

Iran: An on-going Challenge after Thirty Years of Revolution

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Four relevant events in the modern history of Iran should be noted at the outset: The Constitutional Revolution of 1906, where the United Kingdom appeared to side with those in favour of establishing *Majles* (parliament). The occupation of part of Iranian territory by the Soviet forces after the WW II and their eventual withdrawal from the country by the strong support of the United States and the brinkmanship of the Iranian Prime Minister at the time, *Qavam*. The nationalisation of Iranian Oil Industry by the Iranian Prime Minister, *Mosaddegh*, and the subsequent coup in 1953, engineered by the UK and the US, to remove him from power; and the Islamic Revolution of 1978-79. In the first three instances Iranians seemed to know what they sought whereas in the last they appeared to know what they did not want. In all the cases some form of overt or covert external hand attempting to engineer and/or influence (the course of) events seems to have been at play.

Internal Challenges

Two important domestic challenges have beset the Islamic system in Iran since its foundation three decades ago. First is the question of modernity in its political form, i.e. who does sovereignty in the political realm lie with? God or people? Does the ineffable word of the Almighty revealed by and through His Messenger constitute the framework within which political action may be formulated? Or is it the will of the majority that should form the basis for governance? The second challenge is the rule of *Shari'a* as it was devised many centuries ago. The applicability of *Shari'a* has in itself posed an important question on the historicity of humanity; if rules devised one thousand four hundred years ago for a specific group of people under specific circumstances can and should be generalised to all of the people all of the time, the axiomatic conclusion would be that humanity is a standard immutable pattern of behaviour throughout time and history. i.e. humankind is an ahistorical creature. Real life examples of the rule of *Shari'a* in our time such as the Taliban Afghanistan and the current day Sudan offer poor models to emulate.

In short the question of rationality vs *Shari'a* (the former focused on national interests but the latter on religious interests) has dominated the underlying philosophical debate in the Islamic Republic. Can such religious dictums as 'economy without interest' or the polarisation of humanity into good and evil be practical guides to human governance in the twenty First Century? The so-called 'reformist movement' had a poor attempt at reconciling rationality with religiosity. First led by Khatami as president, aided by a 'reformist' parliament, the movement sought to present 'religious democracy' as the practical Islamic alternative to Western democracy. The Movement failed spectacularly because it lacked clarity of goals and means to achieve those goals (no one has been

able to explain or understand what 'religious democracy' really means); also the hurdles put in its way by the more conservative forces contributed to its losing support.

External Challenges

The fundamental external challenge for the Iranian system, emanating from the domestic challenge, has been the pursuit of ideological goals (religion is ideologised) in the era of national interests. The most dramatic failure of this discourse was illustrated by the collapse of the Soviet Union some twenty years ago.

In more concrete terms it is the enmity expressed by the Iranian rulers against the United States that gives shape to this challenge. The question for the Iranian government is why thirty years of anti-Americanism? Has it served the ideology or the national interest of Iran? On the face of it at least, the USA has appeared to act in line with ideological and national interests of Iran as predicated by the Islamic Republic. The Bosnian question, the ousting of the Taliban and the deposing of Saddam lend evidence to this proposition. Reportedly the only foreigner killed for Iranian constitutionalism was an American called Howard Baskerville. The consequences of this enmity have been many for Iran and Iranian people: Iran has been kept out of the World Trade Organisation; it seriously lacks spare parts for its commercial and fighter planes leading to much higher black market prices paid by Iran; kept out of international fora such as the UN Security Council and deprived of Iranian assets frozen in the US since the hostage crisis.

Of course this anti-Americanism must be welcome by US competitors. After all Iran has the fourth largest oil reserves and the second largest gas reserves in the world. It is located strategically overlooking the Persian Gulf and the straits of *Hormoz*. Over seventy million Iranians provide a potentially valuable market.

It was with regard to the above that a reported Grand Deal was offered by Tehran to Washington in 2003. Allegedly the Deal proposed cessation of Iranian support for Hamas and Hizbollah, recognition of Israel if the latter left the Occupied Territories and granting access to IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) inspectors for full and unlimited inspection of nuclear sites. In return the Islamic Republic asked for security guarantees from the United States (US having demonstrated the ability to dislodge regimes through sheer military prowess such as in former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq)), lifting of sanctions, removal of Islamic Republic's name from the Axis of Evil and allowing European investment in Iran (in 2003 after the ousting of Saddam, Iran had reportedly stopped all nuclear activities in fear of US military reprisals). The Deal is said to have been delivered by a Swiss Diplomat to Washington, who was reportedly reprimanded for having undertaken this task. Washington reportedly rejected the Grand Deal.

Two other attempts, one by former US President Reagan in 1980s and one by former Iranian President Rafsanjani in 1995, to mend fences between the two countries were inconclusive. It remains to be seen if diplomatic manoeuvres in Tehran and Washington are enough in themselves to turn a new leaf or that more fundamental changes are required to bring that effect.