

Iran, Like Some Here, Also Believes In Apocalyptic Myths.
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We live in a time of strange beliefs. The latest comes from Iran. Although a country with skyscrapers, metro subways, and nuclear aspirations, their leaders believe in sorcery. The conflict between obnoxious President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the \223Supreme Leader\224 Ayatollah Khamenei has now produced a spate of arrests; 25 people, associated with Ahmadinejad's Chief of Staff, Mashaei, have been accused of being \223magicians who evoke djinns\224 (evil spirits)-yes, like the ones who come out of bottles found on beaches.

They are accused of using \223supernatural powers\224 to further Ahmadinejad's policies. One of the arrested men, Abbas Ghaffari, was described as a man with special skills in metaphysics and connections with \223unknown worlds.\224 One hardline cleric, Ayatollah Yazdi, warned that disobeying the supreme leader - who has the ultimate power in Iran - is equivalent to "apostasy from God."

Ahmadinejad professes to believe a Shiite myth, the \223hidden imam\224 (the Mahdi), the sainted last descendent of the Prophet Mohammad's son-in-law, Ali, who \223disappeared\224 centuries ago and will come back to end the world. Ahmadinejad and his arrested colleagues say they have \223documentary evidence,\224 shown in a film, that the US is trying to prevent the return of the Mahdi. The Ayatollahs do not want Ahmadinejad to control the Mahdi legend, which has too much popular appeal to leave it for the uneducated without clerical control. They take seriously what we make fun of (the May 21 apocalypse that didn't happen).

It is difficult to determine who is worse in this story: the Ayatollah or the President. It appears that Ahmadinejad's faction is trying to rid itself of the clerical government altogether, and rule as a fascist dictatorship. The Ayatollah and his faction do not want to give up their dictatorial control, particularly because they can always condemn opponents as being \223against God.\224

Other issues are also roiling Iranian society. Along with beating down any dissident movements, such as those that followed the last fraudulent election, the government is using what demagogues always use (both there and here): cultural issues. What women wear and what they cover up or reveal is back on the front burner. But there is a new target for these fanatics: dogs as pets. A couple of years ago, the Ayatollah complained that men have pets and walk them in the park to attract girls. That complaint has now gone theological. Islam has an unaccountable loathing for dogs; there are now plans to forbid all dog ownership; confiscation is underway.

The Revolutionary Guard, begun as an alternate army loyal to the Ayatollahs, has become a major force in the country, accumulating wealth, demanding bribery, and threatening all who cross them. For the moment, they are loyal to the Ayatollah (not to the President); but one hears stories of internal stresses within this institution. There is already a generational split between the ignorant fathers and their now educated children.

The older Guards are fighting back. They are shutting down all humanities programs in the universities-literature, history, sociology, anthropology-for being in conflict with traditional values and Islam. These disciplines are considered an infiltration of \223western\224 ideas. (Isn't nuclear technology a western idea?)

It is amazing to see this once modernizing country under attack by leaders who are fanatical, ignorant, and violent. And lest one think this is some sort of true religious quarrel, consider how much of their ill-gotten money has gone abroad-mostly into Swiss banks. Even when the late Ayatollah Khomeini, author of the Islamic Revolution, had heart problems, he did not drink the ink dissolved from a page of the Koran, as he urged others; he brought in an Austrian heart surgeon.

As Iran grows more strapped for money, Ahmadinejad is cutting off subsidies of bread and fuel to the poor, who are beginning to demonstrate in front of government buildings. It is not the young and educated who can bring down a government in demonstrations; it is the merchants and labor unions, particularly the oil field labor unions.

Bombings and assassinations are going on all over Iran---perhaps the end game for the Islamic Revolution?

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