Can Iran renovate Islam? RELIGION AND POLITICS


ABSTRACT

Changes in Iran could reverberate through the Muslim world, writes Tony Parkinson.

FULL TEXT

ONE of the more perverse symbols of the new mood of liberalism in Iran is the late-in-life conversion of Ayatollah Sadeq Khalkhali. A man who once personified the violent excesses of the Islamic revolution is today preaching the cause of tolerance and moderation.

Khalkhali, the "hanging judge" of the 1979 revolution - who was filmed picking through the charred remains of United States soldiers in Tehran after President Carter's failed hostage rescue mission - is among the growing list of former hardliners to throw their support behind President Mohammad Khatami's push to introduce greater democracy, and end Iran's international isolation.

In the weeks leading into Iran's February elections, Khalkali emerged to pronounce himself an advocate of reform. "I am in complete agreement with the president," he told the French daily Le Figaro. "I very much like his idea of a dialogue between civilisations, and also of the development of civil society."

Can this be the same man speaking? Today Khalkhali is 73 and feeble, suffering recurring heart problems and Parkinson's disease. He has spent much of the past decade out of the public gaze, retreating into seclusion in the ancient and holy city of Qom. But the mere fact that he emerged in the election campaign to back Khatami is a pointer to the profound shift in sentiment beginning to reach into Iran's elites.

At a popular level, the Khatami campaign is powered by Iranian youth. Sixty per cent of the population is under 25 and, through student protest movements, they have mobilised a campaign for a more open and tolerant society, looking to escape some of the more oppressive strictures of the shariat, or Islamic law.

Part of the campaign is driven by aspirations for greater prosperity. Although a wealthy nation by regional standards, Iran's economic development has been retarded by its international isolation, notably through US trade embargos. The high rate of unemployment among university graduates is crushing the spirit of the young.

What is extraordinary in the recent events is that even some of the hardened veterans of the revolution appear also to accept the need for a new way forward. Ayatollah Khalkhali is not alone. Former interior minister, Abdollah Nouri, is also calling for greater freedoms. Jailed for speaking his mind, he refuses to be silenced. Similarly, the grand-daughter of Khomeini, Zahra Eshraji, has spoken out in favor of women's rights: "This is the year 2000 and the world is progressing. These unnecessary restrictions on women should be stopped."
Much has been said and written of what the surge in popular support means for Khatami’s careful and cautious crusade to democratise the Islamic state. More widely, is this proof that the tide is running out on radical Islam? Will the attempt to turn one of the great faiths into a revolutionary global ideology dissolve in the face of popular pressures for Western-style democratic freedoms?

In the politics of Islam, too much extrapolation is perilous. More than a billion Muslims represent the majority population in no less than 50 nations across three continents. It is a monotheistic faith, certainly, but it is far from monolithic.

For a start, four-fifths of all Muslims are Sunni, as distinct from the Shia branch of the faith observed in Iran. And, even within the Sunni faith, broad generalisations are unhelpful. From the Maghreb nations of northern Africa through to our own near-neighbors in south-east Asia, Islam accommodates a vast diversity of culture and ethnicity. Likewise, its political leadership ranges from pluralist elected leaders, through divine-right monarchists, to tinpot tyrants and demagogues. It is meaningless to attempt to cram the entire Muslim world into a "one size fits all" template.

There are two obvious caveats in exploring the significance of Khatami’s victory. First, although the election result is a landmark victory, the tyranny of the clergy in Iran is far from over. Secondly, there is no guarantee that a more moderate Iran would mark the global retreat of Islamic fundamentalism. As the Taliban in Afghanistan are demonstrating, there are other forces eager to export the Islamic revolution.

In concert with shadowy elements in Pakistan’s security forces and the Saudi terrorist mastermind, Osama Bin Laden, the Taliban are sponsoring insurrectionist movements across a wide front. Their main focus is on the central Asian republics and the Xinjiang province of northern China. But this new wave of Sunni fundamentalism poses risks to the regional stability not just of the Middle East and central Asia, but also north and central Africa, and the Indian subcontinent.

It could also seep into the politics of south-east Asia. Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines are all grappling with armed insurgency by Islamic movements. The Malaysian Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, warned the West in October not to allow sensitivities over his rough handling of domestic critics to obscure the nature of the broader threat: "While there are hordes of Malaysians who are eager to be in the vanguard of IT and the multimedia age, there are also quite a number who believe television sets should be thrown into the river because they are instruments of Satan."

It is not surprising, then, that Western governments should rush to welcome the blossoming of a pro-democracy movement in Iran, as have moderate Muslim leaders around the world. Iran is a nation of 65 million people, the world’s third-biggest oil producer. It has genuine claims to the status of a regional power.

As the first nation to surrender its Constitution and all the machinery of government to the precepts of the Koran and the hadith, it became the cauldron of Islamic militancy, sponsoring Middle East terrorism through groups such as Hizbollah and Hamas.

Given its recent history, Iran may never have sympathies for the West, much less Israel. But if Khatami manages to moderate Iran’s posture, it will represent a significant realignment in the politics of the Middle East, if not more widely.

That said, the battle is only just beginning in Iran. The phenomenal levels of support for Khatami’s reformist movement have electrified the country’s politics. His supporters won 80 per cent of the seats in the Majlis,
National Assembly. No other leader in the Middle East can claim anything like the same legitimacy.

But in the politics of the Islamic Republic, popular sovereignty runs a poor second to the power of the clergy. Although Khatami exercises significant control over executive government, most of the crucial instruments of state - the armed forces, the security apparatus, the judiciary, and the "Mobile Units of God's Vengeance" - remain under the control of Iraq's spiritual leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Under Iran's 1979 constitution, Khamenei, although unelected, holds the status of supreme leader. In Iran's theocratic system of government, he represents the velayat-e faqih, the doctrinal device invented by his predecessor, Ayatollah Khomeini, to entrench the imams at the peak of power.

Ali Khamenei is fervently protective of his paramount role in the affairs of state, and unwavering in his insistence that Iran must remain under Islamic law. Claiming his own mystical mandate, he scolds the advocates of reform: "Know that the people won't tolerate us ignoring their religious convictions."

In defiance of the election result, Khamenei's conservative judiciary have signalled they have no intention of relaxing the strict enforcement of Islamic codes of behavior under the shariat. Only this week, 42 young men and women were each sentenced by a court to 35 lashes, having been found guilty of attending a "depraved dance night".

Political repression remains very much in fashion. Reformist newspapers reported this week on the torture and beating of Akbar Mohammadi, one of four free-speech agitators arrested and imprisoned for their part in the student uprising at Tehran University last July.

Mohammadi has written a letter of protest to Iran's chief justice, complaining that prison guards hoisted him on a rope to the roof of his cell in Tehran's Evin prison, whipped him with an electric cable, and then beat him viciously. The student's pleas for amnesty to Ali Khameini have gone unheeded. He is still facing a death sentence. As President Khatami has warned supporters: "The path to freedom is risky and rough."

In wrestling with the power of the imams, Khatami has shown a shrewd grasp of the nuances of his constitutional authority, says Professor Amin Saikal, director of the centre for Arab and Islamic Studies at the Australian National University. For the moment, Khatami has the upper hand. But Saikal warns that nobody should underestimate the dangers if Khatami seeks to push too far, too fast.

Ayatollah Khamenei's command of the security forces remains the threat to the fragile democratic instinct in Iran. Traditionally, the Iranian army - as distinct from the intelligence services and the Republican Guard - does not intervene in politics. Yet its commanders are fiercely loyal to the Supreme Leader, to whom they owe their appointments. Says Saikal: "The defence chiefs have indicated they will not intervene unless it is absolutely necessary. But if it comes to a crunch, where does their role as military people stop, and their role as defenders of the faqih start? They have given strong indications as to where their allegiances lie."

The West will continue to watch with fascination as Khatami pursues his "softly-softly" strategy of incremental reform. The foreign ministers of Italy and Germany will fly into Tehran this week, as western Europe moves eagerly toward re-engagement.

Of course, relations with the US - the "Great Satan" in the standard Iranian text - remain the sticking-point. There are powerful economic reasons for Iran to abandon its ideological hatred of the US. Apart from wanting to end
long-standing trade embargos, Iran is preparing to launch exploration and development of the massive Caspian Sea oil and gas reserves that it shares with Russia and Azerbaijan. In the race to lay oil pipelines - worth billions of dollars in revenue to the host nations - the influence of US industry giants will be crucial.

FOR the moment, Washington is keeping its distance. No dramatic shift in the US position is likely in a presidential election year. The US remains alarmed by the ayatollah's insistence on pursuing a nuclear weapons program, an enterprise assisted nefariously by Russian interests. The caution is understandable. There is no certainty President Khatami will produce a more open and pluralist Iran. Likewise, there is not much evidence to suggest other extremist Islamic regimes and revolutionary movements would follow the lead.

But, according to Saikal, it is a dramatic attempt to take Islamic fundamentalism to another plane. If Khatami succeeds, a seventh-century faith may prove itself more viable as an ideology for the 21st century: better able to adapt to the demands of global integration and the information age, and more attentive to the international consensus on human rights and civil liberties. Says Saikal: "They may well demonstrate to Islamic opposition groups around the world that there is a way to create an Islamic democracy compatible with Western ideals."

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Illustration
Caption: Illustration: Iranian women walk past a mural of the conservative Ayatollahs Khomeini, left, and Khameini.

Photo.

DETAILS

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<th>Publication title:</th>
<th>The Age; Melbourne, Vic.</th>
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<td>Pages:</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of pages:</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publication year:</td>
<td>2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publication date:</td>
<td>Mar 4, 2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section:</td>
<td>News Extra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publisher:</td>
<td>Fairfax Digital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place of publication:</td>
<td>Melbourne, Vic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country of publication:</td>
<td>Australia, Melbourne, Vic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publication subject:</td>
<td>General Interest Periodicals--Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISSN:</td>
<td>03126307</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source type:</td>
<td>Newspapers</td>
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