

## *Khatami's Election as President of Iran: Does It Really Bear Tidings of Change?*

### Background

Khatami, who achieved an impressive victory in the May 1997 elections for president of Iran, attained another important success when the *Majles*, Iran's parliament, confirmed all 22 of his candidates to ministerial posts (20 August 1997).

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Since his election, Khatami has made a number of relatively moderate statements concerning Iranian willingness to open a dialogue with the US. Although these messages have not produced a breakthrough, they have contributed toward improving the atmosphere surrounding relations between the two countries.

### The Factors Shaping Iran's Revolutionary Policy

We can point to three main domestic changes that have joined to influence the Iranian policy during recent years and which, at the same time, limit the president's capacity to genuinely modify that policy:

- Khomeini's death created a political vacuum that has yet to be completely filled. None of his "heirs" have the religious authority, political power, or personal charisma that he had. Khomeini was capable of making difficult decisions while retaining public support; for his successors, matching those accomplishments is proving to be much more problematic. Therefore, it will be significantly more difficult for his successor to reach decisions regarding the resumption of relations with the US and the nullification of the ban against Rushdi, let alone a change in attitude toward Israel.
- The contest over the nation's leadership has still to be decided; hence, the distribution of authority cannot be resolved. This struggle is being waged on a number of levels at the same time: on the highest level, there is

the contest over the inheritance of Khomeini's spiritual authority as leader of the revolution; covertly, among members of the political-religious leadership (such as Khamene'i, Khatami, Rafsanjani, the Majles); and among different factions — “pragmatists,” “radicals,” and “conservatives” — within the government regarding the shape the revolution is to take. These conflicts are being acted out in tandem with the common struggle against the opposition, in its various aspects.

- The persisting socio-economic difficulties, which continue to encumber broad segments of Iranian society, represent the main factors stirring public dissatisfaction and pose a challenge to political stability. Providing solutions to these problems, or even significantly easing their intensity, is a formidable task given the circumstances in which the country finds itself.

### **A Radical Regime, a Pragmatic Policy**

Internal and external changes have not generated a clear, unequivocal policy. In effect, a considerable degree of ambiguity and even inconsistency characterises the revolutionary regime's operational guidelines. Khatami's election has not yet changed this trend.

Like Khomeini in 1979, Khatami has “sold” a dream, and hence become a symbol of the yearning for change. Nevertheless, a series of obstacles, inherent within the government's structure and the revolutionary situation, has hampered making such a breakthrough.

First, at the head of the revolutionary institutions, we find Khamene'i; to a considerable degree, Khatami, as president, is subject to his authority. The outgoing president, Rafsanjani, continues to exert considerable power, and in the Majles, as well as other revolutionary organization, the influence of religious conservatism is still markedly felt. The serious economic adversity dampened the possibility of a breakthrough, while ideological, political and personal divisions hamper the consolidation of a cohesive and more decisive policy. Moreover, the elections have replaced the president, but they did not alter the character of the regime. Khatami has committed himself to save the revolution, not to destroy it. There are limits to which Khatami can deviate from the revolutionary consensus, even if he should wish to do so.

Ideologically, the revolution has been sorely disappointing for its own followers. Although its doctrine aspires to the establishment of a government led by theologians whose authority is anchored in their scholarship and piety, the regime rests in the hands of cleric-politicians whose influence flows from their positions at the centres of power. In any case, the people's expectations of the revolution — an improvement in economic conditions, more freedom — have been so far mostly dashed. Hopes

regarding Khatami have been very high, but his power to put his ideas into practice is still, a year after entering office, questionable.

In order to ease the distress and to perpetuate the revolutionary regime in the long term, the revolutionary leadership has been forced — similar to every revolutionary movement involved in a transition from opposition to governing power — to deviate, often quite dramatically, from its doctrine and adopt more pragmatic approaches. In essence, whenever the Islamic revolution's doctrine conflicted with Iran's national interests, the latter triumphed — not from ideological inclinations but because of the actual onerous conditions. Nonetheless, the radical revolutionary line continues to hold in regard to two main issues: loathing of the US and animosity toward Israel.

### **Khatami's Differentiation between the US and Israel**

Due to the West's "cultural invasion," imperialism continues to be the main enemy of Iran and Islam. In Iranian eyes, the US continues to be the "Great Satan." Khamene'i sees no reason to change this attitude, although Khatami's approach betrays a new tone: Khatami is aware of the western cultural achievements while raising the need for a dialogue between western culture and the world of Islam. Moreover, he emphasises that Iran bears no hostility toward the American people — it criticises only the US government — which undoubtedly represents a modification, even if a limited one, of the stand taken toward the US; this attitude was expressed on a number of occasions during the past year. However, with regard to Israel, we still cannot point to any new tidings even on the part of Khatami.

In general, since his election, Khatami has proven that he is interested in change, and ready to actively defend for his views. However, the difficulty in making far-reaching decisions on critical issues, such as Iran's relations with the US and Israel — which have become important symbols of the revolution — is considerable. Precisely due to the prominent retreat from so many other issues, which has left only two banners — the hatred of the US and of Israel — in their hands, many are convinced that it is advisable to wave those banners still higher as testimony to the revolution's continuity and success. At present, it appears at least one of the major standard-bearers (that is, Khatami) is convinced that it is preferable to differentiate between the anti-American and anti-Israeli banners, while lowering the former just a bit.

This trend's persistence, and the possibility that it may harbinge a change in Iran-US relations, is intensifying the challenge to Israel for the short run. Israel should carefully consider the evolving situation, and should not hesitate to re-examine her policy, if there is a similar willingness on the other part. After all, Iran is one of the most important countries playing a role in the region.