

# Iranian President Khatami visits Goethe's Weimar

## A cynical charade courtesy of the German government

Stefan Steinberg  
21 July 2000

Having spoken before assembled businessmen and concluded financial deals worth tens of millions of marks with German industry, Iranian President Mohammed Khatami concluded his state visit last week with a trip to the eastern German town of Weimar. The proclaimed purpose of his trip was to encourage “understanding between the peoples” and “cultural exchange between east and west”.

Accompanied by German President Johannes Rau, a member of the ruling Social Democratic Party (SPD), Khatami unveiled a memorial dedicated to two of the greatest German and Persian poets, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Hafiz, the poetic name of Shams ud-Din Mohammed (c.1325-89).

For a day the charming town of Weimar was turned into an armed camp. The historic facades and roofs of houses, some dating back to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, were peppered with sharpshooters and military police. The small number of Iranian protesters was massively outnumbered by police and restricted to an area of the town far removed from the focus of the Khatami visit—a house where Goethe lived during his tenure at the ducal court of Saxe-Weimar. The three-day visit by the Iranian president and “friend of culture” involved one of the most complex and expensive (9.9 million German marks) police-military operations in the history of post-war Germany.

In fact, Khatami's visit to Weimar demonstrated the cynical manner in which the German and Iranian governments are prepared to abuse their common cultural heritage to shroud increasing attacks on democratic rights in both countries.

Following the unveiling ceremony, Khatami was scheduled to speak before assembled dignitaries for 20 minutes. He spoke longer, dwelling on the close historic links between Iran and Germany. He referred to Goethe's affinity for the work of the fourteenth century Persian poet Hafiz, and also to the Islamic poet and political leader Muhammad Allama Iqbal (1877-1938).

Khatami's references to the relationship between Goethe and Hafiz are historically accurate. Goethe first came across translations of the Persian poet in 1814. He was immediately taken with the vital, life-embracing texts of the Persian that employed a rich range of metaphors to deal with the human condition. He declared himself to be Hafiz' twin and his aim to be the celebration of love and wine in the manner of his co-thinker. By the middle of the same year Goethe had written 30 verses dedicated to the earlier

poet.

Goethe has often been described as the quintessential German poet, but what characterised his work above all was its universalism. His interest and study of literature embraced all of European literature, including classical Greek and Roman, as well as the outstanding prose and poetry of Arabia and the Middle East, China and India. In 1827 he wrote: “National literature no longer means very much, the age of world literature is due.”

When Hafiz wrote his poems in the fourteenth century, he was by no means appealing to a “national” audience. His potential audience in the Islamic and Oriental world, with its heart in Persia, extended throughout the Arab countries, North Africa, Sicily and Spain. Goethe wrote one stanza linking Hafiz to Spain's most celebrated poet, Calderon de la Barca:

“Magnificent Orient  
spread across the Mediterranean  
Only he who knows and loves Hafiz  
can understand the songs of Calderon.”

(From Goethe's *West-östlicher Divan* [West-eastern divan]—translated by SS)

This is the immensely rich cultural heritage that is being misappropriated by the Iranian and German governments to further the narrow and mercenary interests of their respective ruling elites.

The image of Khatami as a figure of enlightenment was emphasised by most German newspapers, which paid glowing tributes to his visit to Weimar. The liberal *Frankfurter Rundschau* headline, in an article commenting on his visit, drew from Hafiz' work and read: “Let Us Spread Roses and Fill Our Beakers with Wine.” The article then went on to describe Khatami, in his lightly coloured robe, as a “shining light” in striking contrast to his darkly clad entourage.

In his visit to Germany Khatami spoke repeatedly about the necessity for freedom, tolerance and understanding between cultures, but his own career is intimately bound up with the rise of the Islamic fundamentalist regime led by Ayatollah Khomeini following the popular revolution of 1979. Khatami was first appointed minister of culture and Islamic guidance by Prime Minister Mousavi in 1982.

During the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War, Khatami served as head of the Joint Command of the Armed Forces and chairman of the War Propaganda Headquarters. He was once again appointed minister

of culture by President Rafsanjani in 1989. He resigned from this post in 1992 and was then appointed cultural advisor to President Rafsanjani and head of Iran's national library.

Although Khatami now evokes the spirit of Hafiz to present himself in the mantle of a democratic reformer and, at the same time, assist his current faction struggle against ultra-orthodox elements inside the Iranian regime, Hafiz' work was for a long time ignored and neglected by the orthodox mullahs, who had little sympathy for the poet's verses dedicated to the celebration of "love and wine". Following the uprising that swept away the old regime of the Shah, the Islamic dictatorship under Ayatollah Khomeini, with Khatami as cultural minister, frowned upon Hafiz' works. Only at the beginning of the nineties did a certain relaxation take place, permitting his poems to be once again discussed in public.

For its part, Germany's "cultural links" with the Islamic regime extend back over a decade and a half. In 1984 former foreign minister Hans Dietrich Genscher personally visited Tehran. He laid a wreath at the grave of fallen martyrs of the revolution and concluded "a cultural agreement" (*Kulturabkommen*) with the Ayatollah's Islamic government, a move that was crucial in opening a door to the West for the Khomeini regime.

Khatami was serving as culture minister in 1989 when Khomeini pronounced a death sentence (*fatwa*) on British author Salman Rushdie for his depiction of Mohammed in his book *Satanic Verses*. Khatami openly defended the *fatwa* at that time. Two years ago, as president, he recommended that the death sentence not be carried out. Nevertheless, he has done nothing to rebuff influential forces in Iran who not only continue to call for the implementation of the *fatwa*, but seek to extend it to the publishers of Rushdie's book.

In recent weeks the Iranian weekly magazine *Die Front* has issued an appeal, "Kill Him," directing fanatical followers of the Islamic regime to execute a publisher living in Essen who is planning to reprint the *Satanic Verses* in Germany. Five dissident Iranian authors have been assassinated over the last two years following repeated death threats. Although investigations have pointed to the role of the Iranian secret police, an official probe of the murders has been dropped—with the approval of the president.

In addition, state censorship measures against Iranian newspapers have intensified. Abdollah Nouri, the editor of two newspapers, the dailies *Khordad* and *Asr-e Azadegan* (*Era of the Free*), was arrested last November and given a five-year prison sentence by the Special Court of the Clergy. The charges brought against him included publishing anti-Islamic articles and insulting government officials. Also arrested and imprisoned was Mashallah Shamsolva'ezin, the editor of the paper *Neshat* (*Happiness*). Shamsolva'ezin was accused of insulting Islam and also running an article in his paper that questioned the validity of the death penalty in Iran.

Nouri is a political ally of Khatami and his arrest by the Special Court of the Clergy was an attempt to undermine the latter's influence in the run-up to parliamentary elections held in February this year. Following the elections, however, political repression of the media has intensified under Khatami's rule. Further arrests of journalists in Iran took place in April of this year, including that of Akbar Ganji.

Ganji's crime was to report on what took place at a conference held in Berlin in April of this year. The conference, organised around the theme "Iran after the elections," was rigged by the Iranian government and featured a number of writers and intellectuals close to the Islamic establishment. The purpose of the conference was to pave the way for the Khatami visit and demonstrate the new government's "democratic credentials." The conference was organised by the Heinrich Böll Institute, which is attached to Germany's Green party.

Opposition elements were able to infiltrate and disrupt the proceedings. The Iranian government immediately cracked down on the media and prevented the conference from being extensively publicised in Iran. A total of 13 papers and periodicals were forced to close down in the government sweep in April.

Although Khatami appealed for openness during his trip to Germany, cultural repression is continuing apace in Iran. Recently two Iranian magazines were censored and received warnings for the crime of "obscenity". One magazine was found guilty of publishing the famous personification of the French Revolution, Marianne, at the barricades displaying a naked breast; the other printed a picture of the former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher in a short skirt.

Other reactionary actions carried out by the Iranian regime, including the recent persecution and imprisonment of 13 Jews, have already been dealt with in previous articles on the WSWs. In response to a question during his Weimar visit, Khatami defended the trial and prison sentences of the group of Jews, repeating the official government line that all had been deservedly found guilty of espionage. He also justified the persecution of the Bahai religious group, a number of whose members have been executed during Khatami's period in power.

The profound abuse of democratic rights taking place at the moment in Iran cannot simply be dismissed as the product of a society with a "different cultural heritage". Although involved in a serious power struggle with influential, ultra-orthodox clerical forces in Iran, Khatami has chosen to take their side on every occasion when the stability of the Islamic government has been threatened by popular revolt or criticism from intellectual circles.

These are the credentials of the man feted so ceremoniously by the SPD and Green governing parties in Weimar. The hypocrisy with which German government representatives were able to evoke the poetic genius of Goethe and Hafiz in the presence of Khatami is a warning that, in future, cultural and intellectual circles in Germany should expect no better treatment from the SPD-Green government than that currently being meted out in Tehran.



To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**