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Iran: Doubting Reform?

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Iranian officials and citizens alike have felt the unintended consequences of Al Qaeda's attacks against the United States. September 11 exposed contradictions in the Islamic Republic's politics as Iranian students, just days later, spontaneously organized candlelight vigils for the American victims, catching the ruling clerics—especially conservatives—by surprise. Some reformist Iranian officials expressed their condolences directly, with Tehran Mayor Morteza Alviri and Municipal Council Chief Mohammad Atrianfar sending a letter to New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani in which they proclaimed that “Tehran's citizens express their deep hatred of this ominous and inhuman move, strongly condemn the culprits, and express their sympathy with the New Yorkers.” And, once the Taliban was toppled, the Iranian government aided in Afghanistan's reconstruction.

But the Bush administration suspected Tehran's motives, ultimately identifying the Islamic Republic as a member of the “axis of evil,” along with Iraq and North Korea. President George W. Bush's rhetoric angered Iranian officials—including the reformists, who initially closed ranks with the conservatives to deny American accusations of involvement in terrorism and a quest for weapons of mass destruction. Meanwhile, Iranians in general have wondered why the United States has turned its ire against them when they had nothing to do with the September 11 attacks.

Conservatives have found in Washington's stance a new reason to suppress intellectuals, publications, students, and other segments of Iran's nascent civil society whose ideas can be labeled “pro-Western.” With repression escalating, Presi-

dent Mohammad Khatami, the leading official advocate of reform, once again seems to have little alternative but to rail against his conservative rivals. Indeed, September 11 and subsequent developments have put to rest any idea that reforms will occur quickly in Iran or that relations will be restored with the United States.

ONE STEP FORWARD . . .

Khatami's second electoral victory in June 2001 was expected to give him a mandate for the reforms promised since 1997: government accountability to the citizenry, consistent rule of law, and relaxation of Islamic social codes. In the contest to define the nature of sovereignty in the Islamic Republic, the proponents of popular rights had defeated the advocates of divine rule, at least for that moment. Less than two years later, however, Iranians have become disillusioned with reformist officials.

Prominent proreform personalities have urged Khatami to change his strategy toward the conservatives, demanding that the president become more assertive or resign. Perhaps the most significant protest against Khatami's passivity was Ayatollah Jaleddin Taheri's resignation in July 2002 from his post as Friday prayer leader in the city of Isfahan. The ayatollah lamented watching the “flowers of virtue being crushed, and values and spirituality on the decline” among Iranians. In a scathing resignation letter, Taheri condemned the ruling clerics' corruption and greed.

Reformist officials had hoped that Taheri's resignation would spark sustained demonstrations by reformist sympathizers. Yet after two days of rioting in Isfahan, the judiciary forbade the press from reporting any news about Taheri's letter or the unrest. When *Norouz* printed the cleric's letter in full, the daily was shut down. Khatami's quiet during this controversy prompted the newspaper *Etemad* to ask, “Where is Khatami? We are all amazed at Khatami's absence . . . from the [politi-

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cal] scene. Clearly, a silent Khatami is a Khatami who serves the conservatives' interests."

Emboldened by Taheri's resignation, Iran's main proreform party threatened to quit the Islamic Republic unless the conservatives stopped undermining the elected administration. Mohammad-Reza Khatami, the president's younger brother and head of the Islamic Iran Participation Party, warned: "We want to work toward agreement. . . . But if [the conservatives] do not heed the people's demands . . . then we can only withdraw the reformist presence—that is to say the legitimate elected representation—from the regime."

As clerical factionalism intensified, President Khatami proposed two controversial pieces of legislation in September that directly challenge the conservatives' power. One bill would enhance the president's ability to deal with officials who violate the Islamic Republic's constitution, and the other would curb the Council of Guardians' role in vetting candidates for elections. With a reformist majority in parliament, these bills will probably become law soon, increasing Khatami's prerogatives, at least on paper.

Conservative officials are likely to pay only lip service to the laws. More than the reformists, conservatives enjoy control over the coercive arm of the state—the judiciary and various security forces—and are willing to resort to force when they perceive their interests are at stake. Khatami is a lame duck whose presidency will end with the 2005 election. His legislative proposals will benefit his successor, but Khatami may have to live with the pattern of one step toward reform and two steps back as conservatives persist in thwarting any moves in the direction of pluralism.

. . . AND TWO STEPS BACK

During Khatami's second term in office, conservative officials have wasted no time flexing their muscle. Despite momentary unanimity in the face of American rhetoric about the "axis of evil," the president's second term has seen more frequent episodes of repression. In fact, the Bush administration's position on the Islamic Republic has breathed new life into the conservatives' cause. Anyone daring to dispute the clergy's supremacy, as personified by the *faqih* or supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, risks being accused of conspiring with the United States and other "enemies of the Islamic Republic."

Although rarely commenting publicly on factional disagreements, in August 2002 the Revolutionary Guards denounced the reformists for

"working to turn Iran into a secular state and build[ing] ties with Washington." Claiming that the Islamic Republic's opponents had infiltrated the regime, the guards blamed the reformists for "exceed[ing] all bounds by openly supporting subversion on the streets." The guards declared that they would not stand by idly to witness the achievements of the Islamic revolution undermined.

The judiciary and security forces have backed the Revolutionary Guards' warnings to reformist officials with yet another crackdown against their sympathizers, particularly intellectuals and student activists. Perhaps most noteworthy are the arrest warrant issued for proreform strategist Abbas Abdi and the death sentence pronounced against academician Hashem Aghajari in early November. Abdi's "crime" was to contend that reformists in the executive branch and parliament could erode the power of conservative institutions by refusing to cooperate with them—naming his strategy simply "leaving the government" or "*khuruj az hakemiyat*."

Aghajari's words were even more stinging to conservative ears. During a speech last June in Hamedan, he asserted the ability and rights of the pious to understand their faith without the clergy's intercession, comparing the relationship between Shia Muslims and leading ayatollahs to the "mimicry" practiced by "monkeys." A provincial court tried Aghajari in secret and issued the verdict of death.

The death sentence against Aghajari has provoked national furor. Some 5,000 students poured into the streets of Tehran to protest, inspiring demonstrations in other university cities. The fourth anniversary of the assassination of nationalists Dariussh and Parvaneh Foruhar by agents of the Ministry of Information and Intelligence on November 21 strengthened the demonstrators' resolve. Students stayed in city streets during much of November, dispersing only when security forces appeared but then returning to demonstrate again.

Recognizing the students' tenacity, Ayatollah Khamenei threatened that if elected government officials could not quell dissent, he would call on the "forces of the people" to do so—a not-so-thinly veiled reference to *hezbollahi* thugs whose vigilantism conservative clerics sanction. The supreme leader has since softened his tone, ordering a judicial review of Aghajari's sentence, and the students' protests have diminished.

As during the larger student rebellion in July 1999, consistent repression eventually discouraged the protesters—at least for now, until another government decision or policy rouses proreform sympa-

thizers. More significantly perhaps, intellectuals and students, along with other reformist constituencies, such as the press and women's rights activists, have not yet coalesced into a full-fledged movement ready to defy the government or at least conservatives within it. Rather, these constituencies have pursued disparate goals despite their overall support for Khatami and reformist parliamentarians. For their part, reformist officials have walked a tightrope between cultivating these constituencies' support and preserving political stability. When confronted with the choice between accelerating the pace of liberalization or maintaining the system's stability, reformist officials have so far chosen the latter.

NEITHER EAST NOR WEST— NEITHER THIS NOR THAT?

Like the Islamic Republic's domestic politics, the ruling clerics' policies toward the outside world are marked by factional disagreements. Thus, analysis of Iran's foreign policy since September 11 requires an understanding of the interaction of internal and external factors that shape decision making by the clergy.

Khatami and the proreform Ministry of Foreign Affairs have argued that the implementation of foreign policy should benefit from public debate. Such debate would not only be consistent with the spirit of internal reform but would also enable the Islamic Republic to reenter fully the international community. Reformist officials suspect that Iranians are weary from years of war and regional adventurism, preferring instead that the Islamic Republic engage the world in dialogue and commerce.

Conservative officials, by contrast, have reserved the right to make decisions affecting national security outside the public arena. Moreover, they have not abandoned the posture of the Islamic Republic's first decade, despite numerous setbacks in their attempts to export the revolution. While realizing the importance of dialogue with like-minded international actors and not denying the need for trade and foreign investment, conservatives still believe that the ideology of Islamic universalism should guide Iran's conduct in the world.

Complicating factional disagreements over Iranian foreign policy is the inescapable reality of geography. At the crossroads of Central Asia and the Middle East, surrounded by the waters of the Caspian Sea and Persian Gulf, and rich with natural gas and oil, Iran's strategic value is obvious. The events of September 11 and the Bush administration's declaration of war against terrorism have only increased Iran's strategic value—and its foreign policy dilemmas.

The ruling clerics have maintained their stance "Neither East nor West, Only the Islamic Republic!" Yet reformists have shown a willingness to cooperate in a limited fashion with the United States and its allies in the war against terrorism, although the clerics diverge from Washington on many matters—most notably, on Iran's military buildup, its role in the Persian Gulf, and its stance toward the Arab-Israeli conflict. Khatami and Foreign Affairs Minister Kamal Kharrazi have not resisted the pull of Iran's geography, recognizing that the Islamic Republic could play a constructive role in creating a peaceful and stable Afghanistan free from the Taliban.

As Washington prepared to launch military hostilities against the Taliban in October 2001, Khatami insisted that the Islamic Republic and the United States had established "no secret contacts," despite rumors to the contrary. In the weeks before the American bombing campaign, however, Iran's president twice hosted Britain's Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, who, according to the September 25, 2002 *Financial Times*, served "essentially as an intermediary" between Tehran and Washington "in order for both sides to reach some kind of understanding." With war's outbreak, the ruling clerics stepped up their assistance to Iran-based Afghan rebels fighting to wrest control of Herat and reportedly offered to help rescue downed American pilots. Iran's aid was crucial in driving the Taliban out of Afghanistan's northwest, setting off a chain reaction of military defeats elsewhere in the country.

Meanwhile, the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance in Afghanistan sought to persuade its new friends in the Bush administration to work with Iran's leadership in planning Afghanistan's reconstruction. Both American and Iranian officials understood the obstacles to cooperating openly. Yet once out of the limelight, the United Nations and Germany, hosting the Bonn Conference in December 2001, pushed the United States and Iran to acknowledge and further their shared interests. The collaboration of American and Iranian diplomats was vital in establishing the present Afghan government.

Consequently, when President Bush delivered his State of the Union address on January 29, 2002, devoting much of his speech to explaining why Iran, Iraq, and North Korea constitute an "axis of evil," the ruling clerics and other Iranians were shocked, especially the reformists. Iranians of all political stripes united in frustration at Bush's statements. A week later, during celebrations for the Islamic Republic's twenty-third anniversary, almost 100,000 marched in Tehran, carrying placards

exclaiming that “Bush is Dracula!” and burning effigies of the American president and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. In sermon after sermon, Iranian officials—reformists and conservatives—deplored the Bush administration’s belligerence.

Washington’s reinvigoration of hostility toward the Islamic Republic reflected suspicions that Iran had tried to undermine the new Afghan government, continuing to arm some warlords, including Ismail Khan in Herat and Rashid Dostum in Mazar-i-Sharif. American officials failed to reconcile their suspicions with the Islamic Republic’s pledge to provide more financial aid to the new Afghan government than any other country, a move winning praise from the United Nations.

The Bush administration, however, pointed to Israel’s seizure in January of a ship loaded with arms bound for the Palestinian Authority and thought to have originated in Iran. Although Tehran rejected Israeli accusations, the discovery of the *Karine-A* in the Red Sea aggravated American concerns that Tehran was increasing its support for militant Islamists throughout the Middle East. Interestingly, Iran’s conservative officials have done little since the “axis of evil” speech to dissuade American decision makers, particularly hawks within the Department of Defense and National Security Council, not to distrust the Islamic Republic’s regional intentions.

Realizing the weakness of their reformist rivals, the conservatives have continued to aid militant Islamist groups in Lebanon and the West Bank and Gaza, to seek Russian and Chinese assistance in developing nuclear power, and to reject any contact with the United States. With the American troops in Afghanistan, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, conservatives have argued that the Islamic Republic is surrounded. As the Bush administration plans for war against Iraq, Khatami and the Foreign Ministry seem on the defensive in the debate over foreign policy.

When a polling organization, the Ayandeh Research Institute, revealed that more than three-quarters of the Tehran residents it had surveyed last September favored a rapprochement with the United States, conservatives arrested the pollsters, who are now awaiting trial. The Islamic Republic’s press court has charged the institute with taking money from the Washington-based Gallup Organization to fabricate the survey results. All national research institutes have since come under the judiciary’s microscope, despite parliamentarians’ letter of protest to Khatami in November.

In this context, reformist and conservative officials have begun debating how they should respond to a

United States attack against Iraq. Tehran has reportedly sent signals to Washington through third parties that it could help American forces by sharing intelligence. And Iranian leaders have not objected to cooperation between their client in the Iraqi opposition, the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, and American-funded groups. Yet Tehran will likely adopt a wait-and-see approach until international weapons inspectors complete their job in Iraq. As the impasse between reformist and conservative clerics persists, the Islamic Republic’s foreign policy position “Neither East nor West” is actually neither this nor that.

REPRESSION, REFORM, OR REVOLUTION?

Iran today is at a turning point in both its domestic and foreign policies, but factional gridlock within the ruling clergy shows little sign of ending any time soon. For now, the Islamic Republic’s leaders have calculated that stalemate is less costly than a decisive victory by one faction over the other. Khatami’s camp cannot afford to quicken the pace of reform, and the conservatives want to avoid resorting to repression on a massive scale that may incite civil war. Popular dissatisfaction with the clerics is growing as Iranians from every walk of life vent their frustrations through the ballot box, in the press, and with political jokes.

Yet proreform constituencies have not managed to capitalize on this widespread disenchantment. These constituencies are insufficiently organized and, with the exception of a few major thinkers close to the ruling clergy, have not articulated a clear ideological alternative to the Islamic Republic. Thinkers such as Abdolkarim Soroush and Mohsen Kadivar have contended that reforms are not feasible without distinguishing between religion and the state. Although these intellectuals have endured the conservatives’ brutality, they are still “*khodi*,” or from within the revolution’s ranks. The reformist discourse is a relatively elitist phenomenon, engaging a number of Iranians, but certainly not all who have grievances against the government.

Indeed, most Iranians are distracted by the exigencies of daily life and by the prospect of instability along their country’s borders. The options Iranians have are few and poor: resigning themselves to the repressive status quo, pushing harder for reforms through the system, or revolting against the Islamic Republic. For now, the ruling clerics are the beneficiaries of a perverse form of luck, a resentful but risk-averse society coupled with a looming foreign threat. ■