

Iran between revolution and democracy

David Hayes

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The Islamic Republic of Iran's rulers are determined to keep power – by developing nuclear weapons if need be. Iran's web-savvy young people are restless for change. Millions of the country's citizens, disillusioned by the failure of President Khatami's reform programme, seek a way forward that respects their country's history and achievements. Amidst this clash of forces, where is Iran going? David Hayes introduces a new openDemocracy series.

Iran lives the contradictions of 21st-century world politics. In Tehran, a sclerotic, Islamic, post-revolutionary, nuclear state commands a youthful, idea-hungry, proto-democratic, networked society. Iranians everywhere – in Los Angeles, Berlin, and London as well as Tehran, Isfahan and Shiraz – are rethinking their country's future. [openDemocracy](#) joins them by hosting a symposium in which Iranians from many backgrounds and with differing political allegiances seek the best way forward to democracy, freedom and justice for their country and its people.

Iran's tumultuous history since the revolution of 1978-79 deposed the Shah and brought the Islamic theocracy to power has included the epic slaughter of the war with Saddam Hussein's Iraq (1980-88), intense repression of dissent (including a murder campaign against critical writers and intellectuals in late 1998), and a regional context transformed by war and regime change in its neighbours, Afghanistan and Iraq.

President Mohammad Khatami's election in February 1997 saw early reformist promise turn into conservative stagnation, as the country's "mullahcracy" – the "state within a state" of religious institutions and authorities, headed by supreme leader Ayatollah Ali

Khamenei – gradually recovered its poise and consolidated its position as the true source of power in Iran.

Khatami's re-election in June 2001 was followed by widespread student mobilisation – some of it in defence of persecuted intellectuals like Hashem Aghajari – that was crushed by the regime. If such forceful responses reflect the Islamic Republic's determination to maintain itself in power against domestic challenges, its plans to develop the technology capable of producing nuclear weapons, and its willingness to strike lucrative, long-term deals with partners like the People's Republic of China, demonstrate an equal commitment to flex its muscles globally.

As the June election approaches, the dominant view of the Tehran regime appears (to observers like [openDemocracy's](#) global security columnist, Paul Rogers) one of confidence. This assessment reinforces that of our global politics columnist, veteran Iran expert Fred Halliday, who has written that Iran (alongside Turkey and Israel) considers itself to be one of the three great strategic "winners" of the Iraq war – though he cautions Tehran against over-optimism in this regard.

But Iran lives within contradiction at every level. The reverse of the regime's strategic confidence is the sense of encirclement that Paul Rogers also identifies. In domestic terms, too, the death of Khatami's top-down "reform" project has not meant that the mullahs can rest easy. Rather, the vibrant energies of proponents of change in Iran – students, writers, journalists, civil society groups, bloggers, intellectuals, lawyers like the Nobel peace laureate Shirin Ebadi – have been channelled in new directions.

Iran's presidential election of June 2005 will mark the next decisive stage in an epic twenty-seven years in the country's political fortunes. Will this election confirm the trend of regime consolidation (perhaps, symbolically, with the return to office of Khatami's predecessor, Hashemi Rafsanjani) or check it? Even if the former is more likely, how long will the Islamic Republic be able to contain the pressure for democratic change?

In this critical period, [openDemocracy's](#) symposium seeks to build on the already rich and vibrant conversation amongst Iranians worldwide about what a democratic Iran might look like. One proposal to emerge from this conversation forms our starting-point: the idea of holding a national referendum, under the auspices of international observers, on Iran's constitution.

The choice between the current constitution of the Islamic Republic, and a new, fully democratic and secular one consonant with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has been argued by the former regime loyalist turned prominent dissident, Mohsen Sazegara. His [openDemocracy](#) essay develops ideas proposed by the liberal theologian Abdolkarim Soroush. It argues that the very idea of an Islamic Republic strangles democratic potential by reserving real power to the mullahcracy; that Islamism as the foundation of the state must be replaced by a pluralist

democracy; and that the precondition of such a move is not a change in Iran's government but a new Iranian constitution.

Both author and idea are already controversial. Sazegara's history as a former regime loyalist and government minister makes other Iranian opposition figures uneasy. One human-rights activist, Ladan Boroumand, told the *New York Sun*:

"It's hard for me to forget what someone like Sazegara has done. But I am willing to forgive him if he is committed to these democratic principles and if he is struggling for the democratic cause and putting himself at risk."

These concerns increased with Sazegara's acceptance, in March 2005, of a two-month fellowship at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, a think-tank with a strong pro-Israeli bent. Some Iranian democrats fear that this move will jeopardise the referendum movement by playing into the hands of the regime and of other critics of the referendum who see any attempt to destabilise the Islamic Republic as bolstering American and Israeli regime-change designs on Iran.

The referendum initiative, the most visible and galvanising proposal to have been put forward since the reform movement collapsed, has already been passionately debated by Iranians from Tehran and Mashad to Frankfurt and Toronto – this February 2005 discussion between Mashallah Adujani, Majid Darabeigi, and Mohsen Nezhad is only one example.

In the coming weeks, [openDemocracy](#) will publish a variety of responses from Iranians both inside and outside Iran to Mohsen Sazegara's proposal. Through this debate [openDemocracy](#) seeks to expand the dialogue about Iran's future, deepen awareness and understanding about the choices facing Iranians, and build a democratic bridge between citizens of Iran and those of other countries.

*David Hayes is Assistant Editor of [openDemocracy](#). He has written textbooks on human rights and terrorism, and was a contributor to *Town and Country* (Jonathan Cape, 1998). His work has been published in *PN Review*, *the Irish Times*, *the New Statesman* and *The Absolute Game*.*

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