

Mideast expert dissects Iran's crisis

By Sally Teale



Saikal described how Khamenei and Ahmadinejad have used their positions to marginalise and neutralise their factional opponents. Saikal believes that Ahmadinejad's inflammatory comments about the Holocaust and his verbal assaults on Israel were designed to convince the US to maintain sanctions on Iran, which would then unite the Iranian public in favour of the leadership against the outside threat from the US and its allies. In reality, Saikal explained, the Iranian public is far from united. Instead, it is polarised along the same factional lines as the political elite. The urban poor and those in rural areas are strong supporters of Khamenei and Ahmadinejad, while the Iranian youth and residents of the major cities and towns back the reformers.

Amin Saikal, Political Science Professor and Director of the Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies (the Middle East and Central Asia) at the Australian National University, shed light on the Iranian political system and its key players at a Castan Centre lecture in February. Saikal also outlined the underlying issues that led to the outbreak of violence following the 2009 elections.

Saikal's lecture was entitled, "Iran: Between the Sovereignty of God and the Sovereignty of People", a description that sums up the Iranian political system. As Saikal explained, the Iranian Constitution establishes a two-tiered system, one tier representing "the sovereignty of God" through the Supreme Leader and the Guardian Council, and the other tier representing the people through the popularly-elected President and National Assembly (Iranian Parliament). The Supreme Leader and Guardian Council are responsible for ensuring that all affairs of the state conform with Shia Islam.

The two-tiered system was the vision of Ayatollah Khomeini, leader of the Iranian Revolution of 1978/79. According to Saikal, Khomeini's aim was to create an Islamic political system that would "empower the dispossessed against the privileged". The two tiers of government were to work interdependently, using a creative interpretation of Islam that would be flexible in a changing international order.

Saikal went on to outline how, in the mid 1980s, factions emerged within the ruling elite. The three factions were the conservatives, the reformists and the pragmatists. Saikal stressed that, until recently, these factions often worked together on state affairs. Membership of the factions was fluid and individuals often moved between them. Factionalism gained potency, Saikal explained, when Mahmoud Ahmadinejad came to power. Ahmadinejad is a conservative, as is Khamenei, the Supreme Leader. Ahmadinejad's election tipped the balance between the two tiers of government in favour of the conservatives.

The factions and the divided public, Saikal explained, were key factors in the 2009 presidential elections and the violence that followed. According to Saikal, the 2009 elections split the ruling clerics, as the reformist clerics had openly backed opposition candidate, Mir Hossein Mousavi, believing that he would win. The opposition believes the elections were corrupt, and this view was enhanced by Supreme Leader, Khamenei, openly supporting Ahmadinejad's re-election as a "blessing from God" before the election results had been officially declared by the Guardian Council. Saikal pointed out that the Supreme Leader and Ahmadinejad have used the cover of Islam to suppress the opposition, and by doing this have destabilised the political system. Saikal believes that Khamenei has become an autocrat like the Shah, and that Iran could be set for another upheaval to restore balance between the religious and political dimensions of the system. In Saikal's view, Khamenei's misuse of his position to gain more power and to attack his critics has made the role of Supreme Leader superfluous, prompting Iran to revert to a single-tier system of government with only a popularly elected leader. However, this is still a long way off, Saikal explained, as there are currently too many vested interests in the two-tiered system.

Saikal finished his lecture by offering some advice to the international community, particularly the USA. He said it should remain vigilant about Iran, but engage the leadership in ways that help resolve the crisis. Above all, Saikal stressed, the international community must not pressure Iran, instead it must use tact, patience, perseverance and fortitude. The key question, Saikal put to the audience, was whether the international community has the time to wait.

Audio recording of Professor Saikal's lecture can be found at: www.law.monash.edu.au/castancentre/events/2010/saikal-lecture.html