Between Mullahs’ Robes and Absolutism: Conservatism in Iran

Yousra Y. Fazili

The contested 2009 presidential elections revealed deep divisions among Iran’s ruling elite at a political and clerical level, calling into question what a society governed by jurisprudence and Islamic law truly means. As the leadership attempts to maintain its tenuous hold on power while suppressing a popular reformist movement, the question remains: How to resolve the tension between divine law and popular will? What does it mean to be a conservative in a country where both the right and the left are committed to an Islamic government? The new reformist movement in Iran reveals the unresolved tensions that exist in a theocracy, the contradictions between faith, modernity and democracy. Conservatives have used their commitment to Khomeinism to consolidate their hold on power, but without Ayatollah Khomeini’s unifying presence, what it means to mix religion and politics is no longer clear, as both conservatives and reformists claim Khomeini’s legacy.

In the United States political conservatism is relatively easy to trace with the linear paradigm of right and left, yet in the Islamic Republic of Iran this linear vision of politics and society fails to accurately capture the political dynamics at play. The political spectrum in Iran is best defined by varying degrees of commitment to the country’s two defining adjectives: “Islamic” and “Republic.” It is the tension between a society predicated on socialist and democratic values, which concomitantly champions a non-elected clerical elite believed to realize God’s will on earth. As such, it is best to view conservatism and reform in Iran by degrees of commitment to the political philosophy of the founding father, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and his vision of velayet-e faqih, or rule of the jurists. Indeed, we find that Iran’s hardliners and ruling elite, from the Supreme Leader to the President, reify their claims to power and authority by asserting that they embody the principles of Khomeinism, his vision of the Islamic Revolution, and the effort to make an Islamic state a reality.

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Khomeini had the high clerical standing, the charisma and the leadership of a deft politician; he was the glue that held together the idea of an Islamic Republic, however successor, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is less suited for the position. Neither personable nor a high standing Ayatollah, Khamenei has been forced to rely increasingly on a militarized state apparatus, brute force in politics and seminaries, and his pervasive security apparatus (i.e., the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and Basij paramilitary forces), which monitors the minutiae of Iranian life and quashes dissent with strong-arm tactics. This summer the world learned that even those who were once politically influential are not immune to the state’s will to power.

The rifts that have always existed between different segments of the clerical elite have grown since Khomeini’s death, threatening the essence of Shi’a Islam and the viability of the Iranian Republic as a theocracy. Certain ayatollahs are associated with bolstering the regime and its policies, such as Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, Ayatollah Yazdi and Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami. Prominent reform-minded clerics include Ayatollah Nouri, Ayatollah Sane’i and the late Ayatollah Montazeri. Both reformers and conservatives, however, want to preserve the Islamic system of governance. No one is calling for an end to velayet-e faqih. It is the degree of flexibility and independence within that system that forms the basis of their disagreements from “left” to “right” on the Iranian political spectrum. It is perhaps more useful to speak of “reformists”—exemplified by the Association of Combatant Clergy, Islamic Iran Participation Front, and the Executives of Construction Party—and the “establishment” or “regime loyalists.” The Islamic Coalition Party, the Combatant Clergy Association, and Mesbah Yazdi’s political affiliates typify what can be called the Iranian “right.”

The struggle between Iran’s ruling conservatives and eager reformers is based on differences in opinion of what a society governed by jurists truly means. Conservatives, or regime loyalists, are united by a belief that there should be more government control of the economy, more clerical control of government, and a more aggressive foreign policy that seeks to support world-wide Shi’a movements. Socially, they favor strict adherence to their definition of Islamic rules and regulations, and the unchecked power of the office of the Supreme Leader, believing that he derives legitimacy from God, not the people.

On the other hand, reformers believe that the legitimacy to govern comes predominantly from the people and the power of the ballot box, wishing to modify the absolutism of the Supreme Leader’s authority with checks such as the Assembly of Experts and Expediency Council. Within the framework of an Islamic governing structure, reformers champion increased civil liberties including freedom of speech and freedom
of the press, as well as more relaxed social rules (like the abolition of mandatory hijab). Economically, reformers seek to integrate Iran into the global economy, ending its isolation by attracting foreign direct investment, encouraging privatization, and decreasing government control of the economy. Former President Khatami and 2009 presidential opposition candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi lead the current reform movement. It is important to note that this is neither a battle of secularism versus religion nor clerics versus non-clerics; it is a struggle within the religio-political establishment.

Islam and Iranian Politics: A Marriage of Convenience?

The post-colonial experience of the Muslim world has been shaped by the effort to modernize without Westernizing. Indeed, this quest shaped the pathways of liberal Muslim intellectuals from Taha Husayn to Jamal al-Din al-Afghani. At the juristic level the challenge centered on how to access the democratic impetus in Islam and Islamic history without simply mimicking a Western model of democracy.

Several prominent Iranian clerics have always contended that the marriage of religion and politics corrupts religion. They stress that a monolithic and state-driven reading of religion quells *ijtihad*—the evolution of new religious laws to fit evolving circumstances—and consigns a traditionally vibrant and dynamic clerical establishment to become inert. No longer institutions encouraging philosophical debate or spirituality, seminaries become co-opted by the goals of the state and its political agenda. Such a radical (or traditional depending on one’s perspective) point of view poses a threat to the Iranian political system.

To prevent intellectual stagnation as well as the lack of flexibility, evident in its Sunni counterpart, Shi’a jurisprudence has several elements meant to safeguard its vibrant and intellectually liberal character. Historically, Shi’a jurisprudence seeks to prevent the consolidation of religious authority and abuses of religious power. A jurist’s opinions are binding on his followers, not a whole community. Rulings lapse upon their author’s death, so that living *mojtaheds*, jurists qualified to partake in *ijtihad*, serve as living guidance for the Shi’a community. Consequently, living *mojtaheds* are free to interpret Islamic law because of their training and experience. Hence, Shi’a Islam remains free to adapt to changing times and circumstances.

With the advent of the Iranian theocracy, the state no longer became a vehicle for Shi’ism, rather Shi’ism became a vehicle for state policy, control, and doctrine. Consequently, the clerical elite has always remained divided in its commitment to Ayatollah Khomeini’s principle of *velayet-e faqih*. Cognizant of this, Ayatollah Khomeini established the Special Court for Clergy, which functioned independent of the Judiciary to maintain discipline among clerics as well as to counter religio-political dissent. It was vested with the radical authority to sanction mullahs with unorthodox (i.e., anti-Revolutionary) views.

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Misguidedly, some see Iran’s competing movements within the clergy encapsulated by their view of modernity. They believe Iran’s clergy fall into two camps: reformists who believe there is no conflict with Islam and modernity, and conservatives who question whether modern institutions can ever be compatible with the faith. This perspective is an oversimplification. At issue is not modernity as modernity. Indeed, Khomeini employed modern telecommunications and technologies as well as socialist principles coupled with modern leftist political thought in making the Revolution a success in 1979. Clerics happily embrace technology like cell phones, video recorders, and computers as well as modern notions like representative government. They also often perform intellectual acrobatics to couch western ideas as originating in Islamic thought. As such, there is some greater force at work beyond a banal or reactionary fear of modernity. If anything, the issue truly centers on an unwillingness to cede authority to the masses, to trust the people of Iran as an electorate to decide the fate of their nation rather than the monopoly of power currently enjoyed by a specific clerical elite. To understand this tension between a society founded by a popular revolution but controlled by a clerical elite we must examine the principles of modern Iran’s founding father: Ayatollah Khomeini.

**Khomeinism**

Khomeini’s vision of an Iranian state consisted of many things at once. It was Islamic, couched in the revolutionary theology of Shi’a Islam, which unlike its Sunni counterpart has always had an elite clergy. It was socialist, dedicated to social justice, economic empowerment, and wealth redistribution. It was absolutist, where, despite elected bodies and democratic institutions, his word was the final word. It was anti-imperialist, and continues to be marked by a deep resentment of the West and unwillingness to normalize relations with the West, especially the United States. It was nationalist, specifically embedded with Persian nationalism in response to the national issues facing Iran. Despite its nationalism, the revolution aimed internationally, hoping to remake the Muslim world in its image. Importantly, Khomeini advocated Islamic unity that reached beyond the Sunni-Shi’a divide.\(^7\)

Shi’ism lends itself to a radical and revolutionary understanding of Islam and its role in society since Shi’a political doctrines center around principles of social justice and freedom from an oppressive and illegitimate political system. In this vision of Islam, Prophet Mohammad was a reformer who challenged and remade the existing socio-economic system. As the original embodiment of Islam and politics, he was a man of religion who founded a polity based on religious law. Until Khomeini planted the seeds of revolution, the traditional clergy, in the ivory tower that was Qom, were wrapped in their mullah robes. Khomeini turned the understanding of Shi’a religious philosophy on its head, asserting that it was up to clerics to be actively involved with their people, community and politics. While older clerics saw this as corrupting the ranks of religion with politics, it fed into a desire on the part of younger clerics to take action against the Shah’s re-
gime. Islam became a symbol of resistance. Today’s hardliners in Iran share a devotion to the essential pillars of Khomeini’s vision, as anti-Western, populist and most importantly, Islamic.

**Iranian Politics After Khomeini**

*1989: A Turning Point*

With the death of Khomeini, 1989 marked a major crossroad for the Iranian Republic. Its founding father’s passing left Iran in the midst of defining itself as the Revolution matured. The year before, a constitutional amendment created the Expediency Council, which oversees all laws ensuring that no law would be un-Islamic and that no law would conflict with the country’s constitution, goals, and policies. It was created to act as an arbitrator between the elected majlis and appointed Council of Guardians, which often vetoed laws created by the majlis as against Islamic law. Philosophically the creation of the Expediency Council was a profound change in the nature of Iranian politics. Islam was no longer the final word. Instead, the needs of the state could supersede Islamic law.

Also in June 1989, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei became the Supreme Leader of Iran despite lacking the religious and scholarly credentials to rule. His appointment embodied the changes in the republic that had moved away from its philosophical roots. The doctrine of *relayet-e faqih* and the Iranian Constitution mandated that the Supreme Leader be a Grand Ayatollah. Of the Grand Ayatollahs alive in the 1980s, Hossein Ali Montazeri was the most qualified to serve as the Supreme Leader. In fact, Khomeini initially chose him as his successor. However, in the late 1980s Montazeri began to challenge Khomeini’s leadership, calling for social and political liberalization. Khomeini not only renounced him as a successor, but also placed him under house arrest and attempted to delegitimize him as a cleric. Khomeini then revised the Constitution, removing the requirement that the Supreme Leader be a Grand Ayatollah. Rafsanjani insisted to the Assembly of Experts that when on his deathbed, Khomeini had appointed Khamenei his successor. As a result, the Assembly of Experts elected Khamenei Supreme Leader in June 1989 despite the fact that he was not *marja’e tāqlīd*, i.e., a top-ranking cleric worthy of emulation.

His appointment as Supreme Leader signaled the rise of realpolitik, the expansion of the regime’s centrist authoritarian style, and the decline of a purist religious philosophy all while Iran struggled to maintain its identity after the death of its iconic leader. Without Khomeini’s charisma and educational background, Khamenei increasingly began to rely upon and expand the security apparatus of the state. Without the rank of *marja’e tāqlīd* he could technically be over-rulled by higher-ranking clerics, a
problem Khomeini did not have to deal with. Khamenei managed to sustain his position as Supreme Leader without strong clerical opposition by aligning himself with one of the most conservative elements of the clerical establishment, the Haqqani School. This gave him much needed legitimacy, and it gave hard-line orthodox clerics increased spheres of influence in the world of politics. As Khamenei began to consolidate power as the new Supreme Leader, Rafsanjani took over Khamenei’s previous role as President of Iran, embarking on an effort to make the Presidency a more active political institution without eclipsing the power of the Supreme Leader.

Understanding the Movement from Reform to Ahmadinejad
Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani’s presidency, which encapsulated the greater part of the 1990s, heralded a fundamental change in the nature of the relationship between state and society. A regime insider to this day and responsible for helping Khamenei become Supreme Leader, Rafsanjani has long been a figure on the more pragmatic side of Iranian politics. Under his presidency, the state was no longer the bearer of spiritual salvation; it also delivered on practical promises in this lifetime. With the hopes of improving the economy and foreign direct investment, Rafsanjani began to relax cultural restrictions and improve social freedoms. In many ways he embodied the Revolution’s arrival at middle age—no longer full of youthful zeal—when pragmatic realities from engaging the outside world to rebuilding after the Iran-Iraq War took over.

Buoyed by an Iran full of promise and potential, a loose coalition of dissident clerics and students attempted to challenge the conservative establishment throughout the 1990s. Their union, however shaky, ultimately led to the triumphant 1997 presidential victory of Seyed Mohammad Khatami, who won the election on a platform of economic and social reform and international engagement. In the 1990s the term “reformist” really referred to the broad spectrum of people who were simply not hard-line conservatives. While Rafsanjani was a pragmatic conservative hailing from the political party the Combatant Clergy Association, Khatami was a reformist from the Association of Combatant Clerics. Despite being a liberal president, reform proved a herculean effort primarily because hard-line conservatives retained political hegemony by dominating Iran’s non-elected institutions (The Guardian Council, Judiciary, Office of Supreme Leader), the IRGC, and Basij.

Despite being the public and international face of Iran, the Iranian presidency has significantly less power than the Supreme Leader. Throughout Khatami’s presidency, Khamenei’s coercive hold over Iranian political and military institutions led to a deadlocked and ineffective government as popular frustration soared. The student protests on the 18 of Tir (July 9, 1999) foreshadowed the regime’s response to the protests of 2009, as students who peacefully protested the closure of Salaam, a reformist newspaper, were met with brutal attacks resulting in demonstrations and rioting throughout Iran. These in turn were met with repression on the orders of the Supreme Leader. Khatami could do little to reign in the Supreme Leader,
who controls the military and security apparatus of the state, both of which are loyal to him and help to uphold his regime. Fatefuly, as a result of the 18 of Tir protests, the government passed an intrusive “thought crime” law, which prohibited “any violent or peaceful act by a person or group against the regime” including speech. It outlined harsh punishments and sentences for otherwise peaceful actions.9

A surprising effect of the 1990s brush with liberalism was the formation of a new political front in 2003: Etelaf-e Abadgaran-e Iran Eslami. The Alliance of Builders of Islamic Iran, shortened to Abadgaran, remained a relatively obscure coalition of neo-conservative Iranian political parties until it swept Tehran’s municipal elections in 2003 and 2004 and became the party of Tehran’s controversial mayor, a somewhat unknown politician with high ambitions named Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. During the Khatami presidency, while the populist debate over democracy and freedom reached new heights, conservatives consolidated politically as conservative intellectuals created a new relationship between the clerical leadership and society based on providing pragmatic solutions to political and social issues.10 Gheissari and Nasr astutely summarize this transition: “Pragmatic authoritarianism relied on new relationships of economic patronage for social control . . . [It] combined a concentration of power in the office of the Supreme Leader and greater coherence in relations between conservative clerics and the military wing of the regime with a more broad-based and economically motivated relationship with society.”11 While such relationships are not unique in developing countries, Ahmadinejad’s presidency marked a move both right and left. While his politics leaned right, supporting the orthodoxy of the revolution, his economic policies swung left to the socialist history of the revolution as he championed economic issues for the poor.

The Green Movement
The 12 June 2009 Iranian election and its contested aftermath, in which incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was declared victorious, revealed fissures within the Iranian clerical establishment as well as popular frustrations with the current regime. Mir Hossein Mousavi rallied the masses as a popular opposition candidate whose calls for a recount in the allegedly fraudulent election launched what has come to be known as the Green Movement12 led by Mousavi, Mehdi Karroubi, Mohammad Khatami, and the late Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri.13 Whether allegations of electoral fraud are true or false, confidence in the system as a whole and the legitimacy of the government has been shaken.

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Whether allegations of electoral fraud are true or false, confidence in the system as a whole and the legitimacy of the government has been shaken. Mass mobilization and infighting among regime elites created a serious threat to the Iranian political system. Unlike previous protests, these transcend class, ethnicity, age, religiosity, and geographic location.
Before this summer, Mousavi was a regime insider, he played an integral role in the 1979 Revolution, was appointed Foreign Minister in 1981, Prime Minister from 1981 to 1989, and a member of the Expediency Council from 1997 to the present. He came to prominence on a platform of change, governmental transparency, and economic reform. Since the election, protests and public displays of popular discontent against the election and its results have taken place throughout Iran. The regime responded to this popular outcry with contradictory messages: first investigating charges of electoral fraud and later launching a targeted campaign of arrests and invasive policing in an effort to control the rising tide of popular unrest.

The Green Movement mirrors the popular rising tide of anti-clericalism as the average Iranian struggles with staggering inflation, unemployment, low wages, and underemployment. These economic factors have resulted in a popular, and perhaps even ideological, backlash against the political clerical elite, known for its conspicuous consumption and heavily-lined pockets. In fact, Ahmadinejad won popular support by turning against corruption among the clergy and calling for a purer return to Khomeini’s original principles. As a result, he has as many enemies as friends within the clerical establishment.

There is a trend in western media to portray this summer’s incarceration of once-elites as an atrocious anomaly, yet in many ways this summer revealed how little has changed in the regime’s methods to contain dissent and opposition. If anything, the repression that characterized much of the 1980s has only intensified. Perhaps, ironically, the major change is that new media technology has provided the West a view inside. Given the unprecedented mass demonstrations after the disputed elections, the severe crackdown revealed a more stern face of repression, one in which no one—regardless of family background or status—was immune. Consequently, the extent and degree of repression shocked even everyday Iranians.

The Supreme Leader has slowly shifted sides as the political winds have changed, aligning himself with Principalists and Ahmadinejad. The President and Khamenei have a symbiotic relationship. The President’s ideology supports a strong institutional role for the Supreme Leader, while the Supreme Leader supports Ahmadinejad’s continued presidency. During Khatami’s presidency the frequent clashes between these two leadership roles led to a deadlocked and ineffectual government. The confluence of interests and power under Ahmadinejad’s presidency has led to an increasingly centralized and authoritative state with little tolerance of dissent.

This summer’s brief foray into public expression and popular demonstrations, at first optimistically labeled the “Green Revolution,” has been met with severe repression as hundreds of Iranians from street protestors to people who were once regime insiders were placed under house arrest, jailed, abused, and forced into sham “confessions” where they “admitted” to treason against the state. As the Green Movement’s momentum continues to expand, popularizing dissent and mobilizing Iranians throughout the country, the Iranian right is shifting, hoping to mitigate the Green Movement with an ideological move beyond brute force and strong-arm tactics.
To monolithically define the Iranian political right would be an oversimplification. Other than a steadfast commitment to Khomeinism, Iranian neo-conservatives do not fit into geo-political molds of conservatism. Terming themselves “Principalists,” Osulgaran in Farsi, they are stridently anti-capitalistic, opting instead for social welfare for the poor and anti-corruption measures to be firmly in place. Principalists are defined by their understanding of the basic principles of the 1979 Revolution. As such, Ahmadinejad’s platform included calls for stronger government, a better economy, social services, and greater prosperity for the average man. He appealed to the lower classes with promises of redistribution of wealth, continued government subsidies, and his humble and incorruptible image. Both his 2005 and 2009 campaigns were more about class than religious sensibilities as Ahmadinejad promised to empower the masses economically, to fight corruption, and to deliver more transparent governance.

Indeed, what we now find among conservative parties in Iran is a split, a fight between neo-conservatives (i.e. Principalists) like Abadgaran and pragmatic conservatives who support the older generation of leaders like Rafsanjani. Unlike the older generation, defined by the Revolution, the Iran-Iraq War has defined the younger generation of hard-line conservatives. While the older elite is maligned by younger conservatives as economically and politically corrupt, this new generation of ruling insiders has become more aligned with military circles. Though the broad spectrum of conservatives remain loyal to Khomeini’s vision of an Islamic Republic, Principalists have taken this loyalty a step further, with a heightened commitment to Khomeinism and the office of the Supreme Leader that eclipses any room for change and ijtihad.

The main problem currently facing the Islamic Republic is a political and philosophical debate on the nature of freedom in civil society. Is the Supreme Leader empowered by popular mandate or God? Clerical conservatives and regime loyalists like those who support Ahmadinejad believe that the divine right to govern implicit in velayet-e faqih makes public accountability unnecessary. The primacy of an Islamic state trumps that of an Islamic Republic. However, this conservative view conflicts with Constitutional Article 107, which states that the Supreme Leader is not above the law and that the popularly elected Assembly of Experts checks his power. This article was added as an amendment shortly after Khomeini’s death, perhaps as an acknowledgment that only the father of the revolution could viably claim to be above the law. Indeed, the country has yet to resolve the tension between democracy and divine will as an Islamic Republic.
The inability of the clergy to deliver in terms of daily governance has fueled a shift in political thought. Ahmadiinejad has gone after economic corruption in the ranks of the clergy, a move that signals a power struggle at the elite level of Iranian politics and within conservative camps. What we now see is the emergence of several alternative trends; no longer do the simple monikers of “conservative” and “reformist” properly encapsulate the Iranian political spectrum. Within the clerical establishment there is a struggle for how religion and democracy can work together as more liberal elements gain momentum. Indeed, while conventional wisdom dismisses Khatami as ineffective, today we see the first blushes of green and the promises of flowering democracy planted during his presidency as the Iranian political, social, and religious landscape has grown organically to counter an ailing vision of “revolutionary” stagnation. Political debate has shifted from economic liberalization to political liberalization. While regime loyalists and Principalists may wish to maintain the status quo, centrists and reformers are clamoring for greater freedom of expression, association and assembly—although still under the aegis of Islamic governance.

What most defines a conservative platform in Iran is the effort to maintain political hegemony, a “jurists know best” philosophy, which holds that the popular will of an elected representative government should not infringe upon the jurists’ power and authority. The influential Ayatollah Mezbah Yazdi, the main proponent of elite clerical rule, stridently maintains that a clerical elite is more important than democracy. Indeed, Iranian conservatives maintain that the main problem with liberal rule is not that it embraces modernity, or even that it seeks to normalize relations with the West. It is the simple idea that the non-divine, and consequently potentially flawed, hand of the masses may lead the nation. On the other side of the political spectrum, reformists are not calling for an end to relayet-e-faqih; they are simply seeking to limit the absolute authority of the Supreme Leader and other unelected clerical bodies. The primacy of popular will has framed and continues to define the reform movement since Khatami’s presidency. Beginning in the 1990s reformists have been re-examining the role of public participation in an Islamic government. And since this time, the issue falls squarely upon one concern: How can we accommodate, if at all, popular will? Iran’s clerical elite answers this query from two widely different perspectives. Regime loyalist clerics maintain that popular will is irrelevant, while reformist clerics believe that democracy is not only compatible with Islam, but rooted in Islamic principles.

Mesbah Yazdi: The Man Behind the President

Bearing the banner of the orthodox perspective on Iranian religio-political philosophy is Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi, the ultraconservative cleric who serves as Ahmadinejad’s spiritual leader. A man known for his hard-line allegiance to the “Islamic” element of Iran’s self-definition, he is one of the founders of the Haqqani School, a Shi’a school of thought from which many regime insiders hail. He is known for his opposition to democ-
racy, anti-Western stance, intolerance of different religious perspectives, and advocacy of violence. He has framed both sanctions on Iran and political provocations within Iran as efforts by Western “crusaders” to fight a cultural war for the soul of the Iranian nation. Taking positions so extreme it may be unfair to label him a simple neo-conservative; he considers concepts like elections, freedom of political parties, and human rights as un-Islamic.

As a staunch ally of Supreme Leader Khamenei, Mesbah Yazdi propagates an official version of Islam central to Iran’s theocracy while having the religious credentials Khamenei lacks. Rumored to have ambitions to be the next Spiritual Leader of Iran, his high religious rank helps to legitimize the current Supreme Leader. His political philosophy contends that jurists are afforded the privilege of ruling because of their education and do not need the popular support of the people.

Mesbah Yazdi’s vision of official Islam holds steadfastly to the absolute authority of the guardianship of the velayet-e-faqih. While many clerics saw Khomeini’s vision of jurists ruling as a corruption of Shi’a notions of the Mehdí and his future sovereignty, Mesbah Yazdi argues that a qualified jurist can and should assume the position of leadership during the occultation of the twelfth imam. Historically the opposite held true: few Shi’a jurists held clerics in such lofty regard, believing that only the imams were infallible. Despite views that appear to favor a clerical elite, Mesbah Yazdi was not well regarded by Ayatollah Khomeini and retains few allies among the high clerical elite because his belief in the singularity of the Supreme Leader’s authority infringes on their own claims to a role in the process of political power.

Without Khomeini’s charismatic leadership and the unifying symbolism of the war with Iraq, the Islamic Republic needed to create practical justifications for its continued rule. Mesbah Yazdi and a small clerical elite, whose philosophical outlook encapsulates the farthest right of conservatism in Iran, provided this justification couched in terms of faith: “Humans have conditional, not absolute, freedom, the condition is the tenets of Islam, which must be accepted without question.” Against the dilution of the principle of velayet-e-faqih, freedom of speech and a free press, he has stated: “The culture of tolerance and indulgence means the disarming of society of its defense mechanism.” In his worldview, democracy and freedom are fashionable trends that must not prejudice the way we interpret Islam.

Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi is best known for advocating and legitimizing violence in political affairs; yet little is heard about him in the West. He writes: “When people are convinced that the plots against the Islamic state are endangering it, they must act because this is a case where the use of force is necessary even if thousands get killed . . . Not using force against those who commit offenses will lead to more violence and chaos. Islam says
mohareb (those who wage war against the Islamic order) should be executed, or their hands cut off, or deported." He was the primary cleric against Khatami’s reforms, calling for tough action, even vigilantism, against dissident students in the July 1999 protests on the 18th of Tir. Similarly, in the summer of 2009 after the election protests, he famously issued a fatwa calling for the arrest, trial, and possible execution of opposition leaders as traitors to the state. Most people understood this fatwa to be an implicit threat towards Mousavi.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s a host of Haqqani graduates, loyal to Mesbah Yazdi and his philosophy, took over the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), the Islamic Propaganda Organization, the IRGC, the Revolutionary Courts system, and the Special Court for Clergy. This political development made the Haqqani School and Mesbah Yazdi far more influential than perhaps any other seminary or seminarian. As the spiritual leader to many in the IRGC and Basij militias, in the 2005 and 2009 elections he issued fatwas ordering both Basij and the IRGC to campaign on behalf of Ahmadinejad. Considering the influence of these institutions—especially the Basij with its presence at all sectors of civil society from universities to local mosques—his reach is far and wide across Iran’s class lines and its urban-rural divide.

While Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi is a polarizing figure in the Iranian political landscape, reformists are also using religious doctrine to refute conservative paradigms in the hopes of transforming the dialogue about the role of religion in Iranian politics and re-interpreting the meaning of the 1979 Revolution and its relevance for Iranians today. Thus, the debate over a society governed by jurists is not monopolized by voices like Mesbah Yazdi’s alone.

**Progressive Voices Engaging Religion**

There has always been a segment of the clerical elite strongly opposed to Khomeini’s revolutionary vision of velayat-e faqih. They argue on religious grounds and principles against an Islamic state, asserting that clerics must be spiritual guides who remain above politics and that appointing a Supreme Leader disrupts the natural order of waiting for the Mahdi central to Shi’ite belief. While a unified political party or political front has yet to coalesce around this view, these voices have become more vocal with time and have reached across the divide from university students to seminary students in Qom.

Abdel Karim Sorouch is at the heart of this progressive movement. Sorouch, an Islamic intellectual who believes in the compatibility of Islam and democracy, became a vocal dissident, critical of clerical rule after Khomeini’s death. He claims Iranians need not accept a clerical vision of Islam unquestioningly. He further contends that religious knowledge changes and evolves over time, and as such ijtihad is at the heart of a vibrant Shi’ism. Protesting state cooptation of Shi’ism, he stresses that unlike Sunni jurisprudence, logic has always been a source of Islamic law in Shi’a jurisprudence and it should continue to be a source of Islamic law in conjunction with the
Quran, hadith and teachings of the Shi’á Imams. According to Sorouch, by using religion as political ideology we limit the religious experience of Muslims, and for this reason we need to separate religion and politics—not for the sake of politics, but for the sake of religion, because politics can corrupt faith. The Islamic Republic labels him subversive because of this “radical” conclusion.

Yet Sorouch’s philosophy is not novel. Early clerical voices had also couched their opposition to the marriage of faith and politics with a religious justification. Ayatollah Shariatmardari (1904 to 1985) called the Revolution a deviation from true Shi’ism. He became a victim of an ideological purge, stripped of his religious authority, defrocked as a cleric, and placed under house arrest. Hojjat-ol-Islam Mohsen Kadivar, a progressive cleric urged the clergy to distance itself from politics. He was charged and sentenced by the Special Court for Clergy for “confusing public opinion” in 1999 and released in 2004. He opined, “I believe that democracy and Islam are compatible. But a religious state is possible only when it is elected and governed by the people. And the governing of the country should not be necessarily in the hands of the clergy.”

The emergent trend is one in which democratic philosophy has entered public discourse couched in terms of Islamic principles. In this manner, the debate over velayet-e-faqih remains both religious and political. Without Ayatollah Khomeini’s unifying presence, what it means to mix religion and politics is no longer clear. This is further complicated by the Khomeini family’s move away from conservative religious and political elements as they have become champions of democracy and liberalization.

Claiming Khomeini’s Legacy: The Khomeini Family and the Reform Movement

While conservatives struggle to maintain the legacy of Ayatollah Khomeini, interestingly his progeny has moved towards the reform movement. Writing for The New Republic, former Iranian newspaper editor Ali Reza Eshragi notes, “[A]s the regime and opposition both fight to be Khomeini’s rightful inheritors, the real deciders are Khomeini’s own family members—often referred to as Beit-e-Imam. In Shi’a tradition, these relatives are considered the guardians and true interpreters of an imam’s thoughts.” Khomeini’s grandsons, Hassan and Hossein (whom anyone schooled in Islamic history would recognize as the same names of Prophet Mohammad’s grandsons who are highly revered in Shi’a Islam for their struggle against tyranny and injustice), both mid-level clerics, have long opposed the current regime.

Since 2003 the Iranian government banned Hossein, a forty-seven-year-old controversial reformist cleric, from granting interviews to the Iranian media because of his vocal criticism of the regime’s policies and
his profound influence over everyday Iranians as Khomeini’s grandson. In a 2006 interview with al-Arabiyya TV he described the Iranian government as “a dictatorship of clerics who control every aspect of life.” In his opinion, these leaders corrupted his grandfather’s message, which was one of freedom and democracy: “My grandfather’s revolution has devoured its children and has strayed from its course. I lived through the revolution, and it called for freedom and democracy . . . The revolution rocked the foundations of society, which had [previously under the Shah] been conservative and rejected freedom. Thanks to the revolution, all sectors of society . . . are now able to accept [the notion of] freedom and have become politically aware.” In his opinion velayet-e-faqih is based less on pure Shi’i religious philosophy and more so as a response to political realities that preceded the 1979 Revolution in which clerics were persecuted.35

The thirty-eight-year-old Hassan is by far the most important public figure of the Khomeini family and is highly regarded as the keeper of the Ayatollah’s mausoleum. The hard-line media has criticized Hassan for his support of the Green Movement. Because of his support for Mousavi, conservatives accused him of colluding with reformist leaders and activists in trying to destabilize the regime.36 Indeed, the state run news agency, IRNA, and hard-line media source Kayhan have accused Hassan of “cooperating with behind the scenes elements” and allowing his grandfather’s ideas to be manipulated by the likes of reformists including Khatami, Karoubi, and Ayatollah Sane’i.37 Choosing to leave Iran rather than attend Ahmadinejad’s inauguration this August, Hassan has vocally criticized the government’s extreme and brutal response to protestors and opposition candidates.

It is no secret that in 2009 the Beit-e-Imam had overwhelmingly supported change in the form of Mousavi as opposed to the status quo. Campaigning for Mousavi ten days before the election, Khomeini’s granddaughter Zahra Eshragi quipped “Mousavi was one of the very few people trusted by my grandfather.”38 In many ways the family’s fondness of Mousavi mirrors that of their patriarch’s. In 1985 Khomeini made certain that Mousavi remained Prime Minister (a post that no longer exists) despite then-President Khamenei’s protests. Hassan’s younger brothers, Yasser and Ali, also support reformist parties. Ali, who is married to Iraqi Ayatollah Sistani’s granddaughter, campaigned for Mousavi throughout Iran. In one speech he called into question the legitimacy of the current regime, remarking it has strayed from Khomeini’s original principles. Even the Ayatollah’s less liberal daughter Zahra Mostafavi Khomeini supported Mousavi in the 2009 Presidential election. She is secretary-general of a women’s rights party and Mousavi’s wife is also on the central committee of the same party.39

Many believed their grandmother, Khadije Saqafi Khomeini, shielded her progeny from the harshest side of the regime, but her death in March 2009 opened the doors to increased regime pressure on Hassan and Hossein. Up until recently, the Khomeini family was untouchable—at least outwardly. They are admired and have tremendous clout and social capital. In today’s Iran this means little in terms of real power given the increasing authoritarianism of the state. The day after the June 12 election both Khomeini’s granddaughter Zahra and her husband (the brother of former President
Khatami) were arrested for supporting reformist activities. Hassan has remained an outspoken critic of the government, though some wonder if the regime is treading lightly in their treatment of Hassan because he has the potential to carry the mantle of his grandfather’s legacy. Most importantly, his understanding of that legacy is one that alienates the Supreme Leader and favors a more active role for popular participation and civil society. Like Soroush and Kadivar, Hassan sees no conflict between Islam and democracy, favoring a strong civil society and expanded social freedoms. The question remains, which will succeed in claiming Khomeini’s legacy: the current establishment or reformers who are calling for a populist (yet Islamic) change that seems eerily reminiscent of Iranians who once took to the streets in 1979?

**Conclusion**

The main difference between Iranian conservatives and reformists centers on how to accommodate popular imperatives and their interpretation of the powers of the office of Supreme Leader. In the eyes of conservatives, the Supreme Leader’s powers are immune from electoral scrutiny, while reformers contend that the democratic spirit of the Constitution trumps the absolutism of the Supreme Leader’s office. Reformists resolve the tension between divine rule and popular will by arguing that God speaks through the democratic will of the people. Remarking on the populist foundation of Iranian politics as he criticized the Ahmadinejad government’s response to the Green Movement, former President Khatami remarked: “We accept that the constitution is not a message from God and if anyone has an objection to it, it is not a problem; but the foundation of our movement is this constitution which is the result of the revolution and was approved by the majority of the people.”

Similarly, in speeches throughout his campaign and during the fall of 2009 Mousavi emphasized the importance of the role of President as a true representative of the people and their votes, stressing that this form of representative government is at the heart of an Islamic system of government.

On a certain level the fundamental difference between these two camps comes down to faith in their fellow Iranians. Reformists have faith that their compatriots will sustain a religious state with democratic principles, while hard-line regime loyalists fear that choice and pluralism signal their demise. The contested 2009 presidential election has revealed deep divisions in Iran’s ruling elite on both political and clerical levels. Of the nine ayatollahs holding the highest rank of marja’i taqlid only two have publicly congratulated Ahmadinejad on his electoral victory, while several have publicly criticized the government’s response to the Green Movement. The religious establishment’s traditional backing of the regime makes their criticism of the Republic and its Supreme Leader all the more biting.

This battle among the clergy has also provided a valuable lesson to Muslims around the world watching Iran to see if this experiment in religion and politics works. If anything the Revolution has revealed the unresolved tensions that exist in a theocracy, the contradictions between faith, moder-
nity and democracy. Indeed, better examples abound for the Muslim world of resolving the tensions between faith and modernity, such as Indonesia and Malaysia—both far cries from an outright theocracy.

Iran is no longer seeking to export its revolution; rather, its leaders are seeking to maintain their tenuous hold on power while suppressing another burgeoning revolution. Iran is no longer seeking to export its revolution; rather, its leaders are seeking to maintain their tenuous hold on power while suppressing another burgeoning revolution. The summer of 2009 revealed the capacity of Iran’s youth to take to the streets in the name of their right to self-determination, to justice, and to their country. While met with harsh measures seeking to quell a green revolution, one wonders if these populist actions and the ideology behind them are not also at the heart of Khomeini’s founding principles. What this may mean for the future of the Republic remains to be seen.

Notes

1 He has not achieved the high rank of Grand Ayatollah or marja’ e taqlid, a cleric worthy of emulation.
2 Despite having the same name as former President and reformist Mohammad Khatami, the two are unrelated and have wildly opposite political views.
3 While no one is challenging the union of religion and politics, there have been movements to broaden the concept of velayat-e faqih among religious thinkers and even politicians like Rafsanjani so that a single person as Supreme Leader is not vested with such absolute authority.
4 Turkey stands out as an exception to this rule in which Westernization was embraced as a means to modernization.
5 This philosophical difference among Shi’a clerics is discussed in detail below in the section on “Progressive Voices Engaging Religion.”
7 This is important to keep in mind as political pundits often buzz about a Shi’a crescent or Iran’s efforts to reach out in sectarian ways to radicalize Shi’a minorities in Arab states. Since at its heart the Iranian Revolution embraced pan-Islamism, it has always been viewed as threatening by the Sunni leaders of regimes like Saudi Arabia, who hope that in branding Iran as Shi’a reactionaries they curb the appeal of its proto-democratic political system.
8 The amendment was later codified as Article 112 of the 1989 amended Constitution.
11 Ibid., 142.
12 Named after Mousavi’s campaign color which was, through no coincidence, also the color associated with Islam.
13 Grand Ayatollah Montazeri, the spiritual voice of the Green Movement, passed away on December 19, 2009, during the Shi’a holy month of Muharram. His mourning period, which happened to coincide with the holy day of Ashura, turned into days of political demonstrations against the current regime.
16 The term “neo-conservative” in the Iranian context is far different than its use in an American context.
18 For more on Ahmadinejad and the clerical view of Principalists in politics see: Resalat (October 15, 2008). Available online: http://www.resalat-news.com/Fa/. Resalat is an Iranian news agency aligned with the conservative clergy in Qom.
21 Mehdi Moslem, Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002).
23 See his personal website www.mesbahyazdi.org.
27 Ibid.
28 As quoted in Rajaei, 180.
29 It is important to note that within the ranks of the IRGC and Basij there are different political and religious leanings.
30 Though once a professor at the University of Tehran, Soroush is currently a professor in the United States.
34 Hassan is the son of Ahmad Khomeini and Hossein is Mustafa Khomeini’s son. The two are cousins, not brothers.
38 See Eshraghi “Khamenei v. Khomeini.” Zahra is the wife of Mohammad Reza Khatami, head of the main reformist party, the Islamic Iran Participation Front (Mosharekat). Former president Khatami is her husband’s brother.
39 Ibid.