

January 2006
06-01

MIT CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

The Audit of Conventional Wisdom

In this series of essays, MIT's Center for International Studies tours the horizon of conventional wisdoms that animate U.S. foreign policy, and put them to the test of data and history. By subjecting particularly well-accepted ideas to close scrutiny, our aim is to re-engage policy and opinion leaders on topics that are too easily passing such scrutiny. We hope that this will lead to further debate and inquiries, with a result we can all agree on: better foreign policies that lead to a more peaceful and prosperous world. Authors in this series are available to the press and policy community. Contact: Amy Tarr (atarr@mit.edu, 617.253.1965).

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Is Iran's Reform Movement Dead?

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The surprise victory of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the Iranian Presidential election last June brings up the question of whether the reform movement is dead in Iran. Does Ahmadinejad's success imply that Iranians have economic demands only? Who now are the supporters of reform?

Political reform is defined as constitutionality; monitoring political authorities and making them responsive; strengthening the civil society and its institutions; increasing the socio-political participation of all citizens; fair distribution of wealth, power, and freedom; and respect for humanity.

Looking at the first round of the presidential election, we see that the total votes of all the conservative candidates combined (Mahmud Ahmadinezhad, Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, and Ali Larijani) was 11 million, while the total votes for all the reformist candidates (Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, Mehdi Karrubi, Mostafa Moein, and Mohsen Mehralzadeh) came to 17 million votes. Therefore, the reformists got 6 million votes more than the conservatives, despite many allegations of election fraud and interference. Also, around 20 million of the eligible voters boycotted the election, believing that it was not going to be free and safe.

In the second round, both Rafsanjani and Ahmadinejad entered the competition with promises to improve the economy. The key point is that Ahmadinejad was relatively unknown to the public and without a negative record, while Hashemi-Rafsanjani had a not-so-positive past record, and faced well-organized campaigns against him (this was the outcome of a complex, multi-layer plan, according to a senior military official).

Despite all of its shortcomings, the reform movement has some of its achievements planted so deep into society that they survive; even conservative hardliners adopted reformist slogans during the June elections, proof that change remains underway. As Mohammed Khatami, the reformist president from 1997 to June 2005, said: "A need for reform has been entrenched in the heart of the society and that will help the reform going." But will it keep going, and what will prevent its forward movement?

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citation

Fatemeh Haghighatjoo. "Is Iran's Reform Movement Dead?," MIT Center for International Studies Audit of the Conventional Wisdom, 06-01 (January 2006).

Obstacles to Reform

There are three major obstacles for the reform movement:

1. *The political structure of Iran.* Iran's constitution is not democratic, because the Supreme Leader has the ultimate power. The president, the parliament, the judicial system, the army and police, national television and radio, the Guardian Council, the Expediency Council, the Council of Constitutional Change, and some important economic enterprises, among others, are supervised by the Supreme Leader. Even though the president and parliament are two sections of the power structure that are elected by the people, the formation and authority of both can be strongly controlled by those branches chosen through the Supreme Leader. This came very clear in the 6th Majlis (parliament), which was very limited in law-making and monitoring power. According to the constitution, all bills passed by the Majlis have to be approved by the conservative Guardian Council, and in case of any disputes over legislation between the Majlis and the Guardian Council, the Expediency Council makes the final decision.

The formation of the 7th Majlis was not the result of a free election, considering that more than 2,500 registered candidates were barred from entering the competition.

Islam is recognized by the constitution as the principal religion, with the Shi'a sect being superior to others. There is little freedom of religion, and there are legal barriers for the participation of religious minorities and minority Islamic sects in key positions such as the presidency; the only exception is membership of the parliament, which is specifically mentioned in the constitution. In cases where there are no legal barriers for the participation of religious minorities, still some Shi'a clerics oppose the participation of minorities, including Sunni Muslims.

According to the constitution, parliament cannot make any laws that are contrary to Sharia (Islamic law), and final decisions are made by the Guardian Council.

2. *The reformists.* Reformists span a vast ideological spectrum, and this difference in thoughts and approach has mostly caused separation and a waste of energy.

At one end of this spectrum is the group that believes in the Islamic Republic based on the supreme leadership; most of them even recognize Ayatollah Khamenei, the current Supreme Leader, as the best choice and would still choose him if they were to choose a leader. This group considers other reformists on the spectrum as too radical. The middle of the spectrum is the group that believes in the Islamic Republic without the supreme leadership. They recognize the first draft of the constitution written before the 1979 referendum, in which there is no trace of the supreme leadership. On the other end of the spectrum is the group that believes in the separation of religion and state, and a completely secular regime. During Khatemi's presidency, only members of first two groups mentioned above were included in the power structure.

Despite their disagreements on the political structure of the country, reformists stand on a more inclusive common ground when it comes to civil rights and political and social freedoms. This became especially clear during the 6th Majlis, in which the first two groups of reformists were present. During that period, all bills that were related to civil rights and social freedom were passed with a majority of votes. For instance, all reformist groups were supportive of reforming bills related to women. In the case of the wearing of the headscarf, or hijab, for women, both the first and second groups believe in wearing the hijab as an Islamic duty; however, they disagree with forcing women to submit to it. In the economic policy, reformists gradually moved away from the idea of state-owned enterprises and toward a more balanced economy, leaning toward privatization and limiting government interference. The reformist factions had different opinions on solutions for the nation's economic problems presented during the recent presidential election. For example, Karrubi used slogans with a theme of "Direct Distribution of Cash Amongst the Nation," where Moien promoted "Reforms in the Economic Structure."

These groups also had different methods and action plans that resulted in slowing down the reform movement. A majority of the reformists included in the power structure were not willing to pay a price and would retreat at any push from the conservative front. This prevented the reform movement from achieving as much as it could have. In general, the lack of tolerance and flexibility of some reformers would get in the way of reform.

3. *Common culture.* Thousands of years of monarchy and dictatorship in Iran have embedded an authoritarian culture in the soul of Iranian life, and have established a master/follower relationship in all parts of society including family, school, work, and so on. Some major characteristics of this culture are intolerance, incompetence, lack of mutual respect, and dishonesty. Even with a change of the political system, Iran still needs to make changes in every part of society through education.

Achievements of the Reform Movement

The reform movement made major changes that will shape the future of Iran. These changes have been made in the core of Iranian society, and while this has occurred slowly, it will continue forward and will not stop with the governmental changes, only the way it moves will differ in every government.

Mohammad Khatami, with his charisma and because he built a good base while president, raised an awareness about the negative cultural characteristics of Iranian society and brought up concepts such as civil rights, patience, tolerance, dialogue, questioning and answering, mutual respect, and democratic family relations. More broadly, he changed the traditional master/follower relationship and introduced aspects of a democratic culture, although it is clear that cultural change takes a long time.

The achievements of the reform movement can be categorized into those addressing women, civil society, politics, religious authority, the judiciary, economics, and freedom of speech. The impact on women has been profound: bolstering the self-confidence in women and introducing them to their social rights; increasing women's participation in political, social, economic, and public administration at regional and central government levels; improving the quality and quantity of women's NGOs; improving women's education; improving women's health and decreasing the number of deaths; changing negative perspectives about women; enlarging budgets for women's participation; assisting single mothers with governmental loans and mortgages, among other, more general impacts.

Reform has also achieved broader gains. Examples include encouraging the creation of civil institutions and non-governmental organizations; forming more organizations for students, women, press, and labor; leading technology-related activities such as weblogging and its influence on public awareness; forming city/region assemblies, improving the political party system and its importance to the political structure; de-sanitizing the Islamic regime by turning it into an earthly phenomenon and introducing different interpretations of the religion; increases in social freedom changing some discrimination laws; eliminating judicial sentences like stoning; relative economic improvement and reform, like new bills on collective duties, facilitating foreign investment, privatiza-

tion of banks, decentralization, optimizing the size of government, combining four ministries into two, and so on. There have also been some improvements in the news media, including an increase in the number of female journalists and publishers, even though a lot of them were banned and journalists were jailed.

This is only a partial list. Much more has been accomplished, and appears to be firmly entrenched.

The Future of Reform

In light of what has been mentioned as the obstacles to reform, it might seem that the conservatives have blocked all entrances to the power structure and made it hard to imagine that the reformists will return to power again. However, through my personal experience in the country's power structure, I believe that the reform movement can continue to develop by forming a strong party inclusive of all groups that are demanding democracy and human rights, regardless of their faith and ideology, and pressuring the regime to submit to the public demand and change the constitution.

Another solution in rebuilding the strength to confront the anti-reformists is by linking the existing parties. Divided actions of political, social, and cultural activists will not get us anywhere and we will never end up reforming.

The various reform groups, after considering the obstacles in the political structure over the last two years or so, came to the conclusion that they need to rethink this problem. There are several sides:

1. The current constitution is acceptable; however, we need to remain completely loyal to all aspects of it, including the power structure that is described.
2. Since the current situation doesn't allow for a change in the constitution, we should promote democratic interpretations of the current constitution and try to limit organs of power and make them responsive.
3. The current constitution is not democratic in soul and needs to be changed. This group is still looking for internal change through reform.
4. The constitution needs to be changed with the help of an external power and foreign intervention, since the change won't happen from within.

None of these groups has found a way out of this problem, but debate is lively and a search for solutions continues.

Those who believe in democracy need to realize that reform is Iran's only way out of dictatorship and corruption. The public showed its demand for reform in the last three elections by either voting for the available reformist candidates or boycotting the elections. The people are for reform, and can prevail.



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