

The Clerics vs. Modernity: Failure of the Islamic Republic's Soft Power

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Articles & Testimony

The Islamic Republic's greatest fear is neither a military attack on its shadowy nuclear program nor a forced suspension of uranium enrichment, but a cultural invasion in the form of Western modernity.

As much as Tehran's regime takes culture seriously, it misunderstands its nature, mechanisms and dynamism. Therefore the government's dissatisfaction with the cultural situation within Iran never ends. The political revolution in 1979 reached its goal by overthrowing the monarchy, but the process of Cultural Revolution never stops, and the re-Islamization of Iranian society and culture has been an ongoing project. Every year there are new programs and plans for changing the culture and Islamizing it. The regime attempts the impossible and believes in the triumph of hope over experience.

Militarizing the Cultural Arena

In a speech in 2003 Ayatollah Ali Khamenei stated that

More than Iran's enemies need artillery, guns and so forth, they need to spread cultural values that lead to moral corruption. They have said this many times. I recently read in the news that a senior official in an important American political center, said: 'Instead of bombs, send them miniskirts.' He is right. If they arouse sexual desires in any given country, if they spread unrestrained mixing of men and women, and if they lead youth to behavior to which they are naturally inclined by instincts, there will no longer be any need for artillery and guns against that nation.

It is striking here how the government uses military literature, vocabulary and metaphor to speak about culture. Since Khamenei is the commander in chief of the Armed Forces he also regards himself as the commander in chief of Islamic culture. He is the one who defines it and he is the authority who implements it.

What Khamenei considers a cultural invasion should be seen as the broadest war in the history of mankind. In his

eyes the enemy's armies are innumerable and include all members of Western society who adhere to modern liberal values and cultural institutions -- from art to tourism. Not only this, but the West has globalized its ideals in order to poison all foreign cultures -- not only Muslim hearts and minds but also non-Muslim cultures like Japan. According to Khamenei the Muslim world is under particularly heavy attack. Western cultural colonizers are trying to destroy the cultural "authenticity" of Muslims and deprive it of its "originality" and there are colonized minds within Muslim community who are knowingly or unknowingly the West's agents -- who corrupt cultural territory and contaminate it with western cultural microbes. These agents -- such as intellectuals, scholars, artists and writers -- reproduce the same values that the colonizers want to spread all over the world. Therefore aesthetics are as dangerous as conventional politics: We may not easily be able to perceive its danger but we should be certain that it was not created by the West in vain.

As Islamist ideology believes Islamic government should manage all cultural affairs of the country, the rulers of Iran therefore believe that Western culture is under the tight control of the political powers -- imperialists and Zionists. For them the capitalist world is not designed to function within a decentralized network but as a well-guided structure that exploits every citizen and dominates undeveloped nations.

In other words, everything is political and every member of the society ought to prove whether she/he is with 'us' or with 'them'. The process of proving that one is with the ruling ideology is not easy. Totalitarian ideology is temperamental and moods can change swiftly, because in the end it is not principles which define the ideology but the whims of the ruler. Absolute loyalty to the ruling ideology can also be risky. The cult of personality of the leader trumps the ideology in such a way that he becomes the main criterion for measuring the fidelity to the ideology.

"The objective of a totalitarian system is to destroy all forms of communal life that are not imposed by the state and closely controlled by it, so that individuals are isolated from one another and become mere instruments in the hands of the state" wrote Leszek Kolakowski in describing why Joseph Stalin killed many more people who were sincerely loyal to the communist ideology than people who were opposed to it.

"Those who took the faith seriously wanted to interpret it for themselves and to consider whether this or that political step was in accordance with Stalin's version of Marxism-Leninism. But this made them potential critics and rebels against the government, even if they swore fealty to Stalin; for they might always invoke yesterday's Stalin against today's and quote the leader's words against himself" Kolakowski continues.

In Iranian contexts this picture seems very familiar: Mir Hossein Moussavi and Mehdi Karubi -- the leaders of green opposition who have been under house arrest for more than 450 days at this point -- never rebelled against Islamic ideology but instead criticized Khamenei. Both were former officials and sincere believers in the Islamic Republic but came to the conclusion that Khamenei had deviated from the initial path of the revolution. This is also true about intellectuals who were considered to be committed to Islamist ideology three decades ago, but now are seen by the government as Western agents who seek to penetrate Muslim society and corrupt it from within. The film maker Mohsen Makhmalbaf, the late poet Qaisar Aminpoor and the intellectual Abdul Karim Soroush are among the best examples whose starting-point was within Islamic ideology but the government's record disappointed them and made them its critics. In fact the true believers who abstain from becoming morally and economically tied to the regime are susceptible to become revisionists and reformists.

Re-Islamizing Islam

For Islamists, the golden age is not the period immediately before Western colonialism or the emergence of modernity in Europe. They idealize the time of Prophet Mohammed and his four succeeding Caliphs (in the case of Sunnis) and (in the case of Shi'ites) his fourth succeeding Caliph. They look at the history of Islam as a history of misunderstanding Islam. Islam deviated from its divine path a short while after its very inception. They reject not

only the objective and concrete history of Islam but also its subjective history; Islamic theology and exegeses. They want to provide a 'new' interpretation of Islam which is supposed not to perfectly correspond to the period of prophet. Since interpreting is not possible without referring to a tradition, they take a very eclectic approach to Islamic traditions, books, authors, and customs. They arbitrarily choose what they need for their political agenda and leave what does not serve their ends -- occasionally forcing people to forget it ever existed. Consequently they use force not only to fight with Western cultural influence but also to impose their own image of the past in the minds of Muslims -- manipulating Muslims' historical memory and identity. This is why they try to re-Islamize Muslim society; a process that never ends.

Islamists fight not only with the present and the future but also with the past. They fight time itself and want to replace it with mythological eternity. Islamists' historical pessimism does not have any cure. It just makes them exert more violence until their capacity of using force gets exhausted; something that is happening now in Iran after the brutal implementation of Islamic ideology for more than three decades. Interestingly their approach to modernity is also eclectic. They do not deny all of it. They choose technology and science and reject certain cultures and worldviews. The marriage of modern technology and ideological interpretation of Islam can generate the darkest forces in our time.

Cultural Ground Zero

The Islamic Republic has tried to transform Islamic tradition into a shield against modern culture. But the clerical establishment -- the main factory for producing tradition and guarding it -- was not equipped to do the job. Indeed, clerics themselves have not been effective guardians of tradition. The clerical mind has been closed for several centuries. Clerical discourse is a repetition of what has been said by Muslim scholars many centuries ago. After the revolution the clerical establishment's bureaucracy was not compatible with the requirements and expectations of the newly formed Islamic government, it was modernized structurally and bureaucratically but failed to modernize the foundations of its thought and to remedy the sclerosis of tradition. The government allocated billions of dollars to the clerical establishment and other religious institutions, so that they could take the place of modern cultural institutions.

Significantly, the intelligence ministry and the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC) maintain de facto control over cultural production but the result is not satisfying for the regime. Islamist ideology, as in other totalitarian ideologies, ignores the spontaneous nature of culture. None of the religious cultures of the past could have been created as a result of social and cultural engineering by the ruling power. Culture evolves naturally, unconsciously and freely. Consequently, as the government has sought to intervene in culture in order to steer it in a specific direction, it has destroyed it. By censoring cultural production, bankrupting private publishers and cultural entrepreneurs, arresting writers and artists, laying off scholars from universities, eliminating humanity majors from academia and changing textbooks to religious books, the government has so far failed to produce its own brand of acceptable culture.

Islamist ideology defines itself as more 'against' modernity than 'for' building an authentic and functional society. Islamist ideology is now more than a century old, but still there is no clear vision of what a Utopian Islamist society would look like. Since its nature is more based on negation its power lies more in destruction. What is ironic in Islamist ideology is that it gives a pivotal role to culture and soft power, but in countering Western soft power it relies on aggressive hard power. Without a potential recourse to violence local society tends to become influenced by modern global culture rather than isolate itself from it.

Also Islamist ideology wants to replace culture with Shari'a or Islamic law. Therefore in its view, religious jurists become custodians of culture and they have the responsibility of imposing a juridical model on the society. An ideology that looks at individuals only from a juridical perspective would find all of them sinful.

Culture Saves the Nation

Islamists in Iran were lucky to take power in 1979 but not lucky enough in ruling a society already deeply modernized. Had Iran not been modernized for several decades before the Islamic Revolution, imposing an "Islamic model of society" would have been much easier. Women, young people and the urban middle class in Iran subsequently saved the country from going in a similar direction to Afghanistan under the rule of the Taliban. Despite all the daily systematic pressure on people in Iran, more than 40 percent of people watch prohibited satellite television and more than 20 million use the internet. Underground culture in Iran is not underground anymore; it is visible and widespread. The new generation stands against the government's imposed cultural model. Even the religious strata of the society distinguish between state Islam and civil Islam and frequently prefer the latter. Clerics who do not have affiliation with the government feel closer to people than those who are in power. Both the Islamic state and state Islam are losing their credit, even in the house of IRGC and the clergy.

The Islamic Republic did not take into consideration that the Islamization of a society has its limits. It has overstretched its political authority. Women and youth want to look to the future but the government wants to imprison them in a mythological past. Under the Islamic Republic the number of schools for foreign languages in Iran has enormously increased, because families are keen to provide their children with secular education. Despite censorship people are more eager to read Western books or watch Western movies or listen to Western music. If the Pahlavi monarchy was trying to modernize the society from above, the Islamic republic has unwittingly but successfully modernized the society from within. If modernity was a luxury for the upper and upper-middle class in the north of Tehran under the Shah, now every remote village can access the internet and satellite television and dream of a better life and a noble cultural interaction with global culture.

If the newly elected Egyptian and Tunisian Islamist governments declare that they do not want to imitate an Iranian model, it means that the Islamic Republic of Iran is an example for no one in Muslim world. Iran needs to rely on its money and military strength to mobilize Muslims to its cause. While the Islamic Republic's soft power fails, the Iranian people's urge to integrate into world culture and economy is unprecedented. This leaves the door of hope for political change in Iran wide open. ❖

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