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PROTESTS IN IRAN

Rejection of the Nezam

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In Iran, protests are relatively common. When examining them, one can see differences in their objectives. One type of protest seeks change within the system, rallying around causes and initiatives; the other seeks to change the system. The Islamic Republic of Iran came to power in 1979 after the Iranian Revolution (1978–79), which was characterized by a series of the latter type of protests by leftists, clergy, and ordinary Iranians rallying against the country's monarchal system that had lost touch with the majority of its own citizens and acted with total impunity against any dissent.

The charismatic exiled cleric Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who became Iran's leader after the revolution, ushered in a hitherto novel and fairly unknown governing system called *vilayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the jurist).[1] This system incorporated theocratic and republican norms that empowered first Khomeini and then Ali Khamenei, after Khomeini's death in 1989, to rule as Iran's supreme leader. The legitimacy of the *nezam* (system, i.e. regime), as the Islamic republican system is referred to in Iran, has rested on Shi'ite Islamic theological tenets as well as popular support, the most important manifestation of which has been elections for positions throughout the governing system, from local municipalities to the president of the republic. Despite there being various checks and filtering systems in place to ensure the loyalty of those running for office, especially higher positions, there has been a semblance of popular choice by the voters.

Among the presidents of the republic, there have been individuals, such as Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005), who have tried to introduce some degree of openness. Khatami allowed greater personal freedoms as well as favored a more rules-based system by which the public, within the existing Islamic republican rules and regulations, could expand its however-limited freedoms. During this time, there was more public expression of dissent, seeking change around certain issues or causes. Khamenei, backed by the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC), responded by clamping down on and eventually silencing Khatami and quelling public expression.[2] This ignited new waves of protests.

Since mid-September 2022, when the current protests began in Iran, questions have arisen about the type of protest Iran is now experiencing. Is this yet another spontaneous uprising over a specific cause—in this case, the death of a young woman in police custody named Mahsa Amini—or the more existential type?[3] This article will first discuss the protests that arose over irregularities in the 2009–10 Iranian elections; then, it will examine the current protests and how they may actually resemble mass protests that seek regime change.

The Green Movement

The protests that followed the 2009 Iranian elections are referred to as the "Green Movement." These were the largest mass demonstrations since the events of the Iranian Revolution in terms of levels of participation by different segments of the population, violence, and geographical spread. The main reason for the Green Movement was blatant irregularities in the reelection of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president of the Islamic Republic in June 2009.[4] Ahmadinejad had come to power in 2005 with the backing of Khamenei and the IRGC to counter Khatami's influence and silence regime opposition. While chants of "death to dictator" (a reference to the supreme leader, Khamenei) surfaced during this time, and some may have been seeking regime change, the majority of protesters took to streets to rally around a specific issue. They demanded the application of the very laws and regulations that the regime had enshrined in the 1989 Iranian Constitution, which in this case meant elections free of direct interference by the establishment forces—that is, the office of the supreme leader, the IRGC, and the judiciary. As this author wrote in this publication more than a decade ago:

> Prior to the 2009 presidential election and the internal fallout that ensued, the Islamic Republic's leadership structure, while perplexing and labyrinthine, was intelligible. The office of the supreme leader was, both on paper and in fact, the final arbiter, an impartial entity external to and above the governing administrative structures. The person of Khamenei and his position served as the source of ultimate legitimacy within the Islamic Republic regime and as the regime's guardian. That all changed with the Supreme Leader's blatant and unquestioned support of Ahmadinejad prior to the election and after his controversial victory. This action removed any lingering sense that the office of the supreme leader and the person of Khamenei were impartial and above the political machinations and manipulations.[5]

As a result of these events, the IRGC emerged as the true guardians of the system, thereby scrapping even the veneer of people's choice in determining who would govern Iran.

Attempts to Give the Regime a Facelift

During Ahmadinejad's eight years as president of Iran, the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic regime plunged both domestically and internationally. The dire economic conditions in Iran, brought about by a combination of tough U.S.-led, broadly backed international sanctions and gross mismanagement and kleptocracy, further drove ordinary Iranian citizens away from the regime, which caused greater erosion of its legitimacy. As this author argued a decade ago, the decision by Khamenei and the IRGC to allow the relatively moderate, likable, and pragmatic Hassan Rouhani to stand for president in 2013 was not a surprise, as the leadership in Iran had "calculated that the system required a total facelift both domestically and internationally in order to safeguard its existence."[6]

During his first administration, Rouhani enjoyed the backing of Khamenei. Despite his personal mistrust of the West in general and of the United States in particular, Khamenei allowed Rouhani to enter into direct negotiations with the United States to limit Iran's nuclear program to quell concerns about illicit nuclear activities. This led to the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015 between Iran on one side and China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States on the other.[7] The regime's rationale for agreeing to the JCPOA was to lessen international ostracism, especially in the Western world, and regain broader domestic legitimacy and support through limited openness, an inflow of funds, and an increase in economic opportunities.

Despite this initial hopefulness and euphoria, however, the JCPOA did not alter Iran's economic woes as expected, partly due to the deep entrenchment of the IRGC in almost every aspect of the country's affairs, including economics. While Iran's standing in Europe improved, Khamenei, continuing to believe that the U.S. government's ultimate strategy toward Iran remained undermining the very nature of the Islamic Republic system, banned commercial deals and bilateral contacts with the United States outside of the JCPOA.[8] In 2017, despite winning his second term as president with broad popular support, Rouhani's administration was unable to improve the economic conditions in Iran, and the situation worsened.

Protests and Increasing Violence

In late 2017 to early 2018, Iranians again took to the streets, this time to protest high food prices—specifically eggs.[9] Participation surpassed that of the Green Movement protests of 2009–10. While the number of demonstrators in Iran's capital, Tehran, were fewer, protest activity was widespread throughout the country, revealing growing discontent among the citizenry in general, not just in the centers of power. Again, the protestors were decrying the economic conditions in Iran, and like eight years earlier, they shouted "death to dictator." This time, however, there was an escalation and expansion of the rhetoric, as protestors identified Khamenei

by name, denounced the IRGC, and even chanted "death to Rouhani." No longer were the protestors differentiating between the hard-liner and more moderate elements of the regime. Rouhani, wearing his reformist hat, argued that the protests were due to "the gap between officials and the young people" as well as social and cultural restrictions imposed by the system.[10] But the people did not seem to think so.

In 2018, protests continued in Iran over economic conditions and environmental concerns. Then, in May of that year, U.S. president Donald J. Trump unilaterally pulled the United States out from its commitments under the JCPOA.[11] The defeat of the pragmatist Rouhani in the foreign policy arena, coupled with his administration's ineptitude in dealing with Iran's economic problems, cultivated within the population the sentiment that the very nature of the Islamic Republic system was the cause for Iran's inability to provide better living conditions for its citizens.

In late 2019, as the Islamic Republic was engaged in what it calls "resistance economics" against U.S. pressures, the price of gasoline skyrocketed, leading to yet more mass protests against the nezam. In what became the most violent and perhaps widespread protests since the Green Movement, Amnesty International documented that more than 320 people were killed during the few days it took the government to quell the uprisings.[12]

In sum, between 2017 and 2022, there has been at least one major protest per year in Iran, with the majority of the demonstrations being driven by economic hardships. According to Qatar-based researcher Nikolay Kozhanov, the annual inflation rate in Iran has increased by 10 percent per year since 2020, reaching more than 50 percent in 2022. Moreover, in 2022, 18.4 percent of Iranians lived in absolute poverty, while around 60 percent were "either at or below the poverty line."[13]

Forecasting the Future of the Islamic Republic

Since the early days of the Islamic Republic in Iran, there have been events, such as the Iran-Iraq War of 1980–88, the death of Khomeini in 1989, and the Green Movement of 2009–10, that have led Iran watchers to predict the demise of the system. Nevertheless, the nezam has managed to survive through varied measures such as the use of force and intimidation, the slight broadening of civil rights through the façade of popular choice in elections, and the forging of international deals via threats of going nuclear to change the narrative and gain international acceptability.

However, Iran's governing system has gradually been changing from a theocracy with a veneer of republican democracy, which enjoyed fair degrees of public support, to a military dictatorship headed by an aging and weak theocrat who, rather than providing legitimacy to the system, is guarded and survives due to the IRGC and its paramilitary and intelligence affiliates.[14] The reform-minded Rouhani's warnings to balance regime and social security have gone unheeded. The guardians of the system—namely, Khamenei, the IRGC, and their affiliates—are once again keen on enforcing a more restrictive, abusive, and violent social contract with the people they govern. This clashes with citizens' demands for cultural and personal freedoms and a sound economy.

As the *nezam* centers of power debate how to quell the current protests that began in September 2022, they seem to be keenly aware that these popular uprisings, while triggered by the death of Mahsa Amini in police custody, have much deeper causes than women's rights or other civil liberties. The chant that has been popularized since September is "woman, life, and freedom." These three words, which rhyme in Persian (*zan, zendagi, azadi*), are significant in that they focus beyond the restrictions on female civil liberties alone. Such sex-based restrictions have been a hallmark of the Islamic Republic since its inception. The inclusion of "life" and "freedom" is new and telling, and it moves the narrative beyond a single issue or cause. This denotes that the regime is restricting life and freedom for all Iranians and, as such, is rejected.[15]

The message to the nezam from the streets of Iranian cities is that it has lost its legitimacy with the people. Beyond the annual protests that began in 2017, signs of further erosion of the already damaged relationship between the clerical regime and the majority of the Iranian people were showcased in the last parliamentary and presidential elections in 2020 and 2021, respectively, during which the numbers showed the lowest voter turnout since 1979.[16]

A survey measuring and analyzing the attitudes of nearly 17,000 Iranians inside Iran conducted in February 2022 found that 88 percent of respondents consider a "democratic political system" to be "fairly good" or "very good," while only 28 percent said that a "system governed by religious law" was good.[17] The survey was conducted by a Netherlands-based group one week after the 43rd anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, a time during which the Islamic republican system showcased its power and connection with the people and which ought to have been a more favorable period for Iranians to express support for the system. According to the IRGC-affiliated Fars News Agency, as of 19 October 2022, nearly one-half of the protestors arrested were between the ages of 20 and 35, while 41 percent were younger than 20 and only 10 percent were older than 35. As such, the overwhelming majority of those protesting in

the streets are children of the revolution who are demanding more than reforms within the system, unlike the protestors of the Green Movement more than a decade ago. The February 2022 survey also mentioned that more than 62 percent of respondents favored the overthrow of or gradual transition away from the Islamic Republic, while only 8 percent sought reforms within the system. The preservation of the revolutionary values and system was the choice of 18 percent of those surveyed.[18]

In a final assessment, despite the length of the September 2022 protests and their widespread geographical reach, there are no known leaders for protestors to coalesce around. Moreover, beyond chanting positive slogans, the protestors do not seem to have a set agenda. Finally, there is no organized or widespread support for the protests among Iran's merchants and workers. Based on these factors—coupled with the regime's demonstrated tendency to use violence against protestors and their supporters, as well as its extensive and multilayered organs designed to safeguard the Islamic Republic from internal threats—the current protests as they stand seem unlikely to lead to the downfall of the system. Questions remain about the direction that Iran's governing system will take. Will Iran turn into another total dictatorship, with the IRGC calling the shots while selecting someone malleable and with exploitable religious credentials as the country's next supreme leader? Will an internal or external leader or group emerge to galvanize the people for change? Such a leader or group could breed changing sentiments within Iran's merchant class, members of the clergy and military, and technocrats who are finding that the nezam they supported—and which previously had the backing of 97 percent of the population (according to official numbers)—has lost its luster and that it is time to change.

ENDNOTES

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