

The 25th Anniversary of Iran's Islamic Revolution: Looking Back and Ahead

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Brief Analysis

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The autocratic features of the Islamic Republic of Iran have demonstrated remarkable durability over the past twenty-five years. The defining characteristic of the Iranian political system is the concentration of authority in the person of the Supreme Religious Leader, who has vast powers under the constitution. In some ways, this system is a closed entity that has proven impervious to reform and liberalization.

The Islamic Revolution also led to a complete change in the nature of the Iranian elite. Among the political elite, the clergy hold a privileged position (although they are not as prominent as they were in the early years of the republic). Moreover, economic oligarchs similar to those seen in Russia have emerged among the Iranian clergy. In the early months of the revolution, all major sectors of the economy either were nationalized or had their assets expropriated, similar to what occurred in Arab countries that underwent revolutions in the 1950s and early 1960s. The new regime placed a significant portion of the economy under the control of bonyads, or parastatal foundations, preventing the growth of a more dynamic economy and providing a source of funds for patronage, even corruption, by influential members of the clergy. Indeed, a large portion of Iranian trade is controlled by clerical families with key allies in the bazaar.

Oil income since the revolution has amounted to an astonishing \$380 billion. Nevertheless, per capita income remains 30 percent below pre-revolution levels. Although the country has begun a program of economic reform and rationalization under President Muhammad Khatami, it has been a painfully slow process. The obstacles to rapid economic growth and prosperity remain formidable. An unprecedented number of Iranians are dependent on the state for subsidies and for jobs that often provide them with a title but little actual work. Iran's population has doubled since the revolution, but its civil service has quadrupled in size.

Over the past two decades, the Iranian public has shown periods of both withdrawal and active political engagement. Women in particular have demonstrated the latter tendency. Despite the fact that nearly one hundred newspapers and some of the country's principal journals have been closed down, Iranian papers are still filled with interesting ideas, and good reporting still exists. For example, Iranian journalist Emad al-Din Baqi remains active despite spending several years in prison due to investigative reporting he conducted into the serial murder of Iranian intellectuals and writers by the Iranian security services. He recently published an article that provides a statistical account of prisoners in Iran -- an account showing that the number of imprisoned Iranians is higher than the Iranian government's figures and even higher than the figures estimated by the UN Commission on Human Rights.

The current Iranian reformist movement is strikingly different from previous reform movements. In the past, Iranian reformists tended to glorify the rule of the leader (e.g., the leadership of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and Mohammed Mossadegh). As in the Arab world of the 1950s and 1960s, the Iranian intelligentsia assumed that democracy meant leading the masses onto the street and drawing ideas from Marxist literature. Today, reformists

understand that democracies require greater scrutiny of the powers of the state, including an effective system of checks and balances and an uninhibited freedom to form associations.

The most recent reformist movement, which began with tremendous momentum, has failed to deliver upon its promises due to a failure of leadership. Khatami did not capitalize on opportunities presented to him, largely because he is not a confrontational person. He believes that civil liberties will emerge naturally if the revolutionary system is permitted to run its own course. Yet, there is little evidence to suggest that this will happen.

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As recently as three weeks ago, analysts and observers inside and outside Iran believed that the electoral stand-off between the conservative Guardian Council and the reformists would be resolved through a compromise (e.g., a last-minute intervention reinstating at least the majority of the disqualified reformist parliamentary deputies and candidates). These expectations were not borne out, however, nor were predictions that President Khatami and his cabinet would resign if a compromise was not reached.

Nevertheless, Iranian society continues to open up, regardless of what the conservatives might argue. As in the past, youths manifested their defiance in their appearance. Women wear short jackets, tight trousers, heavy make-up, and relatively skimpy scarves that cover their shoulders more than their hair. Young people are harassed less frequently for breaking the dress code, socializing with members of the opposite sex, or playing loud techno music in their cars. In the universities, male and female students are mixed together, whereas a decade ago they were strictly separated both on campus and in the classroom. In Tehran and other large cities (as opposed to the provinces, where politics is local), many youths have succumbed to apathy and depoliticization. This attitude has spread to the middle and upper classes, which are not tied to the right either politically or economically. Such individuals do not read the reformist or conservative press and thus do not care which candidates were prohibited from participating in the upcoming parliamentary elections. Youths in particular feel alienated from the elections and will not vote regardless of the potential for a small turnout. This scope of this political apathy includes any consideration of what will happen to the government of Khatami or the reformist members of parliament, providing a sharp contrast to the parliamentary and presidential elections of 2000 and 2001.

Although many Iranians perceive Khatami and his cabinet as totally ineffective, they see the reformist parliamentarians as courageous but helpless in the face of the conservatives. In fact, Khatami and the right are seen as the primary stumbling blocks for the reformists in parliament: Khatami for caving in to the conservatives by not vigorously supporting the reformists, and the right for systematically obstructing reformist initiatives. Khatami is still popular as a man who has good ideas and is not corrupt, but he is seen as a weak leader who cannot protect his supporters. Iranians do give him credit, however, for helping to open Iranian society, advance discussions regarding the rule of law, and gain respectability for Iran in the international arena. Moreover, reformists, intellectuals, and average voters alike all argue that even if the right wing wins elections in the short term, it cannot turn the clock back with regard to the opening up of Iranian society.

As for U.S.-Iranian relations, some have argued that the Iranian right has intended all along to become the instrument of rapprochement with Washington. Many believe that, once fully in charge, the conservatives will finally deliver what Iranian have wanted for more than two decades, namely, relations with the United States. The U.S. presence in Iraq and the Persian Gulf, although not a common topic of conversation in Tehran, has brought home to the conservatives the urgency of engagement with Washington. Developments in postwar Iraq had a sobering effect on many people -- nobody wants chaos, unrest, or the unraveling of the social fabric in Iran. Therefore, most Iranians would prefer talks with the United States over confrontation on the one hand, or a desire for U.S.-led regime change on the other.

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