

The first open challenge came inside the Majlis in August, when members of Parliament were called upon to ratify the cabinet appointments presented by Khatami. Militant resistance was posed against those nominees whom the conservative wing associated with the West. During a faction meeting of the 160 parliamentarians in the right wing, shortly before the confirmation hearings, the group contested the candidacy of several nominees, among them Ataollah Mohajerani, nominated to be Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Mohajerani had caused an uproar in 1990, when, as vice president under Rafsanjani, he had publicly proposed that Iran open direct talks with the United States. Another nominee, Dr. Kamal Kharazzi, who had served eight years as Iran's permanent representative to the United Nations, and thus had precious experience to utilize as Foreign Minister, was attacked in the right-wing newspaper *Jomhuri Eslami* in the following terms: It is not fitting that a person who has lived in the United States, whether as a student or as UN ambassador, be in charge of the foreign policy of a nation that considers the United States its greatest enemy.

Despite such outspoken opposition, a majority did confirm all of Khatami's 22 nominees, as a result of political calculations and maneuvering which were to be repeated in the future. Knowing that the popular mandate for Khatami was real, the conservative leaders chose to acquiesce rather than risk the possibility that political conflict inside the Majlis might turn into social clashes in the street. Both the Supreme Leader of the Revolution, Ayatollah Khamenei, and the defeated candidate Majlis Speaker Nateq Nouri, reportedly intervened to broker a compromise, to ensure ratification of the cabinet. Khamenei acknowledged as much when he publicly thanked Nouri for his tactful conduct in the delicate task of handling the confirmation hearings.

Another aspect of the vote, as pointed out in an *Iran News* commentary on Aug. 25, 1997, was that it showed an actual shift in the composition of the majority. According to commentator M. Serjoe, those who ended up voting against the most hotly contested nominee, Mohajerani, were only 96, as opposed to the 130 or 140 majority which the right had always claimed it commanded. What happened in this vote, was that the independents had abandoned the right-wing faction, and voted with the government forces. This meant, that the die-hard rightist partisans number only 96, a fact which reflects the political shift expressed in the elections themselves.

Among Khatami's new cabinet members, were 17 new faces, and 5 from the earlier government. The majority of the ministers were engineers by training, many of them educated in the United States. Politically speaking, the cabinet brought together Khatami's closest collaborators, plus members of the Rafsanjani current, as well as some leftists and a few conservative clerics. For the first time in the history of the Islamic republic, a woman was named to be a cabinet member: Mrs. Massoumeh Ebtekar was named vice president, with special responsibilities for environmental issues.

Khatami focussed on fulfilling the three major campaign pledges he had made: improving the economy, relaxing social and political restrictions inside the country to foster a more open political debate, and reintegrating Iran in the community of nations, including those of the West.

The most immediate results which the population could perceive, were in the social and cultural realm. In 1998, the formation of political parties was officially allowed, among them the Islamic Iran Solidarity Party, and the Servants of Construction, or the group of Six, around Rafsanjani, which had supported Khatami's election bid. In parallel, new publications began to appear, rapidly increasing the number of newspapers and magazines available to a literate and politi-

## Political tug-of-war: the Karbaschi case

The most serious challenge to the new political ordering ushered in with the government of Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, came in April of this year, when Tehran's Mayor, Gholamhussein Karbaschi, was detained on charges of corruption. Karbaschi is a leading political figure, from the Cadres of Reconstruction current, associated with former President Hashemi Rafsanjani. Karbaschi is also personally a close associate of the new President. Karbaschi had succeeded in transforming the nation's capital into a modern city, with functioning transportation infrastructure, modern distribution outlets, recreation areas for youth, and so forth.

The arrest and detention provoked immediate protests from Karbaschi's political allies, who did not hesitate to denounce the move as a politically motivated attack on the new President, by those conservative layers still in control of the judiciary. A group of 687 mayors from across the country sent an appeal to Khatami, asking that he investigate the detention, while evidence emerged that Karbaschi was being subjected to intensive interrogation under detention, and his human rights violated.

On April 8, the Supreme Leader of the Revolution, Ayatollah Khamenei, summoned the heads of the three branches of government to a meeting "to exchange views on the issue of the mayor of Tehran." At the meeting, which brought the arch-rivals face to face, Khamenei "asked the heads of the executive and judiciary branches to coordinate fully in matters related to the file and . . . fully observe the laws of the nation and justice and submit a full report . . . to the Leader." According to a statement later released by the government, no progress was made at the meeting.

With Karbaschi still in jail after a week, students began

cized public. Between August and December, the new government issued licenses for publications of various sorts, political, sports, culture, economics, etc., doubling the number on the market. The Culture Ministry was issuing ten licenses per week, and 991 new titles had been authorized by year's end, 59 of them daily newspapers. This has not proceeded without a struggle. The conservative opposition has wielded the power which it still holds inside the apparatus of the judiciary, to shut down a number of publications, on trumped-up charges. Khatami himself had had ample experience in this fight, back in 1992, when he was Minister of Culture. His moves to liberalize culture, especially in cinema, had led to his being sacked by the conservatives.

## Launching the foreign policy challenge

In the foreign policy realm, what Khatami did was nothing short of revolutionary. On Jan. 7, 1998, he addressed the American people, through the format of an interview with CNN. The mere fact that the President would do such a thing, it must be stressed, was considered a crime against the most cherished myths of revolutionary Iran. What Khatami said in the interview, was considered a further outrage, not only by the conservative clergy, but also by many social layers who had otherwise enthusiastically endorsed his candidacy.

The reason lies in the fact, that Khatami dared to question the popular axioms of belief, not only in the American people

to organize demonstrations, although the government had specifically requested that no rallies take place. Demonstrations were reported at Tehran University, where clashes broke out and arrests were made. At an event held at the Interior Ministry on April 15, parliamentarian Faezeh Hashemi, the daughter of former President Hashemi Rafsanjani, made a speech defending Karbaschi from the embezzlement charges. Her words were met by chants from protesters, who shouted, "Plunderer of public wealth must be executed." This led to clashes, with arrests and injuries.

All these violent confrontations were reported in the Iranian daily press, which carried continuing editorial comments, defending or attacking Karbaschi in brutal terms.

### A solution is engineered

Finally, on April 15, Karbaschi was released from prison, but still had to stand trial. What went on behind the scenes, to secure his release, again demonstrated the careful maneuvering undertaken by rival political factions, all aware of the dangers of an escalating confrontation. According to reports in the Iranian media, Rafsanjani, as head of the Expediency Council, played a central role. Rafsanjani met with Ayatollah Khamenei, and received agreement for Karbaschi's release. Thereupon, President Khatami wrote to Khamenei, requesting the release.

By April 19, the crisis seemed under control. Ayatollah Khamenei and Rafsanjani both appealed to the population to preserve "unity and solidarity" and to avoid exacerbating social tensions. Clearly, it was at the point that the conservative faction, including the highest authority Khamenei, perceived the danger that the factional struggle among politicians could spill over into civil disturbances in the street, that they decided to engineer a solution.

Karbaschi did stand trial on charges of embezzlement of public funds, misconduct in government activities,

wasting public property, and bribery. He was convicted of all except the bribery charges. The sentence announced on July 23, was five years in prison, 60 lashes, and a fine of 1 billion rials (equivalent to \$333,333).

In addition to the unusually harsh sentence — including the 60 lashes, albeit postponed — Karbaschi was informed that he would be banned from holding any government position for 20 years. This is clear proof that the entire affair was politically motivated.

The Karbaschi affair, though temporarily cooled off, is by no means over. While his appeal has been filed, there have been further political repercussions. Interior Minister Abdollah Nouri, who had openly defended Karbaschi, was impeached by the Majlis as a result, with a vote of 137 (of 270). Nouri had not only defended Karbaschi, but had attacked his accusers. Although the Majlis, still under the sway of the conservatives, had won one battle by removing this Khatami man from office, Khatami succeeded in co-opting him as Vice President for Development and Social Affairs. In addition, Khatami managed to have a political ally, Abdelvahed Mousavi Lari, ratified as his nominee to succeed Nouri.

As for Karbaschi himself, it is possible that he may try to present his candidacy for the next Majlis elections. Were he to be accepted as a candidate, for example, following release from prison, he would most certainly win by an overwhelming margin of votes. However, in the Iranian political system, candidates must be authorized by the Guardians Council, the upper house of the Majlis. Were this group to reject Karbaschi's candidacy, and popular support for the former mayor were to remain strong, then the political conflict could develop into an institutional crisis, in which the system as a whole were called into question.

Although such scenarios are hypothetical at this point, they are important to bear in mind, to understand the nature of the political process in Iran today.