

# The Fractured Opposition to the Islamic Regime

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Brief Analysis

## The Iranian opposition has aligned itself well with the recent protest movement, but evidence of its ability to play an organizational or leadership role in future protests remains limited.

### Iranian Opposition Forces

The “Women, Life, Freedom” protests that were sparked by the death of Mahsa (Jina) Amini in the hands of Iran’s morality police have generated unprecedented solidarity and demand for change, despite the regime’s massive effort to suppress the protests.

Although some analysts have [suggest \(https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2022-12-16/democratic-pro-us-iran-will-lead-mideast-over-gulf-arabs?leadSource=uverify%20wall\)](https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2022-12-16/democratic-pro-us-iran-will-lead-mideast-over-gulf-arabs?leadSource=uverify%20wall) that regime change is imminent, such a change can only be realized if the demands are given a command center, a national leadership composed of the diverse groups and individuals that represent Iran’s opposition. Almost five months in, Iran’s opposition forces appear unable to create such leadership, or make meaningful contributions to the ground movement.

The opposition groups against the Islamic Republic can be classified into six categories: ethnicity-based groups, nationalists, monarchists, leftists, progressive Muslims, and the People’s Mujahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI (<https://english.mojahedin.org/>)).

Even within these categories, there can be a significant amount of variation in ideology and makeup. Among the ethnic groups, Kurdish parties have typically been the most influential, namely, the [Kurdistan Democratic Party \(https://pdki.org/english/\)](https://pdki.org/english/) of Iran (KDPI (<https://pdki.org/english/>)) and the [Komala Party \(https://www.komalainternational.org/\)](https://www.komalainternational.org/). Among nationalists, The National Front and its related currents are the most prominent. Iran’s “leftist” wing is a bit more varied—including the Organization of Iranian People’s Fadaian (<http://fadai.org/index.html>), the [Left Party of Iran \(https://www.bepish.org/sarsokhan/\)](https://www.bepish.org/sarsokhan/), the [Tudeh Party \(https://www.tudehpartyiran.org/\)](https://www.tudehpartyiran.org/) of Iran, and the [United Republicans \(http://www.jomhour.com/en/\)](http://www.jomhour.com/en/) of Iran.

This is also the case when it comes to the monarchist faction, a category composed of a multitude of small and large groups—some supporting Prince Reza Pahlavi and others opposing him. The most well-known monarchist entity is the Constitutional Party of Iran ([Liberal Democrats \(https://www.irancpi.net/\)](https://www.irancpi.net/)). Yet new royalist organizations, including the [Iran Novin Party \(https://irannovin.party/\)](https://irannovin.party/)—founded by a political network group called Farashgard that supports the Prince—have been established more recently amidst the protests.

Likewise, the anti-regime progressive Muslims are divided into several currents and groups, with conflicting opinions about the Islamic regime. Reformists—those who previously advocated for instituting reformist changes while maintaining the current regime—normally fall into this category when they turn away from the regime. The latest example came from Mir Hossein Mousavi, the former Prime Minister of the Islamic Republic, who in his recent [letter \(https://www.zeitoons.com/109112\)](https://www.zeitoons.com/109112) has stated that he believes that enacting reforms in the regime is impossible. The presence of similar attitudes inside Iran is noticeably evident.

Iran’s opposition also consists of numerous influential figures—ones not necessarily aligned with any party and yet concomitantly opposed to the regime nonetheless. Among these figures are Prince Reza Pahlavi, Masih Alinejad, Hamed Esmaeilion, Ali Karimi, Shirin Ebadi, Nazanin Boniadi, and Maulvi Abdul Hamid, a Sunni Imam in the city of Zahedan. Add to this list the many influential writers, intellectuals, artists, and activists who have spoken out against the Islamic regime, and there are too many opposition voices to count.

These groupings have long suffered from a lack of coordination, both internally and with each other. Although they all agree in their opposition to the regime, their discrepancies in dealing with the current dilemma and in adopting strategies of mutual struggle are inhibiting solidarity.

The lack of coordination between opposition voices has been especially apparent during the most recent protests. While composition groups such as the National Assembly Decision ([Shoraye-Tasmim \(https://shora.org/english/\)](https://shora.org/english/)) and the [Iran Transition Council \(https://iran-tc.com/en/home/\)](https://iran-tc.com/en/home/) have emerged in past years to support popular protests, there is little evidence that the recent protests were in any way organized or coordinated by any of the opposition groups. In fact, it is unclear to what extent protestors have paid attention to any of the messaging of the opposition.

Although opposition groups have often voiced their desire to overthrow the Islamic regime, there does not seem to be a consensus on what that overthrow should look like. Even in cases where protestors have explicitly defended the monarchy, for example, it does not appear that actual pro-monarchist opposition entities have had anything to do with the organization or encouragement of such demands.

### Two Deficiencies

In organizing and leading the current protests in Iran, the opposition appeared to have acted in a belated manner, falling behind the ongoing protests while the latter remained several steps ahead. This phenomenon highlights two long-standing deficiencies in Iran’s opposition groups: 1) the endemic disagreements that characterize attempts at internal and external coordination and, 2) the way these disagreements abort the attempts of the opposition groups to put forth a leadership capable of leading a popular movement in Iran.

This lack of coordination is driven by several different factors. On the one hand, Iranian opposition groups are limited by their own ideologies. From the perspective of the PMOI, for example, there is such strong faith in the leadership and goals of the mujahedin that they see themselves as the sole organizational leader of the future revolution of Iran. As a result, they see no need for alliances with other forces or even coordination efforts for protests. Despite being perhaps the most experienced opposition group, the PMOI came up flat in the current protests, without evidence of a single slogan echoed in their favor inside Iran.

On the other hand, encouraging chasms in Iran’s opposition political groups is part of the regime’s strategy to reduce their efficacy. Creating discord between opposition groups is one of the known methods of the Islamic Republic to divide and conquer. The regime has wielded these divisions expertly in the recent protests, crafting a [narrative](#)



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