

Change Rhetoric, Not Substance

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Articles & Testimony

Today, Muhammad Khatami was slated to begin his second term as president of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Khatami secured 78 percent of the vote, winning a crushing victory over nine challengers. In cities and towns across Iran, residents swarmed into the streets, chanted slogans, and celebrated Khatami's landslide. Pundits trumpeted an important victory on the road to reform, much as they did after Khatami won the presidency in 1997, and after his allies triumphed in Iran's February 2000 parliamentary elections.

Despite enthusiastic punditry, the reformists' victories have proved Pyrrhic. The West hoped for a breakthrough following Khatami's 1997 "dialogue of civilizations" speech, but instead Iran test-launched a Shehab-3 medium range missile capable of striking Israel and Turkey.

Khatami's supporters in Iran and abroad urged patience, and promised real change once reformists grabbed hold of parliament. Well, Khatami's allies did grab parliament. The result? More than 40 newspapers banned, the reformists muzzled, and 13 Jews jailed on dubious charges.

Khatami allies still promise that their electoral mandate will lead to real reform, that it is simply a matter of time until they can assert greater control over power centers like the judiciary, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and the Intelligence Ministry.

Unfortunately, the reformist margin of victory has shown itself to be irrelevant. Simply put, Iran's hard-liners will never voluntarily surrender power. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei enjoys dictatorial power. His hard-line allies control Iran's lucrative revolutionary foundations that they use to finance pet projects. The Foundation for the Disabled and the Oppressed, for example, encompasses a business empire worth over \$10 billion. Among other activities, it assists Lebanon's Hizbullah.

While the Western press seeks to link election victories with increasing liberalism, often the opposite is true. Each reformist victory entrenches the hard-liners. When I traveled in Iran during former president Hashemi Rafsanjani's administration, Iranians were welcoming and hospitable; I ate in friends' houses and drank tea in their offices. When I returned to Iran during Khatami's first term, when reform was supposedly ascendant, I still saw friends, but they explained they preferred to meet in restaurants or hotel lobbies rather than have neighbors or coworkers see an American in their home or office. With Khatami's latest victory, hard-liners are ratcheting up the pressure further; public floggings, stonings of women, arrests of Westernized youth, and vigilante attacks are on the increase.

Ayatollah Khamenei's allies are increasingly employing vigilante groups like Ansar-i Hizbullah (Defenders of the Party of God) to intimidate opponents and undercut the rule of law. The group has repeatedly attacked prominent reformers like Abdolkarim Soroush, burned movie theaters, and even threatened to blow up the German Embassy in Teheran. In 1999, Ansar-i Hizbullah stormed a Teheran University dormitory, sparking Iran's worst rioting in 20 years. Witnesses described masked civilians beating, maiming, and murdering students. If the group was from the lunatic fringe, the threat would be serious enough - but the vigilantes have high-level patronage and protection.

Ansar-i Hizbullah members ride security-service motorcycles, and repeatedly avoid prosecution for their violence.

They receive funds from Council of Guardians chairman Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, one of Khamenei's closest advisers. Such support only encourages bolder actions. A week after President Khatami's most recent election victory, they attacked a ceremony where the president's brother was speaking.

Ansar-i Hezbollah is not the only gang of brownshirts seeking to undermine reform. In 1998, rogue Intelligence Ministry employees murdered several reformist intellectuals; the alleged ringleader died in prison in mysterious circumstances before he could implicate his superiors. In the last few weeks, the murders of almost two dozen women accused of un-Islamic behavior has terrorized Mashhad, Iran's second largest city. The arrest and confession of a suspect has not stopped the murders.

So far, Khatami has been successful in changing the rhetoric but not the substance of Iran. Meanwhile, the hard-liners, dead set against substantive reform, are employing a win-win strategy to stymie moderation. By intimidating women, students, the press, reformers, and parliament, vigilantes successfully derail reforms. However, if groups like Ansar-i Hezbollah go too far (as in the 1999 dormitory attack) and provoke violence in the streets, then Iran's hard-line security services can declare a national security crackdown and scale back freedoms. Demography may be on the reformers' side, but with Khatami unable or unwilling to control Iran's vigilantes, the real question is whether substantive reform can happen nonviolently. ❖

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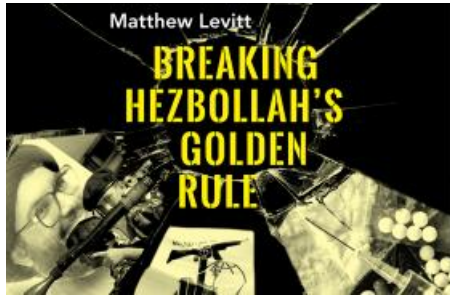
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