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Volume 30, 2007 - [Issue 1](#)

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Understanding Iran's New Authoritarianism

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Pages 163-179 | Published online: 05 Jan 2010

“ Cite this article <https://doi.org/10.1162/wash.2006-07.30.1.163>

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Understanding Iran's New Authoritarianism

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's victory in the June 2005 Iranian presidential elections and his confrontational politics highlight two remarkable aspects of Iran's political development. First, it indicates that Iran is in fact undergoing a gradual process of regime change, not moving toward democratization but rather modifying Iran's brand of authoritarianism. It constitutes the beginning of a marked shift from the existing clerical theocracy toward a more conventional authoritarian regime. Two threats have created the need for more effective authoritarian governance to secure Iran's clerical regime: the internal challenge by the reformist opposition and the external threat of U.S. intervention posed to Iran in the post-September 11 world. This transition will therefore see remnant democratic features erode as the evolving regime concentrates power among a small number of key decisionmaking centers. Similar to other authoritarian regimes, the role of the military-security apparatus will be enhanced, as will the regime's dependence on tools of patronage or repression to assert full control.

Second, in contrast to many ill-fated predictions regarding Iran, the domestic political economy underpinning the regime is surprisingly stable in the medium term. Profound structural problems in Iran's economy will prevent the leadership from implementing the China model—authoritarianism with high economic growth—but Iran's oil-based economy nevertheless provides the regime with sufficient resources to satisfy its supporter base and discourage opposition. If anything, the potential but unlikely international isolation of Iran if Tehran mishandles its apparent quest for nuclear weapons represents a greater threat to regime stability than Iran's economic condition.

Elliot Hen-Tov is a doctoral candidate specializing in contemporary Iranian and Turkish affairs in the Department of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University.

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The Washington Quarterly • 30:1 pp. 163–179.

THE WASHINGTON QUARTERLY ■ WINTER 2006-07

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