

## International ramifications of the “Reformists” triumph in the recent Iranian elections

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**Abstract:** As a result of the globalization processes, national elections often have considerable influence on a state’s foreign policy and international relations. This is particularly true for the states with geopolitically strategic locations and in control of vital resources. The Islamic Republic of Iran is one of the largest states in the Middle East in terms of area and population. It is the second largest oil producing country with a commanding control over the strategic Persian Gulf waterway. With over 65 million inhabitants and billions of dollars annual hard currency exchange, it is also a dynamic trade partner in the global economy. In 1997, Iranians elected Mohammad Khatami, a moderate cleric as the president, with a landslide victory. They also voted overwhelmingly in favor of the “reformist” political groups in the February 2000 parliamentary elections. The triumphant president and the reformists in the parliament (Majles) promised a new era in national democracy and substantial improvements in the foreign policy. This study examines the ramifications of the “reformists” victory over the “conservatives” in the presidential and parliamentary elections for Iran’s foreign policy and international relations since 1997. So far, mainly because of power struggles between the reform-minded and the hardliner groups, the government’s success in ending Iran’s international isolation and re-establishing full integration into the global economy and political system has fallen short of its potentials and expectations. Possible changes in the internal Iranian political system and the international situations in the new millennium are also discussed.

## **Introduction**

In the last several decades, the Iranian internal political events have often involved other states, sometimes with far-reaching consequences (Ghods, 1989). Iran is one of the largest states in the Middle East with a population of more than 65 million and a commanding control over the strategic Persian Gulf waterway. It is the second largest oil exporting country in the world, producing 3.7 million barrels per day, more than half of which is exported. Iran is also an active partner in the global economy in areas of industrial technology, communication equipment, military hardware, and foodstuffs. A stable and prosperous Iran can contribute to the peace and stability of the Middle East region. After almost two decades of enduring sanctions and isolation, Iran is trying to enter the international scene with a new image. The election of Mohammad Khatami, a reformist as the president in May 1997, promised a new era in national democracy and improvements in the international relations. The impact of Iran's presidential (1997) and parliamentary (2000) elections on the state's foreign policy is the focus of this paper.

## **Backgrounds**

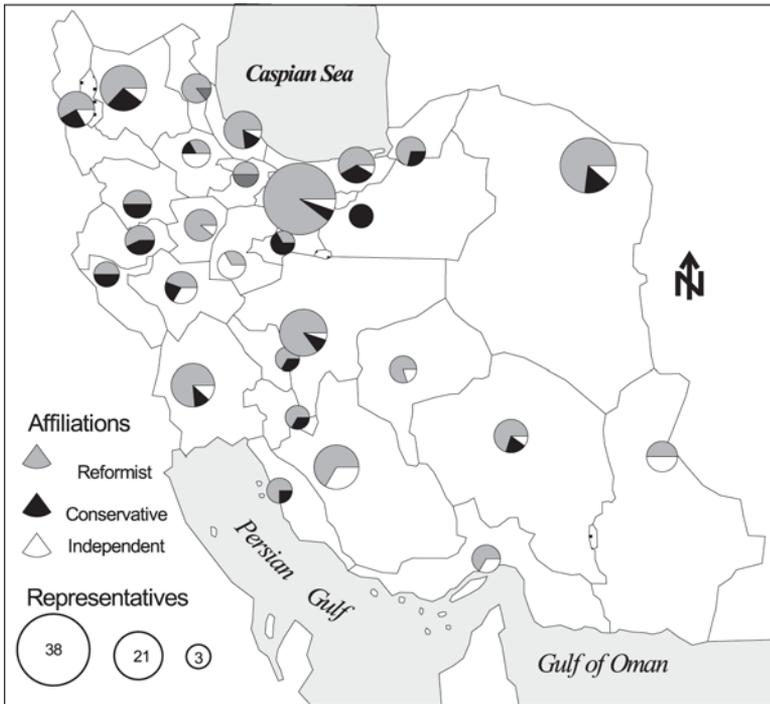
Iran's first experience with popular political election was as a result of success in the constitutional movement of 1906-11. After more than two thousand years of absolute monarchy, the political system was changed to a constitutional monarchy. However, the monarchs (shah/king) rarely allowed the first constitution to be fully implemented. The 1979 Revolution, for the most part, was a reaction to decades of interference by the government in the constitutional rights of people to hold free and fair election of their representatives.

The advent of the Islamic Republic of Iran put an end to the monarchy, but the theocratic nature of the regime adopted a "unique brand of democracy" which is different from those practiced by the European states and North America (Takeyh, 2000). In the Islamic Republic, the ultimate power is in the hands of the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenie, who supports the conservative groups. He has the ultimate power and is not responsible to anyone

or limited by any laws (Hunter, 1992, p. 18-23). He is not appointed and his responsibilities are not clearly defined, nonetheless he has a commanding influence in matters of religious law and national affairs. Another layer of political authority is the Guardian Council, which can reject legislation approved by a majority of Majles (Parliament) representatives if it decides that they do not confirm to the rigid definition of Islam. Thus, the powers of presidency are sharply limited by the Iranian constitution, which entrusts commands of the police and armed forces, as well as control of the judiciary, to the supreme clerical leader. At present, the conservatives also control the state's powerful broadcasting systems.

Since 1979, Iran has held twenty elections including four presidential elections. The two previous presidents relinquished their powers after the period stipulated in the constitution. This is in sharp contrast to other Middle Eastern republics such as Egypt, Libya, Iraq, and Syria where presidents have managed to stay in power for life. The relative openness of recent elections is further proof that the Islamic Republic is one of the most pluralistic countries in the region. The elections have been relatively free of serious fraud allegations and public participation and engagement have been unprecedented. The election for the Sixth Islamic Consultative Assembly (Majles) was held in February 2000. In this election 83% of the eligible voters (38.7 million) cast their votes to elect 290 deputies (Maloney, 2000). Since the minimum age of eligibility for voting is 16 years, the youth along with women were the most significant groups to vote. The pattern of support for the reformist is not uniform among the 28 provinces (Figure 1). In addition to the core-periphery variations, large urban centers also voted for reforms. Even Qom City, the center of religious seminaries and a stronghold of conservatives elected one reformist and two conservatives. The five officially recognized religious minorities each elected one representative. The Zoroastrians and Jews have one representative each; Assyrian and Chaldean Christians collectively have one representative; and the Armenian Christians of the south and the north each have one representative.

The president is elected directly by the electorates for a four-year term and it is possible to be reelected for a second term. President Mohammad Khatami was elected with a landslide in 1997.



**Figure 1:** Number of representatives and their political affiliations in the 2000 elections.

He is considered the leader of the “reformist” political groups in comparison to the “conservatives” who support hardliners in state affairs. The reformists’ strong showing at the presidential ballot boxes was repeated in the local elections held in 1999 and the parliamentary elections of February 2000 (Abdo, 1999). These elections have brought some of the differences in ideology and approaches to governance to the surface of the political arena. This study examines the ramifications of the reformists’ triumph in the presidential and parliamentary elections for Iran’s foreign policy and international relations since 1997. These election outcomes are significant not only for Iranian society and politics but also for the region and beyond.

## **Role of the President**

Because of the many layers of the power structure, especially the role of the supreme leader and the Guardian Council, the president and parliament are hampered from initiating and implementing fundamental reform policies. Khatami's government has made instituting a "rule of law" one of his political priorities. Although the President is still popular inside and outside of the country, he has had only a limited success in energizing the national economy and improving Iran's international relations. He blames the conservatives for lack of success in fulfilling his obligations and progress in his economic development programs. On November 26, 2000, the president, addressing a conference on the constitution expressed his frustration by saying: "I declare that after three and half years as president, I don't have sufficient powers to implement the constitution, which is my biggest responsibility. In practice, the president is unable to stop the trend of violations or force the implementation of the constitution" (Agence France Presse, Nov. 26, 2000). Since April 2000, the judiciary, which is controlled by hardliners, has closed down 30 publications—all but one of them pro-reform newspapers. Khatami said that the closed-door, no-jury courts that were being used to try journalists and political activists were an example of how the constitution was being trampled.

The conservatives' tendency toward economic and political isolation at a time of growing globalization trends also hinder the country from achieving tangible economic development. Consequently, there are a great number of disillusioned Iranian youth who may spread the recent isolated unrest to a dangerously wider circle. Lack of economic opportunities and double-digit unemployment rate force thousands of Iranians to seek work and residency outside of the country. After more than two decades, still Iran is among the top ten countries with the highest origins of refugees and asylum seekers in the United States, Canada, and Europe (Yungk, 2000).

## **The Parliament**

The parliament has a significant role in the foreign affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Articles 77 and 82 of the constitution state that the Majles must approve international treaties, protocols, contracts, and agreements. Employment of foreign experts is forbidden, except in cases of necessity and with the approval of the parliament. According to the Constitution, the Majles is the main institution conducting the Islamic Ummah (community) towards independence, growth, and freedom. It is also entitled to obstruct 'infiltration of imperialism' by approving or disapproving all political, economic, and cultural relations with foreign countries.

In order to attract foreign capital investment, the new parliament passed a landmark trade law. Since 1950s the laws have prohibited foreigners from holding more than 49 percent of companies in Iran. The new law permits ownership of over 50 percent and the government guarantees the foreign investments against nationalization and takeover. During late August 2000, Karrubi, the head of the Majles and pro-reform cleric was in the New York City for a UN visit. He organized a meeting with the major US oil corporations to invite them to invest in Iran's oil and gas industry. However, continued internal power struggles and the ensuing failed Arab-Israeli Peace process prevented Iran from attracting any substantial foreign investment (Gasirowski, 2000). Although the reformists are in a majority in the Sixth Parliament, still they are unable to support the President to muster enough power to implement his policies. The legislators are also subject to the power of the supreme leader and the Guardian Council members.

The new Majles has approved several socially significant pieces of legislation such as raising the age at first marriage to 16 for girls and 18 for boys and the right to have a lawyer present in court plus it intends to modify the penal code put in place by conservatives in 1996. The remainder of this study is devoted to the foreign policy and international relations of Iran since the election of President Khatami.

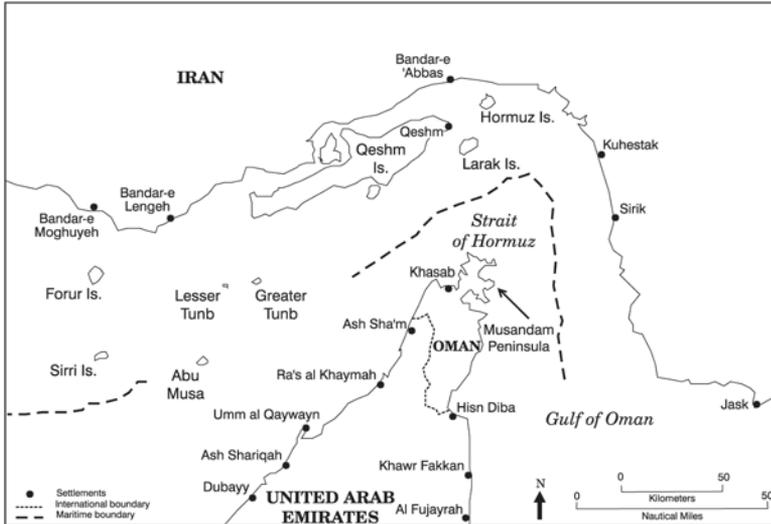
## International Relations and Foreign Policy

President Khatami suggested to the United Nations General Assembly to designate the year 2001 as the “*International Year of Dialogue among Civilizations*.” Following its approval by the Assembly, a new center with the same name was created in Tehran to promote the President’s foreign policy of dialogue and peaceful co-existence along with mutual respect and sovereign equality of states. A series of events since the 1979 revolution led to Iran’s isolation at the international scene. In an effort to end the country’s international isolation, Tehran hosted the Eighth Summit of the Islamic Conference Organization (OIC) in 1997 (Ramazani, 1998). As a show of support for the newly elected moderate reformist, 56 heads of Islamic states including the Saudis, Egyptians, Iraqis, and Palestinians attended the meeting and elected Khatami as the president for 1997-2000. So far president Khatami has visited Rome, where he met Pope John Paul II, France, Japan, Qatar, Kazakhstan, Venezuela, and the United States to attend the UN Millennium Summit.

### a. The Arab World

The revolutionary Pan Islamic rhetoric uttered by the Shiite clerics alarmed the Sunni governments of the region leading to Iraqis invasion of Iran in 1980. During Khatami’s government the relations between Iran and Iraq have improved somewhat, despite major problems such as unresolved border disputes, prisoners of war (POW), Iran’s demands for war reparations, and the presence of dissident groups in both countries. In recent years both governments have returned hundreds of POWs, pilgrimage to the holy Shiite shrines of Karbala and Najaf is resumed, and high-ranking government officials have visited the capitals in search of avenues to reduce tensions. Although the overall relations between these archenemies are improving, substantial problems still remain to be resolved.

The relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have also notably improved (Ramazani, 1998). Saudi Arabia and Iran have better relations on many fronts; especially by cooperating at the OPEC meetings on oil export quotas and pricing matters. A



*Figure 2: The disputed islands of Abu Musa, and Greater and Lesser Tunbs.*

thorny issue is a dispute between Iran and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) over the islands of Greater and Lesser Tunbs and Abu Musa, near the Strait of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf (Figure 2). Mehr summarizes the current diverging points of views as follows: "Iran has always maintained that the question of the three islands -- Abu Musa and the Tunbs -- is purely an Iranian domestic matter and that the Arab League, the Gulf Cooperation Council (G.C.C.) or the U.N. have no jurisdiction over it. The United Arab Emirates continues to insist that the matter be referred to the International Court in The Hague, or submitted to international arbitration" (Mehr, 1997, p. 214). Although the dispute over the islands has the potential of causing open hostilities between Iran and UAE, the existing economic and cultural ties between the two countries, despite occasional tough rhetoric, remain strong (Amirahmadi, 1996). In 1998-99, UAE ranked first among the Asian countries in import of non-oil commodities (28%) from Iran (SCI, Table 20-10).

The friendly relationships between Iran and Syria, Lebanon, and Palestinian people continue. Iran helps the Palestinians' cause by supporting resistance groups in southern Lebanon, providing financial aid and medical care to the Palestinian refugees and

victims, and urging the OIC members to act more decisively against Israeli occupation. However, the reformist government of Iran seems less vocal in its opposition to Arafat's efforts to reach a peace deal with the Israelis. An effort is under way to improve the ties with Egypt as well.

### **b. Non-Arab Middle East**

The relationship between Iran and Afghanistan is special in several ways. First, Iran has tried to resolve the conflict between the Taliban and opposition groups with little success. Second, there are still more than one and half million Afghan refugees in Iran whose fates are uncertain. Third, Afghanistan is the major producer and trafficker of all kinds of narcotics into and through Iran to the region. So far, Iran has failed to stop this flow that is a major source of inter-state difficulties.

Turkey and Iran have maintained friendly relations despite occasional differences in a number of regional issues. President Demirel's visit to Iran is a sign of keeping the mutually beneficial relations alive (Aras, 2000). On the other hand, Iran and Israel are not on good terms. A passport issued by Iran prohibits the holder from traveling to Israel. Furthermore, the emergence of a military alliance involving Turkey, Israel, and the United States is watched with apprehension in the region. The alliance constitutes a strong military power centered on the Eastern Mediterranean Sea, which makes Arab and non-Arab states, such as Greece, Iran, and Afghanistan, feel very uneasy.

### **c. East Asia**

Because of Western sanctions, Iran has turned to Asian countries, especially China, Japan and the Koreas for assistance in technology and investment. Japan has had a long history of financial involvement in Iran's petrochemical industry. This trade partnership was given an added boost by the president's visit to Japan and the signing of a deal to give priority negotiation rights to exploit Iran's recently discovered massive oil field at Azadegan. Similarly, China continues to be a source of military hardware, industrial products, and technological "know-how." South and North Korea are other beneficiaries of sanctions against Iran. South Korean car

manufacturing, for example, supplies a lion's share of the state auto industries. North Korea provides military hardware.

#### **d. Russian Federation**

Historically, Iran has always been wary of a strong military power at its northern borders. Since the revolution, an ever-present slogan has been that "neither West nor East" domination will be tolerated. Iran has kept its friendly but distant relationship with Russia and its former republics. In recent years, trade with Iran has been very helpful to the troubled Russian economy. Their most visible presence is in the commercial air travel, where a number of rented Russian planes are operating between Iranian cities. They have also been involved in Iran's nuclear energy industry by providing technology, inputs, and training of the technicians. However, despite billions of dollars of investment and decades of delays, the nuclear power project is still far from completion. Bilateral treaties on energy resources, and fishing and pollution control in the Caspian Sea region are some of the other areas of close cooperation. When Khatami was the head of OIC, he frequently expressed the organization's concern for the plight of Muslim Chechens who resisted Russian domination. Of course, his efforts and other national and international organizations proved to be ineffective in protecting them from Russian military assaults. Iran maintains a close relation with the former Soviet Republics in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Khatami has already exchanged official visits with many of them. Since most of them are landlocked, their potential for further cooperation and transit trade through Iran is substantial.

#### **e. Europe**

During the last two decades the European Union (EU) members have expanded their economic ties with Iran. In the absence of the US, some EU members found greater chances to increase their exports and imports. A recent example is France's TotalFinaElf oil company signing a deal worth \$550m contract for the Siri oil fields that could have gone to the US oil firm Conoco (Kerr, 2000). In the fiscal year 1998-99, 52% of Iranian imports originated in Europe, 33% in Asia, 11% from Americas mainly from Argentina, Brazil,

and Canada (Statistical Center of Iran, 2000). As a part of their general policy of openness, the reformists are interested in expanding foreign trade and attracting investments. Khatami's visits to Europe are indicative of the government desire for greater international cooperation and commercial exchange. On the other hand, the conservatives are determined to keep Western states out of Iran.

#### **f. The United States**

Iran-US relations have been the toughest to improve for both countries. The United States claims that Iran's policies and involvement in three activities harm its national interests: desire to have weapons of mass destruction, support of terrorism, and lack of support for the Middle East Peace process. Of course, Iran rejects these as allegations and states its own reasons for the failed relations. They include US's interference in Iran's national political process since the 1950s (Risen, 2000), decades of economic sanctions, frozen assets, and partiality in the Middle East Peace process (Fuller, 1998). Nevertheless, since Khatami's presidency cultural and sporting exchanges are promoted, the United States has lifted its embargo on imports of non-oil products, and American tourists and scientists visit Iran (Eiland, 1998; Ramazani, 1998; Sciolino, 2000). Yet, the general sanctions on oil are still in effect and opening of embassies is not on the agenda.

The reformists realize that in the growing global economy, lack of access to a huge market such as the US hampers their national development efforts. On the other hand, there is a growing realization in Washington that Iran, a major regional power that straddles the oil and gas wealth of the Middle East and Central Asia, is no longer a country it can afford to neglect. American businesses have lost many opportunities to invest in the Iran's lucrative energy resources, and export industrial and food products. American oil giants such as Mobil, Conoco, and Chevron all lobbied the Clinton administration to improve relations by lifting the ban on investments in Iran (Washington Post, April 9, 1999). Their argument along with some of the European states (e.g., British) is that two decades of sanctions has been ineffective in changing Iran's behavior (Amuzegar, 1997). An alternative approach is engaging

rather than continuing failed old policies (Eiland, 1998; Brzezinski, 1997). Besides oil and economic interests, there are over a million Iranian professionals and businesspersons living in the US, as well as many Americans who are interested in the Persian civilization and culture who strongly support closer ties between the two nations. However, in both countries there are groups who do not want the relations improved and so far have been successful in preventing it from happening (Kurzman, 1998).

## Summary

Undoubtedly, the Iranian democracy is going through the growing pains of maturing, mainly because of difficulties in changing a system that is based on religious doctrine. The 1979 constitution was amended in 1989, and it seems to be headed for another overhaul in the coming years. Substantial changes are needed in the distribution of power in the state apparatus. Recently, Khatami complained that the president's power is so limited that he is not able to safeguard the implementation of the constitution or accomplish his development policies. Many Iranians believe that too much power is allocated to the positions of the unelected supreme leader, the Guardian Council, and other unregulated foundations (*bonyads*). The President who is also a cleric and a devout Muslim lamented that "Our country emerged 20 years ago from the weight of dictatorship, but unfortunately we are not yet completely delivered from it, and dictatorship continues to haunt us all" (Agence France Presse, Nov. 30, 2000).

Although Iran's foreign policy, under the reformists, has moved toward the center, it has fallen far short of its potential and expectations. Relations with Israel remains unchanged with little hope for any improvement in the near future. The ties with the US also remain cold, mainly because of severe opposition of conservatives in Iran and some of the American officials. While it is difficult to predict future political events in the Middle East, a resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict could significantly reduce the tension in the region and pave the road to further improvement of Iran's foreign policy (Fuller, 1998). Iran hopes that the Bush-

Chaney team, with close ties to the American oil companies, will lift sanctions against oil imports and investments in Iran. Despite his failure to improve relations with Israel and its strong ally, the US, President Khatami has been successful in reintroducing Iran to the rest of the world with a new image and friendlier posture. Currently Iran has good relations with the major economic powers such as China, Japan, the European Union members, Russia, the Koreas, and Saudi Arabia. Iran is also an active member of the group of Developing Eight Countries (D8), founded in 1997, consisting of Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Turkey. They are determined to accelerate economic integration of member states and double their intra trade volume in the coming five years (Bernama, Feb. 26).

This paper has shown that the results of national elections often influence the international relations of states. The difference for Iran has been a policy of isolation and anti-Western rhetoric versus a policy of cooperation, exchange, and mutual respect. In the prevailing globalization process, the overall trend seems to be toward integration and cooperation, even though the pace may be slow and road often bumpy. Iranian democratic forces are on the move while encountering stiff resistance at every step, yet change in the power structure is imperative if the state is going to prosper in the global economy of the new millenium. The moderate President and the pro-reform Majles representatives struggle to establish a democratic political system where powers remain with the people elected representatives rather than personalities. When they succeed, Iran will be a stronger democracy with a more stable foreign policy and amenable international relations.

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