Iran’s regime faces a serious crisis with the outbreak of mass demonstrations following the elections of June 2009, and the death of the dissident cleric Hossein Ali Montazeri last December. Some commentators have compared the unrest in Iran with that of 1978. Indeed, the current situation is the most profound evidence of destabilisation of rule since the Islamic Revolution of 1978/9. Compared with protests in the recent past (1990s and 2000s), this revolt has engaged Iranians on a scale which transcends age, ethnic background, income level, or geographical location. Are we witnessing a repeat of the revolutionary movement of 30 years ago? In the first of two articles examining the prospects for Iran, Mehdi Amineh looks at the position of the current regime in relation to the oppositional forces and the conditions for change.

Mehdi Parvizi Amineh

The post-election revolt of June 12, 2009 created a ‘revolutionary’ potential for confrontation with the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI). The power structures of the IRI have always been characterised by factionalism, but the recent developments showed that contradictions and differences between different factions have reached a tipping point. The regime has responded with violence and repression, leaving no possibility to make a compromise based on ‘general interests’ between competitive factions within the power block, as was the case during the charismatic leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini. As a result, the conflict and contradiction within the ruling elite and their social supporters intensified the regime’s instability.

In addition to the lack of elite unity, the IRI also faces a legitimacy crisis caused by a number of factors. First, in the last two decades a type of secular/liberal oriented interpretation of political Islam has been developed by a segment of the dominant political elite – including Abdul Karim Soroush, Ayatollah Mohammad Mojahid Shabestari, Mohsen Kadivar and Hasan Yousefi-Eskhavan. A second factor is the contradictory nature of the Constitution of the ‘Islamic Republic’ which seeks to combine theocratic and democratic dimensions of the legitimacy of the system. At the same time, the gap is increasing between, on the one hand, the ideas and practices of the Islamic regime, and, on the other hand, the contradiction between the dominant Islamic ideology and the demands of the people in urban areas – mainly the young, women, minorities, and students – as a result of the failure of Islamisation of the society’s norms and values by the regime. Thirteen years after the victory of the IRI [...] the ruling clerics, despite their intensive financial and organisational resources and consistent brutality in eliminating their secular opponents, have failed to create a religious order in the country. Iranians today appear to be less religious in comparison to the public of other Islamic countries, and the trend in their value orientations is towards individualism, gender equality, democracy, and national identity.1

Furthermore, one of the main political characteristics of the IRI is the chronic administrative inefficiency in managing the country’s affairs. This phenomenon has intensified during Ahmadinejad’s presidency. It is characterised by the failure of his populist political economy, which manifested itself in inflation, recession and increasing unemployment. State capacity for effective action requires elite cohesion and widespread diffuse support for the regime in society. In a situation where there is no elite cohesion and unity of the leadership, economic crisis is not solved, leading to instability in society. This opens up the possibility of political mobilisation by oppositional forces. The post-election protest movements in Iran were primarily caused by demands that the new government was unwilling to meet, or even hear; an inconsistency between the increasing political demand of the people and the result of the election. But this is an incident, just a trigger that shoots us into a wider world of political action. It is known that the presidential election has little real impact on Iran’s controlled system.2

When the main political factions – the radical and fundamen- talist faction (Khamenei-Ahmadinejad) and the conservative pragmatic faction (Rafsanjani) – publicly manifested their differences, it created an opening for action from below; a feeling of expectation from the people that the conservative/pragmatic elements should accept the demands of the ‘Green Movement’ (the name given to the mobilisation of the people which occurred during and after the June 2009 elections). The peaceful mass protests of the people after the elections were not tolerated. On the contrary, they were brutally and violently suppressed by the security forces. In the case of authoritarian regimes a legitimacy crisis brings forward realignment among elite segments. In such a situation, the winning side may be that which is able to obtain support from paramilitary security forces. In this case, the role of the Revolutionary Guard expands. As a result, regimes don’t hesitate to subordinate the protest movements. With weeks of suppression in Iran by the security forces, public anger has now mixed with fear, further delegitimising the current regime.3

The impact of the current movement on the future of the IRI. A combination of a deepening conflict within the ruling class and an intensified conflict between the dominant political elite and society was crucial in the emergence of the people’s movement. To analyse whether the current movement in Iran is a serious threat to the stability of the IRI, it is necessary to investigate the challenges that the current movement creates for the regime and to what extent the regime is able to control the situation. Two factors are crucial for the outcome of the current crisis: (1) The position of the regime’s coercive apparatus and its ability to use it to eliminate oppositional leaders and organisations. (2) The position of the leaders of the protest movement and their ability to mobilise the masses and create a new alternative ideology for change.4 To be examined further in Part 2 of this article, to appear in IAS Newsletter #54.

In recent months, the IRI has sought to control the situation with the repression of mass demonstrations and by arresting key elements of the oppositional forces. (According to some sources more than 200 members of the opposition have been arrested). These two factors, together with the lack of a strong leader of the opposition with related ‘new’ ideas/ideology and organisation, make it difficult to sustain the mobilisation of the people against the current regime. The preliminary conclusion is that civil society organisations in Iran are not strong enough to maintain a level of activity that could realise political change.

Furthermore, the protest movement revealed the nature of the power structures of the regime. The Supreme leader is the now the main decision-maker in the whole system. In fact, the protest movement delegitimised and changed the position of Supreme Leader from a constitutional and mediating element in the system to an absolute autocratic ruler. Concurrently, the protest movement threatened the dominant ruling faction and alarmed the regime into continuing with free elections. Moreover, the movement has created a dilemma for the current regime. It is a choice to preserve the republican components of the IRI and continues to hold presidential elec- tions every four years, then it risks unwanted electoral turnover. However, if the regime continues to pressure its opponents and limit the participation of the people in elections, it will delegiti- mise itself further. Another outcome of the movement, then, is that distrust among the people over political participation can lead to a loss of the regime’s legitimacy. With other words, the republican components of the IRI will gradually decline and the IRI will become an increasingly theocratic system. As such, the regime can only find support from non-democratic institutions and interest groups and conservative clerics.

Four elements of regime stability Following the Iranian political scientist Bashiriyeh, there are three main elements of regime stability, namely: legitimacy, elite cohesion or unity of the leadership, and the security apparatus and its ability to keep the regime in power and restore order. I posit that a fourth factor is important and should be taken into account: a sufficient level of state income and independent state revenue. Only the third and fourth elements appear to be present as a basis for the stability of the current regime in Iran.5

Legitimacy Under Ayatollah Khomeini (1979-89), the legitimacy of the young IRI was based on populism. Populism is authority based on the charismatic leadership of a strong person, combined with the mobilisation of the masses through appeal or manipulation. Populist Islamic rule, which is incompatible with the trend of modernization and democratisation, pushed the society into permanent revolution, traditional authority, Islamization of the social fabric, and fragmentation of political desires.6 The Iran-Iraq war (1981-1988), together with this populist-revolutionary ideology empowered the authorities to mobilise the masses and suppress the oppositional political organisations, parties and associations.7 However, Khomeini had failed to institutionalise his charisma into a coherent party and social force and with his death, the regime’s populist-revolutionary ideology gradually lost credibility and support. Khomeini’s successor, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, is not a charismatic leader, does not have the same religious standing and, therefore, does not have the same authority among the population in general and the clergy in particular. This created
were unacceptable to the theocratic elements in the IRI. Moreover, the outcome of the June 12 elections, which attempted at reform that would threaten the existing hierarchy, was unacceptable to the theocratic elements in the IRI. To be part of the regime and to criticise it heavily is to dig one’s own grave. Furthermore, while certain segments of Iranian society oppose the current regime, others continue to support it. This support is primarily the result of the structures of the Iranian economy. A private sector that is responsive to demands. In other words, oil and gas exports make it possible for the dominant faction to finance the military forces in order to suppress oppositional forces and maintain order. Furthermore, revenues are exchanged for support and to buy political loyalty and obedience. Oil and gas revenues enable one to persist, and the distribution of oil revenue in combination with repression essentially pacifies the majority of the Iranian populace.

Consequently, ambiguities and tensions are inherent to the formal political structure. The theocratic element, however, has primacy. For example, the religious supervisory body the Guardian Council checks all bills going through parliament on constitutionality and compliance with the Shari’a (Islamic law). It also decides which candidates are qualified to become a member of parliament, or to run for the presidential elections. The velayat-e faqih juridical system must be accepted in respect of presidential elections, according to which the Supreme Leader who is able to block any law or regulation, is the ultimate decision-maker. This limits democratic participation, and the Republican institutions function as a disguise for the true nature (that is theocratic-authoritarianism) of the IR. Although reformist candidates did manage to achieve some electoral victories, their power was effectively reduced by the constitutional powers granted to the Supreme Leader who is able to block any attempts at reform that would threaten the existing hierarchy.

The recent political developments revealed the superiority of the religious supervisory bodies and the authoritarian element of the IR. Moreover, the outcome of the June 12 elections, which were unacceptable to the theocratic elements in the IR, showed the contradiction in the political system of the IR and the roots of a clash between different political institutions and forces.

Although the ruling elites are divided, almost all have an interest in sustaining the IR. To be part of the regime and to criticise it heavily is to dig one’s own grave. Furthermore, while certain segments of Iranian society oppose the current regime, others continue to support it. This support is primarily the result of the structures of the Iranian economy.

Constitutionally, the armed forces in the IR are under the command of the Supreme Leader and consist of two components: the regular military, and the revolutionary military, which is made up of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) with its paramilitary Basij militia and the Law Enforcement Forces (LEF). They are loyal to Khamenei and his dominant faction.

While the role of Iran’s regular military is to defend against external threats to the country, the Basij militia was established to deal with internal threats against the regime. In November 1980, Ayatollah Khomeini ordered the establishment of an institute called the Basij-e Mostazafin (Defenders of the Oppressed). Subsequently, the Basij was expanded to include mosques, schools and universities. Initially, the Basij was supposed to play a role in construction in the urban and agricultural sectors. However, after the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war the Basij-e Mostazafin came under the command of the new Supreme Revolutionary Guards and it transformed into a paramilitary unit. According to official documents, during the Iran-Iraq war, more than 550,000 students, from elementary to secondary schools, and 4,6 million students, from elementary to secondary schools, were organised into Basij groups to prepare the Basij for war and to provide benefits, good governance, rule of law and accountability in return. The phenomenon that resource revenue has caused a considerable increase in authoritarianism in Iran, other words, oil revenues make it less necessary to diversify Iran’s economy beyond the energy and public sectors throughout the 20th and early 21st century have failed. Resource abundance and development in this case don’t go hand in hand. Moreover, the fact that increased oil prices leads to competition for the control of oil revenues which in Iran has encouraged bad governance and corruption. Second, the Iranian oil revenues hindered democratization and maintain authoritarianism. In a resource rich country, oil revenue becomes a substitute for tax revenue. This way the state can act independently of society and is less sensitive to political demands. In other words, oil revenues make it less necessary to diversify Iran’s economy beyond the energy and public sectors throughout the 20th and early 21st century have failed. Resource abundance and development in this case don’t go hand in hand. Moreover, the fact that increased oil prices leads to competition for the control of oil revenues which in Iran has encouraged bad governance and corruption. Second, the Iranian oil revenues hindered democratization and maintain authoritarianism. In a resource rich country, oil revenue becomes a substitute for tax revenue. This way the state can act independently of society and is less sensitive to political demands. 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