

Major Trends in Iranian Society

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Thirty-eight years after the Islamic Revolution, Iran continues to maintain a high level of stability, even in the midst of the upheavals that have marked the region in recent years. Since the Islamic regime consolidated its power base in the early 1980s, it has not had to face any substantial threat to its survival, even during the riots that broke out after the 2009 presidential election. Iranian society too also enjoys relative stability, although it faces increasing difficulties, especially economic.

At the same time, in the last few decades, Iranian society has experienced far reaching demographic and cultural changes, including a widening gap between the public on the one hand, and the institutions of the regime and the religious establishment on the other. These are joined by secularization processes and the adoption of Western life styles that bring with them profound and complex challenges to the Islamic Republic. These deep-seated processes are underway in the midst of demographic trends, changes in the interface between society and state institutions, and rising exposure to the West and modernization. They already pose a significant challenge to the regime, because they reflect erosion in public support for the regime's institutions and the values of the revolution. Even if these processes have not necessarily ripened into a significant political change, they could, in the future, subvert the regime's fundamental principles and its very stability, especially after the death of current Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

A Young but Aging Society

With the onset of the Islamic Revolution, Iran's policy on family planning underwent radical change, and after the revolution, the family planning program officially launched in the summer of 1967 to reduce the natural population growth was suspended. Although shortly after the revolution

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Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the moving force behind the revolution, ruled that there was no religious ban on birth control, the council operating the family planning program was nevertheless disbanded, most family planning clinics either closed or were downsized, and the supply of means of birth control was limited. These joined the regime's policy of strengthening the status of the family,¹ and consequently, Iran today is characterized by its young population.

At the end of the Iran-Iraq War in the late 1980s, the regime recognized that uncontrolled population growth was liable to hinder economic growth and development, and once again adopted a family planning policy, which in turn led to a sharp decline in birthrates. This policy remained in place until the summer of 2012, when the Supreme Leader ordered it reexamined, to spur a population increase and stop the aging of Iranian society. The population census of September 2016, however, showed that low birthrates persist despite the regime's efforts to encourage large families. Iran's population was close to 80 million (an increase of about 4.8 million since 2011), and the data show a consistent (though small) drop in annual population growth from 1.29 percent in 2006-2011 to 1.24 percent in 2016. And while Iran's population continues to be marked by its younger component, there is also an accelerated growth in aging: 49.1 percent of the population is under 30 (compared to 55 percent in 2011), 44.8 percent are age 30-64, and 6.1 percent are older than 65 (compared to 5.7 percent in the previous census).² The persistent drop in natural increase is due to the consistent rise in the average age at which people get married and to lower fertility rates as the result of greater education, secularization processes, and the desire of Iranian couples to better their economic situation.

These demographic trends pose significant challenges to the regime, both in the short and long terms. In the short term, young people represent high pressure on the job market and the state, which is incapable of creating sufficient jobs (about one million new jobs per year). In the long term, the demographic processes pose a no-less difficult challenge. The aging of the population will not enable the regime to guarantee sufficient welfare services over time; it will represent an economic burden on the state; and it will force it to allocate a significant portion of its resources for national insurance and social services for the elderly. All this will occur at a time when the workforce can be expected to shrink. The pension funds, already suffering from a severe budgetary deficit, are liable to collapse.

Less Religious, More National (even Nationalistic)

Even after the Arab conquest and the arrival of Islam in the seventh century, Iran preserved its unique culture and ethnicity. The inhabitants remained Iranian and the language remained Persian, even as it was highly influenced by Arabic. Thus the complexity of Iranian identity is connected to two primary sources: the national pre-Islamic Iranian cultural tradition that took shape after the Arab conquest of the seventh century, and the Shiite Islamic cultural tradition that took root in Iran, especially after the Safavids made the Shia the national religion in 1501. The pre-Islamic past of Iran served as a source of national and cultural pride and became the central component in the national narrative during the pre-revolutionary Pahlavi era, and the force of the Persian cultural identity was preserved even after the revolution. Despite the Islamic regime's hostility to the blatant secularism of the Pahlavis and its reservations regarding their attempts to emphasize Iran's pre-Islamic past, the Islamic Republic adopted the national narrative, though at times it has tried to clothe it in Islamic garb. The continued existence of pre-Islamic traditions in contemporary Iran, such as the Persian New Year (Nowruz) and the celebration of Charshanbe Suri, a traditional ceremony observed as a prelude to the Nowruz and meant to cleanse all evil, are evidence of the force of the national/cultural component of Iranian identity co-existing with and sometimes surpassing the religious Islamic dimension.

Moreover, in the decades since the Islamic Revolution, national Persian identity has strengthened at the expense of the Islamic stream in Iranians' cultural self-definition. As part of this trend, many Iranians, especially the young, highlight the unique Persian component of their identity over the Shiite Islamic strand. A study conducted in Iran more than a decade ago charted the relegation of religion in Iranian national identity. In 2005, 42 percent of respondents answered that they define themselves first and foremost as Iranian (compared to 34 percent in 2000), compared to 50 percent who defined themselves first and foremost as Muslim (compared to 61 percent in 2000).³

Iranians are proud of their historical and cultural heritage and are prepared to resist any attempt to undermine their national cultural identity. One example is the furious response in Iran in November 2010 to a YouTube video documenting a speech by Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah in which he claimed that Iran's roots are Arab rather than Persian and that there is no such thing in Iran as "Persian" or "Persian

civilization,” only Islamic civilization and the Arab religion of the Prophet Mohammad. He declared that the leaders of the Islamic Revolution were also of Arab descent, and that even Supreme Leader Khamenei bears the title “seyyed” – evidence that he is a scion of the Arab dynasty of the prophet’s descendants.⁴ Intense Iranian national feelings were also evident in the enraged responses to President Donald Trump’s speech in mid-October 2017 that presented his new strategy vis-à-vis the Islamic Republic with reference to the “Arabian Gulf” rather than the Persian Gulf; this is considered an affront to national pride.⁵

The sense of national solidarity is shared not only by Persians but also by at least some of the many ethnic communities and cultures comprising Iran. Members of minorities, such as Turkish Azeris, Kurds, Arabs, Baluchis, and Turkmenis, living mostly in the hinterland, currently make up close to half of Iran’s population, posing a difficult challenge to the regime. Yet despite the heterogeneity, and unlike other nation states in the Arab Middle East whose borders were shaped by Western colonial powers (mostly after World War I), Iran has existed as a separate political and cultural entity with a unique national identity for hundreds of years. Furthermore, the great differences in the historical development of the ethnic minorities, their religious affiliation (Sunni and Shiite), and their degree of integration into Iranian society greatly reduce the threat that minorities represent to Iran’s national cohesiveness and the stability of the regime.

The sense of nationalism is at times translated into racism, especially against Arabs. When tensions between Iran and its Arab neighbors rise – for example, when hundreds of Iranian pilgrims died in Saudi Arabia during the Hajj, or when two Iranian teenagers returning from Mecca were sexually assaulted in Saudi Arabia in April 2015 – there are expressions of racism and incitement in Iranian traditional and social media. Such manifestations are not only a product of political disagreements between Iran and its neighbors; they are also motivated by a sense of ethnic and cultural superiority.⁶

More Secular, Greater Distance from the Clerics

While the national Persian identity grows stronger at the expense of the religious Islamic component, Iranian society is also experiencing secularization processes and an increasing sense of alienation from the clergy. The extreme politicization of religion in Iran, the regime’s failure

to resolve economic and social woes, and the widespread corruption have all weakened the attractiveness of religion for the masses.⁷

In recent years, senior members of the religious establishment and Iran's institutional media have issued repeated warnings about the lowered status of the clerics⁸ and the growing distance of the public from religion, manifested for example in lax observance of the Islamic dress code and meager mosque attendance. A recent commentary published on an Iranian news site warned of the poor attendance of the mosques by Iranian citizens, and linked the phenomenon to a trend of greater alienation the public at large feels toward the nation's clerics.⁹

Less Collective and Ideological, More Individualistic

Since the 1990s, it has been possible to discern the increased importance of individualism in Iranian society, especially among the revolution's second generation. The conduct of young people has sparked heated deliberations over the crisis of values felt in Iranian society. For example, the mass mourning observed by young Iranians over the death from cancer of pop singer Morteza Pashaei in November 2014 aroused much debate about deep-seated social processes. The musician's funeral became the biggest mass rally since the popular protests of 2009 and led to internal criticism of Iranian society's increasing affinity for individualism, lack of social solidarity, and political escapism, manifested in young people's disdain for political matters and their preference for devoting their time to entertainment and leisure activities.¹⁰ Even the nature of events of an ideological stripe has changed, such as the parade celebrating the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, which from an event of a blatant political and revolutionary character has become a national holiday celebrated as a colorful carnival primarily valued for providing an opportunity for family fun and socialization at street fairs.¹¹

Yet despite this trend, Iranian society continues to be characterized by a high level of collectivism, expressed in great commitment to frameworks such as the family, shared national and cultural identity, and demonstrations of solidarity, especially against an external enemy. Although at present Iranian citizens show less willingness than in the past to enlist in a collective effort in the name of ideology, the regime still preserves the ability to rally public support around national and religious symbols, such as the formative myth of the Battle of Karbala, which tells of the self-sacrifice of the first Shiite imam, Hussein Bin-Ali, in 680, against Yazid I, the Umayyad

caliph. Similar to the use of Shiite religious rhetoric during the Iran-Iraq War, the emphasis on Shiite religious symbols and the elevation of the idea of self-sacrifice for the sake of defending the sites sacred to Shia in Syria are a central motif in the regime's propaganda efforts surrounding Iran's expanded military involvement in Syria, which has taken a heavy toll of the Revolutionary Guard fighters stationed at the front. Although these efforts do not altogether stave off public criticism of Iran's military involvement in arenas far from Iran's borders, to some extent they have helped the regime enlist public support for the war effort. Public unity over national and religious symbols was manifested, for example, at the mass funeral held for a member of the Revolutionary Guards, Mohsen Hojaji, who was captured on the Iraq-Syria border by the Islamic State and beheaded in August 2017. On posters and placards, the propaganda disseminated after his death depicted the soldier alongside the figure of Shiite imam Hussein Bin-Ali, who according to tradition was similarly beheaded in the Battle of Karbala. The mass participation of citizens in his funeral in Isfahan in late September was evidence of the intensity of national feeling and social solidarity.¹²

Leaning West but Resistant to Western Pressure

Increasing modernization and exposure to the West has led many Iranians to adopt a Western life style and more liberal ways of thinking, especially among the young who feel a growing sense of alienation from the values of the revolution. This slice of the population has adopted a more permissive way of living, including consumption of Western culture, underground parties, and so on. Social and cultural processes of change are quite apparent when it comes to attitudes toward women. In recent years, public awareness of the Islamic Republic's discrimination against women has grown, as has the demand for changes in legislation in various areas discriminating against women, including women's legal status, their marriage and divorce rights, their inclusion in public and political positions, and the enforced wearing of the headscarf. Modernization processes and alienation from a traditional religious life as well as the nation's economic woes have made "the marriage crisis" – a significant rise in the average marriage age and a higher divorce rate – an acute issue in Iranian society. Although these trends are not unique to Iran, in the Islamic Republic they are seen as an expression of a preference for the West and an undermining of the religious Islamic identity of society and the sacredness of the institution of the family.¹³

The Iranian public has shown greater openness to Western companies entering Iran, especially after the sanctions were lifted with the achievement of the JCPOA. A survey conducted in August 2017 in advance of the joint economic Europe-Iran Forum indicated widespread Iranian support for the expansion of trade with Western companies. Most of the respondents viewed foreign investments, especially on the part of German, Japanese, French, Swiss, and Italian companies, as highly favorable.¹⁴ This attitude is very much at odds with the position of the regime, which is concerned about the penetration of Western culture that would inevitably accompany economic liberalization.

Yet along with the positive attitude to the West, the Iranian public is highly critical of any expressions of Western superiority and pressure aimed at forcing Iran to comply with Western dictates. Public opinion surveys indicate widespread opposition to concessions to any Western demands seen as harming vital national interests. The economic sanctions imposed on Iran by the West were exploited – highly successfully – by the Tehran regime to whip up anti-Western public sentiments. The West was painted as the chief culprit for Iran’s worsening economic troubles. Although over the years Iranian citizens opposed the heavy price of the long-lasting sanctions, many adopted a hostile attitude to the West, which was seen as responsible for their difficult situation. A Gallup poll conducted in December 2012 showed that 47 percent of Iranians blamed their economic disaster on the United States, compared to only 10 percent that held their own government responsible.¹⁵

Another survey, published by the University of Maryland in July 2017, revealed that the Iranian public continues to oppose concessions to Western demands. Findings show that a clear majority support Iranian retaliation, should the United States violate the nuclear agreement. Fifty-five percent of respondents said that if the United States withdraws from the agreement, Iran should renew its nuclear program rather than simply appeal to the UN, even though an absolute majority of Iranian citizens (76 percent) continue to support the agreement. The survey also showed that most of the Iranian public opposes suspending missile testing, even in exchange for easing the sanctions. Fifty-five percent of respondents expressed support for continued missile tests, against the West’s demand to stop the tests, and 63 percent of respondents felt that the demand to reduce the number of tests is totally unacceptable.¹⁶

The reliability of opinion surveys in Iran depends on a number of factors, such as survey methodology, sampling method, the survey administration method, and so on. In recent years, dozens of surveys of Iranian public opinion have been taken by both Iranian and international research institutions. The limits the regime places on freedom of expression are a challenge to the ability to produce a survey approximating people's real feelings, especially when it comes to issues considered sensitive. Nonetheless, a critical look at the methodology used by the survey, a cross reference of the results of several surveys, and the cumulative experience of academic research institutions that conduct polling in Iran (such as RAND, Gallup, and the University of Maryland) make it possible to learn much about the Iranian public's attitudes to different issues.

Criticism of the Regime; Preference for Incremental over Revolutionary Change

The regime's failure to provide relief to social and economic ills is not lost on the Iranian people, which continue to demand a response in the political, civic, and economic spheres. The public rage that erupted in the protest movement in the summer of 2009 again proved that the Iranian public is prepared to battle the regime when it feels its rights are trampled with impunity. While the authorities succeeded in suppressing the riots, Iranians continue to be critical and protest the infringement of their rights and failures of the regime, such as government corruption and nepotism.¹⁷

In recent years, Iran has seen a wave of protests that in certain cases became violent clashes between the security forces and civilians over environmental struggles, particularly the severe air pollution afflicting the country. In February 2017, in the southwestern Khuzestan Province, a series of protests broke out as the result of severe dust storms that caused extended power outages and disrupted water supply throughout the province. Thousands of citizens demonstrated for several days and at times there were violent clashes with the security figures. The demonstrators protested not only the air pollution and interrupted water and electricity supplies, but also the persistent neglect of the province and the authorities' skewed priorities leading to far too few resources provided to the province where the country's Arab minority – 2 percent of Iran's population – is concentrated.¹⁸

Election results for political office – whether the presidency, the parliament (Majlis), or local government – also reflect the public's demand for change, both with regard to resolving the nation's social and economic problems

and with regard to expanding political and civil liberties. The defeat of the conservative candidate Ibrahim Raisi in the May 2017 presidential election proved that the Iranian people are no longer willing to accept empty populist promises or slogans on social justice and “the resistance economy,” but demand practical solutions to burning issues, in particular the unemployment crisis.

At the same time, it is clear that the Iranian public generally prefers a process of gradual change over revolution. The 2009 political crisis was a severe blow to the regime’s legitimacy, but it seems that most of the public is currently prepared to acknowledge the rules of the game and is willing – at least in the short run – to make do with an improved economy and a limited and incremental reduction in the government’s involvement in their private lives. The high voter turnout (more than 60 percent) in the most recent parliamentary election (2016) and in the 2017 presidential race (more than 70 percent) does not necessarily indicate support for the regime’s policies, but it does indicate that Iranian citizens at this stage prefer stability to political upheavals with unpredictable results.

Will Social Changes Translate into Political Change?

The processes of change in Iranian society bear the potential for future political change in the Islamic Republic, especially after the death of current Supreme Leader Khamenei. Nonetheless, the ripening of deep-seated social trends into political change depends on many factors, among them the regime’s willingness to satisfy public demands, especially in the economic sphere; the development of the interrelations between the political and military loci of power, including the Supreme Leader, the President, and the Revolutionary Guards; the effectiveness of repression aimed at expressions of protest and resistance; and developments in the regional and international arenas.

An analysis of the central trends in Iranian society reveals processes that both encourage and inhibit political change. The younger population is, for the most part, growing distant from the revolution’s values and is challenging the conservative religious establishment, but the aging of the society strengthens the preference for gradual change, political stability, and economic improvements over a radical transformation. Secularization processes and the erosion of the status of the clerics challenge the clergy’s traditional power, but the strength of the national and cultural identity and the sense of solidarity provide the regime with the ability to enlist

public support over national and even religious symbols. The exposure to the West and modernization encourages individualization trends and the adoption of more liberal attitudes, but the public's opposition to external Western pressures on their country and to foreign dictates encourages the willingness to rally behind the flag and stand shoulder to shoulder with the regime against external enemies.

The regime is not unaware of these processes in Iranian society. It knows full well that the gap between the public and the ruling institutions is widening and that it must respond, although there are differences of opinion at the highest ruling levels on what those responses should be. In his tenure (1997-2005), President Mohammad Khatami tried to expand individual liberties and promote civic reforms; his successor, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013), worked for a more just distribution of the nation's resources and stressed the Persian cultural heritage over the Islamic stream; and currently, President Rouhani is focusing on improving the economy. The regime must acknowledge the social changes occurring in Iran if it wants to succeed in tackling the nation's domestic challenges. At the same time, in the absence of an in-depth handling of the problems and a willingness to adapt the revolution's ideology in the face of the constraints of a changing reality, the deep-seated social processes could very well threaten the stability of the regime in the long term.

Notes

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