

Beware of Misnomers in Iran's Politics

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Autumn of 2000*

"Reformers" and "conservatives" have gained broad acceptance outside Iran as correct terms to describe the two feuding factions within the ruling clerical establishment in Iran. They are misnomers, however, and lend more confusion and enigma to a situation that is already mind-boggling enough without added semantic complexities.

These terms, and others in the same gamut such as "moderates" and "hardliners," may make Iran's political landscape more tangible or recognizable to outsiders, but they grossly oversimplify - and consequently misrepresent - the alchemy of mullahs' sleazy political world, where factional loyalties move more quickly than the shifting sand.

It is ironic, for instance, that ex-President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, once hailed in the West as an enclave of moderation and sanity in Khomeini's dark world of fundamentalist folly, is now being described by his past spin doctors as "an opportunistic thug." (The Washington Post, May 7, 2000)

The fundamental flaw in such labels is that they are based on the assumption that politics under the ruling clerics in Iran is much the same as that in the West. Nothing could be further from the truth. A "conservative" anywhere on the political map in the West adheres to generally known political and economic bearings, while "liberals" or "reformers" have their own recognizable agenda, too. In clergy-ruled Iran, however, there are no well-established political parties, no clear party agenda, no declared party policies on issues facing the nation; in short, no distinguishing "features", but only loose alliances and transient positions.

Take the Majlis elections in February and the run-off contests in May, for example. Veteran "Iran watchers" had a tough time trying to identify how many seats were won by the "reformers" and how many by the "conservatives." Le Monde's correspondent noted in a report from Tehran: "Political opportunism being the *ordre de jour*, particularly at election times, it will still take considerable time to be able to know the exact number of genuine reformers among the 290 members of Iran's new parliament, assuming that many other ambiguities will be clarified one day." (Le Monde, May 9)

The London Independent's correspondent made a similar observation when he noted that "executioners" have become "reformers" under Khatami's banner.

Ironically, the situation was no clearer to the factions themselves. After the second round of the election in May, the spokesmen for the Khatami camp and the rival faction came up with grossly different tallies as to who won how many seats. Dubious factional politics aside, such discrepancies to a large extent reflect the arbitrary nature of political affiliations in the mullahs' regime. Mir-Taher Moussavi, the elected candidate in the city of Karaj, for example, was on the pro-Khatami ticket, but everyone in the city knew that

he was an ardent supporter of Khamenei's faction. There were many others like Moussavi among the 66 new members of mullahs' Majlis elected in the second round.

The Islamic Iran Participation Front, the party closest to mullahs' president, has been hailed outside Iran as "the principal reformist party" by some international news organizations. But the IIPF has declared publicly that it has not recruited any members other than the politicians who founded it, nor does it have any organization. Moreover, a closer examination of its "founding members" reveals that they are as close to a "reformer" or a "liberal" in the West as Moussolini was to Antonio Gramsci. The President's brother, Mohammad Reza Khatami, and Mohsen Mirdamadi, two leading members of the Party boast of leading the "students" who in 1979 seized the U.S. embassy in Tehran and created the most dramatic hostage drama of the twentieth century. Other include mullahs who have signed death decrees for thousands of political prisoners; Revolutionary Guards commanders who have been responsible for major bombing attacks on foreign embassies in different parts of the world. These characters who would hardly resemble a stereotypic "reformer"!

The duplicity of these born-again "reformers" has even infuriated their former colleagues. In an article in the daily Kayhan, Ruhollah Hosseini, head of the Islamic Revolution's National Archives, addressed his former associates in the Ministry of Intelligence and State Security, now being among "the President's men": "When I think about your rhetoric against violence and at the same time recall your previous occupational background, I become utterly surprised. Why don't we find out what the roots of violence are by asking who and which faction sowed the seeds of violence in this country. We should not be surprised that those who banned the entire nation from leaving the country and those who took over an embassy in public, are now speaking of détente and blame others for tension. They must be praised for their artful conduct. One day they crawl up the embassy wall, the next day they prostrate themselves in front of it."

Take a harder look at these "reformers" and it becomes clear that this is not a pedantic discussion over semantics. The "moderate" President Khatami ordered the closure of a newspaper in March after it crossed the red line and mentioned "the large-scale execution of political prisoners in summer 1988." Another government-run daily, Iran News, explained in its April 9 issue why Khatami took the decision: "The death sentences were issued when President Mohammad Khatami was the deputy chief of staff of the Armed Forces for ideological and cultural issues. He used to implement Imam Khomeini's verdicts in the most rigorous manner."

Many of these so-called "reformers" have records of human rights violations no less shocking than those of infamous war criminals of twentieth-century Europe. Hamid-Reza Jalaipour, a "darling" reformer of some Western correspondents, was a Revolutionary Guards commander who for ten years ran a vicious campaign of suppression, executions and ethnic cleansing against Iran's Kurds. In one instance, Jalaipour issued the order for the mass execution of 59 Iranian Kurds from the city of Mahabad. Asked recently why he made that decision, Jalaipour replied: "We were at war at the time and holding public

trials was not an issue... Those who ask about Kurdistan in those years and about the execution of 59 people, are in reality the armed groups who must be held to account."

Jalaipour's response to troubling questions about his past is typical of these "torturers of the eighties, reformers of the nineties" - as some independent writers in Iran have dubbed Khatami's men. What makes the Iranian people doubly suspicious about the motives of these latter-day reformers is that they not only adamantly refuse to apologize for their past crimes, but make a point of expressing "great pride" in the "services" they have "rendered to the Islamic Republic and Imam Khomeini." Jalaipour said in response to a journalist who asked him whether he was "remorseful" about his past: "Why me? The armed political groups and any one who engaged in violence should be remorseful. Me and those like me were in our early twenties when we went to Kurdistan. As representatives of the government, we strengthened government institutions. This was not an easy task. Why should we be remorseful?"

Another one of these so-called reformers is Akbar Ganji, a former Revolutionary Guard-turned-investigative journalist. Westerners have come to know Ganji for his "transparent" revelations about the political killings by the Intelligence Ministry in late 1998. What prompted Ganji to write about the killings of writers and intellectuals two years ago were not, as some would want us to believe, his embracing of secular and reform-oriented outlook. His exposures, albeit carefully tailored not to unmask the main principals, were an attempt to undermine the already isolated and discredited "conservatives" who are locked in a bitter power struggle with the rival faction. A glance at Ganji's background makes it clear that his dubious change of heart came only after the faction to which he belonged, the so-called "Line of the Imam," was swept away from power when Rafsanjani became President in 1989 after Khomeini's death.

In an article from Tehran entitled, "The Second Revolution: "Khomeini's Descendants," on February 1, the French daily Libération wrote: "Akbar Ganji was transferred to Kurdistan where a rebellion was underway as a young Revolutionary Guardsman. He was first put in charge of propaganda and then security. Twenty years later, this man, who took part in the Islamic Republic's suppressive apparatus, condemned the unbridled fascism in this very institution."

Alireza Alavi Tabar, another of Khatami's backers said the following about Ganji in the daily Sobh-e Emrouz on January 2, 2000: "Ganji was among those joining the Revolutionary Guards from the very first days the Imam [Khomeini] came to Iran. Afterwards, Akbar's image as a tireless Guardsman in Sa'd-Abad garrison (a.k.a. Imam Ali Garrison, one of the Guards most important training centers) will always remain. Early in the war [with Iraq], Akbar and the Revolutionary Guards commander drove to the western fronts together. For many years, thereafter, Akbar was member of the Revolutionary Guards... Many Bassiji and Guards members went to the war fronts, inspired by the words of the likes of Ganji."

And last but not least, let us look at the background of Saeed Hajjarian, dubbed by some in the West as the architect of Khatami's "reformist" agenda.

Hajjarian was, in his own words, one of the founders of the dreaded Intelligence Ministry which grew into a criminal Mafia of murder, assassination and terrorist bombing. For several years he served as the Ministry's top deputy under its first Minister, Mohammad Mohammadi Rayshahri.

Aside from being one of the key principals in the U.S. embassy takeover in 1979, he vigorously directed the violent and vicious campaign against the Mojahedin in the 1980s. This is how one of his former colleagues described his services to the state in an article on April 3 in the daily Kayhan: "Saeed Hajjarian stood firmly against those who wanted to overthrow [the state] and the counter-revolutionaries in the 1980s. We have no doubts as to how he would deal with a new wave of those who are bent on overthrowing the state. In this respect, one example of his actions must be recalled. As reported by one daily, in just one night in his neighborhood, he and his fellows killed dozens of members of groups who had taken up arms against the Islamic Republic of Iran in the early 1980s. The next afternoon, they executed the rest of them according to judicial rulings. Throughout the 1980s, Saeed Hajjarian was always steadfast against the Mojahedin, the monarchists and other groups seeking to overthrow the state."

The weekly Jebhe added the following on April 9: "Those who are so much against violence, crushed the Mojahedin in the 1980s with executions... Of course, they must be commended for it. If it were not for the brutal conduct of the likes of Saeed Hajjarian and Mohsen Armin to deal with the Mojahedin, God knows what would have happened. The presence of Assadollah Lajevardi, the notorious ex-chief of Evin prison, Mohammad Kachoui, Head of the Evin Prison, and Saeed Hajjarian was necessary so that they could forcefully rise to challenge the terrorist Mojahedin."

Even in Eastern Europe following the collapse of the communist regimes, former agents and members of the security services and secret police were never allowed to be "rehabilitated" without formally and specifically acknowledging their past activities and excesses and apologizing for them. How could the Iranian people be expected to settle for anything less after innumerable crimes that include 120,000 political executions, systematic use of torture, bloody suppression of student and labor protests, violent crackdown on ethnic and religious minorities, etc.?

The simple truth is that there are no reformers or conservatives among the clerical rulers of Iran. Khatami's "reform" project is in fact a ploy to save his own neck and buy time for the religious dictatorship in Iran at a time when it is facing insurmountable political, economic and social crises. The Washington Post's columnist Jim Hoagland was right to the point when he wrote in an article entitled "Tumult in Iran" on May 7, that Khatami's "top priority at the moment is survival, not enforcing the mandate for sweeping change."

In other words, the mullahs' objective was to use this ploy to break out of the strangulating regional and international isolation. Otherwise, the rival factions have both been heavily involved in the implementation of the most important tenets of mullahs'

policies, namely suppression inside Iran and export of terrorism and fundamentalism abroad.

The indisputable criterion for reform in any dictatorship is the ruling regime's willingness to hold free and fair elections. But the clerical regime has only allowed elections that boil down to a power struggle between its own factions, with no one outside the ruling cliques being allowed to run.

To misread the signs of the decline and fall of a weakened, faltering regime as indications of "liberalization" and "reform" would be a huge mistake. The prerequisite for avoiding such misreadings is to get rid of misnomers.