

A Review of Iran's Reformist Movement

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Iran has, over the past century, witnessed the slackening of the traditional 3000 year monarchy, as new political concepts such as "parliamentary rule", "distribution of power", and "civil rights" set in and as grounds were laid for a modern government system in the country.

Throughout this period, Iran's political developments have shared a common feature: The Iranian people have always known "*what they did not want*" rather than "*what they actually wanted*", a trend that has been in place ever since the Constitutional Movement which served as the country's first political-social uprising in the modern era up until the May 23, 1997 presidential elections which brought the reformist Mohammad Khatami to power through a sweeping victory.

Absence of political parties that normally serve as mediators between the government and the people and harmonize both sides' demands has all along served as the major cause leading to this trend.

During the Constitutional Movement, for instance, the Iranians knew virtually nothing about "parliamentary rule" and "distribution of power". They were, however, certain of one thing: They wanted to do away with the tyrannous Qajar dynasty. The Constitutional Movement was, therefore, aimed at crushing the old establishment rather than creating a new one.

Likewise early after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, 98 percent of the Iranian people voted, in nationwide elections, in favor of the Islamic Republic system, without actually knowing what this government system would be and how it would operate.

Again, too, the Iranian people did **not** know "*what they wanted*". They, however, well knew "*what they did not want*": They were fed up with the Pahlavi rule and did not want the dynasty in power anymore. To escape from the Pahlavi regime, the Iranian people took recourse to the Islamic Republic.

The same feature was manifest during Iran's May 23, 1997 presidential elections when 20 million people voted for Mohammad Khatami. But this did not mean that all these voters were fully aware of what Khatami's electoral promises, especially his idea of "civil society", meant and how he would translate them into action. In the said elections, the Iranian people knew only one thing: They were fed up with almost two decades of right-wing government policies and performance which did not satisfy their political and social taste. To escape from another right-wing government, the people, therefore, took refuge with Khatami and his "civil society".

Rather than voting for Khatami for who he was and what he promised to do, the people elected him to show their rejection and negation of the right wingers.

Viewed from another angle, absence of political parties in Iran brings the politicians face-to-face with the nation, making them directly accountable to the people, a feature that heightens the statesmen's chances of success and risks of failure.

The politicians' accountability to the people creates a populist society in which the masses determine how the politicians should act, bringing about a situation in which politics is dominated and dictated by the demands of the masses and tastes of the politicians rather than the law.

The high voter turnout (80% of the legible voters) in Iran's last presidential elections should not, therefore, be a source of pride, since it beams out a cautionary message: The majority of the people voted for one candidate in tune with the historical Iranian spirit of demanding "all or nothing". This is an extremist type of involvement in political affairs, as the people would show polarized reactions: absolute acceptance or total rejection without any middle-of-the-road stance whatsoever.

Another characteristic feature of Iran's social and political society is that it is traditionally in quest of a hero. Iran's popular legendary hero is characteristically wronged by an ominous person or force. The more wronged the hero is, the more popular he would be.

Rostam, Siyavash, and Arash are mythological Iranian heroes – all warriors -- who gave their lives defending the ideals of their people. They did not die in fair and equal battles but lost their lives because of enemy ploys and duplicity.

In like manner, Imam Hussein, the third Shiite Imam, is the most beloved hero in the religious history of the Iranians. He, too, was wronged and martyred in a battle the enemy unfairly staged and fought against him.

The philosophy behind Shiite "Mahdaviyat" (reappearance of the 12th Shiite Imam) is also based on the notion of a nation looking for a savior and hero at "akhar ul-zaman" (end of time or Doomsday). This hero who combats the enemies is also prominently characterized by being unjustly dealt with and wronged.

In the first decade after Iran's Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini symbolized the wronged and beloved hero for the Iranians. He called all foreign enemies of the Islamic Revolution to task by relying solely on the peoples' support.

"Global imperialism", "Great Satan", "Criminal US", "regional reactionary regimes" were all the enemies of the Iranians' hero in the first decade following the revolution.

The 1981 takeover of the US Embassy in Tehran was actually a way to give vent to the Iranians' long cherished frustrations and ideal hero quest.

Ayatollah Khomeini displayed acumen and tact in the seizure of the US Embassy in Tehran in that he succeeded in taking the initiative away from the communists in the then bipolar world order, enabling himself and his Islamic Revolution to outpace the communists who for years claimed to be at the forefront of the fight with the imperialists.

This was a highly important development, as the communists had for long claimed that religion causes stupor and thus prevents the people from battling the enemies, namely the imperialists. The communists, however, were in for a surprise during the US Embassy seizure, when a religious hero combated the imperialists more boldly than they had ever done. Till his dying hour, Ayatollah Khomeini adamantly kept up the revolution's anti-American spirit.

But after Ayatollah Khomeini passed on and after the end of the Iran-Iraq war when domestic problems surfaced, the Iranians started searching for a hero who would not fight external enemies but who would audaciously and powerfully grapple with domestic foes.

The new enemies of the Iranians in the second decade of the revolution were no longer imperialism, regional reactionary regimes, and the US. They were rather domestic despotism, reactionary tendencies, petrification and stupor. The Iranians now sought a national hero to fight these new monsters.

This national hero was Mohammad Khatami for whom 20 million Iranians voted on May 23, 1997. Ironically, however, Khatami was personally disinclined to be at the helm, as he reluctantly re-entered the scene of Iranian politics in 1997 after an 8-year lapse when he headed Iran's National Library. Also personality-wise Khatami is not ambitious, and this is while ambition is a key requirement for politics and politicians.

Khatami, therefore, approaches politics and power like the legendary Diogenes (ancient Greek philosopher who said, "It is the privilege of the Gods to want nothing, and of godlike men to want little"), namely without any incentive to launch a power struggle.

Khatami is an intellectual, a cultural figure. He is attached to books and knowledge and gets spiritual and intellectual satisfaction from cultural activities which are more appealing and attractive to him than politics.

Another feature of Iran's reformist movement is that politics is governed by the masses. Khatami's landslide victory in the presidential elections was made possible with the votes of the commoners and masses of people who mostly had superficial concerns.

The commoners are characterized by their concern for earning a living and having legitimate pastimes for their families. The commoners cannot and would not go beyond this closed circle of worries. To them government systems -- be they dictatorships or liberal democracies -- are one and the same.

The lofty ideals of the Iranian reformists -- including freedom of thought and expression and political rights -- are of no importance to the commoners. In point of fact, the commoners have no political thought or statement to seek to freely vent them.

What the commoners are concerned with is generally limited to minimum relative welfare, sustenance, and favorable pastime. The commoners find social freedom to be by far more attractive than political freedom.

The commoners will idealize any government that can meet these demands -- irrespective of how. A large number of votes cast in favor of Khatami came from the commoners. This development has in a way deceived the leaders of Iran's reformist

movement who erroneously believe that the overall votes cast for Khatami are indicative of the mental maturity and social awareness of the Iranian people.

May 23, 1997 was in essence the day when the commoners in Iran went to the polls in the hope of having their long-denied demands met. Spinoza considers negation a kind of self-assertion in that when a person negates something, he is actually asserting himself.

During the 1997 presidential elections, the people negated the ruling wing's candidate in order to assert themselves and retaliate for all the humiliation meted out to them in the past years. They also demanded their long-denied citizenry rights. May 23, 1997 was in actuality the Iranian community's reflexive response to years of humiliation during the right wing's grip on power in Iran.

Iran's reformist leaders have not, nevertheless, been able to realistically analyze the essence of the votes cast in Khatami's favor during the 1997 elections. They have taken all the 20 million votes for Khatami to signify the maturity of Iranian people. As such, these leaders seem to be dominated by the mass mentality, and instead of leading the masses, they are led into following the masses.

The last – and most unconventional -- trait of Iran's reformist movement is that the press are at the forefront of reforms. But the press normally deal with what happens on the surface and do not probe the roots of events, and as such they cannot be appropriate leaders of reforms.

But due to the absence of political parties in Iran, the press have inevitably turned into the vanguards and leaders of the reformist movement. Excitement, routines, and absence of strategy, therefore, grip Iran's reformist movement.

On the one hand, Iran's reformist press are bent on humiliating the conservatives, making the latter unnecessarily averse to reforms. The offshoot of this is the promotion of violence.

On the other hand, the reformist press approach and picture the reform movement's leaders with infatuation verging on sanctification.

The sentimental writings of a large segment of the reformist press are marked by buttered-up respect for and veneration toward the reform movement leaders, making the latter inordinately prominent, falsely aggrandizing them, putting them in the spotlight, and thus subjecting them to conservative diatribe and attacks. The said press actually instigate the conservatives to eliminate their rivals.

To insure its perpetuation and success, Iran's reformist movement has no choice but to avoid sugarcoated material and offer realistic – and most probably very bitter and pungent -- analyses.

But that is no problem, as put by prominent Iranian poet Saadi:

*How true the apothecary said:
"Take bitter medicine
If you wish to be cured."*