

# The faultlines and opportunities within Iran

## Mohammad Khatami can find room for manoeuvre inside the Islamic system, writes *Chibli Mallat*

**M**ohammad Khatami's openness may develop into a critical dialogue with the West and a strong domestic emphasis on the rule of law. But it is also possible that his aspirations could be defeated by the barrage of mistrust in leading circles in Iran because of the simple weight of the powers-that-be.

The Iranian leaders do not like to see studies suggesting that the Iranian system is not a single, consolidated and coherent continuum, and read in any analysis emerging from outside Iran 'a plot' to undermine the revolution. This of course disregards the very nature of the constitutional system in place since 1979, where the separation of powers knows several tiers, including one between the three traditional branches of government – the executive, now headed by Khatami, the legislative (soon to be headed by Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri) and the judiciary, which is led for all intents and purposes by Ahmad Jannati in the Council of Guardians.

But there is one further fault line inherent to the system, and which results from the position of the leader, now Khamenei, and which contributes to the realignment of forces at work in Iran.

The present institutional constellation appears heavily stacked against the new president. On the side of the ruling elites, the Leader, Ali Khamenei and the speaker Ali Nateq-Nouri, who Khatami defeated on May 23, pretend nothing has happened. They will endeavour to ensure nothing has changed in Iran. On June 1, the re-election of Nateq-Nouri to a further year in office by his fellow members of parliament, despite his crushing defeat in the presidential elections, is testimony to the ruling group stonewalling on the message of the electorate.

Meanwhile, messages like the one issued by the secretary of the Council of Guardians, Ahmad Jannati, a few days after the elections,

have already reminded the new president, and the hopeful electors, on the dangers of any significant reform: "The first thing is to please God ... The second one is the eminent Leader (Khamenei). Following him are the electorate."

Another type of warning was voiced by Tehran deputy Ali Movahedi Savoji on June 10: "If Khatami...consults with the Majlis [parliament] before introducing his cabinet, he would not face any problems in winning the Majlis vote of confidence."

In other words, the president must not ignore the powers in place. This has not prevented the realignment of political forces behind the president-elect in the light of a massive victory with over two-thirds of the votes cast in his favour. Ayatollah Hussein Muntazeri, the former leader-in-waiting, who is widely thought to have been under house arrest in Qum since his demise in 1989, has already breached the wall of silence to which he has been confined for several years, by voicing his support for pluralism and the rule of law.

The "hooligan" threat to Khatami has also been already somewhat deflected. It is typically represented by the revolutionary guards – the pasdaran – and a motley collection of ready-to-descend on the streets mobsters, known in Iran as the club-wielders (chomaq-dar). Last week, an unofficial survey showed that the individual pasdarans voted in their majority in favour of Khatami, despite the open support of their leaders to Nateq Nouri in the campaign – in flagrant disregard for the neutrality of armed forces. This has led to an expression of support to the new president by the pasdaran commanders.

But this is a delicate area, and rampage by extremists may be condoned, once the period of grace is over, by the defeated circles. The precedent of Abul Hasan Bani Sadr, also elected with a wide margin, offers a clear warning.

There are considerable constitutional means available for undermining the presi-

dent-elect. The previous confrontation between an elected president (Bani Sadr) and the leader (the late Khomeini) led to the eventual impeachment of the president. Under the constitution, the leader is the most prominent figure, but the president is the head of executive power. The sphere of authority between the two positions is, in the text, obscure and poorly delineated. But the landslide in the elections lends Khatami a momentum which may be used to good effect, and the present leader, Khamenei, has far less clout than the founder of the Islamic republic.

It is important to see how Khatami has already positioned himself to deflect his would-be detractors, including Khamenei, who was instrumental in his removal from office in 1992. In his readings of contemporary Islamic thought, three clear heroes emerge: Ruhollah Khomeini of course, Murteza Mutahhari, who was killed by an assassin in the early days of the revolution, and Mohammad Baqer al-Sadr, the Iraqi leader from Najaf executed by the Iraqi regime in 1980.

Also prominent are references to Hamid Enayat, an enlightened professor who taught in Tehran for a long time, then moved to Oxford where he died young, to outgoing president Rafsanjani (whose brother Mohammad was evicted from an important position in the media by Khamenei and 'the conservatives', and who was one of the main architects of Khatami's campaign); and further back in history, to the enlightened Mohammad Husayn Naini, another scholar from Najaf who wrote the first treatise by a Shia scholar favouring constitutional rule at the turn of the century.

The way Khatami reads these authors yields several further clues to his openness and mode of thinking. There is a telling reference in his book *Bij-e Muj*, where Khatami quotes a letter by Khomeini to no other than Khamenei, who was at the time president.

In that letter of January 6, 1988, Khomeini criticised the understanding by Khamenei to the idea of *velayat-e faqih* (the rule of the jurist): "Your interpretation of my remarks that 'the government exercises power only within the bounds of divine statutes' is completely contrary to what I have said." While that criticism is not reported in Khatami's chapter on Khomeini in the book, the gist of the argument is emphasised in terms of the room for manoeuvre of the government, in the country's best interests, as against any rigid Islamic rule.

**W**ill Khatami have the means to pursue Iran's best interests as he sees them? On the one side, Khatami and two-thirds of the electorate. On the other, Khamenei, Nateq-Nouri, and the majority of the Council of Guardians, with a complex, and generally (but not always) antagonistic relationships between the two sides.

The domestic odds, then, are heavy, but the new president is not so hamstrung as to be reduced to immobilism. Any move to defend the rule of law and the constitution will require tact. It cannot be spectacular, and will be reinforced or weakened by foreign developments.

How, then, can a constructive terrain of compromise be developed on an international level?

*Tomorrow: professor Mallat examines possibilities for reshuffling 'dual containment'. Chibli Mallat's The Middle East into the 21st Century was recently published in paperback. This piece is special to The Daily Star*

**Finding a leader  
for the world's Shias  
page 9**