

Iran:

Demonstrations, Despair, and Danger

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Brief Analysis

In the early morning hours of June 11, according to Reuters, 3,000 demonstrators near Tehran University shouted, "Political prisoners must be freed!" This incident comes shortly after the issuance of two letters sharply attacking the present system -- one signed by more than one-third of the Majlis and one by 196 prominent clerics and intellectuals. Are these signs that the Islamic Republic is in trouble?

Demonstrations

Iranian hardliners have been nervous about the approaching anniversary of the July 9, 1999, demonstrations touched off by police and vigilante attacks on a Tehran University dormitory. Several student leaders have already been arrested, possibly contributing to this week's demonstrations at the university. Chants during these demonstrations included "The clerical regime is nearing its end!" and "Khatami resign!" As Reuters reported, "many people said they had gathered after hearing calls by U.S.-based Iranian exile television station channels to go to the campus." This suggests that such television stations have impact in Iran, and that the U.S. government should explore how to make use of these stations.

The prospects for profound change in Iran remain difficult to determine. The latest demonstrations may stay confined to campuses, as did those protesting the November 7 death sentence imposed on Professor Hashem Aghajari for questioning whether every cleric's decree had to be obeyed. Many convincing indications can be brought forward to show that Iranians are becoming uninterested in politics (for instance, the abysmally low turnout in the April municipal elections that allowed hardline candidates to triumph in Tehran). That said, regional experts did not predict any of the revolutions of the last three hundred years -- French, Russian, Chinese, or Iranian. These experts are often too close to the scene to expect significant changes. It is difficult to see how the stalemate in Iran can persist indefinitely: the Iranian people hate the system, and the hardliners completely reject reform. Moreover, Iran is a country with a history of mass popular movements, such as those during the Mossadegh years (1951 -- 1953), the Constitutional Revolution (1906 -- 1910, a bloody civil war over popular demand for a constitution), and the Tobacco Protests (1891 -- 1892).

Despair

On Mohammed's birthday (this year occurring on May 19), 196 prominent clerics and intellectuals issued an open letter to "express our complete dissatisfaction with the rulers in Iran." The sharp criticism focused on "the unelected institutions" which are "united against the wishes of the people" -- phrases that echo those used by U.S. president George W. Bush. The letter warned that present policies "might provide an excuse to some groups who desire freedom to sacrifice the independence of the country," in other words, a U.S. invasion might be welcomed. It added, "We must learn a lesson from the fate of the Taliban and Saddam Hussein and understand that despotism and selfishness is destined to take the country down to defeat."

On May 25, 127 (or, by some accounts, 135) out of 290 Majlis members signed a letter to Supreme Leader Ali Hossein Khamenei. The letter carefully refrained from any criticism of Khamenei, but its tone was otherwise tough. It warned, "Perhaps there has been no period in the recent history of Iran as sensitive as this one [due to] political and social gaps coupled with a clear plan by the government of the United States of America to change the geopolitical map of the region." Insisting on "fundamental changes in methods, attitudes, and figures," the letter warned, "if this is a cup of hemlock, it should be drunk before our country's independence and territorial integrity are placed in danger" (the hemlock phrase was used by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to explain his 1988 decision to end the war with Iraq).

Neither of the two letters were mentioned in Iranian newspapers, television, or radio because of a ban imposed by the Supreme National Security Council, chaired by President Muhammad Khatami. (This ban belies the commonly held notion that Khatami-era Iran enjoys press freedom.) The Council's concern appears to be the spreading mood in Iran that the country is at risk of a U.S. invasion because of provocative actions by the hardliners. It is interesting to observe that such perceived risk emboldens reformers to step up their criticism of hardliners, contrary to the theory widely heard in the West that U.S. pressure hurts reformers.

Danger

No Iranian action has been as provocative to U.S. policymakers as those associated with Iran's nuclear program. U.S. policy thus far has been to delay developments in the program in the hope that the hardliners will lose control before Iran "gets the bomb." That scenario could still unfold, but the window of opportunity is closing with the program's great progress. The "optimists" maintain that Iran may not have a nuclear weapon for another three to four years; others believe the timeframe is shorter. Regardless, Iran's nuclear program is developing with a momentum that will have to be reversed soon if it is to be stopped.

On June 6, International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) director-general Mohammed ElBaradei issued a report to the IAEA board stating that Iran has "failed to meet its obligations under its Safeguard Agreements" with the agency. The report went well beyond noting Iran's admitted failure to report 1.8 tons of natural uranium that it imported from China in 1991. ElBaradei's report also cited four "open questions" about additional important matters:

"A complete chronology of its centrifuge and laser enrichment efforts, including, in particular, a description of all research and development activities carried out prior to the construction of the Natanz facilities," which the IAEA visited in February;

"Further follow-up on information regarding allegations about undeclared enrichment of nuclear material, including, in particular, at the Kalaye Electrical Company," where Iran is thought to have carried out undeclared testing of centrifuges for enriching uranium;

"Further enquiries about [Iran's admitted fabrication of] uranium metal"; and

"Further enquiries about Iran's programme related to the use of heavy water," which is used most often in reactors optimally designed to produce bomb material.

This wide range of IAEA questions reflects the difficulty in reconciling what is known about Iran's nuclear program with the country's declared intention to produce only nuclear power. The IAEA is to be congratulated for asking some tough questions, but the hard part lies ahead: requiring detailed and convincing answers.

In its June 16 board meeting, the IAEA must decide what to do about the report. Options range from simply "noting" the report to declaring Iran in noncompliance of its Nonproliferation Treaty obligations. The most likely action is to postpone any decision until the agency's September board meeting. This plays into Iran's strategy of stalling while it completes -- possibly within a year -- the nuclear facilities that will give the country a full "fuel cycle," that is, the full capability to make the fissile material for bombs without relying on any further foreign inputs. At the least, the IAEA should lay down a short timetable for addressing its concerns. And the European Union (EU) and Russia should back up the agency by telling Iran that progress on other programs it holds dear (the Trade Cooperation Agreement with the EU; loading the Bushehr light-water reactor with Russian nuclear fuel) will depend on progress with the IAEA. So far, Bush administration policy on Iran's nuclear program has been to rely on multinational cooperation. Whether this will turn out to be a successful approach depends on whether the EU, Russia, and the IAEA take effective actions within the short period of time available before Iran acquires a dangerous inventory of fissile material. If not, the United States will have to consider unilateral options.

Conclusion

Iran is a complicated country. It is easy to criticize as inappropriate any one policy option toward Iran considered in isolation from others. The challenge is to ask which -- from among the menu of poor choices -- is best. It is high time for a systematic review at the highest level of U.S. priorities regarding Iran and what kind of effort the U.S. government is prepared to make.

Patrick Clawson is deputy director of The Washington Institute.

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