

Watershed:

The Will of the Iranian People Should Not Be Ignored This Time Around

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Articles & Testimony

Iran is reaching the boiling point. On July 21, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, enforcers for Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's religious dictatorship, issued a warning that some Iranians see as a possible prelude to a state-of-emergency declaration and a Tiananmen Square-style crackdown. The basis of the Revolutionary Guards' complaints? Too many Iranians want Western-style democracy. They want to separate mosque from state. They feel the power of the Supreme Leader is too great. And perhaps most significantly to the man on the street, they now actively question the Islamic Republic's inability to pull Iran out of social and economic freefall.

A recent poll sanctioned by Khatami's own government and published in the April 28 edition of the reformist daily Entekhab found that 65 percent of the country's youth did not feel that the Islamic Republic could adequately address their needs. The White House, finally taking note of the maelstrom inside Iran, issued a statement on July 12 expressing support for the Iranian people as they struggle for freedom against an increasingly oppressive regime. It is ironic, then, at a watershed moment inside Iran, past and present State Department officials still advocate engagement with a terror-sponsoring government whose subjects long for true democracy.

Just how badly has Iran's economy fallen? Historian Houchang Nahavandi, writing last February in the French daily *Le Figaro*, noted, "[Iran's] per capita income in 1977 was \$2,450, and by all accounts this would be equivalent in the year 2000 to \$10,000, close to that of Spain. It is, at present, less than \$1,500, near to that of...the Gaza Strip." Under President Muhammad Khatami, living standards have continued to plunge.

In a November 2001 report, the Iranian Statistics Center declared 15 percent of Iranians live in "absolute poverty," while a majority of Iranians now say they must struggle to put bread on the table. Literally. According to the reformist daily *Hambastegi*, Iranians can now afford less bread than even during the hardship years of the Iran-Iraq War. The adjusted real cost of accommodation, fuel, and electricity has increased 70 percent in four years; likewise, the adjusted real cost of goods and services has increased by more than 50 percent under Khatami. In a May 13, 2002 interview, Ali Asghar Badban, a worker at the Supreme Council for National Insurance, citing central bank data declared, "Workers would have to earn a minimum wage of 2.2 times what they earn today in order to be able to buy basic commodities." The precipitous decline in living standards comes despite a tripling of world oil prices during the Khatami era.

Unemployment in Iran is skyrocketing. Each year, over 700,000 Iranians seek employment, yet the Iranian government can provide no more than 300,000 new jobs annually. More than four million young Iranians remain unemployed, according to Iran's own labor minister. However, Iranian experts warn that their government regularly fudges employment statistics. Ali Rashidi, a senior member of the Iran Economists' Association, reported told the association's June meeting, "The official data published regarding unemployment do not reflect realities and the true number of unemployed is far above three million," almost triple the figure cited by Khatami during an appearance two months ago in Mazandaran.

During the Khatami era, the unemployment rate among university graduates has doubled to more than 22 percent. According to Zahra Shojai, Khatami's adviser on women's affairs, in the past two years, women's unemployment has shot up from 30 to 60 percent. How systematic is the failure to provide adequate jobs? On May 14, Muhammad Reza Tabesh, representative for the city of Ardakan in Iran's parliament, told the Nowruz daily, "Even if the State invested all of its oil revenues for the next ten years in solving the problems of unemployment, it would still not be able to create jobs for all of today's jobless." Job creation might mean abandoning other projects, like Iran's multibillion-dollar nuclear program, or Iran's intercontinental ballistic-missile program. The State prefers another tact, however. At a June 23 news conference, Abbas Alizadeh, the judiciary's representative in Tehran, reported that the Islamic Republic's leaders had ordered his ministry to treat strikers and protesters "with a heavy hand."

Unable to collect unpaid wages from state-owned factories, Iranians are increasingly resorting to acts of desperation to put food on their tables. Last February, the reformist daily Azad reported that brokers were buying healthy kidneys from impoverished residents of Tehran. The medical blackmarketeers have grown so bold as to set up stalls in the alleys just off Tehran's central Vali Asr Square.

Prostitution is also skyrocketing. According to a July 2000 report authored by Muhammad Ali Zam, director of cultural and artistic affairs for Tehran, reported that prostitution had increased 635 percent between 1998 and 1999. Prostitution thrives even in the clerical center of Qom where, in December 2001, authorities broke up a large prostitution ring. Widely believed rumors of the complicity of officials in prostitution were bolstered when, in February 2001, authorities arrested a judge in connection with running a prostitution ring involving runaway girls, including some as young as 13. Every month, the press brings words of new raids on brothels. Just this month, one of Iran's leading soccer stars was suspended and sentenced to a fine and lashing for patronizing a brothel in Tehran. The exponential growth in exploitation of girls and women has reached such heights that officials are no longer able to hide it. At a June 2002 conference in Tehran on public-health issues, health and social workers spoke of 84,000 prostitutes working openly in Tehran. Thirteen out of every 45 girls running away from home never return and are likely forced into the trade; officials speak of 80,000 runaways annually. While the Revolutionary Guards now warns that it considers discussion of Iran's social problems to be subversive and treasonous, some opposition religious figures have broken ranks to talk about the root cause of the decline.

On March 24, 2002, Hojjat al-Islam Hadi Ghabel addressed a crowd in Isfahan, and declared, "Thirteen and fourteen year-old junior high school girls now engage in prostitution, and I ask how can it be that under such degrading conditions the regime wastes billions of dollars on worthless programs...?" Indeed, while fathers sell their daughters in order to put food on the family table, and workers at state-owned factories march for salaries not paid in eight months, in March 2001, Khatami traveled to Moscow to sign a \$7 billion weapons and nuclear-technology purchase. It is this juxtaposition that spurred the resignation on July 8 of Isfahan's Friday prayer leader, Ayatollah Jalalidin Tahiri, who blasted the Islamic Republic for "unemployment, inflation, and high prices, the hellish gap between poverty and wealth, the deep and daily-growing distance between the classes, the stagnation and decline of national revenue, a sick economy, bureaucratic corruption, desperately weak administrators, the growing flaws in the country's political structure, embezzlement, bribery and addiction, and the failure to find effective solutions."

The turbulent U.S.-Iran relationship is fast approaching a watershed, as domestic dissatisfaction reaches a head in Iran. In 1953 and 1979, the U.S. ignored the will of the Iranian people and stood instead with an autocratic leader; we are still paying the price. Despite State Department tendencies to the contrary, the U.S. should not make the same mistake three times. Never has an ideological regime willingly given up power; there will never be significant reform in the Islamic Republic. While journalists, Middle East Studies Association academics, the American Iranian Council (in effect, the vanguard of the Islamic Republic's lobby in America), and pundits still adhere to the tired old myth that the struggle in Iran is between hardliners and reformers, the Iranian people (including the 600,000 now

incarcerated in the Islamic Republic's prisons) increasingly make clear that the real dichotomy is between the government and freedom-seeking dissidents.

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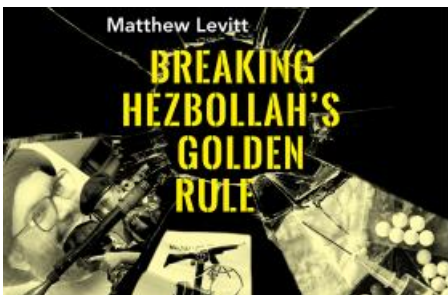
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