

Khatami's Re-Election and Iran's Pressing Problems

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

Jun 7, 2001

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

Tomorrow, Mohammed Khatami is sure to be re-elected president of Iran. But that is not likely to make much difference to Iranians, as Khatami has no coherent program for any of Iran's three pressing problems: economic revitalization, political liberalization, and reduction of security threats. Even though Khatami has shown disinterest in improving relations with the United States, Washington should try once again, while not expecting much-if any-response.

How Many Votes for Khatami?

Khatami's opponents are called the "nine dwarfs" in the Iranian press. The top two in the polls, former labor minister Ahmed Tavakoli and colorful Open (Azad) University president Abdollah Jasbi, also ran in 1993 against then-incumbent Hashemi Rafsanjani, when they were seen as the more reform-minded alternatives. They will do well to match their 1993 result of 24 percent and 9 percent, respectively. The clear hardliners, Defense Minister Ali Shamkhani (an ethnic Arab) and the sinister former intelligence minister Ali Fallahian, will get few votes. Khatami is likely to better his 1997 share, which was 69.2 percent.

The big question is whether Khatami can top his 1997 figure of twenty million votes (20,138,784 to be precise) -- a figure his followers often cite as the basis for their claim to represent the Iranian majority. So far, Khatami looks to be following the pattern of past Iranian presidents: first elected in a flurry of high expectations and excitement that generated a high turnout, and then re-elected by many fewer bored and cynical voters. Rafsanjani got five million more votes when elected in 1993 than when re-elected in 1997 (15,550,528 vs. 10,566,499); Sayyed Ali Khamenei got almost four million more when elected in 1981, compared to his 1985 re-election (15,905,987 vs. 12,205,012). Perhaps Khatami can break the pattern thanks to the coming to voting age of the revolutionary baby boom, which has swelled the electorate from about 33 million in 1997 to about 38 million now. However, turnout is sure to be much lower this time, compared to eighty-eight percent in 1997, when 29,076,070 voted. It will be interesting to see how many turn out at the fifty election sites set up in thirty-three U.S. states at which anyone born in Iran can vote.

As usual, only those candidates with unswerving commitment to the present system were permitted to run for president. Two prominent ex-Khatami supporters who advocate more far-reaching reform, Mohsen Sazgara and Ebrahim Asgharzadeh, were among the 800 candidates disqualified by the hard-line Guardian Council. While student and reform groups debated sitting out the election, most ended up reluctantly supporting Khatami, who ran

a bland campaign: his speech at his main Tehran election rally on May 28 was so stale that much of the audience trickled away after the first half hour.

Clueless about Iran's Main Problems

After his victory, Khatami has little if anything to propose as solutions to Iran's three main problems: Stagnant economy. At least 700,000 young Iranians join the labor market each year (were more women to think they might find jobs, the figure would rise closer to 900,000), while the Iranian government admits that no more than 300,000 jobs a year are created-others say no more than 200,000. Thanks to high oil prices, the last two years have been as good as it is going to get. But all Khatami's government has done with the extra money is: (1) dump dollars on the local market, making imports cheap and thereby hurting local producers, and (2) build up a \$12 billion war chest of foreign reserves, for which the only announced use is the \$7 billion arms deal signed during Khatami's March visit to Moscow. Khatami has been roundly criticized for his lack of attention to economic issues, but he has shown no inclination to tackle the growing corruption or to curb the absurd fuel subsidies (gasoline is twenty cents a gallon) which lead Iran to consume 50 percent more energy than neighboring Turkey and cause Tehran's air to be among the world's most polluted.

Political repression. Khatami has done nothing to restore the pro-reform press, allowing hardliners to close forty newspapers in the last year. Operating outside formal government control, the Revolutionary Guard has this year arrested more than sixty reform politicians -- including a deputy minister in Khatami government and a sitting Majlis member-on the orders of judges who proudly proclaim they are not bound by laws approved by the Majlis. While some of the more prominent victims have had their sentences reduced on appeal, the hardliners have, since March, arrested more than twenty reform supporters on the very serious charge of plotting to overthrow Islamic rule, for which they have produced no evidence except transparently forced confessions. Khatami acts helpless in the face of these brutal assaults on the rule of law, when in fact he could easily mobilize powerful public protest that could force the hardliners to pause if not to compromise.

Security threats. Iran faces serious security threats on several borders. To the east is Taliban-dominated Afghanistan, which is openly hostile to Iran and from which emanates the opium and heroin to which 2 million Iranians are addicted. To the west is Iraq, which sponsors the People's Mojahedeen cult whose members have carried out more than twenty armed attacks inside Iran in the last year, including some deadly mortar assaults in Tehran. The United States shares Iranian concerns about both Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict that is right on Iran's borders, yet the Khatami government is locked in a needless confrontational posture against America. Evidently, Khatami puts raw ideological venom against Israel ahead of Iran's state interests.

One More Try by Washington

Khatami has not responded positively to the many U.S. gestures since 1998 toward better relations, from expressing regret over the 1953 Mossadegh coup to easing sanctions. Instead, Khatami repeated at his June 4 press conference his mantra, "American leaders must first change their behavior and their policy." He also maintained, "there are no obstacles to relations between the two peoples" of Iran and America -- whereas his government in fact acknowledges that it issues less than five visas per day on average to Americans, barring even the great majority of sympathetically minded scholars and analysts. So much for people-to-people dialogue. Nevertheless, it is worth making yet another try to show that the United States wants regular dialogue with Iran, if for no other reason than to further dispel the illusion that the United States is the obstacle to normal diplomatic contacts. In fact, Iran has the only government in the world that refuses to talk to Washington. Such a gesture will be particularly important in the next few months, since Congress is likely to extend the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA) set to expire August 5. The Bush administration needs to show that it wants dialogue but will simultaneously take tough steps like the ILSA extension,

aimed against destabilizing Iranian actions such as supporting anti-Israel terrorism, building long-range missiles, and pursuing nuclear weapons.

But more important than any initiative toward the Khatami government is outreach to the Iranian people. The U.S. government shares the Iranian people's desire that they have basic liberties and a government that reflects their will, rather than arbitrary tyrannical rule. The same hardliners who sponsor terrorism against Israel and against Americans (as in the Khobar Towers bombing) also imprison and torture journalists, reform politicians, and intellectuals inside Iran. To that end, the Bush administration should take a variety of steps to refocus restrictions on the Iranian government rather than on the Iranian people, much as it proposes to do with regard to Iraq. This would include both replacing the degrading policy of fingerprinting Iranian visitors to America and permitting more trade with the Iranian private sector.

Patrick Clawson is The Washington Institute's director for research.

Policy #539

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iran \(/policy-analysis/iran\)](#)