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**The Protest Movement in Iran:**  
**A Significant Challenge to the Regime**  
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Iran is experiencing the most significant wave of protests since the riots that erupted in 2009 following the presidential election. The demonstrations began as a protest against the ongoing economic crisis, particularly the high cost of living, the collapse of pension funds, and the unemployment crisis. The public criticism was compounded by the proposed budget that President Hassan Rouhani recently submitted to the parliament (Majlis), which includes price increases, higher taxes, and a substantial reduction in the number of individuals entitled to government cash subsidies.

The protest broke out on December 28, 2017 in the city of Mashhad and spread quickly throughout the country, assuming a political anti-establishment character. The protestors are no longer limiting themselves to the demand for an improvement in the economic situation, and are challenging the very existence of rule by clerics. The protests have included calls against the regime, and most prominently against Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, whose pictures have been defaced and destroyed by some of the demonstrators. Pinpoint attacks have also occurred against government institutions and security forces vehicles. In the course of the demonstrations, calls were voiced against Iranian activity outside the country, as well as the ongoing support for the Syrian regime and terrorist organizations, which has exacted a heavy financial toll and has come at the expense of attention to domestic hardships.

The first five days of demonstrations indicated a number of significant differences between the current protest movement and the disturbances of the summer of 2009. First, unlike the events of 2009, which were led by leaders of the reform movement under Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, the current protests have no recognized leadership, although demonstrations in different cities may have been organized by local activists. Moreover, the protestors are not associated with either of the two major political camps in the country – the reformist camp, which supports President Rouhani, or the conservative camp – and demonstrations have included calls against the reformists, who, protestors maintain, are willing to accept the political rules of the game dictated by the regime. The absence of a united leadership is likely to help the protest movement during the current stage of the protests, as it makes it difficult for the regime to arrest leaders in

an effort to quell the protests. At the same time, this lack of a united leadership may make it difficult for the protest movement to formulate clear aims and demands.

Second, the riots of 2009 erupted against a background of claims by the reformist opposition of election fraud and assumed a distinctly political character. After the disturbances were quelled, voices within the reformist camp maintained that the protest leadership's disregard for the economic issue, which was the top public priority in Iran, was one of the factors that resulted in the movement's failure. The current protests, in contrast, combine a demand for improvement in the economic situation with a demand for greater political and social freedoms.

Third, the scope of the current protests differs from that of the protests of 2009. On the one hand, the overall number of protests appears to be lower than in 2009, when hundreds of thousands of Iranians took to the streets. On the other hand, the current protests have a broader geographical distribution and are not limited to Tehran, and occur in parallel in a large number of cities throughout the country. The current socioeconomic distribution of the demonstrators is also more diverse. In 2009, members of the urban middle class played a central role in the Green Movement demonstrations. The current protests, in comparison, are characterized by broader representation of Iranian society, including students, members of the middle class, workers, ethnolinguistic minorities, and others. The heterogeneity could prove to be an advantage for the protesters, as it facilitates, for the first time, a coming together of different social forces. Nonetheless, it may also make it difficult to formulate common goals and may result in a vagueness surrounding the aims of the movement, which range from demands for regime change, to civil reform, to economic improvement. At this stage, it is unclear whether the calls by some demonstrators to topple the regime are representative of most of the protesters, not to mention the general public.

The Iranian regime has thus far refrained from using all the means at its disposal to put down the protests. The authorities have reinforced their security forces in the major cities in recent days, employed riot dispersal measures, and have arrested hundreds of demonstrators. Occasional use was also made of live ammunition, which resulted in more than 20 deaths. The authorities have also disrupted the country's internet and cellular networks, which demonstrators use to relay instructions, publicize dates and times of demonstrations in city centers, and disseminate videos documenting the protests. In an unusual measure, the Iranian Minister of Communications blocked Telegram, the most popular messaging application in Iran, with tens of millions of users. According to the authorities, the app has been used for purposes of incitement, armed uprising, and relay of instructions regarding the use of Molotov cocktails against the police.

The regime appears hesitant to pursue more severe measures, particularly greater use of live ammunition, out of a desire to avoid escalating the situation and doing additional damage to its own legitimacy, as occurred in 2009. This may also stem from an assessment that the demonstrations do not yet pose a serious threat to the stability of the regime. In addition to the measures to quell the protests, the authorities, headed by President Rouhani, are attempting to appease the public. In his first statement regarding the protests, the President said that the citizens of Iran have the right to protest and that their lives deserve to be improved. However, he also warned that his government would have no tolerance for damage to public property, the disruption of order, and chaos in society. He attacked US President Donald Trump who expressed support for the demonstrators, maintaining that the man who just a few months ago referred to Iran as “a nation of terrorists” had no right to express his sympathy for the Iranians. In a January 1 meeting with the heads of Iran’s parliamentary committees, Rouhani stated that the demonstrations could provide an “opportunity” to address the problems of citizens. He also expressed an understanding of the demands of the demonstrators who, he noted, had not taken to the streets only for economic reasons but rather out of a desire to expand their freedoms.

The protest movement poses a significant challenge to both major political movements in Iran. It is difficult for the reformists and supporters of President Rouhani to oppose the protests unequivocally for fear of increasing the alienation of the general population. At the same time, the reformist camp fears that escalation may not only threaten the stability of the regime, of which Rouhani is a part, but may also weaken the status of the president and his primary responsibility for the controversial economic policy. While the conservative camp may have been interested in weakening the political status of the president and may have been behind the demonstrations during the initial stage of the protests, the actions of the protestors have begun to oppose the very rule of the clerics, and conservatives can no longer risk undermining regime stability.

Thus far the protest movement does not pose an immediate threat to the stability of the Iranian regime. The scope of the demonstrations remains relatively limited, and the regime retains other methods to quell the unrest. Still, the demonstrations could expand and escalate, especially if the number of protesters killed rises. The geographical distribution of the protests also challenges the regime and could make it difficult for it to contain multiple centers of protest that are so widely distributed. A turning point could occur in the event that the regime decides to use significant force, and some of the security forces refuse to take part in efforts to quash the disturbances.

The outbreak of the protest movement once again highlights the intensity of the despair and frustration of the Iranian population and the increasing gap between the population in

general and the young generation in particular on the one hand, and the institutions of the revolution on the other. Even if the Iranian authorities succeed in containing the current protests, this will not constitute a long term solution for the regime's failure, on the eve of the 39th anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, to formulate a relevant response to the Iranian public's demands regarding the economy and civil freedoms. Despite some improvement in the economic situation since the signing of the nuclear agreement, the fruits of the agreement are not currently enjoyed by Iran's citizens, particularly due to structural problems within the Iranian economy and Western companies' ongoing reservations regarding renewing their business with Iran. The great expectations that Iranian citizens had pinned on the agreement and the lifting of sanctions have yet to be actualized, and instead have been replaced by a sense of disappointment and despair.

Responding effectively to the demands of the Iranian public requires deviating from the revolutionary dogma, encouraging foreign investment in the economy, and implementing far reaching structural reforms within the Iranian economy that would facilitate more significant growth engines. President Rouhani is well aware of the need to adapt the ideology to the current realities, to achieve economic improvement through foreign investment and structural reforms, and to carry out limited changes in certain areas, such as less Islamic enforcement and expanded civil liberties. Rouhani may take advantage of the protests to demand more significant backing from Supreme Leader Khamenei for pursuit of his goals, particularly in the economic realm. President Rouhani remains limited, however, by the fact that most political centers of power, the Revolutionary Guards, and the law enforcement apparatuses are under the control of Khamenei and the conservative establishment. If the Iranian leadership does not take advantage of the current protests to advance practical solutions that meet the demands of the public and continues to disregard the deep social and demographic processes underway in Iran, the protests are likely to intensify further, to the point of posing a genuine threat to the survival of the regime.