Hojjatieh (Hujjatiya)

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HOJJATIYA, a Shi?ite religious lay association founded by the charismatic cleric Shaikh Mahmud Halabi to defend Islam against the Bahai missionary activities. Hojjatiya exerted considerable, albeit indirect and unintended, influence on the education and world-view of the lay elite leadership of the 1979 Islamic revolution. The association was founded in the aftermath of the coup d’état of 1953. The explicit goal of Hojjatiya was to train cadres for the “scientific defense” of Shi?ite Islam in the face of the Bahai theological challenge (author’s interview with Mahmud Halabi, July 1994). Bahai missionaries (moballegs) argued that Shi?a’s awaited savior (Mahdi, also referred to as Hazrat-e Hojjat) had already emerged and that Islam had been superceded by the Bahai faith. Hojjatiya sought to defend the Shi?ite position based on both Islamic and Bahai texts. Halabi’s own sensitivity to this controversy stems from a personal encounter. As a seminarian he and his colleague Sayyed ?Abbas ?Alawi had been approached by a Bahai missionary, who had succeeded in persuading the latter to convert. Alarmed by this experience, Halabi abandoned the normal course of his studies and immersed himself in the study of Bahai history and original texts with the intention of composing a comprehensive Islamic response to the Bahai challenge. Halabi’s original plan to train a group of seminarians to discharge these duties was rebuffed by the clerical establishment in Qom. Halabi then embarked upon recruiting a corps of volunteer lay disciples adept at both substantive arguments and debating skills. This is the group that came to be known, after the Islamic revolution, as Anjoman-e hojjatiya.

Although the primary stages of Halabi’s project evolved in his native Mašhad, he met with little enthusiasm there. It took him six months to recruit and train his first serious student (author’s interview with Mahmud Halabi, May 1978). Halabi’s decision to move to Tehran proved a strategic success. The first circle of his students in Tehran were comprised of religious merchants and professionals (author’s interview with Hosayn Tajeri, June, 2002). They, in turn, succeeded in recruiting from a talented pool of ardent students from religious as well as secular high schools. By the late 1960s the second generation of Hojjatiya recruits had entered universities and embarked upon modernizing and standardizing the management of the association. Therefore, the early 1970s witnessed organizational reforms within the association that reflected increasing complexity and division of labor. Graduates of the basic instruction on Shi?ite and Bahai history and theology were recruited in specialist teams of operations. The latter included: The Guidance Team (Goruh-e eršad), that was charged with debating Bahai missionaries, persuading Bahais to return to Islam, and neutralizing the effects of Bahai missionary activity on those exposed to it. The Instruction Team (Goruh-e tadris) along with the Authorship Team (Goruh-e nega-reš) jointly worked to standardize instructional material and levels. These came to include basic instruction (paya), the intermediary training (viža), and the graduate training (naqd-e Iqan). Most of the instructional material was distributed, in typed and copied form (poly-copy) in classes that met weekly in private homes across the country. They were retrieved within a week so that no copies would leave the provenance of the association. Students were instructed not to share or discuss the material with outsiders. The public speaking team (Goruh-e sokanrani) organized weekly public gatherings in various venues that featured trained Hojjatiya speakers discussing Shi?ite theology, critiquing Bahai positions, and fielding questions. The intelligence team, named the Investigation Team (Goruh-e tahqiq) operated, in three distinct regiments, as a fifth column within the Bahai ranks and succeeded in thoroughly penetrating the Bahai hierarchy.

Unbeknownst to Bahai’s, some members of the Hojjatiya had advanced to the rank of prominent Bahai missionaries (author’s interview with Asgar Sadeqi, June 2000). There were, also, smaller service-providing units within Hojjatiya such as the bureau of contact with foreign countries, bureau of libraries and archives, and bureau of publications. Thus, the most salient specialists in the association were known, in the jargon of Hojjatiya, as: polemical activists (mobarez), public speakers (sokanran), instructors (modarres), and intelligence operatives (mo-haqqeq). Most full-fledged Hojjatiya members carried out at least two of the above duties in the course of weekly meetings. Bahais reacted to the emergence of Hojjatiya by adopting a more defensive and reserved posture and by avoiding open debates and confrontations. This response further emboldened the Hojjatiya members and reassured them of the effectiveness of their approach (author’s interview with Mansur Pahlavan, August 2001). The organization steadily grew and by the early 1970s had spread throughout Iran and a few neighboring countries such as Pakistan and India. Indeed, in certain parts of Iran, Hojjatiya grew disproportionately to the Bahai threat and bred resentment among other Islamic organizations, that intended to mimic its success or to recruit from the same pool of talented religious youths (account of Hašem Aqajari about his involvement with Hojjatiya).

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Between the early 1950s and early 1970s a great number of the future elite of the Islamic revolution were trained, usually as a transitory stage in their ideological development, in pedagogic and practical venues provided by Hojjatiya. Beyond Hojjatiya's explicit and stated objectives, a sense of dedication, engagement, and accomplishment akin to a Jesuit zeal electrified successive generations of its members. Along with ?Ali Asgar (?Allama) Karbascian's ?Alawi High School, Halabi's Anjoman-e Hojjatiya signified traditional Shi?ite Islam's attempt to acclimatize itself to the modern environment and to utilize its resources for the propagation of its worldview (see, e.g., Abdolkarim Soroush's [pp. 5-6] account of his encounter with Hojjatiya). Ironically, in its attempt to confront the Bahai challenge, Hojjatiya emulated a number of Bahai idiosyncra-cies such as the practice of secrecy with respect to the workings of its bureaucracy and access to its original literature, the lay hierarchical nature of the organization, and the unhindered access to modern means of communication and implements. For example, long before Hosayniya-ye eršad, the first modern Islamic lecture hall, was inaugurated in the north of Tehran, Hojjatiya's public gatherings had become the first Islamic organization to replace rugs and pulpits with chairs and lecterns. Members of Hojjatiya, unlike their traditional brethren, were clean-shaven and groomed for success in the secular educational and professional world (author's interview with Ahmad Qandi, June 1997). Hojjatiya, under the leadership of Halabi, had succeeded in acquiring necessary religious dispensations and written permissions for usage of a portion of tithes (sahm-e emam) from Shi?ite grand Ayatollahs. These resources were spent for logistical purposes only, as the entire body of the Hojjatiya was comprised of volunteer members.

From the very beginning the activities of Hojjatiya attracted the attention of the security apparatus of the Pahlavi regime. Based on documents published after the Revolution, the leadership of Hojjatiya was pressured to formally register the association as a non-profit, philanthropic organization—hence the title, Anjoman-e Kayriya-ye Hojjatiya Mahdawiya—and to promise to abstain from political activities. The latter pledge came to haunt the association after the Revolution of 1979 (Bagi, p. 78; Ahmadzadeh, pp. 27-28).

The Islamic revolution caught Hojjatiya by surprise. The initial reaction of the leadership toward the Islamic revolution was one of skepticism and suspicion. This caused many defections in its ranks (author's interview in July 1999 with Mehdi Tayyeb, a primary leader of defection). With the success of the revolution Hojjatiya, under the leadership of Halabi, attempted to placate the revolutionary leadership but was rebuffed. Ayatollah Khomeini, despite his earlier affirmation of the association (Dar rasta-ye feqahat, pp. 9-13), allowed open criticism of its apolitical nature and its "conservative bias" in interpreting Islam (Rafsanjani, p. 366; Kaz?ali, pp. 9-10). Finally, five years after the Islamic revolution, Khomeini publically threatened Hojjatiya with violent suppression in thinly veiled words. Halabi, responded by terminating all of the activities of the

Hojjatiya in a terse notice published in a number of newspapers (Keyhan and Ettela?at, 5 Farvardin 1362 Š./25 March 1984). The announcement was followed by a widespread campaign to purge Hojjatiya affiliates from decision-making, academic, and educational bodies throughout Iran.

The animosity between Halabi and Khomeini is traceable to their distinct casuistries concerning the meaning of Messianism in Islam (mahdawiyat). Inasmuch as Islam shares the Judeo-Christian Messianic tendencies (Sachedina, pp. 1-2) one may draw a parallel between the Judeo-Christian and the Islamic brands of pre-millenarianism and post-millenarianism (see “Millenarianism” in Merriam-Webster Encyclopedia of World Religions, Springfield, Mass., 1999). The quietist conservative interpretation of Hojjatiya is akin to a pre-millenarian world-view that, while advocating the ardent and pious practice of “awaiting” the savior, discourages active revolt in order to hasten the appearance of the “Mahdi” or any attempt to build the promised Islamic utopia in the absence of the awaited one. The revolutionary activism of Khomeini, on the other hand, is reminiscent of the post-millenarian tendencies in Christianity and Judaism in that it advocates taking an active role in bringing about the just Islamic society prior to the appearance of the Mahdi in order to hasten his coming. A telling incident illustrates the aforementioned contrast: in the months following the success of the 1979 Islamic revolution, the gatherings with Hojjatiya affiliation had adopted the slogan of “O Mahdi, make your appearance” (Mahdi bia Mahdi bia). In response, the pro-Khomeini crowds composed a slogan of their own “O God, O God preserve Khomeini until Mahdi appears; preserve him even alongside Mahdi” (Kodaya, Kodaya ta enqelab-e Mahdi, hatta kenar-e Mahdi, Ko-meyni ra negahdar).

In the years since the termination of the Hojjatiya activities, the origins, nature, and goals of the association have been publicly debated with varying levels of accuracy and objectivity. Its detractors from the left and the right have played a pivotal role in perpetuating views that vastly exaggerate and distort the organization’s influence and agenda through spreading myths and conspiracy theories about Hojjatiya. The pro-Khomeini religious establishment (both organizations such as the Revolutionary Guards and individuals such as Shaikh Sadeq Kalkali (Katerat, pp. 195-96; Anjoman-e Hojjatiya, nasli ma?yus az harakat wa enqelab, pp. 122-34) have repeatedly maintained that the Hojjatiya’s line remains alive and continues to pose a threat to the revolutionary cause in Iran. The secular critics (namely the Tudeh Party and its ideological allies) have claimed that the association, despite its obvious fall from favor, has been the true power broker behind the scenes. They have used the title Hojjatiya as a euphemism for all they deem retrogressive, authoritarian, bourgeois, and pertaining to an agent of imperialism in post-revolutionary Iran (see “Mafia-ye Hojjatiya”). However, the original members of the association have largely declined to join the debate, perhaps for reasons ranging from a pious penchant for secrecy to a genuine fear of reprisals.

As the leaders of Hojjatiya were committed to a non-violent, persuasive strategy in dealing with Bahais, the Association did not take part in persecution of Bahais in post-revolutionary Iran. For all Halabi’s animus against Bahais, he was a disciplined pacifist. He was distraught by violence and repeatedly warned his followers: “This is not the way, this is not our way” (interview with Nader Fazeli, 2003).

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