

**Policy Notes****STRATEGY FOR A CONSTITUTIONAL REFORMER**

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President Khatami is a serious challenger to the status quo in Iran. He is a constitutional reformist (*Qanun-gera va eslahtalab*) who seeks political change as the foundation for social progress. He is a supporter of the view that non-constitutional reforms, such as pragmatic relations with the West, economic development or even an opening up of the political climate will not necessarily provide long-lasting solutions to the ills of Iranian society. His continuous emphasis on the need for "law" stems from his seeing "arbitrary government" as the cause of the country's social instability. These characteristics put Khatami within the ideological tradition which has been trying, since the constitutional revolution, to introduce orderly politics in place of Iran's tradition of arbitrary administration, violent intrigue and mass rebellion. Should the elements which brought him to power endure, he might stay in office for two terms, as authorized by the constitution. But his objectives and actions, as most observers would agree, are alien to Iran's political traditions and, therefore, vulnerable. A long-term assessment of Khatami should therefore look at those elements which brought him to power, namely the status of his supporters, his rivals and public opinion.

At the level of political activists, Khatami is being supported by a coalition which despite a degree of ideological cohesion, is at best loose. This centre-left coalition includes, on the one hand, former radical leftists who are now dedicated to a vision of a civil society independent of the influence of the state, and on the other hand, supporters of the former president Hashemi Rafsanjani who are the proponents of pragmatic politics. The two tendencies come from two different traditions. The leftists are influential among intellectuals and students, while the pragmatists enjoy a base among the civil servants. The former are best represented in the Mujahedin of Islamic Revolution, the latter in the Servants of Construction.

There are differences of opinion between the two camps on many aspects of the economy and foreign affairs. The Left has always supported a radical foreign policy and an egalitarian economic strategy. The pragmatists have been the main force for the normalization of

foreign relations and of ruthless realism in economic affairs. In the past few years when the pragmatists have been encouraging a rapprochement with the states of the Arab peninsula, the Left has been promoting a strategy of closer cooperation with Iraq and Syria. While the pragmatists were the vanguard of *laissez-faire* and privatization of state industries, the Left was concerned with maintaining government subsidies for the low income groups.

Khatami was originally a Left candidate who rose to prominence only after the pragmatists failed to come up with a serious candidate in the 1997 presidential elections. Since then there have been complaints that he has been under the influence of a small group of leftist advisers, especially as far as economic affairs are concerned.

Despite these differences, the coalition seems to have been working. There are a number of reasons for this. Above all, both tendencies realize that the rhetoric of the revolutionary era can no longer be marketed. Secondly, there is a genuine ideological commitment on both sides to a more regulated and open political climate. Thirdly, there is a very practical fear that if the old guard is given the chance it will probably succeed in seriously curtailing the current democratic experiment.

But the long-term question is whether the common commitment of the two tendencies is sufficient to maintain the coalition? This might prove difficult, especially when they enter upon new territory: for example, when they might have to depend on the support of political forces outside the establishment — such as intellectuals, the fringe Islamic groups or the secular pressure groups — as their new coalition partners. The problem is particularly acute when it comes to organizational matters. Needless to say, attempts to organize political parties have repeatedly failed in the past two decades, indicating the supremacy of the inclination to maintain a more personal and less legal approach to networking.

The opposition to Khatami is also a form of coalition, which in turn includes conservative and radical-Hezbollah elements. This type of coalition has emerged a number of times since the 1979 revolution, and has an “anti-liberal” function. In the early 80s it even included the pro-Soviet Tudeh Party as a junior partner until the party had served its function in destabilizing the “liberal” movement. The various members of this unofficial but de facto coalition also have different points of view on the economy and foreign relations.

While the conservatives have historically tended to the Bazaar and the private sector, the Hezbollah radicals see themselves as flag bearers of egalitarianism. While the conservatives have tended towards a more pragmatic foreign policy, and for example were the first to seek normalization of relations with the Saudis, the radicals have not lost many opportunities to promote radical options in foreign relations, including the Hajj rebellion. But all the opposition elements share the commitment to maintain the status quo in the face of efforts by the reformists to change the Islamic system.

Even though the influence of the conservatives and the radicals is on the wane — as evident for instance in the elections for the fourth and fifth Majles — Khatami and the reformists need to delicately cultivate a working relationship with them. There are several reasons here. First, the conservatives constitute an important force in Iranian contemporary history and the denial of this fact could be fatal for any political movement, let alone one dedicated to an “Islamic” thinking. The conservatives enjoy an important social base in

urban and rural areas and there is no reason to suppose that the situation is going to change drastically in the long term. Secondly, the conservatives and the radicals control important sections of the political establishment and state bureaucracy. Without their conditional support, the reformists would find it very difficult to function on a daily basis. Thirdly, the Khatami camp itself is committed to an “evolutionary” strategy which seeks to shed the extremist methods of the past decades. This is particularly significant in view of the fact that “non-loyal” political forces, inside and outside the state, have little realistic prospect of emerging as major players in an “evolutionary” scenario.

Tactical maneuvering by the reformists towards the opposition has been flexible but not necessarily steady. There is pressure on the reformist camp, particularly from the fringe groups outside the political establishment, for resolute action against the opposition. Khatami himself has indeed been firm at times. Immediately after the elections, for instance, the established wisdom was caution in the face of the defeated rivals. But Khatami showed boldness in standing up to them — which paid off by securing him all the “political” posts in the cabinet. But Khatami, unlike some of his supporters, has not been dogmatic and has shown flexibility. When required he has demonstrated his radical credentials. His speech at Khomeini’s memorial service this year and his use of fire and brimstone rhetoric testifies to his ability to calm the nerves of the conservatives who are sometimes fearful of a “constitutional scenario” with the subsequent emergence of a Reza Khan.

Khatami, therefore, has to consider how far the opposition camp is able to move, albeit reluctantly, into a regulated political process. Unless conservatives establish themselves in this new climate, Khatami’s own campaign will have less chance of survival. In one sense he has to lead both his own coalition and that of his rivals into a more “democratic” game. This is a case not of eliminating, but changing, the rival.

Formulating a policy for the two camps is not, however, the whole story. The public at large has also its own particular requirement in this period of transition. It might not be necessary to point out that in Iran, ordinary people have always felt alienated from the affairs of the state and the daily political process. This is clearly seen in all major periods since the Constitutional Revolution. Ordinary people have only had a direct input into the political process through social unrest and disobedience as for example in the early 50s or the late 70s. Their role has been at best mobilizational rather than participatory. If Khatami wishes to change this situation, as he claims he does, he will have to find a means of institutionalizing public interaction with the political establishment. But the task is particularly complicated because there are no organized political forces which could represent, as well as shape and lead public opinion.

The most immediate preoccupation of the general public is the economy. There have been many chronicles of socio-psychological difficulties that have risen because of rapid population growth, falling oil revenues, poor foreign trade, extensive urbanization and rising poverty. There is no need to repeat them here. But surprisingly, peoples expectations are not high. This might well be because they are psychologically exhausted after two decades of revolution and war and, possibly more important, because there is a new sense of “realism” among ordinary people and the intellectual classes — which mould public opinion — about

the actual existing options. People, it seems, have come to the conclusion that Khatami, much like his predecessor Hashemi Rafsanjani, would need several years to consolidate his position before being able to implement substantial reforms. The reformists are aware of this. But this cannot diminish their anxiety that time is no longer a luxury. In fact, one thing that breathes fire into the campaign of the more extreme elements in Khatami's camp, is the realization that the current reform campaign could fail if public support, demonstrated magnificently at the 1997 presidential elections, run out of steam. The alternatives are not pleasant to contemplate, and to buy time Khatami has some instruments at hand: to campaign for political education through a more open press, to support new political forces such as the student movement or to put the responsibility for the existing problems at the door of the Old Guard. But sooner or later he will have to deliver some economic goods for the man on the street.

In short, Khatami's strategy aims at fundamental social reforms based on regularizing the political process. This, he hopes, will establish the security of life and property necessary for promoting the institutions of civil society and a substantial private sector involvement in the economy. But to regularize the process, he would need to formulate a steady long-term policy towards his own forces and those of his rivals, and to rationalize his actions for the public by giving them a more participatory role. Too little or too much in either case could be disastrous for the reformists.