

Is Ahmadinejad Islamic Enough for Iran?

Why the Iranian president's latest fight with the supreme leader could be his last.

BY ABBAS MILANI

While most of the Middle East region has been risking life and limb for the sake of a democratic future, in Iran, different factions in the regime have been busy debating the virtues of the ancient Persian King Cyrus the Great. Neither side brings any new historical insight, but it hasn't been an exercise in mere navel-gazing -- in Iran, debates on ancient history have been a high-stakes affair. Today, the question is whether the Islamic Republic should pay closer attention to the country's pre-Islamic Iranian heritage; the answers recently offered by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad threaten the collapse of the current regime.

The dispute itself is nothing new. For decades, if not centuries, the twin enigmas of Iran's identity and the nature of Islam in Iran have bedeviled Iranian scholars and politicians alike. Iranian identity is bifurcated, split between the pre-Islamic traditions of Zoroastrian and Manichean millennium before Islam, and the Islam-influenced developments of the last 1,300 years.

But there has never been a consensus about which side of this bifurcation should be privileged. Even in the first centuries after the arrival of Islam in Iran, though Iranians had a decisive role in formulating Islamic laws, governance, and literature, there was considerable tension between Arabs and Persians: The former routinely referred to the latter with the pejorative moniker *Ajam*. Some Arabs (and some Iranians) even questioned whether Shiism -- the dominant sect in Iran today

-- qualifies at all as a legitimate branch of Islam, arguing that it was actually a thinly disguised form of Iranian nationalism. Indeed, many scholars have pointed out that key ideas singular to Shiism in the Islamic world -- like the concept of a messiah (*mahdi*), and millenarian optimism -- are in fact a reincarnation of pre-Islamic Iranian ideas and concepts drawn from Zoroastrian and Manichean philosophies.

Negotiating these tensions has long been a requirement for any Iranian regime. The shahs of the Pahlavi era, seeking to blunt Islam's role in public life, accentuated the pre-Islamic age. The grandest example of that campaign came in 1976, when the shah spent several hundred million dollars to celebrate 2,500 years of Persian monarchy in a tent-city he specially erected outside Persepolis, the capital of ancient Persia. He even changed the national calendar for the occasion, away from one of Islamic origin to one that claimed to have its genesis in the age of Cyrus, the ancient Persian king praised in the Old Testament for freeing Jews from their Babylonian captivity (though the change lasted only two years).

But when the Islamic regime came into power in 1979, it attempted to obliterate the Persian pre-Islamic past and emphasize only the Islamic component. It was an agenda that required some heavy cultural lifting, to say the least, in a country where people still routinely decried the "Arab invasion" of a millennium past, and practiced with pride and care a language that had survived the era of Arab imperialism. Ayatollah Khomeini, the Islamic Republic's founder, made Iran's pre-Islamic Persian holidays a special target: He derided Nowruz, the Iranian New Year celebration held on the first day of spring, as a "pagan" festivity.

Iranians, for the most part, resisted the regime's ambitions in this regard. The popular response has been to insist on even more ostentatious celebrations of traditional Persian festivities and support for campaigns to "purify" the language of any Arabic words and names. And just a few years ago, during the days of Mohamad Khatami, Ahmadinejad's reformist predecessor, an Iranian scholar published a five-volume treatise chronicling the two centuries of fierce fighting by Iranians before they accepted Islam, contradicting the regime's official history that Iranians accepted Islam eagerly and as soon as they had heard its message.

It is this sort of national pride that Ahmadinejad and his closest advisor, Esfandiar Mashaei, have been tapping into with their recent calls for an "Iranian Islam." They have made Iranian nationalism a pillar of the Ahmadinejad government, repeatedly and profusely praising pre-Islamic Iranian grandeur.

Rather than neglect Nowruz, Ahmadinejad marked the occasion this year by inviting 20 heads of state to Persepolis -- once so reviled by Shiite clerics that in the early days of the revolution Sadegh Khalkhali, a hard-line judge, tried to have it bulldozed (he was stopped by angry locals). Though Ahmadinejad gave in to heavy criticism and decided against having his celebration at the ancient site, he refused to heed the threats and advice of conservatives and held it in Tehran. It was rightly seen as a direct challenge to the clerical authorities.

Ayatollah Khamenei, the supreme leader, pointedly refused to meet with any of the invited guests and even left town during the festivities. Ahmadinejad and Mashaei also played a key role in the much-celebrated temporary return to Iran from its permanent home in London's British Museum of the Cyrus Cylinder, a

small clay cylinder inscribed with words considered the first declaration of human rights in history. Ahmadinejad has openly praised Cyrus on numerous occasions, including when the cylinder first arrived in Iran.

The actions of Ahmadinejad and his alter ego may seem innocuous enough, but they have deeply angered the conservative clergy. In any country, such faint praise for a past ruler of international, even Biblical, stature would have been normal. In Islamic Iran, it is considered something akin to sedition. In the first days of the Islamic revolution, key clerical figures in the regime, particularly the infamous Khomeini -- a favorite disciple of Khomeini, who appointed him head of the revolutionary courts -- went on to call Cyrus a "Jew boy" and a "sodomite." Now, Ahmadinejad was spending millions to bring the Cyrus Cylinder back to Iran and praising its value and singularity. Meanwhile, in spite of an increasingly louder chorus of critics, some from the highest echelons of clerical power in Iran, Mashaei continued to wax eloquent about Cyrus, Iranian nationalism, and Iranian Islam.

What appeared as cause for a minor irritation has now morphed into one of the biggest challenges facing Iran's leaders since June 2009's contested presidential election. This new rift within the Islamic regime has appeared while the leaders of the Green Movement continue to be under house arrest and show no sign of compromise. Even Ali Hashemi Rafsanjani, the powerful cleric, has refused to fully rejoin Khamenei's camp. Every indication is that serious economic hard times are ahead for the regime. There is open talk of Ahmadinejad's impeachment; Akbar Ganji, the well-known and usually reliable dissident journalist now residing in the United States, has alleged that the Ahmadinejad team worked with European Union to prepare the list of Iranian officials banned from travel for

complicity in human rights abuses -- a list he alleges is composed only of Khamenei's allies, and includes no one from the Ahmadinejad team. According to Ganji, the president has sent a team of reliable aides to open secret negotiations with the United States and the EU. Other sources inside Iran allege that the president's team was trying to steal documents from the Intelligence Ministry to blackmail other leaders.

The crisis came to a boil about 10 days ago when Ahmadinejad fired the minister of intelligence --the second cleric he has fired from that position in less than two years -- and Khamenei resisted the move. A few weeks earlier, Ahmadinejad had fired the foreign minister, another Khamenei ally. Instead of trying to solve the crisis behind closed doors, as has been his wont in the past, this time Khamenei wrote a letter, pointedly not to the president, but to the dismissed minister, and reappointed him to his post. There is absolutely no constitutional provision that allows him to unilaterally appoint a minister.

Although a majority of members of the parliament have written an open letter to Ahmadinejad asking him to comply with Khamenei's egregious breach of the constitution, the president has hitherto refused to accept the leader's interference. He has refused to attend cabinet meetings and has yet to make a public comment about the decision. Either Khamenei must cave and allow Ahmadinejad to fire the minister -- yet another major blow to his authority -- or Ahmadinejad might have to go, creating a political crisis just when the regime least can afford it. Of course, if Ahmadinejad caves, he will be more vulnerable to his many foes, and that can only add to the political instability in the regime.

So what kind of game is Ahmadinejad playing? Why the sudden surge of Iranian patriotism? And why the public fight over the Intelligence Ministry? Some see the moves as part of his calculated effort by to prepare for the upcoming elections by creating some distance from Khamenei and the clerical regime. According to this theory, Ahmadinejad knows how reviled the clergy are in Iran and is keen on either challenging them or at least distancing himself from them. His decision to dismiss the minister of intelligence simply brought what had been a mere confrontation to the point of explosion.

Another key question is why Khamenei and his allies in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) have decided to pick this fight now. On the one hand, Khamenei and the IRGC have been increasingly tightening the political screws, and ruling more and more through brazen force. But more crucially, with the economy heading toward a crisis -- the central bank just announced that the inflation rate for foodstuffs is 25 percent, another official announced the real unemployment to be near 30 percent and an influential member of the parliament declared that government economic statistics are either kept secret and those made public are all unreliable -- and with the continued winds of democracy blowing in the region, Khamenei seems to be preparing to sacrifice the president and blame him for the financial calamities faced by the country. But will Ahmadinejad go down without a fight?