

Iran, Post-June 12: Politics, Survival, and the Nuclear Program

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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On October 17, 2009, Hossein Bastani and Patrick Clawson addressed The Washington Institute's annual Weinberg Founders Conference. Hossein Bastani is director-general of Iran Gooya Media Group and an editorial board member of the influential Iranian news outlet RoozOnline.com. Patrick Clawson is deputy director for research at The Washington Institute.

The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Hossein Bastani

Following the October 1 negotiations in Geneva, new questions have emerged regarding the future of relations between Iran and the West. Many observers are also concerned about the impact these talks might have on the opposition Green Movement in Iran -- particularly in light of evidence that the regime is tailoring its foreign policy to domestic issues.

Currently, the government of President Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad is attempting to convey an image of control, in part by modifying the narrative in a manner that silences opposition arguments. For example, the regime has portrayed the Geneva negotiations as proof that it is not dangerous, and that the situation with the international community is not escalating. When critics and opposition members argue that they want to ratchet down tensions with the West, Ahmadinezhad supporters simply claim that there are no tensions to ratchet down. Therefore, any action by the international community that is construed as a victory for diplomacy will only benefit the regime.

Technically, Ahmadinezhad no longer needs the support of the people, as evidenced by the vote rigging in the June election. He therefore has a free hand in conducting his antagonistic diplomacy. Moreover, he has become desensitized to the people's suffering, so economic factors such as sanctions and inflation are no longer a major concern either.

In contrast, the Green Movement is fueled by popular unrest and will be sensitive to any further ills that plague the people. Most of the individuals and groups that make up the movement share common interests with Westerners.

Yet they are also keenly aware that the West is contemplating stronger sanctions. The people of Iran prioritize their own interests first, and they will not support or pursue a path that jeopardizes their livelihood. This attitude is also evident in the movement's vocal disapproval of Ahmadinezhad's adventurism, as heard in chants such as "Not Gaza, not Lebanon, my life is only for Iran."

The Green Movement's complicated makeup has created difficulties for the government as well. It used to be fairly easy for the regime to identify the opposition's key actors, who typically hailed from the reformist ranks. The Green Movement, however, has become increasingly autonomous, making clampdowns problematic. A wide assortment of factions have united against Ahmadinezhad's government; although many of them still listen to former reformist leaders such as Muhammad Khatami and Mir Hossein Mousavi, the opposition remains a grassroots movement that is difficult to contain.

The regime has recognized both the decentralized nature of the new opposition and the shuffling of priorities by the Iranian people. And each of these developments has factored into its calculus during negotiations. In the end, Iran's leaders believe that normalization with the West would spell disaster for them. From their perspective, the former Iraqi regime attempted to restore relations with the West only to be undermined and eventually overthrown. This sense of being cornered may mean that negotiations are far from over, especially if domestic threats place more pressure on Tehran. At the same time, the regime did not really agree to anything novel in Geneva, and conservative elements throughout Iran are quick to claim that they have not yet conceded anything. All of these factors further complicate any potential solution to the Iranian problem.

Patrick Clawson

Iran's recent concessions on the nuclear issue -- namely, allowing the International Atomic Energy Agency to examine more of its facilities and agreeing to ship its enriched uranium to the West -- are an extension of the truism that all politics are local. In the wake of the massive antiregime protests that followed the June 12 election, the Islamic Republic is at a crossroads. Its leaders are now formulating foreign policy with an eye toward how it might affect their domestic political situation.

The unpredictability of Iranian domestic movements, including the Green Movement, has been evident throughout much of the country's history. What is certain, though, is that Iran's leaders are terrified of the new movement's capabilities and the manner in which it has demonstrated its opposition using officially sanctioned events and holidays. In this sense, the Green Movement has provided the West with a means of facilitating a solution to the nuclear issue. Members of the regime have become so preoccupied with domestic political problems that they do not want a simultaneous confrontation with the international community. Thus, while the West has spent several years thinking of ways to gain leverage on Iran, the country's latest internal developments have given the United States and its allies a real opportunity to apply pressure.

Using this leverage will require the West to engage the Islamic Republic. Past concerns about this approach are dissipating -- talks will not necessarily bolster the regime's legitimacy or damage the Green Movement. Clearly, the international community does not condone the Islamic Republic's domestic or international behavior, nor is it attempting to further the regime's legitimacy by finalizing a deal. The United States did not recognize the regime for thirty years, and once it finally did, the Iranian people rejected its legitimacy themselves. At the end of the day, the people are responsible for determining the Islamic Republic's future. The main U.S. considerations should be ensuring that the situation on the ground is both conducive to American interests and potentially useful in resolving the escalating crisis.

The Green Movement may be capable of maintaining pressure on the regime, as some have argued. It has already become something larger than what many reformist leaders had originally intended. Were it not for Ahmadinezhad's

contemptuous attitude toward the opposition and his lack of finesse in rigging the election, the protests would not have become as problematic for the government as they are now. The regime's disregard for domestic Iranian concerns and its constant worries about a velvet revolution have turned a previously loyal opposition into a disloyal opposition -- one that is truly calling for change. This works to the international community's benefit. The more the opposition asks for, the more pressure the regime will feel, and the better the West's chances will be of resolving the nuclear problem under favorable terms. ❖

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