

The New Iranian Government: Continuity and Change

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Brief Analysis

Hojjat ul-Islam Mohammad Khatami, who won a landslide victory in Iran's presidential elections on May 23, has scored another stunning achievement with the Iranian Majlis' (parliament) approval of all twenty-two of his cabinet ministers on August 20. The ratification of all—even the most controversial—appointments, was a substantial show of Khatami's strength. In every previous Iranian government except former President Ali Akbar Rafsanjani's first cabinet, the Majlis rejected some of the nominees.

These developments attest to popular support for real reform in Iranian politics. They mark a new phase in Iran's continued quest for equilibrium between the creed of the Revolution and Iran's need for practical solutions. Majlis approval of his cabinet strengthens Khatami's mandate to pursue greater pragmatism and implement greater change. These events are yet another sign of growing discontent, and signal that the Iranian people have high expectations for the amelioration of the numerous economic, social, and political difficulties facing their country. However, significant limitations remain on Khatami's power which could hinder far-reaching reform.

The New Government. Khatami describes his ministers as the "most suitable from among the suitables," combining "experience, innovation, and new thinking." Like their predecessors, the ministers are a highly professional team of technocrats with strong revolutionary credentials. Most are prominent revolutionaries who served in previous governments—half of them were ministers and vice-presidents (mostly under Rafsanjani), and most of the rest held prominent positions in the former administration as provincial governors, ambassadors, or members of the Majlis, the Council of Experts, or the Expediency Council. Of Khatami's six vice presidents, two also served in that capacity under Rafsanjani, while another served as a minister in Rafsanjani's cabinet. In addition, Khatami appointed the first woman to the position of vice-president, in large part reflecting the importance of the women's vote to his own election.

Signs of Change. Khatami has a mandate from the Iranian people to reform aspects of government policy. His statements since the election suggest he is resolved to make good on his pledges to do so, and confident that his program is the best way to advance the goals of the Revolution. Moreover, his past actions suggest he has the determination for the job. In 1992, Khatami demonstrated much integrity when he was forced to resign as minister of Islamic guidance and openly denounced the "retrograde and stagnant" climate in Iran. Also, conditions are fairly propitious for change: the Revolution has matured, the people are discontented, and the mood calls for pragmatism, even at the expense of established dogma.

The composition of the new cabinet also seems to augur significant change. Khatami nominated several highly controversial candidates to certain key posts, attesting to his determination to blaze his own trail. Khatami's own Minister of Islamic Guidance, 'Ata'ollah Mohajerani, has antagonized Iran's conservatives by criticizing the restriction of personal freedom, by advocating the amendment of the constitution (to allow Rafsanjani's re-election), and, above all, by writing an article in *Ettela'at* in April 1990 arguing in favor of dialogue with the United States. Similarly, Khatami's Minister of the Interior, 'Abdollah Nuri has championed liberalism in Iranian domestic policy,

and vehemently criticized the conservatives, particularly Majlis Speaker Ali Akbar Nateq Nuri. Similarly, the conservatives mistrust the new Foreign Minister, Kamal Kharazi, because he has spent many years in the United States, first as a student and then as United Nations ambassador.

Obstacles to Change. Despite popular support and Khatami's intentions, the obstacles to effecting change in Iran are daunting. First, the head of the state is the Leader- Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i-not the President. Khamene'i virtually backed Nateq-Nuri for the presidency against Khatami and does not seem to share many of Khatami's ideas, especially in the realms of culture and foreign affairs. Khamene'i cautioned the new cabinet to preserve Revolutionary values, resist the greed of foreign powers, and avoid hasty actions when he met them for the first time on August 24. Second, former President Rafsanjani-now head of the powerful Expediency Council which will mediate disputes between the Majlis and Iran's executive branch-retains great prestige and also may serve to limit Khatami's freedom of action. At this early stage, Rafsanjani's support seems crucial for Khatami's success: the backing of the pro-Rafsanjani "Servants of Reconstruction" group was one of the keys to Khatami's election and his team is filled with Rafsanjani's protgs-including Rafsanjani's brother, Mohammad Hashemi who is one of Khatami's vice presidents. Majlis Speaker Nateq-Nuri was defeated in the election, but his conservative colleagues still maintain much influence in the parliament and other Revolutionary institutions. Some Majlis members who approved Khatami's cabinet ministers may still try to block their policies.

Other difficulties are inherent in the structure and institutions of the Islamic Republic. Previously, under the dual leadership of Rafsanjani and Khamene'i, most policy issues were determined between these two men. Now there seem to be two rival axes coalescing: Khamene'i and Nateq Nuri on the one hand, and Khatami and Rafsanjani on the other. A crucial unknown is the extent to which these groupings will be able to coordinate policy. Khatami's relations with Khamene'i and Nateq Nuri appear even more strained than Rafsanjani's had been.

Finally, some of the left-leaning factions within Khatami's coalition oppose many of the more pragmatic aspects of his expected program. Sorting out the contending positions on economic reform alone (welfare state or market liberalization) is likely to be a difficult process. Moreover, even those of Khatami's supporters who favor greater pragmatism remain loyal to the basic convictions of the Islamic regime, and debates are likely over how far the reforms should go. As one new minister said, Iran should "leave the door open to allow a breeze through," but "not to let in a destructive storm." The key issue, therefore, is what degree of openness turns a "breeze" into a "storm."

The Quest for Post-Revolutionary Equilibrium. Khatami's landslide election and the overwhelming endorsement of his cabinet provide him with a mandate for change, but not carte blanche to grant unfettered openness or completely abandon the creed of the Revolution. On the other hand, the same popular expectations for change that swept Khatami to power now present him with a challenge as Iranians expect immediate action and instant results. Like Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979, Khatami has become a symbol for many Iranians, providing them with a new hope. Whether Khatami will answer Iran's prayers or dash its hopes remains to be seen, but the tension between rising popular expectations and the constraints on Khatami's ability to deliver change are likely to be the defining features of Iranian politics for the foreseeable future.

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