

Real power behind Tehran's tirades

Rodger Shanahan

The Australian

9 July 2012

P. 8

Iran is a theocracy, but few understand how power is distributed among its senior clerical leadership. While much is made of the aggressive rhetoric of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, his powers are actually extremely limited.

Control over the forces that matter, such as the Revolutionary Guard and the nuclear program, rest with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Through representatives sprinkled throughout Iran's religious, military and political bureaucracy, he can ensure that the messages he wants are transmitted.

The difficulty in discerning Iranian intentions, and therefore dealing with them effectively, is the opaque nature of Khamenei's deliberations with his inner circle.

We do know that Khamenei was selected to succeed the founder of the Islamic Republic not for his religious learning, but for his political acumen. In this sense then, he is a "rational ideologue".

As a consequence of the closed nature of Iranian decision making, the intent of Tehran's nuclear ambitions is unknown. While the clerical nature of the leadership makes some ill-informed commentators ready to ascribe the nuclear program as a way of achieving the clergy's millenarian goals, the reality is that Iranian decision-makers are much more rational actors than many would have us believe.

Being a rational actor, however, does not mean clerical leaders readily seek compromise. The sense of Persian exceptionalism and experience of foreign intervention, allied with what they see as their revolutionary achievements, mean they see themselves as having earned the right to be at the top table as an independent actor. Recent negotiations with Iran over its alleged development of a weaponised nuclear capability are the result of increasingly tough international sanctions allied with sabre rattling by Israel and posturing by the US.

This is as it must be, for Iranians have traditionally shown an unwillingness to seriously negotiate on issues unless their feet are held to the proverbial fire. In other words, these types of sensitive negotiations require Tehran to view the risk versus return calculations in seeking a nuclear capability in largely the same way as those with whom it negotiates. This is what makes it so hard to determine Iran's intent, not only in nuclear negotiations but in overall foreign policy. While many are tempted to point to Ahmadinejad as evidence that Iranian political leadership is irrational, the nature of Iran's theocracy is that all the key foreign policy decisions (particularly concerning nuclear negotiations) are the purview of Khamenei and his advisers.

As with all post-revolutionary governments, regime survival takes first priority. But the Iranian experiment is unique in that it represents the first modern example of a successful Islamic revolution. Though it is a peculiarly Shia Islamic revolution, its architects, for a while many non-Shia Muslims, looked beyond its Shi'ism. They saw Iran as the great exemplar for the broader Muslim community to usurp its corrupt and un-Islamic rulers; a leitmotif that Tehran continues with, even though the peak of its attraction was 30 years ago. The defence of the rights of all Muslims and support for the just struggles of the oppressed against the oppressors are constitutionally mandated elements of its foreign policy.

Despite extravagant claims by some, translating that philosophy into practical policy outcomes is difficult to do in the region, let alone internationally. While the notion of Persian exceptionalism may fuel Tehran's desires for a nuclear capability and greater influence, the notion that Persians are likely to be able to act as hegemon over the Arab world is rather far-fetched. Similarly, the thought that the

regional Shia minority will act as an Iranian vanguard/fifth column ignores the power that both nationalism and ethnicity have in determining people's loyalties.

There have been claims, for example, that Iran seeks to expand its influence among the Shia faithful through the promotion of its "man" as successor to Grand Ayatollah Sistani, the pre-eminent scholar of his day. This misreads the nature of the Shia faith. A single, undisputed spiritual head is rare and a multiplicity of sources of emulation (marja) is more normal. It also ignores the fact that a marja's greatest strength is his independence.

While closeness to Tehran may provide access to financial support, the resultant lack of independence makes him less attractive to the broader Shia community.

Iran's clerical leadership may seek to influence events far outside its borders, but the reality is that its ability to do so is limited. The leaders are an ethnic and sectarian minority in a largely Sunni Arab world. Their model of revolutionary Islamic government is unsuited to anyone else and their claims to provide support to the oppressed only ever appear to be carried out to further other Iranian foreign policy goals. Iran's theocratic leaders are not crazed ideologues; rather their opaque decision-making processes hide the fact that ultimately they are rational actors.

Rodger Shanahan is a non-resident fellow at the Lowy Institute for International Policy