

Iranian Revolution Coming Apart?  
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At the time of this writing, street demonstrations have been roiling Iran for almost a week now. The last display of public outrage was in 2009, when the obviously fraudulent election imposed hardline winning candidates that the demonstrators knew had not won legitimately. That demonstration was put down with state violence, snipers, mass arrests, and the house arrests of the opposition candidates. It was ugly.

It is instructive to make a comparison between the Arab Spring demonstrations in Egypt and this one in Iran. We might also revisit the 1978-9 revolution that drove out Shah Mohammad Pahlavi and gave the country an Islamic Revolutionary virtual dictatorship (masquerading as a republic).

The Egyptian Revolution was certainly exciting for the western press to watch. Most of the demonstrations were in Cairo and Alexandria, Egypt's largest cities. The press interviewed young English-speaking elites, computer techs, feminists, and young Egyptians versed in cell-phone use. The demonstration succeeded in removing the long-time military dictator, Mubarak, but a national election put in power the head of the Muslim Brotherhood, not the kind of secular leader the educated Egyptians hoped for.

What few observers noted was that the vast majority of Egyptians are uneducated, poor, and religious. They do not speak English and most Western reporters never interviewed them. The Islamists had their chance to rule, but after some months of increasing religiosity and failed economic change, another round of demonstrations brought the country a "democratically elected" military dictator. So much for the Arab Spring.

Iran's 2009 demonstrations failed for similar reasons. The educated elites and urban middle class took to the streets. A few other large cities followed suit. But the lower class, long the base for the clerics, did not join in. The revolt failed.

But I am not sure this one will fail. Looking back to the 1979 revolution, what made it succeed was that the oil workers went on strike (Iran's winters are bitter cold) and the shopkeepers in the country's bazaars went on strike too. If the same thing happens this time, the dictatorship is toast. It is winter and cold; prices have made life difficult even for the middle class; and climate change and population increases have made water availability a real problem.

What is new this time in Iran is that these demonstrations are country-wide, both urban and small town. For the first time, the animosity toward the religious mafia is universal. Calls for Ayatollah Khamenei to step down and cries of "Death to the Clerics" are heard everywhere around the country. Most informed observers do not think that the revolt will succeed, but believe that it further fractures a failed state.

Posters showing the sour face of Supreme Leader Khamenei, the world's longest serving leader, are being torn down. Even the long-suffering peasants now realize that the Pahlavi Shah tried to end their virtual serfdom but the clerics are now the feudal owners of half the agricultural lands. Cries of "clerics, get lost!" are heard.

Iranians also have a long history of anti-clericalism. The country is much older than when Islam appeared in the world. They had an old and distinguished monarchy that ran three imperial empires, and an even older religion, Zoroastrianism, that still lurks in the psyches of all Iranians. The Persian New Year celebrations beginning at the vernal equinox (first day of Spring) have never been stamped out by Muslim rulers, even although the Ayatollah Khomeini tried. Persians refuse to give up this obviously Zoroastrian festival. In addition, more Iranians visit the tombs of their poets, none of whom were great practitioners of Islam, than visit Khomeini's tomb.

The pious and thuggish beneficiaries of the Islamic Revolution have lost their popularity. Under their rule, the economy has suffered. A huge portion of the country's money is in "religious charities," funds are used to sponsor overseas adventures: support of Palestinian Hamas and Hezbollah, fighting in Syria, and a very unpopular war in Yemen. The demonstrators are furious about this as their domestic economy suffers. Khamenei and his circle have looted the country, and everybody knows this.

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