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The Fragility of Khatami's Revolution

Geneive Abdo

Thousands of young Iranians gathered in the town square in Yazd one afternoon after Iran's parliamentary election to see President Mohammad Khatami. A desert city known for its mild manner and graceful wind towers that catch the subtle breeze, Yazd is in Khatami's home province. He grew up in a small village called Ardakan approximately 25 miles away, where his father was a famous ayatollah, fondly remembered for keeping the religious flame lit during the darkest days of the shah's regime. The crowds were jubilant as they awaited the president's arrival. They wanted to hear from the local boy who became president, but, more important, they wanted to hear the president's reaction to his faction's victory in capturing a plurality of seats in the parliament. The February 18 election seemed to be the fairest in modern Iranian history and a turning point, minimizing the power of the conservative establishment, which had held a majority.

When Khatami appeared on the balcony of the *hosseiniyeh*, a religious gathering place in the town square, the crowd of mostly young men thrust themselves toward the iron barricades that the security men had set up to maintain control. They looked up to their president, who extended his arms high in the air to greet them, and shouted, "Khatami, Khatami, we love you." They were mesmerized by Khatami's mythical persona looming large against the sky above the fold. In his brief speech, the president said nothing of the reformist movement's electoral victory. Instead he promised development projects for Yazd province.

I mingled in the crowd and asked a few young men why they had helped turn an ordinary cleric into a charismatic figure. What was it about him that solicited such adoration? Their replies were that Khatami was their hope for [End Page 55] a brighter future. Few could articulate the ideas behind the Khatami revolution or, as it is called, the *Dovom-e Khordad*, the May 23, 1997, landslide victory that brought Khatami to power. Here was a man who spent the better part of his life mastering Jean Jacques Rousseau and Alexis de Tocqueville to formulate his ideas for creating a civil society in Iran. But a much simpler message appeared to have been absorbed in the heartland--that Mohammad Khatami was the new charismatic figure, the most distinctive characteristic in propagating Shi'ite Islam. More than 70 percent of the electorate had participated in the February national parliamentary election, but their eyes focused on one man who did not run in the poll but for whom they voted in spirit.

The most recent results were viewed by many Western analysts as Iran's great step toward a modern democracy. Voting appeared to be free and fair with limited fraud at the ballot box. Attempts by a conservative-dominated election supervisory board, the Guardian Council, to eliminate reformist candidates, as it had done in many previous elections, were kept to a minimum. Public pressure for an untainted election was so intense that the Guardians feared the public's wrath more than they feared the likely outcome, that the conservative presence would be diminished in parliament.

The Guardians waited until after the election to make their move, when the world had its eyes on new sights. In May, they quietly nullified 11 constituencies nationwide and canceled 726,000 votes out of 3 million in Tehran, where reformist candidates won 26 of 30 seats in the first round of voting. The race in Tehran, Iran's political center, was the most heated, with both conservatives and reformists putting their leading lights on the ballot. Although this apparent rigging of the results did not fundamentally change the reformists' triumph by securing a plurality of seats in the new parliament, it made the Tehran election less legitimate by eliminating a fourth of the votes cast.

Iran's close brush with democracy soon evaporated into a replay of past elections. But even if the Guardians had permitted the results to stand, there is scant evidence that Iran is ready for the kind of Western-style democracy sanctioned by foreign governments or even the civil society that Khatami envisages. The masses are still banking on a charismatic leader to save them, rather than developing institutions outside the state to help themselves. Conservatives still control major institutions of power--the judiciary, the armed forces, and the Friday prayer pulpit from which the political [End Page

56] agenda is set each week. Showing their strength, conservatives in the judiciary closed 17 reformist newspapers and journals after the February poll, depriving the reformist movement of its greatest political weapon. Despite the new progressives now taking their seats in parliament--approximately 150 of the 290 seats--backroom politics is as powerful as ever.

A misconception about Iran is that there is a backward regime holding nominal power and a promising civil society representing progress and modernity underneath. The political dynamic is far more complicated. One force driving the rule of law is the religious policy formed in the holy Shi'ite city of Qom. This force is as least as powerful as the parliament, for clerics formulate social policies that reverberate far beyond their seminaries. This is where debates on legalizing satellite dishes, music, and birth control are bantered about between reformist and traditionalist clerics who hold no elected post in government but maintain power through religious edicts. If the clerical establishment were to issue religious decrees that permit satellite dishes, enormous pressure would come to bear on the parliament to codify this ruling. At the moment, divisions between traditionalist and reformist clerics are more acute than at anytime since the 1960s, when Ayatollah Khomeini united the clergy in Qom by launching a resistance movement that eventually led to the 1979 revolution. Reformists claim that at least half of the young seminarians agree with their views on more freedom in Iran, but a bitter struggle is under way on this fundamental issue. The conservative clerics believe that they must be guardians of the people's souls, and reformists have faith that believers can make their own moral and religious judgments if given proper guidance.

At this stage, it is unrealistic to expect the Iranian state or the clergy to help craft a civil society, primarily because the battle among official arms of the polity is dominating the scene. The development of civil societies generally emerges from the people, but Iranians are too immature in their political development to initiate institutions outside the state. In addition, citizens lack the power generally extended by the state because Iran is still determining whether it is a republic or a theocracy. Thus the state's ability to crush independent forms of association is as powerful as ever.

The recent closure of the newspapers and journals is the greatest example of civil society being thwarted. Before the conservatives in the judiciary closed the reformist press--largely responsible for spreading the ideas of the movement that President Khatami leads--the media revolution had been under way for approximately three years. A core generation of journalists in their late thirties and early forties at the center of the free-press movement had opened a string of four newspapers after each one was closed by the judiciary beginning in the late 1990s. But the crackdown in April was far more damaging. Not only were nearly all progressive publications closed at once, [End Page 57] but the action followed a new press law passed by the outgoing conservative parliament that makes it far more difficult for closed publications to reopen. Under the previous press law, many license holders were able to reestablish publications under new names while keeping the same staffs. But under the new law, all license holders who apply to publish a newspaper must be approved by the conservative-dominated judiciary. This provision in the law was designed to weed out reformist-minded publishers. Even after the new parliament convenes, the existing press law cannot be repealed for almost six months, making any attempts to reverse restrictions on the reformist media impossible until October.

The independent press was Iran's anchor in its evolving civil society. Without it, free expression is seriously threatened, making initiatives toward political development nearly impossible. Run by intellectuals inside Tehran's beltway, the press was the bridge between theoreticians in Khatami's government and the average loyalist standing in the town square in Yazd. Years of authoritarian rule have generally left citizens afraid to express their opinions publicly, even though Iran is a society in which political debate is necessary for survival. The newspapers gave Iranians the courage to speak out without fear of retribution. It is unrealistic to expect citizens who have limited legal power to resist the authoritarian state and go their own way.

In the absence of newspapers, internal information circulates slowly in Iran. The state television network, IRIB (Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting), is controlled by Iran's supreme leader and is run by conservatives at odds with Khatami's government. Therefore, news broadcasts have a particular political spin, and Iranians cannot rely on television as an honest source of information. Their opening to the outside is primarily from foreign radios, such as the BBC Farsi service, Voice of America, and Radio Liberty, a network funded by the U.S. Congress and based in Prague. It began broadcasting approximately a year and a half ago to influence Iranian public opinion of the outside world, in much the same way that Radio Free Europe was piped into the Soviet Union during the dark days of communism.

Those newspapers permitted to continue publishing after the press crackdown were primarily conservative to varying degrees. Seeing the meager selection of newspapers--declined from at least 20 to a handful--after their morning trip to the newsstand, many Iranians remarked that the political atmosphere had gone back to the days of the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s when public debate was tightly controlled. The substance of national discussion was also reminiscent of an earlier time. Two topics dominated the media once again: Iran's preoccupation with the Israeli occupation of Palestine and Iran's relations with its so-called enemies in the West. An eerie retreat to the past overcame the country once the noisy and flamboyant reformist press had been silenced. It had featured everything from cartoons lampooning [End Page 58] major political figures to ranting commentaries on the latest political scandal.

As in the old days, prominent journalists and editors who ran reformist publications were imprisoned

for their misdeeds. Hardliners in the judiciary jailed journalist Akbar Ganji, the country's most outspoken commentator, ahead of a planned trial. Mashallah Shamsolvaezin--who started four newspapers, all now banned--began serving a 30-month jail term.

"This February electoral victory has angered the extremists and they want to change the atmosphere in the hope that they can affect the composition of the new parliament," said Hamid Reza Jalaiepour, an editor at the banned *Asr-e Azadegan* newspaper. In ordering the closure, the court accused many of the newspapers of publishing material that "disparaged Islam and the religious elements of the Islamic revolution."

There was little doubt that the reformists' victory at the ballot box was the impetus behind the press crackdown and the imprisonment of journalists. Powerful conservatives, particularly former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, wanted to punish the press for its great influence over voters. In the months leading up to the poll, Ganji and other commentators led a full-fledged campaign against Rafsanjani, who ran for a seat in parliament from Tehran. Ganji accused Rafsanjani of being behind a series of murders of secular intellectuals during his presidency and of corruption in his family. The assault achieved its purpose: Rafsanjani squeezed by in an embarrassing thirtieth place in preliminary results, apparently winning just enough votes to secure a seat in the first round of voting. Many reformists speculated that he had done worse and had lost all together. Their instincts were bolstered by a report a few days after the election on a secret information wire distributed by the Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA). The report said that Rafsanjani had finished thirty-first, pushing him into a runoff election that he would likely lose. But one hour after the report was circulated, it was withdrawn without explanation. For a man who considers himself still at the center of Iranian politics and who was tapped to be speaker of the parliament, revenge seemed the only logical response.

His conservative backers on the Guardian Council then stepped in to save him. They announced in March that there had been widespread cheating in the tallying of votes for Tehran and proceeded to recount the ballots until May. When the final results were certified three months after the actual vote, Rafsanjani placed twentieth in the poll, but few believed it was **[End Page 59]** true. Sources in the Interior Ministry, who were in charge of the election, said that they had proof that the Guardian Council fabricated the results to boost Rafsanjani's standing. Even the conservative press took the opportunity to ridicule him. In the end, Rafsanjani resigned in disgrace from his new seat as deputy in parliament. He said he was quitting to "save the revolution." But in reality, he stepped down to salvage what was left of his reputation. Despite Rafsanjani's low popularity rating among voters, he still wields enormous power as the head of the Expediency Council, a body that ultimately determines the law of the land when legislation passed by parliament is disputed by the watchdog Guardian Council. Members of the Expediency Council are appointed by Iran's supreme leader, who is considered by conservatives to have divine power.

Iran's early spring showed the reform movement's political limitations, which had been masked as the independent press flourished in the wake of Khatami's election in 1997. Divine rule and personality politics still hold precedence over the exercise in republicanism by citizens at the ballot box, despite the success of the reformists making public opinion part of the political dynamic.

"As opposed to other countries, our history shows that if certain individuals dabbled in politics once, they would never want to leave the political scene," wrote Mahmoud Sarioulqalam, an Iranian scholar who runs the Middle East Studies Center in Tehran. "They are always waiting to make a comeback. They do not believe in the circulation of power, and the emergence of individuals who are more capable than they are," he says, arguing that Iran is not culturally prepared for civil society.

The conservatives deprived the reformers of their link with the public once the newspapers were closed, but, just as important, they delivered a blow to the intellectual inspiration that drove the movement. A small circle of intellectuals who associated with Khatami for years before he became president believed that their movement would bring about modernity through a free press. The reform movement is the press and the press is the reform movement, they often remarked. Much of Iran's internal postrevolutionary struggle has been waged through the press and the institution that controls the press and the arts, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance.

When Ayatollah Khomeini wanted his views to penetrate society in 1980, he brought Khatami out of the seclusion of the seminary to become editor of the newspaper *Kayhan*. From there, Khatami was chosen to be the head of **[End Page 60]** the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and was in and out of politics until he ran for president.

"The press is the offspring of modern civilization, and the axis of modern civilization is freedom," Khatami said in a speech to journalists in November 1998. "Therefore the connection between the press and freedom is a strong one, and we should define freedom in order to determine the duties of the press."

As Iranians mark the third anniversary of Khatami's landslide victory, there is more evidence that political development has shifted into reverse. The state has become increasingly paralyzed. A consensus on the definition of freedom is as remote among the warring political and religious factions as an agreement on the court's right to close newspapers and imprison journalists or on the Guardian Council's decision to ignore the voters' choice and hand their man, Rafsanjani, a seat in parliament.

Iran's stalemate in mending relations with the United States is a perfect example of how narrow political factionalism has come to override what most would now agree lies in the national interest. The tired rhetoric of "Death to America" obscures the broad consensus across the entire spectrum of Iranian politics that the time has come to make up with Washington. Recently, the venerable Muslim leftists of the Mujaheddin of the Islamic revolution publicly reversed more than 20 years of hostility to the United States and suggested a rapprochement. The old mercantile class, grouped around traditional clerics, is already on board with visions of fat import contracts dancing before its eyes.

In fact, it is widely accepted that had the candidate of the clerical establishment managed to defeat Khatami in the 1997 presidential election, relations with the Great Satan would be much further along. Likewise, most of the new reformists, many of whom helped take over the U.S. embassy in 1979, have softened their views. Additionally, most ordinary Iranians make no secret of their desire to see the U.S. embassy reopen in downtown Tehran or to taste a burger from McDonald's. The popular desire for American-style fast food prompted one enterprising businessman to open Star Burger in Tehran, an imitation McDonald's, decorated with Coca-Cola posters smuggled in from Canada.

The economic logic is equally unassailable. One pro-reform economist estimates that U.S. sanctions and their powerful ripple effect--the brake on meaningful inward investment, the reliance on black-market and gray-market suppliers, and the lack of easy access to spare parts for the large installed base of U.S.-made infrastructure--slow the Iranian economy by 10-15 percent a year. This comes at a time when economic growth and job creation are vital to a society that must crank out at least 750,000 new jobs each year just to keep up with demographic trends. What is more, U.S. officials have [End Page 61] unilaterally eased import restrictions on Iranian luxury goods, chiefly carpets and pistachios, and all but apologized for the Central Intelligence Agency's role in the 1953 coup against then-Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq that restored the shah to the Peacock Throne. So what's gone wrong?

The answer lies in the diffused nature of power in the Islamic Republic, with each and every major institution torn by factional rivalries, and in the short-term horizon of a conservative establishment that does not want President Khatami to reap the political windfall that would follow an opening to the United States. Proponents of civil society must be troubled that both popular will and national good together are unable to push through the political inertia that blocks their way. The incoming reformist deputies to parliament hope to break the deadlock by creating a special committee to examine a restoration of ties to the United States, and there is even talk of a referendum on the issue. Such unusual steps may prove the only way out of what on the surface appears to be an unnecessary and unwarranted glitch in the machinery of state.

The debate on the United States shows that the system will tolerate some flexibility. Not long ago any suggestion that relations should be restored was taboo. But Iran's political development and ability to establish a civil society depend largely on the degree to which public debate is permitted. At this stage in the struggle, most evidence suggests that free expression has been generally limited rather than expanded. What Iranians call "the red lines," the outer limits of debate, often shift depending on the changing balances of power among the religious and political forces at play. These limits are never clearly defined, but once crossed, the results can literally be fatal. Saeed Hajjarian, a former deputy intelligence minister and the architect of civil society, was gravely wounded in March as he approached the steps of Tehran's city council building. The young gunmen, Islamic vigilantes from a poor district outside Tehran, thought that they were perfectly justified in shooting Hajjarian once in the head. After all, prominent hard-line clerics had declared Hajjarian an apostate for supporting Khatami's ideas. Suddenly, one of the closest aides to the president and the consummate insider had become an outsider. As such, Hajjarian was fair game. That young vigilantes would choose such a prominent, well-connected figure shows the fragility of civil society. In today's Iran, anyone can still become a victim.

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