



Iran's Emerging National Compact

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Getting Iran wrong is an old habit. Until the very eve of the 1979 revolution, Americans grievously misjudged the staying power of the Shah and underestimated the appeal of his clerical opponents. Now Washington risks the obverse error by misjudging the strength of theocratic ideologues and their militias, while underestimating the staying power of Iranian reformers. Granted, over the past five years, the inability of the reform movement led by President Mohammad Khatami to overcome Iran's systemic hurdles to genuine democratization has frustrated an impatient electorate and generally sullied the Cinderella story of a changing Iran. At a press conference this summer, the Iranian president himself ruefully and realistically declared, "I admit that there is a sort of hopelessness in our society."

The conventional Washington wisdom is understandable. Iranian politics are in an intractable stalemate. Khatami's resounding electoral victories and the reformers' tremendous gains in parliamentary and municipal elections are greeted in America with skepticism, if not resignation. The reformist press has been stifled—more than 70 publications have been suppressed on specious charges by hard-line judges in the last three years. Responding to scores of arrests of their liberal members, and massive disqualifications of reformist candidates, the Iranian parliament is about to adopt legislation that would deny the clerics on the Council of Guardians—the political fortress of orthodoxy and autocracy—the high-handed right to disqualify candidates. Yet this pervasive skepticism obscures the gradual

shifts in Iran's political topography that have taken place since the first reformist breakthrough six years ago—subtle but fundamental changes in the structure of authority and the fabric of society.

Although overshadowed by the reform movement's setbacks and overlooked by jaded observers, these incremental enhancements of Iran's republican infrastructure have established the foundation for more progress toward a genuinely democratic polity. Despite the repressive tactics of the militant right, the reform movement has succeeded in empowering the average Iranian and making the citizenry an important arbiter of the regime's legitimacy. Iran's restive youth and hard-pressed middle class have refused to be relegated to the margins of society, to passively obey the dictates of the clerical estate. It is this reality that has realigned Iran's politics, causing important shifts in both the reform and conservative blocs. As a result, important elements among the country's theocratic rulers are moving, however uneasily and haltingly, toward a new national governing compact.

The Evolution of the Reform Movement

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a regime of paradoxes. The revolutionaries of 1979 sought to usher in a virtuous order in which temporal affairs would conform to divine mandates. Thus, the supreme leader (*Vali-ye Faqih*) was invested with the power to abrogate election results and to select the heads of the armed forces, the judiciary, and the Revolutionary Guards. The dominance of the clerical estate over national affairs was

further strengthened by the creation of the Council of Guardians (*Shura-ye Negabban*), which is largely made up of clerics responsive to the dictates of the supreme leader and empowered to screen all candidates for public office and to scrutinize parliamentary legislation for conformity to religious strictures.

However, the public that had overthrown the formidable monarchy could not be categorically excluded from the deliberations of the state. Thus, the president, Parliament, and local councils were to be chosen by the electorate. Despite the impressive array of powers granted to the clerical oligarchy, Iran's revolutionaries created a governing arrangement whereby collective will would remain an important source of legitimacy. As Iran's clerics were to discover, institutional power devoid of popular legitimacy cannot be sustained over a prolonged period of time. For the theocracy to function, indeed to survive, it had to find a balance between divine authority and popular representation.

During the first decade of the Islamic Republic, the unchallenged authority and charisma of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini obscured the regime's underlying contradictions. Iran's contending political factions accepted Khomeini's fiat, while elections were occasions for the public to endorse the ayatollah's candidates. The divisions within the clerical community, where many traditionalist clerics had long viewed actual assumption of temporal power as inconsistent with Shiite theology, went unaired. In the meantime, the democratic promises of the constitution remained largely unfulfilled, as Khomeini neither tolerated dissent nor honored the constitutional pledge of political freedom. Revolutionary excess and rigid dogma became the twin pillars of Iranian politics and, over time, the bond between the regime and the populace gradually began to erode.

In the late 1980s, two events altered the dynamics and nature of Iran's polity. First,

the long war with Iraq that had begun eight years earlier ended in 1988, and the ceasefire that followed revitalized political consciousness on the part of a public anticipating some tangible reward for its profound and protracted suffering. Then, less than a year later came the passing of Ayatollah Khomeini. The death of the founder of the Islamic Republic eroded the fragile political consensus and deprived the clerical establishment of both its charismatic leader and its institutional coherence. The ensuing struggle for predominance among the ruling clerics came at a time when the expectations of the public were on the rise. Over the course of the next decade, simmering public discontent and revisionism within the ranks of the clergy and the intelligentsia nurtured a new political movement in Iran.

Not unlike the revolution that it began to critique, the reform movement took shape in universities, seminaries, literary groups, and professional associations. Intellectuals and political activists began to discuss ways of broadening political representation within the context of Islamic governance. Their outlook was informed by their participation as students in the revolution and their subsequent service in the Islamic government, and by their position on the periphery of political viability under the increasingly authoritarian administration of President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani.

Foremost among the first wave of new thinkers was Abdol Karim Soroush, a Tehran University professor whose early training in Islamic jurisprudence and subsequent secular education allowed him to fashion a rationale for the amalgamation of democratic precepts and Islamic imperatives. Through his articles in the intellectual journal *Kian* and public lectures across the country in the early 1990s, Soroush became one of Iran's most significant public thinkers and one of the Islamic Republic's most persistent critics. Soroush contended that the Islamic regime's rigid adherence to dogma had produced an entire generation of

Iranians estranged from both the regime and religion. In order to reverse this trend, he argued, the sacred texts needed to be reinterpreted along progressive lines. After all, religious interpretation was not “sacred and therefore can be criticized, modified, refined and redefined.”¹

Soroush believed in the compatibility of Islamic precepts and participatory democracy. Religious texts and Islamic jurisprudence should be seen, he argued, as the means of ensuring individual sovereignty, government accountability, and the rule of law. Through such a progressive reconceptualization of Islam, Soroush said, it was possible to envision a political order in which religious doctrine and pluralistic precepts could be reconciled. “To be a religious man,” he said, “necessitates being a democratic man as well. An ideal religious society cannot have anything but a democratic government.”² Soroush’s writings and speeches, which represented an unmistakable challenge to the authority of the supreme leader, secured him the enthusiastic approbation of disaffected students. However, his lectures were constantly disrupted by the regime’s thugs, while *Kian*, the journal he had pioneered, was shut down.

It was not only university professors like Soroush and long-time political activists who shaped the reform movement, however. From the outset, Iran’s seminaries harbored a cadre of clerics uneasy about the direction of the revolution and the growing estrangement of the populace from the religious establishment. A younger generation of clerics—many of whom were linked to Ayatollah Ali Montazeri, ousted in 1987 as Khomeini’s heir apparent—sought to interpret Islam in a manner that accommodated popular sovereignty and democratic representation. Hojjat-ol-islam Mohsen Khadivar, a leading voice for Islamic reformation, captured this sentiment by stressing, “I believe democracy and Islam are compatible. But a religious state is possible only when it is elected and governed by people. And the

governing of the country should not be necessarily in the hands of the clergy.”³

The collaboration of the clerics and intellectuals fused disparate interests within a broad-based movement articulating democratic demands in the language of a familiar faith—yet another parallel with the mobilization leading up the 1979 revolution. The children of the revolution had come to see themselves as agents of change as opposed to passive pawns in the Kingdom of God. In political terms, this translated into an insistence that the public was the ultimate arbiter of proper governance and that the collective will was the primary source of legitimacy. Iranians could and should shape the ideals and direction of the state through participation in elections and public affairs. Advocacy of this imperative emerged as the guiding principle of the reform movement. The popular appetite for change meant that the reformers had a ready audience and that—unlike previously in Iran’s long and troubled political development—the intellectual impulse toward democracy would find fertile ground in which to germinate.

Into this charged arena stepped Hojjat-ol-islam Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, a mid-level cleric with impeccable revolutionary credentials who was recruited to stand in the 1997 presidential elections in token opposition to the establishment candidate. Despite his position in the clerical establishment, Khatami had long distinguished himself from it, both in his politics and his intellectual enterprises. In 1992, the future president, who was then minister of culture, broke with the Rafsanjani administration over his liberal tendencies and his willingness to grant license for publications and plays that defied the strictures of the regime. After he was ousted, he immersed himself in Western philosophy as a complement to his Islamic training. In his subsequent writings, Khatami dared to contravene the ruling consensus, declaring that “state authority cannot be attained through coercion and dictatorship. Rather it is to be

realized through governing according to the law, respecting the rights and empowering people to participate and ensuring their involvement in decision-making.”⁴ In his campaign speeches, Khatami emphasized the rule of law, the pursuit of justice, and the strengthening of civil society

This expansive vision of a tolerant Islamic government won the hearts and minds of the Iranian public. And it gained Khatami (who won a whopping 69 percent of the vote) a stunning victory. His election energized the reform movement, as its adherents made the leap from theory to action, from contemplation and critique to accountability and implementation. Now the reformers faced a new challenge: how to navigate the treacherous waters of Iranian politics and institutionalize their ideas. This would prove a much more difficult task than they had imagined.

The Reformers' Track Record

Prior to 1997, theoreticians of reform had invested considerable time and energy in mapping out a strategy for slowly reclaiming their influence over the course of the Islamic Republic. Having derailed the conservative drive to dominate Iran's tumultuous factional politics with their unexpected capture of the nation's highest elected office, Khatami and his allies now had to put thought into action. However, they faced determined adversaries who rallied their considerable resources to forestall further reformist incursions against entrenched interests.

Once in power, the reformers opted for a strategy of incrementalism, seeking to reform the Islamic Republic gradually from within its own institutions. Taking a dual approach—characterized by the catchphrase, “pressure from below, negotiations from the top”—they sought to respond to burgeoning public demands for greater freedom.

The new president picked his battles carefully and sought to avoid open clashes with the conservatives. To turn up the pres-

sure from below, hundreds of new publications were licensed, censorship guidelines were loosened, and permits for reformist groups and gatherings were issued. The reformers refrained from challenging the wide discretionary power of the supreme leader, which his hard-line allies guarded jealously. Instead, the reformers focused on expanding their institutional power base, taking full advantage of the opportunities accorded by provisions of limited democracy under the Islamic constitution to bring the political competition into the public arena. The reformers sought to buttress their cause by establishing media outlets and creating political parties, notably the Islamic Participation Front.

The strategy of gradualism produced results. Iran's democratic infrastructure was broadened when, in 1998, elections for the constitutionally mandated local councils were held for the first time. Overnight, the number of elected officials in Iran went from 400 to 200,000, with the overwhelming majority of those posts being held by politicians sympathetic to a reform agenda. In the February 2000 parliamentary elections, the reformers captured 189 out of 290 seats, reclaiming an institution that had long served as a bastion of conservative power. At this point, reformers held sway throughout the provincial administrations, in the newly inaugurated municipal councils, and in Parliament. They capitalized on their institutional gains by developing diverse political parties as a means of mobilizing their mass constituency.

The reformist ascendancy produced a number of tangible victories. The most important among these was the reaffirmation of Parliament's prerogative to scrutinize organizations under the supreme leader's jurisdiction. Institutions such as the Ministry of Intelligence, the state broadcasting authority, semi-governmental economic foundations, and even the armed forces were for the first time to be subject to parliamentary oversight. Under its reformist majority, Par-

liament took up its investigatory license with a vengeance, probing into issues as diverse as the behavior of the security apparatus to the prospect of renewed relations with the United States. Here parliamentary representatives took up the mantle earlier worn by enterprising reformist newspapers.

Khatami's strategy of incremental reform did not lead to the anticipated democratic breakthrough, however. When the reformers began to purge institutions such as the Ministry of Intelligence and to talk about reining in the judiciary, they infringed on the power base of the conservatives. The hard-liners' strategy for retaining the upper hand soon crystallized in the targeting of individual reform leaders, the selective use of violence to intimidate and create division, and the use of the judiciary, along with the Council of Guardians, to block genuine reform. Each time the reformers' inventive circumnavigations of the system managed to gain them even the most ambiguous advantage, they were more than outgunned by the concerted hard-line response, particularly in the courts. Through the cynical use of their institutional powers, the conservatives shuttered hundreds of publications, imprisoned many reformist intellectuals, journalists, and officials, and brutally broke up peaceful student gatherings. The militant faction of the clerical community, the reins of power in its hands, simply refused to countenance a challenge to its anachronistic vision of theocracy.

A New Phase

Despite the conservative backlash, Iran's reform movement has not crumbled. If anything, it is entering a new and more aggressive phase with the emergence of a younger generation of leaders who are pressing for more immediate results. Among the rising stars of this more robust reform movement are the parliamentarian Mohammad Reza Khatami, who is the president's brother, the dissident cleric Mohsen Khadivar, and student leaders Ali Afshari and Akbar Moham-

madi. These reformers have rejected the strategy of incremental change and opted for the more assertive policies of disengagement and confrontation. Some reform parliamentarians and public officials are threatening to leave the government in a move to delegitimize the Islamic Republic, whose survival requires a degree of popular consent. And student organizations are increasingly engaging in active street protests in defiance of the theocracy's prohibitions. Thus, while the reform movement's objectives remain the same—to create a polity that harmonizes religious injunctions with democratic imperatives—its tactics are evolving. Instead of changing the system from within, reformers are increasingly seeking to exert pressure from without.

The new reform strategy crystallized this past summer when the Islamic Participation Front, Iran's largest reform party, which controls 130 out of 290 parliamentary seats and 5 ministries, warned that if the conservatives continued their obstructionism, it would disengage from politics. Ebrahim Yazdi, one of Iran's most prominent dissidents, pointedly declared, "We are approaching a turning point. Basically, down deep, there is confrontation between tradition and modernity."⁵

University students, chafing under suffocating cultural restrictions and frustrated by the lack of employment opportunities, are increasingly taking to the streets in protest. At a time when the regime is incapable of providing employment for half of the 800,000 people who enter the job market each year, and with the "moral police" once more cracking down on those who deviate from religious codes of dress and conduct, the young are demanding radical change. In defiance of government bans, student associations, such as the Office for Consolidation of Unity and the Union of Islamic Students, have emerged as the vanguard of the newly emboldened reform movement. A protesting student captured the spirit of the new partisans of change in

declaring, “We aren’t afraid. They can’t frighten us.”⁶

The Internet has become a potent source of information in the place of the banned newspapers, and a means of organizing. Many Iranian journalists are establishing websites. “Technology always wins, and therefore the closure of reformists’ newspapers is unimportant when there is the Internet,” declares one writer.⁷

The conservatives’ strategy has backfired. Their policy of obstructing evolutionary change and Khatami’s strategy of cohabitation has led to the rise of an even more determined reform movement whose leaders are not just impatient but capable of mounting a serious challenge to the legitimacy and viability of the Islamic Republic.

As the reform movement alters its tactics, it is forcing the conservatives to shift their perspective. Increasing numbers of conservatives are beginning to appreciate that their long-term relevance is contingent on their ability to engage Iran’s youth and on their commitment to the creation of a tolerant society.

A New National Compact?

The Western media often portray the Iranian right as a monolithic group—devoted to the cause, united in purpose. The behavior of the judiciary, with its contrived tribunals and arbitrary procedures, certainly lends credibility to this claim. The judiciary and such institutions as the Council of Guardians have been the mainstays of the right, persecuting reformers and blocking progressive change at every turn. This is not the whole picture, however. The conservative bloc is fragmenting, and, under the watchful eye of the supreme leader, competing factions of hard-liners and pragmatists are struggling to define its direction.

The extremists, led by Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, head of the Council of Guardians, seek to sustain a rigid theocratic regime. Their Islam is averse to innovation, intolerant of dissent, and contemptuous of demo-

cratic accountability. As one of the foremost figures of this bloc, Moslemin Gharavan has declared, “One cannot differentiate between right and wrong by virtue of a referendum, just as no prophet has ever said that whatever people say is just.”⁸ Although their congregations have dwindled and a stale rhetoric has limited their popular appeal, they retain substantial power through control of the judiciary and the Council of Guardians. They continue to deliver fiery sermons on the depravity of the West and the virtues of vigilance and martyrdom. “We shall wait to see what place these forces who set claim to be the supporters of reforms will occupy in hell,” thunders Mohammad Yazdi, a member of the Council of Guardians.⁹ Over the past five years, the extremists have waged a powerful defensive game, thwarting many democratic reforms and cultural liberalization measures.

The essential dilemma for the hard-liners is that their strategy of retaining control through repression is unsustainable in an Iran where there are representative institutions, regular elections, and a degree of pluralism. If the right maintains its current state of electoral irrelevance, its only alternative to loss of power will be to abrogate the constitution and attempt a coup. Given the dubious loyalty of the rank and file of the Revolutionary Guards, which is made up of young men who themselves voted in overwhelming numbers for Khatami, such a course of action would entail tremendous risks. Thus, many conservatives sense that in order to retain their influence, they must adjust their thinking.

The new conservative pragmatists are mimicking the early reformist strategy of promulgating their message through intellectual circles, professional associations, and the press, particularly the conservative paper *Entekhab*, which carries the supreme leader’s subtle sanction. In recent articles, *Entekhab* has condemned “fossilized thinking” and slammed conservatives for adherence to “reactionary Islam.”¹⁰ These moderate conserva-

tives argue that violent suppression of dissent will not only marginalize the right but threaten the entire edifice of the Islamic Republic. In an even more resounding rebuke of the hard-liners, one of Iran's most senior clerics, Ayatollah Jaleddin Taheri, has warned that "the failure to find effective solutions have grave and tragic consequences, which are all accumulating like a devastating flood behind the dam and threaten the country and the life of the nation at any moment."¹¹

This ideological reformation within the conservative camp is a matter of survival. Ayatollah Feizollah Arabsorkhi of the Islamic Revolution Mojahedian clearly understands this. The "reconstruction of the right-wing faction must be in two general areas," he says. "It must first respect the rules of the political game and second it must amend its program in line with society's expectations and demands."¹² But such political expediency does not detract from the importance of conservative new thinking, which is beginning to make a tangible imprint on Iranian domestic policy. The framework proposed by the pragmatists hints at important changes in the right's political and economic perspective.

In contrast to the rigid definition of Islam that militant conservatives have propounded in recent years, the new thinkers seek a progressive reinterpretation of scripture and the establishment of a more tolerant society. They explicitly endorse the need to reengage young Iranians, and they have pointedly condemned the traditionalist segment of Iran's conservative power base, the bazaar, for its economic backwardness. "Iranian political intellectuals must now draw up and organize the principles and practices of the game in the framework of a new phase, because we are now putting an end to period of political cold war," says Amir Mohebkian, a leading intellectual architect of the right.¹³

During last year's presidential election, all nine of the conservative candidates came

out in strong support of political and economic reform. Three even endorsed a future dialogue with the United States. Their statements with respect to reform were not simple sloganeering. The conservatives who entered the presidential race did so largely to position themselves for future bids for political office, and thus their statements reflected their recognition of Iran's shifting center of gravity.

The pragmatic conservatives offer an avenue out of Iran's polarized politics and the gridlock that has precluded progress on such critical issues as economic reform. However, ultimate power in Iran lies with the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has the authority to invalidate election results and to appoint the heads of the security services, the armed forces, state media, and the judiciary, as well as veto power over all parliamentary legislation. Unlike his predecessor, Khamenei possesses neither the charisma nor the standing as a theologian that would immunize him from challenges from within the clerical hierarchy. To preserve his standing and power, therefore, he has had to bend to the will of the militant clerics who support and sanction his claim to Iran's highest religious and political authority. But Khamenei is now confronted with a perplexing dilemma, namely his uncritical association with the militant right is proving to be inconsistent with his statutory role as preserver of the Islamic Republic. Despite his incendiary rhetoric and personal proclivity toward a dogmatic interpretation of Islam, Khamenei was not a charter member of the militant bloc, and as supreme leader he has on occasion sought to curb some of its excesses.

As Iran's political temperature rises, Khamenei is beginning to evince greater pragmatism and is increasingly signaling his approbation of the moderate conservatives. "The main characteristic of new thought," he said earlier this year, "is its ability to regenerate itself, bring itself up to date with changing needs and circumstances, and

provide political and social solutions for contemporary society.”¹⁴ This tacit endorsement of conservative new thinking evokes Khamenei’s history of relative moderation prior to his accession to Iran’s highest office in 1989, and portends the possibility of cooperation between the reformers and moderate conservatives. Unlike many on the militant right, the supreme leader appreciates the necessity of paying attention to the two-thirds of Iran’s population who are under the age of 30, arguing that government officials “should view this massive stratum of young people as a tumultuous river which is full of riches.”¹⁵ Clearly, Khamenei is searching for an alternative that avoids revolution or full-scale repression.

Ironically, just as the militant conservatives were beginning to feel concerted pressure from within their own ranks, the president of the United States came to their rescue. In castigating Iran as a member of an “axis of evil,” President Bush handed the hard-line conservatives a propaganda weapon. “Under the circumstances,” the conservative paper *Resalaat* editorialized, “a discourse about how to establish a civil society sounds ridiculous.”¹⁶ Iran’s reformist vice president, Masoumeh Ebtekar, bemoaned the adverse impact of Bush’s statement: “These threats could create even more setbacks for genuine reform and democratic process in the country.”¹⁷ Ebtekar proved prescient. Under the banner of national unity, the conservatives have orchestrated further crackdowns, closing a number of reform newspapers that began publishing after the parliamentary elections two years ago and banning one of Iran’s liberal parties, the Freedom Movement.

Despite Washington’s counterproductive sloganeering, Iran’s existential struggle will proceed on its own terms. The recent signs of ideological conversion on the part of some conservatives do not imply the end of Iran’s internal tensions, but they may mean a greater degree of collaboration in such key areas as judicial and economic reform. This

collaboration will not come easily, but it may well be the prelude to a new national compact.

The struggles of the past five years have persuaded an important segment of the conservative bloc that the current stalemate will only lead to the demise of the governing system established in 1979. They know that they must start on the path to reform or face an angry constituency whose demands cannot be ignored indefinitely. The pragmatic forces within the conservative camp appear to be looking for a way to advance the cause of pluralism while retaining the Islamic boundaries of the state. If they succeed, Iran’s contending factions may yet confound their critics and fashion a compromise that fulfills the revolutionary pledge of 1979 to create a political order that is both representative and responsive to traditional values. ●

Notes

1. Robin Wright, *The Last Great Revolution: Turmoil and Transformation in Iran* (New York: Knopf, 2000), p. 42.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
3. Elaine Sciolino, “Cleric Uses Weapons of Religion Against Iran’s Rulers,” *New York Times*, September 18, 2000.
4. Islamic Republic of Iran’s News Agency (IRNA) May 5, 1997.
5. Associated Press, May 15, 2002.
6. IRNA, July 26, 2002.
7. Reuters, August 5, 2002.
8. Iranian Student News Agency, April 21, 2002.
9. John Ward Anderson, “Iran’s Conservatives Face a Growing Split,” *Washington Post*, June 2, 2001.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Nouruz*, July 10, 2002.
12. *Seda-ye Edalat*, June 13, 2001.
13. *Resalat*, April 29, 2002.
14. *Entekhab*, March 21, 2001.
15. IRNA, September 23, 2001.
16. *Resalat*, February 7, 2002.
17. Associated Press, March 6, 2002.