

Islam vs. Iran's 'Islamic Republic'

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Dec 18, 2009

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Brief Analysis

A new opportunity is now emerging for the "Green Movement" in Iran to demonstrate opposition to the Islamic Republic and the manipulated presidential election results earlier this year. Friday, December 18, marks the beginning of the months of Muharram and Safar in the Islamic lunar calendar. For the regime in Tehran, gaining control of the streets has become gradually more difficult since the Green Movement turned all officially sanctioned political ceremonies into opportunities to wage protests against the Islamic Republic. The coming two months, however, represent the first time that a religious opportunity has come up.

Mourning Means Revolting

In Shiite tradition, Hossein, the third imam -- meaning both political leader and spiritual guide -- led a noble but ultimately unsuccessful revolt against the unjust rule of the Muslim caliph Yazid. The tenth day of Muharram, or Ashura, marks the bloody end to this revolt in October 680 of the Common Era, when Hossein faced off against Yazid's army at Karbala. Once Hossein's forces had been defeated, he and some seventy of his disciples, along with all the male members of his family, were brutally killed. Since then, Hossein has occupied a special place for Shiites. He gained the title "Master of Martyrs," and in the course of Islamic history his image has been influenced by pre-Islamic mythology as well as Christian scripture. Remembrance of the passion of Hossein and his sacrifice, as well as the suffering of his family and disciples, has served as a locus for sustaining Shiite identity. The events of Ashura are viewed by Shiites as the defining moment when they split from the mainstream Sunni sect and the caliphate. By extension, Shiites have long connected mourning for Hossein, and his divine sacrifice, with the principles of truth and justice as opposed to unjust and cruel leadership.

The Pivot of Shiite Social Networks

In Iran, both before and after the sixteenth century -- when Shiism became the official state sect -- commemorating Ashura has been the mythological cement that binds the community. This remembrance does not occur only in mosques, but also in the hundreds of thousands of buildings known as hosseinyehs or tekyehs that were constructed for the sole purpose of remembrance. Beyond these sites, which are funded by religious endowments and wealthy donors, many middle- and upper-class families have equipped their homes as places for commemorating the tragedy of Karbala. In this process, they have allowed their homes and their families alike to be blessed by the name of Hossein. Both the hosseinyehs and the use of private homes for remembrance have created a wide social network

in Iran that has remained significant even as the country has become modernized. In the absence of a civil society, and against government restrictions in the public sphere, this network has, under certain circumstances, served nonreligious social and political functions.

The commemoration of Imam Hossein's martyrdom takes place through *rowzeh khani*, a ritual consisting of dirges that recount the tragedies of Karbala, usually rendered by professional cantors and religious singers, or *maddahs*. In the course of the two months, Shiites form *heyats*, or religious associations, which organize street processions that begin with gatherings in mosques, *hosseinyehs*, *tekyehs*, or private houses. Congregants then spill into the streets, where they sing rhythmic religious songs and beat their chests. In the processions, the rows of flagellants are led by one or more individuals who bear the crushing weight of a decorative steel cross called an *alam*. The massive lamentations in the streets are accompanied by special music for Ashura, including trumpets, kettledrums, and other instruments. Religious singers, cantors, and clerics do not limit their words to narration from the Karbala tragedy; they also address social and political issues of the day. In the years before the Islamic Revolution, Muharram and Safar offered the best opportunity for antigovernment clerics to mobilize people against the shah, usually by comparing him to Yazid, the epitome of an unjust ruler. The opposition, on the other hand, likened itself to the murdered martyr Hossein, the epitome of truth and justice.

Failed Monopolization Policy

Since the beginning of the Islamic Republic, the government has posited itself as the official and exclusive authority on religious affairs. Not only has the regime established a monopoly over the management of economic-religious organizations and institutions that manage endowments along with the clerical establishment, but it has also tried to consolidate management of the Shiite rituals that traditionally fell outside the state's jurisdiction. By creating bodies such as the Office for Islamic Propaganda (*Daftar-e Tablighat-e Eslami*), the Islamic Propaganda Organization (*Sazman-e Tabliqat-e Eslami*), the Center for Imams of Prayer and Friday Prayers (*Dibirkhaneh-ye Aemmeh-ye jomeh va jama'at*), the Center for Mosques Affairs (*Markaz-e residergi be omour-e masajed*), and tens of other similar institutions, the government has been able to purge clerics who are deemed to be insufficiently pro-government and to silence their preaching and performances during religious rituals such as those during Ashura.

Nevertheless, because of the widespread observance of the Muharram and Safar rituals, as well as their reach into all corners of the country, the government has not been able to effectively control all practices associated with the remembrance. In recent years, the regime has complained of attempts by the younger generation to transform the religious commemoration into a more modern and fashionable event. For many sociocultural reasons, Iranian youth -- who cannot enjoy concerts and street festivals as can their peers in more Western-oriented societies, or even meet with members of the opposite sex in public -- have transformed the events into an opportunity to experiment with new music and mingle with one another without fear of police interference.

In recent years during the festival, many middle- and upper-class neighborhoods of big cities have seen young performers sing romantic and passionate songs with ambivalent lyrics -- open to identification by either sex and applicable to sacred as well as earthly love. The music's melodies and style are also inspired by Western forms, including pop and rock and roll. For their part, young women wear revealing and fashionable dresses, usually black, and some go so far as to wear black makeup, emulating Western Goth subculture. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and other official clerics have criticized this "transformation" of Ashura rituals as "inappropriate," but nonetheless, the government has failed to prevent youths from remaking the religious ceremonies for their own purposes.

Fighting the Enemy with His Own Weapons

As a decentralized movement, the "Green Wave" is well positioned to challenge the government by using the religious rituals held during the months of Muharram and Safar. From the government's perspective, mounting a

confrontation against the socially dynamic scene would prove deeply exhausting. In virtually all cities and villages where Shiites live, mosques and homes are potential centers for a civil and democratic movement in opposition to the government. After all, Iranians used this same technique during the prerevolutionary years under the shah. Three decades ago, the participation of millions in these rituals -- including many who usually did not practice their religion -- had a major role in overthrowing the shah's regime. Today, even low-ranking clerics who support the Green Movement could play a significant role by allowing the people to politicize the ceremonies and transform them into opposition gatherings. In a recent statement, opposition cleric Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri said that the "Islamic Republic is neither Islamic nor republic; it is a military government."

The Green Movement's use of Muharram and Safar could have a tremendous impact on the religious credentials and legitimacy of the regime. If the government avoids violence out of respect for the religious values of Muharram and Safar, it could mean two months of open challenges to the fundamentals of the Islamic Republic's ideology. But if the government cracks down on religious displays, resentment against the Islamic Republic could increase significantly.

Mehdi Khalaji is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on Iranian politics and the politics of Shiite groups in the Middle East. ❖

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