

# Khatami confirmed as president of Iran

## Iranian establishment closes ranks against the population

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The widely anticipated landslide re-election of Iran's President Mohammed Khatami has been hailed by all factions of the Iranian government and the Western media as an expression of the Iranian people's "trust" in his policies and the apparent ability of the Islamic Republic to undertake democratic change.

In reality, the vote expresses a clear rejection of the de facto rule of religious hard-liners that Khatami was able to benefit from due to the lack of an alternative—despite his politics. He represents not so much a democratic opposition as the left wing of the reactionary clerical regime itself, which closes ranks every time it comes under pressure from the masses. This is the case once again following Khatami's overwhelming election victory.

The final results of the election held last Friday were made known on Sunday. According to the state news agency IRNA, Khatami received 21 million out of a total of 28 million votes—approximately 1 million more votes than in the last election four years ago. Khatami received over 77 percent of the votes this time, compared with 69 percent in 1997.

His conservative rivals performed correspondingly poorly—despite their combined efforts to present themselves as independent and open in regard to democratic rights. The most important conservative organisations and personalities even refrained from openly speaking out in support of any of the nine conservative candidates, afraid that their mere endorsement might discredit him.

The former minister of labour and economic scientist Ahmed Tavakoli came second with 15 percent of the vote. He was regarded as the clandestine candidate of the right-wing and was supported in particular by the fanatical religious militia, the Bassij. Third in the voting was rear admiral and former minister of defence Ali Shamkhani with 2.5 percent. The rest of the candidates each received less than 1 percent. Ali Fallahian, the former head of the secret police who is the subject of an international arrest warrant because of his presumed involvement in numerous murders, received just 55,000 votes.

It is necessary to bear in mind the thoroughly undemocratic character of the Iranian electoral process. The first qualification for participation as a candidate was absolute loyalty to the system of Velayet-e-Faqih (Rule of the religious Jurists), which allocates all powers of decision in the last instance to the Islamic clergy—not the populace. Candidacy for the election was decided upon by the Council of Guardians, which is dominated by right-wing clerics. It rejected 99 percent of the candidates (including all the women) in

a thoroughly arbitrary manner. Without giving any reasons, the Council of Guardians rejected every single alternative candidate from the camp of the "reformers," thus leaving Khatami without any serious challenge—a measure which met no serious opposition from the reformers themselves.

The Council of Guardians is also required to confirm the results of the election. In order to remind everybody of its powers, the Council made murky references at the weekend regarding apparent irregularities that are supposed to have taken place in the elections.

Reports on voter participation were somewhat contradictory. Both the Iranian and international media reported "massive" participation, with polling station hours being extended on no less than three occasions on Friday. Voting finally came to an end at midnight.

Nevertheless, it appears that the total vote is smaller than at the last election. Four years ago 83 percent of eligible voters (29 out of 35 million people) took part, one of the highest totals in the history of the Islamic Republic. This time 67 percent (28 out of 42 million) voted. Prior to the election, Khatami's government had predicted that between 80 and 90 percent of the population would vote.

A report in the June 6 *Financial Times Deutschland* made clear the extent of the disillusionment amongst Khatami supporters: "When Khatami called last week in the overflowing Tehran Shirudi Stadium for a 'repudiation of extremism' and urged his supporters to 'moderation' thousands left the arena. The end of his long awaited election campaign speech ('we want democracy together with religion and spiritual life') took place before half-empty rows of seats."

There are three related reasons for the overwhelming majority that returned Khatami to office:

First, the complete discrediting of the most reactionary faction. When one adds together all the votes for conservative candidates, it is clear that they lost around 2.7 million votes compared with the last election.

Second, the mobilisation of young voters. An additional 7 million first-time voters took part in Friday's election (young people are able to vote at 15 in Iran). The highest rate of voter participation was registered among young people and the vast majority are estimated to have cast ballots for Khatami. Newspaper reports described 15-year-old youths distributing photographs of the president, criticising Iran's supreme religious "leader" Ayatollah Khamenei at election meetings and attacking

the Mullahs with cries such as “Death to the Taliban!”

This was evidently in response in part to the intensification of repression over the past months: newspapers have been banned, bizarre “confessions” have been made by arrested student leaders and the Bassij has increased its activity as the policeman of public morals. According to one newspaper report, young people boasted to their friends that they had been whipped merely for attending parties. In May a dispute erupted in Tehran when a group of religious fanatics abused a young girl complaining that her head scarf was not tightly enough secured and a group of students came to her assistance.

The third and decisive factor for the Khatami victory was the lack of any viable alternatives. This was not merely the outcome of the systematic repression by the judiciary and security forces of any opposition striking a more radical pose than Khatami—who himself declined to criticise such actions. The main problem is the general lack of orientation and the politically confused and socially heterogeneous nature of the widespread opposition.

In a commentary the June 11, the German *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* observed: “Political Islam is the only ideology with broad appeal in the region. Western secularism is regarded as repulsive—even by young Iranians. They dream of their own Iranian way, which they are unable to define concretely. As a result, and despite the widespread dissatisfaction, attempts to form a strong movement of political opposition have been unsuccessful up to now. In the long run the Islamic regime is threatened by internal erosion, loss of credibility, economic decline, mass unemployment and possible violent chaotic rebellions rather than by a revolutionary opposition intent on overthrow.”

The country has foreign debts totalling \$9 billion, an official inflation rate of 20 percent and an unofficial unemployment rate of up to 30 percent. Despite Iran's enormous oil wealth, around 40 percent of the population live below the poverty level. According to Werner Schoeltzke, chairman of the Middle and Far Eastern Organisation of German Business, Iran would need 750,000 new jobs per year to meet its population's needs.

Social tensions are so pronounced that even the reactionary clerics speak of reform. It appears, however, that the regime favours the “Chinese type” of reforms, economic “reforms” accompanied by continuing political repression.

On election day Khatami called upon the conservatives to work together with him: “All forces in our society must cooperate so that the historic aspirations of the Iranian people will be fulfilled.” When his victory was assured, he warned his supporters in his customary manner to exercise “patience and moderation.”

Religious leader Khamenei also spoke out in favour of collaboration: “Today the rivalry ends, and I say to everyone that they must put their rivalries aside, and help the next president solve the problems of the country.” Hashemi Rafsanjani and other leading conservatives made similar comments. Their aim is to drive ahead with economic liberalisation while avoiding any sort of political liberalisation.

On Saturday the state news agency IRNA reported a statement by the leading conservative politician Hamid Reza Taraqi: “The unrestrained freedom in the first term of office of President Khatami led to desecration of sanctities and insults to

personalities, including the president himself,’ he [Taraqi] said. He recommended that President Khatami consider political rivalry as a fait accompli and make use of competent technocrats to boost solidarity and work on solving the major issues (economic problems) of the country.”

Khatami appears to be willing to respond to this demand. He made that clear during the election campaign. According to CNN, he declared to a group of bazaar merchants: “Any government that comes to power should create job opportunities for young people.... Investors play an important role in this. Investment security should prepare the grounds for investment to flourish.”

After the election he made similar comments: “The urgent demand of today and tomorrow is to instil and deepen republicanism, give back the legitimate rights of the people in line with the (Islamic) religion, identify priorities in the economic field and solve basic problems of the society under a prudent agenda.”

The *Washington Post* reported that according to Khatami's brother Mohammed Reza, a leader of the “reformers,” the top priority now is the “restructuring of the national budget”—something which could lead to conflicts with the “hard-liners,” who influence large parts of the national economy through their control of religious institutions. Nevertheless, it appears that the Council of Guardians has decided not to block a law passed in May facilitating investment.

The decisive contradiction is not between so-called conservatives and so-called reformers, but between the entire establishment and the broad working masses. The implementation of deregulation and privatisation, the prerequisite for a considerable inflow of investment, means that conflicts with the working class are inevitable. This is the main reason for Khatami's vehement rejection of any sort of popular mobilisation and why he continually warns the conservatives of the threat arising from the people. Any significant mobilisation would immediately bring to the surface the most varied social layers who all have their very different interpretations of “reforms” and democracy.”

Despite the calls for “moderation” and “collaboration,” events following the election point to the intensification of conflicts in the future. In a number of cities youth celebrating the election result were promptly turned on by religious militias and arrested by the police.



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