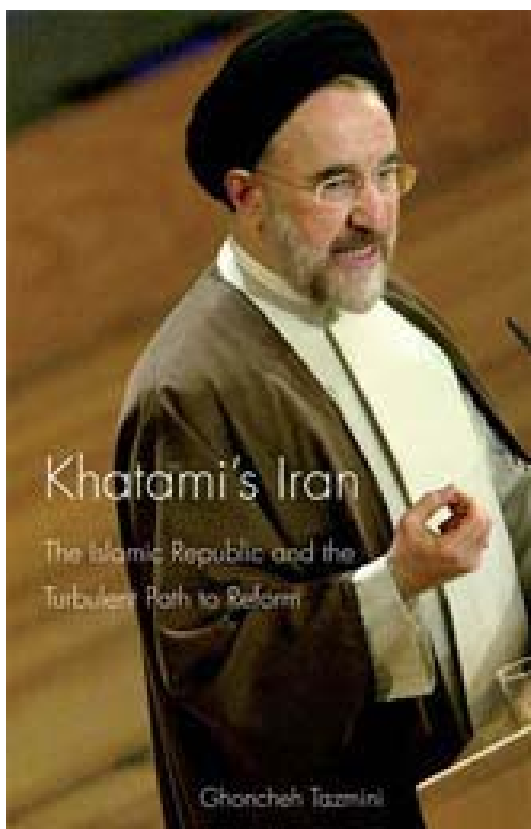


# ***MEI BOOK REVIEW***

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***Khatami's Iran: The Islamic Republic and  
the Turbulent Path to Reform***

***By***

***Ghoncheh Tazmini***

Tauris Academic Studies, 2010

First South Asian Edition, 210 Pages

ISBN: 978-1-84511-594-4

***Reviewed by Sonia Roy***

**S**eyed Mohammad Khatami's election to the presidency in 1997 symbolized a period of great change in Iranian politics, attracting tremendous and unprecedented global attention to the Islamic Republic of Iran not witnessed since the revolution. His term from 1997 to 2005 is seen as a 'blend of divine rule, theocracy and democracy' (p.5), introducing gradual institutional reforms under the existing theocratic framework. He was instrumental in consolidating the rule of law, encouraging intellectual discourse and socio-political liberties.

Ghoncheh Tazmini tries to beautifully balance a study of Khatami as a person, intellectual, and a politician; the obstacles that Khatami faced both from within and without, the greater intellectual discourse on civilisation differences and the problems associated with the fit-all understanding of the Western conception of modernisation.

The organization of the book is thematic to enhance clarity in unravelling Khatami's personality. The author provides three separate strands of analysis. The first theme delves into Khatami's childhood and nurturing, reflecting on their impact on his political-philosophical understanding. The second theme explores the intellectual context of Khatami's reform. The third strand focuses on the policy issues, contextualizing them in social, political as well as foreign policy arenas.

Khatami's childhood is portrayed as a combination of a tolerant and encouraging father and his own personal expectations to understand divergent views on socio-political issues beyond the Iranian regularities. This psychological make-up is asserted to be critical in understanding the Khatami way of understanding life. Tazmini talks of how Khatami came to the forefront and secured almost 70 percent of the votes, ushering in a new era of expectations for the different sections of Iranian society. It specifically encouraged students and youth of the society to take an active part in Iranian politics. As far as the position of women was concerned, Iran being a conservative Islamic society, his victory held high expectations.

One interesting concept introduced by the former 'reformist' President of the Islamic Republic of Iran was that of *akhlagh* (social adeptness), which brought to the fore concepts like patience, tolerance, dialogue and communications. He was welcomed by the West even when Iran was under the shadow of the 'axis of evil' and maintained a hard relationship with the US. The chapter on '*Obstacle to Reform*', however, discusses how various difficulties like securing the goodwill of the religious elements, limits imposed on him by 'tradition', and the absolute position held by the Supreme Leader, time and again played a part in reducing his margin of reform success. Khatami was held back from reaching his full potential.

Most famous of Khatami's contributions was his thesis on *Dialogue among Civilization*, which is often contrasted with Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*. He believed 'Knowledge is the product of dialogue and exchange' (p.81) and viewing the international society as dialogue communities would supplement existing diplomatic channels. It signalled Iran's willingness to come out of isolation. The United Nations proclaimed the year 2001 as the United Nations' *Year of Dialogue among Civilizations*, recognizing its value. Tazmini believes the failure of the 'dialogue' was its inability to enter the arena of ideas and philosophy. There was no substance in addition to the rhetoric. The theoretical construct of the 'dialogue' had its own shortcomings. If it was meant to be communication between the West and Islam, Iran, a Shi'a country, does not represent the larger Islamic Sunni world. Thus, there were serious methodological shortcomings to the dialogue itself, both in its practical as well as theoretical construct.

On the whole, this book is a penetrating analysis of the first reformist president of Iran. It is not merely a person's biography but tries to explain the various trends of intellectual thought running through the Iranian society, to understand the constraints on leadership as they appear. The importance of the book goes beyond Khatami and enriches the understanding of Iran.

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