

Muhammad Khatami takes over in August as president of Iran. How far will he change the Islamic Republic? What kind of change does Khatami want? Professor *Chibli Mallat* begins a major series of articles, exclusive to *The Daily Star*, on these crucial questions for the future of the Middle East

## Khatami – a man amidst the waves

The victory of Muhammad Khatami could be good news for Iran and the world, if he delivers on the last message of his website – [www.khatami.com/](http://www.khatami.com/) – which was posted on the day following his victory in the presidential elections of May 23.

The message congratulates the people of Iran for “a turning point in the history of the country”. In examining Khatami’s ‘new’ Iran, I will this week seek to appreciate the extent to which these elections might constitute a turning point for the Middle East.

In the avalanche of opinions since Khatami’s victory, a consensus has emerged around two major ideas: (a) the new president is an open and tolerant person; (b) he is too constrained to be able to operate major changes.

I do not quarrel with this overall appreciation, but the second premise is too defeatist as stated. It should be rephrased to take account of the formidable call for change expressed by the Iranian people.

Rather than focusing on the limitations inherent to the Iranian system, a more creative question should be phrased: granted that Khatami’s room for manoeuvre is constrained, what are the means to open up the small window of hope which was unlocked by those who elected him?

So phrased, the question suggests an answer where ‘could’ becomes an operative word: Khatami’s election against all odds could be a watershed, but this will happen only if domestic and international factors converge to help fulfil the new president’s better inclinations.

Is Khatami better inclined? The short answer is yes. My explanation will appear in the course of examining his worldview, but first, the overall setting needs to be presented.

The current period of grace, during which those who disliked the results of the elections have put a brave face on their disappointment,

should continue for a few weeks, until the cabinet is appointed when Khatami takes over in August.

By then, the men – and with a bit of luck and a lot of determination, a woman – in the cabinet will be the first indication of the realignment under way. Then roads will part. Of course, more of the same is a real possibility. As in the case of the previous president, Ali Hashemi Rafsanjani, who had the reputation of being a “liberal”, the change could be slight. Rafsanjani adapted to the status quo, and tried to loose as few feathers as he could.

Rather than take on the establishment, will Khatami not do the same?

The differences between the election of Rafsanjani and that of Khatami are that the voters have clearly and

massively expressed their wish for some real change in the ways and means of government, and that Khatami has promised them so much.

Whether his course will differ from the immobilist one Rafsanjani resigned himself to accept depends on three basic factors, which this series will examine: what are Khatami’s better inclinations? how much, considering these inclinations, does he have room to manoeuvre domestically? will there be, at the appropriate moment, a terrain of compromise between Iran and the United States?

But before closely examining the main faultlines in the domestic situation in Iran, and the potential of change both for the new Iran and for the United States of America, a few basics are worth restating. In response to the victory of Khatami, western nations, mainly the USA and Europe, have been re-examining their policy towards Iran with the hope that

the massive vote in his favour can be transformed in a fruitful rapprochement.

But Western advocates of a rapprochement with Iran have so far been wrong in their basic premise.

Tehran is not necessarily interested in mending its ways with Washington; indeed the system lives off standing up to the US. The Iranian dominant elite does not want to throw itself open up to America, and anti-Israeli and American slogans remain a daily fixture of public speech in Tehran. There is no point in the US trying rapprochement so long as there is no

willing partner in Tehran to respond.

If Khatami is to be a willing partner for a rapprochement – as suggested by his repeated calls, since his election, for “the easing of

international tension” – then the relaxation will not be straightforward. For Khatami, as for other leading figures in Iran’s establishment, the “arrogance” of the US must be resisted.

Khatami is slightly less sanguine about the animosity towards America. But this is a matter of degree, not of essence. Nor is there much love lost on the other side, as one could hear in the statements of US defence secretary William Cohen in his recent tour of the Gulf.

For rapprochement to succeed, another tack is needed, which must be based on a more precise understanding of the Islamic Republic and what makes it tick. Only then can the window of opportunity opened by the massive Iranian vote for change be widened.

The first requirement is therefore a more accurate appreciation of the margin of manoeuvre which the new president will have. But a margin of manoeuvre suggests that he is ready

to manoeuvre, which is a meaningless premise without an appreciation of his worldview.

For that, we have his past deeds, writings and campaign speeches. These are well documented in Lebanon, which Khatami visited in late December for a conference on Muslim-Christian dialogue. We have access here to a number of publications in which the would-be president of Iran may have probably been less guarded than in his Persian manifestations.

Apart from a number of articles recently reprinted in the Arabic press, and his steady contributions to the enlightened page of *Afkar* (‘ideas’) in the London-based *al-Hayat*, Khatami has published in Beirut a book entitled *Bij-e Muf*, after a verse from the great classical Persian poet Hafez. This translates literally as ‘fear of waves’, and the verse suggests a man struggling against great odds, a particularly apt description of the president-elect.

In this book is an important testimony to his reading of contemporary Islamic thought. This journey is itself a second part of a grander intellectual design apparent in Khatami’s first significant book (*Az dunya-ye shahr ta shahr-e dunya*, ‘From the world of metropolis to the city-world’), which is a sophisticated reading of Western political thought.

These works fit together with other pieces of the jigsaw; Khatami’s career and campaign writings; evidence given by close associates like Muhammad Ali Abtahi, who helped in the campaign as advisor and friend.

So what is the weltanschauung of president-elect Muhammad Khatami, and how do his ideas square with the dominant ideology in Iran, and with US Middle East policy?

*Tomorrow professor Mallat examines Khatami’s views on Christianity and the West. Chibli Mallat is a professor of law at St Joseph. His books include The Renewal of Islamic Law, which won the Albert Hourani prize*