

Iran's Reformists: From Failure to Sobering Realization

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The brutal suppression of the protest wave in Iran has led to a radical shift within the reformist camp toward the regime. Senior reformist figures, who in the past adhered to a cautious and restrained discourse and affirmed their commitment to the Islamic Republic's core principles, have in recent days expressed positions that challenge the very political conception underpinning the current regime. This shift follows years in which reformists emphasized the necessity of evolutionary change over revolutionary transformation. Together the reformists' persistent failures to advance the necessary reforms, these positions have generated growing public disappointment with the reformist camp and its capacity to serve as a genuine governing alternative.

Nevertheless, given the deadlock confronting the Islamic Republic and the regime's deepening crisis of legitimacy, reformists have renewed efforts to position themselves as a possible governing alternative, particularly in the absence of other clear domestic political options. Their ability to organize protest at this stage is almost nonexistent, as many of their leaders are imprisoned or marginalized, and public support has eroded significantly. Still, in a scenario involving the erosion of the regime's foundations, new opportunities may emerge for more moderate domestic leadership, especially under figures who have not participated in decision-making processes during the past decades and some of whom have paid a heavy personal price for their positions. These actors could provide an ideological backbone for the post-regime-erosion phase and serve, perhaps temporarily, as a bridge between the protest phase and the establishment of a new political order.

The brutal suppression of the protest wave that erupted in Iran in late December 2025 marks another breaking point not only in relations between the regime and the public, but also within the reformist camp. Senior reformist figures—who in the past adhered to cautious and restrained discourse while maintaining commitment to the Islamic Republic's foundational principles—have recently escalated their rhetoric in response to developments in the country and are now openly challenging the political conception underpinning the current regime.

The leader of the reformist opposition, Mir-Hossein Mousavi, who headed the protest movement (the "Green Movement") in the summer of 2009 amid opposition claims of electoral fraud in the presidential election, [accused](#) the regime of losing its way and called for a referendum and the establishment of a new social contract. In a statement released from house arrest, where he has been held since 2011, the 84-year-old Mousavi accused Iran's rulers of betrayal and of committing grave crimes against the Iranian people. He called on the security forces to lay down their arms and on the country's leaders to step down and hold a referendum on a new constitution.

Former Speaker of Parliament Mehdi Karroubi, who led the Green Movement alongside Mousavi, [claimed](#) that the regime has lost any moral basis to continue ruling without the consent of the people. Karroubi blamed Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, as the primary figure responsible for Iran's dire situation, citing his destructive domestic and foreign policies, including his insistence on pursuing a costly and futile nuclear project. According to Karroubi, the only way out of the current crisis is recognition of the people's right to self-determination through a referendum.

Additional senior reformist figures joined the sharp criticism, including political prisoners [Narges Mohammadi](#)—a Nobel Peace Prize laureate—and Mostafa Tajzadeh. In a letter sent from Evin Prison, Tajzadeh [described](#) the suppression of the protests as unprecedented since the Constitutional Revolution of the early 20th century. He called for the establishment of an independent investigative committee to examine the scope of the events and placed responsibility for the current situation on clerical rule under Khamenei's leadership, which he said had refused to respond to public demands and respect the will of the majority.

Former President Hassan Rouhani also voiced strong criticism of the authorities. He [stressed](#) that confrontation with the people is leading the country into a dead end and called for broad and meaningful reform, the development of a genuine party system, referendums on key issues, and a commitment to act in accordance with the majority's decision. According to Rouhani, limited adjustments are insufficient to extricate Iran from the deep crisis in which it finds itself.

The reformist movement emerged from within Iran's political system beginning in the second half of the 1990s and reached its peak at the end of that decade and the beginning of the 21st century, with the election of Mohammad Khatami as president in May 1997 and the establishment of a reformist-majority parliament (Majles) in 2000. [The reformist camp](#) rested on broad public support and was fueled by deep public frustration over the failures of the revolution and the regime's conduct. It encompassed a wide array of interest groups and political organizations whose main common denominator was a desire to change the status quo—albeit within the rules of the Islamic Republic. The reformists did not challenge the existence of the Islamic regime itself; rather, they sought to promote reforms that would enable it to adapt to changing realities and enhance its prospects for long-term survival. Even if such reforms might, over the long term, have led to more profound changes in the regime's character, the reformist camp's mainstream consistently emphasized the need for gradual (evolutionary) rather than revolutionary change.

The failure of the Green Movement, the political repression that followed, and the renewed conservative takeover of elected institutions in the early 2010s prompted a process of reassessment within the reformist camp. Ahead of the 2012 parliamentary elections, major reformist organizations decided to boycott the vote, arguing that the authorities had failed to ensure even minimal conditions for free and fair elections. The boycott effectively left the political arena to conservative-aligned candidate lists and resulted in the formation of a parliament under absolute conservative control. By contrast, ahead of the 2013 presidential election, reformists grew increasingly concerned about the prospect of a victory by a candidate associated with the hardliners. As a result, they rallied behind Rouhani, accepting the need—at least in the short term—to settle for limited achievements: improving the

economic situation, increasing openness toward the West, and cautiously and gradually reducing government involvement in citizens' lives.

Against the backdrop of protest waves that erupted in Iran from late 2017 onward and [ongoing disappointment](#) with President Rouhani's performance, a renewed and pointed debate emerged among reformists regarding the future of the reform movement. During the formation of Rouhani's second government in 2017, it became clear that the president—seeking to avoid confrontation with the conservative clerical establishment—had ignored most reformist demands. The mounting domestic and external challenges facing the Islamic Republic sharpened the reformists' dilemma between the need to continue supporting the president as a “necessary evil” and the fear of growing identification with his failures.

As confrontation between the public and the regime intensified and the government failed to address citizens' hardships, prominent reformist intellectuals [warned](#) of the growing strength of radical forces that were no longer satisfied with gradual reforms but instead sought comprehensive regime change. Reformists argued that although the activity of the regime opponents at the time was focused mainly outside Iran, their influence on domestic public opinion could expand as internal hardships deepened and government failures persisted. In this context, reformist intellectuals and political activists called for a reassessment of the reformist movement's strategy in order to reposition it as a relevant alternative to both the conservative camp and the radical opposition that challenges the Islamic Republic's very existence.

The sense of distress within the reformist camp—especially given its structural weakness and inability to contend with conservatives' firm grip on all centers of power—was clearly reflected in an opinion column [published](#) a few months before the June 2021 presidential election on the Asr-e Iran website, titled “Farewell, Reforms.” The site's editor, Ja'far Mohammadi, argued that the weakness and practical conduct of Rouhani's government had led to the historical and official departure of the reform movement. While the need for reform in state affairs remains, Mohammadi wrote, the reform movement in its current form has reached its end, having lost not only its strategic direction but also the social base on which it relied.

Indeed, the persistent failures of the reformists generated growing public disappointment within their camp and its ability to serve as a genuine governing alternative. Slogans heard during waves of popular protest from the late 2010s—such as [“Conservatives, reformists, the story is over for all of you!”](#)—clearly reflected a loss of trust in Iran's two main political camps. In the eyes of many Iranians, reformists became part of the problem itself: partners in the illusion of gradual change that provided the regime with legitimacy and prolonged its lifespan without producing meaningful change in its repressive character or policies.

Nevertheless, given the deadlock confronting the Islamic Republic and the deepening legitimacy crisis, reformists have made renewed efforts to present themselves as a possible governing alternative, particularly in the absence of other clear political alternatives. Over the past year, signs of renewed activity of the reformists have been apparent. Following the 12-day war in June 2025, the Reform Front [issued](#) a statement outlining far-reaching demands for changes in Iran's domestic and foreign policy, including renewal of negotiations with the United States, suspension of uranium enrichment in exchange for sanctions relief, the release

of all political prisoners, abolition of the Islamic dress code, and removal of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps from political involvement. These demands reflected reformist circles' recognition of both the urgency to address worsening domestic crises and the renewed opportunity, during a period of reflection and preparation for the post-Khamenei era, to strengthen their standing in the political arena.

Against the backdrop of dramatic developments in recent weeks, four central [political scenarios](#) can be identified in Iran. The first is continuation of the status quo accompanied by the regime's gradual and ongoing decline—similar to the Soviet Union's final stages—until the death of the 87-year-old Khamenei, which could lead to internal regime collapse. The second is revolutionary regime change resulting in the overthrow of the Islamic Republic. While this possibility cannot be ruled out given renewed popular protests, it appears unlikely at present, particularly so long as the political and military-security elite—including the repression apparatus—maintains internal cohesion. The third scenario is [a change](#) from within the regime: a takeover by elements of the political-military-security elite, including the Revolutionary Guards, leading to an alternative authoritarian-military governing model. The fourth scenario involves undermining the regime's foundations due to foreign military intervention, particularly a US strike, which would severely damage the political and security leadership, trigger significant upheaval, and compel the Islamic Republic to undertake a substantial political shift, such as holding a referendum on the nature of the regime or conducting free elections.

Across all these scenarios, the absence of an organized, domestically led opposition is striking. Since the clerical establishment consolidated power in the fall of 1981, most opposition centers have been suppressed, and many activists imprisoned, driven underground, or forced into exile. Most recognized opposition organizations now operate primarily within the Iranian diaspora in North America and Europe and are typically fragmented along political, ideological, personal, or ethnic lines.

[The Mojahedin-e Khalq](#) organization espouses an ideology combining Shiite Islamic and Marxist ideas. Its opposition to the monarchy began in the early 1970s, and shortly after the Islamic Revolution, it entered into a violent confrontation with the new regime, which responded with severe repression. The organization subsequently relocated much of its activity to Iraq, where it aligned with Saddam Hussein's regime and participated in Iraqi military operations against Iran during the 1980s war. As a result, many Iranians, including critics of the current regime, regard the organization as traitorous, and its level of support inside Iran is extremely limited.

In recent years, activity has increased among groups openly aligned with monarchist circles calling for the establishment of a constitutional monarchy under the leadership of [Reza Pahlavi](#), son of the deposed shah. During recent protest waves, unprecedented expressions of support emerged for the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty, alongside calls for restoring the monarchy under Reza Pahlavi. Nonetheless, it remains unclear whether nostalgia for the Pahlavi dynasty reflects frustration and despair with the current regime or genuine, broad-based recognition of Reza Pahlavi as a consensual leader. Moreover, the shah's son has consistently failed to establish an effective and organized opposition. Even the coalition he formed at [Georgetown University](#) in Washington, DC, in February 2023 collapsed within

months due to internal disagreements. [His dramatic statement](#) in the summer of 2025, claiming to have recruited tens of thousands of defectors from Iran's armed forces, also failed to materialize during the most recent protest wave.

Accordingly, in a scenario involving erosion of the regime's foundations, new opportunities may emerge for more moderate domestic leadership—particularly figures who have not participated in decision-making over the past decades and some of whom have paid a heavy personal price for their defiant stance toward the regime. At present, reformist circles' ability to organize protest is almost nonexistent, as many of their leaders are imprisoned or marginalized and public support has eroded severely. Nevertheless, reformists may serve as an ideological backbone for the post-regime-erosion phase and act as a bridge, at least temporarily, between the protest phase and the establishment of a new political order.

In such circumstances, it is conceivable that segments of the public—even if they do not view reformists as a long-term solution and associate them with the failures, shortcomings, and injustices of the Islamic Republic—could nonetheless agree to accept them as relevant actors. This acceptance could persist until a new consensual leadership emerges through free elections or a referendum during a transition to an alternative political order that will depend heavily on the ability to form a broad coalition of sectors holding diverse and even opposing views.

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