

Iran's Reaction to New Bush Policy Shows America-Bashing Is Out of Style

by [Patrick Clawson \(/experts/patrick-clawson\)](/experts/patrick-clawson)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Patrick Clawson \(/experts/patrick-clawson\)](/experts/patrick-clawson)

Patrick Clawson is Morningstar senior fellow and director of research at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.



Brief Analysis

Iran's democratic movement has had a busy few weeks. Today, the usually weak-kneed President Muhammad Khatami spoke out about the importance of democracy and warned hardliners against their crackdown on reformers: "No problem will be solved through the superficial elimination of a group. . . . [S]uch tendencies would go into hiding and grow up at great cost." Sunday, 151 of the 290 Majlis members signed a statement criticizing the judiciary for its hardline crackdown, arguing that it would bring only disappointment and discontentment to the populace. Last week, the often timid main student organization (the Office for Strengthening Unity) issued its first strong defense of respected antiregime Ayatollah Hussein Ali Montazeri, demanding he be released from house arrest. Finally, two weeks ago, protests forced the Expediency Council to withdraw a proposed directive that would have placed it above the president and Majlis, able to overrule both.

All of this came on the heels of President George W. Bush's July 12 statement supporting democratic and reformist forces in Iran (without referring to President Khatami), a new policy spelled out in detail by National Security Council official Zalmay Khalilzad in his [August 2 speech \(templateC05.php?CID=1523\)](#) at The Washington Institute. Despite the continuing vitality of the democratic movement, pro-Khatami analysts have tried to convince credulous Western observers that U.S. support has hurt reform and emboldened hardliners. That claim is transparently self-serving. After all, Khatami supporters have argued for five years that the United States needs to offer him more encouragement and concessions, with the clear implication that U.S. support would bolster its recipient. Now that U.S. support is directed elsewhere, Khatami backers argue that it hurts the recipients.

Bush and Khamenei Agree -- and Then Differ

As Khalilzad explained, one of the motivations for the July 12 Bush statement was the July 8 resignation letter of Isfahan prayer leader Ayatollah Jaluluddin Taheri, which criticized "deception, unemployment, inflation, the diabolical gap between the rich and poor, bribery, cheating, growing drug consumption, the incompetence of authorities, and the failure of the political structure," among many other problems in Iran. The lengthy statement's language bordered on the insulting.

Taheri's resignation led Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to issue a response on July 12, which agreed with much of

what Bush said the same day. Khamenei's statement, read several times over Iranian radio, began as follows: "[Taheri] complained about several conditions of the country, for instance, the expansion of moral and financial corruption, the existence of discrimination among classes of people, and unlawful exploitation by some of the suitable government and religious companions. These topics are true, and I have often publicly and privately warned . . . about them." Bush was less harsh, stating, "Far too little has changed in the daily lives of the Iranian people. . . . Meanwhile, members of the ruling regime and their families continue to obstruct reform while reaping unfair benefits."

Yet, Bush and Khamenei differed on what should be done about these problems. Bush's recommendation: "The people of Iran want the same freedoms, human rights, and opportunities as people around the world. Their government should listen to their hopes." By contrast, while Khamenei was primarily concerned with admonishing Taheri for his public criticism rather than offering solutions: "It is necessary to speak and act wisely. . . . Each of us in our speeches and statements must exercise more care and be more precise and not threaten the unity and inspiration of this big and brave nation. . . . [A]ll that America lacks to carry out its threats against Iran is the existence of a secure popular base." In other words, the Supreme Religious Leader acknowledged the Islamic Republic's serious problems but warned against speaking about them, while America's leader called on the Iranian people to solve those problems.

Iranian Response

Bush's statement clearly touched a nerve in Iran. In the reformist newspaper *Nowruz* -- which was banned in no small part for such reporting -- Fayzollah Arabsoorkhi wrote the following under the headline "Bush's Remarks: A More Careful Look": "The U.S. president considered Iran an ancient land and home to a proud culture with a rich heritage of learning and progress. . . . The point which cannot be ignored is the fundamental changes in the direction of the U.S. vis-a-vis Iran. . . . International opportunities are a mix of positive and negative points."

Of course, Iranian hardliners lambasted Bush. Iran Radio, quoting Expediency Council chairman and former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, strongly criticized him for flagrant interference in Iranian internal affairs, echoing the objection of other authoritarian regimes, who know that calls for democracy strike a responsive chord at home. Meanwhile, Khamenei's complaints implicitly acknowledged the attraction of Bush's words: "In the propaganda and the remarks by the Americans . . . they talk about reform in Iran. Reform is a nice word. . . . In the eyes of the Americans [however,] reform means the elimination of the Islamic Republic. . . . Sometimes one hears that . . . such and such opportunity was lost. What opportunity? Surrender before the bullying and greed of a world-predator and an arrogant power is no honor."

The hardliners' attacks had little effect. Few of the Majlis reform elements endorsed the July 19 anti-American rally organized by the hardliners. Moreover, *Etemad* newspaper ran an article by Sayed Mosta Tajzadeh asking, "Will detente with the U.S. give Iran more power for manoeuvre in the world, the region and among its neighbors . . . ? I think the answer is clear. . . . If the U.S. is willing to have talks with the Islamic Republic of Iran on the basis of mutual respect . . . why should one not have talks with them even in the present conditions?" In addition, when the Revolutionary Guards, annoyed at the reformers' refusal to sign on to the anti-Bush campaign, issued a statement warning about a "mysterious current" (i.e., reformers) that has "challenged the values of the revolution," more than ninety Majlis members accused the Guards of interference in domestic politics, echoing the hardliners' charge against Bush.

Meanwhile, last week saw a fascinating exchange of letters between Mohammed-Reza Khatami -- the president's younger brother and secretary general of the Islamic Iran Participation Front (IIPF), the main reform party -- and Habibollah Asgarowladi, leader of the hardline Islamic Moutalafeh Group. Asgarowladi complained, "The stands of you and your party are so distant from the stands of the honorable president that for the public they show a kind of

ambiguity of coordination with the U.S. . . . Play with words such as 'elected' and 'appointed,' faulting the Constitution and undermining the political philosophy of Iman Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution in Bush's remarks and statements do not seem to have been an accident" -- in other words, Asgarowladi strongly implied that Bush's stand is also the stand of the IIPF. In response, Mohammed-Reza Khatami strongly defended rule by the people, ignoring the charge of collusion with Bush: "If the state loses its popular backing there will be room for concern that the rulers must either submit to the wishes of the U.S. or give up the sweet power."

A Final Warning

Rafsanjani's response to the Bush statement included a threat: "The Islamic Republic must get ready for confrontation against the enemy's attack by answering its offensive right in its heartland" -- not a comforting thought. Such rhetoric from the hardliners underscores why their continued grip on power is not in U.S. interests.

Patrick Clawson is deputy director at The Washington Institute.

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