

Iran's Crisis of State Ideology

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Articles & Testimony

FPA blogger Reza Akhlaghi interviews Mehdi Khalaji on Iran's ideological crisis and its effect on the upcoming presidential election.

If there's been a crisis of state ideology in Iran's current power structure, has this ideological crisis impacted the process of selecting key presidential contenders? Could this crisis linger after the elections?

The ideological crisis that is such a source of anxiety for the Islamic Republic is nothing new. The legitimacy of an Islamic government has been questioned since Ayatollah Khamenei came to office in 1989, especially because he lacked valid religious credentials within the clerical community. The democratic legitimacy of the Islamic Republic has also been a matter of dispute following the aftermath of the 1979 revolution, but has worsened since the government's post-election crackdown on demonstrators in 2009.

This crisis of democratic and Islamic legitimacy will persist through the upcoming presidential election; the situation could actually intensify subsequent to the election. Ayatollah Khamenei has been forced to resort to several coercive mechanisms in order to exert his authority. Four major tools have enabled him to regulate the country's issues at large: armed forces, intelligence apparatus, the judiciary, and state media. All democratic institutions and elections can be manipulated and weakened through the use these four tools. However, his heavy reliance on these coercive forces has not impeded his increasing political fragility. Therefore, blatantly using force or shutting down all democratic channels may end up being catastrophic in cost. An essential mistake was his failure to maintain relations with the traditional elite of the Islamic Republic and those that made up the revolutionary generation, such as Rafsanjani. Making forceful decisions without consensus and not being the final authority within the ruling elite will complicate his situation.

In the next two months preceding the election, Khamenei needs to invigorate the public towards participating in the election, while simultaneously keeping the competition among candidates limited and manageable. Reformists may introduce a number of candidates, but none are likely to possess the popular support that Khatami does. If Mashai is disqualified, Ahmadinejad's camp would move to introduce lesser-known candidates. More than ten individuals

affiliated with various conservative factions have announced their candidacy. An increased number of candidates will most likely mobilize larger voter participation. For Khamenei, the rate of participation is almost as important as the individual elected, because he would interpret it as an endorsement of his own policies and legitimacy within the Islamic Republic. His personal choice for president would win with less votes than that of formerly elected presidents, yet this would be ironically beneficial for Khamenei because of his desire for the president to be loyal and without a strong social power base that would motivate him to pursue his own agenda, similar to Khatami and/or Ahmadinejad.

To what extent do you expect adoption of a certain form of Iranian nationalism -- however manipulatively conducted -- as a policy tool and part of an evolving state ideology?

Using nationalist discourse is an apparent sign of the regime's failure to provide Islamic legitimacy. Resorting to nationalism began more than two decades ago after the Iran-Iraq war ended and Khamenei came to power. Ahmadinejad's nationalistic rhetoric was somewhat of a new phenomenon, in which he combined a crude nationalist discourse with anti-clericalism. Those in power in the Islamic Republic seem to cater to such discourse because they believe it may attract ordinary people; it does not carry the same influence on the military and political ruling elite. It is, therefore, likely to garner a decent amount of votes, but not enough for a victory for Ahmadinejad's circle.

What are the key expectations of Iranian reformists in the upcoming elections and how much maneuvering room do they have to make their impact felt on election dynamics?

Reformists likewise have a deep-rooted ideological and political crisis, no less than the crisis that plagues the Islamic Republic. They lack strategy, organization, and media channels. In sum, they lack political imagination and vision. They are profoundly concerned with the mobilization of people to the streets because this could result in an immediate fundamental change -- specifically the elimination of velayat-e faqih -- absent deep-seated reform. In other words, reformists face a dilemma: If they advocate minor changes, Khamenei would ban their return to power, and it would be very difficult for them to amass a sizeable amount of popular support. If they support fundamental change, they would attract a significant portion of society, but if they were to succeed, society would hardly trust them, or be able to differentiate between existing rulers and reformists who have not been held accountable for their past, especially those reformists who were in power during the first decade of the Islamic Republic. Reformists have lost confidence in the Islamic Republic's political and military elite as well as many of those people who supported them under Khatami's presidency.

Is there a brewing conflict of interest between key decision makers overseeing Iran's militarized economy on one hand, and those in charge of institutions aligned with the clergy, on the other? Could this conflict of interest impact the status and influence of the clergy in Iran's domestic politics?

There are many conflicts of interests within supporters of the Islamic Republic, from the IRGC to the clerical establishment. One of the aspects of the legitimacy and ideological crisis is that the clash between various factions of conservatives or Khamenei loyalists is not ideological, but purely politico-economic. For multiple reasons, the clergy would probably play a marginal role in political developments in Iran, whether within the framework of the Islamic Republic or whatever its eventual successor may be. The clergy benefits from the Islamic Republic as an institution, not as individuals, at the cost of its image and independence. For this reason, even their support for a presidential candidate would be of little assistance. This is why Ahmadinejad is experimenting with the anti-clerical card, while he reaped the benefits from the clergy's support in the last two presidential elections.

In the 2009 elections Iranian women proved themselves to be a potent force in influencing not just the election dynamics, but also those of the political order. What is the outlook for the Iranian women in this year's presidential elections?

It is hard to generalize on the subject of women in Iran. Ordinary people, especially those in rural areas, small towns, the lower and lower middle class, and the religious strata of the society (both men and women) usually support the regime, or at least do not show active hostility toward it. The main threat to the Islamic Republic comes from middle and upper class women, especially women whose aspirations and values are more at odds with what the Islamic Republic wants to impose. However, women's movements and organizations have been seriously oppressed by the government in recent years and many women's rights activists have fled from Iran, especially after the disputed election of 2009. In the absence of these organizations, I do not think that even brave and progressive Iranian women would be able to significantly affect the outcome of the election.

Mehdi Khalaji is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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