

## **Three Months of Protest in Iran: A Revolutionary Situation, Sans Revolution**

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**The protest in Iran, entering its fourth month, has apparently thus far not succeeded in posing a significant and immediate threat to the regime. The scope of the violent demonstrations has narrowed, significant social sectors have not joined the protest, and there is no evidence of rifts among the political elite or the security and repression forces, led by the Revolutionary Guards. However, this does not mean that the regime has succeeded in suppressing the protest and that the situation will revert to what it was. Occasional civilian unrest continues and Iran's slide into an ongoing revolutionary situation poses a significant challenge to the Iranian system, especially in light of the worsening economic crisis. On the eve of the 44<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, it seems that the regime is unable to deal with the roots of the protest, and that the widening gap between the state institutions and the public, and especially the younger generation, will continue to feed more manifestations of protest and even exacerbate them.**

The protest in Iran, entering its fourth month, has apparently thus far not succeeded in posing a significant and immediate threat to the stability of the regime, and even more so, in creating an alternative to the current political order. In recent weeks, there has been a noticeable decrease in the scope of violent demonstrations across the country, apparently due to the repressive measures by the regime, the difficulty of maintaining an ongoing protest for a long time, the winter weather conditions, and possibly also the distraction of the World Cup. On December 5-7, there was a temporary increase in the number of protests, against the backdrop of calls for three days of demonstrations and strikes on the occasion of "Student Day," which is marked in Iran every year on December 7. However, even this uptick was

relatively moderate compared to the first two months of the protest. Recent weeks have seen far fewer centers of protest, with only dozens to hundreds of protesters participating. In the areas inhabited by the Kurds (in the northwest of the country) and the Baluchis (in the southeast), protests continue on a larger scale, but even there the scope remains limited, apparently due to effective repression by the authorities.

Not only did significant social and economic sectors not join the protests (workers in main industries and services, for example), but also the student demonstrations at universities, which were a central component in the first stages of the protest, have declined significantly. At this stage, it does not seem that the demonstrators are able to evolve from spontaneous protests to an organized force with a strategic plan for the future. In addition, there is no evidence of rifts or defections among the ruling political elite or the security and repression forces, led by the Revolutionary Guards, who remain completely loyal to the regime. In early December, a leak by the hacker group Black Reward reported that at least 115 soldiers from the regular army were arrested after participating in the protest demonstrations. Yet even if there is a basis for this report, it does not reflect a widespread phenomenon among the army and the Revolutionary Guards, which number hundreds of thousands of soldiers and officers.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that the Iranian regime has succeeded in suppressing the protest and that the situation can revert to the way it was before the outbreak of the demonstrations following the death of Mahsa Amini in mid-September 2022. Occasional manifestations of civil disobedience have continued since the outbreak of the protest, including women appearing without veils in the public sphere, anti-regime graffiti and chants from civilian homes, young people removing turbans from the heads of clerics in city streets, and non-violent gatherings, for example, following the execution of two protest detainees in the first half of December and mourning events commemorating the deaths of those killed in the protests. Furthermore, the continuation of the protest – even if on a limited scale – puts the regime in a predicament. Willingness to respond to the demands of the protesters and making changes in the official policy

may be perceived as a show of weakness, which could increase the demand for further concessions on expanded civil and political freedoms and provide additional support for the protest. Moreover, it is highly doubtful whether a partial response to the demands of the demonstrators will assuage the anger of the citizens protesting against the very existence of the regime. On the other hand, ignoring the demands of the demonstrators and continuing to rely on violent suppression measures could lead to further escalation of the situation.

The dilemma confronting the regime is reflected in the authorities' inconsistency regarding possible changes in the mandatory Islamic dress code. In early December, the Attorney General, Mohammad Jafar Montazeri, stated that the Majles and the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution established a joint committee to examine the policy on this issue. A few days later, Montazeri responded to a journalist's question regarding a possible halt to the activities of the "morality police" by saying that the activities of the police are not the responsibility of the judiciary, and that it is the law enforcement forces who assign and rescind them at will. This statement was interpreted as an intention on the part of the authorities to abolish the "morality police," although they hastened to publish a denial on this matter. Even if there is much doubt regarding the authorities' ability to resume the regular activities of the police for fear of worsening the clashes with the public, it is not inconceivable that enforcement of the dress code will be renewed in the future by other means. Nor do recent speeches by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei provide any evidence of a willingness on the part of the state to compromise. In his speech on November 26 on the occasion of the Basij Week, Khamenei again placed the responsibility for the protest on the enemies of Iran who want a regime change, and praised the Basij forces for suppressing the "rioters." Referring to the calls by the critics of the regime to listen to the voice of the people, the Supreme Leader stated that the voice of the people was clearly heard in the pro-regime demonstrations and at the funeral of Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the Quds Force of the Revolutionary Guards, who was killed in January 2020.

Under these circumstances, it seems that while the regime does not have the ability to prevent the continuation of the protest and return to normalcy, neither do the demonstrators have the ability to undermine the regime's stability. Although protests in Iran are not an unusual phenomenon, some significant differences between the current protest and previous protest movements should be noted, chief among them the unprecedented duration and the challenge by the protesters to the very existence of the regime. Iran's slide into a continued revolutionary situation poses a significant challenge to the Iranian system. First, it creates an explosive reality that may again degenerate into violent confrontations, especially around events such as marking national days, additional executions of protest detainees, the death in prison of political prisoners, and so on. Second, it may allow the protest movement time to organize despite the regime's counter efforts, although the regime may also use the time to improve its preparation and readiness. In addition, the economic crisis continues to worsen, manifested primarily of inflation at about 45 percent, a severe budget deficit, and the continued erosion of the local currency rate, which recently reached an unprecedented low of more than 400,000 rials to the dollar. The worsening of the economic crisis has exacerbated the sense of frustration among the public and may lead other social sectors to join in the protests.

Recently, the sociologist and journalist Hamidreza Jalaei-Pour warned of Iran's slide into systemic insecurity and the creation of revolutionary conditions, although he estimated that the regime still has the ability to prevent a revolution. In an interview with the pro-reform daily *Etemad*, the reformist intellectual said that in the absence of a willingness on the part of the regime to agree to reforms, for example by strengthening the institutions of civil society, and to recognize the deep changes underway in Iranian society, it will not be possible to survive the current crisis, and the power of the radicals will grow stronger. However, past experience indicates there is much reluctance from the regime to adjust its positions and policies, especially in view of the absolute control of the hardliners in all state institutions. In recent years prominent Iranian commentators, intellectuals, and academics have already warned against exacerbating

despair and loss of public trust in the authorities. Thus, for example, the political commentator and journalist Amir Mohebian, who is associated with the conservative right, said after the fuel riots in November 2019 that Iranian society is sitting on a social bomb that could explode at any moment and warned that the period between waves of protest could become even shorter. Approaching the 44<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, it seems that the Iranian regime is not ready (and may not even be able) to address the roots of the protest, which lie in the widening and unbridgeable gap between the state and the public, especially the younger generation. This gap will continue to fuel the manifestations of protest, which have become more frequent and more radical in recent years, even if at this stage they do not pose an immediate threat to the very survival of the regime.

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