

Celebrities, the Clergy, and Succession: Wild Cards in Iran's Protests

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Sep 30, 2022

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Brief Analysis

By targeting celebs and financially coopting the clergy, the regime has revealed a great deal about what it sees as its greatest vulnerabilities.

As the latest protest wave continues to roll over Iran, its many unique features—some of which were discussed in [PolicyWatch 3652 \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-irans-protests-differ-past-movements\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-irans-protests-differ-past-movements)—are significantly undermining the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic. This trend and the wild cards that are driving it will become especially problematic for the regime when it has to decide who will succeed Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei—whether down the road or more imminently if rumors regarding his poor health are true.

Celebrities Endorsing the Protests

From the start of the movement, the regime has brazenly intimidated influential public figures in a bid to prevent them from joining the protests or announcing their solidarity with people on the streets. Yet some prominent sports figures and cinema stars have nevertheless posted messages on social media sympathizing with anti-regime actions and condemning the government's behavior and policies, especially the "compulsory veil" rule that sparked this round of protests. Notably, most of these messages have appeared on Instagram due to heavy regime filtering of other apps.

For example, soccer superstar Ali Karimi, a former player on the national team, was hit with unprecedented punishment for such a high-profile figure when he expressed support for the demonstrators. Shortly afterward, security forces assaulted his home and sealed it for a day, barring him from entering. Several other celebrities have been arrested outright. And on September 28, the judiciary warned that authorities would immediately seize the assets of any such figure who publicly supports or encourages the protesters.

This has not stopped some celebrities from acts of defiance, however. After the judiciary placed a travel ban on

Mehran Modiri, Iran's "King of Comedy," he reportedly fled the country and posted criticisms of the regime response to the uprising. Elsewhere, several female celebrities have appeared in public or online without a hijab.

The regime's aggressive pressure is based on its apparent assessment that celebrities may be the only class capable of mobilizing the masses and broadening the movement to the point that it threatens the Islamic Republic's stability. Their heightened stature stems largely from the possibility that traditional political and civic figures inside Iran may have lost much of their social power base, along with the trust of many young people marching in the streets.

The Clergy's Silence

Thus far, Iran's Shia clerics—including its top religious authorities (*marjas*)—have not reacted to the protests at all. Their silence says much about the state of the institution four decades after the Islamic Revolution:

- Under Khamenei, the clerical establishment has gone through a bureaucratic revolution that included monopolizing religious leadership under the Supreme Leader as the "ruling jurist." This meant diminishing the role of *marjas*, who historically were quite independent of the government.
- In the past, the clergy was primarily funded by voluntary religious taxes and endowments controlled by religious authorities. That changed as clerics relied more and more on government funding. Over the past decade in particular, they began to enter a wide range of economic activities (e.g., import-export firms, industrial enterprises), all of which are heavily dependent on government favors in order to stay profitable. In short, the clergy is no longer financially reliant on the Iranian people, but substantially beholden to the regime.
- Although some clerical authorities likely harbor doubts about the regime's policies and perhaps even its foundational "ruling jurist" doctrine, they are also concerned about what kind of government would replace the regime should it collapse. They (correctly) believe a successful anti-regime movement would lead to the emergence of a new government that is unwilling to preserve their special position and benefits. Thus, regardless of whether they agree or disagree with the regime's ideology, many clerics likely see the Islamic Republic's survival as the only path for maintaining their **political and economic privileges** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/shiite-clergy-post-khamenei-balancing-authority-and-autonomy>).

Implications for Succession

Do these protests signal the beginning of the end for the regime, or will Tehran be able to stop the uprising by resorting to even greater violence? The answer remains unclear for now, but the question of Khamenei's succession could shape the answer.

If ongoing rumors about the Supreme Leader's ill health are valid, then one might plausibly expect regime decisionmakers—especially the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps—to hesitate about violently suppressing protesters to the degree seen in past uprisings. In a scenario where he is poised to leave the scene, mass killings on the street would risk severely complicating the succession process and foiling the IRGC's post-Khamenei objectives. Appointing a new Supreme Leader will ostensibly require a quieter domestic scene free of major unrest or legitimacy crises. Whoever Khamenei's successor might be, he will need to create a social power base for himself, even if it hinges on a minority of the population. This would enable the next leader and his regime to create a favorable public image of itself and establish enough legitimacy to assert control—regardless of whether a large portion of the populace privately questions his authority. Ongoing street protests would ruin such efforts.

Furthermore, repeated crackdowns on fellow Iranians have left many political elites, ordinary citizens, and even faithful supporters with fundamental questions about how much the regime respects Islamic and Iranian law. With each new crisis, the regime has suffered a significant loss in its social base, so the combination of continued protests, another heavy crackdown, and a messy succession could pose an existential threat to the whole system.

If the regime decides to refrain from further mass violence, it will need to strike a serious compromise with the protesters, whether explicitly or implicitly. This would presumably mean a government promise to stop harassing citizens in the public sphere, perhaps including some kind of de facto freedom regarding the appearance of women—or, at the very least, an understanding that such “violations” of religious codes will be dealt with sympathetically rather than harshly (or fatally).

Alternatively, the IRGC may be counting on the currently leaderless and unorganized protest movement to fade away through a combination of internal exhaustion and intense regime intimidation. Yet if the movement expands drastically and shows signs of becoming more well-organized, then the IRGC may decide that waiting it out is not an option, and that unlimited violence is required to end the protests definitively.

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