

## Who is Mohammad Khatami?

*By Ali Safavi*

Mohammad Khatami was born in 1943 in Ardakan, in the central province of Yazd. His father was a cleric and Khatami completed his religious studies up to the lower intermediate level at Qom's theological school. In 1978, a short while before the overthrow of the shah's regime, he went abroad to administer the mosque for Iranians in Hamburg, Germany.

Khatami's stature within the Shiite hierarchy is low because he has not sufficiently studied the classical religious curricula. Another factor that works against him compared with Khamenei, Rafsanjani and other leading clerics is that he has no record of political activity before the anti-monarchic revolution. Even in the first years after the mullahs came to power, he remained obscure, until the parliamentary elections in 1980, when he was elected as candidate of the Islamic Republican Party (set up at the time by Khomeini's decree) from his hometown of Ardakan.

In the Majlis, Khatami was known as an active member of the Line of the Imam, the dominant grouping within the Islamic Republican Party most closely identified with Khomeini's policies. This faction was distinct from other factions for its absolute obedience to Khomeini's leadership, its opposition to individual and social freedoms under the pretext that they were "manifestations of liberalism," its emphasis on a centralized statist economy and its commitment to Khomeini's doctrine of exporting "Islamic revolution."

During those years, extensive feuding prevailed among the fundamentalists and those opposed to Khomeini's theory of government, called velayat-e faqih, or absolute clerical supremacy in government. In his speeches and writings in the Majlis, Khatami quickly established himself as an active proponent of the velayat-e faqih theory of "Islamic government" and Khomeini's unchallenged leadership. For this reason, when the journalists at Kayhan, the largest daily in the country, rebelled against government attempts to dominate the paper, Khomeini overlooked Khatami's junior ranking within the clerical hierarchy and appointed him as his personal representative to overtake Kayhan, purge its journalists and turn the paper into a "Hezbollahi" publication. Khomeini wrote in his decree: "In view of your competence and your expertise in this field, I hereby appoint you to the post of supervising Kayhan newspaper which belongs to the oppressed."<sup>1</sup>

Khatami demonstrated such vigor in this task that in 1982, upon Khomeini's recommendation, Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mousavi, also from the Line of the Imam, appointed him the Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance.

Khatami owes his current position in the regime to the years when as the Minister of Guidance, he was the mullahs' chief censor in the media, the arts and culture. He also

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<sup>1</sup> . Kayhan, November 24, 1980.

turned his ministry into an important organ for exporting fundamentalism. In the 1980s, it was Khatami who censored the country's media. After shutting down all independent publications, he coined the term "self-censorship" for publications managed and edited by government officials themselves.

Contrary to some claims that Khatami contributed to the expansion of the film industry in Iran, exiled Iranian film makers say that the Ministry of Islamic Guidance would not allow any film maker to operate in Iran if he did not advocate and defend in his works the regime's policy on the war and other issues. Many good films were censored and shelved by the Ministry's censors. The regulations about restrictions on female actors and even the wearing of the hejab for small children in films were drafted and implemented during Khatami's tenure as Minister of Islamic Guidance.

Khatami's patron in those years was Khomeini's son, Ahmad, who led the Line of the Imam faction. Ahmad Khomeini once said: "I have known Mr. Khatami for many years. God willing, he will carry out the tasks entrusted to him by the Imam (Khomeini) in a competent manner."<sup>2</sup>

In an interview with Kayhan, Khatami said: "May God keep the exalted blessing of the Imam who was really the main architect and mentor of this revolution and the great player in our history. It was his great role that so dramatically changed this nation and caused such changes in this world along the divine path of human dignity."<sup>3</sup>

During Khatami's tenure, thousands of writers, musicians, poets, singers, sculptors, intellectuals and thinkers, all victims of the Ministry of Guidance's cultural repression and inquisition, fled the country.

As a key member of the Supreme Council on Cultural Revolution, Khatami played an important role in purging all dissidents and enlightened elements from all universities and educational establishments. Khatami stressed that "in the Islamic Republic of Iran, the pen, literature and arts must be completely subservient to the cause of the war." He added in the same interview: "Arts and literature must be in the service of the war, and must serve the spirit of pride and resistance for all the oppressed people in history." For years the director of cultural affairs in the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the Armed Forces and the head of the War Propaganda Headquarters, Khatami played a crucial role in advancing the clerical regime's warmongering policies. Under Khatami's direction, the Ministry of Islamic Guidance went far beyond cultural censorship and domestic inquisition. It became an important organ for exporting fundamentalism.

Khatami enjoyed the cooperation of his close colleagues, Ali Akbar Mohtashami, at the time the ambassador to Syria and the founder of the regime's terrorist networks in Lebanon, and Mohammad Moussavi Khomeiniha, the mastermind of the occupation of the U.S. embassy and the hostage-taking of U.S. diplomats in Tehran in November 1979.

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<sup>2</sup> . Kayhan, November 24, 1980.

<sup>3</sup> . Kayhan, January 22, 1987.

Khatami secured a huge budget for setting up “cultural centers and bases” in different European, Arab and Islamic countries, all of which propagated Khomeini’s fundamentalist ideology among Muslims in different countries. Khatami’s agents were instructed to scout for “talents” -suitable individuals among non-Iranian nationals who could be recruited by the Revolutionary Guards’ terrorist networks. These “volunteers” were sent to Iran by Khatami’s scouts working under the cover of “cultural attachés” in Iranian embassies.

They received political and ideological indoctrination and eventually joined the Guards’ extraterritorial unit, the Qods Force.

But Khatami’s star, much like that of all other figures in the Line of the Imam faction, began to fade with Khomeini’s death in 1989. With the ascent of Rafsanjani’s faction and Khamenei’s leadership, all key figures of the Line of the Imam were removed from important positions. Like his colleagues, Khatami was cast aside from his post as the Minister of Guidance in 1992 and given the ceremonious job of the Librarian of the National Library.

By 1997, the clerical regime had reached such a state of turmoil that Khatami and the Line of the Imam were once again able to emerge from political hibernation and take over the helm of the state. When Rafsanjani removed the Line of the Imam figures from their key government positions a few years ago, many observers outside Iran hailed the move as a sure sign of Rafsanjani’s moderation. Ironically, when the very individuals purged in that round of the clerical regime’s power struggle, including Khatami, regained some of their lost power in May 1997, those observers again called this a “victory” for moderation! It is indeed difficult, if not impossible, to see how the dismissal and the reinstatement of the same individuals can both be interpreted as “a boost for moderation!”

A look at Khatami’s positions on different issues demonstrates his true colors:

#### **On commitment to export of fundamentalism**

“What could we do in order to enter the world scene? We need a force which the enemy does not possess, and this is the force which is superior to technology and to arms. What we need as a balancing force is the newly born, fully-alert, and ready to sacrifice Islamic force. If the Islamic Republic is supported by such a force, the same force as in Algeria, then its movement would be taken seriously. Like Sudan is taken seriously. New centers of power are being formed in the Islamic world... This is a problem which should be dealt with seriously.”

Ressalat, June 5, 1991

#### **On relations with the West**

“We are fundamentally and profoundly opposed to Western civilization and culture, which are engulfed in serious crises. We are talking about some very weighty issues, and those who want to propagate [Western] ways lack sufficient weight to be considered a serious threat...” “The bullying attitude of America is a source of dual disaster. The American people have the shallowest culture in the entire world. They are a bunch of

bullies and knife-toting adventurers... “The worst of Europe gathered together and went there [to the United States] to find money. It is a culture without roots; it is based on the technology of force... Now the Americans, a nation without the least culture, have most of the world’s resources at their disposal. This represents a dual catastrophe for humanity.”

Ettela’at, July 7, 1991

### **On Saudi Arabia**

“If Saudi Arabia is really incapable of performing its duty to provide accommodation for the pilgrims, it should make it official so that the Muslims could do something about running the affairs of the two holy sites.”

State media, July 27, 1985

“The government of Saudi Arabia gives precedence to maintaining security and the interests of the enemies of Islam over providing security for Muslims around the world to perform their divine duties... We condemn this breach of Islam by the government of Saudi Arabia and warn the Muslims throughout the world that this inappropriate action marks the start of a new phase to tarnish the image of Islam and a serious threat to the beloved Ka’ba. We declare that we will not rest in the face of this great oppression and call on the Islamic world to rise to the occasion and carry out their religious and historic duty in the face of this blatant aggression against the divine rights of Muslims.”

Kayhan, July 29, 1985

### **On export of revolution**

“Today, the Hajj is the biggest forum for Islamic Revolution. The gathering of Muslims for the pilgrimage creates the best chance for the presence of the Islamic Revolution.”

Kayhan, August 7, 1993

“Currently, the Ministry of Guidance has seven foreign language newspapers, one in Swahili, the language of East Africa. Its current circulation of 50,000 can easily be increased to 200,000.”

Ettela’at, July 10, 1991

### **On the fatwa Againsts Salam Rushdie**

“Salman Rushdie, the author of Satanic Verses, must be executed in accordance with the religious fatwa issued by His Eminence Imam Khomeini. He has no escape from this fatwa...”

“By publishing the blasphemous book, Satanic Verses, the East and the West proved to the world that they were not only the enemies of the Islamic Republic and the Imam, but also the enemies of the great religion of Islam and more than one billion Muslims around the globe...”

“The silence of Arab countries on the publication of Satanic Verses proved that they only defend Islam through words, not deeds. The opposition of His Eminence Imam Khomeini to the publication of this book demonstrated that he is the only real defender of Islam, the Quran and the oppressed. This has become obvious to the World Arrogance.”

Kayhan, March 7, 1989

“The largest enclave of exiled Muslims live in Europe. They were brilliant in their religious activities, particularly their rallies and gatherings to condemn Salman Rushdie.”

Ettela’at, July 10, 1991

### **On freedom**

“If by freedom you mean confronting the aspirations of this nation and the foundations of the Islamic Revolution and Islam, Iran’s revolutionary people cannot accept it and will not allow it...”

Kayhan, June 10, 1986

### **On video tapes, music, and female singers**

“We consider videos to be much more dangerous for the Islamic Revolution than drugs.... The Ministry of Islamic Guidance has been among the most adamant opponents of legalization of videos in Iran... As the country’s chief authority on culture and arts, I declare that music is allowed in this country, but improper music is banned... The Islamic Republic prohibits female singers from solo performances for the public at large.”

Ettela’at, July 10, 1991

### **On satellite dishes**

“This issue is important because satellite television is a gap through which alien culture can penetrate our society and spread.”

Ettela’at, July 7, 1991

### **Khatami’s positions after becoming president**

#### **Defending clerical rule**

(Addressing a gathering at Khomeini’s grave):

“We declare to the world that we will continue to tread along Imam Khomeini’s path... We will persevere to do so.”

State television, January 19, 1998

“Imam Khomeini’s notion of velayat-e faqih is the main pillar of the Islamic Republic. All citizens of the Islamic Republic have a practical commitment to velayat-e faqih. This means that all those who live under this system must abide by this principle and regulate their conduct within the framework of the constitution.”

(Khatami’s declaration on the eve of the May 1997 presidential elections)

“In the Islamic Republic, defending the law means defending the velayat-e faqih.”

State television, November 18, 1997

“Our state stands far above the wishes and tendencies of individuals. All tendencies must try to safeguard the Leader’s honor and the pillars of the state. The clergy must be at the forefront.”

State television, July 5, 1998.

“The main axis and the central pillar of our system is the Great Leader and the vali-e faqih, around whom other institutions and organs take shape.”  
State television, May 23, 1998.

“The Leader (Khamenei) is the central pillar of the Islamic state and the symbol of national sovereignty.”  
State television, May 1998

“I work under the supervision of the Leader, and His Eminence is the central pillar of our system.”  
State television, April 22, 1998

“The Leader as the central pillar of the state and society stands above personal preferences.”  
State television, January 24, 1998

### **Freedom of expression**

“Freedom without limits results in anarchy in society... Anarchy is much more damaging than dictatorship.”  
Tehran radio, September 8, 1998

“Only those have the right to political activity and existence in Iran who have faith in Islam and the leadership.”  
State television, November 18, 1997

“We must not act in a crude manner so that our enemies would take advantage of our approach to freedom. We must be vigilant so that while we work to institutionalize freedom, we do not align ourselves with the enemies.”  
State television, May 23, 1998

(Reacting to young people chanting “Down with dictatorship” at a rally in Tehran University):

“I really do not consider some slogans being chanted in different venues such as Friday prayers or student and religious meetings to be correct. They are very dangerous.”  
State television, July 5, 1998

### **Repression**

“The heroic people of Isfahan responded to the message sent by our generous Leader and the people showed their love for the state and the Leader through their presence and at the same time they demoralized the malevolent enemies.”  
State television, April 22, 1998

“A punitive approach and the language of security (organs) should be employed in dealing with those who do not accept our regime and are conspiring to overthrow it.”  
State television, November 18, 1997

“Today, the government, the Guards Corps and the Armed Forces stand shoulder to shoulder with His Eminence the Great Leader acting as the central axis in order to advance the revolution, and defend the dignity and independence of the nation... With our body and soul, we are proud of the Guards Corps.”

Tehran radio, May 24, 1998

**Foreign policy**

“We have suffered more than any other (nation) from the oppressive policies of the United States... If we are seen to have turned away from our revolution and given up our identity, no matter what they would give us, we shall lose.”

State television, January 19, 1998.

From the Book, *Iran, under Khatami, The Myth of Moderation*, published in September 1998