

Iran As Part of the Axis of Evil (Part I):

Reforms Stagnate

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Brief Analysis

In his January 29 State of the Union address, President George Bush criticized Iran as one of three states (the other two being Iraq and North Korea) forming an 'axis of evil' and castigated its "unelected leaders" for denying the will of the majority. Indeed, the perennial conflict between Tehran's political factions seems to have escalated, deepening the stalemate that has essentially paralyzed its governing system. The durability of the Islamic Republic has always stemmed from its flexibility and capacity to absorb change. Since the election of Muhammad Khatami in 1997, however, the popular demand for change is outstripping the system's accommodative capabilities. The youths' demands for employment and cultural freedom, the middle class's quest for representation, and the women's clamor for social emancipation are creating tensions and pressures that threaten the foundations of the Islamic Republic.

Parliamentary Crises

Since the triumph of reformers in the February 2000 parliamentary election, Iran has experienced a series of crises. The conservatives' reaction first became evident in the massive closure of newspapers that essentially silenced a once vibrant press corp. The parliament's attempts to reform the electoral process and press laws and to relax restrictions on foreign investments have been systematically stymied by the Guardian Council, leading to ample frustration and acrimony. The latest crisis was sparked on December 25, when reformist deputy Hossein Logmanian was imprisoned on charges of "insulting" the judiciary, in contravention of parliamentary immunity. Three other deputies were similarly convicted for speeches they gave on the floor of the parliament, while sixty others are evidently being prosecuted for articles or speeches that they have made in the chamber or at political rallies.

The latest attack on the parliament and its institutional privileges led to condemnation not just from the reformist wing, but also from the moderate speaker Mehdi Karroubi, who is generally viewed as a conciliatory figure adept at crafting compromises. In an uncharacteristically bold speech on January 14, Karroubi warned that unless Supreme Leader 'Ali Khamene'i rectified the situation, he "would no longer attend [parliamentary] sessions." In essence, Karroubi and the reformist majority threatened to leave the parliament en masse and shut down the elected chamber. Whatever the parliament's actual effectiveness, given its historic pedigree and reformist tendencies, its dissolution would seriously jeopardize the legitimacy of the entire system.

The escalating tension and countercharges finally led Khamene'i to step in and neutralize the crisis by pardoning

Logmanian. This apparent resolution reflects the regime's penchant toward defusing immediate crises while continually deferring the larger issue of fundamental reform. The problem with such a crisis-management approach to politics is that after each conflict, the gap between the contending factions widens and the political situation becomes more polarized. Indeed, the next crisis looming on the horizon is an anticorruption campaign launched by the judiciary, which many in the reform camp fear is another attempt by the conservatives to undermine the reform movement and parliament. The first high-profile case is of billionaire businessman Shahram Jazayeri, who is accused of bribing government officials. Thus far, Jazayeri has named the speaker of the parliament and a number of reformist deputies and conservative clerics as beneficiaries of his largesse. On January 30, Karroubi denounced the trial, claiming, "The people support any campaign against economic corruption, but this issue is a case against the parliament; it's a political case." Whatever the merits of the case, it appears that Iran's cantankerous clerics are headed toward yet another episode of conflict and discord.

Public Protests

Indeed, as the political system becomes paralyzed, the reform movement threatens to disengage from politics and express itself through sporadic labor and student protests. The increasingly defiant mood of Iran's restive youths was expressed by Akbar Atri of the Office for Fostering Unity -- Iran's largest pro-reform student movement -- in a December 11 speech at Tehran's Amir Kabir Technical University, when he asked, "How can one justify these long-term sentences? Who is responsible for such illegal acts?" Public expressions of such sentiments are no longer isolated events. During demonstrations accompanying Atri's speech, university students chanted that the regime should "watch recent developments in the world and learn a lesson, considering what happens to nondemocratic governments that are not backed by the masses"; such demonstrations seem to reflect the disenchantment that most young Iranians feel toward the slow pace of the reforms. The deepening alienation of Iranian youths led Khatami to warn in his own December 10 address to university officials and students that "when the hardline establishment acts badly and is not responsive, gradually criticism turns into protest."

In an even more dramatic move, Iran's major cities have witnessed widespread demonstrations by teachers demanding better pay. Iran's two million teachers have an average monthly salary of \$130 to \$200, forcing many to take second and even third jobs to meet the escalating cost of living. On January 18, some five thousand teachers took to the streets of Tehran to protest their conditions. By January 20, the demonstrations had spread to other major cities, including Isfahan, Zanjan, and Shiraz. Khatami has attempted to placate the demonstrators by creating a commission, headed by Education Minister Morteza Hadji, that is to recommend measures to redress their grievances. Despite the president's commission and a police ban on further protests, some ten thousand teachers staged a demonstration on January 29 that began at the University of Tehran and ended outside the parliament. As with many of Iran's demonstrations, the protesters also made political demands, calling for the release of colleagues who had been detained for "political" reasons. Many pro-reform papers expressed concern that the demonstrators did not limit their grievances to the hardline clerics -- the teachers were equally critical of reformers and the poor performance of the reform-majority parliament. As one of the leading reform papers, *Hambasteghi*, stressed on January 23, "The politicization of demands threatens national security."

A Stagnant Future?

In the near future, Iran is unlikely to witness either revolutions or dramatic democratic breakthroughs. The appeal of the reform movement was in its promise to an economically hard-pressed and socially restive population that change was possible within the confines of the system. Indeed, one of the strengths of the Islamic Republic had been its accommodation of some of the demands of its constituents. Yet, the deepening economic crisis and the growing cultural demands of Iranian youths have outstripped the system's ability to be responsive. It is not apparent whether Iran's reformers will be able to make slow but consistent progress in translating their overwhelming popular

support into liberalization of the theocracy.

Should the hardliners succeed in completely obstructing reform, Iran may not see a revolution similar to the 1979 mass uprising, but rather a state that increasingly resembles the Soviet Union of the 1970s. As with the Soviet Union, Iran's hardline clerics are poised to create a stagnant bureaucratic state infected with mass corruption, idly cloaking itself in stale revolutionary rhetoric of martyrdom and sacrifice that inspires no one. In such a situation, the electoral process will cease to be the venue for expression of popular will, as many will largely abandon the political arena. The alarming rise in drug addiction is an ominous indication of a young generation that is becoming not only disengaged from politics, but also disillusioned about life in the Islamic Republic. As such, Iran's dangerous impasse is threatening to produce a lost generation of Iranians in addition to extinguishing a once bold reform movement.

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