What Does It Mean To Be a Reformist in Iran?

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Mar 10, 2016
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Brief Analysis

An unprecedented combination of regional turmoil, international pressure, and authoritarian machinations have coopted the reformist movement, leading many Iranians to view the current regime as Iran's only means of survival.

The meaning of the term "reformist" has fundamentally changed in Iran since the movement's heyday in the 1990s. Having reconciled themselves to the policies of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, today's reformists are primarily concerned with gaining power.

NO MORE CONFRONTATION

Akbar Ganji, a well-known reformist journalist in exile, has offered a sound critique of the movement by explaining that reformists no longer accept the views of the late Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, the influential figure who was once a designated successor to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini but later became a sharp critic of *velayat-e faqih,* the system under which the Supreme Leader wields absolute authority. As Ganji put it in a March 3 interview, "Reformists now believe that instead of confronting Ayatollah Khamenei, they have to reconstruct their relations with him. Therefore, in their view, the election result should not be interpreted as a 'no' to Ayatollah Khamenei [intended] to incite him to react in a costly and unpredictable way...In [their] view, the worst policy in the current situation is confrontation with him. They say, 'Instead of confrontation, we should act in a way that encourages Khamenei to support the government as he did during the nuclear negotiations'" (for more on their post-election narrative, see PolicyWatch 2582, "Reformists Apply the 'Lesser Evil' Theory to Iran's Elections" **(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/reformists-apply-the-lesser-evil-theory-to-irans-elections)**).

Ganji's claim about reformists giving up their defiant approach to Khamenei and his military, intelligence, and

economic apparatus seems right. In other words, they are trying to alter the very notion of reform in order to assure Khamenei and other hardliners that "enemies" such as the United States cannot use the movement to subvert the regime. In revolutionizing the idea of reform, they hope that Khamenei will in turn reform the notion of revolution, so that he will once again view them as loyal to the Islamic Revolution's principles and easily appropriated by the system without causing trouble. A cynic might therefore say that "reformist" refers not to a distinct ideology, but rather to individuals associated with the Khatami government in the late 1990s who now wish to return to government.

This exceedingly deferential approach is more comprehensible when one considers Iran's lack of well-established political parties, which makes individual members of parliament much more vulnerable to outside influence. For example, over the course of its four-year term, the outgoing Majlis has completely changed its attitude toward each of the past two presidents based solely on actions and statements by the Supreme Leader and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Such behavior shows the degree to which parliamentary politics have become subordinated to the dynamics of the regime's unelected core.

ELECTIONS WITHOUT CHANGE

The Islamic Republic can best be categorized as "electoral authoritarianism." In such regimes, elections are just as important as the state's authoritarian agenda, though not for the usual reasons. These systems are not as closed as true autocracies, but not as open as true democracies. Instead, multifactional elections and other formal democratic institutions operate within or alongside authoritarian practices and policies. As scholar Andreas Schedler put it, election results in these systems "are the combined outcome of two unknown and unobservable variables -- popular preferences and authoritarian manipulations." Regimes use creative mechanisms to run these elections and incite people to take part in an ostensibly competitive process, and while the exact results are not always predictable, they do not undermine the system's core. In this manner, political struggle between various factions is constrained within the regime's rules and redlines.

Holding elections is vital for such regimes because they cannot rely solely on undemocratic sources of legitimacy; this is particularly true for Iran given its historical background, anti-monarchical revolution, and highly modernized society. Elections serve the regime's authoritarian nature, insulating it against popular uprisings. Whether one calls such regimes "pseudo-democracies," "disguised dictatorships," or "competitive authoritarianism," what they all share in common is a mixture of democratic and authoritarian practices that effectively close the door on both reform and revolution. Occasional inclusive gestures are used to refresh a regime's image at home and abroad, but other restrictions keep the political competition to a minimum (e.g., in Iran, Jews, Christians, Sunnis, and women can all vote like anyone else, but with little if any substantive impact). For most citizens, hope is coupled with fear of brutal suppression, so even minor changes can keep their hope alive.

ROUHANI EMPOWERED?

As usual, Khamenei interpreted the high turnout in the latest election as the people's vote of confidence in the regime, but President Hassan Rouhani took a different view. In a press conference shortly after the vote, Rouhani depicted the outcome as a popular endorsement of his foreign and economic agenda: "Today, sanctions -- even those unrelated to the nuclear issue -- have been lifted. This has been announced [by the West] too...But people want all of the sanctions lifted, and that's okay. We will let the negotiating team negotiate [on nonnuclear sanctions] again, and we will certainly conclude that [deal] too." Yet Khamenei is no doubt confident that the newly elected parliament cannot empower Rouhani enough to back those words up, since that would involve forcing the Supreme Leader to compromise on Iran's foreign policy, the main cause of the remaining nonnuclear sanctions.

This outlook is evident in the moves Khamenei made in the days following the elections. First, he appointed an anti-

Rouhani hardliner to one of the most important posts in Iran. Right after the election, news outlets reported the death of Abbas Vaez Tabasi, the custodian of an institution called Astan-e-Qods Razavi since 1979. Formally charged with overseeing the shrine in Mashhad, this organization is actually Iran's largest endowment complex and financial enterprise, involved in various industries (e.g., telecommunications, automobiles, energy, mining, agriculture, banking, and construction) as well the educational, medical, media, and charity sectors. The colossal apparatus and its billions in annual revenue are exempt from taxes and government investigation -- Astan-e-Qods Razavi is accountable only to the Supreme Leader, and its financial activities are not transparent to any of the government's three branches.

Appointing Tabasi's replacement was important not only for its own sake, but also as an indicator of how the elections would -- or, rather, would not -- affect Khamenei's approach to the "reformists." On March 7, he appointed Sayyed Ebrahim Raisi al-Sadat as the new custodian. A top-ranking judiciary official for more than three decades, Raisi is a well-known hardliner who won a seat in the latest Assembly of Experts election. In 1988, he was involved in mass executions of political prisoners, as revealed in Ayatollah Montazeri's memoirs. His family ties are hardly encouraging either -- Ahmad Alam al-Hoda, his father-in-law, is a top Mashhad imam who has frequently criticized Rouhani and moderates in general.

Raisi's appointment fits Khamenei's recent pattern. In June 2015, he appointed judiciary chief and well-known hardliner Sadeq Larijani to succeed Muhammad Reza Mahdavi Kani, a traditional conservative, as head of Imam Sadeq University and its associated organizations and endowments. Two months prior, he appointed IRGC Welfare Foundation chief Parviz Fatah to chair the Imam Khomeini Relief Aid Committee, replacing traditional conservative Habibollah Askar-Oladi. Thus, even after elections in which hardliners were not major winners, Khamenei strengthened their position in nongovernmental institutions that play an outsize role in Iran's politics, economy, and regional activities, without presidential or parliamentary supervision.

WHY SHIFT NOW?

The conventional makeup of Iranian politics has been destroyed by the recent turmoil in the Middle East and the ongoing pressure on Tehran. Khamenei warned the people that the turmoil following the contested 2009 presidential election was designed by the West to overthrow the regime and destabilize the country, claiming that the only alternative to the Islamic Republic was chaos. This narrative gained considerable traction after the 2011 "Arab Spring" ushered in a period of unimaginable violence in the region, discouraging many Iranians from taking part in any political actions that might undermine the system. At the same time, increasing international sanctions increased their fear of a military attack.

These concerns, coupled with the outcome of the nuclear negotiations, have raised the people's hope that minor changes through elections can save the country from war and chaos. The high vote tallies for non-hardliners can be interpreted as the public's longing for politicians who will take a less hostile approach to the West and guarantee their peace, prosperity, and security. In that sense, the people voted not so much for the regime's legitimacy, but rather for its unique ability to keep the country from falling apart. In the absence of any political alternative to the regime, and without any guarantees that an uprising would produce a democratic outcome, Iranians seem to regard the current system as Iran's only hope for survival.

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