

Revolution at a Crossroads: The Struggle for the Nature of the Islamic Republic

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Introduction

Ten months after Hassan Rouhani's election as President of Iran, the Islamic Republic is in the midst of a deep internal struggle between the President and his supporters on the one hand, and his conservative rivals on the other. While the President seeks significant changes in his country's domestic and foreign policy, conservatives in the political system, the religious establishment, and the Revolutionary Guards are attempting to block some of his initiatives, which they perceive as a potential threat to the values of the revolution and the stability of the regime.

Rouhani, who was one of the founders of the Iranian regime and is considered a moderate conservative, has since his election sought to lead changes on the basis of his campaign promises to his voters. These include improving the economic situation, easing the security atmosphere in society, releasing political prisoners, granting rights to women and ethnic minorities, and expanding freedom of expression. Even though Rouhani is not identified with the reformists, he recognizes the need to make the revolutionary ideology fit the conditions of the current situation. His election augurs changes in Iranian policy, though he himself is committed to the path of the Islamic Revolution and a government system based on the principle of the rule of jurisprudence (*velayat-e faqih*).

Rouhani's religious training, his Western academic education, his establishment background, and the mandate he received from the public allow him to promote his policy while attempting to avoid conflicts, to

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the extent possible, with the main centers of power: Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the religious establishment, and the Revolutionary Guards. At this point, the President is choosing his battles carefully, giving preference to economic issues and the nuclear talks with the West in an effort to advance a repeal of the sanctions. Nevertheless, it is evident that he is determined to spearhead profound changes, even if they are moderate and gradual, in order to reduce the government's involvement in ordinary civilian life and provide a response to the public's demand for change.

A Government on the Way to Change

Since Rouhani was elected president, he has made a number of statements expressing his commitment to cultural and social changes and his support for expanded civil liberties and cultural freedom. In a November 26, 2013 television interview marking his government's first hundred days in office, the President declared that the government does not intend to become involved in cultural issues where it is not essential. According to Rouhani, "We are not interested in a governmental culture, but rather,

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a cultured government."¹ Ali Jannati, Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, has also expressed the government's commitment to cultural reforms. Unlike his father, senior cleric Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, who serves as the secretary of the Guardian Council and is identified with the radical conservative right wing, Ali Jannati has adopted a relatively liberal approach to issues connected to freedom of expression and the press. In an interview with *al-Jazeera* in English in January 2014, the minister stated that the government is aiming to expand freedom of expression in journalism, literature, and the film industry.²

The government's commitment to implement gradual civil reforms is not limited to declarations; it is also reflected in an actual change in policy. Early in the government's term, the Ministry of Science and Higher Education announced its decision to return to the universities several dozen students and lecturers

who in recent years were suspended from studying or from teaching for political activity.³ In September 2013, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic

Guidance allowed the House of Cinema to reopen. This institution, which brings together more than 5,000 film industry workers, was closed in early 2012 by order of the ministry, which claimed that its managers were acting contrary to the values of the revolution and were collaborating with opponents of the regime. It was likewise reported that the government intends to reopen the Association of Journalists, which was closed in 2009 in the wake of the riots.⁴

One of the main areas in which the change in government policy is noticeable is with regard to social networks. The change is evident both in the increased presence of government officials on these networks and in their public support for lifting legal restrictions on them. On this issue, the new government has adopted a liberal approach that advocates lifting blocks on social media. Mahmoud Vaezi, Minister of Communications and Information Technology, has often stated that the government supports lifting the ban on Facebook, a position contrary to that held by the Committee for Determining Criminal Web Content, which is responsible for filtering and blocking websites.⁵

A certain easing in enforcement of the Islamic dress code is also evident. In November 2013, the Iranian media reported that the President plans to disband the modesty police who patrol the streets of the cities, and to transfer the power to enforce the Islamic dress code from the internal security forces to the Ministry of the Interior, which is under his direct control.⁶ Rouhani instructed the internal security forces not to take an extreme approach to enforcement of the Islamic dress code and to respect human dignity. This is in accordance with the reservations he expressed during the election campaign about the current mode of enforcement of the Islamic code.

The Conservative Counterattack

The conservatives did not allow the government's domestic policy initiatives to go unanswered. The regime has been forced to allow the President to promote certain changes, since it recognizes the public demand for change, reflected in the election results. Nevertheless, regime officials, and the Supreme Leader in particular, are determined to present the President and his government with red lines that, if crossed, could, in their view, undermine the values of the revolution and present a substantive challenge to its stability. This is especially true in light of the experience under President Mohammed Khatami (1997-2005). The conservatives believe that because

Khatami attempted to promote far reaching civil reforms (most of which were blocked by the conservative establishment) he posed a real challenge to the character of the Islamic Republic and sowed the seeds of the calamity that led to the riots of 2009. In its efforts to torpedo any attempt to promote significant reforms, the conservative establishment has not recoiled from exploiting its control of the judiciary and the security and law enforcement apparatuses.

Since his election, Rouhani has generally enjoyed backing from the Supreme Leader. This support is what has allowed him, inter alia, to promote the diplomatic process with the West on the nuclear issue and to conduct negotiations with the United States. Nevertheless, Khamenei has remained committed to a revolutionary worldview, and on several occasions he has criticized the President for undermining the values of the revolution. In December 2013, Khamenei took advantage of a meeting with members of the Supreme Council for Cultural Revolution to criticize publicly – albeit implicitly – the President’s intention to reduce the government’s involvement in cultural issues. In a speech to the members of the council, Khamenei stressed that the government is committed to overseeing cultural affairs. He also warned against the Western “cultural offensive” and argued that Western efforts to influence Iranian young people through communications networks, the internet, books, and children’s games are a grave threat to Iran.⁷

The Supreme Leader’s attempt to restrain Rouhani is also reflected in his approach to Iran’s policy toward the United States. Recognition of the need to reach a nuclear agreement with the West that will enable a lifting of

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the economic sanctions has forced Khamenei to allow Rouhani to conduct negotiations with the United States. Yet in contrast to the President’s position, namely, that the direct talks with the United States could potentially lead to a more open policy toward the West, the Supreme Leader has maintained his fundamental position rejecting any possibility of normalizing relations. In his speech marking the anniversary of the takeover of the US embassy, Khamenei harshly attacked the United States and stressed that he does not trust it. He reiterated this

hostile stance in a speech on January 9, 2014, in which once again he called

the United States “Satan” and claimed that the nuclear talks have proven to all that the United States is hostile toward Iran, Islam, and Muslims.⁸

The clearer it became that Rouhani intended to promote domestic openness and lift some of the restrictions on the social networks and on cultural figures and artists, the more it aroused criticism of the President – from the religious establishment, political figures, and the Revolutionary Guards. The religious education of the President, who holds the title of *hojatoleslam*, has granted him a special status that makes it easier for him to implement his policy. However, this status has not prevented criticism of his policy from senior clerics identified with the radical religious right, such as Ayatollah Nasser Makarem Shirazi. In a meeting with members of the Cultural Committee of the Majlis, the senior cleric expressed concern about the change in policy by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance on the Islamic dress code, activity on social networks, and restrictions on publication of newspapers and books. He warned against turning it into the Ministry of Culture and Un-Islamic Guidance.⁹

The Majlis, which is controlled by a conservative majority, has increasingly become a source of criticism of the President and his ministers. In early January, the Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance was summoned to a hearing before members of the Majlis, which criticized his ministry’s policy. Majlis member Hamid Rasaei accused the minister of demonstrating excessive tolerance for harm to the sanctity of Islam. He also complained about the minister’s public support for women’s singing and his reservations about a judiciary decision to close the reformist daily *Bahar*, which had published an article perceived as offensive to the honor of Ali ibn Abu Talib, the first Shiite imam.¹⁰

In recent months, senior figures in the Revolutionary Guards have joined in criticizing the President’s policy. This tension comes in context of Rouhani’s efforts to reduce the influence of the Revolutionary Guards in politics and the economy. These are evident, inter alia, in their reduced representation in the government and their being pushed out of a number of economic projects in development and energy.¹¹

For their part, the Revolutionary Guards are not interested in a public confrontation with the President, who enjoys the backing of the Supreme Leader and broad public support, and at this point, they are making do with cautious criticism of the government. In a speech at Imam Sadiq University in Tehran in December 2013, Revolutionary Guards commander Mohammad Ali Ja’fari expressed his reservations about the increasing

Western influence in managing the affairs of state. In addition, Ja'fari referred implicitly to Rouhani's comments about the need to keep the Revolutionary Guards out of politics, arguing that the greatest threat to the Islamic Revolution is in the political realm and that the Revolutionary Guards, who are committed to protecting the revolution's achievements, cannot remain quiet in the face of this threat.¹²

The conservative establishment did not content itself with public criticism of the government, and took practical steps that reflected its determination to stop the attempts at civil reform. A short time after the presidential election, several dozen political activists were released, many of whom had completed or were close to completing their sentences. However, dozens of political prisoners have remained in jail, and at the same time, the authorities have arrested a number of artists and social media activists. Nor has the policy of freedom of expression and freedom of the press changed qualitatively. In October, the reformist paper *Bahar* was closed and its editor arrested. In addition, the authorities have prevented publication of several reformist newspapers that were slated to resume circulation. Blocks on social networks have also remained in force. In December, the government blocked the Chinese chat service WeChat, which is commonly used in Iran. In tandem, there were reports that the committee responsible for filtering and blocking websites intended to block other services, such as Viber and Instagram. In early December, Gholam-Hossein Mohseni-Ejehei, Iran's prosecutor general and the spokesman for the country's judiciary, announced that as long as Facebook encouraged corruption and included criminal content and content that harms security and morals, there would be no change in the judiciary's position toward it.¹³

An Entire Generation Demands Change

The President's efforts to improve the economic situation and to reduce the government's involvement in the lives of the citizens reflect his recognition of the need to respond to the hardships facing Iranian citizens and their increasing demand for change. This theme was reflected in Rouhani's statement during the elections, which he repeated in his December speech to students at Shahid Beheshti University in Tehran, that the centrifuges must spin, but only on condition that the citizens' lives and the economy move forward.¹⁴

Relieving economic and social hardships and achieving political freedom were some of the important goals of the Islamic Revolution.

Yet as the revolution continues in its thirty-sixth year, the Iranian regime has still not succeeded in satisfying the wishes of its citizens, and the gap between the public and the revolutionary institutions is on the rise. Iranians, especially the younger generation, are demanding both a solution to the hardships and increased freedoms, and they are gradually moving away from revolutionary values. In recent years, Iran has faced a serious economic crisis, which in part is a function of structural problems in the Iranian economy, including dependence on oil revenues, the weakness of the private sector, and widespread corruption. Part, however, stems from poor economic management and from the sanctions. While signs of the economic crisis are evident among the entire population, its effects are particularly conspicuous among young people.

Because of the sharp rise in the birth rate in the 1980s, Iran today is a country with a young population. Since the Islamic Revolution, the birth planning policy has undergone far reaching changes. The family planning program, which was formally launched in the summer of 1967 to reduce the rate of natural population growth, was suspended. In the second half of the 1980s, there was increasing recognition of the economic and social ramifications of uncontrolled population growth – perceived as an obstacle to economic growth and development – and Iran’s leaders reintroduced the birth planning program. This policy remained in place until the summer of 2012, when the Supreme Leader gave an order to reexamine birth planning policy to increase the population and stop the aging of Iranian society. Yet despite the sharp drop in the birth rate to 1.27 percent in 2012, achieved through the regime’s monitoring efforts starting in the late 1980s, the demographic momentum in Iran is evident to this day, with millions of young people born since the 1980s seeking to enter the work force. In 2011, Iran’s population numbered over 75 million: nearly 72 percent were under the age of forty, and some 55 percent under the age of thirty. Of these, a considerable number are young people of working age (fifteen to thirty) and the rest are children up to the age of fifteen.¹⁵

The economic sanctions imposed on Iran have also contributed to a delay in significant political changes because they have caused serious harm to civil society and the middle class, which is considered one of the key agents of change in Iranian society.

As a result of both the high rate of natural growth in the first decade after the revolution and the economic recession, the Iranian economy is increasingly unable to provide a solution for the number of young

people eligible to enter the work force every year. The unemployment crisis is thus particularly evident among young people, including the educated. In October 2013, Adel Azar, head of the Statistical Center of Iran, noted that the unemployment among Iranians aged 15 to 24 had reached 26 percent in the year 1391 of the Iranian calendar (2012-2013), more than twice as high as the official overall unemployment rate of 12.2 percent.¹⁶

In addition to the social and economic hardships confronting Iran, there is a growing gap between government institutions and the religious establishment on the one hand, and the younger generation on the other. Many young people are moving away from the values of the revolution and adopting a Western lifestyle, despite the government's efforts to stop what it views as a Western cultural offensive. In December 2013, the Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance admitted that the government's efforts to prohibit the use of satellite dishes for viewing foreign television broadcasts had failed, and that more than 70 percent of the residents of Tehran watched these broadcasts.¹⁷

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An additional social trend that could be of concern to the religious establishment is the process of secularization of Iranian society, along with the erosion of the clerics' status in recent years.¹⁸ The religious establishment's concern that Iranian society is moving away from Islamic values was expressed on the eve of the anniversary of the revolution by Ayatollah Seyed Ahmad Alam al-Hoda, Friday prayer leader in the city of Mashad, who stated that Iranian society today is worse culturally than before the revolution. He complained that young people would rather watch satellite television broadcasts and movies and listen to music than to engage in religious matters.¹⁹

The Conservative Dilemma: The Need to Change vs. the Fear of Change

The economic and social hardships facing Iran's population and the demand for change have not escaped the notice of the regime, which is aware of the public's high expectations and recognizes the need to allow certain changes. A government policy that meets the demands of the people could in the short run help strengthen the regime and reduce the gap between government

institutions and populace. The easing of the sanctions also presents an opportunity for economic improvement, which could contribute to the stability of the regime. However, if the President succeeds in promoting domestic reforms and achieving a total lifting of the sanctions as part of a permanent agreement between Iran and the West, sooner or later this could become a double-edged sword for the regime, which recognizes the public demand for change but fears its effects. The regime faces a double paradox. Lifting of the sanctions could relieve the hardships Iran faces but could also increase its exposure to Western influences and strengthen civil society. In addition, Rouhani's success in promoting his policy could satisfy the wishes of the public but could also increase the expectations that far reaching civil reforms will be implemented and strengthen his standing at the expense of the Supreme Leader.

The economic sanctions imposed on Iran by the international community have undoubtedly hurt the country's economy and laid the groundwork for political change and a shift in nuclear policy. Nevertheless, they have also contributed to a delay in significant political changes because they have caused serious harm to civil society and the middle class, which is considered one of the key agents of change in Iranian society. While the upper classes were generally able to cope with the effects of the economic crisis and the lower classes received partial compensation from the government in the form of allowances and subsidies on basic imported goods, the middle class was forced to bear the brunt of the economic burden. In October 2012, the reformist newspaper *Ebtekar* called the economic crisis, which to a large extent was caused by the sanctions, "the last nail in the coffin of the middle class," and it warned that the middle class was weakening and being pushed below the poverty line.²⁰

The erosion of the middle class has caused serious harm to one of the main centers of power of the reformists. In a study based on field work carried out in Iran during the riots in 2009, American sociologist Kevan Harris pointed out that the Green Movement was based to a large extent on the urban middle class, which has grown in the past two decades.²¹ One of the main arguments raised in recent years by critics of the sanctions was that because of the economic crisis, the middle class is engaged in a daily struggle to survive and cannot take the time to continue the struggle to promote political freedoms and political change. A 2012 report published by the International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) argued that "the urban middle class that has historically played a central role in creating

change ... in Iran are key casualties of the sanctions regime,” which is causing it to disappear.²²

Not only have the sanctions weakened the middle class; they have actually contributed to strengthening the economic influence of the Revolutionary Guards, which have taken up economic projects at an accelerated pace because Western companies have ceased working in Iran. In an interview with the reformist daily *Shargh* in July 2013, Revolutionary Guards spokesman Ramadan Sharif, a senior officer, stated that the economic sanctions had forced the Revolutionary Guards to increase their involvement in national economic projects because local contractors were unable to carry them out after foreign companies left.²³ It is not likely that the Revolutionary Guards will be pushed out of large economic projects in the coming years, even once the sanctions are lifted totally, because the private sector in Iran is weak. However, the return of foreign companies to Iran’s markets could jeopardize the economic interests of the Revolutionary Guards and spur the President to curb their power. A renewed foreign presence in Iran could also increase the Iranian economy’s integration into the global economy and expand the society’s exposure to Western influences beyond economic influences.

Lifting of the sanctions could pose another difficulty for the regime. In recent years, Iran’s leaders have taken advantage of the sanctions to evade responsibility for the economic crisis and mobilize public support against Western countries, which they have presented as the main reason for the worsening economic hardships. The public was asked to tighten its belt

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and to adopt a “resistance economy” in response to the difficult conditions forced on Iran. President Rouhani’s election proved that Iran’s citizens are not prepared to pay the heavy price of continued sanctions. However, over the years many of them have taken a hostile approach to the West, which is perceived to a large extent as responsible for their difficult situation. A Gallup poll conducted in December 2012 showed that 47 percent of Iran’s citizens placed responsibility for their difficult

economic situation on the United States and only 10 percent saw their government as being responsible.²⁴ Lifting of the sanctions could help lessen hostility toward the West and increase public demand for openness toward Western countries, first and foremost the United States. This is

especially true since it is no longer considered taboo to hold a dialogue with the United States.

If the President fails in fulfilling his promises to the public, particularly regarding the economic situation, this could lead to frustrated expectations and renewed public protests. However, if he succeeds in implementing his policy, this could also pose a challenge to regime officials: it would strengthen his position at the expense of the Supreme Leader and even encourage him to promote reforms in other civil areas as well. Regime officials are therefore prepared to support the government up to a certain point, but they are determined to stop the process of change that the President is leading to the extent possible. The regime will continue to work to lift the sanctions, but it will seek to prevent the anticipated Western penetration following the renewal of foreign investments in Iran. The Supreme Leader will allow the President to conduct specific negotiations with the United States on the nuclear issue, but he will continue to oppose normalization of relations between the two countries. Rouhani can implement gradual, small changes that will to a certain extent ease the domestic security atmosphere. However, he will be limited in his ability to promote far reaching civil reforms. The heads of the regime will continue to support the President as long as he avoids crossing the red lines defined by the Supreme Leader and contents himself with carrying out circumscribed changes under the supervision and control of the conservative establishment.

Epilogue

The struggle over the character of the Islamic Republic is far from over. Rouhani's election as President signaled clearly that the Iranian public desires change, but the regime is not expected to readily accept the need to promote far reaching civil reforms. It appears that the heads of the regime prefer at this point to focus on relieving the economic hardships and at most to accept a certain limited expansion of civil freedoms. Repeated statements in recent months by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei expressing concern about the cultural situation in Iran, along with his uncompromising hostility to the United States, are a clear indication of the red lines that the conservatives intend to impose on the President in the future as well: a total rejection of domestic reforms that could, in their view, undermine the basic values of the Islamic Revolution and jeopardize the stability of the regime, along with firm opposition to normalizing relations between Iran and the United States.

In the short term, the regime is liable to contain the public demand for change by improving the economic situation and relaxing the rules on individual freedom. Thirty-five years after the Islamic Revolution, it appears that most of Iran's citizens prefer a gradual change to another revolutionary change whose results are unknown. The fact that more than 30 million citizens went to the polls in the presidential elections did not necessarily reflect their agreement with the framework of the regime, but it did indicate their willingness to attempt to influence their future by working within the rules of the game allowed them by the regime. In the absence of a clear, promising alternative to the current regime and given the fear of another suppression of political protest, most Iranian citizens prefer to focus on improving their economic situation and to express their frustrations privately or on social networks. However, it is highly doubtful that over time, the regime will succeed in stopping the demand to promote far reaching political changes. Rouhani's election has proven once again the power of the Iranian public, which in the course of modern Iranian history has demonstrated on a number of occasions its determination to play a major role in shaping its future. The extent of support for Rouhani indicated that those seeking change are alive and well, in spite of the violent suppression of the riots in 2009.

The failure of the nuclear negotiations between Iran and the West and a lack of economic improvement in the coming period could reawaken the public protest movement. Iran's leader is already laying the groundwork for a possible failure of the negotiations, and this past February reiterated the need to implement an economic policy based on a "resistance economy" in order to reduce Iran's dependence on outside markets and to extricate Iran from its economic crisis.²⁵

In the meantime, the social and demographic processes in Iran could further widen the gap between government institutions and the public. In the future, these processes could pose a serious challenge to the regime and the concept of "the rule of the clerics," particularly if this institution faces a significant crisis, such as, for example, the departure of the current Supreme Leader. President Rouhani is the protege of the Islamic Revolution and the flesh of its flesh, and it appears that he does not aspire to undermine its basic principles. Nevertheless, in the future, the changes he is seeking to promote could turn out to be the beginning of a process whose end he did not wish for.

Notes

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