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The Wilting Flower of Hope: The Modern Iranian Reform Movement

by Tanya Basu

(Honors Political Science 221)

The Assignment: Students were asked to pick a topic on a country of interest in the Middle East and write a ten page research paper on the subject.

“The future of religion is that it has to cope with freedom; otherwise it has no future. If religion confronts freedom, then religion will suffer.” (Montaigne 33)

Thus does Mohammad Khatami, the reformist President of Iran, voice the struggles of the Islamic republic today and its battle to compromise religion and state in the twenty-first century. For a nation plagued with many social, political, and economic problems, Khatami has offered hope for the liberalization of Iran’s strict interpretation of Shi’ism and the possible establishment of a secular democracy. Citizens saw the 1979 Islamic Revolution under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini as a promise of more prosperous times free from the shah’s harsh rule. However, many of Ayatollah Khomeini’s pledges have yet to be fulfilled, especially regarding justice, freedom, and economic policies, heralding in the Khatami era. Although Khatami represents a flicker of optimism for the dire situation in Iran, his term is coming to an end, and a reemergence of the Islamic Revolution is brimming with active conservative agendas. Yet, it is necessary to first explore the roots of the modern revolution prior to venturing into the consequences it may yield not only for Iran, but also for the world.

As much as numerous Americans may view Ayatollah Khomeini as a tyrant, it is impossible to refute the fact that he was an immense force behind the 1979 Islamic Revolution and improved upon the shah. After Ayatollah Khomeini successfully overthrew the shah, paved roads, water, and electricity appeared in rural areas—a feat that the wealthy shah had not been able to accomplish. Higher education for the masses occurred, including women, a notable example of equality of the sexes in an Islamic country. Also, Khomeini was able to make Iran a country that was unusually receptive and tolerant to other religions (the glaring exception being followers of the Baha’i faith). However, it is unquestionably the rural areas that benefited the most under the new rule of the Ayatollah and his policies. Telephone lines, bridges, drinking water systems, and irrigation pumps were installed to help isolated villagers. The Ayatollah is heavily credited with designing the “Crusade for Construction” program, which aimed to aid those suffering from destitution (Montaigne 10). In spite of perceptions in the Western world of the Ayatollah being a power hungry oppressor, his achievements qualify him for the title of “reformist,” although his idea of reform is very different from that of Mohammad Khatami.

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s original vision remains vibrantly alive today and is enjoying a resurgence by the conservative majority in government. According to the Ayatollah, the state should be founded on the principles of independence, freedom, and *velayat-e faqih*, or the supremacy of Shi’a jurists. Of late, however, the blending of state with the divine, channeled through the authoritarian power of a supreme leader, has begun to raise questions, as theologians are finding that the Koran prohibits the absolute power of a mere mortal human being.

Accusations from theologians such as the philosophy's chief originator, Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, initiated public skepticism, mainly due to the fact that the prosperity and social justice promised had not been delivered, giving rise to the possibility that corruption could have interfered with the philosophy's success. The misery index's colossal increases, the severe drop in income, and the reintroduction of poverty pointed towards a nauseous economy, further bringing the regime's right to exist in question among the public (Amuzegar 50-52).

Four cofactors worked together to bring the modern revolution to full throttle. The first was the strong patriotism Iranians hold for their country, resulting from years of suspicion and growing bitterness against foreign forces who did not help them in the Iraq initiated war of the 1980's. A second aspect of the revolution is domestic policies. "Reformers" and "conservatives" both believe in the revolution and fiercely protect the 1979 Constitution. In fact, neither reformers nor conservatives share the West's concept of human rights and prefer to abide by the Koran's interpretation of such matters. What marks the reformers from the conservatives is primarily economic and political in nature. A third asset that ignited a will to change was the Shi'a interpretation of religion. Although seen by the West as a restricting religious sect, it technically does not bar the follower from modernization. Finally, and most importantly, the coming of age of the Third Force has significantly increased interest in reforming Iran. The "Third Force" is the name given to young Iranians who did not live through the shah's rule. This is not to say that they desire separation of religion from state; indeed, much of the "Third Force" seek the two to remain intertwined, for secularism is not seen as a realistic choice in the current climate. The Third Force feels that their careers and lives are halted because of the Ayatollah's leadership and distrust many of the clergy in office. These four influences combined and continue to effect modern politics, giving Khatami the chance to reshape Iran (Amuzegar 48-50).

For his part, Khatami introduced several measures that encouraged Westerners to interact with Iran and gave signs of developments that many surmised could signal the end of the regime. Khatami's policies follow two distinct patterns. The first is the embracing of civil disobedience and its effect on relaxing the theocracy's firm grasp on daily lives. Khatami quietly supported organizations that were not approved by the government to address problems in society, especially those facing women and the economic chaos facing the nation. The government's stranglehold on the press was loosened, and the Internet became a popular channel for dissidents, many of whom were living abroad. Most importantly, street demonstrations have become more commonplace with responses from the government coming in the form of increases in the minimum wage, for example. The second and major portion of Khatami's policies focused on the economy. Khatami introduced policies that would reduce the power of the theocracy to control the majority of funds from the gross domestic product (primarily oil) as well as to integrate Iran with modern needs in the global marketplace so as to break from its current dependence on oil. Utilizing pressure from international banking associations such as the International Monetary Fund, Khatami was able to reduce the power of the theocracy by introducing access to foreign credit. Another step towards revitalizing the economy occurred in 2000, when Khatami engineered a bill legalizing private banking and insurance, allowing national savings to move from the Ayatollah's treasure chest to be shared with the public. Khatami's economic reforms reached their pinnacle when he instituted the protection of foreign investments and copyrights to protect original work law, creating a source of revenue that was not oil-related (Amuzegar 53-54). Khatami has also played upon this interest of reducing dependence on oil and promoted Persian carpets and pistachios into the market as successful alternatives to black gold. His ultimate fiscal goal during his terms as President was the

establishment of rail lines between Central Asia and ports on the Shatt al-Arab in the Persian Gulf (Montaigne 27). However, Iran's economic growth is inhibited greatly by the United State's blocking of its entry into the World Trade Organization. Along with the European Union's trade cooperation agreements, Iran could have a renaissance economy, for it is rich in natural and human resources (Amuzegar 55).

Besides the economy, Khatami has become a notable figure for his handling of other areas of reform. Yet, people remain frustrated because Khatami follows Khomeini's slow pace of change that had turned many Iranians against the Islamic Revolution. Khatami's election came about because of his popular "restrained populist message" of keeping the traditions of Islam while testing Western concepts of democracy, marking revolutionary accomplishments in emphasizing privacy and "civil rights and freedoms." His greatest victory lay in how he was able to attract all strata of society, especially the lucrative groups of women, intellectuals, businessmen, and most significantly, the Third Force (Montaigne 14).

However, this is not to say that Khatami has been magically able to liberalize the system with grand successes. Indeed, Khatami's administration has been plagued with problems, ranging from the economy to women. Critics point out a number of loopholes and injustices, such as the disappearances of some intellectuals and the conviction of politicians from Khatami's own reform movement on unsubstantiated charges. Khatami's limited power and opposing views with the Ayatollah make his reforms difficult to pass, especially in a country where clerics run an economy they know little about. Rural women are sheltered compared to their urban counterparts, and literacy is dropping in rural areas as families are attempting to make ends meet. Despite Khatami's economic reforms, the economy has suffered huge blows, including inflation of 20% a year and a drop in per capita income (Montaigne 22-23). High oil prices allowed Iran to benefit to a healthy increase in GDP of 6% a year ("Defiant Iran: The World of the Ideologues" 24), yet dropping prices in the market today are wounding the nation reliant upon the precious resource for national income. Other blows include brain drain, the war with Iraq during the 1980's (in addition to the current war in Iraq), U.S. trade sanctions, and a population that could double (Montaigne 23).

As Khatami nears the end of his term, his administration faces challenges that threaten to destroy what liberalization Khatami did achieve in his two terms as President. Opponents in the conservative parties are gaining power in unusually high numbers after recent elections, as the Council of Guardians disqualified more than 2000 reformist candidates, granting an enormous break for right wing politicians. These newly elected members find Khatami's views too foreign friendly with "conciliatory policies abroad and liberalizing measures at home." To counter this, the attempt to gain nuclear capabilities has begun in efforts to isolate the country from liberalization and western values. Furthermore, Khatami's efforts are being torn apart, as Parliament revised a "liberalizing development plan" approved by the prior liberal Parliament which emphasized foreign involvement in the economy via investments and privatization. Slowly, the instruments of the reform party for change-the press and the Parliament-have been silenced due to rigged elections designed to benefit the conservatives. The blooming of debate that had occurred before and during the Khatami administration's earlier years are dying, giving way to conservative rhetoric ("Defiant Iran: The World of the Ideologues" 24).

Khatami's revolutionary reform movement is suffering a serious setback and seems doomed for an early demise in the social arena as well. Khatami had pushed for improved penitentiary surroundings and preached tolerance of political opinions – two ideas that did not take well with the conservatives now in power. The conservatives favor tightening the social

restrictions that annoyed them to no end under Khatami, as the “morality police” are once again coming back to life, particularly against women. Popular perception is also favoring the conservatives once more, as Parliament revitalized loss making factories, the launching of various infrastructure projects following Khomeini’s popular “Crusade for Construction” concept. Youth are less politically involved as exit polls reported disappointing numbers earlier this past election season, and anti-Iranian satellite channels no longer remain popular (“Defiant Iran: The World of the Ideologues” 26).

What hinders the advent of further advancements in the reform movement is largely the United States and its foreign policy stance with Iran. There remain five obstacles to the recommencement of normal international relations with Iran that the United States has repeatedly made clear: official and documented state sponsorship of terrorism around the world and specifically against the United States; a quest for weapons of mass destruction, such as nuclear weapons; opposition to the Arab-Israeli peace process and Israel’s right to exist; threats to neighbors in the Persian Gulf who are allies with the United States; violation of human rights within Iran; and the accusation that Iran protects al-Qaeda operatives within its borders (Amuzegar 45). In addition, already frozen relations plunged deeper into coldness as it was unearthed that Karine-A arms shipments from Iran were sent to Palestinian operatives active in violence against Israel (Hollis 6). For its part, Iran has set aside a list of demands that must be met for any relation between the United States and Iran. The original three parts to the demands were: acceptance of the 1979 Revolution and the Ayatollah as Iran’s leader; absolutely no interference in the domestic policies of Iran; and “respect and equality” for the regime’s systems of operation. However, as time has passed, Iran has increased its demands of the United States to include: the relieving of U.S. economic sanctions against Iran; the release of frozen Iranian assets in the United States; the immediate departure of the United States Navy from the Persian Gulf; an end to one-sided, favorable support towards Israel; and finally, a formal apology for American “misdeeds” against the country. Given the countries’ resistance, it seems unlikely one will give in to the other’s demands (Amuzegar 46).

In recent months, various world events have created rifts in Iranian policy, and the reform movement may suffer. Near the end of the Clinton administration, the Iranian government under Khatami had begun to forge bonds, inching towards a possible reconciliation between the two nations. However, the advent of the Bush administration put an immediate halt to such plans, especially when, in a State of the Union speech, President Bush piled Iran together with Iraq and North Korea as the “Axis of Evil.” Bush had motivations of pleasing his frightened nation and attracting international support for the war on terror, warning Tehran that missteps would lead to grave danger. European allies felt uneasy with such a proposition, and Iran lashed back at the United States for what they considered insulting and preposterous indictments. Both reformers and conservatives were joined in anger against the United States at the allegations (Amuzegar 46). Recent nuclear capabilities have choked the Iranian reform movement, as Mohammed ElBaradei, head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, has announced that Iran has committed violations of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Iran has consistently retracted from undertakings to stop making centrifuge components, claiming that the nation is seeking an alternative form of energy, although evidence suggests otherwise, giving rise to the concern that Iran’s isolationist policy may be leaving its promising reform movement in its infancy (“Defiant Iran: The World of the Ideologues” 24). Yet another factor that seems to be an obstacle in the path towards reform in the international circle is Iran’s strategic position in what many call a “dangerous neighborhood.” Bordering contentious Iraq, holding grudges against Pakistan,

unfriendly with Afghanistan, and isolated from most other Middle Eastern nations because of its neutrality in Operation Desert Storm, Iran has found itself in the heart of the war on terror and noticeably alone. American sanctions and wariness of both Iran and Iraq allowed Iran's now notorious connections with the European Union's trade circles. Understanding their unique role as negotiators between both sides, the EU has repeatedly asked the Islamic Republic to accept an additional protocol; however, the United States has not taken an active role on this issue, mainly because of its focus on Iraq (Hollis 6). Moreover, Iran's reform movement has recently been put on hold because of the war in Iraq. Its challenge for survival of the regime lies in the possibility that the United States may achieve their goal of a free Iraq. The results of this situation could eventually determine the fate of the Iranian theocracy geographically, Iran could become completely surrounded by American allies and forces. A free Iraq could also hurt Iran through the mobilization of the Third Force, whose confidence in regime change could be bolstered. Iran also faces economic hardship once pipelines begin to flow again in war-torn Iraq; combined with a decline in oil prices, gasoline in Iraq would be able to overpower Iranian oil. For a nation that relies virtually solely on oil for its survival, the opening of Iraqi oil pipelines may spell disaster for the Iranian government (Amuzegar 55-56). Iran may have connections to Sunni militants and Muqtada al-Sadr's insurgents to help oust American forces. Combined with these developing international events, Iran's reform movement faces difficult times ahead promoting its liberal policies and view that internationalism and cooperation with the West will lead to a safer and more prosperous Iran.

Iran's modern reform movement faces a daunting task in surviving the obstacles in its path, including the reemergence of conservatives in Parliament and the international community. Many are pessimistic about the revival of the fervor that had been energized by Khatami. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's power and support is increasing, and American action in the region is helping neither the peace process nor the reform movement. However, it is necessary to note that Iran's Third Force remains mobilized and unhappy. Should the conservative government rejuvenated in recent elections fail in any way, the Iranians may drum up support once more for the liberal reformists to come to power again-it happened prior to Khatami's election, and it may certainly happen again in Iran's often unpredictable political climate.

On May 23rd, 1998, Mohammad Khatami spoke at a rally organized by many of the disenfranchised young voices of the Third Force. Here, he reiterated his goals of a just social environment and liberalization. In the midst of his speech, a group began to call for "Death to America!" Soon afterwards, a deafening roar of "Death to Monopoly!" conquered. An observer writes, "For a moment Khatami stood quietly... Then he uttered a remark that silenced everybody. 'I prefer,' said the President of Iran, 'to talk about life, not death'" (Montaigne 33).

The flower of hope may yet blossom for Iran.

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