

# Assessing Khatemi's Victory in Iran

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## Brief Analysis

Iran's recent presidential elections constitute an impressive personal victory for Hojjat ol-Islam Seyed Mohammed Khatami and a significant endorsement of greater pragmatism inside Iran. They also signal considerable popular discontent with the Islamic regime. They indicate a desire for change in policy, within the framework of the Islamic system. The fact that the elections were held on schedule and that only candidates loyal to the revolution were allowed to compete attests to the degree to which clerics have consolidated their rule. However, the results show that they have so far proven less effective in implementing Islam as a way to resolve the day-to-day problems faced by Iran's people.

Mixed Results for Iranian Democracy: The vitality of the Iranian political process, the lively campaign, and the unexpected results attracted worldwide attention. By regional standards, the open criticism of regime policies during the campaign was astonishing, as was the regime's adherence to the constitution. After the election, Iranians pulled posters of the losing conservative standard bearer, Hojjat ol-Islam 'Ali Akbar Nateq Nuri, signaling that the candidate of the regime had been defeated, but by the verdict of the people, not by coup d'etat—a refreshing change in this region.

Since Iran's constitutional revolution early this century, freedom has been an important goal of Iranians. They may not have fully achieved it yet, but Iranians have again shown their interest and involvement in politics. As they have on several other occasions this century—e.g., the constitutional revolution, the Mosaddeq movement, and Khomeini's revolution—they made their preferences loud and clear, and the system responded. As a result, for the first time in the history of the Islamic Republic, the candidate supported by the conservative establishment was defeated. The depth of popular disaffection was made clear by popular participation in the election, topping 90 percent. But the elections were far from being genuinely free, nor does daily life in Iran attest to much freedom; signs of openness should not be confused with true liberalism. Only those considered loyal to the regime were allowed to compete in the election. Although 238 people declared themselves candidates, only four (and none of the nine women) were allowed to run by the regime's Council of Guardians, which screens all potential candidates for their Islamic credentials. The role of the Council thus limited freedom of choice and constrained the possibilities for change.

A Real Choice: Although all four candidates followed "the Imam's line," there were considerable differences among them, and especially between the two main contenders. By Iranian standards, Khatami is a "liberal." In contrast to Nateq Nuri's dogmatic devotion to the extreme positions of the Islamic regime, Khatami's campaign statements signaled policies of relative openness and tolerance, and a focus on social welfare and economic rehabilitation—all of which would implicitly entail a less confrontational posture toward the outside world. Whereas Nateq Nuri rejected outside cultural influence as part of a Western "cultural onslaught," Khatami reasoned that outside influences could actually strengthen Iran, provided the country preserves its unique identity and independence.

Thus, Khatami rode into office on a wave of popular support for a more pragmatic approach to Iran's many problems. The key to his victory was the vote of the "resentful"—mainly the mostaz'afin (dispossessed), the young, women and the educated classes—whose expectations remain largely unfulfilled. Although Khatami has been out of

office since 1992, he has gained a reputation for supporting openness. Of even greater importance, Nateq Nuri became the clear, if not quite open, choice of Supreme Leader Ali Khamene'i and the conservative clerics. To the extent that the elections were a referendum, Nateq Nuri's dramatic defeat was a clear setback for Khamene'i. The result was a mandate for change, albeit within the framework of the Islamic system.

**Constraints on Presidential Power:** Despite his victory, significant limitations inside the religio-political structure of the Islamic regime may curtail any plans Khatami may have to change Iranian policy on key issues. The president is not the preeminent authority in Iran, that distinction belonging to Khamene'i. Khamene'i has grown more assertive in articulating policy and exercising political prerogatives in recent years and once his former rival Rafsanjani is out of the presidency, Khamene'i is expected to strengthen his power further. He has promised to cooperate with Khatami, but if Khatami tries to lead Iran in new directions he could well find himself stymied.

Khatami will also have to reckon with Rafsanjani, recently named to advise an enlarged "Council for Ascertaining the Interests of the State" charged with mediating between the supreme leader and the government. This position could give Rafsanjani considerable power to approve or reject major policy decisions, in addition to his undiminished personal influence and prestige. A key unanswered question will therefore be whether Rafsanjani aligns himself with Khatami, or tries to establish himself as a balancing power among other institutions. Likewise, Khatami's rival Nateq Nuri, re-elected uncontested yesterday as Majlisspeaker (with 211 of 243 vote, the rest abstentions), almost certainly will fight to maintain the power of the conservative parliament and possibly thwart change. Nevertheless, Khatami's electoral mandate may discourage the popularly-elected Majlis to oppose minor policy alterations. The already strong nucleus of supporters for Khatami's line in the Majlis may also help him against Nateq Nuri and his conservative allies. Finally, Khatami does not appear to have an independent power base beyond the government to help him fend off the challenges from these other Iranian political powers. Although in Iran, as elsewhere, nothing succeeds like success and his resounding victory will doubtless attract new followers, Khatami's freedom of action may ultimately depend on his ability influence key governmental agencies and constituencies, such as the bazaar merchants, the clergy, the revolutionary guard, and other Iranian power centers.

**Khatami's Challenge:** Rafsanjani assumed the presidency in 1989 with a similar mandate, stronger power base, equal prestige and even more favorable political and economic conditions. But he failed to use this opportunity to produce a significant policy change. Today, Khatami has a more formidable task, not least because there is growing popular disillusionment with the regime. In addition, Khatami was supported by a wide variety of groups, with very different agendas and political aims. Like Khomeini in his struggle against the Shah, Khatami became a symbol, standing for whatever the regime was not—a trait that varied from group to group and person to person. But now he must govern (or at least assert his role in governance) and in so doing must either chart a course among the differing aims of his supporters, or else find some way to reconcile often competing goals. Though he won't formally assume the presidency until August, Khatami does not have time to acclimate to office. Rafsanjani's failures make the lesson for Khatami clear: he must move forward quickly and authoritatively, and demonstrate leadership even before he enters office. So far, his statements (including about America, Israel, the peace process) are not significantly different from the pragmatists' past declarations (except with regard to culture). In any case, what counts is actual policy, not statements of intention.

To preserve domestic stability, the regime must address a myriad of problems, and soon. However, real change that could lead to a real improvement in the domestic situation cannot be achieved by slogans and promises, and may require very significant deviation from the standing credo of the Islamic regime. The revolution has already deviated considerably from its founding ideology, yet this has clearly proven inadequate to solve Iran's social, economic, and political problems. What is needed now is tantamount to confessing that the slogans of the revolution were impractical and misguided—a herculean labor for any regime, let alone one so zealous as the Islamic republic.

Indeed, long before the elections, Khatami expressed the fear that the realities in revolutionary Iran could extend far from its borders to discourage Islamists elsewhere, and thus "endanger Islam." He is now called on to prevent such a threat. In doing so, he may need to return to more traditional interpretations of Islam, quite distinct from Khomeini's radical interpretations.

Eighteen years after the Revolution, its ideology is losing its persuasiveness, its politics have failed to remedy Iran's malaise, and the number of disillusioned is growing. Khatami's victory has served the revolution with a severe warning. His election may provide the revolution with its last chance to prove that its vision encompasses the cure for the country's problems; it is surely a stiff warning that further decline will fuel an even more serious domestic crisis.

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