

The Internal Crisis in Iran: Looking Back, Looking Ahead

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As every year, Jerusalem Day was observed in Iran on September 18. This is an important date for the Islamic regime, celebrating the goal of the Muslims' eventual liberation of Jerusalem and supporting the Palestinians in their struggle against Israel. The day is marked by mass parades and impassioned speeches against Israel and Zionism. However, this year the day was different, as the focus was on the internal struggle in Iran. While the regime undertook to prevent another outbreak of discontent, the reformist camp, which aims to change the orientation of the regime, hoped the day would bring thousands out into the streets to demonstrate support for its demands. In practice, the regime once again had the upper hand. In Tehran and other cities thousands of people demonstrated against the government's policy, but the regime succeeded in staging even larger demonstrations that overshadowed the reformists' protests.

The June Protests and their Aftermath

The reluctance by the members of the reformist camp to take to the streets on Jerusalem Day en masse reflects the regime's success in blocking the spread of protest, at least for now. The angry protests that broke out following announcement of the election results on June 12, 2009 peaked during the first ten days, in terms of the number of people who took part, the force used by the regime to quash the protests, and the number of casualties, including dozens of fatalities. The protests in Iranian cities were the largest in the history of the regime, and involved hundreds of thousands of people. Rallying cries escalated quickly from demands to

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correct the election results to calls of “death to the dictator.” However, in the subsequent days the number of protests saw fewer participants; since the middle of July, protests have grown sporadic and generally involve at most several thousand people, if not fewer.

Despite the initial extent of the protests, the regime did not lose control of the street at any stage and did not yield to the demands of the protesters to annul the election results. With the help of the police, special forces for quelling civil uprising, and members of the Baseej militia – a volunteer militia with around three million members that operates under the Revolutionary Guards and has proven itself as a skilled force capable of suppressing outbreaks of protest – the regime used primarily physical force and intimidation to deter the reformists from taking to the streets in larger numbers. The Revolutionary Guards themselves were for the most part not deployed against the demonstrators, probably because the regime did not see the need and because, in contrast with the Baseej, the Guards are not allowed to operate on campuses and arrest students there. However, the Revolutionary Guards had an important behind the scenes role: collecting intelligence and disrupting the opposition; falsifying the election results; and interrogating the arrested reformists.

From the outbreak of the protests the regime pursued a hard line approach towards the reformists, almost without compromise. Although the most senior leaders of the protest movement were not arrested, despite occasional reports of regime intentions, their assistants and members of their families have been detained, at least for short periods.

In addition, the slander campaign waged by the regime against the reformist leaders has included an announcement by the committee for protecting the constitution, responsible for screening election candidates, that the reformist candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi will not be allowed to run for president in the future. The regime also announced that a special investigation would be launched against the other reformist candidate, Mehdi Karubi, likely charging him with aiding and abetting enemies of the regime. Hundreds of movement activists, including senior members, were arrested for long periods; some were tortured in prison cells or subjected to showcase trials, and their confessions were publicized in the media. The police periodically raided and closed offices connected to the reformist leaders, in order to disrupt the opposition’s organizational efforts. At the same time, the regime announced its intention to examine

the university's academic programs to ensure they are not offensive to Islam or the revolution, and it is looking to boost Islamization of the education system. The regime is also liable to undertake cleansing of the universities on the assumption that they are the most important source of the protest, particularly during the academic year, which began in early October. Meanwhile, it has closed reformist newspapers, and journalists were forced to flee Iran for fear of being arrested.

The reformists adopted a low profile in the face of the force and threats of arrest. It is important for them to demonstrate and convey the idea that the regime is not legitimate, that the unrest is ongoing, and that they will not forsake their struggle. However, without having the ability to contend with the organized power of the regime, at this stage they are making do with non-violent protests: limited demonstrations, traffic jams in the cities, organized nightly calls of Allah Akhbar (God is great) from the rooftops, graffiti against Ahmadinejad and Ali Khamenei; and websites, social networks, and blogs to organize, communicate, and maintain the unrest.

The Crisis in Retrospect

From the outset it was clear that the unrest that broke out in Iran in June did not stem fundamentally from the charge that the presidential elections were rigged. The allegation of false results was the catalyst for the outburst, not its cause. The basis for the protest came from the frustration and dissatisfaction of a large part of the Iranian public, possibly the majority, with the nature of the regime and its handling of internal affairs. Many Iranians are no longer prepared to tolerate the meddling of the Islamic regime in their private lives and the institutionalized suppression, which have increased since Mahmoud Ahmadinejad assumed the presidency in 2005. Demands for more individual freedom, protection of the rights of the individual, increased political freedom, and reduced corruption among the leadership have been sounded, likewise prompting calls of "death to the dictator" at the demonstrations. Such calls were directed against Ahmadinejad in the past, but this time they were also directed towards Khamenei. The discontent was exacerbated by the difficult economic situation in Iran, reflected in the high rates of inflation and unemployment and the housing shortage, all of which suggest to many Iranians that the oil royalties do not trickle down and are not used for the

welfare of the individual or improvement of the economic situation. This desire for change has existed in Iran for some time, particularly among the younger generation and women, and in the past has been expressed periodically through student protests that were quashed quickly and efficiently by the regime.

The force of the outburst following the announcement of the election results apparently surprised the regime and confronted it with the most significant internal challenge in many years. Moreover, the June 2009 crisis exposed a number of cracks at the base of the regime, beginning with a rift between the regime and much of the public. The massive demonstrations in June made it clear to the regime, for the first time with such force, that a large part of the public has had enough of its policy and its leaders. The demonstrations reflected deep disappointment over expectations that have not been met and the failure of the regime to fulfill promises of socioeconomic justice, political freedom as part of an Islamic democracy, and economic welfare. The regime's explanations that the protests resulted from outside subversion and the actions of a small minority were not convincing to a public that is looking for change.

A second rift lies within the regime leadership. The protest was led by senior members of the regime, central figures in the Islamic Revolution – former presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami, former prime minister Mousavi, and former parliament speaker Karoubi. This was not a matter of trying to mount a counter-revolution or a demand to change the Islamic regime, and it appears that most of the Iranian public continues to support the Islamic republic as the preferred form of regime. However, a division has emerged between those who want a conservative, rigid Islamic republic and others who want a more liberal and open Islamic regime. From the outset the Islamic regime was characterized by confrontation and internal differences, but this time the rift went deeper. Since early 2008 Rafsanjani, and later Khatami, have criticized Ahmadinejad's performance in the areas of economics and foreign policy. Their decision to support the candidacy of Mousavi against the incumbent president, who has the public support of the supreme leader, indicates the depth of the divide between the reformists and the conservatives.

A third rift lies in the religious leadership. During the crisis it became clear that an important group of senior religious officials also has reservations over the conduct of the regime and its senior members, and

over the status of Khamenei and Ahmadinejad. The most prominent among this group is Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, one of the leading religious clerics in Iran, who in the 1980s was considered Khomeini's heir, but since then has been relegated to the sidelines. During the crisis Montazeri criticized the regime for repression and tyranny and called on senior religious leaders in the holy cities to oppose the ruling leadership and use their influence to restore authority to the people. The willingness of this group to expose a rift in the religious leadership stems from a number of factors: the damage inflicted on their standing; the reservations over Ahmadinejad's leadership, and possibly of Khamenei's too; and their sensitivity to the feeling among the public.

However, there was another important reason for the reservations of the religious clerics with the behavior of the regime's leaders: the strengthened standing and influence of the Revolutionary Guards in the Iranian system. The Guards were formed as an elite force whose main job was to protect the regime. During the Iran-Iraq War, however, they became a large military force that took part in the fighting against Iraq, and at its height numbered over 700,000 soldiers. After the war the force was reorganized and today it is a large military force, the equivalent of a standing army, with about 120,000 members. It includes an air force and a navy and is also responsible for the missile units. No less important, since the 1990s the Guards have become the most important economic organization in the country with control of major economic companies, including the energy sector. The Guards have also become a highly involved political force, and Guards veterans fill important positions in the government, parliament, city and local councils, and the financial sector.

The Guards' political influence relies on their control of economic organizations, their ranks holding key positions and constituting the main support of the regime, and the percentage of the public that identifies with them: over the years millions of young people – estimated at 10 million – have joined the Guards. Even though the constitution prohibits political involvement

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by armed forces, the Revolutionary Guards are a group that answers to the supreme leader and is involved in politics. In the past, Guards commanders provided public support for suppressing student protests, and during the last crisis they openly expressed their opposition to the reformists and defined the protests as hostile to the revolution. President Ahmadinejad is a Guards veteran. He boosted their political and economic power, and their support facilitated his victory in 2005 and his reelection in 2009. On the other hand, leading Guards officers opposing Ahmadinejad did not receive adequate support, probably because Khamenei did not want them to be elected: Muhammad Baker Kallibaf, a former air force commander in the Guards and currently the mayor of Tehran, was defeated in the 2005 elections, and in the 2009 elections former Guards commander Mukhsan Razai was also defeated.

The Revolutionary Guards' heightened political and economic standing concerns some of the senior religious leaders. The Guards are steadfastly loyal to the spiritual leader on religious grounds. However, there are reports that they have reservations towards the religious establishment being at the heart of the decision making process while they risk their lives to defend the country and the regime. In any case, the process of accumulating power by the Guards is likely perceived by the religious establishment as a potential threat, out of fear that they may become an independent factor that will whittle away its power and

authority. Former president Rafsanjani, himself a religious leader, has publicly attacked the control of the political and economic system taken by figures in the Guards.

The June 2009 crisis carries additional significance: the supreme leader lost some of his authority as supreme leader, which is a fundamental principle of the Islamic Revolution. Once Khamenei became the spiritual leader in 1989 when he replaced Khomeini, he took care to steer clear of political arguments. However, before and after the 2009 elections he openly supported Ahmadinejad, thus taking sides in the

confrontation. As Ahmadinejad is a controversial figure in Iran, part of the public's anger was directed towards Khamenei, thereby challenging

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his moral authority. Above all, his authority has been damaged with leading figures, including from the religious establishment, who have criticized his conduct because the reformist leaders did not heed his call to stop the demonstrations and accept the election results, and because calls of “death to the dictator” were also directed against him.

Moreover, in the past Khamenei was able to maneuver between the various groups in the regime’s leadership in order to sustain its cohesion. In 1997 and 2001 he allowed the election of the reformist Khatami as president, but he permitted the conservatives to control the judicial authority and the media. In 2005 he supported the election of Ahmadinejad as president but did not block the appointment of his main rival Rafsanjani as head of two influential bodies: the Assembly of Experts and the Guardian Council, which has authority to appoint and depose the spiritual leader. This time he forsook the balance and compromise approach and placed all his weight behind the radical camp.

Why Khamenei chose to attack the reformist leaders and support the controversial Ahmadinejad is not clear. He may have been concerned that victory by the reformists in the current circumstances of deep unrest, coupled with the reservations of senior religious figures over Ahmadinejad, would implicate himself, harm his standing as spiritual leader, and destabilize the regime. In any case, Khamenei’s actions damaged the public standing, legitimacy, and maneuverability of the spiritual leader. Against this backdrop there were reports of differences of opinion with regard to Ahmadinejad among the regime’s leadership following the elections, and that some are demanding that his independence be limited, due to his negative image in the public and his ties with the Revolutionary Guards. If so, it is possible that Khamenei will distance himself from the president and limit his freedom of action, in order to rehabilitate his own standing.

What Lies Ahead for the Regime?

The June 2009 crisis posed a serious challenge to the Iranian regime but did not significantly undermine its stability. Throughout the crisis the regime controlled the situation, and was not even close to retreating from its positions. Within a relatively short period it managed to stem the protest without having to use all the means at its disposal. The regime continues to enjoy the support of millions of Iranians, particularly among the lower

classes and in rural areas, and it has vast experience in suppressing demonstrations and riots. Its military and paramilitary organizations – especially the Revolutionary Guards, Baseej, and intelligence and internal security mechanisms – protect the regime firmly and effectively. There were no reports of divisions or disloyalty in their ranks during the operations, and following the crisis the militia was reorganized, in order to improve its efficiency.

Nevertheless, the crisis is deep because of its many facets. It became clear that a large group in Iran is looking for a change in the regime's approach and conduct. Divisions emerged both in the political and religious leaderships. The polarization between the two camps became more discernible and more pronounced than before. The regime lost some of its legitimacy, both in the internal system and the external arena: legitimacy was hitherto based on embrace of the revolutionary approach and the values of Islam; since June 2009 it has largely relied on intimidation and deterrence. Khamenei lost some of his moral authority and his status as the senior religious authority whose ruling is final, and Ahmadinejad is a controversial figure and hated by large sections of the public. These are divisions that a hard line approach alone cannot repair or suffice to contain the unrest. And while the regime has currently resorted to intimidation and deterrence against the reformists, it is possible that in the future it may have to consider appeasement and compromise.

The reformist camp did not achieve its objectives in the June 2009 crisis, mainly because conditions for change were insufficient. The protest was not organized and it lacked determined and charismatic leadership. The demonstrations were mostly spontaneous and were not organized events. The reformist leaders did not present a cohesive alternative position that over time could have helped them sway the masses in the face of brutal force. Mir Hossein Mousavi, the prominent figure in the reformist camp during the crisis, is still not viewed as a leader capable of spearheading the desired change, possibly because he was outside the political arena for the past twenty years. It may also be due to his past tenure as a prime minister under Khomeini, in one of the darkest periods of the regime, which does not give him an image of a true reformist. The other leading figures among the reformists are no more attractive. Rafsanjani is not viewed as a genuine reformist, and the public sees him as a corrupt person who used his senior position to get rich. Khatami was

the great hope of the change seekers when he was elected in 1997, but he also disappointed his supporters and was seen as weak and incapable of finding the means to bring about change.

However, failure notwithstanding, the unrest will not disappear. The protest movement is not a transient matter, and it enjoys strong support among the younger generation and the greater public, and even among some of the religious leaders. As it reflects a genuine desire for change, it will likely seek and find channels of expression, violent and non-violent, and will occasionally erupt, in an organized or spontaneous manner, when the opportunities arise. The economic situation, which is not about to improve significantly in the near future, may contribute to a deepening of the rift between the regime and the younger generation. Thus the potential for change in the nature of the regime will continue to exist. The change itself could come when there is a convergence of factors: the emergence of a strong leader, organized protest, and determination not to be deterred by the regime's use of force. This will probably not happen in the near future, but it is highly likely that it will ultimately occur. If and when that time comes, the events of June 2009 may in retrospect be an important milestone.

Outside intervention will not greatly help to bring about change in Iran. Subversive means, opposition forces, and Western propaganda will likely not contribute to strengthening resistance to the conservative regime. Heavy economic sanctions will create pressure on the regime, but it is doubtful if they will spark active internal opposition. When change in the nature of the regime in Iran takes place, it will be the result of internal processes and not outside involvement.

One should not expect the regime to alter its approach on foreign and security issues as a result of the crisis, as they did not contribute to the outburst of the unrest and therefore there is no real internal pressure on the regime to adopt different policies on major issues. On the tactical level, the regime is liable to take a tougher stance. It will seek rapid and striking gains in its nuclear and missile programs, in order to draw attention away from internal distress. Thus if the internal crisis has any impact at all on foreign policy, it is liable to lead to the demonstration of a tough stance on the nuclear issue, especially continued insistence on uranium enrichment in Iran.

At the same time, the crisis may also affect the imposition of sanctions on the regime regarding its position on the nuclear issue. On the one hand, exposure of the division within the Iranian people may heighten the regime's sensitivity and vulnerability to pressure and economic sanctions, as the economic distress is one of the important reasons for the outburst of unrest. On the other hand, Western governments decided to launch direct talks with Iran on the nuclear issue, notwithstanding the internal crisis. Nonetheless, the sense of estrangement in the West towards the Iranian regime, in the wake of the forceful repression of the protest, may strengthen the willingness to increase the sanctions on Iran, should the talks ultimately fail.