

Tehran's Renewed War on Culture

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Brief Analysis

After a period of some tolerance under former president Mohammad Khatami, Iran is now experiencing a cultural clampdown. President Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad is implementing the hardest of hardline ideological tendencies in the cultural arena, consistent with his belief that his administration should prepare the country for the reappearance of the hidden imam (who is now more than a thousand years old). To this end, Ahmadinezhad has taken a host of provocative steps regarding:

The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. The new minister, Mohammad Hossein Saffar Harandi, was a member of the Revolutionary Guard and was one of the closest men to Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. In his position as deputy editor of the hardline Kayhan newspaper, Harandi wrote many articles condemning democracy as a Western model for governing, pluralism as an "effective weapon of the West to achieve their cultural invasion into Islamic world," and freedom of speech as a way to destroy people's religious beliefs. His background of attacks on liberal journalists and political activists strongly suggests that Ahmadinezhad wants to suppress cultural freedom and to limit the freedom of information.

The Supreme Cultural Revolution Council (SCRC). In its first session under Ahmadinezhad, the SCRC adopted a circular banning all movies that "propagandize for schools like secularism, liberalism, nihilism, or feminism, and destroy the authentic cultures of religious societies and humiliate them." The circular emphasizes that all movies that explicitly or implicitly deny the right of religion to govern, or that show secular regimes as superior to their religious counterparts, are forbidden. Many Iranian directors, like Bahram Bayzai, experience delays lasting into years receiving permission to produce films, and many others, like Abbas Kiarostami, cannot show their work in Iran. Some Iranian filmmakers, like Mohsen Makhmalbaf, prefer to live abroad in order to pursue their art in freedom and safety.

Journalism. Mashaallah Shamsolvaezin, spokesman for the Tehran-based Association for Advocating Freedom of Press, said that state pressure on journalists has increased since Ahmadinezhad took office. According to Shamsolvaezin, the culture ministry, in cooperation with intelligence and security forces, has in recent weeks called in many journalists for questioning without apparent reasons. The goal clearly is to intimidate them. Many of those pressing journalists are former employees of the Ministry of Intelligence who were fired under Khatami for their involvement in killing intellectuals and political activists. Instead of arresting journalists and sending them to Evin

Prison, Tehran seeks to reduce international notice of its intimidation of journalists and political activists by putting psychological pressure on them. Even the families of victims are threatened against speaking about the intimidation.

Book publishing. The process of issuing permission to publish books of literature and the human sciences has practically ground to a halt. All books, even Qurans, must receive official permission for publication from the culture ministry. Writers and publishers say that the censorship regulations have become stricter since Harandi took over the ministry. The young writer Hossein Sanapoor, for example, opted not to publish his planned book of short stories because censors asked him to eliminate four stories that, taken together, represented the majority of the book.

Musical performances. Since September, the culture ministry has cancelled more than thirty concerts. The ministry has also announced the cancellation of the Fajr Music Festival on the grounds that it would overlap with the period of Moharram, the mourning ceremonies for the Shiite third imam, but after seeing the extent of public dissatisfaction and its negative impact on Ahmadinezhad's image, the ministry allowed the festival to take place at a later date. The rescheduled festival will differ from recent years, though, focusing on religious music.

Restrictions on women. Since Ahmadinezhad's election, conservatives have been campaigning to impose a single national dress code for women. Parliamentarians have introduced numerous proposals for defining "national dress," which would oblige all women in state offices, universities, and other public places to wear a unique "Islamic" costume. In addition, police forces have expanded their harassment of young people in order to restrict the freedom of relations between young men and women.

University curricula. Ahmadinezhad has promised to Islamize the universities. Ten university presidents have quit or have been dismissed as a result. In early November, the new minister of sciences, research, and technology, Mohammad Mehdi Zahidi, went to Qom, where the clergy urged him to cleanse the universities of "enemies of the Islamic revolution" and to incorporate religion into all levels of education. In Iran's universities, this would mean making fundamental modifications to the content of textbooks to make them compatible with religious tradition; erasing Western culture from textbooks; and forcing women to study in their native cities in order to maintain their morals by being in the family home.

Seminary-university relations. Not only is Ahmadinezhad devoting an enormous part of the cultural budget to reconstruction of mosques or religious-economic enterprises such as the Imam Reza Shrine in Mashhad -- perhaps the richest economic enterprise in Iran -- and religious institutions in Qom, he is increasing the influence of seminaries at the expense of universities. Ahmadinezhad's program of giving the most crucial academic responsibility to clerics or seminary professors runs the risk of politicizing the universities. Since Iranian universities already faced serious problems with the quality of their research, these developments are worrying for the future of Iranian education.

University dress codes. On the first day of the current academic year, security agents handed university students a flower and an announcement. Students were urged to respect Islamic values, specifically including a detailed dress code for women, asking them to prefer a chador (a gown covering the full body) or to wear a simple long coat in a dark color. Perfumes and cosmetics are not to be used. Male students should wear loose-fitting, long-sleeved shirts that "cannot be thought to follow Western culture or other banal cultures." The announcement concludes with a warning that students who disrespect the recommendations will be punished in accordance with university rules.

The National Youth Organization. Ahmadinezhad has appointed Ali Akbari to head the National Youth Organization, a state organization that has a large budget and enormous authority over government and nongovernmental organizations related to youth affairs. Akbari, a cleric for forty years, is an uneducated preacher who, like most of Ahmadinezhad's men, is an ideological radical lacking in management experience. He was one the main organizers

of the World without Zionism gathering in October at which Ahmadinezhad announced that Israel should be wiped off the map. Under Akbari's leadership, the National Youth Organization is working closely with the Basij militia and other military organizations to advance radical propaganda.

Conclusion

Ahmadinezhad's cultural strategy is to trust influential positions and institutional responsibilities either to former Revolutionary Guard commanders or to young radical clerics. The president's cadre of reactionary apparatchiks seek to control cultural production and creativity more than ever before in the history of Islamic Republic -- but this does not mean that Iranian society will surrender. Despite great pressure, increasing restrictions, and the threat of punishment, underground culture has dominated Iran's social and cultural scene for some years now. The gap between young people and the government is growing wider and deeper. Despite the regime's many mechanisms for keeping the Iranian people closed off from the world, Iranian youths are more Westernized now than at any other time in contemporary history.

Mehdi Khalaji is a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute.

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