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The revolution has died: Iranian protests in panoramic perspective

The recent protests draw the final curtain on a story that began with the revolution of 1979 and its aspiration for a free, democratic, and prosperous Iran for all Iranians.

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Video grab of Iranian civil cloth security forces kidnapping a protester in Tehran, November 17. | Picture by SalamPix/ABACA/ABACA/PA Images. All rights reserved

My latest stay in Iran coincided with the most calamitous event of the year: a rise in fuel prices ranging from 50 to 300% by the state and the subsequent demonstrations that turned violent and deadly amidst a brutal crackdown by security forces. The recent phase of protests occurred as Iran is enduring one of its worst economic crises due to a series of crushing sanctions by the US, as well as internal misconduct and acute corruption within the Iranian administration. Thus, it seems as if Iranians are subjugated on two fronts: first, by an international coalition headed by the US that has imposed far-reaching economic sanctions on the whole country and that holds the population to account for the existence of a rogue state; and, secondly, by a despotic regime that perceives any sort of protest and criticism by its people as a security threat and adopts militant confrontation and repressive measures to silence them.

The ongoing events that started on November 15 draw the final curtain on a story that began with the revolution of 1979 and its aspiration for a free, democratic, and prosperous Iran for all Iranians. Following the latest upheaval, any apologists of the Iranian government, who would still argue for the possibility of change and reform from inside the system by the already existing political factions, should consider themselves complicit in the crimes committed by the state. For politics in Iran has decayed; the system is locked in a dead-end, the players are corrupt, the people are vilified and constrained, and hope for change has withered. Hypocrisy is perpetuated, rule by fear and intimidation internalized, coercion by force and bloodshed normalized, civil society paralyzed. In short, the revolution, along with everything it stood for, has died.

An erosion of ideals

To appreciate the significance of the latest mass uprisings as the last nail in the coffin of the 1979 revolution, one should also consider the student protests of July 1999, as well as the protests of June to July 2009 that came to be known as the Green Movement. In the former case, the reformist government of President Khatami was in power following the 1997 elections. The public enthusiasm for his presidency was ubiquitous as it had campaigned on notions of civil society, liberal economic policies, and rule of law. It was said that Khatami had advised his cabinet members to read *The Open Society and Its Enemies* by Karl Popper as the new vibrant reformist movement he was leading promoted dialogue with every international power, including the US.

However, the unelected office of the Supreme Leader, which functions as a parallel state vis-à-vis the executive branch, exerted pressure on the government through its authority over the judiciary and the ministry of intelligence.

While the judiciary ordered the closing of several newspapers, several reformist figures were targeted in assassination attempts. These followed the mysterious killings of writers and intellectuals opposing the Islamic Republic, known as the chain murders of 1998. The failure of the executive branch in delivering on its promises caused dissatisfaction and unrest, specifically in universities. The protest movement led by students transformed into the most serious popular challenge facing the government since the revolution. Hence, the subsequent crackdown that was also severe. The demands for a broad and inclusive public sphere to enable social dialogue and toleration of conflicting views were deemed too threatening. The Green Movement of 2009, was essentially political as it concerned public participation in the governmental process.

The Green Movement of 2009, was essentially political as it concerned public participation in the governmental process. Despite the lack of evidence for the argument surrounding the 2009 presidential elections, which itself is caused by the self-contained structure of the system that does not allow for any form of

inspection, it is widely acknowledged that the results were manipulated in favour of the candidate preferred by the Supreme Leader, even though he denies any interference. Iran does not have free elections as an institutionalized multilevel filtering process ensures figures sympathetic to the core ideology of the state would be the only nominees. In return, Iranians are granted the right to choose among the approved candidates and the vote count would be lawful. Yet, this semi-democratic right to vote was withheld in 2009 to deny the public, once again, means of change and reform from inside the system.

Massive protests erupted in the wake of the top candidates' refusal to accept the fixed results, the scope of which surpassed the July 1999 demonstrations. Security forces, including police along with members of Basij militia and the IRGC soldiers, flooded the streets and crushed the protests violently after the Supreme Leader's call for the result to be accepted unanimously. The leaders of the movement, Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, were put under house arrest with no trial, which continues to this day.

For the first time, videos of the clashes between security forces and demonstrators surfaced on the internet. Filmed on cell phones by protestors on the ground, the videos displayed the level of banal brutality exerted by the state as dozens were killed, and hundreds arrested. The possibility of reform through elections was denied to the people, signalling that even the right to vote was not guaranteed if the outcome contradicted the will of the regime. Protestors included mainly young men and women from the middle class and university graduates in city centres who struggled in a post-Ahmadinejad economy that excluded the well-educated from chances of employment and income.

Deepening rage, widening discontent

One group that abstained from participating in both the July 1999 and the

June-July 2009 protests, were the less-educated, factory and market workers, as well as the wealthy merchants of the bazaar, who were concerned chiefly with the flow of business. As long as the wages were paid and profits were adequate, everything else seemed secondary. However, the economic conditions changed following the sanctions imposed by the US and the expensive regional proxy wars the Iranian state engaged in within Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. The 2015 Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA) provided momentary economic relief, but, with the Trump Presidency and the US withdrawal from the deal, sanctions were restored.

In addition to this, the extensive degree of corruption in the administration of Iran and the endless cycle of news regarding the disappearance of vast monetary amounts, up to 2 billion dollars in cases, infuriated lower income groups, expanding the animosity and outrage against the system. The conditions facing the lower to middle classes deteriorated further as the wealth gap in society increased. The first signs of dissatisfaction came with the protests of January 2018, as the unemployed and impoverished sections of the society took to the streets. This was the beginning of a series of riots driven by these groups, which reoccurred throughout the year in different capacities and various parts of the country.

The recent rise in gas prices has refuelled the rage and discontent, which have been on full display since November 15. Nevertheless, the government had been preparing for any type of uprising since the 2009 protests. Alongside the usual response, which includes systematic and organized exertion of force and violence, another radical step was taken with shutting down the internet and disconnecting Iran from the rest of the world.

While protestors have committed acts of vandalism by burning state-owned bank buildings and petrol stations to reflect the accumulated resentment (even though there are also claims that the Basij are behind these acts to justify the violent crackdown), the IRGC has been the chief among the armed forces

initiating oppressive measures to counter the uprisings. One senior IRGC commander compared the situation to an operation during the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-88, where Iranian soldiers joined in deadly combat with Iraqi soldiers, while another identified the on-going events as a “world war” that enemies of Iran had engaged within its borders.

The revolution’s worst-case scenario

From a panoramic perspective, the linear succession of protests of July 1999, the Green Movement of 2009 and the events of 2018-19 represent step-by-step deterioration and restriction in the social, political and economic spheres and circumstances, respectively. Firstly, the right to a civil and open society consisting of free speech and free press with the rule of law was repressed. Secondly, the right to vote in a semi-democratic system was manipulated and mass participation in the political process was denied. Thirdly, the right to basic needs was abused by mismanagement and corruption at the governmental level, coupled with severe economic sanctions imposed on the country; notwithstanding the right to internet access that was denied for at least a week by the state. Thus, the ideals of the 1979 revolution aspiring to a free, democratic, and prosperous Iran were eliminated gradually as the state turned more totalitarian and dismissive of its people.

Not only were Iranians progressively excluded from decision-making processes as the country moved away from democracy; but they were also barred from expressing any form of criticism, opinion, and dissent. As the managerial and executive means become restricted in the hands of a few authoritarian figures and undemocratic institutions, the masses are pushed further away from the state affairs, causing a larger disconnection between the state and the people. They turn into two entities living in separate socioeconomic and ideological conditions. As the managerial and executive means become restricted in the hands of a few authoritarian figures and undemocratic institutions, the masses are pushed further away from the state affairs, causing a larger disconnection

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With the increasing integration of the IRGC into the state apparatus and the existence of an unelected head of state as the ultimate authority, the Islamic Republic has metamorphosed into a totalitarian police state that prioritises expediency and survival of the ideological system above all else; including the lives of its citizens. The structural deficiencies and obstacles render reform and transformation improbable and unachievable. With little international and domestic legitimacy and the blood of tens of thousands on its hands, the Iranian state has become a mutation of its worst-case scenario: arguably, the most destructive and murderous regime in modern Iranian history.

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