

Student Protests and the Stability of Gridlock in Khatami's Iran

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Iran has a divided government. The executive branch, led by President Mohammad Khatami, is constitutionally responsible for implementation of legislation and national planning (Articles 113-142 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, as amended in 1989). The legislative branch, led by isolationists opposed to Khatami, is responsible for passing legislation (Articles 71-89). The judicial branch, led until early August 1999 by opponents of Khatami, is responsible for the implementation of justice, including public rights (Articles 156-174). The Great Leader, 'Ali Khamene'i, can overrule any of the other branches and has primary responsibility for military and security affairs (Article 110).

The result of this divided government, as in the United States and elsewhere, is gridlock: no one side is able to advance its agenda without the cooperation of the others. Each side has been pushing the levers in its control for two years, since Khatami's election in May 1997 brought these divisions into the open, but the levers operate at cross purposes, and little gets done. For example, the executive branch has been handing out newspaper licenses in the name of a free press and vibrant civil society; the judicial branch and security forces have been shutting the new papers down as fast as they can (Jame'eh, Tus, Zan, Salam, Neshat), arresting dozens of reporters and editors. The legislative branch has chimed in by passing a restrictive new press law in July 1999 that sparked student protests at Tehran University.

What I find particularly interesting about this gridlock is its stability. It seems to have weathered these student protests, and the nighttime attack on a student dormitory by security forces, quite easily. These events were highly threatening challenges to the current political system, but political leaders on all sides shied away from any break with the system. They seem to prefer gridlock to an unknowable alternative.

Threat #1: Student Unrest

The Islamic Republic of Iran does not mind public political demonstrations. What it cannot tolerate are demonstrations that have not been arranged by some branch of the government. The government did not plan the student protests in July 1999, although they voiced strong support for Khatami's executive branch, and as a symbol of "disorder" they challenged the legitimacy of the political brokers. Fresh on everybody's minds, I think, was the precedent of student activism against Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in the 1970s, when "student unrest" held an almost mythical prominence as vanguard of the revolution. Western press coverage of the July 1999 student protests referred constantly to this precedent, with the implication that the current regime may be as unpopular as the monarchy, and that small student protests might portend future mass protests. In Iran, though, this precedent was not often voiced publicly – to do so would have been to break with the current system.

Iranians who viewed the student protests as a threat cited instead the precedent of the 1953 coup d'état, when the shah came back to power with the assistance of the CIA. This form of analysis links the student protests with foreign hostility to the Islamic Republic in a grand

conspiracy to undermine the political order in Iran. For example, Amir Mohebbian wrote in Resalat: opponents of the Islamic Republic are trying

“to call the authority of the [regime’s] rule into question by producing tension and unrest in the country. This current tries to make differences among the children of the revolution in order to obstruct the trend of establishing institutions, and institutionalizing them in the depths of the society. By this measure, they want to fix the false idea of governmental instability in the minds of the people and of foreign countries. Hence, each measure that aims to weaken the authority of the ruling system undoubtedly seeks to execute a scenario of subversion.”¹

This sense of threat was not limited to Khatami’s opponents. Khatami himself suggested that the students’ protests were a plot to undermine the Iranian political system:

Who are the people who incite unrest? I mean, who are the people who take the quite natural exchange of views, ordinary conversations and routine remarks and turn them into street clashes set fire to properties and destroy public property? Who are the people within the system who issue orders for using force and violence? Both of them [those who incite unrest and those who issue orders] say that this system [a republic based on the constitution] should not exist. They are deliberately working to destroy this society, destroy this revolution and destroy this system. Or they are unwittingly moving in this direction [to destroy the system].²

Threat #2: Security Forces Attack

Khatami’s speech, just quoted, also identifies the second event in July 1999 that threatened the political system in Iran: the security forces’ nighttime attack on a Tehran University dormitory on 9 July, an incident in which hundreds were arrested and one or more killed. According to stories floating around Tehran in the weeks after the incident, hundreds of students fled the dormitory in their underwear and were taken in by strangers who opened their doors in support.

This incident was perceived by supporters of the students as part of an ongoing plot to use violence to undermine Khatami’s reforms. Since the coming of the Islamic Republic in 1979, isolationists have engineered international crises on several occasions to spoil the government’s normalization of relations with the United States and Europe.³ Again in fall 1998, it now appears, isolationists within the Intelligence Ministry murdered a series of opposition figures, some in brutal fashion, one axed to death along with his wife in their home. According to an unnamed suspect quoted in the investigative report by the Judicial Branch of the Armed Forces:

“Our motive in having the officers of the [Writers’] Society and others killed was this: human rights societies and centers would demand to come to Iran, Iran would again refuse, and from an international perspective Iran would remain isolated.”

The suspect continues:

“The short-term goal of killing several writers and [Dariush] Forouhar and his wife [Parvaneh] was to prepare the ground for a confrontation between leaders [of the Islamic Republic of Iran]; in addition, the long-term goal was for Iran to remain in an international stalemate....”⁴

Khatami’s supporters viewed the attack on the dormitory as the work of the same plotters. For example, the Coordinating Council of the Groups Following the Line of the Imam issued a statement along these lines:

“At a time when a great opportunity had come about for enhancing the national and international status of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the revolution had been blessed with this God-given opportunity, these festering cells — whose continued existence is hostile to health and vigor — targeted the foundations and organizations of the system with their conspiracies and short-sighted plots, and denied peace and security to the government and the nation. ... The calamitous attack on the university dormitory, which was similar to the blind crimes and the savagery of the hard-hearted individuals who had carried out the recent series of political murders, makes one wonder whether the main source of mischief and the main festering cell resides somewhere else, and whether it is still active in pursuing its seditious acts. It will be a clear mistake to imagine that this disaster has not been connected with the series of murders.”⁵

Two threats to the system, each alleged to be a plot against the Iranian political system, each offering a break with gridlock: the student protests could have led to more widespread protests, and the dormitory attack could have led to a broader crackdown. Yet the political groups that might have benefited from these breaks did not pursue them. Instead, they pulled back from brinkmanship. They sought to placate the extremists on each side — the students who might be considering future protests, and the security forces who might be considering future crackdowns.

Response #1: Placating the Students

Khatami, in whose name the students were protesting, called on them to stop, and to “cooperate with the government, allow restoration of law and order,” avoid any “unlawful act,” and “allow adoption of a firm and decisive decision consistent with the interests of the system.”⁶ Khatami then supported a mass rally of loyalty to the system on 13 July that effectively ended the week of protests. At the same time as they reined in the protests, however, the country’s political leaders sought to placate university unrest by honoring the student victims of the security forces’ attack. Khamene’i, for example, spoke out immediately on this theme:

“In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful. I welcome you, my dear brothers and sisters. There is much to be said. But the matter which, from my

point of view, is more important than anything else and has preoccupied my mind concerns the attack against the dormitory of students and the young people [at the university campus]. This bitter and heart-wrenching incident has caused me pain. This incident was an unacceptable incident in the Islamic Republic of Iran. An attack against the home and residence of a group of people, particularly at night or during the congregation prayers, is by no means acceptable in the Islamic system of government. The young people of this country, whether they are students or non-students, are my sons and daughters. They are my children. For me it is very difficult and hard to bear anything that causes our young people inconvenience, dissension and mishap. It makes no difference who was involved here [in this incident], and whether he was a policeman in uniform or a civilian. Those who are in breach of the law and break the law in the Islamic Republic must be dealt with in accordance with the law. But in the case of someone who has done no wrong and who is resting in his own home, particularly in a student environment, I have to say that what has taken place has been very wrong and unjustified. The fact that 100 or 200 people left the university hostel, said things and shouted slogans cannot be an excuse, cannot be a reason for some people, whatever uniform or title they might have, to enter the premises and behave inappropriately. This is even more important when the sacred name of the Law Enforcement Force is involved - any action which would harm the reputation of the Law Enforcement Force.”⁷

thKhamene’i repeated this theme in a speech on 30 July 1999, a major event marking the 20th anniversary of the re-institution of the Tehran Friday Sermon: “In fact, the human heart burns at the thought that the hands of the enemy could so heedlessly commit this dirty crime, that ... they picked some of the greatest elements a country has — youth and students; this time students.”⁸

At the same time, Khamene’i embarked on a series of meetings with students. On 1 August, he met with students injured in the attack and assured them that “when a human being encounters an event, a tragedy, or crime like this sort of crime, one takes on certain responsibilities.”⁹ On 4 August, he met with representatives of female student organizations. On 5 August, he met with students of the University Jihad organization. Other political figures followed suit.

Khatami met with representatives of High School Girls’ Associations on 2 August, with Math Olympiad students on 11 August, and with Muslim student groups on 12 August; Mohsen Reza’i, secretary of the Expediency Council, met with the Muslim Pupils Association at a summer camp in Karaj on 4 August and with professors at a teacher’s training school on 6 August; and virtually all of the country’s political leaders appeared at the meetings of the University Jihad in early August, which provided a ritual setting for the display of sympathy with the university in a non-compromising environment. Some figures went quite far in expressing their sympathies. Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, former president and now chairman of the Expediency Council, told the group “that college students are the greatest national assets, and to humiliate them or to question their moral uprightness would be to cast doubt on the value and the merits of their future accomplishments.”¹⁰ Khatami’s speech was outspoken in defense of the university:

“What is the university? The university is a place for the elite, for the people of knowledge, for the people of research, for the people who seek new things. These make up the identity of the university. It is the place for young people, for the elite, for the seekers of new ideas, for young and spirited people. When you put all these things together you have the university. It is obvious that a center which such great sensitivity, which has gathered all the most effective and most distinguished members of the social elite should have certain enemies and should be the target of many pests.”¹¹

Response #2: Placating the Security Forces

At the same time as the political leaders of Iran condemned the attack on the university dormitory, they went out of their way to express their continued respect for the country’s security forces (police, military, intelligence agencies, and related organizations). Interior Minister Abdolvahed Musavi Lari, who called the attack unwarranted and unauthorized,¹² made a point of praising the security forces as “an invincible fort and adornment of the country as well as a source of honor for the system and nation.”¹³ Speaking in Hamadan, Khatami similarly stated:

“To suppress riots and revolts, governments routinely make use of army tanks, armored vehicles and heavy weapons. But what pride is greater for our nation, for our administration, for the supreme national security council, for the law and order force and for the armed forces to have ended riots and reinstated order in a city [Tehran] with a population of more than 10 million without having fired even one bullet. ... I appreciate the efforts of the information ministry that tried to restore peace and order on the side of the law and order force of our country. Less than 1,200 persons had been arrested, but as the result of the efforts of committed people at the information ministry one thousand of them were set free within 48 hours of their custody.”¹⁴

Khamene’i too praised the security forces. In the same Friday Sermon in which he defended university students as “the greatest elements a country has,” Khamene’i also stated that:

“the enemy wanted to take advantage of the anger of these young people ... but the armed forces entered the scene forcefully.... Then the Basij — that fundamental and great force of the nation of Iran — entered with the organization of the Revolutionary Guards of the Islamic Revolution and decisively crumpled the enemy like a piece of paper.”¹⁵

He followed this up with a heavily publicized dawn prayer with Basiji forces encamped outside Tehran on 6 August.

Response #3: Placating One Another

In this way, Iranian political leaders attempted to bring potential threats to the current system back into the system. Meanwhile, they reiterated their faith in the current political

system through elaborate praise of one another. Khatami has always made a point of reassuring his opponents of his loyalty to the Leader, so his comments were not striking. But in a period when Khatami's supporters were denying rumors that he was being pressured to resign,¹⁶ Khamene'i went to pains to express his support of the president. In his Friday Sermon of 30 July, Khamene'i emphasized that "I completely support the leaders of the country, especially the president."¹⁷ Again at the end of August, Khamene'i said: "Fortunately, His Excellency Mr. Khatami, the respected and dear president, praise be to God, is fresh, ready for work, energetic, and has the necessary quality for the job. I thank God for this and pray for him."¹⁸ Hard-core figures fell into line. General Rahim Safavi, for example, said the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps "has always been a supporter of President Khatami, and would not tolerate the acts of those who sought to diminish the role and the stature of the presidency in Iran."¹⁹ (A year previously, Safavi accused the executive branch of "hypocrisy in disguise of the clergy" and threatened that "some have to be beheaded and some tongues have to be cut off. ... The liberals are all over our universities and the youth enchant 'Down with Dictatorship.' Can we foil dangers coming from America through dialogue among civilizations?"²⁰)

This show of mutual support might mean that the various political movements are now willing to negotiate civilly to break the gridlock. In early August, for example, pro- and anti-Khatami leaders in parliament cooperated to investigate the dormitory attack, and to pass legislation requiring the Guardian Council to give a reason for rejecting parliamentary candidates. But with parliamentary elections coming up in several months, this bipartisanship seems unlikely to last. Another way to read the burst of politeness is as a defense of gridlock. Almost immediately, politicians reverted to the tried-and-true levers they have been pushing for years. Khatami's cabinet started to talk about new reforms they wanted to introduce. On the other side, General Safavi was back to worrying about liberal currents as a threat to Islam in Iran: "Anyone attempting to create discord in the united ranks of the country's authorities will be regarded as the biggest traitor to the nation and to the Islamic revolution. ... Imperialism these days does not send troops to foreign countries, but carries out its objectives through journalists and liberty radios."²¹ Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati warned Iranians to be on the lookout for "strangers" and their operatives.²² Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi and Mohammad Emami Kashani spoke out against "tolerance" and in favor of harshness as a healthy component of an Islamic system.²³

The open question is whether the hard-liners will act on this rhetoric and root out creeping tolerance through a coup d'état or other acts of violence. But the fact that these hard-liners backed away from the crackdown on student protest suggests that they are not eager to abandon gridlock.

Endnotes

- ¹ *Resalat*, 3 Aug 1999, translated by Foreign Broadcast Information Service, FBIS-NES-1999-0910.
- ² IRIB Television Second Program Network, 7 August 1999, translated by FBIS-NES-1999-0808.
- ³ Charles Kurzman, "Soft on Satan," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 6, No. 1, June 1998, pp. 63-72.

- ⁴ *Hamshahri*, 5 August 1999, <http://www.neda.net/hamshahri/780514/siasi.htm>.
- ⁵ *Asr-e Ma*, 21 July 99, translated by FBIS-NES-1999-0804.
- ⁶ IRNA, 12 July 1999.
- ⁷ IRIB Television First Program Network, 12 July 1999, translated by FBIS-NES-1999-0712.
- ⁸ *Ettela'at*, 31 July 1999.
- ⁹ *Hamshahri*, 2 August 1999, <http://www.neda.net/hamshahri/780511/siasi.htm>.
- ¹⁰ Iranian Republic News Agency (IRNA), 9 August 1999.
- ¹¹ IRIB Television Second Program Network, 7 August 1999, translated by FBIS-NES-1999-0808.
- ¹² *Khordad*, 1 August 1999.
- ¹³ IRNA, 7 August 1999.
- ¹⁴ IRNA, 25 July 1999.
- ¹⁵ *Ettela'at*, 31 July 1999.
- ¹⁶ IRNA, 27 July 1999.
- ¹⁷ *Sobh-e Emruz*, 31 July 1999.
- ¹⁸ IRIB Television First Program Network, 24 August 1999, translated by FBIS-NES-1999-0825.
- ¹⁹ IRNA, 23 July 1999.
- ²⁰ *Iran Daily*, 30 April 1998.
- ²¹ IRNA, 5 August 1999, translated by FBIS-NES-1999-0805.
- ²² IRNA, 20 August 1999.
- ²³ *Kar va Kargar*, 24 July 1999, translated by FBIS-NES-1999-0817; IRNA, 6 August 1999, translated by FBIS-NES-1999-0806; *Neshat*, 7 August 1999.

DISCUSSION

Mahmood Monshipoori:

Dear Prof. Kurzman: Your analysis of gridlock in Iranian politics is poignant. You make a comment towards the end of your essay to the effect that there appears to be a willingness to negotiate civilly to break the gridlock. In early August, different factions in Parliament cooperated to “pass legislation requiring the Guardian Council to give a reason for rejecting parliamentary candidates.” As you know, the Guardian Council overruled that a month later. So the gridlock continues as you predicted. I am not sure, however, how to interpret your final observation: “the fact that these hard-liners backed away from the crackdown on student protest suggests that they are not eager to abandon gridlock.” As you know, some of students and their leaders have been arrested, tried, and sentenced. Moreover, several “neo-fascist” groups attacked students. How could hard-liners attacked pro-Khatami demonstrators on a scale similar to the crackdown on Tiananmen Square riots?

Charles Kurzman:

I very much appreciate Dr. Monshipoori’s comments. I agree that the crackdown on the students in summer 1999, both legal and extra-legal, was significant. But I would argue that this crackdown was not as severe as it might have been, had the hard-liners quoted at the end of my article been given free rein. There were no declarations of martial law, no instant trials and convictions, no mass executions or expulsions — so far. Indeed, one indication of the stability of gridlock in contemporary Iran will be the fate of the student activists currently awaiting trial. If the students are all executed or serve long prison terms, I would take this to mean that the hard-liners have abandoned gridlock; if some or all have their sentences commuted, I would take this to mean that hard-liners still do not feel strong enough to abandon gridlock unilaterally.