

Misreading Qazvin in Washington: On the Protests in Iran - The Iranian government has no choice but to rethink its current economic strategy

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Iran has featured protests throughout several provincial cities (e.g., Mashhad, Kermanshah, Rasht, and Isfahan) since they first started on Thursday 28 December 2017. Some reports indicate that conservative opponents of the Rouhani government in the north-eastern city of Mashhad initiated the protests. However, they have since spread and escaped their oversight. In the early stages, protestors' demands largely revolved around spiraling prices of basic foodstuffs and bore the classic signs of frustration with the country's ongoing economic torpor. Today, they reached Tehran and have been taken up in limited numbers by students around the university. As of yet, it is not clear whether we can speak of one protest movement or several protest movements, as there are different (and sometimes conflicting) grievances and solutions being articulated.

Appropriating “The People”

Commentators and self-styled experts have been quick to jump to hasty conclusions and decree what is driving the present bout of discontent. The giddy enthusiasm of the Trump administration, rightwing DC thinktanks, and many others is palpable. Predictably, the same voices who have consistently demanded Iran's international isolation, along with the imposition of sanctions, military intervention, and regime change, have rapidly sought to bandwagon the recent expressions of discontent and appropriate them for their own imperial agendas. Such rampant and frankly malevolent opportunism is frustrating to say the least. Within the space of some twenty-four hours, and with only a small number of exceptions, nearly every mainstream Western media outlet has inclined to assimilate legitimate expressions of socioeconomic distress and demands for greater governmental accountability into a question of “regime change.”

Needless to say, these very same individuals and venues have time and again completely ignored the fact that countless strikes and protests from Khuzestan to Tehran, ranging from teachers to retirees, have become a regular occurrence in Iran since President Hassan Rouhani's 2013 election. The latter's administration and those sympathetic toward its agenda have sought on many an occasion to scale down levels of securitization and similarly distinguish between those citizens who express legitimate civic grievances and others who seek the system's overthrow. These may seem like fine

distinctions which fail to assuage the liberal conscience, but they are nevertheless immensely important for the institutionalization of legal and mutually recognized channels of civic contestation. These achievements and many others besides (e.g., indications of relaxed policing of “bad hijab” and the commuting of the death penalty for drug smugglers under two kilograms) are not inconsequential or to be belittled. They harbor implications for the lives of thousands if not millions of Iranians.

The pernicious “all or nothing” outlook, which permeates mainstream media coverage of discontent inside Iran, systematically prevents serious consideration of other grievances at work.

It is almost as if many of these commentators suffer from a fundamental epistemological blind-spot which ensures such misrecognition, and which makes Iranian state paranoia all the more inevitable. Almost without exception, anytime there are protests these commentators and media outlets depict them as a fundamental question of legitimacy about the system *in toto*; which in turn can only be solved when said system is swept away in its entirety. Indeed, one of the great dividends of the reformist period, which saw seventy percent of the electorate (some twenty million votes) elect Hojjat al-Islam Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005), was its ability to show that other discourses and political practices exist and are available to citizens. As a process, it was slow and messy, complicated by state parallelism and the disproportionate distribution of powers. It did not always yield immediate alleviation or the much awaited “democratic transition.” However, it nevertheless allowed people to retain a genuine horizon and belief that their circumstances will gradually improve and empowered them as citizens’ harboring agency for change.

The pernicious “all or nothing” outlook, which permeates mainstream media coverage of discontent inside Iran, systematically prevents serious consideration of other grievances at work. These include growing inequality, high food prices, air pollution and environmental degradation, diminished domestic productive capacities, the lack of economic diversification, youth unemployment, and everyday corruption, to list a few. These issues can hardly be analyzed through wishfully-propelled narratives of “regime change” and the facile assumption that what guides the policies of Western powers and their allies is a commitment to democracy. In fact, if these same commentators could escape their caged prejudices they might realize that these very real issues are faced by many countries across the global south and beyond.

These problematic and skewed kinds of mediatized narratives similarly took hold with the emergence of the 2009 Green Movement. As prominent Iran scholars (Hamid Dabashi among them) have declared time and again, that movement is best seen as a civil rights movement which sought to reform the system relying upon the Islamic Republic’s very own constitutional and normative sources of appeal. The protesters aired their grievances to the country’s leaders and political elite, because the overwhelming majority of those who participated were convinced that their protestations might be taken seriously and could possibly provoke a change in state policy. The basis of people’s objections was their conviction that elements within the state had violated the social compact. Their chant was “where is my vote?” This is why they first took to the streets, as the peaceful right to protest is constitutionally guaranteed, not because they sought to tear the system down.

Historical Precedents

The current protests, at least at their inception (they have since been taken up by students around the University of Tehran), are to some extent similar to the provincial ones witnessed under the presidency of the late Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani (d. 2017) where in 1991-1992 inflation hit over

forty-six percent and the price of basic foodstuffs (above all, bread) skyrocketed. This period also featured the devaluation of the Iranian rial to a twentieth of its value. During Rafsanjani's second term (1993-1997) there were repeated protests over spikes in prices, first in Mashhad and Shiraz in mid-1992 and then Islamshahr and Qazvin in mid-1995. Each protest eventually diffused and subsided, yet subsequently hampered the Rafsanjani government and forced the ambitious president to concede much of his economic policy agenda (e.g., subsidy reductions, increases in foreign borrowing, etc.) to the traditional right, but also those rightists who took matters of social justice more seriously. In large part, this is because the latter (i.e., the right) saw and continue to see the core of their social base emanating from those poorer, often provincial strata.

On this cursory appraisal we can therefore see different political mobilizations making the most of the sudden burst of protest onto the scene: the poorer, economically frustrated which populate provincial towns and the south of the capital; students and disgruntled members of the professional and salaried middle class whose demands align more closely with the student protests of 1999 and Green Movement of 2009, which were quickly, albeit violently curbed. Whether these groups are simply talking past one another (which seems likely) or prove capable of dialogue and coalition building is an open question. Skepticism is warranted though. Plenty of differences certainly exist with respect to the aforementioned precedents, and history never exactly repeats itself. It should also be said that social media and its repercussions for the nature of social mobilizations complicates matters considerably.

Many of the slogans chanted in this latest round of protests were surely political and relate to frustrations with the status quo. Others, however, demonstrate well how socioeconomic grievances coalesce with expressions of racism and xenophobia. Not exactly news to those following the rise of right-wing populism across Europe and the United States. Such instances do not merely give voice to anger over state support for Hizballah in Lebanon and the Asad regime in Syria, but also anti-Arab discourse and bizarre nostalgia for the days of Reza Shah (i.e., this generation never lived through or experienced the first Pahlavi monarch's rule); views which have sometimes found themselves cultivated by Western media, but also popular diaspora Persian language TV channels such as Manoto, whose sources have been the subject of much speculation.

A Note on the US Factor

It would be remiss not to mention that the Trump administration has continued to try and thwart foreign investment and Iran's integration into the global economy. Its aggressive anti-Iran stance and constant demonization of the country has to some extent dovetailed with Rouhani's preoccupation with reducing inflation and subsidy cuts in view of the collapse of global oil prices, a kind of neoliberalism-lite, only exacerbating matters further [1]. The Obama administration's drive to sanction Iran's oil exports and Central Bank between 2011 and 2015, similarly sparked a crisis in the value of the rial in 2012-2013 as the Ahmadinejad government and later that of Rouhani scrambled to acquire foreign currency. In addition, Europe's inability to resolve Iran's being locked out of the international banking system has made conduct of even the most rudimentary financial transactions for state and private sector alike a convoluted chore. Such obstacles thrown up by Washington, along with European inertia, show little regard to the diplomatic accord struck between Iran and the P5+1. Given such dynamics, there is little wonder that the Rouhani government is struggling to square the circle.

Conclusion

These protests will surely be something of a wakeup call for the Rouhani government. There is little doubt that expectations have been poorly managed and that people need to see the tangible and material benefits of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and experience its dividends in the course of their daily lives. Thus far, this has not happened. As great an achievement as the nuclear deal was, it is yet to engender the transformative momentum many had set their hearts on. This is, of course, something the Trump administration does not want to see happen. In fact, Trump, the Israeli government, and many other malign forces are banking on failure. However, the Iranian government has no choice but to rethink its current economic strategy; which is in large part a hang-over of the Rafsanjani era: namely, the transformation of the Islamic Republic into a technocratic, free market and business friendly exemplar for other Muslim nations. Foreign tourists as well as symbolic deals with Boeing (which Trump is aiming to destroy), Total, and Italian coffeeshop chains might be all well and good. However, for many struggling Iranians, it is not going to provide the country with the more just, equitable, and sustainable political economy they desire and deserve.

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P.S.

* <http://jadaliyya.com/Details/34931/Misreading-Qazvin-in-Washington>

Footnotes

[1] ESSF (article 42811), [Labor and Class in Iran – Government policies, labor mobilizations, political elite, concept of class](#).