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Iran's Reform Movement: The Enduring Relevance of an Alternative Discourse

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Abstract

Given the surprise electoral victory in May 2013 of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, which was attained on a recurrent platform of reform and change, this article seeks to investigate Iran's reform discourse by looking at how it systematically developed under President Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005). Its chief purpose is to delineate the discourse in a retrospective analytical attempt to show why it has proven so resilient and persuasive in theory while briefly explicating the causes of its failure in practice under reformists, which set the stage for the rise to power of populist neo-conservatives marshaled by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–2013). Divided in two main parts, it thus seeks to tease out the domestic ideology of reform as theorized by Khatami and his men on the one hand, and the foreign policy of détente and dialogue as performed by the reformist administration on the other. In so doing, the article draws primarily on the original Persian sources produced during the respective period and afterward, including Khatami's own writings as well as theoretical formulations and articulations propounded by his political strategists. Finally, it anticipates that Rouhani's "moderation" project can face the same fate as Khatami's "reform" project if the former does not heed the hard-earned historical lessons of the latter, even though it is operating in a different sociopolitical context.

Introduction

The election of Hassan Rouhani, a centrist politician, as Iran's president in May 2013 bore a resemblance to the May 1997 presidential victory of Mohammad Khatami, a reformist figure in two salient respects. Both developments took place against a backdrop of public inertia and social ennui at a time when the forces of status quo had entrenched themselves in almost all significant institutions of state, rendering the potential for change next to nothing. This was largely why the results on both occasions took many political observers and policy mavens inside and outside Iran off guard. Similarly, both victories were accomplished on the back of an alternative platform of change, promising to replace the corrosive politics of despair

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that had set in over consecutive years of conservative rule with an emancipatory politics of hope, thus marking paradigmatic watersheds in the post-revolutionary life of Iranian society. More precisely, it was, to a great extent the strategic deployment of Khatami's reform discourse and the mobilization of reformist forces following him that enabled Rouhani-led centrists to overcome the powerful old guard and win the national struggle for hearts and minds.

Such a strategy manifested itself most conspicuously in Rouhani's symbolic assertion during a televised debate in response to Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf — a former Revolutionary Guards commander and potent principalist contender — that "I'm not a colonel, I'm a jurist" (cited in Ghouchani, 1392/2013, para. 1). Coupled with the intellectual and emotional maturity of Iranians characterized by a deepening belief in nonviolent action, his mantle of moderation eventually secured him the presidential office (Behraves, 2013; Sadjadpour, 2011); and also demonstrated the remarkable resilience of a discourse first introduced systematically, in a different format however, to the Iranian society-polity by the reformist President Mohammad Khatami.

The chief purpose of this article is to demonstrate that discourse is an analytical attempt to show why it has proven resilient and persuasive in theory while briefly explicating the causes of its failure in practice under reformists, which set the stage for the rise to power of populist neoconservatives marshaled by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–2013). Divided in two main parts, it thus seeks to tease out the domestic ideology of reform as theorized by Khatami and his men on the one hand, and the foreign policy of détente as performed by the reformist administration in the international arena on the other. To this end, the article draws primarily on the original Persian sources produced during the respective period (1997–2005) and afterward, including Khatami's own writings as well as theoretical formulations and articulations propounded by his political strategists.

The Ideology of Reform Under Khatami: Islamic *Mardomsalari* (Democracy) at Home

An ardent harbinger of reform in Iranian politics, Khatami represented those marginalized but potentially explosive forces who had long been seeking a departure from the paralyzing stasis of the war and postwar years, and those progressive but unheard voices who had long been calling for change. In a sense, his sweeping victory over well-entrenched conventional conservatives was the collective Thermidorian reaction of a generation to a revolutionary past whose excesses had reached unexpected and undesirable levels, and whose utopian promises of good life had yet to be fulfilled. The reformist resurgence anticipated a sea change, both in the configuration of power relations within the Iranian polity and in Iran's relations with the outside world, not least the West.



In the domestic sphere, the withered civil society was revived and expanded, civil and individual liberties were promoted, the press found a new opportunity to voice the various views of competing political factions and develop an alternative culture of critique and dialogue, a novel political culture based on Islamic reformism and modernism was born, and finally the state political economy leaned leftward in an attempt to strike a balance between market liberalism and social justice. On the foreign scene, an attendant policy of détente to establish constructive relations with the regional actors as well as Western powers was placed high on the diplomacy agenda, a dialogue among civilizations was introduced and championed at the global level, and finally a national–statal campaign was launched to project a fresh image and recast a new identity of Iran abroad. It was Iran’s reform moment in the national and international spheres. The renowned Iranian foreign policy maven, R. K. Ramazani (1998a) identifies a “pivotal synergy” in Khatami’s worldview between domestic reforms and international peace (p. 177), and considers this as the major reason why his ideas about democracy and dialogue appealed deeply to the Iranian youth, who constituted his greatest support base among the electorate. Such a majority was seeking an alternative but also a better way of life that had been denied the preceding generation as a result of the social and political vicissitudes of the 1979 revolution and the long war with Iraq.

In his books, *From the World of City to the City of World* (1373/1994) and *Fear of the Wave* (1376/1997), Khatami advances his view of the potential challenges adherence to the Western culture poses to the Islamic ideology and the religious Iranian identity in particular. In so doing, he maps out the ways in which two apparently competing Universalist modernities can be integrated into a moderate and balanced remedy for the modern man. His primary concerns relate to the force of Western cultural onslaught that may lead to the erosion of Islamic culture and loss of Islamic–Iranian identity, and a struggle for combining the positive elements of Western liberalism and liberal democracy with those of Islam. While modern Western political thought emphasizes individual and national self-determination and responsibility of the state to protect people’s rights and secure their interests, Islam highlights religious values of morality, justice, and social responsibility of individuals, calling for restraints upon what Khatami regards as “the limitless materialism, atomization and hedonism (*bibandobari*)” thought to be underlying Western modernity (Shakibi, 2010, pp. 150–151). In his view, perhaps this integration, once successful, might help fill in the “emptiness at the core of liberalism” — as Francis Fukuyama admits in his controversial essay “The End of History?” as a defect in the ideology (1989) — and compensate for its failure, at the end of the day, to deliver a meaningful life (cited in Weber, 2010, p. 115).

It would be strikingly naïve to reduce the Iranian reform movement epitomized by the presidential election victory of Khatami and symbolized by his worldview, to the micro-level human factor and agency of a particular leader, and thus discount the macro-level structural and discursive circumstances setting the stage for its



emergence. In factional terms, the triumph was the result of an emerging sense of alienation between the center and the right and thus “a shift in allegiance of center and moderate groups from right to left” in late Reconstruction period under the preceding pragmatist President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (Wells, 1999, p. 37). Put a bit differently, what created momentum for the massive reformist victory were the split between traditional and modern right and the fear of power monopolization in the country by a single group or coalition. In the words of Gholam-Hossein Karbaschi, a former mayor of Tehran and modern-right supporter of reforms: “we were worried that one group would capture all the major power positions. We were worried that a coalition wanted to have all the power in the country. This worry was very real for many people and brought everyone around Mr. Khatami and the Second Khordad movement was born” (cited in Shakibi, 2010, p. 154). In discursive terms, however, as Mohammad Reza Tajik, a reformist theoretician and then presidential advisor, argues, the second of Khordad (victory) movement¹ was the culmination of a deconstructive development that initiated a different reading of social and political relations and constructed a new discourse in the Iranian culture, politics, and society:

The 2nd of Khordad signified a profound shift in the [Iranian] nation’s socio-political life; a shift which, on the one hand, summoned Iranians to once again play an active role on the socio-cultural scene of their society, and on the other hand, blatantly brought the passivity and sterility of that period before their eyes. The 2nd of Khordad was the culmination as well as the start of a deconstructive transformation in our society. In spite of the sacredness of the pillars of the system remaining intact in this process of change and transformation, those moments and elements constructing and constituting the structure and sphere of society were subjected to a different reading and a new discourse in the domain of politics, society, and culture was shaped . . . The deconstructive movement of 2nd of Khordad was the movement of incorporating the margin into the text (as its complement); [it] was the politics of attention to the overlooked and dismissed; therefore the multitude of its devotees were the “Other” of the Defined in the society, [that is] those who had been disregarded and had no place in the minds and hearts of [political] planners of the age. (Tajik, 1379/2000, p. 95)

Having been set to rectify the distortions in the official power discourse of the Islamic Republic and deviations from its promised revolutionary ideals, the reforms were intended to introduce a structural overhaul of the dominant ideological positions and political mechanisms of governance and were thus bound to impact upon the entire social, political, and economic aspects of state–society dynamics.

Two of the key objectives central to the reform movement were development of the civil society and empowerment of democratic forces, such as nongovernmental organizations and the press, as well as promotion of the rule of law enshrined pri-



marily in the Iranian Constitution. The growing collective aspiration of the Iranian youth for a freer society was an important part driven by the globalized international sphere where democratic norms and institutions had been speedily diffused and entrenched since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. This meant that as the national expectations for democracy were rising, any type of autocratic or arbitrary rule could hardly be tolerated, and instead the rule of law and its equal application to all would be advocated. Struggling for political participation, building a dynamic and resilient civil society, promoting individual freedoms, defending the rule of law, demanding for government accountability, and pursuing social justice constituted key elements of what Ramazani calls “Khatami’s democratic peace” (1998a, p. 180).

The majority of reformist forces believed that all political groups and circles that support the rule of people and abide by the rule of law should be given an appropriate opportunity, within the framework of the Iranian Constitution, to disseminate their ideas and participate in the political process regardless of their ideological leanings. It was a prevalent conviction among the reform-minded intellectuals that those groups who have been marginalized for their ideological attitudes and whose civil and individual rights have been violated for their political positions should be recognized as full citizens and allowed to represent themselves in the public sphere through engagement in lawful political, social, and cultural activities. It should be pointed out, however, that the great number of these figures sponsored an *indigenized* version of democracy and modernity which would be founded upon the collective historical experiences of Iranians and compatible with their cultural characteristics and religious values. As Ibrahim Yazdi, Secretary-General of the Freedom Movement of Iran, and a prominent reform exponent of nationalist tendencies contends:

I believe we Iranians have a very rich culture, and if we allow this culture to perform its function [freely and properly], we can both solve the problem of cultural clash and confrontation, and reach a kind of consensus in establishing a type of democracy [in the country] which will be neither Western, nor American nor English, and yet a democracy [in the real sense of the word], an Iranian democracy indeed. (Yazdi, 1379/2000, p. 290)

In trying to achieve this type of democracy, Khatami would draw an important distinction between the Islamic and Western versions of civil society to divert attention to the religious, spiritual, and moral dimensions of the former as contrasted to the latter. For him, the Islamic civil society in which individuals’ rights and freedoms, including sociocultural, economic, and political liberties, were supposed to be respected, emanated from the Islamic concept of *Madinat ul-Nabi* (The City of the Prophet) and as such, differed in principle from the Western civil society, rooted in the Greek notion of the city state, where liberty has a different ideological thrust and bearing and is strongly associated with “secularism” (Yazdi, 1379/2000, p. 290). Though he makes clear that liberalism in the Western sense of the term is opposed



to the Islamic doctrine of political and social life for its powerful secular underpinnings, he espouses a liberal interpretation of the powers and responsibilities the Iranian Constitution has stipulated for the Islamic government and the Supreme Leader in particular.

In other words, the authority of the Islamic ruler, who is supposed to be a qualified *Faqih* (jurisprudent), over elected officials including the president and, by extension, the people he rules should be balanced, as expressed in the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) statute, by the responsibilities entrusted with him, particularly the responsibility for moral leadership of society and protection of public rights and interests. In Khatami's reform-oriented view, the Iranian Constitution tries "to weigh both factors [of powers and responsibilities] equally," an interpretation Ramazani refers to as a type of "faqih-guided democracy" (1998a, p. 181) in which even the supreme *Faqih* himself is not above the law. For him, the rule of law was the source of that vital power necessary for the proper functioning of social as well as political institutions that would provide security and prosperity for all. "The foundation of a progressive society," Khatami argued, "is security, and the foundation of security is for the society to become lawful, and for [the establishment] of sustainable security in the society, [the rule of] law should become sustainable" (cited in Tajik, p. 90). Similarly, his electoral campaign insisted upon respect for the rule of law and preservation of civil liberties within the legal framework of the Constitution.

The freedom reformists spoke of was meant to strengthen the popular foundations of society and reinvigorate its security since, if the free flow of information was obstructed by the state and the public need for knowledge was not met, then people would inevitably find themselves consuming foreign representations of domestic affairs. According to Khatami:

We need organized political parties, social associations, and an independent free press to provide channels to convey to the state the people's needs. The government must eliminate obstacles to the expansion of these channels . . . We have no other path except moderation and dialogue . . . and to people intending to use violence and harshness, even if they have good intentions, we say that violence and harshness will not work. The more independent and free the press, the greater their representation of public opinion. The press has two main roles: proper transfer of the demands and occurrences of the society to the authorities and the true transfer of the issues that the establishment engages in to the people. (cited in Shakibi, p. 233)

Along with the implementation of political reform through the development of civil society, empowerment of the mass media, promotion of the rule of law, and encouragement of political participation and state accountability, the Khatami administration was also committed to reform the country's dilapidated economy that had been suffering from years of considerable mismanagement and was marked by a high



level of inflation and unemployment as well as unequal wealth distribution when the new government inherited it. In spite of Khatami's awareness that structural economic reform and development required a comprehensive political strategy, his economic plan was beset by the conflicting economic perspectives of his political allies, with the modern right advocating economic liberalism and removal of state control over the market and the modern left underscoring state intervention in economy to create social justice and equitable income distribution. On the one hand, therefore, the reformist administration gravitated toward promoting greater foreign investment, efficient resource management, elimination of monopolies, enhancement of market competition and effective privatization, but on the other it represented a commitment to the leftist tendency of economic regulation by the state (Tazmini, 2009, pp. 75–76).

All economic overhaul-oriented efforts notwithstanding, it might be safely argued that the government achieved little in terms of economic development and failed, in spite of its admirable intentions and ambitious plans, to heal Iran's ailing economy largely due to the absence of fundamental structural reform in the mode of state governance and ideological institutions. What is quite evident is the existence among Iran's top-ranking leadership elite of a strong antipathy toward capitalism, Western economic models and, in general, "the Western way of life," theoretically because they are underpinned by "secular, humanistic and liberalist" principles instead of Islamic or "theistic foundations" (Amuzegar, 2009, p. 43; see also Amuzegar, 1999). Even among most of the reform-oriented groups and figures, including President Khatami himself, it was widely held that real economic and political development might not be realized by drawing on foreign and Western socioeconomic and political models; rather, they maintained, it was necessary to formulate an authentic "national, home-grown and Islamic paradigm' compatible with Iran's own history, geography, politics and culture" (Amuzegar, 2009, p. 43). This is an important part of why Khatami's conception of national identity — which is said to be based upon the three pivotal elements of Iranian-Islamic culture, dialogue among civilizations, and Islamic *mardumsalari* or democracy — has been viewed as a discourse of resistance (Holliday, 2010).

The Iranian reformist discourse was far from being a uniform and homogeneous articulation of sociopolitical relations within the sphere of a sovereign nation-state. More significantly, in endeavoring to prepare a safe and appropriate context for the expression and revival of difference as a prerequisite for the creation of dialogue and a cosmopolitical order (Bakhtin, 1929/1984, 1979/1986; Kinnvall & Lindén, 2010), it steered clear of the homogenization of cultural, social, and political forces, and sought to characterize itself as a pluralist movement in which boundaries of legitimacy and inclusion are tolerantly defined, and no legitimate voice is denied a platform or occasion for speaking (Lamming, 1995). Khatami's (inter)national discourse of reform, or what Mohammad Ghouchani (1387/2008), a reform-oriented Iranian journalist, calls "Khatamism," was a combination of uniquely novel and old elements



and moments, in that it aspired to accommodate and integrate tradition and modernity, civil society and Faqih-ruled society, young and old forces, woman and man, “self” and “other,” earthly law and *Sharia*, want and value, constitutionality and republicanism, theocracy and democracy, and the other apparently binary oppositions into an inclusive, dialectic, and pluralistic discourse within which the pillars of the Islamic Republic would be defined and protected (Tajik, 1379/2000, p. 97).

The Reformist Foreign Policy: Dialogue and Détente Abroad

Dialogue, détente, mutual respect and understanding, rapprochement, and cooperation were the key concepts upon which the reformist administration of Mohammad Khatami endeavored throughout eight years in power to formulate its foreign policy. His foreign policy of détente may be regarded as a reflection or continuation of his domestic politics, his struggle to apply a modern and moderate reading of Islam and establish a religious democracy at home. Democratic peace is one of the central liberal theories of international relations in the light of which the reformist foreign policy has been analyzed. Lying at the heart of the liberal challenge to realism that considers peace as dependent upon the balance of power not on the regime type in world politics, this theory maintains that international peace depends on whether the regimes operating within states are democracies or not as democracies do not enter into war against each other. The chief explanations theorists offer for democratic peace are that: 1) democracies are committed to the norm of nonviolent resolution of political disputes and differences both in their internal politics and in their relations with other democracies, and 2) a democratic nation or the public often balk at supporting war against another democracy because it has to bear the costs of war (Richardson, 2008, p. 47; see also Russett, 1993). These accounts can both be encapsulated within the dyadic version of democratic peace theory. Another variant of which is monadic, whereby democracies are hardly inclined to use force, even against nondemocratic enemies (Ramazani, 1998a, p. 180).

Referring to Khatami’s interest in, and awareness of Kantian philosophy, from which the democratic peace thesis stems, Ramazani observes that his notion of foreign policy was based upon his peaceful worldview and commitment to democracy which, once applied within the framework of Iranian polity and according to its Islamic principles, would amount to what he calls “faqih-guided democratic peace” (1998a, p. 181). Underlying this line of thought is a belief in nonviolence in difference resolution, cooperation among nations, interdependence of cultures and economies in a globalized international society, and dialogue among civilizations, a formulation Khatami advocated as an antithesis to Samuel Huntington’s (2003) “clash of civilizations” and to which he owes the bulk of his popularity and credibility on the global scene. Proclaiming his project in an official address to the United Nations General Assembly on September 21, 1998, Khatami foregrounded dialogue



among civilizations as a means to replacing confrontation with conciliation adding that:

The Islamic Revolution of the Iranian people was a revolt against coercion and suppression . . . Certainly, a revolution that resorted to logic in the phase of destruction is much better disposed to resort to dialogue in the phase of construction. Hence, it calls for a dialogue among civilizations and cultures instead of a clash between them . . . through such a dialogue, the realization of universal justice and liberty may be initiated . . . the establishment and enhancement of civility, whether at national or international level[s], is contingent upon dialogue among societies and civilizations representing various views, inclinations and approaches. (Khatami, 1998)

Espousing a dynamic and proactive foreign policy, Khatami was intent on building friendly, mutually respectful, and constructive relations with other nations, either Islamic or non-Islamic, as long as they respected Iran's independence and avoided confrontation. In a similar vein and along parallel lines, the reformist government's foreign policy discourse has been categorized as one of "peace-centered dialogism" whose seminal signifiers were "détente in foreign relations" and "civilizational dialogue" which emphasize interaction with the "Other," especially the West, based upon mutual understanding (Adibzadeh, 1387/2008, pp. 149, 152). To use the characteristic terminology of international relations, "Khatami essentially discarded vulgar realism," argues Ansari, "and introduced a measure of constructivism into Iran's foreign policy strategy" (Ansari, 2006, pp. 154–155).

Khatami's discourse of national civil society, reflected in his call for the repudiation of violence and adherence to state–society dialogue, paved the way for the development of civil liberties, greater public participation and consensus over issues of national interest, compliance with the rule of law and respect for the right of citizens at home. Similarly, his discourse of global civil society, represented by his emphasis on inter-civilizational dialogue, brought in its wake an improvement of Iran's foreign relations on the basis of mutual respect, creation of confidence-building mechanisms, and active engagement, as well as promotion of multilateralism in resolving regional conflicts. Most of these perspectives were echoed in his famous interview with CNN in January 1998, a key event construed by international observers as an evident attempt by the reformist administration to present a different picture of Iran in the world. Characteristic of this endeavor to portray a fresh and favorable image of Iran and especially to terminate a certain mode of relationship between Iran and United States, was the alternative conception he propounded of the Anglo-American civilization and the intellectual affinity he accentuated as existing between Iran and the United States:

In his [de Tocqueville's] view, the significance of this [American] civilization is the fact that liberty found religion as a cradle for its growth, and reli-



gion found the protection of liberty as its Divine calling. Therefore in America, liberty and faith never clashed, and as we see, even today most Americans are religious peoples. There is less war against religion in America. Therefore, the approach to religion, which was the foundation of Anglo-American civilization, relies on the principle that religion and liberty are consistent and compatible . . . We feel that what we seek is what the founders of American civilization were also pursuing four centuries ago. This is why we sense an intellectual affinity with the essence of American civilization. (cited in Ansari, 2006, p. 156)

Among the most rewarding corollaries of cultivating an open and conciliatory attitude in the country's foreign policy was the emergence of a more positive phase of bilateral relations between the IRI and the European Union (EU), epitomized by the replacement in early 1998 of Iran–EU Critical Dialogue — which had been suspended in 1997 — by the process of Comprehensive Dialogue over such areas of concern as human rights, the Middle East peace process, international terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. The improvement of Iran–Europe ties, contrasted with the lack of progress in the IRI–United States relationship, was also partly due to the European — and in particular the British — governments' relatively more nuanced understanding and higher awareness of the realities in Iran as well as their adroitness in delicate diplomacy in the Middle East. This was exemplified, among other things, by the more or less reciprocally satisfactory settlement of such a sensitive matter as the Rushdie Affair in 1998.

Three major elements have been identified as underpinning Khatami's view of national security and how best the state can provide and protect it. The first as broached above was the empowerment of civil society as a source of soft power production, which could result in the elevation of public awareness, better observation of the rule of law, and finally promotion of public participation in national affairs. The second pillar consisted in the policy of détente as a means of eliminating tensions in the country's foreign relations, which was aimed to repudiate the authority of force at the international level and concentrate on sociocultural and geostrategic commonalities. With the third component being inter-civilizational dialogue, the reformist mindset sought to highlight all humanity's common fate in terms of security, emphasize coalition and collaboration to establish global peace, foreground native and national identity of societies, draw attention to the evolution of global culture, promote the standing of Muslims and Islamic countries worldwide, and ultimately underscore the equal sociocultural and civilizational status of international actors and their perspectives (Eftekhari, 1384/2005).

In more rationalist terms, having based Iranian foreign policy upon the three pillars of decontainment, deterrence, and détente, the Khatami administration strived to create a better atmosphere for the protection as well as promotion of national interests. It was because of this multifaceted approach that IRI's relations



with the EU burgeoned substantially, and a number of high-ranking visits at presidential and prime ministerial levels were exchanged between Iran and such European countries as France, Germany, and Italy,² which helped to attract international firms to Iran's energy sector and increased foreign investment in the country to unprecedented levels. Offering further examples of this almost alternative foreign policy orientation will serve to clarify the argument.

In December 1997, a few months after the election of Khatami as president, the Islamic Republic hosted the eighth summit of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, where most of the Arab leaders and delegations from the Persian Gulf states rushed to participate. The importance of this gathering can be better understood if one takes into account the close alliance of the Muslim world Arab states with the United States and the latter's still negative perception of the IRI as an international outlaw, which would pose a threat, not only to the national security of the United States but also to the Western version of global order as a whole. In such a context, the development, however, and the opportunity it afforded for a regional reconciliation between Iran and its Arab neighbors, was an opportune occasion for Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council to publicize their emerging rapprochement (Ramazani, 1998b). Arguably, the success of the event in easing the Iranian–Arab tensions and helping the two sides to mend fences with each other was in part, as Ramazani contends, due to Khatami's democratic peace-based foreign policy, which had greatly contributed to the projection of a new identity image of Iran on the international arena and the growing Arab disillusionment with the impasse in the U.S.-orchestrated peace process between the Israelis and the Palestinians. While committing itself to defend the Palestinians' right to determine their own fate, Iran's reformist administration tried hard to distance, if not dissociate itself, from the militant Palestinian and Lebanese groups — whose violent measures threatened the safety of Israeli citizens — and thus pursue a policy of nonintervention in the conflict. In a historical offer to initiate official talks with the United States in 2003, it went so far as to promise to cease financial and logistical support to these groups and announced the IRI's acceptance of the two-state solution to the Israeli–Palestinian crisis, provided the Palestinians agree (Shakibi, 2010, pp. 208–209, 217).

Striving to pull down the wall of mistrust between Iran and the West, Khatami had first to construct an identity of Iran as “a force whereby [the world] could solve [its] problems, rather than see it as a problem itself” (cited in Behravesht, 2011a, p. 343), an outlook embodied, for example, by the Iranian support for the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan and removal of Taliban. With this in mind, he based the reformist administration's foreign policy on conciliation and confidence building, which was supposed to be employed within an overarching framework defined by the three principles of national esteem (*ezzat*), collective wisdom (*bekmat*), and pragmatic expediency (*maslahat*). In this light, détente did not mean a kind of underestimation of threats or compromise on the state's ideological principles, but was interpreted as a policy instrument for discerning enmity boundaries and trying



to invigorate friendships and commonalities while creating a world order characterized by elimination of force in international relations (Assadi, 1387/2008, pp. 155–156). Khatami viewed détente as a long-term strategy rather than a short-term tactic that could “bring the human community closer to happiness, welfare and peace” (Khatami, 1379/2000, p. 182). Implicit in such an outlook was his conception of détente as an indispensable prerequisite for building a sustainable international security community where the collective interests of the global society could be advanced systematically:

The policy of détente is the firm foundation of security and stability . . . No force or country in the world can stay out of the sphere of peace, calm and security and therefore humanity has a common fate, and it is in terms of this common fate that we want co-existence and relations based upon mutual respect and interests with all the world, including industrial and developed countries. In our foreign policy . . . we note that others’ need to have relations with us is no less than our need to have relations with others . . . We have taken positive steps in détente [with others] and, God willing, will continue our work to enter a new stage, that is, from the stage of détente to that of confidence-building, and thence to . . . mutual comprehensive cooperation. (Khatami, 1380/2001, p. 158)

In point of fact, the reformist foreign policy and the reconciliatory practices it accompanied reconstructed a new type identity of Iran as a problem-solving force under Khatami. This helped the IRI free itself, to use a constructivist terminology, from the Hobbesian culture of anarchy in which it had long been entangled and enter a Lockean international culture where it could look at Others not as enemies that would threaten its survival but as rivals that would recognize its sovereignty (Wendt, 1999; see also Behraves, 2011b). A remarkable example of this intersubjective transition from one culture of anarchy to the other during the Khatami presidency was the improved status of relations between Iran and the EU despite the United States’ opposition and the notable IRI–EU engagement over such issues of strategic interest as Iran’s nuclear program. Of course, Khatami aspired, as delineated above, to a higher, more peaceful, and collective discourse of interaction with the outside world, namely, the Kantian culture of friendship and perpetual peace, but it would be a gross exaggeration, in the last instance, to claim that Iran and the outside world, particularly the West, were interacting with each other within a Kantian discourse of international politics.

Conclusion

The reformist administration’s call for change has been likened to that of *glasnost*, introduced by Mikhail Gorbachev in the Soviet Russia in late 1980s and early 1990s, as both governments considered the gradual increase of political freedoms,



while liberalization was seen as central to building a solid relationship between civil society and the state, which in turn had the potential to mobilize popular support behind the politics of change. In the light of this comparative analysis, Khatami's ultimate failure to institutionalize the social and political reforms to the degree his supporting constituents demanded might be ascribed to a few agential and structural factors including his lack of an organized plausible strategy for implementing change, the domineering structure of state power and the constraints it imposed upon political action, and above all, to his exceedingly soft personal character and lack of political audacity (Shakibi, 2010, pp. 221–222).

Among these constraints and limitations one may refer to his administration's lack of control over the state radio and television organization whose head was appointed by and accountable to the leadership office, an institution wielding more power than the presidential office and, by extension, the government, given particularly the fact that the outlet was heavily utilized by opponents of reform movement to advance their interests in the factional fight for more power and popularity. Another chief hurdle was the control of the press and mass media by the judiciary — a traditionally conservative institution whose chief is directly appointed by the supreme leader himself — and imposition of restrictions on their operations by the revolutionary courts which actively worked to maintain the status quo and check the politics of change by adopting punitive measures against reformists. A famous example of this check was the supreme leader's direct intervention to prevent the passage of a new law in the sixth *Majlis* that had been proposed in the form of a bill by the government to institutionalize a higher degree of freedom for media activities (Shakibi, 2010, p. 243). Another characteristic example was the blockage by the guardian council — a conservative body in charge of ensuring the compatibility of the *Majlis*-passed legislation with the Islamic and constitutional law³ — of what became known as twin bills, two pieces of government-proposed legislation which was passed by the *Majlis* and which would introduce changes to the country's general election laws and expand presidential powers.

On the foreign policy front, a year before Iran's nuclear case hit the headlines in August 2002, the 9/11 terrorist attacks induced the United States and its allies into a global "war on terror." In 1998 — one year after Khatami took office — the Taliban extremists had slaughtered nine Iranian diplomats in Mezar Sharif. Believed to offer sanctuary to al-Qaida terrorists, therefore, the Taliban were perceived both by Iran and the West as a common enemy bound to spread terrorism and insecurity in the globe. The Khatami administration saw this as a good opportunity to set in motion its policy of reconciliation with the United States. Thus, in virtue of the precious intelligence provided by the Iranian government as well as the ground support of its Afghan ally, the Northern Alliance, the U.S.-led coalition managed to topple the Taliban and replace it with the Afghan national government under Hamid Karzai whom Iran helped to establish his power. Nonetheless, not only the United States retained Tehran in its blacklist of terror-sponsoring states, but also on 29



January, 2002, much to the anguish of Iran's reformist leaders, came President Bush's "axis of evil" speech — a radical verbal attack that, according to President Khatami threw the bilateral relations into an unprecedented low. In his words, "the problem of designating Iran [a member of] the axis of evil took our relations to a situation which was perhaps worse than that which existed at the beginning of the Revolution and the peak of hostilities between Iran and America" (cited in Behraves, 2011a, p. 342).

In the face of severe reprimands by his political opponents inside the country for his conciliatory foreign policy, Khatami continued to seek an opportunity for reconciliation with the United States, only to be met with the White House's persistent refusal, as well as its mounting pressure to completely halt Tehran's newly revealed nuclear activities. A few months later in March 2003, the United States and the United Kingdom waged an avoidable war against Iraq on the pretext of dismantling its weapons of mass destruction, which was construed in Iran's decision-making circles as an ominous sign of the western determination to further dominate the region and control its energy resources. Bush's radical rhetoric against Iran followed by the invasion of its neighbor to the west dashed Khatami's hopes for any Tehran-Washington rapprochement. The perception gained ground when the United States—United Kingdom invasion of Iraq was accompanied by calls in the American neoconservative corridors of power for regime change in Tehran.

Surrounded by adversaries on the country's eastern and western borders — an indication of the failure of the reformist foreign diplomacy — and by staunch political opponents inside the country, who blocked the adequate progress of the reform movement, Khatami's reformist government ran aground. As a reform-minded intellectual, he endeavored for eight years to bury that intersubjective and historically hardened hatchet but was impeded, *inter alia*, by a distrustful United States, unaware that its tough policies toward Tehran were a blessing in disguise for the country's hard-liners. The ground had already been prepared for the emergence of a hard-line figure on Iran's political scene who would pose the most formidable challenge to the West since the establishment of the Islamic Republic. The negative perceptions of each side of the other's intentions, which Iran's reformist leadership had strived to transform, gradually started resurfacing toward the end of Khatami's second term in office.

The failure in practice of the reform project was not simply the result of incidental stumbling blocks or even structural hindrances on the ground as briefly discussed above. It was also a largely inescapable function of the immanent antimonies and inconsistencies that are usually characteristic of such utopian undertakings and may finally prove to bring about their demise. In the context of Iranian polity more specifically, it was the tacit endeavor on the part of reformists to redefine some of the foundational premises upon which the Islamic Republic had predicated itself as a revolutionary state — including the absolutist institution of *Velayat-e Faqih* (Guardianship of the Supreme Jurisprudent) — in an attempt to reconcile them with their



democratic and pluralist ideals. As the abortive political experience of the reform period (1997–2005) illustrated, such a far-reaching venture was not only discursively implausible but also elicited a consciously tailored systematic backlash from the very centers of power whose survival depended on the preservation of those institutions. Less than a decade later and with the grievances of the Green Movement of 2009 still fresh in collective memory, the same challenges lie ahead of Rouhani and his centrist administration in one way or another. A long-serving and faithful son of the revolution himself, Rouhani has arguably shown to be better equipped to navigate them, but it remains to be seen if the centrist administration will deliver its promise of change, or be hampered by the impediments that bedeviled the reform movement.

Notes

1. The 2nd of Khordad 1376 in Persian calendar, equivalent to May 23, 1997, is the date when Mohammad Khatami won the presidential elections in Iran. It later came to be used as abbreviation for the Reform Movement.
2. For example in March 1999, Khatami travelled to Italy and to meet with Massimo D'Alema, the then Italian Prime Minister, and Vatican leaders, which was the first official visit by an Iranian President to the city-state. In October the same year, he took an official trip to Paris and met Jacques Chirac, then French president. Also, in an interview with the widely popular *Sharq* newspaper on January 31, 2004, Kamal Kharrazi, then Iranian Foreign Minister, announced that the level of foreign investment in Iran had risen two and a half times since 1994, and the number of firms involved has increased eightfold. For further details, see MirEmadi (1384/2005).
3. Article 96 of the IRI Constitution; See S. Hosseini-Nik (1385/2006).

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