

The New Wave of Social Engineering in Iran

Written by Afshin Shahi

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AFSHIN SHAHI, OCT 3 2010

At a time when the Islamic Republic is facing grave internal and external challenges, it is intensifying its thirty year old programme of social engineering.

The social engineering venture of the Islamic Republic has been a systematic attempt of the ruling machinery to reshape the socio-cultural infrastructure of the Iranian society in accordance with the ideological mandate of the state. It has been an attempt to standardise the collective consciousness through the productive social agencies and reshape collective behaviour. In a recent attempt to stifle the internal opposition, the Islamic Republic has called for more "Islamisation" of the educational system and has in particular targeted universities for further "de-westernisation".

Lately, Kamran Daneshjoo, the Minister of Higher Education in Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's Cabinet, warned about the "threat" of "un-Islamic" universities and called for universities that failed to follow their Islamic duties to be crushed to dust. He clarified this notion of an "Islamic university" by stating "We have pledged to take our universities in the direction of the Supreme Leader. That means if He orders something we need to unconditionally obey, even if we disagree with Him to one hundred percent."

Daneshjoo's statement reflects a longstanding conviction of the Supreme Leader himself that the dangers of western values are reaching the Iranian society through the social sciences and humanities. Hence, he has labelled these academic fields as "dangerous," since they can breed "secularism, liberalism and materialism" thereby undermining the foundations of the Islamic State.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has been a zealous supporter of the strategy of Islamisation of universities as well. Shortly after being elected as President in 2005, over 50 university lecturers were forced to leave their jobs. Dr. Hossein Bashiriyeh, who is regarded as the father of political sociology in Iran, was one of the many who lost his academic posts. Recently, even more purging has taken place in Iranian higher education. Over the last three months, the heads of 17 universities and three research institutes were replaced. After the suspension of 40 other leaders of educational institutions there is a widespread feeling that the war on academia will continue to take its toll on the structures of higher education.

What is the cause of this intensification of Islamisation policies in Iran? Do the ruling elite genuinely believe that by remoulding the highly politicised universities their impact in anti-government protests can be reduced? Are these policies assumed to recondition the intellectual consciousness of the academic community to fully internalise the State's discourse? Is it a way to address the current crisis of legitimacy? Or is it simply another step in a larger effort to maximise government control over the educational institutions?

There is a combination of factors, which encourages Iran's ruling elite to enforce a policy of social engineering that resembles approaches taken during the Islamic Cultural Revolution of the early 1980s. Back then, the notion of a cultural revolution had been introduced by the Islamic Republic in order to systematically combat what the regime identified as "Gharb-zadegi", literally "Westoxication". Arguably, this was a straightforward way of discrediting incompatible norms and values by associating them with the demonised west. Creating an anti-western culture was part of an ideological battle, which allowed the regime to justify rejecting any set of values that was not in conformity

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with its foundations, by simply labelling them as “western”. The Islamic Republic defined an identity-saving mission for itself to cure a culturally and religiously “ill” society whose members were “contaminated” with western values. Once the western values had been defined as a threat to the nation the necessity of eliminating the values and any one associated with them was justified.

Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the revolution identified political diversity as a key obstacle to the establishment of an Islamic state, blaming its existence on the lack of proper Islamic education in universities. He considered “un-Islamic” universities more dangerous than “cluster bombs” and called for a complete process of Islamisation to cleanse the universities from “decadent” western values. Soon enough such ideas were translated into a course of action, which undermined what the Islamic Republic considered as a breeding ground for “un-Islamic” activities.

This resulted in the temporarily closure of all universities and colleges throughout the country; an event that was marked as the beginning of the Islamic Cultural Revolution in Iran. Thousands of students and scholars were purged, books were burned and texts were rewritten in accordance with the ideological doctrine of the Islamic Republic.

It is quite astonishing that after all those years of systematic state effort, the ruling elite still blames the “corrupt” universities for the existence of nonconformist voices in the country. Arguably, the ongoing stigmatisation of the humanities and social sciences is an involuntary acceptance of failure. It is an implicit acknowledgement that all the attempts over the last thirty years failed to produce an educational system in conformity with what the regime considers Islamic. However, if the process of Islamisation has failed in the first three decades of the Islamic Republic, what is the point of reinforcing the same ideas today? The answer to this question seems straightforward. A regime, which has constructed itself based on an ideology cannot fully divorce itself from a policy of active social engineering. Furthermore, symbolic enforcement of ideology becomes more crucial when an ideological state faces concrete paradoxes.

At a time when confidence of and in the ruling political class is low, some of the former elites have joined the opposition to express the idea that the utopia of Islamisation has failed, the regime has to stand firm. Indeed it needs to convince the masses that they are still committed to their guiding principles and that they have not given up on the cause. Against this background, blaming westernisation and an unfinished process of Islamisation seems to be the most straightforward strategy.

However, given the existing divisive political climate in the country, it would be unrealistic to accept that these policies can be successful. Moreover, the products of globalisation and information technology have already proved that the media are increasingly beyond the control of the state. Hence, there must be an additional motive for such gestures and that is something that all authoritarian states need at a time of existential threats, control.

If the regime can't sell the idea of Islamisation any longer and reshape the mediums of thought, it can maximise control over the educational institutions to pave the way for further homogenisation of academia. These state policies are vested in fear. Particularly, since the last presidential election the regime is afraid of any institution that may shelter nonconformists. When the regime publicly expresses its fear of soft-revolution and “internal conspirators”, it sets the pretext for further control. By purging nonconformist voices, they hope to prevent any orchestration of oppositional units within these wider institutions.

It is possible to argue that, the Islamic Republic's programmes of social engineering have failed. There are indications that the ideological state is struggling to authenticate its “Islamic” mandate and cannot effectively filter the mediums of thought to its own favour. Their inability to engage in social and political reconciliation, which has converged with the crisis of legitimacy following the recent presidential election, leaves the regime with one choice and that is tightening its control. The current policies of Islamisation still correspond to the basic ideology of the state and yet provide an indispensable pretext for further domination of the ruling elite.

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