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### June 23, 2009: Does the Iranian Struggle Demonstrate that Religion and Democracy are Incompatible?

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Title: Does the Iranian Struggle Demonstrate that Religion and Democracy are Incompatible?

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6/23/2009--Reuel Marc Gerecht wrote a New York Times op-ed on Sunday that we are witnessing "two incompatible ideas" in irrevocable conflict: the idea that God's would rule or that the people would rule. This, he writes, is the tension between theocracy and democracy. But, as Gerecht acknowledges, these are only incompatible because of the structure in Iran of who decides what the will of God is. What makes Iran a theocracy is not that the will of God controls. What makes Iran a theocracy is that a group of clerics decides what the will of God is. Imagine instead a country composed entirely of pious Muslims. Every person in this society agrees that the country must be run in accordance with the will of Allah. But they also believe that Allah speaks to every person and that two heads are better than one. So they conclude that whenever there is a dispute about what is to be done, about anything, the most reliable way to determine the will of Allah will be to vote. Is such a country a theocracy? No. It is a democracy. Democracy means, with some rough edges, that we vote about what should be done. Therefore, if some religious Americans vote against abortion or gay marriage because God tells them to, this is democracy, not theocracy. Iran is experiencing the tension between dictatorship and democracy, not between religion and democracy.