

# Iran: social revolt and prospects for change (part 1)

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 decennia 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 Mojtabah Shabestari, Mohse Kadivar and Hasan Yousefi-Eshkevari. 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 youth, 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’.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, one of the main political characteristics of the IRI is its 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.<sup>2</sup>

When the main political factions –the radical and fundamentalist 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 the one that 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.<sup>3</sup>

**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.<sup>4</sup> (To be examined further in Part 2 of this article, to appear in IIAS 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. If it chooses to preserve the republican components of the IRI and continues to hold presidential elections every four years, then it risks unwanted electoral turnout. However, if the regime continues to pressure its opponents and limit the participation of the people in elections, it will delegitimise 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.<sup>5</sup>

**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 democratization, pushed the society into permanent revolution, traditional authority, Islamization of the social fabric, and fragmentation of political desires’.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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

Above:  
Protester holds up poster of the dissident cleric Hossein Ali Montazeri who died in December 2009.

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an opening for struggle between factions or elite fragmentation. That said, the appearance of competitive political factions within the ruling class, accompanied by the emergence of new intellectual movements with a more liberal and secular orientation, gradually led to the decline of the legitimacy of the fundamentalist faction of the IRI.

Elite cohesion

The current events in Iran have brought the disputes and conflicts between the ruling elite and various factions to a head. Consequently, it is difficult now to make new conditions for consensus. The differences between reformist, conservative/pragmatists and fundamentalists on the one hand, and disputes within *ulama*’ circles and religious institutions as well as between the political and the military elite on the other, have intensified substantially.

There are a number of reasons for this political tension and the lack of elite cohesion in the IRI. The IRI is unique in a sense that it combines a theocratic mode of rule based on the *velayat-e faqih* system (the Governance of the Jurist), which was institutionalised in the constitution of 1979. As a result, Iran is an amalgam of both republican as well as religious institutions, all of which exert political power. This blurs the lines of authority. At the same time, Iran is unique among non-democratic regimes, having regular parliamentary and presidential elections with a (limited) choice of candidates, as well as relatively open discussions in parliament.<sup>8</sup> The duality of this system was the result of the existence of liberal and theocratic forces when the constitution was drafted. Today, there are three ‘republican’ institutions: the legislative *Majlis* (parliament), the executive and the judiciary. Parallel to these republican institutions there exist multiple religious supervisory bodies, the most important being: the Guardian Council (*Shora-ye negahban*), the Assembly of Experts (*Majles-e Khobregan*) and the Expediency Council (*Majma’-e Tashkhis-e Maslahat-e Nezam*). Thus, the legitimacy of the IRI is twofold; a theocratic mode of rule (the divine) and a republican mode of rule (the popular) are deemed simultaneously legitimate.

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 motlaqeh faqih* system must be accepted in respect of presidential elections, according to which the Supreme Leader (Khamenei) is the ultimate decision-maker. This limits democratic participation, and the Republican institutions function as a disguise for the true nature (that is theocratic-authoritarian) of the IRI.<sup>9</sup> 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 IRI. Moreover, the outcome of the June 12 elections, which was unacceptable to the theocratic elements in the IRI, showed the contradiction in the political system of the IRI 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 IRI. To be part of the regime and to criticise it heavily is to dig one’s own grave.

Besides the inherent tension between political institutions and democratic and theocratic elements in the IRI, another factor creates disunity at the political level. This is the existence of multiple rival power centres which are organised around powerful individuals like Rafsanjani, Khamenei or Ahmadinejad, or groups like the Society of Islamic Coalition (*Jam’aiyat Mo’atalefeh Islami* – JMI). Almost all power centres control streets mobs, have their own (para-) military forces, financial resources, media, intelligence, ideology, clerical support, foreign diplomatic relations, courts etc.<sup>10</sup> Some of these power centres have even become governments within themselves, providing housing, education, healthcare etc; and most are very influential in some state institutions. Often they have managed to operate beyond legal frameworks. With multiple power centres there is not one government but many. This undermines and weakens central government and its authority.

Although the ruling elites are divided, almost all have an interest in sustaining 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 barely exists in Iran. On the contrary, a great proportion of the labour force is employed in the public sector and therefore economically dependent upon the state and public institutions. Many religious institutions and *ulama* too are dependent on states subsidies and as a result they support the regime politically or choose to remain passive.

The coercive apparatus and independent state revenue

The ruling faction of the political elite rests on two pillars of power: the security forces and the oil and gas industries. These two pillars form the main pillars of the regime at the moment and are inseparable. State revenues from 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 the regime to persist,<sup>11</sup> and the distribution of oil revenue in combination with repression essentially pacifies the majority of the Iranian populace.



Above: Young men of the *Basij* militia, a paramilitary group within the Revolutionary Guard.

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*. Subsequently, the *Basij* was expanded to mosques, schools and universities. Initially, the main task of the *Basij* was 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 *Sepah Pasdaran* (Revolutionary Guards) and it transformed into a paramilitary unit. According to official documents, during the Iran-Iraq war, more than 550,000 students were sent to the military fronts. Of this number 36,000 were killed or disappeared in the war; 2853 became disabled; and 2433 were arrested by the Iraqis. Over the past 30 years this institute has developed further and is now used for the purposes of the ruling elite.<sup>13</sup> In the last decade, the *Basij* has been used as a social pressure group to propagate the ruling ideology and disrupt public manifestations of students, youth and women. According to official figures, there are currently 4,6 million students, from elementary to secondary schools, enrolled in the *Basij*, being trained in 700 bases (schools). These young *Basijis* (mainly under 18 years old) played a key role in suppressing the people during the recent social protests and demonstrations. Some parents actively encourage their children to participate in the *Basij* in order to give them access to organised holidays and guarantee access to universities via the ‘University Share for members of the *Basij*’ arrangement. The IRI is ultimately responsible for the organisation, training, agitation and stimulation of young *Basiji* to engage in violence, first in the war with Iraq and now on the streets.<sup>13</sup>

The Revolutionary Guard has been playing a key role in Iranian politics, especially since the election of President Ahmadinejad in 2005. The Guard itself and the companies run by the Guard obtain major contracts in every sector of the economy; from airport construction to telecommunications to car manufacturing. Consequently, its power in recent years has increased in all facets of national affairs, cementing its support for the current regime in Iran.

In Part 2 of this article, to be published in the next issue of the IIAS Newsletter (#54 Summer 2010), I will examine the position of the oppositional forces in relation to the state and look at the prospects for change.

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Notes

1. Moaddel, Mansoor. ‘The Iranian Revolution and its Nemesis: the rise of Liberal Values among Iranians’, in *Comparative Studies of South, Africa and the Middle East*, The Thirtieth Anniversary of the Iranian Revolution, Vol. 29, no.1: 2009, p. 126.
2. Some scholars and journalists give too much credibility to the electoral system and the various elections that have been held. The 2009 elections were neither free nor fair in the democratic sense. The fact that the Supreme Leader could legally and constitutionally ban non-Islamic candidates removes the democratic potential of the election. Reformist and democratic forces could easily be sidelined via the obligation to ideological conformity; rendering any efforts at democratisation effectively invalid.
3. Radio Farda’s interview with Iranian scholar Hossein Bashiriyeh concerning the recent political development in Iran, September 5, 2009 at 12:59pm.
4. Ibid
5. Ibid
6. Alamdari, Kazem. ‘The Power Structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Transition from Populism to Clientelism, and Militarization of the Government’, in *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 88.pp. 1285-2005
7. Abrahamian, Ervand. 2008. *A History of Modern Iran*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
8. Chehabi, H.E. 2001. ‘The Political Regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Comparative Perspective’, in *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 36, No. 1, 48
9. Alamdari, K. 2005. ‘The Power Structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Transition from Populism to Clientelism, and Militarization of the Government’, in *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 8, 1285-1301.
10. Ibid: 1293.
11. The state’s oil-revenue has two other effects: First, reliance on oil exports hinders diversification of the economy by creating the ‘rentier state’. It is easier for a government to satisfy its financial needs by capturing rents from oil revenues than investing in the sectoral economy and collecting increased tax revenues in the long term. As a result, attempts to diversify Iran’s economy beyond the energy and public sector throughout the 20th and early 21st century have failed. Resource abundance and development in this case don’t go hand-in-hand. Moreover, the availability of resources often leads to competition for the control of oil revenues which In Iran has encouraged bad governance and corruption. Secondly, the state’s oil revenues hinder democratisation 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 for the Iranian ruling elite to be responsive to society’s needs. Rather it becomes more repressive and arbitrary. Governments reliant on tax revenue need to compromise with social forces and have to provide benefits, good governance, rule of law and accountability in return. The phenomenon that resource revenue hinders both development and democratisation is called ‘the resource curse’. It is a challenge to Iranian society to turn the resource curse into a blessing. In Iran, the oil and gas exports constitute 85% of total exports. The fact that the recent high oil prices resulted in an enormous inflow of capital available to the ruling elite and the government of Ahmadinejad is also relevant in this context, augmenting the resources available to strengthen the regime.
12. The LEF was established in 1990 (during the Rafsanjani presidency) out of various Islamic revolutionary committees (*Komiteh-ye Enqelab-e Eslami*), the City Police (*Shahr bani*), and the gendarmerie (countryside police). During the first decade after the revolution the revolutionary committees – mainly composed of members of the Conservative faction – together with the regular police were responsible for implementing law and order in Iran. By merging them with other police forces in 1990, President Rafsanjani reduced their scope of action. The committees are not so visible on the streets anymore today but maintain an independent structure and activities. (Hermann 1994: 546).
13. See the interview of Ali Taefi, The Learners-Basiji and the Increasing Violence between the Children by the Radio-Deutsche Welle-in Persian, September 23 2009: <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,4718243,00.html>.



Left: women protesters from the Green Movement, the opposition movement formed during the June 2009 elections.