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Culture and Diplomacy

Last November the White House and the United States Department of State held a conference on culture and diplomacy, in order to discuss with diplomats and cultural figures from around the world problems such as maintaining cultural diversity in the era of globalization and making sure that the United States is represented not only by its most commercial forms of culture. The conference acknowledged what has become increasingly clear in recent years: that, after the end of the cold war, culture is becoming a serious foreign policy question. Nations no longer worry so much about missile gaps, troop numbers, arms deployments, and the concerns that dominated a world divided into two great military blocs. Now, the tensions and conflicts between countries are expressed in more indirect ways: differing attitudes toward globalization, trade agreements, domestic film content, genetically modified food, immigration, and the rights of linguistic and ethnic minorities. U.S. ambassadors in countries such as France are no longer called on to justify the latest NATO weapons system but to argue that globalization is not synonymous with American cultural hegemony.

The cold war masked a host of regional and ethnic tensions—between Orthodox, Catholics, and Muslims in the former Yugoslavia but also between the North and South of Italy; and the cultural and political autonomy of groups such as the Catalans and Basques of Spain, the Scots and Welsh in England, the Corsicans and Bretons in France (to name only a few) have become political questions of the first order. A number of the pieces in this issue of *Correspondence* deal with the ramifications of this reality. As Denis Lacorne explains in our opening article, France's decision to grant limited autonomy to Corsica involves redefining the nature of the French Republic—which has served as the archetype of the highly centralized European nation-state.

The transformation of Europe from a land of emigration to one of immigration has forced many countries to reconsider the issues of national identity and multiculturalism and led some German politicians to call for a *Leitkultur*—a dominant national culture that foreign immigrants should adapt to. In Italy, the question of national unity was reopened by the Catholic Church's beatification of Pope Pius IX—the nineteenth-century pope who defended the Vatican's temporal realm and opposed the movement for Italian unification. In Greece, the Orthodox Church seized an equally public role by opposing the elimination of religious affiliation from the Greek national identity card—a symptom of public unease in Greece over losing its particular identity in a more homogenous united Europe.

The borderless electronic technology of the information age weakens the control of central government, as is clear in Jon Alterman's piece about the Arab press, many of whose outlets are produced in London and beamed by satellite into the Middle East. And in China, the government has grudgingly accepted the gaze of foreign media as an unavoidable reality, causing it to change the name of what was the Ministry of Propaganda into the Ministry of Publicity. The French government has become embroiled with the Mormon church over its vast genealogy Website, which houses the records of some 400 million dead souls. While the French government allowed the Church of Latter-Day Saints to copy its records, it never imagined they would end up on the Internet, where family

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Iran's Quiet Revolt

The news from Iran is contradictory. At times raising hopes, at times threatening, or simply capturing terror in stark news-agency sentences, it always seems to focus on a power struggle between so-called reformers and conservatives. This impression is not wrong, but the clash between various high-level factions of the state is merely the outward sign of a larger societal conflict. On one side stands an ever-growing majority of those weary of ideologically legitimized regimentation; on the other, a minority that feels obliged to defend an existing order it considers sacrosanct.

The rift, opened long before the political reform process began in 1997 with the election of President Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, extends into almost every area of Iranian society. It is visible in the business world, with its emerging economic and technological elite, who view the world differently than the traditional bazaar merchants. It divides the women who withdraw obediently into private life from the many who respond to official inequality with all the more resolution to determine their own lives. The rift passes between the generations and through many families in which children do not understand why their parents were once prepared to die for this system, and parents are shocked that their children so facilely dismiss what they won at such great sacrifice. But the conflict is harshest and most palpable where an Islamic republic has its center: within the clergy.

In the ambitious religious-philosophical periodicals, in the colleges and universities, and especially in the theological seminaries, discussions began in the early 1990s that later reached public forums and the highest-circulation daily newspapers. Their aim was a change that would once again separate politics from religion and legitimate the authority of the head of state through the people alone, not through God. Almost all the spokesmen of this debate, like the clergyman Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari or Abdolkarim Soroush, the philosopher and theologian the Guardian Council barred from teaching, say the decline of religiosity since the Islamic Revolution is one of the essential reasons to secularize the state. If Islam is identified with the state, then it will be held responsible for every injustice the state creates. They say the results are atheism, the loss of moral values, and ubiquitous religious hypocrisy and open intolerance. They analyze the ideologization of Islam, to which they themselves contributed, as a misunderstanding that arose in response to the Pahlavi dynasty's forced and superficial efforts to modernize the country. Soroush, unlike many of his colleagues and students, still espouses a "religious government," yet he means something very similar to what European Christian Democrats desire. In his eyes, a government is already Islamic if it feels bound by a general Islamic

ethics and respects society's religious feelings. He does not see why it must be led by clergymen or base policy consistently on religious sources. He does not think Islam has answers to every question of human and societal practice. This is what distinguishes Soroush, his fellow religious intellectuals, and many other clergymen in present-day Iran from earlier reform thinkers: The latter defended democracy or compliance with human rights through Islamic sources. But Soroush rejects the need to refer always to Islam to espouse democracy and human rights; consulting society and one's own reason is enough. He has thus shed one of the basic difficulties of Muslim reform thinking: The previous generation felt obliged to keep interpreting religious source texts that contradict today's conceptions of human rights and a modern society until the contradiction dissolved. Soroush accepts the contradiction as given, but deems it irrelevant, since it does not go to the heart of religion.

A strict theocratic model of the state cannot last in Iran chiefly because it has lost its hold in society. At the beginning of the 1980s, Khomeinism had strong, though not unlimited, support in the centers of Shi'ite popular piety—the small and medium-sized cities, the bazaar, and the poorer quarters of the big cities. These are the places where Western photographers find the only motifs that seem to interest them: women in chador and bearded men. The urban middle and upper classes and much of the rural population, whose religiosity is heterogeneous and often only rudimentary, always felt alien to Khomeini's ideology. The first group may be called Westernized, the second tied to local traditions, but the stance they share toward religion is eminently secular: most consider Islam a private matter, not a guideline for politics or source for state law. Which is why the rural population never and the bourgeoisie only initially took part in the shaping of a political will in the Islamic Republic. They neither support the system nor threaten it.

But during the 1990s it became ever more apparent that even those segments of the population whose loyalty was the foundation of the Islamic Republic had long since turned away in droves from their own political elite. The reasons were varied: the trauma of the first Gulf War, the economic crisis, the constant political oppression, the mismanagement and corruptibility of many officials, and the unstoppable flow of information and cultural commodities from abroad. The shift in values is most conspicuous among the sons and daughters of the former revolutionary masses. Often, Madonna speaks more clearly to them than Khomeini, and the rules of the European Soccer Champions League are more familiar than the Shi'ite mourning rituals. Meanwhile, the debate that began in the universities, seminaries, and philosophical journals on the relationship



between the state and religion stimulated calls for democracy, adherence to human rights, and a civil society. After Mohammad Khatami's election victory, that debate was not simply continued, nor its theses on secularizing Iran merely made more concrete. Most decisively, it reached the broad public, in newly founded, reform-oriented newspapers that printed and distributed articles critical of the Islamic Republic's ideology, in print-runs in the hundreds of thousands.

All important reform-oriented newspapers have since been banned, however, and many journalists, intellectuals, clergy, and student leaders been arrested. But once publicly formulated on a mass scale, the call to de-ideologize religion can no longer be suppressed. Whatever the outcomes of skirmishes in the political arena, the ancien régime has thus long since lost, even if it still insists—with a violence not merely metaphorical—that it still has a chance. It has lost because the majority of society have, in their thoughts, put far behind them the patronization, the mixing of politics and religion, and every ideological foundation for the public sphere. The forces of reform in politics are responding to, not initiating, this change. Because the West often perceives this causality backwards, the reform process, which began before Khatami's election, was first overlooked, then for far too long regarded as hopeless, and then declared dead whenever the president stumbled: when intellectuals were murdered in the fall of 1998, after the student protests were put down in the summer of 1999, or when all critical dailies were closed in the spring and summer of 2000. A society changes more slowly than a government can be voted out or a political system revolutionized, yet that change is irreversible.

There were always secularists in Iran; throughout the Islamic Revolution, the bourgeoisie, including its intellectuals, always saw religion as a private matter. But their secular perception cannot be taken for granted among the thinkers, theologians, and politicians currently speaking out. These people often come from thoroughly traditional segments of society, and did not adopt Western theses or vocabulary; and this is something very special in today's Islamic world. In contrast to the Arab countries, where religious but secularly educated intellectuals like Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid and Mohammad Shahrur stand for a new, progressive interpretation of the Koran, the reformation of religious thought in Iran is occurring also and even primarily among the clergy itself. The Islam emerging in some of the country's theological colleges and universities and widespread precisely among seminarians and young theologians is the result of a mental and historical development that could hardly have been more brutal, rapid, and deep. It is a genuine product of Iran's own culture, and the collective experience of its own society. This lends it staying power, substance, and an intellectual incisiveness conceivable in very few countries of the Islamic world. Iranian society is thus catching up with the intellectual change that colonialism and the Western-oriented dictators neglected and perhaps even prevented in their zeal for modernization. Such a societal learning process would be something to cheer, if the human, political, and social sacrifices it has cost and still costs the country were not so immense, or prospects for peaceful change so uncertain. ♦

—Navid Kermani (translated from German by Mitchell Cohen)

No One Writes But the Colonel

Mario Vargas Llosa's latest novel, *La Fiesta del Chivo* [The Goat's Party] is a powerful, detailed fictional portrait of Dominican Republic dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo. Though focusing on his last years in power, Vargas Llosa masterfully catalogues the oppression that characterized most of his thirty-year rule, which hinged on his obsessive, total control of information. Newspapers, radio stations, and publishing houses were not only owned by the Trujillo family, but also run by the dictator's most trusted allies. His long hand extended even to the work of foreign correspondents. On July 17, 1959, Ramón Marrero Aristy, a well-known historian, former editor of the daily *La Nación*, and then Minister of Labor, "accidentally" died in a car crash. Shortly before, negative articles about Trujillo were published by a *New York Times* journalist Aristy was assigned to "guide" over the island. A story now only fit for historical fiction? Unfortunately not. Censorship in Latin America, if it ever ended, seems to be making a comeback.

In March 2000 the Inter-American Press Association's reported a rise in press censorship across Latin America. The Committee to Protect Journalists, Index on Censorship, The Digital Freedom Network, Freedom House, and Human Rights Watch concur with the IAPA's assessment that freedom of speech is being curtailed to varying but increasing degrees, not only in such usual censorship hotspots as Colombia or Peru, but such purportedly thriving democracies as Chile or Venezuela. These cases are the more remarkable because they seem to represent islands of constraint in an otherwise open sea of political debate. Censorship in these societies can be attributed to the disparate pace of political change, which either preserves vestiges from a bygone, less democratic era, or foretells trouble to come.

The former appears to be the case in Chile, where Article 6b of the State Security Law, enacted in 1958, makes "defamation, libel, or calumny" of government officials punishable by up to five years in jail. Still in force, this law was recently applied to charge and convict journalists and writers. Human Rights Watch has documented the cases of twenty-five people charged under it since the country's transition to democracy in 1990. The most dramatic of these cases, filed only last year, led to the banning of *El Libro Negro de la Justicia Chilena* [The Black Book of Chilean Justice], and the forced exile of its author, Chilean journalist Alejandra Matus. The moment the book appeared, on April 13, 1999, Supreme Court Justice Servando Jordán filed a personal libel charge against it. The very next day, Judge Rafael Huerta of the Santiago High Court ordered police seizure of all remaining copies and Matus's arrest. On her lawyer's advice, Matus fled to Argentina, hoping to return on dismissal of the charges — which never came. The book remains banned in Chile, and the charges are still pending against her.

The libel law, in its widest application, metes out strict punishment not only to authors, but anyone connected with an