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**FINAL PAPER**

“A Comparative Study between Secularism and Political Islam and the  
Downfall of Secularism during Khatami’s Presidency”

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ABSTRACT

Fighting against pro-secular groups and parties is a policy to which both the Second Pahlavi and the Islamic Republic regime adhered. Although either of the regimes considered different reasons for such restrictions, this policy has affected the above groups with grave consequences: consequences which trapped those politicians who pioneered the practice of this policy. In a sense, one of the major causes of the Islamic regime’s emergence and the decadence of Pahlavi regime is currently known as the political gap caused by the absence of secular political parties during the post-Mosaddegh period. The gap which was never filled even after designating Bakhtiar, the last prime minister of the Second Pahlavi regime. Based on accepted definitions in political philosophy, free secular parties have either never existed in Iran’s political history, or have never achieved political legitimacy. This presentation examines why secular groups are considered as *secular* in Iran’s political convention. The following five parts will be highlighted in this paper to study the downfall of former president Khatami’s government from 1997-2005 (a period deemed as the final period for secular groups by rulers in power). (1) Restricting these groups’ activities by closing down related newspapers and media outlets; (2) Studying Khatami’s contradictory slogans regarding the granting of further political freedom; (3) Studying the gradual process to exclude these secular groups from Iran’s political profile; (4) Accusing these groups of anti-

Islamic actions, and pointing out the importance of unity among various groups within the regime; and (5) Exposing how secular groups repeated the same historical fallacy in accepting silence and giving up their endeavor to fight which ultimately legitimated their political loss among the people. Finally, this paper will explain why secularism is a political term that requires adherence by free political parties. It will also examine the regime's policies against secular groups and their reaction toward the regime's actions. Due to the lack of academic resources regarding this period, field research, writers' observations (from the post-revolutionary generation) and cultural studies (based on the public's reaction toward these groups) will be used.

## INTRODUCTION

As far as I can remember, last year when I decisively started writing this article, Iran reformists movement was dangling in a political and intellectual inactiveness. Khatami's policies brought about and raised an inharmonious phenomenon called Ahmadinejad and everyone was pessimistic regarding the future of political freedom in Iran. The distinction lines among different reformist groups were getting bolder and instead of criticizing the 8 year period in which they were ruling the government as well as the Parliament, they were busy fighting against one another within themselves and getting farther and farther. I should confess that since a month ago when top reformists were imprisoned, tortured and even summoned to charade trials, I have found myself on a dilemma to present this article. The only thing which encouragingly pushed me forward was my firm belief in criticism and self-criticism which both tends to be a pre-requisite for change in any culture and that the current political and social hardships in Iranian society, in general, and reformists, in particular, could be traced back and also roots in policies and measure enacted and taken during President Khatami's presedential election.

In view of the convention of the western political culture, it might seem pretty weird. However, taking into account his background as the head of Keyhan Newspaper organization and the minister of Culture, we can realize that there is a long distance between his personal ideas and what I call the implications of his

policies. Turbulent and passive policies which as Saeed Hajarian –his senior advisor in the first 2 years of Khatami’s presidential period- once pointed root in Khatami’s intellectual uncertainty.

Regarding the secular groups which despite being few existed in Khatami period, I should explain that, in a sense, there has never existed a dependant political party in Iran as it is defined in political science. Besides, many believe that even a political stream with certain barriers can not be found; on the contrary, these are the periods which boldly stand out such as: Hoveida’s period, Bani Sadr’s period and so on. Along with these defenitions, Hajarian points out political societies(mahafel). In fact, Hajarian himself does not present a clear-cut definition on societies, however, based on the political texture in Iran, society or mahfel can be defined and postulated as a group having the same thought in common which forms in a certain historic period as well as a socio-political ground with a fairly certain political approach which usually is in distinction from the power. Societies which gradually, in the passage of time can bring about changes, gain the power or owing to the closed political system are banned to act. Considering the above introduction, I believe in pro-secular societies or mahfel rather than secular groups or political streams. In this article these societies are groups which in terms of their intellectual approach embody the features of a secular group. These groups were also present in the years after the revolution as well as during Bazargan 1980 government ( a nationalist and secular democratic cabinet which resigned in protest to the occupancy of the US Embassy in Tehran) , thereafter, they disappeared from the political stage in Iran. Nehzate Azadi or the national-religious best embodies such groups. Along with this group, figures like Morad Farhad Pour or later Akbar Ganji and Emadoddin Baghi, had a secular approach although were never members.

As the last point in the introduction I should make the point that due to elemental differences between the Iranian society and western societies, the disabled nation making cycle in Iran, the incomplete cultural modernization and many other issues, secular groups in Iran’s contemporary history either before or after the revolution have sharp differences with what we consider as a secular group with a

certain political thought and objectives in the western world. Differences which could be studied in a separate article. Regarding the viewpoints of these groups in terms of religion, it should be stressed that secularism ,in Iran, has never got involved in social and political conflicts and has always attempted to thrive on as a pro-modernism stream. During its 150 year activity, this secularism has never been classified as social movements such as socialism, communism or capitalism, but simply defined itself in terms modernity. The Iranian secularism further favors elimination of religion in the realm of politics and denying its right to determine a public virtue based upon religion. Iranian secularism, at some points, even accepted and preached to follow religious values providing religion would not act as the reference in social changes. Thus, this form of secularism has never fought against religion; however, it was not required to struggle for solidifying and strengthening the religion. In sum, that is the reason why Iranian secularism has never been purely perfect.

Iranian secularism was not anti religion but it rather avoided religion. Since it considered religion elimination something impossible, it never turned to secularization stage. Iranian secularism's main concern was to develop not to confront with religion although at some points it weakened religion for the sake of development.

### **The Dawn of Khordad the 2<sup>nd</sup>**

I well remember that when Khatami was elected in 1997 it turned to raise hopes in the minds of people particularly, the urban middle class. Khatami came with a white cloak and nice words. Considering reformists' present remarks, shows that they did not expect such a victory in 1997. Taj Zadeh and Hajarjian ( Khatami close friends) in a joint interview points this out: we expected an 8 million vote which would grant us a more political bargaining power and as a result we could extend our political movement. So, we had no plans to govern the country. And winning the election not only did shock us but also shocked Khatami's competitors. He was completely unprepared to confront future storms. In sum, reformists started their work without a defined political thought and plan which forced them later to preserve the regime instead of following their slogans.

## **The Chain Murders and the Opposition Discard**

The first momentous shock in Khatami's government was discovering the politically planned chain murders of intellectuals in 1998. These murders which were planned by a religious radical group within the Ministry of intelligence had begun from Hashemi Rafsanjani's government and continued till Khatami's period.

I should add that in terms of majority of Shiat clergies closely connected to the power in Iran including Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi one of the latter students of School of Haghani and Hojatiyeh Association and in a country whose constitution is prioritized to Shiat Islamic Shari at(i.e. a religious-political interpretation in Islam which clergies define its norms through secondary ordinances), from years before Khatami's presidency, pro-secular groups along with interpretive and intellectual streams which presented a different interpretation from the dominant political Islam were looked upon not as groups with certain political or ideological approach but as dissidents against a regime endorsed by God and as a result foes to the religion. Consequently, this paves way this radical stream to pronounce fatwa against the pro-secular opposition of the regime as well as Velayat Faghih.

Consequent revelations of these murders along with the shocking confessions made by some agents showed that these murders were committed through a fatwa. The political nature of these fatwas targeted a wide spectrum of the regime opposition entitled as assumed enemies. Unfortunately, pro-seculars, nationalists and the national religious figures like Dariush Forouhar and Parvaneh Eskandari were among the victims.

Having revealed the murders, Khatami took a giant leap in preventing against opposition discard. It was a great shock for a regime which claimed to be harmonious in different aspects particularly following Ayatollah Khamenehey empowerment. When Salam newspaper( the official newspaper for Rouhanion Mobarez party in which Khatami is one of the leaders) was closed, people and students protested on streets in Tir 1999. This was the time when protests and oppositions on the top in a political and judicial level were spread to the society

among the people. Although these protests were severely suppressed, concurrently some still anonymous who were also involved in the chain murders, launched two projects which seemed more like a threat of a political coup: Senior commanders of Sepah wrote a historic letter to then-president Khatami launched a tirade against his policies which in their view would lead to the secularization of the society and threatened him to interfere. Besides, there were rumors regarding some pressures from senior authorities on the parliament to announce Khatami as disqualified. These pressures finally forced Khatami to compromise his measures and suffice with preserving the regime is prior to anything else.

The revelation of the chain murders scandal not only did not dry the root of such vicious actions, but also turned this hostility with secular groups as well as individuals into a new phase. Even Khatami who had considered secularism dominance something inevitable, later was forced to take an opposite measure and call secularism a destructive anti-Islam phenomenon. When the physical elimination project failed to succeed, in the second phase they started discarding secular liberal groups so that the relative support which was provided by Khatami for these groups would be cut off. When Khatami retracted his support from these secular groups, magazines associated with these groups were officially closed such as Iran Farda (the official magazine sponsored by Nehzat Azadi) and members were also arrested. In recent years most of these members received heavy charges from the justice department which is under the solemn power of the Supreme Leader.

Concurrent with attempts to separate Khatami from the radical trends of reformists or the deconstructionalist (the term first applied by Hossein Shariat Madari the editor in chief of the radical Keyhan newspaper) such as Tahkim Vahdat or Mosharekat Party and gradually rendered Khatami's friends in a similar destiny through his idle inactiveness. Saeed Hajarian or the brain of reformists was assassinated, pro-reformist newspapers were all closed and Khatami as well as Khomeini's friends were jailed. The system of thinking in which *valih faghih* was represented as a divine messenger on the earth (mentioned in one of Mesbah's speeches), red lines for seculars was broadening. In the second presidential

period, Khatami announced that he is kind of reluctant to remain in his position as the president and was simply an obedient executive of the Supreme Leader's ordinances facing crisis after crisis.

### **Conclusion**

In his final years, Khatami's friends were mostly isolated and secular groups were officially banned to be active, their magazines and websites were all closed and filtered, some were detained in prison and were not even allowed to have home sessions. It might be too soon to conclude that Ahmadi Nejad is the legacy of Khatami as well as reformists' pitfalls and flaws and that this radicalism grew in Khatami's period but the consequences of Khatami's policies and not utilizing the social capital of people who elected him by 20 million votes have had dire consequences on social freedom and freedom of expression within the country. In the meantime, after Ahmadi Nejad's first presidential period I mean the former secret government and the supposedly today's legal government, not only secular groups have been totally discarded from the political stage in Iran but also have lost their legitimacy among the average people and thrive on only in the minds of some few academicians and intellectuals.

History , however, despite all consistencies and inconsistencies, well remembers Shah's remarks: I have heard the voice of your revolution. He then asked Shapour Bakhtiar, one of the members and fans of Nehzat Azadi and Mosadeq who was overthrown years ago by Shah's coup, for help to save his throne. Since Shah's governments after Mosadeq always lacked legitimacy among the people, even Bakhtiar failed to help Shah