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Trends. United States Foreign Policy, Iran, and Mirror Imaging

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A common dilemma posed by United States (US) foreign-policy decision makers concerning Iran is the tension between the rule of law and democracy on the one hand and arbitrary religious authority on the other. In fact, this dilemma suggests more about the perceptions of US decision makers than of events in Iran.

First, the dilemma as posed suggests that religious authority is incompatible with the rule of law and democracy. Yet there are those who espouse religious authority who also espouse the rule of law and democracy. In fact, there are those who claim a religious basis for the value of the rule of law and democracy. Interestingly, the forces espousing the rule of law and democracy in Iran comprise many religious authorities led by President Khatami.

Second, the dilemma as posed suggests that the rule of law and democracy naturally go together. Actually, the two are often arbitrarily conflated. Throughout history there have been democracies with problematic rules of law and non-democracies with a rule of law.

Third, the dilemma as posed suggests that religious authority must be arbitrary. Those who believe in divine inspiration, revelation, and the received word through study would surely disagree. And if logic and consistency are positively valued, the political representatives of the religious right in the US should also take issue with the validity of the dilemma. Yet the latter support the dilemma as distillation of foreign-policy choice.


(Keywords: Democracy, Foreign Policy, Iran, Religion, United States.)