

The Power Struggle in Iran:

Is Peaceful Reform Possible?

Dec 16, 1999



Brief Analysis

On December 8, 1999, Wilfried Buchta—author of the forthcoming book [Who Rules Iran?, \(templateC04.php?CID=7\)](#) to be published by The Washington Institute in conjunction with the Konrad Adenauer Foundation—addressed the Institute's Special Policy Forum. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks.

The Iranian revolution has endured years of internal turmoil, but there is turbulent political debate about the nature of the revolution. Politics in the Islamic Republic are characterized by fierce competitiveness among power centers.

Formal and Informal Power in Iran. Iran's formal power structure is grounded in the constitution and governmental regulations and consists of state institutions and offices. Among these are the Supreme Leader, Assembly of Experts (which chooses the Supreme Leader), the president, the Majlis (parliament), and the Council of Guardians (which vets legislation for its consistency with Islam and the constitution).

The informal power structure can be envisaged as four concentric rings. The inner ring consists of the most powerful clerics in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. In the second ring are the highest-ranking government functionaries and administrators. The third ring is the regime's power base, including members of revolutionary organizations such as the foundations (bonyads) that control much of the economy, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its paramilitary militia (basij), and local vigilantes. The fourth ring consists of formerly influential individuals and groups.

Both informal and formal power structures in Iran are controlled by an Islamic-revolutionary leadership elite composed of both clerics and laypersons. Ideologically, this elite is split (mostly on social and economic issues) into an Islamic left, a modernist right, and a traditionalist left. This construct is more accurate than the "radical" vs. "moderate" dichotomy often used in the West, which does not adequately reflect the orientations of the Iranian protagonists. Each of these factions has its own fora for expression and asserts differing positions on various issues, such as rule by the jurisprudent (velayat-e faqih), economic policy, freedom of expression, and the export of the revolution.

Outside the circles of power are the great majority of Shi'i clerics who are politically "quietists." The traditional Shi'i clerical establishment rejects the velayat-e faqih, the concept that provides ideological legitimization for clerical rule in Iran. Although the majority favors the withdrawal of the clergy from politics, some would like to see clerics retain some kind of supervisory role over the political system. Some in the clerical semi-opposition, led by Grand Ayatollah Hossein 'Ali Montazeri, accept the concept of velayat-e faqih in principle but reject Ayatollah 'Ali Khamene'i's credentials to be the ultimate religious leader.

Khatami's Impact. Iranian president Muhammad Khatami did not create the change now underway in Iran; he is a manifestation of that change. With the youth at the vanguard, the majority of Iranians desire more political freedom and a loosening of social restrictions, which, inter alia, translates into a desire for a reform of the dress code and greater freedom of speech. Furthermore, Iranians want a regime that corrects the present imbalance among the

three main elements in the country's identity--nationalism, Islam, and modernity--by restoring nationalist pride and embracing modernity.

Khatami has had some successes implementing his reform program; for instance, he has introduced the concept of "civil society" into the political lexicon of the Islamic Republic. This slogan is well chosen to reflect Khatami's program. It does not imply a separation of religion and politics. It captures Khatami's support for greater freedom of expression, as long as it is done peacefully and within the boundaries of the constitution. At the same time, "civil society" avoids a conflict with his opponents that the terms "liberalism" or "democracy" might ignite in Iran.

Since Khatami became president, he has been caught in a paradox. On the one hand, he supports reform, but on the other, he desires to maintain the "rule of law," which provides his political opponents with a means of blocking reform. Consider the issue of freedom of the press. Khatami has been able to widen the limits of free expression in Iran--there are now about 570 magazines and newspapers in the country. At the same time, elements within the system often draw red lines in this field: Publications are constantly being shut down while Khatami stands paralyzed on the sidelines.

The Likely Evolution of Iranian Politics. The prospects for a democratic breakthrough appear rather bleak. The main barrier to implementing the reform program is, for now, the Majlis. Khatami has failed to reduce the power of the Council of Guardians in the pre-selection of candidates for the Majlis elections, and the council is likely to disqualify most reform candidates. Therefore, it is unlikely that the reformers will attain a majority in the Majlis as a result of elections scheduled for February 2000.

In order to improve their chances, eighteen pro-Khatami associations and organizations have founded a loose coalition with a common platform. Their top candidate was former Interior Minister Hojjatoleslam Abdollah Nuri, recently jailed on charges of insulting the values of the revolution through his newspaper, Khordad. Nuri's trial served to boost his popularity because of his refusal to recognize the clerical court. His trial may have gained him stature among the people as a potential presidential candidate someday; indeed, he seems to be on the way to joining Mohammed Mossadeq (the prime minister who nationalized the Iranian oil industry in 1951) and Khomeini in the pantheon of Iran's revered nationalist leaders.

If the upcoming elections do not yield favorable results for the reformers, a violent outburst of greater magnitude than the student riots this past July is possible. Iran's student population may indeed become even more disenchanted with the current government if they are severely disappointed with the election results. Several scenarios are possible:

- The political left rallies behind Montazeri. They declare him their supreme religious and political authority and a civil war ensues.
- Large student protests occur in the cities, portions of the IRGC attempt a coup against Khatami, or the Majlis calls on Khamene'i to depose Khatami, causing the latter to resign.
- The parliamentary elections confirm the status quo. Following a wave of arrests of his supporters, Khatami fails to intervene on their behalf and suffers a massive loss in standing among them. Khatami refrains from running in the 2001 presidential elections, making a Rafsanjani victory almost inevitable.
- Khatami's supporters gain a majority in the Majlis after the February elections. Khatami is able to push through large parts of his reform program.

It is hard to say which scenario is most likely. Over the longer term, it appears that either the reformers will win or the regime will break down violently. Iran is not in a revolutionary situation today, but it is conceivable that there could be bloody strife within a few years.

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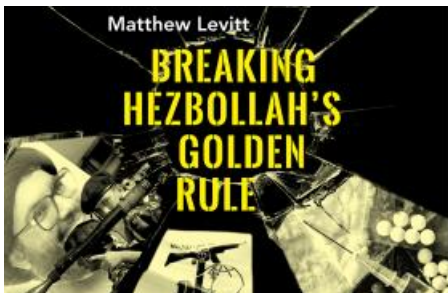
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