



Why Iran May Be Locked Into a Future of More Protests

Vahid Yücesoy | Wednesday, Nov. 27, 2019

At midnight on Nov. 15, Iran's government announced a precipitous 300 percent hike in fuel prices. Immediate public outcries quickly escalated into nationwide protests (<https://www.politico.com/news/2019/11/17/iran-protests-thugs-gas-prices-071331>) that spread to more than 100 cities and gripped the country for 6 straight days, before the authorities effectively crushed them.

Since President Donald Trump withdrew the United States from the Iran nuclear deal in August 2018 and reimposed unilateral sanctions, the Iranian economy has been charting difficult waters. President Hassan Rouhani admitted as much recently when he exhorted lawmakers to reduce fuel subsidies in the face of plummeting oil revenues (<https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2019/11/17/hikes-in-the-cost-of-petrol-are-fuelling-unrest-in-iran>), saying that “Iran is experiencing one of its hardest years since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.”

While Iranian government officials and some observers abroad have been quick to cast the blame for this month's protests on American sanctions, the causes are deeper and more structural. The fuel hike only set them off. Consider the popular chants of protesters, which targeted Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei—with “Death to the dictator!” (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/11/16/cash-strapped-iranians-are-protesting-rise-fuel-prices-heres-how-economic-protests-have-played-out-before/>)—and Iran's wider ruling elite, rather than the United States. While Trump's “maximum pressure” campaign is certainly exacerbating economic strains, Iran has seen sporadic unrest and protests for several years now by workers, teachers and poorer segments of society—the very people that the Islamic Republic had vowed to represent when it first came to power.

For the moment, Iranian officials seem to have managed to contain the protests by resorting to repression. An Amnesty International report decried the “intentional lethal use of force”

(<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/11/iran-world-must-strongly-condemn-use-of-lethal-force-against-protesters-as-death-toll-rises-to-143/>) by Iranian security forces, which killed at least 143 protesters. The internet was also shut down across the country.



Smoke rises during a protest after authorities raised gasoline prices, in the central city of Isfahan, Iran, Nov. 16, 2019 (AP photo).

Iran has used this playbook—excessive brutality and an internet blackout—to quell various mass protests over the past decade. In 2009, in what came to be known as the Green Movement, millions of middle-class Iranians took to the streets to demand accountability in the face of widespread electoral fraud that ensured then-President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's reelection. Pro-regime forces killed scores of protesters, whose chants for reform fell on deaf ears. As Iranian officials kept ignoring protesters' demand, the slogans became more radical, calling not just for reform but for the fall of Khamenei.

In 2013, hopes of Iranians were high when Rouhani came to power in a landslide election victory. A soft-spoken cleric who spoke of the rule of law, Rouhani was a political moderate compared to the hard-liner Ahmadinejad, but in the context of Iranian politics, he is more of a conservative pragmatist. Still, he managed to resuscitate the reformist constituencies that had been largely incapacitated after the Green Movement. While promising to end U.S. sanctions imposed by the Obama administration, Rouhani's government also pledged to make peace with Iranians through what it called "the Citizens' Rights Charter," (<https://iranhumanrights.org/2018/05/rouhanis-citizens-rights-charter-a-harmful-distraction/>) spelling out the rights and freedoms Iranians are meant to enjoy according to Iranian law. Yet under Rouhani's presidency, Iran continued imprisoning dual nationals, executing the highest number of people in the world per capita, and censoring the internet.

The social contract between Iran's regime and the population at large is coming apart as the reformist project has run out of steam.

Then, in December 2017, the "Dey-Mah" demonstrations (<http://slingerscollective.net/dey-mah-protests-in-the-year-that-elapsed-a-class-factional-and-political-analysis-of-an-ongoing-crisis/?fbclid=IwAR1uHos1GF9jEHfV1qUBID-kXKfJ5Ajqcqh0au65NzaovvTsyC8idEHLpkc>)—named after the month of the Persian calendar in which they occurred—rocked several provincial towns across Iran. In a matter of a few days, much to the astonishment of the ruling establishment, poor Iranians took to the streets chanting radical anti-regime slogans: "Down with the dictator!"; "Death to Khamenei!"; and "Reza Shah, rest in peace!" That third chant was a reference to the first king of the Pahlavi dynasty, whose son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, was overthrown in the Islamic Revolution.

The regime's response to these demonstrations included the usual brute force, but in a new twist, reformist figures joined conservatives and hard-liners in casting the protests as plots by foreign enemies. Masoumeh Ebtekar (<https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-wave-protests-prices-government-rallies-trump/28947178.html>), Rouhani's vice president for women and family affairs and the highest-ranking woman in the Iranian government, claimed protesters were being directed by the Saudis and Americans. Abbas Abdi (https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/01/05/why-havent-reformists-joined-the-protests-sweeping-iran/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.cc3be71395b9), a prominent reformist journalist and leader, called the protests "calculated and irrational." Mostafa Tajzadeh (<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/01/iran-protest-mashaad-green-class-labor-economy/551690/>), a reformist politician who was jailed in the notorious Evin Prison from 2009 to 2016, described them as "destabilizing."

The Association of Combatant Clerics, a group led by the former reformist President Mohammad Khatami (<https://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/iran-unrest-will-it-happen-again-1500257592>), claimed “opportunists and troublemakers have exploited the demonstrations.”

But this effort to discredit the protests failed; if anything, it had the opposite effect. One slogan popularized by students at the University of Tehran—“Reformist! Hard-liner! The game is over!”—suggested just how disillusioned many young Iranians had become with the status quo, seeing the choice between reformers and hard-liners as a false one. Earlier this year, Khatami himself confirmed what outside observers have suspected: That many Iranians who had backed Rouhani and his camp have lost faith in the possibility of slow reform, and that their disillusionment could pose a threat to the Islamic Republic (<https://en.radiofarda.com/a/do-not-boycott-elections-former-president-asks-iranians/30064950.html>). “If people are disappointed, those who want a regime change might find an opportunity for success,” he warned.



Streets are blocked in a protest after authorities raised gasoline prices, in the central city of Isfahan, Iran, Nov. 16, 2019 (AP photo).

So it was only a matter of time until more protests broke out. But demonstrators were angrier and more determined to press ahead with their demands this month. The public anger was palpable, and not just in provincial towns or working-class areas, but also the middle-class neighborhoods of Tehran

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/21/world/middleeast/iran-protests-internet.html>) that took part in the protests. And the reformists' image was further stained since none of them condemned the security forces' brutality in the streets.

Ahead of parliamentary elections in February 2020, the social contract between Iran's regime and the population at large is coming apart as the reformist project has run out of steam. In addition to anger over reformists' silence in the face of repression, there is growing frustration with them over signs of corruption and nepotism among political elites (<https://www.dw.com/en/iranian-elite-cite-good-genes-in-nepotism-controversy/a-40303398>), at a time when ordinary Iranians have been suffering severely under U.S. sanctions.

Iran's rulers are confident that they can weather future unrest with their usual playbook. But both the demonstrations of late 2017 and early 2018, and the latest ones this month, are reminders of how quickly Iranians can mobilize mass protests. Continuous repression only increases the likelihood of uniting different Iranians—working-class and middle-class, all with their own grievances—against the Islamic Republic itself. If a more coherent protest movement forms along those lines, it could potentially trigger a schism within the military and security forces.

With so many unmet expectations, and more Iranians with seemingly nothing to lose, the country may be locked into a future of more protests. But how much longer will Iran's aging theocracy be able to quell rising public anger, if repression only creates more of it?

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