



Solidarity in Crisis: Collectivism and National Identity in the Islamic Republic in an Era of Protest

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Against the background of the protests that erupted in Iran in September 2022, there are signs of a decline in the collective identity and respect for national symbols associated with the Islamic Republic among certain segments of the Iranian public. These signs include burning flags, refusing to sing the national anthem, and cheering at the defeat of the national soccer team during the World Cup. This does not necessarily indicate that Iranians have become less patriotic or nationalist, but rather that they increasingly associate national symbols with the regime. The erosion of collective identity has prompted the Iranian authorities to take a series of steps, including the growing use of pre-revolutionary and even pre-Islamic symbols, in an attempt to revive feelings of solidarity. The unraveling of collective identity challenges the ability of the state authorities to maintain social unity, and could eventually limit the regime's ability to recruit full public support during times of emergency and national crises, including external threats.

Keywords: Iran, society, politics, regime stability, protests

Introduction

A few days before the soccer game between Iran and the United States on November 29, 2022 at the World Cup in Qatar, the Iranian Students Polling Agency (ISPA) published the results of an opinion poll conducted among a representative sample of Iranian citizens. According to the poll, 78.3 percent of respondents hoped that their national team would win the match, while 4.8 percent hoped for a US victory, and 16.7 percent were indifferent as to the result. When asked about Iran's crushing defeat by England on November 21, 66.1 percent responded that they were unhappy with the result, compared to only 6.8 percent who were happy with the defeat of their national team (ISPA, 2022).

While the poll found the majority of the Iranian public hoped for a victory for their national team, some saw the findings as evidence of the erosion of national solidarity and identification with national symbols, such as the flag and the anthem. Commenting on the poll, reformist journalist and political activist Abbas Abdi noted that the 20 percent who were not looking forward to a victory by the national team was a high figure, indicating growing polarization in Iranian society (Khabar Online, 2022). Sociologist Mohammad Rahbari also expressed concern over the poll's findings, stating that the fact that the majority of respondents were eager to see the national team win was significant. He argued

that under normal circumstances, the entire public, including those who are not interested in soccer, would presumably want Iran to win. He added that the national soccer team had always stood above political disputes as one of the elements that fostered unity and solidarity, but now that it was the object of disagreement, it pointed to a grave crisis in society. Rahbari called on the authorities to investigate the cause of this crisis and the change in the public's attitude toward the national team, warning that without acknowledging the crisis, it could not be addressed (Setare-ye Sobh, 2022).

Alongside the social and economic distress in Iran, there is a widening gap between the regime's institutions and the public, particularly the younger generation.

Additional evidence of changing attitudes toward symbols of collective identity can be found in the pictures and videos posted on social media at the end of the match between Iran and the United States, showing Iranian citizens celebrating their team's defeat (Sullivan, 2022). These displays of joy join other attacks on national symbols since the outbreak of disturbances in September 2022, such as the burning of flags by protesters and the decision by national team players to refrain from singing the national anthem at their first appearance at the World Cup. Facing the English team, they chose to stand with their mouths closed, in solidarity with the protest movement in their country (Branch, 2022).

Alongside the social and economic distress in Iran, there is a widening gap between the regime's institutions and the public, particularly the younger generation. Faced with the regime's ongoing failure to address civilian demands and distress, over the years criticism of the Islamic Republic has grown harsher, public trust in state institutions has declined, and the sense of despair has intensified. These trends, very clear in the demonstrations of recent years,

peaked in the wave of protests that erupted in September 2022 following the death of Mahsa Amini after her arrest by the morality police. Protests are not uncommon in Iran, but the waves of popular discontent in recent years stand out both in their size and their frequency and have been more extreme than in the past, as shown by outbreaks of violence and the slogans opposing the rule of the religious leaders.

In spite of the widening gap between the Iranian regime and the general public, until recently it appeared that the strength of national-cultural identity and social solidarity would enable the regime to continue harnessing public support for national and even religious symbols, particularly in the face of external threats (Zimmt, 2018). But lately there are increasing signs that the growing polarization of Iranian society and the possible slide of the Islamic Republic into an ongoing revolutionary dynamic contribute to the erosion of the solidarity and collectivism that formerly characterized Iranian society. Occasional displays of civil revolt have continued since the start of the protests, including the presence of unveiled women in public spaces, anti-regime graffiti sprayed on walls, slogans criticizing the regime sounded in private homes, clerics having their turbans removed by young men in city streets, non-violent assemblies, such as those following the execution of two demonstrators arrested in the first half of December, and ceremonies marking the deaths of people killed during demonstrations.

The purpose of this article is to examine the changes underway among sections of the Iranian public in their attitude to national symbols associated with the Islamic Republic and the erosion of their sense of collective identity, which traditionally characterized Iranian society, irrespective of in-depth processes occurring over recent decades. Aware of these processes, the regime has resorted to various measures in an attempt to block the changes. Their methods include the use of pre-revolutionary and even pre-Islamic national

symbols to bring the public back into the fold and reinforce the sense of national identity.

Collectivism and National Identity in Iranian Society

Iranian society is dynamic and complex and has experienced far-reaching demographic and cultural changes since the Islamic Revolution. These include a widening gap between the public and the institutions of the regime and the religious establishment, secularization, and greater adoption of a Western way of life. These changes pose enormous challenges to the Islamic Republic. Social modernization, such as the rise in average marriage age and a drop in birthrates as people become more educated and young couples strive to improve their economic situation, encourages the trend toward secularization and individualism (Zimmt, 2022a). Some changes are affected by global processes, such as the internet and social media revolution, and others by local developments. Westernization and secularization also bring changes in values.

Since the 1990s, processes of individualization in Iran have increased, particularly among the Islamic Revolution's second and third generations. In addition, there is growing internal criticism of weaknesses in Iranian society, evidenced by the adoption of Western modes of conduct, the lack of social solidarity, and the trend toward individualism and escapism. Some critics attribute these weaknesses to the growing influence of Western culture, particularly among urban middle class youth, while others attribute them to the deteriorating economic situation and social distress (Zimmt, 2022a).

Yet in spite of growing individualism, Iranian society is still characterized by a large degree of collectivism, as shown by the strong commitment to the family framework and the shared national and cultural identity. This collectivism is also seen in demonstrations of solidarity, particularly in face of an external threat. Iranian society still attaches great importance to social clans

(*khodi*) and the observance of social norms and group expectations. Manata Hashemi highlighted the conformity of young people from lower social classes in their attempts to maintain personal honor and advance within their societies. She showed that young people from weaker sections of society generally do not rebel against conventions and prefer to comply with accepted codes of social behavior as a way to gain access to economic opportunities and improve their chances for advancement (Hashemi, 2020).

The strength of collectivist sentiments was particularly prominent during national crises and emergencies such as natural disasters. The major earthquake that struck Kermanshah province in western Iran in November 2017, resulting in hundreds of deaths, led to a national assistance drive. The earthquake also saw a loss of faith in government institutions. In addition to donations of money and humanitarian aid to the Iranian Red Crescent and charity organizations, hundreds of thousands of dollars were raised for earthquake victims through the private accounts of well-known individuals (Jafary, 2017). There were also displays of solidarity during the COVID-19 pandemic, when citizens volunteered to help distribute food and essential items to the needy, volunteering in hospitals, and handle the bodies of the dead, while shop owners and malls gave discounts and exemptions to tenants (Faghihi, 2020).

In the second decade of the 21st century, social media often served as a platform for mobilizing the public around issues of national importance. Initially, the emergence of digital media was thought to potentially strengthen individualistic tendencies while weakening collectivism and national identity. In 1997, Nicholas Negroponte, the architect of the "one laptop per child" initiative and head of the media laboratory at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), predicted that "twenty years from now children who are used to finding out about other countries through the click of a mouse 'are not going to know what nationalism

is” (Reuters, 1997). However, the discourse on Iranian social media over the past two decades suggests that his assessment was too simplistic. As Niki Akhavan has pointed out, while the internet makes it easier for remote individuals to form groups, nationalism remains a powerful tool for mobilizing the masses on digital media (Akhavan, 2013). In fact, virtual space not only provides a platform for individual expression but also a space for Iranians to express solidarity and mobilize support based on a collective national identity (Khiabani & Sreberny, 2007). As social media has become more widely used in Iran, the power of collective identity to rally citizens around shared national goals has only grown stronger.

Shared national identity is sometimes able to rise above the political disagreements that often characterize Iranian society. Iranian identity is based on an ancient history, cultural ties, and memories shared with Iranians from other nations. The power of national-cultural identity and the sense of solidarity are used by the regime to persuade the public to promote national objectives. Although many citizens have recently shown less willingness to join the collective efforts in the name of a particular ideology, the regime still has the ability to garner public support around national and religious symbols, such as the founding myth of Karbala, which tells of the sacrifice of the first Shiite Imam, Hussain ben-Ali, in the battle of Karbala in 680 CE.

For example, the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s boosted feelings of national identity among the Iranian civilian population, as well as among their political and military leaders. The attack on Iran led by a foreign element aroused deep-rooted patriotism. The leaders of the Islamic Republic had to mobilize the population to defend the country and its regime and tapped national resilience for the war effort. Invoking the Karbala myth was intended by the regime to serve as a source of inspiration for the fighters and spur the public to take to the battlefields. However, the growing criticism of the war

policy from the mid-1980s onward forced the leadership to explain the conflict with Iraq in more practical terms, such as preserving the independence and liberty of the homeland. Thus, from 1986 there was greater use of national rhetoric to stimulate public support for the struggle against an external enemy (Harel, 2009).

The emphasis on Shiite religious symbols and proclamations of the value of sacrifice in defense of Shiite holy places in Syria became a central motif of the regime’s propaganda efforts, following Iran’s deeper military involvement in Syria and Iraq, which took a heavy toll on the Revolutionary Guards. While these efforts could not entirely prevent public criticism of Iran’s military activities beyond its own borders, they helped the regime achieve some public support for the war effort. In addition to the religious rhetoric, senior Iranian figures stressed the importance of fighting in Syria for Iran’s national interests and its security (Zimmt, 2015). Uniting the public around national and religious symbols was also evident in the mass funeral for Mohsen Hojaji, a Revolutionary Guards fighter who was taken prisoner by ISIS on the Iraq-Syria border and beheaded in August 2017. The large number of Iranians who attended his funeral in Isfahan at the end of September was evidence of the power of nationalist emotions and social solidarity (AP & TOI Staff, 2017).

The recent erosion of identification with national symbols is particularly noticeable when compared to previous waves of protest in Iran over the past two decades, and above all in the protests of 2009 (the Green Revolution), when claims that the results of the presidential election in the summer of 2009 had been falsified brought hundreds of thousands of demonstrators to the streets. The 2022 protests were far more widespread geographically than the 2009 disturbances, which were concentrated primarily in Tehran and a few other big cities. The 2009 protests were of a clearly political nature, with the focus on the reformist opposition’s allegations of

faked election results (“where is my vote?”). On the other hand, in 2022, the protesters were not satisfied with the demand to remove the obligation to wear the hijab or even to stop the activity of the morality police; they also challenged the very existence of the theocracy. The extremism of these demands, expressing a desire to change the existing social and political order, can also be seen in the status of national symbols identified with the Islamic Republic. The 2009 protesters made frequent use of Islamic symbols. Opposition supporters went out onto their roofs and balconies each night to recite the religious call “Allahu akbar” together. Even the green color adopted by the protest movement reflected an Islamic symbol (the flag of the Prophet Mohammed). The movement also made use of the Shiite days of mourning of Tasuaa’ and Ashuraa’ to recruit public support for the opposition demonstrations (Rauh, 2013). By contrast, in the current wave of protests, not only were religious Islamic symbols absent, but even contemporary national symbols identified with the Islamic Republic, mainly the flag and the national anthem, became objects of attack by some demonstrators.

This situation can be explained by the trend to secularization, particularly among the second and third generation of the Islamic Revolution, and growing extremism and loss of faith in the political system in general. For example, the low voter turnout in the parliamentary elections held on February 21, 2020 and in the presidential elections on June 18, 2021 were indicative of the crisis in public trust. Less than 49 percent voted in the presidential elections—the lowest rate recorded in presidential elections since the revolution. The sweeping disqualification of the majority of presidential candidates by the Council of Constitutional Guardians contributed to public apathy, but the low turnout also reflected growing public dissolution with the regime and the political system. The regime’s blatant interference in the elections, which were never fully free and democratic but at least maintained some degree of contest,

demonstrated its determination to eliminate any political or ideological movement that could undermine the conservative domination of government institutions. This policy helps the conservative religious establishment to maintain its position in the political leadership in the short term, but its efforts to suppress every other focus of power has deprived it of its basis for legitimacy, which was supposed to combine an Islamic element, expressing the sovereignty of the deity, with a democratic republican element, expressing the sovereignty of the people. Moreover, unlike the 2009 protests that were led by the reformist movement, headed by Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, who were deemed to be part and parcel of the revolution, the 2022 disturbances have no recognized or organized leadership. Rather, they are led by young Iranians born in the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century, who identify far less with the Islamic Republic. This trend is clearly shown in their attitude to national symbols and has aroused concerned debate within the Islamic Republic.

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“Terrorism against the National Identity”

The changing attitudes toward national symbols among portions of the Iranian public have not escaped the notice of the regime’s conservative supporters, although some have tried to play it down. An op-ed on the *Mashregh News* website, which is affiliated with the radical wing of the hardliner camp, stated that throughout Iranian history, there were always some Iranians who supported their country’s enemies. Still, the phenomenon must not be ignored, even if it represents only a small minority. Most Iranian citizens support their country’s independence and its national interests, respect its symbols, and dislike seeing it weakened. However, there

is a small but vocal minority acting on behalf of foreign interests, and they will not be happy until they have secured Western interests in Iran, even at the expense of the Iranian people. As long as this minority is not actually working against national security, it is not necessary to limit their rights. But those who support elements that are a danger to Iranian national security must be denied their freedom (Mashregh News, 2022a).

The conservative daily *Jam-e Jam* also condemned those who harm national symbols. In an editorial under the heading “Terrorism against the National Identity,” the paper claimed that the national soccer team represents the 85 million citizens of the state, and the campaign against it targets not only the Islamic Republic but also the national identity of all Iranians. The paper quoted the conservative commentator and political activist Nasser Imani, who claimed that the burning of the Iranian flag at demonstrations proves that the protestors did not have a problem only with the Iranian regime but also with the very existence of Iran, and they were not anti-revolutionaries so much as anti-Iranians. The article added that there were some who sought to destroy Iran’s national internal unity using a kind of virus intended to damage its identity. This virus was able to penetrate Iran because of social media and its growing influence on the younger generation. Humiliation by the national team, burning the flag, insulting the national anthem, and weakening elements of national unity are all intended to deprive Iranians of their citizenship and lay the foundations for the absolute destruction of Iran. The displays of joy at the defeat of their national team are evidence of the influence of this dangerous virus. A cultural policy is needed to inoculate the people against it, while increasing public awareness of the efforts by anti-Iranian governments to remove Iran from the global map (Jam-e Jam, 2022). The need for an ethical and cultural struggle against the weakening of national solidarity was also raised by Esmail Chamani, a senior lecturer at the University

of Mohaghegh Ardabili in northern Iran. At an event marking Student Day, Chamani called for reinforcement of patriotic sentiments among the students in view of Western attempts to achieve their objectives in Iran. “We must roll up our sleeves to glorify our Islamic motherland because foreigners certainly do not want our progress and pride,” he said (ISNA, 2022b).

The conservative newspaper *Hamshahri* also blamed the West for the rising attacks on national symbols. In response to the refusal of the soccer team to sing the national anthem, the paper claimed that the protest was due to propaganda originating outside Iran, designed to turn the people and the athletes against one of their national symbols. The organizers of the campaign put pressure on the team not to sing, explaining that their success would make the regime happy. The paper claimed that the Cuban exiles who emigrated after the Castro revolution in 1959 never called for a boycott of the Cuban team and even supported it in its matches in the United States. Unlike them, some of the Iranian exiles who describe themselves as “Iranian patriots” are doing everything to increase the suffering of the people, including by supporting harsher economic sanctions on their country. However, it is clear that they have no support inside Iran, or even among groups opposed to the regime outside the country. Nobody wants to boycott the national anthem because most Iranians know well that an attack on its honor will be engraved on their foreheads forever (Asr-e Iran, 2022a).

Condemnation of the attack on national symbols was also sounded by senior figures in the religious and political establishment. For example, in a Friday sermon in the city of Khomeyn, cleric Hojjat ul-Islam Seyyed Qasem Mirsadeghi declared that the enemy was using national symbols, including the flag and the anthem, to sow divisions within the Iranian people. He remarked that unity was a prominent feature of all branches of national sport, including soccer, and that everyone—rich and poor, Shia and Sunni, all social classes—put

their differences aside for sporting events (IRNA, 2022c). The Supreme Leader's representative in the West Azerbaijan Province warned against insulting state symbols. In a Friday sermon in the town of Urmia, Hojjat ul-Islam Seyyed Mehdi Kureishi said that it is not acceptable to insult the anthem and the flag, and that the authorities must fight anyone who is working against the Iranian and Islamic identity, and against the sanctity of the flag and the national anthem (ISNA, 2022a). A former Majlis member who is identified with the pragmatic wing of the conservative camp, Imad Afrogh, also condemned the athletes' refusal to sing the anthem. In an interview to the government news agency IRNA, Afrogh said that the anthem of the Islamic Republic was a symbol of Iran's national identity, honor, independence, territorial integrity, and pride, and that anyone who refrained from singing the anthem was insulting a symbol of national unity. The Iranian politician added that this was an ugly move by the team, even if the authorities had made mistakes in their handling of the Mahsa Amini affair (IRNA, 2022b).

A Weakened National Identity: A Risk for Iran

In their efforts to stop the erosion of identification with national symbols, regime supporters recently warned against the weakening of the national collective identity, as this poses a risk to Iran's territorial integrity and unity. They present the trend as the reflection of a Western plot to divide Iran, as shown also by the encouragement of ethnic-linguistic minorities, mainly Kurds and Baluchis, to participate in demonstrations. The presence of these minorities has been prominent since the start of disturbances in September 2022, with anti-establishment calls to remove the discrimination against them and to extend their civil-political rights (Alfoneh, 2022; Fiennes, 2022).

Minorities, including Azeri Turks, Kurds, Arabs, Baluchis, and Turkmen, make up almost half of Iran's population, and they pose a

challenge to the regime that is far from simple. They live primarily in the peripheral areas around Iran: the Azeri Turks in the northwest, the Kurds in the west, the Baluchis in the southeast, the Turkmen in the northeast, and the Arabs in Khuzestan. In the past these ethnic groups spawned separatist movements, some of which even set up independent states, although only for short periods, such as the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad and the Turkish Republic of Azerbaijan, which arose at the end of the Second World War. Outbreaks of violence were recorded in minority areas following the Islamic Revolution, particularly during the first two years. The efforts of the central government to integrate the many different ethnic communities into one national community did not resolve the core problems, and minorities claim they are treated unfairly by the authorities. Iran's centralized development strategy has caused wide socioeconomic gaps between the center and the periphery and uneven allocation of state resources. The authorities are also accused of applying discrimination in education and employment, as well as preventing children in mostly minority areas from learning their local culture and languages in schools (Elling, 2013).

The ethnic issue has been a sensitive subject in Iran for many years, often leading to protests and violent conflicts in areas with minority populations such as Khuzestan, Baluchistan, and Kurdistan. Nevertheless, and in spite of deep differences between the ethnic groups, Iran has existed as a separate political and cultural entity for centuries. This sets it apart from national states in the Arab Middle East, whose borders were mainly drawn after the First World War by the Western powers. The considerable differences between the historical development of the ethnic minorities, their religious alliances (Sunni and Shia), and their degree of integration in Iranian society significantly reduce the threat they pose to Iran's national unity. For example, most of the Arab minority living in Khuzestan are Shiite, which strengthens their attachment to the

Iranian national state and interfered with the efforts of Iraqi ruler Saddam Hussein to gain their support during the Iran-Iraq War. Over the years, many members of the ethnic minorities have held senior positions, including Supreme Leader Khamenei (half Azeri on his father's side), former Prime Minister Mousavi (Azeri), former Speaker of the Parliament Karroubi (Lori), and Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council Samkhani (Arab). Moreover, as shown in research by Rasmus Elling and Kevan Harris, based on a wide-ranging social survey conducted in Iran in 2016, many Iranians do not always clearly define their ethnic-cultural identity, and sometimes see themselves as belonging to more than one group (Elling & Harris, 2021).

Most demands from ethnic minorities focus on retaining identity and local culture and removing discrimination, rather than separating from Iran. However, the ongoing fear that minorities may wish to separate attaches special sensitivity to any external attempt to encourage separatism within Iran. For example, in January 2021 a meeting of the Support Committee for the Arab Minority in Khuzestan, which was held in Cairo, sparked anger in the media and on social media in Iran. The conference was attended by representatives of the separatist Movement for the Liberation of Ahvaz (the capital of Khuzestan, and the Arab name for the province), religious Muslim leaders, representatives of al-Azhar College in Cairo, and some representatives of Egyptian political movements identified with Islamic movements, headed by Imad Abd al-Ghafour, advisor to then-President Mohammed Morsi. The conference, which coincided with a visit to Cairo by Iranian foreign minister Ali Akbar Salehi, angered many Iranians who were opposed to expressions of separatism in Iran. They fiercely attacked the Egyptian government and President Morsi, and even demanded a strong Iranian response against Egypt, which was ostensibly working against Iran's interests and challenging its territorial integrity (Zimmt, 2012).

Public fears of dividing Iran, particularly in view of the growing challenge to the stability of the central government, are exploited by the regime in its attempts to gain public support, or at least to stop the erosion in the sense of national identity. An example of these efforts is the words of the Deputy Minister of Sport and Youth and hardliner internet activist Vahid Yaminpour, who warned of attempts by media hostile to the Islamic Republic to sow doubt in the minds of Iranians about their national unity in order to prepare the ground for a division of Iran. Yaminpour argued that attempts by foreign media to link protests and anger in Iran to attacks on national symbols are an expression of "media fraud," designed to cause a breakdown of Iranian society (Asr-e Iran, 2022b). The Director of the Department of Culture and Islamic Guidance in Alborz Province, Saeed Jaberi Ansari, also linked identification with national symbols to the territorial integrity of the country. He contended that contempt for the anthem and the flag is evidence of opposition to Iranian unity; this must be resisted, since Iran's territorial integrity does not depend on the consent of one government or another (Javan Online, 2022). Jalil Rahimi Jahanabadi, a member of the Majlis Committee for National Security and Foreign Policy, expressed a similar position when he warned against attempts by Iran's enemies to attack its 3500-year-old identity using popular protest as an excuse. The Iranian politician posted on his Twitter account that weakening of national symbols such as the flag and the national soccer team is a dangerous strategy used by Iran's enemies to divide the country and must be stopped (Jehan-Abadi, 2022).

The news site Fararu pointed to the link between respect for national symbols and recognition of the country's borders. An editorial stated that the national flag represents a geographically defined country with recognized borders. Therefore, when protestors at rallies and demonstrations wave any flag other than the official flag of the Islamic Republic, such as

flags identified with ethnic-linguistic minorities or the lion and sun flag, which was used by Iran in the monarchic period that preceded the Islamic Revolution, they express support for the division of Iran. Disrespect for the national flag is found in two groups: members of separatist organizations, and people who are not aware of the flag's importance. Anyone who considers himself Iranian and supports Iranian unity irrespective of religion, nationality, or political outlook must see contempt for the flag as crossing a red line, and supporters of attacks on the flag's sanctity are preparing the ground for the destruction of their country's territorial integrity (Fararu, 2022).

Return to Pre-Revolutionary and Pre-Islamic Symbols

Along with the fierce criticism of contempt for national symbols and the attempts to link this phenomenon with Western efforts to undermine Iran, there have been recent signs of a growing effort by the Iranian authorities to build public support around national symbols identified with Iran's pre-revolutionary and even pre-Islamic past. The leader of the revolution Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini rejected nationalism as a legitimate ideology and defined Islam as the exclusive basis of Iran's identity. However, as Meir Litvak showed, over the years, the Islamic Republic adopted nationalism and even created a modern Islamic nationalism. This nationalism has created new forms of collective identity and given broad sections of the population the possibility of playing a more active political role. In spite of the Islamic regime's hostility to the blatant secularism of the Pahlavi regime that preceded the revolution and its rejection of the old regime's attempts to stress Iran's pre-Islamic past, the Islamic Republic has adopted the national narrative, even if the authorities sometimes present it in Islamic trappings. The tension within the Iranian identity's dual focus has not disappeared, but over the years has led to a synthesis: religious nationalism stresses the centrality of Islam as a dominant cultural

factor and combines aspects of the pre-Islamic and Islamic cultures (Litvak, 2021).

The nurturing of religious nationalism was partly a reaction to profound processes in Iranian society. Not only was a strong Persian cultural identity maintained after the revolution, but sometimes it exceeded the religious-Islamic identity.

In his research, Menahem Merhavi found that as the revolutionary government became more established, its leaders no longer had a substantive fear of the ideological revival of Iranian nationalism. As a result, the religious establishment began to sanction a more placatory and inclusive approach to Iran's pre-Islamic past. Concrete political expression of the acceptance of pre-Islamic features of the Iranian identity came with the visit by President Mohammad Khatami in 2001 to Persepolis, an archaeological site that is associated with the glorification of the Iranian monarchy in the time of the heirs of Cyrus. On September 13, 2010, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad hosted a festive reception in honor of the Cyrus Cylinder, which Iran borrowed from the British Museum in London for a few months. The event was unusual in the Islamic Republic and deviated blatantly from the ideology guiding the revolutionary government. Moreover, at the ceremony, President Ahmadinejad praised Cyrus and said that his declaration of human rights was a continuation of the way of the prophets (Merhavi, 2017).

The nurturing of religious nationalism was partly a reaction to profound processes in Iranian society. Not only was a strong Persian cultural identity maintained after the revolution, but sometimes it exceeded the religious-Islamic identity. While the efforts of the monarchical regime to shape a secular society actually strengthened religious identity, the widening gap between the Islamic regime and the public, and particularly the younger generation, led many Iranians to prefer the Persian focus of

their national identity over the Islamic-Shiite focus. The continued celebration of pre-Islamic traditions in the Islamic Republic, such as the Persian New Year (Nowruz) and the tradition of Chaharshanbeh Suri—a traditional ceremony to drive out evil before the new year, celebrated on the last Wednesday of the year—is evidence of the intensity of the national-cultural component of the Iranian identity. In view of efforts by the Islamic Republic to maintain control of Iranian national identity, many Iranians decided to adopt their own version of identity, which distances itself from the focus on Shiite Islam, even though religion continues to be a fundamental component of the society (Rad, 2022). They are supported by the erosion of the status of religion. The exaggerated politicization of religion in Iran, the regime's failure to solve the severe economic and social problems, and the widespread corruption have dented much of the public's support for the revolutionary government—and more importantly, weakened the attraction of religion in the eyes of many. Therefore, not only have pre-Islamic traditions persisted, but many middle class young people have developed a counter-culture that stresses the pre-Islamic Persian element of Iranian nationhood, in opposition to the state-established Islam. In this process, events and historical symbols are exploited to construct a national narrative and identity that compete with the regime's narrative.

The clearest expression of this culture is Cyrus the Great Day, celebrated on October 29, to perpetuate the memory of the founder of the Achaemenid Empire. This custom, which began in the last decade and is not included in the official Iranian calendar, runs counter to the ongoing effort by the regime to stress the religious-Islamic element of Iranian identity over the cultural Persian element. It is not by chance that the authorities imposed restrictions on holding ceremonies next to the grave of Cyrus. In October 2016, as Cyrus Day was marked, violent clashes broke out between the security forces and thousands of citizens

who came to the grave site in Pasargadae in the Fars Province of southwest Iran, when they began shouting slogans critical of the government. In 2017, as Cyrus Day approached, the authorities announced that they intended to ban crowds gathering around the grave, and erected barriers on the main roads leading to the area. The Revolutionary Guards commander in Fars warned that the security forces and the judiciary would not allow “anti-revolutionary forces” to hold events around the grave and thus undermine security in the province (Mehri, 2017).

Efforts by the authorities to prevent these ceremonies sparked criticism that they were missing an opportunity to strengthen feelings of national identity. Sociologist Mehran Solati compared the efforts to stop the commemoration of Cyrus to the Shah's failed attempts to erase Islamic identity. Solati claimed that the growing obsession with Cyrus Day shows how the regime's policy was actually reinforcing the pre-Islamic cultural identity of the citizens. Instead of trying to combine the different elements of Iranian identity, the regime is trying to Islamize Iranian society (Solati, 2017). The news website *Tabnak* also pointed out the increasing importance for many Iranians of commemorating Cyrus, and the ineffectiveness of government attempts to stop the ceremonies. An op-ed stated that not only does honoring the founder of the Persian Empire pose no risk to Iran's national security; it could even be exploited to strengthen citizens' feelings of national solidarity (Tabnak, 2017).

Nonetheless, these voices have not led to a change in a government policy, whose consequences are very clear today. Journalist and political activist Said Hajjarian recently blamed the erosion of national identity on the regime's failure to unite the public around non-Islamic/religious symbols. Referring to the events at the World Cup, Hajjarian—considered one of the leading strategists of the reformist movement—claimed that the weakening of national symbols was the result of the absence of a “civilian religion,” i.e., an alternative set of

ceremonies, beliefs, and symbols that have sacred validity in a modern state, such as memorial days, national events, or government symbols. He said that the Islamic Republic has not managed to create a civilian alternative to the symbols of pre-revolutionary Iran, such as the monarchy. Due to the weakening of religion in Iranian society and the regime's failure to provide an alternative through the official revolutionary ideology, and in the absence of a colonial past that could have produced symbols such as those found elsewhere, for example in India, the Islamic Republic was left with no strong foundation for solidarity (Kebna, 2022).

The regime's increasing concern about the weakening of national solidarity led to stronger efforts to unite the public around symbols that are not identified with Islam or the Islamic Republic. Expressions of these efforts can be seen in billboards erected in Tehran during the World Cup. In some billboards the national team's players are shown alongside images of pre-Islamic heroes taken from Iranian mythology (Carmi, 2022). The attempt to reinforce patriotic feelings is also seen in the unusual prominence given to the anthem "Ey Iran," written in 1944 and associated with pre-revolutionary nationalism. Although it never received official status, "Ey Iran" became the de facto anthem during the transition from the fall of the Shah in 1979 to the adoption of the official anthem "May Iran be Eternal" in 1980, followed by its replacement in 1992 by the current anthem of the Islamic Republic (Khordad, 2022). Since "Ey Iran" is largely identified with the monarchy, over the years it has been adopted by many critics and opponents of the regime as an alternative to the official anthem, and to some extent has become an expression of anti-regime protests. In early December 2022 the Iranian media reported that it was sung by a group of 300 young men and women in Azadi Square in Tehran (Mashregh News, 2022b). A few days later there were reports that the national orchestra played this anthem at an

event marking International Volunteers Day (Alef, 2022). The regime's changing attitude to this older anthem, which is considered a marker of traditional national identity, could indicate an attempt to use it to strengthen support for the regime.

The playing of "Ey Iran" is particularly striking against a background of efforts by the conservative religious establishment since mid-2022 to gain support from the public, especially the young, with a series of mass events where children and young people sang a religious anthem called "Listen Commander!" This anthem was first performed in March 2022 on the 15th day of the Muslim month of Shaban, celebrating the birth of the 12th Imam, who according to Shia faith disappeared in the year 874 and is due to return as the savior (Mahdi) at the end of days and bring justice to the world. The clip of the anthem was filmed in the Jamkaran Mosque near the city of Qom, one of the religious institutions most closely identified with the belief in the return of the Mahdi, and was first broadcast on national television immediately following the broadcast of Khamenei's speech marking the Iranian New Year (1401) on March 20, 2022. The anthem has a modern rhythmic style, unlike traditional religious songs, and includes a call to the 12th Imam and expresses the hope for his return. It also reflects support for the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist led by Khamenei and incorporates references to the leader's call to the younger generation of the 21st century to enlist on behalf of the motherland. In addition, the anthem praises the commander of the Quds Force of the Revolutionary Guards Qassem Soleimani, who was killed in Iraq in January 2020 by the United States. The anthem likewise mentions the Iranian revolutionary leader Mirza Kuchak Khan, founder of the Jungle Movement, a guerrilla movement that operated in the forests of northern Iran against the forces of the monarchy, and with the support of Russian Cossacks, thwarted the achievements of the constitutional revolution in 1906. Kuchak Khan,

who was defeated by the army forces in 1921 and froze to death in the Gilan forest after the failure of his revolt, is still considered an Iranian patriot who fought against foreign intervention in his country (Zimmt, 2022b).

Despite the challenges that have emerged since the Islamic Revolution, and particularly in recent years, the Iranian regime has continued to retain the powers that allowed it to survive, including the ability to recruit public support.

Events where this religious anthem was played were covered widely by the national media, and stimulated serious public and media debate. Supporters of the demonstrators claimed that they enabled the Islamic Republic to rally the young around religious and national symbols and strengthen their religious faith. According to supporters of this phenomenon, the clip offers an alternative to Western music, which has become popular among young Iranians. The government news agency published an article saying that the anthem had created a wave of social solidarity, and its enormous popularity was proof of the possibility of a cultural opposition to the “vulgar works” aimed at the new generation (IRNA, 2022a). The *Nour News* website, which is identified with the Supreme National Security Council, argued that the clip provides an important tool for creating a sense of unity at a time when the Iranian nation needs harmony (2022). However, its opponents argue that it encourages militarism, is an abuse of children in the service of regime propaganda, and is designed to distract public attention from the growing economic and social distress in the country. Some of the critics even compared the mass demonstrations to propaganda demonstrations in Nazi Germany and fascist Italy in the early 20th century, and to similar demonstrations in tyrannical states in the region and beyond, such as North Korea (Zimmt, 2022b).

Conclusion: From Erosion of Regime Legitimacy to Erosion of Identification with the Regime’s Religious Nationalism

In recent years there has been perceptible, steady erosion in the Iranian public’s trust in state institutions and the regime’s legitimacy. During popular protests in the latter half of the second decade of the 21st century, there were cries of “conservatives, reformists, the story is over for all of you,” demonstrating the loss of trust in both of Iran’s principal political camps. This growing mistrust has been fueled by the authorities’ failure to deal with the severe economic crisis, natural disasters, and the COVID-19 pandemic. The erosion of public trust is also clearly evident in the protests that followed the regime’s mishandling of the shooting down of a Ukrainian passenger plane in January 2020 by the Revolutionary Guards. The regime’s weak response and the confession by the commander of the Air Force of the Revolutionary Guards, Amir-Ali Hajizadeh, that the the Revolutionary Guards were responsible for firing the missile, brought thousands of angry citizens into the streets to protest against senior regime figures who had tried to whitewash the details for three days. An Iranian news website referred to the damage caused by the authorities to public trust, saying that while the Ukrainian plane was only struck by one missile, public trust had been struck by thousands of missiles (Asr-e Iran, 2020).

The regime’s legitimacy crisis can be clearly seen in the more frequent and extreme popular protests in recent years. Sources close to former President Hassan Rouhani have also warned about this trend. In early 2018, at a conference in Tehran, Hesam al-Din Ashna, Rouhani’s advisor and head of the Strategic Research Center in the President’s Office, warned that since the protests had taken on a political and social character, they could call the very legitimacy of the regime into question (ISPA, 2018). With protests ongoing since September 2022, it appears that not only is there a deepening

crisis of legitimacy but also signs of erosion in the status of contemporary national symbols identified with the Islamic Republic and the sense of national identification, which had remained a prominent feature of Iranian society despite social changes and the widening gap between the regime and the public.

This does not necessarily mean that Iran's citizens are less patriotic or nationalist, but more and more they identify state symbols with the regime. Even after the 1979 revolution, these symbols were seen to represent unity, national honor, and pride, but now they are more identified with the Islamic Republic. The growing alienation between "Iran" and the "Islamic Republic" calls into question the ability of the state authorities to maintain national and social solidarity in the long term. This is particularly true under current conditions where Iran could slide into an ongoing revolutionary situation, characterized by endless unrest and occasional displays of civil disobedience. An Iranian economic daily recently warned that erosion of the national identity could also affect the country's economic performance. The newspaper argued that national identity is an essential element in the national structure, and that countries whose national identity is weakened are unable to manage their economies effectively because they cannot be sure that individuals will take full advantage of their abilities to promote the development and advancement of their country. As proof, the paper cited the economic success of countries such as Japan, China, and Germany, whose economic prosperity also depends on their success at maintaining a strong national identity (Donya-ye-Eghtesadi, 2022).

Despite the challenges that have emerged since the Islamic Revolution, and particularly in recent years, the Iranian regime has continued to retain the powers that allowed it to survive, including the ability to recruit public support. The national solidarity and collectivism that characterized Iranian society have encouraged willingness to rally around the flag and support

the regime against internal and external challenges. However, the ongoing erosion of the internal unity and collective commitment to religious nationalism and state institutions that the regime is trying to foster could further damage not only the already shaky foundations of regime legitimacy, but also its ability to call on the public, which it was formerly able to do with some success in times of emergency and national crisis, including external threats.

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