruption into the political arena in the brief but decisive decade following the fall of Reza Shah's rule not only in Kurdistan but in Iran at large. The peoples of Iran, Kurds included, had now acquired a political existence. They constituted a decentered being, socially differentiated and culturally fragmented with a shared political identity, expressed in terms of popular discourses and practices questioning the conduct of the sovereign power in a public sphere.

The nascent public sphere lacked essential forms of legal protection. It was the fragile locus of popular political dissent exposed to sovereign violence.

That the political existence of the people was expressed in opposition to the sovereign meant that the legal and political unity of the sovereign power depended on the containment, suppression and control of popular opposition. The emergence of the people as an active political subject, its eruption in life as a force conscious of its rights, was a new development in a society in which power was seen to emanate from sovereign will. The exclusion of the people from the political process, perpetuated by the relentless suppression of its voice in the domain of power, was the *sine qua non* of the politics of authoritarian modernisation under the Pahlavi rule. The re-emergence of the people and the struggle to assert popular will changed the established ‘norms’ of political conduct between the sovereign and the democratic opposition in the years that followed Reza Shah’s abdication. The restructuring of Pahlavi absolutism, therefore, required more than just a reorganisation of the power bloc grounded on the large landlords’ regime. A substantial change in the mode of exercise of power to ensure the continuation of sovereign domination in the face of increasing popular opposition challenging the legal unity and political legitimacy of the sovereign was required.

The continuation of sovereign domination was insured by the change in the rationality of power which expressed itself in terms of the modernisation of the state apparatuses, especially the military and security apparatuses of the state. The matrix of rationality informing the working of power in the state apparatuses was closely tethered to the ‘security problematic of the state’, to use Foucault’s terms (Foucault 2003). Henceforth the security considerations of sovereign power defined not only the conceptual structure of the official discourse, but also the strategic objectives of the state in the economic, political and cultural fields, at home and abroad. This crucial development in the conduct of sovereign power signified above all the conservative ethos of the modernisation of the state in the aftermath of the 1953 coup. The ‘redeployed absolutism’—a concept used to define the character of the regime in the decade following the coup—was the paradoxical outcome of this process. Governed by the new security considerations, the conduct of the regime was driven by its primary aim to stop the return of the people to the political field and the public representations of popular democratic demands.

The predominance of the security problematic and the associated order of governmental rationality outlived redeployed absolutism, continuing to



define the repressive ethos of sovereign power in the fateful years between the 'White Revolution' and the 'Islamic Revolution' (1962–1979). The expulsion of the people from the national political field, the destruction of the means and conditions of popular representation, constituted the strategic objective of sovereign power from 1946 to the revolutionary rupture of 1978–1979. The restructuring of the power bloc and the reconfiguration of its forces and relations under the hegemonic sign of the sovereign following episodes of national crisis were prompted and defined by the conservative and defensive ethos of this strategy. The reasons of the state had given way to the logic of sovereignty: security geared to sovereign domination.

Kurdistan was paramount in the order of sovereign domination that followed the consolidation of power under royal dictatorship. The decade preceding the revolutionary rupture in 1978 witnessed the intensification of the royal repression and further centralisation of the means and mechanisms of opposition to popular democratic politics, targeting its subject within and outside the juridical realm of power and politics. The relentless application of this policy, compounded by unconstrained use of violence, undermined civil society and politicised the economic and cultural fields in the community. The contradictory effects of the royal repression in Kurdistan were more striking than in the rest of Iran, for in Kurdistan it resulted not only in a radical political field but also in debilitating economic backwardness. The two continued to enforce each other within the ethnic confines of a repressed civil society, leading to the dislocation of nationalist politics and the strategic predominance of armed struggle in the Kurdish resistance movement in Iran. The present study addresses this issue, exploring its structural unity and political and cultural diversity. It is concerned with the development and transformation of Kurdish nationalism from the fall of the Kurdish Republic to the revolutionary rupture in 1978–1979.