



The Iranian Moment

Frédéric Tellier

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Patrick Clawson, Series Editor

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Front cover: Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad delivers a speech in the city of Zahedan on December 14, 2005. Copyright AP Wide World Photos/Saman Aqvami

About the Author

Frédéric Tellier is a researcher at the Institute for International and Strategic Studies in Paris. A specialist on Iran and its geopolitical environment, he has authored numerous works on political and religious developments in that country as well as on regional security and proliferation issues. He appears frequently in the French media as a commentator on Iran.

In 1999–2001, Mr. Tellier served as a science and cultural attaché at the French embassy in Tehran. He later served as a civilian strategic analyst in charge of Iranian politics and nuclear activities with the French Ministry of Defense, working at the Office for Prospective and Strategic Studies within the Directorate for Military Intelligence.

His American education, at Harvard and the University of Chicago, has led him to play a significant role in the transatlantic dialogue on Iran with American think tanks and the U.S. intelligence community, most recently regarding the Iranian nuclear crisis.

To my wife, Frédérique

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Executive Summary

THE ELECTION OF Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president of Iran has frustrated the hopes for democratization placed in it by the West. Even as it sharply contradicted the conciliatory tone of the Khatami presidency, the 2005 election represented the final step in a progressive shift in the Iranian political mainstream.

During the 2004 legislative elections, it was not simply maneuvering by the Islamic regime's lackeys that defeated the reformists. Rather, they lost for two independent, yet interconnected, reasons: because the public felt they were too loyal to the Islamic system, and because regime fundamentalists felt they were not loyal enough. Above all, the reformists' failure lay in their inability to practice concrete, effectual politics built on compromises, alliances, "territorial" gains, and the development of influential networks. The taste for grandiose speeches and reckless bridge-burning on the part of the Participation Front's leaders landed them all too easily in Iranian jails. As a result, the people of Iran withdrew from political involvement, which they felt was aimed only at keeping the same entities in place without altering the basic structures and tenets of the Islamic Republic.

By using Iranian nationalism as a political tool, the conservatives are actually following in the reformists' footsteps. In this regard, it was President Khatami who paved the way. Aware that revolutionary Islam's capacity for mobilizing the masses had been exhausted, Khatami tried to build consensus by rehabilitating the revolution as an essential component of the national heritage. Indeed, the nation's prestige and international influence transcend political divides, and a conservative who could prove himself on this terrain would be no less representative and legitimate in the eyes of the majority than a reformist would be. This fierce attachment to the Iranian nation and its independence has led some of the same individuals who are openly hostile to the Islamic regime to show solidarity with certain of its initiatives. For example, the Iranian nuclear energy program and its likely military application have garnered support that stretches far beyond clerical circles.

The revolution is turning secular. Its guardians have noticed this trend and are adapting their rhetoric accordingly. They are abandoning the terrain of ideology, on which the broken bonds between regime and society cannot be restored, for the terrain of nationalism and development, where a consensus still prevails. In the conservatives' eyes, the Islamic Revolution rested on three pillars: ideology, national independence, and technological development. Though the first of these pillars is crumbling, the other two can still keep the regime stable.

The Tehran mayor's office, taken over in 2003 by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad himself, is a case in point. Ahmadinejad, unlike his predecessors, proved capable of handling in several months questions that had formerly been hijacked by political and administrative imbroglios—such as relocating military barracks to make way for new roads in a city frozen by traffic jams. Such rapid advances were due to the mayor's political will prevailing—with the help of the Revolutionary Guards—over the maddening inertia of the Iranian administration. Tehran's conservative administration therefore showed the public that it could master the machinery of state and offer Iran effective and coherent governance.

A latent tension is now developing between conservatives who are inclined to facilitate the transition toward a liberal economy—"transitional conservatives," or pragmatists—and those whom we might call "old-school conservatives," who defend their interests using the arcana of the Islamic system. Iranian political life is no longer guided by the fault line between reformists and conservatives, but rather by a new boundary located in the very heart of the conservative camp. The Iranian "neoconservatives," as the press has sarcastically dubbed them, have made no secret of their admiration for the Chinese model, which combines economic growth based on openness to both foreign investment and social and cultural liberalization, on the one hand, with political restrictiveness, on the other.

America is the conservatives' obsession, in a way diametrically opposed to the condemnation of the "Great

Satan” that characterized the early years of the revolution. The anti-American character of the revolution was actually caused by the “Islamic left,” the same group that would don “reformist” garb in 1997. The kernel of the Islamic left surrounding Khatami expressed criticism of capitalism and was ideologically opposed to America, and it made no overtures whatsoever toward Washington. By contrast, the growth-minded conservatives want to present themselves as an enlightened and moderate elite capable of acting as the West’s, and especially America’s, rational interlocutor.

The Islamic regime is aware of the uncertainties and dangers that go with its new strategy and by no means places all its eggs in the basket of transitional conservatism. In times of crisis, the Revolutionary Guards are the Islamic regime’s last bastion. The modernizing authoritarianism now being proposed to the Iranian people does not exclude a more traditional form of authoritarianism, which would see the Islamic regime deploy its impressive arsenal of repression in order to make society toe the line. This hypothesis is only a worst-case scenario, however. The Revolutionary Guards now provide a kind of ideological filter for the recruitment, selection, and socialization process of future conservative leaders in the Islamic Republic—a way to co-opt and initiate them into the financial mysteries of the Iranian regime.

Consequently, although the Supreme Leader momentarily considers the Revolutionary Guards the surest guarantee of his power, the relationship between the two contains a fair amount of mutual distrust. The Guards are pursuing a strategy to become an autonomous power, which is potentially worrisome even for the Supreme Leader himself. This strategy consists of three closely interrelated elements. First, it rests on the financial autonomy that the Guards have derived from their mastery of the underground economy and contraband networks. The second element, which dovetails with the first, is military autonomy. The third element is the Guards’ degree of spiritual independence. The Supreme Leader is not their only source of religious legitimacy; they are more attached to the principle of *velayat-e faqih* (which gives religion primacy over politics) than to the person of the Supreme Leader. The

Guards are on their way to achieving an unprecedented process of militarization of Iranian civil society, with the emergence of a military junta a distinct possibility.

As Tehran strives for diplomatic and commercial normalization, it is unclear whether the Islamic regime understands how its own international conduct compromises its efforts. We are beginning to see a remarkable imbalance in this regard. From the Iranian viewpoint, the two remaining pillars of national independence and economic development naturally complement each other. But by placing its ambitious nuclear program—with its probable military component—at the heart of its independence strategy, Iran is undermining its desire for commercial relations with the West. Iran is facing off against the world at the very moment when diplomatic normalization is crucial to the Islamic regime’s health. The future of the Islamic Republic will be played out on the international stage—beginning with the strategy Washington will adopt. Tehran more than Washington will emerge transformed by this rendezvous with America, which everyone in Iran knows is inevitable.

Implications of Ahmadinejad’s Election

Even more than Khatami’s triumphant election in 1997, the 2005 election was the most decisive vote in the history of the Islamic Republic, a watershed event. The election clearly captured the public imagination more than anyone had expected when the campaign began. Although in the first round Ahmadinejad finished third, or even fourth, his participation in the second round and his ultimate victory are owed largely to the regime’s censors (the Guardian Council) and their military and paramilitary correspondents in the state machine (the Revolutionary Guards and *Basceej*, or volunteer militia). Still, it would be a grave error to see the election as simply a conspiracy. Iranian society expressed itself quite openly, and it sent a clear message to the regime. We are now witnessing a rivalry between two poles: on the one hand, the conservative forces around the Supreme Leader, the spine of which consists of the powerful networks of the Revolutionary Guards, and, on the other hand, the pragmatic conservatives, composed of disgruntled reformists and tech-

nocrats who see a need for economic reforms and have clustered around the powerful Rafsanjani.

For the past eight years, the reformists retreated behind the reassuring, educated society of students, intellectuals, and artists who were Khatami's principal allies. But throughout those years, civil society had obscured *real society*, meaning the majority of Iranians, who suffered most from the economic crisis and who were consistently ignored by those in power. Ahmadinejad based his political wager on the observation that inequalities were persisting, even increasing. By denouncing social inequities, which are greater now than they were under the shah, and highlighting the risks of foreign interference posed by his opponents' desire to open up the Iranian economy, the mayor of Tehran exploited the full gamut of nostalgia, frustrations, and fears that still motivate the common Iranian citizen.

Ahmadinejad characterized his victory as a "second Islamic Revolution." To the Revolutionary Guards, the people ignored by the shah are the same people now groaning beneath the feet of the mullahs. In fact, the Guards' network based its victory on discrediting the mullahs and denouncing the corruption

of the clerics in power. We would be sorely mistaken about the nature of the new president's victory and its implications if we omitted this crucial point: more than anything, Ahmadinejad's victory spelled the defeat of the mullahs.

What effect will this election have on Iran's international conduct? On the one hand, Ahmadinejad is hardly the most qualified person to represent Iran's interests abroad. He has left the country only three times in his life. On the other hand, who better than Ahmadinejad to turn the nuclear crisis into a North-South controversy about the right to pursue nuclear technology? Given his ideological background, he is well suited to this role—he can play at being the Mosadegh of nuclear energy as a means of appealing to Iranian nationalism.

Iran's longstanding strategy with regard to nuclear development has proven effective thus far. First, Iran tests the West's determination. Then, it pretends to pull back while, in reality, it bides its time. Finally, when push comes to shove, Western diplomats more or less give in to Iran's wishes. Iran thereby gives the impression of retreating despite actually attaining its goal. Ahmadinejad will likely continue this strategy.

Introduction

HAS THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC of Iran chosen to frustrate the hopes for democratization placed in it by the West? The election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president would make it seem so. Ahmadinejad is an ultraconservative from the ranks of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and his election represented a bombshell in Iranian politics. Just as the election of Muhammad Khatami in 1997 symbolized hope, so the outcome of the June 2005 vote has raised the specter of a radical—and highly surprising—regression. Eight years ago, the Iranian people spoke out en masse by bringing Khatami to power. Has Iran now, contrary to all expectations, embraced the anachronistic rhetoric of a political party that threatens to reverse all reformist gains, meager as they may be? Or should we view this conservative resurgence as merely the product of disillusionment with public policies that benefit only the extreme ends of the political spectrum—as the inevitable result of the majority’s growing intolerance for factionalism within a system that it seems fated to leave behind? This reversal of fortune demands closer examination.

The 2005 presidential ballot is the fermata in the conservative resurgence. The conservatives now control all the levers of power in the Islamic Republic, with opposing factions defunct within the Islamic system. Yet, although the recent election signals a “clean break” from the conciliatory tone of the Khatami presidency, the outcome represents the final step in a process—the result of a gradual shift within the Iranian political mainstream. It is the product of a planned and well-thought-out evolution, with its own coherence and

continuity. The municipal elections of 2003 and the legislative elections of 2004 were both harbingers of this shift. With those ballots, the lesson was not simply that the reformists lost credibility or that the polls were marred by voter fraud. To be sure, the electoral process in Iran is not democratic, but this fact does not exempt us from analyzing its consequences.

In each of the past three elections, reconfigurations have taken place within the Iranian power structure, providing a cross-sectional view of Iranian society and its hopes and frustrations. One clear sign of continuity is Ahmadinejad’s “civilian” status. Though a devout believer, he is not a cleric, and he will be the third president since 1981 not to wear a turban. This trend within the conservative movement actually began in 2004 when Haddad Hadel became head of the Iranian parliament. Such continuities must not be ignored because they help explain the conservatives’ carefully planned strategy.

In the following pages, I shall not focus on the June 2005 election itself. This paper is a translation and expansion of a chapter from my book *L’Heure de l’Iran* (Editions Ellipses, 2005), and much of the text was written before the election. Detailed analysis of the outcome and consequences of that event are included in the afterword. In writing the main part of the text, my aim was not to predict the election’s outcome, but rather to analyze changes in the conservatives’ discourse and strategy. Iran may have a new face, but many of its features have long been familiar to anyone who cared to look.

Paris, October 2005

The Conservative Resurgence

HAS THE IRANIAN population embraced the same forces it had labored to escape since Muhammad Khatami's triumphal election as president in 1997? It would seem so. Indeed, the first round of legislative elections—on February 20, 2004—reinstalled the conservatives in parliament with a clear majority. For the reformists, this defeat was a symbolic event that not only deprived them of their center of influence but also banished them from an essential enclave of democracy within the Iranian governmental structure: the same enclave they had successfully occupied in February 2000. At the time, the reformists' earlier victory had seemed to strike a fatal blow to the enemies of reform and to condemn the conservatives to political obsolescence. But as we approach the 2005 elections, the only remaining reformist in the legislature is President Khatami himself, whose powers are hardly more than symbolic compared with those of the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Hossein Khamenei. In the last year of his final term, in particular, Khatami has found himself in a weakened political position.

In the 2004 elections, the defeat of the reformists came only at the end of an unprecedented political crisis in which the legislative ballot was stripped of all authenticity. By deciding in January 2004 to nullify the eligibility of nearly 45 percent of the candidates, including 51 percent of the reformists (among them the 80 sitting deputies), the Guardian Council—an institution subordinate to the Supreme Leader—obliterated the reformists' chances. This provoked 125 reformist deputies to threaten to resign in nearly 109 electoral districts, which represented 155 of 290 seats. Among those forced to abandon their run were members of the principal reformist party, led by President Khatami's own brother. As Mohsen Mirdamadi, chairman of national security and foreign affairs for the Majlis (Iranian parliament) declared, "This is a civilian coup, one that means changing the regime with-

out military intervention."¹ Khatami's brother's party therefore preferred to boycott the election, leaving to the Society of Combatant Clergy—President Khatami's party—the burden of representing the reformists. Thus, the reformists lost in an incomplete election—the abstention of nearly 50 percent of voters makes this fact quite clear. That conclusion, however, is not the only lesson to be drawn from the election.

It was not simply maneuvering by the Islamic regime's lackeys that beat the reformists in the 2004 legislative elections. The reformists also suffered direct losses at the polls, with the case of Mehdi Karrubi, a leading reformist candidate in Tehran, an instructive example. Facing an unfavorable race, he chose instead to retire from political life. The image of Karrubi leaving the assembly (which until then he had led) amid the jeers of his rivals shows that rejection by the voters was far more damaging than the elimination of candidates by the Guardian Council. The reformists, whatever corruption existed at the polls, lost because, on one hand, the public felt they were too loyal to the Islamic system and, on the other, regime fundamentalists felt they were not loyal enough. They fell because they waged an unsuccessful battle on both fronts—in countering regime fundamentalists and in winning the people's support.

"Sadly, the time for the people to mobilize has passed," the reformist deputy Mohsen Kadivar observed lucidly. And, in fact, the populace has not responded to any calls to demonstrate in support of the reformists. Seeing this lack of popular support, the reformists' opponents have become ever more emboldened; they are confident that they run little risk of sparking an uprising. One significant indicator of the popular mood was that, during the riots of June 2003, students' slogans were aimed not only at the conservatives, but also at the reformist president. Most people saw the crisis taking place at the top levels of government as

1. Iran Press Service, "Khamenei Ordered CG to Approve Rejected Candidates," January 14, 2004.

mainly an internecine conflict, one that demonstrated the Islamic regime's contradictions and its inability to embrace reforms. By merging into the institutional frameworks of the Islamic Republic, the reformists tacitly accepted their role in this institutional power struggle. This acceptance put them at a disadvantage and paralyzed them from acting in any substantial way.

As far as the public was concerned, after President Khatami's seven years in power, four of them with the parliament's support, he shared responsibility for the government's inaction. Only in August 2002—five years after he took office—did Khatami finally propose two laws in parliament aimed at addressing the institutional imbalance that blocked his initiatives. One would remove from the hands of the Guardian Council the power to select electoral candidates; the other would give the president final say over decisions handed down by the ultraconservative judicial authority. The rejection of Khatami's proposals by the Guardian Council in April and May 2003 demonstrated, glaringly, the reformist president's political impotence. In the vicious circle of Iranian political institutions, the fate of both proposals ultimately rested with the very entities whose powers they would have curtailed. The mandate of the Iranian people demanded that Khatami break this circle, and he failed to do so. He should have been able to cut through the knot that ultimately strangled his own political mobility.

By 2004, the reformists had no control over a system that they were supposed to have transformed. Khatami was elected as an opponent of the Iranian political class, and he never initiated the slightest alliance with that class, not even with the powerful Servants of Reconstruction that formed around former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. This same group is the pivot of the new conservative majority and, in return for political legitimacy, might have offered Khatami the institutional connections he has always lacked. To a large extent, in 2004, the reformists were paying for their earlier disavowal of Rafsanjani. He was, first, irritated at being kept at a distance by the same individuals he had helped rise to power, and second, humiliated by them during the legislative elections of February 2000.

Above all, the reformists' failure lay in their inability

to practice concrete, pragmatic politics consisting of compromises, alliances, "territorial gains," and the creation of influential networks. It is the failure of a reformism that was irresolute by its nature. The taste for grandiose speeches and reckless bridge-burning on the part of the Participation Front's leaders landed them all too easily in jail. Meanwhile, during the presidential election of 2001, the Front managed to organize only a single rally in support of Khatami throughout the entire country. On the eve of the legislative elections, the Front still could not agree on a coherent political strategy. Despite the huge hopes invested in it, the reformist camp was ultimately just a sounding board for popular discontent, from which it drew only high-minded rhetoric. Still bearing the heavy stamp of revolutionary intransigence, the reformists' policies did no more than promote strategies for confronting the conservatives. The policies even included tactics for how to *leave* power, an easy way to avoid the question of how to use it. If Khatami's only true talent was his ability to appeal to public opinion, the people, by turning away from him, stripped him of his lone remaining merit. The conservatives took admirable advantage of this reversal; for the past three years, they have excoriated Khatami for his impotence.

Indeed, since summer 2002, the conservative vise has not loosened up on Khatami and the reformist camp overall. The balance initiated by Khatami's victory in 1997 has been upset, and the conservatives, certain of the public's passivity, have stepped up their provocations. Prisoners have been executed according to the rules of *sharia* (Islamic law), even as Iran negotiated with the European Union over human rights; the arch-conservative Said Mortazavi has been reappointed general prosecutor of Tehran; the yoke of censorship has been reinforced, with Iranian journalist Zahra Kazemi assassinated in prison and increasing numbers of newspapers shut down. In the end, the frail edifice of reformism was besieged on all sides, splintered, and finally demolished.

The reformists' awakening came very late. Actions such as their rebellion against the Guardian Council seemed incidental, because they contrasted so sharply with the silence of the parliamentarians when the

council rejected texts as crucial to basic human rights as the Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and the Convention against Torture and Other Inhumane Acts. As exhibited by their stance on human rights—which only became an issue for parliamentarians after their own privileges came under fire—the reformists’ defeat brought to light the extent of the gap between them and the civilian population. Worse, the political crisis during Khatami’s last years in office almost certainly had been planned at the top levels of government.

Rafsanjani, whom many Iranians refer to as the “Shark,” seems to have been the primary orchestrator of this maneuver, which sought to decrease abstentionism by rousing the indignation of the populace. This strategy helped preserve the credibility of the Islamic system. And indeed, throughout the crisis, the Islamic system never appeared to be in danger. On the contrary, President Khatami and the Supreme Leader gave the impression that they were following a perfectly arranged two-part harmony. The former nimbly mixed indignation with a reaffirmed adherence to the system that nurtured him by refusing to resign and by making his party participate in the election—thereby isolating it from the other reformist movements. The latter positioned himself as the safeguard of established institutions and even pleaded for greater tolerance from the Guardian Council, implicitly disavowing the radicals in his camp. Both sides seemed to come together, working in concert toward a kind of recalibration of Iranian politics that ensured the defeat of extremists in both camps and freed up a new space in the center—the very space that Rafsanjani hoped to occupy.

Aware of those maneuvers, the people of Iran withdrew from political involvement, which they felt

was aimed only at keeping the same entities in place without altering the basic structures and tenets of the Islamic Republic—beginning with the *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the jurist), which gives religion primacy over politics. Depoliticization is the symptom of this weariness, and abstention is its means of expression. Less pronounced in the provinces than in the cities, this shift resulted in the majority’s irrevocable break from the political system spawned by the Islamic Revolution. The electorate simply vaporized under Khatami’s feet.

In 2002, an official poll revealed that although 80 percent of Iranians remained supportive of President Khatami, more than half of those surveyed, 54 percent exactly, expressed their disapproval of his policies.² Despite this dissatisfaction, only 3 percent were able to name another political figure who might realize their aspirations. Already at this point, Khatami’s popularity depended on the absence of viable alternatives to his leadership. For the president, the municipal and regional elections of February 28, 2003, were the cruelest warning of the fate awaiting his movement. The reduced number of candidates (220,000, compared with 330,000 in 1999) and massive voter abstention (88 percent in Tehran, an average of 80 percent in the major cities, 71 percent in the area around the holy city of Qom, and an average of 50 percent for the entire country) illustrated the people’s disenchantment. Although the conservatives certainly won by default, their victory nonetheless put an end to the long series of political victories that made the reformist movement seem invincible. The conservatives had returned to power through a kind of nonmilitary coup, but the scope of the Iranian people’s avoidance of the polls suggests a muted uprising—a mass show of contempt.

2. The poll results, reported by Agence France Presse on April 28, 2003, were obtained over the course of a year from a sample of 75,000 people ages 14 to 29. The survey was conducted at the request of the National Organization of Iranian Youth, a department under the umbrella of the president’s office.

Where Is Iran Headed?

THE RESULT OF THE 2004 legislative elections seemed to confirm the bleakest possible outlook for the Islamic Republic's future. Could the reformists' defeat signal an imminent social breakdown that could sweep away the Islamic regime? Had Iran celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of its revolution on the eve of a new one? This latter hypothesis is popular among the monarchist opposition to the Islamic regime and within the "interventionist" fringe of the Bush administration, both of which see the failure of reformism as removing the last obstacle to popular discontent with the Islamic regime. As happened in the old Soviet bloc, says this logic, mass uprisings will now be inevitable in Iran.

But this way of thinking ignores the central dynamic of Iranian society and confuses the situation with a simple political construct. This dynamic is no artifice. Although Iran has, in fact, demonstrated an inexorable tendency toward change (one that preceded and has constantly outstripped President Khatami's reformist rhetoric), certain features of Iranian society—beginning with the depth and intensity of national pride—may well protect Iran from new upheavals and nourish a sense of union that cannot be undermined by the recent political shift. Iran wants to make a clean break from the structures left over from the Islamic Revolution, first and foremost in the economic realm. What Iran does not want is a second revolution in twenty-five years that would threaten its independence and damage its stability. The Islamic system is fraught with uncertainties, but it has managed to remain in place; a radical challenge to that system would be cause for grave anxiety. Despite the hardships of everyday life, everyone in Iran knows where he or she belongs and has found a personal niche. The images emanating from Iraq of toppled administrations and demolished state structures, as well as of the ensuing chaos and instability, have only reinforced the Iranian people's certainty that *tabula rasa* policies would be excessive.

It is precisely along this path that the conservatives hope to gain ground and to build a new majority consensus, thereby reconciling national sovereignty

with well-regulated international overtures. Their new domain is this center that political maneuvering has opened to them. Not one of the new members of parliament in 2004 doubted the depth of the Iranian people's desire for change. Privately, these legislators freely admit the inevitable nature of the break between the populace and the regime's Islamic framework. Oddly enough, the vast majority of these new politicians accept the legitimacy of the Iranians' demands (economic, especially) much more easily than Khatami's cabinet could. Unlike many reformists, who adhered to a socialistic, state-controlled economic model, a number of the new politicians tend more toward economic liberalism. Ideology no longer guides their steps or dictates their policies. In the social realm, for instance, the conservatives do not wish to provoke members of civilian society by abolishing the hard-won freedoms acquired under Khatami. Islamization no longer interests the conservatives. Rather, their ambition lies in promoting a transformation of the regime and in gradually abandoning the ideological terrain of revolutionary Islam, which is now discredited, in favor of consensus over national independence and economic development.

In other words, this new generation of politicians aims less at "adapting" the regime than at following irreversible evolutions, while at the same time avoiding breakdown and chaos. The space in which this new majority operates is not only political—the space it occupies at the center of the Iranian political spectrum—but also psychological. This majority will navigate between Iranian society's growing desire for change and its instinctive fear of any new revolutionary overthrow. In their turn, the conservatives cannot ignore the stabilizing and modernizing role of the present national current. They are ready for change so long as the change does not unseat them.

By using Iranian nationalism as a political tool, the conservatives are actually following in the reformists' footsteps. Although the cult of the nation was a secular heresy for the revolutionaries of 1979, nationalism

has become—twenty-five years later—the regime’s last chance to get its second wind. In this regard, it was President Khatami who paved the way. Aware that revolutionary Islam’s capacity for mobilizing the masses had been exhausted, Khatami tried to build a consensus by rehabilitating the revolutionary heritage as an essential component of the national heritage. Indicative of both a will toward liberalization and a refusal to embrace the kind of liberalism that characterized the Iranian reformists, nationalism here becomes the middle ground and an ideal tool with which to gain new support for revolutionary institutions.

Nationalism signals at once continuity and rupture; it follows from the primacy conferred on the state by the revolution and signifies a turning point, an escape from the Islamist rhetoric it wants to supersede. Nationalism offers a new way to defend the special status represented by the institutions that the revolution created. Khatami was quick to realize that the ideological struggle between Islam and the nation would eventually prove to be Islam’s undoing. Leaders would therefore have to identify nationalism with the Islamic regime, which could not ignore such a powerful bonding agent if it wanted to regain credibility.

One of the most important accomplishments of the Khatami presidency was to rehabilitate the reputation of the late prime minister Muhammad Mossadegh, who had been anathematized since the revolution of 1979. On March 5, 1999, the thirty-second anniversary of his death, the first pilgrimage to his tomb was authorized. Medhi Karrubi, who had been one of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s closest advisors, publicly stated that Khomeini’s eldest brother, Ayatollah Pasandideh Khomeini, never traveled without a photograph of Mossadegh in his suitcase—alongside one of the Imam.¹ The admission of reverence for these two men came down like a bombshell. It not only rehabilitated nationalist sentiment (which until then had been banned), but also showed that praise of nationalism would henceforth occupy a central place in the Islamic Republic’s rhetoric and would be the linchpin of its renewal.

The Islamic Republic was an increasingly precarious structure. The reformists buttressed it by invoking nationalism, thereby broadening its foundation and allowing the idea of national community to smooth over the ruptures of history. Nationalism is, in fact, the most widespread religion in Iran, the most spontaneously accepted, and the most deeply felt. Though the man in the street does not like the Islamic regime, he will not renounce the revolution of 1979, considering it one of the great moments in twentieth-century Iranian history, alongside the constitutional revolution of 1906 and the nationalization of oil in 1950. He includes all these events within the same wave of protest and national independence.

The regime’s supporters do not often rely anymore on the ideological yoke of Islam, which they had been imposing on Iran since 1979, but they gain an aura of legitimacy when they portray the regime as heir to the history of the Iranian nation and the guardian of its independence. An imaginary, eternal Iran is substituted for the day-to-day Iran, and that perception links even the most contradictory periods together, thus promoting a version of history guided by continuity. The conservatives cannot ignore the benefits of this balm, which seems to soothe all Iran’s and its people’s wounds.

The depth of the Iranians’ conviction in their exceptional destiny—fierce nationalism, or a remarkably intense form of ethnocentrism—seems to offer a solid framework for the country’s evolution and to justify the conservatives’ gambit. Both the inexorable changes to the Islamic system and the painful severing from revolutionary tenets imposed by the current situation can be channeled to form the nation’s future. Thanks to nationalist sentiment, popular uprisings and revolutionary unrest can be avoided. Though the dynamic of change in Iranian society is real, none of the actors is calling for a blank-slate approach that would benefit only foreign “saviors.” On several occasions, even street rioters have set limits to their protests. A striking example of this phenomenon took place in June 2003, when students reacted to attempts to co-opt their move-

1. Interview, *al-Sharq al-Awsat* (London), March 19, 1999.

ment. The students themselves declined support from the Persian-language television station in Los Angeles and responded to calls for an uprising from elements close to the Bush administration with the slogan “This is a student movement, not an American movement.” Although the students oppose the regime, they do not want a crisis that would imperil the independence and integrity of the Iranian nation.

Iranian youths have the same dual rapport with the United States that young people have anywhere else in the world. America fascinates them, but this fascination does not quite eliminate the distance that only a gross error in judgment could underestimate. As in other countries, just because young people admire America does not mean that they wish to become Americanized. A huge gap often exists between such openly pro-American quips as “the reformist policies of President Khatami are beginning to have concrete results—in Afghanistan and Iraq” (which are aimed mainly at needling the regime’s supporters) and an unconditional adherence to the American model. Clearly most young people imagine an idealized America, known through exiled family members who are often admired for their high standard of living and social successes. For young people, the “American dream” represents an escape from reality rather than an actual ideal. The memoirs of Farah Diba Pahlavi and television movies about life under the shah are flourishing, apparently benefiting from a “sudden” (and well-financed) rebound of interest in Iran. Such books and movies certainly stimulate the imaginations of teenage girls in Iran, while providing a distraction from daily life and momentarily recreating a world gone forever. But they do not nourish or reinforce any structured political philosophy, nor do they elicit any nostalgia. For young Iranians who have no connection with the period portrayed, such stories approximate little more than rose-tinted fairy tales.

At first glance, the myth of America is ubiquitous in Iran, even though anti-Americanism was one of the principal dogmas of Iran’s revolution. This makes for one of Iran’s most striking paradoxes: the politi-

cal divide that neither America nor Iran seems able to repair coincides with a sort of cultural interweaving between the two nations. “The Tehran of the mullahs has a rather American look,”² Olivier Roy wrote in 1992. Indeed, more than a decade later, the daily life of Iranian youths in many ways resembles that of American youths. For Iranians, the one distinguishing factor is the backdrop of totalitarianism. Still, much of the world where they grew up was fashioned in the American image, not only since the time of the shah, but also since the revolution. (Modern Tehran was modeled on Los Angeles, and it is striking to note just how much its geography evokes similarities between the cities.) In recent years, large numbers of essentially Americanized exiles have returned to Iran and contributed to the American myth—in a dollarized society in which the aura of the United States seems unparalleled.

The cultural and social universe of young Iranians is shaped by American reference points, such as fast food and shopping malls. Recent reforms in higher education now punctuate students’ careers with BAs, MAs, and PhDs. With the Internet, satellite television, and video and CD swapping, the daily life of young Iranians is also increasingly similar to that of young Americans. This youth culture constitutes an infra-society hidden within the lines of the Islamic regime—a society that takes the West as its model and that long ago adopted Western attitudes.

Moreover, this infra-society is in the majority, while the regime is in the minority. For a large portion of young people, it is an almost daily ritual to visit one of Tehran’s many Internet cafés and fire off e-mails in “Penglish”—Persian written phonetically, using the Latin alphabet—which young people use to stay in touch with exiled family members. To these youths, the regime’s ideological anti-Americanism is a joke. They have lost count of how many of their professors hold degrees from American universities, awarded since the revolution. The demonstrations of this official anti-Americanism seem like pathetic enforced celebrations or even relics. Among themselves, young people

2. Olivier Roy, *L'échec de l'islam politique* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1992), p. 38.

ask openly whether the huge anti-American fresco³ at the entrance to Tehran's city center is worth keeping—similar to the manner in which the people of Moscow question whether to preserve old monuments to Lenin as historical artifacts. The fresco in Tehran, a classic expression of the revolution's anti-American rhetoric, already belongs to Iran's historical patrimony.

In the same way, although the anniversary of the seizing of the American embassy is a key moment in revolutionary celebrations, the crowd gathered at these events can scarcely conceal the dozens of buses parked near the embassy, buses that had earlier brought children from their primary and nursery schools and old people from the rest homes. These days, mass anti-Americanism is mainly the province of seven- or seventy-seven-year-olds. Groups of homeless people drawn by giveaways and free soup also drop by to swell the ranks.

Nevertheless, as in many other countries, America does get criticized in Iran. Even if the younger generations view the United States as the only power capable of challenging or even toppling the unwanted regime, they have no desire to accept American hegemony and sacrifice centuries of culture and tradition. As in other cultures, America is a model to be at once embraced and avoided. Fascination with American power does not obscure an instinctive distrust toward a country whose societal model has been replicated in Dubai, a country that allies itself more readily with peoples who have no significant history than with great nations whose histories stretch back for millennia. In this regard, America's passive response to the pillaging of Baghdad's museums constituted a flagrant error by confirming young people's secret fears about the United States. In the same way, those figures in the United States who raised the possibility of "regime change" in Iran hurt their cause, because the phrase gave Iranians the sense they could hope for little more than a repetition of history, another coup of 1953.

Something in Iranian youths remains resistant to all attempts at manipulation and co-optation. Thus,

the student movement of June 2003 arose in opposition to increased tuition fees at the university. Only later did students begin spouting democratic slogans. Some observers in Washington, however, immediately thought that the "great night" was at hand, going so far as to assign it a date: July 9, 2003. This happened to be the fourth anniversary of the great student protest of 1999. But the utter nonevent constituted by the sit-in of three thousand students (though amplified by the din of thousands of car horns) should have convinced those overly optimistic about change in Iran that young Iranians were not awaiting saviors—or, still less, directives from abroad.

In fact, the Islamic regime's tyrannical bent has not erased Iranians' collective trauma inflicted by years of foreign domination—until the revolution—and that trauma has engendered a deep-seated distrust of foreign interference. The student movement's attachment to Mossadegh, a symbol of national independence spurned by foreign nations, makes this distrust clear and renders some American leaders' calls for an uprising all the more unfortunate, since these calls coincided with the fiftieth anniversary of the CIA-backed coup against Mossadegh.

The nation, its prestige, and its influence abroad transcend political divides, and a conservative who could prove himself on this terrain would be no less legitimate in the eyes of the majority than a reformist would be. Such is the case of Hassan Rohani, a conservative assigned to handle negotiations over Iran's nuclear program, who now enjoys credit for the success of the October 2003 accord that gave Iran a reprieve from international pressure. Rohani may well have a future in national politics, and he has long been considered a favorite for the 2005 presidential election. The split between reformists and conservatives is ultimately less significant than the consensus that forms around a "national hero."

This fierce attachment to the Iranian nation and its independence has led some of the same individuals who are openly hostile to the Islamic regime to show

3. The fresco shows an American flag whose red stripes end in bombs and whose stars are skulls, with the entire image covered by the slogan "Death to America."

solidarity with certain of its initiatives. For example, the Iranian nuclear energy program and its likely military application have garnered support that stretches far beyond clerical circles. In October 2003, five hundred students from Sharif University—the most Westernized of Iranian universities responsible for training the country’s scientific elite—demonstrated to maintain the country’s nuclear program in the name of national independence. Those students—who generally come from the most privileged social strata, who are on the front lines of the student movement, who travel abroad, and who are among the few authorized to study in the United States—nonetheless share the ideal of helping their country take its place among the world’s most developed nations, which would allow it to maintain its standing as a regional power. Their call ended with these words: “We, the signers of this letter, urge the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran to, under no circumstances, sign any letter which would create an impediment to our legitimate right to acquire knowledge and technology.”⁴

In the realm of nuclear power, which today is so crucial for the national future and international standing of the Islamic Republic, neither reformists nor conservatives exist. Are there even opponents? On this particularly sensitive point, the explicitly critical and often pro-American statements mouthed by the average citizen can suddenly yield to harsh denunciations of external challenges to Iran’s nuclear program, which are seen as unforgivable assaults on the nation’s sovereignty.

The belief in national independence and the various means of safeguarding and strengthening it, beginning with scientific means, has proven a remarkable substitute for the decline of Islamic politics. The revolution is turning secular. Its guardians have noticed and are adapting their rhetoric accordingly. They are abandoning the terrain of ideology, on which the broken bonds between regime and society cannot be restored, for that of nationalism and technological development, where a consensus still prevails. Such is the conserva-

tives’ gambit: the failure of political Islam does not mean the failure of the revolution. In their eyes, the Islamic Revolution rested on three pillars: ideology, national independence, and technological development. Though the first pillar is crumbling, the other two can still keep the regime stable. The main challenge is to shift emphasis from the first pillar to the second two. A remark by the philosopher Edgar Morin reinforces the metaphor of three pillars: “The energy of the Iranian phenomenon ... is not only the return of the clerics via Shiism. It’s the melding of religion and old Iranian nationalism with the crystallization of the modern nation-state; not the rejection, but rather the integration, of all the engineers, technicians, and scientists educated in American universities.”⁵

The leaders of the Islamic Revolution have clearly recognized that Islam is being pushed aside by the Iranians’ patriotic sentiment and desire for scientific development. This odd mix defines *homo islamicus* as envisioned by the revolutionaries of 1979: a Muslim fundamentalist, capitalist entrepreneur, cutting-edge scientist, and passionate nationalist all combined into one. Now that the Islamic pillar has cracked, what remains of the revolution is a commitment to the defense of national independence and scientific development. The regime’s loss of credibility, a result of the decline of revolutionary Islam, pales beside the combination of nationalism and the demand for progress and scientific influence that has helped maintain Iran’s independence. Overall, the permanence of the belief in national community is restoring the bonds undone by political infighting—whether through cultural policies that flatter the nation’s heritage and take credit for its historical past (an object of pride for regime partisans and nonpartisans alike) or through the need to master technical knowledge that will place Iran among the most developed nations.

Such is the ambivalence of the revolutionary heritage: the desire to do away with the regime’s Islamic functionaries is genuine, but this aim does not mean

4. Quoted in Nasser Hadian, “Iran’s Nuclear Program: Contexts and Debates,” in *Iran’s Bomb: American and Iranian Perspectives* (Washington, D.C.: The Nixon Center, 2004), p. 59.

5. Edgar Morin, “Vie et mort des idéologies, Interview d’Edgar Morin par T. Nathan,” *Nouvelle revue d’Ethnopsychiatrie* 19 (1992), p. 23.

renouncing what to most people is an Islamized national revolution. And just because the Islamic Revolution has drifted toward despotism, this does not erase the collective traumatic memory of foreign control over Iran.

The proclamation of the Islamic Republic is still considered a veritable declaration of national independence. When the great opposition figures criticize the use of religion to legitimize power, most are, in fact, criticizing the derailing of the 1979 revolution's ideals and the corruption of its national and egalitarian dynamic, rather than challenging its underlying principles. In her remarks to the French press, Shirin Ebadi, the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, summarized this logic and the strength of the Iranian consensus: "I have never lost my belief in the rightness of the revolution. The problem is that the revolution's demands have not been followed through. Independence, freedom, and democracy were the watchwords of that revolution."⁶ In short, no call for democratization will be heeded by the Iranian people if it means renouncing the revolution of 1979.

In Iran, the dynamic of change does not reflect nostalgia for a situation that would wipe away the past twenty-five years of national history. The new majority, even more than the leadership under Khatami, will have every opportunity to occupy the field of Iranian nationalism and reap its benefits. That group's political approach and governmental tactics will combine pragmatism and some difficult revisions with both the fundamental tenets of the revolution and the balm of praise for national sovereignty. The inauguration of Tehran's Imam Khomeini Airport in May 2004 illustrated this approach perfectly. Less than half an hour after the first plane had landed, the Revolutionary Guards (Pasdaran), with Iranian

flag fluttering in the wind, shut the airport down because a Turkish-Austrian consortium (TAV), publicly accused of sharing interests with Israel, had been hired to run the new facility.

This high-minded outburst is wholly representative of the conservatives' state of mind. Indeed, while it evinces a desire to show the Iranian people that the new majority, seconded by the powerful Pasdaran, will be a staunch defender of the nation wherever its interests are threatened, the airport invasion also allowed the government to regain control of an important revenue stream. Finally, the event shows the twofold nature—national and economic⁷—of the new conservatives' demands.

The incident calls for a further observation: that the conservatives are not a homogenous group. At its core, the Pasdaran constitutes an autonomous entity prepared to defend its interests at any price, including a diplomatic crisis much like the one that occurred over Turkey.⁸ In parliament, roughly eighty deputies are former Pasdaran members.⁹ A latent and still discreet tension is becoming more evident between the conservatives who are inclined to facilitate the transition toward a liberal economy—"transitional conservatives," or pragmatists—and those we might call "old-school conservatives," who defend their interests using the arcana of the Islamic system.

Nationalism, the common ground of these two conservative forces, is the Iranian common denominator that will rebuild consensus and stabilize the foundations of the regime. In so doing, it will both restore economic confidence and protect the more or less clandestine business networks maintained by the Revolutionary Guards. Thus, the conservatives' gradual conquest of the main levers of power aims, among other things, at placing reliable relays at all levels of govern-

6. Interview with Shirin Ebadi, *Libération*, December 19, 2003.

7. In this incident, the economic dimension was at least as important as the defense of national interests. The Pasdaran was outraged that the airport services had been licensed to the Turkish-Austrian consortium TAV. But what they really deplored was the loss of market share. Initially, two businesses associated with the Foundation for Disabled Veterans and the Disadvantaged had been hired. An identical situation occurred in the context of the first Iranian mobile phone provider, when the Turkish group Turkcell was denied the contract on the same grounds of "relations with the Zionist regime," to the benefit of Irancell, an international consortium composed of public and private Iranian firms and several foreign companies. On this subject, see "Iran Government denounces parliament decision to reduce Turkcell's stake," Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), February 2, 2005.

8. Khatami was indeed forced to cancel an official trip to Ankara right after the airport incident.

9. Vali Nasr and Ali Gheissari, "Foxes in Iran's Henhouse," *New York Times*, December 13, 2005.

ment. The conservatives' purpose is to promote the effectiveness and coherency of business networks and to offer to the world—especially foreign investors, who are often made skittish by the breakdown of power centers and the high number of internal adversaries—business partners who share a common ideology and who are able to overcome obstacles in the system.

The Tehran mayor's office, taken over in 2003 by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, is a case in point. The vastly increased municipal budget aims at winning over the population, while Ahmadinejad, unlike his predecessors, has proven capable of handling in several months questions that had formerly been hijacked by political and administrative imbroglios—such as relocating military barracks to make way for new roads in a city frozen by traffic jams. Such rapid advances are due to the mayor's political will prevailing—with the help of the Pasdaran—over the maddening inertia of the Iranian administration. The conservatives' main purpose is to show the public that they can master the machinery of state and offer Iran effective and coherent governance. Faced with the demand for change, the inscrutable, disorganized edifice of the Islamic Republic, which despite its rigid ideological dogmas is essentially empirical in nature, is yielding to the need for rational governance.

This need melds with the expectations of Iranian society, which is fed up with administrative roadblocks that paralyze initiatives and corruption that forces people to sidestep the administration altogether. The explosion in the housing market and the vast increase of high-rise construction in the north of Tehran—with its utter disregard for quality of life, and despite an official interdiction against surpassing a certain maximum height—is symbolic of this situation. The fact that the new mayoral cabinet has planned many new public parks and made the unblocking of Tehran traffic a priority shows its will to restore the reputation and credibility of public administration in the eyes of the majority. As the 2005 presidential race approaches, effective and coherent action are the watchwords of the Pasdaran. Members of the Pasdaran know that the electorate's main criterion will be the candidate's ability to find concrete solutions to common problems,

and that effectiveness on these fronts will win out over the platform of an ideologue.

Deeper still, this conversion to realism is in sync with the sociological dynamic of the Iranian elite. The revolution is a quarter-century old, which means that the potbellied apparatchiks recruited en masse—on the sole basis of their revolutionary convictions and with little regard for their actual competence—are growing old. Their approaching retirement will free up a considerable space for the younger generation and will cause a sudden shift in mentality. Some of this new blood is already running in the veins of the Islamic Republic, and that change is only the beginning. Often educated abroad, the younger politicians come back as MBAs and promote a vision of modernization that mainly serves their personal interests. They represent the genesis of a neoliberalism, even an ultraliberalism, that—paradoxical as this concept might seem—is emerging as Iran's second wind and the key to its future. The conservative authorities have understood the importance of these individuals and the need to keep them in Iran. Conservatives have no illusions that, after five years in the United States, these leaders' choices will be determined not by ideology and Islam but by the prospect of individual profits. The conservative administration itself is engineering the encounter, which will ultimately prove antagonistic, between the revolution's egalitarian heritage and "savage capitalism." The breadth of the investment that the conservative regime—Rafsanjani first and foremost—has made in the vast network of tuition-bearing Azad universities and the orientation of their curricula toward business demonstrate blatantly the economic realism that has taken hold in Iran. Here again, the moralism and egalitarianism of the revolutionary dogmas have, in fact, generated an oligarchy with glaring inequities, the true motor of which (as becomes clearer with each passing day) is capitalism.

Economics provides a perfect illustration of the transitional conservatives' turn toward pragmatism. Rather than showing nostalgia for the religious yoke of the revolution's early years, many in the new parliament elected in 2004 have chosen to train a clear eye on Iran's current situation and to place economic development at

the heart of its concerns. The majority in the new Majlis calls itself the “Coalition of Builders of Islamic Iran,” a name not coincidentally reminiscent of “Servants of Reconstruction,” which was a powerful technocratic group. Nonetheless, here again we need to look closely. The “new wind” sweeping through Iranian politics and swelling the most pragmatic sails, with Rafsanjani at the head, cannot escape the vigilance of a conservative fringe devoted to the Supreme Leader—a fringe composed of religious zealots, devout petit bourgeoisie, *bazaris* (wealthy merchants) unable to cope with reforms (mainly, the standardization of exchange rates), and the various “foundations” that boast near-monopolistic powers (e.g., the Foundation for Disabled Veterans and the Disadvantaged [Bonyad-e janbazan va mostazafan]). Iranian political life is no longer guided and determined by the fault line between reformists and conservatives, but rather by a new boundary located in the very heart of the conservative camp.

Despite old-school conservatives in the shadows, the dominant trend in contemporary Iranian politics supports the rise of the transitional conservatives. Western observers—too often blinded by a Manichean interpretation that overestimates the internal significance of categories such as “reformists” and “conservatives”—have underestimated the importance of those who call for a pragmatic approach to Iran’s problems and who are receptive to economic liberalism. Like the exceedingly rich and powerful Rafsanjani, this group reflects the oligarchic nature of the Islamic system and the machinations of the elites. Moreover, its powerful connections in the state machinery, the technological infrastructure, and the intelligence community give it the ability to act concretely and could well prompt the adherence of reformists tired of the previous legislature’s inaction.

“The atmosphere of the new parliament will be different. Partisan infighting will be reduced. The priority is to create an environment propitious to rational decisionmaking,” declared Gholam Ali Haddad-Adel, the leader of the Coalition of Builders. This French-speaking former student of Henri Corbin has nothing of the reactionary ideologue about him, and reformists can respond favorably to his statements. In the final

analysis, they have more in common with these new conservatives than they did with the left wing of their own party, which, with its Marxist leanings, remained fiercely opposed to economic liberalism. And, indeed, the reorganization within elite circles of the ministry has been rather slight. This move toward the center was confirmed by the “restoration” of Karrubi: the day after his blistering defeat in the legislative elections, he joined the Expediency Discernment Council, whose job it is to resolve conflicts between the Guardian Council and the parliament, and which is headed by none other than Rafsanjani.

“The mullahs tear at each other’s flesh but never break each other’s bones,” a popular saying goes. Bitter as the conflict between reformists and conservatives has been, it has never really altered its antagonists’ adherence to a system of which they are at once the founders, the heirs, and—more than anything else—the beneficiaries. The boundaries between political groups often hide a deeper continuity—that of their shared circles. In Iran, as anywhere else, self-interest takes priority over ideals. The new political structure might well free up an unprecedented new space for initiatives, if only because it is in the interests of those who run the Iranian system to avoid a crisis that could damage the revolutionary edifice housing them. If this happens, the victory of that political group, rather than inaugurating a period of social regression, might actually favor adaptation and overtures to some outside nations, beginning with the United States.

The first two projects being taken up by the conservatives confirm this hypothesis and have little to do with the spread of Islam or the defense of religion. Rather, they are concerned with reforming as quickly as possible the particularly constrictive legislation regarding foreign investments, as well as speeding up the privatization of the banking industry. The strange paradox, for those conservatives who have emerged atop the ruins of the reformist movement, is that they have no option other than to effect reforms.

The Iranian “neoconservatives,” as the press has sarcastically dubbed them, have made no secret of their admiration for the Chinese model, which combines economic growth based on openness to both

foreign investment and social and cultural liberalization, on the one hand, with political restrictiveness, on the other. For these conservatives, the ideal scenario would be an Iran that falls into step with post-totalitarian China, which promotes economic exchange, the enrichment of the middle classes, and the liberalization of civil society, so long as its political authority remains unchallenged. Adopting this scenario, Iranians would have an opportunity to move away from religion and, therefore, to move away from politics. Indeed, what better way to get a country like Iran out of Islamic theocracy (without the phase of political unrest) than to encourage the growth of a consumer society?

The “Islamic Japan” that the Supreme Leader has called for (while being careful to avoid such overtly undemocratic signals as an explicit reference to China) would present the dual advantages of offering new opportunities to the wider public while not actually challenging the enormous privileges of the Islamic oligarchs. Could “Make yourself rich!” be the new ideal of theocratic Iran? The transitional conservatives know that their aims are justified and that, to some extent, the Chinese model is already being applied in Iran. Economic growth has risen by more than 6 percent, inflation has been reduced to 16 percent, and the conservatives will not try to reverse liberalizing trends in social mores. Across the globe, the large industrialized nations no longer have any doubt as to Iran’s economic value. In 2004, the British economic risk analysis agency Fitch Ratings gave Iran a B+, raising this mark to a BB in 2005.

Apolitical young Iranians, who know all too well the risks of taking a public stand on social issues, are mainly seeking jobs. Indeed, for the moment, Iran’s students are almost completely removed from politics. Their reformist ranks have split, and some have even joined the conservatives. With demands less political than ever, they are more concerned with interpersonal relations and scholastic matters. As with the rest of Iranian society, their lofty statements about social change have yielded to a desire to resolve concrete problems. The student movement is evolving toward a kind of corporatism that aspires to exist in its own space and have a voice in the way universities are run. Symbolic

of this shift, for the first time in five years, the students did not make any political demands or call for any demonstrations on the eve of July 9, 2004, the fifth anniversary of the 1999 riots.

Like China, Iran has a powerful diaspora, notably in the United States, that long ago reconnected with its homeland and saw the economic potential of the Iranian market. Quasi-underground business networks have sprung up between Tehran and “Tehrangeles” by way of Dubai, allowing those involved to sidestep the embargo and rapidly build the fortunes of the Iranian nouveaux riches. The conservatives hope this connection to the United States will lead to the lifting of American economic sanctions and the unfreezing of U.S.-based Iranian assets, which Rafsanjani has estimated at more than \$8 billion.

America is the conservatives’ obsession, in a way diametrically opposed to the condemnation of the “Great Satan” characteristic of the early years of the revolution. In taking a closer look, we see that the anti-American character of the revolution was caused by the “Islamic left,” the same group that would don “reformist” garb in 1997. The religious conservatives—often referred to as “American Islam”—did not endorse this development in the first months of the revolution. By contrast, in appropriating terms like “reform” and “overture,” the Khatami regime went a great distance toward advancing misunderstandings and misinterpretations of Iran’s relationship to the West during its tenure. For the vast majority of observers, the camp that adopted those buzzwords held out the hope of renewed relations between Tehran and Washington, whereas the conservative camp, which seemed to reject them, opposed such a renewal. This dichotomy is an utter illusion.

The kernel of the Islamic left surrounding Khatami was both critical of capitalism and ideologically opposed to America, and it made no overtures whatsoever toward Washington. Kamal Kharazi, Khatami’s pragmatic minister of foreign affairs, responded to the situation with this exasperated statement to the parliament’s Foreign Affairs Committee: “It is erroneous to maintain that the reformists in Iran favor a resumption of relations with the United States and

Figure 1. Evolution of Iranian Government Strategy

	AIMS	MEANS
1950 Mossadegh Government	Reformist	Revolutionary
1979 Islamic Revolution	Revolutionary	Revolutionary
1997 Khatami Government	Revolutionary	Reformist
2004 Conservative Victory	Reformist	Reformist

that the conservatives oppose it.”¹⁰ Indeed, well before Khatami came to power, signs appeared of an attempt to improve relations between Tehran and Washington once the regime’s anti-American rhetoric began to wane. The vast majority of those initiatives came from the transitional conservatives—such as in 1995, when then-president Rafsanjani offered the American company Conoco exclusive access to the Iranian oil market before he had even considered the European contenders. In the same way, the conventional aggressiveness of Rafsanjani’s anti-American speeches is matched only by the complexity of his maneuvers in having members of his clan meet with American officials and diplomats.¹¹ Today, Rafsanjani has placed some of his closest associates at the head of Iran’s main embassies in Europe, with unofficial orders to help bring about a rapprochement with the United States. The transitional conservatives are well aware that Iran’s economy cannot succeed unless it manages to normalize relations between Tehran and Washington—the Holy Grail of Iranian politics, regardless of official rhetoric.

The growth-minded conservatives want to present themselves as an enlightened and moderate elite. While they all acknowledge being products of the regime, naturally, they are pragmatic and open to adapting the governmental structures. They want to present the image of a homogenous group capable of acting as the West’s, and especially America’s, rational interlocutor. The new parliament counts approximately seventy PhDs among its members, most of them having

received their degrees from American universities. For the first time since 1979, none of the deputies is from a working-class origin. The strategy adopted by this new generation of conservatives—a mix of oligarchy and joint sovereignty—closely resembles the strategies of other postrevolutionary regimes that wish to restore order without abandoning the tenets of the revolutions from which they were spawned. In the minds of this group, the Majlis election results of 2004 therefore represented a major event in Iranian history, the result of a concerted strategy. From this perspective, taking over the parliament inaugurated the true moment of reform—a moment that realized the harmony between aims and means that Iran’s other great historical moments have lacked. For the first time in more than a half century, the conservatives can claim a coherent political approach in which the political majority will have the wherewithal to attain its goals.

In brief, the conservatives’ strategy is based on a reinterpretation of modern Iranian history. Figure 1 (used on several occasions by Iranian officials and, recently, by Nasser Hadian, an Iranian visiting professor at Columbia University¹²) illustrates their contention.

Whether or not this view is accurate, the new parliamentary majority would like everyone to believe it. This reading of Iranian history prompts three observations. First, it makes the legislative election of 2004 a symbolic date marking the end of the revolutionary model. In fact, this vision of contemporary Iranian his-

10. Agence France Presse news wire, Tehran, May 8, 2003.

11. According to the Iranian press, in the summer of 2002, Hashemi Rafsanjani sent a delegation to Cyprus that included his own son to meet with representatives of the American State Department. The affair had huge repercussions in Iran, where it was labeled “Cyprus-Gate.” Available online (www.alternet.org/story/13221).

12. Interview by author, New York, June 2004.

tory appears to denounce President Khatami's reformism for using a discourse that still derives from the ideology of the revolution.

Second, the table posits a similarity between the today's situation and the Mossadegh period. Both share a reformist (rather than revolutionary) ideal, the difference being that the means used by Mossadegh to reach his reformist goals were revolutionary and brought about his failure. It follows that the new majority would be the only government to reach its reformist goals via reformist means, thereby defining itself as a wiser brand of Mossadeghism. The same ideal of matching aims with means allows the conservatives to justify their progressive conquest of all levers of power, including their winning of the presidency in 2005.

Third, this particular scenario deliberately omits the revolution of 1906 in its recap of eminent dates in Iranian history—precisely the only revolution that was truly democratic. François Guizot's famous phrase comes to mind when describing the present situation: after Iran's revolution, then comes its Thermidor. Odds are high that the present majority envisions a new paradigm. Its ambition is reminiscent of the doctrinaires of the "July Monarchy,"¹³ who, without following the complete path to democracy, put in place what Guizot termed "social power," or a "society of intelligence"—in other words, the power of an enlightened elite.

This paradigm could also describe the balance within the Iranian oligarchy, as well as the power struggles within Iranian society as it attempts to integrate the middle classes socially while keeping the masses at a distance. In this effort, the oligarchy's secret aim is to bring about a middle class that will guarantee the stability of the revolutionary edifice, all the while keeping it away from the mechanisms of power. We may well be seeing an "Iranian moment," in the same way that there was a "Guizot moment."¹⁴ Eventually, the French doctrinaires responded to the need to "end the

French Revolution"—in other words, to leave behind the ethereal realm of ideas and utopian idealism, and to lead a society irrevocably transformed by revolution back to daily reality. In their way, the Iranian conservatives have given themselves the task of closing the revolutionary chapter by meeting the enormous demands of a society completely unlike the one that existed before 1979.

Though the new majority's rise has been referred to as a "return of the clerics," it is actually basing its program on the "secular pillars" of nationalism and economic development. It is no coincidence that Hassan Rohani, a rising figure in Iranian politics, is in charge both of nuclear energy and of engineering secret meetings with the United States, mainly on behalf of Rafsanjani. Ironically, the conservatives—not the reformists—have followed the secularization of Iranian society most closely: not one of the three candidates for the presidency of the parliament was a member of the clergy. That paradox is astonishing, for never in the history of the Islamic Republic has a layman occupied such a high office. Does this represent a paradox or a necessity? In Iran, where politicized religion has accelerated the process of secularization, what could be more normal than having the clerics themselves usher out religion?

In February 2005, responding to questions from the Iranian Students' News Agency (ISNA), Rafsanjani did not hesitate to characterize the Islamic state as secular (*orfi*), adding that the *velayat-e faqih* itself represented a secular institution and not a divine mandate. As he saw it, the only mandate that the institutions of the Islamic Republic could consider legitimate was that of universal suffrage. Though these statements seem radical, they do no more than express what many in the country are thinking.

On their own terms, the transitional conservatives are managing the Iranian version of the "end of ideolo-

13. The "July Monarchy" designates the period of French history stretching from 1830 to 1848. It constitutes one of the richest and most fascinating times in France's political history. The entire debate converged on the notion of political representation and on the means of aligning the will of the masses—whose legitimacy had been established by the French Revolution—with a restored monarchy that was eager to keep the masses at a distance, at least in the political realm. Iran, which today vacillates between a desire to represent the greatest number of citizens and the Islamic oligarchs' concern with preserving the existing system (even at the price of changing it), presents a strange similarity.

14. I have borrowed this expression from Pierre Rosanvallon's book *Le Moment Guizot* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985).

gies” and are wagering on society’s growing materialism. This paradigm seems to dominate contemporary Iran and has been articulated aptly by Daryush Shayegan:

It is no longer Iranian society that is becoming Islamic—though the outward signs remain the same—but rather Islam that, out of weariness, is leaning increasingly toward liberal solutions and that, by force of circumstance, is acquiring a more technocratic, and therefore more modern, discourse. While at first its discourse remained primarily ideological (out of a need to heighten the stakes and compete with Marxist-Islamic demands), it is now becoming more moderate and gradually taking on a liberal coloration.¹⁵

Religious values per se are no longer invoked by the conservatives other than to justify funding for essential goods and services, or for the high number of public-sector jobs, which allow the state to ensure social peace so long as oil revenues remain stable. It is with their own base that the conservatives risk having problems. Swept into office by the dispossessed of Iran and other traditional beneficiaries of the Islamic system of redistribution, the majority could well end up launching the liberal initiatives that will reveal them as Iran’s new representatives of the proletariat. Tehran will no longer be able to maintain its 6 percent growth rate and reform its

economy, however, without facing huge social unrest. Ultimately, the split is more likely to occur to the right of the new majority than to its left.

Indeed, it is the Islamic system’s traditional “clients,” the natural allies of conservatism, who could find themselves the primary victims of the current attempt to reorient the Iranian economy. As the regime knows, it has less to fear from protesting students grappling with Western values than from Iranians with traditional values. Until now, such support has been exceptionally stable, but it might well crumble under the feet of leaders who embrace too openly liberal a platform. Consequently, the more the new majority moves toward liberal economic reforms, the more it could expose itself to “populist” discontent.

Finally, the conservative strategy can work only if the West plays its role as a business partner and does not concern itself overmuch with human rights issues—in other words, if it adopts the same attitude it has taken toward China, subordinating politics to economics. The problem is that Iran is not China—at least not demographically—and the Iranian market will not necessarily pay sufficient dividends to buy the complacency of the industrialized nations, particularly if Iran’s nuclear ambitions make Tehran a potential strategic threat.

15. Daryush Shayegan, *Les Illusions de l'identité* (Paris: Editions du Félin, 1992), p. 289.

The Two New Faces of Janus

THE ISLAMIC REGIME is aware of the uncertainties and dangers that accompany its new strategy and by no means places all its eggs in the basket of transitional conservatism. This “softer side of authoritarianism” is, in fact, on the lookout for the slightest sign of alarm in Tehran. The so-called pragmatists, more “kindly” in appearance, cannot deny the possibility of a major crisis combining internal social collapse with increased external pressure. Indeed, the regime is preparing to deal with such a scenario.

An assignment of two new roles, at once rival and complementary, is now becoming necessary. One is the cluster forming around Rafsanjani. The other is the domain of the Supreme Leader of the revolution, which presents itself as the final rampart against the threats faced by the regime. The increased investment in the Revolutionary Guards shows quite clearly that Iran has no intention of lowering its defenses should its reforms fail. More than ever, the Revolutionary Guards represent the mainspring of Iran’s military machine. They are the privileged members of the system, as opposed to the army. Though the army’s neutrality certainly contributed to the revolution’s victory in 1979, it has been under suspicion since it tried to take back power during an abortive coup in 1980. Within the military, the Pasdaran has the most sophisticated weaponry with the greatest offensive potential, especially the North Korean Shahab 3 missile, whose supposed range of 1,300 kilometers (or 2,000 kilometers, as Iran recently claimed) threatens Israel directly. If Iran’s latest claims about the range of its Shahab 3 are correct, the missile may also threaten some regions of Europe, such as Greece. Finally, the Revolutionary Guards have “ultimate responsibility” for the way in which the probable military facet of the Iranian nuclear program will be conducted.

The Pasdaran is the Islamic regime’s last bastion in times of crisis. Already, on two occasions, the Supreme

Leader has considered calling in the “people’s militia”¹ to deal with spikes in social unrest. In such rhetoric, one can easily hear the threat of the Pasdaran crushing any opposition that might endanger the regime’s stability and stifling democratic debate across the board. The modernizing authoritarianism now being proposed to the Iranian people does not exclude a more traditional form of authoritarianism, which would see the Islamic regime deploy its impressive arsenal of repression in order to make society toe the line.

Such possibilities, however, are only worst-case scenarios, and are unlikely to occur. Although the Revolutionary Guards do indeed constitute, more than ever, an effective and pampered military force, their role in Iran’s new political configuration is in no way limited to posing such threats. As we have seen, the Revolutionary Guards, before being a military power, are a social and economic power that uses military means as a safeguard. Financial dealings are the bedrock of both the Rafsanjani and Supreme Leader poles, and the Pasdaran is a highly effective, not to say crucial, component in the Islamic authorities’ economic prosperity. For now, this parallel army, composed mainly of draftees, has no interest in a coup d’état, which would merely weaken the power that it already enjoys in the Islamic machine and that it hopes to increase through its business networks. Indeed, this power has the advantage of conforming both to the Pasdaran’s own interests and to the expectations of the mainstream.

Through its recruitment, selection, and socialization process, the Pasdaran now acts as a kind of ideological filter for future conservative leaders in the Islamic Republic. It offers a way to co-opt and become initiated into the financial mysteries of the Iranian regime, which any person of consequence in the system must know in order to defend his or her financial interests. Like the Rafsanjani side, the Revolutionary Guards also favor the election of a pragmatist to the presidency,

1. The second threat to call out the “people’s militia” dates from the Supreme Leader’s speech following the November 18, 2002, confrontation between students demonstrating in support of Dr. Aghajari and soldiers at the University of Tehran.

so assured are they of their control over the main levers of power. As the armed wing of the regime, the Revolutionary Guards mainly aspire to broaden their reach. And though they are, indeed, the Supreme Leader's last recourse, they exert, in return, an increasing influence on his decisions and are gradually channeling his rule into multiple power centers.

Consequently, though the Supreme Leader momentarily considers the Revolutionary Guards the surest guarantee of his power, the relationship between the two entities contains a fair amount of mutual distrust. The ranks of the Pasdaran are rife with potential rivals, while the Guards' growing autonomy is moving them toward the status of a counterauthority; Ali Khamenei may not even control the Guards. If the Supreme Leader is logically closer to the Pasdaran than he is to Rafsanjani, his authority still does not entirely coincide with that of the Revolutionary Guards, and much of Iran's future could rest on their discreet but very real disagreements over how business should be conducted.

The Pasdaran is pursuing a strategy to become an autonomous power, which is potentially worrisome, even for the Supreme Leader himself. This strategy consists of three closely interrelated elements. First, it rests on the financial autonomy that the Revolutionary Guards have derived from their mastery of the underground economy and contraband networks. Entire sections (not to say the quasi-totality) of the sugar industry are now under their control. Both the energy sector and the supply of automobile and airplane parts have largely been infiltrated by Pasdaran networks.² Their support of large Islamic foundations, such as the Foundation for Disabled Veterans and the Disadvantaged (Bonyad-e janbazan va mostazafan), has helped consolidate their standing. The Pasdaran already controls major strategic elements of Iran's economic and industrial independence.

The second element, which dovetails with the first, is military autonomy. By controlling the manufacture

and operation of the country's main offensive weapons, the Revolutionary Guards are taking spheres of influence entirely under their control. This strategy will be complete when the Guards have established control over military nuclear energy. But what do we really know of the Pasdaran's involvement in the Iranian nuclear program, other than that it surely plays some part? What do we really know about the military chain of command in the Revolutionary Guards? And are we so certain that the Supreme Leader will be at the helm under any circumstances and that he himself knows what those circumstances are?

These questions highlight the third element of Pasdaran autonomy—the Guards' degree of spiritual independence. The Supreme Leader is not the Guards' only source of religious legitimacy, with the debate on religious authority, and consequently spiritual guidance, reaching into the ranks of the Pasdaran. The former Friday prayer leader of Isfahan and one of the Supreme Leader's principal rivals, Ayatollah Taheri, has always enjoyed great prestige among the Pasdaran. Thus, it is no surprise that Taheri's thunderous resignation on July 4, 2002, brought the Islamic regime to the brink of crisis, nearly resulting in the declaration of a state of emergency. We can only speculate as to whether the Supreme Leader perceived spreading unrest that could overthrow his own power. This crisis was, in fact, the second he faced. It echoed an earlier call addressed to him by twenty-four highly placed Pasdaran officers under General Zolqadr during the student riots, threatening military intervention to restore public order with or without his consent—a clear warning. These two crises underscore the Pasdaran's greater attachment to the principle of *velayat-e faqih* than to the person of the Supreme Leader. In any case, the Pasdaran is on its way to achieving an unprecedented militarization of Iranian civil society.³ In Iran, even the Supreme Leader must learn to deal with the "party of the barracks."

2. The French company Renault apparently had its own run-in with Pasdaran control over the black market with regard to automobile parts. In fact, the lucrative contract that united Renault with Iran Khodro and SAIPA to manufacture the Logan was disputed at the same time challenges were issued for the Turkish contracts for Imam Khomeini Airport and mobile phones. While the official reason for the veto was that Renault controlled 51 percent of the proposed conglomerate's capital (even though 50 percent of the spare parts had to be manufactured by Iranian companies), the true reason was that the secret interests of the Pasdaran had been infringed upon.

3. See Vali Nasr and Ali Gheissari, "Foxes in Iran's Henhouse," *New York Times*, December 13, 2005.

The emergence of a military junta in Iran is a distinct possibility and would function as a kind of secularizing second wave. Its authoritarian power structures would be defined in much less of a religious context than that prescribed by the current Islamic constitution. Oddly enough, if such a scenario were to occur, the Revolutionary Guards would become the instruments both for secularizing the regime's functionaries and for enhancing the Pasdaran's own networks of influence. The French analyst Alexandre Adler once qualified the KGB as the Soviet Union's ENA.⁴ The Pasdaran project is similarly elitist. The group has formed a kind of technostucture that might serve as the fulcrum from which Iran moves past theocracy. The military force that today serves the regime might end up transforming it from top to bottom.

Unlike the Rafsanjani side, for which economic interests come first and profits are an end in themselves, the Pasdaran confederacy is marked by an aura of secrecy—a taste for opacity and exclusivity that makes observers wonder whether the Pasdaran's increased activity really involves a conversion to realism or whether it is still pursuing ideological goals. The Rafsanjani side understands that the maintenance and growth of its privileges now depend on the prosperity of the Iranian people. While the Revolutionary Guards do not dispute this fact, they see economic development less as an end in itself than as a means of giving the revolution's ideals another life. A scent of revolutionary utopianism continues to surround the Pasdaran's dream of producing and training a new elite all on its own. The Pasdaran nurtures the vision of a second, even a third, generation of caretakers of the Islamic system that is spawned, formed, and promoted by the revolutionary apparatus.

The advent of such an elite, with no ties to Iran's pre-revolutionary past, formed *ex nihilo* on contact with revolutionary dogmas, is the very definition of totalitarian ambition. It aims to preserve the purity of both ideals and origins. But will this new elite simply act as a guide for the final years of the Islamist ideology, as

the pragmatic conservatives are doing in Rafsanjani's wake, or will it seek to give the ideology a new future? The Pasdaran speaks the language of business, not of democracy. Yet, ideological priorities have not been abandoned by the new generation of Revolutionary Guards, who firsthand have experienced neither the Islamic Revolution nor the war against Iraq. As mayor of Tehran, Ahmadinejad was indeed the architect of a local *realpolitik* aimed at revitalizing the city's atrophied administrative structures. Still, he highlighted the ideological aspect of those policies when he proposed entombing a martyr beneath each of Tehran's public squares and erecting 24,000 billboards regarding the return of the Mahdi. He also personally opposed renaming the street on which the Egyptian embassy is located—the road had originally been named Khaled Islambouli in homage to Anwar Sadat's assassin.

All signs indicate that the Pasdaran network is engaging in an unprecedented level of activity outside Iran. In Africa, in the Shiite communities of the Ivory Coast and Senegal, and in North and South America, its groups are being restructured and reinforced. This educated elite, often trained abroad, is strengthening the networks of "old-timers" even on Canadian and American college campuses. In and of itself, this process symbolizes all the ambivalence and duality of the Revolutionary Guards' priorities. On the one hand, those international networks might be used to foster commercial and scientific cooperation, which is crucial to buttressing the Guards' power within Iran and to advancing the cause of restored diplomatic relations with the United States. On the other hand, if a situation called for it, the networks might constitute formidable outlets for launching terrorist strikes in the very heart of Western societies. The Quds Force, composed of roughly one thousand men, would likely coordinate such attacks, aided worldwide by its network of "brothers." The Pasdaran is the sword of the Islamic system, but its blade is more double-edged than ever before. Regardless of how the sword is used, any effort by technocrats to control the Islamic Republic would

4. École Nationale d'Administration, a French institution that trains the highest-placed administrative and political figures of the French Republic.

face much heavier resistance from the Pasdaran than it would from the Supreme Leader.

One thing is certain: the interaction of the two competing poles now taking shape at the top of the Iranian state will determine the next president of the republic. At first, relations between the two poles will be governed largely by the rivalry between Khamenei and Rafsanjani, who has never hidden his desire to be Supreme Leader.⁵ Though many signs of this rivalry exist, much of the story plays out in the shadows rather than the glare of the public arena. Since late 2003, for instance, the Tehran police—seconded by the Pasdaran—have been engaged in a vast offensive against organized crime and corruption. The Rafsanjani clan has implicitly been targeted by this very opportune moralistic initiative.

The rivalry between the two conservative poles is taking the form of an economic war. The emergency law adopted by the parliament on September 19, 2004, amounted to a declaration of war on the Rafsanjani clan and was the rivals' first public skirmish. Rafsanjani responded on October 2, 2004, by amending articles 43 and 44 of the constitution, authorizing the government to launch a progressive privatization initiative.⁶ But however fierce the rivalry gets, it will not be allowed to compromise the stability of the Islamic system. In this context, the election will play a stabilizing role, with the power struggle between the regime's two main figures waged over the 2005 presidential election rather than through open confrontation. Everyone involved knows that such a confrontation could potentially damage the stability of the Islamic Republic. Moreover, both sides recognize the need for a pragmatist to be elected president.

The probable candidates in the 2005 elections are, first, someone close to Rafsanjani, such as Rohani, the general secretary of the National Security Council (who, therefore, enjoys credibility on matters of security, something Khatami always lacked). The second

candidate will likely be a figure close to the Supreme Leader, such as Ali Larijani, the former head of the Iranian Radio and Television Organization. A race between two such candidates, however, will not likely bring record numbers to the polls and thus restore a connection between the government and the people, as occurred in the elections of 1997 and 2001. At best, the victory of either of these candidates would be another victory by default, a clan victory that would fail to halt the erosion of popular trust in the system.

Accordingly, the Supreme Leader may adopt a more sophisticated strategy. Every member of the regime recognizes that the risk of losing the presidential election is ultimately less serious than losing the electorate once again. For the Iranian regime, abstentionism represents a greater danger than the controlled pluralism characterized by the rivalry between its political players. This is why the true goal of the 2005 election might be to restore the broken connection between the people and the regime, especially if the benefits of such a maneuver give the Supreme Leader an advantage over his main rival, Rafsanjani. The logic goes like this: if Rafsanjani is seeking his revenge for the 1997 election, the outcome of which he could not control, then he should be forced to relive that failure as well as to watch the Islamic system gain new impetus. Against all expectations, therefore, the Supreme Leader might sanction the candidacy of a popular figure whom he would, nonetheless, keep under his control. As with the selection of Khatami in 1997, such a candidate could reestablish the broken connections between the regime and the electorate.

If, to top it off, this candidate did not belong to the Rafsanjani clan, the Supreme Leader could reinforce his hold on the Iranian system while keeping his main rival at bay. Khamenei would thus contain his most serious competitor, at least for a while, under conditions that Rafsanjani could not challenge—for Rafsanjani also has an interest in the regime regaining the

5. To my knowledge, Rafsanjani never publicly stated his ambition to become Supreme Leader. Nevertheless, his political strategy is based on mastering the institutional levers that would allow this ambition to be realized. The most striking example of this approach remains his maneuvers to take over the presidency of the Assembly of Experts—charged with appointing the Supreme Leader—in 1998, at a time when speculation about Khamenei's health was rampant. See Wilfried Buchta, *Who Rules Iran?* (Washington: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2000), p. 153.

6. Islamic Republic News Agency, October 2, 2004. Articles 43 and 44 of the constitution establish the principle of a regulated economy.

legitimacy it lost through the mass abstentionism of previous elections.

Paradoxical as it might seem, the candidacy of a popular reformist might prove an effective weapon in the hands of the Supreme Leader and might serve his interests by splitting a majority that would otherwise support an associate of Rafsanjani. The Supreme Leader is likely thinking along these lines, already with someone in mind. At once popular and reliable, that candidate might have been Mir Hossein Moussavi, who was prime minister (when the position still existed) from 1982 to 1988, while Khamenei was president of the republic. During the war against Iraq, Moussavi conducted an economic austerity policy, which was based in part on consumer credit and allowed him to moderate the disastrous economic effects of the war. In Khamenei's eyes, the public's relatively sympathetic memory of Moussavi might have made a more controllable version of Khatami. Yet, Moussavi's refusal last October to run in the election created a tricky problem. His decision put Karrubi back in position, shifting the center of gravity in Iranian politics back to Rafsanjani. In Iranian politics, one day's crushing defeat can mean credit with the electorate the next—a phenomenon from which the regime hopes to reap benefits. Karrubi's humiliation in the legislative elections might, in fact, become precious capital for a run in the presidential campaign.

That said, Rafsanjani may not need a stand-in, after all, with the new political alchemy making his candidacy more than likely. Only he, in fact, has both the stature and the credibility to sidestep a veto by the Guardian Council and unite the Iranian people. The centrist dynamic of the Islamic regime, for which Rafsanjani is the great architect, is matched only by his present efforts to reinvent his persona as "Father of the Nation," the last recourse for an Iran in crisis. Still, this portrait is not merely artifice. Elderly, extremely wealthy, with an aura of invulnerability, Rafsanjani has nothing more to prove and can genuinely act on Iran's behalf in personifying its recovery. Until now, he has shown a taste only for actions that served his interests. At this stage of his life, Rafsanjani might, in fact, have no greater ambition than to meld his personal destiny

with that of his country. Over the past several months, he has made numerous references to Ayatollah Khomeini, always to condemn the Islamic regime's shift toward authoritarianism and always to underscore that this shift betrayed both the Imam's wishes and his heritage. Scarcely veiled challenges to the Supreme Leader, these public statements, which he began making at the end of 2004, leave little doubt that the man speaking is "Candidate Rafsanjani."

The former president strives to reconstitute the reformist pole outside the ranks of the party, which has co-opted the word "reform" for the past eight years. In its place, he wants to build a national union front devoted to the politics of economic development and capable of avoiding factional maneuvering and restoring a coherent national will. As Rafsanjani knows, reformism has never been so central to everyone's concerns as since he was discredited as a political force. Using his connections to the Iranian state machine, he can carry a concrete reformist standard that can actually be realized.

More than anything, the populace does not want a "second Khatami." Khatami opposed the regime yet had no pull within it. Rafsanjani, meanwhile, comes across as an opponent from the inside, with his hopes resting in the Iranians' sense of realism. Khatami's election in 1997 looked like a controlled popular uprising. Seeing no new upheavals on the horizon, Rafsanjani wants to create a more concerted support base. He wagers that, by appealing to the public's goodwill, he can turn his own version of reformism into the only possible course aside from the complete collapse of the Islamic system. Rafsanjani knows that if he is elected, the Islamic regime will face unprecedented tensions and pressures, both internal and external. In his eyes, this appeal to national sentiment, personified by his newly patriarchal persona, constitutes the best antidote to the latent crisis in Iranian government.

Still, the wager is risky. The long period of reflection that Rafsanjani has allowed himself shows that, despite his enormous influence and power as the Islamic regime's virtual second-in-command, an electoral defeat would spell catastrophe for his political career. It would look too much like a second and final

humiliation after the one he suffered during the legislative elections of 2000. Even leaving aside the Supreme Leader's virtuosity in manipulating a possible reformist candidate so as to weaken Rafsanjani's support in the first ballot—and thus, for the first time in the history of Iranian presidential elections, force him into a wholly unpredictable second ballot—and leaving aside the fierce and well-organized opposition of the Pasdaran, Rafsanjani is already having trouble gauging his popularity among the Iranian electorate, especially the younger generations.

As builder of the Islamic system, engineer of its arcane secrets, and prime beneficiary of the state's mafia-like confiscation of national riches, Rafsanjani cannot be so deluded as to think Iranians will rally whole-heartedly in support of his candidacy. His new garb cannot conceal his past deeds. Rafsanjani wishes to be an opposition figure, while operating from the heart of the regime, but for most people, this only reinforces his status as an insider. In fact, much like his ultraconservative rivals, he will benefit from the Guardian Council's likely disqualification of popular candidates and by the no-doubt significant level of abstentionism in the vote. Rafsanjani will not be the figurehead of a new popular surge uniting the considerable majorities of 1997 and 2000. Worse for him,

the parliament is not firmly in his corner, and the nuclear question, which is fueling tensions between Iran and the rest of the world, has been taken over quite effectively by the ultraconservative elements that oppose him.

Just as for Khatami, the diplomatic front will take top priority for Rafsanjani. On this front, too, his credibility is limited. America, which knows Rafsanjani too well, does not believe in him. Rafsanjani might still tell his listeners that he will be the leader to make major overtures toward the United States, and even toward Israel, whose existence he claims (privately, to foreign visitors and diplomats) to recognize. But, for now, his actual versatility falls cruelly short of his ambitions.

Rafsanjani hopes to be aided by a large voter turnout in the upcoming elections. He realizes that the people will never fully accept him; in his view, electoral validation would be a stepping-stone, not an end in itself. It would lend to his actions the patina of democracy, which would give him a tactical advantage in his struggle against Khamenei. If he loses, however, he will be pushed aside. And if he is elected by only a slight margin, he will find that his president's garb is much more constricting than the suit he currently wears, and that his influence will be far in the background, entirely subordinate to the will of the Supreme Leader.

Toward a New Revolutionary Model?

IRAN GIVES THE IMPRESSION of knowing its course and its priorities. Is the path chosen by Tehran really all that surprising? Despite the cultural specifics of its own society, Iran essentially aspires to the kind of neoliberalism now being witnessed in China. In this regard, Iran is like any country that wishes to breathe new life into its authoritarian structure: it downplays the signs of a now-anachronistic ideology and steps up its technocratic rhetoric, which fits more closely the needs of the modern world. We must not underestimate the influence of such a model, which, let there be no doubt, thrives on the weaknesses of the democratic powers. The Chinese model turns liberalism away from its goals, or, rather, impoverishes liberalism by dividing economic liberalism from political liberalism. Thus reduced to questions of market efficiency, liberalism no longer denotes a social ideal based on the recognition and guarantee of public freedoms. Rather, it becomes the vehicle by which a nation makes the shocking transition from the inhumanity of totalitarian social relations to the inhumanity of “savage capitalism.”

In this model, the categories of the West are perverted, invoked only to allow for a subtle transformation of totalitarianism. The paradigm of absolute domination changes shape, espousing the outer forms of Western ideals and globalization. Because the system is built on the ruins of totalitarianism, this “post-totalitarianism” becomes more difficult to see and to denounce. By manipulating liberalism and economic overtures to its own advantage, it stops being the closed, autarkical system for which its critics in the free world predict a rapid end. Rather, donning the garments of the “business partner,” it uses the same rhetoric of liberalized trade as do its traditional adversaries, capitalizing on the West’s leniency by flattering its economic appetites.

As Tehran strives for diplomatic and commercial normalization, it is unclear whether the Islamic regime understands how its own international conduct compromises its efforts. We are beginning to see a remarkable imbalance in this regard. From the Iranian view-

point, the two pillars of national independence and economic development complement each other naturally. But by placing its ambitious nuclear program—with its probable military component—at the heart of its independence strategy, Iran is undermining its desire for commercial relations with the West. Seen from the international viewpoint, these two poles of the conservatives’ strategy contradict each other. The question is, why is Iran embracing this contradiction so openly? Does Iran believe it can win its nuclear wager while somehow gaining leverage from the new geopolitical context imposed by the American war against terrorism?

Iran’s nuclear activities are having an unusually intense impact on world affairs, even while Tehran must know that the future of the Islamic Republic depends on its return to the community of nations. Iran is facing off against the world at the very moment when diplomatic normalization is crucial to the Islamic regime’s future. The split nature of Iran’s behavior is at a peak, marked on the one hand by distinct signs of ideological transformation in this “Iranian moment” and on the other by goals that are causing legitimate anxiety in the international community.

The United States can no longer approach Iran in the same way it has in recent years. The future of the Islamic Republic will be played out on the international stage—beginning with the strategy Washington will adopt. Every day, the Iranian question becomes more pressing. Indeed, the rift between Tehran and Washington remains one of the deepest in diplomatic history. Nevertheless, Tehran more than Washington will emerge transformed by this rendezvous with America, which everyone in Iran knows is inevitable. This encounter will be at least as important as the original rupture between the two nations was for the young Islamic Republic in 1979. The revolution was built on opposition to America. Will it survive America’s seeming determination to reverse it? Or, alternatively, will it survive because of America? One can only speculate as to whether the curtain will fall on a stage reuniting

the same actors, on the Iranian side, as when Islamism was the order of the day. Whatever the outcome, the form taken by Iran's meeting with America will surely determine the future of the Islamic Republic. For every servant of the Islamic regime, this is an intimate certainty: the future of Iran depends on this encounter,

which is both anticipated and dreaded, regardless of whether it takes the form of reconciliation or conflict. No one in Iran, from the man on the street to leaders in the highest spheres of government, has any doubt that the future of the Islamic Republic is being written in Washington.

Afterword

THE IRANIAN PRESIDENTIAL election has come and gone. The ultraconservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, acting mayor of Tehran, won with a stunning 61.69 percent of the vote, replacing the reformist president Muhammad Khatami. The West has made no secret of its dismay at having its hopes for the evolution of Iranian society dashed in this way. Has Iran taken a step backward? After following the path of reform for eight years, has Iran now made an anachronistic choice that puts it “out of step” (in the State Department’s words) with its neighbors? The election seems like a complete reversal, even a snub to all those who nurtured hopes of Iran becoming a laboratory for progressive change in the Muslim world, and who today feel the drafts of revolutionary ideology blowing through the victorious candidate’s rhetoric.

Even more than Khatami’s triumphant election in 1997, the 2005 election is the most decisive vote in the history of the Islamic Republic, a watershed event. The election clearly captured the public imagination more than anyone had expected when the campaign began; the very fact that it went to a second ballot is highly significant. Clearly, voter fraud did play a key role in Ahmadinejad’s victory, at least in the first ballot. While in that round he finished third, or even fourth, his participation in the second round and his ultimate victory are owed largely to the regime’s censors (the Guardian Council) and their military and paramilitary correspondents in the state machine (the Revolutionary Guards and Baseej, or volunteer militia). In the first round, Karrubi—who was said to have come in third with 17.28 percent, just behind Ahmadinejad—may have suffered most from voter fraud. Still, it would be a grave error to see the election as simply a conspiracy. Iranian society expressed itself quite openly, sending a clear message to the regime.

The election’s second round was between two candidates who had both benefited from machinations that disqualified other candidates deemed a threat to the Islamic regime. The advantage gained by one candidate over the other could not simply be a result of manipu-

lations, which both men could have effected. The face-off between Rafsanjani and Ahmadinejad was not just a shadow play shrewdly orchestrated by the regime’s lackeys. We must take this election seriously, for it confirms a political dynamic that has been building in Iran for the past three years. It covers a sociological reality that will continue to drive future evolutions.

We are witnessing a rivalry between two poles: on the one hand, the conservative forces around the Supreme Leader, the spine of which consists of the Revolutionary Guards’ powerful networks, and, on the other, the pragmatic conservatives, composed of disgruntled reformists and technocrats who see a need for economic reforms and who have clustered around the powerful Rafsanjani. These two poles, the two faces of the Iranian Janus, came into view only gradually before squaring off against each other in the second round of the elections.

Initially, this rivalry met at the political center. This refers to the remarkable absence, or at least the extremely muted quality, of ideological themes. As symbols of the past, such themes could make any candidate adopting them seem obsolete. Instead, the candidates preferred to stress their ability to meet the challenges of the present. Change was the watchword of the campaign, and the main candidates’ platforms seemed to converge on the need for systematic reform. An observer might understandably have wondered where the “real” conservatives had gone, because reformism suddenly became the common denominator for the various political entities, not only in content but also in form. Indeed, every political player, including the former chief of police, Mohsen Qalibaf, went as far as he could in adopting Western symbols and displaying a commitment to modernization. Qalibaf, a former airplane pilot, posed proudly before aircraft of the Iran Air fleet, while Rafsanjani tried to bury the perception of himself as a man of the past by holding endless dialogues with Iranian youth and using Internet blogs to spread his message.

The liberties taken with the revolutionary dress code, such as the reformist candidate Mostafa Moin’s

appearance on campaign posters wearing a tie,¹ were in themselves symbolic of this new atmosphere, which suggested that the future president of Islamic Iran would be chosen depending on both his determination to reform the Islamic system and his degree of openness to Western values.

The final days of President Khatami's term in office, which symbolize the failure of eight years of reformism, have seen everyone taking up the theme of reform. The reformists are gone—long live reformism! Could this be Khatami's revenge after the fact? Hardly. In the current situation, basically moderate conservatives have appropriated reformist rhetoric, diluting traditional reformist support. The reformists' gambit consisted in maintaining the fiction that their initiatives were constantly being thwarted by reactionary opposition from the conservatives. In other words, after eight years, the reformists still had devised no strategy other than "counting on the ugliness of their adversaries."² Once those adversaries "beautified themselves"—that is, once they co-opted reformist themes—the conservatives reduced the reformists to silence. In Khatami's wake, the reformist candidate Moin learned this lesson the hard way, when he was caught in the same dilemma that proved so fatal to his colleagues in the legislative elections of 2004. Faced with a seemingly no-win situation, Moin could either position himself outside the Islamic system, at the risk of losing control, as Khatami had, of the levers that could put his programs into practice, or within the Islamic system, at the risk of losing credibility with the electorate.

Khatami did not have the opportunity to take any revenge at all; on the contrary, he saw the influence of his possible successor curtailed by the same vise that had strangled his own actions. The Supreme Leader played this dilemma like a virtuoso. By personally approving Moin's candidacy after it had been rejected by the Guardian Council, Khamenei gave Moin an electoral kiss of death. Thus discredited, Moin represented no danger for the Supreme Leader but would still take significant votes away from Rafsanjani in the first round.

Ahmadinejad's final victory did not surprise only international observers: for a long time it had seemed improbable even to the Islamic functionaries. Indeed, three days before the first ballot, the Supreme Leader was still backing his clear favorite, Mohsen Qalibaf. Ahmadinejad was a last-minute choice. Most likely, this was because the Supreme Leader was concerned about the overly "modern" emphasis of Qalibaf's campaign, not to mention his weak popular appeal. In the eyes of the Supreme Leader, Qalibaf's campaign themes seemed to fall in step with those of Rafsanjani, and thus to serve the latter's cause. At the eleventh hour, therefore, the Supreme Leader injected into the Islamic system the surest antidote to Rafsanjani and liberalism. He blocked "Bonaparte" Rafsanjani's path by supporting a man who appeared to be the "little corporal" of the Islamic system.

Ahmadinejad's victory is a victory for the Supreme Leader and a crushing defeat for Rafsanjani, who seemed incapable of even putting a dent in his adversary's stature. More than seven million votes separated the two candidates. But despite the apparent rupture constituted by the results, Ahmadinejad's election is in fact a continuation of the dynamic that has characterized the regime for the past three years. The conservatives—with the Revolutionary Guards at their core—won control over the levers of Islamic power. Opposing forces no longer exist within the Islamic regime, and the entire political chain of command is in their hands.

Ahmadinejad's victory is the victory of a system: the victory of the Islamic Republic, with the strong turnout affirming the Supreme Leader and the Islamic institutions, and, even further, the victory of the Pasdaran system. Ahmadinejad was carried in by the Pasdaran network, which gave him an advantage over the other candidates initially favored by the Supreme Leader. Now Rafsanjani's official functions are limited to presiding over the Expediency Discernment Council. How long he will last even in this role is not clear, with Ahmadinejad possibly challenging this position

1. The necktie is one of the "petit bourgeois" symbols par excellence that the Islamic Revolution prohibited.

2. Khashayar Dayhimi, interview in *Le Monde*, June 25, 2005.

on the Supreme Leader's behalf. Constitutional history would be on his side: indeed, before 1997 this function was included in the president of the republic's mandate. Still, such a challenge is unlikely. The desire for consensus, evidence of the Islamic regime's integrity, will carry the day. In addition, the conservative dynamic, whether embodied by Rafsanjani or the Revolutionary Guards, is supported by networks that are largely interconnected. Ali Akbar Velayati is the perfect embodiment of these numerous connections. Khomeini's former minister of foreign affairs will likely soon return to the political forefront. Rohani, however, occupies too sensitive a position not to pay the price for his involvement in the election. His likely ouster confirms the tendency of the past months, during which the actors involved in a dialogue with the West have lost political standing.

A concerted strategy brought Ahmadinejad to power. Having served as mayor of Tehran for three years, he understood that Iranians were looking for concrete answers to concrete problems. Weary of excessive reformist blather, internecine struggles, and meaningless debates, Iranians sought coherent leadership with real-world results. Tehran became the showcase for this new efficiency. Rapid improvements to the urban environment and the fight against real estate speculation proved at least as convincing as the meager results yielded by eight years of national reformism. These practical successes were doubled by what proved to be a successful wager on the inclinations of the Iranian electorate.

For eight years, the reformists retreated behind the reassuring, educated society of students, intellectuals, and artists who were Khatami's principal allies. But throughout those years, civil society had obscured real society—that is, the majority of Iranians, who suffered most from the economic crisis and who were consistently ignored by those in power. The government's disregard for the "real" population, the consequences of which are now all too obvious, is a constant feature of Iranian history. Never has the Iranian state managed

to gain a decent sociological understanding of a population that it continues to regard as essentially rural, despite major demographic shifts. Oil revenues worsen the problem by dispensing with the need for income tax, thereby severing one of the state's main connections with the populace. The Islamic leadership, like the former monarchy, reigns at the top of a mountain with no clue about the subjects who dwell at its base. V. S. Naipaul, reporting from the comments of his Iranian guide, Ali, gave an unusually convincing portrait of this sociological split:

Away from this, and as if in another world, were the Shah's people.... They were about five percent of the population. Maximum. The others, below, were the ninety-five percent, reading Koran, Arabic—the real people, the masses. They had no communication with the five percent. They were two tribes living in one country.... The two tribes of Iran still exist. If there is no marriage between them, I don't know where they are going.³

Apparently they are not going toward democracy. Yet, the people, eternal strangers to Iran's governments, have now resurfaced. This shift is confirmed by the sociology of the election, in which none of Karrubi's votes went over to Rafsanjani. The eleven provinces in which Karrubi led in the first ballot—essentially for reasons of tribal or religious solidarity—voted for Ahmadinejad in the second. The community-oriented vote of the first ballot became a class vote in the second. On the national level, the reformist electorate had no sociological coherence.

Ahadinejad based his wager on his perception of persisting, even increasing, inequalities among the people—in other words, on the premise that the revolutionary building site was not yet closed. The laboratory for his policies was Tehran, which he saw as a metaphor for contemporary Iran: disorganized, corrupt, frighteningly unegalitarian. Like his city, in which the poor quarters to the south can be juxtaposed against the new wealth to the north, the nation's population

3. V. S. Naipaul, *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions among the Converted Peoples* (New York: Random House, 1998), pp. 241–242.

is split at a stark fault line. Rather than following the lead of the other candidates and embracing elements of Western culture, Ahmadinejad preferred to create a bond with the “real” country. Riding ahead of the tidal wave, he let himself be carried forward on its crest. He understood that the prospect of major economic reforms weakened the traditional “clients” of the Islamic system, and that this situation allowed him to imbue the old revolutionary demands with fresh vigor. Ahmadinejad could then denounce the Islamic oligarchy symbolized by Rafsanjani, the dizzying inequalities to which it gave rise, the corruption with which it went hand in hand, and the America that—through the exiled diaspora—seeks only the moneyed youth and powerful family clans that look down on the poor.

The second generation of Revolutionary Guards, just entering the political arena, is cultivating the myth of a repeat of history—that is, the myth of a revolution that has been betrayed but whose egalitarian spirit is intact and more relevant than ever. In particular, its condemnation of the “oil mafia”⁴ targeted mainly the Rafsanjani clan and sounded like Mossadegh calling for a repossession of national wealth from a clannish elite whose greed threatened to isolate Iran from the foreign oil companies. By denouncing social inequities, which are greater now than they were under the shah, and by highlighting the risks of foreign interference posed by his opponents’ desire to open up the Iranian economy, the mayor of Tehran exploited the full gamut of nostalgia, frustrations, and fears that still motivate the common Iranian citizen. The revolution spawned its own ruling class and its own tribe of oligarchs with no connection to the real population. Ahmadinejad understood that the key role to play in this context was that of the “incorruptible one.”⁵

For Ahmadinejad, there is room for a revolution within the revolution. He himself characterized his victory as a “second Islamic Revolution.”⁶ His political gambit is essentially populist, born of the sense that the common man, even when critical of the Islamic regime,

is still reluctant to embrace the alternative of a liberal model that inspires fears of a brutal upheaval. For most Iranians, stability is the most precious commodity of all. Having witnessed the fall of Kabul and Baghdad, they fear nothing more than to be in the place of the Afghans or the Iraqis. In the absence of a valid alternative political model and a structured philosophy to support it, fortune favors those bold enough to base their platform on simplistic slogans, the defense of revolutionary gains, ostentatious piety, and denunciations of foreign powers. This strategy won the election for Ahmadinejad.

When no defined political parties exist, the electorate becomes a moving target that nothing can hold steady. It can let itself be won en masse or can slip away suddenly like shifting ground. Ahmadinejad’s opponents understood this theory, and they too gave themselves over to the giddiness of populism. Karrubi’s good showing stemmed from his promise to allocate a pension of \$60 per month for each young Iranian. And in the final hours of the campaign, feeling victory slip from his grasp, Rafsanjani promised to grant every Iranian a loan of \$11,000, reimbursable over a period of ten years.

Still, this resurgence of revolutionary themes should not foster any illusions. The revolution is not retracing its steps, and its main accomplishment lies in reawakening hope and enthusiasm among the underprivileged masses. Behind the façade of ostentatious devoutness, the Pasdaran model promoted by Ahmadinejad has nothing retroactive about it. Religion is highlighted insofar as it wins adherents, but Ahmadinejad uses it no less as a patina than do his opponents. Nor is the expression “second revolution” neutral. It expresses the desire for a clean break from previous modes of governance, showing that the new conservatives’ dynamic consists of something other than mere nostalgia.

To the Pasdaran, the people ignored by the shah are the same people now groaning beneath the feet of the mullahs. The Islamic Republic is just as much subject

4. Agence France Presse news wire, Tehran, June 15, 2005.

5. Robespierre’s nickname during the French Revolution.

6. Agence France Presse news wire, Tehran, June 29, 2005.

to criticism as was the monarchy. With this in mind, the Revolutionary Guards likely envision becoming the architects of a new alliance with the Iranian people. In fact, the Pasdaran network based its victory on discrediting the mullahs and denouncing the corruption of the clerics in power. Indeed, the victory of Ahmadinejad was built against the clergy. The “turbans” voted overwhelmingly for Rafsanjani; his defeat is their own. We would be sorely mistaken about the nature of the new president’s victory and its implications if we omitted this crucial point: more than anything, Ahmadinejad’s victory spelled the defeat of the mullahs.

In this sense, the victory is one for neither the right nor the left, but rather for those calling for a third alternative. Both right and left, reformists and conservatives, have been rejected. They are suspected of sharing the same interests and belonging to the same networks as the leaders who betrayed the ideals of the revolution and allowed a new privileged class to rise in the very heart of the clergy. In the 2005 election, the new alliance proposed a break from this generation of “old-timers” in favor of a second generation formed on the compost of the revolution—a break that even disposes of the regime’s clerical outward appearance.

In ideological terms, this nascent authoritarian model suggests a kind of national populism that in its way confirms the secularization of Iranian society. After all, is Ahmadinejad not a layman? Though a believer in Islam and faithful to the regime, he is not a cleric. The fact that the president of the Iranian Republic will not wear a turban is important, even crucial. It shows how the regime is consciously promoting the rise of a secular figure whose ambitions are less spiritual than pragmatic. In this regard, the presidential election complements the legislative election of 2004, which was itself marked by the advent of a “civilian” to the head of parliament. The entire second generation of conservatives is wearing new clothes—civilian clothes that make it easier to identify them with the man in the street. The motor behind the Pasdaran model will be at least as

much authoritarian development as Islamization. Religion guarantees consensus, but it is not the pivot on which the new movement turns.

In returning to the metaphor of the three pillars that uphold the revolution, the Pasdaran naturally will build on the two columns still intact: development and nationalism. The figure of the building engineer devoted to his nation’s cause is supplanting that of the true believer. The new president will bring to the national scale the same policies he practiced on the local level, including an increase in large-scale public development projects. In this endeavor, he will have the help of the Pasdaran network, notably the powerful Kerbala group, which was created in 1989 by the Revolutionary Guards and is now the principal developer of building and related supplies.

Spreading like wildfire is a new nickname for Ahmadinejad: *khaki*, the dusty construction worker. The goals of the Pasdaran elite look as much like those that drove the shah’s development projects as they do the goals of a religious leadership. Though sacrilegious in appearance, this unnatural rapprochement between the Revolution and the monarchy was publicly assumed by one of the Pasdaran candidates, Mohsen Qalibaf, who during his campaign styled himself “Reza Khan Hezbollahi.”⁷ The psychological profile of this new elite is reminiscent of the technocrats who served Reza Shah. In the 1930s, the shah caused a major upheaval by force-marching traditional Iranian society into the modern world. At the time, he did not hide his admiration for the fascist model, and the elite of the time became charged with that spirit. The Pasdaran now in power offer an identical spectacle: a mix of political romanticism, technical rationality, cold fanaticism, unconditional development, and collective yield.

What effect will this election have on Iran’s international conduct? Ahmadinejad is hardly the most qualified person to represent Iran’s interests abroad. He has left the country only three times in his life. He went to Iraq to fight, to Austria (in all likelihood) to help assass-

7. Iran Press Service, “Iranians Cool to the Presidential Election,” *Safa Haeri*, May 17, 2005. Qalibaf declared, “I have no program. I had no time for that. But I shall call for accountability by everyone. Go and see what people say in the taxis or at sandwich stands, ... saying they want a Reza Khan. I shall be a Reza Khan, but of a Hezbollah type.”

sinate a Kurdish leader, and to Moscow as mayor of Tehran to participate in a meeting for the world's major cities. Ahmadinejad has no international education. Of the three trips he has taken abroad, two were for clandestine operations. He has built his relations with the world as a soldier on the "foreign front" of the Islamic Revolution. Conflict is the paradigm for those relations. One might therefore conclude that Iran is going to harden its tone on the nuclear question, change its strategy, or even break off negotiations. In the short term, however, none of these outcomes is likely.

One reason these outcomes likely will not happen is that Iran's current strategy has proven favorable. It is a strategy of consensus and is, at this point, well established. First, Iran tests the West's determination by announcing the resumption of sensitive activities in a particular sector. Then, it pretends to pull back from these activities while, in reality, it bides its time. Finally, when push comes to shove and it must cross a technological boundary, Iran threatens to break off negotiations and to resume its activities in every field of nuclear development—that is, conversion and enrichment. To keep Iran at the negotiating table, Western diplomats tend not to impose sanctions so as to prevent more widespread resumption of Iranian nuclear activity. At that point, Iran, which for the moment really only needs to achieve conversion, can show leeway on enrichment. It thereby gives the impression of retreating, whereas, in fact, it has attained its goal.

The semi-victory of the Western negotiators is, of course, always an illusory success. Ahmadinejad will most likely pursue the same line. Yet, the election of the new president has lowered the United States' threshold of tolerance on the nuclear question and heightened the distrust of the international community. Moreover, the Supreme Leader has supported this candidate in part, because Ahmadinejad has no experience on the international stage and is therefore more inclined to battle the international community—in the name of revolutionary values and Persian nationalism—than to try to make common cause with it. Who better than

Ahmadinejad to turn the nuclear crisis into a North-South controversy about the right to access nuclear technology? Given his ideological background, he is well suited to this role—he can play at being the Mosaddegh of nuclear energy as a means of appealing to Iranian nationalism. In this scenario, enriched uranium replaces oil as the symbol of Iran's national independence.

The choice of Ahmadinejad is not neutral but rather a harbinger of changes to come. As a nationalist faithful to the revolution of 1979, he can be the perfect man to defend Iran's right to pursue nuclear enrichment, even unilaterally. Should the United Nations Security Council step in, Ahmadinejad would confront the West and reinforce alliances that could help attenuate the effects of new sanctions. China is no doubt Iran's coveted partner, the possessor of a saving veto in the Security Council. It is toward China that the Pasdaran has addressed its most intense business overtures. Coincidental or not, in the same week as the Iranian presidential election, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization admitted Iran as an observer. Not simply a calculated choice, the selection of Ahmadinejad by the Supreme Leader predicts a scenario of rising international tensions.

The result of a consciously devised strategy, rather than a series of surprises, Ahmadinejad's election represents the fermata in the "Iranian moment." The new conservatives now occupy a space whose outlines they traced by testing the actual mindset of the country. The social underpinnings of this new conservatism do exist.

As regards the electorate, the communitarian vote in the first ballot paved the way for the conservative shift in the second. For the individual voter, the lure of national development and personal prosperity won out over the defense of the common good. The Iranians "are behaving not as citizens but as individuals," wrote one editorialist.⁸ The evaporation of social bonds caused by twenty-five years of Islamism, furthered by the increasingly materialistic desires of Iranian citizens, has made the social body malleable. As the victorious

8. Dayhimi, *Le Monde*.

conservatives know, the concessions they will make to economic liberalism are not likely to mutate into political demands. On the international level, America's foundering in Iraq provides a measure of reassurance. Perhaps the most striking lesson of this reconstitution of the now-triumphant conservative camp is that the Islamic regime has restored trust in its foundations, even its social foundations. The reconciliation of the

Iranian people with their representatives has occurred at the expense of democracy—a concept that becomes almost superfluous vis-à-vis notions like greatness, development, sovereignty, and independence. Such is the legacy of the Iranian moment: the conservatives are here, and they have less reason to doubt themselves than ever before.

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