

# A Marriage of Convenience

Nov 18, 2010



Articles & Testimony

In a speech this October at the national conference on "soft war" in Tehran, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad emphasized that, "there are many interpretations of Islam, but [the] basis for our practice is the Iranian interpretation. The historical experience proves that the Iranian interpretation of the truth is the closest one to the truth."

This statement not only enraged Ahmadinejad's conservative critics who claim that only Islam, not nationalism, should be reckoned as a basis for the Iranian government's practices, but also shocked international observers familiar with the Islamic Republic's record in the last 30 years. Before this statement, Iranian leaders have always insisted that Islam is the main underpinning of the Islamic Republic's domestic and foreign policies.

In a Fatwa published on his website, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, supreme leader of the republic, states that, "according to Shi'a, all Muslims have to obey the order of the [Iran's] ruling jurist and submit to his commands. This edict even applies to other Shi'ite jurists let alone their followers. In our view, commitment to the rule of the jurist is inseparable from the commitment to Islam and rule of infallible imams." Accordingly, the official title for Khamenei in Iran's state media is "the leader of the Islamic world."

Why has Ahmadinejad turned to a nationalist discourse that rejects Arab and Turkish understandings of Islam, and instead announced that the Iranian school of Islam provides the most valid interpretation of the religion?

Since assuming office five years ago, Ahmadinejad has relied on an apocalyptic discourse to garner support. He has promised everything from the end of world, the coming of the Shi'ite Mahdi (the Twelfth Imam expected to return to the Shi'a community) to the establishment of a global and just government. Now he abandons Shi'ite discourse that had a broad appeal to Arab Shi'ites as well as their Iranian counterparts by opting for a more nationalist tone. Assuming that Ahmadinejad takes his own rhetoric seriously, this could signal a radical shift in the Iranian leadership's worldview.

Yet, the Islamic Republic has not always been supportive of all Muslims. Instead, Iran's support for Muslim interests has been contingent upon the country's regional agenda. Should a particular cause not advance Iranian interest, the government will either neglect the issue or side with its adversaries. One notable example has been Iran's approach to Chechnya. Iran has always kept silent about Chechnya's Muslims, who have been in conflict with Russia for over a decade. Moreover, Iran said nothing when, in July 2009, in a series of violent clashes, Chinese government forces killed more than 190 Uighur Muslims. Another example that sheds light on Iran's inconsistent support of Muslims has been the conflict between predominantly Christian Armenians and Muslim Azerbaijanis in which Iran supported Armenian forces while denouncing Azerbaijanis. By approaching geopolitics from a realist perspective, Iran's relationship with Russia, China and Azerbaijan has precluded it from supporting various Muslim causes in these countries.

Likewise, Iran's attitude towards Muslims inside its own borders is not free from paradox. In his public speeches, Ayatollah Khamenei accuses the Western powers of igniting sectarian conflicts between Shi'ites and Sunnis. For

him, the West benefits from division and internal fighting among Muslims. But the Sunnis' situation in Iran does not support his claim. Systematic legal and political discrimination has been imposed on the Sunnis since the beginning of the Islamic Republic in 1979. While Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians have their synagogues, churches and temples in several Iranian cities, including the capital, Sunnis are not allowed to have their mosques in nor perform their Friday prayer in Tehran.

Iran's problem is not only with non-Shi'ite Muslims. Shi'ites -- whether secular intellectuals or religious authorities -- who do not believe in the theory of the rule of the jurist (*velayat-e-faqih*) face strict punishments. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic, condemned Arab governments and elites for not supporting the brand of revolutionary Islam that he propagated. But far beyond that, Shi'ite clergy and religious authorities -- *marjas* like Ayatollah Abul Qassem Khoi in Najaf and Ayatollah Kazem Shari'atmadari in Qom -- who also rejected Khomeini's brand of Islam on which he essentially justified his monopoly of power, were verbally battered in public. He called them "stupid," "enemies of Islam and its prophet," "followers of the American Islam," and accused them of having "fossilized minds."

Iran's attitude toward Muslims is rooted in its approach toward Islam itself. Before 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini had been working diligently to build an intellectual case in support of the rule of the jurist, arguing that the strict implementation of Shari'a was indispensable. Since a jurist is an expert on Islamic law, he is the most qualified to implement its tenets and should thus rule the country. When he came to power, however, he found that modernization had led Iranian culture and society to be intolerant of many Shari'a principles; it became nearly impossible to return to a lifestyle that fit the traditional understanding of Islamic jurisprudence. So, he borrowed the idea of *maslaha*, or expediency, from Sunni jurisprudence and *raison d'état* (a French concept that justifies the overriding power of the state) from Western political philosophy, and applied them according to his own rules.

Khomeini argued that in cases where Shari'a conflicts with the realities of modern life, the ruling jurist has the religious authority to overrule Shari'a. In this way, what sets the ruling jurist apart is not found in his ability to implement Shari'a but rather in his unique religious authority to ignore Shari'a in favor of the regime's own interests should Shari'a be at odds with what would otherwise sustain the government. Based on this novel method of thinking, Khomeini solved many problems his government faced, including women's suffrage (which he forbade more than a decade before the revolution), women's right to appear on TV, in films or as public musicians, as well as the forced sales of privately-owned property, the imposition of new tax systems and so on. So, even though there are many other jurists in the Shi'ite world who are more learned and knowledgeable than Iran's ruling jurists, what makes this class of Shi'as suitable for this job is that they also understand the regime's interests and can recognize the situations in which Shari'a law should be overridden in favor of national interests.

Overruling Shari'a is not simply an inadvertent issue in the Islamic Republic. Rather, it has become institutionalized. When Khomeini realized that present conditions prevented Shari'a from being implemented fully, he introduced the notion of *maslaha*. He then established the Expediency Council of the regime to integrate his methodology into the political system. The Guardian Council, created in the original constitution, was tasked with examining parliament's decisions to ensure that they adhered to both the constitution and Islamic law, while the Expediency Council was to resolve conflicts between parliament and the Guardian Council. For example, if the Guardian Council rejects what has been ratified by parliament, the bill can go to the Expediency Council for deliberation. If the Expediency Council (on behalf of the ruling jurist) believes that parliament's decision better serves the interests of the regime, it can vote for in favor of the legislation, even if it is against the constitution or Islamic law. At the top of the pyramid is the ruling jurist, who is authorized to overrule the law himself or through the Expediency Council. This is the meaning implied in the "absolute authority of the ruling jurist," mentioned in the revised version of the constitution.

Ayatollah Khomeini elaborated a theory for government, which is nothing but autocracy in the name of Islam. In this

political order, everything depends not on the ruling jurist's understanding of Islam but rather on his will.

The Islamic Republic not only has an instrumentalist approach toward Islam but also seeks to utilize Shi'ism in its favor. In its policy toward Muslims, Iranian leaders use the Shi'ite-Sunni divide for political gain by calling for pan-Islamism when addressing the Sunni world, while emphasizing the uniqueness of Shi'ite identity when addressing Shi'as. When President Ahmadinejad hides apocalyptic discourse under the shadow of nationalist discourse, one should not assume that he believes in Iranian nationalism or Islamic ideology. For example, while publicly mentioning the name of pre-Islamic civilization and tradition in Iran was forbidden by the government for many years, Ahmadinejad, as president, speaks of pre-Islamic pride and Iran's splendid monarchies. In all his speeches before the last election, one can hardly find any mention of this time period. This change in discourse is a clear effort on his part to regain lost support, particularly from the lower classes and religious strata, after the controversial elections in July 2009. It also results from the deterioration of Iran's economic situation due to UN and US sanctions as well as the administration's economic mismanagement.

The political crisis, which started last year, has discredited the Islamic Republic as an "Islamic" government. Iran's leaders have always criticized Western liberal democracies and considered them corrupt. Although they had no realistic claim to democracy, what is at stake is the Islamic nature of the regime and its claim that Iran is the "only real Islamic government" in the world. It has become harder for them to use Islam to justify what happened in the last year. Nevertheless, it is common knowledge that Islam does not approve of raping men and women in prison as punishment for their demonstrations against election results. Therefore, Ahmadinejad has been forced to look elsewhere to acquire a new constituency. Some Iranians, both inside and outside of the country, are proud of their national identity, yet do not necessarily care about the current political system. That Ahmadinejad is trying to portray Iran as a major power in the region might satisfy their national lust. These groups may not form a large faction among Iranians, but now they have become the target of a desperate president who has all but lost his religious legitimacy.

As Ayatollah Hussein Ali Montazeri, former deputy of Ayatollah Khomeini who became an outspoken critic of the regime, said that the Islamic Republic is now neither Islamic nor a republic; what shapes its decisions is neither Shi'ite theology nor Islamic ideology. What determines Iran's policy is its interest in maintaining a status of supremacy in the region and its survival as an autocratic regime. The Islamic Republic lacks principles, and its alliances with other countries or groups are all provisional. Thus, the Islamic Republic is enabled to dance with wolves if "the expediency of the regime" so demands.

Mehdi Khalaji, a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, studied Shi'ite theology at both Qom seminary in Iran and Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes of the University of Sorbonne in Paris. His most recent book in Persian is titled *The New Order of the Clerical Establishment in Iran*. ❖

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