

Dealing Reform: Iranian Domestic Politics after the Nuclear Deal

Written by Sidra Hamidi

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SIDRA HAMIDI, MAY 15 2016

The signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) between the United States and Iran in July 2015 prompted two narratives of success. The first came from the Obama administration and credited the signing of the deal to the successful use of diplomacy and soft power in capturing the reformist faction of Iranian politics in order to accomplish American objectives abroad. President Obama referred to the deal as containing “the most comprehensive inspection and verification regime ever negotiated to monitor a nuclear program.” The second came from President Rouhani and other Iranian negotiators who credited the success of the deal to Iranian reformers’ ability to change Iran’s image abroad without compromising Iranian interests.

In a televised address to the Iranian people, Rouhani declared the nuclear deal a “victory” for Iran. Each narrative of success is somewhat at odds with the other, displacing concessions to the other party in the negotiations and displaying different accounts of who won and the exact nature of that victory. But what these narratives have in common is the consensus that Iranian “reformers” were the key for securing the diplomatic success of the deal. Lauding the nuclear deal as a victory for Iranian reformers ignores the fraught history of reform in Iran. Iranian reformers are not monolithic. As such, the nuclear deal was a victory for a particular brand of Iranian reform. The deal is linked with what gets to count as “reform” in Iran and has the unintended consequence of prioritizing a certain type of reform in Iran and foreclosing other options.

While the Obama administration was careful not to link domestic reform in Iran with the fate of a verifiable nuclear deal, the recent success of reformists and moderates in Iranian elections appears to indicate an ability of American soft power to influence domestic outcomes. There is a temptation to view the signing of the nuclear deal last July as increasing the likelihood of domestic reform. While the deal and subsequent elections are linked, the deal did not simply increase the *likelihood* of reform but also affected the *terms* of reform.

A recent interview with conservative candidate, Rafat Bayat demonstrates the complicated relationship between moderates and hardliners in Iran. Bayat ran in the recent election due to her dissatisfaction with the government’s attempts at economic development. She cited the example of the Iranian government’s purchase of 100 new civilian airplanes from European companies, which expands Iran’s international economic profile but does not necessarily affect the average Iranian. In Iran, economic justice and common ownership of Iranian industries are often rallied by conservatives as opposed to reformists who have often expanded privatization as a means to combat the *political* conservatism of the conservative factions. As such, reform can mean alleviating rural poverty. It can mean enhanced electoral accountability. But it can also mean buying Western airplanes.

The JCPOA reveals what reform in Iran looks like to the United States, particularly the Obama administration, where reform takes a distinctively international and neoliberal form. The nuclear deal had the effect of shifting the focus of reform from the domestic to the international, linking the fate of reform to Iran’s image in the international community rather than to political and economic reform that effects the average Iranian. The nuclear deal added yet another layer to Iran’s fraught history of reform by turning the conversation outward and shifting the terms of reform to what is considered acceptable by the international community. In recent years, Iran’s status as a nuclear pariah limited its ability to engage in international markets. Since the early 2000s, and by virtue of the sanctions regime, Iran’s nuclear

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status has been linked to economic issues. As such, the sanctions had the effect of not just coercing Iran to limit its nuclear program but also push Iran in a particular direction in its economic policy.

Rather than putting civil and political reform along with economic justice on the agenda, the current election highlights the struggle within Iran for how to define reform and subsequently, the kind of reform the Obama administration has come to support. A brief history of reform in Iran will demonstrate the shifts in what is meant by reform.

After the 1979 Islamic revolution, the country split into radical left and conservative right. The term “radical” reveals yet another misunderstanding of the Iranian context, in which radicals are leftists and not radical Islamists. The history of reform and what it means to be a reformist can be traced through the rise and fall of two figures in Iranian history: Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Rafsanjani served as speaker of the Iranian parliament, or Majles, and then served as President from 1989 to 1997. He initially aligned with the conservative right in the early 1990s but then shifted alliances to the radical left in 1997, and supported reformist candidate Mohammad Khatami who was President until 2005. In the early 2000s, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was able to take advantage of the political climate by drawing on the support of the conservative poor. Specifically, in the 2005 Presidential election, Rafsanjani, one of the wealthiest political figures in Iran, faced Ahmadinejad, who hailed from the lower middle class. Much of Ahmadinejad’s platform was based on populist narratives combined with notions of religious conservatism.

Ahmadinejad’s victory signaled confrontation with the international community but he still enjoyed a brief period of legitimacy, both from the people and from the Supreme leader. However, Ahmadinejad’s vitriolic rhetoric against the West combined with his failed promises of economic justice, quickly led to his downfall. As Kaveh Ahsani notes, despite his campaign platform, under Ahmadinejad “the process of privatization has actually accelerated exponentially, benefiting neither the general public nor a genuinely independent private sector but mostly semi-public entities and institutions closely associated with the current ruling political faction.” Ahmadinejad’s disastrous rule undermined the legitimacy of more radical political and economic reforms and shifted the focus of reform from domestic equality to international legitimacy. Amidst allegations of electoral fraud in 2009, Ahmadinejad fell out of favor with the people and his opponent, Mir Hossein Mousavi who started the Green Movement. The Green Movement exposed the deep socioeconomic divisions inherent in Iran and opened the space for the kind of moderation and reform present in Iran today. The Green Movement consistently focused on a radical shift in existing political structure, including the independence of universities, removal of armed forces from politics and culture, and an independent judiciary. This movement focused on reform from within rather than through the mechanism of international legitimacy. However, Ahmadinejad’s triumph undermined these more radical demands from coming to fruition.

After Ahmadinejad’s second term ended, Rafsanjani and Rouhani led an effort to lead both the radical left and conservative right to the center. As detailed by Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar, “the reformists downgraded their democratic and human rights priorities, while the moderate conservatives moved away from their anti-American and overtly Islamist rhetoric. Both inched closer to Rafsanjani’s development and pragmatic foreign policy models.” Current changes in Iranian domestic and foreign policies are a result of these compromises, which, at once, define what is meant by reform in Iran and limit the possibilities for more radical social and political reform. This shift towards the middle culminated in the signing of the JCPOA which demonstrates an inextricable link between Iran’s nuclear status and ideas of domestic reform that exist both within and outside Iran.

This type of issue linkage can also be traced to Iran’s participation in the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT). Being a signatory of the NPT and being defined as a “non-nuclear weapon state” by the treaty leads Iran’s nuclear status to be negotiated by the international community. This negotiation and deliberative process is full of conflict and has consequences for the way that the international community sees Iran and for which issues are at stake in nuclear proliferation. We can contrast this sort of negotiation with the nuclear proliferation of NPT non-signatories such as Israel, Pakistan, and India. India’s move from a nuclear pariah to a legitimate nuclear state was conducted through a unilateral nuclear trade deal headed by the United States in 2008. Pakistan’s nuclear pariah status does not prevent the United States from allying with the state to fight other security threats. And Israel’s policy of nuclear ambiguity is rarely questioned by the West. On the other hand, Iran’s nuclear status is up for negotiation in part due to the

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obligations of the NPT, which initiated widespread inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in the first place.

The nuclear deal signaled the triumph of a conservative reformism that prioritizes a particular kind of economic reform. The nuclear deal is not only important in its ability to limit Iran's ability to develop a nuclear weapon but has more widespread consequences for change in the domestic political arena. In a recent interview Fariborz Raisdana, who was jailed in 2012 for criticizing changes in governmental subsidy payments, criticizes Rouhani and most other Iranian politicians for their emphasis on certain aspects of economic development. He notes that all recent administrations were "capitalist administrations with semi-governmental monopolies. All these administrations were basically opposed to any effective form of welfare, scientific planning or democratic or cooperative programs that would increase equality. For all of them, making more profit by relying heavily on petroleum revenue, heavy capital investment, trade and real estate has always been the number-one goal." These economic policies have bolstered a brand of state capitalism which supports a lot of *state* ownership of common sectors rather than *public or common* ownership. Calling attention to the neoliberal policies of Iranian administrations is not meant to say that privatization should be discouraged but rather that certain aspects of reform such as allaying economic inequality and civil rights reforms are not necessarily on the agenda as a result of this domestic shift. Green Movement reformers such as Mousavi specifically called for privatization in very specific sectors, such as an independent media that could rival the state-controlled networks. The recent elections signal the triumph of a kind of reform that is ultimately very different than the kind of reform called for during the Green Movement. Rather it represents a compromise that is not quite satisfactory to either the radical left or the conservative right.

In 1987, the Reagan administration held secret talks with Iran in order to reach out to the moderate elements of the ruling structure. At that time, Eric Hooglund noted that for the Reagan administration,

the terms 'moderate' and 'radical' have a strictly polemical function, equivalent of 'good' and 'bad.' The sole criterion is whether or not a given person or faction is willing to deal with the US government. The same White House that denounced the same Iranian leaders a year ago as fanatics and extremists now characterizes them as 'moderates' without any indication that their internal policies have changed.

Hooglund's statement is particularly striking given the recent deal and subsequent elections. I would not go as far to say that internal policies have not changed as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) did find Iran in compliance with the terms of the deal earlier this year. But the changes that have occurred represent a particular brand of reform that prioritizes the current regime's willingness to deal with the US as indication of a reformist agenda. This particular brand undermines radical political and economic reform that is led by the Iranian people rather than through the mediating factor of the international community.

Prior to the recent elections, many observers in the media referred to them as a test for the success of the Obama doctrine. And it was a success, but in a way that shows the limits of the Obama doctrine in accomplishing the kind of social change that many reformists, both in the United States and Iran, would like to see.

About the author:

Sidra Hamidi is a PhD Candidate at Northwestern University and her research interests include international relations theory, nuclear politics, and state identity. Her research focuses on the distinction between "nuclear" and "non-nuclear" states and how this distinction gets legally and socially-constructed.