



Mullocrats and Revolutionaries: Religion and Decisionmaking in Iran

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“Iranians don’t wake up in the morning from dreams of nuclear weapons and begin denying the Holocaust,” journalist Afshin Molavi told a Capitol Hill panel on April 30. He said that for ordinary Iranians, financial worries and the needs of their families dominate individual concerns. Molavi spoke to Congressional staffers along with Dr. Jon B. Alterman, director of the CSIS Middle East Program, as part of the CSIS Congressional Forum on Islam. The discussion, entitled “Mullocrats and Revolutionaries,” examined shifting political power in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Alterman began by judging that clerical control over Iran was in part the product of happenstance. The 1979 Iranian revolution was carried out by a diverse coalition that was united in their desire to overthrow the Shah. Nationalism was at least as important as Islamism in this case, but Islamists consolidated their control as “Ayatollah Khomeini emerged as a symbol of Iranian authenticity.” Reinforcing this point, Molavi added, “At the time of the revolution, the populace chanted, ‘down with the Shah and in with the revolution,’ not ‘down with the Shah and in with a strict, conservative, intolerant, authoritarian government.’”

After Khomeini’s death, many clerics became disenchanted with the prospect of political power. Many came to believe that mixing politics and religion “had not sanctified politics, but rather politicized religion,” Alterman said. Younger clerics especially have advocated stepping back from politics and into more spiritual roles.

To understand today’s Iran, Molavi urged the audience “not to probe too deeply into Shia religious thought.” He suggested that the Iranian government is not much different from any other, guided by power politics and a desire to stay in control. Molavi quoted former President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani who, when asked by a journalist if a particular policy was consistent with Islam, responded, “my friend, 90% of what we do is against Islamic law.”

Molavi and Alterman both stressed that the Iranian government has a great deal of “overlapping authority,” leading to inefficiencies and contradictions in decision making. Alterman suggested that the overlapping authority also creates a kind of “constructive ambiguity” that Iranian leaders often play to their advantage internally and internationally. Molavi lamented that the one leader who might be able to surmount all this ambiguity and dispersal of power, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, is unfortunately notoriously indecisive.

Molavi judged that most Iranians have little interest in the heated rhetoric of President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, but instead reflects Iranians’ frustration that the reform movement of President Mohammed Khatami achieved so little during his eight year presidency. He added that the reform movements in Iran have “an Achilles heel”—the inability of reformers to link

“freedom and bread.” Concentrating on political rights under Khatami did little to improve Iranians’ standard of living; to the contrary, it declined (and has largely done so since the Revolution).

Ahmedinejad won election in 2005 as a populist, not as a racist or xenophobe. Come election day, Ahmadinejad came across as a humble ordinary man who cared for the poor, while his opponent, Rafsanjani, was a millionaire bureaucrat with Swiss bank accounts—precisely the kind of person many ordinary Iranians had come to loathe. Molavi recalled his conversations with an elderly Iranian woman to make his point. In 2003, she pleaded for President Bush to liberate Iran from religious authoritarianism. Two years later, she voted for President Ahmadinejad because “he was the only one who cared about the poor.”

Molavi believes that Ahmedinejad’s rhetoric plays better outside of Iran than inside the country. Iranians voice frustration that their national resources pour into Palestinian and Lebanese “resistance groups,” while Iranians go hungry. When Molavi visited the site of a major earthquake in Iran, citizens complained to him, “if this earthquake happened in southern Lebanon or the Occupied Territories, our government would have done much more.”

Molavi had two prescriptions for Congressional action. First, he said sanctions should be imposed with a clear eye toward who is most affected by them. According to Molavi, “escalatory sanctions weaken the middle class and adversely affect the private sector,” isolating American supporters within Iran and thus strengthening the hard liners. He also cautioned against encouraging President Ahmedinejad by leaning too far in the direction of seeking a “grand bargain.”

Alterman suggested that, in the near term, the United States should seek to “play for a tie” with Iran. He explained that a clear U.S. win in this political stand-off is unlikely right now, but growing economic mismanagement inside Iran combined with a future drop in oil prices would strengthen the American hand significantly. He suggested that the United States and the international community should seek to negotiate a lower level of uranium enrichment and some advancement on civil nuclear energy development. According to Alterman, the United States should seek a deal that de-escalates the situation, marginally advances U.S. interests, and is something Iran can sell to its population as a victory at home.