

SYMPOSIUM 20/02/2009

‘FACING THE FUTURE: 30 YEARS OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN’

Report Workshop 1: **Global and regional dimensions of the Islamic Republic of Iran**
by **Prof. Dr. Anoush Ehteshami**

Central angle Dr. Ehteshami:

How can we analyze the external behaviour of 30 years Islamic Republic of Iran?

A few introductory remarks:

- Revolutions are primary a domestic affair. But they also cause a tear in the international system so you can not isolate it as just a domestic issue.
- Revolutions disrupt the prevailing balance of power and diplomacy. They cause disruptions in relations between states and existing elites.
- These two notions apply with no exception to the Islamic revolution in Iran:
- Monarchy gone
- A series of new priorities and interests of new elite, based on religious morale.

Four different ways to analyse external behaviour Iran:

1. State that foreign policy has been a success:

Big and important player in the Middle East. Achieved nuclear independence. Ability to send satellites into space. Good relations with many countries, both secular and religious, also well beyond the Middle East. Export of Islamic revolution message.

2. State that foreign policy has been a failure.

Isolated. Sanctioned by the UN. Has mixed relations with Muslim neighbours. Its people are deprived. Failed to provide a global alternative to global capitalist order and previous Soviet order.

3. Measure its policies and behaviour in context of realities that the Republic faces.

Poorly experienced elite (secular as well cleric). Great pressure from international order. And yet the regime survived for 30 years.

4. Measure its policies and behaviour according to Islamic Republic's own criteria.

Constitution only gives abstracts of wishful thinking like justice and independence. Within the government there is a critical voice about the shortcomings but also a very proud voice about the accomplishments. Ability to balance all of this notions is according to Dr. Ehteshami the real art.

Some reflections:

- Although pragmatism is distinctive for Iran's behaviour, moral values and ideologies still play a significant part in governing. Core elite continues to talk about respect, humanity, etc.

- Post '89, Iran has been successful in not choosing an East/West orientation.
- As consequence of 'neither East nor West orientation, a third way of thought emerged with counter hegemonic tendencies. Anti American position. Alliance with Syria.
- Iran has no Muslim-first foreign policy: poor relations with South East Asia, alliance with secular Syria, calls Saudi Arabia 'American Islam', little awareness of India.
- Foreign policy focuses on greater Middle East. Reduced foreign policy to geopolitics.

Was the last 30 years of Islamic Republic a renaissance or a sign of gradual decline?

- + From its own point of view: 30 years of Islamic Republic has been a renaissance. Emerging regional actor, feels important, U.S. need to acknowledge its existence. That is direct consequence of legitimacy and power base at home.
- On the other hand: young Iranians are aware of its gradual decline. Iran is going forward but is not keeping up with the rest. In absolute terms, Iran is falling behind.

Comments by discussants:

Prof. Dr. Touraj Atabaki (Universiteit Leiden and IISG):

Major turning point for Iran was the fall of the Soviet Union and the 1991 Gulf War. During the Cold War, Iran benefited from the international setting in a bipolar world. If the Soviet Union had fallen twenty years earlier the Islamic Republic would not be a success.

Reason: Back then, Iran had only one direct neighbour to negotiate with: the Soviet Union. Now it has eight republics around it, three with direct borders: Shiite Azerbaijan, Christian Armenian and the rest Sunnites. New autonomies in Middle East correspond with minorities in Iran. Iran is still trying to find a reliable partner in the Middle East. Iranian revolution called for Islamising politics, instead Islam has been politicised and gone over the borders. Iran cannot control it and its radical groups.

Reply **Ehteshami**:

After the fall of the Soviet Union two elites emerged: forces of compromise and forces of isolation. The Gulf War has benefited that latter one. One of the largest successes of Iran is that it could remain viable as a country of many minorities, no exodus was taking place.

Maaïke Warnaar (University of St Andrews):

Four paradoxes of Islamic Republic have been worked out. Is there a sign that in the future Iran will act in consistent way, in explanatory terms? No approach in International Relations can explain Iran's foreign policy. This could mean that it is not Iran that is the one that needs to change its view/policy, but maybe International Relations should adapt a new strategy to explain its behaviour.

Reply **Ehteshami**:

Notions in International Relations need to be dealt with caution. It can become truism. E.g., every step that Russia makes now is being fitted into a Cold War frame. Geopolitics determines the paradox of Iran's behaviour. There is also the influence of irrational actors like Ahmadinejad and his messianic aspirations.

Some remarks from the interaction with the audience:

- The Republic has accidental supremacy in the region while the Shah had consistent supremacy. The Republic gains its success as consequence of American behaviour.
- The fall of Soviet Union was indeed important for success of Iran but we must not forget that Iran missed a handful of opportunities to have friendly relations and gain power in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

- The only successful partnership that Iran has found is Hezbollah.
- Iran needs to make a trade-off between political and economic independence. Political independence means sanctions. Globalisation means economical interdependence. War is a fantastic propaganda tool. In times of war, Iran can sell sanctions and deprivation to its citizens because of a higher goal. But how long will the role of the war legitimise the political and economic situation?

Report Workshop 2: **The resilient republic: *Can civil society bring change?***

By: **Peyman Jafari, Roschanack Shaery-Eisenlohr, Shervin Nekuee**

Peyman Jafari

What is civil society? There are many definitions used to explain civil society. Besides the many definitions, the term is used in a different way by state officials, Islamists, activists etc. Also the dichotomy between state and non-state is problematic in finding an unambiguous definition of civil society.

The civil society debate revived at the end of the 1980's/early 1990's and had an intellectual/academic character. But also policy makers, donor countries and international organizations interfered. Important goal of those parties was to finance the opposition of the Iranian regime in order to 'facilitate' a regime change. The support of the opposition was promoted as non-ideological, pragmatic understanding of democratization. The liberal approach was leading: democracy by capital development. Jafari explains that people romanticize (the role of civil society in) democratization.

Civil society in Iran revived three times: the early twentieth century (constitutional revolution), 1940 (ended by the coup of 1953) and 1979 ('spring of liberty'). After the revolution of 1979 three events marked important changes in civil society: the end of the Iran-Iraq war / death of Khomeini, economic reconstruction under Rafsanjani, 1997 Khatami. Khatami was clearly in favor of strengthening civil society. But this process isn't just something from outside the Iranian society. The Iranian people themselves want emancipation. Under Khatami there has been a rise in the number of civil society organizations, student movement, cultural centers, bloggers, women groups, political organizations and also the workers played an important role (outside the unions). But this strengthening of civil society had place in a problematic context.

The strategy of the reformist project was to mobilize reformism from below and negotiate from above. To evaluate the experience of the reform project Jafari poses the question 'why didn't it work?' One of the main reasons is the focus of CSOs on the middle classes of society. Social issues concerning working classes were ignored. Therefore, CSO activity has strengthened conservative policies in stead of reformist policies.

Next question is what to do now? Jafari gives some suggestions. First, escape the state - civil society dichotomy. Second, he states that civil society reforms don't take place in a neutral sphere. The assumption that civil society is the realm of freedom and the state the realm of coercion is false as well: there is also some kind of coercion in the realm of civil society, - civil society is, at least, also very much exposed to pressures resulting from the economic situation and economic inequality.

Jafari mentions three obstacles for a stronger civil society in Iran: political, economical and social. The political obstacle is the structure of political society in Iran: democratic versus theocratic institutions. Conservative elements try to restrict democratic reforms. CSOs can act in a way to limit this obstacle. They have to play an independent role in order to enforce democratic functioning of the state. Jafari also thinks that it would help to add political demands on CSOs own agendas. CSOs also have to build 'counter power' to the state. The lack of the above mentioned issues result in the failure of civil society.

The foremost economical obstacle is the state economy. Also the nationalization of bonyads (approximately 20% of Iran's DGP!) plays a crucial part in the economy.

The most important social obstacle is the inequality in Iran. One out of seven persons lives below the poverty line (and this is an official number!). The top 20 % gets 50 % of all incomes, the bottom 20% only 2% (World Bank 2006). The new middle class is changing into a state bourgeoisie, bounded to the Islamic Republic. The state is using allowances to create such an effect.

Roschanack Shaery-Eisenlohr

Shaery-Eisenlohr is questioning whether civil society can bring a change. On the one hand she is optimistic: there is awareness that people have to organize themselves, things can change and have changed. On the other hand she is pessimistic: civil society is a one man show, there is no real civil society platform (not much effect) and secularism and Islamism are conflicting aspects in the role of civil society. Shaery-Eisenlohr poses the question: If Khatami is re-elected, will reformism revive in Iran?

Shervin Nekuee

Nekuee doesn't agree with the assumption that civil society should be 'democratic from within'. Is civil society an end or a means? He argues that civil society isn't something to create something else in Iran. In the past there were some great civil society activists, but they were also conservative. Nekuee thinks that civil society is important even if it doesn't bring democratization. It brings stability in the Iranian society which is positive on its own.

Peyman Jafari

Jafari agrees with Nekuee, but point of discussion is whether civil society can bring democracy or not. Civil society is important and has its strengths, but also its weaknesses. First it came 'from above' (within the state) now most of the time from outside the state.

Roschanack Shaery-eisenlohr

Shaery-Eisenlohr thinks that the classical mistake of the Islamic Revolution will be repeated if people try to blend secularists and Islamists again. This approach is opportunistic but won't work. Because of the mistake, the revolution was hijacked by Islamists. She also claims that political parties are needed to support claims made by CSOs. However, there won't be political equality without economical/social equality.

Shervin Nekuee

Nekuee reacts on the claim of Shaery-Eisenlohr. He says that the irony of Iran is, that if politics are involved everything will turn political.

Paul Aarts

Aarts poses the question whether a priority scale in the mentioned obstacles can be defined. Jafari listed the political obstacles first. However, aren't economic obstacles more important? And what does Jafari think about privatization/liberalization as an impulse for civil society?

Peyman Jafari

Jafari replies by saying that there is no priority scale. The obstacles of civil society are foremost political; however they are also connected with economics. Those spheres are inseparable. Business people were happy with the election of Ahmadinejad, because it removed the risks of reformation. Under Ahmadinejad there is a more stable climate for business. Thus, business communities won't bring change in Iran. There is little liberalization in Iran. Jafari calls this 'liberalization with an Iranian character'.