

# Protests in Iran: not a crushing end

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Several days of protests in cities small and large around Iran in the recent eruption of political unrest served as yet another reminder that Iran's Islamic Republic titanic vessel has collided with an iceberg of new protest waves. The Islamic Republic of Iran, which has traditionally relied on recruits from smaller towns and villages and even from urban working classes or low-income families, now faces new challenges emanating from these segments of the population. Unlike the 2009 Green Movement that brought to the fore deep expressions of discontent with the Islamic Republic by the urban middle classes, these protests erupted from small cities, rural areas and remote villages across the country before spreading to other parts of the country.

Whether instigated by right-wing factions against the reformist President Hassan Rouhani, who secretly revealed parts of his annual budget that spared the religious institutions and the revolutionary guards from planned austerity measures, or by foreign elements provoking such uprisings, or spontaneously erupting due to widespread public discontent with the current regime, these protests raise the question: What do the Iranian people really want — democracy, economic recovery, a social opening or just basic freedoms? And how can they manage to achieve them? The economic pressures and hardships that Iranians have endured at a time when the nuclear deal's dividends have failed to improve the country's economic situation have led them to pour into the streets, demonstrating against unmet expectations, mismanagement, endemic corruption, and inequality throughout the country.



## A leadership gap

While the nuclear deal raised people's hopes for an expedited and expanded economic recovery above and beyond their former aspirations, and while a case may be made that President Rouhani made a mistake in overselling the economic benefits of the nuclear deal, the country's current

economic difficulties, as well as widespread corruption, have created an intolerable gap between popular expectations and government leadership performance. A recent Iran Social Survey released in January 2018 examines voter loyalty and electoral volatility in Iran. The survey illustrates that there was a substantial degree of vote switching between the 2013 presidential election and the 2016 Majles (parliament) and Assembly of Experts elections. Of those respondents who voted for a reformist or moderate Majles candidate in 2016, 74 percent voted for Rouhani in 2013. Of those who voted for a principalist candidate in 2016, 32 percent voted for Rouhani in 2013. What this survey demonstrates is that nearly one-third of those who voted for the reformist President Rouhani in 2013 presidential elections chose to vote for a conservative candidate for either the parliament or Assembly of Experts in 2016.[1]

The data further show that the reformist-principalist dichotomy is not as clear-cut in the minds of Iranian voters as many experts—especially those of us who write from afar—think it is. Perhaps, as the authors of this survey demonstrate, immediate local concerns are better indicators of voters' preferences. In this context, the shift of loyalty can also be explained in terms of the growing disillusionment with the lack of perceived or real economic dividends of the nuclear deal nearly a year later.

Although these uprisings appear to be without strong leaders and/or structural and institutional support from business sectors, shopkeepers, student movements, or even former establishment figures, the waves of protests suggest that the resentment cannot be easily curbed in the coming years. The current regime is mobilizing its forces and resources in the face of new waves of protests while also grappling with an enormous loss of credibility and legitimacy over failed efforts at tackling the country's glaring economic problems—notably unemployment, corruption and inequality.

Clearly, the underlying causes of these protests are economic grievances and class differentials, indicating the failure of the Islamic Republic to deliver on multiple fronts. A closer look at Iran's economic policies illustrates that Iranian officials have tried to simultaneously promote two conflicting economic programs—Rouhani's neoliberal agenda and the traditionalists' "resistance economy." Rouhani's economic policies, reflected in the country's recent budget allocations, have been based on austerity measures—policies that have exacerbated the difficult socioeconomic conditions of many Iranians.[2] The "resistance economy," by contrast, underlines some degree of self-sufficiency by reducing the excessive dependency of the country on oil revenues, while seeking to protect local industries and markets from foreign competition and international financial institutions. Both of these schemes have failed to deliver for a variety of reasons. Thus far, leadership has failed to offer an alternative third way. Iran's growing trade with Asian countries over the past three decades has failed to counterbalance intense Western sanctions. Perhaps more importantly, President Trump's decision to de-certify the nuclear deal and keep the sanctions in place has also contributed to a climate of uncertainty for European banks and investors that have entertained the possibility of foreign direct investment in Iran in the post—nuclear deal era.

As Iran attempts to expand its influence across the tumultuous region, an enormously costly venture in both treasure and blood,[3] nearly 30 million low-income Iranians face cuts in state subsidies in the coming months and years.[4] What the vast majority of Iranians immediately seek is not a full-fledged democratic system that provides a wide-ranging freedoms and civil liberties. For many, social freedoms and the ability to hold the government accountable seem among the most immediate demands that they currently seek. While President Rouhani's pledges of economic improvements have clearly fallen by the wayside, people have rightly placed the blame where it belongs—that is, on religious and security entities that tend to earmark a massive amount of the national budget for themselves.

It is worth noting that the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings, which underscored the importance of information and communication technologies in successfully mobilizing protests against authoritarian regimes in the Arab world, have left a negative and enduring memory in the minds of many Iranians, and that may explain why a swift, radical change is not necessarily seen by many Iranians as the immediate solution—at least for now. The widespread instability in the aftermath of uprisings in the Arab world has made Iranians highly suspicious of rapid and unpredictable change. Yet the broad-based discontent and displeasure with the economic realities under the Islamic Republic are sounding an alarm that many conservative elements and politicians have thus far been reluctant to hear.

## Paving the way for transformation?

The remedy may lie somewhere between a gradual reform and radical change—that is, a slow but metastasizing internal crisis that could pave the way for transformation. A recent study by Misagh Parsa has provided a comparative look at democratic transitions in the countries of South Korea and Indonesia, arguing that South Korea provides an example of successful economic development that facilitated change through a reformist path from military rule to democracy. Indonesia, by contrast, experienced decades of repression, cronyism, and corruption under General Suharto (1967–1998), when his rule ultimately collapsed in the wake of the 1997 Asian currency crisis as it faced mass protests and riots that swept the country. Iran's economic development since the 1979 revolution, the author argues, has been handicapped by mismanagement, capital flight, a prolonged war with Iraq, unrelenting US sanctions, a system of patronage politics, and an ongoing brain drain. These conditions resemble those of Indonesia, making Iran susceptible to revolutionary upheavals rather than reform.[5]

A contrasting view suggests that it is not clear whether the Iranian middle classes, who share the discontent but also fear insecurity and generally prefer social freedoms and an improved standard of living, are prepared for—much less committed to—radical change as opposed to gradual reform.[6] This may explain why reformists chose to distance themselves from these new waves of protests.[7] Moreover, the problem with abrupt revolutions in general is that despite their initial promises, radical changes are unlikely in the long term to even modestly satisfy the expectations that have been unrealistically set.

The Islamic Republic has no strategic vision nor any major political agenda, and worse, no sustainable program to deal with the demands and dynamics of Iran's young demographics—fifty percent of Iranians are below the age of 30. The poor economy has particularly affected Iran's young people. Officially, youth unemployment is near 20 percent, but many experts claim that it is in fact closer to 40 percent.<sup>[8]</sup> The state's failure to address the yearning of these young people for a pluralistic and socially tolerant society, as well as their social needs—including education, health, employment, and housing—is well documented.<sup>[9]</sup> The country's leadership has failed to reward a young, educated population with sufficient job opportunities and social mobility, rendering them less ideologically sympathetic to the regime and more inclined to seeking opportunities and new lifestyles outside the country; a brain drain of this nature has grave implications for the country's future. The chasm separating a quickly evolving and modernizing society from a political regime whose identity is framed in anti-Western beliefs and policies along with a rigid statist interpretation of Islam has never been deeper.<sup>[10]</sup> Moreover, Iranian health officials, overwhelmed by growing socioeconomic problems, have expressed deep concern over widespread drug addiction and rampant alcoholism among both the young and the old, calling for measures to tackle these issues.

It may be that the Islamic Republic of Iran, which has over the past three decades created a welfare system marked by expanding basic health, education, and aid programs, contains the seeds of its own transformation. Iranian society has increasingly become an active agent in transforming the state, as those who have benefited from a welfare system have formed a powerful base of oppositional unrest.<sup>[11]</sup> Although the original sin lies in the regime's economic bankruptcy, it is ultimately the political process that may well facilitate its demise. This would be possible with the emergence of new leaders, either from within the state elite institutions or from society at large, who could steer the ship in a different direction.

This new leadership, rooted inside the country, need not be revolutionary but rather pragmatic and inclusive. The intellectual source of change, aligned with progressive forces in society, must draw from within to provide an alternative, legitimate opposition if the pretense of foreign intervention is to be avoided. That day may seem far off given the suffocating and repressive nature of the current regime, but the recent protests suggest that it may not be that far off. The aging ayatollahs appear dead set on prolonging their climate of fear, in part because now more than ever they appear clueless about the real perils facing their regime.

## NOTES

[1] Kevan Harris and Daniel Tavana, "Voter Behavior and Political Mobilization in Iran: Findings from Iran Social Survey, *Iran Social Survey*, January 2018, available at << <http://eirg.org/repository/eirg-report-2018-01.pdf> >>. Accessed on January 11, 2018.

[2] Ali Fatholah-Nejad, "Causes Behind Iran's Protests: A Preliminary Account," *Aljazeera*, January 6, 2018, available at <[https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/iran-protests-preliminary-account-180105232533539.html?utm\\_source=Weekly+Bulletin&utm\\_campaign=8258e73bfe-EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN\\_2017\\_08\\_25&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_812dcb9172-8258e73bfe-132816945](https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/iran-protests-preliminary-account-180105232533539.html?utm_source=Weekly+Bulletin&utm_campaign=8258e73bfe-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2017_08_25&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_812dcb9172-8258e73bfe-132816945)>. Accessed on January 11, 2018.

[3] Scott Peterson, "Mideast's New Superpower," *The Christian Science Monitor Weekly*, December 8, 2017, pp. 24-30.

[4] Thomas L. Friedman, "Iranian and Saudi Youth Try to Bury 1979," *The New York Times*, January 9, 2018, available at <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/09/opinion/iran-saudi-youth-1979.html>  
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[5] Misagh Parsa, *Democracy in Iran: Why It Failed and How It Might Succeed*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016: 304-305.

[6] Thomas Erdbrink, "Iran Warns of Tough Crackdown on Largest Protests Since 2009," *The New York Times*, January 2, 2018, pp. A1-A6; See also Haleh Esfandiari, "Reform or Revolution: Iran's Path to Democracy," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2018, available at  
<<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/review-essay/2017-12-12/reform-or-revolution>  
(<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/review-essay/2017-12-12/reform-or-revolution>). Accessed on January 8, 2018.

[7] Mohammad Ali Kadivar, "Why Haven't Reformists Joined the Protests Sweeping Iran?" *The Washington Post*, January 5, 2018, available at <[https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/01/05/why-havent-reformists-joined-the-protests-sweeping-iran/?utm\\_campaign=8258e73bfe-EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN\\_2017\\_08\\_25&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_source=Weekly%20Bulletin&utm\\_term=.78bd57a52058](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/01/05/why-havent-reformists-joined-the-protests-sweeping-iran/?utm_campaign=8258e73bfe-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2017_08_25&utm_medium=email&utm_source=Weekly%20Bulletin&utm_term=.78bd57a52058)>. Accessed on January 11, 2018.

[8] Thomas Erdbrink, "Iran Warns of Tough Crackdown on Largest Protests Since 2009," *The New York Times*, January 2, 2018, pp. A1-A6; see especially p. A6.

[9] Abbas Amanat, *Iran: A Modern History*, Yale University Press, 2017, pp. 871-873.

[10] Thomas Erdbrink, "Iran Warns of Tough Crackdown on Largest Protests Since 2009," *The New York Times*, January 2, 2018, pp. A1-A6; see especially p. A6.

## Comment to “Protests in Iran: not a crushing end”

1. **dave** says:

January 22, 2018 at 4:27 pm (<http://blogs.berkeley.edu/2018/01/22/protests-in-iran-not-a-crushing-end/#comment-285280>)

Iran is a police state\* and its power structure has no intention of letting go, and it takes a huge amount of courage and perhaps recklessness for people there to “fight the power”.

It might also take courage for expat Iranians to “fight the power” from overseas even though the Iranian diaspora does have wealth, education, achievement ... but apparently a sense of detachment and powerlessness and fear.

Iran could become a great country  
if it could only collectively recognize that its core problem is not the U.S.  
but instead the root problem is hardline religious conservatives  
who want to twist religious dogma to enact their personal selfish agendas  
across all of society.

Help wanted: genuine leaders, apply within.

“A genuine leader is not a searcher for consensus but a molder of consensus.”  
(Martin Luther King, Jr.)

\*“Police state: a political unit characterized by repressive governmental control of political, economic, and social life usually by an arbitrary exercise of power by police and especially secret police in place of regular operation of administrative and judicial organs of the government according to publicly known legal procedures ”

Reply (<http://blogs.berkeley.edu/2018/01/22/protests-in-iran-not-a-crushing-end/?replytocom=285280#respond>)