

Title:

The Najaf Hawza between the Ba'athist State and the Iranian Revolution

Abstract:

What do religious clerics do when anti-government protests erupt? In this paper, I propose a theory of institutional responsibility which argues that elite clerics have a sense of responsibility towards the religious establishment and will seek to protect it in the face of state reprisals and political instability. In order to protect the religious establishment, they will remain un-involved in protest and will mediate if protests hit a tipping point that threatens the status quo. To make this argument, I examine the participation of the Iraqi Shi'a Religious Establishment in two protest movements in the authoritarian Ba'athist era: the 1977 Safar Uprising and the 1979 Rajab Uprising. Conventional wisdom from existing literature, largely drawing upon the Catholic Church in Latin America and in Eastern Europe, suggests two explanations for clerical behavior: strategic and ideological. In other words, clerics are either driven by self-interest or by ideological proclivities. I exploit the occurrence of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which recalibrated both strategic and ideological incentives, to examine whether these explanations hold. I find that clerical participation in protest is a multi-causal story but that institutional interest offers new insights that can be used to conceptualize protest activity beyond Shi'ism and beyond the Middle East.