



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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"Analyzing the Political Elite of the Islamic Republic of Iran"

Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
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The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars hosted an event with Professor **Mehrzad Boroujerdi** of Syracuse University, who is compiling a database with detailed information on nearly 2,000 people in the political elite of Iran – from cabinet and parliament members to religious authorities, military officer, members of the judiciary, and presidential advisors. He presented his preliminary findings and discussed their implications for Iran' tumultuous political landscape. **Daniel Brumberg** from the United States Institute of Peace also provided some thoughts following the presentation.

Boroujerdi began by stating that the study "makes an argument for the importance of an institutional approach to Iranian politics. This doesn't discount the role of individuals, but in my view the more appropriate approach is the one that looks at institutions." He then recounted a few of the major arguments developed as a result of his study:

1. There has been a generational change in Iranian politics.
 - A "graying" of the old clerical guard, as well as the Majles (parliament) deputies.
 - A new, younger generation is filling more cabinet positions
2. **Clerics only account for one-third of the ruling elite in Iran** – the other two-thirds are "lay individuals." Clerics are also more likely to be appointed to public office rather than elected by the Iranian people.
 - The most popular educational fields are engineering, management, and theology.
 - Local leaders are less likely to come from theological backgrounds, and more likely to have degrees in engineering.
3. The percentage of cabinet ministers, Expediency Council and Guardian Council members with prison or exile experience pre-1979 has declined.
4. There has been a rise of the elite from the provincial periphery – the percentage of cabinet ministers born in the provincial periphery has risen relative to those born in urban centers
5. **Incumbency is more assured in appointed rather than elected institutions.**

Next, he used these trend-lines to present a couple of conclusions:

1. **Iran is in a transitional phase.** The power of the clerics is declining while the power of the revolutionary guards is on the rise.
2. There are two main arguments: one, that yes, the IRGC has taken over and spurred a militarization of politics; two, that the clerics retain tremendous power, particularly since the supreme leader can wield the mandate of his office to influence or control significant portions of the country – since the revolution, clerics have always accounted for huge percentages of the

Assembly of Experts, judiciary chiefs, prosecutor generals, Expediency Councils, presidents, Guardian Councils, and supreme leaders.

Daniel Brumberg then spoke and suggested that "we have not only the emergence of the revolutionary guard and non-clerics, but the emerging system is increasingly less inclusive – there is an increasing exclusion of another elite, the sons and daughters of the revolution – and the rising elite has no experience in international affairs, which is very disconcerting." He observed that Iran is run by elites with a very conspiratorial worldview. "The real challenge is to address whether or not this new state – a military autocracy -- is a permanent shift" from the old state framework of lively and diverse debate. But it would be a mistake, he said, to forget that autocracies have a constituency and the Iranian regime has a "very successful strategy and good networks to mobilize its constituency. This doesn't mean it's acting democratically, but it's not a regime without support." And while it's clear that the rising elite is a very real phenomenon, it's also noteworthy that the supreme leader has created an alliance with this emerging faction.

In response to a question about measuring the importance of institutions relative to people, Boroujerdi referred to the supreme leader as a good example of an institution's pervasive influence. "If the office of the supreme leader can decide who ends up as Friday prayer leaders, the institution matters because he can handpick [who goes in front of thousands of people]."