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THE RISE OF IRAN'S REFORMERS REQUIRES A CAUTIOUS U.S. RESPONSE

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The results of Iran's February 18 parliamentary elections have reinforced the power of reformers who support political, economic, and social liberalization. The growing strength of Iran's reformers, led by President Mohammad Khatami, is a positive development from Washington's perspective because they advocate the rule of law and the building of a more tolerant and less violent Iran. But the reformers' political victory is not likely to have an immediate and decisive moderating influence on Iran's hostile foreign policy, which remains firmly in the hands of Ayatollah Ali Khamanei, Iran's supreme leader, and his hard-line supporters. Therefore, the United States should cautiously sound out Iran's reformers, but maintain economic sanctions to give Tehran maximum incentives to end its support of terrorism, violent opposition to the Arab-Israeli peace process, and development of weapons of mass destruction.

Reforming the Mullahcracy. Early reports indicate that President Khatami's loose coalition of 18 political groups has won a major victory, gaining an estimated 65–75 percent of the 290 seats in the Majlis, Iran's parliament, up from about 25 percent in the last election. The reformers' victory reflects widespread disaffection with the harsh Islamic regime that has exported terrorism abroad, repressed freedom at home, isolated Iran, and ruined its economy. The lopsided election results and record 80 percent turnout of eligible voters demonstrate the popularity of President Khatami's

reform program: the relaxation of strict Islamic social restrictions, expansion of individual liberties, building of a civil society based on the rule of law, and liberalization of the stagnant economy.

Despite the reformers' gains in the Majlis, old guard Islamic revolutionaries still dominate many of Iran's power centers, including the judiciary, the police, the Revolutionary Guard, the state-controlled radio and television media, and the Islamic foundations, which control more than one-quarter of the economy. The hard-liners are led by Ayatollah Ali Khamanei, who succeeded Ayatollah Ruhollah

Khomeini as the *Faqih* or supreme leader, and remains Iran's ultimate political and religious authority. Although reformers may make faster progress with a majority in the Majlis, Khamanei still has considerable power to thwart their efforts. For example, all legislation must be approved by the Council of Guardians, a twelve-member supervisory body of clerics and Islamic law experts, half of whom are appointed by Khamanei.

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Foreign Policy Implications. Foreign policy issues were largely ignored during the election campaign, and Khatami's coalition is expected to give priority to the domestic issues that helped it to gain control of the Majlis. Major changes in Iranian foreign policy are unlikely in the immediate future; the reformers will not want to risk disrupting their coalition or provoking a certain confrontation with the hard-liners until they have addressed more pressing social, economic, and political issues. Moreover, Ayatollah Khamanei retains control over Tehran's foreign policy and security affairs by virtue of his command of the Iranian armed forces, intelligence agencies, and the Revolutionary Guard.

Iran continues to support terrorism. Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet testified before Congress on February 2 that Iran remains "the most active state sponsor of terrorism" in the world. Iran also violently opposes the Arab–Israeli peace negotiations and continues to arm and finance radical Islamic groups opposed to peace with Israel, such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and Palestine Islamic Jihad. And Iran's persistent clandestine efforts to obtain a nuclear weapon led the Central Intelligence Agency in December 1999 to conclude for the first time that it cannot rule out the possibility that Tehran has acquired one.

Despite these ominous trends, the Clinton Administration has relaxed economic sanctions against Iran in an effort to entice Tehran into a dialogue. It has waived sanctions against foreign oil companies that invest in Iran's energy industry and allowed U.S. aircraft manufacturers to sell spare parts to Iran's national airline. Iran has spurned American calls for a rapprochement, insisting that Washington must make the first move by lifting economic sanctions. This puts the cart before the horse. But there is a danger that the Clinton Administration now may be tempted to abandon economic pressure on Iran in a misguided effort to engineer a détente with Iran to furnish Bill Clinton with a quick-fix foreign policy legacy.

This would be a dangerous mistake. Relaxing economic pressure on Iran now would let Tehran off the hook just when Washington's sanctions policy appears to be paying off by exacerbating political discontent with the hard-line Iranian leadership and assisting the political victory of the reformers. Relaxing the sanctions sends the wrong signal: that Iran can enjoy better relations with the West while continuing to export terrorism. It would deflate President Khatami's incentives for moderating Iran's foreign policy and would vindicate hard-liners who argue that Iran can foment Islamic revolution at little cost to its own national interests. Moreover, a premature American embrace of President Khatami could backfire by provoking hard-liners to stage a coup against him or sabotage a rapprochement through terrorism.

Conclusion. Instead of rushing into a one-sided détente, Washington should cautiously probe the willingness of the new Iranian leadership to enter into a substantive dialogue on ending hostile policies and exploring areas of possible cooperation. But U.S. economic sanctions should be firmly maintained until Tehran takes concrete actions to end its support of terrorism, violent opposition to the Arab–Israeli peace process, and nuclear weapons programs. U.S. economic sanctions helped create the conditions that brought Iranian reformers to power and sanctions remain a useful tool for helping Iran to make the difficult transition to a genuine democracy. If Iran can complete this transition, Iranian–American relations could be normalized and the two countries could cooperate on a wide range of issues including containing Iraq, stabilizing Afghanistan and Lebanon, and fighting international drug trafficking.

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