

## **Reform Era in Iranian Politics**

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### **Abstract**

**Political legitimacy is one of the fundamental notions in contemporary political theorizing. To explain this notion, a set of views, influenced by Weber, put emphasis on the role of political beliefs of the citizens. Yet, recent academic enterprises refer to the political agents, focusing on their actions. This article studies Iranians' socio-economic conditions in 1990's, and reveals the setting of the emergence of the reformism, with regard to the notion of legitimacy. Along this line, the strategy of the reformists as the political agents is examined and their weaknesses and strengths as well as the reason of their failure are discussed.**

**Keywords: legitimacy, reformism, Iranian socio-economic conditions.**

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## **Introduction**

The literature on political legitimacy, following Weber, has long emphasized the role of citizens' *beliefs* regarding political arrangements in society. For Weber, legitimacy is

“the *belief* in legitimacy on the part of the relevant social agents; and power relations [are] as legitimate where those involved in them, subordinate as well as dominant, believe them to be so” (1968: 213).

This is how the early wave of democratization and political development literature tended to define legitimacy. Lipset, for example, defined legitimacy as the capacity “to engender and maintain the belief that the existing political institutions are the most appropriate one for the society” (Lipset, 1958: 86).

Implied in these notions of legitimacy is the idea that if beliefs regarding the rightfulness of power relations and political arrangements weaken to a significant degree, the political system is on its way to collapse. Taken to its logical extreme, as Beetham rightly argues, such theorizing leads to claims such as “the reason for the collapse of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989 lay in a deficiency of public relations rather than anything actually wrong with the system of rule itself” (Beetham, 1991:9).

The other side of the coin is the counter-claims by such regimes that political protest against them is the result of better propaganda

campaigns by imperialists and the Western media. It is this implied wisdom that I want to challenge in this paper.

More recent theorizing on legitimacy emphasizes actions undertaken by political agents and how they affect the subjective beliefs of citizens in different contexts. In other words, it is power-holders' actions, their legality and the justifiability of laws on one hand, and citizens' actions in expressing consent towards a system of rule on the other, that lies at the center of debates about legitimacy of historically specific political systems (Habermas, 1994; Beetham, 1991; Arato, 1994).

Some specific questions to be asked when dealing with a political system's legitimacy are:

-Whether power has been acquired and is maintained through lawful means, however those means are defined in historically specific conditions of the country under study;

-Whether these means and rules are justifiable in terms of the values and attitudes prevalent among majorities in a given society; and

-Whether there is evidence of expressed consent on the part of citizens (Beetham, 1991:13-17).

By asking such questions, the focus shifts from what goes on inside people's minds to political agents' actions. In this paper I focus on how, in the post Iran-Iraq war period, the official discourse on legitimacy in Iran has

shifted in consequent stages from focusing once on a ‘mission’ to bring about *revolutionary change* and a more *spiritual and just society* to economic *development*, and then, in more recent years, from *political reform* and democracy to *authority, Islamic state and national security* in the last two decades.

But before discussing those developments, I would like to give a brief picture of the available empirical evidence indicating problems of political legitimacy in Iran.

The best source of empirical data for this purpose is the two waves of the National Survey of Values and Attitudes in Iran (NSVA) conducted in 2001 and 2003. There are about 30 political-attitude items in these surveys that could be taken as indicators of the beliefs related to political legitimacy.

Quantitative political science literature on the subject treats legitimacy as a multi-dimensional concept encompassing evaluations of government’s performance (efficiency), accessibility and accountability, political system’s fairness, general evaluations of societal justice, and trust in government.

In order to see how these attitude-items cluster around underlying dimensions of political legitimacy in Iran, I performed a factor analysis of all such items in the two waves of the NSVA. <sup>(1)</sup>

The results show that these 30 or so items could be taken as indicators of five underlying dimensions of political legitimacy, namely fairness of the political system, government accessibility and accountability, government efficiency, trust in government and a general sense of societal justice.

**Table1** Underlying dimensions of political legitimacy

Trust in Government	Trust in the parliament, (state- run) Radio and TV, Ministry of the Interior, the Judiciary, Ministry of Culture, The Guardian Council, the Expediency Council, the executive branch.
Accessibility and Accountability	Success in defending freedom of expression, how much government heeds public opinion, how much people can criticize the government without fear, to what extent political parties can be active.
Societal Justice	Poor-rich gap getting wider, poor-rich gap in the next five years
Political Fairness	People can gain their rights through legal means, public service employment is not based on meritocracy, law equally applies to officials and ordinary people, ordinary people will never get to the top, the governments treats all equally, People’s dignity is respected.
Efficiency	How successful the government has been in promoting welfare, in implementing rule of law, in consolidating security
NSVA 1	2001
NSVA2	2003

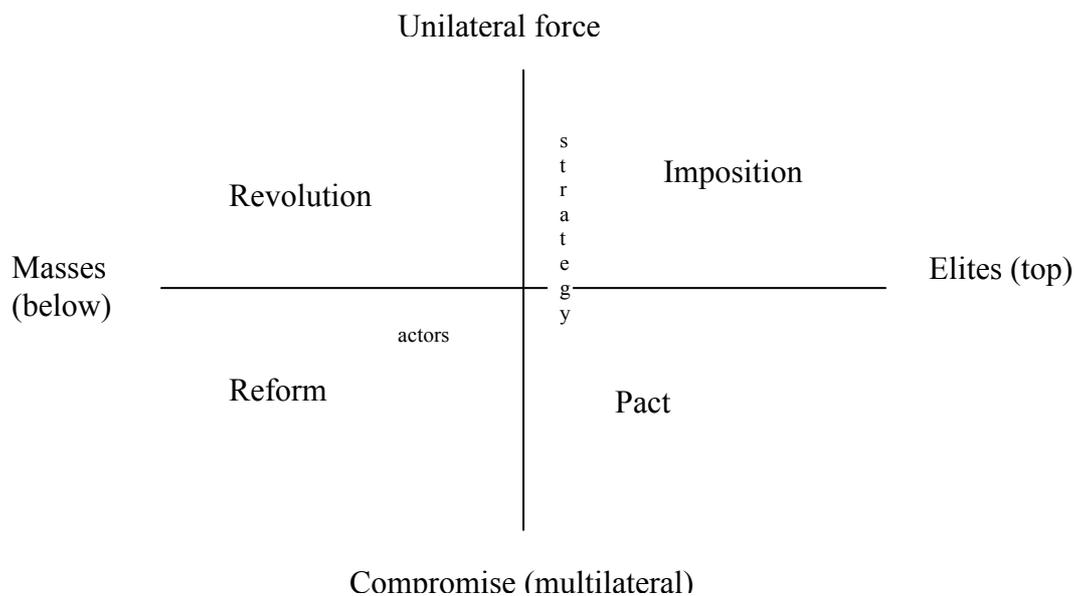
**Uncertain Transition**

The literature on ‘transition to democracy’ is almost unanimous on the conclusion that ‘transition’ from authoritarian rule is an uncertain process that could lead to democratization or, finally, another authoritarian form of government.

Depending on the particular combination of ‘unforeseen contingencies’, and ‘unfolding processes’ initiated by parties involved in the transition, leading to intended *and* ‘unintended

consequences’, the outcome of the transition will be determined (Schmitter and Schmitter, 1991:270).

Summarizing the experience of countries in southern Europe (Spain, Portugal, Greece) in the 1970s, Latin America in the 1980s, and Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the above authors produce a classification of ‘modes of transition’ on the basis of the interface of ‘actors’ and ‘strategies’.



**Figure 1** Modes of transition, adapted from Schmitter and Schmitter, 1991: 275

*Pacts* are multilateral compromises among elites about the rules of the political game (Typical cases: Spain, Uruguay).

*Imposition* amounts to the unilateral use of force by some elite faction in the government to bring about a fundamental change in power-

sharing arrangements (Typical cases: Turkey, Ecuador, the Soviet Union).

*Reform* usually is the outcome of pressure from below by mobilized masses and bargaining at the top by the opposition to the authoritarian regime or its hardliner factions in

order to change the rules of the political game without resorting to violence (Typical case: Poland).

*Revolution* is the forced removal of the authoritarian system through mass mobilization and the use of violence (Schmitter and Schmitter, 1999: 275; Stepan, 1986; Przeworski, 1986).

In southern Europe and Latin America where the governments were mainly controlled by the military or where the army had a significant say in running of the affairs of government, the ideal mode of transition turned out to be pacts. Bargaining between the authoritarian regime and the moderate democratic opposition produced a new set of rules of the political game minimally agreeable to both sides.

In Eastern Europe, where the coercive organs of the state were weak and where the main power imposing the status quo, i.e. the Soviet Union, decided to withdraw support of the communist regimes the main modes of transition were either reform, based on mass mobilization, or imposition by factions of the former ruling parties.

In all cases, however, lack of legitimacy *in itself* did not produce regime change or genuine democratic reform. Przeworski seems to be right in pointing out the fact that: "What matters for the stability of any regime is not the legitimacy of this particular system of

domination but the presence or absence of preferable alternatives" (Przeworski, 1986: 51-52; see also O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986).

### **Critics of Structuralists**

Critical theories have of course been criticized by the structuralists. They think that analysis of the crisis is based on the study of structural relations specially in the economic/social arena; and believe that crisis in real relations and specially in class relations is the fundamental cause of legitimacy crises. The structuralists, in their explanation of the crisis, are generally divided in four groups. Their most important group thinks that emphasis on economic preconditions is the most effective cause of crisis. Marxists thinkers such as Polanskas are the most important interpreters of this thesis; although in their structural view emphasis on ideological machinery and the role of political leadership has special importance. Many non-Marxist theoreticians, too, share this approach. Of course, it should be noted that the previous group directs its discussions toward the issue of passage to democracy. In their opinion, a certain level of wealth and economic progress are preconditions to the formation of political stability in the form of democratic states (Lipset, 1958: 53).

Another group of structuralists emphasize the importance of political culture as a system of beliefs and values. In their opinion,

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historical and social traditions form the foundation for the development of political legitimacy (Almond & S. Verba, 1963). The third group takes the historical background and results of specific historical formations in each country to be the foundation for development of crisis. This group takes issues such as formation of national unity, opposition of tradition and modernity, relation of pluralism and central government, to be basic elements to the formation of crisis (Paay, 2003). The fourth group emphasizes the effects of external elements. Discussions such as theories of dependence [on] global division of labor, geopolitical situation, and roles of world powers are the most important parts of their analysis in tracing crisis and instability (Huntington, 1984).

#### **Iran's Experience: Legitimation and Reform**

When Mohammad Khatami was elected as Iran's president in May 1997, his victory came as a great surprise even to most of his own supporters. It was eight years after the end of Iraq-Iran war (1980-1988), and the country had gone through eight years of 'reconstruction' under the two terms of the 'pragmatist' president, Hashemi Rafsanjani.

Rafsanjani launched an ambitious 'structural adjustment' policy based on less strict controls on exchange rates, a more liberal monetary policy, heavy investment in infra-structure

development, such as large dams, irrigation projects, electricity, and in heavy industries such as steel, petrochemicals, cement, aluminum, and new refineries. He also tried to start a number of foreign policy initiatives to improve relations with Europe, East Asian countries and Russia. There was some more toleration on the cultural front, with more independent publications being licensed, more investment in urban leisure and recreation, and, generally, less restrictions on lifestyles and cultural consumption.

In a span of five years, Iran's imports raised three fold to close to \$25 billion in 1993. Compared to an average annual 0.5 percent decline of GDP during 1980-89, Iran's GDP rose by an average of 7.3 percent annually during the Second Development Plan (1989-93) (Plan and Management Organization, 2004: 88). After a decade of negative growth, per capita income started to rise after 1989. In 1987, Iran's per capita income had fallen to its mid 1960s levels.

There were also improvements in foreign policy. In 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait and Iranian leaders welcomed, though silently, the destruction of their arch enemy's military might by another enemy. Relations with Arab states in the Persian Gulf region, Japan, China, and Europe also improved, and there was even optimism about a process of normalization with the U.S.

The political discourse on ‘reconstruction’, with its emphasis on the importance of economic growth, political stability and material prosperity displaced the revolutionary discourse of the previous decade that focused on puritan values, austerity and self-sufficiency, the necessity of fighting the imperialist evil, history as a permanent battle ground.

At the same time, the more open cultural atmosphere of the late 1980s, made it possible for a group of ‘religious intellectuals’ (*Roshanfekraan-e Dini*) to popularize their discourse on a hermeneutical understanding of Islam. According to these intellectuals, there is a distinction between the ‘true’ meaning of religion and religion as it is understood by people at every age (Soroush, 1991: 131-157).

No human being can claim to understand the ‘true’ meaning of religion. Our understanding of religion and all interpretations of sacred texts are time-bound (*asri*) and influenced by the social conditions we live in. The search for the ‘true’ meaning of religion and its teachings is a never ending endeavor and always open to revisions, criticism and reformulation. There is no final verdict on what ‘social forms’, especially what form of government, religious teachings imply (Kadivar, 1998). This is the main reason that religious intellectuals are accused of ‘de-sacral zing’ religious teachings and its discourses on politics.

This, coupled with an ‘ideology critique’ of religion (Soroush, 1993: 98-155) paved the way for the marginalization of the revolutionary discourse developed during the 1970s and fully imposed during the war years.

Nevertheless, short-sighted economic policy making, poor implementation and mismanagement of economic resources brought chaos. Iran’s short-term and long-term foreign debt, not exceeding \$10 billion during the worst years of war, reached \$30 billion only in five years and inflation reached a record- high level of 49.4 percent in 1995 (Management and Planning Organization, 2004, Chapter 2: 117).

Economic hardships of the ‘structural adjustment’ program coupled with political frustration unleashed a wave of urban protests in large Iranian cities, Mashad in the North East, Aarak in Central Iran, Ghazvin in the center of the northern part of the country, and Islam Shahr on the southern edge of the Capital, Tehran.

Rafsanjani’s economic liberalization program polarized the polity, and his plans to privatize state-owned companies, attracted foreign investment, encouraged wealthy Iranian expatriates to start businesses in Iran, and his government’s efforts to reduce the volume of state-provided subsidies met with strong resistance from both the Islamic left, at least in the early days of the Structural Adjustment Plan, and the more conservative factions within state apparatuses toward the end of his first

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term in office in 1993. It was said then- as it is today by the representatives of conservative coalition that forced the reformists out of the parliament in February 2004 election – that privatization at a time when the ‘revolutionary generation’ is not strong enough to guide its direction will weaken the ruling capacity of the system( *taz’eef-e haakemiyat-e nezaam*). There was also harsh criticism of the more open cultural policies implemented in the areas of cinema, the press, music and book publishing by Mohammad Khatami, then the Minister of Culture. Most notably, the more modernist and culturally more tolerant policies of municipalities came under attack , because they provided a space for a wider variety of intellectual production, including more critical religious intellectuals and more secular artists and intellectuals. The burgeoning cultural sector was conceived as a threat, and was linked to a ‘cultural invasion’ conspiracy orchestrated by ‘foreign powers’.

The ‘cultural invasion’ thesis, as it is known in Iran claimed that ‘Imperialist plans’ work through local ‘bridgeheads’, i.e. intellectuals and opposition politicians disguised in local-culture costumes but deeply loyal to ‘Western values’. These people could even be found within the ranks of revolutionary institutions. They could range from the likes of Yeltsin to Havel and Violetta Chomorro.

In fact Rafsanjani’s second term in office (1993-97) was a time of recurrent setbacks and frustration. All reformist ministers in his cabinet were impeached by the rightist-controlled parliament or resigned. Khatami’s resignation was quite a significant political event at the time since he openly criticized the ‘cultural invasion’ thesis and showed the political motives behind it.

The economic liberalization plan failed too as recourse to price controls, multiple exchange rates and tight fiscal and monetary controls were this time dubbed ‘Economic Stabilization Plan’.

His foreign policy initiatives did not prove successful for reasons related to conflicts with some European countries that resulted in a diplomatic crisis between Iran and the EU. All EU countries, except Greece, withdrew their ambassadors from Tehran.

At the street level there were demonstrations against ‘violation of Islamic decency’, or against the Ministry of Culture for licensing movies considered indecent, or newspapers, writers and publishers who published articles, books or caricatures considered politically incorrect.

The important point to be noted here is that all these developments were signs of deep divisions within the regime itself. As Rafsanjani’s second term came closer to its end, the intensity of conflicts and the tone of criticism leveled against him and his

reconstruction policy became harsher. The Judiciary started summoning his top managers, most notably Tehran Municipality's top administrators and District Mayors, many of whom later, in fact in the first year of Khatami's presidency, were sent to jail.

Gradually, members of his family, albeit not without a cause, came under attack by the conservative controlled media for their misuse of state funds, for being 'too liberal', for profiteering through their government contacts, and so on. In fact, Fayeze Rafsanjani, the president's daughter, became a political superstar during the election campaigns for the parliament in the winter of 1995 mainly because of her open cultural leanings and the fierce criticism she received from the conservative media.

All the setbacks in this period, however, dashed away hopes for reform that came with the election of Rafsanjani after the end of the war with Iraq. His insistence on economic modernization without political reform and all the developments mentioned above left him with no real base of support either in society or among those in control of hard power within the state bureaucracies. One of his sons was quoted in private conversations as saying that his father tried to transform the social base of support of the political system by targeting more modern strata of the population, but events led to a situation where he lost both the

'*Hizbollah*', traditional revolutionary-religious strata, and the modern middle classes.

He lost the support of the establishment because of his efforts to open up the economy to foreign investment and privatization and his more liberal attitudes in the cultural realm. At the same time, he lost the general support because of the failure of his economic and cultural reform agenda. The revived authoritarian-modernization discourse, mainly borrowed from the pre-revolutionary era, seemed to lose its appeal as a new political discourse, emphasizing political rights and an autonomous civil society, loomed on the horizon to become the next hegemonic discourse in the Islamic Republic.

This is also a pattern that has more or less repeated during Khatami's presidency, albeit under very different circumstances. The point to note, however, is that persistent political discontent at the society level, somehow indicating a legitimacy problem, rose to dangerous heights as rifts at the top structures of power widened in hitherto unprecedented ways in the history of the Islamic Republic. This seemed to be an ideal recipe for the start of a crisis situation as suggested by the literature on democratization (O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986: 19; McSweeney and Tempest, 1993:411). It was not, however, as we will see in the following sections of the paper.

### **The Reform Era**

Toward the end of 1996, the government was struggling with its worst legitimacy crisis since the downfall of the Shah. Rafsanjani's second-term vote was the lowest turnout in the history of the Islamic Republic. Out of a total of 32 million eligible voters only 10.5 million, 34 percent, voted for him. Total voter turnout in the 1993 presidential election was 54 percent, which is, again, lowest since 1979. Inflation rate rose from 19 percent in his first year of office in 1989 to 42 percent in the first year of his second term in 1994, and to a historic high of 49.4 percent in the next year. During the eight years of his presidency, the average inflation rate was 31.9 percent, unparalleled before and after 1979 (Institute of Research and Education in Management and Planning, 2004: 23-5, 23-12).

### **Foreign Policy Failures**

Iran's foreign relations were also deteriorated after the passage of the Iran- Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA) by the U.S. Congress during the first term of the Clinton presidency. It followed the condemnation by the government in Iran of the Oslo Peace Accords between Israel and Palestinians, the failure of the 'Critical Dialogue' started by the European Union aimed at improving Iran's foreign policy behavior and human rights record and reaching a settlement of the Salman Rushdi controversy, and linking Iran to terrorist attacks against U.S. military

personnel in Al-Khobar, Saudi Arabia by some Western media.

All but one of E.U. ambassadors, Greece, had left Tehran by 1997 in protest to lack of progress in diplomatic talks.

Several analysts have pointed to the structural changes that made possible the surprise victory of Khatami in May 1997 election. By this time about half of a population of 61 million people, was under 19, and almost 70 percent of the total population had no involvement in the revolution or the establishment of the Islamic Republic. The rate of literacy had almost doubled in two decades and the number of university graduates tripled. Yet, while 19 million people were in schools or universities, the prospects for future jobs and a decent life were increasingly bleak.

In a period of 25 years after the revolution of 1979, real per capita income in Iran had declined at an average of 1 percent. Unemployment rate was around 11 percent on the eve of the 1997 election, but it was about 30 percent for those below the age of 30 (Rabiee, 1991:316; Abdie and Rezaei, 1998).

The war mobilization effort of the 1980s necessitated the expansion of the media reach of the state in Iran and by 1997 the remotest parts of the country were under the coverage of radio and T.V. Yet the information and telecommunications revolution of the 1980s and the 1990s, and of course the more open political and cultural

environment of the first few years of Rafsanjani that significantly raised expectations among people, made it also possible for the Iranian population, especially the Iranian youth, to see snapshots of the lives of other people in the world

and in their neighboring countries. As Table 1 shows, comparing living standards in Iran and countries that were at a similar development level around the time of the revolution revealed bitter results.

**Table 2** GDP per capita at purchasing power parity dollars

Country	1977	1980	1990	1999
Iran	3323	2862	3897	5531
Turkey	2009	2519	4846	6380
Korea	2007	2988	8923	15712
Malaysia	1541	2412	4763	8209

Source: World Bank, *World Economic Indicators*, 2001; Quoted in Management and Planning Organization (2004, ch.2: 197-98)

The GDP per capita in Turkey, Korea and Malaysia was less than that of Iran around the time of the revolution. All have now joined the ranks of the NICs (newly industrializing countries) and their industrial exports surpass Iran's foreign revenues.

In retrospect, there was a miscalculation on the part of the conservative camp about the result of the upcoming election.

Mass discontent at the society level, coupled with unbridgeable divisions at the top, once again paved the way for a mass social movement in support of Khatami's candidacy. This movement was organized by students, activists of the marginalized revolutionary elite of the first decade after the revolution, independent local activists in provincial towns, journalists and intellectuals whose efforts were

coordinated through hastily formed 'Khatami coordination offices' (*Setaads*) across Iran.

Khatami himself was reluctant to run at first, since he believed that the president in Iran's formal and real power structure has no effective power. He was convinced only after extensive consultations and pressure from more radical activists of the first revolutionary decade.

This line of reasoning went on to say that by participating in the election and introducing a candidate with a clean past record, the opposition could get around seven million votes out of a total of 15 or 16 million, while at the same time the opposition could use the opportunity provided by the election campaign mobilization to form the nucleus of a nationwide political party.

It was on this basis that Khatami accepted to run for presidency. But once the movement

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gained in momentum, the picture started to change and the degree and extent of support was so huge that it was not possible to stop the wave. The media campaigns of the conservatives only played into the hands of the Khatami camp. It was only two weeks before the election date, 23 May 1997, that opinion polls conducted by researchers close to the Khatami campaign in Tehran and some other large cities showed khatami's margin is too large. Reformists did not fully realize the immense risks this kind of victory posed to their own political future.

It is not surprising, then, that the result of the election was a great surprise!

But it was a surprise to the reformists too, since they were not prepared to draw a comprehensive plan to run the country in the highly charged atmosphere created by the rising level of expectations. They did not have the organizational capacity to turn mass discontent into effective political force that could be used in high-level political bargaining. Nor did they possess the vision for a gradual, step by step transition to democracy. Last but not least, they could not agree among themselves on a feasible platform of economic and political reform. The mass nature of the reform movement and the broad coalition it brought to power concealed deep divisions and differences of opinion within the reform camp itself, and in the society at large.

Charles Tilly is right to note that 'contested elections' encourage social movements in

several ways. They magnify the importance of numbers, and the space to practice the right to speak and assemble is broadened as a result of such elections. They also polarize public opinion on the basis of attitudes toward rival political programs to govern the country (Tilly, 2003: 25). Yet, to sustain the social movements over time requires other resources such as organization, disciplined personnel, effective diagnostic and prescriptive framing, and some degree of systematic connection to the social bases of the popular movement that has emerged during the election competition. Reformists lacked these resources.

#### **The Honeymoon**

After the surprise victory of Khatami many things changed for the better in a short period. Iran's regional and international standing improved considerably. Better relations with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states helped resolve issues inside OPEC and agreements reached over production quotas, combined with higher demand for oil and the escalating political troubles in Iraq made it possible for oil prices to jump above \$20 per barrel. The dispute with E.U. over Salman Rushdi was resolved and relations with Britain returned to normal. The E.U. started a 'constructive dialogue', not so much 'critical' this time, with Iran over political and trade issues. Khatami even started a 'dialogue with the 'American people' when he

called for pulling down ‘the wall of distrust’ between the two nations in an interview with the CNN in the first few months of his presidency. The response from the U.S. government was not enthusiastic at first, when the Clinton administration continued with sanctions against Iran. The mere rhetorical wishing well for the reformists in Iran only played into the hands of the opposition faction that portrayed these statements by the leader of ‘World Arrogance’ as an indication of ‘imperialist designs’ to win over the hearts of the ‘naïve local liberals’ in Iran.

Only toward the end of the second term of the Clinton Administration, the U.S. secretary of state made a speech in which she expressed regret about past U.S. interferences in Iran’s affairs, including staging the August 1953 coup d’etat against the popular prime minister, Mohammad Mosaddeq, and selling arms to the Shah’s regime during the 1970s while turning a blind eye to his record of human-rights violations. This message, like that of Khatami’s earlier on, did not make any breakthroughs for it got caught in the crossfire during the intensified battle between reformists and conservatives over domestic political issues.

Perhaps the most important of Khatami’s achievements was the open atmosphere his victory created for the emergence of a free press and criticism. A year into his presidency, the circulation figure of Iranian newspapers more

than doubled to reach two million copies per day and, in the months after the exposure of the involvement of rouge agents of the Ministry of Intelligence in the murder of political dissidents in the fall of 1998, it reached almost three millions.

This event, which was a result of Khatami’s personal insistence on transparency, brought him and his reformist political allies great credibility. As a result of this increased popularity reformists won landslide victories in municipal (1998) and parliamentary (1999) elections.

### **Reformist Strategies**

In the first two years, the reformists’ main strategy was termed ‘pressure from below, bargaining at the top’. Bargaining at the top was left to Khatami, whom in good faith tried to convince the conservative leadership that democracy and the rule of law are the best guaranties for the long-term security and survival of the state. His style of negotiation combined private talks with top-level power holders.

Pressure from below meant two things in principle: exposure of wrong doings through media campaigns made possible by the increasing availability of a free press, and controlled protest by the student movement that was the only organized, albeit very loosely, organ of the reform movement.

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This arrangement seemed to work for a year or so, but with the attack on student dormitories and the subsequent arrests and court cases brought against student activists, and the mass closure of the reformist press and the virtual dismantling of the media infrastructure of the reform movement over time, it was clear that this strategy had reached its limits of effectiveness.

In the summer of 1999, all hopes shifted to the parliament which was controlled by a wide reformist majority. The reformist parliament, in spite of the many setbacks that blocked effective democratic legislation, brought unprecedented transparency to the workings of the state machinery in Iran.

The sixth parliament passed legislations that have long-term consequences in terms of policy. Iran's last Foreign Investment Act dated back to 1950s and previous efforts to change it had all faced strong resistance by beneficiaries of trade and other economic monopolies in the state apparatus. This law, at least in formal legal terms, provides a much more practical framework for foreign financing and transfer of modern technology.

The parliament also passed legislation on the functioning of economic trades and corporations (*Ghanoon-e Nezam-e Senfi*) that relaxes much of government interference in the business and professional life of middle class entrepreneurs, engineers, legal consultants, nurses, and chartered accountants.

In terms of budgetary disciplines, the parliament introduced measures to regulate oil-revenue spending by the government by, among others, the creation of a 'Foreign Currency Reserves Account' that sets annual limits to spending of variable oil income due to price fluctuations in the world market. Laws were passed that regulate the amount of deficit spending, and cheap bank loans to state-owned firms.

Yet, the main pieces of political reform legislation by the parliament were blocked by the Guardian Council. The main bills in this respect were the bill to amend the electoral law that took away the veto power of the Council of Guardians to block laws passed by the parliament, and another bill that allowed the president to issue 'constitutional warnings' against violations of the constitution and gave him the authority to take those cases to independent courts, known as the Presidential Powers Bill. Bills that abolished discrimination against women were also vetoed.

By the summer of 2001, even after the landslide victory of Khatami in his second term of office with close to 70 percent of the popular vote, it was clear that the strategy combining public opinion pressure and bureaucratic bargaining at the top had exhausted all its energies, and this became clear in a period of two years when Khatami's 'Twin Bills', amendment of electoral laws and the Presidential Powers Bill, could not pass.

A change of strategy was in order, but reformists could never form a consensus on a coherent plan of action since then. Two other strategies were widely discussed at the time. One was Akbar Ganji's the Republican Manifesto. Ganji's main point of departure was a critique of the theoretical basis of the political reform movement in Iran. Religious intellectuals had tried for a century to reconcile religion and democracy, but in his opinion this project had reached a dead end. It is not intellectuals' duty to reform religious teachings in a way that it becomes compatible with democracy. Intellectuals are not, in the end, to decide what religion is and what its true meanings and teachings are. They do not have the authority to do so. The duty of intellectuals is to push for democracy as a program that regulates interactions in politics. The democratic project should be advanced independent of religion (Ganji, 2002).

This was a critique of Khatami's 'religious democracy' thesis, and in practice it meant non-obedience to present laws and civil disobedience tactics for a gradual, non-violent change of the political system through the force of pressure exerted by civil society organizations and dissident intellectuals. The fact that there are not much of those organizations around in a rentier state did not concern Ganji's theory.

An alternative strategy was proposed by Abbas Abdie, a well-known political activist and social researcher, who called for 'exodus from the state'.

Abdie's thesis revolves mainly around the notion of a 'lack of balance' between power and responsibility in the power structure of Iran. The unelected parts of the power structure have concentrated all powers under their control without being accountable for their decisions. The current impasse in Iran is not a legal one. It is political in nature. The conservative camp cannot be persuaded through 'legal reasoning' that power should be accountable and to be legitimate it should be based on popular consensus. Since only force can change the current balance of power between the reformists and the conservatives, and since reformists do not wish to resort to violence under any circumstances, the only way out of the current impasse is to resign, en masse, from all government responsibilities and let the conservatives deal with all the responsibilities of running the government and be accountable to people (Abdie, 2003: 77-81).

In practice, this meant calling for a popular referendum on some form of amendment to the present constitution that took away all forms of veto power and paved the way for full popular sovereignty. The least this strategy could achieve, in Abdie's view, was the fact that it

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could save the reform movement as a credible force for the future.

These debates on these strategies dragged on without producing any broad consensus in Iran. The popularity of the reformists withered away. Reformists lost their majorities in the parliament and in municipal councils in large cities in elections that a high percentage of people decided not to participate, and finally in the 2005 presidential election. International events played a role too in sealing the fate of the reform movement. The events of September 11, 2001 and the 'Axis of Evil' rhetoric of the U.S. government increasingly acquired a 'regime change' tone, at least as it was interpreted inside Iran by many in the government and the opposition.

This brought a dilemma for reformists as to what could be their reasonable choice. Historically, they were the children of the 1979 revolution and they could not side with any foreign power to overthrow the Islamic Republic.

Khatami never was a radical politician and he mainly wanted to bring a human face to the system, and now every radical move that could cause social unrest could be interpreted as a national security threat.

Once again the 'choice between foreign domination and domestic status quo' was imposed on the Iranian psyche.

Khatami's response was gradual retreat from his main previous promises. He turned cynic in

his speeches and mocked the president in the Islamic Republic as a mere 'logistics manager' (*Tadaarokaatchi*). He also blamed, on occasions, the reformist parliament for some MPs 'extremist remarks' on the separation of state and government, and reformist intellectuals for their views on secularization and liberalism. This further eroded his popularity among some segments of the population. While Iranian society once again, and certainly for not a long time, seemed to have turned anti-political, the official legitimacy constructing discourses have shifted to state authority and national security. Conservative candidates in the presidential election emphasized rebuilding national authority and national security through 'managed development'.

### **Conclusion**

There are three 'absences' that characterize Iranian politics at this time. With the (temporary or permanent?) end of the reform movement, the first absence is that of a mobilizing discourse.

'Democracy' replaced the development and economic reconstruction discourse in the period leading to the reform era. But as the failure of the reform movement clearly showed, in the absence of political actors based in clear material interests that bind groups for reasons other than mere temporary political alliances,

democracy is too broad a discourse to form lasting political identities.

In fact, one of the sources of conflicts and schisms within the reform movement itself was the confusion over what democracy is and what it means to be a democrat in a state of populist mobilization. One of the things democracy is, other than philosophical theories about individual rights, is enjoying rights to be represented at the polity level and to participate in politics as groups. Reformists groups, *and*, ironically, the more radical secular opposition groups, remained groups based in intellectual spaces all along the years since May 1997. Not even till very recently, anyone spoke of class-based representation, or representation on the basis of some societal relation with a base. Reformists, and others opposing the conservative power, always claimed to represent 'the people'. This meant farmers and workers, students, teachers, industrial capitalists and small merchants, and virtually all groups in society. While unemployment rate rose from about 10 percent to 15 percent during the reform era no one claimed to represent the unemployed.

It seems one of the lessons of the reform era is the necessity of adding 'prefixes' to democracy and working on social-democratic, or liberal-democratic, or even Islamic-democratic for that matter, programs that could represent very different material interests. This is so, mainly because the main weakness of the reform movement came exactly from where its strength was, i.e. very broad

popular discontent and a very broad coalition of forces that could not agree on any minimum platform of action. This is the main reason why there was no consensus from the beginning on whether a pact formula works best for Iran's political reform, or a reform movement based on mass mobilization, or civil disobedience tactics.

The second absence is that of a credible political actor. With the popular trust and widespread hope enjoyed by the reformists gone, there is no political actor in the short run to fill the void.

This actor would not emerge unless the elitist political culture of the Iranian opposition is replaced by a political culture that looks to organizing interests at the society level as the main source and resource in the struggle for political power. The rentier state legacy portrays the state as the main agent of effective and long-term social change. This glorification of the state has lured many intellectuals and activists into the idea that conquering the state is the panacea to all problems of Iranian society, in spite of all the rhetoric about the necessity of organizing civil society.

Almost all intellectuals talk about what 'the state' or 'the country' should do, while they cannot organize small groups that could, over time, develop into something that could force that state to do what a majority of people want. Reformists preferred to fight, at times very bravely of course, 'on behalf' of people.

### *Reform Era in Iranian Politics*

In the absence of the two very important resources mentioned above, the third absence is the absence of ‘political interest’ on the side of large segments of the Iranian people especially the younger generations.

Perhaps another lesson to be learnt is that mobilization focused on strictly political issues cannot endure for ever. As Alberto Melucci has shown in his various works on social movements there is a link that connects everyday life to those more organized and visible forms of mobilization. Political identities start from an embryonic stage that is not seen through the lens of theories that focus on the polity level (Melucci, 1996).

This embryonic stage of development captures the everyday forms of resistance against the dominant political ideology. At this stage, identity construction relies heavily on the production of meanings, and on creating new symbols that challenge the hegemony of the dominant cultural models. Islamic Reformists and their secular counterparts have not been able to connect to this level of life in Iran. Nor have they focused on societal, group-interests that could form the basis of trade union or corporatist solidarities. Without the force of organized mobilization, the vacuum created by legitimation deficits has usually been filled by eruptions of mass, populist, participation followed by periods of apathy and despair.

The other point that many of Iranian reformists failed to note, but should be included in the

discussions of the structuralists, is known under the heading of “alternative forces and the possibility of return (to power),” in the so-called “passage literature.” Based on this, the legitimacy crisis by itself does not cause democratic reform; and as research has shown –and some emphasize it– what guarantees the stability or instability of a regime is not its legitimacy or illegitimacy, but presence or absence of alternative forces and suitable structural conditions (Schmitter & Donell, 1986:51, 52).

It was also clearly stated that “passage” is not a guaranteed process and can return to the previous state; and also even in case of success, its consequences depend on a combination of structural causes and behavior of engaged forces in this process and the configuration of forces at the beginning. It might be possible to represent these findings based on the kind of interaction among different forces and their strategies in a chart (See: Figure 1).

Some of the reformist believed that the reformism process is irreversible. In their opinion one can and should pass through this stage. This passage in its radical form included going beyond Khatami and even achieving a kind of non-religious republic. This approach could not choose a strategy that possesses operational capabilities in the area of social possibilities, but as a kind of division in the reformist front had a considerable effect on the train of events.

**Notes**

1. For a list of items, factor structure and factor loadings see appendix 1.

**Appendix**

The following are some of the findings of the two waves of the *National Survey of Values and Attitudes in Iran*, conducted in 2001 and 2003. This is the best available source of data on public opinion in Iran after the revolution. Unfortunately, there were no such surveys conducted before the revolution. Results have been published as:

Office of National Projects, (2001 and 2003), *Values and Attitudes of Iranians*, 4 Vols. Tehran: Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance.

Some people think that at the moment the rights of people with no connections or money are ignored. Do you agree or disagree? (percentages)		
	2003	2001
Disagree	12.3	10.8
Undecided	7.1	7
Agree	80.6	82.3

In your opinion, if someone's rights are denied in this country, to what extent can he/she get them back through legal means?		
	2003	2001
Very little	44.1	311.1
Undecided	40.8	19.7
Very much	15.1	49.1

In your opinion, to what extent does the law apply equally to officials and to ordinary people?		
	2003	2001
Very little	60.4	55.4
Somewhat	31.3	16.2
Very much	8.3	28.3

In your opinion, has the gap between the rich and the poor increased compared to 5 years ago, or decreased?		
	2003	2001
Increased	87.9	77.2
Decreased	7.4	14.3
Hasn't changed	4.7	8.6

Do you think the gap between the rich and the poor will increase or decrease in the next 5 years?		
	2003	2001
Will increase	86.8	74.7
Will decrease	8.1	7.7
Won't change	5.1	17.7

**Factor Analysis:**

The following tables are factor loading matrix for political- attitude items asked in the two waves of NSVA. (Extraction Method: Principal Axis Factoring. Rotation Method: Promax with Kaiser Normalization)

**Structure Matrix and Factor loadings for political legitimacy, NSVA1**

	Factor				
	1	2	3	4	5
Can get your rights through law	.429	.480	.617	.456	.351
Law the same for officials and ordinary people	.411	.464	.714	.434	.329
Government treats all the same	.443	.497	.693	.459	.295
Government heeds public opinion	.544	.636	.575	.530	.243
Rating gov success: security/order	.528	.519	.481	.695	.217
Rating gov success: welfare	.454	.528	.513	.753	.344
Rating gov success: respecting law	.549	.566	.576	.792	.313
Rating gov success: defend freedom	.463	.637	.498	.606	.249
Respondent follows political news	8.032E-02	7.168E-02	1.307E-02	9.202E-02	-.012
How much people can criticize government	.425	.668	.496	.457	.253
Possibility of investment in economy	.419	.562	.433	.455	.242
Trust in government parliament	.787	.551	.492	.522	.227
Trust in government state broadcasting	.656	.642	.499	.461	.238
Trust in government ministry interior	.829	.534	.485	.500	.215
Trust in government judiciary	.760	.701	.610	.520	.278
Trust in government ministry culture	.643	.360	.351	.379	.153
Trust in government guardian council	.751	.737	.569	.490	.246
No money no rights	.255	.338	.468	.295	.545
Poor get poorer	.199	.249	.338	.269	.793
No meritocracy	.206	.267	.389	.220	.333
No high posts for ordinary people	.174	.242	.340	.181	.305
Poor rich GAP in 5YRS	.188	.201	.268	.233	.484
Limits of legal party activity	.383	.633	.394	.388	.186

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## دوره اصلاحات در سیاست ایران

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مشروعیت سیاسی از مفاهیم بنیادین نظریه پردازی سیاسی معاصر است. در توضیح این مفهوم، دسته ای از نظرات، متأثر از وبر، بر روی نقش باورهای سیاسی شهروندان تأکید می کند. اما نظرات آکادمیک متأخر ضمن توجه به مباحث ساختارگرایان با اشاره به عوامل سیاسی، نقش کنش آنان را مد نظر قرار می دهند. این مقاله، با محور قراردادن این مفهوم، اوضاع اقتصادی-اجتماعی ایران در دهه ۱۳۷۰ را بررسی و زمینه های روی کار آمدن اصلاح طلبان را نشان می دهد. در دنباله، استراتژی اصلاح طلبان، به مثابه عوامل سیاسی، بررسی و نقاط ضعف و قدرت شان به بحث گذاشته می شود و دلیل عمده شکست آنان مطرح می گردد.

واژگان کلیدی: مشروعیت، اصلاحات، شرایط اقتصادی-سیاسی ایران.

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