

*F O C U S   O N   I R A N*

# BET ON THE OPTIMISTS: PROSPECTS FOR REFORM



Julia Yaskar

**T**A SOCIETY WHERE THE GENIE OF DISSENT HAS BEEN LET OUT OF THE BOTTLE CANNOT REMAIN SILENT IN PERPETUITY.

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*BY MEHRZAD BOROUJERDI*

Three years ago, a front-page editorial in *Shargh*, an Iranian daily newspaper, observed that “The reformist camp trusts Europe more than America because they are concerned that American pragmatism might sell the reform enterprise to the conservatives like any other business commodity. . . . Yet while in the Balkan War the Europeans supported the Croats and the Russians the Serbs, only America supported the Muslims because the multi-ethnic nature of America has prevented the emergence of the notion of a pure race.”

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The commentary continued: “The nuclear issue will one day come to an end and then the issue of human rights will take over. If a militarist America is worried about nuclear energy, the secular Europeans are instead waiting to ambush you under the cause of human rights. On that day the Islamic Republic will not be able to favor the secular, nationalist and ideological Europe over the religious, multiethnic and pragmatic America.”

That editorial seems to advocate a course of foreign policy diametrically opposed to the cantankerous, maladroitness and raucous diplomacy that has become the hallmark of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s administration. It is indicative of the deep ideological and political fissures among Iranian political elites.

Pessimistic analysts of Iranian politics cite the intimidation and imprisonment of prominent activists, lawyers, editors and publishers; draconian measures against the press; and vigilante violence as evidence that things have changed little in the last decade. They maintain that the parliament still lacks power; the judiciary and the Guardian Council, accountability; the civil service, dexterity; and the press, freedom.

Optimists, on the other hand, insist that we should not interpret the curbing of the belligerent press and the arrest of iconoclastic journalists as anything more than temporary setbacks in Iran’s long and arduous march toward a more open society. A society where the genie of dissent has been let out of the bottle cannot remain silent in perpetuity, they say, arguing that the demography of a young, urban, well-educated and politically aware population favors the reform movement.

The optimists interpret these demographic trends as harbingers of the new revolution of rising expectations gaining momentum in the country. Furthermore, they claim that, thanks to the addition of over 20 million new entrants to the ranks of eligible voters since the 1979 Revolution, Iranian voters are increasingly asserting their willingness and commitment to reshape the socio-political and cultural system of the country.

These different readings provide diverging answers to the following questions: Did former President Mohammad Khatami’s (1997-2005) cautious and syncopated cru-

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sade for political liberalization drive his popular base toward cynicism, demoralization and dejection? Did hardliners manage to wear down the reformist camp and discredit it in the eyes of voters? If the reform movement is now battered and beaten, does this mean that political change can now only emerge from outside the ranks of the regime? Before we can begin to sort through the answers to these questions, we must try and get a better sense of the deeply embedded cultural and political paradoxes and nuances of Iranian politics.

### **Toward a Modern Society**

The profound cultural, demographic and socio-economic shifts during the post-revolutionary era are rapidly reworking the contours of Iranian society from a traditional-authoritarian structure to a modern and open one. They have also bequeathed to Iranian politics a multidimensionality and sophistication previously unimaginable.

While less than half of the country’s population lived in urban centers at the time of the 1979 revolution, that figure has now reached over 61 percent. During the same time span the literacy rate skyrocketed from less than 47 percent to over 80 percent, and the population’s median age is now 24 years. As of 1996, out of the country’s population of 60 million, 40 percent were below the age of 15 and 30 percent were students in primary or secondary school (16 million) and college (2 million).

The events of the past two decades have made it clear that the members of Iran’s strong cultural middle class now view themselves not as mere nationals but as citizens. No longer interested in hearing pontificators talk about their patriotic and religious duties, they are increasingly inquiring about their citizenship rights (e.g., jobs and political and social freedoms). A robust and sober movement representing millions of high school and university students is a formidable constituency that the state cannot simply absorb, ignore or buy off.

In addition, Iranian journalists and writers have managed to create a substantial, serious and sophisticated media audience and an animated court of public opinion that looks skeptically at the clergy’s attempts to present a whitewashed view of Islamic history and their own revolutionary pedigree. One need only recall the ministerial interpolations and melodramatic public trials that took place during Khatami’s term in office as an example. While the clerical and revolutionary courts almost always reprimanded or found the accused guilty of the alleged

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offenses, the court of public opinion concurrently gave the defendants the honor of being icons of reform and democracy.

Iranian society is evolving rapidly. Unctuous sophistry, hidebound slogans and superficial palliatives are now met with cynicism and tongue-in-cheek ridicule; emotional and frenzied crowds are giving way to calm and organized opponents; family structure is becoming more egalitarian; personal relationships and expectations are better defined; and both the consumers and purveyors of goods and services are becoming better informed. Furthermore, the commercialization of the electoral space, the financing of political life by businesses, elite factionalism, and the entry of new constituencies (such as families of the martyrs, Hezbollah activists and war veterans) into the political fray are altering the political landscape. In short, the process of the transition from a traditional-authoritarian society to a more modern-open one continues despite the various setbacks.

The weight of the demographic tidal wave, coupled with the accumulation of people's unmet socio-economic needs and political expectations (e.g., free speech and assembly, free elections, a fair judicial system), which gave birth to the reformist movement, are hard to ignore. Yet despite the demographic trends that predominantly favor the reformists, prudence dictates that we should not confuse hope with reality. We should be wary of formulations that reduce politics to mere reflections of economic processes and social structures.

Iran is still a country where the conduct of politics remains nontransparent, where tutelary patronage is a long-established tradition, where elites define interests largely as individual needs and private ends, where politicians are viewed with cynicism, where deliberate political provocations are often effective, where the precipice of mediocrity is hard to ignore, and where "free and fair elections" is not synonymous with "democratic governance." It is still a country of persons, not laws, where the religious-patriarchal state is both able and willing to devour institutions of civil society, and where nongovernmental organizations cannot act as ombudsmen between civil society and the state.

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In addition, primordial ties often overshadow social obligations. Trust as a factor of social capital barely manages to cut across the horizontal family, clan and friendship ties. Social mobility is viewed as based on fortuitous factors, connections or influence-peddling rather than hard work. And civil society remains underdeveloped, its shock-absorbing institutions fragile.

### **Pendulum Swings**

In Iranian politics, observed trends and regime positions are never absolute. Flexibility toward change is the norm. The popular reform movement that appeared on the Iranian political radar screen on May 23, 1997, exposed the fallacy of the argument that we cannot transform a bona fide theocracy from within. On that momentous day — without having been cajoled by any leader or established political party — over 83 percent of eligible voters voted in the largest-ever turnout for any executive or legislative branch election and provided the reform candidate, Mohammad Khatami, with a landslide victory. In three subsequent elections — the 1999 village and city council elections, the 2000 parliamentary elections, and the 2001 presidential elections in which Khatami was once again a candidate — a respective 64 percent, 69 percent and 67 percent of Iran's voters went to the polling booths and each time overwhelmingly cast their votes for the reformist candidates.

Conversely, political fortune smiled on the conservatives in the 2003 and 2006 city and village council elections, the 2004 parliamentary elections and the 2005 presidential elections. On these occasions the Iranian public registered their disillusionment with the status quo by electing conservative candidates who were largely politically unknown.

The crushing electoral defeat of the reformist camp can be partly attributed to their failure to mobilize the mushrooming constituency of the urban poor, a group not as preoccupied with the cultural sensitivities of the educated elite, but experiencing the burdens of corruption, unemployment and inflation. These elections also showed that we should not underestimate the power of the conservative establishment or the enduring appeal of

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religiously informed social practices. The conservative camp has extensive economic and social roots, solid organizational strength, and an army of foot soldiers (e.g., pensioners affiliated with charity foundations, Basij forces, etc). Meanwhile, the influence of the Revolutionary Guards in Iranian politics is bound to grow. The adjutants of the clerics, who have finished their apprenticeship in revolution, are now demanding recognition as the linchpins of the Islamic Republic.


### **The Upcoming Elections**

All political personalities and parties in Iran are already eyeing the three important upcoming rounds of elections: parliamentary voting in late 2008, presidential elections in early 2009, and city and village council elections in 2010. Because the institutions that will in one way or another oversee the conduct of the elections (the Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Intelligence and the Council of Guardians) are controlled by the conservatives, it is very probable that a high enough number of reformist candi-


dates will be disqualified to prevent them from recapturing control of the parliament.

The prospects for electoral interference and irregularities are less likely in the 2009 presidential elections, because many of the potential leading candidates are established political heavyweights who cannot be barred. On the reformist side, former presidents Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami, and former speaker of parliament Mehdi Karroubi, are being mentioned as potential candidates. The conservative camp is likely to be represented by Pres. Ahmadinejad, Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf (the present mayor of Tehran) and Ali Larjani (the chief nuclear negotiator). Karroubi and Ghalibaf may prove to be the two candidates most capable of unseating the incumbent. If that were to happen, Ahmadinejad would be the first post-revolutionary president who completed a full term in office but did not manage to win re-election.

Since its latest round of electoral defeats, the reformist camp has been attempting to become more mainstream



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and a bit more united, especially as signs of internal division have emerged among the governing conservatives. While they have not managed to abandon their own internal fights, it is much less likely that they will repeat the mistake of the 2005 presidential elections when they fielded four of the final seven candidates and split the popular vote.

The municipal council elections scheduled for 2010 will be influenced by the outcomes of the preceding parliamentary and presidential elections and the political waves they will set in motion. Because the Council of Guardians applies less stringent criteria in vetting many thousands of candidates in municipal elections, it is possible that individuals with reformist dispositions will manage to win seats.

### A Work in Progress

Ira Lapidus, a historian of the Middle East, commented in the *New York Times* in 2000 that Iran is “a nation that is open and welcoming but remains hidden and mysterious; a clerical dictatorship, but one of the Middle East’s liveliest democracies; a puritanical regime, but a people who love everyday life; a severe orthodoxy, but an expressive cinema and an argumentative press; a revolution that has rejected secularism, but a nation heading toward a fusion of Islamic and Persian identities.” We can also add the following paradoxes to the list provided by Lapidus.

- A constitution that simultaneously affirms religious and secular principles, democratic and anti-democratic tendencies, as well as populist and elitist predilections;
- A society in which many cultural, political and social institutions are Western and modern in pedigree and configuration, yet native and traditional in iconography and nomenclature;
- A hyperpoliticized society that does not benefit from the presence of recognized, legitimate or effective political entities such as parties;
- A theocracy where religion is an axiom of political life, and yet secular agents, aspirations, ideas, institutions, language and motifs continue to survive and — more importantly — manifest their significance in the private and public space;
- A society where the eclectic texture of popular cul-

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ture has made the practicality — let alone desirability — of religiously sanctioned statecraft highly doubtful, in turn leading to a gradual but consistent disillusionment with the belief that Islam is the only political solution;

- A clerical leadership that has claimed to protect tradition but has amended and broken numerous age-old religious protocols for the sake of state expediency;
- A society whose Islamic intellectuals resort to the writings of Western thinkers to validate their own “Islamic” critique of the West;
- A citizenry that has come to enjoy sophisticated artistic and intellectual productions despite living under a politically repressive state; and
- A society where women’s rights have been trampled upon, yet where women have continued to make strides into the educational, cultural and professional domains, thereby increasing awareness of women’s rights and issues at the social level.

These paradoxes demonstrate that what has softened the hardness of an Islamic republic born through revolution — and will continue to do so — are the eclectic realities of the political landscape and popular culture of the country. We must bear in mind that in the overtly polarized, regimented and stilted world of Iranian politics, every action is politically and symbolically significant. Even the most innocuous signs (pictures, cartoons, theatrical plays, ambiguous language, nostalgic lyrics), acts (clapping, dancing, holding hands, whistling, anodyne leisure or recreational activity or other manifestations of youthful verve) and events (victory or defeat of the national soccer team, temporary loss of water or electricity, factory closures) can cause a serious political crisis, because the state is neither ideologically nor structurally capable of preventing or defusing such incidents.

As an adviser to former President Khatami has put it, the Iranian regime resembles a tall glass building where voices echo, and even the smallest stone that is thrown creates a loud shattering noise.

### The U.S. As a Wedge Issue

“In a curious sense, Iran and the United States are mirror images of each other,” writes Gary Sick, a long-time

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observer of American-Iranian relations. “Both countries are prone to a moralistic air of self-righteousness, especially in foreign policy matters; and both are inclined to ideological rigidity and a sense of moral superiority. Each perceives itself as the indispensable state. Above all, these are two interpenetrated societies whose mutual sense of grievance, humiliation and betrayal has infiltrated their respective internal politics until the line between foreign and domestic politics is often indistinguishable.”

Domestic Iranian politics plays a significant role in how elites frame and implement policies vis-à-vis the United States. How the political elite make use of the image of the United States reflects the vagaries of factional politics in Iran. In the absence of legitimate and effective political parties, factions employ multiple conventional and unorthodox means to undermine rivals and achieve their policy objectives.

For example, factionalism is reflected in the media. The hard-line outlets consistently urge the citizenry to remain steadfast against the “Great Satan” and portray the United States, depending on the mood of the day, as a “paper tiger,” an “imploding power,” a “reckless bully,” a “hypocrite” or “the world’s leading arrogant power.” The reformist press, by contrast, continually reminds the hardliners that the only way to thwart potential threats from the United States is to open up the Iranian political system and thereby enhance its legitimacy.

This stance should be understood in light of the reformists’ weaker position within the political establishment. Although the reformists do not consider the United States their sworn enemy, they dangle the possibility of an American threat to create greater elbow room for themselves. The operating assumption is that whichever party manages to restore relations with the United States will stay in power in perpetuity and enjoy popular support.

As such, those groups that are the underdog at any given moment will do their best to torpedo the other side’s efforts at any type of rapprochement. Spoiling the efforts of one’s rivals, which can also include members of one’s own faction, can take place in the form of managed leaks (i.e., revealing the 1985-1986 Iran-Contra affair), public

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criticism, intimidating American tourists and business people who are visiting Iran as guests of the government, etc. So the squabbling conservatives and reformists will continue to work against each other for the foreseeable future, so long as rapprochement remains out of reach.

The mainstream public and elite’s views of the United States are first and foremost driven by what America represents: the world’s largest economy, the strongest military, the most cutting-edge technology and a hegemonic entertainment culture. These realities are hardly lost on anyone. Yet for most Iranians, these qualities do not translate into naively believing that what is good for America is good for them. Indeed, they are reluctant to attribute any altruistic motives to American actions toward their own country or any other. Complaints about American unilateralism, militarism, lack of humility, inadequate knowledge of Muslim cultures, and shallow public relations campaigns are shared by people and elites across the political spectrum.

Moreover, the words and actions of Washington echo loudly in Iranian society. President George W. Bush’s “axis of evil” speech in January 2002 deeply offended all those Iranians who had empathized with Americans after the 9/11 attacks and were now perplexed and angered by this designation. Meanwhile, the conservatives managed to ably exploit this “nefarious label” to their advantage in domestic politics.

Furthermore, although Iranians are rather critical of the clerics’ style of statecraft and their political track record (human rights abuses, economic hardships, political violence, etc.), they resist the historical proclivity of their predecessors to call for the revolutionary overthrow of any government of which they disapproved. Some contend that the legacy of two revolutions (1905 and 1979) and numerous other political upheavals (1941, 1946, 1953 and 1964) in one century has diminished Iranians’ appetite for radical and drastic change.

Still, at a time when the nuclear cleavage has obscured more meaningful approaches to U.S.-Iranian relations, one is left wondering whether there is, in fact, any desire in Washington or Tehran to escape the present quandary. ■