

Khatami and the Myth of Reform in Iran

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Articles & Testimony

On May 26, 1997, Iranians overwhelmingly elected Muhammad Khatami to be the fifth president of the Islamic Republic. Khatami won nearly 70 percent of the vote in elections marked by 80 percent turnout. The New York Times was euphoric, declaring in an editorial that same day that Khatami was "dedicated to relaxing or eliminating the political and religious repression that has long disfigured" Iran.

Such a characterization of Khatami has stuck. Today, a number of present and former officials, as well as prominent academics and commentators, describe Khatami as a reformist and the Islamic Republic as moderating. On February 12, 2002, Robin Wright, the staff writer for the Los Angeles Times labeled the Iranian president "the country's leading reformer." Senator Chuck Hagel (R-Ne.) told CNBC's Hardball the following week that George Bush's "Axis of Evil" speech "made it more difficult for Khatami and the reformist forces in Iran." A public myth has developed that the United States has a reliable partner for discussion in Iran. In an essay published in *The Age of Terror: America and the World after September 11*, eminent Yale diplomatic historian John Lewis Gaddis declared that Iran has been "moving toward free elections and a parliamentary system." Unfortunately, Gaddis ignored the fact that the Iranian government had disqualified 234 out of 238 candidates prior to the election because they were too secular or pro-reform. Nevertheless, Gaddis criticized the United States for doing "nothing to adjust policy."

But, does the myth of top-down reform in Iran have any basis in fact? There is no doubt that among the vast majority of the Iranian population, people crave true reform. But is the reform versus hardline dichotomy within the Islamic Republic real, or more a creation of the Western media? After all, almost five years into Khatami's rule, there have been no substantive reforms. Indeed, freedom in many ways has diminished. Perhaps rather than being a true reformer, Khatami is merely engaged in a carefully choreographed dance with Supreme Leader Ayatollah 'Ali Khamenei to win the Islamic Republic diplomatic and domestic space from audiences willing to accept rhetoric over reality.

The myth of Muhammad Khatami

In December 1996, London-based Iranian commentator 'Ali Nourizadeh addressed the question of reformers in the Saudi news magazine *al-Majalla*. He cautioned Western analysts and journalists to be wary of viewing Iranian politics as a dichotomy between hardliners and reformers. After all, within the Iranian discourse, such terms are remarkably fluid and often devoid of clear meaning, he argued. Nevertheless, many American commentators have been less than cautious in their enthusiastic embrace of the so-called reformists like Khatami. Following the election victory of Khatami, former National Security Council staff member and Columbia University professor Gary Sick declared Khatami to be "a reformer with an outspoken commitment to civil society, social justice, the rule of law and expanded freedom." Is Khatami's record deserving of such praise?

Between 1982 and 1992, Khatami served as Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, and so was among the primary ideologues shaping the Islamic Revolution. While Sick commented that "Khatami permitted the introduction of hundreds of original and provocative publications," the fact remains that Khatami censored over 600 publications. Is Khatami a supporter of democracy? Writing in *Keyhan* in 1980, Khatami declared, "Knowledge of

God's commandment must be the foundation of individual and collective life. People are not able to comprehend God's will through the explanations contained in the Quran and Sunna. Acquiring such comprehension requires several years of studies and much effort." In other words, democracy is fine so long as power is limited to the mullahs and ayatollahs. While words may translate nicely from language to language, analysts must take care that the intentions behind the words are not different.

But, even if the vast majority of viewpoints are excluded from political discourse in Iran (such is one purpose of the Council of Guardians), does Khatami truly support the rule of law? In his recently published memoirs, Grand Ayatollah Husayn 'Ali Montazeri described a 1988 purge of political prisoners which resulted in the deaths of several thousands. Khatami was a member of the ruling council at the time, and intimately involved in passing the death sentences.

Khatami's record post-1997 is little better. Under Khatami, more than 50 newspapers have been banned and satellite dishes confiscated. In November, Iran's judiciary began the largest trial of political dissidents in over two decades. Public executions and stoning of women are on the increase. The legal age of marriage remains nine years old for females. Khatami does little to even speak on behalf of the oppressed. It should come as no surprise then, that in October 2001, hundreds of thousands of Iranians took to the streets in worst anti-government riots since 1979. "Death to Khatami" and "We love the U.S.A." were among the chants. Iranians no longer trust Khatami's sincerity; it is ironic that Western policymakers do. While some commentators argue that the Iranian president is powerless to act because he does not control the centers of power, the sad fact is that Khatami has refused to exercise what powers he does have to speak up as his closest supporters are hauled off to prison. It should be no surprise that in December, reformist students at Tehran University heckled the president, calling on him to step down, and chanting, "Khatami, stop chanting slogans! Start acting!," and "Khatami, Khatami, Honesty, Honesty."

Truth in advertising: The record of Iran watchers and the U.S. media

So is Khatami really a reformer, or is his reputation merely the result of a label arbitrarily bestowed by the Western media? To answer that question, it is useful to examine the track record of the Western press and some Iran experts.

In 1989, Ayatollah 'Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani ascended to the Iranian presidency. The Western press had already been bestowed him with the "moderate" label. On October 24, 1988, a Washington Post headline referred to Rafsanjani as the "Voice of Moderation" in Iran, while the Financial Times called Rafsanjani the "pragmatic power behind the Revolution." On August 5, 1989, the Washington Post published a front page article headlined, "After decades of enmity, a rhetorical reversal. New tone from Tehran raises U.S. hopes for normalizing relations." State Department spokesman Margaret Tutwiler was optimistic, though maintained a degree of caution, commenting, "President Rafsanjani's remarks appear to be moderate and are therefore encouraging." Less than two weeks later, the Washington Post without any semblance of caution, declared, "Rafsanjani's ascendance to a new and more powerful presidency indicated that more moderate forces were consolidating their control." The proof? The appointment of "relatively moderate" Ayatollah Muhammad Yazdi to be head of the judiciary. If Yazdi is a moderate, then moderate in the Iranian context includes calls for banning reformist newspapers and executing Jews and Baha'is. One official within the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance who had previously studied under Yazdi remarked to me shortly before Yazdi stepped down at the end of his ten-year term that no Iranian official "had more blood on his hands than Mohammad Yazdi." So was Rafsanjani any more deserving of the 'moderate' label than Yazdi? Following the September 11, 2001 terror attacks in New York and Washington, Rafsanjani blamed the Zionists. Curiously, the Associated Press stringer in Tehran, reported, "Iran's reformist and hard-line factions have found agreement by condemning Tuesday's terrorist attacks." (The Associated Press also missed the comments of both Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi and Khatami advisor and noted reformist Ataollah Mohajerani, both of whom blamed the Zionists and Jews) as well as the hostile rhetoric of official Iranian dailies like Keyhan and the English-

language Tehran Times).

Rafsanjani again displayed his moderation when, on December 14, 2001, he mounted the podium at Tehran University to deliver the government's official weekly sermon. He slowly and purposely declared, "If one day, the Islamic world is also equipped with weapons like those that Israel possesses now, then the imperialists' strategy will reach a standstill because the use of even one nuclear bomb inside Israel will destroy everything." Perhaps moderate would be an appropriate label so long as it includes advocacy of first strike use of nuclear weaponry.

The willingness by some State Department officials to ignore such high profile threats and statements is curious. Testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee last December, State Department Policy Planning chief Richard Haass told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that, "the pattern of Iranian behavior deserves to be labeled as constructive." Then again, Haass has a long history of advocating engagement and rapprochement with Iran, albeit in reports and studies financed by oil companies.

Do the experts know how Iranians feel?

Officials like Haass and politicians like Senator Arlen Specter (R-Pa.) advocate doing business with Iran. On October 24, 2001, after dining with Iran's United Nations ambassador at the Capitol, Specter declared, "We ought to consider turning over a new leaf and having a conversation with them." However, the United States should base its policy toward Iran on reality rather than on the description of some experts and commentators who have an unfortunate history of being completely wrong. Indeed, there is little accountability for commentators of the Iranian political scene. For example, in 1997, Gary Sick explained that Khatami's rise was made possible when "President Hashemi Rafsanjani, a highly popular figure, chose not to run again." But if Rafsanjani really was so popular, then why during the 2000 parliamentary election did he come in 30th? Academics and journalists too numerous to mention uncritically accepted the heady rhetoric of Khatami's 1997 and 2001 election victories.

However, a far more glaring example of press misinterpretation of events in Iran came in the New York Times' reporting of the Iranian reaction to President Bush's "Axis of Evil" speech. In an article entitled "Millions in Iran rally against U.S.," correspondent Neil MacFarquhar reported:

The threats expressed by Mr. Bush and other administration officials over the last two weeks surprised many in Iran. In some ways, they have united the reformists and the old guard here in criticism of the United States; in other ways, they have strengthened the hand of the conservatives. "Any time we face international problems, democracy stops," said Ali Reza Haghighi, a political science professor. "Now all the discourse must be against the Americans." Mr. Khatami worked to keep his reformist agenda alive "The stress on democracy is the soul of the Islamic Revolution."

Unfortunately, MacFarquhar blindly accepted Iranian government estimates. Iranians who attended the rally estimated that no more than 200,000 were present. He also neglected to mention that most in attendance were state workers forced to attend. Most egregiously, MacFarquhar apparently did not realize that his source, Ali Reza Haghighi, is widely known to work for the Ministry of Islamic Guidance as the official in charge of foreign press. Thus, accepting the conventional wisdom of Khatami's reformism, the New York Times uncritically accepted the interpretation of Bush's State of the Union speech as explained to them by officials of the Islamic Republic. Based on the statements of Haghighi, the Times further editorialized upon Bush's speech, criticizing an American policy that was actually widely applauded by the vast majority of Iranians outside of the ruling circle.

Where next with Iran?

Never in history has an ideological dictatorship voluntarily relinquished power. Iran has been no exception. Contrary to John Gaddis' assertion that Iran is moving toward democracy, the leadership of the Islamic Republic retains tight control over press and society. While Muhammad Khatami speaks eloquently of the need for reform and democracy, he has achieved little if anything in the space of nearly five years. Rather than being the personification of reform,

Khatami unapologetically played a crucial role in the most damning human rights abuses of the Islamic regime. It is ironic that while many Iranians now question Khatami's sincerity, Western officials, commentators, and journalists continue to judge Khatami by his words rather than by his actions. The resulting picture is often the Islamic Republic as liberal Westerners would like it to be, rather than Iranian society as it is. Acknowledging truth is the surest way to achieve real reform, rather than simply whitewash abuse. ❖

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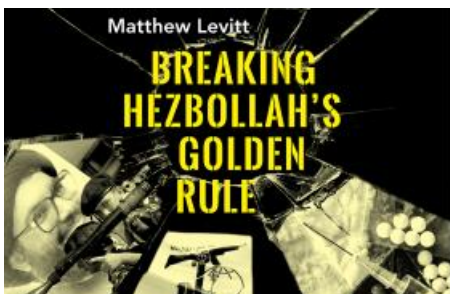
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