The New Conservatives Take a Turn

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The conservative forces that took majority control of Iran's parliament, or Majles, in the February 2004 elections were not swept into office by a mass movement. Conservative candidates had the help of the Council of Guardians, a body of 12 senior clerics[1] vested by the constitution of the Islamic Republic with the power to

President Mohammad Khatami, middle, and Majles Speaker Gholam Ali Haddad Adel, left, at a joint session of the cabinet and Parliament, August 18, 2004. (HENGHAMEH FAHIMI/AFP)
overturn acts of parliament, which blocked the candidacy of over 1,000 men and women associated with the reformist trend that held the majority in the Sixth Majles of 2001-2004. Thanks to this intervention, conservatives won the majority of seats, because many Iranians were left with no one for whom to vote.

The Guardian Council’s wide-ranging disqualification of reformist candidates symbolized the extent to which unaccountable actors shape formal politics in the Islamic Republic. The judiciary, the Expediency Council—another unelected clerical conclave—and the office of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, successor to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini as Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution, are three other conservative-controlled institutions empowered either to veto initiatives of the elected parliament or to repress the movement for reform outside parliament. In the seven years since the first election of reformist-associated President Mohammad Khatami, the conservatives used all of these institutions to reestablish control over a system that seemed to have escaped their domination. Yet the conservative forces did not regain their strength through repression alone.

Lack of unity among the reformists, the inability of Khatami to face down the conservatives and the peculiarities of the constitution that gave conservative bodies so much power all played a major role in the conservatives’ reversal of fortune. The parliamentary reformists’ inability to cope with Iran’s social and economic problems and their constant feuds with the conservatives discouraged supporters of reform outside parliament. Meanwhile, the conservatives mobilized economic and social forces loyal to them, but their shrewdness in these tasks alone does not account for their success. In order to reconquer the parliament and, they hope, the Iranian presidency in the election coming up in 2005, a new generation of conservatives chose a new strategy, one that is quite different from the course they had followed over the preceding two decades.

Puritanism to Pragmatism

For years after the Islamic Revolution, the conservatives in the regime relied on their alliances with powerful institutions and did not engage the electorate directly. The most influential circle supporting the conservatives is the Jamiat Mo’talefeh Eslami, or Islamic Coalition Society (ICS), a group of laymen formed in the late 1960s by merchants in the bazaar and early supporters of Khomeini. Habibollah Asgarowladi, a leading bazaar merchant with strong ties with the clergy, transformed the ICS into a party in the course of the revolution. Profoundly traditionalist in their religious outlook, people like Asgarowladi, Ali-Naqi Khamouchi...
and Asadollah Badamtchian, all of them revolutionary bazaaris with a strong influence in the Revolutionary Guards, have political clout that extends well beyond their immense personal wealth. Under the Shah, these bazaaris were politically marginal and their economic power was waning. But especially after the death of Khomeini a new “Islamic” economic order took shape that favored the merchants. Like former President Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, they were for an open-door economic policy combined with cultural and religious conservatism.

Many ICS members are married into powerful clerical families, including the families of many of the conservative clergymen who compose the Society of Combative Clerics, a political party that holds seats in the parliament. Other main backers of the conservatives include the top-ranking officials of the Revolutionary Guards, an armed force mustered after the revolution as a sort of praetorian guard for the regime, the group around Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, president of Iran from 1989-1997 and head of the Expediency Council since 1997, and the revolutionary foundations (bonyads). These foundations own the nationalized assets of the elite under the Shah and many other industries. Their money pays for conservative groups’ street demonstrations and other activities.

After Speaker of the Majles Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri lost the 1997 presidential race to Khatami and the conservatives went on to lose their parliamentary majority in 2000, a subgroup of middle-aged conservatives began to argue for revising the conservatives’ political message. Many on the old right clung to revolutionary tenets denouncing the West and preaching selflessness, with a particular stress on “martyrdom” as the sacrifice of one’s life—literal and figurative—for the sake of Islam. These slogans clashed with the reformists’ focus on opening Iran to the outside world and leaving behind the heroism of revolutionary martyrs in favor of a society in which Islam would not impose self-abnegation and self-denial. The new conservatives saw that the rhetoric of self-sacrifice had become meaningless to the generation born after the revolution—over half of Iran’s total population. In their newspapers, they began to question the old guard’s puritanism and obsession with lamentation and, instead, to borrow themes from the reformists to better compete in the electoral arena. Progressively, expressions of the conservatives’ message sounded less and less like the dolorous exhortations of the old guard. Their widely publicized slogan in the 2004 parliamentary campaign—“a free, developed and joyful Iran” (Iran-e azad, abad va shad)—had no specifically Islamic component. Instead, the conservatives spoke of economic wellbeing (refah-e eqtesadi) and the transformation of Iran into a kind of “Islamic Japan.” While the traditional conservatives had mentioned economic justice, they had normally rejected rhetoric of economic development and material progress in deference to...
Khomeini’s saying that “economics are for the beasts.”

The new generation of conservatives, mostly aged in the forties and fifties, are further distinguished by their university educations, as most of them are engineers or hold doctorates. Their manner of speech, relying on Western words instead of Arabic to augment their Persian, sets them apart from the bazaaris or the older generation. They do not reject “democracy” outright as being anti-Islamic or a strategy of Western powers against Muslim countries, and they speak favorably of the citizen’s right to privacy. Even their use of these terms distinguishes them from the old guard, who still denounce democracy for its hypocrisy and secularism and believes in no real private life as a right of the citizens. Ayatollahs Mesbah Yazdi and Ahmad Jannati, official Tehran prayer leaders nominated by the Supreme Leader, use their Friday sermons to denounce democracies as innately corrupt political regimes that rule against the commandments of God. This view, rejected by the reformists, has also been challenged by the new generation of the conservatives.

**Consolidating the Base**

The most prominent of the new conservatives are the three leaders of the Seventh Majles elected in 2004. Gholamreza Haddad Adel, who has family ties with the Leader, is the speaker of the parliament. His deputy speaker, Mohammad Reza Bahonar, is the head of the Islamic Society of
Engineers. Ahmad Tavakkoli, a member of Parliament, rounds out the troika. Other important new conservative voices are those of Mostafa Mirsalim, the Supreme Leader’s councillor, ICS member Hamid Reza Taraqi, Mohammad Nabi Habibi, elected president of the ICS in July 2004, and Ali Larijani, former head of state radio and television. The reformists particularly hate Larijani because they regarded the state broadcast media as biased against them. In June 2004, Larijani left his position to another conservative of his generation, his deputy Ezzatollah Zarqami, who held a high rank in the Revolutionary Guards. There is also Elias Naderian, one of the main organizers of the impeachment of the reformist minister of transportation, Ahmad Khorram, on October 3, 2004. One might add the names of some 90 others who have shown their loyalty to the Iranian political system by serving in the Revolutionary Guards and who were elected as new members of the Majles in 2004.[4]

A new social and institutional framework undergirds the new conservative ideology. The major new institution is the Islamic Society of Engineers, whose middle-aged leaders pride...
themselves on being more “modern” in their rhetoric and even their look than the established conservatives epitomized by the old generation of the ICS. Bahonar played a major role in the conservatives’ successes in the municipal elections of February 2003 and the parliamentary contests a year later, uniting the heterogeneous groups of the right under the banner of “Unity of the Partisans of the Imam’s Way and the Supreme Leader” (e’telaf-e peyrovan-e khat-e emam va rahbari). He promoted the group known as Organizations Convergent with the Militant Clerics’ Association, thus strengthening the coalition of the conservative clergy and lay members of the conservative groups (particularly the new generations of the ICS). In order to clear the way for younger conservative candidates, people like Bahonar had to convince the gerontocracy in charge of the conservative organizations to retire. Prominent figures within the ICS like Asgarowladi, Khamouchi and Badamtchian were not willing simply to give up power,[5] so the task was difficult. But by the time of the parliamentary elections of 2004, the new conservatives had achieved it: none of the old guard figures stood as a candidate. While the electoral “victory” of the new conservative formations was due to the Guardian Council’s disqualification of their reformist opponents, through the elections the new conservatives were able to marginalize not only the reformists, but also most of the grandfathers in the conservative elite.

**Forces on the Far Right**

Recognizing the deep changes in Iranian society since the halcyon days of the Islamic Revolution, the new conservatives present a platform in which economic development and some tolerance for individual autonomy and cultural creativity go hand in hand. But this does not mean that they will succeed in imposing their platform on more hard-line factions of the conservatives.

The extreme religious right is still powerful in many sectors of Iran’s institutional life, particularly within the Revolutionary Guards and in the Baseej, a branch of the Guards some of whose young volunteers still believe in categorical rejection of the West and its “fifth column”—the new generation of consumerists. The Baseej have supplied the foot soldiers for the regime’s proxy attacks on protesting students in 1999, 2002 and 2003. Many prominent members of the clergy, moreover, are still imbued with Khomeinist ideology: opposition to the West, refusal to let economic development take precedence over ideological purity and opposition to any cultural opening of the society. Even some older ayatollahs within the hierarchy who are not strict Khomeinists rejected the reformists as dangerous “innovators” (the partisans of bid‘a, anti-Islamic innovation) and are suspicious that the new conservatives will diverge from the path of Islam if they are left to their own devices.
Finally, entanglement in a web of patronage bolsters the staunch ideology of many conservatives. The bonyads and the equally closed hierarchies of the ICS and the Chamber of Commerce reject any innovation that threatens their privileged status, which they claim derives from the Islamic legitimacy of their institutions. The Chamber of Commerce, which warded off many “modernization” attempts by the reformists, has not been liberalized under the conservatives, either. Ali-Naqi Khamouchi, the powerful old member of the ICS and head of the Chamber, selected the technocrat Ahmad Mir Motahhari to introduce reforms, but Motahhari presented his resignation in September 2004 after only a few months.[6] The revolutionary foundations profit from their proximity to power, importing products into Iran without paying heed to government regulations or paying taxes, since they are tax-exempt. An official Ministry of Information account told in July 2004 of how some 110 cranes controlled by bonyads in various Iranian ports, particularly Hormozgan in the south, transfer goods duty-free from ships onto trucks. These goods are then sold in the market, constituting unfair competition for importers who must pay duties and for local manufacturers.[7] The bonyads regarded the reformists as enemies in so far as they asked that the revolutionary organizations be accountable to the elected bodies and the government.

The loudest opposition to the modulated tone of the new conservatives has come from Ansar-e Hezbollah (Partisans of Hezbollah), the most puritanical branch of the Revolutionary Guards. This organization formed during the first years of the revolution to monitor the personal conduct of youth, and now it is attempting to reimpose strict rules for female veiling and gender segregation of young people in parks, cinemas and university campuses.[8] In the Majles, Mojtaba Kashani, a young cleric who is a member of the central council of the Ansar-e Hezbollah, has inveighed against Bahonar’s wish not to impose the chador and permit women to wear the “Islamic hijab,” a tightly knit scarf, instead of the full body covering.[9] With the backing of the daily newspaper Keyhan, this group revives the old denunciations of insidious attacks upon Islam in Iran by both the West and the Westernized enemy within.

If these brigades enforcing “Islamic” mores or other repressive institutions tied to the Revolutionary Guards are able to reverse the socio-cultural opening that accompanied the reformist ascendancy of 1997-2004, the new generation that never knew the self-sacrificing ethic of the early revolutionary years will probably not accept its predicament passively. To avert a rise in social tensions, the new conservatives will have to rein in the forces to their right, as well as promote job-creating economic development. It could be a tall order.
CORRECTION: Due to an editor's error, the printed version of this article incorrectly stated that Rafsanjani lost the presidential election to Khatami in 1997. In fact, he had already served two terms as Iran's president and thus was barred by term limits from running.

[1] Six of the Guardians are chosen by the Supreme Leader, two by the government, two by the judiciary and two by the legislative body.

[2] This party should not be confused with the Militant Clerics' Association, whose president is Mehdi Karroubi, reformist speaker of the Majles until the 2004 elections.


[5] Vaqay-e Ettefaqieh, July 10, 2004. This newspaper was closed down shortly thereafter by the judiciary.


[9] On the ideology of radical conservative groups in Iran, see Farhad Khosrokhavar, "Neo-Conservative Intellectuals in Iran," Critique 19 (Fall 2001) and "Bassidje, auxiliaires juvéniles de la révolution iranienne," Journal Cultures et Conflits 18 (Summer 1995).