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TRANSFORMATION OF THE IRANIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM: TOWARDS A NEW MODEL?

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Editor's Summary: The author analyzes the history of the Islamic Republic of Iran, its changing balance of power, debates, and wider meaning. He suggests that this comprises an ongoing experiment in the attempt of Muslims to find some system which combines tradition and religion with stability and material success. The emerging situation is one in which President Muhammad Khatami is simultaneously president and leader of the opposition. There is a lively debate among Iranians and Islamists in other countries about the proper course to seek and the appropriate mix of secularism and democracy for their societies.

The history of the Iranian political system since the early days of the revolution might be called a "transformation process." An analytical study of this experience can provide clues on the system's future shape. The revolutionary elite, operating under the heavy impact of the shi'a legacy concerning the legitimacy and authority of political relations, created an ideological political system which has been controlled by a set of institutions dominated by religious leaders and pro-revolutionary elites.(1) The gradual transformation of the political system has led to a two-track model, based on the hegemony of bureaucratic institutions or state elites and the limited role of conventional political elites in this system.

Arguments based on notions of a "failure of political Islam" or "Iranian Westernization" are not the best way to understand the evolution of the Iranian institutions, political thought, or the system as a whole. What is going on in Iran is less a failure of the Islamic revolution or of Islam itself than it is an ongoing experiment, a search for a new Muslim identity, in which various ideas and structures are being tried and in some cases rejected. This is an ongoing process that has been occurring throughout the Islamic world for more than 80 years. Due to the absence of a universal institutional template, different societies and polities are likely to construct various unique identities and models of "good governance." An analysis of Iran, in this context, might help us to gain a better grasp on the whole picture and a better understanding of the ongoing processes of political change throughout the Islamic world.

Such an attempt should first emphasize the main turning points of the political history of the revolution. Without detaching them from their historical context, the dynamics of change and the emergence of different political positions need to be seen as mechanisms of transformation that have been in operation for over two decades. In this way, it would be possible to analyze the transformation of the Iranian political system along with its broader political implications.

THE IRANIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM SINCE THE REVOLUTION

It is useful to look at the political history of the Islamic revolution as divided into three distinct periods. The first period might be referred to as the "first republic" or the period of revolutionary Islam, from 1979 to 1988. The second period, from 1988 to 1997, might be referred to as the second republic or the reconstruction period. The third republic or the period of searching for a more open society began with the election of Mohammed Khatami in 1997.

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini assigned Mehdi Bazargan the task of establishing a transitional regime in Iran following the Islamic revolution of 1979. Bazargan adopted a cautious approach, defending gradual, step-by-step change, opposing the use of any domestic violence so as to mobilize support for the new regime. He closed the revolutionary courts that had been founded following the Islamic revolution and sought to provide and strengthen the rule of law in Iran. He resigned, however, after the student attack on the U.S. embassy on November 4, 1979. The Iranian people voted for Abulhassan Sadr for the presidency; but, he was soon dismissed by Khomeini. The next president, Mohammed Ali Rejaee, was assassinated by the opposition Mojahedeen-i Khalq organization.(2)

After 1981, control of the Iranian political system shifted to pro-revolutionary elites who closely followed Khomeini's line of thinking. Throughout this period, the state attempted to maintain society in a state of emergency with the help of radical religious factions, declaring that their goal was not only to "free" Iranian society, but the whole world as well. All resources were mobilized to conduct this "war" and to provide the world with a more happy future founded upon religious principles. These elites sought to mobilize mass support for their cause of establishing a permanent Islamic regime in Iran.(3)

This period was characterized by an attempt to stifle all divergent opinions, declaring all opposition to be "anti-revolutionary" and "agents of imperialism." Other salient characteristics of this period were a belief in a charismatic *velayet-i faqih* (the mandate of the jurist) and an overtly ideological character of the state machinery. Islam was seen as the only legitimate source of political thought and it completely dominated the public sphere; revolutionary elites accepted the politico-religious doctrines of neither East nor West and sought to struggle against what they saw as "global imperialism," especially as represented by the United States. As a result, virtually all forms of foreign investment were discouraged.(4)

This period continued until the end of the Iran-Iraqi war in 1988. The end of the war, however, along with Khomeini's death, laid the foundation for a political restructuring of society. The recognition of the need to change the direction of state policy was mostly due to the regime's inability to cope with the massive problems that it faced as a result of its isolation. In addition, the revolutionary elite began to lose its ideological cohesiveness and profound differences began to emerge.

By 1988, the Iranian economy nearly collapsed and domestic production had decreased by five-fold. Iran continuously used up its resources during the war and at the same time population increased around 40 percent. Iranian economy was not in good shape even shortly after the revolution. A profound currency crisis, the loss of human life and material damages that resulted from the war, a severe budget deficit, and floating petroleum prices presented extremely grave problems for Tehran.

The second republic began with Khamanei in a position of religious authority and the assumption of Rafsanjani to the presidency.⁽⁵⁾ In this era, the rights that accompanied religious leadership were extended by legal amendments and the office of the premier was merged with that of the presidency. The subsequent erosion of the legitimacy of the religious regime, the economic demands of the people, coupled with the collapse of the Soviet bloc led to a search for a new economic order in Iran. Rafsanjani's tenacious personality and his progressive ideas concerning economic development were central factors that led to an eventual restructuring of the economy. Economic reconstruction became the central goal of this era. Other government objectives included a gradual separation of the economic realm from ideological elements, large-scale privatization, greater freedom with respect to foreign trade, and a restructuring of the legal framework in conformity with international laws and norms.

These attempts at economic reconstruction and political liberalization created great excitement throughout the society and the debate over passing from a religious to a more modern or secular administration dominated discussions in intellectual circles. Cornerstone premises of the revolution, such as the hegemony of religious values, came to be seen by many as obstacles to reconstruction. By March 1989, Iran had moved into a period of a planned economy that initiated widespread economic changes throughout the country.

At the same time that economic reconstruction was pursued throughout the country, the ruling elite also adopted a more pragmatic line with respect to foreign policy, especially toward Europe and the Gulf Arab monarchies. Their principal goal was to attract foreign investment and aid in order to overcome the massive damages caused by the war. They sought to find a place for Iran in the international political economy. Rafsanjani gained legitimacy in the eyes of the religious leadership by putting forward the idea that reconstruction would create an exemplary state for other Muslim countries, through economic development and advancement.⁽⁶⁾ He was successful, therefore, in getting permission to attract and accept foreign investment.

The ruling elite failed, however, to accept fully the extension of economic liberalization into the cultural and political realms. The resistance of the religious leadership restricted progressive development to economic considerations. The gains made during this period, therefore, were very limited. Conservative attitudes remained dominant, especially in the cultural sphere and success in economic reconstruction was limited as well. Attempts at political and economic reconstruction and liberalization, for the most part, only served to facilitate the emergence of a new class of wealthy people who prospered on the basis of state resources. Poverty among the common people increased even further.

The period of second republic, though on a limited scale, led to an opening of space in which the main premises of the revolution came to be questioned and a more open and civilian style of government was first imagined and then slowly put into place. These developments came to be called the "intellectual religious movement"--it was fostered, in particular, by the writings of Abdolkarim Soroush. Reformist intellectuals became increasingly alienated from the state and organized privately. Much of this activity took place in the universities. Probably the most

important aspect of this era was the emergence of a variety of political demands, supported by various institutions and organizations. The emergence of new politico-economic demands, the increasing search for a more open society and rich intellectual debates constituted the main source of "Khordad 2," (May 23, the day Khatami was elected) as the new Iranian revolution came to be called. Nevertheless, the conservative bloc of religious leadership, although faced with a profound legitimacy and authority crisis, continued to dominate developments throughout this period.

Demands for continued reform became united under the umbrella movement led by Mohammed Khatami, who the Iranian people selected as their third president on May 23, 1997. At least in theory, there was a shift from a system based on a charismatic leader to a system inspired by the will of the people.⁽⁷⁾ This opened up new horizons and provided greater opportunity for the representation of popular demands in the administration. It also meant that, for the first time, the Iranian people were able to constitute a serious challenge to the dominant minority, which had heretofore ruled the country with an iron hand. Most of the basic premises of the revolution came to be seen as outmoded and a new social contract became both a necessity and a reality.

Khatami gave priority to civil society, the rule of law, greater political freedom, respect for pluralism and a more open dialogue with the West. While he did not describe freedom as anti-religious, he emphasized that institutions that did not appreciate the importance of freedom were destined to fail and disappear. Khatami sought to establish an institutionalized freedom in the public sphere and attempted to draw boundaries that would allow for necessary constitutional amendments.

The Khordad 2 movement was the result of differences among powerful factions, the crystallization of new ideological tendencies, and the demands of the people. Iranian society is still in search of a new social contract based on openness, civil society, pluralism, and freedom. In accord with these demands, important positive developments have come to life: there is greater (though still very limited) freedom of the press and an increasing acknowledgment of the civil and human rights of opposition groups.

THE DECOMPOSITION OF IRANIAN POLITICS

Important differences in the Iranian political arena emerged in the early part of the 1980s. At that time, the major issues on the political agenda were religious law and economic development. Not much later, however, differences sharpened over issues of public planning, foreign affairs, and the reshaping of the political system.⁽⁸⁾ Khatami's ascendancy to the presidency represented a profound turning point and created a system of two powerful political blocs, conservatives and reformists, and a third bloc that consisted of relatively weaker groups.

Those political factions that give precedence to defending the status quo and opposing reformist demands represent the conservative camp. The main point of reference for conservative groups is the institution of *Velayet-i Faqih* and they consider it as the bastion of all laws and norms. Other references are the call for continued Islamization of the state and the reflection of this religious character in all matters of state, absolute obedience to state authority, and absolute state hegemony in the political realm. The foremost groups in this camp are the Hizballah along with more moderate conservative groups.

The Hizballah organization considers itself to be the only legitimate authority in the Iranian political system and regards all means as acceptable in order to safeguard the revolution.⁽⁹⁾ In their view, human history is a mammoth struggle between the forces of good and evil, and it is a religious duty to engage in the war against all evil forces. This group was the leading force in the Iranian political scenario until 1988; since that time, it has continued to serve as an extremely important pressure group in Iran. It still holds great power over the military, as well as government, intelligence, and security institutions. The history, ideology, and legacy of this movement has largely been shared by the Islamic Revolution Resistance Front (*Jebhe-e Mokavemete Engelabe Eslami*) as well as *Ansar-ul Hizballah*.

Conservative groups followed Khomeini in asserting that religious leaders should govern the state based on *shari'a* (Islamic law). These groups have accepted the leadership of the *Velayet-i Faqih* and have stood opposed to the development of democracy and civil society as Western inventions. *Jame-e Ruhaniyete Mobarez* (Community of Struggling Mullahs), *Jemiyete Motelefe-e Eslami* (United Islamic Community) and *Peyrevan-e Khatte Eman ve Rehberi* (Followers of the Line of Imam and Religious Leader) may be considered to be the forerunners of this ideological front.

The reformist bloc consists primarily of those groups which are in favor of reforming the Iranian political system and institutionalizing these reforms through constitutional amendments. The groups gathered in this bloc were among those responsible for the revolution, but, over time, they gradually became alienated from the regime. This bloc demonstrated quite dramatically, in the 1997 presidential elections, that it had greatly increased support among the Iranian people. The reformist bloc argues that democratic principles are or can be compatible with an Islamic order. They see tolerance and consensus as integral parts of social life and civil society as a positive project that is necessary for the respect of human rights and political freedoms. In contrast to conservatives, they seek to restrict the role of *Velayet-i Faqih* and to create a legal framework for this position. The reformist bloc can be classified into two different groups: moderate reformists and leftist reformists.

Moderate reformists are gathered together under the leadership of former President Rafsanjani. They seek to increase the public welfare and overcome the difficulties or roadblocks to economic development. This group consists of technocrats, managers, industrialists, and upper level bureaucrats. The groups in this camp include *Khizb-e Karguzarane Sazendegi Iran* (Servants of the Reconstruction Party) and *ve Khizb-e Etedal ve Tosee* (Moderation and Development Party).

The leftist reformists argue that the most important obstacle to the development of Iranian society is the failure to broaden participation in the political realm and provide more freedom in this sphere. They see this as necessary to overcome what they see as a bottleneck in the Iranian political system. They argue that the minority which holds political power in Iran is not open to popular accountability and that their performance leaves a great deal to be desired. This, they argue, is why the dominant group has lost support and is no longer seen as legitimate by the Iranian people. *Mejme-e Ruhaniyon Mobarez* (Community of Struggling Mullahs), *Sazman-e Mojahedin Engelab Eslami Iran* (Combatants of Islamic Revolution), *Khizb Khembestegi-e Iran-e Eslami* (Islamic Solidarity Party of Iran), *Jebhe-e Moshareket-e Iran-e Eslami* (Islamic Participation Party of Iran), *Khizb-e Kare Eslami Iran* (Islamic Labor Party of Iran) are the principal parties that comprise this bloc.

For reformists, once the republic--as it is defined in the constitution--has been established in Iran, then the political system will be improved to a considerable extent. The influential Iranian

thinker, Abdul Karim Soroush, known as intellectual architect of Khatami revolution, is in favor of keeping religion aside when it comes to ruling the state. He argues that shari'a may be basis of modern legislation but it should be flexible and adaptable rather than being static.(10) The power of the intellectuals in Iran, and in other areas with a Muslim majority or minority, is increasing and also gaining transnational status since their publications are rapidly translated to other languages.

The groups that do not belong to either of these two major power blocs fall into two categories. While some of these organizations, like the Iranian Freedom Movement, are mild reformists, others seek a radical transformation of Iranian society. These especially radical factions are organized into a broad range of different groups, the best-known being the People's Combatants. These groups have found only limited opportunity for involvement in the political system in legal ways. Perhaps as a result, some have extended partial support to the Khatami bloc, at least this was the case in the elections to parliament in February 1999. Still, they generally consider the reformist bloc to represent a lesser evil.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE POLITICAL SYSTEM

Following the elections of 1999, a two-bloc political model emerged within the Iranian political system. Executive and legislative offices, along with the presidency, remained in the control of the reformists, while the economy, the intelligence, the military and the judiciary remained under the hegemony of the conservative bloc. While traditional institutions established after the revolution--including the *Velayet-i Faqih*--have stayed in the hands of conservative groups; they have lost much of their influence over the Iranian political system.(11) *Velayet-i Faqih* is an institution that closely follows the principles of Khomeini's sermons of the 1960s.

After the revolution, the demands of prominent religious figures like Huseynali Muntezeri, Hassan Ayet and Mohammed Huseyin Behesti were included in the constitution. This resulted in a constitutional recognition that the right to govern belonged to the highest religious jurist (*Faqih*), in the absence of prophets and imams. Khomeini, therefore, was seen as both the predominant religious and political leader. This only changed with his death and the ascension of others to positions of religious and secular authority.(12) This institution has remained a powerful force in Iranian society despite the fact that it has faced a severe legitimacy crisis. It has served, more or less, as a tool for the conservative bloc.

Other institutions like Council of Islamic Consultancy, Council of Supervision, Higher Council of National Security, Expediency Council and Council of Experts have also been dominated by conservatives.(13) Ironically, this has meant, in a sense, that the country's president is also the leader of the opposition. Yet while reformists have not won this conflict among government institutions, the very existence of a continuous debate paves the way for the creation of a civil society or, in Fariba Adelhah's formulation, "religious public space."(14) However, the intense rivalry between the two opposing political blocs has also demolished the sense of national harmony within the state bureaucracy and created an atmosphere of instability characterized by a profound lack of confidence.

The current political constellation has led to the emergence of increasing strife in public life. Particularly following the assassination attempt on Saeed Hajjarian, a near civil war-like atmosphere has emerged. Unsolved murders, increasing political pressures, and arrests have

served to maintain high levels of tension between the two groups. Conservatives not only escalated the tension but also compelled the other bloc to respond in kind. Although coming to office on a platform of reform, Khatami has been indecisive in his tactics and approaches to emerging problems. The climate of increasing political tension is especially detrimental to the reform movement, its cadres, tools and aims. Khatami's vague policies have created great disappointment and a sense of loneliness among the Iranian people. The cyclical, political repercussions of mass political events in the big cities is a result of this general frustration.(15)

Khatami and his reformist colleagues are trying to change the system without being perceived as threatening to the state's security. The conservative bloc, on the other hand, is trying its best to paint the reformists as a threat to the future of Iranian society by provoking them to radical alternatives. Their aim is to force them to give up any serious attempts at meaningful reform.(16) This situation may result in increasing levels of political violence, as has been the case before when political institutions failed to answer to the increasing demands of the people.

THE WIDER IMPLICATIONS

Throughout the Islamic world, political legitimacy has become the product of elections. After many long years of political authoritarianism, in many Islamic countries, electoral democracy has come to hold a dominant position in the eyes of the vast majority of the people. Iran became a landmark example in this regard with the election of Khatami. Once democratic elections were recognized as the source of political legitimacy, then the focus of attention shifted to jostling amongst the various political parties. Political parties have come to be seen as the most suitable institutions for absorbing and representing the highly politicized demands of people in Islamic countries. The recent multiparty elections in Iran and Indonesia are landmark examples in this regard. While democratic systems in Islamic countries leave a great deal to be desired in terms of freedom and participation, from Algeria to Indonesia there is a widespread attempt to maintain and improve multiparty political systems.

Perhaps the single most important ongoing development in Islamic countries is the changing perception of the role of religion in the public sphere. This development has even led to misperceptions or exaggerations concerning the failure of political Islam or the decline of Islamic civilization.(17) Others argue over the compatibility (or incompatibility) of Islam and democracy. This is a most complex issue given that the former is an ontological position and the other a political ideology.(18)

The other side of the coin has been the development of a nationalization or statization of Islam in certain Islamic countries. This trend is highly visible in Malaysia, Turkey, Indonesia and in various Arab countries, which are constructing different versions of a "national" Islam for different purposes. One clear aim is to restrict the actual power of Islamic groups in the political realm and the attempts of authoritarian leaders to diminish the role played by Islamic groups in the political structure. Nevertheless, these attempts have failed to decrease the overall influence of Islamic thinking in their countries.

The change toward greater freedom and pluralism is not unique to the Islamic world and is also happening in different parts of the globe. At this point, it is necessary to mention the input of the globalization to the processes touched upon here. Globalization can be defined as the significant intensification of global connectedness--economic, political, social, and cultural relations--across

borders, with a high degree of consciousness of this intensification. The proliferation of media and means of communication, and increasing ease of travel, direct results of globalization, has had positive impacts over the ongoing developments in Islamic world. Eickelman's interpretation of the new media revolution gives clues to understand the positive impact of this trend. He argues that: "the asymmetries of the earlier mass-media revolution are being reversed by new media in new hands."(19) The new media and the new contributors led to the emergence of greater awareness of diverse ways to express their ideas and created new channels for participation in an enlarged public sphere.

What is most striking, perhaps, is that demands for greater secularization and modernization are now coming from Islamists themselves. Again, however, the literature tends to misinterpret the demands as moderate impulses in Islam.(20) What is especially clear is that there is a widespread search for a new identity in the Islamic world. Conceptual endorsement of civil society--*Jame'e Madani*, for example, in Iran and Sivil Toplum in Turkey--are now widely discussed subjects in Islamic countries. On the other hand, it is important to note that this does not mean that the new civil societies that are imagined are necessarily based on Western models. Nevertheless, emergent models of good governance do generally bear a great similarity to those of the West. Muslim intellectuals are increasingly employing Western concepts in dynamic debates over "good governance."

Robert Hefner's argument that the real clash of civilizations in the modern era will not be "between the West and some homogeneous other but between rival carriers of tradition within the same nations and civilizations"(21) seems relevant to our discussion. The possible tense clashes within different civilizations may be avoided by profiting from the each other's riches through hybridization, reciprocal borrowing and cohabitation. The West, in this sense, stands to benefit from these dynamic developments in Islamic civilization and good relations with the Islamic world. At the same time that Islamic civilization has tended to adopt many characteristics of the West, it could also be seen as emerging as an alternative political model to the dominant West. There is, of course, widespread resistance to the notion that the West is the best.(22) Khatami showed himself to be representative of this search for alternative models when he called for a dialogue between East and West.

Iranian society is struggling to cope with great difficulties that are faced in attempts to shift from religious conservatism to democratic processes that respect religious values. Iran is an extremely important political player within the specific context of the Middle East and throughout the Islamic world in general. The Iranian people are attempting to open up new horizons, which would enable them to realize their full potential for influencing ongoing trends in the Islamic world in general. The Iranian case serves as a particularly salient example of the way in which the people are well aware of notions of "good governance"; and, they are quite willing to struggle to establish better forms of government if given the opportunity.

The current Iranian regime may be able to resist substantial progressive change for some time by blaming outside powers for the nation's problems. It could well be argued that a regime in Iran that faces so much popular opposition and is trying to stem political processes arising from major social changes does not have much chance of surviving in the country's future. It is possible that the Khatami-led reform movement may be repressed or reduced in the short run. Nevertheless, a more likely scenario would be that an even stronger reform bloc will emerge, less intimidated by state security, and determined to reconstruct the Iranian political system along more moderate and democratic lines.

NOTES

1. For legitimacy and authority relations in Shi'a tradition see Said Amir Arjomand, (ed.), *Authority and Political Culture in Shi'ism* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1988).
2. For more information see Sadik Zibakelam, *Jame'e Madani*, Tehran, 1378.
3. Mohammed Khatemi, *Bim-e Moc* (Fear of Wave) Tahran, 1378, pp.17-47
4. Said Berzin, *Jenahhayi Siyyasi Der Iran Emrooz* (Contemporary Political Positions in Iran) Tahran, 1378., p.52.
5. Anoushiravan Ehteshami, *After Khomeini: The Iranian Second Republic* (London: Routledge, 1995) 1995
6. Feramerz Refi Pur, *Tose-e ve Tezad* (Progress and Conflict), Tehran, 1377.
7. See www.moshareket.com, 12 February 2000.
8. *Fath*, 23 February 2000.
9. Hussein Allah Kerem, *Sobh*, Vol.2, No.1, (1996), p.61.
10. Abdul Karim Soroush, Mehdi Bazargan et. al., *Gerayi Dini* (Religious Renewal), Tahran, 1378.
11. Hamit Reza Celayi Pur, *Pes Ez Dovom-e Khordad* (After Khordad 2), Tahran, 1378
12. Shahrough Akhavi, "Contending Discourses on Shi'i Law on the Doctrine of Wilayat- al Faqih," *Iranian Studies*, Vol 29, Nos. 3-4 (Summer-Fall 1996); Muhsen Kediver, *Hukmet-e Velayi*, Tahran, 1378
13. For the roles of these institutions see, Iranian constitution provided in English at <http://eurasianews.com/Iran/const.htm>.
14. Fariba Adelkhah, *Being Modern in Iran* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).
15. *Sobh-e Emrooz*, 17 February 2000.
16. Emadeddin Baki, *Terajedi Demokrasi Der Iran* (Tragedy of Democracy in Iran), Tahran, 1378.
17. Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).
18. For example see, John L. Esposito and John Voll, *Islam and Democracy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1996).

19. Dale Eickelman, "Islam and the Languages of Modernity," *Daedalus*, Vol. 129, No.1 (Winter 2000), p.131

20. See for example Charles Kurzman, (ed.), *Liberal Islam: A Source Book* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

21. Robert W. Hefner, "Multiple Modernities: Christianity, Islam and Hinduism in a Globalizing Age," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, No. 27 (1998), p.92.

22. For an inspiring article in this issue see, M. A. Muqtedar Khan, "Constructing Identity in Global Politics," *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, Vol. 3, No.3 (Fall 1998).

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