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THE POPULAR PRESS OF IRAN: 1964-1974

After the fall of the second Pahlavi monarch of Iran in January 1979, the conventional wisdom of postmortems on his policies and programmes has emphasized his inability to sell development and modernization to his people at a pace of his choosing. With a finality of judgement that comes only after the fact, his fall has been attributed to faulty perceptions about the role and function of structures of modernity borrowed from abroad and their consequent misapplication to the social and economic conditions of Iran in the sixties and seventies. The press as a modern institution in Iran antedates the Pahlavi dynasty by at least several decades. But its history there during the decade 1964-74 illustrates graphically the failure of the former Shah and his advisers to create conditions under which a national press could fulfill the traditional role of public watchdog, critic and adversary of state policy. Like several other institutions taken over from foreign models, the press and media in general were regarded by the ruler as useful vehicles for the consolidation and perpetuation of his power. For many reasons, some of which were doubtless self-imposed, the press in general took a very minimalist view of its role and responsibilities. In the absence of full financial independence, the press was easily controlled by state censorship and bent to the service of the regime's propaganda interests. In attempting to attain the twofold

objective of ingratiating itself with the authorities in the hope of financial aid, and satisfying the public's need for news, the press in general failed to win the confidence and satisfaction of either.

In Isfand 1341 (March 1963) nearly seventy daily and weekly publications were closed down, reducing the total number of serial publications throughout the country to one hundred and fifty-eight<sup>1</sup>. In the years that followed the political and social upheavals of mid-1963, the number rose again gradually achieving a total of two hundred and twelve, one hundred and thirty-eight of them in the capital. The character of these publications, their methods of operation and general objectives are a good index of the increasing subservience of journalism and the media to state control under conditions of accelerated economic development and rapid social change. Although the two large publishing houses of Kayhān and Ittilā'āt prospered in these years, putting new printing presses and equipment into service, increasing the pages in many publications, as well as their prices, there were no proportionate increases in the level of thought, knowledge and reporting skill of reporters and newsmen whose salaries remained relatively static while the profits of the corporate directors soared. Despite the relative improvement in the technical and financial positions of many publishing houses and individual publications in this decade, in comparison with the preceding, by opting for the road of state support the overwhelming majority of publications that reached the hands of the public were unable to satisfy their needs for news and for specific subject matter and content.

There were several reasons for the gradual decline of public confidence in the press - never very great at the best of times - over this period. Newsreports of local developments often did not correspond with public perceptions of reality. Information and public relations offices of the state apparatus spoke incessantly about what was going to happen rather than about what had actually been achieved, and these information releases

were parroted uncritically in the press. In reporting on actual developments editors frequently resorted to playing the game of words until the basic issue became completely obscured and any shortcomings carefully disguised. Most Iranians who experienced their press on the receiving end of an interview found their remarks grossly distorted in print. The general standard of literacy and cultural awareness in the press corps was considered very low by educated Iranians; this condition was usually explained by the fact that publishers generally preferred whoever was willing to work for the lowest wage. People who had business of one sort or another with various ministries or agencies of the government knew from personal experience that the civil service was inefficient, if not generally incompetent, and yet this condition was never reflected in the press. For those who wondered why, the excuse that reporters and newsmen were not informed on this subject was unacceptable. A more credible explanation was the publishers' deliberate policy of avoiding criticism of the state apparatus and its officials. The general disenchantment of educated Iranians with their press following the Khordad 1342 (June 1963) troubles, but especially after 1970, is vividly reflected in the following remarks:

Our press, with one minor exception, did not answer the spiritual needs of the educated Iranian. As for news, the radio and TV took away from the newspapers the opportunity of breaking important developments quickly to the public. The educated reader preferred to read foreign articles in their original language in foreign magazines. It often happened that translators were not as proficient as they should have been. Or editors felt that certain expressions were not useful to the readers of their newspapers or magazines and therefore omitted them. This group of readers could not find what they wanted by way of background to subjects of local interest<sup>2</sup>.

Part of the Iranian public's lack of confidence in their press undoubtedly had its origin in the latter's conception of its task. Publishers and pressmen considered their unique responsibility to be that of communicating the news. Background was completely ignored. Articles dealing with the philosophical roots of political and social issues were few and far between. If any attention was paid to such matters it was so exceptional that no practical result could be expected. Whereas in the years leading up to 1963 a number of articles dealing with political and social commentary could be found in various publications, especially the two large evening dailies of the capital, in the years that followed such articles disappeared. Occasionally the odd item of interest would turn up translated from the foreign press. These were carefully selected for their neutral character and lack of relevance to the local Iranian environment. In the decade 1964-74 no newspapers or magazines convened seminars on any subject. If Kayhān and Ittilā'āt occasionally raised socially relevant subjects, they were never followed up in a manner that would acquaint the reader with the roots of the matter. They would either cut off the discussion in mid-phase, for reasons best known to themselves, or if they continued it was in such a manner as to obscure the primary issue and preclude any positive result. In general the newspapers excused themselves from printing articles on pressing social issues either domestic or foreign. If anyone sought the reason for particular exceptions they would more than likely have been told that it was to stir up controversy to boost circulation. The two evening dailies in this ten-year period did not raise a single basic and important social or political issue affecting the interest and daily life of the masses. Instead they contented themselves with the following formula: special attention to the pronouncements of the ruler and the speeches of government officials (texts often in full) or ministerial bulletins, domestic news including a morbid preoccupation with murders and other crimes, short excerpts translated

from the foreign press and brief foreign news coverage from foreign news services, an entertainment section including details on the private lives of movie stars and singers, occasional sallies into the realm of the arts and culture with superficial articles on such topics as the controversy between supporters of the old and the new poetry or painting, advertisements and want-ads, and sports. The major reason why the Iranian press could not and did not fulfill public expectations of it was that with the increasing economic power of the state the press fixed its eyes on the hand and purse of the state in the hope of financial aid as the answer to their central problem. In the words of Ittilā'āt:

"... to fulfill such a duty would be much easier when the press is guided by a sound, correct and very close tie with the state... the state will help the press to fulfill its duties by means of an expanded policy of guidance and information"<sup>3</sup>.

Into this picture of the press in Iran during the years 1964-74 several features of contour and definition, which represent exceptions to the overall image, should be inserted. One of these is the role played by the popular press in the first half of that decade. These years witnessed a general proliferation of more popular serial publications - dailies, weeklies, monthlies and quarterlies - some in the format of a newspaper, others as magazines<sup>4</sup>. For a time at the beginning of this ten-year period the relative indifference of the population to the contents of the press was reflected in a number of these serials, some newly established, others older. The press as a whole seemed to find greater public approval, if only for a limited time, when newspapers and magazines appeared to be in competition for articles dealing with problems relating to the life of the masses. The comparative fortunes of these publications in the struggle to promote what was then still a relatively new medium did not depend solely on the ability of editors to attract the interest of readers at

a level below that of average. Many of these serials sustained extensive transformations of format, cover design and content in order to broaden their popular appeal and expand their readership. And yet many failed after several years or a year, more or less, of survival, thus lending credence to the argument that popular appeal and circulation, although important, were less crucial to their ultimate survival than government attitudes and policies.

According to the testimony of some inside observers, the condition of the fourth pillar of Iranian Constitutionalism at the time was hardly flourishing. Newspaper sales were nowhere near international averages (10 per cent of the population) and the level of writing and reporting in most publications was not up to international standards, however that may have been reckoned. Factors inhibiting the growth of circulation and financial security of publishing houses were considered to be chiefly difficulties of distribution and the lack of a coherent policy for commercial advertising, rather than the recalcitrance of the reading public<sup>5</sup>. The situation vis-à-vis the popular magazines was scarcely better. There were only four of these that could be considered successful, each having clearly defined its objectives and purposes and carefully identified its own readership; they were Zan-i Rūz, Ittilā'āt-i Haftigī, Taufiq and Firdausī. All other weeklies were in some sense imitative of these four types and were therefore proportionately less successful, if they could survive at all<sup>6</sup>.

Facts and figures on these publications are of interest as part of the general picture of the vicissitudes of the Iranian press in the late sixties and early seventies. Of more intrinsic interest are several social and cultural implications derived from careful review of a sub-group among these weekly magazines, i. e. Tihrān-i Muṣavvar, Firdausī, Umīd-i Irān, and Raushanfikr<sup>7</sup>. These magazines obviously belonged to the same genre; they exhibited a high degree of similarity with regard to form, content and style and it may therefore be assumed they were aimed at

the same reading constituency. This readership was carefully identified by the publishers and editors and if relatively limited by comparison with standards for like magazines in more populous countries, it was nonetheless a market which was expected to increase significantly as a by-product of expanding education and a nation-wide literacy campaign under government sponsorship. For convenience sake we refer to this genre as "the popular literary and semi-cultural weekly"<sup>8</sup>.

The first thing to be noted about this genre is that in the context of the Middle East it is a derivative type modelled, in both conception and execution, on foreign prototypes. A local Iranian observer of this type of publication, Jalal Al Ahmad, set a terminus a quo of 1941 for its first full-fledged appearance and subsequent efflorescence in Iran<sup>9</sup>. In his view, this phenomenon was just one of the many conclusive signs of the Iranian government's obsessive infatuation with, and desire to imitate, Western social and cultural forms, regardless of their desirability and potential compatibility with the Iranian cultural milieu. Even if we discount Al Ahmad's deep pessimism, there can be little disagreement that a number of quite unnecessary excesses were committed in the vanguard of these weekly serials which outraged the moral sensibilities of an important sector of the population.

It is argued here that by the end of the sixties these magazines had to some extent outgrown their initial awkwardness and frequent excesses, and although still by no means free from certain endemic defects, had displayed a number of features which gave them a wider potential for social and cultural influence. What is to be regretted is that, with the possible exception of Firdausī, these features did not represent a consistent or lasting policy on the part of the ownership and editorial committees of these magazines. One of the more important of these tendencies was the roster of professional people mustered by the editors to provide authentic material and commentary on a wide variety of topical subjects. This development was a long step forward

from the days when virtually all articles and stories, regardless of author, were written in slavish imitation of the language and style of a Faramarzi, Javaher Kalam, Musta'an or Ganjeh'i. Perhaps as a reaction to this earlier cult of personality in many serials, a new trend appeared - albeit somewhat transiently in many cases - toward the end of the decade of the sixties, of drawing into each issue as many specialists and authorities as possible from a wide spectrum of interests and professions. A typical example of this tendency is reflected in an issue of Tihrān-i Muṣavvar<sup>10</sup>. Among other features there are articles by, or interviews with, ten wellknown authorities of the time in various fields. Of these ten contributors, five dealt with literary matters, two of them from an historical perspective and two from a critical and contemporary standpoint. The two contemporary pieces, by Manuchehr Ateshi and Reza Baraheni, were authored by prominent practising poets.

The question that arises in this connection is why so many creative writers, scholars and university professors were constrained to write regularly for these weekly serials. Baraheni, then a teacher of English literature at Tehran University and a prominent critic on the local literary scene, provides us with a clue to his motivation in writing for such weeklies. He believed that the monthly and quarterly magazines were of little value in a world of rapid social and cultural change, such as existed in Iran of the day. They were a forum where important current issues could only be aired when they had grown old and stale, left behind by the rapid and inexorable forward march of modern life. In the weekly magazines, on the other hand, it was possible, provided one kept one's mental antennas attuned, to grasp something substantive from this kaleidoscopic caravan of events and pass it on to the reader. Whereas the daily newspaper demanded such a frenetic rate of output as to preclude anything but nonsense, writing for the monthly journal or annual would result more often than not in the purveying of an already antiquated mes-

sage. The weekly journal was a compromise between the exigencies of rapid change, and the need to draw meaning and sustenance from passing events. It did not deal with these events in such haste that one had no chance to reflect on them, nor so slowly that these same events had lost all relevance and significance before one could communicate this to the reader. In the weekly serial one could be an attentive receiver and still be mindful of the need to stop and reflect before communicating with the reader<sup>11</sup>.

This view of change in pre-revolutionary Iranian society was obviously one which would not have been shared equally by different sectors of that society. Many scholars and intellectuals would have preferred to believe that the rate of change was not nearly that rapid and that monthly, bi-monthly and quarterly publications on social and cultural affairs, especially in areas such as economics and literature, would continue to have relevance and serve a useful function in promoting ideas and exchanges thereof in the society at large. This opinion would find considerable external evidence to support it, such as the continued popularity of monthlies like Nigān, and the forum for discussion of social problems, Masā'il-i Irān. These publications, and many others like them<sup>12</sup>, continued to find a place in the broad spectrum of interest in social and cultural affairs in Iran, and played an influential, if somewhat declining, role.

What should be emphasized is that the popular weeklies catered to a broader and rather different clientele. It was often said, and with some justice, that these weeklies continued to retain their popularity only by providing a hodge-podge of fare, a grab-bag of articles and features on a broad range of subjects in which there was usually something for every taste. A glance through the above-mentioned example of Tihrān-i Muṣavvar would seem to confirm this general impression. It is obvious that this kind of mixture was calculated to draw as wide an audience as possible. Not every reader would read all the articles in a given

issue, but the presumption was clearly that the reading habits of the Iranian public were such that a blend of this kind served them best. It must also be assumed that in such a publication articles of a more serious nature on literature, for example, would gain broader exposure and a wider readership than if published in a heavier literary journal like Sukhan. This kind of assumption also lay behind the regular contribution of serious literary critics like Baraheni and Dastghayb to these weekly serials<sup>13</sup>. And yet, there was more to it than that. In a sense the medium itself provided such individuals not just greater or wider exposure, but an opportunity in a society of rapidly changing social values, to influence the development of new standards and values in literature and society at large. The custodians of a purblind literary orthodoxy in pre-revolution Iran would not likely be much influenced by the iconoclasm of a Baraheni printed in a monthly issue of Yaghmā or a university literary quarterly. But the possibility of inculcating an awareness of the need for change and revaluation in all the fundamental institutions and structures of society was far greater amongst that educated sector of the society who read these popular weeklies. Such an objective would require strong language and an aggressive public posture. Both were clearly evident in these words of Baraheni:

In the struggle which my peers and I are waging there is no room for sweetness. The prose I write was born of the individual and collective disputes of our time. In the years since the Constitution the Iranian nation hasn't accomplished anything of any great significance so as to deserve a distinguished prose. The same is true of its poetry. That delicate, polished prose (of zabān-i ma'ṣūm-i fārsī) suited admirably the generation of privilege and titles. The same is true of that searing noble Persian verse. But this kind of prose is inscriptional, etched on a background of decadence. Is it journalistic? Indeed it is, and must be so. Does

it smack of petty commercialism? Indeed it does and must do. But whatever it is, it's not fake. It has life, it moves, it takes this generation - and even the generation before - by the collar and explains them, and in the event they may have proven barren and sterile, exposes them in full view... . This prose is historic for the reason that it belongs to and comes face to face with that decadent by-way whose name is history; it is also anti-historic in that it opposes that decadent by-way which it confronts and is in open conflict with it.

Of course it has metaphor, simile and allegory, but these are simply devices of disguise to be made strategic use of by those in the vanguard of the struggle, a struggle which allows no slacking, and calls for attack by means of the pen, frankly and bluntly, sometimes of short duration and sometimes prolonged, but in any case, an attack. Prose obviously involves disputation and where disputation is concerned there is no place for sweetness<sup>14</sup>.

Perhaps the most significant feature of these popular literary and semi-cultural weeklies was the conspicuous absence of any consistent philosophy or ideology, social, cultural or other, which informed its editorial commentary and other content and provided a meaningful frame of reference for its readers. It was an article of faith even in traditional Iranian journalist circles, that the press is an important pillar of any modern society and as such should play a significant role in moulding the ideas and thought patterns of that society<sup>15</sup>. Without a mould this obviously cannot be accomplished. None of these magazines succeeded in creating a clearly defined social philosophy or policy through which the ideas and opinions of readers might be influenced or changed. This would normally be the responsibility of the owner, his editor-in-chief, or the editorial board of the journal. It would be achieved over a period of time through the medium of editorials, criticism and commentary, and the content formula of the maga-

zine. The editorial policy of these magazines in no case emerged in the form of a coherent and integrated set of principles regarding the broad spectrum of social and cultural life. Editorials could and did take a position on a particular issue but this position was normally dictated by the rapid flow of changing circumstances and did not derive from a broad and fundamental point of view. In this respect these editorials had yet to implement the exhortations of an earlier generation when guidelines for the writer were set down typically as follows:

The editorial should always take cognizance of three essential points: the policy of the paper, the attention of the reader and the topicality of the subject<sup>16</sup>.

What was obviously missing from these magazines and their editorials was substantive political commentary and criticism. Such a lack was bound to leave a large gap in the editorial writer's efforts to propound any coherent and comprehensive social ideology. The reason for this glaring omission, for the artificial character of these magazines and the non-existent or truncated form of their "policy", was the pervasive influence of the censor.

Two things are influential in the creation or altering of public opinion: one is effective communication in the context of free speech and comment, the other is the censor: both have their own special methods and particular influence, but we omit further mention of these in order to avoid prolixity<sup>17</sup>.

Regardless of the relative merits of the Press Law of 1963, and arguments regarding the extent to which it legalized censorship, the history of the press in Iran and its control through the censor created an accumulated hypersensitivity to the whole question, which in turn inhibited both writers and editors and fostered practices which were both beyond the letter of the law and the need it sought to serve. Owners and editors were subconsciously reminded of the fate of such predecessors as Afsah al-Mutakallimin, Labib al-Malik, Jehangir Shirazi and Malik al-Mu-

takallimin<sup>18</sup>, and were obsessed with the desire to apply the requisite self-censorship. It may have been difficult for the outside observer to summon much concern about the problem of censorship in Iran (with or without a copy of Taufiq in hand), but the whole question took on surrealist dimensions when it was common knowledge that many of the key editors also worked in the Ministry of Information, the government agency responsible for press censorship under the guidance of the law. To the uninvolved outsider such an arrangement merely seemed somewhat cynical and hypocritical. To the involved insider trying to publish responsible critical comment to topical social issues the situation was usually frustrating and restrictive. When the degree of local sensitivity to this matter assumed such proportions that it prevented the articulation and exposition of a full-fledged social, political and cultural philosophy for which weekly magazines like Tihrān-i Muṣavvar or Raushanfikr<sup>19</sup> could stand in the minds of their readers, then the whole situation assumed more serious proportions for the future role of periodicals as catalysts in the process of social and cultural change in Iran.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Mas'ud Barzin, Matbū'āt-i Irān: 1343-53 (Tehran: Behjat Publications 1354/1976), pp. 7-9.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 16-17.

<sup>3</sup> Wednesday, 11 Ordibehesht 1353 (1 May 1974), quoted in Barzin, p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> For these publications see the chart in Barzin, p. 28.

<sup>5</sup> Mehdi Samsar, Firdausi, No. 1013, pp. 13-14.

<sup>6</sup> Nasir Khodayar, Firdausi, No. 1015, pp. 15, 48. If relative circulation figures were the only measure of success in this scheme, it is difficult to see how such weeklies as Sipid-o Siyāh and Ittilā'āt-i Bānūvān, with claimed circulation of fifty thousand and thirty thousand respectively, were not to be considered equally successful.

<sup>7</sup> Of these four magazines the first was the oldest and had thus appeared most often. The cover of Firdausi for issue No. 1053 claims the magazine was then in its twenty-second year of publication, indicating that over the years it had fallen more than a year behind regular issue. The third and fourth were roughly half the age of the first. All continued to flourish in the decade of the sixties. Despite extensive government support Raushanfikr folded in the early seventies. None appear to have survived the revolution.

<sup>8</sup> This may then be considered a sub-classification within the more general species which Al Ahmad called rangin nāmah-hā-yi haftigī. See varshikastigī-yi matbū'āt in his Sih Maqālah-yi Digar, (Tehran 1342), p. 11 et passim. A more recent and more satisfactory classification scheme for all Iranian serial publications, where these magazines are included in the category majalāt-i haftigī, is provided by Mas'ud Barzīn, Sayrī dar Matbū'āt-i Irān, (Tehran: Rasti Press 1344/1966), p. 50f, and Matbū'āt-i Irān, pp. 81-92.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 18f.

<sup>10</sup> No. 1347, Tir 24 to 31, 1348 (July 15-22, 1970). The bias of this journal at the time toward literature is immediately obvious; of a total of twenty-nine separate pieces, twelve dealt with one or another aspects of matters literary and six of these were feature articles. The next most popular subject was history with a total of four articles (three features), followed by two each for editorial commentary and general social affairs. The amplitude of offerings was considerably extended by one article on each of the following subject: psychology, women, art, sex, movies, science, education, international affairs, provincial affairs. Unfortunately this trend lasted only a few months in this particular magazine, and it soon reverted to type, i.e. a more pallid bill of fare with heavy emphasis on sports, sex, sensational events from the local and international scenes, and love stories of the 'popular romance' type.

<sup>11</sup> Tihirān-i Muṣavvar, No. 1347, p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> Sukhan, Yaghma, Vahid, Rāhnāmā-yi Kitāb and the various quarterly journals of the universities' faculties of letters. These magazines represented a primarily traditional approach to literature. They did not exhibit any great concern for modern literature and were conservative, not only critically, but also artistically.

<sup>13</sup> Both have published their critical views in book form as well. See, Reza Baraheni, Talā dar Mas, 2nd Ed., (Tehran: Zaman 1347) and Qaṣṣah-nivīsī, (Tehran: Ashrafi 1348); Abdol-Ali Dastghayb, Tahlili az Shi'r-i Nau-wi Fārsi, (Tehran: Sa'ib 1345).

<sup>14</sup> Tihirān-i Muṣavvar, No. 1347, p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> Abd al-Rahman Faramarzi, Zabān-i Matbū'āt, (Tehran: Ibn-i Sina 1349), pp. 41-43.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>18</sup> Jehangir Solhju, Tārīkh-i Matbū'āt dar Irān va Jihān, (Tehran: Amir Kabir-Kitabha-yi Simurgh No. 56 1348), pp. 73, 98, 100-01.

<sup>19</sup> Many observers would no doubt have made an exception of Khāndanīhā. According to one it "enjoys a reputation of relative editorial independence and integrity". (Amin Banani, The Role of the Mass Media [in:] Iran Faces the Seventies, ed. Ehsan Yar-Shater, New York-Washington-London: Praeger 1981, p. 337). In the view of another, an important factor in its success was its political influence stemming primarily from the personal column of its owner, Ali Asghar Amirani. "The editorials of Khāndanīhā, strong, apposite, factual and frank, and sometimes two-sided - though its first numbers elicited some criticism against it - have gradually brought it to the point where it can affect public opinion. ... No other publication until now has been able to create, through its editorial, a public following to the same extent as Khāndanīhā. Every issue has an average of six readers but the figure goes up to from eight to ten for the editorial". (Barzīn, Sayrī, p. 61). This last testimony would have to be discounted somewhat as it comes from a former editor of this journal. Moreover Khāndanīhā appeared twice weekly, and by Barzīn's own admission it became, by 1966, "almost exclusively an organ for higher civil servants and the elite political circles resident in the country both domestic and foreign". It is therefore of another category than those magazines considered here.