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**Soul Searching in Iranian Politics:  
Conservatives and Reformists after the Presidential Elections**

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Since Iran's presidential elections in May 2017, when President Hassan Rouhani was reelected for a second term, the two main political camps in Iran, the conservatives and the reformists, have deliberated their future directions in light of the outcome of the elections. While the conservatives have focused on analyzing the factors that led to their defeat in the elections, the reformists are reexamining the benefits of continued cooperation with the President and with moderates in the conservative camp.

Following Rouhani's sweeping victory and the significant achievements gained by the reformist candidates in the local council elections that were held concurrent with the presidential elections, calls for soul-searching have been raised in the conservative camp. The self-criticism and demands for change stem from the series of defeats that the conservatives have suffered in recent years, led by Rouhani's victory in the 2013 and in 2017 presidential elections, and the reformists' significant achievements during the parliamentary elections in 2016.

The discourse in the conservative camp in recent months focuses on the widening gap between the conservative right wing and the Iranian public, particularly the young generation, which has distanced itself from religious and revolutionary values and no longer believes that the conservatives are capable of providing solutions to its hardships and demands. One prominent conservative critic is Prof. Amir Mohebbian, a senior political commentator and journalist who today is considered one of the leading strategists in the conservative camp. In a series of interviews in the Iranian media, Mohebbian maintained that the conservative right needs to adapt to the social changes in Iran in recent decades, but without compromising its religious values. According to Mohebbian, following the surprising victory by reformist leader Mohammad Khatami in the 1997 presidential elections, the conservatives adopted a populist approach and ousted traditional conservative politicians and clerics from their ranks, including the former president, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the incumbent Rouhani, and the chairman of the Majlis Ali Larijani, who were considered the camp's mainstay. Achieving control of the government became a key objective for the conservatives, even at the price of waiving values and loss of identity. The conservatives preferred to adopt the ways of the

reformists, instead of trying to recruit public support with their own ways, particularly among the young generation and the middle class. For example, the well known rapper Amir Tataloo was recruited by the conservative presidential candidate Ebrahim Raisi to improve his image among the young generation. Yet not only did this strategy not help the conservative cleric; he became the object of much ridicule. The conservative press also criticized the “Tataloo phenomenon” as evidence of the identity crisis that the conservatives are suffering and the populist approach that typifies them. Mohebbian advised the conservatives to remain loyal to their values, but also to forge a new strategy and practical solutions for the public’s demands relating to economic issues and civil liberties, particularly among the young generation. He likewise recommended structural changes, mainly by convening a national congress or national council that would strengthen the interaction with the general public and act to rehabilitate the conservative camp.

Former mayor of Tehran Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, who withdrew from the presidential race a few days before the elections, also joined the call for change in the conservative camp. The local council elections resulted in the reformists gaining clear dominance in the Tehran Municipality, and Ghalibaf was forced to step down as mayor. In late July, Ghalibaf issued a public letter addressed to “the revolutionary youth” in Iran, in which he called for self-examination and for reforms in the conservative camp. He argued that the conservatives’ defeat during the elections derived from structural problems and from poor conduct, which dictates the need for a fundamental change and the formation of a “neoconservative” movement led by the young generation. Although his letter aroused criticism among his political rivals, who claimed that Ghalibaf’s sole motive was to save his political standing after his defeat, it also gained the support of many in the conservative camp, who called for the adoption of Ghalibaf’s recommendations in order to enable the conservatives to win back the public’s confidence.

Calls for reexamination of strategic objectives are also heard in the reformist camp. While for the conservatives the need for soul-searching followed their defeat in the elections, the need for change among the reformists was sparked by the disappointment with President Rouhani’s conduct after the elections, and the recognition that they had failed to translate their political achievements into greater civil liberties and other changes reflecting their world view. When assembling his new government, it became clear that Rouhani, who sought to avoid confrontation with the conservative religious establishment, opted to ignore the majority of the reformists’ demands, refrain from appointing reformist candidates to “sensitive” government ministries, and to exclude women and minorities from his government. The President’s conduct challenged anew the issue of the reformists’ support. Prior to the formation of the government, the

chairman of the reformist faction in the Majlis, Mohammad Reza Aref, declared that there are those who after they win elections forget those who worked on their behalf, and that Rouhani owes his victory to the reformists. Yet notwithstanding the disappointment with the composition of the new government, most reformist officials and commentators emphasized that the reformists have no other choice but to continue supporting the President in order to prevent the hardliners from gaining power. Senior political commentator Prof. Sadegh Zibakalam voiced this position when he argued that even though Rouhani espouses positions that are closer to the conservatives than to the reformists, the reformists should continue to support him and make do with criticizing his policies, because the responsibility for his failure will also fall on the reformists' shoulders.

Coupled with the increasing criticism of the President, the reformist camp is also calling for reexamination of its strategy in advance of the next elections to the Majlis (2019) and for the presidency (2021). Several senior reformist politicians have expressed their doubts about the benefits of continuing the cooperation with moderate conservatives, arguing that the alliance with them during the last elections resulted in the election of candidates with conservative world views who were supported by the reformists but deserted their ranks after the elections. Indeed, Aref announced recently that in the next elections, the reformists will run on an independent ticket and will not agree to form a coalition with conservative politicians.

This is not the first time that the two political camps in Iran are conducting a soul-searching process of this sort. Following the reformist victories in the late 1990s, a new conservative movement began to emerge in Iran. Young conservatives who were of the second generation since the revolution entered Iranian politics. Most had lived through the Iran-Iraq War, and sought to revitalize the Islamic revolutionary values, while also emphasizing the need for economic development and social and economic reforms. The new conservatives, with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad prominent among them, sought to present themselves as a practical alternative to both the older generation of conservatives, who were perceived as irrelevant, mainly by the young generation, and to the reformists, whose battles to achieve political reforms and civil rights were to a great extent perceived as a threat to the fundamental revolutionary values. On the other hand, the conservatives' political repression and their renewed takeover of key political institutions in the previous decade likewise sparked deliberations among the reformists, who demonstrated their willingness to accept the regime's game rules and cooperate with moderate conservatives. They appeared willing to make do – at least in the short term – with improving the economic situation, increasing the openness to the West, and achieving limited, gradual reduction of the government's intervention in civilian life.

The respective processes of self-scrutiny attest to the recognition among the conservatives and reformists alike of their fundamental weaknesses. The conservatives are aware of the public's increasing alienation from the religious-conservative establishment, while the reformists are aware of their failures in promoting civil reforms – even on a limited scale – notwithstanding their achievements during the elections. However, the ability of both camps to promote significant and effective change is highly doubtful. The conservatives' success in recruiting public support, particularly among the young generation, will be contingent upon their backing away from the Islamic-revolutionary model and the positions of Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei. Unlike the conservatives, the reformists are indeed benefitting from broader public support, but past experience has proven that the conservatives are determined to neutralize their power, through legal means, mainly by disqualifying reformist candidates for election, and through political and civil repression. Nevertheless, the discourse underway in both political camps is not without significance. First, it reflects the growing recognition in Iran of the need over time to adapt ideology and political strategy to the changing conditions and changing reality. Second, it indicates the trends in the expected battle over the identity of the Islamic Republic in the post-Khamenei era.