

One Theocrat's Puppet Democracy, One Nation's Democratic Deprivation.

By Yashar Keramati

Twenty-seven years ago Iranians from all different walks of life packed themselves into small cars, trucks, and buses, doubling or tripling the vehicles' capacities, in order to get to city centers to protest against the Shah's regime. With passion and hope in their hearts and minds, they believed their relentless fighting and protesting against the Shah's government would bring about change in the direction of true equality, freedom, and democracy for Iranians. However, Iranian's quickly realized that not only did they fail to bring about equality, freedom, and democracy through their revolution but rather helped put into power a new regime, comprised of religious elites, which was more suppressive and harmful to their existence than the regime they overthrew. Now, more than ever, Iranians are faced with many obstacles in everyday life due to the lack of democracy. It is this lack of democracy which can be held largely responsible for their woes in their public and private lives. Thus, one has to wonder how such a restraining regime can manage to stay in power even though the people, the very foundation of any regime, largely disapprove of its practices. The following essay will thus discuss what the obstacles standing in the path of democratization in Iran are. This essay will argue that the overwhelming, ultimate, and unchecked powers of the religious elites in absolutely every institution and area of Iranian life are at the root of stalling democratization. Furthermore, it will be briefly argued that foreign involvement in the democratization movement of Iran, namely by the United States, not only halts all and any progress being made by the movement but in fact has a reactionary effect on the movement as it gives the counter-democratization forces ammunition to blast the democratization movement with. These arguments will be proven within the context of Mohammad Khatami's presidency from 1997-2005 which saw the movement's progress, due to courageous opposition, at its climax before ultimately being crushed by the religious elites who control all of the Iranian institutions and freedoms which are needed for change.

Section 8, Article 107 of the Iranian constitution states: "The Supreme Leader is equal with the rest of the people of the country in the eyes of law" (Iranian Government Constitution). The current Supreme Leader of Iran is Ali Khamenei and he is anything but equal with the rest of

the people in the eyes of the law, or anything else for that matter. In fact, little justification is needed to say that he is the law. It is this unmatched status and power that Khamenei possesses which can account as the core problem for the lack of democracy in Iran. However, in 1997 when Mohammad Khatami received majority of the votes for presidency, and ironically was approved and appointed by Khamenei as President, the people believed that this charismatic reformist would bring about democratic change to Iran. After all, this was what Khatami advocated and promised during his campaign. Nevertheless, as Saïd Amir Arjomand puts it in comparison to the late USSR, where Mikhail Gorbachev brought about *perestroika* by introducing *glasnost*, Khatami brought about *glasnost* and moved *perestroika* back decades because of it by the end of his presidency (Arjomand, 2005: 507).

When Khatami came into power there was a new sense of openness in Iran. This was not merely an unexplainable emotion but was rather due to the changes Khatami was bringing about. Before his first presidency Arjomand explains that offices on the municipal level were comprised of elites selected by the Supreme Leader or his pawns, such as the Council of Guardian or Council of Experts amongst others, which serve under him. But, in 1999, at the height of Khatami's reform successes, he announced "the first step in political development is participation, and the most evident channel for participation is the election of the Councils" (Arjomand, 2005: 508). After this announcement, elections were held for the first time since 1979 which elected the municipal officers. Open elections were held and the majority of those who won seats were reformists. It was here, at the height of democratization in Iran and Khatami's reformist movement when Khamenei began to show his unprecedented power.

Before Khamenei began imposing his will, this new wave of reformists holding office brought further excitement into the lives of those who were eager for change. They began to believe that Iran was changing and thus they could be freer to speak their minds. Arjomand described this, which later proved to be a false sense of freedom in practice and reality, by explaining an event which took place in early February 1999: "Hojjat al-Eslm Mohsen Kadivar, a younger but prominent reformist cleric who had written a direct and detailed refutation of Khomeini's theory of theocratic government, delivered a speech in Isfahan in which he declared terrorism forbidden by the Sacred Law." What Kadivar meant by terrorism was intimidation by the religious elite of those who opposed their policies. Arjomand goes on to say that "Kadivar was arrested at the end of February 1999, and his trial by the Special Court for Clerics became a *cause célèbre*." (Arjomand, 2005: 508). Here one can see the might of the religious elite in banning freedom of speech, an essential component of any

true democracy. It must also be noted that the Special Court of Clerics, like any other court in Iran, is subject to the Supreme Leader's will and approval. Shirin Ebadi, the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize winner is an Iranian woman who received the Prize for her work in children's and women's rights as a lawyer in Iran. She, like most Iranians, is very concerned with the power of the religious elites in Iran. Ebadi wrote in a publication regarding democracy in Iran that "Democracy has no meaning if citizens are not free to express their opinions without fear of prosecution" (Ebadi, 2006: 50). Although this is a very basic idea, it is truly a fundamental part of democracy. Democracy, at its barest form, is rule by the people, but how can the people rule or even put in their input if they are behind bars for their input if not tortured or killed which is a blatant reality in Iran? Thus, the religious elites are violating a fundamental step in achieving democracy by muzzling dissidents.

But beyond muzzling individuals, the religious elites stifle any other form of opposition to their iron grip over the country. This is prominent in the media which is under the direct control of the Supreme Leader, Khamenei. The media and other sources of knowledge are essential to the necessary freedoms which can bring about democracy. Ebadi writes:

Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and his father Reza Shah imposed strict controls on the press. Although these were lifted after the Islamic revolution, the new regime reverted to strict censorship in 1981, quashing books perceived as opposing official ideology. Publishing any book now requires a written permit from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance.

Here again one must remember that the Ministry also works under the Supreme Leader (Ebadi, 2005: 50). In 1999 an intelligence officer close to the religious elites was imprisoned by Khatami for unjustified murders of dissidents. Such murders are not uncommon in Iran. The imprisonment of this officer was a move by Khatami which Adam Tarock described as Khatami's attempt to prove he was committed to his platform which included bringing about the rule of law (Tarock, 2002: 453). The intelligence officer, who was named Emami, committed suicide in prison but he did not do this before writing a detailed letter to the reformist newspaper called "Salam". This secret letter, described by Arjomand "provided an outline of the restrictive press law with provisions for clerical censorship" (Arjomand, 2005: 509). Salam published the letter on its front page and, immediately after doing so, was shut down by the Special Court of

Clerics which, as mentioned earlier, is a political pawn of Khamenei.¹ Here one can see just how easily the religious elites can kill-off anyone or group which speaks against them. The most horrific aspect of this fact of life in Iran is that such actions go unquestioned due to Khamenei's power. By the end of Khatami's presidency absolutely all reformist newspapers were shut down, the last of which was the newspaper called "Bahar". The Supreme Leader's control is truly the biggest obstacle in Iran's path to democratization as it is the core of all other obstacles. Such undemocratic actions by the Khamenei seem to mirror those of Mussolini who was known to review every single publication in fascist Italy and mark them with either green, meaning they may be published, or red, meaning they may not be. However, in the case of Khamenei, he no longer needs to use the red pen seeing that all of the reformist papers have been shut down.

At this point it must be pointed out the banning of newspapers is just one branch of Khamenei's destruction in the path of achieving true democracy. He also rules directly over all television broadcasts. This is written in Article 111 of the Iranian Constitution (Iranian Government Constitution) so Khamenei does not even have to go around any other organizations to achieve what he wants. William Samii, in his discourse regarding the religious elites and Council of Guardians, wrote that "state broadcast media is more than just a government mouthpiece, under its current leadership it is quite clearly aligned with the most hard-line elements" (Samii, 2001: 645). Direct control over these sources of media stands in the path of democratization in a few substantial ways. Khamenei's control over this institution only exposes the electorate to the views which support the Supreme Leader, his existence, and his policies. Some may ask why the people would vote for conservatives when they disagree with their policies, as they did in 2005 when a landslide victory was awarded to the conservatives. However, the people can only vote for what they have seen and been told about. Through this direct media control by Khamenei, democratization, as a movement and as an idea, is annihilated because the people are only given a pool of conservatives from which to elect their members of Majlis (or parliament). When the people vote, they are only voting for conservative politics. Furthermore, and more harmfully, they believe that they already possess democracy because they are voting. Even though the people could vote for different candidates, they would still be voting

¹ As a side note it should be mentioned that all of the ministries, courts, and so on can at any time be over ruled or shut down by Khamenei. This however has yet to happen since their members are picked or approved by Khamenei or his pawns, and thus they are loyal to Khamenei and align themselves with his beliefs. The first part of the Iranian constitution, in basic translation says that "the Supreme Leader has the final say in all aspects of Iranian affairs (Iranian Government Constitution)

for the same party and thus ultimately the same policies. Moreover, to give the Iranians this false sense of democracy creates another road-block in democratization in that it deprives them of any motivation to strive for true democratization because they believe they already have it. After all, this is what the media is feeding them and deceiving them into. Also, as proven in the 2005 presidential elections, hard-line conservatives receive extremely biased coverage as their agendas play directly into the hands of the Supreme Leader and his pawns. This gives ample explanation as to why conservatives won landslide victories both on the national and local levels in the 2005 election. To be deceived and forced to keep these reactionaries in power sustains in power a regime who's existence relies on the lack of democracy, equality, and freedoms.

But if controlling the institutions within the media which have great effect over the elections does not wound the democratization efforts enough, the Supreme Leader also directly picks and chooses who can and cannot run for positions in the government. This is yet another barrier to democratization created by Khamenei. After 8 years of domination of the Majlis by reformists, Khamenei decided to return the Majlis, which many view as the last reformist controlled institution in Iran, to conservative hands. Azadeh Moaveni explained how this was done by the Council of Guardians which is Khamenei's most powerful and influential puppet by saying "The hard-line Council of Guardians, which reviews parliamentary legislation, suggested last week that M.P.s who failed to show allegiance to Khamenei could be kicked out of parliament." (Moaveni, 2000: 28) Although Khamenei did in fact kick out many members of the Majlis leading up to the 2001 elections, he did even more damage before the 2005 elections to make sure that the Majlis would have absolutely no chance of falling into reformist hands again since it repeatedly did so during Khatami's terms. Although the reformist Majlis of 1997-2005 achieved nothing substantial in regards to pro-democratic reforms, by having a conservative Majlis Khamenei would, and indeed has, saved himself a few minor headaches by not having to go to the trouble to crush their potential efforts towards democratization. Furthermore, as Tarock puts it, a reformist victory in 2005 would have meant "humiliation" for the conservatives and thus their puppet-masters, the religious elites, and therefore namely Khamenei (Tarock, 2002: 451). Before the elections of 2005, as outrageous as it is and may sound, the Council of Guardians had banned 83 of the 125 reformist, pro-democratization members of the Majlis from running again in the upcoming elections. Furthermore, as an act of unity as to protest, other reformist members of Majlis resigned. Arjomand explains "123 of 125 reformist Representatives

handed in their resignations. Meanwhile, 12 ministers and some 28 governors and deputy-ministers, representing the lay, 'technocratic' second stratum of the Islamic Republic, were also said to have submitted their resignations in sympathy." (Arjomand, 2005: 503) Thus, not only did Khamenei manage to eliminate the democratization movement without being checked by any institution, but also managed to demoralize the few left in the movement, who he did not arbitrarily get disowned of political freedom, to the point where these few eliminated themselves from running. After all, they had seen that the best of their efforts at the climax of their movement amounted to arguably nothing. No true democracy can exist if one man or a few people can irrefutably decide who can and cannot represent the people. Free and fair elections are essential to a true democracy and Khamenei has deprived Iranians of this democratic principle on many different fronts.

Some other institutions which are under the direct control of Khamenei are the army, police, and intelligence services. Going back to the shutting down of the Salam newspaper, one could see the best example of Khatami's presidency and democratic ambitions being at the mercy of Khamenei's will. When the newspaper was shut down, students, the same students with democratic hopes who put Khatami into power, took to the streets in a wave of protests at universities around Iran. Thomas Omestad who reported on the protests wrote the following:

The student protesters and supporters who thronged the streets of Tehran last week dashed with security forces and vigilantes, and the scene was repeated in more than a dozen other Iranian cities. Their battle cry was democratic reform of the Shiite Muslim theocracy, but some went further. They denounced the country's spiritual leader as a dictator-an extraordinary act of defiance. Others hurled stones and invective at police in running street battles that left parts of the Capital choked in a haze of tear gas and smoke from burning barricades.

The scene described by Omestad was the biggest protest in Iran since the 1979 revolution (Omestad, 1999: 30). It also marked the summit of the reform movement. Khamenei turned his wrath towards the students who were fighting for the democratization movement, constitutional rights which the religious elites were violating, and freedom of speech which Salam was deprived of. He punished them by releasing the army and police on the students in what turned out to be a bloody and violent confrontation. Later Khamenei's religious goons raided university campuses and beat students, throwing students out of second and third floor windows after

shocking them awake from their sleeps. One student was killed according to the government, but other sources claim up to 5 students were killed during the protests (Schmidle, 2005: 29). True democracy cannot come into being if the questions and demands of the people are met with sheer violence and the forcing of the regime's will onto the justifiably discontented. The institution of Iranian armed forces, being completely out of the control of the public and the elected Majlis and president by the decree of the Iranian constitution's 111th Article which grants it to the Supreme Leader, completely unchecked and unaccountable, impedes on democratic desires and actions taking place towards democracy. It was this institution that stopped the students' movement in the direction of democratization. Thus if any group or individual rises against the regimes in the hopes of democracy the religious elites do, have, and will be simply put down the factions by brute force. However, due to their extensive control over all important institutions and branches of government in Iran, they rarely have to mobilize their armed powers. The people are intimidated to a level where hardly anyone stands against the regime anymore. This is a long term blow to democratization as such a problem takes many years to overcome.

Similarly, another long term problem which stands in the way of democratization in Iran is the demoralization of the masses after Khatami's eight year presidency. The most disappointing part during Khatami's presidency came after the protests of 1999. It can be argued that the students were the backbone of Khatami's election success. If this is too long of a stretch, it still cannot be questioned that the students were the most enthusiastic and active of the reformists in trying to bring about true democracy in Iran. Khatami was the closest Iranians had come to achieving freedom and equality. This is why when Khatami failed to support the students during the 1999 protests, the pinnacle of the democratization movement in Iran, the movement began to move backwards. Nicholas Schmidle quotes Khatami speaking shortly after the protests: "It [the unrest] was an ugly and offensive incident,' Khatami said, 'which marred the image of our dear, patient, rational people. It had nothing to do with this honorable nation or the university students'" (Schmidle, 2005: 31). Khatami's statement here can very much be seen as the turning point of the modern democratization movement in Iran. Until his statement, the people, feeling as if they had the backing of the president, were vigorously pushing forward with demands of reforms. Their now evident false belief that their president was on their side, through thick and thin, was what gave them the motivation and courage to stand up against Khamenei's Iran. However, Khatami's statement regarding the protests proved that not even he himself was brave

nor strong enough to stand up to the theocratic bullies. The demoralization of the masses takes a very long time to recover from. This is because their defeat came at a time better than any they had ever experienced: people were speaking out for the first time, Khamenei was getting denounced, the students were standing up against the *Komeeti* which is a branch of the armed forces in Iran infamous for its brutality and corruption, and the president, the person they believed to have tremendous power, was on their side. When one is defeated when they believe to be unbeatable it is phenomenally more damaging than one getting defeated at any other time. This is understandable since the people would logically feel as if their efforts in the future would amount to nothing if they could not even gain an inch when they put all of their efforts forward in the most favorable of circumstances. They even had the moral support of the world's most power nation, the United States.

But this foreign support caused them even more damage. In Iran, any and all association with the U.S is the ultimate ground for disrespect, alienation, punishment, and the most importantly loss of credibility. Iranians may disagree on numerous topics, but one topic which almost all Iranians can find agreement is animosity towards the U.S. Thus, if the U.S supported the students during the height of the reform movement, then the students' movement itself loses tremendous credibility. Howard LaFranchi puts it in the following way: "outside pressure for change could actually bolster the Iranian regime." And he also links U.S support to such moves made in Venezuela by adding "US efforts to build an internal opposition to Venezuela's President Hugo Chávez, for example, are widely credited with having solidified support for the populist leader by allowing him to attack his opponents as US stooges." (LaFranchi, 2006: 3) In fact, this is exactly how the U.S verbal support of the movement was met in Iran. Regarding the protests and U.S comments at the time Thomas Omestad states "Conservatives including Khamenei, apparently looking for scapegoats, blamed the unrest on foreign 'enemies' led by the United States." (Omestad, 1999: 29) Regardless of whether Iranians are for or against democratization, most of them are fiercely against the U.S. Thus, even those within the reform movement may be turned away from their reformist ambitions due to U.S support. Furthermore, because of this great intense contempt of the U.S, comments or involvement by the U.S give the religious elites who fully control Iran an excuse to clamp down on those who disagree with them. They do this under the argument that since those who disagree with them share the same sentiments as the U.S then they must be dealt with very firmly since the U.S is a great enemy to

Iran. This theory actually was taken into practice after the U.S comments. While interviewing a student by the name of Bijan who was one of the biggest student leaders in the movement, Nicholas Schmidle was told the following: “‘We don't want U.S support,’ Bijan said, becoming angry. ‘Did you know that 4,000 people were arrested the night after those statements were made? It only gives them [the regime] another reason to crack down.’” Even Mohsen Sazegara, a former high ranking member of the post-revolution regime turned dissident living in the U.S has said, directly in regards to democratization of Iran “We would never compromise ourselves by accepting money from a foreign government” (Sazegara, 2005: 67) U.S involvement in the democratization movement of Iran, be it financially, militarily, or morally diverts and wastes the reformist energies from the democratization movement in a few ways. It makes the reformists unite with the religious elites in a bid to oppose the U.S. This can even be seen currently regarding Iran’s nuclear row. Schmidle writes “With Bush's belligerent rhetoric toward Tehran on the rise, many students have turned to embrace Iranian nationalism, their country's nuclear aspirations, and, by a twist of irony, the mullahs they have long despised. The population has come to identify the nuclear program [and their support for it] with the folks in charge.” (Schmidle, 2006:31) If not this, it makes them stop their movement for quite sometime due to losing all credibility since they would be linked with U.S policies and desires. If nothing else, those in the movement, the back bone of the hopes of democratization in Iran, will be jailed by the religious elites under the justification of aligning with the U.S which is never acceptable in the regime’s eyes. At this end, the democratization movement is essential to the freedom and thus prosperity of the Iranian people. Therefore, any forces impeding on the movement are truly unacceptable.

Finally, this essay has covered some of the majour hindrances in the democratization movement in Iran. Predominantly, most of the obstacles standing in the path of true democracy can be directly or indirectly linked to the power of a few religious elites, namely Khamenei who controls all of them, who controls all of the political and legal institutions. These few religious overlords of the Iranian regime are accountable to no one and have the power to crush all and any forces which act or speak against their policies in many different ways. In fact, they have proven this power to be true most significantly during the recent presidency of Khatami. While Khatami did fail to bring about the democratic reforms he promised and strived for, he cannot come near to being fully blamed for his lack of success. Those behind him believed him to be a

counter weight to the theocratic powers of Iran which run the country, but their belief was merely a fantasy. As the religious elites proved, not even the president of the country can come close opposing the theocratic will. Khatami, simply put, did not have the power to stand up to the intimidating colossal shadow which the religious elites cast over him. Those who elected Khatami had yet to experience having such a strongly reform minded president and thus they also had not seen the theocrat's range of power since they never needed to use such power before. Khatami's and the Majlis' failure to democratize Iran proved that even they, what the people believe to be their best front against the religious elites, hold next to no real power. The Majlis of Iran can in some ways be compared the Duma Tsar Nicholas II set up in Russia; although in theory it was democratic and was supposed to wield to the people's demands, it was, ultimately, at the mercy and under the control of the Tsar. Thus, due to the overwhelming dominance of the Supreme Leader in a closed, unchecked, and unaccountable loop of power invested in the religious elites, and namely himself, true democracy has failed to be established in Iran. Every institution, every tool which is needed for even the baby-steps towards democratization is in the hands of the Supreme Leader and his handpicked assailants. Even the mightiest power in the world cannot overturn these oppressors' clench of the freedom of Iranians. Moreover, any attempt or hint of interference by the U.S plays directly into the hands of the religious elites. Thus, with all of this duly and carefully kept in mind, one ought to ask how long will it take the Iranian masses to rise against the tyrants who continuously deliver them lashes? How long will Iranian's allow a few, self appointed, self perpetuated elites tell them what they may and may not do, say, nor think until they gain back their revolutionary spirit and valor of 1979 and impose their will on their subjugators and bring about true democracy instead of living under their subjugators' dictates?

Bibliography

Arjomand, Saïd Amir., 2005 "The Rise and Fall of President Khātami and the Reform Movement in Iran." *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical & Democratic Theory* 12, 4: 502-520.

Ebadi, Shirin., 2006, "Democracy demands free speech." *Global Agenda* 4, 1: 50-51.

- Iranian Government Constitution. Retrieved August 28, 2006, from
<http://www.iranonline.com/iran/iran-info/Government/constitution-8.html/>
- LaFranchi, Howard. 2006 "A bid to foment democracy in Iran." *Christian Science Monitor* 98, 58: 3.
- Moaveni, Azadeh., 2000 "Reform Overruled." *Time Europe* 156, 9: 28.
- Omestad, Thomas. 1999, "Faithful, but fed up." *U.S. News & World Report* 127, 4: 30.
- Samii, A. William., 2001, "Iran's Guardians Council as an Obstacle to Democracy." *Middle East Journal* 55, 4: 644.
- Sazegara, Mohsen., 2005 "Minimal Islam Is the answer for Iran." *NPQ: New Perspectives Quarterly* 22, 3: 65-68.
- Schmidle, Nicholas., 2005 "Between the Mullahs and Bush." *Progressive* 69, 4: 28-31.
- Tarock, Adam. 2002, "The Struggle for Reform in Iran." *New Political Science* 24, 3: 449-468.