

if not offered real choices, will, at a minimum, protest by staying home on election days. In fact, conservatives do best when the turnout is low, reformers benefit when it is high. The ruling conservatives now face the challenge of how to maintain some semblance of legitimacy while not actually sharing power with the reformers, who most probably enjoy the support of the majority of the electorate.

This challenge is troubling to the clerical leadership since the country has in recent decades gone through a profound transformation in political values, with much of the population embracing key aspects of the democratic idea including political pluralism, mass participation, civil society, human rights, and individual liberties. Even conservatives have begun to use such terms, openly describing themselves as “neoconservatives,” “constructivists,” and “pragmatists.”

Meanwhile, those in the general public who feel excluded from national politics remain active in influential nongovernmental organizations that make up an important part of Iranian civil society. The most visible of these is a human rights group headed by Shirin Ebadi, the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2003. Ms. Ebadi has been a lawyer, judge (until the Islamic Republic barred women from holding such positions), writer, teacher, and activist, and has been most prominent in the struggle to protect the rights of women and children. Even if they are completely excluded from the political arena by the conservative religious establishment, so far concerned citizens such as Ebadi remain committed to using legal, nonviolent means to promote change. But they do not want to be associated with American projects for “regime change.”

The Islamic Republic's first attempt to enter the international arena as a militant force to spread its theocratic version of Islam proved counterproductive. This effort diverted scarce resources to the military and contributed to the disastrous war with Iraq. It drove Saudi Arabia and the Gulf sheikdoms into a closer relationship with the United States. It prompted the United States to isolate Iran, discouraged foreign investment, and prevented international organizations from extending economic assistance. Iran's militancy has also alarmed nearby secular Islamic states such as Turkey, Tadjikistan, and Azerbaijan. During the Khatami years, however, the regime managed to repair some of this damage. It won over many Arab states and established cordial relations with its neighbors. It also managed to repair some bridges to the European Community. Some of this repair work has been damaged in more recent years by the Ahmadinejad administration.

The major external challenge to the Islamic Republic comes from the United States. The Bush administration, by naming Iran as a member of the “Axis of Evil” in 2002 and openly calling for “regime change” (and promoting such change by military means in neighboring Afghanistan and Iraq) has dramatically increased pressures on Iran beyond those that already existed because of American economic sanctions, lack of diplomatic relations, and successful barring of Iran from the World Trade Organization. The United States has accused Iran of sabotaging the Arab-Israeli peace process, helping terrorist organizations, especially Hamas in Palestine and Hezbollah in Lebanon, and “grossly violating” democratic and human rights of its own citizens. More recently the United States has highlighted the danger of “weapons of mass destruction” in Iran and accused the country of intending to transform its nuclear energy program into a nuclear weapons program. Even more recently, it has accused Iran of arming and training insurgents in Iraq. Some analysts remain skeptical of such accusations.

The conservative clerics who now dominate Iranian politics have been able to transform this external threat into a political asset. They have intimidated many reformers into toning down their demands for domestic change, even silencing them,

by declaring that the country was in danger, that the enemy was at the gates, and that any opposition to the government in such times would play into the hands of those who wanted to do harm to Iran. Even in the United States people have speculated about whether the Bush administration was seriously considering taking some type of military action against Iran—perhaps a preemptive air strike against its nuclear reactors. These speculations have fed the perception of threat. Few Iranians are willing to appear unpatriotic by openly criticizing their government at a time of external danger.

The Obama administration has followed a more nuanced and ambiguous policy. Before his election, Obama offered an olive branch and implicitly accepted Iran's right to enrich uranium so long as it gave verifiable guarantees it would not produce nuclear weapons. After the election, he continued to hold out an olive branch but muddied the implicit acceptance by imposing stringent economic sanctions in order to presumably bring Iran into negotiations. Unless these sanctions are at some point coupled with some form of compromise offer, they will be taken in Iran—by reformers as well as conservatives—as a continuation of Bush's threats and yet another evidence that the United States—like previous imperial powers—aspires to impose its will on Iran.

Iranian Politics in Comparative Perspective

Unlike most developing countries, Iran was never formally colonized by the European imperial powers and has always been independent. It is, in many ways, an old state with many institutions that date back to ancient times. Furthermore, while many other Third World states have weak connections with their societies, Iran has a religion that links the elite with the masses, the cities with the villages, the government with the citizenry. Shi'ism, as well as Iranian national identity, serves as social and cultural cement, which gives the population a strong collective identity. Iran also has the advantage of abundant oil resources that can be the basis for economic growth that would be the envy of most developing countries.

Nevertheless, Iran also has much in common with other developing countries. Despite some modern aspects, its economy remains largely underdeveloped, highly dependent on one commodity, and unable to meet the rising expectations of its population. Iran's collective identity, although strong in religious terms, is strained by other internal fault lines, especially those of class, ethnicity, gender, and political differences. It wants to be an important player in the world of states, but international, domestic, and regional problems have combined to keep the country pretty much on the global sidelines.

The development of the democratic idea in Iran has been constricted by theocracy. Some argue that Islam has made this inevitable. But Islam, like the other major religions, can be interpreted in ways that either promote or hinder democracy. Some interpretations of Islam stress the importance of justice, equality, and consultation as political principles. Islam also has a tradition of tolerating other religions, and the *shari'a* explicitly protects life, property, and honor. In practice, Islam has often separated politics from religion, government legal statutes from holy laws, spiritual affairs from worldly matters, and the state from the clerical establishment.

Moreover, theocracy in Iran originates not in Islam itself but in the very specific concept of the jurist's guardianship as developed by Khomeini. On the whole, Sunni Islam considers clerics to be theological scholars, not a special political class. This helps explain why the Iranian regime has found it difficult to export its revolution to other parts of the Muslim world. The failure of democracy to take deeper root in