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Oil in the Gulf

Obstacles to Democracy and Development

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ASHGATE

Chapter 3

The Reformist Movement in Iran

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Introductory Remarks

These are confusing and contentious times in Iran, and analysts are wrangling over how to interpret events there.

Pessimists refer to the intimidation and imprisonment of prominent activists, deputies, editors and publishers, Draconian measures against the press and vigilante violence as evidence that things have changed little since Mohammad Khatami (b. 1943) was elected president in Iran in May 1997.¹ They maintain that the Cabinet and Parliament still lack force, the judiciary and the Guardian Council² 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 democratic state. A society where the genie of dissent has been let out of the bottle cannot remain silent in perpetuity, they say, and argue that the demography of a young, urban, educated and politically aware population favors the reform movement.³ They remind us that, while at the time of the 1979 revolution half of the population lived in urban centers, that figure has now reached over 61 per cent, and more strikingly,

1 They have in mind such events as the 1998 serial murders of political dissidents and writers by alleged rogue agents in the Ministry of Intelligence, the assassination of the key theoretician of the reformist movement, the closure of over 90 pro-democracy newspapers and periodicals, the violent crackdown on student demonstrators in July 1999, the trial of numerous intellectuals and activists for taking part in a conference in Berlin or for conducting unflattering public opinion polls, the imprisonment of the most outspoken journalists, scholars and lawyers, and the summoning to court and even jailing of sitting members of the legislature on the grounds that they libeled and slandered the hard-line judiciary during parliamentary speeches.

2 The Guardian Council is a 12-man body of clerics and lawyers which has the mandate of ensuring that all laws passed by Parliament are in accordance with Islamic *shari'a* law and the constitution of Iran. It also has the power to screen and disqualify any candidates contending a national office, on the basis of their ideological and moral qualifications.

3 Iran's population has risen from 33.7 million in 1976–77 to over 65.6 million in 2001. This demographic explosion has meant that in 1996 almost 40 per cent of the country's population was below the age of 15 while only 6.6 per cent were over the age of 60.

during the same time span the literacy rate has skyrocketed from less than 50 per cent to over 83 per cent.⁴ The optimists interpret these irreversible demographic trends as harbingers of the revolution of rising expectations that is gaining momentum in the country. Furthermore, they claim that, thanks to the addition of some 21 million new entrants to the ranks of eligible voters since the 1979 revolution, Iranian voters are increasingly asserting their willingness and potential to reshape the sociopolitical and cultural system of their country.⁵

These different readings provide different answers to the following questions:

- Have hard-liners managed to wear the reformist camp down and weaken it in the eyes of voters? Has this movement fallen victim to cynicism, demoralization and dejection – or can it still rejuvenate itself?
- Is it true that President Mohammad Khatami's cautious administration has managed to drive the sensitive to impatience and despair? Will the reformist movement lead a less cautious and syncopated crusade for political liberalization in the years to come?
- Should we interpret the retreats and setbacks of the reformist movement so far as an allegro prelude to a long mournful march towards disillusionment?
- If the reform movement is now battered and beaten, does this mean that political change will now only come from outside the ranks of the regime?

Before we can begin to sort through the answers to these questions, we must ask one that is more fundamental: what have we learned about the nature of political life in post-revolutionary Iran? This chapter will offer the five lessons set out in the following.

Lesson 1: *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.*⁶

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 change a *bona fide* theocracy from within. On that momentous day – without having been cajoled by any leader or established political party – over 83 per cent of the voters of Iran took part in the largest-ever turnout for any executive or legislative branch elections

4 The above data is based on various editions of *Iran Statistical Yearbook* published by the Statistical Center of Iran and Ashofteh Tehrani (1372/1993).

5 Here we can refer to various sociological studies and polling surveys that indicate that increased literacy has led to a decline in the fertility rate and abandonment of traditional views regarding gender roles and cultural determinism (see Abdi and Goudarzi, 1378/1999). Moreover, analysis of recent electoral data shows that the gap between the political preferences of urban and rural Iranians is narrowing.

6 For discussions of Iranian political and popular culture see Farsoun and Mashayekhi (1992), Khosrokhavar and Roy (1999), Adelkhah (2000) and Yu (2002).

in the country's history and provided the reform candidate, Mohammad Khatami, with a landslide victory. Moreover, in three subsequent elections – the March 1999 village and city council elections, the February 2000 parliamentary elections and the 2001 presidential elections where Khatami was once again a candidate – respectively 64 per cent, 69 per cent and 66 per cent of Iran's voters went to the polling booths and each time overwhelmingly cast their votes for the reformist candidates.⁷

Not only that, but the people demonstrated to themselves as well as the ruling elite that a politically assertive citizenry could tame the conservative clerical establishment by firmly exerting public pressure on it. A brief look at the outcome of the 2000 parliamentary elections demonstrates the truth of these two claims. First, although there were some 1,500 more candidates in 2000 than in the preceding round of general elections, there was a 30 per cent drop in the rate of candidates who were disqualified by the Guardian Council.⁸ The voters unseated 73 per cent of the deputies who had served in the outgoing conservative-dominated chamber and handed over 200 seats (out of a total of 290) to reformist candidates.

Once the election results had shown the clear victory of the reformists, influential conservative elements called for the cancellation of the results in Teheran on bogus grounds of election fraud and gerrymandering. Mindful of the possible repeat of the two-week-long student unrest of July 1999 that had rocked the Iranian political establishment, Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei (b. 1939), the country's Supreme Leader, endorsed the accuracy of the electoral outcome.

The fact that the Emperor has no clothes can be easily observed once one looks at how the percentage of clerics elected to the Iranian parliament has plummeted. The percentage has consistently declined from 49 per cent in 1980 to less than 13 per cent in 2000.⁹ A decline of 36 per cent in only 20 years cannot but serve as a powerful reminder to the ruling clerical establishment that power comes with accountability, that trust has an *ad hoc* quality and that loyalty is revocable in light of performance.

Lesson 2: *Demographic and social forces are rapidly transforming the contours of Iranian society from a traditional-authoritarian structure to a modern-democratic one.*

The events of the past few years have made it clear that the members of Iran's 23-million-strong cultural middle class (people with high school diplomas or university degrees) now view themselves not as mere "nationals" but as "citizens". No longer

7 For an analysis of the February 18, 2000 parliamentary elections, see Esfandiari and Bertone (2000, pp. 11–45).

8 In 1984, 1988, 1992, 1996 and 2000 respectively 1,584; 2,001; 3,150; 5,365; and 6,856 candidates registered to run for Parliament. In these same years, respectively, 54 per cent, 80 per cent, 65 per cent, 61 per cent and 91 per cent of these candidates were cleared to stand for office by the Council of Guardians.

9 See Baktiari (1996, p. 241) and Islamic Consultative Assembly (1981, p. 199).

interested in hearing pontificators talk about their "patriotic or religious duties", they are increasingly inquiring about their "citizenship rights" (jobs, political and social freedoms). A poised, robust and sober student movement representing over 20 million high school and university students has created a formidable constituency that the state cannot simply absorb, ignore or buy off.¹⁰

In addition, Iranian journalists and writers have managed to create a substantial, serious and sophisticated media audience as well as an animated court of public opinion which looks doubtfully at the clergy's attempts to present a whitewashed view of the ancient Islamic glory and its own recent heroic past. The number of newspapers, periodicals, books and pamphlets published in Iran has risen dramatically in recent years.¹¹ This increase has been supplemented with an equally impressive rise in the circulation of books and newspapers as well as the burgeoning of the private-sector press.¹²

These changes are compounded by a fundamental and multi-pronged change-over that society at large is currently undergoing. Emotional and frenzied crowds are giving way to rational actors; populist slogans and ideological appeals (or dictates) are now seen as vain; family structure is becoming more democratic; relationships and expectations better defined; and consumers and purveyors of services better informed. In short, the pace of the transition from a traditional-authoritarian society to a more modern-democratic has intensified. The emerging rifts between ideals and practice, politics and jurisprudence, public discourse and private conduct, and finally, the factual and the "ought to be" (the normative) are responsible for these transformations. The profound cultural, economic and social transformations of the post-revolutionary era have bequeathed to Iranian politics a multi-dimensionality and sophistication previously unimaginable. Today the average Iranian citizen is not politically gullible or subject to flattery, and the polity is not torpid and effete. Indeed, in many ways society has managed to move ahead of politics.¹³

Lesson 3: *In the factional and fluid havoc of Iranian politics, success and failure are often conditional, since gains tend to be marginal and losses temporary.*

Stated positions are rarely inflexible, alliances are hardly enduring, defeat is by no means total, victory is in no way unqualified, grief not at all permanent and political

10 In 1996, students constituted some 32 per cent of the total population of Iran.

11 According to the Ministry of Islamic Culture's Director of Domestic Press, more than 57 per cent (927 out of 1,611) of the periodicals published in 2001 were granted a publication permit after the coming to power of President Khatami in 1997 (*Iran Emrooz*, August 23, 2001). The total circulation of daily newspapers, which stood at 1.3 million copies in 1997, increased to 2.7 million in 1999. The reformist newspapers were responsible for most of this increase.

12 In 1986, the total circulation of books and pamphlets published in Iran was 28,112. In 1998, that same statistic stood at 79,402. Non-governmental organizations and individuals were largely responsible for this upsurge.

13 For an interesting eyewitness account of this, see Yaghmaian (2002).

cachet never eternal. One can think of the ministerial interpolations and melodramatic public trials of the last few years as an example. While the clerical courts almost always reprimand or find the accused guilty of the offenses with which they are charged, the court of public opinion concurrently bestows upon them the honor of being icons of reform and democracy. Converseley, the February 28, 2003 village-city council elections brought about a crushing electoral defeat for the coalition of the 18 reformist parties that had grown complacent and overconfident about their electoral supremacy. In one of the lowest nationwide voter turnouts in the post-revolutionary period, less than 40 per cent of eligible voters went to the polls and registered their disillusionment with the bitter factional wrangling by electing a slate of largely conservative candidates who were by and large political unknowns.¹⁴

Lesson 4: *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), acts (clapping, dancing, holding hands, whistling, ambiguous language, nostalgic lyrics, anodyne leisure or recreational activity or other manifestations of youthful verve), events (victory or defeat of the national soccer team, temporary loss of water or electricity, factory closures) can cause a serious political crisis, since the state is neither ideologically nor structurally capable of preventing or defusing such escapades. As an advisor to 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.

Lesson 5: *Understanding contemporary Iran is impossible unless we understand the deeply-embedded cultural and political paradoxes that have emerged over the past two and a half decades.*

As Ira Lapidus, a historian of the Middle East, wrote in the pages of the *New York Times*, 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".¹⁵ We can also add the following paradoxes to the list provided by Lapidus:¹⁶

14 In Teheran, less than 12 per cent of eligible voters bothered to vote.

15 Lapidus (2000).

16 I have elaborated on this list of paradoxes in Boroujerdi (2001). See also Hourcade (2002, pp. 99–115).

- a constitution that simultaneously affirms religious and secular principles, democratic and anti-democratic tendencies, as well as populist and elitist predilections¹⁷
- 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 "hyper-politicized" society that does not benefit from the presence of recognized, legitimate or effective political media 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 private and public space
- a society where the eclectic texture of popular culture 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 state¹⁸
- 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.¹⁹

The Future of the Reform Movement

One characteristic of much of contemporary political analysis of Iran is the tendency to equate the future of conservative and reformist factions with the political fortunes of their respective leaders, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and President Khatami. I believe we should avoid the pitfall of personalizing politics in Iran, because what we are dealing with is a complex political ambience that is in constant flux. We should bear in mind that, after Ayatollah Khomeini, *Velayat e Faghih* (Guardianship of the Jurist) is no longer a one-man show but has become a collective institution. The reason Ayatollah Khamenei is becoming less and less of a regal umpire or guru has to do with the fact that he is under intense pressure from

17 See Chehabi (1996) and Schirazi (1997) for discussions of the contradictions inherent in the Iranian constitution and political system.

18 See Tapper (2002).

19 See Mir-Hosseini (1999).

those who have gathered under his mantle and speak in his name – Friday prayer leaders, members of the Experts Assembly, the Council of Guardians, the Expediency Council, judges, leaders' representatives in various ministries, universities, councils, etc. – to safeguard the positions and perquisites that they have become accustomed to.²⁰

Nor should we fall for a facile equation of the reform movement with the persona of President Khatami, who increasingly seems to fit Machiavelli's description of an "unarmed prophet" – a man who challenges powerful rivals yet lacks the political muscle to defend himself. Khatami should be viewed simply as a by-product of Iranians' high aspirations, pent-up emotions and tortured hopes. The deep-rooted demands for reform on the part of Iran's young, educated and urban polity indicate that a genuine reformist social movement is quite capable of cutting its umbilical cord to President Khatami, should he fail to keep up with the pace and the turns in the road still ahead. There is even evidence that Khatami's younger and more radical parliamentary allies are becoming more assertive in letting their views be known. As one indicator, we can refer to the confidence votes of President Khatami's two cabinets in 1997 and 2001. In 1997, the conservative-dominated fifth Parliament gave 4,571 positive and 841 negative votes (with 371 abstentions), respectively, to Khatami's cabinet. Then in 2001 the reformist-dominated sixth Parliament, which is more sympathetic to Khatami, gave his ministers a total of 3,690 positive and 1,301 negative votes (with 255 abstentions), respectively.²¹ In another move in May 2003, over 130 reformist parliamentarians wrote an open letter to Ayatollah Khamenei asking him to change the course of political events before the entire establishment collapses. This was supplemented by rumors that they will also resign en masse to further discredit the regime.

Even a passing glance at the state of factional fighting in post-1997 Iran would indicate that the squabbling conservatives and reformists will continue to work against each other for the foreseeable future, with rapprochement not presently within reach.²² And thus, it is likely that the painful and slow process of reform will continue. The conservatives have so far demonstrated their ability to stall, torpedo or dilute any reformist initiative they do not like.²³ In addition, not being worried about how much political capital they have lost, they have not shied away from utilizing the repressive state apparatuses at their disposal. In this way, they have

20 One example of such pressure manifested itself on August 6, 2000, when Ayatollah Khamenei directly ordered the newly elected Parliament to drop its plans to pass a more liberal media law. Parliament and the Khatami Administration could do nothing except look on helplessly.

21 Islamic Republic News Agency (August 22, 2001).

22 For accounts of this phenomenon, see Brumberg (2001), Moslem (2002) and Buchta (2000).

23 In May 2003, the conservative Guardians Council rejected two key pieces of legislation which were introduced, with much fanfare, by Khatami and his supporters to enhance presidential powers. Khatami called the action "unacceptable" but, nevertheless, resigned himself to this predicament.

created a situation that can be best described as a political stalemate if not a deadlock.

Despite all the demographic trends that favor the reformists, prudence dictates that we should not confuse hope with reality. We should be wary of formulations that reduce politics to reflexes of economic processes and social structures. While credit must be given to the reformist camp for maintaining its broad alliance and training its young cadres, we should also recognize that the realization of their goals is neither easy nor imminent. Iran is still a country where the conduct of politics remains non-transparent, 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, where "free and fair elections" is not synonymous with "democratic governance". It is still a country of "persons" not "laws", a country where the religious-patriarchal state is both able and willing to devour institutions of civil society, where non-governmental organizations cannot act as ombudsmen between civil society and the state, where primordial ties overshadow social obligations, where "trust" as a social capital hardly manages to cut across horizontal family, clan and friendship ties, where social mobility is viewed as based on fortuitous factors, connections or influence-peddling rather than hard work, and where civil society remains underdeveloped and its shock-absorbing institutions fragile.

On the positive side, however, Iranians are now experiencing perhaps the most serious national debate in their history on such themes as the merits of democracy, tolerance, non-violence, globalization and modernity. Hence, we should be equally skeptical of predictions about the imminent and/or inevitable final victory by either the reformists or the conservatives. This, then, is the nature of factional politics in post-revolutionary Iran.

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