

Student Demonstrations in Iran:

What Next?

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Brief Analysis

Iran's complexities often lead it to surprise observers. The most recent surprise came not from the hardliners of the regime, but from the most active part of Iran's nascent civil society-students.

Who Are These Students? Because of a quota system designed to purge the student body after the Islamic revolution, university students come from families typically supportive of the revolution, such as the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Yet the demands of these "children of the revolution," if granted, would mean the revolution's demise. One key protester is Manoucher Mohammadi, a former leader of the Islamic Student Association who over the past two years changed his--and his organization's--orientation to the Democratic Student Association. Like many of the current protesters, he used to attack the people with whom he is now in jail and now professes the slogans he formerly put down. And as a protester against the regime, he now faces the prospect of execution.

The student movement's main weakness is lack of organization, but one advantage it has over the 1979 revolutionaries is the students are not strictly ideological. They have aligned themselves with nationalists and have demanded freedom of the press, freedom for political prisoners, and justice for the murderers of secular and nationalist leaders. They were not protesting against President Mohammad Khatami, and they rightly differentiated between Khatami and supreme religious leader Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i. The protests also had fairly wide support from the liberal press, women (another difference from 1979), and some strata of the clergy. Moreover, both Khatami's minister of education and the chancellor of the University of Tehran resigned out of shame for what transpired against the students.

> It is also not surprising that the student protests had only 25,000 people, compared with Ayatollah Khamene'i's counterdemonstration of 100,000. Protesting against the regime is tantamount to putting one's life on the line. Furthermore, the fact that the government's demonstration was only 100,000 people, when it used to get 1 million, shows that the government is vulnerable.

What Led to the Change? The students entered modern, dynamic universities and for the first time, through contact with their professors and the material they were learning, began to see the West as different from what they had been taught. This had a great influence given their age and susceptibility to change, and was compounded by economic

pressure, disillusionment after the Iran-Iraq war, corruption, and factionalism within the government after Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's death. Two years ago, the students protested by supporting and voting for Khatami and letting it be known what they did not like. Through the recent demonstrations--and for the past two years--they have been clear on what they do like, as is evident in their slogans. There was no direct mention of Islam or the Islamic Republic, but there was "Death to Despotism, Long Live Liberty." Specifically, they targeted those whom they viewed as the despots--the leader of the Islamic Republic, the judiciary, the Iranian parliament, the militia, and the IRGC--and made clear who were those for liberty.

Khatami's Role: Khatami is different from Khamene'i, but one should not focus solely on "the reformist Khatami," waiting to see what he will do next and then following his lead. Khatami is not the cause but rather a symptom of change in Iran, and he is caught in a paradox. He has made many promises of reform, but he also wants to maintain the rule of law in Iran. It is this paradox that his opponents use to portray him as unsuccessful in fulfilling promises. The international community's support for Khatami should not emphasize him personally. Instead it should focus on those issues that interest Iranian civil society and judge both Khatami and Khamene'i on how they respond to those demands.

U.S. Policy: If the United States wants to focus on one thing only, it should emphasize the Iranian people who voted for Khatami and are causing the regime to shake. The students want freedom; there is no such thing as "Islamic democracy," there is simply "democracy." Moreover, the political and nonpolitical students are now standing side-by-side. The main threat to the regime is secularism, which has a long history in Iran's struggle for democracy.

This is the best chance for the United States to reach out to the Iranian people and make a people-to-people dialogue work. The United States should support those like Mohammadi and condemn the vigilantes. The Iranian people would enjoy any sign of support to this effect. That is why satellite television and Voice of America are so important--and so worrisome to the regime. Were the United States to reach out to the people, both factions of the regime would get the message about the democratic values for which the Iranian people are fighting.

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Prospects for Iran: Those with power in Iran are prepared to kill to keep it, and as long as this is the case, the prospects for demonstrations precipitating change are slight. The most likely outcome of the demonstrations is that Khatami will have to compromise with the hardliners and slow the reform process. Khatami has to watch his back: If he attempts to take an independent stance on issues that the hardliners care about, he could lose his power if not his presidency. But it is not only Khatami who may decide to compromise; the conservatives are likely to work with Khatami so as not to spark unrest that could endanger their power. The conservative camp has also been very skillful in handling the demonstrations, calling for the punishment of the instigators of the initial attacks on student dormitories even as they arrest the student protesters.

In the past, Khatami has used foreign policy to seize the initiative from the conservatives and to strengthen his domestic political support, but he is unlikely to use the current demonstrations to promote new initiatives, such as with Lebanon or Israel. Nor are the demonstrations likely to lead the conservatives to push for a more hardline foreign policy. Although Khatami will probably defer on issues important to conservatives, they are unlikely to concentrate on foreign policy issues.

U.S. Policy: Just over a year ago, Washington viewed Iran as having the potential for a foreign policy breakthrough in the Middle East, partly because the chance of progress in other areas of U.S. Middle East policy--such as Iraq and the peace process--were fairly low. Enthusiasm for a real change in U.S. policy toward Iran has now waned, mostly because of a lack of response from Iran. Washington often assumes that if and when it decides to improve ties with a given country, it will be done. Iran, however, is perhaps the one country that does not show much interest in

improving its ties with the United States. The most likely direction for U.S. policy following the recent demonstrations is to move slowly, if at all.

Unfortunately, being stand-offish is not the right approach, because an opportunity will be missed. The opportunity to reach out to the Iranian people is evidenced by the attitudes of the student demonstrators. What is needed, and what fits the Iranian political style, are dramatic gestures rather than the small, incremental steps to which Washington is more accustomed. Iranians paid much attention to President Clinton's statement about mistakes made in the past regarding Iran. The United States could still do a lot in the dramatic category to reinforce its current actions.

> A major U.S. goal should be to show the Iranian people that it is the United States that wants a dialogue of civilizations, and that the Iranian government is impeding the dialogue. Last year, more than 20,000 Iranians received visas last year to come to the United States and more than 2,000 Iranians studied in U.S. universities; fewer than 200 Americans received Iranian visas, though. U.S. sanctions do not apply to information, yet Iran blocks satellite television and goes to great lengths to prevent literature exchange. The Iranian government refuses to allow visas to be processed in Tehran, even under the auspices of the Swiss, but Iran has a large consular office in Washington.

The most significant step Washington could take would be to alter trade sanctions to better target that which provides income to the Iranian government--money that is then used to fund the military, weapons of mass destruction programs, and terrorism. This would result in a policy of no trade with the Iranian government or the bonyads (quasi-governmental foundations controlled by hardline clerics), while allowing trade with private individuals.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Adam Frey.

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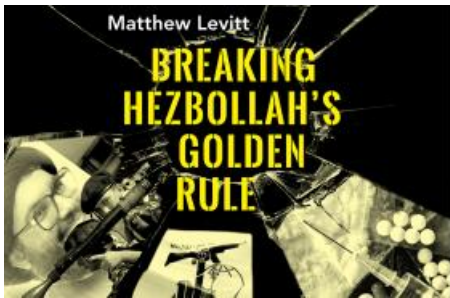
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