



**UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA**

***POLITICAL REFORM IN IRAN DURING KHATAMI PRESIDENCY,  
1997- 2005***

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**POLITICAL REFORM IN IRAN DURING KHATAMI PRESIDENCY,  
1997- 2005**

By

**HOSSEIN ASAYESH**

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra  
Malaysia, in Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy**

**February 2017**

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Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfillment of the requirement for the Degree of Doctor for Philosophy

**POLITICAL REFORM IN IRAN DURING KHATAMI PRESIDENCY,  
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**February 2017**

**Chairman : Adlina Ab. Halim, PhD**  
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In the present study, the researcher attempted to unfold the process of political reform in Iran during Khatami presidency from 1997 to 2005. It analysed the political reform during Khatami's administration. Second, the study investigated factors affecting the growth of political parties during the reformation era of President Khatami, and finally, it rendered several strategies and recommendations to overcome the factors and problems hindering the growth of political parties from 1997 to 2005. The research employed qualitative approach, where primary data were collected through in-depth interviews involving 14 informants using purposive sampling frame. They were among Iranian party leaders. The data were analysed manually and content analysis was used to analyse secondary data gathered from related literature.

The findings indicated that Khatami ignited several reformation programs that gradually aided the growth of political parties from 1997 to 2005, but unfortunately most of the programs were unsuccessful mainly because he gained less support and acceptance from the Supreme Leader. The findings also showed that there were certain factors affecting the growth of political parties, namely electoral system, party law, party funding, and cultural component. Next, all informants provided valuable inputs in terms of establishing underlying strategies and providing valuable suggestions for the empowerment of political parties. Additionally, the findings provided in-depth understanding about the reformation process of political parties undertaken by President Khatami from 1997 to 2005. The present study is hoped to promote better understanding and add knowledge in the area of political reform. Finally, the study presented some recommendations for further research regarding this topic.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia  
sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk Ijazah Doktor Falsafah

**PEMBAHARUAN POLITIK DI IRAN SEMASA KHATAMI JAWATAN  
PRESIDEN, 1997-2005**

Oleh

**HOSSEIN ASAYESH**

**Februari 2017**

**Pengerusi : Adlina Ab. Halim, PhD**  
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Dalam kajian ini, penyelidik cuba meneliti proses reformasi politik di Iran semasa pemerintahan Presiden Khatami dari tahun 1997 hingga 2005. Objektif pertama kajian ini adalah untuk mengkaji reformasi politik semasa pentadbiran Presiden Khatami. Objektif kedua kajian ini adalah untuk mengkaji faktor-faktor yang memberi kesan kepada pertumbuhan parti-parti politik semasa era reformasi Presiden Khatami. Akhir sekali objektif ketiga adalah untuk memberikan beberapa strategi dan cadangan untuk mengatasi masalah yang mempengaruhi pertumbuhan parti politik dari tahun 1997-2005. Kajian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dan teknik temubual itu telah digunapakai bagi tujuan pengumpulan data. Data primer dikumpulkan melalui sesi temubual mendalam bersama empat belas orang informan dengan menggunakan rangka persampelan bertujuan. Informan dalam kajian ini dipilih dalam kalangan pemimpin parti-parti politik di Iran. Dari segi analisis kajian, data primer dianalisis secara manual dan teknik analisis kandungan digunakan untuk menganalisis data sekunder yang diperolehi daripada literatur kajian.

Dapatan kajian menunjukkan Presiden Khatami telah menyediakan banyak program pembaharuan dan reformasi yang dilaksanakan secara beransur-ansur bagi menggalakkan pertumbuhan parti-parti politik dari tahun 1997-2005, Walau bagaimanapun terdapat banyak juga tindakan reformasi beliau yang tidak berjaya. Sebab utamanya kerana tindakan reformasi beliau mendapat kurang sokongan dan penerimaan dari Pemimpin Agung (*Supreme Leader*). Selain daripada itu, hasil kajian juga menunjukkan bahawa terdapat faktor-faktor yang mempengaruhi pertumbuhan parti-parti politik iaitu sistem pilihan raya, undang-undang parti, pembiayaan dana parti dan komponen budaya. Penemuan ini adalah penting terutamanya bagi memperkasakan parti-parti politik dengan strategi dan cadangan yang bernas yang diperolehi daripada informan kajian. Di samping itu, hasil kajian yang diberikan dapat

memberikan kefahaman yang baik mengenai proses perubahan parti-parti politik semasa zaman reformasi Presiden Khatami. Kajian ini berharap dapat menggalakkan kefahaman yang lebih baik dan pengetahuan tambahan dalam bidang reformasi politik. Akhir sekali, kajian ini mengemukakan beberapa cadangan untuk kajian lanjutan mengenai topik ini.



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I would like to dedicate this research to all the people who attempt to improve political party in Iran.

I certify that a Thesis Examination Committee has met on 15 August 2016 to conduct the final examination of Hossein Asayesh on his thesis entitled "Political Reform in Iran During the Khatami Presidency, 1997- 2005" in accordance with the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 and the Constitution of the Universiti Putra Malaysia [P.U.(A) 106] 15 March 1998. The Committee recommends that the student be awarded the Doctor of Philosophy.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

|      |   |
|------|---|
| IRP  | Islamic Republic Party ( <i>Hizb-i Jomhouri Islam-i</i> )                                     |
| ICP  | Islamic coalition party ( <i>Hizb-I Mu 'talifih-yi Islami</i> )                               |
| IIPF | Islamic Iran Participation front party ( <i>Hizb-I jibhih-yi Musharikat-I Iran-I Islami</i> ) |
| IRMO | Islamic Revolution Mojahedin Organization ( <i>Sazman- i Mujahidin-I Inqilab-I Islami</i> )   |
| SCCT | Society of Combatant Clergy of Tehran ( <i>Jami 'ih-yi Rouhaniyyat-i Mubariz-i Tehran</i> )   |
| ACC  | Association of Combatant Clerics ( <i>Majma'-i Rouhaniyyun-i Mubariz-i</i> )                  |
| ECP  | Executives of construction party ( <i>Hizb-i Karguzaran-i Sazandigi</i> )                     |
| NTP  | National Trust Party ( <i>Hizb-i Etemad-i Melli</i> )   |
| ISE  | Islamic Society of Engineers ( <i>Jemeayi islami yi Mohandesin</i> )                          |
| FMI  | Freedom Movement of Iran ( <i>Nehzate Azadi-e Iran</i> )                                      |
| ILP  | Islamic Labor Party ( <i>Hizb-i Islami Kaar</i> )   |
| DP   | Democratic Party ( <i>Hizb-i Mardomsalari</i> )   |
| IRIB | Islamic Republic Iran Broadcast   |
| HTE  | Islamic Civilization Party ( <i>Hizb-i Tamaddone Eslami</i> )                                 |
| MDP  | Moderation and Development Party ( <i>Hizb-i Etedal va Taosae</i> ).                          |

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Introduction

This chapter provides the background of study. It introduces the area of study and the identification of problem statement. This is then followed by the research questions and the objectives of study. Next, the scope and limitations of study are discussed, followed by explanation on the significance of study, as well as the organisation of thesis.

#### 1.2 Research Background

This section briefly explains about the historical growth of political parties in Iran since the fall of Reza Shah until the era of President Khatami. To begin with, during the Second World War, the occupation of Iran and the fall of Reza Shah's dictatorship in 1941 indicated a new era of political development in Iran. The period between 1941 and 1953 witnessed an extensive development of political parties, mainly due to the weakness of central government. This was indeed a period when the activities of political parties were at their peak. The widening of suffrage or right to vote had greatly facilitated the birth of several parties, including the most prominent party in the country, i.e. the National Front of Iran (*Jebhe Melli*) in 1949. This party took the majority of parliamentary seats and its leader, Mohammad Mosaddegh, became the country's Prime Minister from 1951 to 1953 (Naghibzadeh, 1999).

Next, the National Front of Iran party made an important step in the democratisation of parliamentary election. It increased freedom of expression and human rights, as well as opposed the King's interference on the government court. Above all, this party carried out Iran's oil nationalisation, an industry that the Britain used to own a total of 50 percent share. The aforementioned actions created two enemies: an internal enemy that referred to the King, and an external enemy that referred to the Great Britain. This led to the overthrow of Mohammad Mosaddegh in 1953 by a coup, whereupon all political parties were dissolved and dictatorship took over Iran. Since then, there was no trace of independent political parties, but if they ever existed, it was due to the King's order. This system continued until the Islamic Revolution in 1979 (Naghibzadeh, 1999).

After the Islamic Revolution, the Islamic Republic Party (*Hezbe Jomhooarie Eslami*) became the first party created by new revolutionary force. This party dominated Iran until its dissolution in 1987. It had seized all of the state's arms: (i) the executive; (ii) the legislature; and (iii) the judiciary. During this period (1979 to 1987), suffrage fell dramatically, and the popularity and charisma of



Ayatollah Khomeini dominated the society. People turned away from party programs, and merely followed the views and opinions of Ayatollah Khomeini. Communication networks were weak and political parties could not disseminate their messages and programs effectively. In fact, Iran had no functioning political parties until the Executives of the Construction Party (*Hezbe Kargozarane Sazandegi*) was set up in 1994 to run for the fifth parliamentary election. The party actively participated in the fifth parliamentary election and took a large number of seats. Also, the party played a key role in bringing Khatami to power during the seventh presidential election (Nozari, 2001).

Mohammad Khatami entered the seventh presidential election in 1997 with strong support received from political moderates, intellectuals, students, and a few other political parties. Khatami won nearly 70 percent of the popular votes based on the strength of his promises to initiate social reforms, promote civil society, and encourage political development. His victory had launched reform movement, sparked political development, and proliferated the newspapers – most of which were dependent upon the parties. Khatami's political reform supported the democratisation process inside Iran, leading towards the promotion of democracy and civil society in the country (Chaichian, 2003).

During his two terms appointed as the President for the Republic of Iran, Khatami advocated freedom of expression, tolerance and civil society, diplomatic relationship with other regions including Asia and the Europe, and an economic policy that supported free market and foreign investment. However, his policies of reform led to constant clashes with the hard-line and conservative Islamists existed in the Iranian government. The conservative Islamists were the group who controlled powerful governmental organisations like the Guardian Council, whose members were appointed by the Supreme Leader. President Khatami gained less support from the Supreme Leader and by the end of his presidency, many of his followers expressed disappointment against him. This internal problem imposed a great challenge for Khatami during his administration.

In spite of the internal problem, an apparent comparison was made between Khatami and the ruling government before Khatami's occupation – led by the President Rafsanjani. The differences between Khatami's government and Rafsanjani's government were mainly in terms of their views on economics and politics. Khatami emphasised on the political reform and promotion of democracy in Iran, while Rafsanjani emphasised on the economic development (Chaichian, 2003). Moreover, Khatami's period witnessed the emergence of the greatest number of political parties. His political reform consisted of several significant aspects, for example (i) the transformation of election law; (ii) the redefinition of political crime; and (iii) the strengthening of civil society. Thus, this study took an endeavour to examine the process of political reform during Khatami presidency from 1997 to 2005.

### 1.3 The Problem Statement

Mohammad Khatami was elected as the President of Iran in the seventh presidential election in 1997. The election illustrated an important result for the history of Iranian election, whereby there was a staggering amount of voters – a turnout rate of 70 percent. This indicated a significantly high public confidence from the Iranians towards Khatami's leadership and his party. In fact, two political parties, IRMO and ECP, were of the views that 20 million votes which Khatami received in the seventh presidential election, were a signal of "votes for a change" (Hajjarian, 2000). It was the starting point of the present study's problem statement.

After Khatami's victory in 1997, he tried to implement his reform programs. He believed that the Iranians and the country's constitution had the capacity to reform and the reformation should start from the regime (Tajik, 2004). One reform action that Khatami implemented was the redefinition of Political Crime Act in accordance with Article 123 of the constitution which had not been done by the previous government. In 2004, he sent this act to the parliament and it was approved, but the Guardian Council rejected the act. Nevertheless, the implementation of Political Crime Act was an important element in the creation of civil society.

Although Khatami received rejection and less support from the Guardian Council, he believed that the reformation led to the improvement of social rights and democratic government, as well as the promotion of a tolerant and civil society (Sariolghalam, 2013). In conjunction with this, Khatami encouraged newspaper to express a wide range of political views – via press law reform in the year 2000. He wanted the press to be given freedom under the Iranian law and become more open to criticise his administration without any fear. Thus, Khatami announced that he advocated "freedom of expression" and asked people to criticise the high-rank politicians publicly (Dehghani, 2003; Hajjarian, 2004). In this sense, there were many reform actions undertaken by President Khatami from 1997 to 2005 which were still unfold by previous researchers. Therefore, this study fulfilled the gap by investigating the process of political reform during his administration and examined whether his reformation was successful or unsuccessful. This is the problem statement of the present study.

The second problem statement circles around the issue of the formation and growth of political party in Iran from 1997 to 2005. During Khatami presidency, the number of political parties increased from 170 parties to 240 parties, indicating a positive political climate in Iran. Another positive action introduced by Khatami was the allocation of fund as part of government budget in 2001 (Rezaei, 2002) to strengthen the political party and initiate its growth and development. These transformations led to the question "what are the factors influencing or contributing to the growth of political parties during Khatami's political reform?" This query is a crucial point to be examined.

Furthermore, Khatami encouraged the Iranians to participate in politics and also initiated Iran's city council election in 1999. Before Khatami presidency, the local council election had never been implemented although Article 100 of the Constitution underlined it (Sariolghalam, 2013). Moreover, in 2002, Khatami sent a "twin bill" to the parliament to reform the electoral system to which the twin bill later stipulated that the Guardian Council could not disqualify any candidates that had been qualified by the Interior Ministry (Mehrpour, 2005). These efforts were exemplary reforms initiated by Khatami and thus, contributed to people's active participation in political parties – a clear indication of a positive growth in politics. Therefore, this study discovered certain factors influencing its development and how these factors contributed to the growth of political parties during Khatami's administration from 1997 to 2005.

Khatami presidency era was indeed an interesting milieu to study for it was the time when political reform took place and political parties began to flourish; an event unlikely to occur prior to that.

#### **1.4 Research Questions**

Based on the background of study and the problem statement, the research questions of this research are as follows:

1. How did the process of political reform in Iran unfold during the Khatami presidency from 1997 to 2005?
2. What were the factors affecting the growth of political parties in the era of Khatami's political reform from 1997 to 2005? How these factors contributed to the growth of political parties during Khatami's administration?
3. What were the strategies adopted to cope with problems or factors that prevented the growth of political parties in Iran during Khatami's political reform? What are views of the leaders of Iranian political parties about this issue?

#### **1.5 Research Objectives**

The present study addresses the following objectives:

1. To examine the process of political reform during Khatami presidency from 1997 to 2005.
2. To explore the reform factors involved in the growth of political parties during Khatami presidency from 1997 to 2005.
3. To suggest ways in mitigating the factors influencing the growth of political parties in Iran during Khatami presidency.

## **1.6 Scope and Limitations of Study**

The scope and limitations of the present study fall into two areas. First, the research covered only the period of President Mohammad Khatami presidency and second, the time frame of the study is from 1997 to 2005.

After the election of Mohammad Khatami as the President of Iran in 1997, he promised to encourage social reforms, create a civil society, and facilitate the growth of political parties in Iran; to which these opened the path for political reform in the country. In the present study, the operational definition of “political reform” is the improvement or amendment of what was previously incorrect, wrong, corrupted, and unsatisfactory situations which occurred before the period of Khatami presidency. Therefore, the first scope of this study is to examine the process of political reform in Iran during President Khatami’s administration from 1997 to 2005.

The second scope is about the time bound, 1997 to 2005. It is not impossible for any research to examine political reform over a long period, but, in order to gain in-depth understanding of the political reform process in Iran, a specific timeframe had been selected. This research is limited to the years from 1997 to 2005, when President Khatami was in power.

Nevertheless, Khatami was chosen because he was the first politician who announced the need to reform the political system after the Islamic Revolution of Iran. Prior to that, there was no politician who dared to criticise about the offence and misconduct of the former government and political system. Khatami also openly proclaimed that the political system had to be reformed and transformed. Consequently, the majority of people voted for him because of his reformist slogan and supported his political reform.

In addition, the main difference between Khatami’s government and Rafsanjani’s government was their views on economics and politics. Khatami emphasised on political reform, development of political parties, and promotion of democracy, while Rafsanjani emphasised on economic development (Chaichian, 2003). Thus, during Khatami’s era, political parties were growing and developing because Khatami’s government facilitated them with various incentives.

## **1.7 Significance of Study**

This research is significant in revealing the phenomenon of Khatami’s political reform in the framework of academic research. It illuminates the hidden aspects of political reform during Khatami presidency. Also, the present study emphasises Mohammad Khatami as an exemplar Muslim leader to the

Muslims and global communities. He is indeed a role model of people's reformation – one significant point to be examined.

Second, most studies in the past focused on political reform in Iran and were written from historical perspective. To date, there are insufficient studies exploring political reform process in Iran that had analyses related issues including factors, strategies, obstacles, and problems of political parties. This study provides a more in-depth analysis using the primary data retrieved from the fieldwork. It is important to understand how the leaders of political parties perceive the growth of Iranian political parties and render their opinions regarding the factors hindering the growth of those parties.

Finally, this research is significant in contributing relevant perspectives to the body of knowledge, specifically to the field of studies in politics and government. The findings derived from the present study may positively contribute towards the stream of political science and specifically in the area of political reform and development. Suggestions and strategies from the findings can be used as guidelines to improve the growth of political parties whether in Iran, Malaysia, or elsewhere in the world. There must a resemblance of the factors and problems in all democratic countries. Therefore, this study is crucial in terms of its valuable findings.

## **1.8 Organization of Thesis**

This study is organised into five chapters. The first chapter is an overview or introduction of other chapters, comprising the background of study, problem statement, research questions, research objectives, scope and limitations of study, and significance of study.

The second chapter is the literature review, which concentrates on past studies related to political parties. It is categorised into five main themes: the conceptualisation of political parties, the nature of political parties, the development and historical perspective of Iranian political parties, the theories related to political parties, and the theoretical framework.

Next, the third chapter discusses about the research methodology that explains about the research approach, selection of informants, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, ethical consideration, and limitations or problems associated with the study.

The fourth chapter is the most important chapter of the thesis. It deliberately explains the findings, discussion, and results of the present study. Besides discussing about the political reform when Khatami was in power, this chapter also explains factors influencing or contributing to the growth of political parties

during Khatami's political reform. In fact, the research findings present the main themes derived from the informants, their follow-up comments, and from the researcher's notes. This chapter outlines some strategies suggested by the informants, which are applicable in improving the Iranian political parties.

Finally, the fifth chapter concludes the present study through a summary of the main findings and its research implications. Recommendations are also stated to further improve the functions of political parties, as well as other areas that require further investigations.

## **1.9 Summary**

This chapter illustrates a general discussion of what the researcher had planned to do during the research. It contains the background of study, problem statement, research questions, research objectives, scope and limitations of study, significance of study, and organisation of thesis. This is a part of this thesis where the researcher highlights the development of political parties and digs deeper into the political scenario in Iran. Next, literature review is presented.

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## LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

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