

Mohammad Khatami

The Philosopher President

Seyyid Mohammad Khatami was born in Ardakan in the central province of Yazd in 1943. He is the son of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khatami who founded the seminary there. Khatami finished his primary and secondary schools in Ardakan and then attended Qom Seminary in 1961. It is noteworthy that before finishing his seminary studies he received a bachelor's degree in philosophy from the secular University of Isfahan, a relatively rare experience among Shii clergy at the time. In 1969 Khatami entered another secular institution of higher education, the University of Tehran, from which he earned a master's degree. Later he returned to Qom seminary to attend philosophical classes with renowned religious scholars such as Ayatollah Motahhari. Khatami was a political activist in the Islamic movement before and during the revolution of 1979.

Khatami was elected to represent the people of Ardakan and nearby Meibod in the first session of the Islamic Majlis in 1980, and in 1981 Ayatollah Khomeini appointed him as the head of the influential Kayhan newspaper. In 1982, he became the Minister of Culture and Islamic guidance. During the 1980-1988 war with Iraq, he served in different capacities including deputy and head of the Joint Command of the Armed Forces and chairman of the War Propaganda Headquarters. In 1989 Khatami again became the Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance during the presidency of Hashemi Rafsanjani, but after three years, and under pressure from conservative forces, he chose to resign his post rather than struggle to stay in power.

Reason occupies a central position in Khatami's thought. As a Shia, he firmly believes in the concept of justice and accordingly finds freedom of choice to be both closely intertwined with reason, and indispensable to its exercise. Since reason presupposes a notion of human agency and entails freedom, Khatami maintains that Islam has always been a religion with the potential to achieve human liberation. However, the widespread and chronic conditions of tyranny in Islamic lands after the era of the so-called Righteous Caliphs prevented the realization of this potential. As a result of this historical tyranny, in Khatami's view, the ideas pertaining to freedom and human rights among Muslims have remained suppressed and never had a chance to develop.

Khatami's own discourse and agenda professedly aim at reversing this trend through an interpretation of Islamic sources. For this reason he has elaborately discussed the notion of freedom. He maintains that a major task of the prophets of monotheistic religions had been to remove the internal and external bonds of servitude from the hands and feet of the people, and help them to attain freedom, which is the most noble desire of all humans throughout history. Historically, whatever came into conflict with freedom, Khatami maintains, was damaged or defeated. Even righteousness, when it countered freedom, was harmed. Justice, faith, progress, or social justice, when they opposed freedom they all suffered. Medieval Christianity and Communism were both defeated because in the name of religion and the idea of social justice they opposed freedom.

Yet, freedom for Khatami is not absolute. Every society sets some limits on freedom. In an Islamic state, no one has the freedom to say anything she or he pleases as no other state allows such an absolute freedom. Freedom of speech that might disrupt the foundations of Islam and oppose the rights of the public cannot be allowed. But within these limits, everybody is free to express their views. During Khatami's tenure there was an attempt to implement these ideas: critical journals and newspapers were permitted to be published in the

In his speech at the UN General Assembly in September 1998, Mohammad Khatami proposed to analyse the principle elements of American culture in terms of Puritan history and influence. Similarly, in an interview with CNN, he invoked Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* to highlight the religious foundations of American democracy, a gesture that caused a vexatious envy among some American politicians and political pundits. In this essay the author argues that such references reflect not just Khatami's erudition but also highlight central tenets in his political philosophy.¹

Islamic Republic. Films and books that presented an unorthodox point of view also were allowed to be promulgated, despite the conservatives' fierce opposition and the closure of many newspapers and journals and banning of films and books.

Khatami paid significant attention to women's rights in general and to their rights for political and social participation. He proposed establishing institutions such as political parties, trade unions, and associations to realize their civic engagement, even though his success in practice has been very limited. Yet, even on the ideational level, Khatami has revealed some reservation on women's right to participate in their society and state. He acknowledges that women need to increase their presence in the public sphere to realize their potentials, yet maintains that such activities detract from their essential role in the family.

As a philosopher and social thinker, Khatami's success seems much greater in the shaping of Iranian political culture than the concrete reforms in the legal realm and in institution building during his eight years of presidency. On the other hand, despite his attempt to derive a genuine discourse on modern human empowerment and freedom through interpreting Islamic metaphysics as well as western modern thought, according to Khatami the carrier and beneficiary of this empowerment and freedom is not the individual. Very much like some of his revolutionary intellectual forefathers such as Ali Shari'ati, Khatami has castigated the individual very often as he equates individualism with license and denounces it as capitulating to the appetites and desires of the individual.

Yet, it would be unwarranted to consider Khatami's eight years of presidency as total failure. To be sure, he surely promised much more than he could deliver in terms of expansion of freedom and human and citizenship rights. Nevertheless, the expansion of discourse on rights and freedoms and democracy has promoted the tenets of civil society in Iran by raising popular expectations and the demand for its implementation.

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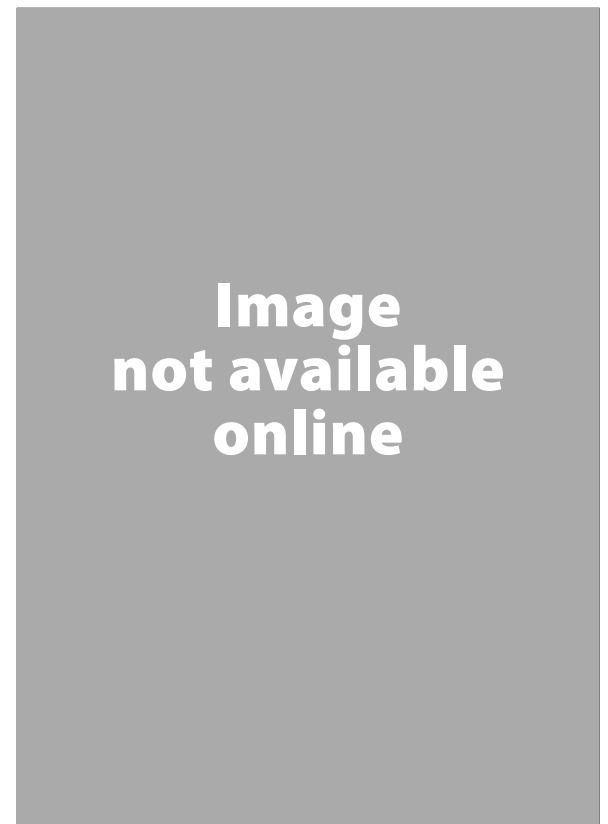


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**Khatami at
the UN General
Assembly,
September
1998**

Note

1. This article is partly based on a longer paper, "Religious Modernity in Iran: Dilemmas of Islamic Democracy in the Discourse of Mohammad Khatami," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 25, no. 3 (2005).