

The Iranian Revolution Thirty Years On

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Thirty years have now passed since the stern, bearded visage of Ayatollah Khomeini graced our television screens decrying the many “ills” of the West and its allies. It was a revolution few, if any, at the time had anticipated, one participants and observers alike still endeavor to properly understand.

Khomeini’s image, which has since become a kind of shorthand for the West’s first encounter with the forces of radical Islam, continues to arouse fear and hostility. But 30 years on, that turbulent time in Iranian history continues to leave Western audiences perplexed, with little comprehension of the forces that incited crowds to chant “Death to America.”

In this haze of images, which for the most part dwelled upon the imminent threat to Western interests presented by “black-turbaned reactionaries,” Iran’s 100-year struggle for political independence against colonial dictatorship was more often than not elided in a frenzy of sensationalism and hysteria. Incidents such as the 1953 MI6-CIA-orchestrated *coup d’etat*, which ousted Iran’s democratically elected prime minister, Mohammad Mossadegh, and their importance in Iran’s meandering path toward revolution were simply cast aside. Sadly, the tableau commonly offered up for consumption (even to this day) is that of a mob of “fanatical zealots” stirred up and manipulated by a bunch of “mad mullahs.” No nuance, no context.

Today, with the benefit of hindsight, the world-historic proportions of the Iranian revolution of 1979 are becoming clear. Not only did this event initiate the end of the 50-year-old, American-backed Pahlavi dynasty, but it also brought to a cathartic climax the dissolution of 2,500 years of Persian monarchy and the arrival of the first theocratic republic in modern history.

Since those early days of the revolution and the ascendance of the clergy to the seat of power, Iran has undergone eight years of brutal war with Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, which resulted in 1,000,000 casualties, the American hostage crisis, revolutionary purges, the Cultural Revolution, the infamous Rushdie *fatwa*, sanctions, and international isolation.

On the other hand, the last 20 years have also witnessed the rapid expansion of civil society, the growth of local government, and the participation of women *en masse* in Iranian society. Today women outnumber their male counterparts in institutes of higher learning. Moreover, 70 percent of Iran’s population is under the age of 30, and with every passing day the young demand more from their leaders.

Back in 1997, the future looked bright under the unassuming and kindly reformist President Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, who was riding on a crest of popular support (70 percent of

the popular vote to be exact). Khatami, in stark contrast to his predecessors, chose to stress the rule of law and transparent elections. Iran was entering a new era, in which a language of accountability was increasingly injected into mainstream discourse, with a courageous and indomitable press its foremost champion.

Despite Khatami's endeavors to foster dialogue between East and West, the Bush administration dubbed Iran a member of the "axis of evil." This event was not only a major setback to the Khatami government in its dealings with the international community, but it also played right into the hands of Iran's hard-liners, who have long tried to forestall the realization of an Iranian *détente* with the West.

Furthermore, and in spite of his best efforts, Khatami often found himself being undercut through official and unofficial channels and harassed by the powerful, conservative forces who man the unelected Guardian Council and judiciary. Nevertheless, Khatami's legacy is still vehemently contested, and there is little doubt that nostalgia is strong for the days of reform, with calls abounding for his entry in the presidential race set to take place this June.

Most analysts agree that many of the popular initiatives first embarked upon by Khatami have since been hampered and "reined in" by the election of radical populist Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who seems to have reawakened the West's collective memory of the Islamic revolution and its more reactionary tendencies. At the domestic level, the former mayor of Tehran is increasingly resented for his mismanagement of the economy. His many sins in this regard include the [squandering](#) of an unparalleled oil revenue surplus and climbing inflation, the likes of which Iran has not seen in years.

While the UK reinstated relations with Iran some years ago, a U.S.-Iranian rapprochement remains elusive. Yet even under President Bush, the U.S. had been negotiating with Iran over the security situation inside Iraq and Afghanistan to great effect, and it was also on the sidelines of Iran's nuclear-program negotiations with the European Union.

The question of whether there will be a substantive shift under the Obama administration has evoked both positive and pessimistic responses. His appointment of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who openly stated that if Iran were to attack Israel the U.S. would "totally obliterate" the Islamic Republic, has not been a particularly encouraging sign. Her statement upon Senate confirmation also offered absolutely nothing that significantly deviates from the course of Iran-U.S. relations pursued under the Bush administration. Nor has the rumor that Dennis Ross, a key ally of the hawkish Washington Institute for Near East Policy, may be given the so-called "Iran portfolio" quelled analysts' growing pessimism. A recent op-ed by Ross in [Newsweek](#) merely emphasizes the fact that he differs little, if at all, from the Bush administration in terms of his bellicosity toward Iran.

President Obama has promised much, and there still remains doubt as to whether he will be able to deliver. After initially pledging unconditional talks with the Iranian leadership, Obama's stance on Iran has become more restrained, much closer to the *status quo* bestowed by his predecessor. Reports state that he has been advised to bide his time until Iran's June presidential election, after which a new figure may come to the fore "with whom America can deal." "Change," it seems, will have to wait a while longer till it reaches Iranian shores.

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