LEVIATHAN

Failure to construct a common identity: The Iranian Reform Movement (1997-2005)

Marie Anna Reddingius details recent Iranian history and how a failure of identity construction led to the failure of a sinificant political movement.

The Iranian Reform Movement was active from the late 1990s until the election of Ahmadinejad in 2005. The movement aimed to democratise the Islamic Republic and united feminist groups, secularists, student movements, and religious intellectuals in order to do so (Khosrokhavar 2002). In 1997, one of the reformers, Mohammad Khatami, was elected president in what was heralded as a 'turning point' for the country (Amuzegar 2002, 59). However, Khatami's reform movement is, now, widely considered a failure, with legal restraints in Iranian politics and Khatami's strategic miscalculations commonly cited as factors (Barlow & Akbarzadeh 2018, 232). It is essential to take issues of framing and identity construction into account – using Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) framework of hegemony and radical democracy, I seek to explain the rise and fall of the Iranian Reform movement from 1997-2005 with an eye to these issues. The absence of hegemonic democratic discourse combined with the failure of some elements of the movement to embrace radical pluralism prevented the construction of the common identity needed for permanent change to take place.

In 1997, Mohammad Khatami was elected President of Iran over his establishment-backed opponent (Kadivar 2013, 1073). Khatami ran on a platform of political reform, democracy, civil society, and rule of law (Ansari 2000, 95-6). Following the presidential election, reformers won the municipal councils and captured parliament in 2000 (Takeyh 2003, 45). Khatami's candidacy and the opportunities it provided inspired and mobilised a large number of political groups to work together. He was backed by a coalition of eighteen groups, which formed a formal umbrella organisation after his election: the 'Second of Khordad Front' (Kadivar 2013, 1073). The organisation included clerical reformists, lay reformists, student groups, nationalist groups, and secular democrats (Kadivar 2013, 1069; Bayat 2007, 111). In return for their support, Khatami's election gave their movement the opportunity to grow (Khosrokhavar 2002). Khatami was thus not so much their leader, but more symbolic and representative of a larger reform movement that consisted of multiple groups and sub-movements (Niakooee 2016, 402). However, after 2000, the coalition that had formed around Khatami in 1997 fell apart (Kadivar 2013, 1069). The reformists' defeat in the municipal elections in 2003, the election of Ahmadinejad in 2005, and the popular apathy that followed marked the end of the window of opportunity for the Iranian Reform Movement (Amuzegar 2006, 58). Using Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) framework helps explain why the movement was initially successful, but ultimately failed to sustain this success.

To create a sustained series of collective actions, it is essential for actors and organisations working together in social movements to be able to identify each other as part of a larger collective (Diani & Moffatt 2016, 33-35). Laclau and Mouffe identify three requirements for forming these identity bonds. Firstly, a narrative has to be created which transforms relations of subordination into sites of antagonism, framing them as oppression (Laclau & Mouffe 1985, 153-154). Secondly, in order to unite different social groups against this oppression, a 'chain of equivalences' must be formed, which extends to other struggles by linking them to a pre-existing overarching hegemonic discourse (Ibid, 182). In the case of Iran, this concept could, for example, be applied to the various feminist and secular groups, and their struggles for equal rights and freedom of expression under the Iranian regime. Laclau and Mouffe's thesis is that when 'the democratic discourse

becomes available to articulate the different forms of resistance to subordination… the conditions will exist to make possible the struggle against different types of inequality' (Ibid, 154). This is why, in order to create 'democratic equivalences', Laclau and Mouffe state that 'the democratic principle of liberty and equality' has to become 'a new common sense' (Ibid 154; 183). In Iran, this would mean that different groups could only work together successfully if they could connect their separate struggles to a shared understanding of democracy. Lastly, to unite different groups within one sustainable movement, Laclau and Mouffe state that the concept of 'radical and plural democracy' must be accepted; if different actors truly embrace the idea that in a democracy none of them has a claim to absolute truth, then a new common identity will be created (Ibid, 167; 184).

Initially, Khatami was successful, employing discourses of oppression and emphasizing the principle of liberty. He stated that thinking in society 'has to be based, first and foremost, on freedom' (Khatami 1998, 4). During his campaign, he used 'freedom' as the ultimate thematic frame within which he placed the more tangible directives of a strong civil society, rule of law, and democracy (Niakooee 2016, 399). Furthermore, he argued that 'tyranny could only be opposed through the institutionalisation of rights' (Ansari 2000, 97). By using the word 'tyranny', he employed the language of oppression to characterise the Iranian regime which had trampled civil liberties, imposed strict censorship on the press, and was known to torture, imprison, and execute political dissidents (Ghoreishi & Zahedi 1997, 87). Besides Khatami, other elements of the movement also used frames of oppression. The reformist press reached more than five million people in the first three years after the election (Niakooee 2016, 399) and operated as the movement's driving force and connection to its social base. It spread the movement's discourse by frequently using 'injustice frames' in the years 1997-2000 (Mashayekhi 2001, 300). Students, who formed the backbone of the movement, provided a national network of organisations all advocating for reform (Bayat 2007, 121; Ansari 2000, 97). They also used 'victimisation' as a critical part of democratisation discourse, employing traumatic narratives of victims of the regimes to emphasise the need for reforms (Mohammadi 2007a, 633). Thus, Khatami and the reformist movements as a whole were initially successful in creating sites of antagonism by framing the Iranian regime as oppressive.

Furthermore, reformist groups initially emphasized plural identities, connected by their similar experiences of oppression by an authoritarian regime (Bahravesh 2014, 268; Mohammadi 2007b, 17). For example, Iran's largest student organisation had been an extension of the state from the 1980s to the early 1990s. However, the organisation embraced a discourse of political pluralism in the years before Khatami's election (Bayat 2013, 41; Rivetti & Cavatorta 2014, 296). In the period 1997-1999, student demonstrations occurred frequently, which formed democratic equivalences by combining the struggles of students - such as 'the poor quality of food in the dormitory' - with wider issues of oppression that did not affect the students immediately - such as the lack of freedom of press, political prisoners, and the influence of the non-elected Guardian Council (Golkar 2015, 65). Therefore, it appeared that some aspects of the reformist movement were articulating the democratic discourses of equivalence and pluralism necessary to unite many different oppressed groups against the Iranian regime.

However, a shared hegemonic understanding of democracy and complete embrace of pluralism was missing, and the consequences of this became clear after 1997. To create democratic equivalences, the reformists had attempted to link their struggle to a larger hegemonic discourse of democracy. Since the early 1990s, intellectual debates about democracy had been presented in the Iranian press (Mashayekhi 2001, 303). However, during Khatami's presidency, the democratic discourse was still being developed. In 2001, Mashayeki wrote that 'the formation of a truly collective and democratic consciousness is still remote' (308). Ansari also stated that the social penetration and ideological commitment to civil society and political participation in Iranian society at that time was 'undoubtedly uneven' (2000, 148). It was felt that democracy in Iran was a philosophical debate instead of a possible institutional reality (Bayat 2007, 131).

Additionally, to be allowed publication by the judiciary, any democratic discourse in the Islamic Republic would have to combine democracy with Islam. Khatami had developed the notion of 'religious democracy', which would democratise the Islamic Republic without losing sight of its Islamic character, but the exact meaning of the term remained unclear (Bayat 2007, 96). The fact that the movement aimed to 'democratise' Iran but was unable to articulate a shared and clear understanding of democracy in the religious Iranian context would prove detrimental to its construction of a common identity.

This lack of democracy as a 'new common sense' became clear when Khatami shifted his master frame from 'freedom' to 'law and lawfulness' once he took office (Niakooee 2016, 399). Even though reformists now controlled the government and parliament, Iran's political system and doctrinal foundation of vilayat-i faqih (which prescribes the rule of Islamic jurists) ensured that Imam Khamenei and his hardliners still controlled the unelected judiciary and the Council of Guardians (Abdolmohammadi & Cama 2015). In what was essentially a conservative backlash (Takyeh 2004, 133), the reform movement was 'squeezed between the encroaching nonelected bodies, the security apparatus, ideological institutions and paralegal vigilante groups' (Bayat, 2007, 123). When a student was killed and hundreds arrested during a raid on Tehran University, Khatami did not side with the students (Kurzman 2001, 43). Instead, he urged them to follow the law and labelled their protests 'an attack on national security' (Rivetti & Cavatorta, 2014, 299). By ignoring a clear example of political oppression, Khatami showed that he valued lawfulness over democratic principles. The student movements[1] felt abandoned; the ideological debates that the events triggered caused the national umbrella organisation for student movements to split into several small groups, some of which openly rejected the president or even the system as a whole (Takyeh 2004, 139; Rivetti & Cavatorta 2014, 299). In 2003, the student movements formally left the Second of Khordad Front (Rivetti & Cavatorta 2013, 653).

After 2000, the reformist press was closed down and its leading journalists were harassed, jailed and tortured, leaving the movement with little means to communicate between or connect its various sub-movements (Paidar 2002, 253; Kadivar 2013, 1076). However, the short window of freedom of press before this had enabled debates about the role of the Supreme Leader and the concept of vilayat-i faqih, revealing stark differences between secular and religious-minded reformists. Different groups strongly disagreed on the extent to which the religious foundations of the country would have to be transformed in order to democratise. Afterwards, reformist political elites were reluctant to accept the secular forces as real partners, which severely weakened the movement (Arjomand 2005, 518; Bayat 2007, 131-134) and demonstrated not only the absence of a shared hegemonic understanding of democracy, but also that their embrace of pluralism was incomplete. In conclusion, this article demonstrates that elements of Laclau and Mouffe's framing and identity construction were essential in determining the trajectory of the Iranian Reform Movement. By combining the language of oppression with the concepts of 'freedom' and 'plurality', Khatami created a chain of equivalences and mobilized a large variety of actors. However, the eruption of ideological debates in his second term and the failure to reconcile religious and secular beliefs showed the absence of hegemonic democratic discourse and the failure of the reformist movement to embrace radical pluralism. Combined with severe state-repression, this prevented the construction of strong identity bonds and a sustainable common identity, ultimately contributing to the failure of the movement.

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1 Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat-e Howzeh va Daneshgah' (Office for the Strengthening of Unity between Religious Seminars and Universities, DTV).

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