

# Iran's President Khatami visits Germany

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Iranian President Mohamed Khatami made a three-day state visit to Germany this week, beginning on Monday, July 10. German President Johannes Rau (Social Democratic Party—SPD) received Khatami with military honours in Berlin. Khatami subsequently met with business leaders, federal Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD) and Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer (the Greens) for talks.

Tens of thousands of exiled Iranians from throughout Europe as well as Jewish organisations announced plans for protest rallies. Khatami's visit is taking place almost exactly one year after the student protests in Iran, during which several students were murdered by security forces and paramilitary thugs, and hundreds of others were injured and arrested. Khatami explicitly supported the bloody suppression of the protest movement and, despite receiving thousands of petitions, refused to do anything for students who were arrested, tortured and sentenced to death after rigged trials.

Only 10 days before the visit to Germany by the Iranian president, who has been widely praised as the representative of a “moderate” grouping of “democratic reformers”, 10 Iranian Jews and 2 Moslems were sentenced to years in prison, fines and whippings after an anti-Semitic political show trial. Neither Khatami nor any other of the other “reformers” criticised the trial. On the contrary, they said the sentences were proof of the independence of Iranian law courts and denounced all protests against them as “Zionist propaganda” and “interference in internal affairs”.

German and international Jewish organisations and the Israeli government called for Khatami's visit to be cancelled or at least postponed. The German government rejected this appeal. It is determined to have Khatami's visit take place, no matter what the cost.

To this end, Berlin has been more or less placed under “emergency law”, as a police spokesman conceded. German border controls have been enormously tightened and airports, train stations and highways will be under close scrutiny to prevent Iranian oppositionists from entering the country. According to press reports, exiled Iranians in Cologne will not be allowed to leave the city for the duration of Khatami's visit. A large portion of the Berlin and national press is backing this effort by publishing a stream of warnings against “riots” on the part of opponents of Khatami.

Why is this visit so important for the Social

Democratic/Green government? An article published March 5 in the daily newspaper *Frankfurter Rundschau* on Foreign Minister Fischer's March trip to Iran gives some indication. Quoting unnamed “diplomatic sources”, the newspaper wrote: “More than economic contacts, it is the geo-strategic role of Iran that interests Fischer. In the German Foreign Office, this country, with its long tradition of civilisation, is regarded as the second ‘lynch pin’ next to Turkey for the restless Eurasian region. That region is an ‘active fault line in world politics’, making it the most dangerous region of all. The Middle East conflict and Israel's security concerns, Islamic dictatorships, the independence movements in the Caucasus and the ‘world's most important oil reserves’ in the Caspian Sea region—these are all reasons why Berlin wants Iran to be a ‘stability anchor’ for the region.”

The main obstacle to rapprochement with Tehran was eliminated by the German government this year and last year. After a German court had practically found Iran guilty of state terrorism in 1997 because Iranian agents had murdered Kurdish oppositionists in the Berlin restaurant “Mykonos” in 1992, German businessman Helmut Hofer was arrested in Iran and imprisoned. In June 1999 one of the Mykonos assassins, Josef Amin, was released from prison in Germany. And when the exposed Iranian agent Hamid Khorsand, who had spied on exiled Iranians, received a mild suspended sentence this January, Hofer was released and Fischer was able to travel to Iran in March. That same month Iran received a new German government-backed “Hermes” export credit guarantee. Germany later pressed the World Bank to grant a loan to Iran.

Foreign Minister Fischer now brushes aside all criticism, claiming that any opposition to Khatami only benefits his conservative opponents. According to Fischer, Khatami's visit will strengthen the “reform process” in Iran, adding that, as the “free elections” in March had shown, 80 percent of the Iranian population supports Khatami. As usual, Fischer ignores the facts.

Last year alone, Amnesty International reported 165 executions in Iran. At least 26 persons were whipped, and at least 16 had a finger or hand chopped off. Torture remains the norm in Iranian prisons. Not a single member of the security forces was ever sentenced for this. Over the past few weeks, 20 newspapers were banned and scores of journalists and student leaders arrested.

Khatami has frequently voiced nebulous democratic phrases and vague criticisms of state repression. But he continues to call for close cooperation with the conservatives, as well as the courts and security forces dominated by the conservatives, although his closest collaborators and even he himself are victims of assassination attempts. He has repeatedly appealed to his supporters and voters not to offer any resistance and to continue to trust the state, its executioners and its prison wardens.

Fischer also overlooks the fact that elections in Iran are neither free nor fair. Oppositionist parties that do not pledge their allegiance to the Islamic regime are banned. In addition to this, all candidates are subjected to a close examination of their loyalty to the “system” by the all-powerful Council of Guardians. This unelected body tried to subsequently manipulate the election results, which is why a number of seats in the Iranian parliament are still not occupied. To claim under these circumstances, as Fischer does, that Khatami was democratically elected is a gross distortion of the truth.

Nevertheless, a number of questions arise: What is the root of the conflict between Khatami’s “reformers” and the conservatives, and why are the “reformers” defended so vehemently by the German government?

There is no doubt that Khatami really does want to reform the ossified social structures in Iran. But he himself stated what he actually means by that during his recent visit to China: “Reform of the Iranian currency, reorganisation of the finance markets, protection and promotion of foreign investments through a guarantee for the security of invested capital, deregulation of our economy and improvement of our tax system.”

The pro-Khatami newspaper *Iran News*, which is published by the state news agency IRNA, added that Iran needs to “learn” from Chinese economic and social policies. Almost 80 percent of the Iranian economy is government-controlled, and two-thirds of government expenditures go to loss-making enterprises that only utilise about 50 percent of their production capacity on average.

Consistently put into practice, Khatami’s market economy reforms would bring about a social catastrophe. Already unemployment and underemployment are as high as 40 percent in Iran, according to unofficial estimates. Radical economic restructuring and an opening up of Iran for international capital would also be a threat to the numerous sinecures of the conservative clergy. According to some estimates, the mullahs control up to 50 percent of the economy, in particular via various foundations. Consequently, they favour only a limited degree of cooperation with international capital.

At the same time, they see danger in any relaxation of their repressive grip on society. As they see it, once the population is allowed to express its dissatisfaction openly, this can easily get out of control. But the hard-liners—who control all of the armed forces, the judiciary and state TV and who can block any law

through the Council of Guardians—can rest assured that the “reformers” will never seriously endanger their power. The “reformers” have just as little desire as they do for the mass of the population to enter the political stage. That is the reason why last year Khatami came out in support of suppressing the students, many of whom saw him as their hope for the future. As soon as social conflicts become visible, the establishment closes ranks in the interests of the stability of capitalist rule.

The Western powers are also interested in upholding this stability, which is why—for lack of a better alternative—they are supporting Khatami. However, Khatami’s obvious weakness and cowardice towards the conservatives has led to dissatisfaction in some of the ruling circles of the West. One expression of this is the protest resolution against Khatami’s visit which was signed by 175 German federal MPs and 300 state parliament members from both government and opposition parties (with the exception, according to press reports, of the Green parliamentary group, which refused to sign the resolution).

But two SPD MPs made it clear just how seriously one is to take the radical rhetoric in this protest resolution. “Our protest is a critical support of the government. We are against the talks being misused, not against rapprochement with Iran,” said lawmaker Arne Fuhrmann. SPD parliamentarian Joachim Tappe also voiced his opposition to the state visit, but at the same time expressed his full confidence that the German government would have some serious words to say to Khatami about human rights issues. The point was to keep a dialogue going with Iran and apply pressure on the country at the same time. Both members of parliament refused to call for participation in the protest demonstrations against Khatami’s visit.

These demonstrations are expected to be dominated by the “National Resistance Council of Iran”, a front organisation of the “Mojahedin” group. Their goal is a capitalist democracy in Iran. Politically, the Mojahedin have no more to offer the working population of Iran than the “reformers”. They are openly courting the favours of imperialism. Their strategy consists of trying to get the Western powers, in particular the US, to support the guerrilla operations they run from their bases in Iraq against the Iranian state. However, most Western governments don’t consider the Mojahedin to be a viable alternative to the Iranian regime. They are prepared, therefore, to occasionally use them as a means to exert pressure, but otherwise classify them as “terrorists”.



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