

Report

The Political Exploitation of Ashura in Iran

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Majma'-e rowhāniyūn-e mobārez (The Association of Combatant Clerics) in Iran issued a statement following a meeting on the eve of Muharram, August 10, 2021, urging the “preservation of the traditions of Ahl al-Bayt (the household of the Prophet), protecting it from superstitions and saving the lives of people.” The statement also called for not allowing a small group - whether due to their ignorance of the Quran and the narratives of the infallible imams or because of their aim to exploit religion and Ashura — to force the people to commit acts that distort Islam, Shiism and the image of Iran before the world.

In addition, the association’s statement called for making it clear, apart from taqiya (lies because of fear and caution) and obscurantism, that protecting the lives of the people is more sublime than any “[favored practice](#).” The striking aspect of the statement is that the association called on clerics and lovers of Ahl al-Bayt to protect the “[enlightened path](#) of the Prophet and the (infallible) imams.”

It is worth mentioning that the Association of Combatant Clerics is linked with the “reformists,” while [the Combatant Clergy Association](#) is linked with the “conservatives.” When reviewing thoroughly the statement of the Association of Combatant Clerics, we find that it addresses two major orientations. First, it sheds light on the ritual current, which has centralized and expanded shrine-related rites and encouraged people to practice them, until they broke from the inherited traditions in addition to violating the Shiite religious narratives and texts.

This orientation is led by the Shirazi movement. The statement reminds people of the sublime purpose of protecting souls, which is one of the overall principles and primary purposes of Sharia.

This is because, according to the statement, “Some people suffer death, wounds and pain due to beating with chains, walking on fire, flagellation and the other forms of devised practices. People must be informed that protecting their lives is more sublime than any favored practice.”

The second orientation that the statement addresses is the current close to the political system in Iran which does not want to decisively stand up against such practices, whether by banning or legalizing these rituals. It prioritizes its sectarian legitimacy among the people over the interests of religion and sect and over the image of Iran.

In addition to political gains, there are other material interests that prevent the current from decisively clashing with those promoting the aforementioned extreme practices.

Support or Opposition to the Politicization of Rituals

There is a long history of extremist Shiite rituals on the day of Ashura and major transformations have taken place in Shiite seminaries regarding these rituals. These transformations sparked concerns among seminary clerics. Some Shiite jurists, such as those aligned with the “reformist” seminary like Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah (1935-2010), said that extreme rituals **have no grounds** in Shiite law. He also shed light on what he called the “dangerous shift which occurred due to some clerics supporting extreme rituals to the extent that they said these rituals are favored acts to boost the spread of Shiism and expand **the sect**.” According to Fadlallah’s viewpoint, this support led to gross violations and transformations. Seemingly addressing Khamenei who rendered lawful extreme rituals— as the coming lines will illustrate — he said that some ordinary Iranians beat their backs with chains and some of them walk on fire or **throw themselves into it**.

According to Morteza Motahhari (1919-1979), it seems that there are some national and ethnic factors and doctrinal deviations that led to such extremism in Iranian ritual practices. He scathingly [said](#), “One of the factors that led us, the Iranians, to be so indifferent and shirk responsibility is the deviant interpretation of the uprising of Imam Hussein.” He also touched on the emergence of the Shiite Murji’tes (those who postpone) who support extreme ritual practices claiming that they are a means to salvation in the hereafter.

It is striking that the political system renders some of the rituals of Ashura unlawful such as tatbir (a bloody ritual in which people beat their heads with a dagger). Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei issued a fatwa rendering tatbir unlawful and [banning it](#). “Thinking of additional religious rituals in conjunction with superstition and committing irrational acts in the name of mourning and commemorating Ashura Day do not serve [the cause of Imam Hussein](#),” Khamenei said in a speech.

However, at the same time, Khamenei’s reason behind making extreme rituals unlawful is not because they are heretical or violate the fundamental principles of the sect or because they came to light during the Buyid, Safavid or Qajar dynasties that introduced rituals related to the mourning of Imam Hussein to boost their religious and political legitimacy. For Khamenei — unlike “reformist” clerics whose main reason for opposing these rituals is the lack of proof that such practices had been committed by the credible imams, as stated by Hussein Fadlallah — the real reason is that these rituals “weaken the rightful sect” and “distort the Shiite sect.”

Khamenei, however, renders lawful beating one’s body and back with chains and does not consider this a practice that makes the

Shiite sect appear powerless. “As long as it is some sort of displaying of sorrow and grief during mourning, then **there is nothing wrong with it**” — although beating one’s body with chains is as harmful as tatbir (flagellation).

Tatbir involves hitting one’s head with blunt instruments such as swords, knives, chains, and brake cables until blood gushes forth. Fatwas like Khamenei’s are part of the politicization and counter-politicization of Ashura ritual acts. For instance, pro-Velayat-e Faqih loyalists never hesitate to politicize the revolution of Imam Hussein. Moreover, they sometimes use leftist and modernist terminology such as “the Imam Hussein uprising,” “arrogant powers and the oppressed,” “countering rulers” and so on, attributing all these phrases to the revolt of Imam Hussein.

During a speech delivered on Ashura, Khamenei said, “They tell us that you spread mourning, funeral ceremonies, weeping and tears among the people. Funeral ceremonies and flowing tears are not merely an expression of grief and weeping but they are values. Behind all these consolation ceremonies, slapping of faces and chests and shedding tears are the dearest and most precious things that may contain all the treasures of humanity. They are **heavenly** spiritual values.” In a blatant expression of politicization, he said, “Hussein ibn Ali revolted to bring to their knees all the insolent rulers and sultans who displayed contempt for the Islamic, human and **heavenly values.**”

Haidar Hob Allah disagrees with the contemporary narratives adopted by pro-Velayat-e Faqih loyalists. He argues that they were developed since the 1979 revolution. Thus, the Imam Hussein uprising has been adopted from a political perspective, which is consistent with the purposes and objectives that contradict oth-

er interpretations of the [Imam Hussein uprising](#) which are more suitable and befitting in the present context and time.

This disagreement was not limited to Iran but extended across the Shiite world. During Muharram every year, differences between supporters of Hezbollah and the Amal Movement arise due to tatbir. Hezbollah, in line with Khamenei's position, bans tatbir unlike the Amal Movement, which encourages people to practice it.

Political competition is another important factor in the disagreement. Each of the two sides wants to impose its own official interpretation and flex its political muscles before the public. Hezbollah wants to strengthen the marjaya of Velayat-e Faqih among Lebanese Shiites. The Amal Movement also has its own marjaya that does not agree with that of Velayat-e Faqih. The differences between them are not limited to ideological aspects, but they also extend to political and [economic](#) issues.

As political and sectarian competition and polarization mount, Hezbollah [immediately dismisses](#) any of its members who practice tatbir. Therefore, it seems that the position of pro-Velayat-e Faqih loyalists (both inside and outside Iran) on tatbir is a political one. Furthermore, the policy of rendering tatbir unlawful is based more on politics rather than on a precise reading of the fundamentals of Shiite jurisprudence.

Hezbollah — adopting the pro-Velayat-e Faqih interpretations regarding rituals — is countering the Amal Movement in Lebanon while other pro-Velayat-e Faqih loyalists inside Iran and Iraq counter their rivals and foes, especially the Shirazi Movement which adopts extreme rituals and promotes them to be among [the fundamentals of the sect](#) and a formula for distinguishing themselves from [ordinary Muslims](#). his Shirazi populist interpre-

tation has gained ground within the Shiite community, even inside Iran, though the Shirazis do not believe in Velayat-e Faqih and accuse the Iranian political system of rendering tatbir unlawful for political purposes.

This Shirazi discourse is a source of concern for the Iranian political system. It fears that this discourse will spill over, influencing incubators of taqlid (source of emulation). Thus, such fatwas and counter-fatwas should be understood in the aforementioned context. This is not a new position by [the Shirazis](#) under the leadership of marja Sadiq al-Shirazi. It is rather a strategic position that has been espoused by the movement since the leadership of [Mohammad Mahdi Shirazi](#), Sadiq's elder brother.

As for the position of the Najaf Marjaya in light of this standoff, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani has espoused a position in the middle – he has not rendered tatbir lawful or unlawful. This is because of the prolonged spat with the marjayas in Najaf over the issue of tatbir, a dispute that dates back to the [1930s](#).

Iranian “reformists,” unlike the political system and “conservatives” who criticize some of these ritual practices, reject all extreme practices. Moreover, the “reformists” call for adopting a relational perspective regarding interpretation for the whole sect. Yet, the “conservatives” are still clinging to the literary, text-centered and traditional interpretation and refuse to adopt a rational interpretation or back down from their positions on some issues — not even for the sake of the supreme interest of Muslim unity.

History of Political Exploitation

The political exploitation of the death of Imam Hussein has been going on for quite a long time. Under the Buyid dynasty, Hussein rituals were formalized. People were ordered to practice these rituals on the streets, provoking extensive sectarian tension af-

ter the Buyids entrenched their rule over the Shiite sect. Afterwards, the Safavids were keen to institutionalize the Hussein rituals and to strengthen the home front and mobilize it along sectarian lines against the external enemy, the Ottomans, and the domestic enemy, opponents such as the Kizilbashis and others. The Safavids deemed themselves as the protectors or guardians of the Shiite sect. The Safavid rulers participated with the people in the consolation ceremonies marking the death of Imam Hussein. Later, the Qajars placed a tremendous focus on the Hussein rituals to enhance their sectarian legitimacy among the people. They also cared for the shrines of Ahl al-Bayt in Iraq and across Iran, which had a major positive impact on the public's affection towards the Qajars.

The political employment of Ashura rituals reached its peak when Nasser al-Din Shah Qajar visited Karbala and stood beside Imam Hussein's shrine. He **said**, "On Ashura Day, Imam Hussein shouted 'is there anyone who could support me?' Your supporter has come. He came to you to support you."

This politicization nearly vanished during the Pahlavi dynasty due to secularization and the revival of Persian nationalism. However, the political exploitation of Hussein rituals resurged strongly after the 1979 revolution. The religious elites sought to coat the revolution with their own ideological perspectives, promote their own religious projects and interpretations among the public, and use rituals as a pretext to deal with their political foes.

Conclusion

The jurisprudential and religious institutions linked with the "reformists" seek to rationalize rituals and clear them of extreme acts — whether because of customs or exaggeration of the sect's practices at the level of authority or grassroots. The strategy of

the Iranian political system has been different. It cracked down on certain rituals, not on all those that were deemed by the “reformists” to be extreme.

However, the two sides – the “reformists” and “conservatives” – are aware of the danger posed by the extremist interpretation of rituals embraced by the Shirazis and their supporters. This danger lies in the Shirazis expanding further and controlling the Shi-ite community and eventually speaking on behalf of the whole sect. Therefore, the strategy pursued by the political system in Iran is the same one pursued by Hezbollah in Lebanon while leaving room for ritual practices which preserve the public’s affection and respect for the marjaya affiliated with Velayat-e Faqih. Nevertheless, the Shirazis and their supporters are betting on the grassroots and the affection of the public on the one hand, and on their independence and being distant from the Iranian political system and even competing with it on the other.

