

Khomeini: Fundamentalist or Populist?

'How did Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini become an Imam?
Much like the Holy Prophet Abraham. He carried out
God's Will, smashed idols, was willing to sacrifice his own
son, rose up against tyrants, and led the *mostazafin*
[oppressed] against their *mostakberin* [oppressors].'

Iranian Parliamentary Deputy, *Kayhan-e Hava'i*, 21 June 1981

The slippery term 'fundamentalist' has been thrown at Khomeini so often from so many different directions, that it has stuck.* For conservatives, the label evokes xenophobia, militancy and radicalism. For liberals, it means extremism, fanaticism and traditionalism. For radicals, it conjures up the image of theological obscurantism, political atavism, and the rejection of science, history, modernity, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution. For Orientalists—who still dominate Middle East studies—it reinforces their underlying presumption that the Muslim world is intrinsically unchanging, irrational, backward-looking, and incapable of freeing itself from its early history. The term has been used so often in the West that Khomeini's disciples in Iran, finding no Persian or Arabic equivalent, but flattered by its implications, have coined a new word, *bonyadgarayan*, translating literally into Persian the English word fundamentalist. This is ironic considering that the same disciples relish denouncing their opponents as *eltegari* (eclectic) and *gharbzadeh* (contaminated with Western diseases).