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EVOLUTION TOWARD REVOLUTION: THE DEVELOPMENT OF STREET PROTESTS IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

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and Eliora Katz

Abstract: Protests are a regular feature of life in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Using street power to push for incremental change or voice discontent with government policy, major protests in Iran have been closely identified with the country's reform movement. But from 2017 to the present, we posit that the aim of protests has drifted from reform towards revolution. We use the observable trend of change in geography, demography, violence levels, organization/cohesion, and slogans of protests to argue that the 2017 event was a change point: a structural break from reform to revolution. Drawing on the scholarship of Ted Robert Gurr and Alexis de Tocqueville on expectations for change and rebellion, we trace the structural and domestic political conditions that existed before 2017, and subsequently examine the five factors. We conclude with the impact this will have on future street protests in Iran and flashpoints for change.

INTRODUCTION

Protests are a regular feature of life in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Using street power to advance incremental change or voice frustration with government policy, protests—such as those in 1999 and 2009—have been closely identified with the country's reform movement. However, since 2017, a new wave of anti-government demonstrations has swept the country, expressing broad discontent and a desire for revolution. To support this claim, we outline domestic conditions and analyze five measures of change across major Iranian protest movements over the past two decades. Our work draws on scholarship by Ted Robert Gurr and Alexis de Tocqueville, demonstrating how raised expectations for change produce rebellion when met with failed political realities.

Specifically, we examine four key instances of protests with the broader aim of substantiating the claim that protests have drifted from courting

reform to coveting revolution. These cases include the 1999 student protests after the forced closure of a reformist publication;¹ the 2009 protests over a contested presidential election that led to the Green Movement;² the 2017–18 demonstrations;³ known as the Dey protests, which began over broad economic issues; and the late 2019 protests that were sparked by the revocation of gas subsidies.⁴

The five observable factors that indicate Iranian protesters' revolutionary aims are: slogans, organizational structure, demography of participants, geographic distribution of protesters, and the use of violence against them.

We first trace domestic Iranian developments while laying the theoretical foundation for our argument. Next, we present supporting open-source data, before finally offering broad trends gleaned from the data and end with a case for future testing.

DOMESTIC DEVELOPMENTS IN IRAN

Over the past three years, Iran has faced the most explicit anti-regime protests since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. On 28 December 2017, unrest broke out in Mashhad initially over the country's economic state.⁵ These demonstrations soon morphed into an anti-government uprising in over 80 cities nationwide.⁶ However, a glance at macroeconomic indicators when the unrest erupted reveals that Iran's financial health was comparatively better than in recent years.

In 2013, Iran's newly elected President Hassan Rouhani inherited an economy with inflation rates at 39 percent, and a deep recession. By March 2015, Rouhani slashed the inflation rate down to 12 percent, and to 9.6 percent by mid-2017.⁷ Iran's economy began to rebound once the 2015 nuclear deal⁸ went into effect in January 2016.⁹ According to the Statistical Center of Iran, GDP increased by 10.8 percent from March 2016 to March 2017 while non-oil GDP increased by 6.2 percent.¹⁰ Why would Iranians then flock to the streets, when conditions were better than they had been in recent memory?

Alexis de Tocqueville's understanding of the relationship between reform and rebellion—known as the “Tocqueville Paradox”—helps make sense of Iran's pattern of unrest. “Experience teaches,” de Tocqueville wrote, “the most dangerous time for a bad government is usually when it begins to reform.”¹¹ Tocqueville argues that reforms raise expectations, and when the implementation of such reforms fall short of expectations, citizens are aggrieved and more likely to revolt. Following similar logic, Gurr hypothesized that men rebel when faced with “relative deprivation,” where expectations of improvement are not met in reality.¹²

Indeed, prior to entering office and before attaining the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the Rouhani government promised economic empowerment,

political and social freedoms, and an end to international isolation.¹³ With commercial development and more interaction with the West, “hardliners will accommodate popular interests in time,” Iranians were told.¹⁴ Iran was on a path to becoming a normal country, or so they hoped.

Rouhani proved incapable of delivering on these promises. While Iran’s GDP grew in the wake of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, this growth mainly benefitted ruling elites¹⁵ and upper income groups¹⁶ largely with regime ties. Foreign investment was awarded to companies controlled by the state, the supreme leader, or the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its affiliates.¹⁷ Average Iranians thus did not reap the deal’s dividends. At the same time, Iran continued pouring billions into Bashar al-Assad’s war against the Syrian people.¹⁸

Similarly, earlier major uprisings in the Islamic Republic took place surrounding reformist administrations.¹⁹ Students took to the street in 1999 during the Khatami presidency, when conservative forces blocked reformists at nearly every turn. In 2009, hopes of electing a reformer were crushed by interference in favor of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei’s preferred candidate, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Scholars have made no secret about how unfulfilled demands by Iranians have tarnished the idea of change through reform.²⁰ Recent scholarship by the sociologist Misagh Parsa endorses this assessment, claiming Iran is heading toward upheaval rather than a gradual evolution out of Islamist autocracy.²¹

FIVE OBSERVABLE FACTORS

Slogans

Slogans chanted during demonstrations in Iran serve as a barometer for popular sentiment. While anti-government slogans can be expected in any demonstration, protests studied in this essay evolved to not only reflect this sentiment, but also featured chants that grew from criticism to rejection of the Islamic Republic, a willful transgressing of taboos, and an increasingly nationalist message.

July 1999 saw the most impactful protests to date since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. Following a series of reformist press closures,²² protests on Tehran University’s campus were violently quelled, leading to a days-long explosion of demonstrations in Tehran and other urban centers.²³ The slogans at these protests represented a breach of a clear taboo of targeting Iran’s establishment, chanting, “Death to autocracy, death to monopolists,”²⁴ and even, “Death to Khamenei.”²⁵ Chants reportedly went so far as to promise vengeance for the loss of fellow university students, claiming: “We will kill, we will kill those who killed our brothers.”²⁶

Ultimately, the 1999 protests are remembered more for the damage done

to the reformist cause²⁷ than for the slogans deployed against the Islamic Republic.²⁸ But a decade later in 2009, a new series of protests similarly tied to the reform movement emerged from Tehran. Rather than die down after several days, the protests, known as the Green Movement, lasted for 20 months and featured a diverse array of slogans by demonstrators responding to an increasingly repressive political environment.²⁹ This environment, according to Parsa, led to a shift from slogans that were merely contesting a stolen presidential election—most famously, “Where is my vote?”³⁰—to those targeting the supreme leader.³¹ In other words, from reform to revolution against the entire system.

Initially, protesters sought to draw on religious leitmotifs to invoke legitimacy. Chants featured, “God is Great,” in Arabic, which was similarly shouted from rooftops in the heyday of the 1979 revolution. Another religious slogan was “*Ya Hossein, Mir Hossein*,”—referencing both the reformist presidential contender Mir-Hossein Musavi and Imam Hossein, the martyred grandson of the Prophet Muhammad whose death is still mourned by Shiite Muslims.³²

While this approach was ultimately dropped, 2009 remains noteworthy from the standpoint of slogans because it featured the first critique of Iranian foreign policy during nationwide protests.³³ That slogan—or a variation on its translation—is “No to Gaza and Lebanon, I will give my life for Iran.”³⁴ Fundamentally nationalist in nature, the chant puts Iran, not Islam, at the center of an Iranian’s life and death. It continues to be heard in every major iteration of protest.³⁵

This nationalist critique has permeated recent protests. Consistent with greater publicity of Iranian interventions abroad, slogans began to target the Islamic Republic’s regional activities.³⁶ In 2017, the refrain “Leave Syria, think about us” was popularized.³⁷ That chant continued throughout 2018, as did slogans against Khamenei, Rouhani, government corruption,³⁸ and even *velayat-e faqih*—guardianship of the jurist—a cornerstone principle of the revolutionary regime.³⁹

The broadening of rhetorical targets for protesters intensified greatly during the Dey protests of 2017 to 2018. It is therefore a strong indicator of the disenfranchisement of Iranian protesters since 2017, and represents a post-partisan moment for Iranian demonstrators. No chant encapsulates this better than the popular attack on both political flanks—often erroneously referred to as moderate and hardliner, respectively—in the Islamic Republic: “Reformists! Principalists! The game is over!”⁴⁰

In 2018, protesters took this one step further, embracing the United States, dubbed the “Great Satan” in the Islamic Republic’s political vernacular. Even in the face of U.S. sanctions, protesters proved they were willing to point a finger at their own government for its shortcomings, claiming:

“Our enemy is right here, they are lying that it is America.”⁴¹

One of the most significant taboos broken by the Dey protests was the touting of pro-monarchical slogans and even praising of the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty,⁴² Reza Shah,⁴³ whose hostility toward the clergy was well known. In 2019, those slogans even called for Reza Shah’s grandson, the current crown prince living in exile, to return to Iran.⁴⁴ According to an analyst who looked at a sample of 30 different slogans in November 2019, “Reza Shah, God bless your soul” and “Death to the dictator” were the most common.⁴⁵

While the 2019 protests began with a specific economic issue—the removal of gas subsidies—a review of open-source social media feeds points to only two slogans tied to gas prices. Both of these slogans follow new norms established in 2009 and 2017: chastising the regime’s foreign policy—in this case, support for the Palestinian cause—to underscore its misplaced economic and political priorities.⁴⁶

In this light, protests, particularly those after 2009, have developed into a more coherent assault against regime legitimacy. This includes attacks on hybrid political and religious symbols of the Islamic Republic’s authority, as seen in 2019.⁴⁷

Organization

The impact of Iranian protest slogans can be magnified or diminished by the ties—or lack thereof—between the demonstrators chanting the messages and the Iranian government. Such ties may exist through the vehicle of support for a party, political organization, or political leader. They can also have implications for the size of the support base for each protest.

Despite the presence of anti-regime slogans in 2009, leaders from the Green Movement “went out of their way to say they weren’t aiming to bring down the system.”⁴⁸ This reluctance became one of many pressure points between lay demonstrators and protest leaders for the Green Movement,⁴⁹ culminating in the next batch, the Dey protests, being leaderless.

The leaderless quality of post-2009 protests is an important outcome illustrating the move from attempting to create change through reform to concluding that conflicts could no longer be resolved within the framework of the Islamic Republic. Mousavi was not a revolutionary, but a reformist who made specific demands within the confines of Iran’s theocratic system.⁵⁰

Reformists broadly embodied the hope that the Islamic Republic could change through its political system. But their expulsion from political power,⁵¹ coupled with the violent crackdown against the Green Movement, was a significant factor contributing to more anti-regime protests from different geographies and strata of Iranian society. Accordingly, post-2009 protests are structurally flatter than previous incidences—horizontal rather

than vertical in their organization. As such, these demonstrations enabled a broader and more diverse constituency to take part.

Demography

The Islamic Republic has been steadily losing its support base over the past two decades. In the 1990s, students took to the streets. In 2009, a substantial segment of Iran's urban middle class, including women and highly educated professionals like professors, lawyers, and doctors, mobilized against the state.⁵² Bazaar merchants, shopkeepers, and industrial workers who comprise the working poor and lower middle classes—traditionally the regime's base—were notably absent. While the “founding father” of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, claimed he established a government for the oppressed (*mostazafin*),⁵³ it is precisely this class that has vociferously risen up in recent years.⁵⁴ Three factors illustrate this shift in class dynamics: the geographic spread of demonstrations, the trigger or cause of each protest, and the growing backdrop of labor unrest.

The protests of 2019 and 2017–2018 drew from smaller cities and towns across the country, in contrast to protests in 2009⁵⁵ and 1999,⁵⁶ which were concentrated in the country's capital. Furthermore, the nature of the catalyst behind each protest indicates the segment of society most frustrated by such issues. Unrest in 1999, 2003, and 2009 was sparked over offenses to political freedoms. By contrast, the Dey and 2019 protests were ignited by a sudden 50-percent spike in food and gasoline prices,⁵⁷ respectively. The more recent unrest occurred amid a backdrop of increased labor strikes and protests by workers, pensioners, and teachers. Indeed, even merchants joined.⁵⁸ Sociologists Kevan Harris and Zep Kalb tracked labor demonstrations in Iran from 2012 to 2016, finding that the relative number of labor protests have been increasing yearly.⁵⁹ In 2015, for example, teacher protests occurred across a record 60 cities.⁶⁰ According to the BBC, over 70 cities saw major unrest in late 2017, and over 80 percent of these towns had witnessed at least one protest in the six months prior, mainly over economic and labor grievances.⁶¹ Steelworkers, hospital staff, railway employees, and bus drivers continued to protest conditions they compared to “slavery” well after the Dey uprising.⁶²

According to Parsa, given the Iranian state's and military's involvement in nearly all aspects of public life, and especially the economy,⁶³ wealth and class conflicts become distinctly political, and ultimately factor into whether a state democratizes via reform or revolution. Citing the role of the IRGC in Iran's economy, Parsa concludes reform is highly implausible in Iran.⁶⁴ This conclusion appears to be understood by the constituents of Iran's post-2009 protests, all of which were sparked by economic issues.

Geography

The waves of protests from 2017 onward are quantitatively and qualitatively distinct from those that took place from 1999 to 2009, with a wider geographic spread and a greater level of penetration of the country's smaller cities and towns.

As revealed by Yadollah Javani, the IRGC's director of political affairs, the 2019 protests were more widespread than the Dey uprising or even the Green Movement. According to Javani, 29 of 31 provinces featured anti-regime protests in November 2019.⁶⁵ A member of the Iranian Parliament claimed that protests occurred in more than 500 "points" in the country.⁶⁶ Meanwhile, opposition sources claimed that protests occurred in 191 cities and 30 provinces.⁶⁷ In comparison, according to Cabinet Spokesperson Ali Rabiee, the 2017–2018 protests took place in 160 cities.⁶⁸ The geographical spread of protests in both waves sharply contrasts with the 2009 and 1999 protests, which were confined to bigger cities, even though the size of protests in select urban centers, like Tehran, was much larger.

As is evident, the 2019 and 2017–2018 protests necessarily penetrated small towns. For example, Amnesty International, which tracks and reports on rights violations around the world, was able only to identify three protesters killed Tehran, while it identified 73 victims in Shahriar, Baharestan and Malard, which are smaller counties in Tehran province.⁶⁹ They are home to roughly 1.7 million people, most of whom are economically struggling,⁷⁰ while almost 9 million live in Tehran. In 2009 and 1999, on the other hand, most victims were in the city of Tehran. Looking at cities where protests occurred, the density of each demonstration in the eastern part of the country is lower in both 2017⁷¹ and 2019,⁷² but that is likely driven by topographic factors, like the distance between cities and towns in that region. The northern, southern, and western regions of the country, on the contrary, feature a higher concentration of towns and cities.

Violence

The Islamic Republic crushed the November 2019 wave of protests using an unprecedented level of violence. To measure and document the level of violence across waves of protests since 1999, we rely on four major sources: international media, statements by Iranian officials, opposition sources, and human rights organizations. Our comparison is based on the number of victims among protesters, the number of minors as victims, the number of casualties among police forces, the number of arrests, and the degree of property destruction.

The above sources put the numbers of victims of the November 2019 protests between 200 and 1,500. Citing three anonymous sources inside the Iranian government, Reuters reported the number of deaths to be an esti-

mated 1,500.⁷³ Conversely, Mojtaba Zolnouri, the chairman of the Iranian Parliament's National Security Commission, claimed the November 2019 protests had only 230 casualties, six of which were Law-Enforcement Force members.⁷⁴ Iran's interior minister estimated the number of deaths between 200 and 225 people, 80 percent of whom were killed with weapons used by law enforcement. Another 20 percent were killed with weapons that, according to Fazli, were not official weapons belonging to Law-Enforcement Forces.⁷⁵ Amnesty International, assessing eight out of 31 provinces, confirmed the identity of 304 protesters killed during the November 2019 uprising.⁷⁶ In comparison, the number of deaths in 1999 was estimated at four.⁷⁷ For 2009, the number of identified victims was reported to be between 70 and 112.⁷⁸ Even the lower bound of the number of victims for 2019 is higher than the upper bound of all previous three significant events, showcasing the level of violence employed.

Taken together, the data shows an upward trend in arrests, injured protesters, injured law enforcement, and attacks against government properties. Zolnouri, claimed that in the 2019 protests, 2,000 protesters and 5,000 law enforcement personnel were injured. He also claimed that 1,221 vehicles were burned, 65 percent of which were government-owned. He also claims that 991 banks and 123 gas stations were either burned or destroyed.⁷⁹ Protesters also targeted seminary schools and Friday prayer imam's offices across the country.⁸⁰ Relying on Iranian official statements, *Radio Farda* estimated at least 8,600 protesters were arrested in 22 provinces.⁸¹

Trends observed in the 2019 protests were consistent with events in the 2017-2018 protests, during which at least 5,000 protesters were arrested, 900 police were injured,⁸² and 60 Friday prayer imam offices were attacked.⁸³ The Critical Threats project at the American Enterprise Institute documented 134 protest occurrences from 28 December 2017 to 9 January 2018. The project identified 47 of the 134 as violent protests and confirms that in 22 cases of 134 protests, security forces either killed or injured protesters.⁸⁴ Conversely, in 2009, Iranian police announced that in the first 20 days of protests, it had arrested 1,032 protesters.⁸⁵ Human Rights Activists News Agency estimated the number for the same period to be around 3,000 and managed to identify 700 names.⁸⁶ Given that the Green Movement protests happened over a 20-month period, until its leaders were arrested, it is likely that the number of people arrested was significantly higher.

Observations on the Nature of Iranian Protest

Taken together, the aforementioned five measures not only prove that demonstrators have pushed past reform, but also that they are actively seeking revolution. Accordingly, these measures can be interpreted as signposts of what may come or intensify in years ahead.⁸⁷

Future protests are likely to feature more violence, including vandalism⁸⁸ against government property and greater numbers of protesters killed by security forces. This is the product of an erosion of older political taboos by the population—such as more nationalist slogans targeting the identity of the Islamist regime—or the state’s increasing comfort with the public use of force⁸⁹ and other measures.⁹⁰ Protests are also likely to occur in bursts, with shorter intervals between each uprising. Less than a year separated the Dey protests and the 2019 protests, yet a decade passed since the start of the student uprising in 1999 and the Green Movement in 2009, and eight years passed between the Green Movement and the Dey protests. Even under reformist governments, the regime is unable to address the lingering demands of demonstrators, and in some cases artificially raises expectations.⁹¹ This will feed more protests. Any issue or crisis may trigger this widening constituency for protests, be it political, social, economic, or even religious. But what will sustain their presence on the streets is a distrust in and distaste for the current system of government.

By this logic, foreign and security policy—so long as it pertains to issues of government competence—may well serve as the next inflection point for protests. The response to Tehran’s belated admittance that it accidentally downed a Ukrainian civilian airliner, leading to the deaths of all 176 civilians earlier this January, is case in point. The admittance triggered a series of short-lived demonstrations where a chant first heard during the Dey protests⁹² was uttered: “Our enemy is right here, they are lying that it is America.”⁹³

Such sentiment is sure to affect other Iranian political behavior, like voting. Mere weeks after the Islamic Republic admitted responsibility for the downing, Tehran held scheduled parliamentary elections with hardline candidates slated to dominate.⁹⁴ Even by official statistics, it was reported to be the lowest electoral turnout in the Islamic Republic’s history.⁹⁵ Previously, the regime sought to use national elections, even at the parliamentary level, to rally the population and project an image of unity.⁹⁶

CONCLUSION

As Iran prepares for a presidential election in 2021, popular participation in that event can serve as another test for the argument about the aims of Iranian protesters put forth in this paper. All else equal, key trends in recent demonstrations and compounding nationwide frustration with the Islamic Republic lead one to anticipate that turnout in the next election will be low. Should the Iranian public shun and boycott even tightly controlled elections, its revolutionary intentions would be further underscored. This would also be consistent with a popular chant among Iranian protesters since 2017: “Reformists, Principlists, the game is over!”⁹⁷ 🇮🇷

NOTES

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