CHAPTER 16

IRAN AFTER REVOLUTION
(1979–2009)

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The Revolution

The February 1979 revolution in Iran was a surprise to all its participants, both domestic and foreign. The imperial regime of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi fell in little more than one year of street demonstrations, which during the last months of 1978 had expanded to include general national strikes and armed clashes.

By September 1978, the ad hoc coalition that eventually toppled the imperial regime was dominated by those envisioning the establishment of an Islamic state. Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini was the undisputed leader of the opposition by this time. The coalition was unique in that it included almost all social classes and political forces, whether tied to the Islamists or not, with the possible exception of the upper layer of the Iranian bourgeoisie. Indeed, by the end of 1978, the shah had managed to alienate almost all social groups and classes.

The American election in 1976 led to the January 1977 inauguration of Jimmy Carter, a Democrat with strong convictions regarding worldwide human rights. Carter’s election seems to have had a profound effect on Iranian politics. The shah, always an active supporter of Republican candidates in American politics, perceived President Nixon’s resignation following the Watergate events and President Ford’s defeat by Jimmy Carter to be a weakening of American support for his rule.

With issues of human rights becoming increasingly important in American politics, the shah moved to adapt his regime’s conduct to the new international realities. This is not to suggest that evidence exists of direct U.S. pressure on the shah. With political power and decision making ever more concentrated in the hand
of the shah, any change in his personal political perception of events triggered changes in the political behavior of the imperial regime. Since the 1953 toppling of the nationalist government of Dr. Mohammad Mosaddeq, the shah had come to rely on America for general guidance. Hence, a change in American foreign policy triggered change in Iran by convincing the shah that it was time to reform.

The imperial regime’s moderate and radical opposition soon realized the change in the international and domestic political atmosphere as well. In October 1977, a group of secular intellectuals, lawyers, and judges addressed an open letter to the shah asking the imperial regime to observe the constitution, free political prisoners, and respect political freedoms and human rights. In November 1977, Grand Ayatollah Khomeini, in exile in Najaf in Iraq, wrote a letter to the clergy in Iran encouraging them to recognize the shift in politics and begin writing letters demanding liberties.

Also in November 1977, the shah’s first meeting with President Carter in Washington, D.C., was disrupted by angry Iranian students. The demonstrators, mainly Marxist activist members and supporters of various branches of the Confederation of Iranian Students Abroad, had been active against the imperial regime for years. The shah’s visit to Washington and President Carter’s return visit to Tehran in late December 1977, during which he called the shah’s Iran “an island of stability in one of the more troubled areas of the world,” seems to have had two results as Iran prepared to meet the turbulent days of 1978. First, the shah and President Carter developed a working relationship, and the shah was assured of strong U.S. backing for the imperial regime. Second, the shah reaffirmed his resolve to push for reforms in Iran. Issues such as human rights and political freedoms were discussed, but no apparent pressure was exerted on the monarch.

January 1978 witnessed a gradual speeding up of events, which resulted in outright revolutionary struggle by the summer and the collapse of the imperial regime in February 1979. Although clashes with security forces and the army had been occurring through spring 1978, the shah did not seem alarmed until midsummer 1978. Yet by fall 1978, it appeared as though the shah had lost control of events. From the late summer of 1978, the shah began to increasingly rely on American and British advice by seeking meetings with their ambassadors in Tehran. It seems that the monarch had a difficult time comprehending the revolutionary events and the cause of rapidly expanding popular rage against his rule. Like many Iranians of his generation, the shah was a subscriber to conspiracy theories, which assert that many or all of Iran’s troubles and misfortunes have a foreign element or power behind them. By consulting foreign ambassadors, the shah, unable to understand or believe the revolution, tried to find out why he had fallen from favor with his benefactors and what he could do to remedy the situation.

Throughout the 1970s, the shah and the imperial regime’s ruling elite believed that the armed opposition to the regime, whether Muslim or Marxist, was in fact an “unholy alliance between black and red,” with the backing of the Soviet Union. For that reason, the regime had deployed the entire repressive means of its security forces to crush the communist threat. The shah’s efforts in this respect were largely
successful, and the perceived communist threat, while not eliminated, was contained. Indeed, the revolution was led neither by the armed opposition of the 1970s nor by any Soviet-backed political organization. It was spontaneous in nature and had come under the leadership of radical Islamists led by Grand Ayatollah Khomeini. The imperial regime’s paralysis in confronting the revolution was partially linked to the shah’s disorientation, loss of will, and inability to comprehend the reality of the revolutionary movement confronting his regime. Finally, a factor which played a role in influencing the shah’s state of mind was his battle with leukemia, a secret known to only a few intimates.

The shah’s state of paralysis was partially linked to the inability of his traditional foreign backers and friends to understand the situation and to give him the general advice he needed. Here, the Carter administration’s confused and contradictory policy toward the shah and revolution played a major role in the imperial regime’s demise.

There seem to be three basic reasons for the American failure in Iran. First, as some American policy makers of the time have noted, there was a sharp decline in U.S. intelligence gathering on Iran in late 1970s. This was due to the trust U.S. policymakers put in the shah’s leadership and their belief that Iran was stable. Hence, in order not to alienate the shah and believing all was under control, the United States cut back on its intelligence activity in Iran. The lack of adequate intelligence meant that the American policy makers were unable to realize the seriousness of the situation in time and, even more importantly, had very little information on opposition leaders and the way they operated.

Second, American foreign policy was faced with a number of important foreign policy issues in 1978 (SALT II, the Camp David Accords, etc.), which stretched its resources to the limit. This meant that the Iranian situation did not receive due attention from American policy makers until the revolution was well underway.

Third, among top American policy makers in the State Department and National Security Council, there were two different approaches to events in Iran, which translated into sometimes contradictory advice to the shah, adding to his confusion. In general terms, the difference between the two policies was that the NSC emphasized the U.S. and Western interest in Iran, while the State Department was more preoccupied with promoting democracy in Iran. After September 1978, as the turn of events became more critical, the shah began to receive two sets of contradictory signals from the Americans. The problem was compounded when the U.S. ambassador to Tehran began to lose his respect among top Washington policy makers, making it impossible for the U.S. embassy to devise coherent advice for the monarch.

Once it became clear that the shah’s rule could not be maintained, the two policies became even more divided. The policy proposed by the NSC held that any government in Iran should enter negotiations with the opposition from a point of strength. Accordingly, the Iranian government was constantly urged to show force, and General Robert E. Huyser was sent to Iran to assure the integrity of the imperial
Iranian armed forces. This policy expected the armed forces to stage a coup if the civilian government of Shapur Bakhtiar failed. The State Department policy makers, it seems, had more faith in the Bakhtiar government and wanted the armed forces to continue backing it. This policy was based on the premise that compromise with the opposition was inevitable and the imperial armed forces should maintain their integrity so that in the future they could be used as a counterbalance to the new revolutionary government.

The Soviet Union's reaction to the Iranian revolution was no less confusing and was the result of an utter misunderstanding of realities. The emergence of Islam and the Shi'i clergy at the head of a mass revolutionary movement in Iran took the Soviets by surprise. Up to the end of the 1960s, the Soviet scholars saw little or no progressive role for Shi'i Islam in modern times. These scholars, and indeed the Soviet government, viewed the 1963 uprising against the Shah's reform program as regressive. The Soviet perception of Shi'ism began to change in the 1970s as a new generation of Soviet scholars began to analyze the subject. These scholars began to see some positive role for Islam in modern Iranian history.

The 1970s witnessed a mutually beneficial economic relationship between the Soviet Union and the imperial regime, and politically a cordial state of minidetente existed between the two governments. The shah always suspected and mistrusted the Soviet Union's hidden agenda for Iran, and the Soviet Union, while recognizing the shah as an ally of the West, viewed the imperial regime as stable enough to opt for accommodation rather than confrontation. Based on its analysis of Islam and coexistence with the imperial regime, the Soviet policy makers were very slow in acknowledging the existence of the revolutionary movement and its ideological character. An additional reason for this lack of comprehension by the Soviet Union was, as with the Americans, a sharp decline in its intelligence performance in Iran.

Despite several bloody clashes between the Iranian military and the rising revolutionary movement in the first half of 1978, the Soviet Union initially played down the hegemonic Islamist element in the leadership of the revolution and then was slow in understanding the scope of Khomeini's popularity.

The period after the February 1979 downfall of the shah may be divided into five distinct stages. First came a period of consolidation for the emerging new Islamic state led by Khomeini (1979–81); the second stage was one of repression, international isolation, and continuation of a bloody war with Iraq, ending with the death of Khomeini (1981–89); the third stage, identified with the presidency of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, was one of an attempt at institutionalization of the Islamic republic through reconstruction, continued repression albeit on a lesser scale, and an attempt to end Iran's international isolation (1989–97); the fourth, identified with the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, was one of emergence of a reform movement aiming at establishing the rule of law, civil society, and an Islamic democracy (1997–2004). The fifth stage began with the election of populist-conservative Mahmud Ahmadinejad in 2005 and continued through his tenure to 2009.
The First Stage (1979–81)

The last shah of Iran left the country at the height of revolutionary fervor in January 1979, and the imperial regime collapsed in February. In a referendum in April 1979, an Islamic republic was confirmed by the overwhelming majority of the population over sixteen years of age. The confirmation of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) marked the initial unraveling of the undeclared coalition that was created to overthrow the imperial regime. The fundamental reasons for the polarization of the coalition were, on the one hand, the ultimate goal of the Islamists to consolidate their power modeled on their perception of a Shi'i theocracy, and on the other, an attempt by the opposition to prevent or postpone such consolidation, thus creating the right condition for their own attempt to secure state power.

In preparing for the consolidation of its rule, the new Islamist elite that governed the IRI had two different interpretations of what an Islamic state should look like. During 1979–81, these two interpretations resulted in the gradual formation of two distinct factions sharing the old and new state organs. One faction, which in general terms may be called the Islamic “liberals,” had a more Western-oriented interpretation of an Islamic state. They believed that once the revolution was successful, the affairs of the state should be entrusted to moderate and Western-educated figures under whom limited parliamentary procedures would be observed, Islamic ethics and morality would be mildly enforced, the economy would be reformed but would remain more or less on the same path, and the foreign policy of the new state would be based on the notion of “neither East nor West,” with more leaning toward the West in order to check the influence of the Soviet Union, Iran’s powerful neighbor to the north. Clearly, in this interpretation of an Islamic state, very little room was left for the clergy, whom the liberals expected to play a marginal role in the IRI. Among the leading members of the Islamic liberals were Premier Mehdi Bazargan and his Liberation Movement colleagues, who ran the affairs of the state from February to November of 1979, and President Abol Hasan Bani Sadr and colleagues, who came to office in December 1979 and were ousted in June 1981. Once the imperial regime collapsed, the Islamic liberals, mandated by Ayatollah Khomeini, moved to secure the old regime’s state apparatus. These were the ministries, the police, and the armed forces, for which the liberals promptly named new caretakers.

In opposition to the Islamic liberals were those who had a stricter interpretation of an Islamic state. Better known as Maktabis (committed and doctrinaire), this faction, organized in the Islamic Republic Party (IRP), saw a more active and dominant role for the clergy and viewed the role of the noncleric Islamists as subordinate. During this period, 1979–83, the Maktabis had a stricter interpretation of “neither East nor West” and opted for more independence vis-à-vis superpowers and more anti-American policies. Men such as the aytollahs Mohammad Hosein Beheshti, Hosein Ali Montazeri, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, and Ali Khamenei belonged to this faction and dominated the revolutionary council and the IRP. As the Islamic liberals took control of the state apparatus of the old regime, the
Maktabis moved to create their own state institutions and paralegal forces in society. Hence, the Maktabis soon gained control of the revolutionary council, the revolutionary komiteh (security committees), and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. These parallel institutions with increasingly more power than the old institutions helped the Maktabis to oust the Islamic liberals.

This period was one of transition in which the IRI moved from overthrowing the imperial regime through a process of consolidation. The main characteristics of this phase were, on the one hand, a struggle between the IRI and its opposition (secular leftists, nationalists, and leftist Islamists opposed to Khomeini and the clergy-dominated state), and on the other, a factional competition within the IRI’s ruling elite, which inevitably involved the opposition as well.

This was a period of relative freedom for the opposition; newspapers were published, political meetings were held in the open, and opposition to the IRI was, for the most part, political. The scale of these political freedoms, however, became more limited as events approached June 1981. Important social and political issues of this phase were the rights of national minorities, the nature of an Islamic state, the rights of women, the American hostage crisis, and the Iran-Iraq War.

The IRI’s internal political opposition consisted of a spectrum of groups challenging the new state on a variety of issues local and national, from ethnicity to gender. These groups and organizations included the Marxist left (e.g., Fedayan-e Khaql and the pro-Soviet Tudeh Party), the Islamic anticlerical left (e.g., Mojahedin-e Khaql), and regional ethnic groups (e.g., the Kurdish Democratic Party). Using the relative freedom of expression and organization following the victory of the revolution, these oppositional groups began to organize, publish, and even violently confront the newly emerging state.

One issue that led to friction between the opposition and the IRI leadership was the writing and eventual approval of the new republic’s constitution from summer through fall of 1979. The new constitution, which was written while excluding much of the opposition, basically called for and envisioned a theocratic republic dominated by the Shi’i clergy. In this arrangement, the role of the opposition and the space in which it would be allowed to function remained ambiguous.

The IRI constitution was written by a group of men, almost all supporters of Khomeini, selected in the summer of 1979. The selection process was arranged so that the popular vote would elect a group of vetted candidates to write the Islamic constitution. The document was eventually put to a vote in December 1979, in the middle of the hostage crisis euphoria. The IRI constitution proved to be a contradictory document combining elements of popular and democratic principles and institutions with theocratic rule. For example, while the president and parliament are chosen by popular vote, other unelected bodies oversee them. The president’s power is in effect limited by the power of the rahbar (leader) or Supreme Ruling Jurist (vālī-ye faqīh), who is selected by a closely vetted but popularly elected body called the Council of Experts. The power of the parliament is limited by a rahbar-appointed Council of Guardians, which also vets candidates for all elections. The third branch of the state, the judiciary, is in effect appointed by the rahbar.
Another sociopolitical issue creating friction between the opposition and the new Islamic state was the rights of women. During the Pahlavi dynasty, many reforms were implemented benefiting women's rights in Iran. These included educational and employment opportunities and changes to legal codes in favor of women in such matters as inheritance, marriage, and divorce. Perhaps the most outwardly visible change to women's status during the Pahlavi period was the forced unveiling of women in 1936. While the policy of using state enforcers to unveil women was discontinued in 1941, in Tehran and other major cities many women, mostly middle- and upper-class, began to unveil voluntarily. The 1979 revolution witnessed the beginning of a trend to reverse the gains, albeit state-implemented, of previous decades.

The new Islamist leadership's insistence on implementing Islamic laws (sharia) meant many reversals for the rights of women, including the loss of many rights in the legal sphere. Once again, the most apparent outward manifestation of these reversals was the forced veiling of women, which was implemented in two phases. First, during 1979–82, women state employees and women who frequented state-owned enterprises were asked to observe the veil, and second, after the crushing of the political opposition, in 1982 some women demanded, and security forces began to enforce, full observance of the veil. Hence, ironically, within fifty years, Iranian women were forced to unveil and then veil without once being consulted directly or indirectly.

The year 1979 closed with what came to be called the American hostage crisis. On November 4, 1979, a group of university students calling themselves followers of the line of the Imam (Khomeini), attacked the U.S. embassy in Tehran and took its personnel hostage for 444 days. Before it was over in January 1981, Iran-U.S. relations would be terminated; Iran would be put under a U.S.-led international embargo as a pariah state; the IRI would use the hostage issue and U.S. pressure to move against the opposition by passing a theocratic constitution; Iraq, deeming Iran weak and under U.S. pressure, would attack Iran; and the hostages would become a major issue in the 1980 American presidential election, leading to the victory of Ronald Reagan and the Republican Party.

Iran was invaded on September 22, 1980, by Saddam Hussein's Iraq, unleashing a bloody eight-year war and resulting in hundreds of thousands killed or wounded, millions displaced, and billions of dollars worth of damage to both countries. The Iran-Iraq War also helped to radically change the internal dynamic of postrevolutionary Iran. The IRI was invaded at a point when it was isolated internationally and left with few friends. With the ongoing hostage issue with the United States and large parts of its territory now occupied by the invading Iraqi forces, the IRI, clearly on the defensive at this point, moved rapidly to line up all resources behind its war effort. Led by the newly elected liberal Islamist President Abol Hasan Bani Sadr, the IRI attempted to put its internal house in order. The hostage problem with the United States was resolved in January 1981. Universities, a hotbed of radical opposition, were attacked under the guise of "cultural revolution." While the university system was to remain closed for the next two years until an Islamic education system
could be developed, the IRI began to purge its faculty and student body of undesirable opposition activists.

As 1980 came to a close, it became clear that not only was friction between the IRI leadership and its opposition intensifying, but within the leadership the Islamic liberals, led by President Bani Sadr, and the clerical faction organized in the IRP were also heading for a collision. The collision came as Bani Sadr allied himself with the opposition radical Mojahedin and the IRP rallied around Khomeini and moved to dismiss Bani Sadr in June 1981. While Bani Sadr’s removal was carried out without much difficulty, the Mojahedin unleashed its paramilitary organization in an effort to topple the IRI and secure state power for itself, resulting in a near state of civil war during 1981–83.

**THE SECOND STAGE (1981–89)**

The second stage started with the June 1981 crisis and ended with Khomeini’s death in June 1989. In June 1981, the clergy-dominated faction of the IRI, organized in the IRP and supported by Ayatollah Khomeini, pushed the Islamic liberals out of power, declared all oppositional political activities illegal, and moved the country into a period of near civil war with the Muslim Mojahedin and other radical oppositional groups. Important social and political issues of this period were the consolidation of the IRI under the clergy-dominated faction, the effective repression of the opposition political groups and the disintegration of their network and organizations inside Iran, the stalemate and attrition of the Iran-Iraq War, and finally, the reemergence and intensification of another round of factionalism among the ruling elite.

The political freedom that followed the 1979 revolution gave a chance to political organizations and parties, from left to right (with the exception of the pronmonarchy forces), to organize. After twenty-six years of relatively consistent dictatorship, this newly achieved freedom gave an important breathing space needed by all groups and parties.

Iran’s postrevolution problems were many, and mistakes made by the new leadership exacerbated the situation. The confrontation with the United States over the hostages and the war with Iraq compounded the problems. Opposition political groups, depending on their strength and organizational networks, began to challenge the new regime on its shortcomings. Almost immediately after the collapse of the imperial regime, signs of confrontation between the new IRI leadership and the opposition began to show, and as time passed it became clear that the degree of tolerance of the new Islamist leadership was limited and was coming to an end rapidly.

The opposition to the IRI was faced with new revolutionary Islamist leadership unlike any in history. Unlike the victors of other revolutions, the new leaders of Iran looked to the glorious past of the Islamic civilization for inspiration rather than to
the bright future. While they emphasized the consolidation of their theocratic state, they pursued a cultural revolution rather than changing the relations of production or the ownership of the means of production, let alone creating democratic institutions.

Furthermore, the IRI’s foreign policy based on “neither East nor West,” regardless of different factional interpretations, meant political independence of the state vis-à-vis international Cold War blocs. Hence, true to its policy, the IRI took on the United States by taking its diplomatic mission hostage in November 1979, and it became an important backer of the Afghan Mujahedeen resisting Soviet occupation.

A combination of the above two maneuvers served to confuse and disorient the opposition, making it impossible for it to develop a realistic analysis of the IRI and postrevolution Iran. It also helped prevent the opposition from uniting behind a program of preserving social and political liberties. All of the above made it much easier for the IRI to move against the opposition and the Islamic liberals in the turbulent months of June to December 1981. The suppression of the opposition continued with less intensity through 1984 and was one of the darkest periods of postrevolutionary Iran’s history, when thousands of people perished in street clashes, by execution, and in jail.

With the elimination of the opposition and with seeming unity among the leadership of the IRI, the energies of the state and society were devoted to the pursuit of the war with Iraq. A longtime ally of the Soviet Union, the secular regime of Saddam Hussein under the Arab nationalist socialist Baath Party saw in Iran’s revolution a threat and an opportunity. The threat came from the reinvigorated Shi‘i version of political Islam in Iran, which had just toppled one of the seemingly most stable and powerful states in the Middle East. With a majority Shi‘i population of its own, the secular, Sunni Arab-dominated authoritarian regime of Iraq felt threatened by the specter of Iran’s revolution spreading to Iraq. The opportunity arose from the fact that, like other postrevolutionary states, Iran was gripped in the chaos and disruption of almost all its state organs, its military included. That the IRI was also engaged in a struggle with the United States over the American hostages, as well as dealing with increasing internal instability due to challenges of the opposition, made Iran a ripe target for invasion in September 1980.

For the IRI, the Iran-Iraq War was essentially a defensive one during 1980–81. This is when large areas of southwestern Iran were occupied by enemy forces while the country was in international isolation due to the hostage problem. But with an end to the hostage crisis in January 1981 and the elimination of the opposition, the IRI went on the offensive, culminating in the May 1982 liberation of Khorramshahr, the only major city occupied by the Iraqis.

In June 1982, the IRI leadership, presided over by Khomeini, made the fateful decision to turn the war into an offensive one by pursuing Iraqi forces into Iraq with the goal of toppling the Baath regime by capturing Baghdad. Although Iran was under a U.S.-led embargo at this point, which made access to modern, especially U.S.-made, weapons difficult, the fact that Iran was much larger than Iraq in terms of territory, resources, and population meant that such a goal was plausible.
Thus, from 1982 onward, the IRI began to devote all the nation’s resources and energies toward its offensive war effort. The war soon intensified and spread to new areas, with the firing of ground-to-ground missiles at cities and the attacking of oil shipping in the Persian Gulf by both sides. Perhaps the lowest point of the war was when Iraq began to use chemical weapons against Iran and its own rebellious population from 1986 onward. The war soon degenerated into a war of attrition, with massive damage to both countries’ civilian and military population and infrastructure.

Internally, hope of unifying the leadership and ending factional struggles by eliminating the opposition proved illusive. By the mid-1980s, the coalition of victors within IRP, or the Maktabis, had begun to polarize. Factional fighting became so acute that the IRP was paralyzed and was ordered to disband by Khomeini in May 1987. At first two, and by 1988 three, factions had appeared on the political scene. First, there appeared a left or radical faction gathered around Premier Mir-Hosein Musavi and such old revolutionary hands as Ayatollah Mehdi Karrubi and others, with tacit support from Khomeini. The left faction supported a more idealistic, even populist, notion of an Islamic state where the state was responsible for the welfare of the community. This faction supported strong state interference in regulating the economy and continued state control of key production units and foreign trade as stipulated in the IRI constitution, as well as presence in cultural and political spheres. The left faction’s peak of power was when it secured a majority in the third Majles (1988–92).

Another figure associated with the left faction, but one who kept his distance from direct factional conflict, was Grand Ayatollah Hosein Ali Montazeri, a disciple of Khomeini who was selected as his heir apparent in November 1985. By the mid-1980s, Montazeri and his supporters were already in conflict with elements associated with the right faction over the treatment of political prisoners in the prison system. His conflict with the right faction would soon spread to other areas, putting him on a direct collision course with Khomeini.

The right or conservative faction rallied around President Ali Khamenei and included conservative clergy and pro-bazaar figures. To this faction, the role of the state was limited to regulating the political, social, and cultural spheres, but it had to keep its hands off the economic sphere, especially when it came to trade, where the bazaar had interests. The regulating policies of Premier Musavi, a necessity of the war effort, were a regular target of the right faction during the second Majles (1984–88).

The third faction, the pragmatists, began to appear in 1987 and rallied around the speaker of the Majles, Rafsanjani; it included many modern, educated technocrats who, while they did not care much for political freedoms, advocated efficiency and economic growth.

A combination of Iran’s factional politics and its gradual successes in the war with Iraq began to change international calculations as to how to deal with Iran’s revolution and war aims. The international community was mostly silent when Iran was invaded in 1980 and while Iraq seemed to have the upper hand. Iran, a country
in revolutionary turmoil, was isolated for taking American diplomats hostage and could find very few friends because of its illegal behavior. Furthermore, its relationship with the Eastern Bloc was also rocky. Iran had condemned the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, was actively supporting the Afghan resistance, and had disbanded the pro-Soviet Tudeh Party in 1983.

The U.S. policy toward Iran and Iraq was one of patiently waiting for the two to weaken each other. The Reagan administration, nevertheless, normalized its diplomatic relations with Iraq and opened its embassy in 1984. In 1986, the United States attempted to open dialogue with Iran on a limited basis. The episode that came to be called the Iran-Contra Affair was an American foreign policy scheme with grand, perhaps unrealistic, goals. The Reagan administration was attempting to create an opening with Iran by offering it badly needed American weapons at inflated rates through Israel, to use the money to support the administration's policy in support of Nicaraguan counterrevolutionaries, and to use Iran's good offices to free Western hostages in Lebanon. The whole policy collapsed after members of Montazeri's office found out about it and leaked the news to a Lebanese newspaper, thus creating scandals in both Iran and the United States. In Iran, the venture had the support of Khomeini and the highest level of the IRI leadership. Hence, those who had leaked the news were promptly arrested and executed. This was the beginning of Montazeri's downfall in Iran and the end of America's attempt to open dialogue with the IRI.

In 1987, the Iran-Iraq War escalated and began to involve the United States more directly on the side of Iraq. First, Iran's military operations on the war front began to show success and brought about the specter of a possible Iranian victory. The IRI had been using its superior numbers, more motivated troops, and better commanders to compensate for its lack of weaponry and adequate firepower. Furthermore, Iran had managed to stop Iraqi oil shipments from its Persian Gulf ports, cutting Iraq's income.

Iraq, while still able to export oil through Turkey, compensated by borrowing from Arab countries, buying top-of-the-line weapons from an international community that did not want to see an Iranian victory, and attacking Iranian shipping in the Persian Gulf. Iran retaliated by attacking Kuwaiti shipping (a major backer of Iraq) in the Persian Gulf, triggering Kuwait to ask for protection from the United States. After some hesitation, the Reagan administration agreed to reflag Kuwaiti oil tankers, making any attack on them an attack on the United States.

This escalation of the war put the IRI and the United States on a collision course as violent clashes occurred between Iran and the United States in 1987 and 1988. Furthermore, through loans from the United States and other countries, and with much help from Western companies, Iraq developed an elaborate chemical weapons program and began to use it on Iranian troops. Here, U.S. diplomatic protection ensured that no international pressure would be brought on Iraq.

A combination of the international community's support for Iraq, U.S. pressure on Iran, and Iraqi use of chemical weapons began to turn the tide against the IRI. By spring 1988, the United States was providing Iraq with detailed intelli-
gence maps and photos of Iranian troop movements. The Iraqis were able to integrate these and U.S.-supplied battle planes with their own. By summer 1988, Iran had suffered major setbacks and was forced to accept a UN-sponsored ceasefire in August 1988.

In the days leading up to the ceasefire, the Mojahedin began an invasion of the IRI from its bases in Iraq. The Mojahedin was a militant Islamist organization with socialist tendencies that had been founded in 1965 and was active in the anti-shah years. After the revolution, the organization fell out of favor with Khomeini and his supporters for a variety of reasons, chief among them the organization’s lack of enthusiasm for clerical rule in an Islamic state. The organization was a major player in the events leading to the IRI’s suppression of the opposition in 1981 and had waged an unsuccessful all-out war against the regime to topple it. With its network effectively crushed and thousands of its supporters killed or imprisoned, the Mojahedin, under the leadership of Masoud Rajavi, first settled in France and then, by the mid-1980s, in Iraq under Saddam Hussein’s protection. During its Iraq residency, Rajavi oversaw the transformation of the organization from a political one to a cult centered on devotion to him. Rajavi also turned the Mojahedin into a collaborationist organization, helping the Iraqi war effort against Iran. In return, the Mojahedin received protection and support from Iraq and managed to create a small army of a few thousand. It was this force that began to cross the Iranian border in an ill-planned and ill-fated invasion with the hope of triggering a popular uprising leading to the toppling of the IRI. The invasion proved to be a fiasco, and the Mojahedin force, with no real air protection, was cut down by the Iranian armed forces, while the envisioned popular support never materialized.

Internally, 1988–89 saw “intensification of factional infighting in Iran. Throughout this period, Khomeini issued a series of religious decrees redefining and clarifying the notion of an Islamic state. Most of these rulings suggested that he sided with the left faction’s perceptions. However, simultaneously Khomeini made other decisions that in the long run were not so clearly beneficial to his beloved revolution. In summer 1988, as the war with Iraq was coming to an end, Khomeini ordered all political prisoners to be either executed or released according to their files. In practice, hastily arranged inquiry sessions condemned thousands of men and women to death in the summer and fall of 1988, many of them having served their sentences or about to be released. In February 1989, Khomeini issued a decree condemning author Salman Rushdie to death for writing Satanic Verses, a novel many Muslims viewed as insulting their Prophet. Finally, in March 1989, Khomeini dismissed Ayatollah Montazeri as his heir apparent upon his objection to the executions and issues related to the Iran-Contra Affair.

Ayatollah Khomeini passed away in June 1989 from cancer complications. He did not name a successor, and his passing meant that the IRI was left without its charismatic and popular leader at a time when after years of war and international isolation it had to face an uncertain future.
The outlook of the post-Khomeini period was unpromising at best and pointed to difficulties to come. While the IRI had effectively neutralized the opposition, beat back an invasion by the Mojahedin, and brought the war with Iraq to a standstill, there were many challenging problems ahead. By summer 1989, the IRI was a country that had lost its charismatic leader, had ended a devastating war without being able to deliver on its promises of victory, was gripped in unending factional infighting, and was isolated internationally.

To remedy the situation, the pragmatists led by Rafsanjani and the conservatives led by Khamenei made a grand compromise designed to outmaneuver the left faction and create stability at the top. Accordingly, following Khomeini’s death in June 1989 the constitution was changed by eliminating the office of premier (a left faction stronghold) and strengthening the presidency, and by dropping the requirement for the rahbar to be a top cleric, making it possible for a middle-rank cleric to occupy the office. This was followed by a referendum on the constitutional changes and Rafsanjani’s election as president in a controlled election amid a euphoric public atmosphere due to Khomeini’s death. Khamenei was selected as the rahbar even though he did not possess a high clerical rank. The strategy was for the conservative faction to take a satisfying backseat by having their candidate occupy the most powerful position in the IRI, and leave the task of stabilization and reconstruction to Rafsanjani and the pragmatists. The two factions also seem to have agreed that political liberalization would not be in order and that the left’s last remaining stronghold, its majority in the Majles, would be the next target. The new arrangement was clearly the brainchild of Rafsanjani, through whose efforts the reluctant and hesitant parties were won over or marginalized. However, Rafsanjani created a long-term problem by strengthening the constitutional power of the supreme leader, reducing the power of elected bodies such as the presidency and the parliament. These changes would later return to haunt him and his supporters.

Khomeini’s death in June 1989 and Khamenei’s selection as his successor created a major problem of legitimacy at the top of the IRI’s power structure. Khomeini was not only the leader of the 1979 revolution but also a high-ranking member of the Shi’i clergy known as the marja’-e taqlid (“source of imitation”), in modern times distinguished by the title of grand ayatollah. According to the original draft of the IRI constitution, the position of rahbar or supreme leader could only be occupied by a grand ayatollah or marja’. Khomeini’s death caused major new problems for his successors in that his supporters could not accept any of the living grand ayatollahs as the Leader of the Islamic Republic for a variety of reasons. This meant that only ten years into the revolution, the leaders of the IRI had come into conflict with the Shi’i hierarchy, whom they found unsuitable for leadership. To rectify the situation, the IRI leadership under Rafsanjani and Khamenei modified the constitution and dropped the marja’ requirement for the position of rahbar, paving the way for the selection of Khamenei by the Council of Experts. The choice of Khamenei
was a political one, as in 1989 he hardly had the religious credentials for the job. Other constitutional changes included naming the position of the supreme leader as one of “absolute rule of the jurist” rather than plain “rule of the jurist,” thus making it even more difficult to question the supreme leader and attempt to limit his power. Another constitutional change lessened the power of the president by removing his responsibility for coordination between the three branches of government and giving it to the supreme leader.

While the IRI was now under the leadership of a middle-ranking cleric, the rise of Grand Ayatollah Hosein Ali Montazeri to the position of grand ayatollah began to compound the problem. As a student of Khomeini and a militant clergyman during the antishah struggle, Montazeri was an enthusiastic supporter of the revolution, a key author of its constitution, and Khomeini’s heir apparent from 1985 to 1989. Montazeri became a victim of factionalism, and his fall from grace was initiated by Ayatollah Khomeini in March 1989. While he was still the heir apparent, the IRI referred to Montazeri with the title of grand ayatollah, but upon his dismissal, Ayatollah Khomeini did not address him with an appropriate title, putting his religious rank in doubt.

After his removal, Montazeri returned to his old occupation of teaching in Qum and avoided politics so long as Khomeini was alive. After Ayatollah Khomeini’s death, Montazeri occasionally issued declarations of protest, criticizing IRI policies. It seems that while he was removed as the heir apparent, his position as a marja‘ among many supporters of the IRI as well ordinary people began to grow. At one point, a member of the third Majles suggested that over a hundred members considered Montazeri as their source of imitation.

From 1989 onward, Montazeri actively built up his power base in clerical circles, attracting many students and supporters. While the government attempted to discourage people from accepting him as their marja‘, he fast became a viable marja‘ with the right credentials. As such, Montazeri soon became a figure around whom the opposition could rally. Occasional government attacks on him, attacks on his home and school, and his periodic house arrest in the 1990s only elevated his position.

Rafsanjani’s two-term presidency (1989–97) consisted of two interrelated policies in economic and political spheres. On the economic side, it was one of reconstruction of the country’s infrastructure and economy and promotion of limited private entrepreneurial participation. In the political sphere, it was one of continued political repression, albeit on a less severe scale, and there was even less space for political dissent among the ruling elite. Furthermore, and less successfully, attempts were made to normalize the IRI’s foreign relations and thus end its international isolation.

Iran after the end of the war was a ravaged country. An estimated one hundred billion dollars worth of damage had been inflicted, while the southwest of the country, center of its oil production and perhaps its most industrialized and richest area, was devastated. Added to this was a high birthrate after the revolution, translating into a population explosion with threatening prospects for economic recovery.
Hence the task of reconstruction was enormous, requiring a massive infusion of capital and managerial skill. Having ended the war in unfavorable circumstances and in international isolation, the IRI under Rafsanjani had little hope of receiving war reparations from Iraq, which was equally damaged. While a 1990 UN inquiry eventually found Iraq to be the aggressor and initiator of the war back in 1980, there was little chance that the international community would press it to pay Iran reparations. Neither could the IRI hope to receive long-term international loans at favorable rates while still isolated and under a U.S.-led embargo.

The task of economic recovery therefore had to rely on domestic resources. While the Rafsanjani administration managed to secure some short-term, high-rate loans from foreign sources, by the end of his presidency Iran’s foreign debt was manageable and rebuilding relied mostly on oil revenues. Due to limited resources, the rate of recovery was slow, especially in war-damaged regions, but nevertheless evident. The capital city, Tehran, received a facelift under the capable pro-Rafsanjani mayor Gholam Hosein Karbaschi. Other major cities followed Tehran as a model. New factories and dams resulted in an increase in industrial and agricultural production. A systematic policy of birth control and education visibly decreased the nation’s birthrate, although the country’s population had already doubled by the end of the 1990s. Rafsanjani’s policy of inviting educated experts to run the reconstruction program resulted in a degree of progress and infusion of managerial expertise. Less successful was his attempt to attract Iranian expatriates to return to Iran with their capital and expertise to help rebuild the country. Continued state intrusiveness in the personal lives of citizens, political repression, and an overall atmosphere of instability and uncertainty prevented many from risking a permanent return.

Rafsanjani was less successful in the international arena. Because of the continued U.S. embargo and attempt at isolating Iran, even goodwill gestures by the IRI failed to break any ground. While the IRI played an important role in releasing Western hostages in Lebanon, with the hope of receiving goodwill in kind, none was forthcoming. The IRI’s neutrality and accommodation in the first Gulf War (1991) also did not win it any goodwill. Continued IRI opposition to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process initiated in Oslo in 1993 and the IRI’s aid to Hezbollah’s resistance to the Israeli occupation of Southern Lebanon were among the factors preventing any breakthrough. Furthermore, apparent IRI-sponsored assassinations of political opposition figures in European capitals through 1996 prevented normalization of relations with the European Union.

On the domestic political scene, political repression tightened. The left faction, with a strong presence in the third Majles, was purged from its last center of power in the 1992 parliamentary elections. Because of the power of the Guardian Council, the left faction candidates for parliament were prevented from running, making sure that the fourth and fifth Majles sessions were dominated by pro-Rafsanjani and conservative supporters.

While political repression continued, in the early 1990s the Rafsanjani administration tried its hand at loosening the state grip on the cultural life of the country.
Under a liberal-minded minister of Islamic guidance, Mohammad Khatami, regulations for publications, filmmaking, arts, and other cultural activities were relaxed, jumpstarting a limited renaissance. Many secular elements in society, as well as many religious people, either in outright opposition or locked out of power, now found the chance to express themselves in the many available periodicals, artistic journals, movies, and other cultural venues. New ideas about civil society, participatory government, reforming the IRI, and democracy began to be expressed, mostly among the educated elite and yet inevitably influencing the public as well.

The period of cultural liberalization also witnessed the reemergence of a vibrant women’s rights movement, sometimes called “Islamic feminism.” The difference between this phase of the women’s rights movement and the one at the beginning of the revolution was twofold. First, the movement’s participants were not limited to the educated modern middle class fighting for jobs, the right to dress freely, and maintaining their legal rights. This time around, middle-class secular women were joined by many religious educated women who had supported Khomeini and the revolution. In addition, many women too young to remember the revolution also joined the movement. Second, the combination of these elements created a vibrant and potent force more focused on results and possibilities than on rhetoric. For example, since challenging the forced veil was out of reach at this point, the women’s movement concentrated on women’s rights in other spheres, such as equal employment and educational opportunity, equality before the law, and more modern, fashion-friendly concepts of the veil.

The intellectual and social stimulation caused by cultural relaxation and public debate of many controversial issues resulted in a challenging movement for more freedom and a rise of public expectation of more participation. The roots of the reform movement of the coming years may partially be traced to this period. Cultural relaxation, however, came to an abrupt end during Rafsanjani’s second term (1993–97) after conservative forces objected to it, resulting in Khatami’s dismissal in 1992. Although the public arena for expression was not completely shut, Khatami’s removal signaled a change of course by the Rafsanjani administration.

Despite attempts at stamping out factionalism, the second Rafsanjani term witnessed the reemergence of factional politics with more intensity and even more potency; this was the genesis of the reform movement soon to erupt in 1997. The Rafsanjani presidency was a period of transformation and redefinition for the left faction. The left, those supporters of the revolution who advocated a policy of increased state intervention in the economy and society, were utterly outmaneuvered after Khomeini’s death. After being purged from the parliament, disillusioned and dissatisfied with the course of events, many major figures on the left began to rethink their previous positions and the general course the IRI was taking. In this, the left was supported by technocratic elements from Rafsanjani’s camp who believed their policies were stonewalled by the conservative faction. As the presidential election of 1997 approached, many from among what may now be called the former left or reformed left faction, plus some from among the pragmatist supporters of Rafsanjani, began to look for a viable candidate to replace Rafsanjani. Hence
the May 1997 presidential election that brought Mohammad Khatami to office and opened a period identified with the reform movement should be understood in light of developments of the previous period.


The IRI has been unique among many Muslim Middle Eastern countries in holding elections for its elected state organs (the presidency and parliament), although candidacy has always been limited to those the state viewed as revolutionary loyalists. The term “loyalist” has been a fluid concept in IRI politics, used to exclude undesirables. At the beginning of the revolution, the undesirables were members of the secular opposition. Then they came to include the Islamic liberals, and by the 1990s the left faction was deemed undesirable. The vetting process in IRI elections gave the Iranian Shi‘i theocracy a unique outlook. While the IRI’s politics have been far from democratic, they could not be defined as totalitarian either. The uncharted space between broad concepts of democracy and totalitarianism is where the IRI political system has stood since 1979, with various degrees of repression and freedom according to the circumstances.

In 1997, the Rafsanjani administration decided to promote a more open election by encouraging its own supporters in the pragmatist faction and those of the former left to put up a viable candidate to run against the conservative candidate Ali Akbar Nateq-Nuri, the speaker of the fourth and fifth Majles. While “nonloyalist” candidates were not asked to run, the idea was to have a more real and even vibrant election at a time when the IRI felt it was stable and secure both domestically and internationally. The hope was to increase the regime’s legitimacy by allowing real competition between candidates with real differences. No one seems to have imagined the conservative candidate could be defeated, while everyone hoped the opposition could show enough popular support to become a viable loyal opposition in future elections. The candidate picked by the left to lead them in the election was Muhammad Khatami, the former liberal-minded minister who had gained a positive reputation during his tenure and because of his abrupt dismissal.

In a way, Khatami’s political career and presidential candidacy encapsulated the transformation the left faction of the IRI went through in the 1990s. Khatami and his supporters, the reform camp as they came to be called, had been ardent supporters of the revolution from the early days. Many, if not all, had impeccable credentials as revolutionaries in support of Khomeini and in defense of the revolution during the war with Iraq. For example, a good number of those students who took part in the taking of American hostages in 1979 now belonged to the reform camp and supported Khatami. As such, the reform camp’s transformation was the transformation of a good part of the revolutionary elite that had been running Iran since 1979.
Khatami’s campaign was a brilliant one designed to reach out to the youth and women voters, by far the largest voting blocks. While Nateq, the conservative candidate, refused to show a smile or grant an interview to women’s publications, Khatami did both and more. He addressed youth and women, acknowledged their difficulties, admitted to some shortcomings of the IRI, and promised remedies. Khatami’s core message was that the IRI ought to let civil society expand, expand individual liberties, make the rule of law a principle, improve the economy, and normalize Iran’s foreign relations with as many countries as possible. In short, the reform camp’s message was that democracy was possible within the context of the IRI and its constitution, or as Khatami sometimes called it, “Islamic democracy.”

The victory of Khatami on May 23, 1997, was overwhelming, as over thirty million Iranians voted, surprising not only the conservatives but also the reformers and their supporters. As if sensing change was in the air and that the new faces and their message were for real, large number of voters showed up and gave Khatami over twenty million votes. Nateq received seven million, and the rest were divided between two minor candidates. In the years to come, many reformers would readily admit that they were not ready for this victory and that popular will in effect put control of the executive branch in their hands. Ready or not, the Second of Khordad Movement (named after the Iranian month in which the elections were held) now faced the challenge of delivering on its promises.

From the early days of Khatami’s presidency, it became clear that the task of delivering on his promises was a challenging one, and mistakes made by him and his supporters made the task even more difficult. While still in shock, the conservative faction was nevertheless in charge of the parliament, which was not scheduled for election until 2000, and of course controlled the all-powerful office of rahbar through Khamenei. Khatami was able to name most of his ministers, but on some key ministries (e.g., defense and intelligence) he had to compromise. More importantly, he immediately began to issue permits for proreform dailies to be published, resulting in an overnight explosion of newspapers and weeklies with new, upbeat outlooks, eager to take on the task of reporting on reform and the shortcomings of the revolution.

In 1998, the conservative faction began a counterattack. Reformist journalists such as Akbar Ganji and others were partially responsible for strengthening the conservative faction by unleashing relentless attacks on former president Rafsanjani and his tenure. After Khatami’s election, Rafsanjani was named head of a constitutional body created in 1989 called the Expediency Council (EC). The function of the EC was to mediate and issue final rulings in disputes between the Majles and the watchdog Guardian Council, which had a veto power over the parliament. Hence, as one of the most powerful men in the IRI in charge of a powerful constitutional body, Rafsanjani was a person who should have been at least neutralized by the reformers if they hoped to advance their agenda. Attacks on Rafsanjani in effect pushed him to make a tactical alliance with the conservative faction, thus strengthening it.
The conservative faction closely controlled the election for the third Council of Experts held in November 1998, making sure reformers did not gain control. This was followed by the serial killings of a number of prominent political and cultural figures. As a result of Khatami’s pressure, it soon became clear that elements from the Intelligence Ministry were the main culprits. While some midlevel operatives were arrested, and one committed suicide, those responsible at the top were never charged. On the positive side, Khatami used the occasion to purge the Intelligence Ministry and turn it into a more professional organ dealing with espionage and counterespionage.

In January 1999, Khatami pushed for and managed to hold nationwide local elections. A constitutional requirement, local elections for city councils and municipalities had never been held in the IRI. Khatami viewed the elections as a step in the empowerment of the people and development of democracy. The elections were another total victory for the reformers, but during the same month Said Hajarian, a key backer of Khatami and a main architect of the reform movement, was badly wounded in an assassination attempt in Tehran. The culprits were once again associated with the conservative faction and were not punished. From the middle of 1998, the conservative faction began to use the IRI judiciary, a state branch under their control, to attack freedom of the press and put key supporters of Khatami in prison. Hence, while the judiciary remained silent on the serial killings and the Hajarian assassination, it closed down newspapers and put people in jail for the slightest transgression. The high point of the conservative counterpunch was the summer 1999 repression of student demonstrations in support of the reform program and freedom of expression.

On the international scene, Khatami’s policy of improving relations with the West and other countries showed a degree of success. Already since the final days of the Soviet Union, Iran had become a customer for Russian-made weapons and nuclear technology. During Khatami’s tenure, relations with Russia, China, and others improved rapidly. Toward the West, Khatami showed a kinder, gentler face of the IRI and proposed a “dialogue of civilizations” in order to bring about a better understanding between the Muslim world and the West, and this was adopted by the UN. In this regard, relations with the EU improved rapidly, allowing more economic and diplomatic interaction between the two sides. Hence, with the exception of Iran-U.S. relations, the Khatami tenure brought a significant partial end to the IRI’s international isolation.

Iran’s relationship with the United States continued to be one of missed opportunities for improvement. In 2000, the Clinton administration came very close to admitting and even apologizing for the American role in the 1953 coup, setting the stage for an opening between the two countries. But strong forces in both countries (the Republican-dominated Congress in the United States and the conservative faction in the IRI) managed to arrest any progress. Any hope of improvement was subsequently dashed with the election of George W. Bush and the tragedy of September 11, 2001.
The reform movement found a new lease on life with the parliamentary elections for the sixth Majles held in March-May 2000, which was yet another resounding victory for the reform camp as it came to control the Majles. With the reformers now in control of two out of three state branches, and with Iran's foreign relations normalizing and improving, the stage was seemingly set for delivering on the reform movement's promises. Yet Khatami's remaining first term and his second term (2001–05) witnessed an effective stonewalling of the reform program by the conservative faction. There were several reasons why things developed the way they did.

First, although the conservative faction lost the popular vote at every election, leaving no doubt that it did not have any type of popular mandate, it still received around 7 to 10 percent of the vote. This reality translated into a potent, militant, and violent social base for the conservatives.

Second, the conservative faction, while unable to control any of the popularly elected organs without rigging the elections, has been nevertheless in charge of other, unelected, constitutional institutions. These include the office of rahbar through Khamenei, who is the commander in chief of all the armed forces, as well as the IRI judiciary and the Guardian Council. It was through these constitutional state organs that the conservative faction managed to arrest the reform movement even when the reformers controlled the presidency and the parliament.

In this context, the evolution of the Revolutionary Guards became a major factor in the politics of the IRI. The Guards were established in the early days of the revolution to guard its accomplishments. During the war with Iraq, they changed from a militia force with limited capabilities to a battle-tested military force. Ayatollah Khomeini had always warned against the military's interference in politics and had explicitly prohibited it. During Khomeini's time, while the regular armed forces were put in charge of defending the borders of the country, the Guards were put in charge of domestic security.

During the Rafsanjani presidency, the Guards were allowed to become a major player in the reconstruction of the country. Thus, the Guards and affiliated business interests soon became a major business association, with vested interests in Iran's oil and other industries. In this context, and despite Khomeini's warning, the Guards began to play a more direct role in politics, and its upper officer corps began to openly side with the conservatives.

Third, President Khatami and his supporters originally proposed to make further reforms within the existing constitutional legal framework. Khatami never suggested that he was willing or able to move against the IRI's constitutional legality. If anything, he kept insisting that the other side observe this legality as well. But the reformers soon realized that with real power in the hand of the antireform camp, even with reform control over the executive and legislative branches, there was little they could do.

Fourth, if Khatami and his supporters decided to pursue their goal of reforming the system, they had to entertain the possibility of confronting the conservatives by appealing to their popular mandate and backing it by involving the populace. Here, the elitist nature of the reform movement and Khatami's hesitation prevented
a showdown. The elitist nature of the reform movement meant that it valued the people's vote to put it in office but failed to follow up with popular grassroots organization or even a viable political party. This inevitably led to apathy among the masses who had supported them. Khatami's hesitation was because he was unwilling to seek a final confrontation that he, probably correctly, thought he could not win. With all the repressive organs of the state in the hands of the other side, he could not rely on a constituency willing to vote but not fight. He therefore, perhaps prudently, declined a showdown.

The reform movement should not be evaluated only on its failures. The reform years provided Iranian people with a unique opportunity to open a dialogue on a national level about many key social and political subjects relating to the nation's future. With open discussion, the publication of thousands of book titles, relaxation of state censorship, and popular participation in elections has come a new level of consciousness, political awareness, and sophistication absent in many repressive societies. Iran's youth, by far the majority of the population, have shown that the revolution has been unable to attract them and that their needs need to be addressed. Repression alone is hardly an answer to such elusive and long-term problems.

By the beginning of 2005, Iran's future hung in limbo. The presidency of Khatami ended in June 2005, at a time when the reform movement had been all but effectively stopped for the moment. Iran's international position had become precarious at best. While the IRI had nothing to do with the events of September 11, 2001, the Bush administration lumped it together with North Korea and Iraq in an "axis of evil" to be dealt with in a hostile manner. Iran's civilian nuclear energy ambitions had become a pretext for U.S. threats against Iran, and American occupation of Iraq appeared to make the threat viable. All these started to overshadow Iran's internal dynamics. With an unsuccessful reform movement and apparent apathy among the population, shortsighted conservative dominance, and a foreign threat, the presidential election of 2005 created new uncertainties for future dynamics of change in Iran.

The Fifth Stage (2005–09)

The June 2005 presidential elections once more produced a surprise winner. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a middle-ranking state administrator and mayor of Tehran, beat other rivals, including the prominent former president Rafsanjani, in the ninth presidential election. Supported by the conservatives, Ahmadinejad's campaign secured the election using strong populist slogans, promising a better division of wealth, and attacking rampant corruption throughout the country. Two factors played a pivotal role in his election. First, despite the positive aspects of President Khatami's administration, it seems much of the electorate was disappointed with his inability to make good on his reform promises. This resulted in a backlash in
which some 40 percent of the voters stayed home. The second factor, directly contributing to low voter turnout, was dissatisfaction with Rafsanjani, Ahmadinejad’s rival in the second round of elections. Here, a popular belief that associated Rafsanjani with the established order and all its shortcomings discouraged many potential voters from going to the polls and persuaded others to vote for the relatively unknown Ahmadinejad.

President Ahmadinejad’s tenure may be viewed in terms of his domestic and foreign policy. Domestically, in attempting to keep his campaign slogan of combating nepotism and corruption he showed a degree of disregard for the expertise and experience of state managers and even university faculty. Under him, many experienced state managers were replaced with relatively inexperienced, but well-connected, new managers. This type of neo-nepotism soon proved disastrous, as new managers proved their inadequacy in dealing with national problems. The net result of this policy in the economic sphere was a sharp rise in unemployment and inflation. His free-spending policy soon sharply reduced the “oil dividend” (money accumulated as a result of high oil prices) and added to the country’s economic woes. The president’s purge of state officials was extended to universities, where faculty and students deemed sympathetic to the reform movement were retired or asked to leave. Repressive policies against independent associations, the press, and civil society in general were also increased. With the reform movement in disarray and reduced to a minority in the parliament, the new administration used less restraint in implementing its socially conservative politics, especially when it came to women and youth. In this area, the state began to use its power to implement moral codes without much restraint either in the parliament or by the opposition.

In terms of foreign policy, while the office of the president in the Islamic republic does not have the authority to make decisions on key strategic issues, it does represent the country in the international arena. President Khatami had used the limited power of his office to establish better relations with the international community, particularly the European Union. With no real strategic ally, Islamic Iran had always felt the weight of its international isolation, a problem the Khatami presidency had tried to address. President Ahmadinejad took the opposite direction. His denial of the Holocaust and other activities added to Iran’s isolation. A more isolated Iran soon found it more difficult to deal with the United Nation’s Security Council regarding its position on Iran’s civilian nuclear program. The country’s isolation also created problems in trying to find allies in dealing with an aggressive, and at times threatening, Bush administration. In short, President Ahmadinejad’s foreign policy proved as problematic as his domestic policy, with very few achievements to point at. Many experts believe that had it not been for the total failure of the Bush administration’s strategy in Iraq and Afghanistan, Iran would have been in mortal danger of an American attack during this period.

As Iran approached the June 2009 presidential election, a sense of frustration returned to the country, and a national debate commenced over which direction to take. In an age identified with a new African-American U.S. president who proposed a new domestic and foreign policy direction, finding a new direction for Iran
soon became an important and urgent topic of the tenth presidential election. The reform supporters put forward a smart strategy to defeat Ahmadinejad, whose presidency they believed had been a disaster. The reform camp's only hope was that the public agreed with this assessment. This strategy entailed, first, a need to produce a viable candidate besides Mehdi Karrubi, the former speaker of the Majles, the leader of the Etemad Melli Party, and a pro-reform politician and cleric who had already declared his candidacy. This was because while Karrubi was known as a straight-shooting cleric, he was also known to be a bit eccentric and at times unprincipled. Also, a second attractive candidate would have galvanized the base and helped overcome the public apathy of the 2005 election. In this context, former wartime prime minister Musavi was approached by the reformers to run for election. Musavi had a good reputation as a state manager during the difficult war years. He was known to have been liked by Khomeini, but to have had serious political differences with Khamenei while he was president in the 1980s. After leaving government, Musavi had stayed on the margins and had built up a reputation as an open-minded and tolerant artist and pro-reform figure who, nevertheless, was reluctant to run for election. Musavi's hesitation, however, was overcome, and he declared his candidacy in spring 2009. To these two openly pro-reform candidates was added Mohsen Rezaie, a pro-Rafsanjani former Guards commander and EC member. Rezaie presented himself as the candidate of the right, hoping to reduce the appeal of Ahmadinejad among more traditional voters.

The election campaign of May–June 2009 proved to be electrifying, as many voters rallied to campaign gatherings where the color green, associated with Musavi's campaign, became a symbol of demand for change. The three candidates in effect concentrated on attacking President Ahmadinejad's record while avoiding attacks on each other. The tenth presidential election showed that the reform camp had managed to resolve its differences with the pragmatic supporters of Rafsanjani and put forward a campaign designed to bring the maximum number of voters to the polls in order to recreate a landslide victory similar to Khatami's in 1997.

What the reform camp, and almost all other observers, failed to realize was the strength of the vested interests in support of President Ahmadinejad and the lengths to which they would be willing to go to prevent his removal from office. Circumstantial evidence points to the rigging of the election by the government, with a hasty declaration of Ahmadinejad as the winner. Here it became apparent that those who rigged the election had miscalculated the public mood, as the announcement of the election results prompted spontaneous demonstrations against Ahmadinejad and in support of Musavi. Mass demonstrations in Tehran and other major cities faced by repression by the security forces. It became clear that the Revolutionary Guards and the militia force under its command, the Basij, would go to any length to suppress the opposition. After the arrest of hundreds of people and the death of close to a hundred, the leaderless demonstrations, which also lacked coherent organization, began to fade away.

But the election of June 2009 caused a deep division within the ruling elite of the IRI. On one side stand the "victors" of the election, who have seemingly managed to
overcome the crisis that followed it. These include, first and foremost, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who came out strongly behind Ahmadinejad, blamed the opposition for attempting to weaken the IRI, and accused them of being influenced by foreign affiliated organizations. President Ahmadinejad and his supporters were also winners, but their grip on power and the legitimacy of his presidency, and indeed that of the IRI, were diminished as a result. It has become clear that the victors are those who advocate less "republicanism" in the Islamic Republic of Iran, and more power to the unelected institutions such as the supreme leader. Also clear is the fact that the military, in particular the Guards, will continue to play a much greater political, social, and economic role in the country in the aftermath of what can only be called a veiled military coup.

In the opposition stand the losers of the election, the reform candidates, who were supported by an enthusiastic population before and after the election. The reform camp was joined, in the aftermath of the election, by Rafsanjani, who openly but subtly put his support behind it. The reform camp and Rafsanjani supporters include a large number of the original leaders and advocates of the 1979 revolution in Iran. Many grand ayatollahs of Qum and Najaf, the main centers of Shi'i religious activity, have either refused to approve the election or have openly come out against its rigging.

The rigging of the election and the repression that followed have left a deep scar on the IRI. The ruling elite of the IRI had worked out a working relationship for the past thirty years, to smoothly share power and deal with differences while at the same time excluding secular and other groups from open political participation. This thirty-year-old plan has now collapsed. While it is difficult to predict the future, it is clear that for now, the perpetrators of the coup have won. With no effective organization, it is difficult to see how the opposition can do anything in the short run. But it is already regrouping and attempting to regain momentum and develop a grassroots organization. Hence, in the long run, it is difficult to see how the victors of today can maintain their grip on power short of using repression indefinitely and risking international isolation.

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