

GOD'S WILL: IRANIAN DEMOCRACY AND THE ISLAMIC CONTEXT

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One of the most powerful movements of the post-Cold War period has been the call for political empowerment. From the collapse of petty tyrannies in Latin America to the demise of one-party states in the former Soviet bloc, pro-democracy forces are reshaping governments and establishing participatory institutions. Despite its reputation as the world's foremost region of despotic regimes, even the Middle East is beginning to see its political order redefined by democracy. The state that is leading the region's democratic experiment is, ironically, the much-maligned Islamic Republic of Iran.

Western scholars have long assumed that if democracy were going to come to the Middle East, it would have to be ushered in by either modernizing technocrats or reforming army officers. The clerics and religion were seen as obstacles to overcome. Thus, many analysts have neglected the Muslim thinkers who are attempting to adapt their traditions to the realities of the modern world. Throughout the Middle East, Islamic reformers are imaginatively addressing issues such as the nature of political authority, the relationship between temporal and spiritual realms, and how to reconcile

democratic convictions with religious dogma. The contribution that President Muhammad Khatami and Iranian reformers are making to this debate is significant, as they are moving beyond speculation and actively employing religion as a means of facilitating a democratic transition. The ultimate result of Iran's experiment can have profound implications not just for Iran but for the entire Islamic bloc.

ISLAM AND DEMOCRACY

In the post-independence period, the Middle East ruling elite sought to reconstruct their societies along Western modalities and sacrificed their traditional institutions as obstacles to progress. The economic models, cultural discourse and political lexicon were uncritically imported from the West. However, in this uneasy process of absorption, Western democratic values were left behind; the modernizing elites insisted that only through monopolization of political power could they propel the engines of progress. The architects of modernization spent little time amending the political structure to express or reflect the popular will. The colonial empire was replaced by the Jacobean state, yielding minimal power to its constituency. By the 1970s, the once-

optimistic promises of modernity faded under the weight of economic stagnation and political repression. The rise of Islamism was a rejection of the acculturated elite and its totalitarian state.

The manifestation of Islamic protest movements and their criticism of the West cannot be seen as a rejection of Western democratic ideals. The Western politicians' and pundits' unease about the resurgence of religion has led them to ignore the fact that Islamic political theory is resistant to despotism. While in post-Reformation Europe the concept of the "people" emerged as countering an arbitrary concentration of power, in the Middle East, Islam developed its own claims against the legitimacy of tyranny. Both Islamic law and traditions insist on consultation and dialogue between the ruler and the ruled. As guardians of the scriptures, the clergy have the obligation to counter the absolutism of the ruling authorities. The modern Middle Eastern governments with their brutal internal security services and sham elections are actually antithetical to Islamic political thought.

In the past, however, Islam's democratic potential remained more theoretical than real. Religious functionaries seemingly abandoned their mission and in many cases legitimized the totalitarian state and its abuses. The brutality of the Syrian regime and the anti-democratic penchant of the Egyptian government have been sanctified by a besieged and docile clerical estate. In the meantime, militant Islamist forces such as Algeria's Armed Islamic Group and Afghanistan's Taliban rejected Western values in their entirety as morally debilitating agents of imperialism. However, a preoccupation with radical figures and complacent clerics can distract observers from the

quiet evolution that is taking place in Islamist circles, where a moderate cadre is seeking to readjust the parameters of their political universe along democratic lines.

As with many political protest movements, the face of Islamism is gradually changing as the militants are being displaced by more tempered reformers. The true proponents of the movement are men such as Rached Ghannouchi of Tunisia, Leith Chebelial of Lebanon and Muhammad Khatami of Iran. These leaders do not advocate the rejection of modernity, but espouse an indigenous response to its challenges and the enveloping regional identity crisis. Given that religion so vitally shapes the political order and social mores of Islamic societies, the reformers stress that a durable democratic system must rely on Islamic approbation. This task is possible, as there are sufficient Islamic injunctions to allow democratic expressions. Islam's call for consultation (*shura*) and consensus (*ijma*) are employed to stress the importance of public opinion and majoritarian rule. The scriptures' emphasis on rulers' accountability is seen as denoting the importance of the rule of law and separation of powers. Through a process of continuous reconceptualization, Islamic traditions are being revised with modern transformations. The secret to the mobilizing power of contemporary Islamism is not its call for restoration of the seventh century but its employment of indigenous vocabulary to sanction democratic concepts. As such, the Islamists' discourse gives democratic ideas the advantage of seeming novel and untarnished by the legacy of colonialism and failed secular rule.

The reformers' doctrinal evolution brings their vision closer to Western ideas

than they themselves would admit. The prominence of fringe groups in the media ought not to obscure the reality that Muslim reformers find themselves not repudiating the West, but selectively appropriating its benign ideals. The irony is that Islamists are best capable of fostering a democratic polity in the Middle East. Given their cultural credibility and undeniable autonomy, they can succeed in connecting democratic values with the dominant culture. The secular elites will have difficulty cultivating the democratic terrain as they are suspected of doing so at the cost of the region's patrimony – Islam. In today's Middle East, the quest for political empowerment is taking place along with the assertion of communal identities and affirmation of religious values.

The one state in the Middle East where Islam is being effectively employed as the basis of democratic mobilization is Iran. Unlike many Islamic reformers, Khatami and his followers are actually in command of a powerful state and thus able to translate such concepts into public-policy measures. The success of this enterprise can have profound implications as it bridges the gap between Western and Islamic political orders. In this context, the civilizations do not clash, but adapt and engage one another.

IRAN'S ISLAMIC DEMOCRACY

The Iranian parliamentary elections held on February 18, 2000, proved the high point of reformers' fortunes as they captured an institution that had long served as the bastion of the conservatives' power. The reformers' parliamentary triumph is part of a gradual liberalization movement that is taking over key segments of Iran's body politic. To properly assess the impact

of the recent election and the likely direction of Iran's reform movement, we must have an understanding of the internal debate that has been raging in Iran for several years. The Iranian reformers have embarked on a creative attempt to merge democratic ideals with Islamic values. Along the way, they are demonstrating to the region's reformers that the indigenous culture need not be sacrificed and Western models blindly emulated for a democratic order to evolve.

The recent electoral success of the reform forces owes much to Iran's constitution, which has already established democratic institutional arrangements. The president serves for a fixed term and is elected by universal adult suffrage. There are regular parliamentary elections and an independent judiciary. However, the constitution's democratic impulses were obstructed by conservative domination and the establishment of institutions such as the Supreme Religious Leader and the Council of Guardians, who vet candidates and legislation to make certain they conform to their rigid definition of Islam. Instead of the pledged democratic system, Iran's clerics constructed an autocracy and an oppressive cultural milieu.

In the aftermath of Ayatollah Khomeini's death, Iranian intellectuals began to coalesce in a variety of political and cultural groups to debate ideas of reform and the means of broadening political participation. Among the prominent members were future stars of Khatami's cabinet and many members of the newly elected parliament such as Ataollah Mohajerani, Abdollah Nuri, Saeed Hajarian, Abdolvahed Musavi-lari and Abdol Karim Soroush. The reformers faced two inescapable mandates. On one

side is Islam with its holistic pretensions, maintaining how the society and individual lives should be organized. On the other side is the irreversible movement of political modernity with its democratic claims. The task of the reformers was to demonstrate that these two realms were incompatible in neither principle nor practice.

The basis of the reformers' ideas is that the interpretation of the scriptures cannot remain immutable and must adjust to the changing human condition. For religion to remain vital, it has to address the demands of the modern social order. Islam is not lacking in traditions that can address this challenge, as the well-established practice of *ijtihad* (interpretation) offers the reformers a path toward an evolved understanding of the sacred texts. As Iran's leading philosopher, Abdol Karim Soroush contends:

There is nothing heretical about new interpretations of Islam that differ from interpretations of the past. An ideal religious society cannot have anything but a democratic government. As interpretations or understanding of Islam evolves, Islamic law can even be the basis of modern legislation.¹

In the hands of reformers, Islam is not merely a system for connecting man to his divine creator but a force for progressive change. The scripture's call for freedom from tyranny and human equality and Islamic civilization's historical legacy of intellectual inquiry are seen as the basis for reconstructing society along pluralistic

lines. Moreover, the Quran's mandate that the community be consulted and rulers be held accountable establishes the platform for collective action and democratic participation. It was such ideas and thinkers that established the guideposts for an Iranian society that has been fully immersed in a dynamic internal debate.

The leading figure to emerge from

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Iran's reform movement was the former minister of culture and a widely read intellectual cleric, Muhammad Khatami. The starting point of Khatami's formulations is that the Islamic Republic has

stagnated and is no longer sufficiently responsive to its constituents' political and social demands. As an intellectual versed in Western political thought, Khatami accepts Western civilization's economic progress and pluralistic achievements. However, it would be wrong to characterize Khatami as a Western-style democrat in clerical garb, as he is quick to criticize the West for its excessive materialism and insensitivity to man's spiritual needs. Khatami is articulating a path that incorporates the best of Western political heritage into Islam's concerns for values and human dignity. Before he became president, he emphasized that "our revolution can give rise to a new civilization if we have the ability to absorb the positive aspects of Western civilization."² In his speeches and writings, Khatami has called for a new "Islamic political society" that is religious in its values, rational in its thought and dynamic in its debate. Khatami's new society is indeed a fresh page in the annals of Iran's long history.

The obstacles in the way of reformers seemed insurmountable as they confronted a besieged presidency, a dogmatic Supreme Leader, a doctrinaire judiciary and a hard-line parliament. The first salvo in the great liberalization movement was the 1997 election of Khatami to the presidency. Upon assuming power, Khatami took the lead in restoring the rule of law and creating a civil society. The newly inaugurated president attempted to purge the security services and oversaw a proliferation of newspapers and professional associations. Even before the momentous parliamentary plebiscite, Iran held elections for local councils that were called for in the constitution but never implemented. The reformers' resounding triumph ensured that they will increasingly dominate municipal affairs. Indeed, February's parliamentary victory by reformers could not have been possible without the organizational and logistical support of the recently elected local leaders.

The next battleground between the reformers and conservatives became the parliamentary elections. Through their domination of the parliament, the conservatives attempted to stymie the reform movement by impeaching Khatami's ministers and passing stringent press laws. In the months preceding the elections, the conservatives employed their institutional power to lessen the reformers' prospects by imprisoning some of their outspoken leaders and closing down liberal publications such as *Salam* and *Khordad*. The conservative-dominated Council of Guardians scrutinized the credentials of over 6,800 candidates and disqualified 669, most of whom were from the reform faction. All these machinations failed as 80 percent of Iran's eligible voters went to the polls

and affirmed the direction of the reformers. After a protracted process of recounting, the Guardian Council finally confirmed the results of the elections, with the reformers winning 220 out of 290 seats. President Khatami celebrated the victory by stating: "It is a sign of our people's political maturity and their desire to move on a peaceful path toward pluralism and legitimate freedoms."³

Although in most legislative elections local issues tend to obscure the larger national themes, Iran's parliamentary elections were different. The main reform parties, the Islamic Iran Participation Party and the Servant of the Constitution Party, campaigned under the slogan of greater democracy and addressed important issues such as citizens' equality before law, the serial killing of dissidents and building a pluralistic society. The new legislatures were aware of their mandate. Ahmad Bourqani, deputy from Tehran, emphasized "for the first time in Iran's history, people did not just vote for an individual; rather they voted for a group of people with a comprehensive reform agenda."⁴ The parliamentarians are attempting to tackle thorny issues such as restrictive press laws, electoral regulations and liberalization of the cultural sector. Jamileh Kadivar, who garnered the second largest bloc of votes from Tehran, stressed that the main "priority for the Sixth Majlis (parliament) will be to institutionalize legitimate freedoms."⁵

In recent months, under the auspices of Ayatollah Khamenei, the hard-liners have sought to reassert their influence by controlling the public debate. Iran's once-vibrant press has been seemingly muzzled as the hard-liners have banned 25 publications and jailed over two dozen writers. This is ultimately self-defeating, as in the

era of internet, fax and satellite television, it is impossible to restrict the flow of information. Moreover, the conservative backlash carries the danger of galvanizing the reform movement, which seems to have stalled in the recent weeks. The reformist parliamentarians are defying even their spiritual leader in seeking to revisit the press law that is the basis for the recent closure of the newspapers.

Khatami has signaled his support for such measures by declaring that he found the banning of the newspapers "painful," and saw the need for the government to create "a free atmosphere for the people to express their opinion."⁶ Even the reliably hard-line judiciary seems less dependable, as the deputy head of the judiciary, Hadi Marvi, has emphasized, "The press crackdown is not unanimously approved by the judiciary. It is more the judgments of individual judges, and there are major disagreements over the crackdown among other judges."⁷ The Islamic Republic is not a totalitarian

state, as its measures and policies require a degree of public support. And this is where the conservatives' strategy falters. Ultimately, a reform move-

ment that enjoys widespread public acclaim cannot be impeded through a series of arbitrary fiat.

The next institution that is likely to fall in the hands of the reformers is the judiciary. The clerical judges have employed their power to jail reform politicians and close down liberal newspapers on baseless

allegations. The student uprisings of July 1999 were in fact triggered by the closure of the popular reform newspaper *Salam*. In the past year, the judicial branch has squandered much of its credibility on its censorship campaign and prosecution of two important reform figures, Khatami's former minister of interior, Abdollah Nuri, on charges of apostasy, and the popular former mayor of Tehran, Gholam Hossein Karbaschi, on flimsy charges of financial corruption. Nuri's spirited defense of his conduct and his eloquent challenge of the court's perversion of Islamic tenets, carried live on national television, caused widespread revulsion at the arbitrary practices of the politically motivated judges. The newly elected parliamentarians led by Muhammad Reza Khatami, the president's brother and the leading vote-getter in Tehran, have pledged to overhaul the judiciary and restore its integrity. One of the persistent themes of reformers' campaign speeches was the notion of

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will further diminish the conservatives' power base.

For Iran to continue to move along a democratic path, it must confront the institution of the supreme religious leader and its current occupant, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The influence of the leader is pervasive, as he appoints half the members

of the Guardians Council, the head of the judiciary, commanders of the armed forces and the Revolutionary Guards. The leader can dismiss the president and is responsible for confirming election results. An institution that can so easily countermand the popular will is inconsistent with democratic pluralism. However, Iranian reformers can take comfort in the fact that most senior ayatollahs view the concept of supreme religious leader as an inappropriate innovation by the late Ayatollah Khomeini and a contravention of Shia Islam's canons. The appointment of Khamenei to this post has further eroded its legitimacy, as he lacks theological erudition and popular appeal, two important preconditions for such an august appointment. There is a growing sentiment within both Iran's enterprising intelligentsia and the traditional clerical community to limit the power of the leader and possibly subject the institution to electoral scrutiny.

The leading proponent of changing the institution of supreme leader is Ayatollah Ali Montazeri, Khomeini's heir apparent until his fall from grace in 1989 and the cleric in charge of preparing the Islamic Republic's 1979 constitution. Montazeri not only challenges Khamenei's credentials but also stresses that the leader was never designed to be unaccountable. The original constitution stipulated that the leader must be chosen through general popular recognition of his outstanding merit. As Montazeri emphasizes,

It is certain that the legitimacy of this post is acquired through popular election. In reality there is a social contract between the people and the Leader, and the Constitution was drafted on that basis. Accordingly, his term may be limited and temporary,

like that of the president or a member of the parliament. And given that the Leader is accorded responsibility by the people, he is not infallible. He must accept criticism and be responsible for his actions.⁸

Given the centrality of the Supreme Leader to Iran's post-revolutionary system, its elimination would likely destabilize the entire political edifice. However, there is sufficient clerical support for revision of the institution and subsuming its powers within a constitutional framework. In the coming decade it is likely that the position of the leader will undergo transformations as its absolutism is widely challenged within both clerical and secular circles.

The 1997 presidential election and the recent parliamentary vote are critical events in the evolution of Iran's Islamic polity. Despite sporadic setbacks, Khatami and his reform supporters are forging new paths and transforming politics into a meaningful representative practice. The Islamic Republic is not about to lose its religious *raison d'être*, but it is strengthening its republican pedigree. A politicized middle class, restive youth and an emboldened civil society make the recession of conservative power inevitable.

THE LIMITS OF IRAN'S ISLAMIC DEMOCRACY

Iran's Islamic democracy will be different from the democratic order that developed in post-Reformation Europe. The Western democracies dedicated themselves to protecting individual rights from all impositions, including the church. Over the course of centuries, religion and politics came to occupy distinct realms of society and the state, though constitutions sought to limit the temporal influence of the

ecclesiastical institutions. From its inception, Islam has had a deep connection to politics and viewed the state as a means of effecting religious precepts. An Islamic state's emphasis on collective values makes a clear distinction between church and state improbable. The clerics who view public affairs as one of their mandates will not be circumspect in imposing limits on individual choices. Even Khatami has cautioned that "a system like ours, based as it is on Islamic ideology, is bound to restrict some individual liberties."⁹

The critical question is, what role would the clerical estate have in such a society? The one area that is likely to remain under the auspices of religious authorities is the legal system. Given that law is the cornerstone of a viable Islamic order, family and penal law will be confined to *Sharia* (Islamic jurisprudence). As such, parliamentary decrees are unlikely to succeed in liberalizing women's rights in areas of divorce, child custody and inheritance. However, it must be noted that despite Islamic strictures, Iran has promoted women's professional and political activities. The Islamic Republic's presidential cabinet, parliament and universities are populated by women who are asserting their interests and shaping their country's institutions. In terms of the penal code, Islamic jurists will sustain archaic practices such as capital and corporal punishments, limit the prerogatives of defense attorneys and the deliberations of juries. Given the primacy of sacred law, women's status and criminal codes are still going to be defined by standards that a Western society would find onerous.

In the realm of politics, religion will at times similarly circumscribe the popular will. Despite their declining numbers in the

parliament, the clerics will sustain their general supervisory role of society and ensure that elected legislatures do not pass laws that contravene Islamic injunctions. For example, the clerical estate will not countenance parliamentary nationalization measures, as they would violate Quran's well-delineated property rights. In the meantime, Iran will never grant legal status to political parties espousing secularism or elevate members of religious minorities to positions of national leadership. In essence, on a range of issues, the public's determinations will still be restricted by edicts of the religious figures. The ayatollahs may concede power to non-clerics, but they will insist on their right to regulate the political arena and ensure that the society's social mores conform to Islamic standards.

Iran's Islamic polity largely reflects fundamental features of democracy: free elections, separation of powers, freedom of assembly and a vibrant press. The struggle in Iran is about how, not whether, to limit the scope of government interference. The recent elections have testified that the trend is toward greater accumulation of rights by the citizenry and lessening of government intrusion. Iran's political system is attempting to balance Islam's emphasis on reverence with the population's desire for self-expression. Such a paradigm is not without contradictions and conflicts. Given the primacy of religion, most such conflicts are likely to be resolved in favor of faith and the maintenance of the Islamic character of society. Iran is seeking to transform itself into a democracy while resisting features of classical liberalism. Classical liberal thought made protection of individual autonomy its foremost priority. The Iranian model will accept the importance of

constitutionalism and the rule of law but still impose limits on civil freedoms that ordinarily accompany liberal governance. Khatami has stressed that “liberalism has an inner meaning which is not in accord with a religious-oriented society. To be totally in agreement with liberalism means one must accept secularism.” To suggest that Iran’s aversion to classical liberalism makes it an undemocratic state is to neglect potentially competing definitions of democracy and the prospect of the emergence of different democratic systems. The final product may not resemble the French Republic or the United States, but it will greatly contribute to the advancement of individual rights and the modernization of Iran’s political institutions.

CONCLUSION

The global movement of democratization reflects the universality of pluralistic ideals. However, for democracy to succeed it must adapt to local traditions,

values and circumstances. The Western media’s focus on anachronistic fundamentalist forces obscures the attempt by moderate Islamists to merge their reconceptualized traditions with Western political heritage. The melding of Islamic precepts with participatory paradigms will help the region join the global democratic society on its own terms. Such a democratic structure will be far more durable, for it does not seek to simply transplant Western idioms and attitudes but to strive for a complex adaptation of two systems of thought. The contribution that Iranian reformers are making to this debate is to demonstrate a complementary relationship between the resurgence of religious identity and the equally compelling calls for a representative society. The ascendance of Muhammad Khatami to the presidency and the recent parliamentary elections can thus potentially make a constructive contribution to the evolution of the region’s political order.

¹ Robin Wright, *The Last Great Revolution: Turmoil and Transformation in Iran* (New York: Knopf, 2000), p. 36.

² Muhammad Khatami, *Hope and Challenge* (Binghamton, NY: State University of New York, 1998), p. 19.

³ *The New York Times*, February 27, 2000.

⁴ *Iran Daily*, March 4, 2000, p. 2.

⁵ *Tehran Times*, March 5, 2000, p. 5.

⁶ AFP, August 18, 2000.

⁷ *Iran Times*, August 15, 2000.

⁸ *The Guardian*, January 13, 2000, p. 4.

⁹ Khatami, op. cit., p. 46.