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WOMEN AND YOUTH MOBILISE IN IRAN

Time for reform of the Islamic revolution

The call for a dialogue with the United States issued by Iran's new president, Mohammad Khatami, at the December summit of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, as well as a rapprochement with the Gulf states, show that important changes are under way in Tehran. Inside the country, Mr Khatami's reforms have the support of civil society, spearheaded by women and the young. But the old guard, led by the Islamic Republic's spiritual guide, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, is, not surprisingly, resisting the change.

By Azadeh Kian-Thiébaud

On 21 October 1997, five months after the presidential election, several thousand students and young people responded to the call by the Islamic Students' Union (*Ettehadieh-e eslami-ye daneshjuyan*) and held a demonstration at the University of Tehran. Heshmatollah Tabarzadi, its leader, publicly declared that the purpose of this political demonstration was to obtain freedom of expression, press freedom and political pluralism. And he drove his point home by proclaiming his support for President Khatami "so that he institutionalises the rule of law and strengthens civil society as he has promised to do".

Mr Tabarzadi was once a militant fundamentalist and ardent supporter of the revolution's supreme Spiritual Leader (currently Ayatollah Ali Khamenei) who, as the senior national figure, takes precedence even over the president of the republic. However, he totally changed allegiance in 1996, when the weekly paper *Payam-e Daneshju* (The Students' Message), of which he was editor-in-chief, was closed down overnight after it exposed a vast network of corruption headed by associates of the traditionalists.

On the day of the student demonstration, this disillusioned Islamist alerted the public to the threats facing the elected president. He believed the danger came from activist groups close to Ali Akbar Nateq-Nuri, the former speaker of the Islamic Parliament, defeated at the last elections, which were acting entirely outside the law. According to Mr Tabarzadi, "the power and impunity of these groups derives from the fact that they are protected by the Leader. They have the power to short-circuit and even neutralise the lawful government's action (1)"

The young unionist questioned the legitimacy of the Leader's power, accused some people of deliberately misreading the constitution and pointed to its weaknesses. Then he openly declared his own objectives: "We demand that the Leader be elected by direct universal suffrage, the term of his mandate limited, his prerogatives clarified and that he be made accountable to parliament."

The views of Mr Tabarzadi, shared by the majority of Iranians, reflect the bitter struggle that broke out in Tehran immediately after the humiliating defeat of the traditionalists at the election on 23 May 1997. Even the general public began seriously to discuss the status of the Leader, a debate until then confined to the clerics and intellectuals who were regarded as the fount of religious knowledge. The traditionalists retaliated immediately. In a communiqué published on 10 November several members of the Qom Seminary Lecturers' Association turned on "anyone who questions the status and power of the Leader of the revolution, the foundation of the Islamic regime". Since then, believers in the Supreme Leader's absolute power have organised a string of demonstrations.

Grand Ayatollah Hosseyn-Ali Montazeri, the main theoretician of the *velayat-e faqih* (concept of the Guardianship of the Jurists) (2) and one-time successor to Ayatollah Khomeini, was placed under house arrest for denouncing the summary execution of his opponents in 1988. Like Ayatollah Azari-Qomi, he has paid dearly for publicly accusing the present Leader of religious incompetence and rejecting the principle of his omnipotence. Both of them regularly come under violent personal attack from demonstrators and receive death threats. The Leader himself wants them brought before the special clerical court.

During the presidential election, at the Leader's instigation, thirty high-ranking clerics, who were members of the Qom Seminary Lecturers' Association, were invited to a meeting where they were to make public pronouncements in favour of a particular candidate. Some of them, who did not believe the clergy should intervene in political matters, refused to attend the meeting. Even the highly conservative Grand Ayatollah Fazel-Lankarani pointed out that the Iranian nation had now grown up and had no need of a Leader to take its decisions for it. But in the end, fourteen of the clerics told the press that Mr Nateq-Nuri was the school of religion's chosen candidate.

This manoeuvre produced an outcry among the clerics concerned. Ayatollah Karimi declared his opposition to the traditionalists' candidate and published the names of the

teaching clerics who shared his views. "Those who pretend that none of the thirty members was against Nateq-Nuri forget that Ayatollahs Fazel, Makarem, Amini, Mas'udi, myself and a few others are also members of that association." Despite attempts at conciliation by some of the clerics, the teachers' association of the Qom school of religion - and the school as a whole - remains marked by this incident.

In his election programme, Mr Khatami attached as much importance to the Muslim religion and morality as to the introduction of a pluralist system, individual and social freedoms, respects for human rights and freedom of the press. Meanwhile, the traditionalists, boasting of the Leader's support, attacked Mr Khatami as a liberal and called on the people to vote against him - just like the foreign opponents of the regime, nearly all of whom called for a boycott of the elections. But, aware of their power, the people gave their own reply. Expressing their will through the ballot box, they showed a political maturity that came as a surprise to many in Iran, as elsewhere. Since the elections, the disputes within the political and religious elite have become increasingly bitter. Although defeated, the supporters of religious autocracy are still trying to retain their hold on society and clinging to the status quo. The victorious reformers remain convinced of the need for a radical change for the regime and believe that is the only way they can hold on to power. Their conviction is justified. By voting for a modernist cleric, who had geared his electoral campaign to civil society and declared his support for the rule of law, the overwhelming majority of Iranians (70% of votes, with a turnout of more than 80%) in effect voted for modernisation. They rejected the social proposals of the traditionalists, who were totally under the control of the Leader, and whose supporters believed him to have the right to "validate the ideas, thoughts and behaviour of the people".

In designating civil society as the only source of political and religious legitimacy, President Khatami has opted for the elective component of the Islamic Republic's political system, rather than its autocratic one. The new president's victory in what his supporters describe as the "second revolution" is due to the fact that, like the religious intellectuals and modernist clerics (3), he is attempting to reconcile Islam with modernity.

Although the traditionalists have lost control of the executive and legislative power, they still control the judiciary, whose head is appointed by the Leader. Astute inquisitors that they are, that is their means of counterattack. The mayor of Tehran, Qolam Hosseyn Karbaschi, is forbidden to leave the country. Some of his close associates, including two district mayors of Tehran accused of corruption and misuse of social benefits, have been given large fines and sent to prison.

This is only the start of the retaliation and struggle between rival factions. For the traditionalists have a majority in several political institutions, such as the Assembly of Experts. Elected by direct universal suffrage every eight years, it appoints and dismisses the Leader. The lack of consensus on the religious and political authority of Ayatollah Khamenei is fuelling rumours that the next assembly, next year, will dismiss him in favour of Akbar

Hashemi Rafsanjani. So it is quite clear why ex-President Rafsanjani is now springing to the defence of the Leader's prerogatives: he is preparing to take over from him.

The Council of Guardians is made up of twelve members, including six clerics appointed by the Leader and six jurists, proposed by the head of the judiciary, and then elected by parliament. The Council monitors compliance of the laws with Islam, checks whether they are constitutional and verifies the credentials of electoral candidates. But it has been weakened by its various abuses of power, as well as the electoral defeat of its candidate at the presidential election.

Then there is the Expediency Council for the Discernment of the Best Interest of the System. This was initially set up to arbitrate in conflicts between the Council of Guardians and the Islamic Parliament, and to advise the Leader. Formerly chaired by the president of the republic, it has managed to evade President Khatami's control. Through a clever manoeuvre, it has fallen into the hands of the traditionalists. A month before the elections, the Leader personally appointed Mr Rafsanjani to chair the Council for a five-year term. In return, the newly promoted chairman appointed Mohsen Reza'i, a bitter adversary of President Khatami, as secretary of the Council. This hostility was not surprising, for in October 1997 Mr Khatami had sacked him from his office as commander-in-chief of the *pasdarans* (Islamic Revolution Guards Corps). This clearly shows how the Council managed to increase its scope and power, at the cost of the constitution and the authority of the elected president (4).

It is not just the future of the factions, but the fate of society as a whole, that is at stake. Nobody knows how the inevitable confrontations that are now brewing will end. It is the people that have created the opening for President Khatami. The question is, to what extent will society prove able to protect this opening, faced with a minority of traditionalists who are on the defensive and prepared to break it up. An analysis of the polls last May is quite instructive.

Of the 238 candidates who were nominated for the presidential election (eight of whom were women), only four were endorsed by the Council of Guardians. Two of them were only acting as fronts: Mohammad Rey-Shahri, founder of the Society for the Defence of the Values of the Islamic Revolution, a former minister of information and security - commonly known as the butcher of Tehran because of his summary executions of opponents - and Reza Zavvare'i, his former assistant. Neither of the two had any credibility in the eyes of the people and they won only 2.4% and 2.2% of votes cast.

The election was fought between Mr Nateq-Nuri and Mr Khatami. And Khatami emerged as the winner because he managed to rally to his cause not just the Islamist left and the modernist right, but also women (5), young people and the secular and religious intelligentsia (including nearly three thousand students at the religious seminaries). By supporting their aspirations, he won their active and mass support. And most intellectuals backed him on account of the pluralist cultural policy he had pursued

when he headed the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (before he was forced to resign in 1992). Women and young people, whose demands are increasingly central to present policies, call Nateq-Nuri and his supporters the "Afghan Talibans", and they mobilised to prevent his election. The young had a decisive role to play in the election, as the Islamic regime had brought the voting age down to sixteen - and 65% of Iranians are under twenty-four.

The commitment of civil society to Mr Khatami, especially the young, has had repercussions within the security forces. In spite of their strong ideological views, many young *pasdaran* and *basij* (volunteer militia) openly declared in petitions and telegrams that they would not automatically support the hierarchy's choice.

The desire for modernisation has spread to every social class, both urban and rural, because the changes brought about by the revolution have profoundly altered society. More than 61% of Iran's 60 million population are now urban dwellers, with all the implications that involves. The literacy rate of women aged between 15 and 49 rose from 28% in 1976 to 65% in 1991 (the most recent figures available), while the average number of children per women fell over the same period from 7.2 to 3.5 (6). To counter a mass rural exodus, measures were taken to modernise rural life by providing a large number of villages with electricity, drinking water, roads, schools, etc. This has gradually closed the gap between town and country.

The large-scale rural literacy and electrification measures carried through by young people employed by the Ministry of Reconstruction Jihad has enabled peasants to acquire radios and televisions. And the written press has also penetrated the rural world. One provincial librarian could not hide his emotion when he told us how his readership now included herdsmen and peasants. So it is hardly surprising that the villagers who went to the polls last May took the trouble to read and discuss the election manifestos of the various candidates.

After his victory, President Khatami paid particular tribute to women, young people and intellectuals for their massive support. Since then, he has continued to repeat the promises he made during his election campaign on the rule of law, a multi-party system, freedom of opinion, the position and role of intellectuals, the access of women to responsible jobs in administrative and political institutions, and measures to fight unemployment, especially youth unemployment. In the event that the hard-liners were to oppose the reforms which most of the country wanted, President Khatami announced that he would go to the people (7). He was counting on popular support when he issued this challenge to his traditionalist enemies.

The elected president's success has led to growing support from independent members of parliament. The current figure is 60, which is 23% of the seats. The parliamentary majority has shifted in favour of the reformers. The Islamic Parliament has approved the cabinet as a whole. This, in spite of the traditionalists' hostility to several members of President Khatami's government - in particular Interior Minister Abdollah

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(1) Conversation between Saviosh Gahzi and Mr Tabarzadi, Persian programme on Radio-France Internationale, 21 October 1997

(2) This doctrine by the "government of the learned" was defended by only part of the Shi'ite hierarchy. According to the doctrine of "Twelver" Shi'ism, after the death of the Prophet Muhammad and the imams who succeeded him, the twelfth and last of the imams did not die but only "withdrew". Pending the return of the "hidden" imam, who was to guide the community of the faithful? According to Ayatollah Khomeini and the supporters of the *velayat-e faqih*, this role went to the *faqih*, the learned one, standing in for the "hidden" imam and delegatee of divine sovereignty.

(3) See "Stratégies des intellectuels religieux et clercs iraniens face à la modernité occidentale" in *Revue française de science politique*, Paris, No 6, December 1997

(4) For the political institutions in general, see Mohammad Hashemi, "Le régime de la république islamique au regard de sa Constitution", and Azadeh Niknam, "Les revers de l'islamisation du droit en Iran post-révolutionnaire" in *Les Cahiers de*

Nuri (Islamic left), Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance Ata'ollah Mohajerani, and Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi (who used to be Iran's representative at the UN).

Mr Nuri and Mr Mohajerani (whose appointment was strongly opposed by the traditionalists) managed to win 60% of the votes cast by members present during a vote of confidence. For the first time, the deliberations were broadcast live on national television. Iranians had a chance to listen to some strong debates, including a speech by Mr Mohajerani, who violently criticised the repressive policies of his predecessor, and made a fervent plea for cultural pluralism and respect for artists and intellectuals.

In President Khatami's new cabinet, which includes several ministers unknown to the general public, his supporters from the Islamic left and the modernist right hold the key portfolios - with one exception. Although Hojjat-ol-islam Qorbanali Dorri-Najafabadi, Minister of Information and Security, officially belongs to the opposite camp, he counts as a moderate among hard-liners. Indeed, his moderate views became clear to all during the election campaign.

A break with political Islam

So far there are no women in government. The president explained that he gave precedence to ability over gender. But he has promised that he will create new vice-ministerial posts, several of which will be given to women. The first woman has now been appointed vice-president of the republic, in charge of protection of the environment. She is Ma'sumeh Ebtekar, aged 36, a doctor of immunology, lecturer at the University of Tarbiyat-e Moddares (Teachers' Training) and co-editor of the women's journal *Farzaneh*. Although it may seem a fairly minor office, her appointment is a significant step forward. Following on her appointment, Zahra Shoja'i, a Muslim militant for women's rights, has become presidential advisor on women's affairs, and other women have been made deputy ministers.

Dr Ebtekar, bilingual in English and French, and a modern and moderate Muslim like all the women in her family, has always preferred the scarf to the chador. She was educated in the United States, where her father was doing a doctorate, before continuing with her own studies at the American school in Tehran. She took an active part in the preparations for the international conference in Beijing in 1995. This increased the anger of the hard-liners, who hotly opposed her appointment. So the first Iranian vice-president has now had to don the chador to appease her detractors.

Contrary to the declared wishes of the Leader, President Khatami has stated on several occasions that he wants Iran to emerge from its isolation and has called for a dialogue between "civilisations". The new president is attempting to normalise his country's relations, in particular with the European Union and the Gulf states. The summit of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference held in Tehran last December and the more open approach to the United States clearly reflect this shift.

l'Orient, to be published in Paris, February 1998

(5) See "Des femmes iraniennes contre le clergé" (available in English, "Iranian women take on the mullahs") in *Le Monde Diplomatique*, November 1996

(6) Marie Ladier-Fouladi, "Iran: pouvoir islamique et baisse de la fécondité" in "Populations, l'état des connaissances", Institut national d'études démographiques - La Découverte, Paris, 1996

(7) *Ettela'at*, Tehran, international edition, 15 August 1997.

But the issue is as much an internal as an external one. For, if Washington continues with its policy of ostracism, it is bound to strengthen the supporters of religious autocracy, at the cost of establishing the rule of law. The real issue of the struggle now taking place in Tehran is how to put an end to the all-pervasive dogma and introduce free, democratic debate. The government of President Rafsanjani was without doubt a major political step forward, which would not have been possible without the contribution of secular intellectuals (some of whom, such as the writers, Sa'idi Sirjani and Amir-Ala'i, paid for the struggle with their lives).

The strong mobilisation of civil society in favour of President Khatami marks a break with political Islam and its partisans. Forty-four years after overthrowing the democratic government of Mohammad Mossadegh, the question is will the United States now respond to the changed circumstances within Iran or take the risk of undermining its new hopes of democracy?

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Translations >>

