



The Formation and Structure of the Komalay Shoreshgeri Zahmatkeshani Kurdistan (The Revolutionary Association of the Toilers of Iranian Kurdistan)

The emergent radical left was not homogenous politically and ideologically. But the diverse ideological tendencies on the left of the political spectrum soon consolidated around two distinct groupings, each holding a different view of Kurdish identity and rights in the process of the struggle for socialism in Iran. The first group believed that the Kurdish question was a product of the subordinate status of the Kurds as an oppressed ethnic minority in a dependent capitalist state, and its resolution was dependent on the conditions and outcome of the national struggle for socialism in Iran at large. Although regional autonomy was their preferred solution to the Kurdish question, they were seriously sceptical about the commitment of the leadership of the KDPI to the supreme cause of socialism in Iran, which to them was inextricably tied to the exigencies and outcome of the ongoing anti-imperialist struggle in the national and international political and economic arena. This group soon found themselves in the burgeoning ranks of the radical left, especially the Organisation of the Peoples' Fedayin (Sazemane Fadayian-e Khalq-e Iran) and the Tudeh Party, as the ideological disagreements with the leadership of the KDPI over the class structure and anti-imperialist character of the ruling faction of the Islamic regime began to override their political and cultural vacillations about Kurdish identity of the popular democratic struggle in Kurdistan. The political and cultural formation of the younger generation

of Kurdish urban petty-bourgeoisie in the two decades preceding the revolution, considered in some detail in previous chapters, played a decisive role in concluding this uneasy transition.

The second group was larger and relatively more cohesive culturally; its members for the most part showed a stronger commitment to Kurdish culture and identity. Their differences with the KDPI revolved around ideological issues but mainly concerned its alleged bourgeois reformism and allegiance to Soviet revisionism, which they rejected from a revolutionary Marxist standpoint. The ideological opposition to the KDPI therefore was not extended to disagreements regarding the class structure and the political orientation of the Islamic regime, on which they were broadly in agreement, especially with the dominant socialist faction in the leadership of the party. The idea that the Islamic regime was backward-looking, reactionary and deeply ingrained in capitalist exploitation and imperialist pillage of the people and the country was widely shared by them. In fact, this uncompromising opposition to the Islamic regime helped counterbalance their initial ambivalence towards Kurdish identity and rights despite the pivotal influence of anti-imperialist populism of the Iranian left on their political outlook. It charted a different route to the left of the political spectrum, whereby claim to revolutionary Marxism not only involved a rejection of the bourgeois revisionism of the KDPI but also bypassed the growing anti-imperialist consensus on the left. The bulk of the younger generation of the Kurdish men and women who subscribed to such views were soon to form the backbone of the Komalay Shoreshergi Zahmatkeshani Kurdistani Iran (the KSZKI hereafter), the second-largest Kurdish political organisation after the KDPI in post-revolutionary Iran.

The existing evidence on the formation of the KSZKI is scanty, and in fact, as it has been pointed out elsewhere in my writings, the organisation has not thus far produced a history of its formation and development (Vali *op. cit.* 2011). Information about the formation of the organisation is for the most part based on personal accounts and hearsay revolving around events and personalities, and the narrative is highly fragmented and very subjective, lacking structure and coherence (Vali, *ibid.*). It is however agreed that before the 1979 revolution the KSZKI existed only as an idea, a concept, in the mind of its makers, all ethnic Kurds from various parts of the Kurdish territory in Iran, who were intent on forming a revolutionary Marxist alternative to the bourgeois reformist KDPI.¹ The concept of a revolutionary alternative as such was a familiar feature of the discourse of the Kurdish radical left in the clandestine public sphere

before the revolutionary rupture of 1977–1979. The rise of popular protests, the opening up of the political field and the marked decline in the efficacy of the security apparatuses of the state are said to have laid the conditions for the formation of the organisation, although the exact date of the founding of the organisation and the identity of the key founders remain unclear to this very date. Despite the lack of precise information, it is safe to say that the organisation which came to be known as the KSZKI was born on the eve of the revolution, when the struggle for the destruction of the royal dictatorship had reached its final and decisive phase.² A consideration of the discourse and practice of the organisation, its ideological formation and political programme would therefore require one to fast forward the analysis, to shift its focus from the period leading to the revolutionary rupture of 1977–1979 to those following from the collapse of royal dictatorship and the triumph of the revolution and the brief but decisive phase in the process of consolidation of clerical rule and theocratic power.

THE KSZKI AND THE POLITICAL FIELD IN KURDISTAN

The persistent tension between ethnic and class categories in the discourse of the KSZKI and the subsequent drive towards communist orthodoxy were also influenced, in no small measure, by the developments in the political and discursive fields in Kurdistan and in Iran at large. In the Kurdish scene, the KSZKI's struggle for the recognition of Kurdish identity and rights was being carried out in two distinct political and ideological fronts defined, respectively, by the 'marxified' nationalism and social reformism of the KDPI, on the one hand, and the emerging anti-imperialist consensus in the ranks of the non-Kurdish Marxist left, on the other. The shift of emphasis from the earlier Maoist grounds to the anti-populist communist orthodoxy after the Second Congress, as was seen, was in large part due to the combined pressure brought to bear on the organisation by the increasing popularity of the non-Kurdish Marxist left, in particular the Tudeh and the Fadaïyan-e Khalq in major Kurdish urban centres. The KDPI, as was seen, was weak and ill-prepared to respond to the growing radicalism among the younger generation of the Kurdish urban petty-bourgeoisie and the middle strata, who were joining the ranks of the non-Kurdish Marxist organisations in significant numbers. The KSZKI's new radicalism, the reassertion of an unequivocal commitment to revolutionary communism, along with the rejection of the authority of the Islamic

regime, on the other hand, proved more attractive to the radical sector of the Kurdish urban petty-bourgeoisie dabbling in Marxism and revolutionary politics. The stream of new recruits to the ranks of the organisation, especially after the military invasion of August 1979, boosted the confidence of its relatively inexperienced leadership, hastening their resolve to challenge the populist revisionism of the Tudeh and the Fadaïyan-e Khalq on more orthodox grounds. But the KSZKI's political radicalism, its claim to be the standard bearer of revolutionary Marxism not only in Kurdistan but in Iran at large, was met with fierce opposition by its Kurdish competitor and non-Kurdish opponents in the political field.

In the Kurdish political field, as was seen, the discursive boundaries of the power struggle with the KDPI were defined primarily by Kurdish ethnicity, and the competing claims to represent the struggle for regional autonomy overshadowed the Marxist class categories. In the struggle for Kurdish autonomy, the discursive representation of the Kurdish rights involved questioning/opposing the ethnic/national identity of sovereign power, and the terms of the struggle against the Islamic regime were profoundly ethnic/national. There was therefore little, if no, ground for the operation of the KSZKI's class discourse, except on the rhetorical level, whereby references to the bourgeois character of the KDPI and the revisionist nature of its ideology served to reaffirm its own orthodox Marxist credentials. The persistence of the struggle for regional autonomy meant that ethnic categories defined the boundaries of the Kurdish discourse and practice, and the assertion of the Kurdish rights, be it grounded in social reformism of the KDPI or revolutionary Marxism of the KSZKI, necessarily opposed the uniform ethnic (Persian ethnicity, language) identity of the Islamic regime and resisted its imposition on Kurdistan, as was clearly demonstrated by the debates surrounding the preparation and ratification of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic in December 1979.³

The KSZKI's claim to revolutionary Marxist orthodoxy fared differently with the non-Kurdish Marxist forces which had already established active operational bases in Kurdistan. The Tudeh Party and the Fadaïyan-eh Khalq both were intent on exploiting the political vacuum created by the KDPI's theoretical poverty and rigid ethnic nationalism. In this sense, therefore, the KSZKI challenged them not only on ideological grounds but also, and more importantly, in the political field, as they attempted to recruit the disaffected segments of Kurdish urban petty-bourgeoisie and channel their radicalism in the direction of the emergent anti-imperialist consensus on the left of the political spectrum in the early phase of the

power struggle after the revolution, especially in the events leading to the occupation of the American Embassy by radical Islamists and the subsequent fall of the provisional government on 4 November 1979—hence, the Tudeh’s increasing hostility towards the KSZKI and its anti-populist revolutionary rhetoric, which initially echoed the critical thrust of the prevailing Soviet response to the Maoist charges of revisionism and social imperialism in the international communist arena. The Fadaiyan-e Khalq, who initially disagreed with the Tudeh’s perception of the Soviet state and its claim to represent international Marxism, were equally scathing of the KSZKI’s Maoism, rejecting its rural populism and sectarian politics. The discursive contours of this conflict were soon to change as the course of events in the summer in Kurdistan shifted the focus of the conflict to the social character of the Islamic regime and the conditions of an anti-imperialist struggle in post-revolutionary Iran.

The course of events in 1979, the military invasion of Kurdistan in August, followed by the seizure of the American Embassy in November, which changed the contours of theoretical and political discourse on the left, also exposed a fundamental problem, a persistent weakness of the KSZKI: a provincial Kurdish organisation with a revolutionary communist ideology arguing for socialism in Iran. For the KSZKI’s opposition to the growing anti-imperialist consensus on the left, its radical rejection of the Islamic regime further pushed the organisation back onto its narrow ethnic basis, thus exposing more than ever the existing gap between its radical communist discourse and its parochial/provincial practice. The KSZKI’s predicament was further exacerbated by the advent of the war between Iran and Iraq on 22 September 1980. The war significantly increased the operational and logistical bases of the organisation, but siding with Iraq against the Islamic regime only accentuated its ethnic identity. The surge of Iranian nationalism precipitated by the war seriously delimited the KSZKI’s options to pursue its strategic objective in the Iranian political field. Although the KSZKI had become stronger and more popular in Kurdistan, its capacity to spearhead a revolutionary communist movement in Iran was more limited. In fact, the political basis of the KSZKI’s ethnic populism in Kurdistan grew in an inverse ratio to the political basis of its communist class discourse in Iran. It was the grim realisation of the widening gap between the communist class discourse and the ethnic populist practice of the KSZKI which led its leadership to seek allies in the Iranian political field.

The leadership of the KSZKI needed a communist ally not only to help it found a genuine revolutionary vanguard for the Iranian proletariat, its much publicised political and ideological objective, but also to provide it with theoretical grounding and knowledge to explain and defend its overwhelmingly sectarian class politics against the populist left in the tense and overcrowded post-revolutionary political field—for the ongoing contest with the Tudeh and the Fadaiyan-e Khalq had clearly exposed the self-confessed theoretical weakness of the leadership of the KSZKI and the fallacy of its populist conviction that correct theories arise out of the practical experience of the organisation. Three years since the formation of the organisation and this fundamental weakness was still staring at its face, undermining its claim to ideological orthodoxy and flying in the face of its long-cherished aspiration to represent the Iranian proletariat in the struggle for socialism. The Communist Party of Iran, resulting from an organisational merger with the Etehad-e Mobarezan-e Komonist (the EMK hereafter; the Union of the Communist Combatants) in September 1983 was more than a mere tactical step in the direction of the realisation of KSZKI's declared strategic objective. It was also a response to the chronic theoretical poverty of the KSZKI, hastened by the suppression of their common ideological foe, the Tudeh Party, earlier in May 1983 by the Islamic regime. In this sense, however, the KSZKI's merger with the EMK was prompted by the same need which had driven the KDPI to the arms of the Tudeh Party 30 years earlier. The arrival of the EMK on the Kurdish political scene, which had already been anticipated/ushered in by the KSZKI's drive towards ideological orthodoxy after its Second Congress, was a turning point in its brief history. It almost immediately shifted the balance of forces in the organisation, displacing Kurdish ethnicity in favour of Marxist class categories, thus signalling the end of the KSZKI's direct engagement with the Kurdish question for years to come. Like the KDPI before it, the KSZKI was destined to pay a heavy price for the political inexperience, theoretical poverty and ideological dogmatism of its leadership.

VACILLATIONS OF ETHNIC-NATIONAL AND CLASS IDENTITIES

The KSZKI was formed in late January 1979 as a Marxist-Leninist organisation committed to revolutionary socialism. The revolutionary rupture and the subsequent upheaval in the political field in the country, as was said, were instrumental in the realisation of the idea held in common by

the small group of Kurdish university students who subsequently formed the founding core of the organisation. They had started as the founders of a clandestine Maoist organisation inspired by the radical though short-lived developments on the left of the Kurdish movement in Iraqi Kurdistan leading to the formation of the Komalay Ranjberan in the late 1960s. Like the leadership of the Komalay Ranjberan in Iraqi Kurdistan, whom they so closely emulated, the founders of the Kurdish Maoist group in Iranian universities subscribed to a world view inspired by the teachings of Mao and his interpretation of revolutionary Marxism in the age of the struggle for global mastery between US imperialism and Soviet social imperialism. Iran, from their point of view, was a semi-feudal and semi-colonial country passing through the stage of democratic revolutions characterised by the popular struggle for liberation from imperialist domination and feudal exploitation.⁴

Although the fledgling Kurdish group did not produce any statement of its political and ideological positions before the revolution, commitment to revolutionary socialism and the primacy of the struggle for the liberation of the Iranian workers and peasants from the twin evil of capitalist exploitation and imperialist domination were invariants of a radical discourse which was subsequently adopted and reiterated by the KSZKI.⁵ This commitment, according to them, was not at variance or incompatible with their commitment as Kurds to the eradication of national oppression in Iran, for they were convinced that socialist revolution in Iran was the means and condition of the ‘democratic’ resolution of the Kurdish question. This political position, by no means novel or unfamiliar, was characteristically expressed by the notion of *setam-e moza’af* or ‘double oppression’, a political euphemism rather than a theoretical concept inspired primarily by Stalin’s popular pamphlet on the *National Question*, which was commonplace in the literature of the Marxist left on the national question since the mid-1960s. It was seen as an ingenious means of articulating national democratic relations in class relations. But given the primacy of the concept of social class and the overriding force of class determinations, double oppression clearly signified the subordinate status of the national question in the discourse of the Marxist left. In practice however the notion served to disguise the persistent theoretical tension at the very core of the Marxist-Leninist approaches to the national question—that is, the theoretical tension between class determinations and national democratic relations which surfaced to great political effect whenever ethnicity came to define the boundaries of political discourse and practice.

The KSZKI was no exception to this general rule. It inherited this fundamental and destabilising tension, which constantly exposed the growing hiatus between its discourse and its practice in the political field.

Soon after the revolution the leadership of the KSZKI moved to shed the crude Maoism of their formative years, thus abandoning the flawed and outdated characterisation of Iran of the 1970s as a semi-feudal and semi-colonial society. But this change did not affect the rural populist ethos of its discourse. Political statements of the organisation, few and infrequent as they were, and the public speeches and utterances of its enthusiastic but novice leadership continued to be dominated by the vocabulary and imagery of a radical rural populism, the focus of which was the prevailing social and economic relations in the Kurdish countryside. In fact, the populist quest for socio-economic equality and the structural transformation of the organisation of production and distribution in the Kurdish countryside, reiterated variously by leading personalities, formed the dialectical nexus of an uneasy relationship between class and national liberation struggles in the discourse of the early KSZKI. Broadly speaking, Kurdish ethnicity defined the boundaries of the KSZKI's political practice, and class categories were given a distinctly ethnic colouring, which in effect seriously undercut its claim to representing class forces and relations outside the Kurdish territory. This meant that, despite its Marxist class discourse, the KSZKI retained a Kurdish ethnic exterior to its identity in the political field.⁶

This ethnic exterior, though the main reason for the rapid popularity and legitimacy of the organisation with the Kurdish public, helping it to draw a clear demarcation line with non-Kurdish Marxist organisations in the political field, was soon to become a thorn on the side of the bulk of the leadership, who did little to hide their disdain for this pronounced ethnic exterior, rejecting its unifying force as an obstacle to their efforts to establish an Iranian proletarian identity for their organisation. This anti-ethnic streak continued to persist in the discourse of the KSZKI, looming large in attempts to emphasise the revolutionary Marxist identity of the organisation. For a regional organisation with predominantly ethnic constituency of support, it was tantamount with slow self-destruction on a grand scale, reaching its climax in the metamorphosis of the organisation to the Communist Party of Iran in 1982. Now, some 30 years after that debacle and several catastrophic splits in the organisation, all directly related to this issue, the bulk of the leadership of the splinter groupings claiming the revolutionary legacy of the KSZKI are still averse to Kurdish

ethnicity and ethnic identity, albeit in varying degrees. Their response, diverse as it is, is far from being ambiguous, ranging from denial to tacit acceptance of the status of Kurdish ethnicity in the representation of the identity of their breakaway organisations. It is not an overstatement to say that they are still blowing their trumpets from the wrong end. I shall return to this point later on in this study.

But despite the Marxist prejudices of the bulk of the leadership the ethnic identity of the KSZKI played a decisive role in its formative phase when the fledgling organisation was thrown into the deep end of an increasingly volatile political field suffering from the aftershock of the revolutionary rupture and the collapse of the royal dictatorship. Kurdish ethnicity in fact was instrumental in defining its status in the political field both as a radical alternative to the KDPI and as a Kurdish competitor to the Iranian Marxist organisations operating in Kurdistan, especially in so far as the crucial issue of recruiting from among the expanding ranks of the new generation of the Kurdish urban petty-bourgeoisie was concerned—for the Kurdish identity of the organisation and its populist political underpinning served to conceal the growing hiatus between the theoretical foundations of its discourse and practice, that is, between the class determinations of a radical Marxist discourse and the ethnic framework of a populist political practice respectively. This hiatus manifested itself most vividly in the KSZKI's two principal but mutually exclusive political objectives: the creation of a genuine revolutionary communist party for the Iranian working class on the one hand and an autonomous government for the Kurdish people on the other. Aware of the contradiction apparent in the articulation of the political and economic conditions of possibility these objectives, the leadership of the KSZKI, in an early policy statement, hoped that the Iranian working class will express a life-long commitment to the struggle for the rights of the peoples of Iran and the civic democratic liberties in Iran. But as the course of events after the revolution proved, in the real world of Iranian politics, the resolution of this contradiction needed a lot more than a mere hope for the goodwill of the Iranian working class.

The KSZKI's early position on the Kurdish question was marked by confusion, showing a clear lack of direction in the leadership of the organisation. The Maoist assertion that correct theoretical positions arise out of the living experience and revolutionary practice of the people, reiterated in the first policy statement of the organisation after its inauguration in late January 1979, was more than a mere revolutionary rhetoric. It was also a

veiled admission of the lack of policy and programme; the KSZKI was proposing to develop a theoretically informed and comprehensive programme specifying its policy positions on fundamental political issues, including the Kurdish question, in the course of participation in the unfolding political process. But despite this naïve populist empiricism, the statement contained the essentials of a regional autonomy project all but in name, albeit as a tactical phase in the process of struggle for socialism. In other words, the creation of a genuine autonomous administration in Kurdistan was perceived not a consequence but a preparatory stage in the liberation of the society under the leadership of the Iranian proletariat. This ‘tactical’ approach to Kurdish autonomy appeared to be in tandem with the theoretical presuppositions of the KSZKI’s communist orthodoxy, which sat in an uneasy relationship with the avowedly rural populist character of the discourse of this confused but important statement.⁷ The statement repeatedly invoked rural populist notions using emotive egalitarian language in order to define the socio-economic content of Kurdish autonomy, which in effect interrupted the seemingly logical relationship between regional autonomy and socialism in the KSZKI’s discourse. For the quest for peasant revolution in the countryside and bolstering the fortunes of the national bourgeoisie in towns, the two proposed objectives of the transition period in Kurdistan in the statement, radical as they may be, could hardly pass the stringent economic class criteria of an orthodox Marxist political scheme. The incoherency apparent in the KSZKI’s Marxist discourse became increasingly pronounced in the following months, especially in view of the developments in the political and discursive fields following the fall of the provisional government in Tehran.

The developments in the political field, in particular the rapid consolidation of the anti-imperialist consensus among the Marxist forces in the political field after the seizure of the American Embassy in Tehran and the fall of the provisional government, hastened the KSZKI’s resolve to come to terms with the inconsistencies apparent in its discourse and practice. The increasing necessity of an ideological demarcation line to distinguish its positions from both the KDPI in Kurdistan and the non-Kurdish Marxist organisations in the wider political field in Iran was the decisive factor in this respect. The former involved a reassessment of the concept of national bourgeoisie and its role in the process of struggle for Kurdish autonomy, and the latter a redefinition of the social character of political power in the Islamic Republic. The Resolutions of the Second Congress of the KSZKI in Farvardin 1360 (March–April 1981) thus admitted that

its position on these issues had been mistaken, deviating from the fundamentals of communist orthodoxy. This deviation, the document further stated, was due mainly to the influence of a populist reading of Lenin's discourse on imperialism which predominated the ideological position of the organisation in its early phase. This was signified by the primacy of the 'people-imperialist contradiction' at the expense of 'class contradiction' between labour and capital as an international system of production and exchange. Iran, it was thus concluded, is a capitalist society and the Islamic state a bourgeois institution whose aim is to ensure the reproduction of the imperialist super-profit.⁸

The KSZKI's break with populism was neither complete nor final. The organisation was to return to this issue over and over again in the course of the next few years. Although the forceful statements arguing for the primacy of class over popular democratic contradiction and the insistence on the bourgeois character of the Islamic regime provided the organisation with a strong platform to oppose the growing anti-imperialist consensus on the left of the political spectrum, they cannot be taken to account for the eradication of populism in the KSZKI's discourse and practice. True, Lenin's discourse on imperialism with its emphasis on national liberation movements had a powerful populist undercurrent, but the persistence of populism in the KSZKI's discourse had another and equally powerful source: Kurdish ethnicity, which while defining the boundaries of the KSZKI's political practice frequently pushed it towards nationalism, especially in areas of conflict and contestation with the KDPI mainly associated with Kurdish autonomy and civic and democratic rights. Kurdish ethnicity not only informed the organisation's positions in this ongoing conflict but also drew an unspoken though recognised discursive boundary around the Kurdish programme of the organisation by working through the structure of the counterarguments used to defend them against the KDPI's alleged bourgeois reformism in the political and ideological fields. The fact that the KSZKI defended a regional autonomy programme using Marxist class categories meant that Kurdish ethnicity automatically defined the locus and the range of efficacy of these categories. Further, given the fact that the KSZKI shared the KDPI's opposition to the anti-imperialist consensus on the left organised and bolstered by the Tudeh Party as well as its rejection of the Tudeh's characterisation of the Islamic regime, the organisation's appeal to the primacy of class relations and contradictions always fell short of achieving its intended objective. The KSZKI's political and ideological battles with the KDPI had to be

fought on nationalist grounds, and the route from Marxism to nationalism, from class to national identity, always passed through the populist territory: the recognised and much trodden ground for the public representation of the social and economic content of its Kurdish programme. So, what had started as a noisy Marxist attack on entrenched populism of the organisation did not go very far. It returned back to populism, albeit by a roundabout way, as the Marxist class categories used to criticise and refute the KDPI and other class enemies of the Iranian proletariat lost their bearings operating in the ethnic framework of the KSZKI's programme for the liberation of Kurdistan.⁹

The KSZKI's much publicised struggle against 'populist deviation' in the organisation also concerned its approach to the Kurdish question. Clearly the organisation's critique of the populist readings of Lenin's imperialism and the rejection of the progressive role of the national bourgeoisie in the process of democratic revolution to reassert its orthodox Marxist credentials had radical implications for its approach to Kurdish rights and the concept of regional autonomy. In fact, a radical approach devoid of 'bourgeois reformism' required, above all, a comprehensive autonomy programme with necessary socio-economic and political provisions to ensure the realisation of Kurdish rights within the class framework of the new anti-populist communist orthodoxy in the organisation. In other words, the KSZKI was required to produce a socialist programme for Kurdish autonomy, in which social class relations not only defined the conditions of realisations ethnic rights, but also, and more importantly, ensured their contribution to the final socialist victory. This, in effect, meant assigning class character to ethnic rights, and ultimately explaining the national rights to self-determination in a strictly class perspective, theoretically and politically. This was a colossal task which had hitherto eluded Marxist theoreticians worldwide for almost as long as the history of Marxism itself.¹⁰

The lure of ideological purity soon forced the KSZKI into this impasse, plunging it into the deep end of a crude class reductionism which was just as hopeless as its populism. The discourse of the KSZKI was now plagued by another incoherency running through its statements and resolutions with unprecedented ease, since the Second Congress did not produce an autonomy programme to match its claims to Marxist orthodoxy, save for the obligatory radical rhetoric about the Kurdish people's resistance movement. The Resolutions of the KSZKI's Second Congress were inundated by lofty praises for the 'Kurdish revolutionary and democratic resistance

movement against the ruling bourgeois dictatorship in Iran' but without any comprehensive analysis of the aims and objectives of the organisation in the region. Instead, the Resolutions focused on the 'limitations' of the Kurdish movement, castigating it for lacking a 'uniform class base, and hence unable to be the agent for the transformation of the relations of production and victory for the proletariat'. It was, the Resolutions went on, a 'defensive movement' incapable of turning into a countrywide movement for the seizure of political power in Iran. The KSZKI's analysis of the 'causes' of the Kurdish movement carried the discussion of its alleged limitations to its logical conclusion, thus depriving it of any political autonomy by subordinating it to the historical process of the development and political and organisational exigencies of the proletarian movement in Iran.

'The [Kurdish] resistance movement is not the continuation of the conscious struggle of the [Iranian] working class, it has not been initiated according to the latter's plan. This movement has come into existence in specific objective conditions: the political weakness of the Iranian proletariat [which], lacking a conscious and vanguard party as well as a strong and independent constituency in the political scene, has been unable to influence the general course of the struggles in Iran directly and consciously.'¹¹

The reason underlying social and political limitations of the Kurdish movement as well as the cause of its quick and forceful revival after the revolution was conveniently attributed to the political and organisational weaknesses of the Iranian proletariat. This meant that the suppression of Kurdish identity and rights in Iran was not the historical effect of the domination of the Kurdish community by modern state power. In fact, the discourse of the Second Congress of the KSZKI denied not only the discursive autonomy of the Kurdish question but also its existence as a historical-political phenomenon in Iran. The suppression of Kurdish identity and rights and hence the advent of the Kurdish question seem to be totally incidental to the history of the formation and development of the modern state in Iran. Historically the Kurdish question is an effect of the formation and consolidation of the modern nation-state and national identity in Iran. The argument that the Kurdish question in Iran is an effect of sovereign domination over the Kurdish community is central to the Kurdish struggle for recognition and freedom from sovereign oppression, and the exclusion of this argument from the discourse of the Resolutions of the Second Congress wiped out its historical specificity altogether, thus erasing a gamut of insurmountable theoretical problems

entailed in the conceptualisation of ethnic-national repression in Marxist discourse. This exclusion may have been a theoretical oversight or even a discursive strategy to overlook insurmountable theoretical problems; in either case it could hardly escape their political consequences for the discourse and practice of the KSZKI. This oversight or exclusion showed above all the political naivety of the leadership and the theoretical limitations of its conception of Marxist theory and theoretical practice, for problems related to the historical specificity of the Kurdish question, the political-cultural nature of sovereign domination and its effects on the Kurdish community resurfaced immediately after the Second Congress, returning in force to haunt the organisation in the years to come.

The political implications of the KSZKI's approach to the Kurdish question, its total disregard for the historical specificity of sovereign domination in Kurdistan, are clear: the creation of a genuine revolutionary communist party to organise and lead the Iranian proletariat in the process of struggle for socialism would suffice to ensure the resolution of the Kurdish question not by realising the national democratic rights of the Kurdish people but by subsuming them in an all-Iranian socialist programme and rendering them superfluous. The KSZKI's analysis entailed in the proceedings of its Second Congress as such surpassed the discursive bounds of Marxist class reductionism, in theoretical and political terms. It had entered the arena of pure historical fatalism. It was not just a simple case of political reason giving way to ideological dogma, but that of ideological dogma giving way to an article of faith as the gaping gap between the ideological discourse and the political practice of the organisation turned the communist ideal to a paradise unattainable by worldly means. The historical fatalism of the Second Congress had planted the seeds of the dogmatic workerism in the Third Congress when the overwhelming majority of the delegates voted for the termination of the KSZKI and its replacement by the Communist Party of Iran (CPI hereafter), deemed to lead the Iranian working class to communism, a move which proved to be no less than a wilful political suicide. It is, however, interesting to note that at the time, none among the novice perpetrators of this infantile radicalism ever wanted to question the wisdom of terminating an active Kurdish political organisation, erasing its ethnic identity and replacing it with an all-Iranian political party whose proletarian identity is derived not from its political practice but from an imaginary representation of the Iranian proletariat. But it was hardly the first time for Marxist political activists to find the truth of proletarian class representation in their ideol-

ogy, the religious belief that their ideology gives them ‘natural’ rights to represent the proletariat even if they have no organic political and organisational relationship with this class. This is held true about the new CPI, as the subsequent farcical developments in the organisation showed clearly.¹²

The flawed logic of this fatalism culminated in the Resolutions of the Third Congress in April 1982. National oppression, the KSZKI declared, was an adjunct of naked bourgeois oppression in capitalist society and can be eradicated only by socialist revolution. National democratic and class struggles were thus integral parts of a revolutionary process which was to be carried out in two successive stages, popular democratic and socialist. While the active presence of the organisation in the Kurdish political field was deemed sufficient to assign a revolutionary direction to the democratic struggle in the first stage, the socialist stage required a revolutionary communist vanguard, a genuine proletarian party, to lead the struggle to victory. The proceedings of the Third Congress thus variously reiterated the KSZKI’s intention to lay the foundation for the creation of a revolutionary communist vanguard. The expression of this intention was by no means new in the discourse of the organisation. In fact, the representation of KSZKI as the vehicle for the creation of a revolutionary communist party for the Iranian proletariat was central to its self-image as a radical communist force. It remained a defining feature of its identity, reiterated to emphasise its differences both from the Kurdish KDPI and the non-Kurdish Marxist organisations in the political field in Iran at large.¹³

The logical outcome of this communist orthodoxy was a perception of the national question as transitory politics, inextricably tied to the predominance of the capitalist mode of production and bourgeois rule in society, which were to be superseded by socialism. This erroneous perception of the national question ran through the discourse of the Communist Party of Iran, underpinning its reductionist approach to the Kurdish question during its short and turbulent existence. The reductionist approach was symptomatic of a profound misconception in the heart of its discourse on of historical formation of the nation-state in Iran in particular the character of political power in the Islamic republic. The CPI had nothing to say about the materiality of the Islamic political discourse, that is, its immense capacity to articulate popular demands in political and cultural processes and practices within and outside the institutional structure of the state and use them to consolidate its grip over the political field and define the shifting boundaries of the popular democratic struggle in the

post-revolutionary conjuncture. Nor did it have anything to say about the ideological function of the Islamic political discourse, its organising and mobilising effects ensuring the dominance of the Islamists in the discursive and political fields following the revolutionary rupture of 1979. The sweeping class reductionism of the Third Congress went largely unnoticed by the leadership, who largely missed the point about the disastrous consequences of articulating a political class identity on the basis of an imaginary class representation. In the absence of any theoretical grounding and conceptual explanation, the legitimacy of the CPI as the vanguard of the Iranian proletariat depended entirely on this imaginary representation. That the assumed representation of the self-appointed vanguard of the Iranian proletariat had no foundation in the existing structure of social and political relations, and could not as such be grounded in the relations of force in the political field, did not seem to bother the delegates, who for the most part were satisfied with the outcome of the congress. The bulk of the participants were mostly resigned to accept the proposed change with a sense of relief, thinking that it can provide a revolutionary solution to their long-standing dilemma, enabling them to put an end to their erstwhile vacillation between Kurdish and communist identities. The enthusiasts on the other hand were ecstatic, eager to shed their Kurdish identity and embrace communist orthodoxy. They did so expressing a renewed conviction in communism along with a pronounced sense of guilt and remorse for their past deviations, their regrettable commitment to bourgeois nationalism and petty-bourgeois populism. Those who were dissatisfied with the outcome of the congress and opposed the brutal marginalisation of the Kurdish identity of their organisation were in minority. They either had to accept the outcome or leave the organisation. Either way they were ineffective, with little hope of reversing the outcome. Knowing this, some retired from active politics to southern Kurdistan, and others started the long journey to exile in Europe, but both with a deep sense of confusion about the course of events and their outcome.

The conception of the national question entailed in the 'Resolutions' outlived the Third Congress. It was the decisive influence in the construction of the 'Programme for Kurdish Autonomy' approved by the Fourth Congress of the Sazeman-e Kordestan-e Hezb-e Komonist-e Iran-Komala (The Kurdistan Organisation of the Communist Party of Iran-Komala), constituted by the same congress to replace the KSZKI in February 1983. The Programme expressed the CPI's commitment to the doctrine of national rights to self-determination, but in a characteristically reductionist

vein, tied it to the victory of socialism in Iran. The socialist revolution was not only the historical condition of possibility of the 'bourgeois' doctrine of national rights but also the legitimate means of its realisation. The double function assigned to the socialist revolution as both the conditions of possibility and the means of realisation of the concept of the national rights to self-determination was seriously flawed, especially in regard to the causal relationship between socialism and the national/Kurdish question.

The CPI's commitment to the doctrine of the national rights to self-determination, the key element in its approach to the national question in general and the Kurdish question in particular, was no more than an unfounded assertion. It was neither theoretically grounded nor conceptually explained. The leadership of the CPI simply took it for granted that the doctrine is a Marxist construct and as such needs no further theoretical grounding and conceptual explanation. They paid no attention to the discursive construction of the doctrine and its theoretical origin in the bourgeois political philosophy since the eighteenth century, long predating Marx and Marxism. They failed to see that the doctrine is juridical construct grounded in democratic theory and as such requires conditions of possibility which go beyond the relations of production and antagonistic class relationships, and that they are essential to ensure the realisation of rights to self-determination in any given social formation. Nor did they understand the theoretical consequences of the inclusion of the democratic doctrine in a Marxist-Leninist party programme constituted by the primacy of class relations. To be more precise, they failed to appreciate the theoretical effects of the national political, legal and cultural conditions of the possibility and realisation of the doctrine on the theoretical structure of their Marxist party political programme. That is, the theoretical conflict and tension arising from the operation of two different forms of causality entailed in class relations and national relations, undermining the discursive coherency and logical consistency of the party political programme.

The commitment to the democratic doctrine of the national rights to self-determination in the party programme did not amount to a solution, and the tension in the heart of classical Marxist discourse between social class categories arising from the relations of production and ethnic-national relations effectively undermined the coherency of the communist programme. This tension cannot be ignored or eradicated by resorting to class reductionism grounded in the teleology of communism. The teleology of communism which underpinned the discourse of the reconstituted Komala clearly pushed the boundaries of class reductionism to new limits,

for it reaffirmed not only the bourgeois and hence the transitory character of the national question and national rights in toto, but also the political impossibility of their realisation in capitalist society. The latter, however transitory, could provide the conditions for popular democratic struggle for regional autonomy, should the people want to articulate their concrete historical demands in the wider context of the proletarian struggle for socialism, the programme further maintained.¹⁴

This argument thus informed the Komala's programme for autonomy, which was also at the same time reaffirmed entirely by the fifth party congress in March 1985. That the programme clearly involved a distinction between national and ethnic rights, associated with self-determination and autonomy respectively, did not seem to concern the guardians of communist orthodoxy in the party. Nor did the organisation's programmatic commitment to the struggle for ethnic rights posed a problem for the struggle against the remnants of ethnic populism in the party. The overarching class reductionism of the discourse of the CPI simply overlooked the conceptual difference between the national and ethnic relations, representing the latter as a variant of the former, albeit a less developed form associated with the early and more radical phase of the popular democratic struggle when national bourgeoisie had not yet been able to define the course and direction of the national movement. The Komala thus proposed to lead this movement; radicalising its democratic content to protect it from nationalist domination by the Kurdish bourgeoisie represented by the KDPI and directing its revolutionary thrust against the bourgeois dictatorship in the Islamic Republic by incorporating it in the strategic project of the struggle for socialism in Iran.¹⁵

This was easier said than done, as the Komala was to find out soon at its own peril, for the party's relentless drive towards Marxist orthodoxy, its pretentious communism compounded by its celebration of workerism in politics and class reductionism in theory quickly exposed the glaring anomalies in its autonomy programme. The precarious balance between ethnic and class relations was quickly undermined once the organisation's commitment to the two-staged revolutionary strategy fell victim to the rising Trotskyist workerism, which had by now become the hegemonic theoretical and political tendency in the leadership of the CPI. The new workerist tendency, bent on the revolutionary communist aspirations of the Iranian proletariat, could not appreciate the limited tactical value of an autonomy programme whose underlying reason was clearly at odds with the historical logic of a communist teleology driven by class antagonism and conflict.

The consolidation of the communist orthodoxy which followed the formation of the CPI thus witnessed a rapid decline in the fortunes of Kurdish ethnicity and ethnic-national categories in the discourse of the reconstituted Komala. Kurdish ethnicity and ethnic identity were not marginalised, but rather effectively expelled from the discursive field, becoming entirely incidental to the political practice of the organisation, which sought to assert the proletarian class identity of the party. The Komala, as was seen, had already shed its Kurdish identity before a defensive reaction to the hegemonic workerist tendency in the party began to surface in the organisation. In fact, the subsequent opposition, conflict and factionalism in the leadership of the CPI, culminating in a major split in the organisation and the formation of the Workers' Communist Party of Iran (WCPI) in 1991, were all expressed in terms of class position and interests of the Iranian proletariat based on competing claims to revolutionary Marxist orthodoxy. Kurdish identity and ethnic/national political affiliations were ideological charges everyone was anxious to deny and avoid.¹⁶

NOTES

1. This view is clearly expressed in a one-page circular announcing the formation of the KSZKI on the eve of the 1979 revolution. The circular defines the political position and ideological stance of the organisation in contrast to those of the existing political parties and organisations in the political field in the revolutionary conjuncture of 1978–1979 in Kurdistan and in Iran at large. The Marxist-Leninist identity of the organisation is clearly expressed in a Maoist tone, highlighting its ideological orientation. The document does not carry the date or place of publication. I am grateful to Ali Karimi for providing me with the copy of this important statement. See also interview with Sa'ed Vatandust (Marsta, Sweden, May 1999) and Yousef Ardalan (Paris, June 2004, and Erbil, September 2006). They both were of the opinion that the KSZKI was founded by a small group of young Kurdish men from different parts of the Kurdish territory sharing the same Marxist-Maoist convictions in the final phase of the revolutionary rupture of 1978–1979. This view has been variously confirmed by a number of other former members residing in different west European countries since the late 1980s. See also Ayubzadeh, E. *Chep la Rojhelati Kurdistan: Komala u Dozi Nasiyionali Kurd (Left in Eastern Kurdistan: Komala and the Kurdish National Objective/ideal) Vol. 1. 2002.*
2. According to the official publications, the KSZKI was founded on 26 January 1979, which is celebrated every year. However, Abdollah Mohtadi, a founding member of the KSZKI and the current chairperson of the

Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan, clarifying the official view, argues that the KSZKI was by no means born on this date, and that the organisation predated the revolution by more than nine years. In a recent meeting in Washington DC (11 June 2018) he reiterated this view, disagreeing with my account of the formation of the KSZKI. Hussein Moradbeigi and Iraj Farzad, both founding members who subsequently broke away to join the Workers' Communist Party of Iran, dispute Mothadi's view of the formation and development of the KSZKI. According to them the KSZKI was officially formed during its First Congress on 26 January 1979, evolving out of an earlier organisation which had been founded in 1348/1969. The latter, the Tashkilat, as it was called by its founders, was a Marxist-Maoist grouping with no specific ethnic identity, Kurdish or otherwise. It had non-Kurds among its founders and had no specific programme for Kurdistan. The Maoist identity of the Tashkilat was emphasised to assert its difference to both the KDPI and the Tudeh on the one hand and the radical Fedaiyan-e Khalq on the other. The KSZKI was formed by the Kurdish members and adopted a Kurdish name, operating in the Kurdish territory. There was therefore no continuity between the Tashkilat and the KSZKI, politically and organisationally (see Ayubzadeh *op. cit.* 2002, pp. 18–22). This view is corroborated by the Statement of the Administrative Committee of the KSZKI in Shorish, the official organ of the organisation, No. 1 Fall 1979.

3. The KSZKI and the KDPI both rejected the new draft of the constitution prepared by the revamped assembly of experts dominated by the hardliner Islamist bent on incorporating the doctrine of the *Welayat-e Faghih* as the primary source of power and codification of rules. They refused to take part in the referendum for the ratification of the constitution. For a detailed analysis of the struggles revolving around the production and ratification of the constitution, see Schirazi (1998).
4. The founding members who took part in the First Congress of the KSZKI were as follows:
Foa'd Mostafa Soltani, Mohammad Hossein Karimi, Abdollah Mohtadi, Tayeb Abbas Ruh Illahi, Mohsen Rahimi, Ibrahim Alizadeh, Sa'ed Vatandoust, Hussein Moradbagi, Omar Ilkhanizadeh and Iraj Farzad. See Iraj Farzad in Ayubzadeh's (*op. cit.* 2002).
5. Shorish (*op. cit.* 1979).
6. It is only in the Second Congress that the leadership of the KSZKI attempted to take up a clear all-round critical stance on populism while restating its commitment to the creation of a socialist society under the leadership of the Iranian proletariat. Populism is thus defined as a deviation from the true Marxist path and is attributed to the influence of revisionism and the three worlds theory, the latter being a euphemism for Maoism in

the literature of the left in Iran in general. Resolutions of the Second Congress of the Revolutionary Organization of the Toilers of Iranian Kurdistan, March 1360/1981. The break with Maoism was completed in the Third Congress of the KSZKI when the organisation reasserted its orthodox Marxist identity; see The Resolutions and Messages of the Third Congress April 1361/1982.

7. See Note 1.
8. The document identifies economism as the source of deviation and claims to try to eradicate it from the organisation, but it makes no reference to political Islam in the characterisation of the state in post-revolutionary Iran. The state is thus characterised as the bourgeois institution of class domination. Political Islam is treated as totally incidental to the institutional form of political power in post-revolutionary Iran. This strikingly reductionist perception of the state and the relationship between political Islam and political power casts serious doubts on the KSZKI's understanding of the concept of economism in Marxist discourse and its significance in the discourse and practice of the organisation. Economism and class reductionism, it is widely known, are inseparable. The latter presupposes the former.
9. See, for example, 'Komala va Masa'le-ye Melli dar Kordestan' (Komala and the National Question in Kurdistan) Pishrew. No 2, Mehr Mahi 1360/1981 also 'Jonbesh Moqavemat-e Khalgh-e Kord va Masa'la-ye Melli dar Kordestan (Kurdish People's Resistance Movement and the National Question in Kurdistan) Pishrow no. 2. Appendix 4, Mehr Mah-e 1360/1981.
10. On the complexities of the conceptualisation of the relationship between class and ethnic-national categories in Marxist theory from the classical age to the present, see, for example, Nimni, E. *Marxism and Nationalism: The Theoretical Origins of a Political Crisis*, London 1994. For a discussion of this issue in the context of the Kurdish movement in Iran, see Vali (op. cit. 2011).
11. See the Resolutions op. cit. 1360/1981, pp. 15–17 (my translation).
12. The formation of the Communist Party of Iran in 1983, though a planned and organised onslaught on the ethnic identity of the KSZKI, by no means eradicated its influence, and Kurdish ethnicity continued to destabilise the new proletarian identity from inside the organisation. But the ideological cohesion of the new Communist Party was undermined most effectively by the growing hiatus between the national/Iranian basis of its ideological claims and the provincial-local/Kurdish field of its political practice, increasingly exposing the imaginary nature of its proletarian identity. This tension remained central to the ideological disputes, political conflicts and splits marking the development of the Communist Party from its inception

to date. For a general survey of the earlier phase, see Ayubzadeh (op. cit. 2002). Vatandoust (op. cit. 1999) and Ardalan (op. cit. 2006) also discussed the conditions of formation of the Communist Party in great detail. Vatandoust insisted on the necessity of the formation of the Communist Party on orthodox Marxist lines in a tone reminiscent of the position which dominated the Third Congress. Ardalan on the other hand provided a more critical view of the event, less sympathetic to the leadership in the critical political climate of the Third Congress and immediately after.

13. See the Resolutions and Messages of the Third Congress op. cit. April 1983. The discussions of the Third Congress have been entirely recorded by some members who were at the time displeased with the direction the organisation was taking and subsequently left the KSZKI, refusing to be witness to its painful metamorphosis into the Communist Party of Iran. I am grateful to T. K., who put the tapes at my disposal. He wishes to remain anonymous. The bulk of my discussion of the Third Congress and its outcomes draws on the information contained in these tapes.
14. See *Barnameh-ye Komala baray-e Khodmokhtari-ye Kordestan: Mosaveb-e kongre-ye 4*, Bahman 1362/1983.
15. See *Jambandi-ye Mabahe-e kongre-ye Panjom, Ordibehesht-e 1365/ April 1986*.
16. The WCPI did not last long, and after the death of Mansour Hekmat, its founding leader and ideologue in July 2002, it was split, and the defectors formed WCPI-Hekmatist in 2004.