

The US Response to Iran's Student Protests: Holding its Breath and Hoping for the Best?

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Two decades after Iran's "Islamic Revolution," demonstrations on the streets of Tehran and other Iranian cities surprised another US administration during mid-July 1999. The Clinton White House and members of Congress watched with alarm and some helplessness as Iranian student protests persisted -- despite official warnings, the brutality of vigilantes claiming to protect the Islamic Republic's interests, and carefully orchestrated counter-demonstrations. The US Department of State reacted cautiously to these developments, while members of Congress -- usually eager to criticize the Clinton Administration's intelligence failures -- remained quiet for the most part.

As initially peaceful marches in Tehran spread to other cities and sparked clashes with security forces, the State Department issued terse statements urging the Iranian government to safeguard the students' rights to free assembly and expression in accordance "with international human rights standards." The students' core demands -- respect for the inviolability of university facilities, the release of their jailed leaders and other dissidents, and freedom of the press -- were consistent with the Clinton Administration's rhetoric favoring democratic movements worldwide. The US, however, did not embrace the students, who, along with other constituencies, voted overwhelmingly for self-declared reformist Mohammad Khatami during the May 1997 presidential election.

The Administration's stance vis-a-vis Iran's latest unrest reveals a historically flawed understanding of democratization. While articulating a discourse of popular freedom, Washington has traditionally worried that genuine democratization in the Middle East would subvert American interests and goals -- namely, the containment of radical forces and great power competitors, the protection of Israel, and the free flow of reasonably priced oil. At the height of the Cold War, US presidents emphasized these interests to justify policies that undermined democratic forces in Iran -- most notably during the American and British-supported military coup d'etat toppling nationalist Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq in August 1953.

Well after the Cold War's end, Iran's students have tested the Clinton Administration's commitment to democracy in the Middle East -- albeit unwittingly. Would Washington support grass-roots efforts at democratization in Iran and elsewhere throughout the region? Or would the White House put its hopes in gradual reforms led by the state from the top down, as President Khatami has tried to implement? If the Iranian student protests are any indication, the Clinton Administration remains leery of grass-roots democratization but can do little to help Khatami gain control of the reform process, as the Islamic Republic's president faces challenges on two fronts. Clerical adversaries want to halt Khatami's reforms, fearing the loss of their political supremacy; whereas a loose coalition of artists,

intellectuals, women, and youth would prefer that the pace of reform be accelerated, anticipating the advantages of domestic pluralism and international openness.

Lacking leverage inside the Islamic Republic or within Iranian society, the White House adopted a “less-said-the-better” approach toward the student protests of July 1999. Four key factors motivated the Clinton Administration’s reluctance to support Iran’s student demonstrators unequivocally. First, the students lacked a clearly identifiable leadership, despite their strong organizational potential. Rather, the protesters simply referred to themselves as “Khatami’s students,” imploring their president to restrain the security forces and to satisfy their demands.

The US also worried that endorsing the students would give hard-line conservatives the excuse they needed to crush the protests. Supreme Leader Ali Khamene’i, believed to control the state’s security apparatus, warned the demonstrators against manipulation by “foreign agents.” In their efforts to legitimize a crackdown against the students, hard-line clerics blamed the US for fomenting violence inside Iran. In particular, the clerics denounced broadcasts by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty’s Persian Service — the Prague-based, US-funded radio station launched in October 1998. RFE/RL’s telephone interviews with eyewitnesses to the student protests gave the clerics “evidence” that Washington had engineered the uprising.

Third, ambivalence toward Iran’s unrest reflected divisions within the White House and Congress over whether and how to deal with the Islamic Republic. Even after pronouncing the policy of “dual containment” in 1993 to thwart the influence of “rogue regimes” -- Ba’athist Iraq and Iran’s Islamic Republic -- US decision-makers have differed over whether isolating Iran merely intensifies anti-Americanism within the clerical leadership. Moreover, those policy makers who favor restoring diplomatic relations — a minority — have disagreed about how this should proceed: Would Tehran or Washington make the first move? And with which Iranian leaders would the US talk?

Khatami’s 1997 victory seemed to answer these questions. Advocating a “dialogue of civilizations” and the beginning of people-to-people contacts between Iran and the US, Khatami gave the Clinton Administration reasons for guarded optimism. Yet Iran’s president has not proved consistently able or willing to challenge his conservative rivals. Recent developments leave the US in the unenviable position of having to decipher Khatami’s motives and maneuvering without the benefit of contacts on the ground in Iran. Because of its isolationist approach toward the Islamic Republic, the Administration most likely perceived little choice but to wait and see, as the ruling clergy closed ranks and Khatami succumbed to conservative pressures to suppress the demonstrations.

Members of Congress refrained from commenting on the Iranian student protests as events actually unfolded, but the Clinton/Gore team could ill afford to ignore its legislative opponents — particularly as the 2000 election cycle approaches. Legislators have generally doubted Khatami’s ability and willingness to reform a regime they consider a threat to American and Israeli interests in the Middle East. Days after the Islamic Republic quelled the uprising, Democratic and Republican members of the US Senate introduced a concurrent resolution to express the “sense of the Congress.” This resolution condemned the clerics’ closure of newspapers and use of force against the students while expressing solidarity with

Iran's pro-democracy forces. When Khatami failed to resolve the crisis peacefully, the Administration's congressional critics arguably felt vindicated in their skepticism about Iran's new president.

Finally, Washington had to weigh the impact of Iran's unrest on neighboring states, especially among the oil-rich but politically unrepresentative kingdoms of the Persian Gulf. Unlike the Islamist leaders of the 1978-79 upheaval, who sought to export their revolutionary fervor, the Iranian students articulated domestic demands and grievances. Nevertheless, if demonstrations were to re-ignite in Iran, they could inspire aggrieved constituencies in neighboring countries to make similar demands for political participation -- an improbable outcome but one that the US would not welcome, despite its pro-democracy rhetoric.

In short, although the July uprising caught Washington off-guard, the Clinton Administration and members of Congress must have taken some comfort in the limited nature of the students' objectives as well as in Khatami's resilience and rhetorical commitment to pursue reform -- until now. Yet Khatami's inability or unwillingness to restrain the Islamic Republic's security forces must have also troubled the White House which has implicitly placed its hopes on the Iranian president's reformist agenda. Under the current circumstances, Washington may not know just what it wants in Iran. But it clearly feared that the summer protests would either plunge Iranian society into chaos or result in a decisive victory for conservative forces within the Islamic Republic. Outcomes that the US has experienced before and would clearly like to avoid, whatever the short-term costs to Iran's students and other pro-democratic forces.

DISCUSSION

Mahmood Monshipoori:

Dr. Vaziri: I concur with your argument that the United States was taken aback when student unrest erupted in Iran this past summer. You're also correct in arguing that the U.S. preference to stay in the background was intended not to undermine Khatami's pro-reform efforts. Nobody has any answers to the innumerable problems facing Iran's transition toward democracy. Khatami's inability to restrain security forces stems from a structural predicament in the Iranian constitution. A new composition in Parliament in February 2000 could help him consolidate his power and introduce some necessary changes in the constitution. Until then, talk of his inability in this or that situation may not help. What do you think? By the way, this comment is intended as an observation, not as a criticism. All the best.

Haleh Vaziri:

Thank you for taking the time to comment on my short essay.

Your point about Iran's eventual transition to democracy — or lack thereof — is astute and well taken. On a rather unscientific note, I almost feel sorry for President Khatami,

because he has adversaries who must feel that they are involved in an existential struggle.

On a somewhat (but only somewhat) more scientific note, I must comment that we in the academic/analyst community still know very little about Khatami's own ideology, leadership style, and psychology. Questions arise: Is Khatami a true believer in clerical supremacy? Or is he what one might call an "Islamic pluralist"? Is his leadership style conducive to confrontation with his adversaries? Does he have the courage to rally his constituents in a showdown against his rivals? Does he even have the "stomach" for such a showdown with his adversaries?

Well, I can only offer tentative answers to these questions as they arise in my mind: I do think that Khatami is in spirit an "Islamic pluralist" who wants religion to play a positive role in people's lives — guiding them to make moral choices of their own free will. I suspect that this would be the ideal in Khatami's mind. However, I do not think that he wishes to abandon clerical supremacy — not quite yet, anyway. He is a product of the system, after all.

In my humble view, Khatami's leadership style also reflects his political socialization in the system. He is more inclined to work with his adversaries and find compromises wherever possible than to confront them directly. Hence, the slow or back 'n forth movement on an issue such as press freedom. Not to mention the absence of progress by the President on the sensitive matter of women's human rights.

Last but not least, I think that the student protests and subsequent repression underscored Khatami's lack of courage and "stomach" for confrontation with his rivals. When the ruling clerics perceived a genuine threat from the student demonstrations, Khatami and Khamene'i closed ranks and resorted to force.

I wish that I could be more optimistic. I found the US response to Iran's student protests to be shortsighted but par for the course. I was not surprised by the Islamic Republic's response either, just saddened...once again. **Hooman Sadri:**

I enjoyed reading your essay, which I think raises interesting questions about President Khatami's leadership style and ideology. We really don't know him enough to make accurate estimate of his political skills and record. I agree that the student protest has served as a test of how he engages his political rivals. At this stage, his record is mixed at best. Of course, we could judge him better after the election, when he hopes to consolidate his power.

Haleh Vaziri:

Dear Dr. Sadri: Yes, I would agree that the parliamentary elections of February 2000 will be crucial for President Khatami. On the one hand, he must campaign for candidates who support his reformist agenda — the Iranian version of presidential "coat tails," if you will. On the other hand, he cannot push too hard for these candidates who will presumably wish to assert their independence and to focus on local issues. However, in judging Khatami's leadership skills and discerning his ideology, I think that we must observe his interaction not only with institutions such as the faqih and the Majlis, but also with key constituencies such as youths and women. I am afraid that I am not terribly optimistic as you have already guessed. Thank you for taking the time to read my essay.