

**A Systemic Analysis of the Rise and Fall of the Iranian Reform Movement**

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**Summary:** *Ever since the presidential elections of May 23<sup>rd</sup> 1997, and the victory of reformist candidate Mohammad Khatami, the world's attention has once again focused on Iranian politics. The reformists' victory is mostly attributed to the astonishing voter turnout that amounted to anywhere in between 80 and 85% of the electorate. Khatami's campaign discourse, emphasizing the need for reform, focused on the important issues of democracy, civil society, the rule of law, citizens' rights and dignity, and women's greater presence, energized the masses and created a huge popular momentum for change. Less than two years after its initiation, however, the reform movement had already begun to encounter very important obstacles, mostly arising out of the conservative factions of the establishment. The resistance continued and even intensified despite successive reformist electoral victories in 1999, 2000, and 2001. This trend culminated, in January 2004, in the disqualification of nearly all reformist candidates for the legislative elections, almost halting the top-down reform initiative. This research aims to determine the reasons for which the reform initiative was adopted in the first place, what it aimed to accomplish, and the factors that eventually brought it to a deadlock.*

The primary goal of this paper is to both **describe** and **explain** the emergence and consequent deadlock of the Iranian reform movement. This requires a thorough investigation of the main causes and roots of the reform movement. It is mainly for this reason that some of the key concepts associated with David Easton's systemic model have been adopted. These allow for an in-depth analysis of the political system as a whole, including the pressures from below (grassroots), from the middle (civil society institutions) and from the top (leading elite and authorities). In other words, it allows for a synthesis of various social, economic and political forces at work.

By the **partial** application of the Easton model and the use of such terms as *inputs* (demand and support), *outputs* (systemic response), *retroaction/feedback* (the information coming back to the authorities with regards to the consequences of their decisions and actions), and *output reaction* (the follow-up systemic response, i.e., *coup de grace*), I try to analyze the underlying reasons for the emergence of the reform movement, and subsequently, the state's abandonment of the initiative.<sup>1</sup> It is imperative to state that in social and political life, a number of minor and major inputs, outputs, retroactions, feedback and output reactions take place simultaneously and in both directions. Political systems and their respective environments are constantly engaged in such activities and it is not our intention to presume otherwise. The aim is to demonstrate that the reform movement and its subsequent deadlock can be explained by this model of reasoning and the explanatory power of its variables.

It is argued that despite ever-present factionalism, the reform phenomenon personified by Mohammad Khatami was a calculated move by the leadership of the Islamic Republic. Therefore, Mr. Khatami's agendas, ambitions and plans were not to transform the basic foundations of the Islamic system and lead Iran toward a liberal democracy, but rather a systemic attempt at a process of limited adaptation in order to cope with the challenges stemming from both within and without the system.

Following a description of the kinds of sociopolitical openings brought about by the reform initiative in its early stages and the challenges that it met, this paper demonstrates how the authorities then began a campaign of selective silencing and elimination of the individuals and groups they deemed threatening. Such a trend reinforces the argument that from the state's perspective, the reform phenomenon was to grant certain freedoms of expression and association so

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<sup>1</sup> All terminology used will be defined in due course.

long as these activities remained “constructive.” However, the slow pace of the reforms and Khatami’s inability or unwillingness to follow through forcefully and rapidly on the promises he had made during his campaign, caused some media groups, intellectuals, and student associations to intensify their pressure tactics. After the student demonstrations of July 1999—a watershed event in the reform era—and the legislative elections of February 2000, the conservative faction of the regime began a widespread campaign of repression, aimed at the most outspoken, active, and influential members of the reformist camp. This process finally culminated in the disqualification of nearly 3,600 reformist candidates in the legislative elections of 2004, thereby eliminating the reformists from the legislature, and effectively suffocating the top-down reform initiative.

At this stage, it is fundamentally important to study and analyze the performance of the authorities and the regime following the 1979 revolution in order to understand the reasons underlying the reform phenomenon. By analyzing the political, cultural, social and economic conditions and circumstances that surround the political system, one can assess the *demands* and the level of *support* (the inputs), which together serve as valuable indicators of environmental conditions and realities surrounding and affecting the political system. Referring to both *demands* and *support*, *inputs* serve as the summary variable that concentrate and mirror everything in the environment that is relevant to political stress. The dual concepts of *demand* and *support* then act as indicators of the way in which environmental influences and conditions modify and shape the operations of the political system. Therefore, through the analysis of both *support* and *demand*, one can comprehend the variety of events and conditions as they relate to the persistence of any given political system.

### **The environment.**

Among other important elements, a nation’s economic well-being and relative prosperity may be considered as one of the most important factors that affect and even determine its political stability. Many of Iran’s profound economic ills can be understood as the consequences of the policies adopted in the aftermath of the 1979 Revolution. These include—notwithstanding the eight-year war with Iraq and its direct and indirect damages—the unfulfilled promises to enhance social welfare programs; confiscation and nationalization of properties, forced sale of some agricultural lands to the people that used to work them without proper training, support and coordination; nationalization of banks and the establishment of “Islamic banking;” monetization of government deficits (printing money); a foreign exchange rate system characterized by too many initiatives and policy reversals; sudden and frequent economic reversals in general; absence of a uniform application of laws and regulations; widespread corruption; extreme reliance on oil as the most important source of revenue, making the overall economy especially vulnerable to fluctuations in the international economic system and the oil market; and finally, the burden brought about by the massive immigration of refugees from Afghanistan and Iraq, making Iran the largest recipient of refugees in the world<sup>2</sup> during the 1980s and early 1990s. Thus, an almost total disconnect between the basic components of economic planning,<sup>3</sup> poor economic and political leadership and management, and a lack of willingness to implement meaningful political and structural reforms have all led the political system and the society to an impasse.

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<sup>2</sup> According to the United Nations, Iran was the world’s largest recipient of refugees in the 1980s, and remained so until the mid 1990s.

<sup>3</sup> See Jahangir Amuzegar, “Iran’s Post-Revolutionary Planning: The Second Try”, 32 and Bijan Khajepour, “Domestic Political Reforms and Private Sector Activity in Iran”, *Social Research* 67, 2 (Summer 2000), 577-598.

The situation has been made worse because of the lack of a unified power structure and the multiplicity of economic decision-makers.<sup>4</sup> Economic policy in Iran is not the product of an authoritative decision-making body or institution that sets the targets and oversees their implementation.<sup>5</sup> In many ways, the creation of the dual-state after the 1979 Revolution is responsible for much of the inefficiencies and ineffectiveness that is characteristic of the Iranian economy.

The Rafsanjani administration that headed the post-war reconstruction era was finally unable to create a competitive environment, help establish legal and political stability, encourage the creation of civil society institutions, help restructure the present distorted market structures, remove legal barriers for investment and growth, and help bring more transparency in the public sector.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the most important aspect of the regime's economic planning, affecting the younger population, was the availability of jobs. For example, the Islamic Republic's second five-year plan's projection<sup>7</sup> was to create 600,000 new jobs a year, while the maximum number of new jobs created never exceeded 300,000. Furthermore, for the 270,000 students graduating from college there were only 75,000 suitable jobs available, leading the rest to join the vocal and threatening army of disgruntled unemployed.<sup>8</sup>

Overall, the Rafsanjani era, labeled as the Reconstruction Era,<sup>9</sup> which had begun in the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War, had effectively managed to harness the support of great many Iranians who, having made great many sacrifices during the difficult decade of the 1980s, expected an overall improvement and normalization of socioeconomic and political life. Rafsanjani therefore, at least initially, had the political capital to make fundamental changes in the right direction had he chosen to play the "people's" card against his opponents. However, far from encouraging a national reconciliation, the regime's policies led to an ever-increasing degree of misery among the population, accelerating a process of delegitimization of the revolutionary regime that claims to represent the interests of the dispossessed and ordinary citizens.<sup>10</sup>

For many, the maintenance of the regime depended on its ability in rationalizing the economy and improving the living standards of ordinary citizens. Rafsanjani's rise to power was meant to do just that. Eight years later, however, the Iranian people were still struggling intensely just to make ends meet and the country's overall financial situation had gotten much worse. The Rafsanjani era represents another lost opportunity for a political system in desperate need of legitimacy. The revolution, the civil war and the eight-year war with Iraq exhausted the Iranian population, which at the end of the war, expected tangible socioeconomic ameliorations.

The above illustrated the system's need to cope with the challenges of post-war and post-Khomeini era by revitalizing the economy and unifying the power structure, thereby securing a reasonable level of public support for the regime and the authorities. As demonstrated, however, the regime has been unable to break the vicious circle that has plagued its power structure and the

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<sup>4</sup> The influences of these competing power centers are not limited to economic decision-making. They are quite influential on social and political matters as well.

<sup>5</sup> See Bijan Khajehpour, "Iran's Economy: Twenty Years after the Islamic Revolution", 108.

<sup>6</sup> See Bijan Khajehpour, "Domestic Political Reforms and Private Sector Activity in Iran", *Social Research* 67, 2 (Summer 2000), 577-598.

<sup>7</sup> From 1995 to 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Jahangir Amuzegar, "Iran's Post-Revolutionary Planning: The Second Try", 37.

<sup>9</sup> From 1989 until 1997 and the presidency of Mohammad Khatami.

<sup>10</sup> See Kaveh Ehsani, "Tilt but Don't Spill: Iran's Development and Reconstruction Dilemma", 18, and Jahangir Amuzegar, "Iran's Post-Revolutionary Planning: The Second Try", 35-36.

nation's economy ever since the Revolution. It has subsequently lost much of the support and the legitimacy it once enjoyed.

However, despite the importance of economic factors in determining the long-term fate and survival of a political system, the emergence of the reform movement cannot be understood and explained solely in relation to the economic sphere. The argument is that a combination of economic, social, political, and cultural problems have led to a crisis of governability, forcing the political system to attempt a process it hoped would develop a program for the integration of the population into a more viable social and political system. To shed light on the stress and pressures exerted on the system by diminishing *support* on the one hand, and the rise in *demands* for reform on the other, we must also analyze the changes in Iran's social, political and cultural settings. The analysis becomes somewhat difficult because political parties were banned after the Revolution and the institutions of civil society are either weak or co-opted by the state, making the input of **organized** demands from the environment into the political system quite problematic. Therefore, we must look more thoroughly at the input of *support* (either positive or negative) to measure the relative degree of legitimacy and satisfaction with the regime and its authorities. However, to partially remedy this problem, we may also analyze the demands for change and reform stemming from within the system itself, through the analysis of *withinputs*, by investigating the important role played by the factions and groups that, together, make up the leadership and the elite of the Iranian political system.

### **The polycephalic nature of Shi'a Islam and the inherent divisions among the clerical elite**

To understand the importance of *withinputs* and their pertinence in the emergence of the reform movement, it is necessary to describe their gradual gain in importance within a historical context. In order to do this, we must briefly study the polycephalic nature of Shi'a Islam and its impact on circles of clergy, specially after the 1979 Revolution. In Shi'a Islam, the Ayatollahs enjoy huge discretionary powers to offer varying and sometimes contradictory (with regards to other dominant clergy) interpretations of both Islamic and political issues. After the revolution of 1979, it did not take long before the clergy split into two main camps: the "radical" Left, and the "conservative" Right. On the one hand, the conservatives; mainly pro-free enterprise, rigid in their interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence and greatly in favor of a stiff implementation of the Islamic code of morality, and on the other, the leftists; generally younger with strong populist tendencies and favoring a more "dynamic" Islamic jurisprudence.<sup>11</sup>

By the second half of the 1980s, a third group began to emerge headed by Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, a pragmatist politician who often went beyond both stiff ideological lines.<sup>12</sup> Although fewer in numbers and mostly made up of bureaucrats and technocrats, the new "centrist" faction soon began to enjoy a greater degree of popularity among the modern middle-class, certain elements of the business community and many ordinary citizens.

Standing above those factions, however, was the charismatic Ayatollah Khomeini whose decisive leadership no faction dared to challenge. He kept the factions competitive, never allowing one to dominate or eliminate the others. This balancing act was essential in maintaining the equilibrium of the Islamic coalition he had so successfully forged to defeat his opponents. This

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<sup>11</sup> For more on this issue refer to Mehrdad Boroujerdi, "The Paradoxes of Politics in Postrevolutionary Iran", Mohsen Milani, "Reform and Resistance in the Islamic Republic of Iran", and Ali Banuazizi, "Iran's Revolutionary Impasse: Political Factionalism and Social Resistance", *Middle East Report* No.191 (Nov.-Dec. 1998), 2-8.

<sup>12</sup> Mohsen M.Milani, "Reform and Resistance in the Islamic Republic of Iran", 32.

situation changed nonetheless after Khomeini's death, when the centrist Rafsanjani and the conservative Khamenei joined forces to form a coalition that would soon run the leftists out of the Majlis and other important centers of power.

The Left's gradual "expulsion" from sensitive positions also partially reflected their level of political support among the Iranian people, having enormously decreased due to their radical and unpopular acts in the 1980s.<sup>13</sup> Perceiving that it was out of touch with the needs and priorities of most Iranians, the traditional Left had to reevaluate its intellectual foundations and its overall worldview. Having lost almost all of sensitive positions to more conservative factions, they were forced to adopt a more "democratic" and somewhat populist outlook. This brought the Left closer to centrist and other disgruntled elements within the Islamic Republic. The Left's new slogans focused on such delicate issues as pluralism of thought, freedom, and personal liberties.<sup>14</sup> The new leftist trend created a new breed of Muslim intellectuals who were primarily concerned with reforming the Islamic Republic. Within the ranks of the new Left, many younger Muslim activists appeared, who in the 1980s, had been involved in such enterprises as the hostage crisis and made up the active personnel of the repressive Islamic Guards Corps, the Ministry of Information, secret police and the regime's propaganda and ideological apparatus.

"Many turned to journalism to mobilize support for their reformist cause. Their knowledge of the inner workings of the system and their bold criticism of the conservative leadership made them popular."<sup>15</sup> As mentioned earlier, Rafsanjani's plans were first and foremost to revitalize the Iranian economy and improve the country's relations with the outside world. At the same time, efforts were being made to promote the idea of a more tolerant society by easing restrictions on the cultural spheres and lifestyles (particularly with regards to the youth). Despite continuous pressure exerted by the conservative Right, the short letdown of pressure (1989-1992) allowed the Iranian society to experience a mushrooming of publications, a booming translation industry and a thriving cinema scene. These were mostly supported and/or headed by the Center and the new Left, which drew the implicit support of the President.<sup>16</sup>

### **The conservatives' attempt at domination: political polarization within the state**

In 1992 however, the conservatives who by now also controlled the Majlis (the Parliament) found the relative cultural openness intolerable and forced the moderate Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Mohammad Khatami, to resign. Having secured a parliamentary majority, the conservatives began to deny Rafsanjani (their ally up until now) the support he needed to implement his "pragmatist" policies and relentlessly pushed for the adoption of their "own" policies. By 1993 and Rafsanjani's second presidential campaign, the coalition of the "pragmatists/conservatives" was showing clear signs of trouble. Conservatives presented their own candidate to run against Rafsanjani, but the latter won the elections with 63% of the vote. This was an important event, which eventually put an end to the 1989 coalition.<sup>17</sup> Disillusioned with the conservatives, Rafsanjani officially broke away with the Right in 1995, and interestingly enough, became increasingly friendly

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<sup>13</sup> The American hostage crisis was the mostly the product of the Islamic Left. The Left also constituted the most fervent anti-Western segment of the regime. Furthermore, their disastrous economic policies had led to a huge decline in their support-base.

<sup>14</sup> Mohsen M. Milani, "Reform and Resistance in the Islamic Republic", 34.

<sup>15</sup> Saeed Rahnema and Haideh Moghissi, "Clerical Oligarchy and the Question of "Democracy" in Iran", 37.

<sup>16</sup> Mehrzad Boroujerdi, "The Paradoxes of Politics in Postrevolutionary Iran", 20.

<sup>17</sup> As mentioned before, the 1989 alliance had brought together the Center and the Right, effectively marginalizing the Left.

with the forces on the Left.<sup>18</sup> By now, the Left had taken a much more conciliatory stance toward the centrists. This had allowed for the creation of an opposition coalition that included groups and individuals that spanned from the moderate Right all the way to the radical Left.

Important debates, therefore, had begun to take place within the political system itself. Groups from within the state questioned the Islamic Republic's past, its place in the world, and what lay ahead.<sup>19</sup> The new "grand alliance" consisting of the new Left and the moderates became increasingly critical of the system's direction and the conservatives' hard-line reactionary policies. "Opposition" members were gradually gaining ground and their ideas were well received by ordinary citizens.

As far as the societal support and inputs were concerned, The Iranian society was experiencing widespread dissatisfaction and disenchantment. The regime, it had become very obvious, was facing a severe crisis of legitimacy due both to the stark reality faced by important social groups and their overall status in society. Women constitute, without doubt, one of the most important groups, not solely because they make up the largest social group, but one that has been probably the most affected by the post-1979 events. Although the women's question does not take center stage following the 1997 period, it has nonetheless contributed greatly to the emergence of the reform movement, and poses one of the most important challenges to the Islamic Republic's legitimacy and its sociopolitical policies.

In general, women have proven very resilient during the post-revolutionary period, and in fact, have forced the regime to reconsider some of its policies. Women have won the battle over child custody for martyrs' widows and brought about amendments to family law that grant a woman limited divorce rights in the event that her husband takes a second wife. They have also fought for the equal division of property accumulated during marriage and introduced "wages for housework," which protects women from arbitrary divorce.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, women in most areas now have many fewer socio-economic rights than they did under the monarchy. To achieve equality and legitimize their cause, women continue their struggle despite the frequent constraints the framework of the Iranian Constitution imposes upon them, and continue to work towards spreading a more dynamic and liberal interpretation of Islam. Women's participation in the political system has taught them the inherent divisions within the circle of clergy and in the constitution itself, leaving much room for debate and interpretation. Also, as the regime and the authorities have unwillingly proved, no law or regulation seems to be written in stone; legislation is therefore open to debate and, ultimately, to reform. A perfect example of this is how, as of 1989, the regime was forced to handle Iran's fertility rate and population growth by resorting to family planning and birth control.<sup>21</sup>

Elsewhere, regardless of the government's censorship and harassments, artistic, intellectual, scholarly and professional publications have thrived despite formidable financial constraints and official pressures. The track record of the press corps demonstrates that they have played a crucial role in shaping public opinion, producing ideas different from that of the state, making the citizenry conscious of their rights, and enabling people to express their views within the established boundaries.<sup>22</sup> The intelligentsia, including some members of the clergy, plays a crucial role in informing the public, analyzing the issues critically, and offering alternative views. But the costs

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<sup>18</sup> Mathew C. Wells, "Thermidor in the Islamic Republic of Iran: The Rise of Mohammad Khatami", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 26, 1 (May 1999), 27-39.

<sup>19</sup> Behzad Yaghmaian, *Social Change in Iran: An Eyewitness Account of Dissent, Defiance, and New Movements for Rights* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 7.

<sup>20</sup> See Homa Hoodfar, "Women and Personal Status Law in Iran: An Interview with Mehranguiz Kar", 37.

<sup>21</sup> The clergy had attacked the monarchy for having adopted such measures. See Homa Hoodfar, "Devices and Desires: Population Policy and Gender Roles in the Islamic Republic", 15.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

associated with intellectual dissent are extremely high, especially for those who transgress the established boundaries. These boundaries, in a country like Iran, shift frequently and suddenly, especially after the 1992 conservative takeover. The already difficult environment for writers, intellectuals, artists, and scholars worsened after 1992 and such individuals began to feel much more pressured. The particular evolutionary path of the regime has only at times made possible the relative but inconsistent openness of the polity. This has resulted in an atmosphere of insecurity and distrust on the part of the creators of cultural products, therefore reducing the possibility of continued and consistent state-society dialogue, and thus, that of maintaining a genuine support for the system as a whole.<sup>23</sup>

On the whole, the post-war years have brought to the fore the real weaknesses of the Islamic Republic in dealing with the immensely serious problems facing Iran. By mid 1990s, it had become clear that the Islamic regime failed in most of its initiatives and had run out of options in dealing with the ills of the society. In the mid-1990s, 70% of Iran's population was under the age of 30 and the regime was facing a severe challenge because of the country's demographic structure. Although after 1989, the introduction of birth-control did have a significant effect in lowering the growth rate, such a demographic reality has nevertheless meant that special attention was needed in the creation of schools, educational and vocational facilities and most importantly, jobs.

The ever-diminishing level of support for the existing regime, and the overall demands for reform reflect the relatively deep structural changes that have actually taken place in Iran. Kaveh Ehsani argues that the First Five-Year Development Plan (1989-1994), formulated in the wake of Rafsanjani's first-term presidency, is filled with alarming statistics about over-population and insufficient infrastructure, housing scarcity and the lack of welfare measures needed to integrate the country's growing population in the absence of both Khomeini's charisma and the war's mobilizing force. "By drafting this plan, technocrats were implicitly acknowledging a crisis of governmentality and quite virtually, the end of the "rentier state's" golden age. Dwindling revenues, enormous war costs and a mushrooming population rendered unstable the domination of centralized and authoritarian state as well as the practice of monopolizing and redistributing financial revenues from petroleum."<sup>24</sup> This meant that the state could no longer rely exclusively on the traditional methods by which to integrate the population, illustrating the gradual imperative for developing a more open system based on popular legitimacy rather than petroleum dollars alone. The Islamic ideology that was to serve as the foundation of socioeconomic, cultural and political life was by now challenged from both within and outside. "Iran's Islamization project has failed. It has been reduced to an authoritarian imposition of external restraints on behavior that bypasses social justice, economic reforms or new configurations of social relations."<sup>25</sup>

Economic, social, political, cultural problems and widespread corruption have, on the whole, proved quite difficult to accept by the young generation of Iranians, mostly born after the revolution.<sup>26</sup> The Islamic Republic has drastically failed in its attempts at the Islamization of the youth and has increasingly managed to alienate the latter. What cannot be denied, however, is that the youth, constituting the majority of the Iranian population, is a giant political force through the

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<sup>23</sup> Sussan Siavosshi, "Cultural Policies and the Islamic Republic: Cinema and Book Publication", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 29, 4 (Nov. 1997), 509-530.

<sup>24</sup> Kaveh Ehsani, "Municipal Matters: The Urbanization of Consciousness and Political Change in Tehran", *Middle East Report* No.212; Pushing the Limits: Iran's Islamic Revolution at 20 (Fall 1999), 22-27.

<sup>25</sup> Olivier Roy, "Tensions in Iran: The Future of the Islamic Revolution", *Middle East Report* No.207 (Summer 1998), 38-41.

<sup>26</sup> See Azadeh Kian, "Les stratégies des intellectuels religieux et cleric iraniennes face à la modernité occidentale", 785.



electoral process. Since the minimum age required to vote is 16, the malcontented youth, if presented with the chance, can play a major role in the country's political future. Very much aware of the dominant democratic political culture in the West and elsewhere, coupled with the historical and indigenous struggle for an end to arbitrary rule and democracy, reformists have been energized and strengthened by their adoption of such concepts as human rights, republicanism, political representation, freedom of expression and thought, legal equality between the sexes, and the separation of church and state. By the end of Rafsanjani's second term, it was apparent that the Iranians' disenchantment with their theocracy had reached explosive levels.<sup>27</sup> The more perceptive members of the Islamic system have come to realize that the appeal and credibility of Iran's Islamic ideals have become severely tarnished.

### **The systemic output**

By 1996, the Islamic Republic had seen its share of support diminish to an unprecedented level. Both the regime's founding ideology and its overall legitimacy had suffered dramatically. As popular resentment and opposition to the regime grew, the political elite had been left to choose between, on the one hand, initiating reforms and granting concessions for greater freedoms, risking to deal with very uncertain events, or on the other, to press even harder with repressive tactics by hoping to violently crush people's aspirations and ultimately hold on to power for a little longer. It was clear that the time had come to initiate a transition, but the question was a transition to what?

It is, however, worth stating that this paper does not assume that the reform movement was strictly a ploy by the authorities to fool the masses and maybe buy desperately needed time (and support, I might add) for a "crumbling" regime. A careful investigation of the overall situation would lead any serious work to refuse to assume and/or acknowledge that attempts at reform solely have their origins in such characterizations. This is because the inculcation of legitimacy is probably the single most effective device for regulating the flow of support for both the authorities and the regime. The restoration of a reasonable and moderate degree of legitimacy is vital to maintaining any political regime in the long term. The stabilization of relationships in a political system between the authorities and the general membership is of great importance for any regime that wishes not to resort solely to the use of force and coercion.

I contend that Mohammad Khatami's candidacy, in coordination and consultation among the new Islamic Left, Center and Right, coupled with both the Supreme Leader and the Council of Guardian's (both conservative) approval of his candidacy point to an orchestrated **systemic response**. The response was **systemic** because a high degree of consensus among governing factions and the major players was reached regarding the choice of candidates representing the Left, Center and the Right. The outcome of this consensus gave way to the running of two major candidates, offering the masses a clear choice between the "old" and the "new." Khatami's "new" vocabulary and campaign messages, centered around such concepts as the empowerment of the people, civil society, the rule of law and obedience to the Constitution, Citizens' rights and dignity, political participation and women's presence, were clearly aimed at energizing disenfranchised citizens and generating a high degree of support.

In a nutshell, this comes down to three main steps. First, the overall shortcomings and failures of the political system in effectively implementing its policies in the social, economic, cultural and political arenas led to a significant drop in levels of popular support and state legitimacy. Second, such failures, coupled with elite factionalism, led to a political polarization within the political

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<sup>27</sup> Ann Elizabeth Mayer, "The Universality of Human Rights: Lessons from the Islamic Republic", *Social Research* 67, 2 (Summer 2000), 519-536.

system hitherto unseen in post-revolutionary Iran. Such tendencies then allowed for the transformation of the new Left and its socio-political realignment with the centrists and, ultimately, the masses. Third, the necessity and urgency of structural reforms, the *demands* made by socio-political forces, and the obvious decline in the level of *support*, led to the eventual rise of the reform movement as a systemic response to high levels of stress emanating from both within the system and its environment.

As a systemic output, the reform movement and the Khatami phenomenon can be characterized as the ultimate form of conciliation the regime offered the people of Iran. The “empowerment of civil society,” therefore, points to the system’s willingness to absorb the modernity of Iran, which up to now had been deliberately marginalized, while **adapting** it to the regime’s requirements and ideals.<sup>28</sup> This willingness to absorb and adapt and the plan of extending the circle of “insiders” to all those who accept and submit to the underlying principles of the regime was quite new. However, this novel approach did not mean that the regime would officially retreat in the face of opposition, but that it was making a gesture of goodwill to demonstrate the regime’s readiness to open the system to those who were willing to accept its ideological foundations and more importantly, the absolute power of the Supreme Leader.

Central to Khatami’s campaign and the reformist political agenda was the “empowerment of civil society.” Borrowing Antonio Gramsci’s conception of civil society, this empowerment can be considered a vehicle *par excellence* for promoting ethical values among the populace through the exercise of ideological and cultural hegemony. If the political society (state) embodies force, the civil society manufactures consent. Gramsci argued that legitimate consent as the predominant means of political control was normal within all societies. This means that at some point, societal complexities no longer allow the state to rely on coercion alone in order to restrain conflicts, especially when their consensual basis is weak.<sup>29</sup> Accordingly, as social processes grow in complexity, an ever greater degree of regulation is needed for the state and civil society to increasingly permeate one another. When such “permeation” reaches its peak, it allows for the combination of “force and consent in such a way as to ensure that force will always appear to be based on the consent of majority, expressed in the so-called organs of public opinion.”<sup>30</sup> In the case of Iran, the problems associated with the lack of legitimacy and support were to be resolved by encouraging the creation of a “semi-autonomous” and, more importantly, a “co-optable” civil society that would help generate consent, legitimacy and support for the political system as a whole.

### **The reform honeymoon**

In what can be described as the reform initiative’s honeymoon, the overall process was off to a relatively good start. Ata’ollah Mohajerani, the Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, did not shy away from issuing permits and the turn of events that followed can be considered historic in terms of the number of publications and their content. Indeed, the new trend contributed to a rapid growth in general cultural and publishing industries, especially in the media. The press blossomed with a variety of daily newspapers and printing materials that had hitherto been taboo, including murders, scandals, police misconduct, public protest and opinion, public appeals to rulers, and

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<sup>28</sup> See Ladan and Roya Boroumand, “Illusion and Reality of Civil Society in Iran: An Ideological Debate”, 309.

<sup>29</sup> Walter L. Adamson, *Hegemony and Revolution. A Study of Antonio Gramsci’s Political and Cultural Theory* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), 168.

<sup>30</sup> Richard Bellamy and Darrow Schechter, *Gramsci and the Italian State* (Manchester: Manchester University Press: 1993), 123.

polemical debates between Iran's different factions were now available. "With the exception of attacks on the concept of *velayat-e faqih* (The rule of the jurisconsult) and the person of the Guide Ayatollah Khamenei, many previously forbidden things have now been printed."<sup>31</sup> The press thus became the instrument of Islamist reformism, so far as it allowed and encouraged a dialogue between state and society. Following the 1997 elections, a real sense of genuine dialogue emerged in these multiplying and censor-defying newspapers and periodicals. A host of editors, columnists, writers and ordinary citizens took advantage of this new-found freedom to voice their grievances and concerns, from nepotism, corruption, injustice, unemployment and the housing shortage to restriction of recreation and entertainment issues.<sup>32</sup>

Students also greatly contributed to the momentum that had been created during the earlier months. The emergence of better opportunities made the surge in formal and informal student activism to be expected. Under the new Ministry of Interior, run by moderate Islamists, some of the old restrictions limiting campus activism were removed, permitting "recognized"<sup>33</sup> student groups to engage in peaceful demonstrations on and off campus. Between May 24, 1997 and January 11, 1999, 104 cases of student associations, demonstrations and confrontations occurred in the University of Tehran alone.<sup>34</sup> This trend was accompanied by a sharp rise in the number of student journals and publications, airing both political and socio-economic demands.

The opening also allowed intellectuals to come out of the relative isolation they had endured for years and provided them with the space, the means and the audience to resume their intellectual activities. When autonomous from the state, the press, the intellectual community and student associations form the backbone of an emerging civil society. With official permission and the apparent backing of the Khatami administration's agenda to promote "free speech" and "freedom of association," not only did these three groups (press, students, and intellectuals/intelligentsia) become the most vocal proponents of change, they very rapidly became the most effective means of influencing popular perceptions with regards to the state, the political, and socio-economic concerns of the people.

Despite such breakthroughs, however, and at the same time as the reform process was in its stage of honeymoon, there occurred a process that can be labeled as selective elimination and a partial backlash. The reasons behind the backlash to the reform agenda are undoubtedly complex, but one of the main reasons—probably the most important—is that the press, intellectuals and student associations were able to form a "triangle of resistance" and dissent. The more intellectuals and the press attacked the system, the more they gained in popularity and readership. The ordinary citizen, who had been shunned for so long, now had the impression—at least symbolically—of getting back at the system. These attacks and the great extent to which they represented the wishes of the public and the threats they posed to the system, forced the authorities to gradually<sup>35</sup> change course. What threatened the regime even further, however, was that many of these "dissidents" were in fact regime "insiders" who were highly respected and possessed impeccable religious and revolutionary credentials.

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<sup>31</sup> Oliver Roy, "Tensions in Iran: The Future of the Islamic Republic", *Middle East Report* No. 207 (Summer 1998), 38-41.

<sup>32</sup> See Jahangir Amuzegar, "Khatami's Iran, One Year Later", 79.

<sup>33</sup> Recognized refers to organizations whose agenda and leadership are deemed trustworthy and not in direct contrast to state ideology.

<sup>34</sup> Source : The Revolutionary Guard Report, 1999, See Mehrdad Mashayekhi, "The Revival of the Student Movement in Post-Revolutionary Iran", 298.

<sup>35</sup> Gradual in the sense that the authorities avoided a general, sudden and massive crackdown.

Despite the regime's best efforts to keep the reform movement and its initiatives "Islamic" and within the trusted circle of insiders and those close to the regime, their efforts were in vain. This is because much of the dissent and critiques were coming out from individuals who were, in fact, considered insiders. These dissidents also included high-ranking members of the clergy and the regime's ideologues. By the second year of the reform movement, all fundamental aspects of the regime were under scrutiny by ordinary citizens, the press, intellectuals and students.

As stated earlier, the reform movement was introduced as a systemic response and as the potential solution to the regime and the authorities' ever-growing lack of legitimacy and a crisis of governability, during a time when the state was adopting a new direction more in tune with the changed/changing patterns of Iranian society. However, the authorities had not counted on such a massive response from the public and had not appreciated the extent of popular dissatisfaction. As far as the authorities were concerned, reform and change were welcomed so long as they remained **gradual, controlled** and **co-optable**. However, what the authorities, especially the conservatives got was a direct challenge to the foundations of the regime and to their positions of authority.

In July 1999, *Salam*, a very popular pro-reform newspaper, was closed-down by an order from the Press Court (for having published a story on the killings of dissident on an order coming from the higher echelons of power). To protest the closure, students organized a peaceful demonstration on the University of Tehran campus. In response, the paramilitary forces and militia entered student dormitories and brutally attacked students, killing at least four. The dormitory incident ignited a series of protest demonstrations over the next several days in Tehran and other major cities throughout the country. The incident soon escalated into full-scale riots when the demonstrators (no longer confined to university campuses) were attacked by militia and members of the paramilitary. "The civil unrest resulting from the student protests was the most serious since the Revolution and unprecedented in the participants' blatant use of anti-regime slogans and the involvement of thousands of non-students as active participants."<sup>36</sup> The July unrest was a first since the creation of the Islamic Republic in terms of size, intensity, openness of defiance and emphasis on freedom, justice and democracy. This was one of the few times that the making of demands for change—and provoked by some regime elements—adopted violent means.

The student demonstration and riots that followed throughout the country were a turning point in the post-1997 era. First, the leadership, whether conservative or reformist, realized that the situation was explosive and if left alone, could have become uncontrollable. Second, for reformists, especially those from the mainstream and moderate factions that included Khatami and his administration, it became evident that some student groups and radical members of the Left had broken rank and now wanted to pursue a strategy of exerting pressure from outside the "official" and institutional channels, effectively creating a volatility that could endanger the reform process altogether. The conflict between the reformist government and the proponents of change had become clear. For many, including students, women, young professionals, a small remnant of the former middle-class modernists, some young clerics and seminarians, the glacial speed with which the government was pursuing reform was almost unacceptable.

### **Selective silencing**

There are a number of arguments that could explain the unwillingness of the system (or at least of the conservative elements) to suppress the reform movement in its entirety. First, the reform

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<sup>36</sup> Ahmad Ashraf and Ali Banuazizi, "Intellectuals in Post-Revolutionary Iran: Iran's Tortuous Path Toward "Islamic Liberalism", *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, Vol.15, No.2, Winter 2001, 237-256.

movement and its leaders still enjoyed a remarkable degree of popularity among the masses. Second, Khatami was a centrist and a moderate reformer with impeccable revolutionary and religious credentials and a very strong advocate of the Islamic Republic's core foundations. The president's insistence on respect for the rule of law and the Constitution and his promise to attempt reform from within the institutions of the system comforted important players among the conservatives. For example, the President and his team never openly involved the Iranian people as a pressure tactic in their political bargaining with the conservatives. During the student protests and riots, Khatami soon dissociated himself and the reform movement from what he perceived to be demagogic, provocative and socially divisive elements. After the end of the 1999 civil unrest, Khatami took great pains to reconfirm his loyalty to the leader and to Islamic values, and to refute rumors about any factional schisms in the leadership. The same can be said for Khamenei and his repeated insistence on their cordial relationship.<sup>37</sup>

In other words, the reformists' participation in the Majlis elections of 2000 was not prevented because the leading conservatives were not prepared to dismiss Khatami's presidency or block his attempts for re-election in the upcoming presidential elections of May 2001. It was still too soon after the riots of July 1999 and concerned with the outcome of such a radical move, the conservatives did not wish to begin a widespread crackdown. The Right also counted on its ability to maintain a firm control on the legislative ability of the Majlis through the instrument of the Council of Guardians, which constitutionally can object to the bills ratified by the Majlis.<sup>38</sup> The Council, firmly in the hands of the conservative faction would always end up having the last word. Another major reason for the lack of widespread disqualifications of reformist candidates is the importance of popular participation in national elections. The system clearly felt that high voter turnout would send an important signal to the regime's opponents both in and outside of Iran regarding the system's legitimacy. Furthermore, over the years the importance of public opinion has become an important element in Iran's domestic politics, and conservatives have gradually come to appreciate the enormous political advantages and disadvantages vis-à-vis public opinion.

In May 2001, despite the difficulties associated with the reform movement and the extremely slow moving change, the electorate gave Khatami another solid mandate during the presidential elections of May 2001. Although turnout had decreased by about 10%, Khatami still managed to receive 70%<sup>39</sup> of the votes, pointing to the notion that while many Iranians were dissatisfied with the achievements of the reformist government, they still refused to return to the pre-1997 era leadership.<sup>40</sup>

The overall situation after the July 1999 unrest and the impotence of the reformist-dominated Majlis, further fractured the already-tenuous reformist alliance. Both the intellectuals and students began to seek an alternative. Overall, the reform movement in Iran began to show signs of fatigue. The same young people who brought Khatami to power had grown frustrated by his failures. "Within 18 months of his second electoral victory, young demonstrators were urging him to step down. With Khatami's relevance waning, the focus of the struggle for civil liberties and human

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<sup>37</sup> Both leaders are against the extent and the level of press freedom in the West. *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>38</sup> See Keyvan Tabari, "The Rule of Law and the Politics of Reform in Post-Revolutionary Iran", *International Sociology* 18, 1(March 2003), 96-113.

<sup>39</sup> Siamak Namazi, "Iran's Upcoming Elections Up for Grabs", 3.

<sup>40</sup> For more on public resistance to reinstate conservatives to the Executive, especially among young women professionals, see Persheng Vaziri, "Caught in the Middle: Women and Press Freedom in Iran", *Middle East Report Online* [On Line]. (February 16<sup>th</sup> 2001), 1-5.  
<http://www.merip.org/mero/mero021601.html>

rights shifted from the presidency to the chambers of Parliament and the offices of the reformist journals.”<sup>41</sup> The public perceived the failure of the parliament to enact legislation as the Council of Guardian’s unwillingness to relent. But Khatami’s persistent appeasement strategy vis-à-vis the conservatives had seriously undermined public confidence. Within the OCU (the main left-leaning nation-wide student association), there had developed a growing rift between the conservative-reformists and liberal-reformists. “The liberal-reformists have recently become more critical of defensive and passive approaches such as the strategy of ‘active quietism’ and the unconditional support for President Khatami adopted by their leadership in the face of both legal and illegal methods of systematic onslaught employed by the authoritarian faction.”<sup>42</sup>

### **From euphoria to apathy: the coup de grace**

Although the regime did not halt the reform initiative following the July unrest, what had taken place in and around universities ever since the riots was deemed quite worrisome. The events that followed in the pursuing months and years have shown a greater coordination among the student bodies with regards to the protests. Numerous protests ranging from the anniversary of the May 23<sup>rd</sup> victory to the anniversary of July 1999 “uprisings” and spontaneous demonstrations over social and political issues have rendered the student body quite vocal, dynamic, and most of all, threatening. These were troublesome to the government because of their size and because their degree of coordination was gradually increasing. In December 7<sup>th</sup> 2002, for example, security forces attacked a crowd of more than 10,000 demonstrating outside of Tehran University in solidarity with the students (Smaller crowds in various cities also demonstrated.). The demonstrations, lasting about two weeks, had been sparked by the judiciary’s sentencing of Hashem Aghajari, a history professor, to death because of his comments about the clerical establishment.<sup>43</sup> The 2003 Local Council elections also served as an important indicator of public support for the state-led reform initiative. The reformist front lost all its seats in the councils of large cities including the capital. Worrisome also was that very few people voted—expressing people’s apathy toward political reform from within. In Tehran, only 12% of the electorate voted.<sup>44</sup> Such trends were indicative of the general political atmosphere in Iran.

In an interview with one of the main student leaders, Saeed Razavi-Faqih, it became clear the students were no longer willing to accept working within the framework of the reformist movement.<sup>45</sup> Many of the students have concluded that some of the reformers in the government are sincerely committed to change but are powerless. “Their presence in the government only prolongs the life of a system that is incapable of reform.”<sup>46</sup>

The clear signals of danger that confronted the political system after the May 1997 elections—a good deal of which was created or provoked by the reactionary policies of the conservative

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<sup>41</sup> Ramin Jahanbegloo, “Pressures From Below”, *Journal of Democracy* 14, 1 (2003), 128.

<sup>42</sup> See Mehrdad Mashayekhi, “The Revival of Student Movement in Post-Revolutionary Iran”, 307. Also see Naghmeh Sohrabi and Arang Keshavarzian, “On the Eve of Iran’s Presidential Elections: Report from Tehran”, *Middle East Report Online* [On Line]. (June 7<sup>th</sup> 2001), 1-4. <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero060701.html> (Consulted on 5 November, 2004).

<sup>43</sup> See Bijan Khajepour, “Protest and Regime Resilience in Iran”, *Middle East Report Online* [On Line]. (December 11, 2002), 1-6. <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero111202.html> (Consulted on 5 November, 2004).

<sup>44</sup> Kaveh Ehsani, “Prospects For Democratization In Iran”, 7.

<sup>45</sup> Kaveh Ehsani, “Our Letter to Khatami Was a Farewell: An Interview with Saeed Razavi-Faqih”, *Middle East Report Online* [On Line]. (July 15<sup>th</sup> 2003), 1-9. <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero150702.html> (Consulted on 5 November, 2004).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

Right—persuaded the regime leaders that continued deadlock in the system caused by factional infighting and the clear opposition within the environment were deemed sufficiently threatening. They perceived continued polarization to be excessively dangerous, with consequences that could not be predicted or controlled. A series of reasons were behind the conservative elements’ “cold” calculations. First, they knew that by disqualifying 3600 out of 8200 people seeking candidacy (most of whom were reformists) the rejected candidates would not break with the past by objecting in a manner that would jeopardize the entire political system. Knowing full well that both the reformers and the conservatives were “cut from the same cloth” and both camps were byproducts of the same revolution,”<sup>47</sup> the conservatives counted on the reformists only responding in a passive manner. After all, the Guardian Council had the constitutional right to eliminate candidates it deems unworthy. Even more interesting was that nearly 90 of the sitting MPs were barred from running for the 2004 Majlis elections. The conservatives had calculated right—in protest, the Majlis deputies only led a sit-in in the Majlis building. Khatami and Ayatollah Kharuzi, the Majlis Speaker, issued a joint statement demanding a full review of the candidate screening. Even the Supreme Leader, demonstrating his “good will”, asked the Guardian Council to reconsider its decisions. Overall, nearly 500 out of the 3600 candidates were reinstated. This put the reformists in a politically hot situation. If they bargained with the conservatives to get their leadership candidates reinstated (including the president’s brother) at the cost of lesser known candidates, they would forfeit what legitimacy remained to them. If they didn’t press to have their leaders reinstated the less prestigious and experienced candidates would not have the political clout or acumen to impose a “common agenda” for reform. At the end, they chose to keep any legitimacy they still retained.

Another important factor is that the Khatami’s supporters must be understood as diverse groups that include young people born after the revolution, women who had suffered from extensive gender discrimination, the urban poor, secular intellectuals and middle-class professionals who found him to be the least objectionable choice.<sup>48</sup> The “coalition” was made up of a wide variety of groups from all walks of Iranian society, united in their disenchantment with the post-revolutionary era and in their (paradoxically) lack of trust in the clerics’ ability to deal with Iran’s problems.<sup>49</sup> The conservatives knew the existing weaknesses in the organization and leadership of the student movements. After a number of riots broke out in many parts of Iran and were suppressed by the authorities, it became clear that the students’ resources, their ability to mobilize, and the public’s weak support were no match for the establishment’s levers of power.<sup>50</sup> Also, as stated earlier, the student organizations had become divided and those who were more radical in pursuing reforms had already lost faith in Khatami and his administration.

In terms of the more organized political affiliations, they consisted of a precarious alliance between the radical/statists on the Left and the free-marketeers and free privatizers in the Center and Center-Right. Hence, one of the greatest challenges Khatami faced after his victory was dealing with the expanding rifts between the 18 political groups and factions that together made up the reformist block.<sup>51</sup> One can even presume that the conservative Right perceived such vast “ideological”

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<sup>47</sup> The idea borrowed from Jahangir Amuzegar, “Iran’s Crumbling Revolution”, *Foreign Affairs* 82,1 (January/February 2003), 44-57.

<sup>48</sup> See Jahangir Amuzegar, “Khatami’s Iran, One Year Later”, 76.

<sup>49</sup> See Jahangir Amuzegar, “Iran’s Crumbling Revolution”, *Foreign Affairs* 82, 1 (January/February 2003), 44-57.

<sup>50</sup> See Jahangir Amuzegar, “Iran’s Future: Civil Society or Civil Unrest”, 94.

<sup>51</sup> For more on this topic see Siamak Namazi, “Iran’s Upcoming Parliamentary Elections Up for Grabs”, *Middle East Report Online* [On Line]. (November 23<sup>rd</sup> 2003), 1-9. <http://www.merip.org/mero111203.html>

diversity within the reformist camp as a great handicap in their ability to represent a united front. The reformists' diversity in vision and ideology—present both among the authorities and their supporters—can be seen as the movement's great strength and great weakness at the same time.

Finally, probably the most important factor in the conservative calculations is counting on the Iranian public's wish not to have a direct confrontation with the regime. The Iranian citizens, who in 1997 made reformism happen through their great participation, have become more and more depoliticized, disillusioned and disinclined to remain active in the country's political dynamics. The majority of the Iranian middle-class—the group Western observers normally expect to spearhead social change—has a direct interest in political stability.<sup>52</sup> Despite its apparent dissatisfaction with the slow pace of reform, Iranian society does not seem ready or eager to force change at this time, favoring instead a gradual process.<sup>53</sup> In other words, after having gone through two years of a bloody revolution and civil war, eight years of an exhausting and fruitless war with Iraq, ten long years of economic austerity, and eight long years of glacially-paced reform, the public is not ready for another bloody insurrection, especially when the alternative to the *status quo*, as has been demonstrated, is still vague and unclear.

Overall, the debate over the reform process, both its means and its ends has met many obstacles. The authorities and leadership have not had the kind of support, or at least, the soft-core critiques they wished to get from Iran's Islamic intellectuals, the press and the student associations in which the system had invested enormously. In the post-1997 era, the most trusted members of the clergy, for whom democracy and human rights had become a priority, have been united in their quest in separating religion and religious institutions from the state. This is in direct contrast to the foundations of the Islamic regime and is leading to a domain that promotes relativism in religious thought and interpretation.<sup>54</sup> If competing versions of Islam were allowed in the name of expanded freedom, then the role of the clerical oligarchy could be very well called into question.<sup>55</sup> And this, as things proved, was a chance that the leadership of the Islamic Republic was unwilling to take.

Following the systemic logic, the relatively significant overtures—in the early stages of the process—provided by the reform initiative in the form of free and fair elections, freedom of the press and expression, the promotion of civil rights and a *détente* with the international community were all necessary aspects of the overall goal to maintain and consolidate the Islamic Republic. The reform initiative, therefore, through selective, guided, and limited openings, was a **maintenance strategy** to help the political system gain legitimacy, consolidate its base and reach a *détente* with the West.

The failure of the reform process—for the reasons previously mentioned—and the rise of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the presidency in 2005, however, must be understood—also following the systemic logic—as a **survival strategy**. The leadership, be it reformist or conservative, could not deal with either the quality or the quantity of “raw” demands coming from the environment. The lack of political parties and civil institutions capable of filtering and channeling the demands soon

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(Consulted on 15 November, 2004). And Jahangir Amuzegar, “Iran Under New Management”, *SAIS Review* 18, 1 (1998), 73-92.

<sup>52</sup> This is not a fact however, only an opinion. It is not known to what extent is the status quo more beneficial to the middle class than radical reform and change.

<sup>53</sup> See Bijan Khajepour, “Protest and Regime Resilience in Iran”, *Middle East Report Online* [On Line]. (December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2002), 1-6. <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero111202.html> (Consulted on 5 November, 2004).

<sup>54</sup> Ziba Mir-Hosseini, “Shirin Ebadi's Nobel Peace Prize Highlights Tensions in Iran”, *Middle East Report Online* [On Line]. (October 27<sup>th</sup> 2003), 1-7. <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero102703.html> (Consulted on 10 April 2006).

<sup>55</sup> Geneive Abdo, “Days of Rage in Tehran”, *Middle East Policy* 7, 1 (October 1999), 78-85.



began to take its toll on the system. Ali Rezaei, in a presentation made at Concordia University's Peace and Conflict Resolution in 2003, noted that the "reformists prayed for rain, and instead came the flood." This statement summarizes the regime's inability to control the momentum created by its promises. As Saeed Hajjarian, a prominent player in the reform movement stated: "We had 20 million people voting for the May 23<sup>rd</sup> movement."<sup>56</sup> Existing political vessels cannot contain the reform movement."<sup>57</sup> Iran suffers from structural problems that will not be easily resolved, and one of the goals of the reform process was to advance the cause of civil institutions, and the eventual creation of political parties that would actually aggregate and filter the wants of their members and supporters into realistic demands.

The reform era's disappointments and the sense of apathy that it created, coupled with the inherent division within the reformist camp which prevented it from agreeing to a single common presidential candidate, played right into the hands of the conservatives. Capitalizing on a low elections turnout, and with two reformists<sup>58</sup> competing with one another in the elections, Ahmadinejad, with the full backing of a united and strong conservative front, managed to finish first. Ahmadinejad's populist campaign-rhetoric and slogan, promising to tackle the widespread socioeconomic inequality, poverty, and corruption attracted the attention of all those millions of individuals for whom bread-and-butter issues were the main priority.

For the clerical establishment and the embattled political system, however, the Ahmadinejad phenomenon and presidency offers a sigh of relief, albeit for a little while. They have been able to once again postpone the inevitable, but for how long?

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<sup>56</sup> Reformists refer to the date Khatami was elected to presidency (May 23<sup>rd</sup>).

<sup>57</sup> Kaveh Ehsani, "A Conversation With Saeed Hajjarian, Existing Political Vessels Cannot Contain the Reform Movement", *Middle East Report* 29, 212 (Spring 1999), 40-42.

<sup>58</sup> The reformist/ moderate camp was represented with two candidates in the 2005 presidential elections.