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# ROUHANI REDUX: IRAN ON THE EDGE OF CHANGE

ロウハーニー政権：イラン内政の新たな転換

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2017年5月の第12回イラン大統領選挙で再選を果たしたロウハーニー大統領は、アフマディネジャード大統領を挟んでハータミー大統領(1997年-2005年)の時代からの内政・外交上の改革政策を継承しつつ、政治手法としては従来と異なった新たなアプローチを取っている。それは①共和主義、②経済発展、③経済的公正、④政治的自由の4つの公準をめぐるイラン近代史の100年間の試行錯誤の帰結として捉えることが可能である。

共和主義との関係でいえば、ロウハーニーはハータミーと同様に改革派的な立場ではあるがハータミー程に急進的ではない。経済発展については1980-90年代のラフサンジャーニーの時代に特に追及され、ロウハーニーもこれを重視している。経済的公正はアフマディネジャードがとりわけ強調した公準である。政治的自由は特に対外関係において1950年代のモサッデク首相の時代と1979年の革命期に前面にでた政治原則である。

我々はこれらの政治的な原則を、「イラン主義」と「イスラーム主義」の2つの軸のあいだのどこかに位置づけて考察することができる。ロウハーニーの政治的な立場について要言すれば、彼はこうした公準のいずれかに傾斜することなく、イラン社会の政治的・文化的小および政治経済的な変容の帰結としての「下からの改革要求」に注意深く配慮した「中庸」の選択を重ねてきていると結論づけられる。

総じて現在のイランでは伝統的な社会的・文化的価値体系と近代的な価値体系とのあいだでイランなりの共存の形を模索する過程が続けられている。それはロウハーニー政権下においても変わることなく、社会生活のあらゆる局面で公的空間と私的空間における女性の行動規範の問題をはじめ様々な新たな問題が提起され、議論と再検討が進行中であるといえるのである。

(文責・鈴木 均)

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## Introduction

Over thirty-eight years since the Iranian-Islamic revolution in 1979, the debate over the Iran's path to reform remains widely contested. In examining change and continuity in the Islamic Republic, there is a permanent quest for an interpretative framework. To understand the nature of reform in Iran and the future of the country's political and institutional development, it is important to examine socio-political change as an historical totality, rather than episodes of transformation. This analysis will begin with some background material on successive Iranian modernisation movements. This approach lends itself to a more comprehensive understanding of both the challenge and opportunity of reform in contemporary Iran. What follows is an overview of the prospect for change under the current presidency of Hassan Rouhani. Rouhani's surprising victory in the June 2013 presidential elections, in which he ran as a moderate, securing 51 percent of the popular vote, represented a significant shift in the Iranian political landscape. His re-election four years later, in which he garnered more than 70 percent of Iran's 56 million votes firmly affirmed Rouhani's popular mandate calling for reform. The changes Rouhani pledged in his first election campaign are not of the scope with which godfather of the reformists, Seyyed Mohammad Khatami initiated his reformist presidency in 1997.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, Rouhani's cautious strategy – which manifests in both continuity and change of norms and structures – has yielded tangible results.

What makes the task of assessing change such a challenge is the fact that the Iranian body politic — the leadership, the elite, civil society and institutions — is so complex and variegated in relation to political culture, intellectual orientation, preference for certain ideas or categories of thinking, traditional or normative values, that it is not easy to decipher and decode the nature of Iran's political evolution. What is certain is that measuring change in Iran using a 'western yardstick' is futile. We cannot measure institutional development in Iran, or any non-western countries with a linear western yardstick. The trajectory of reform in contemporary Iran follows no blueprint, rather it entails an open-ended, non-linear process of self-propelling change. Volker Schmidt reminds us that the term itself is meant to reflect modernity's processual side, its dynamism and restless reinvention.<sup>2</sup>

In view of this methodological consideration, this analysis will avoid employing west-centric analytical tools, and will instead measure the scope of change by surveying the four guiding principles that have guided various Iranian heads of state since the 1979 revolution. These 'pillars' encompass, *inter alia*: republicanism, development, justice and independence. The degree to which these factors have been instrumentalised or prioritised reflects the overarching political orientation of the leadership in power. At the same time, these four pillars have been conditioned or influenced by the degree of emphasis on the notion of either *Iraniyat* or *Islamiyat*, which we discuss further on.<sup>3</sup> Before we assess continuity and change under Rouhani's presidency and the outlook for his second term, we first need to delve into the historical complexity of the exercise of transformation and social engineering in Iran.

The history of development in Iran has been beset by a dilemma: the question of orientation of institutional, political, intellectual and cultural development. Iranian history reflects the struggles of an ancient state seeking to chart a distinctive developmental path based on its historical, religious, revolutionary experience. Iranian leaders of the past – be it a shah or an ayatollah – have invariably demonstrated an ambivalence toward western norms and institutions.

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<sup>1</sup> See Tazmini, *Khatami's Iran*.

<sup>2</sup> See Schmidt, *Global Modernity*.

<sup>3</sup> See Holliday, *Defining Iran*.

### **Modernisation without Modernity**

In the twentieth century, Reza Shah Pahlavi, and later, his heir, Mohammad Reza Shah, embarked on a vast westernisation programme aimed at creating a more ‘modern’ Iran. Modernisation was fast paced, state-sponsored and limited to producing the ‘outward’ manifestations of modernity; political repression persisted, and the autocracy remained undiluted. Both Pahlavi Shahs adopted a brand of westernisation that led to a pattern of ‘modernisation without modernity’. The contradictions of this peculiar brand of modernisation, what can be called ‘modernisation from above’, triggered widespread socio-political discontent, which in the presence of ideological channels and fateful ‘sparks’, culminated in social revolution.<sup>4</sup>

The build-up to the revolution began when broad sectors of the population began to attribute their economic and political grievances to Mohammad Reza Shah’s westernisation campaign. His ideology was grounded in Persian nationalism, emphasising racial differences with the Arabs through emphasis on Persian Aryan ethnicity (calling himself, ‘Aryamehr’, literally, light of the Aryans). He fostered proximity with the west, arguing that Iran was more like France than the Arab world, in order to rationalise his lop-sided modernisation project, his alliance patterns with the United States, his close relationship with Israel, and the idea of monarchic sovereignty.

The hypocrisy of the Shah’s western-inspired project of modernity was to the opposition, symptomatic of the west’s deleterious effect on Iranian society. Broad segments of society, including the intellectuals, the clergy, the pious, mosque-attending adherents, the professional class, the rural poor, the youth and women, increasingly felt culturally and politically alienated because of the Shah’s hyper-nationalist notions of Iranianism and what they saw as cultural and political capitulation to the west.

It was natural that Islam emerged as an antidote in this context. This was reflected in Iran’s political discourse in the 1960s and 1970s, which emphasised anti-western, Iranian-Islamic romanticism in cultural discourse. The opposition began to experiment with Islamic norms and imagery and to reinvent and re-engineer Islam for the purpose of revolution. Intellectuals like Jalal Al-e Ahmad and Ali Shariati reconstituted Iranian identity in a mixture of ideas that were laden with Third worldism, anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism and the eternal battle between justice and injustice – with the Shah and the west firmly in the folds of the unjust side of that dichotomy. Literature such as Al-e Ahmad’s ‘Gharbzadegi’ (Westoxication) emphasised authentic Iranian culture, and later Islamic history after Al-e Ahmad’s pilgrimage in his later years. Al-e Ahmad argued that westernisation had contaminated Iran’s intellectual and social climate, and he called for a national ‘awakening’ and resistance to the hegemony of an alien culture. This culture, he argued, had unleashed a ‘disease’ that had ‘infected’ Iranian society and was slowly eroding Iran’s cultural authenticity, political sovereignty and economic stability.<sup>5</sup>

A cosmopolitan, French educated intellectual who had studied at the Sorbonne, and who had studied the works of Jean Paul Sartre and Frantz Fanon, Shariati used more explicit Shi’a Islamic terms in order to call for revolution. In ‘Bazgasht be Khish’ (Return to the Self), Shariati insisted that the countries of the Third World had to rediscover their religious roots before they could challenge the West. Thus, he proposed two interconnected and concurrent revolutions: a national revolution that would end all forms of imperial domination and would revitalise the country’s culture, heritage and national identity; and a social revolution that would end all forms of exploitation. According to Shariati,

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<sup>4</sup> Tazmini, *Revolution and Reform in Russia and Iran*, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West*, 68-9.

the task of carrying forth these two revolutions was in the hands of the intelligentsia who would guide the masses through the dual revolutions.

While neither Al-e Ahmad nor Shariati endorsed clerical rule, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini proposed a new political and ideological invention, the institution of the *velayat-e faqih* (the rule of the jurispudent), which forms the cornerstone of the Iranian constitution. In the Twelver Shi'a tradition, the *mahdi*, would return to bring justice on earth in the quietist tradition. Thus, clerics chose to humbly steer clear of politics, but Khomeini propagated an amendment to their quietist tradition arguing that clerics and *mojtaheds* (higher clergy entitled to interpret religious legislation in accordance with that time and political necessity / those who learned in the religious-legal science – *ijtihad*), could bring about justice by supporting the leadership of the *velayat-e faqih* – the just ruler who would hasten the return of the hidden imam. The notion of *velayat-e faqih* has never existed outside of Iran or indeed in pre-revolutionary Iranian or Muslim history – neither have theocratic structures such as the Guardian Council, the Assembly of Experts or the Expediency Council – under which democratic practices are subsumed.

Thus, the broad-based 'revolution from below' and the system that followed should be interpreted as a revolt in defence of culture and tradition, and an effort to create a 'homegrown' modernity through prioritisation of the Islamic inheritance and the practices and rhetoric of Shi'a revolutionary activism. This took the form of an Islamic republic: a unique blend of divine rule, theocracy and democracy.<sup>6</sup> This transformative project represented the antithesis of the Mohammad Reza Shah's developmental model in its rejection of western political institutions, specifically secularism, and western cultural norms. What is significant here is that historically, Iran's developmental trajectories, imperial or revolutionary, diverged from those of the west – whether by accident or by design.

### **Civilisational Dilemma**

The pathology of failed adaptation to western norms can be traced to Iran's particularistic traditions, or a 'civilisational disjuncture'. While a proper assessment of this issue is beyond the scope of this paper, it is useful to touch on Iran's cultural/religious roots as a source of this ambivalence, specifically, a unique tradition of an apocalyptic religion and a messianic consciousness. Twelver Shi'a Islam, the branch of Islam that has been Iran's official religion since 1501, holds that the twelfth Imam, the prophesied Mahdi who disappeared in 873 AD and is thought to be not really deceased but in hiding, will one day return to bring justice to the world. The coming of a messiah and the advent of the Last Days in which a sudden transformation of society would occur, have been an important set of themes in early modern and modern Shi'a Islam, and these have been remarkably intertwined with Iranian rebellions, revolutions and state formation.<sup>7</sup> The Islamic Republic of Iran was believed to be a springboard to a Shi'a utopia by virtue of its theological structures, institutions, laws and practices aimed at creating the conditions for the return of the Mahdi.

The need for adaptability became urgent in the 1990s when Iran found itself in the throes of an historical 'moment': having passed through the labyrinth of social contradictions, the country had reached a point where it had to transcend the logic of development of the 20th century. While Iranian leaders had struggled to preserve the country's distinctive historical personality or genotype – Persian,

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<sup>6</sup> Amineh & Eisenstadt, "Theorizing of the Iranian Revolution of 1978-9," 162, 173.

<sup>7</sup> Mirsepassi, *Transnationalism in Iranian Political Thought*, 33-34.

Islamic, revolutionary or messianic – the country found itself in the emerging global village, or nascent ‘cosmopolis’, fuelled by the forces of economic and technological globalisation.<sup>8</sup> The country’s population was rapidly undergoing change, largely in response to the pressures of urbanisation, migration, economic integration, globalisation, cultural exchange and diffusion, and the technological revolution.<sup>9</sup>

When Khatami suddenly appeared on a reformist platform in 1997 and secured a surprise landslide victory of over 70 per cent of the vote, it symbolised an urgent call for change. Iran was at a fateful historical juncture: the pressures ‘from below’, including, a diversified civil society that has made its voice heard in the ballot box; market forces that are inclined towards global economic integration and foreign investment; the public mood that favours normalisation of relations with the west; and technology and the Internet, which have spurred more connectivity and communication. The nation’s demographics – about one-third of Iran’s 56 million eligible voters were under the age of 30 – pushed the country to explore a more integrative approach to development. The developmental experiences and conflicts of the past were exhausted, and Iran needed a more sophisticated formula for social and political change.

### **Politics of normalcy**

Khatami’s eight-year presidency served to cement the shift in orientation. His reform movement ushered in a critical transition in post-revolutionary Iranian history by setting the country on the course of the ‘politics of normalcy’.<sup>10</sup> While there were huge discrepancies between Khatami’s campaign promises, popular expectation, and what was really achieved, the ‘Khatami experiment’ unleashed a vibrant civic activism and a budding pluralistic momentum that prevailed well beyond the end of his eight-year presidency.<sup>11</sup>

The president-reformer’s approach was to transcend the sharp turns and revolutionary breaks that have characterised modern Iranian history. He tried to move Iranian politics beyond the extraordinary experiments of the past, and towards a regular mode of politics. His movement represented the explicit project of a return to normalcy. The politics of normalcy refers to a country that is seeking to avoid diplomatic isolation and to rid itself of revolutionary-style politics, self-reliant economic policies and rigid social restrictions. The attempt to link up with the past — to restore the torn fabric of society and to draw on intellectual traditions and the cultural and religious values of the past — all reflected the post-traumatic pursuit of a usable past as the grounding for contemporary Iran.

Khatami based Iran’s politics on the repudiation of revolutionary politics. While he embraced the contributions of these ‘extraordinary’ times, he pushed for transformation through simultaneous engagement with the future as well as the past. A break from the past translated into specifically, the promotion of civil society, greater openness, the rule of law, economic integration and gradual rapprochement with the international community. A staunch supporter of the principles of the Islamic Revolution, Khatami believed that Iran had to fashion its own brand of modernity, yet drawing on western experience was a *sine qua non*. Between 1997 and 2005, Iran saw evolutionary social changes that unfolded at a measured pace; however, this process neither imitated the west nor followed a rigid

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<sup>8</sup> Dallmayr, *Dialogue Among Civilizations*, 17-18, 85.

<sup>9</sup> Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran*, 328.

<sup>10</sup> This is a term used by Richard Sakwa to explain Vladimir Putin’s presidency. See Sakwa, *Putin: Russia’s Choice*.

<sup>11</sup> Adib-Moghaddam, “The pluralistic momentum in Iran and the future of the reform movement.”

interpretation of the Islamic past. In fact, Khatami's platform accommodated historical, local and national experience with an acknowledgment of the accomplishments of western civilisation.

The distinctiveness of Khatami's strategy lay in his advocacy of gradual, 'western-inspired' institutional change within the existing structure of the Islamic theocracy. The president-reformer believed that modernity was compatible with Iranian culture and that western-inspired practices could be successfully woven into Iran's national, religious and historical tapestry. His mission was to initiate a civilisational upgrade and to push the Islamic Republic into the 21st century by ushering in an era of socio-political transformation predicated on a political platform that

Khatami's eight-year term left an indelible imprint on the language and lexicon of Iranian politics. Khatami moved away from the developmental imagery and convictions of the past in favour of a more adaptive trajectory. He consigned the revolutionary period of Iran's politics to history, but carried forward the original revolutionary ideals of social justice, freedom and equality. Although there have been diversions along the way, the most salient example being Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's eight-year presidency, Iran is dancing on the edges of the path to change as paved by Khatami.

In the view of this author, Ahmadinejad did drift off course, but only momentarily. The peculiarities of his presidency, such as his fiery rhetoric, or the Green movement contesting his second term, can be regarded as the growing pains associated with Iran's entry into full adulthood. It is inaccurate to reduce Ahmadinejad's presidency as nothing more than an era of revolutionary revivalism with apocalyptic scenarios. The international context played a crucial role in determining Iran's hard-line, principlist stance. It was only a few years earlier that Khatami extended an olive branch to the international community in the form of a 'Dialogue of Civilisations' - only to be branded by George W. Bush as a pariah on the 'Axis of Evil' along with North Korea and Iraq. Bush's condemnations incensed conservatives, traditionalist and radicals within Iran, who supported Ahmadinejad's confrontational stance.

However, the pressures 'from below' – the permanent call for political inclusiveness, civil society, the rule of law, and the loosening of social restrictions – persisted and the country slowly began to manoeuvre itself out of the political and economic quagmire it was caught in. The shift in orientation is evident today under Rouhani who made it clear in his campaign that he acutely understands calls for political participation and civic activism. He pledged to relieve the extraordinary economic strain on the Iranian people and to rehabilitate Iran's sanctions-battered economy and foreign relations. Since his investiture, Rouhani has been successful in exploring a more dynamic and creative logic of engagement, while repudiating the politics of resistance and confrontation.

In Rouhani's Iran, we are witnessing the revival of the politics of normalcy where ideological radicalism is giving way to Iran's broader interests. Similar to Khatami, Rouhani is struggling to construct a model of normality that combines western-inspired reforms with something broader, taking into account Iran's unique culture, history and place in the world. Thus, contemporary Iran is experiencing its own modernity, and this is taking place at a time when the very paradigm of modernity is being radically questioned in the west, its place of origin. Let us reflect on some theoretical observations, which are useful in qualifying the nature of change in Rouhani's Iran.

### **Civilisational neo-modernisation as a theory of change in Iran**

Much of the orthodox literature on modernisation and development entails the removal of indigenous foundations in order to make room for a more ‘advanced’ replacement: the product of the *western* intellectual, social and cultural experiences. Edward Tiryakian traces this to the ‘western delusion’ that there is ‘a model of development exportable, applicable everywhere, and superior morally and technically to all other forms of societal development’.<sup>12</sup> Eurocentrically-biased and with a ‘one-size-fits-all’ ideal, classical modernisation theory maintains that by ‘disembedding’ traditional structures, ‘backward’ countries could break away from their past to a future-orientated utopia, or historical endpoint.<sup>13</sup> As this study demonstrates, Iranian history reflects a society that has been reluctant to ‘disembed’ its indigenous social forms.

In this case, civilisational neo-modernisation theory can serve as a framework for understanding the processes of modernisation, revolution, change, and transformation in Iran, as it overcomes the inadequacies of modernisation theory with its linearity and assumed convergence on a western-type model.<sup>14</sup> At the heart of civilisational neo-modernisation is the idea of multiple modernities; in other words, countries can be modern in different ways. A more nuanced and pluralistic representation of modernity, this paradigm takes a much broader view of the modernisation process by placing it in the long-term context of cultural adaptation of civilisational complexes to the challenge of modernity. Indeed, contemporary Iranian developmental represents the unique interaction of universal value patterns and specific cultural codes and thus fits neatly under the rubric of civilisational neo-modernisation theory.

Shmuel Eisenstadt explains that inter-civilisational tendencies combined with an ambivalent attitude to the cosmopolitan centres of globalisation have given rise to new inter-civilisational orientations. Eisenstadt’s civilisational argument is a valuable conceptual tool as it underscores the role of civilisational legacies and non-western norms and traditions in the creation of diverse forms of modernity.<sup>15</sup> Interaction with the western model has been a component of all modernising processes and patterns, but non-western forms have been determined by the encounter with local civilisational settings.<sup>16</sup>

If we assess change in Iran by maintaining the broader perspective that the country is gradually charting its own paving its own homegrown path to modernity – one that is neither modelled on an ‘anti-western’ or ‘pro-western’ theoretical or ideological construct – we are better equipped to gauge change. We go so far as to argue that Iran is following a non-model or a model of experimentation; one that is undefined. These theoretical reflections put us in a better position to understand the scope of change instigated by Khatami and carried forward by Rouhani.

### **Rouhani’s Political ‘Brand’**

What is important to underscore is that while Khatami’s reform strategy did have flaws, insofar as organisation and implementation were concerned, the largest impediment to reform was the

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<sup>12</sup> Tiryakian, “Modernization: Exhumateur in Pace,” 173.

<sup>13</sup> Beck et al., *Reflexive Modernization*, 2.

<sup>14</sup> Sakwa, “The Soviet Collapse: Contradictions and Neo-modernisation,” 73.

<sup>15</sup> Eisenstadt, “Multiple Modernities,” 11.

<sup>16</sup> Arnason, “The Multiplication of Modernity,” 132-133.

character of the country's power structure. The political system in Iran is generally characterised by a multitude of loosely connected, generally competitive power centres, both formal and informal. These 'superbodies' are grounded in the Constitution and in governmental regulations and take the form of state institutions. The latter include religious-political associations, martyr's foundations and paramilitary organisations aligned with various factions of the leadership. The president, as chief executive, is responsible for the everyday running of the country. He does not determine the general guidelines of Iranian domestic and foreign policy, nor does he control the armed forces or security apparatus.

The political system, with myriad and overlapping centres of power with deep policy differences, frustrated Khatami's efforts to push forward with progressive legislation. The legislative and judiciary branches had the power to obstruct – or to expedite – the implementation of Khatami's liberalisation measures. Owing to their staunchly conservative political orientation, these 'superbodies' did not cooperate with the reform-orientated president. In the end, Khatami found himself in an institutional gridlock, and unable to reconcile the political rifts that impeded his program for change.

The question surrounding Rouhani's presidency was whether he would get caught up in a similar quagmire and whether he had the political steering power required to implement change considering the ubiquity of the orthodox wings of the Islamic Republic. Rouhani's strength is that he straddles both sides of the moderate-conservative fence, and this gives him a freer hand in implementing change. He is as much a conservative, establishment figure as he is a moderate figure. As such, Rouhani has more political leverage than Khatami had during his mandate.

Rouhani and Khatami are comparable in the sense that they both pledged the easing of social strictures, and greater openness, however, they are different in their capacity to manoeuvre through the opposition. While Khatami presented himself as a forward-thinking, progressive visionary, an intellectual and a philosopher, who prioritised state-society relations and normative institutions such as pluralism and civil society, Rouhani performs a head of state, focusing on the state's core issues, such as the nuclear dossier and the need for foreign investment.

A few words on Rouhani's background are pertinent here. Like many religious-minded scholars before the 1979 Revolution, Rouhani was drawn to Ayatollah Khomeini. Heard mentioning the Ayatollah in a Tehran mosque, he became a target of Mohammad Reza Shah's dreaded intelligence service. He was forced to leave the country, eventually joining Khomeini in exile in Paris. Since the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s, in which he played a strategic role in the military command, Rouhani has not been excluded from regime institutions. Unlike many reformist and centrist leaders before him, he still enjoys a relationship of trust with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Rouhani's approval by the Guardian Council in the 2013 presidential elections, while centrist Hashemi-Rafsanjani was disqualified, is a testament of his impeccable revolutionary credentials. Thus, it is safe to say that Rouhani is cut from the same cloth as establishment figures.

However, what sets Rouhani apart from his predecessors is his 'brand': that is, being neither a reformist nor a hardliner. The president is the synthesis or the product of a thesis (the reformist/pragmatist camp, excluding the more radical, secular Green Movement supporters), and an antithesis (Ahmadinejad and the more conservative-traditionalist, principalist elements). He is the reconciliation of contending and competing ideological camps – a compromise of sorts. In the view of the author, the Iranian president has not exacerbated the political rifts and factional infighting that Khatami bequeathed him. Rouhani is closer to bringing harmony to the Byzantine labyrinth of Iranian politics, and of acting as an antidote to a socially-divided Iran. At the beginning of his second term, at the time of writing this chapter, Rouhani has demonstrated that while he is sensitive to the

machinations of the conservative establishment, he remains committed to the goals and aspirations of the popular will.

### **The pillars of change in Iran**

As highlighted in the introduction, there are four guiding principles that have motivated various Iranian political heads of state in the past century. The political inclination of leaders of the past has been very much determined by the prioritisation, instrumentalisation or sometimes the interplay of these principles. President Rouhani's overarching challenge has been to strike a balance between these four competing objectives and to achieve a 'balancing point', or what is known in Persian as the *nokhteh taadol*. They can be summarised as follows:

1. Republicanism and Participation (*mosharekat*). The emphasis is on popular sovereignty (*mardom salari*), civil society, (*jameh madani*), and pluralism. This pillar was central to Khatami whose movement focussed on consolidating the rule of law and stimulating civic activism. While Rouhani is a moderate in the sense that he is responsive to the drivers of progressive change from 'below', this pillar is not as central to his political agenda as it was for Khatami.
2. Economic Development (*tose'eh*). This was the cornerstone of Hashemi-Rafsanjani's presidency in the 1980s and early 1990s. Described as a pragmatic centrist, Hashemi-Rafsanjani surrounded himself with technocrats in an effort to revive the post-war economy. Going further back, in the late 1920s and 1930s, economic restructuring was the linchpin of Reza Shah Pahlavi's state-sponsored modernisation program. President Rouhani has surrounded himself with likeminded technocrats as well.
3. Economic Justice (*edaalat*). The pursuit of justice was one of the main pillars of Ahmadinejad's political platform, which was predicated on tackling poverty and corruption, and redistributing wealth. His personal, former website *Mardomyar* or the 'People's Friend', epitomised this mission.
4. Independence/Freedom (*azadi*). The emphasis is on resistance of foreign interference and encroachment. This was the cornerstone of Mohammad Mossadeq's short prime ministership in the 1950s. The democratically-elected, nationalist prime minister insisted that his country's fight for possession of its oil resources was not only a quest for profits, but a fight for liberty. This was also the leitmotif of the revolutionary slogan in 1979 – '*Esteghlal* (independence), *Azadi* (freedom), *Jomhourī Islami* (Islamic Republic).'

### **Iraniyat and Islamiyat**

Let us envision these four elements on an axis. This axis runs on two tracks: *Iraniyat* and *Islamiyat*. *Iraniyat* relates to Iran's pre-Islamic heritage, Persian history, culture, and civilisation.

*Islamiyat* corresponds to Iran's Islamic past, values, dogma, and tradition as well as classical revolutionary themes and slogans relating to Shi'a revolutionary revivalism, nationalism, and populism. *Islamiyat* runs on a continuum: on one side is *Ejtehadi Islamiyat*, which in the case of foreign policy articulation, advances a more moderate, enlightened and dynamic narrative, predicated on integration and dialogue. On the other side of the spectrum is *Jihadi Islamiyat*, which is characterised by a principalist and atavistic discourse.

The *Jihadi* and *Ejtehadi* approach to independence is very different. In *Jihadi Islamiyat*, independence translates into economic independence, guided by revolutionary ideals of self-sufficiency. On the other hand, *Ejtehadi Islamiyat* advocates representation in, and interaction with, international organisations, integration into the global economy and a non-confrontational political discourse. The historic nuclear deal brokered by President Rouhani and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif known as the 'Joint Plan of Action' between Iran and its P5+1 interlocutors on 24 November 2013 is an example of an *Ejtehadi* reading of independence, based on calibrated compromise.

*Iraniyat* also bifurcates in a similar way. To illustrate this point, let us focus on the concept of national independence. On one side of the spectrum, the emphasis lies on radical negation of other civilisations (particularly the west), typified by Al-e Ahmad's 'Westoxication' discourse. In foreign policy, national independence is found in isolationism, the avoidance of political and economic entanglements, and a defensive and confrontational rhetoric. Ahmadinejad and his hardline supporters centred their perception of national independence on this approach. In its more acute forms, this view perpetuates the Shi'a messianic and millenarian worldview and activism.

The other end of the spectrum is characterised by integration and interaction. Khatami's 'Dialogue Among Civilisations' thesis best captures this orientation. Independence is found through emphasis on cultural commonalities and shared histories through an integrative narrative. Rouhani's approach falls squarely in the middle: national independence is found through cautious engagement. His administration is challenged by conservative elements that need to be appeased, thus engagement with outside powers needs to be calibrated.

### **Between change and continuity**

With more executive steering power (and most importantly, the Supreme Leader's tacit support), Rouhani has demonstrated the ability to strike a delicate balance – the *nokhteh taadol* between all four pillars. In other words, he is pursuing a path that seeks to reconcile disparate orientations through the art of principled compromise. This translates into a balance between continuity and change, between *Islamiyat* and *Iraniyat*. Rouhani's 'brand' gives him a luxury of leadership that allows him to pursue these four pillars of change in earnest. The pushes and pulls of Iran's history have brought to the surface a moderate *ijtihadi* (higher clergy qualified to interpret religious legislation) president who understands that the developmental experiences and conflicts of the past have been exhausted, and that Iran needs a more sophisticated formula for political change in order to respond to the pressures for reform 'from below'. Rouhani, then, is a product of the demands of Iranian society for political, cultural and socio-economic change.

Today, Iran finds itself in a unique historical moment where the theocracy is forced to test its commitment to democratic principles and to transcend the dichotomy between conforming to native traditions and dogma, and encouraging progressive reforms. Thus, social and political change in the Islamic Republic will remain an ongoing process of interaction between universal value patterns and

specific cultural codes. This methodological shift is an important one that promises to address the impetus for change 'from below'. With all of his political acumen and his ability to achieve the *nokhteh taadol*, Rouhani still faces the bulwark of conservative resistance, from not only domestic hard-liners, but foreign hawks and warmongers.

### **Internal and external resistance**

Rouhani's 19-point margin of victory after a bruising campaign against hard-line opponents boosted his confidence. Yet, perhaps for that very reason, the conservative establishment, led by Iran's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei and the system's conservative custodians, continue to stymie his efforts to translate his electoral mandate into policies aimed at open Iran politically and economically. This compels Rouhani to adopt more retrograde policies as a balancing act. For instance, in his second term, Rouhani did not appoint any female ministers to his Cabinet as he had promised he would in the May 2017 presidential election. While he explained that he was eager to appoint young individuals and women to high-level positions, Rouhani's new Cabinet featured an all-male line-up.

Hard-line pressure has prompted shifts in rhetoric and orientation. Rouhani promised to free Mehdi Karroubi, a reformist and former presidential candidate who has been under house arrest since 2011. In late August 2017, Karroubi announced that he would go on a hunger strike as a form of protest. He subsequently ended his hunger strike when security forces were removed from his premises.<sup>17</sup> Equally controversial was Rouhani's nomination of the telecommunications minister - Mohammad Javad Azari Jahromi - who built parts of Iran's massive surveillance infrastructure while working in the Intelligence Ministry has led to concerns among civil rights activists that Jahromi could use his new position to expand already extensive online state spying operations on citizens.<sup>18</sup>

At the same time, surprisingly, a moderate ayatollah was appointed to head Iran's Expediency Council. The supreme leader appointed Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi as the new chairman of the Expediency Council. Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani had headed the council for decades, until his death in January 2017. In remarks suggestive of the reformists being content with Shahroudi's appointment, Nemat Ahmadi, a reformist analyst, told the daily *Arman* on 15 August 2017, 'given the national position and moderate attitude of Ayatollah Shahroudi, there is hope that we will see the Expediency Council reaching the goals that have been set and see effective decisions taken like those by Ayatollah Rafsanjani'.<sup>19</sup> Other initiatives that augur change is the Iranian parliament's approval in August 2017 of a long-awaited amendment to the country's drug law that significantly raises the bar for a mandatory death sentence. The amendment, revised four times by the parliamentary judiciary commission, is more limited than a December 2016 draft amendment that sought to outlaw the death penalty for most non-violent drug related offenses. For the bill to become law, the Guardian Council, a body of 12 Islamic jurists, must approve it, agreeing that the bill is in accordance with Iran's constitution and their interpretation of Sharia law. There is an internal mechanism of scrutinising and vetting by conservative bodies, which temper progressive initiatives.<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, Rouhani has had manoeuvre the country through the conservative tide and refine his balancing act. Thus, while he has pledged further social freedoms, openness and relative liberalisation,

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-rights-karroubi-idUSKCN1AW1O8?il=0> (Accessed on 20 Nov. 2017. Same date in the following footnotes.)

<sup>18</sup> <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-rouhani-minister-of-communication-worked-for-intelligence/28680358.html>

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/08/iran-expediency-council-chairman-reshuffle-shahroudi.html>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/08/15/iran-raising-death-penalty-bar>

Rouhani has been pressured to adopt more conservative policies, and at times, a defensive language. In response to the belligerent stance espoused by American president, Donald Trump towards Iran, Rouhani has warned that could restart its nuclear programme *within hours* if the United States imposes new sanctions. This rhetoric is different from the logic of engagement that Rouhani employed, which in the end resulted in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in January 2015.

The supreme leader continues to restrict Rouhani: Khamenei has deployed unusually inflammatory language against the re-elected president, warning against his eagerness to attract foreign investment and his openness to western-style education systems. Rouhani has remained defiant, vowing not to fear detractors. In July 2017, Rouhani's brother was arrested on corruption charges, He was later released on bail, but the prospect of his humiliating imprisonment could be used by the principlists to pressure Rouhani.

Foreign pressure is equally deleterious. The Trump administration appears determined to eviscerate the 2015 nuclear accord. Backed by Congress, the Trump administration has already moved to intensify sanctions and has vowed to aggressively counter Iran's regional policies and alleged ballistic missile activities. From Tehran, the view is clear: from its efforts to create a Sunni arc to curb Iran's purported Shi'ite crescent in the Levant to repeated hints about regime change, Trump's administration is intent on confronting Iran, depriving it of the nuclear deal's economic dividends and seeking to unseat its rulers. The Trump administration, lacking any political intelligence, regional knowledge or soft power, will not succeed where its six predecessors faltered. In that sense, Rouhani has little to worry about.

Of greater concern are the American policies' unintended consequences in the domestic arena. Escalation against Iran is likely to deepen the country's justifiable insecurities, and its siege mentality. Growing tensions will indubitably feed Iran's militarism and militancy, and lambasting Iran will serve to diminish Rouhani's manoeuvring space. The wave of antagonism surging from the United States will bolster the principlists who were defeated in local and national elections. It will give them grounds to regain politically what they lost electorally. Threats of regime change, sanctions and generally arbitrary actions (such as the illegal act of potentially tearing up the international, multi-lateral nuclear deal) are pretexts to obstruct Rouhani's agenda, hinder economic reintegration to preserve their own interests, and to fuel dissatisfaction to ensure their rivals' defeat in the next elections. The United States has proven incapable of supporting Iran's reformist elements; rather its policies have served to boost the principlists' platform. The losers in this political calculus is the electorate hoping for a gradual evolution toward a more pluralistic and open polity.

Rouhani's piecemeal efforts will be severely hindered if the United States choses to escalate regional tensions, deepen sectarian rifts, undermine the nuclear agreement, pursue regime change and eschew diplomatic engagement. The Trump administration's hostile policies are tilting Iran's internal dynamics to Rouhani's detriment. Both internal and external pressures present an ongoing challenge to Rouhani who continues to straddle the fence to precipitate small changes. The Islamic Republic of Iran under Rouhani's presidency is a polity featuring both continuity and change. The pressures for change 'from below' have set the country on the irrevocable path to reform. However, given Iran's competing power centres and deep-seated conservative resistance, Iranian reform will remain an ongoing tug-of-war between moderates and conservatives. The forces 'from below' and the ballot box however, are strong forces that will ensure that the reformist agenda remains a permanent feature of Iranian politics despite repeated setbacks.

## Reform measures

The clearest example of the success of the reform agenda is the 2015 nuclear deal struck between Iran and six world powers: the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, France, China, and Germany (the P5+1). Iran's official revolutionary discourse rejects compromises with the West. The watershed nuclear deal, caught in the middle of factional opposition and wrangling, ultimately received the tacit approval of the conservative Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei.<sup>21</sup> This flexibility suggests a shift towards pragmatism and a more conciliatory stance. Other social policies that are reflective of change include the debate over the re-election of a Zoroastrian as a city council member in Yazd. While the ultra-conservative head of the Guardian Council, Ayatollah Jannati argues that religious minorities cannot be representatives of Muslim-majority constituencies, Rouhani and the parliament are pushing for a reinterpretation.<sup>22</sup> Other measures include the regime's socially conscious measure to set up addiction treatment centres modelled on the American Alcoholics Anonymous model, to care for alcoholics. This subject is taboo or 'haram' (prohibited in Islam) to even discuss. Since 2015, following the order of the Health Ministry dozens of private clinics and government institutions have opened help desks and special wards for alcoholics.<sup>23</sup>

There is an ongoing debate over compulsory hijab in the car – some women are refusing to wear a hijab while driving, sparking a nationwide debate over what is considered private or public.

Obligatory wearing of the hijab has been an integral policy of the Islamic republic since the 1979 Revolution, but it is one the establishment has had a great deal of difficulty enforcing. Many Iranian women are already pushing the boundaries, and observers in Tehran say women who drive with their headscarves resting on their shoulders are becoming a familiar sight. The Iranian judiciary and the police force insist a car interior is public space, but more women are defying authorities by driving with 'bad hijab'. 'Bad hijab' refers to a slack interpretation of the official dress code requiring women to cover their hair and figure.<sup>24</sup>

Rouhani has argued that people's private space should be respected and opposes a crackdown on women who don't wear the hijab. The president said explicitly that the police's job is not to administer Islam. 'Private or not private?' asked an article carried by the state IRNA news agency on 10 July 2017. The article added: 'This is a question that has created a legal and religious discussion about private space within cars'.<sup>25</sup> The debate is not only among liberal Iranians. Abolfazl Najafi Tehrani, a cleric based in Tehran, tweeted: 'People's cars, like people's houses, are their property and a private space and infringing upon this space will disturb people's moral security and will harm women's trust with the police'.<sup>26</sup>

Other indications of change are more progressive attitudes towards women. Iran Air, the country's national airline, has for the first time appointed a female CEO. Farzaneh Sharafbafi, who is also the first Iranian woman with a PhD in aerospace, will replace the current CEO Farhad Parvaresh. Sharafbafi, the current director general of Iran Air's research department, will be the first-ever woman

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<sup>21</sup> <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/dossiers/2014/03/2014331104216470679.html>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/11/iran-sepanta-niknam-zoroastrian-yazd-city-council-jannati.html>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/11/world/middleeast/iran-alcohol-rehabilitation.html>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2015/may/27/iran-hijab-rouhani-versus-senior-clergy-enforcement>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/11/compulsory-hijab-rule-increasingly-flouted-by-iranian-drivers>

<sup>26</sup> [https://twitter.com/najafi\\_tehrani/status/883328643430203392](https://twitter.com/najafi_tehrani/status/883328643430203392)

to head the national flag carrier, Fars reported.<sup>27</sup> In a sign of slowly changing attitudes, Ali Karimi, a veteran Iranian footballer, has called on authorities to allow female fans to attend stadiums alongside men.<sup>28</sup> These measures are indicative that the state is actively debating the parameters of what is permitted and what is prohibited in order to respond to the demands for change ‘from below’. The boundaries of Islamic thought and practice are being creatively extended in order to fulfil the popular mandate. As such, Iranian reform will remain an ongoing process of the interaction between universal value patterns and specific cultural codes – in other words, Iran will continue to explore ways to reconcile historical, religious, revolutionary and cultural context with the modern world.

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<sup>27</sup> <http://www.tehrantimes.com/news/414958/Iran-Air-appoints-first-female-CEO>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/06/30/banned-stadiums-being-woman-iran>

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