

The Khatami Phenomenon in Iran: The Beginning of the End for the Islamic Republic?

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Brief Analysis

The only people who do not realize that the Islamic revolution is over are some in Washington and those in power in Tehran. The revolutionary zeal and popularity is gone. In many ways, Iran today is like the Soviet Union under Gorbechev, with the critical difference that the transition away from the Islamic Republic is being initiated by the same people who were responsible for the Islamic revolution of 1979. For instance, the terrorists who took over the American embassy in Iran in 1980 are now some of President Mohammed Khatami's staunchest supporters.

The current regime is trying to save both the nation and the religion. There is, however, a growing gap between the two: people are less faithful to Islam, and religion has become a private matter and less political. Pious mullahs realize that if Islam continues to be so involved in politics, Islam will lose. The mullahs would prefer, in the best of worlds, that the state enforce sharia as the law, but they realize that doing so has caused people to turn away from Islam. So a significant group of mullahs has decided that a secular state is best for Islam.

> Khatami is trying to destroy revolutionary-era symbols in order to create an irreversible situation. For example, Khatami recently attended an official reception with his wife, which is an unprecedented gesture. Another example is his CNN interview, which was directed more at Iranian public opinion than at the American government. In the interview, his aim was to destroy the symbol of America as inherently evil. He is also trying to establish a state of law in Iran, by controlling the judiciary, security forces and other governmental institutions.

Factional struggles. The election was an earthquake for the conservatives. They are clinging to power for power's sake. For that reason, they desperately want to get rid of Khatami. However, they are not using the old tricks to achieve that end. Instead of assassination attempts, political demonstrations in the streets or use of security forces, the present struggle is being fought according to the constitutional framework.

The conservatives' only hope against Khatami is supreme religious guide Ali Khamenei, whose power to dismiss the president is explicit in the constitution. However, Khamenei will not oust Khatami as long as Khamenei's number one position is not threatened, and Khatami has no intention to challenge Khamenei. Khamenei has not tried to undermine Khatami's efforts to create a state of law; he will remain the ultimate leader of the country, but will act more as a referee. The good relations between Khamenei and Khatami leave no role for ex-president Ali Akbar Rafsanjani. Rafsanjani is furious at Khatami, because he thought he was going to be the go-between with Khamenei, and instead he has no role at all.

> Khatami's primary goal will be to liberalize the political scene and improve the judicial system, and then he will tackle the economic issue. The bigger issue of relations with America can only be dealt with once the internal system has been reformed.

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New images. The Islamic Republic is now allowing a new set of images to emerge, but it is not clear how much policy

has changed. The best example of this phenomenon is Khatami's female cabinet minister, Massoomeh Ebtekar. Women are officially banned from cabinet positions, but due to this regime's emphasis on projecting an image of modernity, she has been made a vice president in the cabinet. Ebtekar is also symptomatic of another paradox of this regime: In 1980, as one of the American embassy hostage-takers, she informed reporters that given the chance, she would not hesitate to murder Americans. Now, this woman is functioning as a diplomat.

Iranian people and the fundamentalist agenda.

- The struggle to regain lost rights. Iran's present has been legitimized by the totalitarian regime's confiscation of its past. Like Turkey and other countries in the region, Iran suffered a societal crisis in the early part of this century. Iran's solution was to modernize. This included important advances toward the emancipation of women and the creation of a modern culture and modern institutions. The totalitarian Islamic Republic has hidden this history of progressiveness, leading people to erroneously lump Iran together with Saudi Arabia. In Saudi Arabia, people have not yet started to fight for these rights. In Iran, people are fighting to gain back rights they once had.
- Islamic law is anachronistic. The fundamentalist government in Iran has tried to legitimize its rule through the use of Islamic law. Khatami supports "the rule of law", an idea that sounds progressive to Western ears, but he means Islamic law, which says girls can be married at age nine and adulterers can be stoned to death. This fundamentalism is not part of the Iranian tradition. Traditionally, there was a strong tendency in Iran to separate religion from public life, with Islam in Iran playing a similar role to Christianity in the United States. Before the revolution, Iran was more tolerant. Since the revolution, the true legacy of Iran has been supplanted by Islamic law, which the fundamentalists have foisted on the people as the true Iranian tradition.
- The Iranian people do not accept the fundamentalist agenda. According to myth, advanced by some ill-informed media, Iranian women have accepted the wearing of the veil for the past eighteen years. If this were true, why would patrols exist that enforce the correct wearing of the veil and other "proper" behavior? This would not be needed if people wanted to act this way of their own accord. Resistance is being expressed on a personal level. Because it would be impossible not to wear the veil, the women show opposition by not wearing the veil properly. This type of guerrilla warfare would not exist in a society that accepted the limitations imposed on its freedom.

The Khatami paradox. Khatami embodies and confronts a paradox. He could run as a candidate only because he was a member of the clergy, had revolutionary credentials, and was part of the establishment. However, the people have become disenchanted with the establishment, and voted for him precisely because he was the least "establishment" of the four approved candidates. During the Shah's time, the clergy always posed as the victim, the opposition. With the clergy's empowerment, they brought about a hatred of theocracy, and even of Islam as a religion. Therefore, in order to win the election, Khatami had to present a platform that went against all of his credentials. Khatami thus finds himself expected to both defend and defeat the Islamic regime. Khatami is the symptom of changes underway; he is not the cause of change.

In an open election, Iranians would vote for the most secular party. The United States should lend its support to the secular trend, not to any individual in Iran. America has been popular in Iran precisely because it has taken firm positions, and it should continue doing so.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Tahl Colen.

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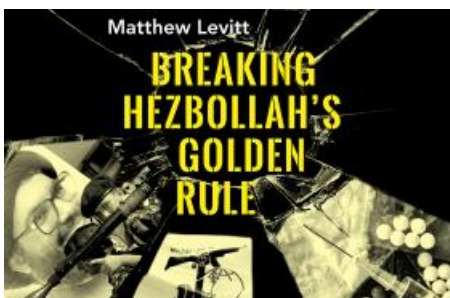
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