

Iran:

Reformist Blues, Economic Woes

Nov 19, 2002



Brief Analysis

Iran has been experiencing nationwide student demonstrations this week, touched off by a hardline court's recent decision to sentence Tehran professor Hashem Aghajari to death for advocating reform of the Shi'i clergy. Although Aghajari's message was well within the mainstream of traditional Shi'a thought, it presented a challenge to the hardline clerics, who insist on a far-reaching revision of Shi'a that includes unquestioning obedience to ruling clergy. The death sentence was meant to send a message to other midranking academics within the reformist movement. Yet, the hardliners' grave miscalculation about the reaction of the Iranian street has led to protests in Tehran, Tabriz, and other Iranian cities.

The Iranian Street

The Iranian people are overwhelmingly disillusioned. Twenty-three years after the revolution, the Islamic Republic has failed to deliver on its most basic promises of prosperity and greater political and social freedom. The Iranian economy is anemic and structurally distorted. Inflation is high, around 15 percent. Unemployment is at 20 to 25 percent, and the country suffers from massive underemployment as well. Younger Iranians, who constitute some two-thirds of the population, have a very difficult time finding jobs. The result is brain drain; one in four Iranians with a college degree lives outside the country; 200,000 young people left the country last year alone. The economic suffering can be sensed everywhere, affecting reformists and hardliners alike. These problems have encouraged a rising tide of anti-clericalism in Iran, especially among working-class Iranians who supported the 1979 revolution.

In election after election over the last five years, Iranians have consistently demanded greater political freedom. They want a liberalized polity and have supported reformists advocating such change. The newspaper renaissance in 1997 brought a renewed interest in, and a greater understanding of, the political system. Many of the reformists in Iran now support the idea of democracy, which is a crucial shift. They are philosophically committed to the idea of democracy and the civil society institutions needed for a democracy to function. Some reformists are even willing to broach the idea of separating the secular and religious sectors. Yet, all of these ideas exist solely on the philosophical level; reformists still have to contend with the brute power of the hardliners who control the key levers of power.

The desire for increased social freedoms is not as broad based as the concern about economic problems, but it certainly extends well beyond the affluent young population of northern Tehran. Social restrictions have sparked many confrontations between youths and Basijis (Iran's volunteer religious enforcers), sometimes resulting in riots. Recently, a Basiji was murdered in a revenge killing, highlighting the citizenry's frustration with Basiji moral enforcement. Such tension has the potential to get out of hand.

Frustration among the reformists could radicalize the street as well. Aghajari's sentencing is a perfect example of this phenomenon. Frustrated students are calling for President Muhammad Khatami's resignation, and even reformers who are close to Khatami have advised him to resign for strategic reasons. The president has said that if his two most recent reform bills (to restructure the guardians council and the judiciary) are struck down, he will

resign, which will bring more radical reformers to the fore.

How Can the United States Reach Out to Iranians?

Compared to the Arab street, the Iranian street is more pro-American, less interested in revolutionary Islamic ideas, and less emotionally moved by the Palestinian issue. Ironically, America's greatest allies in Iran are the hardliners themselves; their constant anti-American rhetoric has made the United States even more popular among the Iranian people. A recent poll (which, incidentally, landed the pollster in jail) demonstrated that Iranians want change: 70 percent favored a dialogue with the United States and 65 percent favored resuming official diplomatic relations.

Although outreach can be difficult given U.S. sanctions on Iran, several measures are possible. For example, Voice of America (VOA) and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) could help influence Iranian public opinion. Rather than repeating the recent change to pop music that these services have adopted in their Arabic broadcasting, VOA and RFE/RL could create more imaginative programming that fits Iranian circumstances. Although Iranian youths enjoy pop music and American culture, they are also deeply interested in learning and engaging with the world. Hence, learning programs on topics such as engineering and computer science would attract many listeners and reinforce the image of the United States as a friend of Iranians. VOA and RFE/RL could also be used more aggressively to send direct messages to the Iranian government.

The United States must also keep in mind that efforts to improve U.S. domestic security could be seen as contradictory to its outreach efforts. For example, Abbas Kiarostami, an Iranian film director who has won several awards in the United States, had to cancel a speaking engagement at Harvard University recently because he could not get a visa in time.

The United States could also use economic measures to reach out to Iranians. For example, dropping U.S. opposition to Iran's acceptance into the World Trade Organization could spark a much-needed debate in Iran on the issue of the Bonyads, the foundations that control nearly one-fourth of the Iranian economy and are accountable only to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Moreover, Congress should no longer oppose World Bank loans to Iran. These loans are quite small compared to the amount of money Iran makes each day in oil revenues. In addition, each of these potential policy shifts could be publicized through VOA and RFE/RL.

Iran and a U.S.-Led War on Iraq

Although Iran would welcome the overthrow of Saddam Husayn, it would also wonder whether it was next. The Iranian street is less suspicious of U.S. intentions in Iraq than the Arab street. Iranians have faced Saddam's missiles, and many have family members who took part in the Iran-Iraq War. In the government, both reformists and hardliners view the possibility of a nuclear-capable Iraq as a menace. Khatami, however, is opposed to a unilateral U.S. strike because he sees the need to establish a precedent for multilateralism. Given the difficulty that the United States is experiencing in building a coalition against Iraq, Khatami knows that it would be next to impossible for Washington to garner the support needed for a coalition against Iran. Moreover, the hardliners could point to U.S. success in Iraq -- that is, a successful invasion, the creation of a pro-American regime in Baghdad, and the consequent feeling that Iran is in the crosshairs -- as pretexts for a crackdown.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Kate Weitz.

Policy #678



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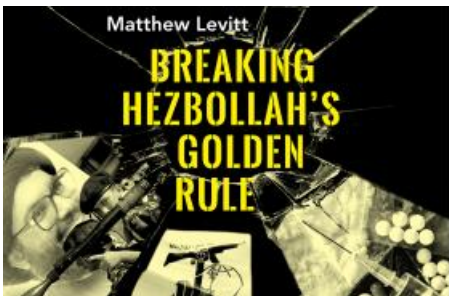
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