

The Iranian Presidential Poll:

Does It Really Matter?

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Brief Analysis

On May 10, 2001, Geneive Abdo, a research scholar at the Middle East Institute of the Columbia University School of International Affairs, addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. The following is a rapporteur's summary of her remarks. [Read a full transcript. \(templateC07.php?CID=173\)](#)

The election of Muhammad Khatami as president of Iran four years ago has given rise to a perception that he is a maverick, a rare political leader in Iranian history who advocates values important to the Western world: political pluralism, freedom of expression, and human rights for all, including religious minorities. However, Khatami's unwillingness to confront the establishment became clear early in his presidency. After students staged five days of protest in July 1999 — the first true test of Khatami's courage — the president took a different turn. He decided at critical moments to side with the establishment, no matter how much he might alienate his own supporters.

The Issues at Stake With the Khatami landslide in 1997, it seemed that the balance of power that had earlier shifted so completely toward the state clerics was now poised to slide back in favor of the "republicans" — those politicians, whether clerics or laymen, who see a more central role for elected institutions. In religious terms, these republicans take their legitimacy from the common man as a creature of God, rather than from holy doctrine as interpreted by the clerical establishment. It seemed as though President Khatami and his loyalists were forcing the nation to resolve the philosophical debate that lies at the core of Iran's intensive national struggle.

That debate has been around two fundamental issues. The first is the role of reason in human affairs. The conservatives insist on reducing religious interpretation to conform with fiqh, or Islamic jurisprudence, not the laws of reason. The conservatives reject pluralism as a way of understanding religion and politics. They view modernism as negative — the opposite view held by the radical reformers — and they blame western countries for the problems facing Iran and the Islamic world. The radical reformers blame Iran's problems on traditional readings of Islam itself.

The other major difference between the radicals and the conservatives is that the latter want to establish a caliphate system, whereby the clerics are dominant, and their main duty is to implement religion. The radicals believe the

supreme leader, or the post of valayat e-fiqh, should be elected, not appointed by conservative theologians as it is now.

One set of issues not at stake between the conservatives and the reformers is the attitude towards the West. Most of the reformers are not going to challenge current anti-Western policies. A recent incident illustrates this point. The U.S. government pronounced that it was pleased with the outcome of the 2000 Majlis elections in which the reformers did well. These comments were quite damaging to the reformers. In fact, they felt under so much pressure by these statements that they conducted a press conference in order to bash the United States. One can never really underestimate the power that such statements have in Iran. The U.S.-Iranian relationship is an obsession in Iran and that is why such statements have huge implications. More generally, Khatami, radical reformers, mainstream reformers, and conservatives all take a unified stance on issues such as cooperation with Hizballah, nuclear proliferation, and support of the Palestinian intifada.

Khatami Could Have Done More Khatami has chosen not to take the path toward profound reform. He could have done much more by using the weapon of public opinion and public protest to force the conservative establishment to make compromises. While his rhetoric has remained consistently pro-reform, he has never forced his ideas through the system in order to create new policies. As Khatami explains, it was only when he entered office that he realized the vast limitations on the presidency and the barriers to profound change. Contrary to his wishes, Khatami found that he had become another tool in the conservatives' hold on power.

The radical reformers' greatest criticism of Khatami is that he did not resort to public protest as a way to pressure the regime into making concessions. When he came into office in 1997, public anger was bubbling up against a rigid clerical system that appeared to offer little to the common man. The concept of supreme clerical rule – which is in no way a tenet of Shi'a Islam – was facing its worst public challenge in almost two decades. Many of the radicals believe that if Khatami had taken a firm stand and mobilized the populace when the first newspaper editors were jailed, the escalation that led to the unraveling of the reform movement would have come to a halt. A more astute politician, one less burdened perhaps by his clerical heritage, might have seized the opportunity to wring real concessions from the establishment in exchange for social peace.

Khatami squandered this opportunity, quite simply, for lack of the required political culture in general and by political incompetence on his part in particular. Khatami's response to each crackdown on his reformist supporters was consistent. He defended the establishment, or remained silent, or spoke in generalities about the need for free expression and religious tolerance. Khatami did not even publicly defend reformers who were unjustly sentenced to long jail terms over the last four years, even though some of them were his staunchest supporters. Instead, he kept silent at times, and at others, called upon those seeking rapid change to retreat and respect the rule of law no matter how unjust it might be. Instead of instilling confidence in his foot soldiers fighting in the streets for change, the president betrayed them. Although those fighting for change within the Islamic system are generally regarded as Khatami loyalists, in fact, they maintain different ideas and, in many cases, no longer support the president. The members of this faction identify with new religious thinkers, such as the progressive cleric Mohsen Kadivar and Dr. Abdol Karim Soroush, who believe that reason should be applied in religious interpretation. For them, applying reason to religion is the key to becoming modern. They, not the mainstream reform movement, are the greatest hope for a democratic Iran. Khatami's detractors within his own movement regard a second term in office as inconsequential at the very least and detrimental to change at the most. They see the president preserving a system they believe could be dismantled if given the right push.

Ultimately, reform cannot depend upon one man. Even if Khatami could implement institutional reform, ultimately his effectiveness would depend upon the people who must create the building blocks of a civil society. The task the Khatami circle set for itself was truly enormous: to drag a tradition-bound, authoritarian culture into the modern era

of tolerance, individual empowerment, and rule of law.

The Iranian state has been ruled from the top down for centuries, and society has limited experience in social organization and mobilization. Under these circumstances, it is unrealistic to expect that Iran could become a fully democratic society anytime soon. Many in Iran are more concerned about the interests of their special group than in the national interest. And there has been little progress – indeed, much less progress than in several Arab countries – in creating grassroots organizations that form the foundation of a civil society.

Prospects for the Election Khatami is likely to receive 60 to 70 percent of the vote in the June 8 election. There will be a period of euphoria after his re-election, and the conservative establishment may even allow him a honeymoon in which some of his supporters are released from jail and some newspapers are allowed to start publishing again. But the status quo is likely to remain. It will not be up to Khatami to fundamentally change Iran. Even though the intellectual debate in Iran may be quite dynamic, the political process is at a stalemate. A restructuring of the system resulting in profound reform will not take place for at least another generation.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Mohamed Abdel Dayem. ❖

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