

The Point of No Return: Iran's Path to Democracy

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Since the 1979 Islamic revolution, Iranian society has been transformed. Urbanism, literacy, industrial growth, international contact, and involvement by women in social and economic affairs have all increased, pushing the country toward democracy. Intellectual life is no longer dominated by revolutionary ideas, but rather by a new paradigm of liberalism and democracy. Whereas none of the main groups opposed to the shah had democratic ideals, most of those opposing the current regime do. This trend has been reinforced by democratic changes in Iran's neighbors, especially Turkey, and by the vastly increased U.S. role in the region.

In this new Washington Institute Policy Focus, Iranian dissident Mohsen Sazegara examines the changes in Iranian society and what they portend for the country's political future. During the past two centuries, he argues, Iran has been wracked by the conflict between modernity and tradition, democracy and despotism. The Islamic revolution was only the latest in a series of failed efforts to resolve that conflict. The regime has failed not only economically and socially, but also in terms of propagating its ideological, revolutionary, maximalist version of Islam. Having unsuccessfully tried to reform itself, the regime now finds itself unable to address the problems of the country and the people. As Sazegara shows, this combination of an illegitimate regime and a defeated reform movement has put Iran on the razor's edge -- a point of no return on the country's path toward democracy.

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