

Romney's accusation on Khatami disputed

By Farah Stockman, Globe Staff | September 9, 2006

WASHINGTON -- Leading human rights groups and academics yesterday disputed aspects of Governor Mitt Romney's high-profile accusation that Iran's former president, Mohammed Khatami, was responsible for "the torture and murder" of democracy activists and student protesters.

The groups said Khatami was a moderate among Iranian leaders who worked largely in vain to expand political freedoms in Iran, which is controlled by Muslim clerics working with Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei . The violent crackdowns on democracy protesters during Khatami's time as president -- 1997 to 2005 -- were believed to have been initiated by rivals of the president and approved by Iran's ruling clerics, they said.

In addition, Romney failed to provide documentation for his claim that "Khatami has endorsed [current President Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad's call for the annihilation of Israel." The Iranian government has long maintained that Israel was established illegally, but Ahmadinejad's call to "wipe Israel off the map" was widely seen as a dangerous provocation.

Romney's spokesman, Eric Fehrnstrom, cited four statements by Khatami that were sharply critical of Israel, but all predated Ahmadinejad's remark.

Nonetheless, Romney's stance on Khatami -- and his refusal to allow Massachusetts State Police to protect the former president during his speech tomorrow at Harvard University -- has been widely praised in conservative circles.

Romney, who has been laying the groundwork for a possible 2008 presidential bid, appeared on Fox News and earned plaudits in newspapers . Romney "gets it," The Washington Times declared. The Conservative Voice called him a "patriotic Republican."

Fehrnstrom said Khatami should be held responsible for abuses during his presidency.

"Presidents should not be allowed to divorce themselves from the policies of their own country," he said. "He was president during the largest crackdown on the Iranian media since the beginning of the Iranian revolution. He was president when Iranian Jews were sent to prison on charges of espionage. He was president when thousands of university students were arrested after the 1999 student rioting."

Fehrnstrom cited "Iranian dissidents" as the source of the allegations that Khatami had overseen the murder and torture of democratic activists.

But Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the New Haven-based Iran Human Rights Documentation Center -- three leading groups monitoring human rights abuses in Iran -- all disputed aspects of Romney's depiction of Khatami's offenses, as did many academic specialists on Iran.

"That is an exaggeration to say that he oversaw the abuses. That is definitely wrong," said Hadi Ghaemi , Iran researcher for Human Rights Watch, based in New York. "The judiciary and the forces close to the Supreme Leader oversaw that . . . [Khatami] was not the one leading those abuses. It was his opponents."

And both Zahir Janmohamed , advocacy director for Middle East and North Africa at Amnesty International, and Jasmine Samara, spokeswoman for the Iran Human Rights Documentation

Center, said their groups had researched the abuses committed during Khatami's presidency, but none could be traced to him personally.

“Khatami is part of a larger state machinery,” Janmohamed said. “It could very well be that the orders to imprison these students came from the supreme leader.”

In his statement to the media explaining his decision to revoke State Police protection for Khatami, Romney accused Khatami of acting in concert with the hard-liners, luring students into protesting only to crack down on their activities.

“Khatami oversaw the torture and murder of Iranian students, journalists, and others who spoke out for freedom and democracy,” Romney said. “Khatami relaxed freedom of speech laws giving democracy reformers a false sense of security only to engage in one of the largest crackdowns in the country's history.”

But academics across the political spectrum took issue with that account.

“That is not the view of most Iran experts,” said Kenneth Katzman, a Middle East specialist at the Congressional Research Service, a research arm of Congress. “I think most experts on Iran would say that Khatami attempted to stop many human rights abuses but did not prevail politically.”

Shaul Bakhash , professor of Middle East History at George Mason University and a prominent Iran specialist , said Romney's assertion does not “accord with the facts.”

“To say of Khatami that he oversaw the arrest and torture implies that he was directly complicit. I don't think anyone believes that's the case,” he said. “You might argue that he was not firm enough or that he did not have enough backbone, but it is hard to argue that he was complicit. . . . I don't think the facts really are in dispute.”

Michael Rubin , a scholar at the conservative American Enterprise Institute who is a vocal critic of Khatami, also took issue with Romney's characterization.

“What is factually correct is to say he turned a blind eye” to the crackdown, said Rubin, who was in Iran during the July 1999 crackdown . “He didn't oversee it.”