

Iran: social revolt and prospects for change (part 2)



The outbreak of mass demonstrations following the elections of June 2009 created a 'revolutionary' potential for confrontation within the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI). The regime responded with violence and repression, leaving no possibility for compromise. Iran's power structures have always been characterised by factionalism but the recent developments showed that contradictions and differences between groups have reached a tipping point. As conflict and contradiction intensify, so does the regime's instability. But what are the prospects for change? In the second of two articles on the current crisis in Iran, Mehdi Amineh examines the position of the oppositional forces in relation to the state.

Mehdi Parvizi Amineh

THE POST-REVOLUTIONARY Iranian civil society organisations and institutions developed gradually during the presidential terms of Rafsanjani and Khatami. These two periods transformed Iran from a fragile and fragmented society into one with more modern structures and civil society institutions. In the aftermath of the 2009 elections, the gap between society and the state began to increase rapidly, bringing millions of people onto the street. Unfortunately, the structures and civilian traditions in Iranian civil society are weak and lack the capacity to continue the movement and resist the violent suppression by the regime.¹

The Green Movement (the name given to the mobilisation of the people which occurred during and after the June 2009 elections) consists of various interest groups with different ideas and demands for democracy. The main leadership within the movement is conservative, believing that democratisation in Iran is only possible in the context of the Islamic constitution. This is one of the ideological paradoxes of the current movement. Both Mohammad Khatami and Mir-Hossein Mousavi have emphasised their loyalty to the constitution and the legacy of the Islamic revolution. Yet others believe that the current constitution of the Islamic regime is the main impediment to democracy and democratisation in Iran. Khatami's and Mousavi's loyalty to the constitution is perhaps understandable, because they want to show the ruling elite that their political activities and demands take place in the context of the constitution of the IRI, thereby protecting themselves against possible repression. At the same time, it sends a message to the regime that the role of oppositional leaders as an intermediate force between the demands of the people and the system is crucial for the survival of them all. The regime's response, however, has been clear. Namely, we do not need you as an intermediate group, if necessary we will deal directly with the people!

Is the reformist movement truly a reform movement, or is the movement actually striving for preservation of the system and the corresponding constitution with its fundamental contradictions? If leaders of the movement are to be loyal to the public demands for democratic transition in Iran, they have no choice but to distance themselves from the current political system and the legacy of the revolution. In fact, the current demands of civil society and the people are far more radical than the demands of the leaders of the Green Movement. The Iranian people believe that the reformist movement should be dedicated to gradual democratisation and democracy. It appears that there is a desire among the people to initiate some kind of 'velvet' revolution, something the leadership of the movement resists. As a result, there is a significant division between the leadership and the people engaged within the movement.

In addition, we observe that the regime has destroyed part of the opposition's mobilisation network and arrested key and influential elements of the oppositional forces. This does not mean, however, that the situation is beyond repair. Leaders of the oppositional forces try to manage the protest movements. At the same time some senior Ayatollahs, including Saneii, Dastqeb, Bayat Zanjani, Mousavi Ardebili, Makarem-Shirazi and Hadi-Ghafari are criticising the regime in a radical way. Before his death in December 2009, the Grand Ayatollah Montazeri issued a statement rejecting the outcome of the June elections, and declared in several other pamphlets that the regime no longer has 'Islamic' legitimacy. He justified the people's protest and was mobilising other senior clerics against the current political development in Iran.

The current dissatisfaction of the people can not be explained only in terms of economic crisis and the incapability of the regime. The history of mass movement shows that it is the canalisation of dissatisfaction which creates conditions for change in a country, rather than frustration with economic and political conditions alone. Political transformation depends on strong leadership.

What makes strong leadership?

The concept of leadership warrants further examination. Three main and interconnected dimensions of a revolutionary leadership have been identified, namely:

- (1) ideas or ideology
- (2) mobilisation or agitation, and
- (3) management.

Sometimes a leader might have all three qualities or dimensions. In the current situation in Iran the protest movement is not being steered by one single person; consequently, these three elements of leadership are not developing or merging into one leadership.

Ideas or Ideology

The Green Movement in Iran does not have a clear and coherent ideology. Rather, it can be considered as a democratic movement. The ideologies of protest movements can be offensive or defensive. A revolutionary movement usually has an offensive nature and strives to change the political system and socio-economic structures. A defensive ideology usually manifests the demands of unsatisfied peoples against the functioning of the system and its leaders. This type of movement is characterised by revolt rather than revolution, like the revolt of peasants, the revolt against taxes or the revolt against ethno-religious discrimination. The Green Movement in Iran is defensive in character and can be defined as a revolt against electoral fraud. To some extent, the current movement in Iran can be characterised as a movement for the *protection* of the existing constitution and a protest against a minority ruling elite protected by the military forces and in control of key economic institutions. The Green Movement is not yet revolutionary, in the sense that it has no clear aim to overthrow the current regime. The current revolt can be compared with the revolt of June 1963 under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini.² There is a possibility of turning this revolt into a revolutionary movement but to do so the Green Movement would need to distance itself from the theocratic principle of the existing constitution of the IRI. Unfortunately, the current leaders – former presidential candidates Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karoubi (arguably the only leader in the Green Movement with radical ideas) and their ally, former president Mohammad Khatami – appear to have no desire to end the current system.

Mobilisation and agitation

In the current atmosphere of brutal repression in Iran, the leaders of the Green Movement have no opportunity to create an offensive movement. The past months have seen weak civil society institutions and structures repressed further and their activities substantially curtailed. In the momentum of repression, the possibilities of mobilisation are diminished. Mobilisation of the people demands high political expenses and risks. In the case of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1978/9 the leader(s) in exile (and therefore without immediate threat to their lives) were able to criticise the regime and mobilise people against it. The current oppositional leaders are within the country and, it seems, are reluctant to take any risks under the current terror of the ruling elite.

Management

In most revolutionary movements, the leader of the movement plays a decisive role in two cases in the 'contexts of action': (1) When the repressive apparatuses of the regime are unable to function. (2) When the rulers or regimes hesitate to repress the people (as was the case during the revolutionary process in 1978 under the regime of the Shah).³ It is difficult for a regime to survive when it faces a deep-power crisis accompanied with an incompetence to control the situation. Therefore, a strong leader with a coherent idea and ideology is able to apply different political activities, mobilise people and, with this force, is able to confront the repressing forces and weaken the rulers. In the current situation a number of dissident political and religious figures (before his death, Grand Ayatollah Montazeri was seen as the main figure in this sense) can play a crucial role in managing political mobilisation and changing the power balance between the ruling elite and the oppositional forces.

Prospects for democratisation in Iran

The Islamic regime in Iran has continued – at least to some extent – the process of state-led authoritarian modernisation and therefore reproduced the same contradiction as pre-revolutionary Iran. The main causes of the current social revolt in Iran are indeed very similar to the classical ones, namely the breakdown of a modernising autocracy torn by internal contradictions between various processes of socio-economic modernisation. This gave rise to many new modernised economic and professional classes, but denied them any political autonomy, or any autonomous access to the political centre.⁴

To replace an authoritarian regime with democracy, two key interconnected factors need to occur: (1) The rise of a strong and independent middle class (2) the emergence of an autonomous private sector.

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Both groups 'serve the process in two distinct ways: subjectively (middle classes) and objectively (private sector)'. Subjectively the middle classes spread ideals of self-determination, responsibility, activism and empowerment. They provide the crucial determinants for civil society to arise, yet they must have a certain level of autonomy and the organisational and financial means to invest in civil society organisations. Objectively, the private sector, amasses 'formidable economic muscle and organizational and financial strength of its own'⁵ to defect from an allegiance with the autocratic regime. According to Kamrava (2007) 'much, then, depends on the bargain struck between authoritarian state leaders and key social actors whose financial or organizational resources the state needs to co-opt for its own purposes'. If executed well, the authoritarian bargain with the private sector, civil society organisations and the middle classes can help to guarantee a relatively smooth transition towards democracy.

Thus, a successful capitalist modernisation is a pre-condition for development of civil society with corresponding forces. In such a situation, the upcoming modern social forces require the creation of a political system in which authoritarian rule is transformed through formal legal guarantees that permit the different social classes and groups to legitimately express their interests. This system should also place the struggle between contending political forces in a legal and constitutional framework made visible to all and guaranteeing public control over important decisions. This means that in order for modernisation from above to be successful, it must allow the civil society forces, created by modernisation, to act independently of the state. In bargaining with these social forces the state becomes less repressive and arbitrary in its actions and more rule-oriented and responsive to society's needs.

Two problems come to the fore in terms of the above-mentioned factors for change: In Iran, a large part of the middle class remains employed in the public sector or in state-owned companies. Because the oil and gas sector does not provide enough jobs, unemployment is skyrocketing.⁶ A huge public sector, state-owned companies and *bonyads* (foundations) created jobs for a great portion of the middle classes. As such, the middle class is dependent upon the state, and refrains from making demands for radical change (clientalism). At the same time, the size of the private sector is almost negligible. Most companies are state-owned or controlled by Islamic *bonyads*.⁷ Previous policies of Ahmadinejad to privatise state-owned companies resulted in passing private property into the hands of dominant political and, recently, military elite and institutions. The private sector is parallel to, and autonomous of, the government and is not strong enough to build up significant organisational and financial strength; conditions that would likely advance democratisation efforts exponentially.

To conclude, a revolutionary change in Iran is not probable as the current protest movement is defensive by nature and with no prospects of transforming into an offensive movement any time soon. Civil society structures and institutions are still immature and, as such, are not strong enough to continue the current movement and to realise a meaningful political transformation. Additionally, the current movement lacks strong leadership with a clear ideology and a strong organisation for mobilising the masses. At the same time, the regime and its main pillars, the coercive apparatus and the financial revenue (based on the income from oil and gas), enable the regime to survive.

That said, the current system is not sustainable as result of its fundamental contradiction, the lack of elite cohesion, and the nationwide social protests.

It seems three scenarios, (which I first introduced in 1999 during the student-revolt),⁸ are still relevant despite the fact that the situation has totally changed.

- The first scenario envisages that social unrest continues to exist, protest re-emerges and is violently suppressed by the current regime. In this scenario, the militarisation of the regime intensifies.
- In the second scenario, reforms are incrementally implemented by the regime in the form of a 'velvet revolution'. This scenario can only succeed if the constitution is altered in such a way that the principle of *velayat-e faqih* (governance of the jurist) is discarded.
- The third scenario is a change from below; a new social revolution. This is only possible if the current mass movement can create an alternative appealing ideology and an organisation with strong leadership able to challenge the current regime.

This last scenario is least likely for the reasons mentioned above. However, a new revolt or revolution for democracy in Iran in the future is not unimaginable, as Iranian history is full of examples of revolt and revolutions. A serious reform of the political system in the form of a 'velvet revolution' seems equally unlikely given that neither the Green Movement's leaders nor the conservative forces are prepared to abandon the principle of *velayat-e faqih*. It seems then, taking into account the latest developments, that Iran's immediate future will be one of continued suppression of the opposition and militarisation of the regime.

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References

1. Interesting Radio Farda interview with Iranian scholar Hossein Bashiriye concerning the recent political development in Iran, September 5, 2009 at 12:59pm.
2. Bashiriye Ibid; see also Amineh, M.P. 1999 *Die Globale Kapitalistische Expansion und Iran – Eine Studie der Iranischen Politischen Ökonomie 1500-1980*. Münster, Hamburg, Berlin: Lit Verlag, pp. 465-469.
3. Bashiriye Ibid; Amineh Ibid, Ch. 13, (1999).
4. See Amineh, Ibid: ch. 13.
5. See Kamrava, M. 2007 'The Middle East's Democracy Deficit in Comparative Perspective', *Perspective on Global Development and Technology*, 6 (1-3): 199
6. Nomani, F. and S. Behdad. 2006. *Class and Labor in Iran-Did the Revolution Matter?* Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.
7. The foundations are estimated to account for 35 percent of Iran's total gross national product. They control over 40 percent of the non-oil sector of the Iranian economy (Saeidi 2004). The foundations have been a great financial burden to the Iranian economy and one of the main obstacles to economic reform in Iran. The foundations have been involved in propagating the ideology of the IRI and the social security programs. The foundations mobilize tens of thousands of people, from urban and rural lower classes, for demonstrations that support the Islamic regime. They have supported: the establishment of schools, universities, and research centers; the publications of books and journals; the production of films; the organization of art and book festivals; as well as the establishment of ideological museums. They, therewith, contribute to the indoctrination of a great number of young intellectuals into the Islamic political ideology, as it was developed by Ayatollah Khomeini. The foundations have become pivotal actors in the power struggle among different factions of the Iranian political elite, not only in terms of mass mobilization, ideological indoctrination and repression, but also as financial resources to the fundamentalist faction. This makes them not only economically important but also significant actors in forming the domestic policies in Iran. According to some estimation the *bonyads* to account for 35 percent of Iran's total gross national product. See E.P. Raketl (2007), "Conglomerates in Iran: The political economy of Islamic Foundations", in Jilberto, A.E.F. and Hogenboom, B. (eds.), *Big Business and Economic Development: Conglomerates and Economic Groups in Developing Countries and Transition Economies under Globalisation*. (Routledge, London and New York): 109-32.
8. Amineh, M.P. 'Khatami wil slagen waar Gorbatjsov faalde', *De Volkskrant*, 26 Juli 1999.

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