

Iran's Khatami advances 'dialogue of civilizations'

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

The visit to France at the end of October of Iranian President Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, constituted a giant step forward in the Islamic Republic's stride toward total normalization of relations with the West. Not only were important agreements made, for strengthening and broadening economic and cultural cooperation, but the personal stature of Iran's President was also visibly enhanced, as the Chirac government rolled out the red carpet for its guest.

Khatami, who was voted into power two years ago with a massive mandate, has been in the forefront of efforts inside Iran to liberalize internal political debate, especially through the encouragement of a free press. In this, he has run up against an entrenched conservative bloc, based in the clerical establishment, which still controls the judiciary, the intelligence apparatus, and a majority in the Majlis (parliament). As the political strife between the two factions has come to a head repeatedly since Khatami took office—for example in the trial against his political ally, Tehran Mayor Karbaschi, and in the riots last summer at Tehran University—Khatami has consistently moved to defuse tensions, while strictly adhering to the law. His message, to supporters eager for more rapid and more radical changes in Iranian society, has been to be patient, and to proceed through democratic means to consolidate institutionally the power which he enjoys among the population. One key inflection point in this process of democratic change, will be the parliamentary elections, scheduled four months from now, through which Khatami's moderate faction could clinch a majority.

Every foreign policy success, is therefore also a vote of confidence for Khatami inside Iran, in his delicate relations

with the opposition. This fact has not gone unnoticed in Western capitals. Thus, the Italians, who historically have had excellent relations with Iran dating back to the times of oil developer Enrico Mattei, have led Europe in developing healthy relations with Tehran.

Foreign policy successes

Khatami's trip to Rome earlier this year signalled a breakthrough in economic and political cooperation, and the Iranian President's audience with Pope John Paul II was an historic contribution to inter-religious understanding.

Thus, too, the French interest in hosting Khatami, the first time Paris has opened its doors to an Iranian President since the 1979 Islamic revolution. As France's *Libération* commented, "The visit to France appears like a 'shield' to protect M. Khatami, in the case of destabilization." Iran specialist Ahmad Salamatian told the daily, "Iranian foreign policy has always served the interests of domestic policies. . . . In the times of Khomeini, it was favorable to factions favorable to radicalization. With Khatami, on the contrary, it favors the partisans of openness. This trip reinforces the President on the international scene because it puts his adversaries in a difficult position. The price of his elimination becomes too high. Any putting into question of the existence of Khatami would only increase the isolation of Iran, which is what all factions fear."

The impact of normalization of relations between Iran, and the Italians, the French, and also the Germans (who have invited Khatami for a state visit), will be to stabilize Khatami's government inside Iran, as a means of stabilizing

the entire Persian Gulf region and, by extension, Central Asia—a region which the British-American-Commonwealth oligarchy has targeted for utter destabilization and disintegration.

In fact, in all his political encounters, Khatami emphasized the importance of political stability in the volatile region. He repeatedly said that Iran's "détente policy" in the region had been crucial to achieving stability and regional security. He welcomed a proposal from François Poncelet, president of the French Senate, for members of the French Foreign Policy and Defense committees to visit Tehran.

France has managed to maintain good economic relations with Iran, despite the sanctions regime imposed by former Senator Alfonse D'Amato (R-N.Y.), and the witch-hunt against Iran launched by Great Britain around the Salmon Rushdie affair years ago. In particular, the French oil concern Total has been collaborating with the Russian Gazprom and the Malaysian Petronas, on major oil development projects.

During his three-day visit on Oct. 27-29, Khatami, accompanied by Foreign Minister Kamal Kharazmi, and a large delegation of political and economic representatives, held talks with Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine, French President Jacques Chirac, and others.

The concrete results of the visit included a significant deal for French locomotives to Iran. The Alstom group announced that the Iranian rail company had placed an order for 100 diesel-electric locomotives, worth 192 million euros. Significantly, most of the locomotives will be built in Iran, which will contribute to expanding its already considerable rail construction capability. Rail transportation development has been at the top of Iran's foreign policy thrust, in the context of the transcontinental Eurasian Land-Bridge, stretching from China to western Europe. In 1997, Iran celebrated the completion of a rail stretch between Mashhad and Sarakhs-Tajan in Turkmenistan, which supplied the missing link in the network through Central Asia.

The battle for ideas

Crucial though such cooperation by France on rail development may be, it would be shortsighted to judge the success of the visit only in these economic agreements. Rather, what must be stressed is the less concrete, but more substantial progress made in what the Iranian President has called the "dialogue of civilizations and cultures."

This idea, which Khatami conceptualized, has been adopted as that to which the United Nations should dedicate the year 2001. Whatever may come out of deliberations inside the UN is secondary. The point is that, for the first time in recent history, an elected head of state has raised the level of political discourse to that of ideas, and has suggested that dialogue between politicians can succeed only to the extent that they consider themselves philosophers.

Khatami has elaborated his concept of dialogue of civili-



*Iran's President
Seyyed
Mohammad
Khatami*

zations on several occasions, including the summit of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), in Tehran on Dec. 9-11, 1997, and in his visit to Rome. In Paris, he developed his thought further, in a major speech delivered to the UN Economic, Social, and Cultural Organization. Noting that the proposal, presented by Iran, for the year 2001 to be designated the year of such a dialogue, had been unanimously accepted by the UN, Khatami went into the reasons why this concept has found such favor.

Khatami referred to two meanings of the word "dialogue," the denotative, meaning actual meetings for discussion, and the connotative, meaning "all cultural, artistic, scientific, and literary endeavors."

Launching such a dialogue among cultures and civilizations, he said, "will require the definitions of 'culture,' 'civilization,' and 'man' to be framed in such a way that they do not clash with the very essence of dialogue. This would mean our paying special attention to the collective aspect of man's existence, emphasizing the vast and infinite range of human civilization, and especially, stressing the point that no major culture or civilization has evolved in isolation" and that only those capable of learning from other cultures have developed.

In this context, he developed the relationship between the politician and the artist: "We cannot ignore the fact that an artist is a person capable of living in the 'present,' and that he or she can also transform this present into an 'eternity.' Creating this eternity of the present for the sake of presenting the concept of the time 'when' and 'at which time,' the artist is able to create a work of art, and we, as members of the

target audience, are drawn to it as the enchanted spectators in its presence. This is regarded as the magic touch of an artist, and only great artists are capable of achieving such a status. The historical fate of an art work is painted in perpetuity. We are also cognizant of this fact, that the historical fate of nations is shaped at certain junctures by great statesmen.”

Later, he added, “the common traits between the statesman and the artist are nothing other than ‘creativity,’ and repetition and imitation are therefore meaningless when it comes to creativity. Furthermore, the full manifestation of creativity in a person depends on his or her ‘tenacity.’”

“A great artist tackles the artistic truth with creativity and tenacity, and a great statesman, likewise, tackles the fundamental and vital problems of his country with the same tenacity, resoluteness, and creativity.

“Today politicians can take a long stride toward the creation of a better future, which is more just, more humane, and more beautiful, for their countries and for the world, by helping the realization of the proposal for the dialogue among civilizations.”

Khatami’s notion of dialogue

It is important that Khatami’s notion of dialogue is not of the pluralist, touchy-feely sort often associated with the term.

He made clear, that he was not talking about dialogue in the broad sense of “cultural interaction, cultural interchange, and cultural domination,” but in the strict sense, and under specific conditions. Therefore, “not everybody, with any world view and belief in some political, moral, religious, or philosophical system can claim that he or she is an advocate of dialogue. For real dialogue to take place, we require a set of general, all-inclusive, *a priori* axioms, without which no dialogue is possible in the true sense of the word.” These axioms, he added, are “not compatible with the dogmas of positivists, and they are not in so much agreement with the extreme cynicism of the post-modernists either.” Therefore, those seeking dialogue must “refine the philosophical and intellectual core of the theory,” emancipating it from “any dogmatism hostile to the pursuit of truth and from the excessive cynicism afflicting the post-modernist thinkers, who, heedless of the terrible pain and suffering of thousands of human beings, regard any call for the pursuit of justice and relief from oppression as a sort of ‘metadiscourse,’ with no philosophical justification or explanation.”

Finally, he called for tolerance, specifying that it is not negative tolerance, but “positive mass cooperation” which is required. Concretely, this means “all human beings are entitled to participate in the activities that will shape the world in the third millennium. No nation should be left on the sidelines because of some philosophical, political, or economic argument. It is not enough to tolerate others, but one must work with others.”

This cooperation, he went on, should be not only economic and political, but “to bring the hearts of human beings closer together.” This can occur only if “great thinkers” make an effort to understand the concepts of others, and to communicate them. Such concepts include the meaning of life, of happiness, and of death. To overcome the brutality and oppression which have characterized the 20th century, and which were the “joint product of the ideas of philosophers and the acts of statesmen,” Khatami called for “a basic change in political thinking” and for “changing the present state of international relations, replacing it with a new paradigm such as the dialogue among cultures and civilizations.”

Khatami specified that his proposed dialogue as a prerequisite for peace, has nothing to do with diplomatic negotiations. “It is a well-known fact that throughout history, there have been many occasions when wars and negotiations have existed side by side. By dialogue, we do not mean here the use of diplomatic language to promote one’s political and economic interests and to bring about victory over the enemy, and in short to continue the war in another form. The dialogue among civilizations cannot take place without sympathy and affection, and without a genuine effort to understand others without the desire to vanquish them.”

The Way Out of The Crisis



A 90-minute video of highlights from *EIR*'s April 21, 1999 seminar in Bonn, Germany.

Lyndon LaRouche was the keynote speaker, in a dialogue with distinguished international panelists: **Wilhelm Hankel**, professor of economics and a former banker from Germany; **Stanislav Menshikov**, a Russian economist and journalist; Schiller Institute founder **Helga Zepp-LaRouche** from Germany; **Devendra Kaushik**, professor of Central Asian Studies from India; **Qian Jing**, international affairs analyst from China; **Natalya Vitrenko**, economist and parliamentarian from Ukraine.



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The economic and social dimensions

Finally, the Iranian President addressed the economic and social dimensions of such dialogue, saying that no such communication could succeed, unless clarity were reached on the causes of wars and conflicts, especially the economic causes. "With the terrible gap between the rich and the poor . . . how can we naively call for peace and mutual understanding, and how can we call for dialogue if this inequity persists and if no fundamental steps are taken to help the deprived people of the world? When, on the eve of the third millennium, 30% of the world's population will live in abject poverty, how can we talk of peace and security and forget justice?"

Denouncing the illusion that the West could survive at the expense of the rest of the world, Khatami said, "All the people living in today's world find themselves aboard the same ship. Riding out the storms and reaching the safety of the shore will be either for all the passengers or for none." He concluded with a warning, that if dialogue in the 21st century does not replace the "sword" which was arbiter in the 20th century, then "this sword will reemerge as a two-edged weapon which will spare no one, and it is quite possible that the mighty warmongers will be among its first victims."

Khatami's message was well received in France, by the political elite and the press. For instance, the daily *Le Figaro* on Oct. 27 ran an article by Serge Michel, from Tehran, entitled "The President Philosopher." Michel dismissed the idea, which has appeared in other press accounts, that Khatami is some sort of Islamic Gorbachov, and suggested a different comparison:

"If one has to find a kind of model, one should look in the direction of the ancient Greeks. . . . In 1997, twenty million Iranians chose a philosopher President, who seeks his inspiration with Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle." The article summarizes the highlights of Khatami's activities, from his religious studies at Qom and his meeting with Khomeini in 1961, to his philosophy studies at Isfahan, and his moving to Germany in 1977, where he chaired the Islamic Center of Hamburg, prior to the 1979 revolution. It was in that period that Khatami began to study German philosophy and culture. Later, Khatami wrote a book, in which he presented the idea that Islam should welcome the positive cultural contributions of all civilizations, including the West, while rejecting negative tendencies.

Khatami's mission in France was obviously shaped to the exigencies of improving bilateral relations between Paris and Tehran; however, no one could miss the implications of his speech, for the government in the United States as well. Khatami inaugurated his foreign policy revolution shortly after his election by going on CNN, in a television interview addressing the American people. In that interview, which cost him considerable grief in Iran, he extended the offer to "thinkers" in America, to engage in this dialogue of civilizations. One is still awaiting the response.

Pakistan's Musharraf faces an uphill task

by Ramtanu Maitra

The bloodless coup that brought the sacked Chief of Armed Services Gen. Pervez Musharraf to power in Pakistan on Oct. 12, poses serious challenges to the Pakistani Army. A huge foreign debt, growing poverty, and a weak economy overall have worsened Pakistan's law and order situation. Threats of Islamic fundamentalists moving eastward into Pakistan from Afghanistan worry Pakistan's traditional friends, China and the United States. In addition, the failure of Pakistan's leading politicians over the last decade to deal effectively with both foreign and domestic policy has weakened the national institutions. Under the circumstances, the new ruler of Pakistan will have to move quickly before he, too, fails.

An Army takeover in Pakistan is neither a new phenomenon, nor fully unexpected at any given time. Musharraf's is the fourth Army takeover in the nation's 52-year history, and this one came after two and a half years of inept administration by the Pakistan Muslim League (PML) under the leadership of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

Sharif, who was a protégé of the late martial law administrator, President Mohammad Zia ul-Haq, was always close to the Army. But, his conflict with the Army was brought about following the recent armed clashes with Indian Armed Forces over Kashmir. In April, Pakistani regulars and Afghan mujahideen infiltrated inside the India-held part of Kashmir around Kargil and captured some high ground. Following a massive operation, the Indian Army drove back the infiltrators. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif blamed the Army for the debacle, drawing the wrath of the military brass.

The response abroad

Musharraf's coup raised eyebrows among policymakers in Washington, and some routine protests were issued. But there are indications that Washington was aware of the developments and had not agreed with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's sacking of the Army chief. Within a week or so, Washington began to change its publicly stated views about the coup, and the U.S. State Department has since issued statements which indicate that the United States is willing to give Musharraf time to bring back democracy.

On the other hand, the European Union, particularly Germany and Britain, refused to accept the legitimacy of