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Beyond repair: Ruptures in the foundations of the Islamic Republic of Iran

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Beyond repair: Ruptures in the foundations of the Islamic Republic of Iran

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A complex set of political and economic challenges have placed the Islamic Republic on the shakiest ground since its inception in 1979. Growing rifts amongst Iran's top clerics and political elite have revealed the regime's inability to pursue a coherent policy and project an image of unity on both the domestic and international stage. To make matters worse, the regime has been unable to provide social and economic security for its citizens in the face of harsh international sanctions and internal corruption. The Iranian Rial is severely inflated, unemployment is on the rise, and living standards are falling. At the same time, the state has shown worrying signs of militarisation, with the government increasingly relying on the Islamic Revolutionary Guards, and its paramilitary wing, the Basij militia, to ensure political compliance and silence voices of dissent. Yet many opposition voices within Iran, including the Green Movement, continue to call for fundamental political reforms.

Introduction

In June 2013 a new Iranian President will be elected. Four years ago, the presidential elections sparked a mass uprising in the streets of Tehran and other major population centres, leading to the arrest of thousands of political activists. The country's leading reformist politicians, Mehdi Karroubi and Mir Hossein Mousavi, remain under house arrest. It is highly unlikely that they will be permitted by the Guardian Council to run as candidates in the upcoming elections.

Growing rifts amongst Iran's top clerics and politicians have revealed the Islamic regime's inability to project an image of unity and pursue a coherent policy. Deep political discord is damaging its ability to maintain a grip on the ideological legacy of its founder, Ayatollah Khomeini. The original advocate of the Islamic regime had kept himself above daily politics and cultivated an air of infallibility. The current Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, has managed to seriously undermine that status and bring himself down to the level of daily politicking. This has made it

possible for his critics, within and without the regime, to criticise him and attack his office. This is most dramatically evident in the public rift between the office of the Supreme Leader, and that of President.

To make matters worse, the regime is now unable to provide social security to its citizens due to tough international sanctions and domestic economic mismanagement. Runaway inflation and rampant unemployment rates have laid bare the Islamic regime's inability to deliver social justice and equality. This is a colossal failure that goes to the heart of the regime. In the absence of a unifying ideological and political vision to mobilise popular support, and also the scarcity of resources to maintain social welfare, the ruling regime has found it increasingly necessary to rely on the tools of organised violence to enforce compliance. Relying on the loyalty of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards and its *basij* paramilitary wing to suppress dissent, the Islamic regime is exhibiting the limits of its political hegemony. Against this background, the opposition Green Movement has shown increasing signs of radicalisation, with many members openly calling for an end to the founding principle of the Islamic state, *Velayate faqih* – rule by the most learned Islamic scholar.

The regime is on a downward trajectory for its political legitimacy, and in the absence of a major policy reversal, this is likely to become even steeper. This must be a worrying trend for the ruling elite against the background of popular, youth-led uprisings in the Arab world. With the retraction of its political legitimacy, the Islamic Republic is at risk of facing a similar revolt.

Fundamental disagreements amongst the elite

Following the heady days of 1979, the Islamic regime was built on a promise of delivering an indigenous and Islamic form of social justice and equality, along with freedom from the shackles of 'westoxification' – an unwelcome influence of the West, especially America. These grand ideals gave the regime an unprecedented level of popular support and the Iraqi invasion of 1980 helped consolidate that support-base. The Islamic regime took advantage of the revolutionary momentum and the external threat to purge its opponents within and without. By the end of the war with Iraq in 1988 the regime had built a united core, free of conspicuous dissent. This political enterprise was helped with income from Iran's vast oil deposits. The subsequent tension in the Persian Gulf region in the wake of Iraqi invasion of Kuwait (1990) helped drive up oil prices and offered the Islamic regime in Iran a windfall.

Yet it was clear from very early on that the Islamic Republic would be unable to deliver on its promises. From the inception of *Velayate faqih* the politics of oppression took root, as the regime sought to silence any voices of opposition to the ruling clerical elite. By the 1990s, a dismal human rights record left the Islamic Republic with a poor reputation on the international stage, and internal discontent was on the rise and rise. The ascendancy of the reform movement under the presidency of Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005) facilitated the articulation of an alternative vision for the Islamic regime, one built on greater social freedoms, economic liberalization, and cultural openness, especially with the West. The reform movement suffered a severe setback with the ascendancy of conservative president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005, but its message of change proved durable enough to excite public support for reformist presidential candidates in 2009.

The 2009 Green Movement uprising revealed a spectacular rift in Iranian politics, including multiple layers of discord within the establishment. Iran's top echelon of power appeared unprepared for the intensity of the opposition movement, and divided on how to respond to the crisis. The emerging cracks went beyond tactical concerns about the legitimacy of force to disperse protest rallies, and raised questions that went to the very core of the regime: the role and responsibilities of the Supreme Leader. For the first time in the history of the Islamic Republic of Iran, a number of high profile clerics and government 'insiders', with impeccable credentials as advocates of the regime, took a public stance against the Supreme Leader. Former-Speaker of Parliament, Ali Larijani, for example, publicly declared the Interior Ministry as responsible for violence and unrest.¹ And a former prominent journalist for *Keyhan*, the mouthpiece for government hardliners, Mohammad Nourizad, published several open letters to Khamenei, sharply criticising him.²

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The fracturing of regime solidarity had its roots in Ayatollah Khamenei's staunch public support for Ahmadinejad's presidential campaign against a background of wide-spread public unrest. This was an aggressive affront to the opposition candidate and his supporters, which included Hashemi Rafsanjani, then

head of the 86-member Assembly of Experts charged with appointing and dismissing the Supreme Leader. Rafsanjani 'fretted publicly over the regime's decisions and the public support they were costing'.³ He angered hardliners by calling for the release of detained opposition members, stating 'people are turning away from the clerics and seeking guidance from the students'.⁴ Rafsanjani was subsequently banned by Ayatollah Khamenei from leading Friday prayers in Tehran, and eventually lost his position as Chairman of the Assembly of Experts – the constitutional body charged with keeping the Supreme Leader accountable.⁵ But Rafsanjani was not alone in his open criticism of the incumbent President. Only two of Iran's nine top clerics publicly congratulated Ahmadinejad on his return to office. A number of other high profile clerics, including Ayatollah Yusuf Sanei and Ayatollah Bayat Zanjani, publicly criticised the Supreme Leader for his hasty judgement.⁶ Such public criticism revealed the depth of discord at the very top of the Islamic regime.

Grand Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Mohammad Dastgheib, a member of one of the most prominent clerical families from Shiraz, took up the case of the Green Movement by questioning the legality of the office of the Supreme Leader. Dastgheib argued Khamenei was in breach of the Constitution by pre-empting Ahmadinejad's return to office, and since the source of the Supreme Leader's authority was in the Constitution itself, Khamenei had placed his own role up for questioning.⁷ Dastgheib openly condemned the Assembly of Experts for remaining silent in the post-election turmoil. In an open letter to the Assembly, Dastgheib called on its new Chairman Ayatollah Mohammad Reza Mahdavi Kani, to 'investigate what is going on in the country', commenting 'it strange that protecting Islam has been reduced to protecting one man' – Khamenei.⁸ The late Ayatollah Montazeri was equally critical, and even employed the term *estebdad* – dictatorship – to condemn the Supreme Leader's abuse of power following the elections, and called on the military and Basij to refuse orders given to beat protestors. Just a few months after the initial chaos, Montazeri made a public admission that what he and other powerful clerics had envisioned in *Velayate faqih* as the post-revolutionary system of governance was 'a mistake'.⁹

Following the disputed elections over 80 people were jailed, some for 15 years, including a number of government affiliates. Government spokesperson Abdullah Ramezanzadeh, former vice-president Mohammad Ali Abtahi, and former deputy-economy minister Mohsen Safaie Farahani were amongst those put on trial. Speaker of Parliament and long-time confidante of Ayatollah Khamenei, Ali Larijani, was accused of promoting 'silent intrigue' for not actively speaking out against the

protestors.¹⁰ Larijani was openly critical of the Guardian Council, which in his view had unlawfully supported Ahmadinejad's return to office. He spoke out publicly against the government's apparent willingness to simply ignore the thousands of Iranian citizens who maintained the election was rigged. *Raja News*, the hardline website closely linked to Ahmadinejad, published a story that was meant to condemn Larijani, but which only seemed to validate claims of electoral fraud. According to the news source, Larijani 'had access to classified information' on the afternoon of the election, and made a phone call to Mousavi to congratulate him on being elected as president.¹¹ This has been viewed by some as a strong indication of who likely received the majority of votes, despite the eventual outcome.¹²

Even the united front presented by Khamenei and Ahmadinejad quickly unravelled following the crushing of dissent. One of Ahmadinejad's first moves in his second term as President was to appoint close confidante, Esfandiar Rahim-Mashaei to the post of Vice-President. Mashaei is well-known for championing a nationalist (Persian) rather than religious (Islamic) narrative of Iran's history. This did not sit well with the Supreme Leader. Khamenei stepped in and dismissed Mashaei, citing the 'regime expediency' as the reason. Ahmadinejad responded by appointing Mashaei as his Chief-of-Staff. The Supreme Leader's overruling was embarrassing for President, but it was only a sign of things to come. In April 2011 Ahmadinejad sacked his intelligence minister for dismissing an official with close ties to Mashaei. Khamenei stepped in again, immediately overruling Ahmadinejad and reinstating the minister. Ahmadinejad responded to Khamenei's move by refusing to attend Parliament and boycotting all government meetings for 11 consecutive days.¹³

This dramatic run of events shattered the illusion of a united Islamic state. In reality, conservatism exists on a continuum in Iran, ranging from hardline to pragmatic. Supreme Leader Khamenei represents the first generation of Islamic rulers in Iran – those who remain firmly rooted in the ideology of the regime. Khamenei's patronage consists of ultra-conservative political and clerical elites, and importantly, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards (IRG) which comprises some 250,000 men (an important point to which we will return below). The politics of President Ahmadinejad, on the other hand, sit more towards the pragmatist end of conservatism in the Islamic republic. Ahmadinejad has been more successful in appealing to working class and rural Iran. The President represents the second generation of Iranian politicians since the revolution of 1979, many of whom served in the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88).

Esfandiar Rahim-Mashaei promotes the slogan 'Islam without the clerics' – an approach no politician has dared take before.

The split between Khamenei and Ahmadinejad became so marked by 2012 that the Guardian Council banned some of the President's supporters from running in the February parliamentary elections.¹⁴ Predictably, reformist candidates were also banned. This included both Mousavi and Karroubi who remained under house arrest and advocated 'silent protests' – a boycott of the elections. The result was a closed contest between the two conservative factions. Luckily for the Ahmadinejad camp, the ban did not include Mashaei, who is reportedly being groomed by Ahmadinejad to run as a candidate in the 2013 presidential elections. The special relationship between the President and Mashaei is a thorn in the establishment's side, and further highlights the futility of rigid political labelling in Iran. Mashaei has promoted the slogan 'Islam without the clerics' – an approach no politician would have dared to take before.¹⁵ According to Hooshang Amirahmadi, president of the American Iranian Council:

Mashaei is saying that Iranians are at first Iranians and Islam comes afterward. He is reviving a source of national pride of Iranians that has been neglected not only since the Islamic Revolution of 1979 but in the past two centuries...Obviously Mashaei's nationalistic views are a threat to clerics. They are afraid that their power might wane if people begin to respect their pre-Islamic history.¹⁶

Mashaei has been pegged as a likely candidate to run in the June 2013 presidential elections. But he is part of what Iran's conservative media has labelled a 'deviant current' – that is, not part of the Supreme Leader's camp.¹⁷ This is an ironic twist following Khamenei's show of support for Ahmadinejad in the 2009 elections. In February 2012 Ahmadinejad was summoned before the Parliament and threatened with impeachment.¹⁸ This was the first time since the revolutionary days of the Islamic regime that such confrontation is played out at the very top of the political establishment. Not even the reformist President Khatami was threatened with impeachment when he was struggling with a conservative parliament in his second term.

According to Mehdrad Khonsari, an analyst with the Centre for Arab and Iranian Studies in London, public support for both Ahmadinejad and the Supreme Leader has declined as a result of the political standoff. Khonsari predicts 'further polarisation, further disunity [and] rivalry...within a state structure that's already fractured'.¹⁹ The forecast is shared by Karroubi, who despite being under house arrest since February 2012, sees no other option but change in Iran: 'If the *nezaam* [political system] is limited to people like Ahmadinejad, Ayatollah Jannati [an arch-conservative member of the Guardian Council], and similar people, then it is a boat that cannot accommodate 75 million people and is not stable'.²⁰ Amongst the most remarkable comments of this nature are those issued by Morteza Nabavi, Member of Parliament and manager of *Resaalat* – a leading conservative daily. Nabavi has candidly revealed: 'We [conservatives] do not have the required stability in the ranks of government officials. They do not all think alike, and are not united. We do not have this even among the Principlists [the self-appointed term of Khamenei's followers]...Today, only a few defend the Supreme Leader'.²¹

Remarkably, there have even been reports that members of the IRGC have dissented from official rank and file. In a news conference in mid-2010, Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari admitted support for the Green Movement amongst some members of the Guards, suggesting that events in Iran since June 2009 had created 'ambiguities' for some Commanders. Earlier, in February 2010, Jafari confronted Ahmadinejad during a session of the Supreme National Security Council, demanding that the president 'have some shame', and admit that, 'it is due to your incompetence that Iran has been in chaos'.²²

The radicalisation of the opposition Green Movement

The unprecedented displays of disunity amongst Iran's top political and clerical elite occurred on the back of a more grassroots-led movement for change. In June 2009, millions of Iranians poured onto the streets of Tehran and other major cities to protest the return to office of incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The protestors claimed this was a case of electoral fraud and demanded a recount of the ballots. But some went much further, demanding the downfall of the Supreme Leader; an end to *Velayate faqih*, the founding principle of the Islamic Republic. This was nothing short of a call for revolutionary change. But what further distinguished the 2009 protests from those of the past was the composition of the protestors themselves. Unlike the protests that peppered the late 1990s in Iran, which were secular-oriented and

student-led, the Green Movement emerged as something far more broadly based, transcending the politics of class, ethnicity, age, religiosity, and geographic location.²³ Afshari and Underwood observed how ‘religious moderates and reformist-leaning regime insiders...[lined] up with a broad swath of the Iranian public against a small cadre of regime hardliners and their minions’.²⁴

The *Basij* paramilitary force was deployed to break up the demonstrations. Police and militias raided university campuses and student dormitories. There were even reports that plain-clothed militias were authorised to use live ammunition against protestors.²⁵ Most dramatic was the sniper killing of 26-year-old university student Neda Agha-Soltan, caught on the fringes of a protest 8 days after the initial uprising, who subsequently became something of a poster-girl for the Green Movement. A raft of beatings, arrests, and imprisonments ensued. Well-known advocates of change were threatened and many, such as human rights lawyer Shirin Ebadi, were eventually forced to leave Iran. Ebadi’s colleague, lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh, was arrested in September 2010 without trial or charge; she was denied the right to attorney and banned visitation rights. The charge against her was ‘acting out against national security’ and ‘propaganda against the regime’, as well as ‘illegal’ membership in Ebadi’s *Human Rights Defenders Centre*. In January 2011, Sotoudeh was sentenced to eleven years imprisonment and prohibited from practising law for twenty years.²⁶ Just over one year later in February 2012, Green Movement figureheads, reformist politicians Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, were placed under house arrest.²⁷

Advocates of rapid regime change may have underestimated the extent to which the regime was willing to go in order to crush the uprising. And the opposition movement was more complex than what it initially appeared to many outside observers. White House advisor Robin Wright noted discrepancies amongst the protestors early, warning in December 2009 that ‘the Green Movement does not speak in one voice; it is united in opposition only.’²⁸ Regime change was not what all Iranian protestors were advocating. Initially, the Green Movement was entwined with the 2009 electoral campaign of presidential candidates Karroubi and Mousavi. Popular support for the reformists surged following a live televised debate on June 4 between Mousavi and the incumbent Ahmadinejad, in which the latter appeared unprepared and lacking in policy content. Reformist supporters initiated public rallies days before the elections. The colour green was selected for its theological significance, traditionally designating those known as *Seyyed* in Shia Islam – direct

descendants of *Ahl-al-Beyt*, household of the Prophet Mohammed. In 1997, the campaign for former reformist President of the Islamic Republic, Muhammad Khatami, benefited from the same strategy. Khatami, a *Seyyed* himself, withdrew his nomination for president in 2009 in favour of Mousavi. In a symbolic act, Khatami used a pre-election gathering to place a green sash over Mousavi, showing support for a reformist colleague and fellow *Seyyed*. Making clear Mousavi's status as *Seyyed* was meant to emphasise his religious credentials and suitability for the position of President of the Islamic Republic.

In this way, the Green Movement spoke the language of the establishment in attempts to reject claims that any challenge to the status quo is by definition 'un-Iranian' and 'un-Islamic'. This cautious approach echoed Khatami's presidency throughout 1997-2005. Khatami's government argued that for the Islamic regime to remain vital, it would have to accommodate the basic needs of its citizens. However, this need not necessitate systemic overhaul. Rather, it could be achieved through a process of incremental, legislative reform.²⁹ Khatami relied on a pragmatic and liberal interpretation of Islamic sources to justify his proposals for change to the

The reach of digital communications in Iran is a determining factor behind the failure of the regime to exert control over the flow of information.

ulama. He employed religious discourse and the notion of *ijtihad* – Islamic reinterpretation of the holy texts – to demonstrate how internal changes would not necessarily transgress the boundaries of *Velayate Faqih*. In the early years of the reform movement, this approach to gradual reform looked set for some success. Throughout the late 1990s, Iran was characterised by a burgeoning civil

society. There was an explosion of independent newspapers and an unprecedented wave of open debate and free expression. Newspapers and magazines even began to play the role of political parties by representing various, and sometimes unorthodox, views on Islam and its relationship to the state.³⁰ At the grassroots level social issues were increasingly discussed in terms of human rights, not as matters pertaining only, or primarily, to faith and religious exegesis.³¹

It is the experience and memories of this kind of political stagnation that led many protestors in 2009 to question why they should remain tied to notions of 'reform' of the Islamic Republic. Most young Iranian men and women were not witness to the heady years of the revolution – a time filled with idealism and hope that Islam would present the cure for all societal ills experienced under the Shah's

pro-Western rule. Demographics play a strong role in the street politics of present-day Iran. Youth represent the most prominent bulge in Iran's population pyramid, and yet the official unemployment rate among those aged 15-24 years of age hovers around 23 percent.³² The resulting dissatisfaction with those in power is compounded by the state's authoritarian mechanism of control over the media and means of mass communication. The state owns all six nationally televised channels, as well as most radio networks and newspapers in Iran. Yet at the same time, Iranians are savvy internet and mobile phone users. According to the Central Intelligence Agency, Iran ranked 35th globally in the number of internet users in 2009, placing them ahead of more likely countries such as Denmark, Finland, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel.³³ In the same year, over 90 percent of Iranians were registered mobile phone owners.³⁴ The reach of digital communications in Iran has been described as a determining factor behind the failure of the regime to exert control over the flow of information.³⁵ Ramin Jahanbegloo has argued that 'a new generation of civic actors will have a major part to play in writing the rules of the game in a changed Iran. Without doubt, this will entail ruptures with theocratic sovereignty and empower the republican gesture in Iranian society.'³⁶

Measures of 'Islamic-ness' are less concerning to young Iranians than their immediate social and economic realities. Youth culture is characterised by a struggle against what many perceive to be intrusive state prescriptions on how to live and manage life, work, and relationships. Deliberate improper wearing of the Islamic veil – *bad-hejabi* – for example, has become a widespread practice amongst young Iranian women. *Bad-hejabi* involves letting the hair show at the front or sides of the veil, or wearing remarkably bright colours and patterns. This is not simply a matter of fashion, but a symbol of desire to live in a society where individual choice is valued and respected. In July 2007 Iranian feminist and aspiring poet Roxana Setayesh suggested why clothing is such an important issue to young Iranian women. Gesturing to her own outfit, a black *hijab* made of sheer material and patterned with red flowers, and a knee-length beige manteau, she asked: 'Why do I have to wear this? What does it mean? It means I cannot choose. I'm talking about choice on a broader scale.'³⁷

Since the decline of the official 'reform movement' of the 1990s, and the subsequent wholesale investiture of government hardliners, there has been an increasing trend in Iranian society to register dissent with the status quo. A good example is the ground breaking One Million Signatures Campaign, initiated in 2006.

The One Million Signatures Campaign is an effort by Iranian feminists of both secular and religious orientations to bring an end to all discriminatory laws against women. The focus of the campaign is not religious precepts, but international standards. 'Iran is a signatory to the UN Convention on Civil and Political Rights', states the campaign website, 'and as such is required to eliminate all forms of discrimination'.³⁸ By engaging in door-to-door and face-to-face street politics to educate Iranian men and women about their rights and the principle of gender equality, the One Million Signatures Campaign represents a shift away from theologically-bound discourse – including by those who may maintain strong personal faith in Islam. This kind of campaigning has its roots in a modernist rejection of Islamic law as the only frame of reference for the formulation of present-day laws to govern public and private life.

Despite taking stands as frontrunners of the Green Movement, the political philosophies espoused by both Mousavi and Karroubi in the heat of the protest movement lagged behind the modernist end of Iranian society and culture. In the early days of the 2009 uprising, in fact, both politicians hesitated and called for a halt to protests. In January 2010 Mousavi emphasised a preference for incremental reform over political reconstruction, posting the following statement on his website: 'I feel a burden of necessity to emphasise the Islamic and national identity of the Green Movement...and its loyalty to our Constitution...We believe in a compassionate reading of Islam.'³⁹ Mousavi's failure to distinguish his politics from the very constitution that mandates *Velayate faqih*, left some Iranians feeling high and dry. BBC analyst Mehrzad Kohanrouz reported on a series of comments submitted by members of Iranian civil society in early 2012 that reveal a great sense of frustration: 'Mousavi and Karroubi failed to keep up with the people's demands. They put protestors off by calling on them to return to the political ideals of the Islamic revolution and the 'golden era' of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini'; and 'Leaders should be ahead of the crowd. As the protestors were shouting 'Independence, Freedom, Iranian Republic', Mousavi and Karroubi were still urging us to return to the values enshrined in by Ayatollah Khomeini'.⁴⁰

Protest rallies to mark the first anniversary of the June 2009 uprising were a reminder of the depth of disillusionment with the regime. Chants for the end of dictatorship, '*Marg bar estebdad!*' ('Death to the dictator!'), were common-place. Protestors burned the Supreme Leader's photographs and called for his downfall. But the chants went beyond protesting those currently in power to implicate the future of the country at large: activists also shouted '*Azadi baraye Iran!*' (freedom for Iran), and

'mimirim, mimirim; harfesh nemipazirim!' ('We will die but never compromise').⁴¹ Yassamine Mather argues the Green Movement has moved down a path of radicalisation, due in part to the inability of Karroubi and Mousavi to 'keep up' with the popular protests.⁴² The movement's radicalisation must also be attributed to the refusal of regime hardliners to engage in any form of negotiation, and their willingness, on the other hand, to resort to violence. Remarkably:

Some Iranians are beginning to wonder whether nonviolent civil resistance is a viable strategy against a regime that has not hesitated to employ overwhelming violence and intimidation against peaceful protestors. They argue that the Islamic Republic is more akin to Qaddafi's Libya than Mubarak's Egypt, that is, more totalitarian than authoritarian, and that the Basij militia and Revolutionary Guards will not cede power without a bloody fight.⁴³

Whilst this is not a view shared by the majority of Iranians who have been strong advocates of nonviolent resistance, it is significant insofar as indicating the extent of civil society's growing impatience for the regime's antics. At the very least, the Green Movement has experienced radicalisation insofar as a now widely held preference for fundamental political overhaul.⁴⁴ According to Ebadi, the Green Movement was never about a stand-alone election, but the political and economic management of the country as a whole. The protestors were not only expressing discontent with present leaders, she argues, but also demanding a more open and free society where public expression, human rights discourse, independent journalism, internet access, and economic freedom flourish.⁴⁵

There are some indicators that this revolutionary flavour on the ground has even influenced political reformists such as Mousavi and Karroubi. In recent months, Mousavi has backed away from former claims of loyalty to the Iranian Constitution, stating that since the Constitution is not God's word, it is not unalterable. He has gone so far as to advocate Constitutional revision and the elimination of all 'undemocratic' articles.⁴⁶ This is reflective of the appetite for comprehensive change amongst broad cross sections of Iranian society, including the more traditional classes who, according to Sadjapour, 'continue to believe strongly in Islam, but have lost their faith in the Islamic Republic'.⁴⁷

The militarisation of Iranian politics: the role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards

Iranian politics have shown disturbing signs of militarisation. This trend has become a distinguishing feature of the Islamic regime. The IRG was created by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979 to protect the aims and interests of the revolution. Constitutionally, the IRG is barred from direct involvement in politics, and this prohibition was held firmly in place by Khomeini until his death in 1989. In more recent decades, however, the line between politics and the military in Iran has been seriously blurred. Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari has stated openly, in fact, that 'before being a military organisation, the [IRG] is, first and foremost, a political-security organisation'.⁴⁸ According to the International Crisis Group, 'Iranians generally view [the IRG] as the most powerful (and intimidating) pillar of the Islamic Republic'.⁴⁹

The major involvement of the IRG in Iranian politics can be traced back to the presidency of Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005). Under the influence of Commander Mohsen Rezai, the IRG lent unofficial support to Khatami's rival, the conservative candidate Ali Akbar Natiq Nuri. One of Khatami's first moves as President was to replace Rezai with the more moderate Yahya Rahim Safavi. But a culture of conservatism was already entrenched amongst IRG rank and file. At the height of the student protests of 1999, the IRG made it clear that it would no longer tolerate the reform movement. A conglomerate of IRG commanders threatened Khatami with prospects of a military coup if he did not reign in the students. Faced with this threat, Khatami distanced himself from the students and called for calm.⁵⁰ This move appeared to embolden the IRG, and accentuated a highly problematic pattern for the future.

Since 2005, the conservative Presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has witnessed the rise of former IRG officials into positions of political power and influence. Almost half Ahmadinejad's cabinet consists of IRG veterans, as well as one-third of the 30 provincial governors.⁵¹ Eighty seats in the 290-member Majlis (parliament) are held by former IRG commanders.⁵² Former minister of commerce in pre-revolutionary Iran, Jahangir Amuzegar, argues plainly that Iran is 'steadily moving from a theocratic oligarchy to a quasi-military dictatorship'.⁵³ This is a stark assessment, but one that is validated to some extent by the role the IRG took in protecting the conservative status quo following the disputed 2009 elections. The Guards were charged with the responsibility of silencing the mass protests that

erupted at the announcement of President Ahmadinejad's reinstatement. Anecdotal reports suggest hundreds of young men and women were arrested and in some cases, killed, by *Basij*. At the time, IRG commanders identified their organisation with a new mission of fighting an 'internal threat' – that is, political reformism.⁵⁴ Chief Justice Sadegh Larijani issued a statement supporting the IRG's role: it 'is not just that of a military force', but included duties in the 'defence of Islam and the school of Islam'.⁵⁵ This statement reveals the regime's increasing reliance on the IRG to project an image of a strong and stable Islamic state. But the very notion of relying on a military apparatus for the protection of a political establishment suggests its true vulnerability.

More broadly, members of the IRG are frequently offered non-competitive contracts for the ownership and control of Iran's strategic enterprises such as telecommunications, trade, oil and gas, financial institutions, and infrastructure. The IRG is estimated to control over 70 of Iran's seaports, earning its members hundreds of millions of dollars in tax-free

The Islamic Revolutionary Guards are frequently offered non-competitive contracts for the ownership and control of Iran's strategic enterprises such as telecommunications, trade, oil and gas, financial institutions, and infrastructure.

import/export.⁵⁶ This near domination of the country's wealth and strategic resources affords the IRG even greater room to interfere in areas traditionally far outside the reach of a military apparatus. A good example is the lobbying efforts of the IRG in 2005, when it successfully blocked a \$3 billion telecommunications deal with Turkish mobile provider Turkcell, framing it as a 'threat to national interests' (despite an inadequate domestic mobile phone service).⁵⁷ This position ensured total control over Iran's cellular network, and proved effective in dealing with the social media based protests of 2009.

New rounds of international sanctions

No account of the domestic Iranian landscape would be complete without taking into account the impact of international sanctions on Iran's oil industry and financial sector. Since the early 1980s Iran has been the target of stringent bans on economic and diplomatic exchange designed to force the regime to halt its nuclear program and cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). But according to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, new measures introduced in late 2011 and early 2012 constitute the most dramatic confrontation between Tehran and the international community in the long 30-year history of sanctions against Iran.⁵⁸

On 31 December 2011 US President Barack Obama signed a law that included measures to penalise foreign companies that do business with Iran's central bank, which processes around half of Iran's oil sales.⁵⁹ This law allows the United States to bar non-compliant companies from the US financial markets. The obvious objective is to force Iranian submission to the inspection regime of the International Atomic Energy Agency and compliance with its rulings, by hampering Iran's ability to sell oil abroad and driving the Iranian economy down. These measures were soon followed by the European Union's decision on 23 January 2012 to ban all imports of Iranian crude oil and freeze all assets belonging to Iran's central bank. This was no short order, considering the EU accounts for around 20 percent of Iran's total oil exports.⁶⁰ Subsequently on 6 February 2012 the United States introduced further measures to freeze all property interests of the Iranian government, the central bank of Iran, and all Iranian financial institutions that come within US jurisdiction. Previously, US banks were required to reject and send back, rather than block and freeze, Iranian transactions.⁶¹

A further major blow came when the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication – also known as SWIFT – announced it would cut ties with Iran as of the 2012 northern hemisphere Summer.⁶² With headquarters in Belgium, SWIFT handles around 97,000 banking organisations, security institutions and corporate customers in 209 countries around the world. SWIFT maintains a firm hold on the international financial market by issuing of SWIFT Codes, the internationally accepted standard format of bank identifier codes. Each bank around the world is issued with a unique SWIFT Code, which are required to securely transfer money between banks, and without which, international transfers cannot be completed. The financial world at large conducts its business through SWIFT, which

provides the only means through which international connections and communications can be made securely. When the decision by SWIFT to end operations with Iran comes into effect later this year, Iran will essentially be cut off from the international financial community, and be left with no means to engage in secure financial transactions.

Washington's effort to isolate Iran is directly aimed at changing the behaviour of the Iranian regime on the nuclear issue. But there is consensus amongst top Iran analysts that this scenario is far from likely. According to Takeyh and Pollack, in fact, 'there is no evidence to suggest that the policy of sanctions and dialogue has had a tangible impact on the perceptions of Iran's leading decision-makers.'⁶³ Others have argued that the latest round of sanctions have led to a further entrenchment of regime hardliners active measures to silence voices of reason and dissent.⁶⁴ The Iranian regime reacted brazenly to the latest efforts towards international efforts towards economic and diplomatic isolation. Government spokesmen have insisted that the measures will not affect the operations of the central bank of Tehran, arguing that it does not engage in financial transactions with the United States anyway.⁶⁵

The regime cannot turn its back on the very real prospects of economic breakdown. Inflation is close to 40 percent and many Iranians are struggling to stay above the poverty line.

However, Iran cannot keep its back turned on the very real prospects of economic breakdown, nor the consequences this will have for maintaining a support base from within an increasingly frustrated and agitated populace. According to Takeyh and Maloney, the new measures will wreak havoc on Iran's energy exports, which generate the majority of the government's foreign exchange, and 'take an enormous toll on the regime's revenue stream'.⁶⁶

Mehrdad Khonsari, a former Iranian diplomat, argues that 'due to the sanctions on banking transactions, the Iranian government and businessmen have to depend on money changers, which are not reliable and increase the cost by 20 to 30 percent. This has had a profound effect in aggravating the internal economic situation'.⁶⁷

Inflation is close to 40 percent in Iran, production has dropped along with purchasing power, investors are pulling out of Iran's oil and gas fields, and the banking sector is grossly corrupted.⁶⁸ The Iranian Rial almost halved in value between January 2011 and January 2012. Many average Iranians are struggling with serious issues of unemployment, unaffordable housing, and widespread ancillary

problems such as family breakdown, prostitution, and drug addiction.⁶⁹ According to the Iranian government's own statistics, one out of every six Iranians lives below the absolute poverty line.⁷⁰

The international sanctions regime may not prompt Iran's hardliners to change tack on the nuclear issue. However, there is every chance that the deleterious effect of the sanctions on an already failing and grossly mismanaged economy will cause further divisions amongst Iran's top politicians and clerical elite, and distance the Iranian public even more from a regime that refuses to negotiate. The latest talks in Almaty between Iran and P5+1 (the United Nations Security Council, plus Germany) in April 2013 were widely regarded as a failure. Some commentators have speculated that this is in part because of uncertainty surrounding who would be Iran's president in three months' time. Ultimately, it is Khamenei who determines Iran's nuclear policy; with his attention now focused firmly on controlling domestic political scene, negotiations with Western powers may be far down on the agenda.

Conclusion

Growing internal discord and a diminishing support base have made the Islamic regime extremely vulnerable. The guiding principle of the Islamic Republic, *Velayate faqih* or rule by the most learned Islamic scholar, is now increasingly questioned by the opposition movement, and even by members of the Ahmadinejad camp. The image of regime solidarity has been shattered by disagreements at the top. At the same time, internal economic mismanagement combined with the imposition of new and harsher international sanctions, threaten to cripple Iran's economy. While the regime has traditionally thrived in an atmosphere of tension and conflict, the country is now experiencing runaway inflation and living standards are falling rapidly. In the meantime, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards have gained greater significance, not only as a security force but as an economic pillar of the state. The evolution of the IRG into a politico-industrial entity commenced soon after its formation and has continued unabated. This evolution gives the IRG an added vested interest in the survival of the Islamic regime, and allows the political elite to rely on it more conspicuously when confronted with political challenges.

In the face of a growing disillusionment with the Islamic regime at the grass root level, and a widening rift within the political elite, the regime has found itself relying more and more on the security apparatus. There is a direct correlation between these two trends. The more the regime loses its ability to garner political loyalty, the more it finds it necessary to enforce compliance through force. This is a slippery slope and puts the survival of the regime at risk.

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