



The Breakaway Boss:

Semiperipheral Innovations and the Rise of Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad

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Abstract

Within a year of becoming president of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad had already confused much of the world. Explanations of his political ascent in a semi-peripheral country rely largely on the concept of charismatic authority. This is a non-explanation, however, as the charismatic historical figure who seemingly holds creative command over the social world also has to be created. Instead, I argue that Ahmadinezhad's trajectory from an Islamist engineering student to the presidency of a post-revolutionary state highlights three mechanisms of social-political innovation that are bounded by space and time: the situated overlap of social capital, the paradox of vertical clientage, and the breakaway of the machine boss. These mechanisms are usually misread as timeless signifiers of national backwardness or as charismatic dei ex machina. By showing these mechanisms at work through biography, we can challenge scholarly and popular explanations of social change that implicitly rehash modernization theory.

Keywords: Islamic Republic of Iran, sociology of charisma, revolutions, political Islam



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Erving Goffman advised ethnographers in the field to seek out situations with multiple people. If you are alone with someone, chances are they will lie to you. If other people are present, even with the company of a participant observer, “they will have to maintain their ties” within the social interaction. Goffman accordingly distinguished between the ethnographer and the stenographer: “I don’t give hardly any weight to what people say, but I try to triangulate what they’re saying with events” (1989:131). I’m no Goffman, but I stumbled into a few such experiences during fieldwork, one of which told me more about Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad (r. 2005-13) than any newspaper or speech.

It was spring 2010 in the central Iranian city of Kashan. I was meandering through restored 19th century houses of the Qajar nobility. These houses’ large inner courtyards, hidden from the street by walls and corners, had created a private sphere for repose and networking among the provincial merchant bourgeoisie. Now Iranian families gawked at them while on vacation from their cramped apartments in a highly urbanized country. In one of the houses’ gift shops that peddled the experience on DVD form, I met four university students, three women and a man, who took my presence as an excuse to have a debate on current affairs. Topics ranged from Barack Obama and Iran’s nuclear energy program, to Kashanis’ reputations as easygoing opium consumers, to the best and worst behaved of the country’s internal tourists. In 2010, after all, there were few tourists to Kashan from anywhere else.

A few jokes later, I steered the conversation towards Iran’s polarizing president. At the time, the Ahmadinezhad administration was proposing a radical shift in economic policy. The government would discontinue universally enjoyed subsidies on electricity and gasoline consumption and replace them with a means-tested income grant for poorer households. Fuel subsidies had been in place since the 1970s under the Pahlavi monarchy. Few Iranians could remember a time before cheap petrol and affordable utilities. The plan had the expert imprimatur of the International Monetary Fund, which hoped to hoist Iran as an example to the rest of the energy-producing region. Many Iranians I had met over the previous two years, however, doubted the capacity of the state to efficiently carry out any sort of reform. Three of the students present were equally skeptical, but one of the women, dressed professionally but conservatively, loudly objected. The president was right, she told us all, and his plan was going to transform Iran into a productive and modern economy so that the world powers would take notice. Why, I asked, was she so certain of success if everyone else dismissed the idea? She did not hesitate for one second: “*That is because they, unlike myself, did not study economics.*” Here were the spirits of nationalism, populism, technocracy, youth militancy, and aspirational mobility all on display. Actually, it was a microcosm of the president himself. No politician in post-revolutionary Iran had blended these traits so skillfully before, so much so that this student

performed, in the gift shop, a keen emulation of Ahmadinezhad's self-assured guise for her own peers.

This woman was not the sub-proletarian slum dweller or rural lumpen which the experts in both Tehran and Washington insisted were the president's social base. Indeed, to this day, explanations of Ahmadinezhad's political ascent and popular resonance tend to lean heavily on the notion of "charismatic authority" (e.g., Ansari 2008). In truth, this is a non-explanation. As Pierre Bourdieu lambasted his fellow sociologists, the charismatic historical figure who seemingly holds creative command over the social world also has to be created himself (1996:168; also see Burawoy and Holdt 2012:13). Phrases such as "charismatic populist" are thus lazy tautologies. Furthermore, though we read the term in wealthy countries applied today from Barack Obama to Sarah Palin, since its mainstream acceptance into 1960s American social science this overused concept has long been social theory's sloppy placeholder for describing Third World countries "stuck in transition." The divine gift of charisma may appear anywhere, but as Lucian Pye declared, "charismatic leaders tend to prevail in non-Western politics" (1958:484; also see Derman 2012: Ch. 6). Under each newspaper op-ed clucking its tongue at the mysteriously successful charismatic leader of a poorer country rests the uneasy legacy of postwar modernization theory.

Classical social theory, however, gives us an alternative view. Weber's charismatic leader is akin to Schumpeter's heroic entrepreneur, one who puts together "new combinations" to break through the equilibria of social life (Swedberg 1991:34—35). For Gramsci, it is "the politician, the active man who modifies the environment, understanding by environment the *ensemble* of relations which each of us enters to take part in." Echoing Marx and foreshadowing Bourdieu, Gramsci adds that individuals cannot innovate as they please. Instead, each individual is "the synthesis not only of existing relations, but of the history of these relations. He is the *précis* of all the past" (1971:352—353). As with Bourdieu, then, explaining political outcomes via charismatic authority is begging the question, not answering it, since the contradictory layers and lineages from which the individual commands change need to be unpacked historically.

World-systems scholars have also put forward theories of innovation, albeit at the macro-level. Peter Taylor argues that wealthy core zones concentrate scientific and technological breakthroughs, the "laboratories of modernity" in the world-economy to be emulated elsewhere (1996:120—121). Chris Chase-Dunn and his colleagues disagree, noting that transformations in large social systems tend to originate in semi-peripheral zones (2015:164—165). After all, the center of the world-economy has not remained fixed to one geographical location over the past six centuries. This is not simply because of the emulation of organizational capabilities of core political and economic powers by weaker ones. It is also because of organizational innovations that remake the structure of the world-economy itself. This is the evolutionary, Schumpeterian

crux of world-systemic dynamics. For example, the integration of mass production and distribution into vertical business corporations, which outcompeted British family businesses and transformed 20th century capitalism, was pioneered in the 19th century U.S. railroad industry (Arrighi 1994:15, 248—250). It was a semi-peripheral innovation. In fact, a diverse set of scholarship locates such laboratories of modernity *outside* of wealthy European countries: for example, Mintz (1989) and Anderson (2006) on the Caribbean, Rabinow (1989) and Wright (1991) on the Maghreb, Bayly (1988) and Dirks (2006) on South Asia, and Cooper and Stoler (1997) on sub-Saharan Africa. To borrow again from Goffman, studying semi-peripheral politics is theoretically useful because it is often “where the action is.”

In this article, I argue that Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad’s trajectory from an Islamist engineering student to the presidency of a post-revolutionary state highlights *three mechanisms of innovation* bounded by space and time which are usually misread as timeless signifiers of national backwardness or as charismatic *dei ex machina*: the situated overlap of social capital, the paradox of vertical clientage, and the breakaway of the machine boss. These are hardly limited to semi-peripheral countries. Yet by showing these mechanisms at work through biography, we can challenge scholarly and popular explanations that implicitly rehash modernization theory.

First, accumulation of differing forms of social capital by individuals often appears contradictory to an outsider perspective. True, the concept has easily succumbed to simplification, but Georgi Derluguian shows its utility by describing varieties of capital with handy folk definitions:

[C]apital describes the ways in which people store accumulated successes. These could be a matter of economic gains, which are the "capitalist capital" proper; political positions and support bases; administrative capital vested in office promotions and special kinds of bureaucratic insider knowledge; symbolic intellectual prestige, diplomas, access to high culture practices, and professional positions; the traditional symbolic notions of family honor, kinship and patronage connections; the workers' occupational capital, expressed through their work skills, shopfloor rights, and solidarity; or the social capital of marginal populations vested in their resilience, resourcefulness, the possession of valuable friends, and the skills they use to avoid brushes with law (2005:132).

As president, Ahmadinezhad could appear as maverick, millenarian, and modernizer all at the same time because of the various social capitals he accumulated before and after the 1979 revolution. An outsider's perspective, held either in Washington D.C. or by those in the Iranian intelligentsia who detested him, could not recognize their overlapping, situated resonance.

Second, state formation often generates vertical patron-client networks which allow political entrepreneurs to penetrate formally closed organizations. This tends to occur when intra-elite factionalism in the upper echelons of state power provides incentives for the political sponsorship of bottom-up forces. The process shows how the "common" man ends up at the top of the bureaucratic ladder. A paradoxical outcome of such "vertical clientage" is that successful use of informal networks tends to splinter elite factions further (Padgett 2012). Ahmadinezhad's post-revolutionary career relied on top-down recruitment and mobilization of provincial cadres. His success, however, splintered the Islamic Republic's conservative power elite and prefigured the tilt towards detente with the United States. As a result, Iran's ostensibly anti-systemic orientation folded back towards the prevailing geopolitical order.

The third mechanism is the breakaway of the machine boss (coined by Broadbent 2003). Patronage and clientelism are near universally posited by social scientists as the antithesis of popular mobilization or civil protest. Yet leaders of "boss" status can repurpose subordinate social networks to break away from control by larger political organizations. As Javier Auyero notes, social scientists are largely blind to this "recursive relationship between patronage and collective action" because our theories assume "a world in which there are clear boundaries between insurgents and authorities, dissidents or challengers and state actors, located in different regions of the social and political space, as in the 'protest side' and the 'repression side'" (2012:111). As president, Ahmadinezhad attempted to breakaway from conservative benefactors by mobilizing provincial networks of lower-ranked state cadres. In the wake of large-scale social unrest and economic recoil, however, he failed to fashion an autonomous power base during his presidency. Instead, Ahmadinezhad's breakaway attempt fed back into Iran's political dynamics through the 2013 presidential election of Hassan Rouhani. As Georgi Derluguian contended a decade ago, the breakdown of 20th century developmental states and privatization of state patronage suggest that 21st century politics will be commonly propelled by breakaway bosses and their networks rather than struggles between clearly demarcated civil societies and states (2005:317). By highlighting such mechanisms through biography as semi-peripheral innovations, instead of signposts of modernization, we might refashion our social scientific toolkit into a more serviceable analytical framework with which to understand the present.

Putting Iranian Modernizations in Their Place

Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad grew up during the Pahlavi monarchy's extensive drive to catch up with wealthy core countries.¹ In Iran, as elsewhere, state-led development rapidly transformed life chances for many individuals by opening or expanding avenues for the accumulation of new forms of cultural capital. Born in 1956 between Tehran and Semnan in a village near the small town of Garmsar, Ahmadinezhad originally had a different surname: Sabaghian. Iranians mostly did not possess surnames at the end of the 19th century, except those in elite merchant, religious, landlord, or court families. During the 1910s in the wake of constitutional uprisings, local intelligentsia demanded the replacement of honorific titles with family names. In 1925 the newly empowered Reza Khan (soon enthroned as Reza Shah Pahlavi) mandated the reform as part of a package which emulated well-known 19th century Napoleonic and Prussian efforts at catching up to wealthier states. As James Scott points out, the invention of permanent, inherited patronyms across the world was usually "a state project, designed to allow officials to identify, unambiguously, the majority of its citizens ... to create a legible people" (1998:65). The assignation of surnames in Iran was linked to taxation of peasants, military service, and legal codification. The effort took place a decade before similar naming schemes were implemented in the Kemalist Turkish Republic (Chehabi 2012).²

Two main practices were common in state assignation of surnames: village of residence and artisanal trade. Sabaghian means dyer, most likely of woolen yarn. Yet by the 1950s Mahmoud's father, Ahmad, was no craftsman. Rather he worked as a town grocer who also took out odd jobs in a blacksmith shop on the side. The family picked up and moved to Tehran around 1960. As Ahmad Sabaghian was not a peasant, the sweeping land reform program announced in 1962 by Mohammad Reza Shah did not likely provide any solace to the new migrant family. Newly situated in the peripheral east Tehran neighborhood of Narmak, Mahmoud's father changed the family name to "Ahmadi-Nezhad": roughly translated, "people of the God-praised." It was a nominal upgrade, to be sure, and it was not uncommon. The upside of uneven state efforts to

¹ This article focuses on Ahmadinezhad's political ascent, not his presidential tenure. I draw from several biographical sources, including the critical biography by Kasra Naji (2008) and newspaper and magazine reports listed below. There is an impediment to analyzing Ahmadinezhad's biography: a fair amount of it is essentially made up. When he became president in 2005, few Iranians knew much about him. The result was a quick production of hagiographies and hatchet jobs. For instance, the oft-cited biography by Naji, a BBC Persian reporter, is full of speculation and conjecture which I refrain from repeating here. Thanks to Ali Reza Eshraghi for pointing out this historiographical problem and saving me much grief, and Saman Safarzaee for help with tracking down sources.

² Notably, the conscription law was passed by the Iranian parliament two days after the surnames law. Unlike the Turkish surname law passed under Ataturk some nine years later, however, the Pahlavi state did not prohibit the choosing of Arabic or Turkish surnames.

fashion a legible population was that families could recreate their own biographies several times over.³

Mahmoud attended a well-regarded private high school and then, according to his own telling, scored 132 out of 200,000 students on the university *concour* — the French-styled annual national exam. Ahmadinezhad could have attended one of several elite universities in Tehran, but chose to remain in his home neighborhood Narmak at the University of Science and Technology, a less prestigious polytechnic. Entering university in 1975 in Iran was homologous to entering university in 1965 in the United States. The next four tumultuous years often determined the future networks within which one would be embedded for a generation or more. A person could hardly avoid being exposed to prevailing currents of intellectual thought, from the various tendencies of Third World Marxism to the syncretist strands of political Islam. The latter developed in distinction to, and often pilfered from, the former. Ahmadinezhad was drawn to political Islam at the same time he studied for a bachelor's degree in engineering. For some this seemed natural; for others it was incomprehensible. As a first-generation university student, why did he and other Iranians see no contradiction between these two supposedly disparate fields?

While it is commonly observed that adherents of political Islam in West and South Asia tend to be educated in technical or scientific subjects, there is little scholarly consensus on the cause. Olivier Roy put forward one commonly held answer: engineering and technical subjects reflect “the coherence of the whole, the rationality of the one [God]” in contradistinction to the messy and unfinished social sciences (quoted in Gambetta and Hertog 2009:221). There may be a more sociological explanation, however, given the fact that in Iran, as in most semi-peripheral states, engineering is an occupation whose role in modernization and mass social control is part of the developmental *doxa*. Engineers formed a growing segment of the etatist intelligentsia which arose in the postwar Third (and Second) World, possessing a “cultural and intellectual milieu based on attainment of higher education, professional skills, and social standing secured by mostly state ... employment” (Ekiert 2010:102).

Religion, however, was not necessarily the guiding light. Many Marxists were also engineers. One count of communist revolutionaries killed in the years after the 1979 revolution found that students, engineers, and teachers were far more representative in party ranks than workers and peasants (Mirsepassi 2004:241—242). Even more telling is David Menashri's

³ A Brazilian journalist who visited Garmsar in the late 2000s told me several local shopboys claimed that Ahmadinezhad's father was a middle peasant who worked in agriculture and benefited from land reform. This does not chronologically make sense, given that land reform took place after the family's migration to Tehran, but it could be true for Ahmadinezhad's cousins and extended family. Or it could be provincial griping.

eyewitness observation that Tehran's engineering students were often first-generation university-goers who took the bus to campus and spoke with working class accents. Cultural and artistic fields, conversely, were filled with the sons and daughters of the pre-existing Iranian literati elite who arrived via chauffeur (1992:257—267). Engineering as a route for obtaining symbolic prestige was thus a quite novel form of social capital for migrant or working class families, unavailable just a decade prior. Yet its link to political Islam still needs explication.

Though precedents exist throughout Islamic history, the call for purification of Islamic doctrine and practice against tainted parochial traditions is largely a modern phenomenon (Zubaida 2011; Cook 2014). It can be found in 19th century Ottoman tanzimat reforms; the Islamic modernism of Mohammad Abduh in Egypt and Abul A'la Maududi in Pakistan; and, of course, the Maududi-inspired notion of the Islamic state taken up in the 1970s by Ruhollah Khomeini (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2014; Zaman 2015). As diverse as they were, the common link between most varieties of political Islam is their concern with self-perceived backwardness.⁴ In this regard, political Islam in Western Asia and North Africa and its assumed antitheses—Turkish *laïcité*, pan-Arab socialism, and Pahlavi kingship—were corresponding nationalist responses to world-systemic peripheralization which crafted creative inventions of tradition. There was nothing anachronistic about the resonance of political Islam, in other words, alongside efforts at state-led modernization.

Had he chosen another university, say, Amir Kabir Polytechnic or Aryamehr University in downtown Tehran, Ahmadinezhad may have drifted towards the various left-wing Islamic or secular factions popular at the top elite universities. At Narmak's University of Science and Technology, Ahmadinezhad took up with Khomeini supporters. Khomeini's anti-establishment attitude was influenced by the forward-looking and lay thrust of political Islam, as were the many non-clerics who ended up proclaiming Khomeini the spiritual head of the anti-Pahlavi movement. It was not uncommon for the times. In *samizdat* publications and speeches, Khomeini denigrated Shi'i clerics as out of touch with the contemporary popular will. This was akin to the nationalist reworking of Catholic doctrine that drew Brazilian and Peruvian students to Liberation theology (Cook 2014).⁵

⁴ This may not have been the case in the late 18th century origins of Wahhabism and the house of al-Saud, which could have been localized responses to doctrinal and political conflict. Personal communication with Michael Cook; see also Cook (1992).

⁵ For instance, see Khomeini's December 2, 1962 speech in Qom, where he repeatedly accuses the Pahlavi state of pseudo-modernization: "Foreigners must come even to build a road. Do international obligations demand this? If you have doctors and engineers [then] you have education. If you say you have education, you have wealth, you have students, and you have doctors and engineers, why do you hire them from outside the country? Why do you pay foreigners a hundred thousand *tumans* a month? Answer this! If you have no answer, then pity this country! For a hundred years it has had universities but it has no doctors, no engineers" (Khomeini 1983-1994: vol.1, 115).

Ahmadinezhad's university contained a pro-Khomeini contingent of students who were openly anti-Marxist. He reportedly helped organize their rallies at the Narmak mosque. There are stories of harassment by the Shah's secret police, but given what we know about his life before 1979, Ahmadinezhad was not deeply enmeshed in underground circles which had direct access to Khomeini's close confidants. Had the revolution not occurred, and there are many reasons why it might have not, Ahmadinezhad would likely have become a municipal bureaucrat as Tehran's urbanization continued apace. After all, he was studying to become a civil engineer.

What did political Islam mean to young revolutionaries like Ahmadinezhad who grew up in the midst of rapid challenges to both religious and secular authority? Iran's 1979 revolution did not pit a modernizing society against a traditional state, nor did it pit a traditional society against a modernizing state—two common interpretations of the revolution, depending on where sympathies lie. Instead, as Steven Pincus argues in his re-reading of the English revolution, “revolutions only occur when states have embarked on ambitious state modernization programs,” and “when the political nation is convinced of the need for political modernization but there are profound disagreements on the proper course of state innovation” (2009:33; see theoretical precedents in Wallerstein 2011). For Pincus, social movements do not result in revolution without the presence of state modernization, defined as a “self-conscious effort” to transform the state along lines of bureaucratic centralization, a strong military, an increase in economic growth, and the expanded gathering of technical information about the “society” within its territory. Iran traveled this rough trajectory from the 1930s into the 1970s. After protesting the Shah's capitulations to the United States, Khomeini entered exile in 1964 still holding a relatively orthodox notion of Shi'i political jurisprudence. He returned to Iran in February 1979 with an idea never seen before in the history of Shi'i religious thought: an Islamic *Republic*. If anything, it was a vision for an alternative form of modernization. As Pincus states, “it is precisely the modernizing state's actions to extend its authority more deeply into society that politicize and mobilize people on the periphery” (2009:40). In that sense, Ahmadinezhad and other young vanguards of the 1979 revolution saw themselves as modernizers -- in spite of, and arguably because of, how others saw them.

Blocked Routes and the Long March to the Center

Ahmadinezhad was sidelined from the revolution's epicenter because of early factional divides, but he slowly rose through state organizations over the next two decades due to a common mechanism of semi-peripheral state-building: vertical clientage between center and periphery.

After February 1979, the revolutionary coalition battled for control of the new state both against remnants of the old order and among themselves. In this setting, Ahmadinezhad's student

activism became a serious matter. Universities were key sites for mobilizing support among various political factions. Tehran's main campuses became open-air fairs where secular and Islamist leftists enjoyed wide backing. Students returning from the United States or Europe quickly entered the fray, signing up to one of many groups tied to revolutionary parties. Ahmadinezhad was a member of his university's Islamic Association, where he helped work on a satirical magazine whose title can perhaps be rendered as *Gripe and Fuss*. The comic targets were Islamist left parties such as the People's Mujahedin.⁶ Ahmadinezhad then joined the central committee for the *ad hoc* Organization for Consolidating Unity between Universities and Seminaries (OCU), a Khomeini-supporting group formed, as its name attests, to corral the student upsurge into a more coherent backing force for Khomeinists. Set up in September 1979, OCU members aged in their early 20s were soon consorting with Khomeini's inner circle, Ahmadinezhad included. He was on the path to revolutionary renown. But then he made a wrong turn.

Image 1: OCU members meet with Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979. Ahmadinezhad is the short young man standing in the second back row, three from the right.



Source: *Tabnak* news, November 14, 2007

⁶ Interview in Shahrvand-e Emruz (2008) with the magazine's founder, Ibrahim Esrafilian, a mathematics professor who became a key agent in closing universities during the early 1980s, then chancellor of the university and a Tehran MP. The title originates not from scripture, but in a line from a Saadi ode which scorns religious hypocrites who claim to be Muslim but do not act accordingly.

This fierce competition for hearts, minds, and muscles among various left and Islamist forces produced numerous political entrepreneurs attempting to nudge the revolutionary momentum in a particular direction. The November 1979 occupation of the U.S. embassy occurred in this context. Eager to display anti-imperialist bona fides, several OCU members from elite Tehran universities proposed to take over the U.S. embassy. The idea was to protest the Shah's flight to America as well as prevent a bolstering of liberal forces which might have come through formal re-establishment of U.S. ties. According to multiple OCU members' accounts, Ahmadinezhad and others opposed the plan. Given the USSR's suspected ties with the Iranian left, they floated the idea of occupying the Soviet embassy instead.⁷

An internal group of OSU students decided to upstage Ahmadinezhad and the rest of the members by quietly going ahead with the U.S. embassy plan. They recruited several hundred companions to secure both the hostages and the assumed CIA documents within. Early on November 4, calling themselves the "Student Followers of the Line of the Imam [Khomeini]," they cut the embassy gates using tools hidden under their female comrades' garb. Unconsulted and taken by surprise, Khomeini and close aides realized that the event could help push aside the pesky moderate factions of the revolutionary coalition. The subsequent year-long embassy crisis also divided leftist groups on whether the new Islamic Republic was sufficiently anti-imperialist. Their standoff halted possibilities of a broader left coalition to impede the brutal curtailing of social and political rights during the consolidation of the state in 1980-83.

After his 2005 election, several former U.S. hostages recalled Ahmadinezhad gleefully participating in the embassy occupation. This, however, was a false memory spurred on by the Western media carnival that accompanied the presidential candidate's surprise victory. In fact, the actual embassy occupiers became revolutionary celebrities and quickly scaled the political ladder in the 1980s as advisors and deputies to government ministries during the Iran-Iraq war. Ahmadinezhad sat out this historic moment of the revolution, and with it an early name for himself. Twenty-five years later, to quash the rumors, Iran's state media released a picture of Ahmadinezhad as a young revolutionary. He wears the wide lapels of Iranian urban middle class couture and a beard shaped to countercultural—not ultra-pious—length (see image 2). Ahmadinezhad could not attain revolutionary credentials in the Islamic Republic by solely brandishing the social capital accrued under the *ancien regime*. In fact, in 1980 the government closed the universities for three years, further disadvantaging the remaining leftist groups and

⁷ See the interview with Mohammad Hashemi in *Tarikh-e Irani*, November 21, 2011. <http://tarikhirani.ir/fa/files/38/bodyView/379> (accessed June 2015). Also see confirmation by Ahmadinezhad's childhood neighbor as told to the U.S. State Department; Cable, Department of State Dubai Office to various field offices, "One Expert's View of President Ahmadinejad," October 3, 2005, 05DUBAI4824_a, https://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05DUBAI4824_a.html (accessed June 2015).

their campus bases. Internecine warfare between the state and various militias was the bloody order of the day, and Ahmadinezhad had not even finished his bachelor's degree. He had to find another route.

Contrary to its enthusiastic propaganda, the Islamic Republic did not recreate the state *de novo*. Instead, state elites relied on a common but costly post-revolutionary organizational tactic: purge and mass mobilization (see Padgett 2012 for analogous cases in Russia and China). The new heads of existing organizations utilized mobilizational energy to remove, or at least penetrate, the inherited bureaucratic inertia of the Pahlavi monarchy (Stinchcombe 1999). They did so by providing incentives for new cadres at the bottom to leapfrog above old bureaucrats (Ahmadi-Amui 2003: Chs. 1-2). The status associated with certain pre-revolutionary forms of social capital was devalued and displaced. By shutting down Iran's universities, the usual symbolic politics of semi-peripheral status credentials were thus partly overturned. Commitment to the revolution could dislodge accumulated expertise.

Image 2: Ahmadinezhad as a young revolutionary



Source: IRIB, June 20, 2005

The 1979 revolution challenged not only the political center but also its local representatives around the country. Individuals whose university pathways were impeded, therefore, often joined provincial revolutionary institutions. As in other revolutions, promises of rapid change that accompanied the disruption of the status order quickly unleashed centrifugal forces. However, as Eugen Weber pointed out in France, historiographical terms like

“centrifugal” and “centripetal” assume a preordained national unity (1976:96). In fact, Iran could have broken up along some variety of ethno-provincial cleavages after 1979. Political unity and center-periphery relations had to be reconstructed through a combination of force and consent. As Kaveh Ehsani noted, “the postrevolutionary power structure that consolidated during a civil war against domestic oppositions (1979—1982) and the Iran-Iraq War (1980—1988) was Khomeinist in ideology, but it was based on networks of local activists and institutions” (2009:39). Most mid-ranking clerics who supported Khomeini had emerged themselves from provincial backgrounds (Hooglund 1986). For Ahmadinezhad, Khomeini-supporting professors at Science and Technology University recommended several of their students to the new Interior Minister. A newly appointed governor of West Azerbaijan province was a graduate, and needed staff to help manage the tumultuous area and its growing Kurdish rebellion. Along with a few of his classmates, then, Ahmadinezhad headed to provincial Kurdistan, hardly the hub of political action by any means. It took him two decades to get back to the center of it all.

In the town of Maku in West Azerbaijan, ten kilometers from the Turkish border, Ahmadinezhad was appointed deputy district governor. The year was 1980, and he was 24 years old. It was no plum post. The area was about as far from urbane Tehran as one could get. Just south of the Caucasus, West Azerbaijan contains living traces of border wars, population movements, and linguistic mash-ups. The Persian-speaking Ahmadinezhad dealt with Kurdish-speaking Sunnis and Turkish-speaking Shi’ites while trying to prevent state breakdown and secession. The newly formed Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC)—a military auxiliary quickly put together in 1979 by Khomeinists in fear of an army coup—fought against Kurdish rebels who could slip back over the Iran-Iraq border when challenged. Once Baathist Iraq invaded in late 1980, Tehran’s attention concentrated on regions southwards, but the Kurdish rebellion festered on. Ahmadinezhad was shifted to the larger Azerbaijani district of Khoy, and then finally to Sananadaj, the capital of Iranian Kurdistan, to work in the governor’s office. During Ahmadinezhad’s harried trek, the secessionist movements that accompanied the revolution had largely been put down by the mid-1980s and the universities had re-opened (Naji 2008:30—32). State consolidation amidst the Iran-Iraq war began to transform the relative values of different forms of social capital once again.

Ahmadinezhad shuttled between his government post and his old Tehran university. By 1986, he finished his bachelors’ degree in engineering. Along the way he married Azam al-Sadat Farahi, a fellow student who majored in, of course, mechanical engineering. No longer a student, Ahmadinezhad entered military service. Relying on old university networks as well as his new provincial circles, he was assigned to the western province of Kermanshah and worked as a logistics engineer alongside IRGC and Army forces. His office also liaised with Jalal Talabani’s Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. The PUK resided in Iran because Kurdish rebellions against

Turkey and Iraq, along with the internecine warfare between Kurdish parties themselves, had made for new bedfellows between the Islamic Republic and enemies of Saddam Hussein. The PUK and Iran's military forces decided to target Kirkuk. For the former, it belonged on Kurdish-claimed soil; for the latter, it was a main site of Iraq's oil infrastructure. On October 10, 1986, Iranian commandos aided by Kurdish guerillas attacked an oil pipeline far into Iraqi territory. Ahmadinezhad may or may not have been directly involved, but the successful operation nonetheless helped his reputation. More importantly, serving with Kurdish *peshmerga* and IRGC commanders created political alliances that could be relied upon once becoming president. Such anecdotes matter, even if the details are speculative. Talabani was Iraqi president by 2005 and helped to undergird Iran's new influence in a post-Saddam Iraq, while most of Ahmadinezhad's cabinet members were provincial or military buddies. The war-forged circle around Ahmadinezhad, which journalists later dubbed "the ring of Kurdistan," moved together in tandem (Barseghian 2011).

By 1989, with the war's end and Khomeini's death, returning veterans were granted the equivalent of a G.I. Bill to enter into higher education (Habibi 1989). While pursuing a doctorate, Ahmadinezhad was appointed to the faculty of Civil Engineering in his old university. It may have seemed nepotistic, but the rapid uptake of veterans and war volunteers into universities addressed a serious dilemma for the Islamic Republic. As the postwar era loomed, Iran's post-revolutionary political elite divided into two main camps. Leftists wanted to maintain the *etatist* basis of the economy and continue an assumedly anti-imperialist foreign policy. Rightists wanted to reaffirm the sanctity of private property and build relations with Muslim-majority countries friendly with the West. The factional struggles between these two camps made for much elite intrigue. Nevertheless, the entire political class came to the realization that most post-revolutionary regimes arrive at in a capitalist world-economy: modernize or perish. Prime Minister Mir-Hossein Mousavi, firmly in the leftist camp but near his tenure's end, presented the stakes in 1989 to the country's leaders from the parliamentary rostrum. Mousavi's remarks encapsulate the frustrating structural logic of the world-economy from the perspective of the semi-periphery:

For ten years this nation has lived for God. ...The world is blind to our achievements. Is this our problem, or the world's? ...Whether we want it or not, we are in strong competition with the outside world. Our ideology is based on humanitarian grounds, and the world asks how

much steel we produce. The world asks about our scientific, economic, and cultural progress and gauges our ideology on that basis.⁸

The Islamic Republic entered its second decade self-consciously in need of what in earlier revolutionary situations were deemed “red engineers” (Kotkin 1995; Andreas 2009). In Iran, this new class consisted not of seminarians but lay technicians and managers, often trained through provincial bureaucracies. Due to ties at the Interior Ministry and an advisory position at the Ministry of Culture, Ahmadinezhad was appointed governor of Ardabil in 1993. This could have been a big promotion up the vertical clientage network, but there was one catch. The province had just been created.

The city of Ardabil in East Iranian Azerbaijan had been in the shadow of its close neighbor Tabriz for centuries. It was, Houchang Chehabi noted, a periphery within the periphery (1997:236). As resources flowed from Tehran through the provincial capitals, Ardabilis grumbled since the larger Tabriz controlled the coffers. Ardebil’s peripheral identity was not only in contradistinction to Tehran but also to the cosmopolitan Tabriz, known for its poets, intellectuals and wealthy merchants. Ardabil was reputed, by contrast, for feverish celebration of Shi’i martyrdom rituals during the month of Muharram. Indeed, its inhabitants’ zealous self-flagellation was held up as a local source of pride. This sort of cultural capital, a confirmation of peripheral backwardness during the Shah’s period, came in handy under the Islamic Republic. By the late 1980s, local Ardabilis were lobbying the central government for a province of their own. The town, they asserted, had contributed one of the highest number of martyrs for the war effort, second only to the larger city of Isfahan. But local elites also appealed to the new postwar zeitgeist. The city could better contribute to economic development if locals controlled their own administrative resources, and the fall of the USSR opened up trade routes between northwest Iran and Caucasian economies. New president Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani (r. 1989-97) visited in October 1991 and, sensing the mood, told a crowd that Iranian Azeris who were “yesterday’s warriors” should be “today’s producers” (Chehabi 1997:242). By spring of 1993, Ardabil was approved by Iran’s parliament to become a separate province, one of numerous cases where provincial groups’ demands for border shifts or autonomy resulted in new administrative creations: Qazvin was formed out of Zanjan, Golestan from Mazandaran, and the province of Khorasan was divided into three separate units. One legacy of post-revolutionary mechanisms of state consolidation, then, was that provinces could redraw the map and open new routes to power at the center.

⁸ January 1, 1989, in FBIS Daily Report 1/3/1989, Near East & South Asia, FBIS-NES-89-001, pp. 49-54.

Few locals knew much about Ahmadinezhad, but Interior Minister Ali Mohammad Besharati jokingly introduced the new governor as a jack of all trades: “I have brought for you someone who is young, and not only an engineer, but also a doctor.” Piling on, Besharati added, “He is also evidently a *mojtahed*”—a seminary-trained theologian (Naji 2008:36). He was neither a medical doctor nor a cleric, but Ahmadinezhad evidently excelled in displaying suitable social capital cues depending on the interlocutor. The new governor seemed in tune with the early 1990s mood of “expert” construction and development which then-president Rafsanjani had championed to the crowd during his visit.⁹ Ahmadinezhad set about building a power base in Ardabil, reportedly by taking Rafsanjani’s call for economic innovation at its word. According to subsequent accusations by the judiciary, Ahmadinezhad illegally sold state-subsidized fuel to the post-Soviet Azerbaijani government across the northern border. The proceeds were plowed into a campaign slush fund to help the right-wing speaker of the parliament, Ali-Akbar Nateq-Nouri, to the presidency in the 1997 election. Unfortunately, former Culture Minister Mohammad Khatami, a relatively obscure candidate known for his social laxity, won instead that year in a landslide. Since the executive branch chooses provincial governors, and Ahmadinezhad’s gasoline stunt made the news, he was quickly removed from his post (Naji 2008:37—38). His vertical climb through patronage networks was blocked yet again by other, better-placed revolutionary elites. As the political culture of the left and the right shifted in Iran, however, Ahmadinezhad glimpsed a new path forward.

From Mayor to President to Breakaway Boss

The technocratic push in the Islamic Republic during the 1990s contributed to two notable outcomes. First, the status order flipped again. The credentialed expert was suited to reintegrate Iran back into the world market. The state poured resources into universalizing access to education and health care. The public sector was scaled back from all but the commanding heights of the economy. The result was a commodification of daily life coupled with a hurried race for cultural capital in professional and educational credentials. As one journalist told me, by the late 1990s “university graduates printed business cards with as many credentials as possible written on them, and they had to be in English.” Third Worldism was out; the Malaysian model of religiously industrious capitalism was in (Ehsani 2013).

Second, the purge and mobilization drives of the 1980s—revolutionary, military, provincial—shaped upstart social strata which not only made new claims on the state but also

⁹ See the collection of news reports in “Ahmadinezhad 16 Years Before: ‘Hashemi’s Name Shines in History.’” *Tarikh-e Irani*, April 10, 2012. (accessed June 2015)

fashioned new elite and popular cultures. A large segment of left radicals tempered their politics into a milder, “reformist” brand (the term liberal, as in many Third World settings, remained electrically taboo). President Khatami (r. 1997-2005), an Iranian *soixante-huitard* of sorts, quoted Immanuel Kant and Max Weber to the parliament while championing an Islamic Republic with a human face to the world. Much ink was spilled over the question of Iran vis-à-vis “modernity” and “tradition,” to which the answer was usually a reanimated modernization theory nestled within globalization buzzwords. As in Turkey, India, and other parts of the global South during the 1990s, intellectuals in Iran wrung their hands over the country’s assumed deficiencies of the stuff that drove developmental success: non-governmental organizations, capitalist work ethic, private entrepreneurs, freedom from the “curse” of oil, and of course, social capital. In glorifying the sacredness of expertise, reform-minded politicians believed their audience was precisely the “new middle class” of technical-professional occupations which expanded from the late 1980s onwards. These revolutionaries-cum-statesmen expected an upsurge of popular support as they finally delivered on the national-developmental promises of 1979.

Another transformation was underway, however. Just as religious and secular liberals formed film and philosophy clubs or started newspapers and journals, other men and women joined war commemoration groups and Qur’an reading societies. Cassettes and CDs of religious crooners circulated widely with a new folk aesthetic. These efforts did not originate at state behest but rather emerged from the latticework of everyday life. Out of them, a new conservative worldview refashioned political Islam towards a form more individuated than the official state version. This “new right” largely accepted the meritocratic discourse of expertise which liberals championed, but also pursued status distinction through other means. Many families had a son or daughter whose participation in the war or in local state-building efforts delivered newfound prestige as well as symbolic and material benefits. Depending on social setting and interaction, therefore, different forms of social, economic, or cultural capital could outflank each other.

Amidst this cultural diversification, folk Islam mixed with lay expertise in a variety of syncretic rituals, myths, and practices of everyday common sense. One version was a personalized new age spirituality, with dollops of pop psychology and translated texts from Western self-help gurus and “mystical” authors such as Khalil Gibran and Paulo Coelho (Doostdar 2012). Another trend hyped the sensual elements of Shi’i eschatology, where the return of the 12th Shi’i Imam Mohammad al-Mahdi would usher in the redemptive end times. Nationalist paeans to 21st century Mahdism crept into political discourse on the right, often among young supporters of the post-revolutionary order. This self-actualization through neo-communitarian culture, often blurring the boundaries between left and right politics of the previous generation, was not only a hallmark of new conservative expression in Iran. New forms

of media spreading throughout the global South spurred claims to cultural authenticity as a Polanyian response to the universalizing ideology and temperament of the post-Cold War era. In Iran, these nationalist sentiments mapped onto the burgeoning “anti-globalization” politics of the late 1990s, or borrowed from conspiratorial narratives about global elites and the hollowing out of popular power. Always in the shadow of a more coherent neoliberal ideology from which liberals and technocrats could easily draw from, Iran’s new right lacked an ideological core, though it still exhibited a paranoid sort of creativity. As a result, battles in the “culture wars” raged during the late 1990s and 2000s, not between Iran and the West, but within Iranian society itself (Khosrokhavar 2001).

After the 1997 presidential elections, Iran’s rightists began to realize that they were on the losing side of the vote for the long haul. Politicians who had previously relied on war nationalism and the authority of religious jurisprudence to mobilize supporters needed to retool their approach. Common cause with Iran’s newly rising “red engineers” was their solution. These new conservatives tended to prefer Western technical terms instead of the Arabic loan words used in the early years of the revolution. By the late 1990s, conservatives were critiquing reformists with electoral slogans such as “a free, developed, and joyful Iran” — a phrase notably lacking in religious symbolism. Instead, developmentalist rhetoric was brandished as a weapon of politicking. Conservatives also took a page out of Albert Hirschman’s *Rhetoric of Reaction* (1991). It was the other side—intellectuals, humanists, student activists—who were the dangerous utopians jeopardizing the future gains of the post-revolutionary order.¹⁰ To utilize the politics of expertise, however, Iran’s new right had to compete with an expanded liberal/reformist intelligentsia on the latter’s own turf. Higher education had mushroomed across the country to the point where any provincial mid-sized town contained several private and public universities. As a result of competition in society as well as among state officials, secular expertise became the most valuable marker of status, even inside the political elite itself. As the composition of the parliament over three decades in figures 1 and 2 illustrates, the Islamic Republic had outgrown its own clerical class.

¹⁰ Not coincidentally, Hirschman’s book was translated into Persian in 2003.

Figure 1: Educational Level of Parliament Members (%), 1980-2004

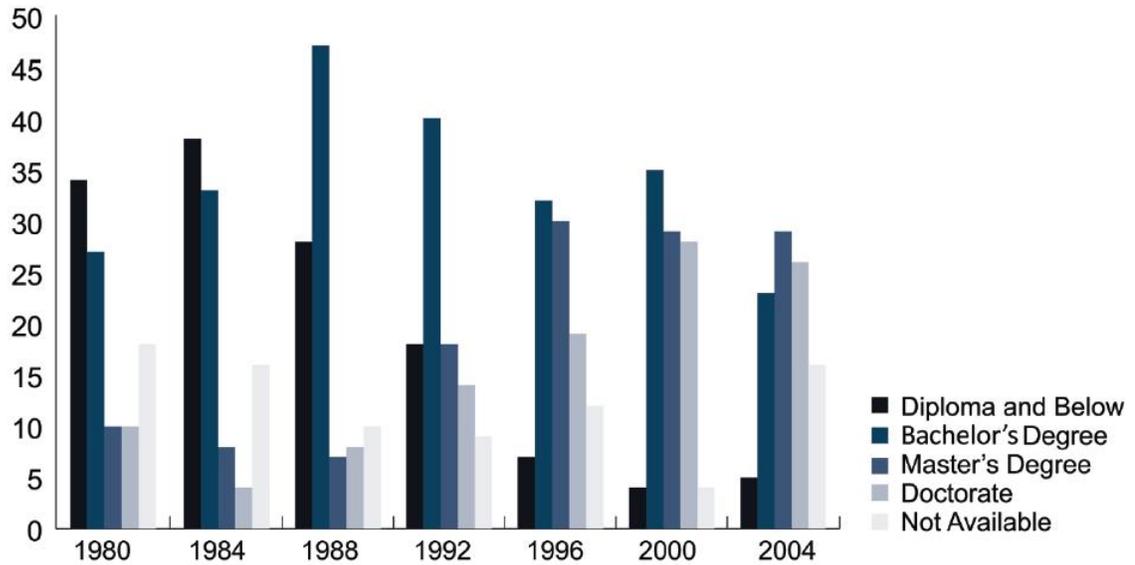
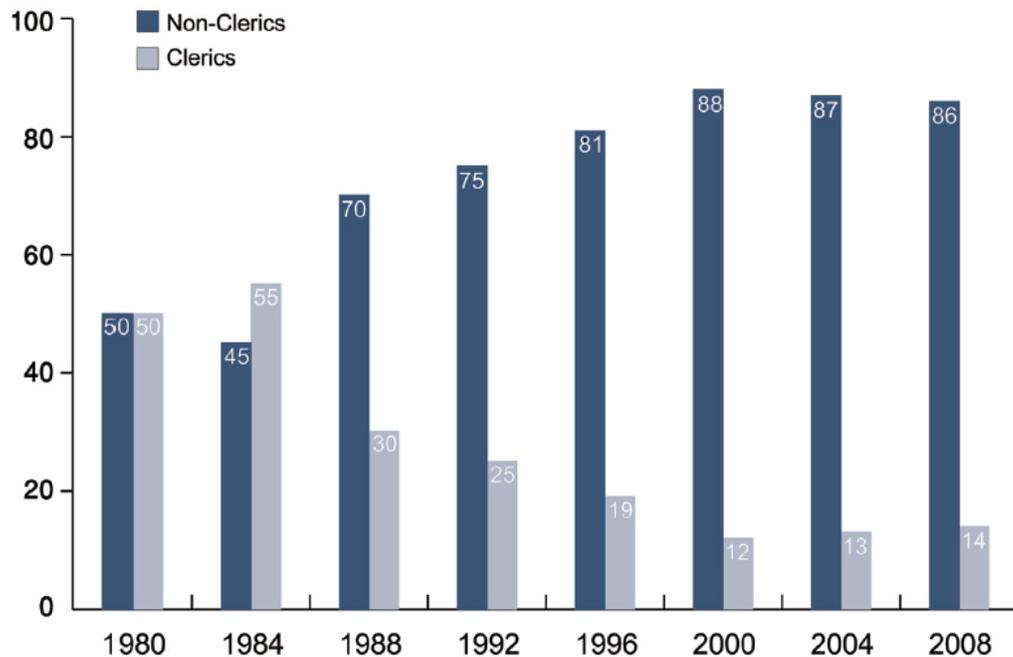


Figure 2: Iranian Parliament Members - Clerics versus Non-Clerics (%), 1980-2008



Source: Alem 2011:42

In this situation, Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad’s variously accumulated social capitals did not present a paradox, but an amalgam. His political resonance rested on the overlap of two trends by the late 1990s: an upsurge in Iranian “civil society” which included conservative associations as

much as it did liberal ones, and a new brand of conservative politics whose proponents stressed their technocratic bona fides alongside folk sensibilities.

As Ardabil's governor, Ahmadinezhad completed his doctoral thesis in transportation engineering. After his 1997 dismissal, he returned to Tehran as an assistant professor at his *alma mater* and published several books with straightforward titles such as *Tunnels in Simple Language* (2003). Ahmadinezhad then made a bid for local office in Tehran, throwing his lot in with the new right's entry on the political scene. He fiddled with his political brand through several more failures until fortune arrived. At the time, president Khatami had argued that popular participation was key to the renewal of post-revolutionary Iran. To prove it, municipal city council elections were held in 1999 for the first time. This was an opportunity for vertical clientage by all sides. A decade of intense intra-elite factionalism had incentivized political sponsorship of bottom-up forces. Ahmadinezhad registered as a candidate and was sponsored on two groups' lists: the *Motalafeh* party of old conservative business elites and the new and obscure Islamic Civilization Party, which made no reference of Islam except in the party's name (Naji 2008:42). Ahmadinezhad, listing his credentials as a Ph.D. in civil engineering, came in too low at 23rd place—the 15 victors elected to the council mostly consisted of well-known reformist politicians.

Undeterred, Ahmadinezhad ran in 2000 for a parliamentary seat on a variety of candidate lists assembled by old and new right factions: the Association of Militant Clergy, the Self-Sacrificers of the Revolution, and the Islamic Engineers Association. The credentials he used for this race resembled the new business cards Iranians were scrambling to acquire: doctor of “road and construction engineering,” professor at Science and Technology University, member of “The Association of Road and Traffic Engineers of Asia and Oceania,” former advisor to the Ministry of Culture, and former governor of Ardabil.

From 1992 onwards, Iran's Guardian Council—a constitutionally mandated equivalent to the House of Lords—granted itself the power to vet candidates running for office on the grounds of religious suitability. Old guard rightists utilized this prerogative to kick out the 1980s left radicals from the Iranian parliament, and it again disqualified hundreds of reformist-linked candidates in the 2000 elections. Still, most reformist politicians who ended up on the ballot received the bulk of votes. The 2000-04 parliament became known as the most liberal group of MPs since the revolution, and Ahmadinezhad once again was blocked from office.

The Guardian Council quickly obstructed most laws passed by the new parliament. Political deadlock set in, leading to rising popular frustration. Ahmadinezhad garnered a position in a leading new right organization, the Society of Self-Sacrificers. There, he lobbed critiques at Khatami's reformist bloc as a power-hungry elite. He also criticized the old right guard as hampering the success of conservative politics. Out of the struggles came a loose association of

new rightists that called itself the Developers Party and ran a slate of candidates for the 2003 city council elections.

As the reform movement splintered apart, the reformists' electoral base opted to sit out these upcoming council elections. Many individuals who had formerly championed Khatami's agenda came to believe institutional politics were an effete affair. Reformist leaders were divided as how to respond to the impasse. The lack of formal political parties meant that internal schisms outweighed intra-elite coalitions. In Tehran's council election, turnout did not top 12 percent (just over half a million votes were cast), and Ahmadinezhad's association mobilized local voters. Given the political opening, his allies won a majority of the Tehran council, whose responsibility it is to select the capital's mayor. Five candidates put their names forward for mayor, including Ahmadinezhad, who won handily.

Over the previous twenty-five years, Ahmadinezhad scabbled up vertical clientage networks when they fell into place in the post-revolutionary order: far-flung office posts, military cadres, provincial seats. Once mayor, Ahmadinezhad took advantage of a structural impasse between political elites by promising to be the bottom-up force for which Iran's conservatives had been desperately looking.¹¹ His future rested on building a political machine so as not to get blocked from above again.

As mayor, Ahmadinezhad pushed Tehran's prevailing growth model to his advantage. By the end of the 20th century, cities in the global South had become major sites of capital accumulation. Wealthy elites used urbanization as a spatial fix for restless assets. Real estate and construction became a massive sink that could link speculative global financial flows up with new and old domestic capitalist strata. In Iran's case during the 1990s, a liberalizing, cost-cutting national government forced Tehran's municipality to resort to legalized bribery in order to raise revenue for public goods. Sales of building permits and ordinances for high-rise apartment construction filled the city's budget gap. The anarchic architecture of contemporary northern Tehran, with its emulation of Dubai's gaudy palatial fabrications, was one result. Then-mayor Gholam-Reza Karbaschi (r. 1989-98) used the funds to transform the metropolis with parks and cultural centers. These public works countered the widening spatial separation of social classes, as poorer families could bus up to central Tehran parks and enjoy a Thursday evening picnic while watching the conspicuous consumption of their fellow urbanites (Ehsani 1999). After 2003, Ahmadinezhad pursued the same strategy as mayor, but in peripheral and poorer

¹¹ According to one story, Ahmadinezhad's corruption scandals while governor of Ardabil resulted in an investigation by the security apparatus and the Interior Ministry. When his name was floated for Tehran mayor, these accusations again came up, but the Commander of the paramilitary *basij* organization, Ismail Ahmadi-Moghadam, vouched for the candidate. Moghadam and Ahmadinezhad had worked together in western Iran in the early 1980s (Barseghian 2011).

neighborhoods. It was not an alternative form of urbanism but a promise of upward mobility for the formerly excluded. Lauding his civil engineering expertise, Ahmadinezhad expanded Tehran's sclerotic highway system and introduced U-turns and shortcuts between previously isolated neighborhoods.

Meanwhile, Ahmadinezhad prepared for a presidential run under the noses of Iran's old right-wing, who were either unconcerned or thought he stood no chance to win. Largely without their help, he amassed a political machine to mobilize grassroots support from middle and lower cadres of state organizations and their families. The right-wing establishment's choice was former IRGC commander and then-police chief Mohammad-Baqer Qalibaf, a polished war pilot who hung up his uniform to don a business suit. Yet as the 2005 campaign commenced, it slowly became clear that Ahmadinezhad was far more popular than Qalibaf. His campaign rallies loosely blended political symbols from humility and frugality to justice and development, with a lumpen eschatology thrown in for good measure. In the 2005 campaign poster below, the slogan reads, "Oil money should be seen on the people's dining-cloths" (see Image 3). The candidate wears a tieless jacket, standard regalia for Iran's newly educated technical-professional stratum, and religious symbols are notably absent. From a position of plain-speaking technocrat and veteran, Ahmadinezhad resonated with many by criticizing the political establishment as aloof.

The reformists put forward three candidates for president, as did the conservative side. Former president Rafsanjani was also in the race. Rafsanjani had been an occasional thorn in the side of the reformists, who tended to attack him in their newspapers, but his campaign represented a continuation of the easygoing Khatami's social policies. This split the center-left vote four ways, while Ahmadinezhad outcompeted his conservative rivals for their limited base of voters. Ahmadinezhad took nearly twenty percent of the first round's votes, while Rafsanjani received twenty-one percent, setting up a run-off election. Reformist candidates cried foul, claiming that Ahmadinezhad's supporters had tipped the scales by stuffing the ballot. True or not, it was spilled milk, given that the fragmented reformists never considered putting forward a coalition candidate to prevent such an outcome.

Image 3: Campaign poster for 2005 presidency

Source: *Fars* news photo reprinted in *Tarikh-e Irani*, “Presidential Election Posters,” May 27, 2013.

Iran’s liberal political movement had lost its momentum. A debate ensued whether to support Rafsanjani or not, but it was a bit too late. As Mohammad Quchani, a popular editor and columnist, admitted at the time, “some of Ahmadinezhad’s criticisms against Hashemi were similar to those levied by the reformists against him five years ago. We could not justify in just three days why people should vote for the target of our past attacks” (ICG 2005:6). Ahmadinezhad won the second round with over sixty one percent of the vote and a two-thirds turnout. Though most conservatives backed him in the runoff, Ahmadinezhad rightly believed he had won without the help of other political actors.

As president, Ahmadinezhad began to act as a breakaway boss in both symbolic and material arenas, pushing to reshape the political dynamics of the Islamic Republic so that his brand of machine politics would trump and displace pre-existing elite networks and their social bases. With a tight circle of aides at his side, he quickly began to muscle in on executive bureaucracies and replace top officials with less-experienced, new right cadres. To satisfy growing networks of clients and search out new allies, Ahmadinezhad aggrandized in all registers, from controversial remarks on the Holocaust to technocratic boasting. Within a year, Ahmadinezhad had confused much of the world. Some liberal-leaning newspapers called him a fascist, while others thought he could be a right-wing Trojan horse for economic liberalization --

a Persian Deng Xiaoping. Ahmadinezhad made references to the 12th Shi'i Imam al-Mahdi and his possible (apocalyptic) coming, alarming many. He then largely stopped making references to the Mahdi a year later, alarming others. Soon he was praising the ancient Persian king Cyrus and proclaiming that Iran would be a wealthy power in a matter of decades due to its scientific prowess and exceptionalist destiny. (The boast was an uncanny replica of the Shah's rhetoric in the 1970s.)

Ahmadinezhad was clearly disliked by old guard elites on all sides, including his ostensible conservative allies in the government, not to mention Arab state leaders and European diplomats. He was loved outside of Iran for that same reason. Whether I was in Damascus, Cairo, or Istanbul from 2006-10, I met working-class men whom, upon realizing I was visiting from Iran, gave me a big grin and professed how much they liked "Nejad." The president wielded his various social capitals with ease, but the overlap resonated differently among assorted audiences. For example, during a 2012 speech in Tajikistan, Ahmadinezhad claimed that both the epic poet Ferdowsi, considered by Iranians as the main font of Persian national identity, and the Mahdi were equally endowed with the prophetic message of Mohammad. Jointly, these two figures saved Islam for the world. After all, he told the crowd, they lived in the same period. Clerics and lay conservatives immediately issued heated rejoinders at the president's attempt to carve out a heretical "Iranian school of Islam".¹² In all likelihood, there was no ideological core to the political machine other than short-term gambits, which soon over-accumulated. The breakaway boss' fortunate conjuncture was closing off.

Conclusion

Was it a mysterious charisma which proved (temporarily) attractive to so many people? After his presidency, Ahmadinezhad's website put up thirty-nine "major accomplishments" from his two terms. Ten were economic, five others were scientific, five related to welfare and education, and ten concerned non-religious cultural projects. Only one was religious in nature—an increase in the number of mosques and Islamic charities.¹³ This mix appealed to individuals such as the young woman I met in Kashan, a true believer in market, not religious, fundamentalism.

¹² See the report of the speech in *Tarikh-e Irani*, 25 March 2012; criticism by Ayatollah Makarem-Shirazi in *Tarikh-e Irani*, 28 March 2012 and Ali Motahari, *Tarikh-e Irani*, 11 June 2012. <http://tarikhirani.ir/fa/news/4/bodyView/1985> (accessed June 2015).

¹³ See www.ahmadinezhad.ir (accessed June 2015). A similar hodgepodge can be seen in his 2009 campaign pamphlet, *Son of the Nation*; by coyly referencing the 1981 assassinated Iranian president Ali Raja'i, the pamphlet's Persian title, *Farzand-e Mellat*, is a political dog whistle for Iranian conservatives while innocuous for others.

The growing problem was that, by attempting to satisfy too many constituencies, Ahmadinezhad fragmented his own mutating coalition. In the international arena, he profited by default from U.S. military overreach during the Bush administration, and therefore was largely unprepared for the Obama administration's softer global image. The Bush years allowed the Iranian government to play members of the European Union against the United States and each other on a host of issues. Barack Obama came into office in 2008 willing to make a quick deal with the Iranians. If Ahmadinezhad had corralled a solid right-wing coalition together in his first few years, he could not only have had a chance at keeping the United States at bay but also forged a reputation of being the non-cleric who steered the country back into international normalcy. Yet he fired nearly all the diplomatic corps and lost their accumulated experiences of maneuvering between the great powers.

All of this was predicated, however, on how he played the domestic game. The president created very few institutions of his own. He was not a state-builder. Rather, as his career trajectory showed, he was a breakaway boss, someone who could skillfully climb existing patronage networks and then repurpose them to destabilize the political establishment. His tenure luckily dovetailed with a global commodity super-cycle from 2005 onwards, but he alienated technocratic elites by denying them state resources and prestige. Instead, he stole their proposed projects and then opaquely implemented them. As a result, state spending ended up generating new layers of mid-level contractors who skimmed off a good portion for themselves (see Harris 2013 for more on this period).

In one of the many ironies of post-revolutionary Iran, Ahmadinezhad had mostly recreated by the late 2000s the Shah's economic mistakes of the 1970s -- another age of windfall commodity revenues. Large state budgets transformed into big liquid outflows into the economy. Producers pushed up prices and asset holders urred to speculation in lieu of productive investment. To deal with inflation, the state lowered tariffs and let in cheap goods from East Asia. This exposed Iran's population to the world economy as never before. On the consumption side, it was paradise, as global brands and local knock-offs became available for the purposes of conspicuous status distinction. Yet on the producer side, Iran's nationalistic import-substitution model was devastated, and provincial centers of manufacturing hemorrhaged jobs.

To be even-handed, one wonders if a liberal president could have pursued a different strategy in every respect. Iran in the 2000s, as with a sizable swath of the global South, was a semi-peripheral state whose growing middle classes had largely abandoned the nationalist project of state elites—liberal or conservative—and needed to be placated in some fashion. Ahmadinezhad took the blame when these contradictions began to overheat. Not only could liberal-technocratic elites critique him on the issue of performance, but his own upwardly aspirational supporters also turned on him as their material conditions began to reverse. Such

contradictions of semi-peripheral rule in Iran's case, however, were further complicated by the residual anti-systemic orientation of the post-revolutionary order. Here, Ahmadinezhad unskillfully played into the hands of U.S. hawks. The resulting economic *cordon sanitaire* imposed on the Islamic Republic prematurely ended Iran's commodity-linked asset bubble.

Inside the country, grumbling by older conservative elites was masked due to the outcome of the 2009 presidential election. A groundswell mobilization for a reformist candidate—the former prime minister Mir-Hossein Mousavi—turned into an unexpected protest wave after the election was called a bit too quickly for Ahmadinezhad. Faced with a million-person crowd near government offices, conservatives temporarily papered over their differences and showed elite solidarity. The largely unorganized opposition could not channel the protests effectively against the state, and the 2009 Green movement demobilized rather abruptly over a few months (Harris 2012). Yet the extent of public anger forced most conservatives to rethink their reliance on Ahmadinezhad. Cracks in the conservative side broke wide open, and former allies began to publicly scheme about how to replace him.

The right wing in Iran did not realize, however, the degree to which Ahmadinezhad's rise through vertical clientage and subsequent breakaway crusade had fragmented the conservative bloc. Instead, conservative political elites, buoyed by the idea that domestic liberal opposition had been quashed, mostly fought amongst themselves in the run-up to the 2013 presidential election. As they squabbled, reformist networks quietly strategized on how to take advantage. Through a near-Leninist attention to organizational loyalty, Rafsanjani, Khatami, and their allies managed to put forth a single candidate in the election, Hassan Rouhani. Standing against four conservatives, Rouhani won an electoral majority in the first round in June 2013 on a political-social coalition that never could have been possible without the disastrous arc of Ahmadinezhad's presidential tenure. As former Tehran mayor Karbaschi put it before the vote, "Ahmadinejad and the members of his team have produced a situation where everybody is now a reformist."¹⁴ After the loss, Ahmadinezhad retreated to his university, sulking on the sidelines with an office located not in old downtown but in a tony northern Tehran neighborhood.

With the return of center-left political elites to the government, the politics of expertise has returned in full force to Iran. Negotiations with the United States and other powers have produced a diplomatic detente of possibly Nixonian proportions. The Iranian national market stands to reintegrate with core zones of the world-economy. The purge and mobilization mechanisms of cutthroat elite conflict, for now, have been channeled into a more regulated form of institutionalized competition.

¹⁴ *Etemad* newspaper, September 24, 2012.

This recent course taken by the Islamic Republic, largely unpredicted by scholars, is hard to understand through a model of an autonomous civil society pushing demands onto an obstinate state apparatus. Instead, we should look for mechanisms of socio-political innovation that bridge the theoretical divides left untraversed by modernization theory. Ahmadinezhad's political ascent relied not on the divine gift of permanent individual charisma but on overlapping forms of social capital which resonated in situated historical junctures due to global, regional, and local transformations. Semi-peripheral state formation fashioned networks of vertical clientage which pulled him and other new cadres from the provincial edges into the political center. Finally, Ahmadinezhad's breakaway boss maneuver created the conditions whereby technocratic elite politics could replace the revolutionary status order which previously favored the zealous upstart. We may not see him enter again onto the political stage, but Ahmadinezhad's biography is not abnormal. If semi-peripheral politics is "where the action is," then the cohesive developmental states of the 20th century may likely be replaced by the ambiguous breakaway bosses of the 21st century.

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