

How Iran Will Solve Its Internal Political Crisis

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

A crisis which has been simmering for the past three years in the Islamic Republic of Iran, is coming to a head in the immediate days and weeks. Its outcome will contribute to determining not only the political direction of this strategically located nation, but the shape of international relations, in the Persian Gulf, and more broadly, Eurasia. It is in the vital interest of Iran, its neighbors, and the cause of world peace, that external interventions into the crisis be prevented at all costs, and that the internal dynamic of the highly sensitive, complex political process, be allowed to play itself out.

The crisis erupted, ostensibly, on April 7-9, when a group of Iranian political figures and intellectuals representing the reform current of President Mohammad Seyyed Khatami, participated in a conference at the Heinrich Böll Foundation, in Berlin, on the theme, "Iran After the Elections." The foundation, a front group of the German Green party, said that it had not invited the diverse groups of exile Iranians, on grounds that they were so factionalized, that they would only create chaos. Predictably, the opposition groups, ranging from pro-Shah activists to pro-terrorists, planned to protest. As the spokesman of the Böll Foundation, Michael Alvarez, stated on April 6, before the event started, "We are expecting protests from various sides." He said that the foundation wanted to "keep the conference open, even for the demonstrators," according to an account in *Tagesspiegel* on April 6.

As foreseen, demonstrators stormed the event, in a protest against the Iranian guests, whom they accused of having "sold out" to the "regime," etc. Among the disturbances staged, was lascivious dancing, to flaunt the Islamic norms governing dress and manners in Iran. This effectively sabotaged the conference.

By virtue of their being present, the 17 Iranian guests at the event, were immediately targetted by conservative press

organs inside Iran, who denounced them for having been a party to such anti-Islamic activities. One hundred and forty members of the Majlis (Parliament) accused those participating in the Berlin conference, of advocating "U.S.-style reforms," and called on the judiciary to bring them to justice. Following their return to Iran, the protests became more boisterous, and, when the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) showed a film of portions of the conference, including scenes of dancing girls, the protests exploded. The implication of the film, was that the reformers intended to introduce such loose cultural norms into the country.

Political Polarization

The political polarization inside Iran appeared in the form of statements for or against the film and IRIB. On April 19, the representative of the executive branch to the supervisory council of the IRIB, Mohsen Aminzadeh, called the broadcasting of the film an "insult to Islamic sanctities as it depicted promiscuous behavior." Interior Minister Mousavi Lari, on April 22, raised the question, why IRIB should show such a film during the mourning month of Moharram, in which the martyrdom of the third Imam was being commemorated. He added, that if IRIB wanted to show the film, it should have broadcast parts showing participants from Iran, defending the Islamic system. "Another question," he said, is "why those who raise hue and cry if a woman's hair is shown a bit from under her scarf, dare broadcast such a film with scenes of dance?" Lari's argument was that forces inside the country have been deliberately breeding a sense of insecurity in the country, in order to discredit President Khatami and his policies. Others, on the conservative side of the spectrum, justified showing the film, on the basis that it "informed" the public as to what the reformers were really up to.



The central square of Isfahan, Iran. It is essential that foreign interventions into Iran's domestic affairs be prevented, if the nation's leaders are to find positive solutions to the political crisis.

At the same time, rumors of a coup were circulating, and being prominently reported in certain international press. The London *Financial Times* on April 20, for example, carried a fiery statement which, it says, had been issued on Iranian national television on April 16, by the Revolutionary Guards. The statement read, "When the time comes, small and big enemies will feel the revolutionary hammer on their skulls." In response, a pro-Khatami organization, the Organization of Islamic Revolution Mojahedin (OIRM), accused hard-liners of plotting a coup, to prevent the newly elected, pro-reform Parliament from being convened in May.

The Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) issued a statement saying that it "will never stage a military coup." Gen. Mohammad Hejazi, one of the IRGC commanders, went on to say, "Of course the IRGC will not remain indifferent whenever values of Islam and the revolution are jeopardized and will take strong action within the framework of the law against those undermining national security and achievements of the Islamic revolution." According to the *Tehran Times* account, the OIRM had sent an open letter to the IRGC, expressing concern over the IRGC's statement, and warning against the possibility that the IRGC could "reduce itself to the status of surrogate Third World army personnel who seek their power in crushing the authors and newspapers."

On the same day that the *Financial Times* story appeared, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, who had rejected "U.S.-style reforms," delivered a speech to a group of youth, in which he denounced certain press. "A number of the existing newspapers in the country," he said, "have turned into bases of the enemies and are doing the same thing as the British, the U.S., and the Zionist broadcasting agencies are doing." He specified, "Ten to fifteen papers are seemingly being guided by

one center as they select similar headlines on different incidents and endeavor to magnify insignificant incidents."

Newspapers Are Shut Down

Just days later, on April 23, the Justice Department of Tehran Province issued an order to close down eight dailies, three weeklies, and one monthly publication, on grounds that the papers had not followed the courts' earlier orders, not to publish material that was disparaging to Islam and to the religious elements of the Islamic revolution. On April 24, another daily was also suspended. Printing such material, the ministry statement said, according to the Iranian News Agency (IRNA), "was part of the cultural assault of the foreign enemies of Iran which . . . they had undertaken with the aid of their agents who had infiltrated into the ranks of Iranian journalists." The Justice Department said that the material published had been against the Iranian constitution and press law, and had undermined national security and unity.

All the papers were aligned with the pro-Khatami reform current.

Not coincidentally, on the same night of the closure of the 12 publications, three journalists were detained: Mashaalah Shamsolvaezin, Akbar Ganji, and Latif Safari. Ganji had been at the Berlin conference.

On April 24, theologians in Tehran, Mashhad, Kashan, and other cities, staged demonstrations, to condemn the Berlin conference. At the demonstration, Prosecutor General Ayatollah Mohammad Moqtadaei gave a speech, and said that the participants in the Berlin conference would be brought to justice. On April 25, an arrest warrant was issued by the special clergy court, for Hojatoleslam Hassan Yousef Eshkenari, also because of the Berlin conference. And, the conservative Assembly of Experts called for judicial action against those

in the press responsible for “desecration of Islamic sanctities and sabotage against revolutionary figures.” The 86-member body pointed to Ayatollah Khamenei’s speech, saying that he had identified a U.S.-led conspiracy behind “anarchist newspapers,” and they asserted that the Berlin conference had been part of the conspiracy “hatched by the foreign enemies and their lackeys inside Iran.”

In a parallel move, the head of the Islamic Propagation Organization, Hojatolislam Mahmoud Mohammadi Araqi, termed the participation of Iranians in the Berlin conference as “humiliating,” and the conference itself “disgraceful.”

In protest against the closures of the publications, and the arrests of pro-reform figures, students staged peaceful demonstrations in several cities, while conservatives mobilized their forces, also for the streets.

The Transition of Power

Obviously, it was not the appearance of some Iranian intellectuals and political reformers at a Berlin conference which *caused* the tumultuous events in Iran, although there can be no doubt, that the outrages staged by the group of pro-terrorist exile Iranians, were indeed deliberately orchestrated to trigger the desired effect.

More deeply, the cause of the escalating tensions, must be located in the extraordinary political process of change which has been unfolding inside Iran, especially since President Khatami’s landslide electoral victory in May 1997. Khatami — who, ironically, had been ousted from his post as Cultural Minister years earlier, by conservatives opposed to his liberal press policy at the time — was swept into power by a 69% majority, mainly women and youth, desirous of orderly change in society, closer contacts with the rest of the world, including the West, and greater cultural freedom domestically.

As the new President made explicit, the kind of change he had promised, could not come about overnight. In public speeches, during his campaign as well as following his victory, he stressed the need for progressing toward a more open society, and better relations with the West, through a gradual process, within the parameters of the constitution. Each time the President made any bold moves toward implementing these changes — for example, when he appeared in a televised interview in the United States — he was immediately attacked by the conservative wing.

Khatami has nonetheless continued his course, even in spite of acts of violence perpetrated by his political enemies, acts which have included serial killings of reformers, and the March 12 attempted assassination of newspaper editor Saeed Hajjarian, close to the President. The only way in which Khatami’s reform program could be realized, he insisted, was by bringing the force of his popular mandate to bear on change, effected through the institutions. After having won the Presidency, the reform current had to secure a majority in the Majlis.

When parliamentary elections took place this year on Feb. 18, Khatami’s political supporters scored a major victory. Voter participation was again at record levels, as it had been in the Presidential election. For the first time in 20 years — since the Islamic revolution — the conservatives were in a minority, and the moderates controlled two-thirds of the seats. The groups elected included the Islamic Iran Participation Party (IIPP), Islamic Iran Solidarity Party, and the Executives of Construction Party, which make up the 2nd of the Khordad Front (the umbrella group containing all reformist factions). The IIPP, led by the brother of the President, Mohammad-Reza Khatami, won a great majority of the 30 Parliament seats in the capital, Tehran, in the first round. The Iranian election system has two rounds; candidates can win in the first round, if they garner more than 25% of the votes in their electoral districts.

It is important to underline, that the candidates themselves are vetted, and those who do not embrace the Islamic system in Iran, *Velayat-e Faqih* (guardianship of supreme jurisprudence), are not allowed to run. Furthermore, the election results must be confirmed by the Guardians Council, which also sets the date for the second round.

Given the overwhelming majority, evident already in the first round, for the pro-Khatami moderates and reformers, it has become clear, that the whole structure of power relations has shifted in the country. The conservatives have been thrust into a minority position by the people. Yet, at the same time, they continue to wield significant power in institutions like the Guardians Council, the Assembly of Experts, and the intelligence and security apparatus. These are positions of power which they are not eager to relinquish.

At the same time, the majority of the population, which has demonstrated its political clout in the polls, is eager to see the desired reforms implemented. Some among the leading reformers, believe that the popular mandate is a license to push through radical change, regardless of the opposition. They, therefore, exert pressure on the Presidency to move more quickly in that direction.

President Khatami on a Tightrope

President Khatami has succeeded, in every crisis to date, in walking the tightrope, assuring his political supporters of his commitment to reform, while signalling to the conservative establishment, that he will not engage in adventurous actions against them.

Thus, in the current crisis, President Khatami was even-handed. On April 22, in his first public response to the televised broadcast of the film from Berlin, Khatami said, “I am totally opposed to the way the IRIB raised the issue which provoked the feelings and caused great concern among the committed sections of the society and those who seek the country’s dignity and honor.” But he also criticized the conference as “not acceptable.” He referred to numerous conferences organized on Iran since the revolution, which “aim to

distort and undermine” its achievements, and said that “some inappropriate statements” had been made at the Berlin conference, as well as “rational words.” He added, that the film had had some positive effect, in that it showed youth “the real nature of those who seek to overthrow the Islamic system . . . many of the people, particularly the young generation did not know . . . how rude, how irrational, how violent, and how impudent they are.” He also said, “This is the procedure adopted by the same current whose logic is the bullet and created a wave of terror and assassination in Iran.”

Khatami stressed the need for the political debate inside the country to proceed, peacefully: “Iran needs tranquillity. Debate and criticism are signs of vibrancy.” However, debate should not mean chaos. He said that the press should “avert media fighting,” and emphasized that “no action should be taken which may worry the Leader [of the Revolution], the nation, the faithful, and the youth” about national security, according to IRNA.

The implicit message which Khatami has repeatedly issued since his 1997 election, is that the reform process will be slow and arduous, and that one should take care not to provide the conservative opposition with pretexts for conflict and violence. Referencing the fact that Iran had been under tyrannical rule in its history, which wasted the country’s resources, Khatami said that “factional discord pushes the country into chaos and the government toward more centralization and use of force which in turn make the people pessimistic about the government.”

Khatami elaborated the same points in an April 24 address to a joint session of the cabinet ministries and governors general. Here, Khatami referred explicitly to the concerns expressed by Ayatollah Khamenei about the press. He said that the Leader of the Revolution is “a supporter of peace and an advocate of freedom, diversity, and pluralism,” and is the one who “elucidates general policies and orientations of the system.” Therefore, “all those abiding by the law should coordinate their behavior and responsibility in line with the same policies and orientations.” The President emphasized the need for “calm and dignity” for the government and institutions, and underlined, “peace of mind for the Leader is important for all, as the calm and stability of the entire system originates from the Leader’s peace of mind.”

Khamenei Responds

On April 26, Ayatollah Khamenei responded, calling on “groups loyal to the revolution and the Islamic system to help the government overcome the problems of the people while maintaining principles and fundamentals,” according to an IRNA dispatch. He said, “All of you believe in Islam, revolution, and Imam, but inside the country there are some who, like the U.S., are against such principles; and it is important to take a clear and transparent position against such oppositions and enmities. However, the stance of some friends and political groups on the issues are so intangible that anyone

who believes in them would feel that he can even be attached to the counter-revolutionaries.” In other words, one should observe the fine distinction between expressing critical views, and playing into the hands of the enemies of the nation. Despite his reiterated attacks on the press, the Leader was uttering a clear statement of support for the Khatami government, which was crucial: “The President is himself defender of the system and the revolution; moreover, I strongly support the President based on principles and foundations.”

Significantly, Ayatollah Khamenei also addressed what had occurred at the notorious Berlin conference, displaying some understanding of what had gone on. Calling the conference an “ugly” move, he noted that “foundations organizing such conferences are usually supported by enemies’ security, political, and intelligence organs,” IRNA reported. He said, “The organizers of the conference had, through such planning and by inviting all the groups abroad opposed to the system had, in fact, tried to turn the conference into a session to put the revolution and the Islamic system on trial. They also wanted to publicize on behalf of the counter-revolutionaries that fundamental reforms are possible only through elimination of Islam and *Velayat-e Faqih* from the constitution or by changing the constitutional law.” “But,” he added, “God thwarted the conspiracy and the disgrace of the Berlin conference remained on German statesmen.”

The Road Ahead

Once it appeared, through the intervention of Khamenei in support of Khatami, that the confrontation between the reformers and the conservatives had been put on ice, at least temporarily, the question arose: Where to go from here?

The next step will be the convening of the Parliament, scheduled for May 28. Obstacles have been placed in the way of its opening, by the Guardians Council, which has yet to set a date for run-off elections. Thirty-two seats remain to be ratified by the body, and 65 are still undecided, until the second round. A recount of the votes is going on in the Tehran constituency, which, according to the Guardians Council, could lead to different results than those announced. The same body has invalidated some results, for example, in Jiroft of Khorasan province.

This has fuelled speculation, that the conservative establishment seeks to prevent the convening of the Parliament completely, as had been mooted by the pro-Khatami OIRM, in its exchange with the Revolutionary Guards. On the day the news was released, of Khamenei’s declared support for Khatami, the London *Guardian* came out with the story that, indeed, a plot was afoot to organize a coup against Khatami, in which blocking the Parliament would be one crucial element. The *Guardian* wrote, without further explanation, that it had come into possession of transcriptions of a taped meeting of three Revolutionary Guards officials, who planned to set up a “crisis committee,” to carry out a three-stage coup. The meeting they referred to, was reportedly two weeks earlier.