

Yearning for Freedom: Iranians Agree with Bush

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Articles & Testimony

State Department officials cringed when President Bush included Iran in the "Axis of Evil," while professors and commentators voiced righteous indignation. But ordinary Iranians overwhelmingly agree with Bush. He voiced what they have known for two decades.

I lived in Iran for seven months in 1996 and 1999. One schoolteacher explained to me why she took part in the Islamic Revolution. "Ayatollah Khomeini promised us an Islamic democracy," she explained, "But all he gave us was an even worse dictatorship. By the time we realized he was a fraud, it was too late."

Between 1980 and 1988, Iran fought a brutal war with Iraq. When the fighting stopped, many veterans walked off with their weapons. Every now and then, the government announces an amnesty for people to return their guns. During a visit to Isfahan, one lawyer offered to show me his illegal weapon, a semi-automatic rifle. I asked if he was going to hand it in. He laughed and told me, "No, I may need it for the next revolution."

Tens of thousands of Iranians were not able to walk back from the war. I went to one religious service to honor disabled soldiers. One wheelchair-bound amputee whispered to me, "They pay attention to us one day a year, and ignore us the rest of the time." Many veterans panhandle to make ends meet. Others have turned to heroin.

It's not only the veterans who are upset. I had tea with one man from Abadan, an oil-rich city largely destroyed in the war. But people don't blame Iraq. "The ayatollahs have had more than a decade to give us schools and hospitals," he told me, "But they only build mosques."

Many American diplomats, journalists and academics insist that all Iranian government officials are not the same -- there are reformers and hardliners. In October, six U.S. senators went so far as to invite Iran's U.N. ambassador to dine with them at the Capitol. Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.) explained, "We ought to consider turning over a new leaf and having a conversation with [Iran]."

To Iranians, that's bonkers. I was in Tehran in July 1999 when tens of thousands of students poured out onto the streets to demonstrate against their government.

They hoped President Muhammad Khatami, often labeled a reformist, would come to their aid. The students still in prison now know better. But at least they haven't (yet) ended up dead like their peers first thrown from the upper stories of a dormitory and then shot.

This past October, a funny thing happened in Iran: The largest anti-government demonstrations since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Tens of thousands of Iranians chanted not only "Death to [Supreme Leader] Khamenei," but also "Death to Khatami." Supposedly the students support Khatami? Well, maybe they once did. At a December speech, they heckled him.

Everyone would like to see Iranians get reform. But when Khatami is judged by what he does rather than what he says, it is clear he is no reformist. He has fulfilled none of his campaign promises. He has not lifted a finger to stop

the murders of dissidents or the imprisonment of his own advisors. His allies in parliament have not passed any significant reform.

Rather, since Khatami's election, the government has banned more than 50 newspapers, confiscated thousands of satellite dishes and disconnected private Internet services. What's growing under Khatami? Public executions and arms shipments to terrorists.

Freedom in Iran is diminishing, not increasing. This is the conclusion of increasing numbers of students, women, workers, professionals and soldiers. One disillusioned Iranian official explained to me, "Religion should be personal. We don't want mullahs telling us what to believe." A taxi driver was less diplomatic. "The mullahs will go to hell," he assured me.

Rather than being a reformer, Iranians realize Khatami is engaged in little more than a carefully choreographed dance with hardliners. The problem is not that Khatami has not been able to push reform past the hardliners; it is simply that he does not want to. Rather than engage an unpopular government in Iran, the United States should welcome its fall. ❖

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