

UNDERMINING DEMOCRACY

21st Century Authoritarians

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CLERICAL AUTHORITARIANISM

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The Islamic Republic has at its disposal a sophisticated and finely calibrated system of authoritarian control that its opponents have often underestimated. The components of this system include a combination of blatant coercion and lingering terror; multiple and increasingly powerful intelligence agencies, particularly within the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC); a monopoly on radio and television broadcasting; overt censorship; and extensive self-censorship by writers and publishers.

INTRODUCTION

There is considerable disagreement among scholars and analysts about the exact nature of the Iranian regime. Some have described it as a pseudo-totalitarian state or a theocratic despotism, others consider it an example of Max Weber's sultanism,¹ and still others have argued that the regime is a form of "apartheid democracy."² However, there is near consensus on two assessments: the Islamic Republic is one of the most despotic regimes in the world, and it represents one of the biggest challenges facing the new U.S. administration.

Iran's nuclear program, its defiance in the face of United Nations resolutions seeking the suspension of its uranium enrichment, and evidence that it is in fact trying to become at least a virtual nuclear-weapons state, if not a full member of the "nuclear club," are only the most urgent aspects of the Iranian challenge.

Other elements of the problem include the Islamic Republic's support for illiberal forces abroad, including Hezbollah in Lebanon, a variety of Shiite forces in Iraq, Hamas in Palestine, as well as warlords and other destructive elements in Afghanistan. The two largest recipients of Iranian aid in Iraq are the organization led by radical cleric Moktada al-Sadr and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, both of which have fielded militias. The Iranian government has declared that it was paying more than \$300 million to Hamas to cover public-sector salaries in the Gaza Strip, and it has clearly admitted its financial, ideological, and military patronage of Hezbollah. For example, the regime has repeatedly

boasted, particularly at the end of the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, that supreme leaders Ruhollah Khomeini and Ali Khamenei were the creators and “guides” of the Lebanese militant group.

Iran’s nuclear program could trigger not only a new arms race in the Middle East, but also a change in the broader balance of forces. The 20th-century history of the region shows that Iran is a bellwether state, and that its course has ripple effects on neighbors near and far. The existence of sizable Shiite populations in Bahrain (where they form a majority), Saudi Arabia (where they are concentrated in oil-rich provinces), and Yemen (where the recent resurgence of Shiite radicalism threatens the government) could offer Tehran the opportunity to foment more trouble in the region. Saudi Arabia’s decision to counter Iran’s growing influence, evident most recently in the kingdom’s willingness to act as a mediator between the Taliban and the Afghan government, is creating a veritable cold war between the two rivals. In a theological manifestation of this war, Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, one of the Sunni world’s most influential clerics, has declared that Shiism is a form of heresy and issued a call to action to confront Shiite proselytizing in Sunni countries.³

Meanwhile, the regime faces little serious opposition at home. Iranian democrats have failed to develop a cogent policy or a unified leadership, and the authorities use a range of tools to sow disunity and confusion among them, disrupting the country’s democratic development.

More broadly, the Iranian leadership hopes to emulate the Chinese model by using improvements in the population’s economic situation to guarantee its continued authoritarian grip on power, although the regime’s economic incompetence suggests that this approach is untenable.

Pursuit of the Chinese model also entails growing cooperation with China, India, and the rest of the Asian countries. Such a realignment, if fully achieved, would be of epochal magnitude: despite the ruling elite’s inclinations, Iran has looked westward for its cultural, political, and economic alliances for most of the last two millennia. The economic foundation of this pivot is a proposed pipeline that would connect Iran to India and China, leaving the country completely independent of any market pressures from the west.

For the present, however, the global economic crisis is crippling the Iranian economy. Should oil prices remain at low levels, they are bound to hamper the regime’s ability to pursue its goals, both at home and abroad. There are also growing signs of public dissatisfaction, and the government has begun reorganizing its coercive apparatus to withstand future domestic instability. It is in this set of complex and volatile circumstances that the Iranian state’s internal order and international pursuits must be understood.

DOMESTIC METHODS OF CONTROL

The Islamic Republic has at its disposal a sophisticated and finely calibrated system of authoritarian control that its opponents have often underestimated. The components of this system include a combination of blatant coercion and lingering terror; multiple and increasingly powerful intelligence agencies, particularly within the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC); a monopoly on radio and television broadcasting; overt censorship; extensive self-censorship by writers and publishers; and the public's religious fears and beliefs. The regime also employs a form of mass bribery to control the population. The authorities spend an estimated \$70 billion to \$100 billion annually on all manner of subsidies, from bread and sugar to gasoline and electricity. However, this is offset in part by the petty bribery of officials, which has become an endemic fact of life. The postman will not deliver mail without extra compensation, while it is widely believed that ministers and IRGC commanders take kickbacks on nearly all public contracts. The state's manipulation of public funds is designed to punish political opposition, reward loyalty, and generally neglect those who remain passive or neutral.

Society is effectively divided into insiders (*khodis*), the minority who defend and depend upon the regime, and outsiders, the majority who have no chance at meaningful leadership in the system. The insiders occupy all political posts and are supported by stipends, salaries, and lucrative no-bid contracts. They also engage in serious factional feuds that often play out in what might be called an apartheid democracy: members of the ruling group compete with one another in Iran's tightly restricted elections, seeking a bigger piece of the economic and political pie. These feuds propel insular, undemocratic politics, as they enable Supreme Leader Khamenei to use his role as referee to reinforce his overarching power. At the same time, they offer a potential catalyst for democratic openings.

In keeping with its pseudo-totalitarian nature, the regime has sought to forge a new Islamic man or woman—pious, loyal, and xenophobic, particularly with respect to the United States and Israel. It simultaneously tries to foster a discourse of democracy that borrows structural elements from the Soviet side of the Cold War ideological debate. It offers what it calls genuine Islamic democracy, arguing that this form of governance protects the true interests of the underclass (*mostazafan*). As with Plato's philosopher kings and the visionary leaders of Soviet communism, Iran's benevolent rulers are said to have access to higher truths that enable them to govern more successfully than the common man. The most important of these leaders, of course, is the *Valiye-Fagih* (Guardian Jurist or Supreme Leader), whose wisdom and legitimacy are both of divine origin. This ideal "democracy" is set up in opposition to what the regime dismisses as the bogus, bourgeois democracy of

the West, where a liberal veneer covers the despotic nature of a system that caters to the rich (the *mostakbarin*, or arrogant ones). The Islamic Republic has deftly used pictures and reports from the war in Iraq to argue that liberal democracy begets chaos. Similarly, officially controlled media have celebrated the recent financial crisis as the death knell of liberal democracy, and Russia's invasion of Georgia has been touted as the last nail in the coffin of America's insidious democracy-promotion scheme.

Iranian democrats, from the women's movement to the student and labor union movements, have worked hard to expose and fight the regime's authoritarianism. In order to shape a genuine democratic discourse that is at once local and global, they hearken to the realities of Iranian society while remaining fully cognizant of the most recent developments in democratic theory around the world. The recent focus of the women's movement on the idea of gathering a million signatures to demand gender equality in Iran, and the incredibly prolific writings of activists like Noushin Ahmadi—who has translated and published dozens of books on the theoretical foundations of feminism—are promising examples of this pattern. Ironically, this democratic discourse is now being confronted with the resurgence of a kind of Marxist-Stalinist orthodoxy among a small but vocal and organized minority of Iran's youth.

There are many signs that the regime has failed in its grand social engineering project. Indeed, according to both empirical and anecdotal evidence, the government is deeply isolated from the vast majority of the people. Iranian youth, who comprise about 70 percent of the population, are surprisingly global in their disposition, savvy in their use of the internet, and secular in their values and ideals. A kind of craven consumerism, a hunger for the latest European and American fads, is rampant among some sectors of the youth and middle class. Society's dismay with the status quo is registered by the secular, melancholic, and defiant music of Mohsen Namjoo; dozens of other underground rock, jazz, and hip-hop groups; and the many films, novels, and short stories that are published despite the regime's draconian censorship. Double-digit unemployment and inflation have heightened the economic aspect of Iranians' despair.

A recent poll conducted for the parliament by the Ministry of Intelligence found that only 13 percent of the population would vote for President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the 2009 election. The regime's unpopularity has forced it to exercise its many mechanisms for vetting candidates, including the intelligence agencies, local committees and Basij militia offices, and the Guardian Council, which must approve all would-be contenders. Even after narrowing the field in this way, the leadership has been obliged to use other resources to control the electoral results. A recent article in the daily *Keyhan*, widely considered a semiofficial mouthpiece for Ayatollah Khamenei, indicated that Ahmadinejad won the last election only through the active support of the IRGC and the Basij.⁴

Faced with these troubling social and political signs, and increasingly aware of the country's extreme economic fragility, the regime recently restructured its most powerful means of survival and repression, the Revolutionary Guards. The IRGC, long focused on defending the country against foreign enemies, is now fighting "domestic foes" and eliminating threats to the regime. In line with its new priorities, the IRGC has a new configuration, with 31 sections corresponding to geographical districts. The IRGC district commanders now directly oversee the two to five million members of the Basij, the regime's gang-like militia. These steps suggest that the state has been retooling its oppressive apparatus in anticipation of growing turbulence.

Oil is a critical regime tool for influence and control. Most social and political scientists have come to agree that oil wealth is poisonous for democratic development, particularly in economically developing countries. In Iran, the state's monopoly on oil revenues allows it to reward its most reliable allies. Commanders of the IRGC have become increasingly involved in the economic field, amassing often fantastic and invariably illicit fortunes. To further ensure the allegiance of these commanders, Khamenei recently decreed that one of the foundations linked to the IRGC, the Mostazafan Foundation, would henceforth be allowed to directly sell a portion of Iran's oil on the international market.

But even windfall oil revenues in recent years have been unable to mask the regime's failed economic policies. Ahmadinejad has repeatedly dipped into the foreign currency reserve—initially set up to allow Iran to weather sudden drops in the price of oil—and used the money to implement his favored economic ideas or simply to saturate the markets with imported commodities. Infrastructural investments have been sadly wanting.

The regime has also used Iranian nationalism to advance its interests. Although it initially tried to dismiss nationalism and love of the nation (*mellat*) as a "colonial project" created by the West to undermine the unity of the broader Islamic community (*umma*), the war with Iraq in the 1980s taught the regime the value of nationalism. In recent years, it has scored arguably its most important propaganda coup by convincing many in the country that its nuclear program is the embodiment of Iranian nationalism. Another facet of this achievement has been the government's ability to tell the world that there is a national consensus on the nuclear issue. No such consensus exists, and there are powerful pockets of resistance to the idea that love of Iran dictates support for the reckless nuclear program. From Shirin Ebadi and Akbar Ganji to the Freedom Movement and the Organization of the Islamic Revolution, many have voiced their doubts about the wisdom of the project.

Exploiting Iranians' sense of pride and competition in another way, the regime cleverly uses sports—particularly soccer—to redirect the disgruntled population's attention toward nonpolitical issues. Many have argued that the state takes this technique of distraction to a darker extreme by willfully ignoring the growing epidemic of addiction to opium, heroin,

Bulwark Against Democracy: Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Basij

Iran's 125,000-strong Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has emerged as one of the most powerful political and economic forces in Iran and, along with the Basij Resistance Force and the state intelligence services, is part of a network of deeply illiberal and nontransparent institutions that serves as a bulwark against democratic development. A self-described "people's army," the IRGC was created to ensure internal security, serve as a counterweight to the regular army, and protect the ideals of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Along with the religious police, it enforces adherence to the Islamic faith, and it has sole jurisdiction over patrols of Tehran.¹ The IRGC's special operations arm, the Quds Force, is responsible for spreading the IRGC's ideology beyond Iran's borders. It has reportedly provided training and roadside explosives to Iraqi Shiite militias for use against U.S. and British forces, and it allegedly supplied missiles to Hezbollah in Lebanon during that group's 2006 war with Israel.² The IRGC's intelligence unit operates in collaboration with Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), which is composed of 15,000 civilian staff members. In 2007, the U.S. State Department formally designated the IRGC as a terrorist organization. The IRGC's wide-ranging activities in domestic economic and political affairs, coupled with its considerable military capabilities, makes it an institution with exceptional power. It is used to repress political opposition and informally vet political candidates. Former IRGC commanders make up two-thirds of Iran's 21-member cabinet, and former officers hold 80 of the 290 seats in the parliament. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, also an IRGC veteran, has used his authority over the Corps to increase his own political and economic influence.³ Current and former IRGC commanders have extended their economic reach considerably, with enterprises including an engineering arm that dominates the oil and gas industries, government construction projects, and a network of dental and eye clinics. Analysts estimate that the IRGC has ties to more than 100 companies, controlling an estimated \$12 to \$15 billion in the business, construction, and engineering sectors.⁴ The Basij Resistance Force, founded by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1979 and operating under the command of the IRGC, is a voluntary paramilitary organization tasked with both domestic security and defending the regime against international threats.⁵ As of November 2008, the force claimed to number 13.6 million, or roughly 20 percent of Iran's population, though experts believe its true mobilization capacity is closer to one million.⁶ Like the IRGC, the Basij are also believed to be involved in a range of state-run and other economic schemes.

methamphetamine, and other drugs. A population of addicts worries more about its next fix than the “fixed” nature of elections or the government’s ongoing failure to address looming systemic problems.

INTERNATIONAL INFLUENCE

The regime has a multifaceted policy for augmenting its international influence. Its elements range from public to covert, take shape in different arenas, and are geared toward different constituencies. Tehran’s most obvious public campaign to increase its global leverage plays out in international organizations. In the United Nations, Iranian officials have worked assiduously to create ad hoc coalitions against the United States and Israel, drawing on support from a number of developing and Muslim countries. Iran’s recent failed attempt to join the UN Security Council was a clear manifestation of this effort. Anti-American sentiment has been similarly employed to stave off critical reports by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and Tehran has relied on China and Russia to block Security Council resolutions on the nuclear issue.

These opportunistic and often ideologically incongruous coalitions are bolstered through the dogged cultivation of bilateral and regional ties. Iran has attempted, so far unsuccessfully, to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which consists of China, Russia, and four Central Asian states. It has had more luck building an economic relationship with China, thanks largely to that country’s hunger for oil and gas resources. India, which competes with China for energy imports and has a tradition of Cold War–era nonalignment, has also been relatively receptive to Tehran’s overtures. The regime has built economic and political ties with Russia in part by drawing Moscow into its nuclear energy program, purchasing Russian weapons systems, and voicing early support for Russia’s August 2008 invasion of Georgia.

Reaching somewhat farther afield, the Iranian regime has aligned itself with Cuba, Venezuela, and Bolivia, promising large investments and joint ventures that are typically based on political expediency rather than real economic benefits. A prime example has been the establishment of direct flights between Tehran and Caracas, which often carry only a handful of passengers. These long-distance relationships allow the leaders in each country to claim that they have cleverly outflanked attempts to isolate them internationally.

The Islamic Republic has made efforts in recent years to improve its relations with other Muslim countries in the Middle East, even suggesting that it should join Arab blocs and form a security organization with its Arab neighbors across the Persian Gulf. However, this prong of its foreign policy is seriously undercut by its long-standing support for radical and violent Islamist organizations across the region, including Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine, Shiite militias in Iraq, and multiple factions in Afghanistan. Such support allows

the regime to portray itself as the leader of the Islamic world in a struggle against its enemies, and regular conferences of these types of organizations are hosted in Tehran to amplify the message.

In addition to its ties with foreign governments and militant groups, the regime makes direct appeals to foreign audiences by sponsoring television and radio networks aimed at the English- and Arab-speaking worlds, including Press TV and Al-Alam. Moreover, the Iranian state has used symbolic gestures to spectacular effect, for example by pledging \$1 billion to help Lebanese Shiites rebuild their homes after the war with Israel, or by offering millions of dollars in free electricity and other services to the Shiite parts of Iraq. Ahmadinejad's many rants against Israel must be seen in this context, as part of a larger effort to claim an international leadership role and win the sympathy of foreign populations who are frustrated with their own government's stances. Many in Iran's reformist movement and even more in the secular opposition have voiced their anger at what they see as the wasteful foreign disbursement of funds that would be better spent on Iran's own pressing economic troubles.

Aspects of the regime's public outreach have drawn the ire of some in the Muslim world. Recent calls by al-Qaradawi, the prominent Sunni scholar and television personality, to resist what is characterized as the Shiite invasion of Sunni societies, are a notable sign of this backlash against Tehran's propaganda.

However, it must be remembered that the Iranian regime's well-funded international strategy serves multiple purposes. It helps to solidify Iran's role as a leader of the radical Islamist movement, enhances its alliances with important world and regional powers, and prevents the formation of a united front against it in international forums. But it also drums up security crises and fans hostility abroad to keep the minds of ordinary Iranians from focusing on their own domestic travails and gross official mismanagement. In this sense the conflicting goals and sometimes theatrical quality of Iran's foreign ventures are less problematic from the regime's perspective, as they only enhance the potency of the distraction.

FINDINGS

- The Iranian regime has a multifaceted policy for augmenting its international influence, which takes shape in different arenas and is geared toward a range of different constituencies. Tehran's most obvious campaign to increase its global leverage plays out in international organizations. In the United Nations, Iranian officials have worked assiduously to create ad hoc coalitions against the United States and Israel.
- Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has emerged one of the most powerful political and economic forces in the country. Along with the Basij Resistance Force

and the state intelligence services, it is part of a network of illiberal and nontransparent institutions that acts as a bulwark against democratic development.

- As part of a broader soft-power effort, the Iranian authorities have invested considerable resources into a number of media initiatives. The regime makes direct appeals to foreign audiences by sponsoring television and radio networks aimed at the English- and Arab-speaking worlds, including Press TV and Al-Alam.
- Iranian democrats have failed to develop a cogent policy or a unified leadership, and the authorities use a range of tools to sow disunity and confusion among them, disrupting the country's democratic development. Iran would benefit from initiatives that foster greater democratic discourse
- The global economic crisis is crippling the Iranian economy. Should oil prices remain at low levels, they are bound to hamper the regime's ability to pursue its goals, both at home and abroad. There are also growing signs of public dissatisfaction, and the government has begun reorganizing its coercive apparatus to withstand future domestic instability.

NOTES

- 1 See Akbar Ganji, "The Latter-Day Sultan," *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 2008).
- 2 In two articles, this author has argued that Iran is a form of apartheid democracy. See Abbas Milani, "Pious Populism," *Boston Review* (December 2007) and "Persian Politicking," *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas* (October 2008).
- 3 For a discussion of these developments, see Israel Elad Altman, "Iran and the Arabs: The Shi'itization Controversy Between Al-Qaradawi and Iran," *Iran-Pulse* no. 25 (October 24, 2008).
- 4 *Keyhan*, August 21, 2008 (21 Mordad 1387).