

Iran: No Electricity, No Water, New President

Raz Zimmt | No. 1505 | August 5, 2021

For weeks Iran has weathered demonstrations, mainly in protest against the growing shortages of water and electricity, and against the background of the prolonged economic crisis and the spread of the coronavirus delta variant. To date, protests are limited and do not pose an immediate threat to the regime. At the same time, the demonstrations highlight the depth of the despair and frustration among the public, which in turn will continue to feed additional waves of protest. This situation poses a significant challenge to Ebrahim Raisi, Iran's incoming president. It is highly doubtful whether he will have the resources needed to solve the problems, and whether he will be willing to push through reforms that facilitate long-term solutions to infrastructure problems. Furthermore, it is still unclear at this stage whether and how a renewal of the protest will affect the regime's willingness to return to the nuclear deal and make the necessary compromises in order to have the sanctions against Iran rescinded.

In recent weeks, the growing shortages of water and electricity have sparked a series of demonstrations in Iran. In early July 2021, hundreds of people took to the streets in a number of cities in protest against the many prolonged power outages that afflicted large areas throughout the country. Inter alia, the power outages caused interruptions of water supplies and disruptions of cellular networks and the internet. Deaths among hospital patients caused by sudden power failures and the lack of backup generators were also reported. The authorities blamed the repeated power outages on a severe electricity deficit estimated at 11,000 megawatts. The shortage of electricity is attributable to the severe heatwave, which led people to increase their consumption of electricity; an ongoing lack of resources for producing energy, due to the drought; a halt in production by a number of power stations because of technical malfunctions; excessive electricity consumption, partly illegal, by the bitcoin mining industry; and the economic sanctions, which have forced the government to cut back its investments in the development of the power industry. Some of the demonstrations also included criticism of the regime, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, and the government.

In Khuzestan Province in southwestern Iran, serious demonstrations began in mid-July in protest against the severe water shortage. In addition to the recurrent drought in recent years, another cause of the severe crisis is faulty planning in the water sector, development efforts that damaged the water sources; a population increase and poor population dispersal policy; and a faulty water policy, including uncontrolled use of agricultural water, use of outmoded and inefficient irrigations systems, and construction of dams of questionable utility. This is not the first time that the environmental crisis has ignited protest demonstrations in Khuzestan. A major wave of protests began in the province in early 2017, following severe dust storms accompanied by heavy rain, which caused lengthy interruptions in electricity and water supplies in Khuzestan cities. In addition to the air pollution and electrical and water disruptions, the demonstrators also protested the continued neglect of the province, which includes concentrations of the Arab and Luri-Bakhtiari minorities. Although Khuzestan is the most oil-rich province in Iran, its population has suffered for years from economic distress and severe environmental problems.

After about a week in which most of the demonstrations were concentrated in Khuzestan, the protest spread to other cities in Iran, among them Tehran, Tabriz, Karaj, Isfahan, and Kermanshah. The demonstrators in these demonstrations expressed solidarity with the residents of Khuzestan and condemned the regime. Except for Khuzestan, most of the demonstrations were isolated and limited in number, certainly in comparison with the large-scale protests in Iran in December 2017-January 2018 and in November 2019 ("the fuel riots"), which involved hundreds of thousands of demonstrators in dozens of locations throughout Iran.

The regime used internal security forces to break up the demonstrations, and arrested a number of protestors. A number of protestors were killed in the clashes between civilians and the security forces. As in previous waves of protest, the authorities disrupted internet communication in order to prevent the demonstrators from relaying instructions and disseminating video clips documenting the protest. At the same time, the regime tried to provide immediate solutions for the shortages of electricity and water. Outgoing President Hassan Rouhani gave orders for the immediate allocation of a special budget for dealing with the water crisis, while newly-elected President Ebrahim Raisi announced the formation of a special team to assess the problems in Khuzestan Province before he assumed office in early August. In addition, the authorities gave orders to change the work hours in a number of large industrial plants in order to spread

out electricity consumption over the day. They delivered water containers to areas in southwestern Iran with help from the Revolutionary Guards, and released water from the dams to rivers in order to relieve the shortage, if only temporarily. As in the past, the authorities accused foreign intelligence services of taking advantage of civilian distress to destabilize the country, foment violence, and strengthen separationist trends among ethnic and linguistic minorities in Iran. On July 27, the Iranian authorities claimed that they had arrested an armed Mossad squad that was planning to incite violent riots in Iran. According to the Ministry of Intelligence, the arrested agents were caught on Iran's western border with large quantities of weapons and ammunition in their possession designated for use during the protest demonstrations.

The background to the protests that followed the growing shortages of water and electricity is the severe economic crisis afflicting Iran. Warnings of a further increase in inflation, currently at 45 percent, have been recently heard in the Iranian media. Concurrently, morbidity and mortality levels are reaching new heights following the spread of the coronavirus delta variant, after the disease in its original form already killed 90,000 people in Iran. The slow pace of vaccination (only 3 percent of the population has received two doses of the vaccine) and the difficulty experienced by the regime in imposing large-scale lockdowns, due to their heavy economic price, further complicates the campaign against the current surge in infection.

At this stage, the protest demonstrations do not pose an immediate threat to the regime, which has so far refrained from using all of the repressive measures at its disposal, particularly the Revolutionary Guards, despite its determination to prevent the protest from spreading, even at the price of a bloodbath. At the same time, the demonstrations show the depth of the despair and frustration among the public, which constitutes fertile ground for resumption of the popular protest, assuming a readily available catalyst. The dire situation augments the sense of frustration, alienation of the people from the regime, and public distrust in the state institutions. This was clear, *inter alia*, in the especially low voter turnout in the February 2020 parliamentary elections and the June 2021 presidential elections. An Iranian sociologist recently warned that Iranian society was on the verge of an explosion. In an interview with reformist daily *Arman-e Melli*, Dr. Mostafa Eqlima warned that the authorities' unsuccessful policy was fanning protest among people facing hunger, rampant inflation, unemployment, job insecurity, power outages, and a shortage of vaccines against COVID-19. He even

compared Iran's current situation to the state of affairs in the country under the shah before the 1979 Islamic Revolution, and argued that at that time, inefficient management by some senior officials intensified the popular protest. Another Iranian daily newspaper, *Jomhuri-ye Eslami*, also recently warned that the Islamic Republic was suffering from a "chronic disease" requiring comprehensive treatment, and that if the authorities did not satisfy the people's will, all of the world's arsenals would not be enough to defend the regime.

The resumption of popular protest indicates an urgent need to provide a response to the civilian distress. This situation poses a significant challenge to President Raisi, because addressing the mounting problems requires not only the allocation of many resources, but also far-reaching infrastructure reforms to accommodate long-term solutions for failures resulting from decades of faulty planning and poor management. The election of a new president and the restoration of conservative control in all three branches of government (the cabinet; the Majlis (Iranian parliament), in which the hardliners regained control in the most recent parliamentary elections; and the judicial authority controlled by the conservative religious establishment) ostensibly provides the regime with another opportunity to find a solution to the problems. The hardline president is likely to enjoy greater cooperation from the other power centers in the country, including the Supreme Leader and the Revolutionary Guards, in his efforts to provide solutions for the pressing problems facing his country. At the same time, it is highly doubtful whether he will have the available resources needed to solve the problems, especially if the economic sanctions against Iran, which are an important (albeit not exclusive) cause of Iran's distress, are not rescinded. Furthermore, the restoration of conservative hegemony in the country's leadership makes it difficult for the hardline establishment to lay responsibility for the situation on the President and his cabinet, as occurred during Rouhani's term in office. The force of public despair is likely to increase, and in this situation, the resumption of public protest is only a matter of time. It is still unclear whether a renewal of the protest will encourage the regime to return to the nuclear agreement, and to make the necessary compromises in order to have the sanctions against Iran rescinded, or whether the regime will toughen its stance out of concern about appearing weak – both at home and abroad.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen