

**THE PINK REVOLUTION:  
THE GROWTH OF THE DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT IN THE  
ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN**

**SAM SEDAIEI**

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## INTRODUCTION

The Iranian revolution of 1979 overthrew Reza Shah Pahlavi's regime and ended 2500 years of Persian monarchy. However, its replacement with a theocratic and extremist regime misled the majority of the rest of the world into believing that the new regime represented the desire of the majority of Iranians. As discussed in this monograph, the Iranians did not revolt to support the establishment of a theocracy, but they supported the revolution mostly to remove the shah from power.

Since the empowerment of the Islamic forces, and especially since the end of the eight-year war against Iraq, a strong democratic movement has been growing, which calls for a change of regime and replacing the current one with a genuine and secular democracy. As Iranians become more dissatisfied with the current rulers, they find more reasons to join the democracy movement. This research explores the facts that have been contributing to the popularity of the democracy movement in Iran.

Since the 1979 revolution, the Islamic regime has imposed an unwanted isolationist foreign policy upon the lives of Iranians. In addition to this policy, the theocratic regime has deprived its citizens of the most basic civil liberties, and eliminated journalists and dissenters by labeling them "hurtful to the society," "disrespectful to the supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei," and "incompatible with Islam." However, the larger half of the Iranian population that is under the age of twenty-five does not seem to have any intention of complying with such policies. As these individuals shape the politics of the twenty-first century, their efforts are mostly overlooked by the West. This claim is more apparent when one considers the fact that even when the Iranian nuclear program is under the scrutiny of the rest of the world, still little attention is paid to the desires of the people or human rights violations in Iran.

This study has been done following a series of interviews with numerous middle-class Iranians from different ages and sexes, which were conducted during a five-week trip to

Tehran, the capital of Iran, in the run-up and after the 2005 presidential elections. The study consists of three major sections, which are as follows:

I. Reasons for the revolution of 1979:

A brief review of major political events between 1953 and 1988 (the beginning of the reformist movement in Iran), and the main reasons behind popular dissatisfaction with Reza Shah Pahlavi's reign

II. A Review of current Iranian political issues:

A thorough investigation of the most important current political and economic issues that have contributed to the growth of the democracy movement

III. Commentary on Ahmadinejad – the new Iranian president-elect

– the 2005 presidential elections, and conclusion:

Observations regarding the election of president Ahmadinejad and the most plausible explanations for his victory

IV. The future of the republic:

An assessment of the most likely development of Iranian politics and the reformist movement in the near future

The main purpose of this research is to reveal the important components of the pro-democracy reformist movement based on a combination of available Iranian and foreign literature on the topic and, most importantly, a recent series of interviews with a number of middle-class Iranians from different ages and genders about the motives of the movement. This study makes available a rich source of information on the strong, but under-investigated, democratic movement in Iran, and its significance in the future of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

## REASONS FOR THE REVOLUTION OF 1979:

### A BRIEF HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF THE REFORMIST POPULAR MOVEMENTS IN IRAN (1953-1997)



Mosaddeq



Pahlavi



Khomeini

## **MOHAMMAD MOSADDEQ AND THE NATIONAL FRONT: THE PARTY, THE COUP, THE LEGACY**

The coup of 1953 which removed Mohammad Mosaddeq, the Iranian Prime Minister and the leader of the National Front for Democracy, was a turning point in the history of Iran. The main reason for this assertion is that his government was the last popular and democratically-oriented government in Iran. Another important reason is the role that the coup played in stimulating the anti-shah movement, which eventually resulted in the 1979 revolution, overthrowing Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi and ending the 2500-year-old Persian Monarchy. Hence it is important to review some of the facts surrounding the coup in order to truly understand the start of the popular pro-democracy movement in Iran.

On April 29, 1951, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the late Shah of Iran, yielded to the increasing popular pressure, and appointed Mohammad Mosaddeq as the Iranian Prime Minister (Gasirowski 1987, p. 261). Mosaddeq was a lawyer and had been an important liberal democrat and anti-Soviet nationalist politician since the early years of the twentieth century. In the mid 1940s, he had prioritized two objectives in his public life: a desire to transfer political power from the royal court to the parliament, and a desire to increase Iran's control over its oil resources, which was then controlled by the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC). The latter had especially gained paramount importance in Iranian politics in the 1940s, due to Britain's substantial power in Iran and the British use of that power to help the shah, who was widely considered as a British puppet.

Following an oil agreement favoring the AIOC in 1949, large demonstrations took place by middle- and lower-class Iranians protesting the agreement, and an organization known as the National Front was formed to coordinate opposition to the shah and the British. the National Front was a broad coalition of political parties based mainly on the urban middle and lower class (Schoenberger 1975, p. 22).

In 1950, the National Front led more demonstrations and managed to elect eight candidates – including Mosaddeq - to the 16th Majles (Persian Parliament). In 1951, Mosaddeq submitted a bill proposing the nationalization of the oil industry. The bill was quickly passed, and Mosaddeq was nominated as Prime Minister by the Majles. As soon as he was appointed Prime Minister, he signed the nationalization bill into law.

The nationalization of AIOC brought Mosaddeq into direct conflict with the British as the latter owned 50 percent of the AIOC stocks (Gasiorowski 1987, p. 267). From this point on, the British attempted to prevent nationalization by either negotiating with the Mosaddeq government or removing him from office. A British negotiating team, which was sent to Tehran, submitted a proposal that was rejected by Mosaddeq. A second similar negotiating team failed to reach an agreement with Iran (Gasiorowski 1987, p. 264).

From this point on, the British refused to negotiate with Mosaddeq, and sought his removal from office through the help of British agents in Iran or covert action by MI6, the British intelligence service. Mosaddeq was evidently aware of these activities and retaliated by suddenly resigning from office, after clashing with the shah over who would control the military (Gasiorowski 1987, p. 275). Immediately after Mosaddeq's resignation, the shah appointed Qavam as prime minister. However, even though Pahlavi had previously started implementing plans for Qavam's accession, those plans were not complete yet. Massive demonstrations were organized by the National Front asking for Mosaddeq's return into office. Demonstrations became violent, causing the killing of 69 people and injuring another 750. The shah refused to use the police force to break the demonstrations. Since Qavam did not have a broad popular base, Mosaddeq's supporters dominated the streets of Tehran. Therefore Mosaddeq was successfully swept back into office (Gasiorowski 1987, p. 265). It was the first– and arguably the last – time in Persian history that the consent of the people – and not a small ruling class – was the decisive factor in choosing the prime minister. From this point on,

the British channeled its resources into MI6 to covertly remove Mosaddeq, and made consistent efforts to get the CIA involved in what became known as operation AJAX.

The Truman administration did not support covert action, and asked the British not to undermine Iran's independence. However the British learned that they would have a better chance of getting the CIA involved after Eisenhower took office. Eisenhower was favorable to U.S. business (and oil) interests, and the Dulles brothers' law firm had often represented U.S. oil companies on legal matters (McMahon 1986, p. 462). In addition, the Eisenhower administration was gradually led by the British into believing that Mosaddeq's government was getting dangerously close to the communist Soviets. Thus, two weeks after Eisenhower's inauguration, the CIA chief met with the heads of MI6 to decide about the details of a coup.

Zahedi, a retired army officer who had made an organized effort along with the Nazis against allied troops in Persia during World War II, was put in charge of carrying out the coup. Two British agents, code-named Narren and Cilly, were given \$50,000 to coordinate massive "fake" anti-Mosaddeq demonstrations (Gasiorowski 1987, p. 282). On the morning of Wednesday, August 19, 1953, the large anti-Mosaddeq crowd was joined by conspiring police and army units. The crowd then marched toward Mosaddeq's house and proceeded to destroy the walls of the house. Mosaddeq escaped through the roof, but turned himself in to Zahedi the next morning. Zahedi was then appointed by Reza shah as the new Prime Minister and his government gave U.S. companies a 40% share in the Iranian oil production (Gasiorowski 1987, p. 275).

The coup d'etat of 1953 was one of the most critical points in the history of the Iranian democracy movement. The coup ended the slow progress that Iran had been making since the early 1900s toward a more democratic government that was immune from foreign influence. The Mosaddeq movement symbolized these aspirations, and the coup made him a martyr of that cause.

Following the overthrow of Mosaddeq, martial law was instituted and remained in effect for years. In addition, thousands of National Front and pro-Mosaddeq demonstrators at the Tehran bazaar and Tehran University were suppressed.

The coup was a decisive factor in the growth of the democracy movement. If the coup had not occurred, Iran surely would have had a vastly different future. Hence, the coup marked the beginning of several political movements which resulted in the 1979 revolution and the unfortunate replacement of the monarchy with a theocracy instead of a democracy. It is important to review the repression that occurred following the 1953 coup d'état in order to understand the decisive factors in the emergence and success of the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

### **REPRESSION IN THE PRE-REVOLUTION PERIOD AND THE GROWTH OF THE REFORMIST MOVEMENT (1953-1977)**

Following the coup of 1953, Reza Pahlavi took steps to create the kind of dictatorship that would prevent the reformists from ever becoming powerful. Using American and Israeli help, he created a new secret police, the notorious SAVAK. In addition, with the help of rising oil revenues, he helped built one of the biggest militaries in the world (Abrahamian 1980, p. 4). He increased the number of armed forces from 120,000 in 1953 to 400,000 in 1976 (Richards 1975, 10). By 1977, Iran had become the main customer of the most sophisticated weaponry American and British technology could produce (Richards 1975, 10).

Arming himself with a massive army and SAVAK, the shah proceeded to suppress opposition and harass proponents of democracy. Immediately after the 1953 coup, Pahlavi outlawed the National Front, arresting most of its leaders, including Mosaddeq, and even executing his own Foreign Minister for having advocated the establishment of a republic. Having served three years in prison, Mosaddeq was put under house arrest where he died in 1967. The Shah especially targeted Tudeh, the Iranian communist party, arresting over five thousand party members and executing forty (Halliday 1980, 17). By late 1950s, both the National Front and Tudeh had lost most of their grass-roots organizations.

Despite the weakening of opposition, organizations such as the Confederation of Iranian Students (CIS) were formed, which continued to organize pro-democracy and pro-nationalization demonstrations in the streets of Tehran (Mobarez 1972, p. 20). Facing this increasingly severe opposition and lack of cooperation by the middle and urban class, the shah stepped up his rule of terror and tried to generate popular support by appealing to the past Persian glories of the kings and the empire. The regime declared CIS to be illegal and membership in it to be a crime. Progressive clergy and other opposition members were exiled, tortured and killed, and universities were closed in response to the least political activity. Prisons were filled with more than 20,000 political prisoners (Mobarez 1972, p. 22). In fact, the celebration of the 2500th anniversary of the Persian Monarchy was blocked off by rings of military forces for miles, making the celebration more like a large party for the shah and the ruling class rather than one for the people.

### **THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION OF 1979, THE FALL OF THE PERSIAN MONARCHY, AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN**

As the year 1977 approached, four distinct oppositions could be found to the Shah: The religious conservatives (whose goal was to eliminate the monarchy through political revolution, but who had no intention of social revolution), religious radicals (who supported the establishment of a theocratic state), secular reformers (led by the National Front and focused on the need for a modern constitution), and the secular radicals (including the Tudeh Party, the Revolutionary Tudeh, and the Marxist-Leninist Organization, which were seeking the establishment of a communist regime in Iran). Between 1977 and 1979, the religious opposition groups had substantially more success in mobilizing the masses, especially among the bazaar population, the poor, and even the industrial proletariat, for several reasons which shall be discussed.

The first reason for the clergy's success in appealing to the masses of the middle and

lower classes was that while the Shah's regime crushed most grass-root organizations belonging to the secular opposition, it permitted the clergy, seminaries, bazaar guilds, and mosques to function (Halliday 1980, p. 21). The seminaries, in fact, greatly benefited from the oil-boom of the early 1970s, and consequently increased the ranks of the lower clergy. By 1977, the religious institutions were the only organizations left in the country free of the Shah's intervention. Therefore, mosques gradually became places for expression of public opposition (Wells 1999, p. 12).

The second reason for clerical success was rooted in the role of religion in the lives of lower middle-class. For the "shanty-town poor," most of whom were migrants from villages, religion was widely viewed as a substitute for their lost sense of community. In other words, shi'ism in Iran during the years before the revolution was playing the same role for the urban poor that Methodism in the nineteenth-century played in England: providing a sense of collectivity and community (Field 1977, 200-201). In such an atmosphere, it was rather easy for a man like Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the revolution, to appear as the savior of the middle and lower class. At the time, most of the middle class was urban while the lower class consisted of both urban and rural poor.

The third reason for the strength of the religious institutions was that the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China openly supported the shah throughout the decade after the coup, hurting the Marxist Left inside Iran that was leading opposition against the monarchy (Halliday 1980, 23). The main reason for their support was that the shah had entered into favorable oil agreements with both countries, and both the Soviet Union and China knew that the rise of any leftist/nationalist government in Iran would result in the nationalization of oil and subsequently sabotage the oil agreements.

Finally, in their efforts to overthrow Reza Shah, the lower clergy encouraged low wage workers to strike and demand higher wages, resulting in the state becoming paralyzed

(Abrahamian 1980, p. 10). Therefore, both their eagerness and their invitation to the lower class to fight for “social justice” made the clergy appear best capable of establishing equality, economic and political independence, and the kind of liberal ideals that the reformists and students had been trying to promote ever since the 1953 coup.

The religious factions were divided, as some allied with the liberal secularists and others with the Marxists. Ayatollah Khomeini, who was by then in exile in Iraq, led a small group that promoted the overthrow of the monarchy and the transformation of Iran into a theocratic state. Throughout the period before 1978, the pro-democracy reformists mostly consisted of the urban middle class, a fairly secular stratum that supported constitutional monarchy. However it was the Islamic groups and Khomeini’s allies that first managed to rally the great mass of the population against the Shah.

By September 1978, major protests were occurring regularly, which led the Shah to declare martial law. As protests continued, the Shah used full military force to crush the demonstrators. However, as two million people filled the streets of Tehran on 12 December 1978, the army began to disintegrate, as conscripts refused to fire at demonstrators (Abrahamian 1980, p. 14).

The shah subsequently agreed to introduce a constitution and to appoint the moderate Shapour Bakhtiar as Prime Minister, but the masses could no longer be calmed with compromise. The majority of the middle class was now loyal to Khomeini, and the Shah fled the country on January 16, 1979, when Khomeini called for an end to the monarchy. Khomeini returned to Iran on February 1, 1979, after being invited by the anti-Shah revolutionaries. In this way, the Persian monarchy had fallen and was replaced by what became known as the Islamic Republic of Iran.

## **THE FIRST DECADE OF THE REPUBLIC, INTENSIFICATION OF OPPRESSION, AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE SECULAR POPULAR REFORMIST MOVEMENT**

In the period after the revolution, the reformists and the masses shared great excitement over the toppling of the authoritarian regime of Reza Pahlavi. However that was one of the very few things they shared. Despite Khomeini's great political popularity, there were dozens of revolutionary groups, including the descendants of the National Front, the Freedom Movement, and the secularists, who wanted to influence the direction in which Iran was headed. As these factions struggled to take government under their own control, two groups appeared to have the most political power: the Freedom Movement and the Islamists. The Freedom Movement most closely represented the liberal, democratic, nationalist, and secular values that Mosaddeq and the National Front had fought for between 1949 and 1979, while the Islamists and Ayatollah Khomeini claimed power based on the role they had played in mobilizing the masses to overthrow the monarchy.

Mehdi Bazargan from the Freedom Movement was chosen to be Prime Minister, and the movement worked to institute a liberal secular government. The clerics on Khomeini's side formed a separate party known as the Islamic Republic Party. As the two groups attempted to cooperate, tensions grew between them.

As disagreements grew and each group looked for ways to take control of the country, the revolutionary guards of the religious faction were the ones that best succeeded in bringing order to the nation. The revolutionary guards also gained control of the judicial tribunals and began to sentence the Shah's former officials in the secret service and the military. In June 1979, the Freedom Movement released a draft of the constitution, referring to Iran as the Islamic Republic, but giving the Islamic law no official role. At this point in time Iran got closest to being the kind of secular nation that the members of the National Front had envisioned establishing before the coup d'etat of 1953.

However, when the new constitution was sent for review to the newly-elected legislature, most of which was dominated by Khomeini's allies, the chamber rejected the constitution, agreeing with Khomeini on the idea that the new government should be one hundred percent Islamic. A new constitution was drafted by the Persian Parliament (Majles), creating the most powerful life-long position of "Supreme Leader" for Khomeini, who would control the military and be able to veto candidates running for office on the basis on their incompatibility with Islam. A four-year president was to be elected from candidates approved by the Supreme Leader and the newly-established Guardian Council. Bazargan resigned as Prime Minister in November 1979, shortly after the new constitution established the beginning of theocracy.

As Iranians were taken by surprise as these political events were taking place, one factor seems to have been significant in distracting the public from opposing the formation of a theocracy, and that was the Iran-Iraq war. Shortly following his taking over the government, Khomeini had started to encourage a shi'i uprising in Iraq, undermining Saddam Hussein's rule. This factor, along with deeply rooted enmities between the two countries, Saddam's regional aspirations, and a border dispute along the Shatt-al-Arab waterway led Hussein to attack Iran (Swearingen 1988, 405). His attack triggered a war that lasted for eight years, partially due to western countries' arms sales to both sides of the conflict. The foreign attack reminded people of the ugliness of other countries' attempts to undermine Iran's independence and hence fuelled Iranians' sense of patriotism throughout this eight-year period. The Iran-Iraq war put a hold on the growth of the democracy movement once more. It was only after the end of the war with Iraq that the movement started to resemble today's modern struggle for democracy all across Iran.

The end of the war in Iraq corresponded with another important event that affected the political climate in Iran as well as the direction of the reformist movement in Iran, and this

was the death of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the charismatic leader of the revolution, in 1989. Khomeini's death led the Islamic Republic to enter a period of "Thermidor." In an article written about the rise of the President Khatami of Iran, elected in 1997, Matthew Wells gives a clear definition for the term "Thermidor":

"Thermidor can be defined as the closing phase of a revolution wherein hard-liner revolutionaries are increasingly challenged by reformists and/or revisionists. It is usually a product of, and/or accompanied by, a popular backlash to revolutionary policies. Thermidorean reactions ... beset ... mainly those [governments] which are (i) comprised of coalitions in which power is shared by diverse factions, and (ii) where legitimacy is derived from one over-arching charismatic figure (e.g. Robespierre, Lenin, Ebert, Khomeini, Ortega)" (Wells 1999, p. 27).

During the first decade of the revolution, power was divided among a group of Islamic fundamentalist revolutionary factions. During this decade, 'followers of the Imam's life' or *Maktabis*, a center-left Islamic coalition, gained dominance. Despite the diverse nature of this coalition, most of the prominent hardliners were from the Islamic left. This faction was closest in ideology to Bazargan, believing in a constitution that would uphold freedom of religion, but simultaneously giving Islamic figures a role in the government. However, beginning in 1989, center and moderate factions grew apart from this coalition, forming an alliance with right-wing conservatives formerly known as the *Hujjatis*. This group wanted Islam to play a much more important role in government, and believed that the constitution should not necessarily guarantee an individual's right to freedom of religion. "The post-Khomeini period has thus been marked by intense factional fighting between hard-liners and revisionists over the future of the republic" (Wells 1999, p. 29). Between 1989 and 1997, a reformist center-right coalition, led by President Hashemi Rafsanjani, dominated the government for the first time in the history of the republic. This right-wing coalition was opposed by the formerly dominant left-wing faction led by Mir Hosain Musavi, Karrubi, Ayatollah Ardabili, and Nabavi (Wells 1999, p. 30).

The constitutional reforms of 1989 and the defeat of the leftist faction in the *Majles*

elections confirmed the right-wing's dominance. As the right-wing government took power, those in power began asserting substantial limits on social and political activities. After the eight-year war, the regime employed the new strategy of maintaining its hold on the country by transforming Iran into a security state, substantially increasing defense spending, eliminating political dissent, and imposing Islamic laws with much greater intensity. The struggle of the reformists, which included students, women, journalists, and intellectuals, fuelled the fire of demand for reform in the run-up to the 1997 presidential election. After the election of the moderate Ayatollah Mohammad Khatami in May 1997, the conservative right-wing's ascendancy appeared to have been reversed.

### **WHO IS KHATAMI? HIS BELIEFS, HIS POLITICS, AND HOW HE FITS IN THE IRANIAN POLITICAL SPECTRUM**

Mohammad Khatami was born into a prominent clerical family in 1943. His political career began when he opposed Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi throughout the 1960s and 70s. In 1978, he left Iran to head the Islamic Center in Hamburg, Germany. After the revolution overthrew the shah from power in 1979, Khatami returned to Iran and was elected to the national assembly, taking the position of minister of culture and Islamic guidance in 1982.

He stayed in that position from 1982 until 1992 during which time he became widely considered as a moderate, easing restrictions on publications, films, art, and music. Consequently he was forced to resign after higher clergy leaders and Supreme Leader Khamenei charged him with permissiveness. After his resignation, Khatami served as director of the National Library and an advisor to President Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997).

In 1996, he announced his intention to run for president. He ran on a platform that pledged to deal with high inflation and unemployment and minimized the government's restrictions on people's liberties and personal freedoms. He was overwhelmingly elected President in 1997, having captured the support of the majority of political moderates,

intellectuals, women, and students.

Following his election, he appointed relatively liberal individuals for his cabinet, and boldly called for the advancement of women and political democratization. He also advocated improved relations with the West and the United States. Hard-line conservatives and the clergy in the military and judiciary opposed many of his proposals for reform, causing his first administration to prove rather ineffective, especially in producing economic improvements. Despite that ineffectiveness, he was reelected with more than three-fourths of the vote in 2001. His election and reelection have consistently been interpreted in Iran as reflecting people's desire for greater democracy and social freedoms.

Khatami's victory can be said to have been facilitated by a shift of loyalty of center and moderate factions from right to left, proving to be a severe blow to the Islamic conservatives whose attempts to impose a strict social code and economic liberalism produced rage on the part of the youth, women, students, and the electorate in general.

This research studies what in Iran is widely referred to as the "mojeh azadi" or "freedom movement." At the time of this writing, this "movement" is not an organized movement and is not led by a dissenting leader or organization. It is rather an *ideological* movement, a wave of consensus by the vast majority of Iranians for a greater and more secular democracy in Iran and even the removal of the clerics from power altogether and the replacement the regime with a democratic system. This movement surfaces every so often when journalists demonstrate after a fellow journalist goes to jail for printing a critical piece on the government, when the youths clash with the police on civil liberties issues, or when people held up candles on September 11, 2001, in Mohseni Square of Tehran to mourn the dead Americans, which signaled their opposition to the Iranian regime's anti-American policy. Some of these clashes have been major enough to be compared to the Chinese Tinnanmen

Square incident<sup>1</sup>, prompting the government to deploy army units to suppress the demonstrations. The term “Pink Revolution” has only been used once in a column written by Nikolas Kristof of *The New York Times*, with pink symbolizing the vibrant colors that women choose for their mandatory scarf and “maanto” (outer garment) to draw the attention that the Iranian government means to deprive them of by imposing a conservative dress code. This is the first study in which the term “Pink Revolution” is used consistently to refer, in a larger sense, to everything the people do to gain more social and democratic freedoms. Hence, it is important to note that in this research, the term “movement” does not follow the definition used by social movement theories, referring to a more organized group with an effective leadership structure. Rather, in this study, movement refers to the significant consensus for greater freedom that is effectively shaping day-to-day Iranian politics.

Following the brief history of the origins of democracy or the so-called “freedom” movement in Iran and President Khatami’s background, it is now important to begin reviewing what issues have key roles in attracting the middle-class – the largest group of supporters – to the movement, as well as how effective the middle-class believes Khatami has been in attending to those issues. The following section will present some very important problems facing Iranians today in their own words.

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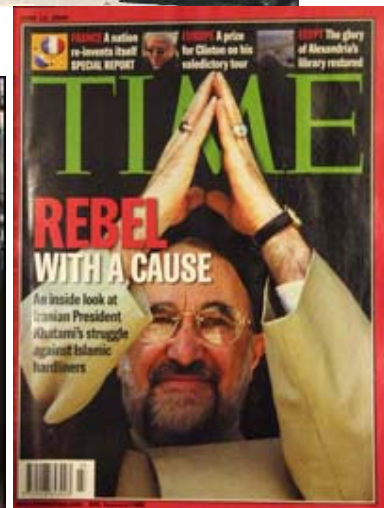
<sup>1</sup> An incident during which where the Chinese government suppressed and killed a number pro-democracy students.

# MODERN IRAN, MODERN POLITICS, MODERN MOVEMENT:

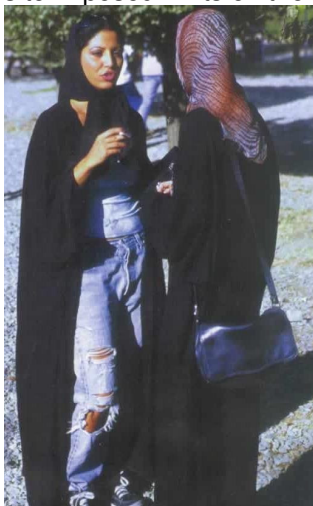
## AN IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS OF THE SOCIAL ISSUES MOST IMPORTANT TO THE IRANIAN MIDDLE-CLASS AND THEIR FIGHT FOR A DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC



Protestors to imposed limits on the press, 1999



Khatami



Fighting the dress-code



Supporters for reform and democracy, 1999

## WOMEN

One of the most important groups that was greatly affected by the Islamic revolution of 1979 and the subsequent regime – both in terms of number, as well as the gravity of impact – is women. As early as March 1979, less than two months after the revolution succeeded, the question of women's role in the new social order came under the spotlight when hundreds of thousands of women turned their celebration for International Women's Day into a demonstration against announced plans to make veiling compulsory (Higgins 1985, p. 477). However what is important to note is that the demonstrations were not so much about veiling, but represented the concern of many Iranian women about how the Islamic revolution would affect their say in various sectors of power, such as the government, the judiciary, etc. Needless to say, their concern was well justified as women's independence was in direct conflict with the ideology of those who were most successful in mobilizing the masses against the shah and subsequently gaining ascendancy – the Islamic Republican Party. At the time of the revolution, women – like others – had focused so much on overthrowing the Pahlavi regime that they had not reflected on how compatible an Islamic regime would be with their independence. “Women, it seemed, were not prepared to accept the more conservative Islamic definition of their place” (Higgins 1985, p. 477).

Immediately after the revolution, the Family Protection Law of 1967 was abrogated and Islamic law was implemented. This change reversed an array of women's rights both in the public and the private spheres, which – twenty-six years after the revolution – are still women's strongest complaint about the post-revolution and contemporary Iranian social order. It is best to classify the nature of these regressions similar to the way Janet Giele does and then proceed to address them individually (Moghaddam 1988, pp. 221-222). These realms are as follows:

*Political Expression:* What rights do women possess, formally or otherwise? Can they vote, in theory and practice? Can they own property in their own name? Can they express any dissatisfactions in their own movement?

*Work and mobility:* What conditions do women work under in Iran? If they are oppressed, what factors have caused women to maintain their strong presence in the labor force?

*Family:* Do women choose their own partners? Can they divorce them? What is the status of single women and widows? Do women have freedom of movement?

*Education:* What access do women have, how much education can they attain, and is the curriculum the same for them as for men?

*Cultural Expression:* What images of women and their “place” are widespread, and how far do these reflect and determine the reality? What can women do in their cultural field?

Lack of sufficient power in the political arena is one of the issues that women are very dissatisfied about.<sup>2</sup> Women’s participation in the revolution against the shah is acknowledged and was praised both by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and the current Supreme Religious Leader, Seyyed-Ali Khamenei. Women have retained the franchise throughout post-revolutionary Iran despite strong sentiments on the part of the hard-liners against female participation in politics. Women are also allowed to run for parliament and hold administrative roles in the public sector. However, practicing female politicians are continually intimidated by the government to not speak in support of “western” ways of advocating inter-gender equality, or such ideologies as feminism. However, some of the women recently interviewed for this research believe that reformist thinkers have the support of the educated middle class – including women – who rely upon secular views to implement change in Iran. Students name women’s magazines, including *Zan-e rooz* (*Today’s woman*), *Zanan* (*Women*), *Payam-e Hajar* (*Hajar’s Message*), *Farzaneh*, and *Zan va Hoghoogheh Zanan* (*Woman and Women’s rights*, to which secular female intellectuals contribute) as critical in transforming women’s political role in society. The goal of these magazines is to reach out to female intellectuals and feminists, as well as political and religious elites, and to

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<sup>2</sup> Confidential interview with recent Iranian female students from the University of Tehran, July 2005.

promote women's political power and female participation in the public sector by criticizing the regime for the regressions it has brought upon women in the legal, political, and economic spheres (Moghaddam 2002, pp. 1143-1147). Students write to such publications and advocate civil and constitutional change in their writings.

In a phone interview with Dr. Mohsen Farshad, a lawyer and professor at the University of Tehran, he indicated that women can indeed hold property in their name. He points out that toward the end of the eight-year war, the government was planning on expanding the conservative ideology in all realms of Iranian society and attempted to prevent women from owning property. However, this plan was confronted with strong opposition, which consequently caused the Islamists to back down.<sup>3</sup>

Another aspect of women's conditions that is causing major dissatisfaction is the set of problems facing women with regard to work and jobs. Women are participating in economic life. The reason for the significance of this participation is that women in Iran are operating under a set of formidable ideologies, characterized by patriarchal and gender-inequality beliefs that are common in all countries, but also to Islam with its emphasis on female domesticity and the difficult notions of "female danger" and "equality with men." A female employee in the public sector explains her belief of how the society has correctly linked problems of working women in Iran to the contradiction between women's political participation in the revolution on the one hand, and patriarchal demands of Islamic ideologues on the other.<sup>4</sup> Hence, women seem substantially unhappy about the problems they face at work – most of which are sexist in nature. However, several reasons explain why despite all the limits imposed on them, women have remained in the modern sector of the economy: (1) the desire of the Islamic Republic to advance and develop economically, and the imperative role women could, and do, play in accelerating development; (2) Women's need to stay at

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with Dr. Mohsen Farshad, January 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Confidential interview with an Iranian female employee in public service, July 2005.

work, as well as their resistance to institutional sexist policies of the Islamists, especially by educated women; and (3) ambiguities and even conflicts among the theocrats about the role of women in the Islamic system (Moghaddam 1988, 225-232).

One of the important factors that today's Iranian women are dissatisfied with is the position they have been placed in regarding marriage, divorce, custody, and marriage laws. Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic, personal status law has become one of the most important issues in Iranian society. Immediately after the revolution, the justice ministry was instructed to cancel all laws that were in conflict with the shari'a. The ministry followed the instruction, cancelling the Family Protection Law of 1967, which substantially weakened women's position in inter-gender and custody matters (Kar and Hoodfar 1996, p. 36). A marriage lawyer explains that despite the Islamic Republic's emphasis on family stability and marriage, women were quick to discover that these laws have only caused marriages to become more unstable.<sup>5</sup> An Iranian woman who has two children in their twenties tells the story of how she has lived with her husband unhappily for twenty-five years just out of the fear that if she had asked for divorce, the children would have automatically been given to the husband, taking them away from their mother at the time critical to the children. She even jokes about it by saying that of course there was even a bigger problem in getting a divorce as only men are allowed to confirm a divorce in post-revolution Iran.<sup>6</sup> Such marriage laws have only brought unhappiness to women's marriages today, sometimes forcing them to stay in abusive relationships, and committing infidelity in their marriages.

There are no statistics on how many women in Iran choose their own partners. However, interviews with young female students from the University of Tehran and a marriage lawyer indicate that the vast majority of Iranian women in the middle- and upper-

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<sup>5</sup> Confidential interview with female lawyer and colleague of the Iranian Nobel Peace prize winner and human rights activist, Shirin Ebadi, July 2005

<sup>6</sup> Interview with an Iranian female and artist, July 2005

class pick their own partners in modern Iran.<sup>7</sup> But as previously indicated, women can only initiate divorce. After a woman initiates a divorce, it will have to be confirmed by her husband. Shortly after the revolution, men were given the right to arbitrary divorce without even having to register them (Kar and Hoodfar 1996, p. 37). This right caused havoc in the lives of many women – especially middle-aged women who did not expect to be divorced late in their marriages. Consequently, divorced women began writing heavily in newspapers and other publications about the injustices that had been done to them by their former husbands and blamed the law for it. They also urged the government to remember one of the fundamental promises of the Iranian revolution: honorable treatment of women. In the late 1980s, enough lawmakers recognized the existence of a crisis to reverse this law and give women more rights to prevent such arbitrary divorces (Kar and Hoodfar, p. 37). Despite the limits on the rights that were given to women, the change of law in this case became an example of how women *can* make conditions better for themselves when they appear united in their desire to make change.

A trip to Iran also demonstrated an important fact about Iranian single women of today, which is their high mobility and independence. Whether they are students in high school and universities, or in the labor force, single women are free to live their lives like single men in terms of personal and marriage status laws.

One aspect of women's lives that is affected by more minor problems concerns their participation in education. Women indeed do have access to education and curriculum the same way that men do. In fact, some female students point out that there are quotas in the education system and the national examination of *concour*, the test for entering universities in Iran. However, these students cite the existence of a stricter dress code for women on college campuses, as well as their placement in the back of the classrooms, which objectifies them

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<sup>7</sup> Confidential interviews with University students and a female lawyer and colleague of the Iranian Nobel Peace prize winner and human rights activist, Shirin Ebadi, July 2005

and makes them appear as second-class citizens. Students believe that if they are to enter the work force, be taken seriously, and be judged by the quality of their work and education – as opposed to their sex – such conditions need to be provided on college campuses by eradication of sexist policies.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, there is the cultural expression part of women's lives today in Iran, and the images that are given of women in the media. In order to answer this question, most Iranians classify the media into two main groups: Those sources, such as the "hard-line" newspapers and national television broadcasting, which are run by the reactionaries and hard-liners, and those media sources such as independent movies and the press, which are run by the reformers. Those women interviewed for this study were pleased with how they are portrayed in the works produced by the second group as these reformers usually present women as strong and independent thinkers in various sectors of society, and able beings in positions of power.<sup>9</sup> However, women's main complaint is about the work of those from the first group. The hard-liners and the government consistently attempt to define women's place in the society through the media and propaganda by objectifying them and portraying them as weak. In a movie – funded by the government – that was seen for this research, it is important to note how those female characters that had covered their bodies well and came from a religious, pro-Khomeini family were given the positive roles while the characters with negative personality were coincidentally those females that were showing their hair and were making make-up.<sup>10</sup> This attempt on the part of the government to define a woman and her place in society is one of women's top complaints, believing that such policies only legitimize the society's patriarchal beliefs. This assertion as well as some of the earlier assertions about the role the Iranian government has been playing in shaping women's lives are partially

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<sup>8</sup> Confidential interview with female and male university students, July 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with female students and a retired high school English teacher, July 2005

<sup>10</sup> Kiarash, Movie directing student from Tehran, July 2005.

subjective and represent the opinions of those individuals interviewed for this study. Thus, it is important to briefly review the characteristics of these individuals in order to make a judgment about how widespread their views are in Iran today.

A total of twenty-four women were interviewed for this study, although interviews with only fifteen of them were used in this segment of this study. Since both the time and the topic of this research were limited the number of women that could be interviewed certain time period, these women were selected carefully with the goal of being able to apply their assertions to the larger population of female middle-class Iranians. For instance, even though only two lawyers were interviewed about personal status laws in Iran, they both possessed impressive legal credentials and education. Therefore, it is safe to assume that information coming from them is in fact true. The same standards were employed to interview those individuals – such as university students – that were interviewed for their opinion and non-factual information. As indicated throughout this section, individuals from different ages and professions were interviewed, but over ninety percent of them were considered as the middle-class.

The women interviewed about women's conditions for this research may not agree on which problem causes the most amount of dissatisfaction in women about the regime, but they all agree on one thing: former president Khatami has done as much as he possibly could in the Iranian political environment to advance women's rights and give them a say on their issues for the first time since the revolution. All of the women interviewed for this research acknowledge the substantial decrease in the amount of governmental religious police on the streets to force women to cover themselves well or even take them off the streets, something that had become a common government practice. Khatami has been successful in creating an atmosphere that has enabled women to fight the compulsory dress-code by choosing bright and vibrant colors for their scarves and maantos, the outer garment worn over clothes, in order

to defy the system and attract the attention Islamists do not wish women to get, hence prompting Nicholas Kristof, columnist for *The New York Times*, to refer to their defiance as the pink revolution with pink symbolizing the vibrant colors of women's clothing in Iran. Also while in office, Khatami selected more women for key positions of his cabinet than any before him since 1979. Iranian women acknowledge that it has been difficult for Khatami to give substantially more freedoms to women or transform the legal codes to attend to women's problems in the face of the Supreme Leader, Khamenei, but nevertheless he has been able to ease the enforcing of the Islamic restrictions on women's freedoms.

## YOUTH

When speaking with the Iranian middle-class of any age and sex, they unanimously agree that one of the main – if not the most important – reasons for the growth of the reformist movement has been the conditions facing youth. Hence, it is important to review some of the main aspects of the problems that Iranian youth face today and follow this segment as well with a brief review of what Khatami has done to acknowledge and attempt to solve those problems.

The first group of problems facing Iranian youth today are those concerning their most basic rights and civil liberties. After the revolution, the government focused most of its strength to survive the war with Saddam Hussein. However, almost immediately following the war, the Islamists began to enforce the Islamic law with much greater intensity. The Islamic restrictions continued to get stronger between 1988 and 1997, the election of President Khatami (Wells 1999, pp. 33-34).

When Khomeini came to power, he used his momentum to change the Iranian way of life as much as he could. One of the things he asked Iranians to do was to have more children. Consequently, the population began to grow enormously. However, Khomeini probably did not foresee that the infants of the revolution would turn into more than half of the seventy-

million Iranian population, and most importantly, that the regime could not keep such large population of youth in the dark about the rights they could have in an age of technology and satellite TVs. There are currently eighteen million Iranians between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five.

Following the war with Iraq, the government transformed *Sepah* and *Basij*, two segments of the military, to include as their duties enforcement in the streets of Iran. Soon that translated into what is most often referred to as *Comiteh* (Committee, referring to the Committee of *Sepah* of defenders [of Islam]). *Comiteh* members are men dressed in dark green uniforms that have the duty of monitoring the streets, telling women to cover themselves and their hair well, telling young men to not wear colourful jeans, and enforcing Islamic dress-code in general. On Thursday nights (weekend nights in Iran), *Sepah* is much more visible as they increase their activities and enforcers as they know that the youth would want to use the weekend to have fun. They look for young people of the opposite sex who seem to be interacting or talking together. When such couples are seen, the couple is asked what their relationship is to each other. If they are anything but married, they are arrested and taken in separate buses to the local *Comiteh* head quarters for a night of custody and no food. Parents are not informed until the next morning as an attempt to “condition” parents to prevent their children from going on dates.

Even though the details of the execution of these restrictions might appear exhaustive to read, it is important to understand what the Iranian youth are faced with everyday. A group of young men and women spoke out in an interview about their experiences with *Comiteh*. One of the men explained how he was on a date with a woman at a pizza place when *Comiteh* stormed into the restaurant and arrested any unmarried and unrelated couples. The young man was whipped that night by *Comiteh* and was released two days later after *Comiteh* had asked and received a large sum of money from his parents to release him. Another young man jokes

about the time when he was arrested with his relatively young-looking mother when the *Comiteh* members refused to believe they were mother and son. The woman's husband had to come to the *Comiteh* branch with valid marriage documents to bail out his wife and son.<sup>11</sup>

However, in a deeper sense, such conditions are more painful than humorous. The young people speak of these problems with rage, saying how preposterous they find the enforcement of Islamic laws. These young people say that by far, this is the biggest reason for their demand for a more secular and democratic government. They remind us of the fact that the Iranian youth, too, is in the twenty-first century, and that they should be able to enjoy the most basic civil liberties like citizens do in many other countries.

Another significant complaint of the Iranian youth is lack of economic opportunity in Iran today. After the revolution, the regime spent a great amount of resources to pay for the costs of war for eight years. Also after the war, it increased defense spending to a peace-time high, taking funding away from other programs such as job training and college-to-work transition programs, or even such measures as simple income tax credits. Despite progress that has been made in fighting unemployment, it still ranged between 10.7% and 12.6% in 2004/2005 (Annual Review of the Iranian Central Bank 2005, p.7). Such inefficiency in policy-making has resulted in a serious lack of economic opportunity for the large young Iranian youth.

Kiarash is a senior student from Tehran, majoring in film-making and cinematography. He took the opportunity of an interview for this research project to speak his mind about the lack of economic opportunities for the Iranian youth:

"I'm a student in my last year in school. I go to classes six days a week from morning until 5:00pm. For the rest of the day, I am either out doing work for classes, or working on my senior movie project. I only have Thursday nights for some fun, and I'm hardly able to go on a date with my girlfriend out anyways unless it's a quiet night *Comiteh*wise. But you see... I have no problem with doing the hard work. But what I have a problem with is that all of this work seems to be because of nothing. Every film-making student has what's most like an interview with a university committee before graduating. In this interview, they are not going to test you on what you know about film-making. I had the interview a few months ago, and what they asked me was questions like "What did Ayatollah Khomeini

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<sup>11</sup> An informal interview with a woman and her son from Tehran, July 2005.

emphasize most in his will” or “what part of the Quran speaks about women’s role in the society?” I’m going to be out of school in a few months, and I will have absolutely nothing to do. I have friends who have graduated with majors in business or languages. They also have nothing to do. There are basically no opportunities.”<sup>12</sup>

Kiarash’s words represent the conditions the youth are faced with today regarding economic opportunities and jobs. In such a system, the youth has consistently seen the government and their inaction as responsible for such a long-term economic recession (Ehsani 1999, p. 10).<sup>13</sup> Such a way of looking at their problems has resulted in the youth supporting the reformists and their efforts to make real changes in the system. The young supporters of the reformist movement include educated females and males across all classes. One of the very few positive things that this regime did after the revolution was to extend education to everyone in Iran. “Iran has an enormously educated population – much more than in the Arab world; 60% of university students now in Iran are women” (Friedman 2002). The young people interviewed about the youth’s as well as women’s conditions spoke in an uncompromising tone, communicating the idea that they might be able to postpone the enjoyment of basic civil liberties, but they would not stay inactive toward a system that is not providing them with opportunities to survive.

The young people believe that Khatami has been partially successful in easing the problems the youth face in Iran. While they acknowledge that Khatami has not been very successful in transforming the economic aspect of the youth’s problems, young people have been enjoying substantially more social freedoms, especially throughout the past few years, compared to the years before Khatami’s presidency. *Comiteh* and religious police have substantially decreased in number although they are still present. Young people now appear to have more freedoms and the image of young men and women having dinner together in restaurants or walking and talking in public has recently become a rather frequent scene. However, the most important twin points to note about the conditions of young people in Iran

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with Kiarash, July 2005.

<sup>13</sup> For more information on this recession, please go to the section of this research labeled “Economics.”

are that the Islamic regime has forced Islam enough on the youth that the latter know they want less of it, and that throughout his presidency Khatami gave enough freedoms to the youth that they now want more of it. These two points have greatly contributed to the creation of a large anti-religion and pro-secularism youth that are now supporting reform with full force (Friedman 2002).

### **PRESS**

Another very important aspect of Iranians' dissatisfaction with the regime concerns the lack of freedom of speech in public places and the press. The press has had an important role in advancing the causes of the democracy movement throughout the past decade and the Khatami years. This is significant due to the nature of the Islamic regime's attitude toward freedom of speech. Almost immediately after appearing ascendant following the revolution, the members of the Islamic Republican Party suppressed dissent and eliminated any form of freedom of speech in much more radical ways than the way the Shah had done before the revolution (Ehsani 1999, p.10). Until 1997, the press had little freedom to publish any articles or public opinions that would reflect people's dissatisfaction with the current regime or their desire to have good relations with the West and Israel, a state the Supreme Leader Khamenei has referred to as a cancerous tumor in the Middle East that needs to be removed (Karimian and Bahrapour 1999, pp. 38-39).

After the war with Iraq, Hashemi Rafsanjani promised that, if elected as president, he would initiate an era of reconstruction to rebuild infrastructure in Iran. However, shortly after getting elected, he focused his energy on improving his personal life, obtaining one of the Shah's mansions for himself and giving large no-bid government contracts to his sons (Milani 1993, pp. 96-97). It was in this context of government corruption that intellectual journals began appearing. The ones with no links to the regime began presenting works in poetry, literature, philosophy and the social sciences that addressed political issues. These intellectual

thinkers, or *degar-andishan*, were speaking after a long period of silence, expressing their unhappiness with the regime. Throughout these years, the government was still showing a fair degree of tolerance toward such practices by the press. *Adineh* (Friday) was created and often denounced poverty in Iran in a Marxist tone and praised Cuba and its regime. An important service that *Adineh* provided was to offer a forum for secular intellectuals to publish their writings for the first time since 1979. Soon after *Adineh*, more secular periodicals appeared that carried covert political messages (Karimian and Bahrapour 1999, pp. 38-39). These papers included *Donyaye Sokhan* (Word's World), *Kelk* (Pen), *Takapu* (Quest) and *Jame'ehye Salem* (Healthy Society), just to name a few. Soon these newspapers become large in numbers, transforming the previously-controlled press into independent publishers that provided forums for intellectuals, and soon the reformers, to speak their mind about Iranian politics.

As these publications emerged, the government under Rafsanjani tightened its control over newspapers (Karimian and Bahrapour 1999, pp. 38-39). The government started to arrest publishers and intellectual contributors, or in some cases to close down the newspapers. This practice has continued, although weakened throughout Khatami's presidential terms. Today in Iran, the press is still under great scrutiny of the *vali-e faqih* (Supreme Leader Khamenei) and government loyalists. As soon as a reformist newspaper emerges and publishes a few articles on corruption and despotism in the Iranian regime, the government closes down the paper. Then weeks later, the same paper with the same staff appears under a different name publishing the same kind of political articles (Karimian and Bahrapour 1999, pp. 38-39).

Another limitation that has been put by the government on Iranians concerns the use of Satellite TVs. Television is owned by the state in Iran. Needless to say, leaders use television as a place to spread their propaganda and ideology. For instance, the news reporters never question any of the government's actions and only praise the Supreme Leader and his

fanatical religious practices. Such control over TV has caused Satellite TVs to become extremely popular all across Iran.<sup>14</sup> Satellite technology includes a dish, which is usually placed on the roof, and a receiver that would connect to the TV and facilitate the showing of images. Through Satellite TVs, Iranians are able to watch up to a thousand TV channels of any country. However, such a product is in direct conflict with the government's policy to keep people in the dark about what is going on in the free world. Hence, the government has made satellite TVs illegal and has done substantial work to punish those who do not abide by the law. A young man shared the way in which the government goes about confiscating Satellites.<sup>15</sup> The government first selects an area to inspect, sending helicopters over the houses of the region and identifying houses with satellite dishes on their roofs. Agents on the ground are informed about the locations of the houses and are instructed to "move in." Agents knock on the doors, and when admitted, they occupy the house. They then proceed to take not only the receiver and satellite dish, but all electronics owned by the household, such as CD and DVD players, camcorders, and sometimes even TVs. Confiscated items are sold at auction and funds earned are taken by the regime.

VOA is another reason why the regime has every reason to prevent citizens from having access to satellite TVs. Voice of America is a multimedia international broadcasting service funded by the U.S. government through the Broadcasting Board of Governors. The Persian section of VOA consists of multiple programs, such as *Negahi Faratar* (Looking Ahead) and *Mizeh gerdi ba shoma* (Roundtable with You), which are forums of discussion among Persian intellectuals from around the world discussing people's problems under the Islamic regime and ways in which a regime change could occur. It is on VOA that the Iranian youth watch the American State of the Union address every year. There are no available ratings on the exact percentage of the population that watch VOA regularly, but about 80% of

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<sup>14</sup> Confidential interview with an Iranian electrician, July 2005.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with a young man (26 from Tehran, computer science engineer with a degree from Microsoft), July 2005.

those satellite owners who were interviewed for this research project (which were most of the interviews) watched VOA news every night.

Possibly one of the most important factors that individuals from various ages and genders agree on, and which causes them to support the replacement of the regime with a secular one, is the lack of freedom of speech in general. Individuals in Iran do not enjoy the smallest freedom to dissent from any of the Iranian regime's policies in any area. As soon as someone is caught speaking with dissatisfaction about the regime, they are arrested and taken into custody. Such a lack of basic freedoms has caused Iranians to live double lives in the sense that inside their homes, they speak their minds freely about the regime and women wear what they choose, while in the streets, the same individuals appear to be loyal to the regime and the outcome of the revolution.

It is regrettable to learn that Khatami did not have much success in giving the press more freedoms. A few Tehran University students point to the change in the press legislation in 1999 as the main reason for Khatami's lack of ability. In June 1999, Iran's parliamentary conservatives proposed that they would clamp down even further on the press.<sup>16</sup> While ignoring constitutional clauses about press freedom, this legislation instituted a stricter degree of legal censorship by placing the press under the jurisdiction of not the Press Court, but the Revolutionary Court. After the legislation passed, it substantially decreased Khatami's ability to defend press freedoms. However, Khatami seems to have been more successful in not enforcing the satellite regulations. It took a short trip to the roof of a building in the heart of Tehran to observe the effect of lighter restrictions: of the roofs of nineteen visible neighboring buildings, seventeen had at least one satellite dish, and some had three to four different dishes set to different directions. In fact satellites have become so common that an electrician finds it safe to mention their expertise in satellite technology to the customers they have met moments

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with Tehran University students, July 2005.

before. Hence, Khatami seems to have been effective in helping to expose Iranians to the outside and free world through such means of communication.

## **ECONOMICS**

The economy by far seems to be the most common problem shared among people of various ages and sexes in the middle class. Throughout the past two decades, the Iranian economy has had to adjust to a revolution, an eight-year war with Iraq, the collapse of oil revenues, economic isolation, and economic sanctions imposed by the West and the United States. Consequently, Iran experienced a reversal of its gains in per capita income of the 1970s (Salehi-Isfahani). Those Iranians interviewed for this research who grew up before the revolution and at a time of consistently increasing incomes describe the past twenty years as an economic nightmare. The same anger is shared among those young people who have only heard of Iranian economic prosperity from their parents. These young people now face one of the harshest economic settings Iran has ever seen in its history: one in four Iranian youth who are looking for jobs cannot find jobs (Annual Review of the Iranian Central Bank 2005, p.7).

Dr. Farshad, a prominent law professor at the University of Tehran with a law degree from the Sorbonne, and a current member of the underground National Front, reflects on some of the economic events that have been taking place since the end of the war with Iraq. In 1989, Farshad indicates, President Rafsanjani acknowledged the economic problems that Iran was facing due to war. This promoted Rafsanjani to launch a pro-market reform program that had widespread support in Iran, largely due to the fact that it did not involve international financial institutions, such as the IMF and the World Bank, that usually champion the cause of promoting free markets in less developed countries. In addition, Iran's foreign debt was relatively too low to require visits from those international institutions. In fact, when the IMF and the World Bank made brief visits in 1992-1993 in support of Iranian reforms, they proved

a liability for reformers.<sup>17</sup> The biggest reason for Iran's economic problems seems to be rooted in the state's inability to underwrite the losses of a large portion of Iranian enterprises while still being able to afford to pay for social programs that have been left unattended since the revolution (Annual Review of the Iranian Central Bank 2005, p.7).

Creating job opportunities to reduce the high unemployment rate (ranging between 10.7%-12.6%) was the main challenge facing the Iranian government in 2004-2005 (Annual Review of the Iranian Central Bank 2005, p.5). "Excess supply of labor-force, supply-side structural bottlenecks, insufficient investment in job creating activities and inflexibility of relevant laws and regulations were problems prevailing in the labor market (Annual Review of the Iranian Central Bank 2005, p.7)."

Not all of Iran's economic problems come from elements that have been out of the government's control. After the revolution, the government began confiscation of individuals' properties, and nearly every major bank, industrial and service institution came under government control. These include 2000 firms and 4000 related enterprises (Ladier-Fouladi 2002, pp. 361-370). The budget for the 404 largest public firms amounted to 38.3 percent of the GDP, indicating the significance of the value of these firms (Ladier-Fouladi 2002, pp. 361-370). This fact represents a significant damage to the public resources since these firms regularly lose money despite subsidies. Rafsanjani came to office only to reduce subsidies to even lower levels, shifting the firms' losses to the public budget and the banks.

A large portion of the properties confiscated by the regime for political reasons immediately after the revolution came under the control of *Bonyad-e Mostazafan* (The Foundation for the Inherited), an institution that is only accountable to the Supreme Leader and not the president and government. Although the extent of *Bonyad's* ownership is unknown, several professors interviewed consider it large enough to call it a rival government.

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<sup>17</sup> Interview with Dr. Farshad, July 2005.

*Bonyad* currently owns 400 companies in all sectors of economy with annual sales of 3.5 billion dollars.<sup>18</sup> Twenty years after the revolution, a large portion of the population is still suffering from the lack of resources caused by *Bonyad's* confiscations, and for many this is a major factor in supporting the reformist movement, hoping that they will eventually get their properties back, or at least have a government with stronger social programs. However there is a larger problem with *Bonyad's* confiscations and that is the poor management skills of the leaders of the institution. Most of those who make key economic and policy decisions for the firms now in *Bonyad's* control are appointed to head the firms not because of their credentials in economics and business, but rather for their Islamic connections to the regime, revolutionary leaders, and the Supreme Leader. Hence most of the economic decisions by the firm leaders are made poorly, resulting in less than optimal levels of efficiency and consequently hurting people and their economic interests.

President Khatami's election in 1997 was partially a response to the economic needs and desperation of the new generation of Iranians and the disappointment of their elders. Despite Khatami's progress in other areas such as establishing a "civil society" or the rule of law, many Iranians believe he has been struggling to create jobs and boost Iran's economy. It is estimated that each year, 800,000 new workers enter Iran's labor market with no one to invest sufficiently to employ these job-seekers (Salehi-Isfihani 1999, pp. 34-37). In the 1980s, he might have been able to rely on providing government employment, but with the collapse of central planning in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and East Asian countries' access to market-led growth, that option was out of the question for Khatami.

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<sup>18</sup> Interview with Dr. Farshad, Law Professor at the University of Tehran and a National Front member

## **DR. AHMADINEJAD, AND THE FUTURE OF THE REPUBLIC**

### **HOW HIS VICTORY FITS INTO THE REFORMIST MOVEMENT AND PEOPLE'S FIGHT FOR REFORM AND DEMOCRACY**



Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad waves after speaking during the 60th session of the General Assembly Saturday, Sept. 17, 2005 at the United Nations in New York.

On June 24, 2005, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected as Iran's president in a landslide victory after winning over sixty percent of the votes. A few days before the election, Rafsanjani, Ahmadinejad's chief rival, had said that the race was "very close" but believed that he was slightly ahead of Ahmadinejad (Esfandiari). Ahmadinejad is Iran's first non-cleric president ever elected by the popular vote. He took public office in August 2005. As soon as Ahmadinejad was elected president, political analysts from around the world attempted to make sense of his election and how it would fit into the progress of the democracy movement in Iran. Having taken office a month before the writing of this study, it is rather difficult to understand and give fully accurate answers to such questions at this time. However there are still several elements that will help us make sense of his election, and most importantly, prevent ourselves from accepting the interpretation that Ahmadinejad's election contradicts the idea of people's unhappiness with the Islamic regime as a whole. However, before analyzing those factors, it is important to briefly review Ahmadinejad's background and credentials.

Dr. Ahmadinejad was born in Garmsar, near Tehran, to a blacksmith. He holds a PhD in traffic and transport from Tehran's University of Science and Industry, where he was a lecturer. Despite allegations that Ahmadinejad was one of the captors of the 52 American hostages in the U.S. embassy months after the revolution, he has denied involvement (*New York Times*, July 31, 2005). Considering that those such as Ahmadinejad with close ties with the hard-liners are proud of the hostage-taking and would not have minded taking part in the operation, his denial of involvement would most likely be accurate. He joined the Revolutionary Guards voluntarily following the revolution, and served in operations during the Iran-Iraq war between 1980-1988. Throughout his campaign for presidency, most analysts in the West focused on his socially conservative background and ties to the Supreme Leader without making the effort to analyze his credentials, philosophy and message more thoroughly.

As in every other aspect of Iranian politics, Ahmadinejad's election is no simple matter to be understood solely by relying on surface and propagandistic information offered by the media and pundits. This segment of the study aims at giving a more in-depth explanation for his election and, most importantly, fitting his presidency into the reformist movement in its entirety since 1953.

The first and foremost reason for Ahmadinejad's victory is rooted in his campaign message and "class politics" in Iran. Class is a very important issue in Iranian politics. However, while sometimes it comes to light during elections, other times it is hidden as other issues take priorities. Shortly before President Khatami's election, a series of political events, such as the closing of the popular reformist publication of *Salam* and students' week-long demonstrations at the University of Tehran, had brought social issues such as freedom of speech to the surface. Therefore class and economic equality were simply hidden under social issues during the Khatami years. Khatami ran for the presidency promising greater social freedoms. His message gained him momentum and resulted in his victory.

However, class resurfaced during the 2005 election. Iranians have recently been suffering from major economic problems and a lack of jobs. Those born shortly after the revolution are now in their mid-twenties, facing a serious urgency to find jobs. In this situation, the freedoms they are looking for have taken a back-seat for the time being as survival has gotten more important. A middle-aged woman from a poor background who was interviewed for this study reflected on the election. After she admitted that she voted for Ahmadinejad, she was asked why she would vote for someone with close ties to radical Islamists and those who have consistently been depriving people and especially women of their most basic civil and social liberties. She responded, "But why would I care about my social freedoms if I can't put a loaf of bread on the table every night for my children... what I

need *now* is not the freedom of speech... it's financial help, a job to survive.”<sup>19</sup> In such an environment with a need for economic well-being, Ahmadinejad appeared with a two-word message the middle and lower class were waiting for: Social Justice. Ahmadinejad is accurately nick-named “Man of the people.” He has a populist streak, calling his campaign website *Mardomyar* (people’s friend). He has been living a simple life in the poor south-side of Tehran all throughout his time as the mayor of Tehran, and has stayed in his residence after getting elected president. Throughout his campaign, he ran on the promise to champion economic justice, provide for the poor, and expand the middle class by following liberal economic policies and closing the gap between the classes. Such a philosophy was precisely what the economically-desperate middle and lower class Iranians were looking for. Iranians understand that reform and the establishment of a true democracy in Iran is a long-term process, and that they need to find short-term solutions for their immediate problems. It seems as if for the short-run, Iranians have learned to juggle their needs from election to election since they know that those candidates that would be capable of solving *all* of people’s problems never get approved by the Guardian Council and the Supreme Leader to run for presidency, leaving people with poor candidate choices.

One of the main factors for Ahmadinejad’s election was an on-going boycott of the elections by a large portion of the voting population, many of whom had voted for Khatami in previous elections. Since longer than a year before the election, Iranian intellectuals, most of whom were unhappy with what the government had done to make Khatami powerless in his fights for reform, began to urge the pro-democracy voters to not vote in the 2005 election. The idea was discussed by professors and politicians from around the world on VOA news as Iranians watched and became more intrigued by the idea. By the eve of the election, there were hundreds of people calling Persian TV programs abroad, saying that they were going to

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<sup>19</sup> Interview with an Iranian butler, July of 2005.

boycott the election, and that whoever they spoke with from the reformist voters were going to boycott the election as well. Unfortunately, the massive boycott that took place on the election day was not acknowledged well by the media and the West, which was precisely why the boycott was to take place. Instead, the boycott appeared to have a detrimental effect on reform. While a big portion of the widely-educated middle-class boycotted the election to continue their fight for social freedoms, the lower-class could not afford the boycott. They thought of voting for Ahmadinejad as a fast solution to their immediate economic problems. Hence the boycott only turned out to be beneficial for Ahmadinejad as those who didn't vote were those who would have been most likely to vote for a reformist candidate named Mostafa Moin. Moin was initially among the 1,000 candidates that were disqualified from running by the Islamic Guardian Council. But when the initial decision to bar him from elections sparked calls by students to boycott, Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, intervened, allowing Moin to run (Harrison 2005). Moin had been a consistent proponent of democratic social reforms who decided to run for elections "to defend the rights of the silent majority" (*New York Times*, November 3, 2005).

Another very important – if not arguably the most important – factor that helped Ahmadinejad get elected was the policies of the Bush administration and Iran's nuclear confrontation with the West. The relationship between America and Iran came under security in Iranian politics after President Bush labeled Iran as part of an "Axis of Evil," along with North Korea and pre-war Iraq. This act had some serious negative effects on the health of the reformist movement. By labeling Iran as such, the Bush administration triggered strong anti-American feelings among Iranians. At a time when the reformers were admiring the West and America as an embodiment of freedom and democracy, the insensitive rhetoric of the Bush administration spoiled many of the reformers' efforts while simultaneously creating a sense of patriotic nationalism that saved the hardliners in Iran. On foreign policy, Ahmadinejad ran as

a patriotic nationalist with deep devotion to Iran's independence, defending his country's right to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes. Shortly before the election on the topic of Iran's nuclear program, he posted on his website, "They will not allow us to progress easily but we should not surrender to their will" (Aljazeera 2005). On America's policies toward Iran after the revolution, he commented "America's unilateral move to sever ties with the Islamic Republic was aimed at destroying the Islamic revolution... America was free to sever its ties with Iran, but it remains Iran's decision to re-establish relations with America" (Aljazeera 2005). By speaking in harsh rhetoric and with disrespect toward Iran, hard-liners in the West wasted a large portion of the progress that was made during the Khatami years by the reformers. As asserted earlier, in the recent election, a large portion of the middle-class which support reform and would most likely have voted for Moin if they had voted boycotted the elections. However, many of those middle-class voters who did vote selected a patriotic hard-liner and an ardent nationalist to stand up to the West, which is precisely what they did in 1951 when they fought for Mosaddeq to stop British influence in their internal affairs. Therefore, those middle and lower-class voters that went to the polls were predominantly those who voted for Ahmadinejad, while others who supported democratic reform and would have voted for Moin boycotted the elections.

Ahmadinejad upheld his promise of standing up to the West when on Saturday, September 18, 2005, he denied that Iran had any intention of producing nuclear weapons in a fiery speech to the General Assembly at the United Nations and lashed out at the United States for its insistence on keeping the production of its nuclear weapons while trying to halt Iran's efforts to build a peaceful energy program.

## THE FUTURE OF THE REPUBLIC

The desire for a democratic, strong and autonomous Iran has been a strong desire of the majority in Iran since the coup d'état of 1953.<sup>20</sup> As people fought to overthrow the Shah, Islamists gained ascendancy due to no immediate better alternative. However, after Khomeini's death in 1989, the regime employed harsh social policies, causing the beginning of what is currently widespread inter-class demand for sweeping changes in Iran's political system.<sup>21</sup> In 1997, people translated their discontent into votes, electing the reformist President Khatami to office. It is most likely that many of the more educated voters even hoped for him to turn out to be Iran's Gorbachev, causing the regime to collapse from inside by pushing for radical reform policies. However, the classification of Iran as part of an axis of evil and rumors spread about American intervention in Iran's nuclear program opened the wounds of the scars Iran was carrying since 1953 when foreign interests orchestrated a coup inside Iran to overthrow a nationalist leader and advance their own interests. Hence, the harsh rhetoric of the West delayed the progress of the reform movement as Iranians chose to deal with a more immediate issue: the intervention of the West in their nuclear program. When the reform movement will gain momentum is unclear as there are two hard-line administrations, one in American and another in Iran, on a collision course over nuclear proliferation. A military confrontation is even very likely in the near future. However, what can be concluded from the interviews conducted with the Iranian middle class is that the people of Iran are certainly not satisfied with the fundamentals of the Islamic Republic, and consistently do what they can to fight for what they have always wanted: A secular, independent, and strong republic.

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<sup>20</sup> Interview with Dr. Mohsen Farshad, July of 2005.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Parvin Sedaei, English teacher in Tehran, July of 2005.

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