

Cultural Policies in the Islamic Republic of Iran

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"We did not make the revolution for cheap melons; we made it for Islam." These words, reportedly uttered by the leader of Iran's Islamic revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, have been deemed as an announcement of the centrality of culture in post-revolutionary reorganization. Indeed there can be no doubt that the forceful post-revolutionary imposition of Islamic values and ways of living, as interpreted by the emerging Islamic mandarins, can be considered to be the most distinctive aspect of the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Through the attempted ideological fusion of culture and religion, the Islamic revolutionaries hoped, on the most manifest level, to make a statement about a new and unified set of values that was about to become important, explicitly rejecting what to them was also an integrated set of values revolving around the impact of westernization on Iranian life and cultural practices. They also aspired to claim cultural authenticity for their own practices and, on that basis, deny political participation to those whose everyday practices did not presumably match their own.

As such, the cultural policies of the Islamic Republic from the beginning had both ideological and political components. They were manifestly "principled" statements about Iran's new "Islamic" identity and yet, instruments to be used against opponents and adjusted to fit the new exigencies of the evolving Islamic state. What this means is simply that the practices and political actions of the Islamic republic, while related, cannot be reduced to the ideology and culture of Islamism that was suddenly announced in 1979. The oft-repeated proviso in the post-revolutionary constitution that everything must keep in line with imprecisely defined "Islamic principles" or "Islamic laws and ethics," afforded ample room for maneuver for Iranian state builders. Yet at the same time, as ideological manifests, they have constantly brought to the fore the question of whether the way principles have been put into practice have kept in line with "true" Islam. Accordingly, they have set the stage for an intense conflict within the Iranian Islamic community over the practice of Islam in the contemporary world. In addition, the forceful and many times physical reiteration of these cultural manifests have ironically turned out to be constant reminders of other, presumably un-Islamic, cultural practices that have resisted and refused to vanish, ultimately compelling the state to come to terms with them through a variety of means, including ignoring, accommodation, or selective punishment.

The tensions created by these balancing acts have been the main reasons for keeping "culture," defined by Iranian authorities as a set of values (*arzesh-ha*) under assault from the outside, as a recurrently contested arena in need of being revisited on a haphazard and unpredictable basis. This is despite the fact that, as will be argued below, post-revolutionary trends have been towards the loosening of the state's cultural controls over people's everyday lives, with quite a bit of flexibility

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exhibited by the state in dealing with cultural issues. There have also been many attempts to make Islamic practices up-to-date, grappling pragmatically with problems of highly complex and urban social settings. In addition, the state has retreated from its project of squashing, belittling, or ignoring cultural festivities, arts, personalities, and sensibilities that are considered uniquely “Iranian.” Examples include the pre-Islamic new year related celebrations of Nowruz and Charshabeh-suri, the ancient capitol of Persepolis, and the poet Ferdowsi. However, given their central place in Iran’s revolutionary legacy *and* contested political environment, debates about cultural policies keep coming back for political/instrumental purposes. This means that, interestingly, on some critical and rather complicated issues as varied as the right to birth control, the right to have an abortion if the mother’s health is endangered, or the right of Iranians to enjoy cultural productions, the post-revolutionary state has quietly, if not completely, backtracked from its initial radical stance. However, some “signature” cultural issues, such as female veiling, abstract notions of cultural assault (*tahajom-e farhangi*), and interactions between men and women, keep popping back into the public arena as needed statements or re-statements of Iran’s Islamic identity.

Such insertion of cultural issues into politics has, of course, had its benefits for those who rule Iran. Every time a woman is harassed in the streets for “improper veiling,” a young man beaten up for dressing like “western infidels,” a house party busted for use of alcohol or “indecent” mixing of sexes, or a newspaper or theater production closed for un-Islamic pictures or performance, the Islamic state’s will to rule is reiterated and opposition to this rule presented as fruitless. At the same time, such blatant insertion of cultural politics into the everyday lives of people in the name of Islamic purity not only makes the Islamic state detested but, ironically, also held responsible for all “deviant” societal conduct, which in today’s Iran, according to official propaganda, can range from mixing of genders and improper veiling to prostitution, drug and alcohol abuse, and serial killings.

None of this, of course, happens in a vacuum. Since its Islamic revolution, Iran has gone through several stages, from the initial contested period, to a phase of mobilization for war, to a period of economic reconstruction, to a stage of attempted political reform, and now perhaps to a new phase of autocratic reassertion. In each phase, culture and cultural policies have played a distinct role, and the distinct role played by cultural policies has carried on to the next phase. In other words, nothing has been resolved.

In this paper, some tentative generalizations about the nature and dynamics of the Islamic Republic’s cultural policies and the mark they have left on contemporary Iran will be made. The basic point is this: despite the distinct post-revolutionary phases Iran has gone through, with each having its own particular characteristics, certain broad outlines can be detected that explain why “culture” has remained both contested and yet something the Islamic republic has had to come to terms with in a quiet fashion.

A Quick History of Cultural Policies

Cultural policies have been continuously contested during the life of the Islamic Republic and, after the early phase of forceful imposition of Islamic values, have gone through repeated cycles of liberalization and conservative counter-reaction. Initially, while Ayatollah Khomeini was alive, there were no specific guidelines or laws regarding cultural policies of the Islamic Republic. As the founder of the republic, he effectively set the standards through piecemeal declarations as issues arose. Hence, factional disputes over the direction and nature of cultural policies became as fierce as the struggle over government institutions as everyone jockeyed to gain a favorable opinion from Khomeini.

The situation was further complicated by the fact that from the beginning, when speaking of “Islamic culture” (*farhang-e eslami*), the authorities had many things in mind. Hamid Nafici encapsulates these

varying meanings by pointing out seven aspects of the notion of Islamic culture: nativism (defense of traditional values), populism (justice and defense of the disinherited), monotheism, anti-idolatry, theocracy (*velayat-e faqih*), puritanism, political and economic independence, and combating imperialism.¹ Depending on circumstances as well as the contending groups involved, these different understandings of Islamic culture have been combined or used separately to consolidate power, attack opponents, or simply make a point about the ideal Islamic community desired for Iran. A quick survey of cultural policies is useful in understanding the dynamic interplay of these various meanings and points of concern.

Post-Revolution Cultural Change. In the initial post-revolutionary period, the future Islamic mandarins used their grassroots supporters effectively to silence independent voices and crush opponents. For instance, Islamic mobs who called themselves *hezbollahi* attacked protestors demonstrating the closure of the independent left-wing newspaper *Ayandegan* by the prosecutor general, injuring a number of them. Grassroots supporters, increasingly organized in neighborhood committees (*komiteh*), were also used to harass people in their homes and in the streets as a means to establish the ascendancy of new values.

The most important hallmark of this period, however, was the explicit announcement of changes in the name of Islam affecting women. More than any other group in Iranian civil society, women were used to demonstrate that there had been a revolution and a profound cultural change that was intended to impact behavior as well as appearance. On 26 February 1979, only two weeks after the victory of the Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini's office announced that the Family Protection Law was to be abrogated. On 3 March, it was announced that women would be barred from becoming judges. On 6 March, Khomeini said in a speech that women should wear the veil (*hejab*) at work. Later that month, beaches and sports events were segregated and, a few weeks later, coeducation was banned. As Parvin Paidar points out, some of these changes were not implemented effectively and coherently for some time to come, but they clarified the new state's position on women and their role in the new official culture.²

Secular intellectuals were another social group that had to be confronted with the Islamic state's cultural policies. Inspired by Ayatollah Khomeini, the Council of the Islamic Revolution in April 1980 ordered leftist intellectuals to leave the universities. Some leftists were physically forced out, and quite a few were killed or wounded. The start of a Cultural Revolution was announced, and in May 1980 Ayatollah Khomeini established a seven-member High Council for Cultural Revolution (HCCR), entrusting it with the task of "setting the overall guidelines for universities based on Islamic culture and principles." Many professors were dismissed and the universities were shut down indefinitely. For most universities, this became a three-year shutdown, and many former students and professors could never return. The Council also had the task of monitoring the curricula for elementary and secondary level education.

The Cultural Revolution was a major blow to Iran's cultural and intellectual life. Not only did it interrupt the education and professional livelihood of many who were "cleansed" (*paksazi*) from the governmental and educational system, it encouraged further emigration by students, teachers, and other professionals. The Cultural Revolution was also a major marker for the victory of the Revolution, allowing suppression of mostly non-clerical opponents of clerical rule in the name of Islamization and cultural cleansing. This task was not necessarily done through the HCCR. In fact,

¹ Hamid Nafici, "Islamizing Film Culture in Iran" in *Iran: Political Culture in the Islamic Republic* edited by Samih K. Farsoun and Mehrdad Mashayekhi, pp. 178-213. London: Routledge, 1992.

² Parvin Paidar, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995: 232.

during Khomeini's life, the council simply engaged in establishing the "correct" mission for higher education. It was Ayatollah Khomeini himself who made pronouncements about policy in other cultural areas. However, he set up HCCR as an independent body, so its decisions were as effective as laws without the need for approval by another body, such as the Guardian Council or the parliament (*Majles*). As will be seen below, this independence was capitalized upon to promote more liberal cultural policies during later periods.

Culture During the War with Iraq. During the 8-year Iran-Iraq War, the political contest shifted from the conflict between systemic and anti-systemic groups to intra-system conflicts, modified by the state desire to maintain, through a variety of cultural activities, the mobilization of volunteers for the war. Factional conflicts between conservatives and radicals in this period were intense, but most visible over the economic orientation of the regime and the role of the state in the economy. On cultural matters, the state essentially followed policies that were helpful in feeding the needs of war, with particular emphasis on populism and rigid puritanism. Mobilization for the war and against security challenges offered emerging post-revolutionary state-builders an important instrument for maintaining popular support as well as an indispensable alibi for domestic crackdowns and the crushing of dissent. The war required massive amounts of material and human resource mobilization, but it was the necessary ideological and cultural groundwork for mobilizing and sustaining the war that proved more long-lasting. The Iran-Iraq War became the basis of a new political and cultural milieu, the remnants of which persisted after the war, despite the rise of other ways of thinking about and conceiving politics.

Mohammad Javad Gholam-reza Kashi identifies emphasis on Shi'i values, Shi'i-generated epic aspects of the war, mourning, opposition to existing values in the city (which included improper veiling, mixing of genders, and lack of a sense of self-sacrifice), martyrdom, action as opposed to words, purity and devotion, and spiritual rewards in the afterlife, as the most important elements of the culture of war propagated by the war machine in Iran.³ There is no doubt that this discourse was a useful one in giving legitimacy to the war effort and the necessary mobilization that accompanied it. To be sure, the propagated ideal type of behavior was not completely distinct from the images generated for an ideal Islamic revolutionary during the revolution.⁴ However, while the revolution brought out a multiplicity of voices, at times emphasizing contradictory aspirations (e.g., submission to Islam and the spiritual leader as well as democracy and freedom), the war offered an univocal venue for both crushing domestic opposition to the newly emerging political order and "sacred defense" (*defa'e moqadas*) against international aggression. According to Kashi, this cultural discourse had specific practical implications, the most important of which were emphasis on war and courage, worship, control of passions, avoidance of fame and material interests, unconditional adherence to the leadership and avoidance of any questioning in this regard.⁵

Moreover, what was developed during the war engulfed the society far beyond the war front. In the cities, the locale from which volunteers were sent to war and stations for the mobilization of *basij* forces, the broadcast of war chants from state-controlled radio, television and loudspeakers, the "narrative of conquest" (*ravayat-e fath*) produced by a cultural foundation of the same name (the largest film production unit connected to the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps, *sepah-e pasdaran*,

³ Mohammad Javad Gholam-reza Kashi, *Jadouye Goftar: Zehniat-e Farhangi va Nezam-e Ma'ani dar Entekhabat-e Dovom-e Khordad* (The Magic of Discourse: Cultural Consciousness and the System of Meanings in the 2 Khordad Election). Tehran: Ayandeh Pouyan, 1379/2000: 326-334.

⁴ For a comprehensive analysis of revolutionary images see Peter J. Chelkowski and Hamid Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran*. New York: New York University Press, 1999.

⁵ Kashi, p.336.

that literally brought the details of the war into people's living rooms every night), and ceremonies held for the funeral of war martyrs, together reflected the encroachment of the values of the war front into the daily life of all Iranians. This encroachment was facilitated by the nature of the war itself, initiated by Iraq's invasion of Iranian territory, eliciting a defensive response on the part of the Iranian population. So long as the war was perceived to be a defensive war and so long as Iranian resistance showed signs of success in pushing back the Iraqi military, the war and all the ideological and cultural groundwork that was needed to keep it at the center of Iranian political discourse remained extremely compelling.⁶

Post-War Reconstruction Phase. With the end of the war and the shift to an era of construction (*doran-e sazanegi*) during the first term of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's presidency, there was also a shift in the Islamic state's cultural policies. Empowered by Ayatollah Khomeini's 1988 decree that effectively gave the central government authority to intervene in the economy and use its discretion to suspend the pillars of Islam, Rafsanjani pushed for a top-down reorganization of the state-guided economy.⁷ He was particularly wary, however, of the confrontational methods used in the streets by the *basijis* in implementing what they considered to be correct Islamic cultural norms and morality. Rafsanjani saw the cultural politics of the *basijis* as a threat to both his economic plans for Iran and his own political control of the Iranian state. In fact, he frequently admonished the *basij* on the need to safeguard the cultural principles in more "delicate" ways.⁸

The government officially addressed the cultural direction of the country for the first time after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in May 1991 when Hassan Habibi, a government spokesman and vice-president, stressed "the need to encounter cultural issues in a sedate and rational fashion because we live in an open society where various ideas and preferences exist."⁹ Rafsanjani's brother Mohammad Hashemi, who was in charge of the state-controlled Iranian television and radio, and his Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Mohammad Khatami, spearheaded the President's attempts to increase cultural openness and tolerance. Their attempts to open up the cultural arena by promoting sports, music, cinema, arts, and literature were initially effective, but Rafsanjani also capitalized on the legal institutional independence bestowed on the High Council for Cultural Revolution to announce the "Cultural Principles of the Islamic Republic" in August 1992. As pointed out by Mehdi Moslem, the liberal theme of this seventeen-page document is immediately evident.¹⁰ While rhetorical gestures were made towards traditional Islamic principles, the document also made clear that a pragmatic approach to cultural issues was valued and, most importantly, the task of handling these issues and determining solutions should be left in the hands of experts and not the clergy. Warning of "the danger of the petrified and the pseudo-religious," the document was an explicit castigation of conservative and neo-fundamentalist discourse on cultural purity.

⁶ For a discussion of the impact of war on the Iranian society see Farideh Farhi "The Antinomies of Iran's War Generation" in *Iran, Iraq and the Legacies of War* edited by Lawrence G. Potter and Gary G. Sick, pp. 101–120. New York: Palgrave, 2004.

⁷ According to Khomeini, "the government is empowered to unilaterally revoke any shari'a agreement that it has conducted with people when those agreements are contrary to the interests of the country or of Islam." *Ettela'at*, 9 January 1988.

⁸ For a discussion of Rafsanjani's concerns over harsh methods and his attempted cultural policies see Mehdi Moslem, *Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000: 170-175. In a recent pre-2005 presidential election interview with the conservative daily Kayhan, Rafsanjani suggested that he held cultural rigidity practiced by some forces during his tenure as president responsible for the popular counter-reaction that ultimately brought the reformist Khatami and, later, Parliament to power.

⁹ Quoted in Moslem, p. 167.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 167-8.

In addition, in Rafsanjani's eight years as President, the discourse on women shifted from one that viewed women as the bearers of revolution and the last bastion of Islamic cultural values, to a discourse on women as human resources to be tapped in the era of reconstruction.¹¹ In 1989, the Women's Social-Cultural Council was created to undertake "nationwide programs that would eliminate structural and cultural injustices faced by women." In 1991, a special bureau in the executive branch was established to deal with women-related matters.

Even more important, and away from the interstices of national politics, were changes promoted at the municipal levels, in particular those spearheaded by Tehran's mayor Gholam-Hossein Karbaschi. The changes included the construction of huge public parks, with some explicitly identified as cultural spaces (*farhang sara*), the beautification of public spaces to encourage outdoor activities,¹² and the creation of Iran's first full-color, city-based daily newspaper (*Hamshahri*), which emphasized environmental and city-centered cultural issues and activities.¹³ Many of Karbaschi's policies were emulated in other cities. The bottom line of these policies was the need to move away from strict or rigid cultural or religious rules in people's daily lives, and toward a renewed emphasis on color, music, joy, and physical activities.

Due to their alliance with Rafsanjani in his first term, the conservatives initially tolerated the president's liberalism on sociocultural issues and did not oppose him. By the end of his first term, however, they were ready to challenge Rafsanjani's more liberal vision in the streets, as well as within the government. This conservative opposition was not a united one. It included the traditionalist opposition to the presumably "modern" values and policies (economic and cultural), propagated by Rafsanjani's government, and the club-wielding neo-fundamentalist wing, which saw as its self-proclaimed duty the purification of Islam from a Western cultural conspiracy. The neo-fundamentalists believed that this conspiracy had led to the replacement of religious piety and the ascetic lifestyle with material greed, indulgence, luxury, and "unfettered" (*bi-band-o bari*) immoral lifestyles. While the traditionalist opposition saw Rafsanjani's state-guided economic policies as a threat to their economic interests and used cultural arguments instrumentally as a means to weaken his government, the neo-fundamentalists saw Rafsanjani's policies as promoters of both economic injustice and moral corruption.

Increased pressure by conservatism's two wings led to the resignations of Mohammad Khatami from the Ministry of Culture in 1992 and Mohammad Hashemi, Rafsanjani's brother, as the head of radio and television in 1993. Both men were replaced by individuals who were close to conservative circles and who publicly pursued different policies. In the streets, rallies were held against improper veiling and the *basijis* were encouraged to take the law into their own hands, even if it led to their imprisonment. In short, the conservative views of organizations, such as *Mo'talefeh*, became the official sociocultural policies of the Islamic Republic between 1992 and 1997, despite the presidency of a man who clearly had more liberal views. Rafsanjani named *Mo'talefeh* member Ali Larijani (and later Mostafa Mir-salim, who was even more puritan than Larijani) to replace Khatami as head of the

¹¹ For a discussion of changing discourses on women in Iran see Farideh Farhi, "The Changing Discourse on Women in Iran," *FOCUS Asia-Pacific* 11 (January–February 1998).

<http://www.twinside.org.sg/title/iran-cn.htm>.

¹² For a useful, even if somewhat discursive, discussion of Mayor Karbaschi's beautification policies and conflicts created, see Fariba Adelhah's *Being Modern in Iran*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000: 18-29.

¹³ For a discussion of the importance of *Hamshahri* for spawning a new kind of press see Farideh Farhi "Improvising in Public: Transgressive Politics of the Reformist Press in Postrevolutionary Iran" in *Intellectual Trends in Twentieth-Century Iran: A Critical Survey* edited by Negin Nabavi, pp. 147-179. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2003.

Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Despite his tolerant appearance, Larijani immediately defined the ministry's mission as one of confronting the Western cultural onslaught (*tahajom-e farhangi*), whose decadent music, art, and clothes permeated Iranian society. Soon after, the mission of the High Council for Cultural Revolution was changed, with the appointment of conservative deputy Mohammadi Golpayegani. Golpayegani was determined to make the High Council tackle dimensions of the western cultural onslaught, such as clothes, theater, films, and broadcasting. The council also directed the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance to employ more doctrinaire staff and increase its supervisory and guiding roles over society. It also encouraged representatives of the supreme leader in the universities to buttress students' revolutionary-religious spirit more actively.

By the time Mir-salim became minister, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance was ready to announce that the only way to confront the cultural onslaught was to enliven the mosques and support arts that dealt with topics such as the sacred defense (war with Iraq) and the cultural onslaught itself. Rather than promoting cultural activities, albeit with an Islamic tint, the ministry began to see itself as the watchful eye of an ideological system. This self-appointed role gave the ministry the mission of "cleansing" the press by restricting the publication of those with stray thoughts (those without proper moral credentials) and the task of supporting publications that spread the "*basiji* culture." According to Mir-salim, journalism was "not a profession. Rather, it must be perceived as an ideological mission aimed at confronting the cultural onslaught."¹⁴ No wonder that a trademark of Mir-salim's tenure was the closure of many "improper" papers and journals. During this period, many journals and newspapers attempting to open up the cultural space were also physically attacked by mobs of *hezbollahis* with implicit, and at times even explicit, support from prominent conservatives. Complaints lodged by members of various cultural industries, including the film industry, which by this time was winning awards on the international scene, did not receive a sympathetic response from Mir-salim or Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei.

With the conservatives' growing control over cultural policy came the increased use of cultural wedge issues, such as cultural invasion (*tahajom-e farhang*), to achieve factional political objectives. This trend reached its peak in November 1992, when the *Majles* passed the "Law of Legal Protection for the *Basijis*," which enhanced the *basijis*' power to assist law enforcement forces in fighting crime and enforcing proper morality. As expected, the *basijis* went beyond turning in moral offenders. Mostly, they focused on young cultural offenders for reasons ranging from improper veiling to "lack of cultural inhibitions." Given the fact that many of the *basijis* were young recruits from poorer sectors of the population, presumably fighting against moral values propagated by the more Westernized, well-off sectors of the population, a class-struggle component was also fanned by the proponents of moral rectitude.

It was against this backdrop that the stunning electoral victories of Mohammad Khatami as President in 1997 and, later, a reformist Parliament were seen as clear rejections of conservative cultural policies.¹⁵ The new reformist leaders could not do much about radio and television because conservatives still controlled the media,¹⁶ but they did everything possible to bring about change in the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. And the changes were palpable. They eased censorship, granted licenses to new publications, and promoted cultural activities and productions.

¹⁴ Quoted in Moslem: 222.

¹⁵ During the election it was rumored throughout the country that if Ali Akbar Nateq Nouri became President, he would have required all women to wear *chador*, the most restrictive form of Islamic veiling practiced in Iran.

¹⁶ It is important to note that even during this period of conservative control, Iran's radio and television did not only limit itself to puritan programs. It had those but it also continued the liberal trend of showing foreign films, domestically produced sit-coms, soccer games, and informative roundtables.

Changes in the Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Intelligence also brought about changes by easing restrictions on people's daily lives, but, like many other aspects of his period of governance, Khatami's cultural policies were both progressive and controversial. Cultural liberalization was pursued diligently, but the 5th Majles, the judiciary, and the Guardian Council—all dominated by conservatives—tried to block every reformist move, especially after the reformist victory in the 6th Majles election.¹⁷ Ultimately, these roadblocks led to the resignation of Ataollah Mohajerani, the popular minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, and other officials. At the same time, these roadblocks should not be seen as part and parcel of a coherent effort to block Khatami's cultural policies. In fact, they had little to do with culture or cultural policies. Rather, they were intended to frustrate Khatami's government as a whole and prevent the permanent political ascendance of reformist forces.

A clear example of how this was done was the judicial case against Gholam-Hossein Karbaschi, the popular mayor of Tehran, who was charged with corruption and abuse of power. Karbaschi had thrown his support to Khatami right before the 1997 presidential election and used the rather resource-rich municipality of Tehran for that purpose. He was ultimately stripped of his job, jailed, and forbidden from holding public office for ten years. Since Tehran's municipal elections had been won by reformist forces, the conservatives were not able to change the direction of Tehran municipality's cultural policies immediately. However, once they were able to win in the next municipal elections in 2003, without delay they appointed a self-proclaimed fundamentalist (*osulgara*) mayor. He, in turn, completely changed the editorial staff and direction of *Hamshahri*, and made clear that its emphasis would from then on be on "Islamic values" and the everyday economic needs of the people, rather than on the promotion of cultural activities. The newly-appointed mayor was Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who later became the surprise winner of the 2005 presidential election. With his appointment as mayor, Ahmadinejad transformed his office in Tehran from an institution promoting city-centered cultural activities into a body more interested in emphasizing the earlier revolutionary links with the urban poor. Less-wealthy citizens were now offered economic rewards, such as marriage loans, and religious spaces and networks such as mosques were used to solidify the municipality's links with this segment of the population.

Conservatives in Ascendance. The conservative electoral victories in the 2003 municipal elections, the 2004 parliamentary elections, and the 2005 presidential election have brought Iran into a new cultural phase characterized by confusion over the direction of cultural policy. The judiciary has intensified its efforts to clamp down on the cultural opening that occurred during the Khatami era by arresting journalists active in civil society and non-governmental organizations. There were also signs in 2004 and 2005 that the *basijis* were once again active in attacking meetings in which reformist leaders were speaking. These moves may have been political rather than a cultural clampdown. At the same time, as mentioned above, Tehran's municipality changed hands and began signaling a turn towards "Islamic values," but a similar change has not necessarily occurred in other cities.

The new conservative Parliament, despite an election process that was surprisingly devoid of any discussion of cultural policies,¹⁸ has also signaled a renewed interest in Islamic values. One of its first acts was to remove the call for gender equality from the Fourth Economic Plan. Some new deputies have also complained of the "second unveiling" that is occurring in Iran and have renewed requests

¹⁷ Several noteworthy bills were brought forth during this period: the bill to make illegal the "instrumental use" of women in publications and the bill to separate medical facilities along gender lines. The use of satellites was also made illegal during this period.

¹⁸ The slate of candidates that won in Tehran competed under the title of E'tela'f-e *Abadgaran-e Iran-e Eslami* (The Coalition of Developers of Islamic Iran) did not emphasize culture or Islamic values in any of their slogans and instead focused on the need to improve the economic well-being of the population.

for segregation of universities along gender lines (*jodasazi*). However, nothing substantial has come of these efforts so far. The opponents of gender segregation have been quick to point out that such ideas were around in the early years of the Islamic Republic and were specifically rejected by Ayatollah Khomeini. In fact, the Parliament's cultural committee in 2004 considered segregating the universities and ultimately rejected the idea. Instead, it suggested the adoption of a "national attire" to overcome the veiling problems faced by the universities and agreed to call on experts to offer designs that would appeal to the youth.¹⁹ Implicit in this call, of course, was an acknowledgment that there is indeed an "attire" (now substituting for a "veil") problem, and that there is a need for the government to think of more appealing options. Where the parliament will go from here is not yet clear, but interest on a national attire continues to persist. The High Council of Cultural Revolution has been asked to deliberate on the matter, but it has yet to formulate an approach or policy.

The election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as the new president of Iran has also brought forth, once again, the issue of culture, but it has done so on the heels of a presidential campaign that in many ways challenged Islamic or revolutionary values. With the notable exception of Ahmadinejad and the reformist Mostafa Moin, whose campaign emphasized democracy and human rights, almost all the candidates shunned the revolution's legacy. Instead, they relied on slogans and advertisements meant to show them as modern or even hip, in tune with the changing values and lifestyles of the youth in Iranian society. Women wearing pithy veils and young men wearing fashionable attire carried posters of various candidates and became the mainstay of the campaign season. In the second round, when the campaign became a contest between Rafsanjani and Ahmadinejad, groups raised the possibility of cultural closure if Ahmadinejad won as a compelling reason to vote for Rafsanjani.

With Ahmadinejad's victory, the fear of cultural closure has intensified. Ahmadinejad attempted to allay these fears by confronting them directly. In his first post-victory press conference, he ridiculed some of the policy changes he was reported to be contemplating (e.g., gender segregation, banning of music), calling them false campaign rumors.²⁰ He identified moderation, avoidance of extremism, and pursuit of socioeconomic justice as the objectives of his government, and denied plans for any major shifts in the cultural realm. He even suggested that some of the cultural extremism witnessed in the 1980s was the result of leftist—now turned reformist—control over the Interior Ministry. He identified himself as someone opposed to the way the Interior Ministry harassed women and the youth in the 1980s.

Economic woes and pressure from the outside world regarding Iran's nuclear program will, in all likelihood, consume Ahmadinejad's government in the same way they did Khatami's government. If history is a guide, not much will happen even if efforts are made to bring Islamic values and cultural practices into the center of Iranian political discourse. The trend towards loosening governmental controls over cultural activities will continue. In terms of cultural policies, the current conservative leaders of Iran will continue to be caught between their puritan values and social base on the one hand, and realities on the ground on the other. Accordingly, they may continue to pay lip service to puritan values and even fan mob activities against the infringement of those values. At the same time, they will feel obligated to come to terms with the cultural demands and needs of an increasingly multi-vocal and assertive society.

Some General Propositions

¹⁹ *Shargh*, October 17, 2004, p. 3.

²⁰ *Shargh*, June 27, 2005, p. 1.

To understand why and how the conservative-dominated government in Iran will need to come to terms with demands for greater cultural opening, I offer a few general propositions about the direction and content of cultural policies in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Despite the initially effective and forceful imposition of many Islamic values at the time of the revolution, the overall trend has been towards a loosening of the state's cultural controls over the society. Changes have not come about overnight, but there has been a steady, albeit uneven, move away from the initially harsh pronouncements of the Islamic Republic. During Khomeini's lifetime and during the Iran-Iraq War, there were moves away from gender segregation, unhindered rights to divorce for men, denial of child custody or guardianship rights for women, and prevention of women from studying in certain fields. The move towards cultural loosening accelerated during Rafsanjani's tenure, despite the opposition of traditionalist and neo-fundamentalist forces. Further opening occurred during Khatami's tenure and it immediately elicited strong opposition. Such trends can be seen, for example, on the signature issue of proper veiling. The kind of improper veils that elicit objections from traditionalist and neo-fundamentalist forces today are a far cry from improper veils for which many women were arrested in the 1980s. Women walk in the streets in much more revealing veils with less worry about getting arrested, young girls are no longer required to wear veils inside segregated schools at the elementary level, and colorful veils and uniforms are deemed necessary for improving their mood.

The same general trends can be observed in literally every other cultural arena. To be sure, newspapers, publications, and movie and theater directors are constantly harassed and closed or censored by the judiciary, but the most cursory look at today's newspapers such as *Shargh, Iran*, or *E'temad*, or magazines such as *Zanan* shows that they are filled, without much fanfare, with news, commentary, and even pictures (including unveiled non-Iranian women) that were simply not allowed a decade ago. Similar trends can be seen in literature, music concerts, arts, movies, and theater despite the continued and at times even intensified harassment by the so-called "popular forces" (i.e., Islamic mobs). A quick and cursory look at the latest published books in Iran includes translations of Susan Moller Okin's *Women in Western Political Thought*, the fiction of Flannery O'Connor, and a new short novel by Zoya Pirzad, which openly deals with a modern relationship out of wedlock, revealing the sea changes that have occurred in the publishing industry. In cinema, a good example of the extent of opening can be seen in the movie *Marmulak (the Lizard)* by Kamal Tabrizi, which unambiguously addresses the role of clerics in the public arena. This highly critical and funny movie not only received approval from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance but was also shown in public for several weeks before opposition from certain clerical quarters led to its withdrawal from movie theaters.

This loosening has occurred within the context of an increasingly young and resistant society and the state's desire and/or need to come to terms with realities on the ground. Two separate dynamics have been at work forcing the state to retreat from its initially harsh stance on cultural issues. The first and foremost cause of retreat has been adjustments necessitated by the consequences of harsh policies. An example of this retreat was first seen during the war period when the state had to face the consequences of its own patrilineal policies, which effectively prevented the state from offering financial support to the mothers of young soldiers who died in the war if the paternal grandparents sought the support. Protests on the part of "mothers of martyrs" forced the parliament to change this policy. The second cause of retreat has been cultural resistance in a low-key but consistent and increasingly determined manner. In responding in a flexible manner, the state has been aided by a strong strain within the religious community which has emphasized dynamic jurisprudence (*feqh-e pouya*) versus traditional jurisprudence (*feqh-e sonnati*). Supporters of dynamic *feqh* believe that although primary Islamic ordinances (*ahkame-e avvaliyeh*) based on the two pillars of Shi'i Islam—

the Quran and *sunna*—provide a solid foundation for the governing laws of the country, Muslims live in a different era and are faced with problems that did not exist during the time of the Prophet. This is why, they argue, particularly given the populist and revolutionary dimensions of the Islamic regime in the contemporary world, emphasis should be placed on secondary ordinances (*ahkam-e sanaviyyeh*) or new religious decrees, allowing the *shari'a* to change and adapt as new issues arise in society.²¹

In terms of realities on the ground, the state has proven quite pragmatic in its approach to cultural issues. When resolving a cultural issue has proven difficult outright, the state has tackled the issue on economic grounds. In dealing with culturally sensitive issues such as the right of mothers to remain guardians of their children, for instance, the Islamic state's approach has been to tackle the issue first on economic grounds rather than on the basis of equal rights. The reason for this has to do with the complicated rhetoric of the Islamic revolutionaries and the fact that their appeal to their social base was as much on economic grounds as on religious ones. To be sure, Khomeini emphasized the spiritual and cultural sources of the revolution, but he also made a point of suggesting that the poverty many Iranians suffered was a sign of the spiritual and cultural corruption of the Shah's regime and its Western supporters. As such, a discourse of economic grievance centering on the regime's presumed social base—the weak and underprivileged (*mostas'afin*)—has always enveloped the discussion of religious values and causes of revolution. Because of this, the Islamic state has always been sensitive to the needs and demands of poorer classes on economic grounds.

On women's issues, in particular, the state's response to poorer women has paved the way for improved standing (relatively speaking) of women in the courts regarding all aspects of family law (child custody, right to divorce, right to court hearing in case of husband's desire to divorce, alimony, and so on). As the Islamic state has come face to face with the daily problems poorer women face as wives and mothers of war martyrs and as wives of irresponsible and abusive men, it has had to adjust in ways that increasingly protect the rights of this constituency. This steady, if not comprehensive, progress has, in effect, led to the gradual and quiet overturning of one of the first public acts of the Islamic Republic—the abrogation of the Family Protection Law. Without much fanfare, the family courts have effectively come back even if laws regarding the rights of women in Iran are far from perfect. More importantly, since these changes have come about gradually in response to real problems faced by women of all classes, the chances of the changes being overturned for ideological reasons are extremely slim, even with conservative control of all elective and non-elective institutions.

When faced with resistance on the part of the increasingly young and restless population, the state has essentially followed a consistent pattern: repress it, selectively punish it, ignore it, and ultimately accommodate it. The Islamic state has not only had to respond to the needs of its constituency. It has also had to deal with the idea of "Iranianness" as it defined its cultural manifestations. Not all Iranians

²¹This focus on dynamic jurisprudence constitutes only part, although a substantial part, of the debate, over the relationship between religion and the state. There are some clerics and lay theologians that go even further, rejecting even the use of secondary ordinances. For instance, Mohammad Mojtahed-Shabestari, whose earlier writings have already established him as a prominent New Religious Thinker through his application of hermeneutics to Islamic texts, argues a state that builds its legitimacy on the application of *shari'a* must eventually face a serious crisis, which he calls "the crisis of the 'official reading of religion'." At the root of the crisis, Shabestari contends, are two incorrect claims: first, that Islam as a religion provides political, economic and legal systems derived from *feqh*, according to which God wants people at all times and places to live; second, that the duty of government among Muslims is to implement the commandments of Islam. See Mohammad Mojtahed-Shabestari, *Naqdi bar Qara'at-e Rasmi az Din* (A Critique of the Militaristic Reading of Religion). Tehran: Tarh-e Now, 1379/2000.

are Muslims or practicing Muslims. The early post-revolutionary period is replete with stories about the state's attempt to eradicate everything deemed non-Islamic or even pre-Islamic—the attempted destruction of Persepolis and rejection of all cultural practices connected to Iran's Zoroastrian past, such as Nowruz or Charshanbeh Suri, are two examples. In confronting these practices, the Islamic Republic faced a dilemma from the beginning: every time it made an issue of them, it explicitly admitted that these practices existed and persisted despite the Islamic Revolution. The widespread nature of these practices also prevented the regime from pursuing an authoritative national strategy. This is why, after a very short period of repression, the state had to move to a policy of selective punishment in the hope of discouraging people from pursuing these practices on the basis of example. Unable to deter the persistence of these practices, the state ultimately moved into the regular practice of ignoring them and, finally, of accepting, accommodating, or even celebrating them.

This rather consistent pattern has been interrupted on some signature cultural issues, such as veiling, public mixing of men and women, and combating Western cultural assault because of the role they play as signature issues for the Islamic Republic. As signature issues, the identity of the Islamic Republic has become tied up with their continued enforcement. Accommodating them or even ignoring them on a regular basis brings forth the question of whether the Islamic Republic has remained true to itself. Veiling is a good example. On the streets of Iran, without enforced veiling, very little physical manifestation of what an Islamic Republic looks like remains. As mentioned above, the initial, many times violent, enforcement of veiling was an important statement about the coming of Islamic values and culture. Since this initial enforcement, the state has moved from outright repression to ignoring the many instances of improper veiling. It vacillates between ignoring and selectively punishing because these signature issues continue to be used as ammunition in the struggle for political control. As such, they tend to reappear when the political struggle intensifies. For instance, in the past few years the veil (*hejab*) has become an issue with the conservative-dominated *Majles*, which is again talking about the need for new laws, regulations and better enforcement. The *Majles* has also accused the Islamic Propagation Organization, which is charged with oversight and propagation of Islamic values, of failing to counter Western cultural assaults. Yet, there are no indications that the Islamic state is in any way prepared to develop a consistently puritan approach to these signature issues. Given the continuity of factional conflicts, cultural policies in these areas are bound to remain haphazard and partisan.

Finally, despite the repeated conservative counter-reaction to any cultural opening, a complete reversal of generally liberal trends has not been possible because of the fractured nature of Iranian politics and political institutions. Clearly, factional politics has been the most important reason for keeping culture as a wedge issue. Under the Khatami and Rafsanjani governments, the relative independence of many institutions allowed forces promoting cultural openness to exist and even prosper. At the same time, there were enough people among the ruling elite and Islamic bureaucrats who supported the idea of cultural opening and experimentation that, one way or another, institutional patrons could be found.

In short, electoral politics has been an important means for the capture of important institutions regarding cultural policies, but competitive politics in Iran is so deep that at times they even exist within institutions that are supposed to be controlled by conservatives. An example is Radio and Television, which has some channels that are clearly more culturally diverse than others. Furthermore, cultural activities have survived because forces promoting them have proven mobile and resourceful enough to move from one institution to another when attacked or when their institutions have been taken over by conservative forces. At various junctures in the life of the Islamic Republic, conservative forces have tried to unify the power structure and bring some coherence to the decision-making process. However, given the multiple institutional centers of power as well as the relatively large number of individuals and cliques, they have so far failed to do so. At this point, despite the

return of more repressive measures, there is no reason to assume that they will be more successful in the future.

Conclusion

Given the continuity of factional conflicts and the repeated reemergence of harsh policies in certain key areas, it is difficult to focus on how much things have changed in Iran, particularly in the cultural arena, since the heyday of the revolution and the Iran-Iraq War period. The reality is that, culturally, Iran has become a much more open society. To be sure, in comparing this openness to the pre-revolutionary period, the Islamic Republic may find itself lacking in many areas. At the same time, the breadth and depth of any cultural opening in relation to all sectors of the society, including those deemed as traditional, should not be underestimated. Part of this change can be explained by increased urbanization and the intensification of the urban experience for the majority of the population, which has also become more highly educated. In this process, the role of conflicting and competing forces that have constituted the Islamic state should not be ignored. The persistence of conflict and competition has assured the continued centrality of cultural issues in the Iranian political discourse. It has also provided space and created an interactive dynamic for the negotiation of cultural issues in a relatively flexible manner. There is no reason to think that the patterns established in the past twenty-five years will change in any fundamental manner in the foreseeable future.