



A bathroom sign at Persepolis. Contrary to myth, the Islamic Republic mandates only that women wear a *manteau* and headscarf, not the *chador*.

AXEL SCHMIDT

The Islamic Republic's Failed Quest for the Spotless City

Azam Khatam

It is characteristic of modern social revolutions to seek moral improvement of the population, as well as redress of the injustices of the *ancien regime*. In 1794, Paris echoed with calls to “righteousness”; in 1917, the Bolsheviks denounced the bourgeois decadence of the czarist era. For Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and other clerical leaders, the Islamic Revolution of 1979 was not only a seizure of political power, but also the moment of revival of Islamic morality, which had been systematically weakened by the secular Pahlavi regime. The clerics set out to build in Iran “a spotless society.”¹

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Since its inception, the Islamic Republic has labored tirelessly to indoctrinate society with a state-sponsored Islamic ethical vision, through the education system, state-owned broadcast media, propaganda films known as “holy defense cinema” and a host of coercive measures. In 1980, the regime infamously launched a “cultural revolution” aimed at intellectual elites, closing the universities for three years, and reopening them only after extensive purges of the faculty, administration and student body.

But the lives of ordinary Iranians have been far more deeply affected by a parallel project, based on the Qur’anic verse “commanding what is just and forbidding what is

wrong" (*amr-e be ma'ruf va nahy-e az monkar*), a basic tenet of Islamic jurisprudence and a moral obligation for every Muslim. In most times and places in Islamic history, this formulation has been akin to the concept of "personal responsibility" propagated by social conservatives in the contemporary United States—an exhortation to industry, propriety and clean living that is, in the end, up to the individual to heed or ignore. Under the Islamic Republic, it was to be up to the state. For two decades, a special morality police rigidly enforced "Islamic" codes of behavior in the streets, workplaces and parks of Iranian cities.

By the end of the 1990s, it was clear that the morality police had lost its power to intimidate. Increasingly youthful and educated, Iranians came to make a clear distinction between Muslim religious identity and the claim that Islam is a basis for an alternative social and political order. And they would simply decide for themselves what was pious personal behavior and what was not. Sights that once incurred the wrath of the virtue squads—forelocks poking out from under women's headscarves, satellite dishes and weekend parties of young friends—were now regarded as ordinary aspects of life, especially in big cities like Tehran. Women, in particular, kept expanding the definition of the ordinary by dint of their actions, working outside the home, exercising in parks, walking the streets in colorful dress and running businesses in the male preserve of the bazaar.² Young people were not necessarily becoming secular. The same man might have a taste for Western music and for innovative hymns of mourning for the martyrdom of Imam Husayn; the same woman might have a keen interest in fashion and believe in a religious duty to cover her hair. Youth turned the occasion of Ashoura, when Shi'i Muslims commemorate the death of Husayn, into a mix of sacred ritual with provocative fashion, flirting and a festival atmosphere.

Conservative hardliners were resentful of the slippage in enforcement of their puritanical standards, a slippage they regarded as a betrayal of the revolution as well as an offense against Islam. Their presidential candidate in 2005, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, ran what has been called a campaign of "stealthy radicalism," pledging to restore moral rectitude by example and not by force. Once he was elected, of course, he cracked down. But the children of the revolution no longer fear or respect the cultural code that Ahmadinejad seeks to reimpose—and, indeed, they have defied it.

Revolutionary Piety

In April 1979, Khomeini ordered the Revolutionary Council to create a morality bureau (*dayereh amr-e be ma'ruf*) that would uproot corrupt pre-revolutionary cultural habits. Initially, this bureau may have held some populist appeal, in that Khomeini hinted it would be a

people's watchdog in the corridors of power. In a May 1979 speech, the ayatollah said: "The morality bureau will be independent of the state, so as to monitor it, and no one, not even the highest authorities, will be exempt from its supervision."³ Indeed, Article 8 of the Islamic Republic's constitution refers to *amr-e be ma'ruf*—the shorthand term for public morality—as a key basis of social relations and a mutual obligation of ordinary citizens and government. In practice, enforcement of *amr-e be ma'ruf* has been directed overwhelmingly at the citizenry—and in particular at women.

A morality police unit was established in Tehran in 1979. One of its first acts was to demolish the old red-light district of Tehran, removing 2,700 prostitutes.⁴ In the ensuing months, thousands of people were arrested for such "moral crimes" as extra-marital sexual relationships, alcohol consumption, gambling and pederasty, and hundreds were executed. More liberal Revolutionary Council members objected to the excesses, as well as the unaccountability of the morality bureau to the Council, and the Revolutionary Court briefly disbanded the bureau, citing unauthorized arrests and confiscation of personal wealth. The bureau was resurrected in 1981, this time as a special court for prosecuting cases of "prohibited activities." In the same year, the Islamic Republic mandated that women wear modest "Islamic" attire. (Contrary to persistent myth, the law in Iran has never required women to don the full *chador*, though they are strongly encouraged to do so. In practice, "Islamic" attire has meant a variety of manners of dress, typically a *manteau* covering the arms and a headscarf. The *chador* is enforced, however, in mosques, judiciary buildings and other public spaces, including on some university campuses.)

At first, the power of the morality court was absolute. Then, in 1982, the first Islamic penal law was ratified by Parliament. The law codified the prohibition of "non-Islamic" dress for women. Article 102 declared that women dressed "improperly" in public would receive up to 74 lashes, a penalty only softened in 1996, when it was changed to jail time or a fine. This clause of the penal law remains the only legal instrument for implementing *amr-e be ma'ruf*. With codification, the bureaucratic state sought not only to restrain judicial autonomy, but also to construct an Islamic identity through threat of sanction. In the 1980s, the state promoted a culture of self-sacrifice and obedience, and any resistance on the part of women to strictures upon dress was treated as counter-revolutionary treason. Even as the Iran-Iraq war raged, prominent conservative figures took the line that the struggle over moral issues should not take a back seat.⁵ Authoritarian enforcement of *amr-e be ma'ruf* created what Roxanne Varzi has called a "public secret,"⁶ by which many urbanites hid their "non-Islamic" beliefs and habits at home, while appearing to be properly Islamic in public.

The Post-War Era

In the late 1980s, morality policing entered a second phase with the formation of a new state "headquarters" (*setad*) for enforcing *amr-e be ma'ruf* and the return of thousands of Basiji (voluntary militia) activists from the war front. The Basiji, initially created to shield the Islamic Republic from internal security threats, was now assigned the role of ensuring that Islamic ethics were observed. Basiji checkpoints in the streets gradually turned to the task of imposing Islamic codes, peaking in 1993, when Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Khomeini's successor as Supreme Leader, espied a "cultural invasion" of Western, secular and counter-revolutionary influences. The state-owned press put the number of Basijis thus engaged at anywhere from 230,000 to 3.5 million.⁷

The target population was no longer the secular Iranians who had criticized the revolution in the 1980s, but the masses of urban middle-class youth who were born and raised under the Islamic Republic, and had supposedly eaten and breathed nothing but revolutionary Islamic ideals. Patrolling *setad* units harassed, humiliated and arrested young men and women in streets, workplaces, universities and other public places, accusing them of moral misconduct.

Meanwhile, the face of the capital was changing under Gholamhossein Karbaschi, the mayor from 1989 to 1998. In

the first half of the 1990s, Tehran witnessed an explosion of new construction, financed partly by the municipality, which levied steep new taxes on commercial developers, and partly by the developers, for whose benefit the city bent zoning laws.⁸ The number of parks doubled, and 74 new cultural centers appeared in less than five years.⁹ Meanwhile, the proliferation of shopping malls reflected the decline of revolutionary fervor, with its collective ideals, as individual consumerism took root. Eventually, the new urban policy became the focal point of a confrontation between the "reformist" figures associated with President Mohammad Khatami and traditional conservatives. Mayor Karbaschi's *Hamshabri*, the most popular newspaper at the time, endorsed Khatami's presidential run in 1997. The next year, he was tried and imprisoned on corruption charges related to the methods behind Tehran's urban renewal.

But the modernization and revitalization of Tehran's public spaces reflected powerful desires among city residents, desires that also hindered the implementation of *amr-e be ma'ruf*. The post-revolutionary technocratic elite, for instance, having made fortunes through political connections, wanted to indulge in conspicuous consumption. The generation of youths that had grown up under the Islamic Republic were highly frustrated by the limits imposed by scarce resources and exclusive policies upon their life chances. They understood the policies as an effort to marginalize those who were insufficiently "Islamic." Public opinion on cultural values began to fragment. The families of war martyrs, who tended to be of humbler origins, supported the fight to safeguard the moral promise of the revolution as well as their protected access to state-sponsored privileges. Meanwhile, the modern middle classes were eager to make a clean break with the "republic of piety."

The extension of *setad* activities into government offices and the provinces intensified official disagreements. Conservatives, raising the specter of cultural invasion, accused the more pragmatic Khatami camp of being indifferent to the ethical promise of the revolution. They mounted attacks in the press on Karbaschi's cultural centers in Tehran.

As minister of culture and Islamic guidance in 1992, Khatami ratified the Principles of Cultural Policy, which became the reformist charter for cultural reform. The charter advocates relatively tolerant policies and refers not at all to *amr-e be ma'ruf*. On the contrary, it calls for government institutions to restrict the selective imposition of severe religious views upon the public, for fear of negative social consequences. In 1999, an Islamic institute at Tehran University sponsoring research on *amr-e be ma'ruf* proposed that "the political system should avoid imposing on people too much ideological pressure, too many restrictive codes and too much propaganda based on religious principles."¹⁰

The ascendancy of the reformist bloc in Parliament, and



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Authorities begin a nationwide program to enforce "Islamic" dress codes, Tehran, April 23, 2007.

the associated intellectual and cultural ferment, effectively ended the second stage of moral policing in the name of *amr-e be ma'ruf*. From 1996 to 2005 the Basij checkpoints were fewer and further between, and the government told the *setad* it lacked legal authority for its indiscriminate patrols.¹¹ *Setad* authorities also lost their control over believers in faraway cities. The discourse of "cultural invasion" through communications technology and mass media was replaced by Khatami's talk of the "dialogue of civilizations." People expressed their will for cultural change through street celebrations, starting with the victory of the national soccer team over Australia in the 1997 World Cup qualifying match.

utilizing slogan for radical Islamist forces as the reformists' moment waned. Later, they used *amr-e be ma'ruf* to gain leverage in their political conflicts with reformists and even more pragmatic conservatives.

Conservatives took over Tehran's city council in 2003, Parliament in 2004 and the presidency in 2005. From their first move back into power, they upped the volume of their demands for aggressive policies to control public life, directing harsh criticisms at the laxity of the reformists to prepare society for the coming retrenchment in cultural policies. The judiciary announced another initiative to create a force responsible for policing "moral crimes" in November 2004.

These celebrations were a cultural turning point, since such "non-Islamic" emotions of jubilation had not been expressed in public since the revolution."

Yet the hardliners did not simply acquiesce in their marginalization. Renegade "operational teams" of the *setad* meted out "Islamic punishment," as with the serial killings of women accused of being prostitutes in Mashhad and Kerman in 2002 and 2003.

The New Puritanism

In 2003, even as many conservatives in Parliament dropped revolutionary-era rhetoric in recognition that Iranian society has changed, the hardliners consolidated themselves in a coalition of more than 18 groups, some of which had been active since the 1990s, and others of which were new associations organized by clerics and officials. Although the coalition had ties to traditional conservatives in the bazaar and among clergy in Qom and Tehran, it aimed primarily to give voice to the less privileged among Islamist ranks, including the radicals marginalized under Khatami and the urban low-income strata.¹² The hardliners turned *amr-e be ma'ruf* into a mobi-

Committees answering the force's national command were to be formed in each mosque, neighborhood, factory, school and government office, with the task of implementing *amr-e be ma'ruf*. Several clergymen, including teachers in the Qom seminaries responsible for training judges since the revolution, mildly protested the idea of placing such a body under judicial supervision.¹³ Independent lawyers also pointed to the clear conflict of interest, as well as the lack of parliamentary approval for the plan.¹⁴

As the 2005 presidential campaign got underway, the leader of the hardline coalition, Ahmadinejad, promised his followers a new age of economic justice and Islamic piety. The two components of his populist platform were harmonious, even if they aimed at different political targets. With his denunciations of corruption and promises to put the fruits of oil wealth on the humblest of dinner tables, Ahmadinejad cast himself in subtle, but clear opposition to Islamist power brokers such as former President Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, a founder of the Islamic Republic who wound up as his rival in the presidential runoff. At the same time, he stoked resentment of the reformists among the more ideological sectors of his base, such as war martyrs' families and Basiji families, by decrying reformist disregard for *amr-e be ma'ruf* and vowing as well to crack down on conspicuous consumption. The 2005 presidential election

was the first since the revolution in which candidates felt compelled to declaim a "mild" position on veiling. Wary of being labeled a fundamentalist, Ahmadinejad promised that he would not "interfere with the choice of hairstyle of young people." But after he won, and all the branches of government were back in conservative hands, the conservatives resumed attempts to discipline public behavior with the language of *amr-e be ma'ruf*.

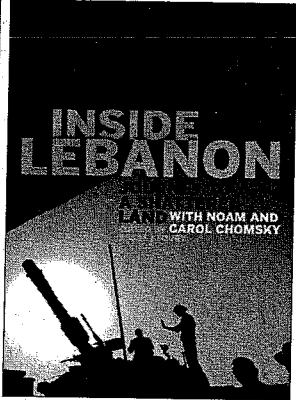
In May 2005, Tehran's conservative city council called in the police commander and blasted him for excessive tolerance of "inappropriately veiled" women in public. A few days later, special morality patrols reappeared in the streets, for the first time employing women officers.¹⁵ In August of that year, the arch-conservative newspaper *Keyhan* demanded that the government step up its efforts to enforce *amr-e be ma'ruf*: "Why do secular states expend such great effort to protect their youth from moral decadence while our Islamic state is painfully indifferent and silent toward the degradation of ethics among our youth?"¹⁶

The same month, the city council ratified a document called "Strategies to Extend Piety," mandating still more bureaucratic organs, including a coordination committee drawn from various ministries and executive bodies, that would cooperate with police to punish violators of "moral codes." By the spring of 2006, the morality police were once again ubiquitous, arresting or intimidating young women and men for their dress and conduct, confiscating satellite dishes and punishing shopkeepers who were selling "inappropriate" articles of clothing. At the same time, several cultural institutes formed during the reformist period were closed. Others were severely restricted; the budgets of cultural centers in Tehran were cut by half, while more funding was provided to religious institutions.

Within the conservative coalition, there were disagreements over *amr-e be ma'ruf*. The director of the parliamentary cultural commission mounted what he called a "fundamentalist critique of fundamentalism," pointing to the inefficacy of past attempts to police morality. Another conservative said enforcement efforts should be "soft, not hard." As conservative intellectuals left the coalition in protest of the morality campaign, more power accrued to the radicals.

In the spring of 2007, the most extreme conservatives in the Tehran courts designed a "public safety program" (*tarh-e amniat-e ejtema'i*) aimed at allaying public fears about increased consumption of drugs, thuggish behavior among youth, rape and burglary—but also at enforcing *amr-e be ma'ruf*. As it was nominally a normal anti-crime initiative, the program was assigned to the regular municipal police by the president. The move was in keeping with Ahmadinejad's "stealthy radicalism" during the campaign, for he sought to assure Tehranis that the regular police, not the notorious Basij, would be the enforcers. As a police commander told the Fars News Agency, "We didn't use Basij forces, because we assumed there would be more resistance from the people."

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The Basij, however, criticized police for their “mild” methods. By August, the Basij had been invited to take over operations targeting drug dealers and gangs of robbers. Basij commanders, embedded in the state bureaucracy, used the chance to proclaim themselves the saviors of political stability of the Islamic Republic in the cities. They inveighed against a “cultural NATO” and a “conspiracy of foreign forces” seeking to overthrow the Islamic Republic through the propagation of “non-Islamic” behavior among youth and women. The mix of cooperation and competition between the Basij and police ended in a kind of military occupation of cities in the spring of 2008. Patrols criss-crossed each of Tehran’s 23 main thoroughfares, where confrontations between police and citizens over “moral issues” were a daily occurrence.

The fresh campaign was vicious in its treatment of young people dressed in “non-Islamic” fashion and its harassment of alleged *arazel va obash*, a derogatory phrase meaning drug dealers, addicts and thieves. In the first four months, nearly 1 million people were publicly humiliated, or “instructed,” in the streets and 40,000 were arrested. Of those detained in 2007, 85 percent were youths aged 16 to 26, and 10 percent were accused drug dealers and thieves, 35 of whom were executed within a month of their arrest. Reports on the program’s progress were released to the press as a warning to all. Investigative reporters revealed that an “instruction” center for addicts in Kahrizak, on the southern fringe of Tehran, was turned into a temporary prison, where “criminals” were severely tortured for one or two months, without trial, to terrorize them prior to their release.

This new puritanism disguised as a “public safety program” lifted the most fanatical elements of the hardline conservative firmament to the commanding heights of cultural policy-making in the Islamic Republic, and turned *amr-e be ma’ruf* into a major challenge for the government, at a time when it already faces crises in economic and international policy. Human rights lawyers and activist women started a round of protests against the “public safety program” in 2007. The feminist website Meydan Zanan took the initiative, publishing news of street demonstrations, human rights activities and government debates on the issue. At the same time 20 independent lawyers filed a complaint against police with the highest court with jurisdiction over government agencies, claiming that the “public safety program” is illegal because it is not included in routine police tasks and it lacks parliamentary sanction. One year later, the court rendered its verdict that “there is no sanction or legal requirement” for the “public safety program.” In the summer of 2008, the main independent student organization, Tahkim Vahdat, initiated a series of public meetings on “violations of human rights by the public safety program” in Tehran and other cities. In most of these activities, there was reference to principles of human rights and the protections of personal freedom outlined in the constitution.¹⁷

In late January 2009, the new minister of interior and the deputy police commander suggested that the “public safety

program” violates the citizenship rights of the people.¹⁸ Regular police patrols have decreased markedly in the streets of the capital. At the same time, Basij commanders and others among the arch-conservatives dream of institutionalizing the agencies enforcing *amr-e be ma’ruf* as a separate ministry¹⁹ and of making *amr-e be ma’ruf* the basis of the penal system. Already, toward the end of 2008, the Basij had declared that its enforcement activities would intensify in redress of the “retreat” of the municipal police.²⁰ The failure of the “public safety program” is another piece of evidence for the proposition that present-day Iran is de facto a post-Islamist society, a place “where, following a phase of experimentation, the appeal, energy and sources of legitimacy of Islamism get exhausted even among its once ardent supporters.”²¹ During the 2005 presidential campaign, Elahe Kolaei, spokeswoman for the reformist candidate Mostafa Moin, referred passingly to his opposition to mandatory veiling. In January 2009, the Coalition of Nationalist Religious Parties, a collection of liberals and social democrats with active “Islamist feminists” among its members, has published a statement calling for the “remedy of discrimination everywhere” and asking that obligatory veiling be abandoned. This is the first time since the consolidation of the Islamic Republic that a political party has taken this step. The events of early 2009 mark both the end of the third phase of the attempts of the state to impose *amr-e be ma’ruf* upon an increasingly recalcitrant population and an unprecedented degree of political fragmentation within the power centers of the Islamic Republic. ■

Endnotes

- 1 *Keyhan*, December 12, 1981.
- 2 See Asef Bayat, “A Women’s Non-Movement: What It Means To Be a Woman Activist in an Islamic State,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27/1 (2007).
- 3 *Ettelaat*, April 4, 1979.
- 4 *Ettelaat*, February 20, 1980.
- 5 *Ettelaat*, April 21, 1986.
- 6 Roxanne Varzi, *Warring Souls* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).
- 7 The lower number appeared in *Keyhan*, November 11, 1995, and the higher number in *Ettelaat*, February 5, 1997.
- 8 For details, see Kaveh Ehsani, “Municipal Matters: The Urbanization of Consciousness and Political Change in Tehran,” *Middle East Report* 212 (Fall 1999).
- 9 *Yas-e No*, November 22, 2003.
- 10 Jahad Daneshgahi, *A Study on the Conditions of Revitalization of the Tradition of Commanding the Just and Forbidding the Wrong*, (1999), p. 138. [Persian]
- 11 *Sharq*, September 8, 2003.
- 12 See Mohammad Maljoo, “Political Economy of the Rise of Ahmadinejad’s Government,” *Goft-o-gu* 49 (August 2007). [Persian]
- 13 See, for example, Laila Asadi, “On Legal Aspects of Veiling in Iran,” a paper published by the research section of the Hozeh Elmieh Qom, and accessible online at <http://www.porsojoo.com/fa/node/73527>. [Persian]
- 14 *Afshar Yazd*, December 12, 2004.
- 15 *Hamehan*, June 14, 2005.
- 16 *Keyhan*, August 14, 2005.
- 17 For more on the protest campaign, see the Meydan Zanan website at <http://meydaan.org/campaign.aspx?cid=55>. [Persian]
- 18 *Etemad*, January 29, 2009.
- 19 *Iran*, February 5, 2009.
- 20 *Etemad*, December 16, 2008.
- 21 See Asef Bayat, “What Is Post-Islamism?” *ISIM Review* 16 (Autumn 2005).