

Received: 21 September 2021 Accepted: 21 September 2021

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33182/ks.v9i2.656>

BOOK REVIEWS

Abbas Vali, **The Forgotten Years of Kurdish Nationalism in Iran [Minorities in West Asia and North Africa.]** Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. XVI + 238 pp. ISBN 978-3-030-16071-5 (paperback); <https://doi.org/10.1007/987-3-030-16069-2> (eBook).

Reviewed by Martin van Bruinessen

The forgotten years of the title are those between the fall of the Republic of Kurdistan in late 1946 and the struggle for Kurdish autonomy at the time of Iran's Islamic Revolution, and the book is a sequel to Abbas Vali's previous one, which dealt with the emergence of Kurdish nationalism and the Republic as its political expression (Vali, 2011). Long awaited, it was expected to fill a major gap in the historiography of the Kurdish movement in Iran. The existing literature in English, considerably less extensive than that concerning the other parts of Kurdistan, has focused mainly on the Mahabad Republic and the years of struggle during and immediately after the Revolution, with little or no attention to the developments in between. Yet it may be argued that the particular shape Kurdish nationalism took in Iran cannot be explained without a better understanding of crucial developments of the 1950s and 1960s that continued to define the political and ideological debates in the later period.

This includes the way the communist Tudeh party and its Soviet sponsors gained and continued to hold almost full control of Kurdish activism, until Mullah Mustafa Barzani's movement in Iraq began to constitute a rival form of patronage in the 1960s. Memories of a large peasant uprising in 1952-53, violently suppressed by an alliance of landlords and the Iranian military, haunted later debates on class and ethnicity in the Kurdish struggle as well as those between Soviet-type and Maoist leftists. More than three decades of political quietism on the part of the major Kurdish party, the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI), were briefly interrupted by an ill-prepared armed uprising in 1967-69, whose leaders were in retrospect remembered as national heroes even by those who considered their action unwise. The existing literature is either completely silent on these developments or makes a tantalizingly brief reference to them, before jumping from the Mahabad Republic to the Iranian Revolution. It is only the political economy of Iranian Kurdistan during this period, notably the changes in landholding, that has received more than superficial treatment (Ghassemlou, 1965; Koohi-Kamali, 2003).

In all these respects, Vali's new book represents a considerable advance. The 1952 peasant uprising and the 1967 armed movement receive lengthy discussion, which is followed by a chapter on the later emergence and background of the KDPI's main rival Kurdish party, Komala. Vali devotes much attention to the heavy-handed intervention of the Tudeh party and its foreign bosses in the KDPI. Throughout the period under consideration, he argues, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) demanded subservience to anti-



imperialism, i.e. alignment with the Soviet Union in global geopolitics and de facto renunciation of the right to self-determination, on behalf of Soviet interests in Iran. Basing himself on the memoirs of and on interviews with leading KDPI politicians of the period (Karim Hussami, Ghani Bilurian, Hemin, Mohammad Amin Sarraji, Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou – all of whom would probably disagree with Vali's interpretations), he sketches the history of the party as one of failure to realize the national interests of the Kurds. The KDPI's slogan of 'autonomy for Kurdistan and democracy for Iran', which for some Western friends signaled the non-radical and reasonable aspirations of Iran's Kurds (and which mirrored the similar slogan of the Iraqi KDP), represented in Vali's analysis a surrender to Soviet demands. (True nationalists would not demand anything less than independence, if I understand Vali correctly.)

Vali contests many established and widely shared views of Iran's Kurdish movement, offering information that was previously unavailable (at least in English) or radically different interpretations. He scathingly dismisses the apologetic views of those who perceived a difference between the Tudeh (unsympathetic to Kurdish ethnicity) and the CPSU (supportive of national liberation movements). His account makes Tudeh control of the KDPI more pervasive than any previous author's. Ghassemlou, the KDPI's most prominent leader from at least 1973 onwards, who was widely considered as a sort of social democrat by his Western friends, appears here as a staunch and prominent member of the Tudeh rather than the KDPI through the 1950s and most of the 1960s. In 1979, however, Ghassemlou's unwillingness to accommodate with Iran's Islamic revolutionary and anti-imperialist regime irritated the Tudeh leadership, which made efforts to have him replaced. This resulted in a split in the party, in which Hussami, Bilurian, Hemin and Sarraji broke away to lead a pro-Soviet alternative KDPI. This breakaway formation soon lost its significance, however, because Ghassemlou controlled most of the fighters, enjoyed greater personal popularity, and had the support of neighbouring Iraq.

Mulla Mustafa Barzani's remarkable influence on the KDPI, in the early years as well as during the 1960s, also receives elaborate discussion. Soon after his arrival in Baku in 1947, Barzani set about organizing a pan-Kurdish nationalist party of a pro-Soviet stance, involving Iraqi and Iranian Kurdish exiles present in the city, including men who were to be among the next generation of leaders of the KDPI. Vali's discussion of this period, which provides much previously unknown information on Soviet policies concerning the Kurds, is based on the memoirs by Hussami *et al.* and on informed guesses on the motivation and perceptions of the actors. (Important new insights may yet emerge from the systematic study of the relevant Soviet archives, such as is currently being undertaken by Nodar Mossaki.) After his return to Iraq in 1958, Barzani soon emerged as the patron of KDPI activists in Iraqi exile. (Most party cadres lived in exile for much of their lives: in Soviet Azerbaijan, Eastern Europe, or Iraq.) He succeeded in sidelining the pro-Tudeh faction and making his protégé Ahmad Towfiq the single most powerful man in the KDPI.

As with most other issues covered in the book, the reader only learns implicitly about these developments from Vali's comments and his strident criticism of others' views and interpretations. Vali appears not much interested in narrative history but primarily in theoretical analysis. The book builds on decades of discussion and debate with other Iranian Kurds and appears to be addressed primarily to those long-time interlocutors. The events and personalities of the period are assumed to be known, although adequate accounts in English

are as yet non-existent. Vali forcefully presents arguments to support his analysis and interpretation of the events, invariably against established opinion, but only rarely does he provide a full and systematic account of the developments.

The 1952-53 peasant uprising in the district of Bukan, some 50 kms to the southeast of Mahabad, is a case in point. It had long been neglected by historians, even those interested in agrarian affairs and class struggle. In Ghassemlou's book, which pays much attention to landholding patterns and feudal relations in Kurdistan, the uprising merits a mere two sentences (1965: 177) -- an indication perhaps that neither the KDPI nor the Tudeh had been involved. The only other mention in a Western language that I am aware of is by the Swiss traveler Nicolas Bouvier, who spent time in and around Mahabad in the spring of 1954 and heard lively stories of the recent 'jacquerie' and its violent suppression, in which fifty peasants were killed (1963: 173). The late Marxist scholar Amir Hassanpour was the first to systematically interview survivors of the event. Vali acknowledges his debt to Hassanpour, whose material he perused but whose analysis he does not share. (Hassanpour's account and analysis of the uprising was published posthumously, in Persian, in 2021.) Vali gives his analysis of the uprising -- which was sparked by government promises of alleviating the degree of rural exploitation and which soon assumed the character of a genuine class conflict, in which both peasants and landlords were aware of their class interest -- but for details of the events he refers to articles in Kurdish or Persian by Hassanpour and a few others that are not easily accessible. His analysis focuses on the failure of the Tudeh and KDPI to respond to the situation, which he blames on the 'superficiality of the Tudeh's class discourse' and the 'anomalies of the KDPI's painfully adopted class politics' (59).

The chapter on Komala, the 'Revolutionary Association of the Toilers of Iranian Kurdistan', places the emergence of this group against a background in which the 'political field' in Kurdistan was dominated by the 'Marxified' nationalism and reformism of the KDPI on the one hand and the non-Kurdish, all-Iranian Marxist left (Tudeh and the Feda'iyān-e Khalq) on the other. Vali is scornful of the party's 'chronic theoretical poverty' and 'naïve populist empiricism' and its inability to resolve the tension between class and ethnic-national identities. Komala gave theoretical priority to the class struggle of the Iranian proletariat but, as Vali notes, its actual political practice pushed it towards nationalism, especially where it had to compete with the KDPI and its program of autonomy and civic and democratic rights. In 1982 (after the pro-Soviet party Tudeh had been suppressed by the Islamic Republic's regime), Komala restyled itself as the Communist Party of Iran, 'erasing its ethnic identity [in favour of a] proletarian identity derived not from political practice but from an imaginary representation of the Iranian proletariat' (160).

In Vali's conceptual framework, sketched in the first chapter, resistance to sovereign domination is the defining element of popular democratic politics. (He appears to consider nationalist movements more genuinely popular-democratic than vanguard parties preaching class struggle.) Modern Kurdish identity is produced through resistance to domination by the Iranian nation-state. Modernization of the regime (under the Pahlavi shahs) required the suppression of Kurdish identity. Class relations in Kurdistan were impacted by heavy-handed intervention by the institutions of the state. A proper analysis, Vali insists in his criticism of the various leftist movements, needs to take account of the historical specificity of the Kurdish community rather than apply an abstract model of class struggle. Although he pays little explicit attention to the political economy, he acknowledges its significance (notably the

impact of the land reform) in defining the modality of sovereign domination and thereby of class and ethnic identities. The framework, informed by eclectic borrowing from the political thinkers Schmitt, Agamben, Negri, Foucault, and Derrida as stray references indicate, remains rather abstract. The historical specificity of the Kurdish community, which Vali frequently invokes in his criticism of the major political movements as well as other analysts, remains almost devoid of empirical content, nor is there an attempt to show what makes it different from the specificity of Iran's Azeri, Baluch or Arab communities.

The reader who expects to find here a handy summary of the developments in Iranian Kurdistan in the second half of the twentieth century will be disappointed. Considerable background knowledge is needed to be able to follow and appreciate Vali's arguments. More knowledgeable readers may find much to disagree with, but most will find food for thought in his arguments. In spite of the author's predilection for abstract theoretical arguments, however, the book contains much information on the period that cannot be found in any other work in English.

Other works mentioned

- Bouvier, N. (1963). *L'usage du monde*. Paris: Librairie Droz. Translated as *The Way of the World*. London: Eland, 2007.
- Ghassemlou, A. R. (1965). *The Kurds and Kurdistan*. Prague: Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences / London: Collet's.
- Hassanpour, A. (2021). *Shurish-i dihqanan-i Mukriyan 1331-1332* [*The Peasant Uprising of Mukriyan, 1952-1953*]. Toronto: Iran Namag Books. <https://www.irannamag.com/en/book/the-peasant-uprising-of-mukriyan-pdf/>
- Koohi-Kamali, F. (2003). *The Political Development of the Kurds in Iran: Pastoral Nationalism*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Vali, A. (2011). *Kurds and the State in Iran: The Making of Kurdish Ethnicity*. London: I.B.Tauris.