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Letter from Tehran

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On a warm spring evening in April of 1999, thousands of young Iranians wedged themselves into a narrow alley in downtown Tehran to mark the annual *Sham-e Ghariban*, or Night of the Strangers, the traditional end to the Ashura mourning period for the Shi'ite hero Imam Hossein, grandson of the prophet Mohammad and third leader of the nascent Muslim community. All around the city, small clusters of people held candlelight vigils for Hossein's surviving family, kidnapped after his martyrdom in the desert of modern-day Iraq thirteen centuries ago. Others served up free meals to the poor or distributed traditional yellow desserts, colored with saffron.

On this supreme day of Shi'ite emotion and worship, the youngsters in the alley were there to hear a radical interpretation of their faith. Abdolkarim Soroush, a lay Muslim philosopher and professor, gave an Ashura sermon with a difference: The sustaining myth of Hossein as a martyr for all that is right and just was a worthy symbol of the Shi'ite Iranians, but it must not obscure the need for reason and analysis and true religious understanding adapted to modern times. Anything else, Soroush told the silent crowd straining to catch his distant words, simply perpetuates what had become an ossified state ideology. Rather, religion must be set free of its official interpretation in order to equip itself and the faithful for the challenges of modernity, a world away from Imam Hossein.

Soroush is a member of a generation of new intellectuals leading Iran into the twenty-first century. Their mission is to unleash Islam from the conservative clerical establishment, in place since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, in order to allow a religious revival. Many of these intellectuals have had close

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ties with President Mohammad Khatami over many years; their writings have greatly influenced his attempts to create an Islamic “civil society” based on the rule of law. When Khatami was urged to run for president two years ago, he was at first reluctant to consider. He agreed to do so as long as Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, endorsed a general movement away from dogmatism and extremism and toward religious flexibility that would lead to renewed political and social development. Ayatollah Khamenei gave his conditional support, and Khatami, a cleric and direct descendant of the prophet Mohammad, embarked upon this risky journey with enormous potential for failure.

It is this challenge that makes up the oft-overlooked subtext of the Khatami presidency. It is a journey into unexplored territory, one where a pluralistic reading of the Muslim faith coexists with recognizable democratic institutions. While cynics at home and abroad see only the same interest group politics of the last two decades—leftist ayatollahs and their conservative rivals battling it out in a zero-sum game—the phenomenon of Khatami in fact represents a profound step forward for Iranian society and for the Islamic world. If Iran manages to establish flexibility within a modern-day Islamic state, it will set a potent example for Muslim societies everywhere.

In the future president’s 1997 campaign, the message was the medium: only tolerance of a diversity of religious, social, and political views could ensure the popular legitimacy of the Islamic system and prevent it from falling back on coercion and force to combat growing dissent. For Khatami and the true believers at his side, spreading the word was more important than victory itself. In the end, this proved a decisive advantage, presenting the people with an authentic candidate who touched the hearts and souls of voters—in marked contrast to the establishment’s choice, with all the official levers of power at his fingertips.

The daunting task of adapting religious interpretation to meet the needs of modernity was inevitable; public opinion was bound one day to call upon the clerics to deliver on Iran’s other half—republicanism. But Iran has matured slowly since the fervor and zeal from the Revolution began to wane. First, its eight-year war with Iraq drained the country economically and psychologically. When the war ended in 1988, Iran was absorbed in a period of economic reconstruction. Only during the decade since that war ended in 1988, has Iranian society begun self-analysis.

For almost two years after Khatami took office in August 1997, the issue of freedom within an Islamic system remained underneath the surface, erupting only when violence or political catastrophe occurred. But today, defining the parameters of religious interpretation has become a national obsession, lying at the core of a fierce and bloody power struggle gripping

the Republic. In the last year, a half-dozen secular intellectuals have been murdered, a high-ranking military chief was assassinated, and thousands of students in July clashed with police and Islamic vigilantes in some of the worst unrest in twenty years. Hard-liners have used the courts, which they control, to close newspapers and imprison journalists accused of trampling on Islamic values in print. And in September, conservatives launched their first personal attack on Khatami in an attempt to crush his presidency.

In practice, the drive toward Islamic revisionism means radical change for all sectors of society. For traditionalists marking Ashura, it means divorcing mystical and literary traditions from true Islamic principles. For Iran's youth, who comprise more than 50 percent of the population, it means social freedom: the right to freedom of expression, the ability to sit as boyfriend and girlfriend in a café without being harassed by police, and the hope for a brighter future. For the conservative establishment with perhaps the most to lose, a re-examination of the faith certainly will diminish their lock on religious authority and political power. Ultimately, it could lead to their removal from politics altogether. Their legitimacy to govern is derived solely from their anointed status as clerics who have existed free from serious criticism for twenty years.

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Is Iranian society at large ready for such a radical reading of their faith? Iranians answered this question with an overwhelming "yes" by electing Khatami in May 1997. Seventy percent of the electorate, or 20 million voters, endorsed his promise to return to the "true Islam," a religion he defined as tolerant and adaptable to the modern age. Khatami said as much while on the campaign trail. "Through a new perspective, the clergy should refer to religious sources in order to find answers to new social questions," he said on a campaign stop on April 16, 1997, in the Caspian Sea province of Gilan. "One should avoid narrow-mindedness ... One should not search in the depths of the beliefs of the individuals, because practical commitment to the Islamic Republic is sufficient, and it is not in our interest to push differing views out of the system."

If Khatami succeeds in loosening the clerical rein on religious interpretation so that tangible social issues can be addressed, the survival of the Islamic system will be guaranteed, political pluralism will develop, and Iran will provide the model for other Islamic societies trying to cope with the modern world. Much progress has already been made in this direction. The

teachings of Soroush and Mohsen Kadivar, a clerical scholar who advocates limiting religion in politics, have penetrated the campuses, the professional societies, and the salons of Iran's intellectuals, particularly in Tehran and the great university centers of Shiraz, Tabriz, and Mashhad. Where else but Iran would thousands of young students eagerly spend a warm holiday evening sitting on concrete to hear a religious and philosophical sermon?

But inside the seminaries in the holy Shi'ite city of Qom, in the newspapers, and in classrooms, vicious battles are underway between this reform movement and the conservative clerical establishment equipped with a

great weapon of defense. Their claim to a monopoly on religious interpretation is rooted in their reading of Ayatollah Khomeini's teachings. Khomeini's concept of *velayat-e faqih*, or supreme clerical rule, laid the foundation for authoritarianism and totalitarianism. Khomeini repeatedly warned against attempts by the West and Islamic states allied with the West to repress the true message of Islam. He insisted that the "puppet clerics," "mercenary intellectuals," and "rulers of the Islamic lands" were out to de-

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stroy Islam by publishing distorted versions of the Koran.

Earlier that day in April, under a baking sun, central Tehran pulsed to the beat of funeral drums as black-clad crowds beat their chests or flailed their backs with ceremonial links of chain in ritual mourning for Imam Hossein's death in a hopeless act of rebellion against an overwhelming army of Muslim rivals. This uneven battle and the subsequent martyrdom of Hossein and 71 loyal followers at Karbala in modern-day Iraq led to the great schism in the Islamic world, between majority Sunnis and the Shi'ites. It also provided Shi'ite Iran with potent symbols of self-sacrifice and struggle against hopeless odds, features that remain deeply rooted in the Iranian psychology.

In recent years the Iranian authorities have moved to limit the more bloodthirsty practices of Ashura, banning the ritual cutting of the head or scalp with swords or daggers that left the celebrants splattered in red. But for the most part, these displays of uncontrolled passion remain largely devoid of official interference, providing a rare glimpse at popular Islam, an Islam of freedom, spontaneity, and genuine participation.

If Iran is to move forward out of darkness and isolation and into modernity, religion certainly will have to mature from fits of passion to measured belief. Nonetheless, both the clerical establishment and Iran's new intellec-

tuals benefit from these religious rituals. Soroush may argue that Ashura ceremonies are divorced from “true Islam,” but they are public displays of society interpreting Islam for itself—without the heavy hand of the clerical establishment. And, it is this flexibility in religious interpretation that is the basis of a new movement’s drive to rattle the clergy’s monopoly on religion.

To recognize a distinction between religious knowledge on the one hand and blind faith on the other—as Soroush suggests—is to limit the sources of power the ruling clerics have at their disposal. If rituals such as Ashura, rooted in culture and tradition, are removed from the clerics’ orbit of influence, they will lose the zeal and fervor that has allowed them to maintain a grip on their followers since the Revolution. To permit the practice of popular Islam outside the official orthodoxy is to allow the kind of flexible religious interpretation the reformers advocate but conservative clerics fear will hijack their monopoly on religious doctrine.

Working in the reformers’ favor is the fact that the conservative clerical establishment has lost much of its credibility, largely through its mismanagement of the postrevolutionary state. If various interpretations are permitted, the clerical establishment would also lose the rhetorical language that perpetuates its power.

The reformers have an interest in expanding the way Islam is practiced in today’s Iran, and some of the conservative clerics also have reached this conclusion. Where they differ lies in the limitations of this freedom. The conservatives have no choice but to become more willing today than they were 20 years ago to appease the demands of a young generation hungry for a modern application of Islam. But they seemed terrified that this tolerance will spin out of control and lead to making a mockery of the faith.

The greatest evidence of this fear was exposed in September with the publication of a satirical play in an obscure university magazine which lampooned campus conservatives by telling a story of the Twelfth Imam, one of the holiest figures in Shi’ite Islam. The play was distributed to only 150 readers but, once discovered by the hard-line press, sparked a national crisis which centered on religious interpretation and revealed the underlying tensions gripping the nation. Conservatives condemned the portrayal of the Twelfth Imam as sacrilegious and one senior ayatollah declared the young playwrights’ work apostasy, a crime punishable by death. Reformers, too, denounced the play as “filthy” and in poor taste, but agreed that the students’ mistake was unintentional, and therefore they should not be punished severely.

In the script, the Twelfth Imam—the last of the Shi’ite leaders to combine spiritual and temporal authority—is having a conversation with a university student named Abbas, who has been praying for the Imam to

reappear on earth to help him with his exams. The Imam tells the student he will make his return on Friday. But Abbas protests, "Friday? I have an examination that day ... Please you have been absent for 1,254 years and 55 days. Can't you just add one more day for my sake?" The Imam refuses to relent. In the end, Abbas takes out a knife and the Imam vanishes forever.

It now appears that at least two of the four students responsible for the publication of the play will be pardoned. The fact that the play was written and published at all shows that Khatami's presidency has heralded a period of extraordinary change. But the bold act of satirizing such a sacred figure demonstrated to both reformers and conservatives the danger of surrendering control of religious interpretation to the masses. The risk of any reform movement lies in its uncertain path. Therefore, will tolerance of religious interpretation in Iran lead to the demise of the Islamic Republic?

The answer is an emphatic no. Since Khatami took office, the West has tended toward misreading every crisis as the nail in the coffin of Iran's Islamic system. When student demonstrations erupted in July, for example, the headlines predicted "a second revolution." But as the scandal over the play demonstrates, every crisis instead leads to revisionism and fine-tuning, a painful process along Iran's road to democracy and modernity. The scandal revealed the deep split within the clerical establishment: While hard-liners rallied around their absolutist interpretations of the faith, other clerics condemned the students' act but said it was the price to be paid for progress. Khamenei, in an astonishing awakening, seemed to realize that Khatami's enemies were also his own. The hardliners will stop at nothing to maintain a monopoly on religion and are more than willing to take victims along the way—including the supreme leader. Khamenei now seems to believe that he must form an alliance with Khatami, lest he too become vulnerable to extinction.

At a Friday prayer sermon at Ayatollah Khomeini's shrine outside Tehran, the leader publicly expressed his support for Khatami in the strongest terms to date. "The president is a cleric, a devout individual, a man who is loyal to the house of the Prophet and someone who is dedicated to the service of God," Khamenei said a few days after the scandal broke over the satirical play.

While Khatami and Khamenei may be forming their own quiet alliance, the broader divide within the clerical establishment is likely to deepen in the near future. In the midst of the magazine scandal, the Society of Militant Clergy, the leading conservative group comprised largely of senior clerics in Qom and supported by wealthy merchants from the Tehran Grand Bazaar, condemned the president and his reform policies. "How long can we remain silent before the people who are making fun of our religious beliefs

in the name of freedom? Some people say we should not endanger freedom in the name of religion, but can we endanger *religion* in the name of freedom?" asked the Society, citing a leading ayatollah's pronouncement that there could be no diversity of religious interpretation. It added, in a rare personal attack on the president, "One official takes the opposite tack and says that under Islam there are diverse readings."

By the next morning, however, it was clear the Society of Militant Clergy had gone too far, and during the following days many of the most prominent clerics in the group, including former President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, tried to disassociate themselves from the declaration.

The conservative clerical establishment had waited for an opportune moment in which to express these opinions and to launch their first attack directly at Khatami, an assault intended to destabilize his government. The Islamic revolution, in fact, is referred to as "a war of words," which historically has been a preferred method for deposing Iranian leaders. A few weeks before the scandal broke, an anonymous commentary published in the right-wing weekly publication *Sobh*, foreshadowed the conservatives' strategy. It also revealed their underlying attempt to call into question Khatami's legitimate right to rule—an age-old tactic used frequently to undermine heads of state in Muslim countries, and one that inspired Islamic militants to assassinate former Egyptian president Anwar Sadat in 1981.

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The commentary was a response to remarks Khatami had given in late September endorsing religious diversity. "This kind of talk is an indication that the recent dispute between the orthodox and heterodox understanding of Islam is getting to a dangerous point," *Sobh* wrote. "Today, the understanding of the Prophet and the religious practices, such as praying, fasting, going to jihad ... is similar in countries like Iran, the Sudan, Libya, Indonesia, Iraq, Pakistan. There is an orthodox interpretation in Islam, and nobody is entitled to offer an alternative understanding without a strong logical base in the Quran and the *hadith* (the oral teachings of the Prophet)."

One of the salient characteristics of Iran's centuries-old relationship with Islam is its lack of a renaissance or reformation. The revisionist process underway began unfolding in the 1960s with modernist Islamic intellectuals such as Ali Shariati. His goal was to create a national and religious identity that could compete with the political and technological gains the West had

made over Eastern nations. Like his contemporaries, Jalal Al-e Ahmad Ali and Mehdi Bazargan, Shariati believed Islam in Iran had become dated from too much control by the conservative clerics. The ideas of these intellectuals created a powerful revolutionary ideology that led indirectly to toppling the Pahlavi dynasty and the advent of the Islamic Revolution.

Where these intellectuals offered an alternative ideology to the 2,500-year-old monarchy in order to make Iran compatible with the modern world, Khatami and Iran's new intellectuals seek change from within. In recent months, their battle with the conservative establishment has been waged in three institutions: the courts, the press, and the national parliament. A new judiciary chief, Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, was appointed in August. A little-known, scholarly cleric, Shahroudi has a conservative record but used his inauguration to vow to banish factional politics from the judiciary. One of his first acts was to remove several key judiciary officials, including hardliners tied to the Haqani seminary in Qom, the holy Shi'ite city and seat of Islamic learning.

Immediately, his hardline rivals in the rank-and-file challenged their new boss' authority. Shortly after his appointment, a court order closed *Neshat*, a progressive newspaper which supports Khatami. The charge against the newspaper—undermining religious principles—was primarily based on an essay calling into question the Islamic practice of retribution, “an eye for an eye.” The essay suggested that the death penalty was backward and should be reconsidered. Two weeks later, a Revolutionary Court announced that four people would face execution for their role in the prodemocracy demonstrations in July. To date, there is no evidence a trial was held, and the suspects have not been named. Shahroudi said both decisions were made without his knowledge.

Shahroudi's strategy lies less in cleaning house within the judiciary and more with placing political disputes squarely in the hands of the appropriate ministers. When conservative clerics charge newspaper editors with publishing articles that insult Islamic values, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance in charge of the press should arbitrate the dispute—not the courts.

Nearly every turning point in the last year, including violent attacks and political maneuvering, has been deliberately timed to next year's parliamentary elections, scheduled for February 18. Conservatives now hold a solid majority of seats in the 270-member parliament and are determined to maintain their power. Conservatives are closing newspapers to deny the reformist press a voice ahead of the polls. University students sit on death row as a warning to others who dare to organize further prodemocracy demonstrations. Journalists and newspaper editors are being called to court, and

some imprisoned to intimidate all those who might freely express their beliefs. Khatami's credentials as a religious figure are being called into question. And more significantly, conservatives are trying to influence the outcome of the parliamentary polls in advance.

The parliament in October approved legislation that effectively perpetuates its conservative majority, bans leading reformers from qualifying as candidates, and ensures voter apathy. The new law gives the Guardian Council, a body of six conservative clerics and six jurists, vast powers to micromanage the election process. The legislation is so specific that some of the provisions seem tailor-made to bar certain reformers from the poll. According to one clause, two members of the Tehran City Council, Abdollah Nouri, the former interior minister ousted from his post by parliament last year, and Jamileh Kadivar cannot possibly qualify. The law requires all candidates to have resigned from their current posts several months ahead of the election. But Nouri and Kadivar—who came in first and third in the vote totals respectively—resigned from the city council only in late 1999.

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The Guardians also now have the right to disqualify any candidate who at some point was associated with an "illegal group." But the definition of such an affiliation is not given, freeing the Guardians to rule that any of their political rivals belong to such an "illegal group." And if any candidate should appeal the Guardians' verdict, a decision will not be rendered until after the election. The new law also raises the voting age from 16 to 17 years old, depriving an estimated 1.5 million voters—most of whom would have been likely to endorse the reform ticket—from taking part.

Through his unofficial power under the sharia, the sacred Islamic law, Khamenei can modify the final text of the election bill. Whether he will exercise this right depends in large part upon how the political struggle will be played out in the coming months. The threat of passive protest in the form of low voter turnout, which is likely if the law stands, may inspire him to take action to ensure continued legitimacy of the system. Although voting in Iran is not compulsory, it is considered "an Islamic duty," and a low turnout will surely embarrass the clerical establishment. Khatami aides say their boss used a similar argument on the night of the presidential election, when the leader was under enormous pressure from the conservatives to nullify the maverick *mollah's* landslide victory. Failure to heed the voice of the people, he said, would endanger the Islamic system and perhaps cripple it for good. His message delivered, Khatami walked out of the leader's resi-

dence without awaiting a response, told his supporters the matter was now in the hands of God, and went to bed. Two hours later, he was declared the victor.

While many of the reformers have pinned their public hopes on reversing the conservative hold on parliament, there are increasing doubts within their ranks that victory is at hand. Many admit the battle over the elections law appears a lost cause, threatening to strip the Khatami camp of many of its most prominent candidates and undermining its ability to compete effectively against the well-organized conservatives. In private, however, a grow-

ing number of reformers see a possible silver lining. By slowing the pace of change and exposing the conservatives as capable of holding onto parliament only through deployment of such blatantly undemocratic methods, the overall cause of the Khatami program may in fact buy enough time to take deeper roots within the political elite and the society at large. A respectable conservative showing, they argue, would also reinforce the Khatami

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message of “inclusive politics,” one that seeks to create a loyal opposition rather than grind the enemy into the dirt.

At the same time, Khatami can take comfort that the general direction of Iranian politics appears to be headed along the course he first mapped out for the supreme leader before announcing his campaign for the presidency. There are, of course, many obstacles on that path—some predictable, others as yet unforeseen—but the rough outlines of a post-Revolutionary Iran can at last be made out.

Iranians like to say that people from the central province of Yazd are adverse to conflict and content to wait for as long as it takes for an opponent to make a fatal mistake. As a true son of this desert oasis, Seyyed Mohammad Khatami has fused these local characteristics into a formidable political weapon.