Tehran: Paradox City

Over two hundred years, decreasing mortality rates and an influx of migrants transformed Tehran from a 2.75 square kilometre city of 15,000 inhabitants into a mega-city of ten million sprawling over 600 square kilometres. Having subsumed flatlands to the east and west and seventy villages on its adjacent mountain slopes, today’s Tehran varies 800 metres in elevation from south to north. The city’s topographical variation is paralleled by the marked differences in class and lifestyle of its inhabitants. All of Iran’s urban and pastoral nomadic areas are represented in Tehran’s population, as are the country’s religious minorities: Zoroastrians, Jews, Armenians, and Assyrian Christians.

The legal system related to land continued to allow for its appropriation while its ambiguities encouraged corruption. The increase in the price of oil in the 1970s induced Mohammad Reza Shah to dream of a grand civilization for Iran’s future. The project of Shahr-i Pahlavi, with ministries, embassies, cultural and recreational centres, built on 354 hectares of land and employing 289,000 people, was to symbolize the future modern city in the heart of Tehran.1

Eleven years after the Tehran Comprehensive Plan, in 1979, the Islamic Revolution shook the city. Two measures were of prime importance in forming the face of the city in the years to come. One was an oral decree by Imam Khomeini that all Tehranis had the right to possess a house. This ignored the city limits set by the TCP and, at night, small houses were built on the outskirts of the city. The second was the government’s decree, in 1989, after the war, that different sectors of the government had to become economically self-sufficient. This encouraged the municipality to allow, and then fine, illegal buildings. Fines thus became permits and buildings were constructed in ways that were not permitted by law.

Old gardens and mansions were destroyed to clear space for massive new apartment blocks. Fines for cutting trees or building high-rises brought colossal amounts of money to the municipality. In modernizing the city, the municipality was in the paradoxical situation of planting trees and flowers to make small parks while benefiting from the destruction of the ‘lungs of Tehran’, the gardened northern section of the city. Previously the gardens had brought cool weather down from the mountains, sweeping pollution into the lowlands beyond the city. Pollution, traffic congestion and accidents thus became facts of daily life. Painting pedestrian crossings white, allowing advertisements to appear on buses and walls, placing billboards along highways and lining streets with lights and colourful flags for festivities added to the transformation of the city, but not necessarily in welcome ways. Hardly any street-names from before the revolution remained, making people recall previous names or ponder before giving directions. When transformation arrives with paradox, it becomes more incomprehensible: When new mosques lose their domes, and new high-rise buildings gain domes, one loses the bearings of identity. When Tehran University remains the site of Friday prayer 24 years after the Revolution, one wonders about the symbolic meaning of such displacement.

Perhaps these are matters of little importance when compared to what may happen with the next earthquake, which records show strike Tehran every 150 years. Should the epicentre of a major earthquake fall on the city, we can expect immediate casualties in the hundreds of thousands. In a matter of days, millions could die as a result of fire and lack of facilities. Who would bear responsibility for neglecting the necessary precautions for such an eventuality?

Bibliography

1. Owqaf: is money or property that wealthy citizens allocated to the poor and to religious students and dignitaries.

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A non-religious building featuring a dome.

Every year, during the many holidays, particularly during the long New Year holiday which marks the beginning of spring, the Tehranis, like the inhabitants of all mega-cities, leave Tehran. The city breathes, its arteries cleared of congestion, and under the blue sky and at the foot of the magnificent Alborz mountains the city has time to reflect upon the two hundred years which have transformed it to hold what was then the entire population of Iran.2

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