

Riots in Iran:

Implications for U.S. Policy

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Brief Analysis

Over the last week, Iran has seen the most extensive rioting since the 1979 revolution. On Sunday, October 21, official accounts showed that public buildings, including thirty-two nationalized bank branches, were attacked in fifty-four Tehran neighborhoods. Rioting also occurred in cities across the country, with at least 180 arrested in Isfahan alone. Riots continued Monday night, resulting in a thousand arrests over the two nights. Financial Times estimated that over 100,000 participated in the Tehran rioting on Thursday night.

The cause of the riots was soccer, specifically, Iran's surprise 1-3 loss to Bahrain on Sunday and then its 1-0 victory over the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on Thursday. Had Iran defeated Bahrain, it would have secured a berth in the World Cup; now, in addition to the UAE victory, it has to beat Ireland.

While Iran has a history of soccer riots, they have been limited to trashing the stadium and surrounding area in the event of a loss, or celebrating in public squares in the event of a victory. Last week's riots were on a much larger scale, and they reflect a generalized popular discontenta mood which offers the United States an opportunity to impress on Iran how much it would gain from a change in terror policies.

The Sour Mood in Tehran

These should be good times in Iran. High oil prices have translated into economic strength unseen for twenty years, with foreign reserves of \$12 billion offering great opportunities for new initiatives. Indeed, the IMF reports the GDP has grown 12.5 percent over the last three years.

But instead the mood is sour. It is telling that Iranians rioted when the national team lost, and rioted again when it won. The patently false report on Los Angeles-based NITV that the Iranian regime had ordered players to lose to Bahrain was widely believed. Officials had to acknowledge that the two Los Angeles-based Persian language satellite television stations have gained significant viewership, and since the riots, they confiscated a thousand satellite dishes in Tehran as part of a crackdown on the banned but ubiquitous dishes.

The regime has become stricter, but public rejection of its actions has become bolder. From July 10 to August 22, hardline judges supervised 125 lashings in busy Tehran street intersections and other public spots for vice offenses;

the public response was outrage, with crowds shouting at the police. As this episode illustrates, the public response to police orders is now defiance rather than sullen compliance. A small but telling sign: after the Tehran police ordered employers on August 23 to ban the wearing of neckties in workplaces, neckties became the rage among young Iranians. Iran Times reported that an American visiting a village in Fars province (the Iranian heartland) was in much demand to teach cravat knots to young villagers.

It would not be surprising if the Iranian public was increasingly disillusioned about the prospects for reform. The new Majlis that both Iranians and foreign observers had such hopes for when it was elected in May 2000 has done very little. Meanwhile, the toll of publications shut since the crackdown started in April 2000 is now fifty. Chances of meaningful change in the near future are small: those who hold the guns are firmly convinced God is on their side even if the people are not, and they are ready to use deadly force to hold on to that power. The Middle East knows many countries where an unpopular elite holds on to power for decades, but Iran has an unmatched heritage of popular uprisings, from the tobacco protests of 1891, the Constitutional Revolution of 1906-10, the Mossadegh era of 1951-53, to the Islamic Revolution of 1978-80.

Opportunities for the United States

There are tantalizing signs that the popular mood of discontent in Iran extends to dissatisfaction with what its foreign policy has been able to achieve. This bodes well for the United States.

Soothing words have long been the specialty of the Iranian Foreign Ministry, a weak agency tasked with being polite to foreigners but without real decision-making influence. More important, there has been a shift toward less ideology and more realpolitik by some close to the clerics. In an interview with the Financial Times, Mohsen Rezai, who commanded the Revolutionary Guards from 1981 to 1997, went out of his way to drop the usual hardline complaints against U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf. He was even prepared to contemplate Iran joining in military operations, though he laid down conditions that made the offer more theoretical than practical (e.g., requiring UN leadership). Similarly, what was interesting about Iran's message on October 8 to the United States that it would aid American pilots downed during the Afghan war was not the statement but the reaction by hardliners or, rather, their failure to object. To be sure, Iran's offer was hardly shattering; as the Iranian Foreign Ministry pointed out, Iran would simply be fulfilling its treaty obligations under the 1906 Hague Convention.

While some hardliners are now sending a mixed message, the main voice remains one of continued hostility. On October 12, supreme religious leader 'Ali Khamenei' told foreign diplomats the United States was "dragging the planet into global war," adding, "Any assistance to this conflict will be an injustice to the human race." Nor are reformers openly acknowledging any change in approach; indeed, on October 23, President Muhammad Khatami said, "There are no new developments between Tehran and the United States and our position toward that country remains the same."

What Next?

It would be useful if Iran were to increase its aid to the Afghan Northern Alliance and play an active role in forming a government to replace the Taliban. Intense diplomatic efforts to that end have included visits to Tehran in the last week by Canadian foreign minister John Manley on Sunday, German foreign minister Joschka Fischer on Thursday, French special envoy about Afghanistan Pierre Lafrance on Tuesday, and British advisor on Afghanistan Robert Cooper and Italian foreign minister Renatio Ruggeiro last Monday. Hopefully these Western visitors have impressed on Tehran the advantages that would accrue to Iran from official contacts with the United States. The key here is not more open dialogue with the Iranian Foreign Ministry but with the real Iranian decisionmakers, such as the Information (i.e., intelligence) Ministry, the military, and clerical leaders.

Furthermore, U.S. objectives are broader than just replacing the Taliban. As President Bush told Congress, "Our

enemy is a radical network of terrorists and every government that supports them." If Iran wants to be seen as a government that has stopped supporting terrorist attacks on Americans, then it has to provide convincing evidence that it is no longer providing safe haven to the seven FBI "most wanted terrorists" (out of twenty-two total) who were once credibly thought to be in Iran; that is, the three Hizballah hijackers of TWA 847 and the four Saudi Hizballah bombers of Khobar Towers. As for ongoing support for terrorism, the United States needs to make clear the distinction between the desirable but implausible (Iran joining the peace process) and the necessary minimum, which is that Iran foreswear any support for groups that target innocent civilians. That minimum does not include Iran accepting Israel's right to exist, much less the peace process; it only entails Iran rejecting terrorism as a political means.

Meanwhile, U.S. policy should be strictly neutral about the future of the Islamic Republic. Iranian leaders correctly perceive that its demise would be warmly welcomed in Washington, and there is no reason to pretend otherwise but also no reason to think that the United States can or should do much to affect the clerics' hold on power.

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