

Reform Versus Radicalism in the Islamic Republic

By David Menashri

THE 1979 ISLAMIC REVOLUTION MARKED A MAJOR TURNING POINT in modern Iran's history that has had far-reaching consequences both within the country and beyond. The aim of the revolution was not simply to replace the Shah's monarchical government with a new, republican system, but to radically restructure the Iranian state and society through the implementation of a new Islamic doctrine. To many Iranians, as well as scores of others throughout the Middle East and elsewhere, the Islamic revolution embodied a promise—and an expectation—of a brighter future with greater prosperity and more liberty.

In the three decades since the revolution, the Islamic Republic of Iran has demonstrated an impressive measure of political resilience and continuity. However, the popular hopes and expectations of the revolutionary era have remained, thus far, largely unsatisfied. Nowadays, the Iranian regime is struggling to find viable ways to cope with a seemingly ever-expanding array of governance challenges—from intensifying power struggles between competing factions within the country's ruling elites to crippling social and economic malaise, a hostile regional security environment, and rising popular discontent at home. Needless to say, many of these challenges are products of the Islamic regime's own making.

In response to these challenges, Iranian politics in the contemporary era have tended to swing between two poles—reform and radicalism. These are best illustrated by the distinctive visions of the Iranian polity's two main camps, which are perhaps best expressed by their most visible leaders—namely, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad,

who represents the radical camp, and former president Mohammad Khatami and presidential aspirant Mir Hossein Mousavi on the other hand, representing the reform movement. Both of these trends stem from the experience and ideals of the Islamic revolution, and both lay claim to the revolution's future. This struggle between reformism and radicalism has gone through several phases since the founding of the Islamic Republic. While Khatami's presidency (1997-2005) marked a period of greater openness and reform within Iran and inspired hopes for continued change, Ahmadinejad's election in 2005 inaugurated a reversal of this process. Ahmadinejad's re-election in June 2009 and the regime's crackdown on the massive protests that ensued reveal that the antagonism between these two camps has reached a new, formative stage. To understand the future of the Islamic revolution within Iran, it is necessary to begin with the past of this reform-radicalism antagonism.

A Framework for Revolutionary Politics

IRAN'S 1979 ISLAMIC REVOLUTION THOROUGHLY UP-ENDED MANY CONVENTIONAL notions about political life and revolution in the modern Muslim world. It produced a new pattern for assuming power, a new political leadership and form of government in the modern Middle East, and a new ideology rooted in a utopian vision of an ideal Islamic society. This new society was (or was supposed to become) superior to all other nations around the world.

As a general rule, the Middle East's many coups from the mid-20th century onward were executed by small groups led by military officers seeking popular support for themselves and their new ideas—but only after they had successfully seized power. Iran's Islamic Revolution was a striking exception to this rule. It was led primarily by Shiite religious scholars who enjoyed popular support not as a consequence of, but as a condition and reason for, their seizing power. Moreover, the Iranian revolution's innovative doctrines were based not on a new ideology, but essentially on Islam, whose glorious heritage and ideology was intimately familiar to ordinary Iranians.

Given these differences between the Islamic revolution and other 20th century coups, it nevertheless echoed earlier Iranian opposition movements in important ways. Three previous popular Iranian uprisings are especially noteworthy: 1) the Tobacco Movement of 1891-92, which rallied against the tobacco concession and the capitulation system in general, ultimately forcing the shah to revoke the concession; 2) the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, which demanded that the shah approve a constitution limiting his power; and 3) the national movement headed by

Mohammad Mosaddeq (1951-1953), which successfully forced Mohammad Reza Shah into temporary exile.

The Islamic revolution shared certain characteristics with all of these movements. For instance, they all began as reactions to the reigning shah's policies, which were injurious to various socioeconomic groups and eventually caused diverse forces to agglomerate and rally around a common agenda. In all but Mosaddeq's nationalist movement, Shiite clerics were the driving force—a fact that demonstrated the clergy's ability to mobilize popular support long before the Islamic revolution. Mass support played a decisive role in each movement. Mounting social and economic tension, intensified autocratic rule, growing secularization, and extensive Western influence were instrumental in garnering opposition in each case.

Finally, notwithstanding their differences, the various groups in each movement rallied around a powerful, unifying symbol: tobacco (and the capitulation system) in the late 19th century; constitutionalism in the early 20th century; oil, nationalization of oil or nationalism in the early 1950s; and Islam in the late 1970s. All four movements were successful in attaining their initial goals, but whereas these earlier popular eruptions had limited objectives (i.e., changing one major item on the government's agenda), the Islamic revolution's ambitions were wide-sweeping and much more radical. The revolution, in fact, did not aim merely at achieving a change of government, but rather sought to completely transform all spheres of Iranian life along Islamic lines.

After 1979, the first 31 years of clerical rule were characterized by an attempt to attain two interrelated goals: 1) to consolidate, institutionalize and, as much as possible, perpetuate clerical rule, and 2) to implement Ayatollah Khomeini's ideology and the new doctrine of Islamic government in all spheres of Iranian life. The revolutionary generation believed wholeheartedly that Islamic government would alleviate the socioeconomic malaise that Iran had succumbed to, which would in turn eventually help to further consolidate and legitimize clerical rule.

While the theocratic regime has been generally successful in enhancing its power and maintaining its rule since the revolution, it has proved less effective in utilizing its revolutionary dogma to address the fundamental social and economic problems that were the initial root cause of the revolution.

Once it assumed power, the Shiite Islamist movement faced the complex demands of governing a country, and the new regime that it established has struggled to adapt itself to these new realities ever since. Obligated to manage rather than simply theorize about state affairs, the Iranian government has been forced to compromise its founding revolutionary ideology—not out of a newfound moderation, but as a natural response to the exigencies of political rule. As the leader of an opposition movement, Ayatollah Khomeini could rally crowds by calling for a “new Iran” modeled on a utopian Islamic

design. But once he commanded the nation, Iran's first supreme jurist soon understood that he could not rule by revolutionary slogans alone. Khomeini's descendants—including both the Islamic Republic's founding generation as well as the so-called "children of the revolution"—have become ever more aware of these facts of political life. As a consequence, many of them embraced policies in the pursuit of state interests (largely defined) that represent a divergence, if not a retreat, from the original Islamic principles that inspired the revolution.

Khomeini himself argued that the state had the authority "to destroy a mosque" or suspend the exercise of the "five pillars of the faith" if the larger interests of the state (*selah-e keshvar*) so required.¹ Subsequently, the authority to determine the "state's interest"—a phrase found in the name of one of the Islamic Republic's key institutions, the *shura-ye tashkhis-e maslahat*, roughly defined as the Discretionary or Expediency Council—was entrusted to a mixed assembly composed of theologians and government officials. This step deprived the cleric-dominated Council of Guardians of its exclusive right to approve legislation. As such, ever since the founding of the Islamic Republic, and with very few exceptions, whenever ideological convictions clashed with the interests of the state, political interests took precedence over religious dogma. This proved the case in both Iran's foreign relations as well as its domestic politics.

Most importantly, the well-being of ordinary Iranians has not improved significantly under the Islamic regime, while at the same time the regime has clamped down on basic freedoms and extended its autocratic powers. Naturally, this led to growing disillusionment and discontent with the revolution and the regime, which in turn gave rise to both popular cries for reform and a broad-based opposition movement. Today, the people's discontent is the main challenge to the Islamic regime's survival.

Among the Islamic Republic's various political factions, there is a wide array of opinion about how to deal with the regime's legitimacy crisis, as well as how to address specific areas of national policy. The two most important political trends competing for ascendancy may be defined generally as "reformists" or "pragmatists" on the one hand, and "conservatives," "radicals" or "principlists" (*osulgarayan*) on the other. Both of these camps are actively maneuvering to set Iranian policy. While both trends emerged from the revolution and are intimately connected with the Islamic regime, the differences between them are nevertheless substantial, especially today.²

Since the June 2009 presidential elections, the reformists have become most commonly identified with the Green Movement—the popular, grass-roots social movement that took shape during the mass protests against Ahmadinejad's re-election. The reformist movement contains a spectrum of intellectual trends and political

agendas ranging from those who seek to gradually emend and modernize Iran's governmental institutions to those who hope to thoroughly overhaul the regime.

The conservatives, or "principlists," currently consist of at least three main streams. All of these streams support the Islamic regime, but they remain bitterly divided regarding the future direction of the state's policies. The first stream, the "traditional conservatives," is identified with Speaker of the Majles Ali Larijani, the former speaker Gholam Ali Hadad Adl, and the Supreme Leader's foreign policy advisor, Ali Akbar Velayati. They are loyal to Supreme Leader Khamenei personally and to the Khomeinist doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the jurist); they oppose Ahmadinejad's provocative theatrics and do not seek direct confrontation with the West. "Pragmatic conservatives," such as former commander of the *Sepah-e Pasdaran* (Revolutionary Guards) Mohsen Rezai and former Tehran Mayor Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, support privatization of Iran's state-centric economy—a move that would open up the Iranian financial system to the global marketplace. A third stream, the "radicals," align themselves with President Ahmadinejad and his clerical supporters such as Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi and Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati. These men fervently oppose the Western-dominated global order and view themselves as faithful executors and guardians of Ayatollah Khomeini's ideology. For this reason they are often referred to as the "neo-conservatives." Importantly, however, even these divisions within the conservative camp are fluid and constantly changing.

Although both the reformist and conservative camps began as followers of Imam Khomeini's revolutionary doctrine, they parted ways over the contemporary meaning of that teaching, and their differences today are deep. While reformists uphold some basic principles of political freedom, economic openness, and social change, and advocate improved ties with the non-Muslim world, the conservatives very often emphasize the importance of strict adherence to revolutionary dogma in formulating national policy. There is a vigorous and complex debate among these groups on such pivotal questions as the relationship between religion and state, ideology versus national interest, isolationism versus globalization, and which attitude to adopt vis-à-vis the outside world. In important ways, these clashes reflect a more fundamental contest between the revolutionary ideals of 1979 and a newer spirit of reform, a contest between institutions of power and an emerging Iranian civil society, between the old guard and the new generation now known as "the children of the revolution."

An interesting manifestation of the widening split in Iranian politics is found in a seminal article that appeared in the magazine *Jamee* (or *Society*, a reformist publication banned shortly after the article's publication). In response to an appeal by Hojjat al-Islam Mohammad Javad Hojjati-Kermani, who had exhorted Iran's youth not to exceed the boundaries of true Islam, one student passionately queried the cleric: How many Islams are there, and who decides what the true Islam is? The

main question for Iranian society, the student continued, was not the youth's penchant for crossing certain unspecified religious "red lines," but how to deal with the fact that "on a one way street" leading to reform, a certain group—i.e., the conservatives—were "driving against the flow of traffic" and were restricting the thought (*andisheh*) of the entire society within a "narrow and dark alley."³

The Futile Hope of Reform

THE CONFLICTING POSITIONS AMONG IRAN'S CURRENT RULING ELITE, AND between elements of the founding generation and the children of the revolution, are perhaps best exemplified by the distinctly different worldviews and political agendas of the country's last two presidents—Khatami and Ahmadinejad. More recently, in the turmoil that engulfed the country following the 2009 elections, this constitutional clash came to the fore in the political struggle that erupted between the Ahmadinejad-Khamenei camp, which was backed by the Revolutionary Guards, and the reformist Green Movement led by former prime minister Mir Hossein Mousavi and backed by influential politicians like Khatami and Karroubi, among others.

Khatami's election in 1997 marked the culmination of what might be described broadly as a growing trend toward pragmatism within Iranian society. A liberal by Iranian standards, Khatami represented a new societal desire for openness, and he advocated for greater political and social freedoms, the relaxation of cultural norms, economic rehabilitation and, in general, the adoption of a more practical attitude toward the outside world. Once elected president, Khatami's pragmatic record and overtures to the West heightened expectations at home and also abroad that a dramatic policy change was in the works. His election was widely perceived as a watershed event that would bring about even greater change within the Iranian polity (albeit change that would occur within the framework of the Islamic revolutionary system).

Such hopes were soon frustrated, however. While Khatami's personal status as an establishment outsider abetted his political rise, his lack of an independent power base within the regime structure posed serious obstacles to his reform efforts. The main stumbling block to Khatami's effectiveness was the fact that the head of state in Iran is the supreme leader (*rahbar*), Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and not the president. Khamenei and his office limited the president's power considerably, since the supreme leader did not share many of Khatami's convictions and, more often than not, identified with his political rivals. In addition to the supreme leader, Khatami also had to reckon with other powerful institutions that were not inclined to reform. These included governmental institutions such as the judiciary, the Council of Guardians, the Council

of Experts and the Revolutionary Guards, as well as a number of revolutionary foundations and semi-governmental bodies (for example, the Foundation of the Dispossessed and Self-Sacrificers and the Foundation of the Martyrs). All of these institutions, as a matter of course, worked to slow down the president's reform initiatives, or blocked them altogether. In fact, in the formulation of national policy, and in all significant contests of power that occurred following Khatami's assumption of office, the hard-liners remained triumphant.

Significantly, Khatami's reformist agenda did not aim for the creation of a new Iranian regime but instead represented a fresh approach within the system established in 1979. It was an attempt to fulfill yet unrealized revolutionary aspirations in a somewhat modified fashion. It amounted to a call to policy reform, not regime change—to save the revolution, not to abandon its Islamist dogma altogether. As a consequence of this, the Khatami presidency inaugurated a genuine *Kulturkampf* within the Iranian polity between two competing visions of the Islamic revolution, between two different sides who have since vigorously fought to determine the future of the country.

While it was unable to affect official policy, the emergence of the reform camp in the 1990s did transform the nature of political participation and significantly alter the political landscape. Symbols that were hitherto sacred lost their sanctity and fundamental taboos were broken. Compared with the realities before the revolution, and relative to most neighboring countries, Iranian society under Khatami's presidency practiced an impressive measure of free expression. Public discourse regularly questioned the erratic application and sometimes even the very principle of *velayat-e faqih*, and people openly discussed the advantages of renewing ties with the U.S.

The magnitude of change during the Khatami era was perhaps best reflected in Iran's intellectual life and press. At no time previously had so many newspapers and journals enjoyed such a degree of freedom and expressed such a diversity of viewpoints with such fervor and sense of mission. A new generation of investigative journalists emerged; brave, penetrating and determined, they questioned basic revolutionary axioms and criticized leading revolutionary figures. The title of a 1999 article by Mohsen Kadivar, "The Basic Problem of Iran is Velayat-e Faqih," captured this newly emerging spirit. Meanwhile, new books were published containing harsh criticism of the Islamic Republic's ideological tenets and describing, in accurate detail, the actual realities in the country. Among the most important of these books were those written by the so-called "jailbirds" (several reformist intellectuals who were imprisoned during the 1990s): Abdollah Nouri's *Showkaran Eslah (Hemlock for Advocates of Reform)*, or Akbar Ganji's "*Talaqqi-ye Fashisti az Din va Hokumat*" (*The Fascist Interpretation of Religion and Government*).⁴

This new reformist discourse was not simply critical of the regime, but constructive

and expressive of new, post-revolutionary ways of thinking about the inter-relationship of religion and state and, more specifically, about the relationship between Islam and democracy. Voices called frequently for greater freedom (*azadi*), openness, and respect for civil rights. Thinkers such as Professor Abdul-Karim Soroush, Hojjat al-Islam Mohsen Kadivar and Hojjat al-Islam Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari soon emerged as the most eloquent spokesmen for these viewpoints. No less important, leading Shiite scholars—most prominent among them being Ayatollah Hosein Ali Montazeri, a man who Khomeini himself initially designated as his successor—added their voices and their authority to this debate.

The open criticism of the regime culminated with the student riots of July 1999. The protestors lamented the lack of freedoms under the Islamic Republic, and their sloganeering directly challenged the authority of the supreme leader, the righteousness of the conservative elite and even the very concept of *velayat-e faqih*. Some of their slogans were particularly revealing: “Khamenei be ashamed (*hayya kon*), abandon the leadership! (*raha kon*).” Heshmatollah Tabarzadi, one of the leaders of the Islamic Union of University Students and Graduates, complained that the original vision of the Islamic Republic, based on democratic principles and the concept of republicanism, had never been achieved. The application of “absolute *velayat*” by the conservatives, he said, “leads to monarchy” of the kind that “no society” would accept, leaving the government no option but to “impose it by force of the knife, the lash, the Revolutionary Court, [or] the Special Clerics’ Court.”⁵

Like Khomeini in the 1970s, Khatami in the 1990s became a popular symbol of hope with a mass following. He provided ordinary Iranians with a sense of renewed optimism that the unfulfilled democratic promises of the revolution might finally be achieved. At the same time, the revolution had by then matured, and people as a whole had grown more aware of its limits—and much more wary of its excesses. The objective realities within the country called for an embrace of pragmatism—even if this meant a retreat from Islamist dogma. It seemed that many Iranians, including a growing number of aging revolutionaries, had realized that fundamental reforms were essential in order to solve the country’s mounting problems and assure regime stability and longevity.

For all these reasons, the electoral victories of reformist candidates—including the presidency in 1997 and 2001, municipalities in 1999, and the Majles in 2000—indicated a widespread yearning for fundamental political change. And yet, the reformist trend ultimately failed to achieve meaningful results. Faced with stiff conservative opposition in the bureaucracy, the people’s hopes for reform have evaporated gradually since the turn of the millennium. All in all, the euphoria following the reformers’ sweeping 1997 victory was soon deflated by a growing feeling of resignation to the status quo, the reformists’ ambitions curtailed by sobering realities.

The Conservatives Strike Back

EVEN WHEN THE REFORMISTS MANAGED TO WIN OFFICE AND LEAD THE government, their conservative rivals, entrenched in the Islamic regime's bureaucracies, enjoyed disproportionately more power and, by and large, managed to dictate national policy. Moreover, even before Khatami's 2001 re-election, the conservatives, led by supreme leader Khamenei, had begun their counteroffensive.

Since the founding of the Islamic republic, both reformists and conservatives have stressed the achievement of justice as a major revolutionary goal. The two camps have parted ways, however, in their visions of justice and its requirements: conservative rhetoric has generally given preference to social and economic development (*towseeh eqtesadi*), whereas reformers have tended to emphasize political justice and institutional development (*towseeh siyasi*). This split, already evident in the early days of the revolution, has in recent years found expression in the antagonism between the reformist politician Khatami and the supreme leader Khamenei.

Either out of sincere conviction or as a way of checking Khatami's popular reformist agenda, Khamenei's pronouncements in the late 1990s stressed the need for government to respond to the country's economic failures before political reform. In 2000, Khamenei thus urged Majles members to abandon "petty issues" and trivial intellectual argumentation over political reform, and to devote themselves fully to resolving the country's complex economic troubles. Portraying a gloomy picture of the population's daily life, he urged the government to focus on securing people's livelihood (*maishat*) and well-being; otherwise, the supreme jurist warned, there will be no religion, no morale and no hope.⁶

Khamenei's economic populism struck a deep chord with the Iranian people, and soon it also had the public backing of conservative clerics Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahrudi and Mohammad Yazdi, among others.⁷ As a consequence of this economic populism, and thanks to the conservatives' entrenchment in government bureaucracies, conservative power was revitalized in the face of the reformists' challenge. Consequently, this set the stage for Ahmadinejad's rise.

Economic development and welfare were the primary messages of Ahmadinejad's campaign, and ultimately won him the presidency. More than any other candidate in 2005, he represented a return to the original revolutionary principles of social justice. He sought to embody the changes demanded by voters and he reaffirmed the ability of the revolution to cure societal malaise. His campaign slogan was simple and appealing—*mishavad va mitavanim*, or "it is possible and we can do it."

When he assumed office, Ahmadinejad was himself an inexperienced politician,

and he brought with him a team that was equally inexperienced and lacked the knowledge needed to address an extremely critical moment in Iran's history. Moreover, while all previous Iranian presidents became relatively more pragmatic during their time in office, Ahmadinejad is the first president to become more extreme—particularly on issues relating to the United States and Israel. The simplest explanation for this may be his deep-rooted anti-Western views and his belief in the need to eliminate Israel; in Ahmadinejad's rhetoric, these sentiments blend seamlessly with his pronouncements on economic populism and social justice. Meanwhile, widespread perceptions that America was stuck in a debilitating quagmire in Iraq and Afghanistan combined with the Iranian regime's burgeoning oil revenues to contribute to a perceived sense of national strength. This, too, may have encouraged the president to revive revolutionary era anti-Western rhetoric.

By embracing a radical international agenda, Ahmadinejad apparently also hoped to shore up his political position at home. Although he was elected on a platform of social justice and economic populism, Iran's domestic problems have continued to deteriorate during his term. Perhaps the president reasoned that diverting attention toward an external enemy would serve to mollify public opinion at home. At the same time, he may have expected that a stridently anti-Western and anti-Israel stance would enhance Iran's leadership position in the Muslim world. Many attentive observers have also sought to explain Ahmadinejad's radical foreign policy by reference to his apparent mystical belief in heavenly oversight and his own divine mission.⁸

Be all this as it may, Ahmadinejad's first term as president did not alleviate the burdens on the lower strata of Iranian society and failed to provide for and extend the basic liberties that people enjoyed in the late 1990s—and which they now came to expect. As a consequence, opposition to the president and to the regime more generally gained momentum, soon acquiring an intensity and tone not seen since the early 1980s (when the Islamic revolutionaries were purging their opposition to consolidate the new regime). The yearnings for reform were once again ignited.

Ahmadinejad and the 2009 Presidential Elections

TWO FACTORS, MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE, BREATHED NEW LIFE INTO THE Iranian people's desire to reform the Islamic Republic in 2009. First was popular disenchantment and disillusionment with the Iranian government due to socio-economic distress combined with the lack of liberties and basic respect for human dignity within Iran. The second factor was the election (and early presidential actions) of President

Barack Obama. Dissatisfaction with the status quo, coupled with President Obama's dramatic rise to power in the U.S.—and his subsequent civil rights emphasis and offers of dialogue with the Iranian regime—inspired ordinary Iranians to seek alternatives to the political deadlock and malaise stifling their national life for decades.

For well over a century, the Iranian people have fought to achieve two major goals: freedom and welfare, or political justice and economic justice. Nowadays, systemic domestic failures continue to fuel the fire of ever-increasing public discontent. Despite the government's oil revenues (which have expanded dramatically due to the price of oil), economic hardships and social gaps are no less burdensome on ordinary people than previously. Moreover, despite the high promises and once quite popular appeal of "Islamic Democracy," freedom has yet to appear in any real sense of the word. During the shah's reign criticism against the regime was considered a crime; under the Islamic regime it is tantamount to a sin against Islam.

The U.S. elections of 2008 gave added boldness to Iran's already dissatisfied reform camp. Obama's rise from a modest background captured the imagination of many throughout the world—and perhaps most acutely in Iran. His pledge of dialogue with Iran helped encourage reformists and revitalized optimism about the possibility for a new détente with the U.S. Iranians, too, began to believe in the Obama slogan "Yes, we can." Thus, only a few months after Obama's inauguration, riots and disorder broke out in Iran—the most extensive public unrest since the early 1980s.

Inspiration is difficult to measure, and no doubt the precise quantification of Obama's influence on Iranian voters is elusive. Nonetheless, President Obama's conciliatory approach to Iran was unmistakable in early 2009. The U.S. President's Nouruz greeting to the "Islamic Republic of Iran" (March 21, 2009)—in which he urged Iran "to take its rightful place in the community of nations," and implicitly recognized both the regime's leadership and its Islamic character—marked a significant departure from the U.S. posture toward the Iranian government since 1979.

This new U.S. posture toward Iran, and President Obama's appeal to "human rights everywhere," seemed to encourage the Iranian reform movement as well. In the aftermath of the unrest following the disputed presidential elections in Iran, both the Western and Iranian media tried to assess how the "Obama effect" or "Obama factor" influenced the rise of the Green Movement. Publications ranging from *The New York Times* to the hard-line Iranian daily *Javan* stressed Mousavi's dynamic and tech-savvy campaign suggesting reform was, in fact, modeled on Obama's own campaign. The conservatives, for their part, were quick to warn that the U.S. administration's conciliatory offer was "poisoned." Their deepest fear was the subversive impact that a warm American embrace might have on the hearts and minds of the children of the revolution.

When Iran's riots came, they presented the U.S. with a serious policy dilemma. In 1953, the United States interfered directly in Iran's politics—a move with toxic effects

on U.S.-Iran relations ever since. By contrast, in 1979, President Carter chose not to interfere and his inaction eased the revolution's victory and the rise of hardliners. To be or not to be involved, and in what shape or dose, was the question facing Obama. Dialogue with the Iranian regime constituted a major pillar of U.S. policy and non-interference a significant principle of President Obama's platform. Hence, endorsing the reformists might have brought about an unintended consequence—eliminating common ground for dialogue with Tehran—without necessarily benefiting the reformists. Obama first chose not to refer to the opposition movement or the Iranian government's crackdown on protestors directly. Only after ten days did the U.S. President convey to Iran a message of support and respect for political freedom and basic human rights.

For the reformers, this message of support came too late. Further, for many protestors, the message didn't seem strong enough; following the June 2009 elections, a constant refrain heard from Iranian protestors through at least November was, "Obama! Either you are with them [the regime] or with us!" Meanwhile, the hardliner Mojtaba Samareh-Hashemi, who ran Ahmadinejad's presidential campaign, claimed that Obama reversed his initial "soft" stance toward Iran's presidential election because Zionists and U.S. neoconservatives had forced him to take a tougher approach toward the Islamic regime.⁹

While Washington struggled to define its policy, Iranian conservatives mounted an impressive political and security response in order to suppress the riots and counter the reform movement. The conservatives in the regime utilized the fact that they claim to speak in the name of Islam, and actively work to silence dissident voices in the clergy. This gives them enormous influence among religious believers, and they rallied this constituency to check the opposition. Perhaps more importantly, the conservatives in government, who enjoy the loyalty of top commanders in the military and paramilitary security forces, were well-prepared to employ these forces to safeguard the Islamic regime ever since they first clashed with reformists and student protestors in the late 1990s.

In July 1999, Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi, a leading ultraconservative from the Assembly of Experts, unleashed an ideological attack on elements that were beginning to challenge openly the regime's policies. In a Friday sermon, Yazdi proclaimed that the heads of those acting against the Islamic regime or speaking out against its basic tenets should be cut off with a sharp sword. After dismissing leniency (*tasahol*) and indulgence (*tasamoh*) as alien to Islam, he inquired whether anti-regime actors, who he alleged were conspiring to undermine the Iranian people's lives, property, chastity and religion, ought to be treated with leniency. "Where do these fallacies stem from?" he asked. Islam, he said, directs Muslims to remove these fallacious weeds, and obliges them to act vigorously against hooligans, traitors and heretics, and against foreign influences.

In this struggle against un-Islam, Yazdi said Iranians should first use “exhortation” (*nasihat*), then, if necessary, “the sword” (*shamshir*). Those who claim that Islam does not approve violence (*hoshunat*), he concluded, do not understand Islam at all.¹⁰

In 1998, Yahya Rahim Safavi, then Commander of the Revolutionary Guards, also threatened to use violence and purge those unfaithful to the revolution. He complained that segments of the press had become nests in which anti-revolutionaries flourished. Safavi saw the West’s cultural onslaught as the main threat to the Islamic regime and recognized the dangers of free expression. He declared that the Guards would not allow the press to inflict blows on the precious ideals of the Islamic revolution.¹¹ He went so far as to state that the Revolutionary Guards would be ready to decapitate and cut out the tongues of the regime’s political opponents.¹²

Ten years later, in 2009, the regime’s condemnation of the protestors and opposition was no less harsh. In a Friday sermon in Tehran, Hojjat al-Islam Ahmad Khatami (a Friday prayer leader in Tehran) pronounced that “unauthorized demonstrations are both against the law and against the Sharia because His Eminence [Khamenei] has advised against them.” The hardline cleric further stated that Khamenei, “the imam, the leader of the Islamic community, can fight [against anyone who acts against the Islamic system] until [that person’s] destruction.” He then declared that the protestors were enemies of God (*muharib*), and ruled that anyone who “wages war against God” or “who takes up arms, be it guns or knives, is a *muharib* and Islam has said that *muharib* should receive the severest of the punishments.”¹³

Such pronouncements provided the conservatives with religious justification to act against their opposition—and they did so systematically and brutally. By acting in this way, the regime sought to assure their supporters that they remained in full control. Clearly, the conservatives learned from their own revolution. They exhibited unwavering resolve in their efforts to prevent their reformist opponents from overthrowing them just as the Islamic revolution toppled the shah’s regime. Unwilling to voluntarily concede power, they are ready to forcibly suppress their rivals and determined to fight to preserve their political status and the survival of the regime. In the minds of these conservatives, the destiny of Islam as whole, of the Islamic regime, and of Iran’s ruling elite, are all one and the same.

Conclusion

OVER A YEAR SINCE IRAN’S DISPUTED ELECTIONS, THE CONSERVATIVES APPEAR to have firmly re-established their control. And yet, beneath the surface the popular fires of rebellion still rage. Moreover, the regime’s integrity and revolutionary identity has been compromised—and perhaps terminally so. The reform movement’s hostility

was directed not only at Ahmadinejad, but also toward the supreme leader of the Islamic Republic himself. Indeed, in video footage posted on YouTube during the Shiite *Ashura* commemoration (December 27, 2009), demonstrators were seen tearing down billboards of Khamenei's image and crying out "Death to the Dictator!"¹⁴ Graffiti calling for "Death to Khamenei!" could be seen scrawled in a few public places.¹⁵

Such calls reveal just how precarious things have become for the Iranian government. Supreme leader Khamenei—whose religious credentials to hold the office of ruling jurist have been questioned ever since he assumed power, and who has always lacked the political acumen and personal charisma of Ayatollah Khomeini—chose to use the authority of his office to support Ahmadinejad's re-election as president. Unlike Khomeini, who managed to maintain his rule and even his personal prestige in times of crisis by standing above factionalism and bridging divides (or by playing factions against one another), Khamenei publicly identified with one element of the Iranian polity and involved himself and his office directly in factional politics. The reformist opposition will not likely forget the supreme leader's attitude anytime soon.

If, during the lead up to the 2009 presidential elections, the political competition appeared to be "within the family" and among competing factions who all laid equal claim to the Islamic revolution, the rifts between the followers of Ayatollah Khomeini now seem much deeper. Moreover, the political base from which the regime derives its authority has narrowed significantly. Thus, while the regime's strength in the past relied in part on its rigorous adherence to Islamic doctrine and values, it now increasingly resorts to oppressive measures and the force of arms.

The revolutionary principle and institutions of *velayat-e faqih*—the main historical achievement of the Islamic revolution—have also suffered a serious blow. In fact, as the Green Movement's opposition to Khamenei attests, the revolutionary mythology by which the Islamic regime has justified its rule appears to be shattered.

In the meantime, the reform movement's inherent flaws have played to the conservatives' advantage. The reformers seem to lack a cohesive alternative ideology, a structured and effective organization, and charismatic leadership. Leading a country fed up with its government was easier for Khomeini, who called to uproot the old system entirely, than for Mousavi, who "merely" wants to improve the system from within. The Green Movement has yet to match the explicit, unequivocal, catchy slogans of 1979 ("Shah must go," "Islam is the solution"). Finally, previous Iranian mass movements were based on a dual pillar—the quest for both welfare and liberty. Powerful as the Green Movement's call "Where is my voice?" has been for those that cry out for political representation and justice, it only attracts a certain segment of contemporary Iranian society. To empower a real mass movement, a supplementary socio-economic and anti-corruption banner could be helpful—perhaps something like "Where is my oil money?"

Despite these shortcomings, Mousavi does enjoy wide-ranging support among the youth and the general public, as well as within segments of the clergy. Indeed, in important ways, the reform movement appears to be a grassroots nationalist movement much stronger than its leader. For example, on the September 2009 Al-Quds [Jerusalem] Day, an annual occasion aimed at demonstrating solidarity with Palestinians, demonstrators were heard chanting “Not Gaza, Not Lebanon! I will give my life for Iran!”¹⁶

Iranians have an impressive tradition of popular involvement in politics. More than other nations in the Middle East, Iranians have taken to the streets to shape the destiny of their country—for better and for worse. Across history, Shiites have never been strangers to struggles against the unjust usurpation of authority and the search for just rule. Indeed, in important ways, this was the founding principle of Shiism itself. The memories of the past and the experience of the last year should serve as a daunting alarm to Iran’s Islamic regime. As of now, the impact of the events of 2009 may appear more like the 1999 riots than the 1979 revolution. Yet, revolutionary movements spring up suddenly; they are rarely predictable, and don’t send out early warning signals.

And so, the Iranian ship of state continues to drift from course to course and in constant search of a proper equilibrium between dedication to its revolutionary convictions and the importunate demands of governance, between religion and state, between an inward-looking Islam and the temptations of the West. The Islamic regime is still searching for an appropriate way to deal with the day-to-day challenges of governance—and at a time of enormous domestic upheaval, worsening social and economic difficulties, dramatic regional changes and increased international pressure. If and when the Iranians decide to change course for the betterment of the people, their decision will depend not upon the degree to which they seek to “return to Islam” or to a utopian Islamic society, but on the measure in which their national political life meets the expectation that fed the Islamic revolution from its inception—the promise of greater welfare and more freedom, of bread and liberty. This remains the revolution’s main challenge, for it has yet to achieve the significant progress the Iranian people seek.

NOTES

1. *Kayhan* (Tehran), January 7, 1988.

2. In discussing Iran’s diverse domestic camps and tendencies, one caveat should be mentioned: categorizing these groups is exceedingly difficult because their composition and membership often prove fluid. Some of Khomeini’s most devout supporters in 1979 challenged his doctrine and practices later on (e.g., Ayatollah Hussein Ali Montazeri and Prof. Abdul-Karim Soroush). Some of the

most radical figures from the early days of the revolution became the leading reformists in the 1990s (for example, former Prime Minister Mousavi, former Majles Speaker Ayatollah Mehdi Karubi, Ali Akbar Mohtashami-pour, and Sadegh Khalkhali). In addition, the two main camps—largely referred to as reformist and conservative—are not unified; there are, in fact, significant variations and sub-groupings within each of them.

3. *Jamee*, May 19, 1998.
4. See an elaborate discussion of such tendencies in my book, *Post-Revolutionary Politics in Iran: Religion, Society and Power* (London: Frank Cass, 2001), chapters 1 and 3.
5. *Jahan-e Islam*, February 14, 1999.
6. *Jomhuri-ye Islami*, June 19, 2000.
7. IRNA, August 1 (Shahrudi); *Jomhuri-ye Islami*, July 1, 2000 (Yazdi).
8. An Iranian website published a video recording of Ahmadinejad in which he claims to have “felt” a divine light while addressing world leaders at the UN General Assembly in September 2005. Ahmadinejad said, “I felt it myself, too, that suddenly the atmosphere changed.” He went on: “I am not exaggerating ... because I was looking. All the leaders were puzzled, as if a hand held them and made them sit.” Also, his repeated reference to the expected return of the Hidden Imam is indicative of his deep belief. Radio Free Iran, Radio Liberty, November 29, 2005, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1063353.html>.
9. Press TV, June 30, 2009.
10. *Neshat and Iran Daily*, July 24, 1999. See similarly in IRNA, August 6, 1999, Daily Report (Middle East), Foreign Broadcast Information Service [DR].
11. Interview with Safavi in *Kayhan* (Tehran), June 1, 1998.
12. *Kayhan* (Tehran), May 28, 1998 and *Mobin*, May 2, 1998.
13. BBC World Monitoring Service, June 26, 2009.
14. *The New York Times*, December 28, 2009.
15. *International Herald Tribune*, August 18, 2009.
16. *The New Yorker*, October 5, 2009; *The New York Times*, September 19, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/19/world/middleeast/19iran.html>.