

Mark Gasiorowski **The Prospects for Democracy in Iran**

By Sinan Hastorun

During the past decade, Iran witnessed the promising rise and ultimate demise of a pro-democracy movement. This movement elected its candidate to the presidency, won a majority of seats in the legislature, but failed to bring about meaningful political and social change.

Why did Iran's pro-democracy movement fail? Mark Gasiorowski, director of the International Studies Program at Louisiana State University, argues the movement failed because its leaders opted to pursue incremental, gradual change from within rather than directly confronting the Islamic regime. They did not undertake an active mobilization strategy, but instead sought political liberalization and greater cultural openness while working within the system. The failure of Iran's pro-democracy movement has important implications not only for the prospects for democracy in Iran, but democratization more broadly.

The reformist movement in Iran consisted of a faction of Iran's Islamist ruling elite that had been key and quite radical players in the Islamic revolution and then in the Islamic regime itself, but subsequently undergone a transition. As they became dissatisfied with various negative effects of the revolution, this faction embraced democracy as their central goal. Many of them were intellectuals and university-educated activists.

During its first few years, Gasiorowski said, the reformist movement was very dynamic. Mohammad Khatami won 69 percent of the vote in 1997 presidential elections, giving the reformists a broad, clear mandate. This was reinforced by subsequent reformist victories in local and national elections. These landslide victories put reformists in control of both the legislature and presidency, and momentum was clearly on their side.

However, things began to change after the 2000 parliamentary election. The conservative reaction to reformist victory and gathering momentum for political change was to adopt a tough anti-reformist position. Meanwhile, reformists failed to mobilize their supporters in the streets when they had the chance to effect real change. Instead, they let the conservative old guard engage in a campaign of repression. Reformist newspapers were closed, demonstrations were clamped down on, political freedoms were curtailed, and many reformist leaders were arrested in a campaign to prevent regime change in Iran.

Why was the reformist reaction to this repression so passive? Gasiorowski believes that pro-democracy activists feared a confrontational approach would be counterproductive and lead only to even more repression. However, he argued, this passive approach was also unproductive. Actively opposing the conservative clampdown might not have worked, but the reformists still could have put their great popularity to effective use.

The conservative clampdown was followed by a string of election losses for the reformists. Most of the electorate who favored political liberalization seems to have been disillusioned by the inability of reformist politicians to bring about change, that is, to keep their promises. As a result, both the presidency and the legislative majority were taken over by conservatives. This was not because the conservatives became more popular, Gasiorowski said, but because people lost faith in the ability of reformists and stayed away from the election booths.

The failure of the democracy movement in Iran is particularly unfortunate, Gasiorowski argues, because most of the social, historical, and cultural prerequisites that social scientists cite for democracy were strong in the country at the time Khatami came to power. First, Iran is a fairly well-developed, middle-income country. Second, Iran does not have endemic ethnic, religious, or class conflicts that tend to make democratization difficult. However, it must be noted that the

potential for division along these lines clearly exists, and this is one reason reformist leaders were timid in mobilizing people against the regime. Third, Iran has a long history of pro-democracy activism, and short but repeated periods of constitutional rule.

Fourth, Gasiorowski argues, Iran also has a religious advantage. Though many people these days see Islam as a poor or even hostile climate for democracy, Gasiorowski points out that the Shi'a branch has strong pluralistic traditions. Multiplicity of leaders and efforts at consensus-building have been the norm among Shi'a clergy, a feature that has deeply affected the character of Iran's Islamic regime. Finally, the democracy movement in Iran burgeoned against a backdrop of an extensive democratization throughout the world. Many totalitarian and authoritarian regimes near Iran were swept away, and the momentum was thus clearly on the side of democratization in the 1990s.

Despite the conducive setting for democracy in Iran in the late 1990s, Gasiorowski said, reformists could not succeed. Islamists themselves have always displayed a mixture of authoritarian and democratic tendencies. One factor conducive to authoritarian rule in Iran is its powerful, intrusive state apparatus, which effectively prevents and suppresses unrest. Though Iran is not highly repressive, the fear of repression discourages people from actively seeking political change. Iran also has a powerful security apparatus that is loyal to Islamic leaders and effectively prevents and if necessary, suppresses unrest.

Another factor is Iran's oil revenues, which allow the conservatives to finance extensive consumer subsidies that help reduce the potential for unrest. Oil revenues also help obviate the need for taxes, which means the state does not have to be highly accountable to society, and society has little room to demand political change from the state.

In the end, Gasiorowski argues, the pro-democracy movement in Iran failed because it chose to work within the system. Iran's main elected offices proved to be institutionally weak venues for bringing about the change that was sought. Unelected bodies such as the Supreme Leader and Council in Iran control key institutions as the security forces and the judiciary. The latter were effectively used by the conservatives to neutralize the reformists and contain their supporters. Once Iranians realized that the reformists were not able to overcome these obstacles, they began to perceive the pro-democracy movement as weak and ineffective. It was not long before reformist leaders lost credibility and support, and eventually were voted out of office.

As a result, Gasiorowski argues, the prospects for democracy in Iran are now quite bleak. It is clear that the reformist strategy of "active calm" rather than a more confrontational approach to break the hold of key state institutions held by their conservative opponents was an ineffective way to bring about political change in the Islamic Republic.