

Whither Iran?

The Khatami Factor

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Brief Analysis

Iran's Islamic Revolution of 1979 was inspired by social, economic, cultural, political, and international factors, in addition to strictly religious motives. The revolution guaranteed that "Islam is the solution" to the problems plaguing the lower strata of Iranian society. However, this promise for a better life has not been realized; the revolution has not been successful in addressing the concerns of the "dispossessed"-youth, women, and the unemployed. Consequently, the revolution has lost its spirit while Iran's leaders have deviated from Ayatollah Khomeini's original vision and dogma. For example, Khomeini envisioned a society ruled by religious scholars, but Ali Khamenei, Iran's current supreme spiritual guide, is not recognized as a leading theologian.

In addition, Tehran's policies have gradually become more rational and pragmatic, and less influenced by the dogma of Shi'a Islam. For instance, the 1992 Iranian occupation of Abu Musa and the Tunb islands in the Gulf was based on calculated risks and national interest and cannot be ascribed to religious motivations. Likewise, after the Gulf War, an anti-Western Shi'ite movement in Iraq struggled to overthrow Saddam Hussein. Iran, however, refused to support the rebellion because Tehran believed it to be Western inspired and controlled. Similarly, Iran has also refused to support Kurdish rebels in Iraq because an independent Kurdish state on Iran's borders could cause problems for Tehran's internal ethnic balance. Nor has Iran supported the Shi'ite Muslims of Azerbaijan, who are fighting Christian Armenians over Nagorno-Karabakh.

Stability of the Islamic Regime

Although the ayatollahs have failed to implement their Islamic ideology to the benefit of the lower classes, they have succeeded in effectively stabilizing their regime. Iran had the same prime minister, president, supreme spiritual leader, speaker of parliament, and president of the supreme court from 1981 to 1989. When Ayatollah Khomeini died in June 1989, several of these positions changed hands, but the moves were not dramatic. Moreover, four of the candidates in the recent presidential elections-and probably all two hundred thirty-eight who submitted their candidacy to the Council of Guardians-professed loyalty to the basic tenets of the revolution and support for the Islamic system.

Khatami's Election

Mohammed Khatami's surprise victory does not guarantee substantive change. Although Khatami has the potential to use his massive popular mandate-he garnered 70 percent of the vote-to effect change, it is difficult to determine whether he will use this asset and implement innovative policies as he makes the transition from candidate to president. First, although Khatami's victory in the May 23 presidential elections did represent a sign of the disillusionment of the Iranian people, it also indicated their desire for change within the current system. The popular vote was more a statement of opposition to Nateq-Nouri who represented the establishment, than a vote in favor of Khatami, who was a minister in the government for over ten years as well as the candidate of outgoing President Rafsanjani. Indeed, Khatami's statements before and during the campaign bore a striking resemblance to

speeches given by Rafsanjani. When he first entered the presidency in 1989, Rafsanjani had also wanted to implement pro-Western policies, but proved unable to do so despite the death of Khomeini and the end of the Iran-Iraq War. Moreover, the elections were not completely free and representative. The Council of Guardians, which must inspect and approve all candidates, rejected two hundred thirty-four hopefuls. Consequently, the Iranian public were merely allowed to "grade" the remaining four.

Khatami's Political Shackles

Khatami's independence will be limited by Iran's political system and by three major actors in particular-Khamenei, Rafsanjani, and the Majlis, still led by Nateq-Nouri. Ayatollah Khamenei occupies the highest position in Iran and Khatami's relative inexperience and his lack of strong position within the Iranian political elite places him at a considerable disadvantage compared to either Khamenei or Rafsanjani. Moreover, Rafsanjani may still hold the second highest position in Iran, not Khatami. In the last sixteen years, Rafsanjani transformed first the Majlis and then the presidency into important institutions. He was recently appointed head of the newly established Council for Discerning the Interests of the State, which will resolve disputes between the parliament and the president, and he will probably use this position to establish a greater base of power. Finally, the Majlis representatives who were elected last year by popular vote may also constrain Khatami. Nateq-Nouri was just re-elected speaker without opposition and could use the parliament to hamstring Khatami's moves.

Khatami also must contend with a coalition that runs the gamut from extreme anti-Westerners to supporters of a rapprochement with the United States. This disparate mix may impede Khatami's decision making, especially in foreign policy. The Revolution has deviated from almost all of Khomeini's ideological tenets, except for hostility to the United States and Israel. Many Iranians would love to see a change in these areas as well, so that Iran can rejoin the "civilized world," but anti-U.S. and Israeli sentiment has become an important symbol of the Islamic Republic. Moreover, current social and economic conditions will impede Khatami's ability to effect change. The expectations and demands which led to Khatami's election are beyond his power to fix. Any government would have difficulty resolving the grave problems in Iran, including a population explosion, inflation, unemployment, financial mismanagement, and inadequate housing and health services. Khatami's election presents the regime with the choice of either proving that "Islam is the solution"-which would be an onerous, and probably impossible task-or correcting the problems of the revolution. Khatami's initial steps in government will determine the course the government will follow because the longer Khatami waits to implement changes, the stronger the constraining political and economic factors will become.

Testing Khatami

If the United States is interested in testing whether Khatami is both willing and able to moderate Iranian foreign policy vis-à-vis the West, the most direct tests are to lift the death sentence on Salman Rushdie and to cease opposition to the peace process, including military support to Hizbollah. The other items on the agenda with Iran-including terrorism and weapons of mass destruction-are critically important but much more complicated to address in a clear and unambiguous fashion.

The Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Rachel Ingber.

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