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Iran’s Green Movement

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The views expressed are my own and not those of the United States Institute of Peace.

Iran's Green Movement

Introduction

- In 2010, the United States will face increasingly difficult decisions about how to balance policy toward Iran's rival political forces—an increasingly autocratic regime in control of a controversial nuclear program and an opposition demanding political, economic and social reforms.
- The uprising since Iran's disputed presidential election is the most important political event in the Islamic republic since the 1979 revolution. The Green Movement has dramatically altered the internal political landscape as well as the diplomatic dynamics for the outside world. It also has the potential to impact other political movements in the 57-nation Islamic world.
- The uprising is the product of growing demands for change over the past dozen years. A reform movement has ebbed and flowed since 1997. But the new Green Movement now appears to be mobilizing a critical mass, despite the regime's use of political and physical force.
- Since the June 12 presidential election, the flashpoints have evolved from allegations of election fraud to challenges of the broader leadership. Growing numbers of Iranians are also questioning the nature and even legitimacy of this particular type of Islamic state. Recently, some in the opposition have begun calling for an Iranian republic instead of an Islamic republic; they've removed the religious symbol from their own versions of the Iranian flag. But the uprising is not yet a counter-revolution. If put to a referendum, significant numbers of Iranians might well vote to remain an "Islamic republic," albeit with as much or more emphasis on the rights guaranteed in a republic as on its Islamic character. The longer the political showdown continues, however, the greater the dangers of a wider erosion of support for an Islamic state and clerical leadership.
- Despite the regime's brutal crackdown, the Green Movement has sustained the most imaginative civil disobedience campaign in the Islamic world—and maybe the world generally – for more than six months.
- The opposition has so far kept to its pledge to engage only in peaceful protests, even when provoked by Iranian security forces. Its tactics represents a particular irony in the world's most volatile region: A regime that came to power through revolution, in a country suspected of secretly developing a nuclear arms capability, faces its biggest challenge to date from peaceful civil disobedience.
- Public protests are just one of many ways Iranians are challenging the regime. Just as significant are the commercial boycotts, challenges at public forums, currency graffiti, silent green-themed actions or displays, and other activities.

- In terms of its future, the Green Movement is a loose coalition of disparate political trends—reformers, conservative pragmatists, moderate conservatives, and liberals who don't like any of the others. The young and women have been the most active protesters, although the coalition includes former presidents as well as people who rarely if ever vote, professionals as well as taxi drivers, all ages, all classes, urban and rural, and both genders.
- Diverse opposition factions view the central issues from very different prisms; their long-term goals often vary just as much. And if it prevailed, this coalition-- like the coalition that brought down the monarchy in 1979-- could crumble just as quickly over different visions of a "new Iran."

Iran's New Political Schism: Five conclusions

FIRST, despite its unprecedented use of force, the theocratic regime has never been more vulnerable. And the idea of a supreme leader—a position equivalent to an infallible political pope—now faces a long-term challenge of legitimacy.

Iran has not witnessed this scope of brutality since the revolution and its vengeful aftermath against the *ancien regime*. The Revolutionary Guards and paramilitary *Basij* vigilantes are now more powerful than at any time since they were created. On July 5, Revolutionary Guards commander Mohammed Ali Jafari acknowledged that his forces had assumed control of domestic security; he called the crackdown a new phase of the revolution. "Because the Revolutionary Guard was assigned the task of controlling the situation, [it] took the initiative to quell a spiraling unrest," he told a news conference. "This event pushed us into a new phase of the revolution and political struggles."

Yet the opposition has not been silenced. A growing number of political and religious groups continue to publicly question the election, the crackdown and even the regime itself.

SECOND, given Iran's modern history, some kind of challenge was almost inevitable. For a century, Iranians have been political trailblazers in the 57-nation Islamic bloc and in Asia. Their quest for empowerment has played out in four phases.

During the 1905-1911 Constitutional Revolution, the first of its kind in Asia, a powerful coalition of intelligentsia, bazaar merchants and clergy forced the Qajar dynasty to accept a constitution and Iran's first parliament. In 1953, the democratically elected National Front coalition of four parties led by Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh pushed constitutional democracy and forced the last Pahlavi shah to flee to Rome--until U.S. and British intelligence orchestrated a coup that put him back on the Peacock Throne. And in 1979, yet another coalition of bazaaris, clergy and intellectuals mobilized the streets to end dynastic rule that had prevailed for about 2,500 years.

So the angry energy unleashed in both peaceful demonstrations and angry protests is the natural sequel. Each of the first three phases left indelible imprints that in some way opened up Iranian politics and defined what followed. The latest phase will too.

THIRD, the protests are not a counter-revolution—yet. The opposition is not talking about ending the Islamic republic. They’re talking instead about what it should be, how to reform or redefine it, and how to make its officials more accountable.

The core issues are—in fact—not new. The main flashpoint goes back to the early debate between the ideologues and the realists over a post-revolutionary government. Ideologues argued that the first modern theocracy should be a “redeemer state” that championed the cause of the world’s oppressed; restored Islamic purity and rule in the 57-nation Islamic bloc; and created a new Islamic bloc capable of defying both East and West. Realists argued that Iran should seek legitimacy by creating a capable Islamic state and institutionalizing the revolution. They too wanted a new political and social order independent of the outside world, while also being realistic about Iran’s need to interact economically and diplomatically with the world.

For thirty years, the bottom line issue has been variations on the same theme: Whether to give priority to the revolution or to the state. Or, put another way, whether the Islamic republic is first and foremost Islamic, or first and foremost a republic.

The same theme issue played out in the presidential campaign. Ahmadinejad championed the revolutionary clerics’ original vision of helping the oppressed, while Mousavi campaigned on the need for a viable and practical state. The same issues are central to the post-election turmoil. Mousavi warned that the large amount of cheating and vote rigging was killing the idea that Islam and republicanism are compatible.

So far, the opposition is not rejecting the role of Islam in the state. The rallying cry, after all, is Allahu Akbar, or “God is great.” The opposition instead envisions a different role for Islam in the state. What is different now is that a debate that has been simmering among elites for three decades has now been taken over by the public.

FOURTH, the election crisis has further refined Iran’s complicated and ever-evolving political spectrum. The fissures have, for now, coalesced many disparate factions into one of two rival camps: The New Right and the New Left.

The New Right centers around a second generation of revolutionaries who call themselves “principlists.” Many came of age during the revolution’s first traumatic decade. They provided the backbone of the Revolutionary Guards and *Basij* (or “mobilization resistance force”) that secured the revolution during the chaotic early years. They were hardened during the 1980-88 Iraq war, the bloodiest modern Middle East conflict. In the 1990s, they went to university and entered the work force. After Ahmadinejad’s election in 2005, many gained positions of political or economic power.

The New Right has effectively wrested control of the regime and the security instruments needed to hold on to power. In stark contrast to the revolution’s first

generation, most are laymen, not clerics. They have effectively pushed many of the original revolutionaries, including big-name clerics, to the sidelines—at least for now.

The New Left is a de facto coalition of disparate interest groups that found common cause during the brief presidential campaign and came together in anger after the poll. Its organization, tools and strategy are weak. But the informal coalition does have numbers on its side. The New Left takes its name in part from former Prime Minister Mir-Hossein Mousavi, an opposition presidential candidate who alleges he won the election. As prime minister during the revolution's first decade, he was considered a leftist. But the name also reflects a common goal among the disparate opposition forces to open up Iran's rigid theocracy.

The New Left includes two former presidents, former cabinet ministers and former members of parliament. But it also includes vast numbers from the demographically dominant young; the most politically active women in the Islamic world; sanctions-strapped businessmen and workers; white collar professionals and taxi drivers; and famous filmmakers and members of the national soccer team.

Iran's political divide is now a schism. Many leaders of the two factions once served time together in the shah's jails; their mug shots still hang together in the prison—now a museum—once run by the shah's SAVAK intelligence. Today, however, their visions of the Islamic republic are at such sharp odds that it will be very hard to recreate unity among them. (The biggest wild card is foreign intervention or an outside military operation that would almost certainly lead rivals to take a common stand.)

FIFTH, the regime's survival strategy relies on militarization of the state. To push back the opposition, Khamenei may rely more on his powers as commander-in-chief than his title of supreme leader. The government's three main tactics are political rebuff, judicial arrest and mass security sweeps. Khamenei and the Council of Guardians have so far resisted all compromises, dismissed all complaints, and steadfastly reaffirmed Ahmadinejad's election. Security forces have arrested key opposition figures in the streets and during nighttime raids, including advisers and aides of Mousavi, which crippled his ability to communicate, plan or organize. Short-term, these tactics may be partly effective; long-term, however, they could backfire.

The Three Faces of the Opposition

The new opposition movement is ambitious, imaginative and determined. But it does not speak with one voice. Nor does it have a single leadership. The diverse factions see the issues through different prisms—and have disparate views of a “new Iran.” The opposition has at least three layers:

- 1) the general public that launched the spontaneous protests and now goes the furthest in demanding changes to the system;
- 2) the traditional political elite, including two candidates defeated in the June 12 presidential election;

- 3) and the clerics, who have launched their own internal debate about the election, *the regime's behavior, and the nature of an Islamic state provides intellectual depth and legitimacy to the public campaign.*

There is, in turn, also great diversity within each sector.

FIRST, the public's civil disobedience campaign has been the most visible face of the Green Movement. The slogans shouted at sporadic demonstrations – Jerusalem Day in September, the U.S. Embassy takeover anniversary in November, and on National Students Day in December – have reflected the shifting tone and themes of the opposition.

- On Jerusalem Day, Iranians in the past shouted “Death to Israel.” This year, protesters shouted “Death to Russia,” because it was the first government to recognize President Ahmadinejad’s reelection.
- At the U.S. Embassy anniversary, Iranians for years shouted “Death to America.” This year many protesters shouted “Death to No One” and “Iranians scream peace with all peoples of the world.”
- Some also shouted “A green Iran doesn’t need nuclear weapons.”
- Others sent a signal to the United States. They shouted, “Obama, Obama, you are either with us or with them.”
- Finally, throughout the fall, protesters have also shouted damning slogans against their own supreme leader, such as “Khamenei is a murder. His rule is null and void.”

But the less public displays of disobedience are just as critical in understanding the opposition’s depth and durability. Three are particularly imaginative:

After the regime’s clampdown began in the summer, the opposition launched a commercial boycott of goods advertised on state-controlled television. The boycott affected commodities from eggs to cell phones.

This fall, the opposition has been writing anti-regime slogans and graffiti on the national currency: a simple green “V” or “Long live freedom” printed with stamps on rial notes; pictures of Ahmadinejad printed with the word’s “people’s enemy” underneath; slogans like “Cheater Khamenei and power-hungry Ahmadinejad” or “Khamenei, the non-believer, is a servant of Putin” and “They stole oil money and give it to Chavez.” Thousands and thousands of rial notes have been disfigured. The regime reportedly tried to take them out of circulation but had to give up.

Televised sporting events have also become a time to wear green to signal support for the opposition. In response, the government reportedly broadcast one game in black-and-white. Groups of men have also shouted “Allahu Akbar,” or God is great at sporting events. Once the theme of the revolutionaries, it has become the battle cry of the opposition—one that makes it hard for the government to prosecute.

The scope of the Green Movement is also evident in individual acts that are uncoordinated and unpublicized in advance. Mahmoud Vahidnia was invited to a meeting

between the Supreme Leader and Iran's academic elite. The math student used his turn to ask a question to challenge the regime for some 20 minutes, warning that Khamenei lived in a bubble and was not aware of what was happening in Iran, and charging that elites on the Council of Guardians and Assembly of Experts had a stranglehold on power. Iranian television abruptly cut off the live broadcast, but not before it was taped and later transmitted on YouTube.

SECOND: The second layer is the political opposition by more conventional political elites, such as former Prime Minister Mirhossein Mousavi and former parliamentary speaker Mehdi Karroubi. Both lost to Ahmadinejad in the June election. Although they are still nominally "leaders" of the opposition, neither has come up with a viable plan-of-action. Their physical movements have been limited by the regime; their aides, relatives and allies have been detained or harassed. Karroubi is more of a political maverick and has demonstrated remarkable courage in publicizing claims of rape and torture in prison, but neither man has yet emerged as a long-term leader. There are, so far, no Mandelas, Havel's or Walenskas in Iran.

Iran's reform movement has always been a body in search of a head. It elected former President Khatami in 1997 because he was seen as the candidate most likely to press for some reforms; when he showed little willingness or ability to tackle core issues, the reform movement moved away from him. The movement rallied behind the lack-luster Mousavi because he was viewed as a man who had stood up to Khamenei when they served together in the 1980s and might be the only one able to do it again. But if he continues to fall short on action, the movement will almost certainly look elsewhere.

THIRD: The third layer is among the clerics themselves. This is the least visible face of the opposition but arguably just as important as the civil disobedience because it provides intellectual depth and legitimacy to the public campaign. It centers on internal debates—in public letters, in seminaries and universities, on websites, and among themselves--about the election, the regime's behavior, and the nature of an Islamic state.

The most important figure is the dissident cleric Ayatollah Ali Montazeri, who was originally designated heir apparent to revolutionary leader Ayatollah Khomeini. But his criticism of the regime's practices led to his dismissal just a few months before Khomeini died in 1989. After the June election, he issued a virtual *fatwa* dismissing the results. He urged Iranians to continue "reclaiming their dues" in calm protests. He also warned security forces not to follow orders that would eventually condemn them "before God." He wrote, "Today, censorship and cutting telecommunication lines cannot hide the truth."

In a scathing letter to other clerical leaders, he wrote this fall:

"The goal (of the revolution) was not simply to change the names and slogans but then keep the same oppression and abuses practiced by the previous regime...Everyone knows I am a defender of theocratic government...although not in the current form. The difference lies in the fact that I intended the people to choose the jurist and supervise his work...I now feel ashamed of the tyranny conducted under his banner. What we now see is the government of a military guardianship, not the guardian of Islamic scholars."

Another prominent dissident is Grand Ayatollah Yusuf Saanei, one of only about a dozen who hold that highest position. He's long been a critic but his position has grown much tougher since June. He expressed "abhorrence" for those behind the violence and sympathy for injured protesters, particularly students who "protested to restore their rights and remove doubts about the election." He said, "What belongs to the people should be given to the people. The wishes of the people should be respected by the state." During the show trials and purges, he wrote a public letter calling the prisoners' confessions "religiously, legally and logically invalid and worthless." He also urged protesters to continue peaceful resistance. And he blasted the regime for betraying the original goals of the revolution.

Another grand ayatollah, Abdolkarim Mousavi Ardabili, warned the Guardian Council that it "must hear the objections that the protesters have to the elections. "We must let the people speak." And Grand Ayatollah Asadollah Bayat Zanjani Grand Ayatollah said the protests were both lawful and Islamic. "Every healthy mind casts doubt on the way the election was held," he wrote. "More regrettable are large post-election arrests, newspaper censorship and website filtering and, above all, the martyrdom of our countrymen whom they describe as rioters." He, too, warned security forces that it is "against Islam" to attack unarmed people.

Clerical groups have gradually added their voices. The Qom Assembly of Instructors and Researchers issued a statement in early July questioning the neutrality of the twelve-member Council of Guardians, which certified the election. "Candidates' complaints and strong evidence of vote-rigging were ignored ... peaceful protests by Iranians were violently oppressed ... dozens of Iranians were killed and hundreds were illegally arrested." As a result, "the outcome is invalid."

The clerics are not just talk. Among themselves, they are also debating what constitutes good governance, what an Islamic state should be, and even whether an Islamic state is good long-term for Islam. Many Shiite clerics have long argued against having their own in charge, for fear that the human shortcomings of an Islamic government would taint Islam. Shiite clerics depend on their followers for income, power and position. Anger at the Islamic state carries potentially serious consequences for them too. In turn, the clerical debate has serious implications for Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. He and his position – the rough equivalent of an infallible political pope -- is under increasing scrutiny among his own.

Conclusion

The spontaneous protests by millions of Iranians set a powerful precedent for Iran as well as the wider Middle East. The full impact has yet to be felt. Just as Iran's 1979 revolution introduced Islam as a modern political idiom—redefining the world's political spectrum in the process—so too has the uprising signaled a new phase in the region-wide struggle for empowerment.

Three factors are likely to determine the future: leadership, unity, and momentum. The opposition is most vulnerable on the issue of leadership. It will be difficult to make definitive inroads without more active leadership or a viable strategy.

Unity is where the regime is most vulnerable. Officials have to be worried about long-term costs of the crackdown. Many government employees, including civil servants and even the military, have long voiced their own complaints about the strict theocracy. In 1997, a government poll found that 84 percent of the Revolutionary Guards, which include many young men merely fulfilling national service, voted for Khatami, the first reform president.

Momentum--the engine of action--may be the decisive factor. For the regime, the challenge has been to shift public attention to Ahmadinejad's second-term agenda. It may be a rocky course. His policies, particularly on the economy, are likely to face greater scrutiny; his proposal to cut national subsidies in favor of cash handouts to the poor was already rejected once this year by parliament. He is trying again. For the opposition, the calendar of Shiite rites, Persian commemorations and revolutionary markers is rich with occasions for public gatherings to turn into demonstrations, planned or spontaneous. The regime has many tools to put them down. But the arrests and trials also add new causes for alienation and opposition. With each new set of issues, the regime's image is further tainted, its legitimacy undermined.

In the midst of this turmoil, any actions by the United States and its Western allies may become an important factor – in many, often unpredictable ways. Arguments can be made both for and against new sanctions.

On one side, the regime could exploit new sanctions as an excuse to clamp down further on the opposition. New sanctions also hold the potential to hurt the public more than the regime, which has the means to circumvent at least some restrictions. Only about 20% of Iran's economy is private sector, which is often seriously impacted by sanctions.

On the other side, new sanctions may nudge more Iranians to press for political change. But depending on new sanctions to be a catalyst for decisive movement is a dangerous proposition. Persian nationalism is a powerful force dating back five millennia. Actions taken by the outside world have often been used to mobilize all sectors of Iranian society behind the regime, as was most visible after Iraq's 1980 invasion of Iran.