Chapter 4
Power Struggle and the Politics of Reform during Khatami Period

This chapter undertakes the case study of Khatami period to understand the power struggle perspective of the politics of reform. This chapter has four sections. The first section ("Sayyed Muhammad Khatami") gives a brief biography of Khatami. The purpose here is to evaluate the ideological influences on Khatami as they had important bearings on analyzing the actual intentions of Khatami while attempting to introduce political reforms in Iran. Next, an account of political life of Khatami is furnished. Here, the emphasis is on the period from 1997 to 2005 during which he served two terms as the president of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The second section ("Khatami’s Reforms") of this chapter presents the detail of those reform measures that Khatami attempted to introduce during his two terms as the President. For an exhaustive study of these measures, the two tenures of Khatami have been dealt separately. A comparative analysis of the two terms vis-à-vis his reforms have been presented subsequently.

The third section ("Power Struggle and Politics of Reform") deals with the power politics of Iran where the warring factions use all available means at their disposal in order to capture power. In course of time, the Islamic regime had become quite unpopular due to its failure to fulfil the revolutionary promises. The regime was found to be increasingly authoritarian and the people wanted some liberal changes. Despite the authoritarian nature of the established regime, there was some scope for real politics in the Iranian political system. Thus the reformist forces tried to capitalize on the situation when the regime was facing a legitimacy crisis.

It is observed that the reformist camp was not completely devoid of such personalities who genuinely wanted to bring about liberal changes to the system. Still, the primary aim of the reformists was to use the popular demand for change as an opportunity to snatch power from the conservatives and establish their own hold over the system. They used
the liberal ideas as a tool to fight against the conservative forces in their quest for power. All such attempts of the reformists have been captured in this section. Further, this section also explains the efficacy of such methodologies and why the reformists were ultimately not successful in vesting power from the conservative stronghold.

The fourth section ("The Tussle between the President and the Guardians Council") essentially deals with the tussle between the reformist President Muhammad Khatami and the conservative Guardians Council. The antagonistic relationship is understood both at the institutional level and at the power struggle level. The Expediency Council was created to mediate between the Majlis and the Guardians Council. However, it was observed during the course of this research that even the Expediency Council furthered the strength of the Guardians Council, posing further complications for the President.

At the end of this chapter an analysis of the Guardians Council has been presented highlighting its obstructionist role towards any attempt at liberalizing the Iranian political system. Further, an account has been given as to how this body proved to be the most uncompromising obstacle to any attempt at capturing power by the reformist camp headed by Khatami. Before going into the first section of this chapter, we give here a brief historical background which paved the way for Muhammad Khatami to emerge as a reformist leader in the Iranian politics.

**The Emergence of Khatami**

Iran has seen substantial changes since the inception of Islamic regime in 1979. The early years of the Islamic Republic was a period of a revolutionary social transformation. In this period the radical Islamist leadership made all efforts to Islamize the Iranian society. This Islamization took place in all spheres of life including the laws, political institutions, schools and media. Iranian people were even forced to observe strict Islamic behaviour and follow the Islamic dress code (Gasiorowski 2007: 74). This was however, not possible without huge mobilization of the people. So the Islamists even took up steps to mobilize people to earn their support in the implementation of such Islamic norms, apart from applying force where there were oppositions.
This mobilization was done through the means of inflammatory rhetoric. They also indulged in dramatic actions such as the US embassy hostage crisis. However, such efforts of the Islamists were not without oppositions. This opposition mainly came from their political opponents and secularized Iranians. So they made all efforts to neutralize such opposing forces. Consequently, the period of early 1980s saw considerable repression of the people in the hands of the ruling clerical elites (Ibid.). Because of the strategy of the clerics to mobilize the people towards Islamization, the repression could not result in a strong reaction from the persecuted people during this time.

However, much of this revolutionary fervour disappeared by the mid-1980s because of the popular unrest that grew due to the economic deterioration. This condition was seen to be the result of the continuing repression apart from the war with Iraq. Evidently, the material demands were now taking precedence over the religious conviction. This situation necessitated a pragmatic approach to the politics. “Since the Ayatollah’s [Khomeini] death, the pragmatic faction within the fundamentalist camp ... gained the upper hand in the ... politics of postrevolutionary Iran (Milani 1994: 219).” In 1989, when Rafsanjani took charge as the president, he responded positively by initiating a period of moderation (Gasiorowski 2007: 74). This began a pragmatic era in the revolutionary Iran.

Rafsanjani used a strategy of reducing the popular unrest by revitalizing the economy. He also complemented this approach with a slight loosening of the cultural restrictions. However, all the while he was in favour of largely keeping the established political system intact. Still, Rafsanjani was not without his own share of oppositions. As discussed in the previous chapter, Rafsanjani’s opposition first came from the Islamic leftists and then from the conservatives. The conservatives particularly blocked many of Rafsanjani’s economic reforms. This resulted in an anaemic economic growth during the early and mid-1990s (Ibid.). As a result Rafsanjani could not see much success in completely attending to the material problems of the people of Iran.

Rafsanjani’s failures in revitalizing the ailing Iranian economy despite his sincere efforts resulted in many people concluding that extensive systemic changes were necessary.
Still, not many people were ready to eliminate the Islamic regime altogether. The prevalent wish of the time was to find out the solutions to the prevailing problems without dissolving the Islamic political system altogether. During his presidential campaign in 1997, Muhammad Khatami was successful in convincing the people of the Islamic Republic that reforming the system was indeed possible without departing from Islamic principles (Ibid.). Such discontented people supported the candidacy of Muhammad Khatami and consequently, he emerged as the reformist president by a landslide victory.

I. Sayyed Muhammad Khatami

A Brief Biography of Khatami¹

Sayyed Muhammad Khatami was born in 1942 to a middle-class clerical family in the town of Ardakan, located in the province of Yazd in Iran. His father, Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khatami, who died 10 years before Muhammad Khatami’s election as president, enjoyed a reputation for fairness. Muhammad Khatami’s father was widely respected for his piety and progressive views and was a friend and early supporter of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

In 1961, Muhammad Khatami left for Qom, where he pursued religious studies and became a disciple of Ayatollah Khomeini. In 1965, he entered the University of Isfahan to study philosophy and obtained a bachelor’s and later a master’s degree. He became involved in political activity from this time onwards and returned to Qom for further religious studies. He also became friends with Ayatollah Khomeini’s son, Ahmad.

Eventually he came to the attention of Ayatollah Mohammed Beheshti. Beheshti was the chief ideologue of the Islamic Republican Party and a key tactician of the revolution. In 1978, Ayatollah Beheshti appointed Khatami to run the Islamic Centre of Hamburg

which was a European centre of the Iranian revolution. This centre had played an important role in organizing revolutionary activity in the Iranian Diaspora.

After the revolution, Khatami returned to Iran in 1979 and took over as the editor of Kayhan Institute, which published several newspapers. He later resigned from this position. Apart from editorship, Khatami’s background also included election to the first Majlis in 1980. In 1982, he was appointed Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, which oversaw Iranian films, publishing and mass media. Khatami remained in this position from 1982-1992.

During his decade long stay in the Culture Ministry, Khatami introduced many positive changes. Khatami encouraged Iranian filmmakers to take part in the international film festivals. He loosened the restrictions on the content of the books and periodicals. Further, Khatami allowed many foreign magazines and newspapers to enter into the country which were not allowed earlier. Finally, he overturned a ban on the live music.

Such positive policies of Muhammad Khatami were seen by the conservative forces as a little too permissive. This way Khatami made many enemies and he was finally forced to resign in 1992. Dariush Mehrjouie, one of Iran’s best-known film-makers said that since Mr. Khatami left, “we have followed a downward trend.” “They still go on producing films, but they’re more restrictive (Lancaster 1997: 9).” Despite his removal from the office, Khatami had made a mark in the Iranian society as a proponent of the positive changes.

Muhammad Khatami’s subsequent appointment was as the head of the National Library of Iran. He was also given the additional responsibility as the cultural advisor to President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. He held these positions until his election as the president in May 1997. During his election campaign Khatami had talked a language of liberty and tolerance. This was seen as convincing by the Iranian people since Khatami’s past actions had reflected his sincere convictions in such liberal policies.
Khatami's Intellectual Thought

Much of the political and intellectual thoughts of Muhammad Khatami can be understood by focusing on two of his recent books. Khatami's political views are laid out in his books *Islam, Liberty and Development*, which was published a year into his first Presidency. His other important work is titled *Islam, Dialogue and Civil Society*, which was published later in 2003. These books are rich reservoir of Khatami's thoughts and beliefs and serve as important source material for understanding his real motive towards bringing out political and social reform in Iran.

It is evident that Khatami was a staunch supporter of the principles of the Islamic revolution. He regarded the Islamic revolution as "a great historical transformation (Khatami 1998: 40 in Siddiqi 2006)." Khatami opined that the challenge that Iran was facing was to overcome a crisis that usually accompanied the birth of a "new civilization (Ibid: 52 in Siddiqi 2006)." However, despite his revolutionary credentials, Khatami favoured an approach of progress and development along liberal line. Khatami had said: "Our identity is rooted in the past; however, this does not mean that we should return to the past (Khatami 2003: 4)." Such beliefs of Khatami indicated his liberal orientations.

Muhammad Khatami was quite unlike other typical mullahs of his time. It is true that he was an Ayatollah's son and had studied Islamic theology in the spiritual centre of Qom. He had also participated in writing and distributing leaflets that denounced the American-backed Shah. In fact during the early years of the Islamic republic, he was one of its leading propagandists (Lancaster 1997: 9). Still, he had other qualities which indicated towards his standing as a relatively liberal.

Despite being a clergy, Khatami spoke English and German and was conversant in the works of Immanuel Kant and Alexis de Tocqueville. Khatami's relative liberal orientation was in such a contrast with his hard-line counterparts that some Iranians even referred him as 'Ayatollah Gorbachev'. Gorbachev was the leader of the former Soviet Union who opened his country to the West in the late 1980s (Ibid.). Such complements show how Khatami was perceived in his own circle as a proponent of change and openness.
Muhammad Khatami firmly believed in democracy and its virtues. He did not find democracy as something antagonistic to Islam. The achievement of democracy, according to him, was essential for achieving human potential. He believed in the compatibility of democracy with Islam. Therefore, he tried to convince the people that the problems of Iran could be solved by democratising the government even without dissolving the Islamic system. Khatami had indicated his belief in democratic process immediately after his victory as the first reformist president of Iran. In his speech on eve of his victory as the president, he told a jubilant crowd:

"Our backwardness is not due to natural resources or culture – we have both. Iranians are smart and creative, they are known for confidence and bravery. The problem is due to the lack of a correct, independent government. People do not have the opportunity to grow. Growth as a country needs sympathy, cooperation, presence in the social scene. It does not mean we should not allow different views." (Lancaster 1997: 9)

Muhammad Khatami was clearly in favour of mutual existence and tolerance. He favoured the freedom of speech and the propagation of differing views in the society. His belief in a democratic world is reflected even from his criticism of the Western politics which according to him aimed "to govern all corners of the world and to dominate the theory and practice of international relations (Khatami 1998: 61 in Siddiqi 2006)." However, Khatami made a clear distinction between the West's politics and Western civilization. Khatami praised the Western civilization by considering it as having important strengths despite having some important weaknesses.

Khatami favoured the promotion of liberty, justice and human rights which have been considered as essential virtues of democracy. He favoured such virtues not just for his own country but for the world at large. He truly believed that people of different beliefs and different backgrounds could indeed coexist harmoniously. Thus in a speech made to the United Nation's annual Heads of State Summit in 1998, Muhammad Khatami, as the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, gave a call for the "Dialogue among Civilizations". He said:

"I would like to propose in the name of the Islamic republic of Iran, that the United Nations, as a first step designate the year 2001 as the "Year of
Dialogue Among Civilizations’, with the earnest hope that through such a dialogue the realization of universal justice and liberty be initiated. Among the wealthiest achievements of this century is the acceptance of the necessity and significance of dialogue and rejection of force, promotion of understanding of the foundations of liberty, justice and human rights.” (Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran 2002: 21)

The initiative of Muhammad Khatami to designate 2001 as the year of Dialogue among Civilizations received worldwide acclaim. It was thereafter unanimously endorsed by the U.N. General Assembly on November 4, 1998. The United Nations called the governments of the member nations to draw up programmes to promote the concept (Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran: 2002). The universal approval of the idea of Khatami also showed that Khatami had made inroads into the heart of the world as a reformist.

Muhammad Khatami was widely accepted as a moderate. He was critical of those Iranians who called themselves as secular intellectuals. This is so because Khatami considered such movement as “superficial and cut off from the people” who wanted a place for religion in their lives (Khatami 1998: 72-5 in Siddiqi 2006). Khatami was equally critical of the religious extremists whom he saw as propagating “the parochialism and regressive visions of dogmatic believers (Ibid: 75).” Thus Khatami disliked both extremes and favoured a moderate path. Thus, the reformists, as represented by Khatami, did not wish to discard the Islamic Republic altogether. Instead, they wanted to make their country “democratic, tolerant, progressive, and in tune with the needs of the people (Siddiqi 2006).” In fact, this approach of working towards reforms by remaining within the system posed a lot of challenges to the reformists as we shall see subsequently.

II. Khatami’s Reforms

We have already seen how several key changes in 1988 and 1989 had initiated a trend towards a relative moderation in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Iran had agreed to the UN proposal to end the war with Iraq in July 1988. Also, Ayatollah Khomeini had died on June 3, 1989 of a long-standing cancer, creating a vacuum in the power structure of Iran.
Rafsanjani, who had emerged as a moderate leader, was elected president in July 1989. At the same time the constitutional review was approved by the Iranian voters. This review boosted the central control and slightly strengthened the power of the president who was largely ceremonial until then (Gasiorowski 2007: 59 and Clawson 2005: 116). Despite this change in the constitution, the president remained much below in the hierarchy of Iranian power structure.

President Rafsanjani formed a government that was dominated by centrist technocrats. The highest priority of Rafsanjani was to improve the economy of Iran which had seen sharp deterioration due to the war with Iraq. Such economic problems were also a result of years of inept and ideologically driven policymaking (Gasiorowski 2007: 59). With his death, Ayatollah Khomeini “had left behind an Iran with its territorial integrity intact, its Islamic regime well-entrenched, but its economy shattered (Hiro 1996: 166).” Consequently, by 1989 Rafsanjani was largely supported in his economic reconstruction programme. However, due to factional rivalries and ideological differences, Rafsanjani was forced to abandon or modify many of his economic reforms (Keddie 2003: 264).

During this time, Iranian parliament was dominated by the Islamic leftists. Therefore, Rafsanjani’s economic reforms met strong opposition in the parliament. This situation resulted in Rafsanjani getting closer to the conservatives who favoured him by vetoing many leftist candidates for the 1992 parliamentary elections. Later, most of the remaining leftists were also defeated at the polls. This way the conservatives got a large majority in the Majlis (Gasiorowski 2007: 59). This alliance of Rafsanjani with the conservatives remained in place for quite some time.

However, as the new Majlis elections approached in 1996, Rafsanjani ended his alliance with the conservatives, “probably fearing that a victory by the conservative Ali Akbar Nateq Nuri in the 1997 presidential race would push the country too far to the right (Keddie 2003: 266).” Rafsanjani had taken this approach due to his pragmatism. However, this step of Rafsanjani adversely affected his economic reforms. The conservative controlled Majlis started showing its opposition to Rafsanjani and the centrists. It blocked most of the reforms that were sought to be implemented by the
government of Rafsanjani (Gasiorowski 2007: 59). This had a major impact in the worsening condition of the Iranian economy and people became increasingly restless due to their deteriorating economic conditions.

As the presidential election approached in May 1997, some new alliances took place. After the defeat of the leftists in the 1992 elections it was shown that their popular support was waning. This led many of the leftists to become moderate. The centrists, on the other hand, were largely disillusioned with the conservatives due to their opposition to the economic reforms. Thus the leftists formed a pro-reform coalition with the centrists. During the election, this reformist coalition had backed Hojjatolislam Muhammad Khatami who was seen as a moderated leftist cleric by these factions (Ibid.).

Khatami’s landslide victory in this election showed that the reformists were much more popular than the conservatives and the people were seriously in favour of the reforms. Apart from the deteriorating conditions of the economy, the victory of Khatami and the ascendancy of reformists was also the result of a legitimacy crisis that the Islamic regime was facing at that time.

The Legitimacy Crisis of the Islamic Regime

Long time back, Richards (1990) had observed: “It is hard to know what constitutes institutional or leadership legitimacy in the Middle East (Richards 1990: 436).” After the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, Iran was suffering from a similar kind of legitimacy crisis. “The election of Iranian President Muhammad Khatami in May 1997 was an expression not only of a popular call for a more open and democratic society, but also of the increasing crisis of religious legitimacy in Iran (Roy 1999: 201).” This legitimacy crisis played an important part in the power politics of the post-Khomeini Iran.

Since its inception, the Islamic Republic was based on two legitimacies – religious and political. The position of Velayat-e-Faqih had been conceptualized by Ayatollah Khomeini as the embodiment of the simultaneous existence of both the legitimacies. The Velayat-e-Faqih was supposed to be the highest religious authority (marja or ‘source of imitation’), as well as the political leader. However, this congruence was realized only by
the personality of Ayatollah Khomeini. Therefore, “Khomeini’s death in 1989 meant the end of this double legitimacy (Ibid.),” since no one after him possessed such a charismatic personality.

Therefore, despite the constitutional power provided to the post of Supreme Leader, this institution has turned weaker since Khomeini’s death. Ayatollah Khamenei, who took the place of Khomeini as the Supreme Leader, possessed neither Khomeini’s charisma nor his theological qualifications (Buchta 2000: 52). It was required by the Twelver Shia religious doctrine that the adherents picked a living Grand Ayatollah. The chosen Grand Ayatollah was required to be considered as a marja-e taqlid (source of emulation). He was to be followed in matters of religious behaviour and social interactions (Calmard 1986 in Buchta 2000: 52).

Grand Ayatollah Hosein Ali Montazeri was chosen as the designated successor during the time of Khomeini for taking his place after him. However, Montazeri had criticised the government for diverging from the revolutionary practices. Due to his behaviour, Montazeri was sidelined by Khomeini. This resulted in a succession crisis since the Article 109 of the 1979 constitution stated that “the ruling jurisprudent must be a source of emulation able to declare a fatwa (Buchta 2000: 52).”

After Montazeri’s exclusion no one was left who could fulfil the required conditions to become the Supreme Leader. This compelled Khomeini to order the repeal of that article. Consequently, “the 1989 amendment to the constitution no longer stipulates that the ruling jurisprudent must be a source of emulation, or that he must be chosen from among the highest-ranking clerics (Ibid).” This effectively lessened the religious requirement for the post of the Supreme Leader.

Because of this situation the Supreme Leader lost much of his religious credentials. Now only the political legitimacy remained with the Leader. This issue did not turn into a political problem till the time all popularly elected representatives were chosen from relatively homogeneous ruling elite. This was the case until 1997 since all the presidents till that time had been chosen according to the wishes of the Supreme Leader. This left
the political legitimacy of the Leader intact. However, Khatami’s election as the president in May 1997 was against the wishes of the Supreme Leader Khamenei (Ibid.). This was a strike on the political legitimacy of the Leader as well.

The situation brought the religious and political legitimacies into contradiction. “If the Guide, who already lacked some religious credentials, was now losing his political support, on which legitimacy was his leadership still based?” (Roy 1999: 202) This legitimacy crisis posed a serious threat to the conservatives’ hold over power and the reformists sought to capitalize on that through mass mobilization. This situation was in fact the result of the unfolding of a constitutional contradiction which existed since the inception of the Islamic Republic (Ibid.). We have earlier noted how the constitution of the Islamic republic was full of contradictions.

No matter what the appearance of the state, the role of the religion in actual was defined by the political institutions in a religious revolution such as the Iranian Islamic Revolution. “Politics rule over religion (Ibid.).” The legitimacy crisis that was witnessed in Iran was leading to the supremacy of the politics. Consequently, a “de facto secularization” of the Iranian polity was taking place. “There was a growing tendency, not only among democrats and liberals, but also traditional clerics, to separate religion and politics, this time in order to save Islam from politics, and not, as was the case in most of the processes of secularization in Western Europe, to save politics from religion (Ibid.).” The transition of the revolutionary politics into politics as usual was complete.

Khamenei’s elevation to the position of Supreme Leader had resulted in this process of politics taking precedence over religion. Ayatollah Khomeini enjoyed the position of being the Marja-e-taqlid. However, until the time of Khomeini’s death, Khamenei was only a Hojjatoleslam, which was the title given to a mid-level clergy. Khamenei was not even a Faqih (Islamic jurisprudent) or an Ayatollah at that time. Therefore, his rank was raised overnight to the level of an Ayatollah. He was now made a Faqih and thus got the authority to issue fatwas. This was purely a political move by the clerical establishment. In fact Khamenei still does not hold the title of Ayatollah ozma (grand Ayatollah) which is the title given to the highest level cleric. Consequently, Khamenei cannot be
considered as a true marja-e-taqi'ld. Resultantly, Khamenei does not have the rightful claim to the highest political authority in Iran (Buchta 2000: 52-53).

This situation had placed Khamenei in a delicate position. His only claim to the legitimacy was his revolutionary identity. He did not possess either the religious or the political legitimacy. There was a danger that his position might result in his isolation from the people. "The conservatives in fact were pressing him to dismiss the president, sooner or later, as Khomeini did with Abol Hassan Bani Sadr (Roy 1999: 214)." However, the situation was not the same due to the weakened position of the Supreme Leader and therefore the removal could not take place this time.

Feared by the prospects of loosing control over power due to the legitimacy crisis, the conservatives started "waging a guerrilla war against Khatami (Ibid.)." Pro-Khatami candidates were barred from running for the mid-term elections in March 1998. This was done by the conservative Guardians Council which enjoyed such rights by the constitution. It also barred pro-Khatami candidates from running for the election of the Council of Experts in October of the same year (Roy 1999: 214)." It was under such extreme pressure that Khatami had set out on his journey to reform the politics and society of Islamic Republic of Iran.

**The Demand for Change as a Political Opportunity**

Daniel (2001) commented that "the transition from Sasanian to Islamic Iran should ... be seen as one marked by continuity as well as transformation, and the subsequent growth of Islam as a national development of Iranian history in its regional setting (Daniel 2001: 64)." However, the Khomeini era had taken the Islamisation a little too far which had its natural repercussions. When the pious motive of adherence to the Islamic principles was converted into a political tool for retaining power, the people reacted.

This reaction was gradual and hardly visible during the period of Khomeini due to his charismatic personality. However, after his death, the dissatisfaction was visible in all its manifestations and took shape of a movement which culminated in the election of Khatami as the president of Islamic Republic of Iran in May 1997. In the following
paragraphs we delve into the history of revolutionary Iran to find out how this movement of reforms took shape and subsequently was used as a political opportunity by the reformists headed by Khatami for vesting power from the conservatives.

The Islamic regime of the revolutionary Iran was largely the product of Ayatollah Khomeini’s vision of state and religion. Khomeini had written a book, titled, *Kashf ul-Asrar* (Uncovering of Secrets) during the oppressive regime of Reza Khan (Lal 1985: 10). This book characterizes many of Khomeini’s pronouncements and serves as a rich source to discover Khomeini’s vision and beliefs regarding the religion and politics.

Khomeini had strongly condemned the Pahlavi regime due to its hostility to Islam. Khomeini saw this hostility as “a part of a comprehensive plan to eliminate Islam as a social and political force throughout the Islamic world (Ibid.).” Khomeini believed that this plan was conceived by the major centres of imperialism and the likes of Reza Khan were the local agents who were entrusted to carry out such plans (Ibid.). In his *Kashf ul-Asrar*, Ayatollah Khomeini made his political and social ideology amply clear. He wrote in the book:

“Our Islamic Revolution has the pure essence of Islam. It is a credit to the world of Islam. The formula put forward by other ideologies failed to justify our Islamic Revolution which introduced new concepts and methods not only in Iran, but all over globe.” (Ministry of Islamic Guidance 1982: 17)

On April 3, 1979 Ayatollah Khomeini officially announced the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the 12th of Farvardin (April 1) was confirmed as the beginning of the Islamic Republic. Khomeini had instilled very high hopes in the minds of Iranian people. He had hoped that the deprived people would dominate in the new Republic:

“God, the Most High, has promised that the deprived of the earth, with His Help and His Grace, will dominate upon the arrogant. God will make them the Imams (guides in faith). The promise of God is at hand. I hope that I will witness this promise and the deprived will dominate upon the arrogant as they have until now. The way that we have gone so far in obedience of Islam and its laws. We must introduce Islam to the world. If Islam is
introduced to the world the way that it really is, the world will turn its attention to Islam. The goods of Moslems are precious goods but they must be offered." (Ibid.: 5)

Khomeini had also realized the importance of information media as an instrument of power. Therefore, the Radio and T.V. were brought under the control of the Islamic authorities. These media were used to propagate Ayatollah Khomeini’s programmes of Islamic revolution. Apart from this, the press censorship too had been imposed in Iran (Khan 2004: 29). Such measures had long term implications on Iranian society and politics.

"Ayatollah Khomeini wanted the media to reflect a proper Islamic emphasis and not to blindly follow Western or American model (Ibid.)." The newspaper editors, too, were asked to reflect "a proper Islamic emphasis" in their papers (Ibid.). Khomeini had very explicitly expressed his apprehensions in this regard when he said:

"I am sorry that we still have ‘westoxication’ amongst us and we still fear, lest Western newspapers write things or that, for instance, a Western magazine, write something. They are, of course, opposed to justice and equality. They do not agree with human rights. They protect the rights of the super-powers in the name of human rights." (Ministry of National Guidance: 7)

Consequently, a number of restrictions were imposed on foreign literatures. Qaderi (2001), while analyzing political ideas of social and political personalities, has observed that “those who are acquainted with discussing political ideas know very well that the political ideas are the most complicated section of the philosophic issue of every revolutionary theorist or social reformer (Qaderi 2001: 40).” Hence, it is important to understand the spirit of the religious beliefs of every political thinker and it should be given priority over understanding his political opinions (Ibid.). Thus, understanding Khomeini’s religious beliefs becomes important if we attempt to understand his political ideas.
Ayatollah Khomeini’s religious beliefs had wide implications on the day to day activities of Iranian government. As we have noted above, Khomeini’s ideas on religion are expressed in his book *Kashf ul-Asrar*. In this book Khomeini writes:

“Religion is the only thing that dissuades mankind from treachery and crime. Unfortunately, those who take the helm of state in Iran either have a false faith or no faith at all in religion. These demagogues who speak fervently of safeguarding the interests of the country really look after their own interests. If a would-be member of the Parliament spends so much to buy votes, it is because he expects to gain more when elected. After a few months in office, a minister, supposedly poor, would amass great wealth. Are they serving their country wholeheartedly?” (Ministry of Islamic Guidance 1982: 5)

Such views were naturally directed against the prevalent corruption in the government. Khomeini claimed that adherence to the religion would also minimise such administrative menace. Khomeini gives an example of Mudarres, a parliamentarian, to illustrate his ideal government functionary. He continues:

“Mudarres was a pious Muslim clergyman and an outstanding figure in the parliament. When he died, he was as poor as before. Let those who have followed the example of Mudarres head the Legislative, executive and judicial powers to put an end to the adversities of the country.” (Ministry of Islamic Guidance 1982: 5)

Khomeini had hoped that there would be such pious Muslims taking up important government positions and that would ensure smooth running of the state machinery. Clearly, Ayatollah Khomeini considered Islam as a system which embraced all dimensions of society. Khomeini also “believed that a spiritual leader must be well versed in the divine precepts to lead the society onto the path of Islam (Ibid.: 17).” He observes in his book:

“A government that orders, in defiance of the laws of the country and justice, a group of fiends, in the garb of police, to assault innocent women and tear off their veils or kick them, even if they were pregnant, is oppressive.” (Ministry of Islamic Guidance 1982: 5)
Such beliefs of Ayatollah Khomeini were well intended. However, in actual running of the state, there were a lot of difficulties that were faced by the Islamic regime. The promises that were made during and immediately after the revolution were not fulfilled. During the time of Khomeini, the frustration of the people was not explicitly expressed. However, as the time progressed, the poor performance of the Islamic regime made people extremely restless.

"The dominance of Islamically devised laws over people’s public and private lives and the suppression of their individual rights led to growing frustration and anger towards the regime (Jahanbegloo 2001: 124)." The Islamic regime successively introduced such measures that were found to be extremely restrictive and repressive. "A main concern of the state from the first had been the regulation of behaviour (Keddie 2003: 257)." Such regulatory behaviour was enforced with full zeal and the regime also tried to mobilise people for the adherence of such norms.

There seemed no end to the restrictions as the regime banned music, alcoholic drinks and publication of un-Islamic materials. The social contact between unmarried men and women was prohibited. Further, repressive dress regulations for both men and women were imposed. The enforcement of such measures was ensured by the establishment of detention centres and severe punishments to the guilty (Jahanbegloo 2001: 124). "Gender segregation and dress codes were perhaps the most important part of behavioural regulation (Keddie 2003: 257)."

"The Iranian revolution was a socio-political revolution in the true sense (Islamic Culture and Relations Organization 2001: v)." However, the same socio-political causes were responsible for the discontent of Iranian people from the Islamic regime. Ayatollah Khomeini had earlier promised to the Iranians:

"In an Islamic Republic, there is no oppression. In an Islamic Republic, situations of forcefulness do not exist. The rich cannot speak forcibly to the poor. They cannot exploit them." (Ministry of National Guidance: 8)
However, such social equality could not be achieved even after two decades of the revolution. All that was left in Iran was the repressive cultural norms (Rhanema 1996: 15). Even the opposition political parties were suppressed. Most of the serious opponents were forced to flee the country. “Any serious criticism of the Islamic regime was considered to be undermining and jeopardizing the achievements of the revolution and had to be violently crushed (Jahanbegloo 2001: 124).” There appeared to be a zero level tolerance against any criticism of the Islamic regime.

Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians were the only religious minorities recognized in the county, who could practice their religion ‘within the limits of the law’ (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Article 13 in Jahanbegloo 2001: 124) There was widespread gender discrimination. Keddie (2003) observes how the condition of women was completely changed to their disadvantage during the Islamic regime. She observes:

“The most contentious and central social questions concerned women. Women who had benefited from Pahlavi reforms were alarmed in March 1980 by Khomeini’s order ending the Family Protection Law (FPL) and requiring Islamic dress, Khomeini made a tactical retreat regarding dress after massive women’s protests. In July, however, government employees were ordered to wear “Islamic dress,” and a year later the majles required all women to do so.” (Keddie 2003: 257)

Ayatollah Khomeini had made his intentions very clear how he wished to change all the rules that were in place during the Shah regime. In his book, Kashf ul-Asrar, Ayatollah Khomeini had said:

“All the orders issued by the dictatorial regime of the bandit Reza Khan have no value at all. The laws passed by his parliament must be scrapped and burned. All the idiotic words that have proceeded from the brain of that illiterate soldier are rotten and it is only the law of God that will remain and resist the ravages of time.” (Lal 1985: 10)

Although these words were said much before the Islamic revolution, Khomeini actually did what he had said. Consequently, the reversal of laws, especially relating to women, turned out to be extremely repressive. The repressive period of Islamic regime had
endured for very long. Depicting the picture of gloom during this period of Islamic regime, Jahanbegloo (2001) chronicles:

“Hardly any Iranian citizen, regardless of social class, who lived in the Islamic Republic was spared humiliation at the hands of the newly empowered group which enjoyed the power it had been given and fulfilled its duty zealously – stopping cars to search for cassette tapes or alcohol, loading un-Islamically dressed men and women into mini buses to take them to detention centres run by the Islamic volunteer force became routine. In the meantime, the system also proved ~at it could rally huge numbers of devoted supporters on many occasions (it is widely believed, however, that these were from among peasants and government employees). A powerful focus for the spread of terror throughout the country was the network of small groups of vigilantes who justified their actions as defence of the Islamic revolution.” (Jahanbegloo 2001: 125)

Consequently, two decades after the Islamic revolution the majority of the people manifested their despair and frustration with its outcome. The revolution had evidently failed to fulfil its promise. Such dissatisfied and frustrated people rallied behind Mohammad Khatami who was seen as a reformist because of his belief that it was possible to bring out the political and social reform based on Islamic principles (Jahanbegloo 2001: 122).

The people of Iran had responded positively when Khatami talked a language of “respect for individual freedom and increase of general tolerance in society (Ibid.: 125)” during his presidential campaign in 1997. Khatami had attended to the prevalent national sentiment. He had showed his conviction to the attainment of democracy through the religion. Khatami had said: “The principle of a civil society is that people have the right to decide their own future; in Islam we believe that God is the only power that can rule humankind and he wants humankind to decide its fate (Press conference with domestic and foreign journalists, December 14, 1997 in Jahanbegloo 2001: 125).” Such views of Khatami promised some hope to the people against the extreme repression that was highly prevalent in the Iranian society since the beginning of the revolution.

Ansari (2005) had observed that “an appreciation of the historical context of the reform movement in Iran is essential to an appreciation of its social depth and durability (Ansari
This view, though quoted in a different context, applies appropriately to the political reforms of Khatami and his allies. The demand that was generated for the political reform in Iran and the common people’s participation in generating them find parallels in Iranian history. Bayat (1997) has identified the importance of common people in the Iranian history. These common people had played major role in generating this demand for change during the repressive regime of Islamic Republic as they had done during the authoritarian regime of the Shah.

The way, “the emergence of factions in Islamic Iran was inevitable (Milani 1997: 86),” the reaction to the Islamic regime too, was not unprecedented. The political thoughts of earlier liberal Iranian figures also gave impetus to this wave of reforms as they were reviewed and given much emphasis during this period preceding Khatami’s election in 1997. “In the 1990s, Islamic intellectuals emerged in new relationships to political power (Esposito 2001: 22).” To such intellectuals, thinkers like Abdolkarim Soroush provided an example of “a rethinking of the Islamic revolutionary tradition (Ibid.).”

The thoughts and beliefs of Ali Shariati and Banisadr were highlighted by the intellectuals and reformist segment of the media. Shariati wanted to give Islam “a dynamic quality so that it survived and triumphed in modern times (Mirsepassi 2000: 116).” Ali Shariati was widely considered as the ideological father of the Islamic Revolution. His life spanned “the highly sensitive period of change during which a conscious effort was made by the Pahlavi dynasty to push Iran from its presumed traditional status towards a Western-defined state of modernity (Rahnema 1989: ix).”

Shariati has been considered as a product of the transformation that was initiated by Reza Shah. He had become an instrumental figure in the fall of the Pahlavi dynasty. “In this respect, his life reflects the convulsions of a culturally rich and historically ancient society confronted with the ideas of changing times (Ibid.).”

Shariati’s had made it his mission to revolutionize and modernize the understanding and interpretation of Islam. “He was probably the only twentieth-century Iranian intellectual who created a socio-political momentum which gave birth to a social movement,
culminating in a revolution (Ibid.: 370).” Shariati believed that the revolution would end the dualities of the system and would “usher in a personal, social, political, economic and religious monotheism, imposing the will of the good and divine over the evil and satanic (Ibid.).”

Just like Ali Shariati, Banisadr’s thoughts too had a lot of appeal during this movement of reform in the Iranian society. This was particularly so among the intellectual circles of Iran. Banisadr had said during the early years of revolution:

“In any case, when we want to decide upon the best method, instead of looking back at how Mohammad acted, we should ask ourselves what Mohammad would do if he were here today. In other words, we must confront the issues by seeking help from the system of “comprehensive understanding” which the Prophet possessed. In this way, instead of looking at what he did, we look at what he would do if he were here. And the problem will be solved sooner.” (Banisadr 1981: 6)

Such thoughts had much appeal against the highly restrictive and repressive Islamic regime and against this backdrop “Khatami presented himself as a man with a strong sense of nationalism and devoted to Islam, whose challenge was to build a democracy on the principles of Islam (Jahanbegloo 2001: 125).”

Khatami had much appeal to many of the ignored sections of the Islamic Republic. He was supported by the youth, women as well as the dissenters who were tolerated but not allowed to engage in political activity. Khatami gave a call for the establishment of jameyeh madani (civil society) and favoured an increased tolerance in the Iranian society (Ibid.: 128). Such efforts of Muhammad Khatami elevated him to the position of the leader of the reform movement.

When Khatami had won in a landslide victory on May 23, 1997, he had immense support of the people. However, he had little authority as President since the post of the president came very low in the power hierarchy and there were many additional restrictions on him because of his reformist credentials. His Interior Minister was not given the authority of the police force. The state television and radio were also not under his control. The Majlis
too was dominated by his anti-reformist opponents (Ibid.). Therefore, Khatami was compelled to take a cautious approach towards his reforms.

Khatami’s First Term as President
The exceptional margin with which Khatami won in the presidential election of 1997 signified one thing very clearly. More than supporting Khatami as a person, the voters had tried to express loudly their extreme dissatisfaction with the clerical establishment due to their poor performance during the last two decades (Jahanbegloo 2001: 133). Still the people of Islamic Republic “did not call for the downfall of the regime (Ibid.).” Khatami had convinced the people during his election campaign that the reform of the Iranian society and politics was possible along Islamic lines and people were willing to give him a chance to democratise the Islamic Republic.

The way Muhammad Khatami was elected, that too with a huge margin, was indeed surprising and “temporarily threw the conservatives off balance and gave the reformists a chance to carry out their programme of reforms (Gasiorowski 2007: 59).” It appeared that even the conservatives were not aware of the extent to which people were dissatisfied with them. The first task of the reformists was to promote democracy. It was logical since ensuring free and fair elections would have provided them the control over the Majlis. This way they would have stopped the conservatives’ from blocking their other reform programmes (Ibid.).

Political parties are considered essential constituting factor for a successful democracy. They perform important functions of political articulation and aggregation of interests of the people and are important part of the political system, more importantly of a democratic system. However, there was the absence of formally recognised political parties in the Islamic Republic. In Iranian polity, this function of political articulation was performed by the different factions through their representative newspapers. Further, even the press in the Islamic Republic was not free and were facing a number of restrictions on them. Thus for any democratic process to take place, the freedom of press was to be ensured in the first place.
Therefore, Khatami and his supporters "began to pursue political reform, liberalizing the press, loosening restrictions on political activity, and challenging the conservatives' control over state institutions (Gasiorowski 2007: 59)." Such steps were, however, taken with extreme caution as the reformists were aware of the political realities of the time. Simultaneously, President Khatami sought to end the International isolation of the Islamic Republic which was mainly the result of its antagonistic relations with the United States. Therefore, after his election Khatami gave positive signals to the United States (Theodoulou 28 May 1997). Khatami's rapprochement was indeed appreciated in the diplomatic circles and it was expected that he would "gradually steer his country to a more moderate path, which could persuade Washington to reduce its hostility (Ibid.)."

However, Khatami was walking a tightrope and he was well aware that he would not be spared by the conservatives if he made any compromises with Washington. Thus he had also made it clear, perhaps for his conservative audiences that the initiative to the good relations would have to be taken up by the Washington and not Iran (Ibid.). At each step, Khatami had to "painfully demonstrate that he had no intention of challenging the basis of the Islamic Revolution (Ibid.)." He was well aware of the fact that despite his being president of the country, he was in no way the most powerful in the political system.

Therefore, soon after getting elected, Khatami had shown his commitment to the Islamic revolution and his respect for its founding father by visiting the mausoleum of late Ayatollah Khomeini (Ibid.). He had people's support. He had got an overwhelming 70 percent vote which showed how much the public had resented the incompetence, corruption and suffocating repression of the clerical regime. "This verdict also showed that the allure and pressure of globalization was still acting upon Iran, even in its isolation (Friedman 10 June 1997)." Despite such huge demand of opening up of the system, the conservatives were not willing to let loose their control over the power. Therefore, Khatami had to be extremely careful not to antagonise the conservatives too much in the first instance.

Commenting on Iranian's obsession with Islamic rule, Friedman (10 June 1997) said: "Over time, that network will punish any country that over indulges either its body or its
soul. For instance, France is over-indulging its body, by trying to maintain a cushy lifestyle without the resources to sustain it. Iran can be said to be over-indulging its soul (Ibid.). This kind of indulgence had brought Iran to a cross road where the regime was finding it hard to convince the people about the efficacy of the Islamic principles and the dissatisfaction were increasing due to the lack of material development of Iran.

The people of Iran had hoped that Muhammad Khatami would strike a new balance between the spiritual and the material. Khatami had said that Iran could learn from the West which had ‘a superb civilization’ and had influenced all parts of the world (Ibid.). However, striking this balance was not that easy for a country like Iran. Friedman prophesied: “He may discover when he tries to act on his mandate that the Iranian Islamic system is much like the old Soviet system – everything is connected to everything else, and once you try to reform it, you expose all of its contradictions (Ibid.).” His prophesy indeed turned out to be true; as we shall see later.

Iranian leadership was under “some real pressure from within (Ibid.).” Khatami had sought to capitalize on this pressure and set out on his course to reforms. Khatami made the press his arm for spreading his message around the country. He sought to build the foundation of democracy through the help of press (Jahanbegloo 2001: 129). He tried to relieve the press from the restrictions that were imposed by the two decades of clerical control. “For the first time in the history of Iran, independent newspapers flourished and began criticizing the government and the establishment (Ibid.).” A major segment of the press came in support of Khatami and his reforms programme.

Such newspapers gave expression to the public dissatisfaction and made known their demanded for freedom. “They began asking if the Islamic Republic was, indeed, a democratic state and they even suggested the separation of state from religion (Ibid.).” Such demands could not be made so openly earlier. Now the people of Iran were more open to such controversial debates. The press even came in support of the pro-democracy rallies of the students when they were attacked by the vigilantes supported by the conservatives (Ibid.). The clerical regime could easily get away with such attacks earlier.
But now the situation was changed to a great extent due to the participation of the press in the promotion of the reforms.

Naturally, it was not long that the conservatives realized the threat to their rule by the freedom of such viewpoints by the press. Therefore, the conservatives reacted strongly and started shutting down such newspapers that came in favour of Khatami and his reform programmes (Ibid.). Still the reformists had not lost all. The situation had changed at least to the extent that now the conservatives had to take recourse to the legal means. This was due to Khatami’s call for Ghanoonmadari that meant ‘the rule of law’ and was popularised very eagerly by his supporters. Earlier, they could have closed down such newspapers merely by force (Ibid.). Still the conservatives had their way since the Islamic courts always ruled in their favour.

However, Khatami refused to bow down, and his government issued more licenses for newspapers. Whenever a paper was shut down others would take its place. In fact one such newspaper calling itself ‘the first civil newspaper in Iran’ kept on publishing under six successive names in the span of two years (Ibid.). This way, the media became the forum for debate and dialogue and the “battle for reform expanded its base (Ibid.).” Such events had indeed shaken the conservatives by now and they had started realizing that stronger measures were needed if they wanted to retain their hold over power. They found their base slipping.

Consequently, the conservatives now started assaulting and arresting reformist leaders apart from closing their newspapers (Gasiorowski 2007: 59). They also attacked the reformists with the ‘demagogic rhetoric’. Notably, in this fight between the reformists and the conservatives “Ayatollah Khamenei largely backed the conservatives, using the broad powers of his office to block many reformist initiatives (Ibid.).” This clearly indicated in which side the Supreme Leader stood. “By the summer of 1998 the two factions were locked in a bitter power struggle (Gasiorowski 2007: 59).” It was becoming increasingly difficult for the reformists to move forward with their reforms.
The conservatives were attacking the reformists from all sides. During this time, the Majlis was dominated by the reformists and it impeached Khatami’s moderate Interior Minister Abdollah Nouri (Valinejad 22 June 1998). He was impeached on the pretext of “jeopardizing the nation’s stability.” However, Khatami refused to be bowed down and reappointed him as the deputy president within hours by creating a new post for him (Ibid.). Such measures of the conservatives clearly showed how desperate they had become so soon.

“The conservative members of Iran’s ruling clergy had been waging a campaign to discredit officials loyal to Khatami (Ibid.).” The conservatives now arrested the Tehran Mayor Gholam Hossein Karbaschi ‘on embezzlement charges’ (New Strait Times, 6 April 1998). Moderate Karbaschi was close to Khatami and this was clearly an attack on the reformists. Karbaschi had formed a moderate faction two years earlier to challenge the conservatives and ever since he was disliked by the conservatives. He was also seen as crucially contributing to the landslide victory of Khatami in May 1997 (Ibid.). The power struggle between the reformists and the conservatives had reached a new low with the arrest of Karbaschi.

Such disputes had been witnessed for the first time “over the course of the country nearly 20 years after the Islamic Revolution (Valinejad, 10 April 1998).” This action of the conservatives had threatened a popular unrest since the people were clearly seen as favouring the reformists. Therefore, the situation compelled the Supreme Leader “to step in to quell the escalating power struggle (Ibid.)” between the two factions over the issue of the arrest of Karbaschi.

The arrest of the Mayor was also a “rare public show of disunity” among the political elites of Iran and therefore Khamenei saw the urgency of the situation (Ibid.). Khamenei summoned the heads of the government’s branches including the President Mohammad Khatami, the head of the Expediency Council, Hashemi Rafsanjani, Parliamentary Speaker Ali Akbar Nateq Nouri and Chief Justice Ayatollah Muhammad Yazdi for discussing the issue (Ibid.). Among these figures, Akbar Nateq Nouri and Muhammad Yazdi were the conservatives.
Ayatollah Khamenei instructed the President and the Chief Justice to "coordinate fully" on the matter and "fully observe laws of the nation and justice (Ibid.)." This issue had posed "the most serious challenge" to Khatami since he took office (Ibid.) and its timing was "directly related to the power struggle" between the reformists and the conservatives (International Herald Tribune, 10 April 1998). In the anniversary rally, when the "students and other Iranian gathered by the thousands in Tehran to celebrate the openness installed by President Khatami" (Jehl, 25 May 1998), the memory of the previous months' political turmoil was fresh in the minds of the supporter of Khatami.

Khatami was greeted well in this rally and it was evident that despite the difficulties faced by him, people still had hopes from him. However, Khatami was cautious even during this time of jubilation. In his speech Khatami had said "people have the right to demand their freedom from the government," carefully adding, "but within the law (Ibid.)." He even hushed the crowd when it begun chanting "Death to the monopoly of power (Ibid.)." Evidently, Khatami did not want to be subjected to further anger of his conservative rivals. His conviction to the rule of law was very much alive. Further, it showed that he did not want to show any indication of defecting from the system.

A careful analysis of the whole issue brings to light that Khatami's approach so far had not been entirely unreasonable. "Since he formally assumed power in August, 1997, Khatami had eased press restrictions, creating a climate of free political expression than at any time in at least 15 years (Ibid.)." Although his influence was limited, it was mainly due to the number of constraints that he was facing. He was also encountering oppositions from the conservatives from all quarters, particularly so from the legislature and the judiciary which were tightly controlled by the conservatives (Ibid.). Due to these reasons "Khatami had kept a low profile whenever disagreements had turned contentious (Ibid.)."

In fact he had warned anyone from going to the extremes fearing that the tensions might spill over to the street clashes. Even during the serious issue of the arrest of Karbaschi, Khatami had mostly worked behind the scenes and was thus successful in persuading Ayatollah Khamenei to order the release of Karbaschi (Ibid.). However, Khatami's rival
conservatives were equally alarmed by the prospects of his reforms and tried to pre-empt any threat to their power (Ibid.). The Majlis, still dominated by the conservatives and led by its Speaker and Khatami’s defeated candidate Nateq Nouri, were planning to bring out such legislations which would give the conservatives more power (Ibid.).

Consequently, “fifteen months after his election as the President of Iran, Khatami was faltering under pressure from the conservative oppositions to his reform policies (The Hindu, 29 September 1998).” Although the conservatives largely accepted Khatami’s liberal economic policies, they were not ready to give in to the reformists’ demands of relaxing moral and cultural rules that were laid down by the Islamic regime (Ibid.). The question that Iran now faced was “whether the population’s growing discontent could be accommodated within the theocratic system or whether it would ultimately lead to a new revolution (Ibid.).” However, it appeared that the people of Islamic Republic were still not ready to answer that question.

Iran was facing a dilemma that was not easy to resolve and its politics was in an extremely turbulent phase (Mohan, 7 January 1999). Despite all the difficulties that Khatami faced, “his battle to reconcile Islam and democracy and end the tension between Islam and the West was of great significance for the future of not just Iran but the entire world (Ibid.).” Consequently, the international community was observing the course of this battle as eagerly as the people of Iran.

As a part of their democratising efforts, Khatami and his supporters were also favouring the formation of formal parties which they felt necessary for the evolution of the Iranian political system. “Some of them even applied for, and received approval from the Interior Ministry to form a full-fledged political party. That was not so easy since further approvals were required from other decision-making centres in Iran’s intricate constitutional scheme (Menon, 3 February 1998).” It indicated that the various factions were trying to consolidate among themselves to exert more pressure on the conservatives. However, there was not much progress in this field either.
Although elections were a regular feature of revolutionary Iran, they were not fought on party lines. Traditionally, the candidates were promoted by different factions and groups for the elections. For instance, Khatami was supported by a group called the Marja-e Ruhaniyoun-e Mobarez (Association of the Combatant Clerics) during his presidential election. He had also received the support of a group of technocrats who were led by the former president Rafsanjani. Mr. Nateq Nouri, on the other hand, was supported by a group called the Jame-e Rohaaneyat-e Mobarez (the Society of the Combatant Clergy) (Ibid.). However, there were no formal political parties like the ones that we find during the elections in a typical democratic country.

The absence of such political parties created difficulties for the people of Iran in choosing their candidates. The close similarity between the names of the groups created further complications in distinguishing them in terms of their manifesto or public postures (Ibid.). Under these conditions, "the voters could guide themselves only through their ideas of the personalities of the candidates (Ibid.)." Interestingly, according to the Iranian constitution, "those who wield power must subscribe to the doctrine of Vilayat-e-Faqih - rule by the supreme religious jurisconsult (Ibid.)." It basically implied that any political organization formed "with a view to ending the system would never obtain official recognition or sanction (Ibid.)."

Still, Khatami and his supporters tried to institutionalize their reformist movement by establishing a political party (Abdo, 13 December 1998). Naturally, it was aimed at countering their conservative rivals and therefore, not much progress could be made in this direction. Therefore, in the two years of his presidency, "Khatami defended himself with only his principle of tolerance and his insistence on the rule of law (Jahanbegloo 2001: 129)." He never directly challenged the rule of the clergy. However, his passive approach had cost him dearly in the form of his two strong allies - Karbaschi and Abdollah Nouri (Ibid.). The reformists were now becoming increasingly restless due to this passive approach of President Khatami.

Despite the repeated debacles of the reformists, the public wave was still with them. This was exemplified by the result of the first municipal council elections of February 1999 in
which the reformist camp achieved a landslide victory (Jansen, 4 March 1999). This election had important implications for the future of the reform movement. The reformists’ victory in the local council polls demonstrated that “even the traditionally conservative country-side sought change (Ibid.).” The other important implication was that this election showed that the younger generation had also revolted against the conservatives. Iranians over the age of 15 were eligible to cast their ballots and “at least half the voters were born after the clerical regime took power (Ibid.).” This election therefore gave new hope to the reformists in their attempts to fight their conservative rivals.

The holding of election to the local council was in itself a move forward because this was the first such election since the revolution. These councils had the power to appoint mayors and oversee the local budgets. “Khatami’s objective in creating these councils was to promote democracy at the grassroots level (Ibid.).” However, the conservatives did not stop their resistance despite their defeat in this election. They continued their attacks and focused mainly on the reformist press. “In July 1999 they closed a popular reformist newspaper, triggering six days of severe rioting that shook the foundations of the Islamic regime (Gasiorowski 2007: 59).” This event brought back the memories of the Shah regime.

It was the closure of the newspaper, Salam that had set off the university protests (International Herald Tribune, 15 July 1999). Thousands of students came out on the streets of Tehran and challenged the conservative authorities. The conservatives, however, responded by violently suppressing the riots which resulted in the intensification of the crisis. Tehran University was raided by the security forces and chain-wielding Islamic vigilantes which caused some student deaths (Ibid.). The student unrest had now spread to other cities. “The clerics who controlled the security forces were in danger of misreading their nation as badly as the shah did two decades earlier, thinking they could prevent change with tear gas, bullets and vigilantes (Ibid.).”

“Although the attacks on Tehran University were carried out under Ayatollah Khamenei’s authority, he had publicly condemned the incident. Yet his statement which
absurdly blamed America for the University raid, failed to appease angry students (Ibid.).” It took some time for the calm to prevail and intermittent violent incidents followed. Thereafter, the religious establishment staged a mass rally to show the support for the clerical rule in the country “but, significantly, also included statements of support for the originally peaceful protests of a week ago and a pledge to investigate abuses by the country’s security forces (Schneider, 15 July 1999).” This was a damage control exercise by the clerics.

This exercise was arranged with the collaboration of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and the reformist president Mohammad Khatami. The demonstration drew a heavy crowd which was estimated at more than 100,000 (Ibid.). However, despite the display of this confidence and strength, the demonstrations had evidently shaken the conservatives and there was hope that the reforms may get a boost (Theodoulou, 15 July 1999).

The six days protests were seen as a “landmark in contemporary Iranian history (Ibid.)” and the first “independent political demonstrations since the 1979 revolution (Ibid.). It was due to this reason that the conservatives had actually sought the help of the reformist Khatami to pacify the grave situation. Khatami, in turn, had obliged them since his supporters feared that “the violence could play into the hands of conservatives” and the conservatives “could use further unrest as a pretext to launch a determined crackdown and seize total control of the regime (Ibid.).”

There were also some hopeful observations that the reason of this consolatory approach during the rally by the conservatives was because “some sense might have eventually reached the minds of the conservatives” that Iran had “a large percentage of youth and that simply cracking them down on demonstrations and calling students stooges of US imperialism and fifth columnists just wont work (Ibid.).” Nevertheless, the most serious challenge to the conservatives since the Islamic revolution was effectively silenced.

Contrary to the general expectations, the conservatives continued their attacks on the reformists and now started arresting its leaders and threatening them of long
imprisonment (International Herald Tribune, 10 August 1999). "By using the clerically controlled courts and police to intimidate supporter of Iran’s reform-minded president, Muhammad Khatami, religious conservatives hoped to strengthen their own authority within Iran’s divided power structure and undermine reform candidates in parliamentary elections early next year (Ibid.)."

First such victim was Abdollah Nouri. Nouri was a popular member of the Tehran city council and held the post of the editor of a reformist newspaper Khordad (Abdo, 21 October 1999). Nouri’s indictment was according to the conservatives’ strategy of disqualifying their rivals so that they could retain their majority in the coming parliament. Nouri was a leading pro-reform politician and he was indicted by a conservative clerical court. This was clearly “a campaign to prevent supporters of president Khatami from standing in parliamentary elections scheduled for February the next year (Ibid.)” since a convicted person was ineligible for contesting elections according to Iranian law.

Conservatives were scared that the reformists might capture a majority of seats in the 270-seats parliament which was now dominated by them. So they did not want to take any chances. Therefore, they had brought a new election law to strengthen the power of the conservative Guardians Council (Ibid.). The indictment of Nouri was seen as largely a part of this plan. “Mr. Nouri was accused of political and religious dissent based on articles published in Khordad (Ibid.).” Khordad was the most influential newspaper among those which were in print and supported Khatami’s policies. Nouri was charged of showing irreverence through his newspaper to Ayatollah Khomeini and other leaders of the Islamic revolution apart from praising Britain and promoting improved relations with the US (Ibid.).

The attack on Khordad had followed the banning of Salam and Neshat, which were other important publications supporting President Khatami. The closure of Salam in July, 1999, had “sparked a wave of student protests, the worst since the revolution (Ibid.).” It seemed that the clerical establishment had not learnt any lesson from that incidence. The indictment of Nouri too was followed by a lot of action. However, this time the action largely revolved around the court. During the trial, Abdollah Nouri compared himself to
Socrates. "It was a self-fulfilling prophecy and with each new monologue he made before the court, his hand moved closer to a bowl of poison hemlock (Abdo, 7 November 1999)."

Although Nouri's newspaper was finally closed, his trial was "expanding the limits of debate" on the clerical establishment (Ibid.). "The trial had opened a new way for us [the reformers] to express our views", Reza Khatami, the President's brother and close advisor, told The Observer in an interview. "The political indictment against him gave him a chance to express his views about social and political issues (Ibid.)." This trial had "transfixed Iran" and Nouri had "infuriated the ruling hierarchy by using the courtroom as a pulpit to promote the democratic principles that caused him to be put on trial in the first place (Burns, 11 November 1999)."

Nouri had turned the courtroom into a seminar on democratic freedoms. He raised questions such as whether the Islamic teachings were compatible with a society that elected its governments. The way Nouri used the court for his speeches on democracy; it led to harsh criticism of the judges from the conservative newspapers. Such newspapers blamed the judiciary for allowing Nouri to "hijack the trial with his lengthy, often-eloquent discourses on democratic values (Ibid.)." There was fear among the conservatives that the long trial might kill the very purpose of the indictment.

"Some papers had called for the trial to be cut short as happened the previous year when another leading political reformer, Gholamhossein Karbaschi, who was the mayor of Tehran, turned his trial, much of it carried on Iranian television, into a showcase for the reform movement (Ibid.)." The same appeared to be happening during this time and the hard-liners were becoming extremely restless. "Although that was not at all what ruling clerics intended when they ordered Mr. Nouri to be tried, it was what they were now getting in the trial, which was being closely followed across the nation of 65 million through the blanket coverage it was receiving in Iranian newspapers (Ibid.)." The wide coverage of the elongated trial indeed proved to be harmful to some extent for the clerical establishment.
The people reacted sharply when Nouri was sentenced to five years jail term. The court verdict had also included an order to close his newspaper *Khordad* and a five-year ban on him from any political activity (Abdo, 29 November 1999). This led to the surge of demand for freedom and democracy among the people who were closely following the trial. Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat, which was an umbrella student organization with a huge following throughout Iran, significantly made a statement: “The important point is how the children of the revolution are put on trial so quickly and punished so severely (Ibid.).”

*Sobh-e Emruz*, a reformist newspaper wrote: “Abdullah Nouri's defence showed one could offer a rational interpretation of the values and principles of the Islamic revolution, an interpretation that is different from the official readings broadcast by the propaganda speakers of the monopolist faction (Ibid.).” However, the far reaching implication of this trial had been that it “called into question the legitimacy of the Special Court for Clergy, which was established by Ayatollah Khomeini to investigate illegal and improper behaviour among the clerics (Ibid.).” Conservatives had widely abused the court for harassing their reformist opponents.

It was now increasingly clear that the case against Nouri was a part of a strategy by the conservatives to imprison the reformist newspaper editors. During the same time and in a similar high-profile case another reformist editor, Mashallah Shamsolvaezin was sentenced to three years in prison on charges of forgery and questioning Islamic principles (Ibid.). Iranians clearly saw that such trials were the attempts of the conservatives to weaken their enemies before the February election. However, “more than an election defeat, the opponents of change feared the calling into question of what they regarded as the legacy of the republic’s founding father, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (Nairn, 30 December 1999).”

The punishment of Nouri was more significant than the other sentences handed down to other reformist journalists. He was handed such a harsh sentence because of the conservatives’ belief that he had carried out an “anti-Islamic propaganda”. “This referred to his defence of individuals and ideas whose influence might endanger the current structure of the republic (Ibid.).” Nouri had spoken in favour of Ayatollah Montazeri.
We have mentioned in a previous chapter how Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri was sidelined by Ayatollah Khomeini. Montazeri had been under house arrest for a long time now. Montazeri was one of the “longest-standing and most eloquent opponents of religious supremacy (Ibid.).” Despite his arrest, Montazeri commanded a large political following. “Two other leading critics of that principle, the philosophers Abdolkarim Soroush and Mohsen Kadivar, had also paid a heavy price for their beliefs (Ibid.).” These individuals had great influence in the minds of the people and due to their differing principles, they were considered as threat to the clerical establishment.

“Soroush had been ostracized for years, and regularly suffered harassment from violent groups. Kadivar had been in prison since April 1999 after calling for a clear distinction to be made between secular and religious powers (Ibid.).” These people were considered as dangerous because “as members of the ruling elite they had been closely associated with the Islamic republic, and because they had challenged the notion of political Islam, not as ordinary non-believers, nor in any anti-Islamic way, but on Islam’s behalf (Ibid.).”

In fact, the debate on this issue “within the upper ranks of the Shia religious hierarchy had been going on since the early years of the Islamic republic (Ibid.).” However, it was not in the open for a long time and the trial of Nouri had brought such contentious issues in the open. Nouri was not as great a scholar as Soroush or Kadivar, still because he had “taken a stand in favour of the right to freedom of expression, in a widely read daily newspaper (Ibid.)” he was considered as dangerous to the clerical establishment.

Within months of Nouri’s demand of freedom of expression, Ayatollah Montazeri himself broke his long standing silence. His first interview since his house arrest was faxed to the Guardian from his confinement (Abdo, 20 January 2000). In this interview, Ayatollah Montazeri expressed his vision for the future of Iran. This interview was published in The Guardian Weekly (20 January 2000). Later, a part of this interview was published by three Iranian national newspapers, Fath, Asr-e Azadgan and Sobh-e Emrouz, for which they were subjected to interrogation.
Ayatollah Ali Hossein Montazeri had been under house arrest for a long time. The timing that he chose to break his silence was significant. This was a highly turbulent phase of the reformist movement when they were facing many obstacles towards their efforts. He said that he had “spent a lifetime fighting for the independence and honour of this country, defending the rights and freedoms of the people (Ibid.).” Therefore, he considered “telling the truth” his religious duty (Ibid.).

His name was not allowed to be taken in public and those newspapers or individuals who propagated his ideas were prosecuted. His ideas and opinions were, however, read clandestinely by thousands of his disciples and seminarians (Ibid.). His criticism of maltreatment of political prisoners had resulted in his getting sidelined and now he lived under house arrest under scrutiny of guards. Even his children were not allowed to meet him without permission. His theological school was shut down and his assets were frozen. The “shadowy existence” of the old leader, born in 1922, had made him “a figure larger than life (Ibid.)” for the people of Iran.

Under this background, his “truth” needs some serious consideration and therefore, we reproduce his main ideas and opinions regarding his vision of the future of Iran that were imported from his faxed interview. His truth was “terrifying for Iran’s conservative clerical establishment (Ibid.).” He favoured the popular election for all the government posts including the post of the Supreme Leader. He said that “from the Koran one can deduce that government is a public affair (Ibid.).”

This belief was largely responsible for his current predicament. His criticism of Ayatollah Khamenei’s power and calling him “unfit to make religious rulings (Ibid.)” had resulted in his house arrest. He reiterated his opinions to the Guardian.

“The leader is equal to any other person before the law. He can never be above the law, and he cannot interfere in all affairs, particularly the affairs that fall outside his area of expertise, such as economics and international relations.” (Abdo, 20 January 2000)

Ayatollah Montazeri had also criticized the clerical establishment for refusing to give more power to the president when a revision of the Iranian constitution was made in
1989, shortly after Khomeini’s death. “Indeed the limitations on President Mohammad Khatami, who was elected in a landslide in 1997, had been a big obstacle to implementing his reform programme (Ibid.).”

On the limitation of presidential powers and its implications on the reform programmes of Muhammad Khatami and his associates, Ayatollah Montazeri said:

“How can the president implement the constitution when the military and security are not under his command? Whereas all social expectations are directed at the president ... all institutions of power are under the command of the supreme leader, a leader who according to some, is above the law and cannot be held accountable.” (Abdo, 20 January 2000)

On the parliament’s amendment of the election law after Khomeini’s death, which gave the Guardians Council the right to supervise elections, Ayatollah Montazeri said that it was the violation of the constitution. The Guardians Council was proving a big obstacle towards reform programmes. Even for the coming February election, it had eliminated key reformist candidates (Ibid.).

Commenting on the role of the Guardians Council, Ayatollah Montazeri said that “the law [constitution] is explicit on the fact that the supervisory role of the Council of Guardians pertains to ‘supervision over the elections’ and not ‘supervision over the candidates’ (Ibid.).” Montazeri also showed his extreme distress on the limitations to the freedom of expression. This was the primary issue raised by Abdollah Nouri which had resulted in his trial and subsequent harsh punishment. Regarding this issue, he said, “There is no tolerance in the Islamic society for hearing anything other than what is coming out of the ruling circles, a condition in which the children of the revolution are being sent to jail (Ibid.).”

Regardless of such criticisms as expressed by Ayatollah Montazeri, the conservatives had been doing everything to silence their reformist opponents (Naim, 30 December 1999). However, the people of Iran were not unaware of the dubious nature of most of the charges and staged trials. “As one court ruling followed another, the reformists were becoming increasingly strident (Ibid.).” This resulted in the reformists getting another
victory in the electoral battle when they won another landslide in the February 2000 parliamentary elections (Gasiorowski 2007: 59). Now they had gained control over a crucial body and were hopeful of facing fewer obstacles in introducing their reform programmes.

This electoral defeat had agitated the conservatives and they “reacted bitterly, arresting reformist leaders, shooting a key reformist strategist, and closing down almost all remaining reformist newspapers (Gasiorowski 2007: 59).” Faced by the prospect of further marginalization of their influence, the conservatives launched a counterattack. “In a few days after the electoral setback the Press Court had ordered the closure of 13 pro-reform newspapers, jailing two journalists, and issued a warning to Muhammad Reza Khatami, the president’s brother and newspaper owner (The Times, 27 April 2000).”

The level of intolerance reached a new low when a clerical court issued an arrest warrant for Hasan Yousefi Eshkevari. Eshkevari was an outspoken mid-ranking Iranian cleric who had criticised the clerical regime at the Berlin Conference (The Times, 27 April 2000). He was later “condemned to death for ‘apostasy’ and ‘war against Islam’ (Mir-Hosseini 2006: 1).” The political situation after the election was highly turbulent. In fact, the rumours spread that the hard-liners in the security forces were planning to carry out a coup against the Khatami government (Gasiorowski 2007: 59).

The Guardian had reportedly procured a transcript of a meeting of the Revolutionary Guard which indicated the drawing up “a strategy for reversing the political gains of the reformers, including provoking citizens to stage a violent crackdown (Abdo, 4 May 2000).” According to this transcript the final stage of the purported plan was to carry out a coup against President Khatami. However, this rumour was later dismissed by a member of the Guardians Council, Mohammad Reza Zavarei, when he said, “There are problems but it is not crisis. But if there is mischief, we will have to use force (Ibid.).”

Khatami was now on the horns of dilemma. He had repeatedly stated that he wished to bring out the reforms by redefining the role of the religion in politics (Jahanbegloo 2001: 133). However, he was never in favour of unleashing chaos by prompting a backlash
from his conservative rivals (Ibid.). Consequently, his efforts were repeatedly failing. He was also facing the prospect of losing the support of his own followers because of his slow speed of reform.

The conservatives, on the other hand, were equally perturbed. They had confronted the choice to either "accept that Islam can accommodate democracy and forfeit their ascendancy peaceably and constitutionally; or continue to insist it cannot, and trigger a popular counter-violence that could lead to the downfall of the republic, moderates and extremists alike (Hirst, 18 May 2000)." There seemed no solution to the impasse.

Meanwhile, the clerical regime faced a new challenge when "thousands of disgruntled members of Iran's underclass joined university students in a bloody battle with Islamic extremists (Abdo, 10 July 2000)." This was a spontaneous coalition of a new kind where students and the ordinary people of Iran were demanding the improvement of their social conditions. This was a "turning point in the struggle to redefine the Islamic Republic (Ibid.)." The pressure on Khatami and his reformist allies was increasing. However, there seemed no progress in sight.

Although the reformists had captured the Majlis now, their hope of using the new parliament for carrying out their reforms was soon dashed. It was so because the Guardians Council was now vetoing most of their legislations. Under the prevailing situation, "the reformists pursued a strategy of 'active calm', pressing for reform but avoiding confrontational actions that might give the conservatives a pretext for cracking down even further (Gasiorowski 2007: 59)."

The reformists repeated attempts to bring out reforms were not producing much results and "as the June 2001 presidential election approached, tensions began to emerge in the reformist camp, with radical reformists calling for a more confrontational approach and some even breaking away from the reformist movement (Ibid.: 60)." The situation reached to such an impasse that "President Khatami publicly admitted that he was powerless (Ibid.) and showed his reluctance to contest for his second term. However, "in
the end, Khatami entered the race and won another landslide victory, indicating that the reformists remained very popular, despite growing unease (Ibid.).”

**Khatami’s Second Term as President**

The beginning of Khatami’s second term was marked by some important international events which had implications on the domestic politics of Iran. Within months of Khatami’s election, the terrorists attacked the United States on September 11, 2001 and subsequently, Iran was declared as part of an “axis of evil” which resulted in the growth of reactionary tendencies in the conservative forces in Iran (Gasiorowski 2007: 60). The struggle between the reformists and the conservatives in Iran continued despite their general preoccupations in the events of Afghanistan (World Regional Survey 2003: 374).

“The conservatives continued to attack the reformists and block their reform initiatives during Khatami’s second term (Gasiorowski 2007: 60).” His re-election in June could not bring out much difference as far as the criticism of his slow reform was concerned (Naim, 10 January 2002). “In the latter part of 2001 the main focus of this conflict was, once again, the judiciary (World Regional Survey 2003: 374).” The only difference this time was that the conservatives were now targeting the reformist-dominated Majlis.

The conservatives started their attack by sentencing a reformist MP, Fatima Haqiqatju in August 2001 by sentencing her to 22 months in prison (Hiro, 11 January 2002: 15). She was held guilty for her remarks on the arrest of a woman journalist, Fariba Daoudi-Mohajer. Haqiqatju was held guilty of misinterpreting the words of Ayatollah Khomeini and insulting members of the Guardians Council. Starting with Haqiqatju, the conservatives continued similar attacks on other reformist parliamentarians and this way harassed no less than 60 MPs within a few months time (Ibid.). All these MPs were summoned to the court on one pretext or another but none of them were sentenced so far.

However, soon after, the conservatives intensified their attack and actually sentenced one reformist MP, Hussein Loqmanian. Loqmanian was sent to jail for 10 months on 26 December for attacking the judiciary in a speech in the house of the parliament. “The issue was the question of parliamentary deputies’ immunity over what they say in the
Majlis (Hiro, 11 January 2002: 15).” Loqmanian’s arrest was seen as a reaction to a strong speech of Khatami that was delivered by him on 20 December at Tehran University. In this speech Khatami had charged the conservatives with attempts to “torpedo political reform” and had described their behaviour as “retribution against the Iranian voters (Ibid.).”

The conservatives continued their attacks on the reformists in newer ways. Now, the conservative Guardians Council joined hands with the similarly oriented Judiciary and rejected a law on legal reform (Naim, 10 January 2002). This law was adopted by the Majlis a month earlier and was directed towards making the judicial procedures more flexible (Ibid.).

There was an increasing realization among the reformists that the reform of the Iranian society and politics was not possible unless some institutional changes were effected. Therefore in the latter half of 2002, they planned to curb the power of the conservatives by introducing two important legislative measures (Samii 2004: 416). The two proposed legislations were collectively known as the ‘twin bills’. The first bill was directed towards curbing the power of the Guardians Council and the second was directed towards increasing the power of the President.

This move of the reformists was seen as an important step for the president’s reformist programme. The debate on the drafts of the proposed legislations was carried live on Iranian state radio. When the twin bills were put to the vote they gained overwhelming support from the reformist-dominated parliament (BBC News, 10 November 2002).

However, despite the passage of the bills by the Majlis, it seemed unlikely that either the Guardians Council or the Expediency Council would approve them. Khatami had indicated that if that happened, then he would hold a popular referendum. Further, if Ayatollah Khamenei were to veto the referendum, then Khatami would resign, which would cause a constitutional crisis for the regime (Moaveni 2002 in Siddiqi 2006).
The conservatives, on the other hand, accused Khatami of trying to assume dictatorial powers (BBC News, 10 November 2002). Consequently, the Guardians Council successively disapproved the two bills citing many constitutional violations. This resulted in strong reaction from President Khatami who described the move as “unacceptable”. Referring to the reasons of the disapproval, Khatami said, “In their proposed amendments to the bill, the Guardian Council has limited the presidential powers to an extent that in certain respects the authority of the president is much less than that of an ordinary citizen (Tehran Times, 24 May 2003).” He further added, “The spirit of the bills should be respected. And without these [bills] work would be very difficult (Ibid.).”

Khatami also declined to forward the bills to the Expediency Council and hoped the dispute between the Majlis and the Guardians Council would be resolved before the elections for the seventh Majlis (Tehran Times, 14 August 2003). However, it appeared very unlikely that the bills would be passed when the reformists faced heavy defeat in the February 2003 municipal elections (McDowall, 2 May 2003: 11). “It left leading reformists struggling to decide how to push their agenda forward amid fears that the people had lost faith in the political process (Ibid.).”

Reformers were now split over how to move forward and it appeared unlikely that the reformists would pursue the referendum or Khatami would resign (Ibid.). “When the Guardian Council finally rejected the bills, much of Khatami’s momentum had been lost. It was too late into his term for a dramatic political showdown to have much effect (Siddiqi 2006).” Therefore, in March 2004, two-and-a-half years after the introduction of the twin bills, “Khatami gave up hope and announced that he was withdrawing them (IRNA, 17 March 2004 in Samii 2004: 417).”

In their public statements, Khatami and his reformist officials had shown that they were sincerely expecting the passage of these bills (Siddiqi 2006). However, Guardians Council enjoyed the constitutional power of the interpretation of the laws and it was highly unlikely from the very beginning that it would approve any bill directed towards curtailing its own powers (Samii 2004: 417). This event surfaced the severe restrictions that were faced by the reformists in changing the system from within.
In the midst of such intense conflict between the reformists and the conservatives, another significant development took place which was perceived as having potential of long term implication on the Iranian politics. Ayatollah Montazeri was released from his house arrest.

Ayatollah Montazeri, the ailing 80 year old cleric, was under house arrest for the last five years at his Qom residence (Muir, 7 February 2003: 18). He was freed on 30 January 2003. Montazari was the highest ranking dissident cleric of the Islamic Republic and was put under house arrest in 1997 for publicly questioning Khamenie’s religious qualifications and political (Ibid.). Montazeri’s release during this time was the result of a lengthy campaign by fellow clerics and politicians which included 120 reformist members of the parliament (Ibid.).

The apparent reason for the removal of his restriction was his failing health. However, the real factors behind his release were not spelled out. “The decision may have stemmed in part from the reported agreement between key figures in the regime to defuse factional tensions and consolidate the centre against the extremes (Ibid.).” Significantly, Montazeri’s condition was mentioned in the resignation letter of the Isfahan Friday prayer leader, Ayatollah Jalaluddin Taheri. In this letter, issued in July 2002, Taheri wrote to Ayatollah Khamenie:

“This disastrous and unprecedented restriction will bring disgrace and an ugly end. Even under the Shah, the dignity and respect and sanctity of the religious authorities were always there. Woe, for the fall of the clergy and decline of the marjayat (system of religious emulation) that we are witnessing, dealt a deadly blow at the hands of those clamouring in the political battle and playing the game of power....” (Muir, 7 February 2003: 18)

Because of such sentiments of prominent figures, the death of Ayatollah Montazeri under house arrest would have been devastating for the clerical regime. Therefore, the release of Ayatollah Montazeri had become imminent. After his release, Montazeri targeted the reformist president Muhammad Khatami for his poor performance. Khatami was asked by Montazeri “to stand aside if he were unable to fulfil the hopes pinned on him by the
millions who voted him into office (Ibid.).” Montazeri appeared to be concerned with the increasing disillusionment of the people because of the failure of the reforms.

As apprehended by Ayatollah Montazeri, in the municipal council election of February 2003, “the voter turnout rate fell dramatically from the level of the 1999 municipal council elections (Gasiorowski 2007: 60).” The disillusionment of the people was now evident. Consequently, the conservatives had won a sweeping victory during this election sharply undermining the support for Khatami and his reformist allies.

“The elections exposed a disturbing level of disillusionment, with less than 15% participation, a fall from traditional levels of around 70% (McDowall, 2 May 2003: 12).” The result of this election had shaken the reformists as they saw their popular support waning. Therefore, the next challenge to the reformists was to face the February 2004 parliamentary elections. The reformists’ problems were further compounded as the conservatives were determined to control these elections.

In accordance with their plan, the conservatives “vetoed almost all prominent reformist candidates, including eighty incumbent members of parliament (Gasiorowski 2007: 60).” The reformists showed their protests by demonstrations, threat of resignations and sit-in strikes. However, barring some exceptions, the conservatives remained firm (Ibid.). When the Guardians Council announced the list, it had more than 5,400 approved candidates. Still, this number was lower than the previous election due to the disqualification of more than 2,300 candidates. The number of disqualified candidates was in fact four times more than the previous elections (Muir, 10 February 2004).

The disqualification of so many reformist candidates resulted in a lot of agitations from the reformists. President Khatami’s government vainly asked the Guardians Council for a postponement of the election. The interior ministry feared the impossibility of free and fair elections. Provincial governors resigned collectively. However, none of these protests moved the conservatives. In the prevalent situation the “reformists suspected the hardliners might be planning to call in Revolutionary Guards or other pro-regime bodies
to administer the polls, and this could lead to President Khatami and his administration resigning en masse (Ibid.)."

Therefore, most reformist leaders eventually backed down on their protests and decided to contest the election. "They were then punished by the voters, winning only 17 percent of the seats filled in the first round, compared with 68 percent for conservative candidates, led by the Developers' Council, turnout was higher than expected, indicating that many Iranians had become disillusioned with the reformists and backed conservatives instead (Gasiorowski 2007: 60)." This election changed the course of the politics of reforms to a great extent.

"The main focus of Iranian politics now set to swing camp, in a way similar to the situation in the years of the Rafsanjani presidencies (1989-1997), when his pragmatic policies were frequently undermined by the hard-liners (Muir, 5 March 2004: 5)." The defeated reformists now tried to keep alive their struggle in a slightly different way. They did it partly through their smaller presence in parliament and partly by going back to the people (Ibid.).

They now made an attempt to rebuild grassroots support through civil society. "Going outside parliament and even outside the government gives us an opportunity to reorganize our party (Ibid.)," Muhammad Reza Khatami, brother of President Khatami, said in an interview. He further added:

"That is the main failing of reform: a lack of organization, or a strong party, so this is very important for us. Leaving parliament doesn't mean reform is finished. It means that we should share our duties with younger people going into parliament while some more experienced people come out and put their time into the party, which is more necessary than parliament for democracy and reform in Iran." (Muir, 5 March 2004: 5)

The optimistic reformists therefore showed their belief that the people still desired reform and "at least appeared determined to go back to the drawing board, regroup and prepare for a come-back with a more solid base (Ibid.)."
In its editorial, *Middle East International* (5 March 2004: 3), noted that the reformists' crushing defeat at the 20 February parliamentary elections was hardly surprising after the mass disqualification of their candidates by the conservatives. However, even without such disqualifications, the outcome was unlikely to have been in favour of the reformists. It further summarized the whole issue in the following words:

"Seven years after they helped sweep Mohamed Khatami into the presidency, and four years after the Majlis landslide that made the popular momentum behind them appear unstoppable, they were becoming a spent force. Time and again, their inability to implement their agenda for reforming the system under its own rules had been exposed. Despite ostensibly controlling both executive and legislature, they were systematically blocked and undermined by the conservative forces entrenched in the regime's unelected structures. Many Iranians had come to the conclusion long before the Council of Guardian's latest constitutional coup that the system was unreformable from within." (Middle East International, 5 March 2004: 3)

It was also believed that with this election, the "Iranian politics had taken a turn to the right (Muir, 23 February, 2004)." With the latest parliamentary debacle of the reformists, and only one year left for Khatami in office, the President was now regarded as capable of exercising only moral authority (Ibid.) without any promise of substantive reforms.

"If you interpret reform as a movement within the government, I think yes, this is the end (Ibid.)," said Reza Yousefian, a reformist who was disqualified during this election. "But if you regard it as a social phenomenon, then it is still very much alive (Ibid.)." He echoed the most reasonable assessment of the reform movement.

As the June 2005 presidential election approached, the supporters of the reformists were evidently disillusioned. Further, the reformists didn't have a strong candidate for the election. At last, the only reformist candidates were the Speaker of Parliament Mehdi Karrubi and a former cabinet minister Mostafa Moin (Gasiorowski 2007: 61). Consequently, a little known hard-liner, the Tehran Mayor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won on the basis of his populist campaign and humble personality (Ibid.). This final defeat effectively ended the politics of reform of Khatami era.
III. Power Struggle and Politics of Reform

“The 1997 election changed the image if not the substance of the Iranian revolution. The story of the eight-year Khatami presidency is how those high hopes dissipated (Clawson 2005: 127).” Khatami’s election was due to the support of the people who were frustrated by the clerical regime and wanted to change the status quo. Despite this victory, Khatami did not have a free hand in the policy making and their implementations. Although the political system gave some scope of real politics, the unelected conservatives had the ultimate say in the scheme of the things.

Khatami “fronted a politics that was partly rooted in the Islamic revolution’s own philosophy of activism and of the widening of political and social participation (Murden 2002: 176).” The people wanted change and freedom and Khatami had promised to deliver. The reformists wanted to vest power from the conservatives through their reform measures. They wanted to open up the political system for the elected representatives so that they could tighten their grip over the power. However, their conservative rivals were too strong for them. Further, Khatami and his allies wanted to change the system from within and this proved to be the main reason for their ultimate failure.

Despite this failure, the power struggle did take place in all its manifestations. The reform movement even “included a number of notable converts … who had been at the heart of the Islamic revolution and its security apparatus before being purged (Petrossian 1999, ‘Reformers Set for Victory’: 2-3, in Murden 2002: 176).” And it appeared during the Khatami era that “the Islamic revolution might have had some quite unanticipated modernizing effects (Murden 2002: 176).” The whole atmosphere of Iranian politics had reverberated with the voices of change, freedom and factional rivalries. “More than two decades after the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, an intense and frequently bitter struggle was now underway among the revolution’s surviving heirs (Brumberg 2001).”

In a typical democratic political system, political parties play important role in the struggle for power among the rival groups. However “in the absence of political parties”
in Islamic Republic, “newspapers had an unusual importance as the poles of politics, airing policy discussions and rallying individuals around positions (Petrossian 1999, ‘Hiatus at Half-time’: 2-3, in Murden 2002: 176).” The power politics was played not only on the journalistic platform, or in the Majlis, but also in the universities. The premises of such politics were laid down by the academics such as Abdol Karim Soroush who had contributed to “a more modern definition of Islam (Murden 2002: 176).”

Intellectuals like Soroush had rejected the notion that democracy was the exclusive domain of the West, and had stressed that “Islam and democracy” were not only “compatible”, but “their association is inevitable (Wright 2000: 40 in Takeyh 2003: 44).” Such viewpoints proved as catalyst to the reform waves that were witnessed during the Khatami era and this wave was sought to be capitalized by the reformists to capture power from their conservative rivals.

Such sentiments were echoed even by the senior dissident clerics such as Ayatollah Ali Montazeri who had declared, “We cannot proceed in the new world by having two or three people making decisions for the country (Yaghmaian 2002: 11 in Takeyh 2003: 44).” These voices had many followers and the people of Iran wanted more political and social freedom. However, there were others who were determined to stop their having it. “The conservatives had socioeconomic empires to run and privileges to protect, so they were not about to take all the criticism now coming their way (Murden 2002: 176)” and therefore these conservatives applied all the forces at their disposal to stop any substantial reforms of Khatami and his allies.

The reformers had recognised the importance of basic rights and freedoms. Therefore, the “terms such as civil society, rule of law and pluralism (Takeyh 2003: 44)” were generously popularised by the reformists through their discourses. Khatami sought to capture the essence of the intellectual current of the contemporary Iran by emphasizing that “protecting freedom of the individual and the rights of nation is an imperative enshrined in our religion (IRNA, 15 May 1997 in Takeyh 2003: 44).”
Consequently, "the ensuing struggle between reformers and conservatives saw heightened conflict over almost every aspect of politics and society (Murden 2002: 177)." This also resulted in the national elections taking centre stage which became an occasion for the propagation of various viewpoints. "In an ironic twist of events, the reform movement that began as a vehicle for expression of public demands was transformed into an avenue for mass infiltration of the corridors of power (Takeyh 2003: 45)." This was mainly the result of the contradictions that were inherent in the constitution of the Islamic Republic which had sought to make the state a republic as well as a theocracy.

The reformist coalition had followed Khatami's strategy of "proceeding cautiously and avoiding significant clashes with the conservatives (Takeyh 2003: 45)." They had hoped that the measures such as passage of legislation, freedom of press and establishment of the rule of law would "gradually reform the pillars of the state (Ibid.)." However, such measures of "incremental reform" had their limitations since the conservatives utilised their "institutional powers to undermine the popular clamour for change (Ibid.)." Conservative institutions such as the judiciary and the Guardians Council were "cynically deployed to shutter newspapers, imprison reformers and void parliamentary legislation (Ibid.)." Such obstructions "forestalled Khatami's quest for evolutionary change and his attempts to reform the system from within its own institutions (Ibid.: 46.)."

"Khatami's problems were entirely predictable because all Islamic experiments with democracy had a fundamental barrier to pass: the fact that the people and their representatives were not really sovereign (Murden 2002: 179)." This was particularly so because of the "well-organized and interest-oriented clerical bureaucracy (Murden 2002: 179)" that was in place in Islamic Republic. "The political struggle between conservatives and reformers was not just about religion but also about socioeconomic interests (Ibid.)."

The religious bureaucracy of Iran had their own socioeconomic interests to protect "against the more pluralistic principles of the reformers (Ibid.)." The struggle of political power was therefore also about the struggle over "who ran what socioeconomic hegemony (Ibid.)" in the Islamic Republic. And "until the religious authority and huge
socioeconomic system that supported the conservative bureaucracy became ineffective or unsustainable, it was difficult to see how the reformers could dismiss the conservatives (Ibid.).” Therefore, the politics of reform could not help the reformists in their power struggle with the conservatives.

The Politics of Reform and its Efficacy

Despite his ultimate failure to capture power from the conservatives, Khatami was successful in introducing some of his reform measures. His “new language of dialogue and tolerance won him support of the outside world and ended Iran’s twenty years of isolation (Jahanbegloo 2001: 131).” He reached out to other Muslim countries as well as to the Americans. He spoke highly of America and said, “The significance of American civilization is in the fact that liberty found religion as a cradle for its growth, and religion found the protection of liberty for its divine calling (Ibid.).”

This way, Khatami added pragmatic consideration of the national interest to his politics of reforms. He sought to combine the democracy at home with the peace abroad (Ibid.). “His strong advocacy of the need for civil society, the rule of law, freedom of expression and other requirements of democracy was matched by an unprecedented bid for reintegration of the Iranian society into the modern international system (Ramazani 2004: 557).” This could be made possible because in the foreign policy matters, apart from other important institutions, the president of Iran also had a significant role in providing inputs (Ehteshami 2004: 182). However, much of the efforts of Khatami were “drastically negated by the Bush Administration’s subsequent bellicose approach to the country (U.S. Department of State, 17 March 2000 in Ramazani 2004: 557).”

“The politics of reforms is a complex matter (Ansari 2004: 48).” Neither, is the politics of reform a domestic matter (Ibid.: 49). Despite his failures in domestic social and political reforms, Khatami’s “foreign policy has enjoyed relative success (Ramazani 2004: 558).” “A factor relevant to the reform process is the state of the economy and its impact on domestic stability (Ansari 2004: 50).” “The economy that Khatami took over form the outgoing administration of President ‘Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani – while in much better shape in many ways than the one left by Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mussavi in
1989 – was still a poorly planned, centrally directed, badly managed, and structurally distorted one (Amuzegar 1999: 535).”

Khatami’s efforts on economic front changed the face of the things to a considerable extent. Not surprisingly, some scholars have said that Khatami has been “reasonably successful (Buchta 2000: 202).” Among Khatami’s other successes, we can mention the end of the underground murder of opposition members which used to be carried out by the intelligence ministry network (Jahanbegloo 2001: 131).

It is notable that although the reformists primarily used the policy of reform as a political opportunity to capture power from their conservative rivals, it did not remain just rhetoric. This was so because the actual reform of Iranian politics and society would have perpetuated the reformists into power. Consequently, their effort to bring out reform was serious. Whatever little successes Khatami could see was mainly due to this fact. However, his conservative opposition was very strong and therefore, the reformists eventually failed in their power struggle despite giving a start to the reform process.

IV. The Tussle between the President and the Guardians Council

In his attempts to introduce reforms, President Khatami faced stiff resistances from many quarters. The unelected and unaccounted institutions of the Iranian political system were mostly of conservative orientation. Among such institutions, the conservative Guardians Council proved to be the most difficult opponent of President Khatami and his reformist allies. In this section, we take up this aspect of the power struggle politics in detail. In order to highlight the struggle between the President and the Guardians Council, it is also imperative to look at the role of the Expediency Council and its relationship with the Guardians Council. Therefore, we first touch upon the relevance of this institution.

Role of the Expediency Council

The Expediency Council was created in February 1988 to mediate the differences between the Parliament and the Guardians Council (Banks 1998: 431). Although, the
main purpose of Expediency Council was to mediate between the Parliament and the Guardians Council, “in practice, the Expediency Council can approve legislation on the basis of the arguments promoted by the Parliament or by the Guardians Council, or it can adopt a completely different position (Samii 2004: 406).” This factor makes Expediency Council an important institution in the Iranian political system.

The Expediency Council was originally composed of six clerics and seven senior governmental officials. This configuration was directed towards reflecting the tilt of the Expediency Council towards the non-clerical domain (Banks 1998: 431). However, “since its creation, the [Expediency] Council has undergone significant changes (Samii 2004: 407).” The most significant change has been an “almost threefold expansion in its membership (Ibid.).”

The expansion of the authority and size of the Expediency Council by Ayatollah Khamenei was seen by some analysts as “a way to preserve the influence of the clergy if it were to lose control of the Majlis (Banks 1998: 431).” Khamenei had taken this measure as he was lacking in the charismatic essence that was commanded by his predecessor Ayatollah Khomeini.

The Guardians Council and the President

There are many conditions that are specified by the Iranian Constitution for a person to contest for the President’s post. Such checks are further institutionalized by the creation of the Guardians Council (Banks 1998: 431). The Guardians Council is an extremely powerful body consisting of twelve members. Its six members are the specialists in the Islamic Law who are appointed by the Velayat-e-Faqih and other six members are the jurists who are elected by the legislature from the nominees selected by the High Council of the Judiciary (Ibid.).

The configuration of the Guardians Council shows that it is “desired by the Constitution” that this body should be “dominated by the clergy (Delury 1983: 473)”. The main responsibility of the Guardians Council is interpreting the constitutional law and supervising elections (Ibid.).
The original Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran had provided for the Guardians Council to ensure that all legislations were "religiously compatible" but it had "limited powers actually to veto legislation (Milani 1994: 154 and Bakhash 1990: 74 in Samii 2004: 405)." However this situation was later changed during the revision of the constitution in 1989. According to the revised constitution, Articles 91 and 94 provides "for the Guardians Council to determine if proposed legislation conforms to the constitution, and its six clerical members can block legislation if it fails to conform to Islamic law (Samii 2004: 405)."

A legislative proposal can be introduced either by a member of the Majlis or the executive branch. After the approval from the Majlis, the bill goes to the Guardians Council. Theoretically, the Majlis and the Guardians Council then discuss the bill and try to come to "some sort of compromise (Ibid.)." And when their disagreements are not resolved then the Expediency Council mediates between them (Ibid.).

Article 99 of the Iranian Constitution delineates "the power of the Guardians Council to approve the credentials of candidates for elected office (Samii 2001: 645)." According to this article, "the Guardians Council has the responsibility of supervising the elections of the Assembly of Experts for Leadership, the President of the Republic, the Islamic Consultative Assembly, and the direct recourse to popular opinion and referenda (The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Samii 2001: 645)."

The rationale behind this provision was "that the clerical community and the Guardians Council specifically had to protect a gullible public from demagogues (Samii 2004: 410)." However, "the extent of what is called 'approbatory supervision' (nizarat-e estesvabi) has been a subject of extensive debate, particularly since the 1988 elections for the third Parliament, when the Council tried to disqualify incumbent candidates (Ibid.)."

Commenting on the role of the Guardians Council, Ayatollah Montazeri said that "the law [constitution] is explicit on the fact that the supervisory role of the Council of Guardians pertains to 'supervision over the elections' and not 'supervision over the candidates' (Abdo, 20 January 2000)." Although the provision of Article 99 was made to
save the power from going in the wrong hands, it has come to be “the most debated role (Samii 2001: 645)” of the Guardians Council. This kind of power has also been seen as a great obstacle towards any kind of reform in the Iranian political system.

The “Guardians Council as an Obstacle to Democracy”

A careful look at the history of the Islamic Republic reveals that the Guardians Council has often used the power of “approbatory supervision” over the elections “to make sure that only candidates who meet its standards actually serve in public office.”3 This was particularly so during the two tenures of President Khatami when the reformists were pitted against the conservatives in a stiff battle for power. The meaning of the term “supervision” has been widely debated and “the most common way of justifying the Council’s activities has been to speak of it as a defender of Islam and of the revolution, and with references to Ayatollah Khomeini (Samii 2001: 646).”

When we take a look at the eight years of Khatami’s presidency, we observe that Guardians Council created obstacles at each stage of the reform process. While at one end the Guardians Council resisted the reformists from entering the representative institutions, at the other, it used its power of legislative interpretations to block most of the reform bills that were introduced by Khatami and his reformist allies. The case of Khatami’s ‘twin bills’ typically illustrates how the Guardians Council proved to be the most uncompromising opponent towards any reform of the Iranian political system.

Due to such obstructionist tendencies of the Guardians Council, it has been considered as “a major obstacle to the further development of democracy in the Islamic Republic of Iran.”4 And this has also been a major reason of the reformists’ failure in vesting power from their conservative rivals.

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2 Adopted from the title of the article “Iran’s Guardians Council as an Obstacle to Democracy” (Samii 2001: 643).
3 “The term also has been translated as ‘advisory supervision’. Approbatory, however, means that something is legally binding, with the opportunity for an appeal, whereas, advisory suggests that a choice is involved (Samii 2001: 644).”
Conclusion

In this chapter we have undertaken the case study of Khatami period to understand the power struggle perspective of the politics of reform. The first section gave a brief biography of Muhammad Khatami. The purpose here was to evaluate the ideological influences on Khatami as they had important bearings on analyzing the actual intentions of Khatami while attempting to introduce political reforms in Iran. Also, an account of political life of Khatami was furnished in this section. Here, the emphasis was on the period from 1997 to 2005 during which he served two terms as the president of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

We have found that Khatami was a staunch supporter of the principles of the revolution. However, he believed that it was possible to achieve the progress and development on a liberal line. He did not find such progress as anti-Islamic. This shows that he was not a typical cleric. He was an Ayatollah’s son and had studied Islamic theology in the spiritual centre of Qum. Also, he was among the leading propagandists during the early years of the Islamic republic. Despite such revolutionary credentials, he was largely considered as a relative liberal.

A study of Khatami’s thoughts shows that he truly believed in democracy. Further, he did not think of democracy as something alien to Islam. He considered that Islam and democracy were consistent with each other. Apart from his firm belief in democracy, he also believed in the mutual existence of different civilizations and cultures. Although, he criticized the Western politics, he distinguished it from the Western civilization which he thought had some important strength apart from some weaknesses.

Khatami was critical of both, the so-called secular intellectuals as well as the dogmatic believers. Instead, he favoured a moderate path. This clearly shows that the reformists such as Khatami wanted to make the Iranian political system more democratic, but they were not in favour of abandoning Islamic Republic altogether.
The second section of this chapter presented the detail of those reform measures that Khatami attempted to introduce as president during his two terms. For an exhaustive study of these measures, the two tenures of Khatami had been dealt with separately. In this section, we have also seen how the popular demand for change was capitalized by the reformers as a political opportunity to vest power from the conservatives. We have elaborated how in May 1997, President Khatami was elected against the wishes of the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. This event had brought the religious and political legitimacies into contradiction. It was also noted that the political upheavals that was witnessed since Khatami’s election was the unfolding of contradictions which existed in the Iranian Constitution.

The primary reason of the ascendancy of Muhammad Khatami was that by that time people of Iran had become extremely dissatisfied with the clerical regime and Khatami’s approach convinced them that he would take care of the ailing system. This dissatisfaction was the result of the enforcement of successively increasing repressive measures by the conservative regime.

Two decades after the Islamic revolution, the majority of the Iranian people showed their frustration with its outcome. People were crying for some liberty from such extreme restrictions. The revolution had failed to fulfil its promises. Hence these people, dissatisfied by the regime and looking for moderation in the Islamic Republic, rallied behind Muhammad Khatami who represented their views.

The people of Iran had responded positively to Khatami’s call for individual freedom and general tolerance during his presidential campaign in 1997. Khatami turned to the prevalent national sentiment and claimed that Islam was compatible with the democracy. The landslide victory of reformist Muhammad Khatami in this election caught the conservatives off guard.

However, despite having people’s mandate, President Khatami was not in a position to bring about substantial changes. This was so because he had little power and authority as the president. The head of the judiciary was his bitter opponent. The state television and
radio were controlled by the Supreme Leader. Even the authority of the police force was not provided to Khatami’s Interior Ministry. Further, the Parliament was also dominated by his anti-reformist opponents. These constraints compelled Khatami to take a cautious approach.

Khatami charted on his course of reforms by depending on the press and made it his arm for spreading his campaign for the development of democracy. Due to the absence of any recognized political parties in Iran, the press performed the vital political function of interest articulation. The different factions in Iran ran their own representative newspapers. However, there were many restrictions even on the press which made Khatami’s task more difficult. Still, Khatami depended on the liberal section of the press for propagating the views of the reformers and also sought to liberalize the press.

However, the conservatives soon retaliated heavily and started shutting down such newspapers one by one. The conservative members of the ruling clergy also started a campaign to discredit officials who were found to be loyal to Khatami. Khatami’s Interior Minister Abdollah Nouri was impeached. Subsequently, another supporter of Khatami, Tehran Mayor Gholam Hossein Karbaschi was arrested. Khatami, however, showed a bold face and continued to fight with the conservatives.

Despite his efforts, in the two years of his presidency, Khatami could not make much progress. This put him under tremendous pressure. He had never found it expedient to pose a real challenge to the rule of the conservatives and was always found to be defensive. Even when the reformists won in the Iran’s first local council polls, the conservatives continued their attacks. These attacks, however, were mostly targeted against the reformist segment of the press. Such conservative retaliation even caused severe rioting, showing that the people still supported Khatami and his reforms despite his setbacks.

When the reformists won another landslide victory in the February 2000 parliamentary elections, the conservatives reacted bitterly. They arrested the reformist leaders and closed down almost all remaining reformist newspapers. The conservatives had become
increasingly restless due to their repeated electoral defeats and they did not want to take the slightest chance. This made almost impossible for any reform measures to take place. Therefore, when the time of June 2001 presidential election approached, Khatami showed his reluctance to contest. He was himself disillusioned due to his repeated failures in overpowering the conservatives.

However, later he changed his mind, compromising with whatever achievements he had made during his first term. When he ultimately contested for his second term, he surprised everyone by getting another landslide victory. This event indicated again that the reformists were still popular, despite the growing unease in the Iranian people. However, the conservatives continued to attack the reformists and blocked the reform initiatives even during Khatami's second term.

By now, the reformists had realized that the reform of the Iranian society and politics was not possible unless some institutional changes were effected. Therefore in the latter half of 2002, they planned to curb the power of the conservatives by introducing two important legislative measures. The two proposed legislations were collectively known as the 'twin bills'. The first bill was directed towards curbing the power of the Guardians Council and the second was directed towards increasing the power of the President.

Khatami had forcefully argued that the proposed legislations were the minimum requirements for running the country's affairs. However, the conservatives accused him of trying to assume dictatorial powers. Consequently, the Guardians Council rejected both bills citing many constitutional violations. The politics revolving around these twin bills were extensive and bitter. Both parties used all their recourses to get their objectives fulfilled. However, the reformists could not prevail over their conservative rivals. Also, the results of Municipal Council elections of February 2003 had brought down the morale of the reformists. Therefore, finally Khatami withdrew his twin bills and this way the last chance of making any substantial reform was lost.

In their public statements, Khatami and his reformist officials had shown that they were sincerely expecting the passage of these bills. However, Guardians Council enjoyed the
constitutional power of the interpretation of the laws and it was highly unlikely from the very beginning that it would approve any bill directed towards curtailing its own powers. This event surfaced the severe restrictions that were faced by the reformists in changing the system from within.

The Municipal Council elections of February 2003 had witnessed a dramatically low voter turnout. Consequently, the conservatives had won a sweeping victory in this election. This election showed that the support for the reformists was now sharply undermined because of the people’s disillusionment with Khatami and his allies. Therefore, the next challenge to the reformists was to face the February 2004 parliamentary elections. The reformists’ problems were further compounded as the conservatives were determined to control these elections.

In accordance with their plan, the conservatives disqualified most of the prominent reformist candidates. The disqualification of so many reformist candidates resulted in strong protests from the reformists. The reformists showed their protests by demonstrations, threat of resignations and sit-in strikes. However, barring some exceptions, the conservatives remained firm. Consequently, when the election took place, the reformists faced a severe defeat. This election changed the course of the politics of reforms to a great extent.

The parliamentary debacle of the reformists had made any progress towards reforms almost impossible. As the June 2005 presidential election approached, the supporters of the reformists were evidently disillusioned. Further, the reformists didn’t have a strong candidate for the election. Consequently, a little known hard-liner, the Tehran Mayor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won on the basis of his populist campaign and humble personality. This way the politics of reforms of Khatami era had seen an end.

A careful analysis of Khatami’s two terms shows that despite his failures in actually bringing out any substantial political reforms, Khatami was considerably successful in his endeavours from many respects. His most commendable achievement has been in the foreign policy field. Khatami’s efforts on economic front changed the face of the things
to a considerable extent. Khatami's other major success was the end to the secret killings of the opposition members by the intelligence ministry network. Still, the most important achievement of Khatami has been that the people of Iran could now openly debate the role of the Vilayat-e-Faqih.

The third section of this chapter dealt with the power politics of Iran. In this section we have seen how the warring factions used all available means to capture power. The defeat of the reformists in this power struggle showed that the actual 'circulation of elites' did not take place. However, we know that vesting power from the governing elite by the non-governing elite, during a thermidor, is a long and arduous process.

The victory of the conservatives was mainly because people were disillusioned with the reformists. It did not imply that the people had reverted back to the conservatives. Although the reformists failed in their power struggle, the process of reform was given a start and still continued as a movement.

The fourth section of this chapter focussed on the tussle between the reformist President Muhammad Khatami and the conservative Guardians Council. We have attempted to understand this antagonistic relationship from the institutional perspective as well as from the power struggle perspective. The reformists were encountering difficulties in every effort of their reforms. They were forcefully opposed by their conservative rivals who were holding such unelected institutions which were more powerful than the popularly elected ones. The Guardians Council was the most important body among such conservative institutions.

The chapter ended with an analysis of the Guardians Council highlighting its obstructionist role towards any attempt at liberalizing the Iranian political system. Further, an account has been given as to how this body proved to be the most uncompromising obstacle towards any attempt at capturing power by the reformist camp headed by Khatami.
Before going to the next chapter, we present here some important findings of this chapter. An analysis of the political and social conditions of Iran before the beginning of Khatami’s first term as president makes it amply evident that the Iranian people were vying for social and political reforms. This can be supported by two broad arguments. First, most of the Iranian people were frustrated with the increasingly repressive conservative regime. Second, during the reform wave of Khatami period, Iran was demographically placed in such a manner that favoured reform movement.

It was also found that due to the absence of any recognized political parties in the Islamic Republic, the press performed the important political function of interest articulation. Instead of political parties, Iran had different factions and their representative newspapers.

Further, we have seen that the Iranian polity was not absolutely authoritarian. Some scope of real politics was discernible. Although non-elected institutions and people had more power than the elected representatives, the elections played important role in giving the much needed political input to the ruling clergy.

Furthermore, the power of the president was very little in comparison to the other constitutional institutions, specially the Supreme Leader and the Guardians Council. We have seen that the legitimacy of Velayat-e-Faqih had been largely eroded after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini. It was also observed that the ‘approbatory supervision’ clause in the constitution related to the Guardians Council had been a major obstacle towards any reform in Iran.

Finally, we have seen that the reformists primarily used the policy of reform as a political opportunity to capture power from the conservatives. However, it did not remain just rhetoric since actual reform of Iranian politics and society would have perpetuated the reformists into power. Consequently, their effort to bring out reform was serious. However, their opposition was very strong. Eventually the reformists failed in their power struggle, but the process of reform was indeed given a start.
Having taken up the case study of Khatami period, we now move on to the next chapter which is largely a continuation of this chapter. In that chapter, we shall discuss some of the important reform bills that were presented in the Majlis and the power-struggle dynamics related to them.