



Iran: Looking Ahead to Reform?

by Reid Smith

When former Iranian president Mohammad Khatami withdrew from the presidential race on March 16, mere weeks after the announcement of his candidacy, it should have reminded outside observers about the dubious prospects for real reform in Iran. Although Khatami was in desperate need of serious rebranding after eight years in office (1997-2005) that were marked by high hopes left unfulfilled, many had been optimistic that the high-profile reformer might finally make good on his promise to bring *détente* with the West and greater social freedom to the people of Iran.

As consensus builds in Washington that dialogue with Tehran is inevitable, and with Iran's June 12 elections approaching, the "reform" spotlight is now on former prime minister Mir Hossein Mousavi, who has previously distinguished himself as a savvy political operator. However, it would be premature to assume that Mousavi could bring reform, even if he were so inclined.

THE SHAPE OF IRANIAN "REFORM"

Immediately after his resignation from the campaign, it was rumored that Khatami had left the race because he felt stifled by the Islamic Republic's religious elite--the Guardian Council and the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. It now appears that Mousavi, by announcing his campaign ahead of schedule, may have simply outmaneuvered the former president and Mehdi Karroubi, his fellow reform candidate and the former speaker of parliament. Since his withdrawal, Khatami has made it clear that he did not wish to further dilute the reform ticket in Iran by running as a second, or perhaps even third, reform candidate. He has stated that Mousavi represents the best hope to defeat President Ahmedinejad. A firm critic of the sitting president, Mousavi commands the respect and support of reformists and conservative pragmatists in Iran for his proficient handling of the prime minister's post during the Iran-Iraq War. Since his term ended in 1989, Mousavi has stayed well clear of politics, choosing instead to serve as president of the Iranian Academy of the Arts.

From the sidelines, Mousavi had watched Khatami's meteoric rise from mid-level Shi'a cleric to international herald of a "Dialogue of Civilizations," following his election as Iran's fifth post-Revolution president. Many fondly recall Khatami's emergence and his promises of *détente* with the West, active diplomacy with Arab neighbors and proposal to check Iran's uranium enrichment program. Visits to Europe and even the United States followed, as he assured us that "Tolerance and exchange of views are the fruits of cultural richness, creativity, high-mindedness and harmony. One must recognize this opportunity."¹ It seemed for a moment that his election might usher in a new era for post-1979 Iran--a contemporary revolution based upon Khatami's vision of political and cultural openness, liberalization of the statist economy and the pursuit of peaceful relations with the world.

Alas, it was not to be. In hindsight, questions can be raised about both Khatami's genuine intentions and his political skill as his promise of reform was left by the wayside. Beyond doubt, however, was his failure to fulfill his promises of freedom, prosperity and diplomatic respectability once elected. Perhaps he was confined by the Supreme Leader's stern resistance to his reforms. He may have lacked the desire to bring such change in the first place. Yet during his two terms in office, human rights and civil liberties were flagrantly trampled. Political dissidents were killed, homes invaded, public gatherings disrupted, more than one hundred newspapers and periodicals banned, reporters, professors and progressive *Majilis* members jailed, and their defense attorneys disbarred. If Khatami's inability to enact his reform platform frustrated Western expectations, the failure of his presidency proved a promise betrayed to Iranians, themselves.

¹ Michael Rubin, "Iran Means What it Says," *Articles and Commentary*, American Enterprise Institute, Jan. 2, 2006.

It remains up to debate whether Khatami was simply an abstract and idealistic dreamer or a “silver-tongued Ahmedinejad,” but the fact remains he was a limited player in the Iranian constitutional hierarchy.² His election may have raised hopes and bought the regime more time, but despite 21 million votes behind him, he lacked an independent political base, the support of the traditional Islamic right, and a cooperative *Majilis* that shared his vision of reform.³ The president’s influence was also constrained by the influential Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which considers itself the guardian of the Iranian Revolution. In 1998, the Guard brazenly undermined Khatami’s message of dialogue with the West by simply test launching missiles that were capable of hitting Israel and Saudi Arabia. Most importantly, as president, Khatami enjoyed neither the authority nor the independence to pursue his campaign promises without the consent and approval of the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei.

Such are the difficulties facing even the most genuine “reformer” in Iran. And while some observers believe that Mousavi’s absence from the political arena in recent years spoke to the depths of his dissatisfaction with the current state of Iranian affairs, it would be hasty to assume that his affirmed opposition to President Ahmedinejad indicates a desire for liberal, democratic reform. On the contrary, he is perhaps best remembered as the leader of the Islamic Leftists who pursued “statist, if not socialist, economic policy,” for much of the 1980s.⁴ Moreover, while he is considered a moderate in Iran, this politician/architect boasts strong revolutionary credentials. A favorite of the original Iranian “reformist,” Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Mousavi assisted the father of the Iranian revolution as editor-in-chief of *Jomhuri-ye Eslami*, the official newspaper of Khomeini’s party, before accepting his post as prime minister of the young Islamic Republic at Khomeini’s behest.⁵ Thirty years after the revolution, the news of Mousavi’s candidacy this past March was greeted with chants of “Blessings to Prophet Muhammad. Khomeini’s companion has come.”

In recent weeks, “Death to the Dictator” has become a more common refrain as Mousavi cements his following thanks to his legitimate opposition to Ahmedinejad and the president’s hard-line cabinet. During their June 3 debate--televised live in a manner never before witnessed in the Islamic republic--the rivals openly discussed foreign policy, corruption and Iran’s economic dilemma. Their views diverged sharply. Mousavi went so far as to state his belief that Ahmedinejad’s leadership has created the political conditions that lead to dictatorship. The president responded with brash accusations directed at his rival’s wife and past administrations.

Beyond his public dispute with the president, Mousavi has stated his desire to pursue relations with the West, while vowing to end the morality police’s restrictions on clothing and to permit greater freedom of speech. Mousavi’s plan to combat inflation, unemployment and the broad spectrum of costly civil subsidies makes more economic sense than the current policies. However, the startling reality of Iran’s political and economic landscape is such that Mousavi’s candidacy does not represent Ahmedinejad’s greatest political threat. At the moment, the country’s centrist conservatives are altogether fed up with the current president’s bellicose leadership and mishandling of the state economy. Ahmedinejad has proven, time and again, that he is his own worst enemy.

President Ahmedinejad was fortunate that his inauguration in 2005 coincided with a swell in oil prices, allowing him to pursue expansive populist endeavors without concerning himself with the nuts and bolts of legitimate economic expansion and future productive capacities. The economic crisis in the West has burst the oil bubble and has led to soaring unemployment and inflation in Iran. The government now finds itself facing a \$44 billion budget deficit, while plunging oil revenues squeeze a stagnant public sector (Iran’s FY 2009 budget is based on an oil price of \$37.50 per barrel, sharply lower than the \$147 per barrel peak in 2008). Longstanding international sanctions and the persistent absence of foreign investment continue to take their toll.⁶

Beyond the economic indicators, an October 2008 strike in the Tehran bazaar supplied further warning of the economic troubles facing Iran. The government’s imposition of a modest VAT-type tax offered sufficient cause for bazaar merchants to close up shop in protest. Ahmedinejad responded by immediately postponing the tax for one year, and in so doing revealed his vulnerability to the people, as the bazaar remains “part of revolutionary Iran’s heartland.”⁷ The president has little left to promise his countrymen, save vague references to the Hidden Imam’s divine support and allusions to a millenarian rush to

² Michael Rubin, “Khatami is just Ahmedinejad with a silver tongue,” *The Australian*, March 25, 2009.

³ Jahangir Amuzegar, “Khatami’s Legacy: Dashed Hopes,” *Middle East Journal*, Winter 2006, p. 71.

⁴ Mohsen M. Milani, “Reform and Resistance in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” *Iran at the Crossroads*, eds. John L. Esposito and R.K. Ramazani, (New York: Palgrave, 1990), p. 36.

⁵ Shaul Bakhash, *The Reign of the Ayatollahs: Iran and the Islamic Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), p. 108.

⁶ Hiedeh Farmani, “Iran parliament passes \$298 billion budget,” *Agence France-Presse*, March 9, 2009.

⁷ “Iran: Breaking the Nuclear Deadlock,” *The Chatham House*, ed. Sir Richard Dalton, December 2008, p. 11.

“wrap up” the various distractions of domestic policy. In the words of Sir John Dalton, former British ambassador to Iran, “As the situation becomes palpably worse Ahmedinejad has reaffirmed his conviction that a utopia is about to be realized.”⁸

Despite the obstacles facing his reelection, Khamenei has called upon Iranians to elect a “people’s” candidate, which was widely interpreted as a near endorsement of the sitting president. And while conservative *Majlisi* members continue to complain that the Ahmedinejad will cost them votes come election time, and demonstrate their dissatisfaction by blocking his economic legislation whenever possible, the fact that he still enjoys the support of the Supreme Leader is, ultimately, paramount.

SO WHAT CAN WE EXPECT?

One man who is not running for office this month holds the power to determine who in fact will be allowed to campaign. Ultimately, that decision falls to Khamenei, who oversees the Council of Guardians and the Interior Ministry. These two bodies share responsibility for election oversight, and the Basij militia and the Revolutionary Guard Corps, which supervise the ballot-boxes and vote count.

So the question remains: What, then, can the so-called moderate, reform movement in Iran hope to accomplish? An optimistic response would suggest that the presidential elections will influence the way Tehran operates. This is unlikely. However, it will be interesting to see whether or not Khamenei allows a moderate to take office if popularly elected. Such relative broadmindedness on the part of the supreme leader might suggest a warming trend for US-Iranian relations. Unfortunately, the current rhetoric coming from Tehran does not forecast such openness.

Consider Khamenei’s response to President Obama’s proposal this past March of “constructive ties,” on the occasion of the Persian New Year of Norwuz. Obama offered “engagement that is honest and grounded in mutual respect” and suggested a proposal of broad diplomacy. His video message did not reference the nuclear standoff between Washington and Tehran; instead, it concentrated on Iran’s historical and cultural contributions while addressing a variety of issues, including political stability in Iraq, Afghan security and Arab-Israeli peace.⁹ Clearly, Obama understands that the time for diplomacy is running short. Iran has produced sufficient uranium to create a nuclear bomb, with further enrichment, and has consistently failed to provide the International Atomic Energy Agency with satisfactory assurances regarding their professed absence of weapons materials and activities.¹⁰

Khamenei responded unusually quickly to Obama’s video message, although he was typically dismissive. In a live televised address, he stated in no uncertain terms that it would take more than words to change the relationship between Tehran and Washington. After detailing a list of Iranian grievances with the United States, including its “unconditional support” for the state of Israel and continued sanctions against the Islamic Republic, the Supreme Leader assured the crowd “They chant the slogan of change, but no change is seen in practice [...] We are observing, watching and judging. If you change, we will also change our behavior. If you do not change, we will be the same nation as 30 years ago,” while pausing at one point to allow the crowd to chant “Death to America.”¹¹ Similar sentiment condemning the assurances of empty rhetoric came hours before Obama’s June 4th speech to the Muslim world, as Khamenei took advantage of the twentieth anniversary of the death of his predecessor to revile the United States and Israel in familiar fashion.

Since Khomeini’s Islamic revolution solidified a “guardianship of Islamic jurists” (*wilayat-e-faqih*), representatives of the government have maintained that the Iranian people enjoy both the rule of law and genuine political representation. This is not the case. Regardless of who is elected on June 12, the president of Iran must answer to the Supreme Leader, who answers to neither his people, nor a freely elected governing body. Although Khamenei was selected by the Guardian Council, which comprises six high ranking clerics and six lawyers, all twelve members of this jurisconsult were technically appointed by him or his hand-picked subordinates and are ultimately compliant with his decisions.¹² Before a president is selected, the Guardian Council determines who will be allowed to compete for the office. In the weeks leading up to the last presidential cycle in Iraq, which witnessed the beginning of the Ahmedinejad administration, “the Guardian Council announced that only six of the 1,014 candidates who registered for the upcoming presidential elections were qualified to be placed on the ballot.”¹³ Beyond his electoral power, Khamenei has the last word on all matters relating to the judiciary, the military, the Expediency Council (which adjudicates disagreements between the *Majlis* and the Council of Guardians), and the heads of countless other political,

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Thomas Erdbrink and Glenn Kessler, “Obama’s Message to Iran Differs Sharply from Bush’s,” *Washington Post*, March 21, 2009.

¹⁰ “Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and relevant provisions of Security Council resolutions 1737 (2006), 1747 (2007), 1803 (2008) and 1835 (2008) in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” *The International Atomic Energy Agency*, IAEA Board Report, Feb. 19, 2009.

¹¹ Nahid Siamdoust, “How Khatami’s Exit Could Be Good for Ahmedinejad,” *Time*, March 17, 2009.

¹² Mohsen Sazegara, “Lawful Crimes in Iran,” *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Policy Watch #999, June 1, 2005.

¹³ Mohsen Sazegara, “Access Denied: Iran’s Exclusionary Elections,” Human Rights Watch Briefing Paper, June 5, 2005.

economic, and cultural institutions under Iran's constitution.¹⁴ So before we get our hopes up for the elections, and the potential for a "moderate" such as Mossavi, it is important to remember that we'd be pinning those hopes on a Khomeini disciple, who has no real authority over Iran's diplomatic resolve, military, or nuclear ambitions.

Talk of reform in Iran has been well received since Khatami's first campaign in 1997 called for a political framework that would meld democratic reform with expansive social freedoms while deferring to country's Islamic traditions.¹⁵ Yet, we learned from his eight disappointing years that such rhetoric remains meaningless without the support of the Guardian Council and the Supreme Leader. For Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's contemporary foreign policy remains rooted in the revolutionary principles originally formulated in the 1970s.¹⁶ He still does not see a contradiction between Khomeini's founding ideals and the best interests of his Republic. Vitriol aside, Khamenei demanded that the United States take definitive action to make certain Iran's future participation in any diplomatic contact between the two nations. Regardless of the steps Khamenei presumes the "Great Satan" must take to ensure that we "avoid an arrogant tone, avoid arrogant behavior, avoid bullying behavior, do not interfere in nations' affairs, be contented with [our] own share, do not define interests extra-territorially all over the world," it is difficult to imagine that the United States will meet his expectations.

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¹⁴ Mehdi Khalaji, "Iranian President Ahmedinejad Relationship with Supreme Leader Khamenei," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Policy Watch 1147, Sept. 12, 2006.

¹⁵ John-Daniel Lafond and Fred A. Reed, *Conversations in Tehran* (Talon Books, 2005), p. 140.

¹⁶ Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *Iran in World Politics: The Question of the Islamic Republic* (Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 67.