Muhammad Khatami's Reforms in Iran from the Perspective of Transitology and the Outlook for Democratic Change

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Reformy Muhammada Khatamího v Íránu z perspektivy transitologie a výhled demokratické změny

Abstract: On May 23, 1997, a victory of Muhammad Khatami in the presidential election in the Islamic Republic of Iran started a brief period of liberalization in the country long mired in a repressive and authoritarian political regime. The new government loosened the restrictions imposed on the public space, widened the scope of some civil liberties and under the slogans of "religious democracy", "rule of law" and "participation" aroused expectations of a further political change. Nevertheless these expectations were futile and the widely popular reform movement was stifled by a repression on the part of the conservative core of the regime. This study attempts to analyze these events as a failed attempt to democratic transition, leaning on the theory of Guillermo O'Donnell and Philipe Schmitter. It demonstrates that the transitive period under Khatami's presidency followed the typical path of the disintegration of the post-World War II authoritarian regimes, which usually begins by the split within the governing elite of the regime itself and proceed through gradual and contingent introduction of liberalizing and democratizing reforms by its "soft-liner". On this basis it attempts to capture the overall dynamic of the transitive process, define its turning points, identify the causes of its ultimate successful obstruction by the "hard-line" conservatives and derive from this experience implications for a possibility of democratic change in future.

Keywords: Iran; authoritarianism; Islamism; Muhammad Khatami; democratic transition; liberalization

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Introduction

This study comprises an analysis of a chapter in Iranian post-revolutionary history which, although now half-forgotten, played a major role in the political development of the country. In 1997 the surprising victory of the reformist candidate Muhammad Khatami in the presidential elections started a brief period of liberalization reforms in the otherwise strictly authoritarian political regime. Although it did not lead to enduring political change, it nevertheless left a lasting imprint on the political landscape of the Islamic Republic and foreshadowed similar attempts in later years. In what follows, I will combine a historical analysis of this period with the application of the theoretical approach devised by Guillermo O'Donnell and Phillipe C. Schmitter [*1986*] for the study of political transitions from authoritarian rule.

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Instead of focusing on the structural factors of democratic transition, O'Donnell and Schmitter concentrate more on the actual possible courses of transitions, their various stages, key events and, first and foremost, the strategic choices made by the actors involved. Their theory pays much attention to the situation within the authoritarian regime itself. It stresses the divisions within its ruling stratum as an indispensable precondition for the "opening up" of the authoritarian regime and the strategy employed by its various factions as a significant factor for its outcome [see *ibid.: 15–36*; cf. *Guo 1999*]. Furthermore, it does not work with a one-way and one-dimensional model of transition, but concedes that it may have different paths leading to very different outcomes. In fact, the authors define transition as "from certain authoritarian regimes towards an uncertain 'something else'" [*ibid.: 3*; cf. *ibid.: 6–14*]. This also includes a continuance of authoritarian rule in the same or modified form.

All of this makes the theory particularly relevant for application to the case in point. The Iranian transitive movement of the late 1990s originated in the elite circles of the former adherents to the Islamic regime, and despite the engagement of the general public at a certain point, it never ceased to depend on the outcome of the conflict within the higher political class of the regime. Neither did it result in democratization, but rather a preservation of the status quo, albeit in a redefined form. Through an analysis of the reformist attempt during the Khatami presidency as a failed transition from authoritarian rule, the study will attempt to answer two questions. Firstly, what were the factors which precipitated the failure of this attempt? And secondly, what conclusions can be derived from this experience for the interpretation of other political events and the overall prospect of a democratic transition in post-revolutionary Iran?

Methodologically, the answer to these questions will be sought through the application of a rather typical scheme of case study, comprising, in the words of Gerring, "an intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of (similar) units" [*2004: 342*] wherein "unit" refers to the particular time-bounded process of aborted transition between 1997–1999, the "larger class of units" refers to the other actual (or future potential) attempts at transition in Iran. To this end, a still another larger class of units (transitive processes) will be involved as "informal units" [*Gerring 2004: 344*], being implicitly present in the form of generalized observations provided by O'Donnell and Schmitter's theoretical framework.

The study consists of four parts. The first deals with the political system of the Islamic Republic with a focus on its institutional structure and the uneven distribution of power among various political actors. The second looks at the political situation on the eve of the transitive period, focusing on the division between the hard-liner and reformist factions, their political attitude, and their position within the political system. The third part recounts the course of the transitive process, focusing on its phases, the strategies of the individual actors, and the critical events that decided its outcome. The fourth part concludes by assessing the validity of the given transitive episode for the future outlook for democratization in a country long mired in a repressive and illiberal political regime.

The Structure of Iranian Authoritarianism

As Daniel Brumberg notes, "all political systems are, to some extent, unique … the more we know about a particular place, the harder it becomes to compare it to others" [*2000: 129*]. There have been numerous attempts to define Iranian the post-revolutionary political arrangement in the general terms of political science, and the diversity of the results attests to the challenging nature of such task. Before plunging into operationalized definitions, it is useful to consider two important historical circumstances to which the apparent uniqueness of the Islamic Republic can be attributed at least in part.

Firstly, it emerged as the outcome of one of the first and arguably most consequential attempts to mobilize Islam to political ends and establish an "Islamic state". Secondly, it was installed during the events of the Iranian revolution of 1978–79, probably the last of the "social revolutions" of the modern era, which brought about a profound change in the political and social order amid unusually extensive social mobilization [see *Skocpol 1979*; *1982*]. Both of these facts render the establishment of the Islamic Republic an event of global significance which, among other things, heralded and inspired the ascent of so-called Islamism or political Islam in the Middle East and beyond [*Ayoubi 2005: 39*; *Sidahmed – Ehteshami 2018: 7–8*; *Barzegar – Martin 2010: 84*; *Tarek 2016: 192–193*]. Both facts also have important consequences for the constitution of the post-revolutionary political regime. The Islamic revolutionaries led by Ayatollah Khomeini ostentatiously aspired to create a novel political and social system pitted against all the others by its being based on the timeless ordinances of Islamic law (*shari'a*), subordinated it to the supreme authority of an Islamist jurist who was to act as the guarantor and "guardian" (*vali-e faqih*) of its Islamic nature, and potentially embracing the whole of the *umma* (the universal Islamic community, or in this case, polity) [see *Khomeini 1981: 27–167*]. Though most of these goals were not realistic and were later tamed by pragmatic concerns, they in many ways influenced the new regime's policies (for example, in the programs of "Islamization" of social institutions and the "export of revolution"), which were at the beginning propelled by revolutionary fervor and sense of a dawn of a new utopian epoch. In this regard, it is important to take into account that the Islamic Republic did not originate as "merely" an authoritarian but also a revolutionary state [see for example *Halliday 1999*; *Lawson 2019*], which at least in some aspects expressed totalitarian inclinations.[1] Nevertheless, these "totalist" [see *Shahibzadeh 2016: 10–11, 37–74*] leanings waned or were significantly reduced after Khomeini's death. It is only from that time on that the regime can be readily identified with the practice fitting into the concept of authoritarianism as outlined by Juan Linz [*1964*] and others, i.e., as focused first and foremost on the preservation of the *status quo* in the form of the rule of a particular governmental elite monopolizing the political space and excluding others from it. This was also the context in which the attempt at transition occurred.

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Lawson 2019] run by a utopian universalist movement which at least in some aspects expressed totalitarian aspirations [cf. *Arendt 1979*].[2] Nevertheless, these "totalist" [see *Shahibzadeh 2016: 10–11, 37–74*] leanings waned or were significantly reduced after Khomeini's death. It is only from that time on that the regime can be readily identified with the practice fitting into the concept of authoritarianism as outlined by Juan Linz [1964] and others, i.e., as focused first and foremost on the preservation of the *status quo* in the form of the rule of a particular governmental elite monopolizing the political space and excluding others from it. This was also the context in which the attempt at transition occurred.

But even then the structure of the Islamic Republic's authoritarianism retained specific features which have to be taken into account properly. Mirroring Khomeini's tenet of the supreme authority of *vali-ye faqih*, the highest office in the country remained the office of the *rahbar* ("leader"), held by a member of the Shi'a clergy for life. The *Rahbar* is designated by the Constitution as being responsible for "determining the overall policies" of the state, is the supreme commander of the armed forces, appoints the head of the judiciary and the heads of the state radio and television, and hold a host of other prerogatives [see *Constitution, art. 110*]. His office is supplemented by several other institutions reserved exclusively for the members of the clergy. These include the powerful Guardian Council (*Shura-ye negahban*, GC), appointed (either directly or indirectly) by the *rahbar* and vested with the right to vet the candidacies in all the elections, adjudicate on the conformity of laws and other governmental ordinances with Islamic law, and the Expediency Council (*Shura-ye tashkhis-e maslahat-e nezam-e eslami*, EC), serving as a supplementary consultative organ for the case of disputes. The *Rahbar* himself is appointed and (rather theoretically) accountable to the deliberative body of his peers called the Assembly of Experts (*Majles-e chobregan*), elected every 8 years by popular ballot, which however, like any other election, is subject to the leader's indirect control through the GC.

Such an arrangement has prompted many observers of the Iranian post-revolutionary regime to designate it as a "theocracy" [see for example *Arjomand 2009: 7*]. Nevertheless, such a designation (in addition to its conceptually problematic content) is not necessarily very precise, especially given the fact that the clerical elite for most of the time and in most of cases does not administer the state directly and personally. The administration of the state on a day-to-day basis is entrusted to offices and bodies organized in the republican manner inspired by the French Constitution of 1958. This includes a cabinet headed and appointed by the directly elected President and the elected parliament (the *majlis*), responsible for the running of the executive and the legislature respectively. There are thus two echelons or tiers of power within the Iranian political system, differing in both their responsibilities and the principles which they represent. The higher echelon tied to the *rahbar* as the *vali-ye faqih* is responsible for the general orientation of the system and its supervision, representing, as it were, the power of God and the Islamic law. The lower echelon, consisting of the republican institutions, is responsible for the adoption of the laws and the running of the ministries and other state agencies, representing, as it were, the will of the people. This has prompted other observers to conclude that the system is in fact

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not theocratic, but rather of a "hybrid" [*Ghobadzadeh – Rahim 2016*; *Abdolmohammadi – Cama 2016: 558*] nature, combining elements of "divine" and popular sovereignty [*Martin 2003: 147–173*; *Ghobadzadeh 2017: 39–43*].

However, there is also a problem with this definition because the purported element of popular sovereignty apparently hardly makes the political system of the Islamic Republic less authoritarian and more democratic.[3] Arguably, this is caused by the highly uneven relationship between the two above-defined echelons of power. Whereas the "theocratic" echelon (and chiefly the *rahbar* himself) holds virtually unlimited power within the whole system, the republican institutions hold only derived and conditional power. This incommensurability of powers stems from the remit of the "theocratic" echelon to intervene in the affairs of the state based on the tenet enshrined in the Constitution, namely that all the laws and governmental processes (including the Constitution itself) are valid only as far as they comply with Islamic "criteria", "principles" and "commandments".[4] In such a situation, there can well be a parliament adopting laws and a president administering the executive according to these laws, yet any of these laws can be vetoed, and any decisive measures taken by these organs prevented by the *rahbar* or the GC. Furthermore, while there may be elections to these institutions, the results of these elections can be significantly predetermined by the right of these institutions to vet candidacies. Consequentially, the theocratic echelon can overturn any decision taken by the other organs and make the procedures and rights otherwise guaranteed by the Constitution effectively null and void.

Drawing on Carl Schmitt's [*1985*; see also *2014*] delineation of the ultimate power within the state or polity not as the control over the institutions and laws but the right and ability to infringe on them, the "theocratic" echelon's power thus must be seen as "sovereign", which, in spite of abiding by some laws normally, is nevertheless always above the law by virtue of its right to make an exception from it or abrogate it altogether. Typically, such an occasion occurs in the situations where its decisive position within the political system (and thus the nature of the system as such) is endangered [cf. *ibid.: 5–7*], as will be demonstrated below. Yet it can be applied virtually at any time, since the sovereign also decides *when* the situation is exceptional, and the corresponding measures are needed [cf. *ibid.: 13*].

It is a basic principle of the operation of the Iranian authoritarian regime that it uses and misuses this power as its basic means of self-preservation, assisted by its monopoly over the means of coercion (the army and the powerful IRGC) and the closely related juridical power. The elected republican institutions are, in contrast, not equipped with similar powers and have little options to resist them, as is overall illustrated in Picture 1. The lower echelon of governmental power against the "absolute authority" of the *rahbar* partakes only in the "administration" of state affairs, as the situation is after all clearly designated in the constitution [see *Art. 6*]. It may or may not cooperate with the higher echelon but cannot in any case prevail over it and act against its will. Therefore, it has a little merit to speak of "popular sovereignty" (after all, there can only be one sovereignty).

Against this background, one possible way to democratize the Iranian post-revolutionary regime, unless we count its replacement with a completely different one, consists of the

3 The lack of political liberties and the inadequacy of the democratic procedures is apparent, and the conventional assessments agree on that [see for example *Freedom House 2020*].

4 See the articles 20, 26–28, 72, 91–99, 105, 107–110, 112 as well as the Preamble of the Constitution.

curbing of these exceptional powers: the protection of the already established democratic processes, as well as individual rights, from arbitrary infringement on the part of the unelected institutions of the clerical revolutionary elite. The political development which occurred after the 1997 election of President Khatami represents such an attempt, as well as illustrating its peculiarities and perils.

The Way Towards Transition

Why would an authoritarian system democratize? The most important reasons can be pragmatic ones. As O'Donnell and Schmitter note [*1986: 15*], post-World War II authoritarian regimes usually find themselves in a complicated position regarding their legitimacy. Because democratic rule based on the precept of popular sovereignty is almost universally preferred, they cannot proclaim the authoritarian rule to be a final solution, and must at best present it as a "transitional" state, if not outright to pretend to be democratic. In the case of Iran, with Khomeini's demise and the impasse of the "Islamic revolution" both at home and abroad, the "revolutionary mandate for dramatic social transformation", the only conceivable exception to this rule [cf. *ibid.*], largely expired, and the dictatorial practice of the ruling clerical elite became more apparent and less justifiable. This situation was reflected in two concomitant developments: the emergence of the so-called reformist discourse, and the split within the revolutionary elite, part of which embraced reformism and moderation as the preferred way to develop the political heritage handed to them by Ayatollah Khomeini.

The Reformist Discourse

Of the two, the latter is clearly more relevant to this study as it opened the way to the political transition, which will be investigated further, yet the former must also be briefly mentioned as it served as the catalyst for the latter. The overall nature of the reformist discourse can be perhaps best exemplified by (and partly also attributed to) the personal trajectory and philosophical work of the renowned Iranian thinker Abdolkarim Soroush. A former adherent and ideologue of the nascent Islamic regime, shortly after Khomeini's death, Soroush began to publish unorthodox ideas about the role of religion in public life, which were willfully reacting to the ideological hegemony established by the Islamic regime. In spite of the considerable intellectual sophistry of his writings (inspired by Popper, Lakatos, and others' Western philosophy of science), these were eventually imbued by a relatively simple underlying idea. This was a demand for free public space as an essential precondition for the flourishing of not just (or even primarily) society and state but of the foundation and the *telos* of the Islamist ideology itself – religion. This enabled Soroush to criticize the illiberal path and aspects of the regime without reneging on the revolutionary heritage or the role of Islam in politics; he later expanded this idea into the notion of religious democracy, which he presented not as a rupture but as a logical development of the revolution itself [see *Soroush 2000*; *Ghamari-Tabrizi 2008*].

Soroush's ideas gained popularity, and he was soon followed by other religious and lay personalities who formulated analogous theses [see for example *Arjomand 2002*; *Ghobadzadeh 2017*]. More importantly, they were also adopted by other members of the

post-revolutionary political elite (of which Soroush was, after all, a part), among others also the future President Khatami, a former member of the first parliament and the Minister of culture and Islamic guidance in successive governments of M. Khamenei and H. Rafsanjani who progressively adopted a posture of an intellectual in his own right.[5] The basic notions of the reformist discourse then remained more or less the same: instead of undoing the revolution by opting for some secular-liberal-democratic alternative, it comprised introducing into the system liberal and democratic aspects by way of gradualism and in concord with the Islamist notion of state and society, preferably combining the purported advantages of each [see for example *Soroush 2000: 122–141*]. Regardless of its feasibility, this imaginary played an indispensable role in the transitive period as the intellectual resource for promoting liberalization policies against the conservative and authoritarian status quo.

The Split within the Political Elite

As O'Donnell and Schmitter assert, "there is no transition whose beginning is not the consequence – direct or indirect – of important divisions within the authoritarian regime itself, principally along the fluctuating cleavage between hard-liners and soft-liners" [*1986: 19*]. Such a division occurred in Iran throughout the 1990s: While one part of the political elite – principally the political faction concentrated around and loyal to Ali Khamene'i as the new *rahbar* – resolutely defended the attained *status quo*, another part began to demand, even if limited, change. Soft-liners and hard-liners are characteristically indistinguishable from each other in the early, stable phase of an authoritarian regime [cf. *ibid.: 15–16*] and, therefore, many of the reformists (including Khatami) were former Khomeinist militant radicals.

Most of them were recruited from the so-called Islamic left, which, throughout the revolution and the 1980s, played an important role in supporting Khomeini's political program and, at the same time, promoted its more social-revolutionary version focused on the egalitarian and redistributive policy and the so-called "export of the revolution" [see *Tazmini 2008: 44–45*]. Nevertheless, after the left was ousted from most of its positions following the 1992 parliamentary elections [see *Buchta 2000: 17*], it changed course in the direction of liberalization efforts. Khatami himself can be counted as part of the left, along with many of his later ministers and, for example, the majlis speaker Mehdi Karroubi. Organizationally, it was represented by the clerical *Majma'-e Rouhaniyoune Mobarez* (Association of Combatant Clerics, ACC), the lay Organization of the Mojahedin of the Islamic Revolution of Iran and the student Office for Strengthening Unity (*Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat*, DTV).[6]

In addition, the leftists were joined by the "modern right" or "centrists", a more pragmatic than ideologically committed group of economically liberal-minded ministers and bureaucrats of the two successive cabinets of President Rafsanjani in 1989–1997. In January 1996, two months before the elections to Majlis, they formed an independent association

[5] For his adaptation of the reformist ideas, see *Khatami 2000.*

[6] The transformation of the latter from radical revolutionary associations into reformist factions is instructive for the development of the whole reformist movement, see *Iran Data Portal 2011a*; *Iran Data Portal 2011b.*

called *Kargozaran-e Sazandegi* (The Executives for Construction, EC), and despite being more interested in economic liberalization, they formed a de facto coalition with the left in the fourth majlis and adopted the wider reformist agenda [*Buchta 2000: 16–17*; *Rajaee 1999: 219*; *Tazmini 2008: 47*]. Led by their most influential member, the Tehran Mayor Gholam Hossein Karbashi, they played an important role in Khatami's electoral success and the initiation of the transitive process.

Against the soft-liners stood the conservative or traditionalist right. The members of this faction, organized in the *Jame'e-ye Rouhaniyat-e Mobarez* (Combatant Clergy Association, CCA) and the less overtly political but no less influential Society of Seminary Teachers of Qom (together constituting the so-called Two Societies), and supported by several other religious and professional organizations [see for example *Tazmini 2008: 45*; *Rajaee 1999: 218–219*], retained control over the most powerful institutions in the country after Khomeini's death – overall the "sovereign tier" of the power structure as described above. It was this group that took the position of hard-liners, determined to defend the Islamic regime against democratic "disorders" [cf. *O'Donnel – Schmitter 1986: 16*]. Additionally, it was supported by the so-called "radical right", consisting of the former and current members and cadres of the IRGC and *Basij* who, while sharing some aspects of the social-revolutionary ethos, ostentatiously sided with the leader and promoted the "defense of revolutionary values", which was also the name of their association established in 1996 by the former high intelligence and security official Mohammad Reyshahri. This group, linked to the armed and vigilante organizations (except IRGC, e.g., the *Ansar-e Hezbollah*) and the office of the *rahbar* himself, used its informal position to attack and intimidate the reformists during the transitive process [*Buchta 2000: 18–20*].

As it will be further shown, this way of re-structuring the political field would also later play an essential role in the course and outcome of the transitive process, for which proved crucial that the emergence of "soft-liners" was ultimately limited almost exclusively to the "non-sovereign" tier of the regime's institutional structure. Neither Ali Khamenei nor his aides and the members of the armed vanguard of the IRGC accepted the prospect of democratization and liberalization reforms – whether this may be ultimately ascribed to the fact that such reforms would threaten their exclusive position within the power structure or still some other reasons is undoubtedly an interesting question which would be worth further investigation and debate.

The Transition

The Election

The transitive process typically starts when the soft-liners gain the opportunity to promote their demands [cf. *O'Donnell – Schmitter: 15–16*]. One of the distinct traits of the Iranian transition of 1997–1999 is that this was initiated by an electoral victory. Such a scenario must be seen as rather atypical, as authoritarian regimes usually abhor and systematically prevent the possibility of the people expressing their will in elections without strictly controlled and predictable outcome – such elections comprise instead the ultimate objective of a transition [see *O'Donnel – Schmitter 1986: 57–64*]. Still, precisely this scenario took place on May 23, 1997, when the reformist candidate Muhammad Khatami

beat by a considerable margin of 69.6% of all the counted votes (the poll reached 80%) the conservative candidate Ali Nateq-Nuri and entered the presidential office with a comprehensive reformist platform.

This spectacular victory must be ascribed to several coincidences. Its necessary precondition was the peculiar structure of the Iranian constitutional regime, which allowed for such elections to occur.[7] Another circumstance was the leniency of the conservatives who, even if wary of the reformist upsurge [cf. *Tazmini 2008: 50–53*], did not deem it a challenge worthy of reacting to preemptively. Finally, the reformists did outstandingly well. They articulated a program that appealed to a significant part of Iranian society, created a formidable and cohesive political coalition to underpin it, and chose an eligible candidate to represent them. Muhammad Khatami possessed the religious credentials of *seyyed*[8] and *mojtahed.*[9] He had proven a loyal adherent of the revolution in the early 1980s while, during the "thaw" of 1990, he gained sympathy for his liberal policy during his second tenure at the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. He was nominated after two other failed plans in January 1997 and backed by all the aforementioned parties of the reformist coalition. Practicalities played their part, too, like the financial support of the KGS, which also provided Khatami's candidacy with a campaign headquarters. Another vital factor was the indirect support of the President-incumbent Rafsanjani, who (though probably only on opportunistic grounds) aided Khatami's campaign, too, and ensured the fairness of the ballot [*Arjomand 2009: 64–65*]. Khatami addressed the voters with a program expressed through the slogans of the "rule of law", "participation", and "civil society". He promised to continue the policy of economic liberalization and *detente* with the West initiated by Rafsanjani. Finally, he also outmatched the conservative candidate Nateq-Nuri with his charisma and the hitherto unusual contact style of the campaign [*Tazmini 2008: 46–54*]. The election results provoked a wave of enthusiasm and passion among the liberal section of the public, and the day of the election became a symbolic date that gave a name to the whole reformist alliance of the "2nd Khordad Movement" [*Tazmini 2008: 55*].

Muhammad Khatami, a *seyyed*, cleric and former parliamentarian who had served twice as Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance and participated in the administration of the Cultural Revolution, was a typical member of the revolutionary elite who had gradually moved towards the reformist positions. During his second tenure at the Ministry of Culture, he gained sympathy for his liberal policy. He was nominated after two other failed plans and in January 1997 was backed by all the aforementioned parties of the reformist coalition. Of particular use was the financial support of the KGS which also provided him, through Tehran Major Karbashi, with a campaign headquarters. Another vital factor was the indirect support of the President-incumbent Rafsanjani, who (though probably only on opportunistic grounds) aided Khatami's campaign too and ensured the fairness of the ballot [*Arjomand 2009: 64–65*]. Khatami addressed the voters with a program of liberalization and democratization expressed through the slogans of "rule of law", "participation", and

[7] A curious paradox must be recognized here. Specifically, because the elections do not mean so much (as the ruling echelon is effectively insulated from the impacts of any elections), the elections have never been controlled as strictly in post-revolutionary Iran as in other authoritarian regimes. Usually, they are at least partly competitive, and their results are not simply determined beforehand [cf. *Ghobadzadeh 2018*].

[8] A descendant of the prophet Muhammad.

[9] A member of the Shi'a clergy entitled to independent legal and theological reasoning.

"civil society". He promised to continue the policy of economic liberalization and *detente* with the West initiated by Rafsanjani. And finally, he also outplayed the conservative candidate Nateq-Nuri with his personal charisma and the hitherto unusual contact style of campaign [*Tazmini 2008: 46–54*].

By that day, the brief period of transition can also be viewed as effectively put in motion by the unexpected and tentative introduction of the democratic element into play. The election facilitated the crucial ingredient of the whole process: an implicit coalition between the soft-liners and the liberal-minded portion of the Iranian public. The demonstrated public support and mass mobilization were the reformists' main assets, along with the limited remit of the presidential mandate (which, significantly, stayed short of being underpinned by the majority in *Majlis*). With little else to opt for than the strategy of gradualism [cf. *Takeyh 2003: 42*], the reformists set out to use this position to promote a limited liberalization program. Such a strategy would fulfill their promises to the public, retain its support, and simultaneously serve the logic of the transitive process by widening the space for further political organization and action.

This all was, though, hardly in the interest of the hard-line camp. For its grip on power, the progress of the reformists on this path represented a clear long-term danger. In a typical manner, the reformists thus had to move cautiously and play a complicated power game with the hard-liners [cf. *O'Donnell – Schmitter: 23–27*]. Because they entered the governmental structures in accordance with the constitutional process and as acknowledged participants of the post-revolutionary politics (being more members of the ruling elite than an "opposition" to it) direct and immediate action against them was problematic for the hard-liners. But it was also evident (and later proven true) that the latter group would not sit idle if the situation went too far.

The Transition in Motion

O'Donnell and Schmitter use two essential scales to analyze political regimes in transition. The first measures the course of the liberalization and the second of the democratization of a given regime. The liberalization process concerns guaranteeing both the individual and collective rights that had been hitherto violated – from the right to life or privacy to freedom of expression and political organization. Liberalization is significant because it opens up space for activities that had not been possible during the period of the full stability of the authoritarian regime. It thereby decreases the costs of both individual and collective dissent and opposition, which by itself undermines the authoritarian regime. The democratization process is somewhat more challenging to sum up because the models of democracy are manifold and different from each other. Yet, in its essential meaning, it means an expansion of collective deliberation based on the equality of citizens to realms that were hitherto administered differently (by arbitrary rule, expert opinion, etc.) Full democratization means the cessation of the authoritarian regime incumbents' monopoly on power [*ibid.: 7–8*]. Although liberalization and democratization can proceed independently of each other, for the successful development of a transition towards democracy, both must be present. While democratization without liberalization may result in formalist change only (the authors use the term *plebiscite autocracy*), liberalization without democratization risks rapid regress to authoritarianism in the future [*ibid.: 9–11*].

The election of Khatami clearly represented a "democratic moment" in the whole process, although one that occurred somewhat inadvertently and did not undo the problematic aspects of the constitutional regime, which contained carefully set limits shielding the top of the incumbent regime from the will of the people. The new President assumed a precisely limited share of political power allotted to him and formed a new government. His choice of the 22 ministers mirrored the composition of the coalition created before the elections. Most of the posts were granted to technocrats and the President's allies, including several sincere promoters of reforms. Some of the notorious hard-liners were also ousted from their positions.[10]

Nevertheless, Khatami was also forced to make significant concessions to the conservative *Majlis,* which concerned the crucial security sector. While he succeeded in getting rid of the controversial Ali Fallahiyan (who had become notorious due to his endorsement and sanctioning of assassinations of "enemies" abroad) at the Ministry of Intelligence and Security, the most he could do was to replace him with the conservative cleric Qorban-Ali Dorri-Najafabadi, who later proved to have little control over the office. Neither was the Ministry of Defense subject to significant changes and remained close to the conservatives [see *Buchta 2004: 8–9, 14–15*; *Tazmini 2008: 61–62*].

Unable to do anything more for the time being, Khatami's government initiated the promised liberalization program. The Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Ata'ollah Mohajerani, announced that his Ministry would not attack artists and writers and censor publications before their issue. The ban on videotapes and other storage mediums of Western provenance was lifted [*Tazmini 2008: 65–66*]. The Ministry began to issue licenses to publish periodicals in large quantities. In December 1997, it also directly supported the establishment of the Assembly Guild for Writers and Journalists of the Press. Mohajerani also changed the composition of the Press Court jury, so more litigations were settled in favor of the journalists [*Khiabani 2009: 103–106*]. Similarly, the Ministry of the Interior, headed by Abdollah Nouri (a former member of the IRGC singled out as the most vocal supporter of democratization in the government) [*Tazmini 2008: 63, 106*], began to permit more street demonstrations and register new political organizations. Between 1997 and 2000, 64 new parties were registered, many of them pro-liberalization and pro-reform [*ibid.: 73–74*]. The number of raids on private events and parties in flats and houses declined, and there was also an easing of the enforcement of dress regulations [*ibid.: 65–66*]. Some other progressive policies were also promoted in other realms, for example, the agenda of equality for women [see *ibid.: 67*; *Osanloo 2009: 186*].

Despite their seemingly minor extent, these changes met with a vigorous response from the general public and the intelligentsia in particular. An array of new periodicals emerged, like the daily *Jame'e,* which designated itself "the first newspaper of the civil society in Iran". Others, like *Tus*, *Neshat*, and *Khordad*, followed. The judiciary subsequently banned some of these newspapers, yet the Ministry of Culture, headed by Mohanjerani, issued new licenses to them under a different name. What was even more seminal was that the press began to openly discuss previously unthinkable questions, such as the responsibility

[10] A case in point is Ali Akbar Velayati, who led the Foreign Ministry for the last 16 years, regularly intimidating the reformists and using his office to derogate the "human rights propaganda" from the West. See *Sohrab – Nomani 2006: 81*; *Halliday 2003: 145*; *Afshari 2011: 29*.

of elected officials, impartiality of courts, and transparency, and the debate on religious questions also became more pronounced and open. The students joined the mobilization as well. In 1999, the ISNA press agency was established by DTV and began to publish the daily *Azar*. The number of NGOs increased rapidly, surpassing 2500 in 2000. Progress also occurred in the visual arts and film industry [*Khiabani 2009: 103–106*; *Arjomand 2009: 106*]. This all created an atmosphere charged with expectations and was even reflected abroad, wherein the US-based organization Freedom House decreased the index of infringement on civil liberties in its annual report *Freedom in the World* of 1998–1999 from 7 to 6 [*Freedom House 1999*].

But any real progress in terms of democratization lagged behind these expectations. Though not insignificant, the only real success was the organization of the elections for local municipalities, already enshrined in the Constitution and held for the first time in Spring 1999 [*Arjomand 2009: 100*; *Tazmini 2008: 71–72*]. Added to that may also be a notable shift in the foreign policy discourse.[11] Yet, except for that, Khatami's administration did not – and could not – do much more. This became apparent once the conservative campaign of intimidation and obstructionism gained pace throughout 1998 and when the first real clash of the two opposing forces occurred in the summer of 1999. Then, the democratization deficit and the reformers' inability to reach the higher, "sovereign" echelon of power proved fatal.

However, even if considering this, the impact of this brief liberalization period on Iranian society and politics must not be underestimated. The temporary reduction in the costs of political and public engagement had a characteristic effect: the hitherto depoliticized and atomized society was mobilized, and the apparently monolithic apolitical consensus behind the regime was shown to be fictitious. Sidelined political identities and aspirations surfaced among the Iranians once more and began to develop with an intensity that surpassed previous expectations [cf. *O'Donnel – Schmitter 1986: 48–49*]. This left a lasting imprint in the collective memory of the liberally-minded public and, as I will discuss again in conclusion, gave birth to moderation and reformism as a significant phenomenon on the Iranian political scene, at least until the relatively recent period.

The Counteroffensive

The conservatives began the counteroffensive immediately after the crushing electoral defeat of their candidate. This happened at first on the rhetorical level. Khamenei himself delivered a clear warning to the reformists in which he explicitly related his authority to the sacred religious imperative (against the mere worldly authority of the elected individuals) and stated that "the enemies of Islam are attempting to sever religion from politics" and condemned the idea of participation as a mendacious Western concept. Other conservative ayatollahs and also the radical right, represented by the *Ansar-e Hezbollah* (who designated Khatami as a "Westernized liberal"), joined him [*Tazmini 2008: 104–105*].

[11] This was symbolized by Khatami's famous speech in the UN on September 5, 2000 about the "dialogue of the civilizations" [see in *Tazmini 2008: 157–161*]. For example, the government, through the Foreign Ministry, also distanced itself from the notorious death sentence pronounced upon Salman Rushdie through Khomeini's *fatwa* in 1989 [*Monshipouri 2009: 374*].

Yet, the conservatives could not discredit the reform movement through propagandist means. As already mentioned, they also did not dare to remove the legitimately elected President out of hand. Their strategy thus adopted the form of a systematic and gradual attack in the form of obstructionism on the institutional positions level and intimidation targeting the chosen prominent individuals.

Already in April 1998, the Tehran mayor Karbashi had been arrested along with a number of his aides and sentenced for corruption and embezzlement in a controversial trial broadcast on state television and widely debated in the press [*ibid.: 105–106*; *Sciolino 1998*]. A similar campaign was initiated against Minister of Interior Nuri, who, in addition to his liberal policy and provocative rhetoric, refused to dismiss Karbashi during his trial. Yet for the time being, he was only dismissed by the *Majlis* from his office (by a narrow majority on June 21, 1998) and continued his political career as vice-president and successful candidate on the Tehran city council in 1999 elections [*Mir-Hosseini – Tapper 2006: 136–139*; see also *Amnesty International 2002*; *Tazmini 2008: 106*].

Another target of the conservative onslaught became the reformist press. During the summer of 1998, the ayatollahs Jannati (the head of judiciary) and Yazdi (the secretary of the Guardian Council) complained of a "cultural offensive" and demanded that Mohanjerani intervene. On July 22, 1998, the license of the daily *Jama'e* was revoked by the court, and in September, the daily *Tus*, which had replaced it, was closed down. Some of the editorial staff were arrested, although provisionally released without charge. Similar steps were taken against other periodicals [*Khiabani 2009: 106–109*].

Nevertheless, the most shocking attack on the liberalizing public space came during the fall. On November 22, 1998, the bodies of Daryush Forouhar and his wife Parvaneh Eskandari, long-term dissidents and critics of the human rights abuses by the regime, were found in their flat in the suburbs of Tehran with stab wounds [*Sciolino 2000: 233–234*]. Just two weeks later, Mohammad Mokhtari and Mohammad Ja'far Puyande, writers and also critics of the regime, vanished, and their bodies were found two weeks later with signs of strangulation. The violent deaths of the four opposition activists brought to attention another suspicious death – of the journalist and translator Majid Sharif – and aroused further speculation about other incidents over the preceding couple of years [*ibid.: 239*; *Amnesty International 1998*].

The murders generated a wave of fear and outrage among the reformists and the liberal-minded part of the public, and a group of distinguished Iranian intellectuals and writers asked Khatami to investigate the case. The President appointed a commission composed of the representatives of Majlis, judiciary, and executive. On January 5, 1999, the Ministry of Intelligence and Security was forced to release a public statement acknowledging that the murders had been committed by a group of its employees who had been acting on their own initiative. Eighteen people were arrested, and on June 20, 1999, the Military Court in Tehran announced that the killings had been organized by Sa'eed Emami, a deputy of the ex-minister Ali Fallahiyan, also connected to the killings of Kurdish activists in the Mykonos Restaurant in Berlin in 1992. Emami then, under unclarified circumstances, committed suicide in prison [*Buchta 2004: 14–15*].

The entire event was one of the rare occasions when President Khatami (who made considerable efforts to resolve the situation) succeeded in intervening in the operation of the security apparatus. After the resignation of Minister Najafabadi, the newly appointed

Ali Yunesi achieved the depoliticization of the Ministry and removed the network of the aides of the former Minister Fallahiyan from it [*ibid.*; *Tazmini 2008: 107*]. For the time being, similar attacks ceased.

Nevertheless, the judicial offensive continued. In the Spring of 1999, the distinguished non-conformist cleric Mohsen Kadivar and the journalist Akbar Ganji fell victim to political processes. Incidentally, both had participated in the unraveling of the "chain murders" perpetrated by the MZB officials the previous year. Kadivar, who had engaged in questioning the validity of the *velayat-e faqih* doctrine based on Shi'a jurisprudence, was sentenced for "propaganda against the Islamic Republic" to 18 months in prison. Ganji, who in the daily *Khordad* had explicitly cast doubt on the Islamic ideology of the regime and expressed a demand for a "rational" attitude towards religion and politics, vindicated himself before the court but was sentenced a year later. Other journalists and activists were charged with similar crimes [*Tazmini 2008: 107*; *139–140*].

The 18th of Tir Uprising and the Disintegration of the Reform Movement

The year 1999 was crucial for the fate of the transition. Despite the problems described above, it seemed that the position of the reformists was not hopeless. The election to the local municipalities meant considerable success. The commission appointed by Khatami and a group of investigative journalists successfully acted against illegal structures in the security forces. Reformist newspapers continued to be published in spite of difficulties. Nevertheless, the situation was heading towards a new confrontation.

In May 1999, an amendment to the press law proposed by the conservatives to stifle the "cultural offensive" was debated in the *Majlis*. The amendment considerably diminished the influence of the Ministry of Culture and Religious Guidance (and thus the reformist government as a whole) on media issues, entrusted the appointment of the jury of the Special Court for the press to the hands of the judiciary, and introduced the direct responsibility of authors and publishers for published material. The proposal, despite severe criticism, passed the first reading in July. Immediately after this, the Special Court for the Clergy ordered the closure of the daily *Salam,* which had criticized the arrangement. At this moment, the popular element stepped forward, represented by students who, on the evening of July 8, staged a peaceful student demonstration against the verdict in front of the dormitories of Tehran University.

Some of the conservative circles (it is not clear who ordered the ensuing action) did not want to tolerate this show of defiance, especially after the protesters chanted slogans against the *rahbar* and other high officials of the regime. In the early morning of the following day, 400 uniformed and plain-clothes members of the security forces (and probably also of the *Basij* and *Ansar-e Hezbollah*) stormed the dormitory area, looted more than 800 rooms, and beat the students present, causing at least one death, many injuries, and significant material damage to the students' belongings and the dormitory facility. The whole incident was outrageous. The Minister of Culture, the chancellor of the University, and eighteen deans of the faculties offered their resignations in protest. Khatami and other members of the cabinet denounced the attack as well.

Nevertheless, the engaged public took the initiative into its own hands again. Large protests (numbering as many as tens of thousands) were convened in Tehran and other major

cities. The demonstrations became a protest against the political repression and higher echelon of the ruling stratum. They quickly deteriorated into violent clashes, which persisted for six more days. At least three people were killed, and many others were wounded and arrested. These protests, the biggest seen in the country since the Islamic revolution, became known as the student uprising of the 18th *Tir* [*BBC 2000*; *Tazmini 2008: 109*; *Khiabani 2009: 111–112*]. In a remarkable change, Khatami stayed silent on the protests and did not intervene in any way (he later even distanced himself from them). As only later revealed, he was occupied by behind-the-scenes negotiations. Twenty-four officers of the IRGC sent him a letter in which they openly threatened to stage a military coup d'état were he to obstruct the violent suppression of the demonstrations.

The emergence of the protests and their suppression proved decisive for the fate of the transition. Arguably, the whole incident occurred as a result of two central dynamics. The first was the growing impatience of the hard-liners with the so-called "cultural offensive" (i.e., the practical consequences of the process of liberalization). This led to their attempt to curb it, which subsequently became a substantial point of contest between both sides. A confrontation ensued, in which the inherent contradictions and imbalances of the whole configuration that was tentatively upheld for two years surfaced. The mobilized public, represented by students and other strata, finally stepped out spontaneously in defense of the precarious freedoms that had been achieved, taking the initiative into its own hands. President Khatami stepped back from endorsing the mass movement and escalating the conflict with the conservative faction in his final fateful move.

Arguably, this brief clash may be regarded as critically important and effectively deciding the outcome of the transition. Khatami's retreat, although prudent tactically (the government by any means did not possess the means to defend against a conservative coup), undermined the crucial power configuration on which the whole transition stood. This was the implicit coalition between the weak institutional representation and the popular majority demanding the reforms. The confrontation between the weak President and the institutions of Guardianship finally revealed the feebleness of the reforms, which were not underpinned by any real change in the regime's power structure.

Khatami was discredited by his inability to intervene, the public was disappointed, and the gradual disintegration of the broad reformist coalition began [*Buchta 2004: 9*]. The risk scenario of "temperate" tactics materialized, as described by O'Donnell and Schmitter. The hard-liners eventually confronted the reformists with the threat of violence and achieved their goals without actually acting. The transition remained limited to a shaky and quickly stifled liberalization, and the reform movement ended divided and disillusioned [*O'Donnell – Schmitter 1986: 24*].

Immediately after the protests, the judiciary closed the daily *Khordad*, and in November, its editor-in-chief and former Minister Abdollah Nuri went on trial, eventually sentenced to 5 years imprisonment and banned from candidacy to *Majlis* the following year. The overtly political trial was ominous for liberal-minded politicians and the public [*Mir-Hosseini – Tapper 2006: 136–139*; see also *Amnesty International 2002*; *Tazmini 2008: 106*]. Although the February 2000 *Majlis* elections brought an overwhelming victory (215 of 290 seats with a 69% turnout) for the reformists, they hardly turned the tide. With his circle, Khamenei effectively used the GC, the EC, and the judiciary to prevent the liberalization process from continuing and reverse it. The incumbent parliament managed

to adopt the controversial amendment to the press law just before its dissolution, and Khamenei directly warned the new one not to revoke it. Over the following week, the courts banned sixteen reformist periodicals, including *Mosharekat*, the organ of IFP. As of 2001, the reformist press was shut down [*Khiabani 2009: 114–115*].

This campaign was complemented by the judicial proceedings against all real or perceived opposition ensuing after the elections. In the spring of 2000, a process with the participants in the conference "Iran After Election" in the House of the World Cultures in Berlin which was stormed by the members of the exile opposition, exposing themselves to the cameras [*Hicks 2001: 13*; on the incident see *Mir-Hosseini – Tapper 2006: 148–149*], ten liberal intellectuals were sentenced to long terms in jail. Other trials followed, involving, among others, members of the *Majlis*, sixty of whom were prosecuted and four sentenced over the following years, mainly on the pretext of their parliamentary speeches [*Arjomand 2009: 50*, *98–102*].

Legislation adopted by the Majlis over its whole tenure was strictly controlled and vetoed by the GC. This also included two late-coming laws that, in 2002, attempted to strip the GC of its remit to vet the candidates for the election and bolster the authorities of the President [*ibid.: 102*]. Despite the repeated Khatami election in 2001, the transition stalled due to the reformists' effective paralysis and isolation from political power. The hard-liners emerged triumphant.

Conclusion

What conclusions does this early experience with a transitive process provide us for understanding the long-term political conflict in Iran and the possible prospects for future democratic change? First, it demonstrates the broader significant phenomena. The post-revolutionary Iranian regime has not been immune to the initiation of transitive processes, or what we may conceive of as attempts at them, essentially along the general paradigm described by O'Donnell and Schmitter, which presupposes the necessity of an internal division within the regime itself and the interest of the part of its elite in liberalizing and democratizing the status quo. The 1997–1999 period comprised the first tangible attempt at such a reform and simultaneously one marked by the novelty of this situation for both sides. As such, it represents a vital comparative material for studying the internal dynamics of the regime, which remains bound by the same constitutional rules and marked by the specific inner power structure.

During this period, a considerable part of the former revolutionary elite, previously sharing the "totalist" aspirations of the early Islamic republic, attempted to alter the regime's disposition towards a new vision. Although promoted in indigenous and nativist terms ("religious democracy"), this vision meant fundamentally a return to the more pluralist and democratic version of political modernity. This was marked by fewer restrictions on free speech and more open debate about the issues of society and politics, less constrained public space and fewer infringements on one's privacy, new avenues for civic participation, and less conflicted relations with foreign countries and the West. It is obviously impossible to determine what a transformed Islamic Republic would look like if the reformists finally got a free hand to remold it (not least because, as O'Donnell and

Schmitter repeatedly point out, transitions tend to progress spontaneously to unforeseeable ends), but it would look different.

However, this change was not realized. The hard-line faction's campaign ultimately stifled the reform attempt, and the Islamic Republic retained its authoritarian disposition. Although the reformists received significant public support for their attempt at change in the May 1997 election and successfully entered government offices, their liberalization campaign was disrupted by judicial interventions and intimidation campaigns on the part of the security apparatus. When the public finally got into the streets to confront this campaign and voice their support for the continuation of the progressive path, the reformist Presidency of Muhammad Khatami backed off under the threat of an armed coup. With this, his weakness within the system was revealed, and as more conservatives' attacks on selected individuals from the liberal front followed, the unspoken coalition between the public and the reformists disintegrated into disillusionment.

The established pattern repeated a couple of times in what followed. In the 2009 elections, the candidacy of the former revolutionary and long-term prime Minister of Iran in the 1980s (and later also an adviser to Khatami during his term), Mir-Hossein Mousavi, was supported by a broad-based coalition of reformists (similar in composition and platform to the 1997 Khatami's bid) in an attempt to challenge the conservative Presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. In this case, Mousavi lost in what was subsequently alleged to be a fraud, which resulted in the eruption of mass protests continuing into the next year and becoming remembered as the "Green movement". In 2013, the continued will of the reformist coalition to engage within the political system was signified by its support of Hassan Rouhani, who eventually won and held two successive mandates. His government negotiated the so-called nuclear deal (the JCPOA) with the United States, but after its efforts for liberalization lagged behind expectations and the new American administration of Donald Trump withdrew from the JCPOA and renewed sanctions on Iran, the reformist movement ended in disillusionment again. Finally, the strictly vetted elections of 2021 (recording also the lowest voter turnout in the history of the Islamic Republic) marked its, temporary or not, departure from the active role in the political process.

Obviously, neither of the reformist upsurges succeeded in significantly liberalizing or democratizing the Iranian political system. The above analysis may ultimately provide us with an explanation of this repeated failure. From Khatami, the reformist faction within the regime attempted to induce a political change by taking over the ministerial and parliamentarian institutions, drawing on popular support – a feature that is, remarkably, at least potentially possible within the current constitutional rules and political practice. Yet, as already the "power game" that ensued between the reformists and the conservatives after the Khatami election revealed, this strategy always faced a significant obstacle, comprising the peculiar stratification of the political field and the institutional structure in the "sovereign" and "subordinate" echelon. Without the leverage vis-a-vis the sovereign office of the Leadership and its aide-de-camp institutions (be it the GC or the IRGC) holding all the decisive prerogatives and the means of coercive power, the attempts at a transition from the lower ministerial positions could be easily prevented. This occurred either through direct intervention by blocking liberalization reforms via constitutional procedures and persecuting its proponents (including the protesting public) or, indirectly, by a mere threat of doing so or resorting to force of even greater magnitude.

Apparently, in the 1997–1999 period, both of these scenarios took place and subsequently accompanied also all the other reformist bids that ended up either by open repression or by the eventual acquiescence of the reformist-held Presidency to the will of the Leadership (and its fall in disgrace among the liberal-minded public). This leads to a significant conclusion: for a successful transition to occur within the current system, it seems it would be necessary for the basic division between hard- and soft-liners to reach up to the higher, "sovereign" echelon – preferably the office of the Leadership, and/or the IRGC powerhouse of the regime. Only in such a case is it reasonable to expect the inevitable "power game" between both factions to result in a markedly different (if still unpredictable) outcome. Unfortunately, the "sovereign" tier has hitherto remained highly centralized and monopolized by the hard-line faction under the oversight of Ali Khamenei. Moreover, the effective ouster of the reformists from the *Majlis* and the Presidency in 2020–2021 further cemented the rigidity of the regime and, together with the heightened geopolitical tensions, seems to decrease the probability of a democratic change in the country almost to null now.

But even this murky situation should not prevent us from considering the possibility of new attempts at a transitive process in the future, which many different circumstances can spell, not least the ongoing generational change within the elite and the continuing legitimation crisis. At the same time, there are few alternatives to it (unless we assume some kind of foreign intervention or the recurrence of a major popular uprising akin to that of 1978, either of which would hardly guarantee democratization by itself). If such a renewed attempt at transition occurred again, we might also use a basic rule of thumb to assess its viability: what positions do the soft-liners occupy within the political system – and do they have a reasonable chance of swaying the "sovereign" institutions on their side?

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