

## Broken Record

Dec 5, 2001



Articles & Testimony

**M**uhammad Khatami became the darling of the Western media the minute he triumphed in Iran's presidential elections four years ago. The soft, smiling underdog had defeated three other candidates -- including Ayatollah Khamanei's handpicked candidate, the colorless and unquestionably hardline speaker of the parliament -- in landslide fashion. Tens of thousands of Iranians were cheering him in the streets. That Iranian authorities had disqualified 234 candidates more reformist than Khatami failed to halt the emotional outpouring of optimistic punditry. Newsday, for example, headlined Khatami's victory a "Heavy blow to Iran regime." The New York Times declared that Khatami was "dedicated to relaxing or eliminating the political and religious repression that has long disfigured [Iran]."

The views of Western journalists, academics, and policymakers haven't changed much since then. The New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, and CNN still refer to Khatami as a reformer and a moderate. A bipartisan array of policymakers -- Bill Clinton, Secretary of State Colin Powell, State Department Policy Planning Chief Richard Haass, and Senator Arlen Specter -- all buy into Khatami's reformist label. It's true that Khatami has succeeded internally in providing some hope to a youthful and disaffected population while at the same time working to soften the Islamic Republic's image abroad. But in more than four years as president, Khatami has not even tried to make significant changes to a system in which he has a vested interest. His Western apologists say he wants to make changes but is prevented from doing so by the enormous role of the Ayatollah in the government. But Lebanon's reputable Daily Star is much closer to the truth when it writes that the president and the supreme leader execute their near-perfect "division of roles ... with consummate skill." As a series of unmistakably illiberal moves in the last few months make clear, Khatami and Khamanei's relationship isn't a real struggle at all: It's more like a well-choreographed political dance designed to stymie genuine reform.

Consider how various freedoms have fared recently in this putative reformer's regime. Over the past 18 months, Khatami's government has closed more than 50 newspapers, one as recently as November 29. In October, police seized thousands of satellite dishes, which remain illegal despite Khatami's promise four years ago to legalize them when his supporters won a parliamentary majority -- something that happened 22 months ago. The judiciary has recently declared all privately-owned Internet service providers illegal. A trial last month for 60 members of the Iran Freedom Movement -- the ideological successor to Muhammad Musaddiq's National Front -- remained closed to the public despite its being potentially the most important political trial since the Islamic Revolution's founding; the elderly defendants face a possible death sentence. Many reformists are already languishing in prisons -- former Khatami adviser Abdullah Nuri and leading reform journalist Akbar Ganji, for example. Yet Khatami is silent. Western correspondents have learned not to interview dissidents if they want to remain in Iran. When Reuters bureau chief Jonathan Lyons interviewed Ganji last January, the Iranian government threw him and his wife, freelance journalist Geneive Abdo, who participated in the interview, out of the country -- this despite the fact that both the Interior and Foreign Ministries remain under the control of Khatami allies. Even the so-called moderates realize that Khatami's reformist label cannot stand up if the Western press is allowed to give coverage to those far more reformist and democratic.

Why, then, do we call this man a reformist? Part of the problem, certainly, is definitions. A "reformist" there is not necessarily a reformist here. Ali Akbar Mohtashemi is among Khatami's most loyal supporters in parliament, and the former publisher of a banned "reformist" newspaper. In the Islamic Republic's discourse, this makes him a reformist. But should the label translate? Mohtashemi is also a founder of Lebanese Hizbullah. He played a leading role in the 1983 bombing of the U.S. Marine compound in Beirut. If he is a reformist, it has only been in the tactical development of the suicide bombing. But the label sticks just the same. Newspapers (like the Washington Post) would probably like to forget that they labeled former President Rafsanjani as a reformist and a moderate when he took office more than a decade ago, even though it's now all too clear that he was far more interested in preserving the Islamic Republic than in reforming it.

Nor are "elections" quite the cause for celebration that they appear to be. In a forthcoming essay examining the September 11 terror attacks, Yale University historian John Lewis Gaddis criticizes U.S. politicians for not recognizing that Iran is "moving toward free elections and a parliamentary system." But "free elections" mean little more than "reform" does in the Iranian context. Earlier this year, seven parliamentarians died in an accidental plane crash. The Council of Guardians, which has the power to vet candidates for the special elections to replace them, has so far disqualified all of the 55 reformist candidates on the grounds of "a lack of commitment to the regime, the constitution and the supreme leader." In Iran, only candidates blindly loyal to the Supreme Leader may run. The true reformists are denied their place in Iran's "democracy."

The disconnect between the image and reality -- which began when Ayatollah Khomeini promised an "Islamic democracy" but delivered a brutal dictatorship -- has made Iranians increasingly cynical about their politicians. That's not a promising start for an erstwhile democracy. In October 2001, hundreds of thousands took to the street, chanting not only "Down with the Islamic Republic," but also "Death to Khatami."

But for the moment, the West seems only too happy to take the image as reality. Diplomats and journalists fooled by the starry reception they get in cosmopolitan Tehran or fixating on Iran's elusive pursuit of reform don't see the advances in Iran's intercontinental ballistic missile program, or notice the weekly Iran Air flights into Damascus that offload crates of increasingly sophisticated weaponry for Hezbollah. They may take Khatami at his word when he declares, as he did to The New York Times in a November 9 interview, that "[t]here are no terrorists in Iran," despite the fact that, according to recent intelligence reports (and despite contradictory reports in the Arabic press), Iran continues to host Imad Mughniyeh, believed to be behind a series of bombings and kidnappings resulting in over 300 deaths.

Rather than react to image and rhetoric alone, the Bush administration and Congress should judge Khatami on his record. They should not excuse broken promises (or, in the case of Mughniyeh, outright lies). If they examine not only Khatami's record, but also the missed opportunities to press the reformist agenda, they will see that Khatami, like Rafsanjani before him, is simply a hardliner dressed in "reformist" clothing. If Colin Powell wanted to find the true reformists, he could begin by looking in Tehran's infamous Evin prison. ❖

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