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## The Tipping Point in Iran

The past six months show that the democratic movement is here to stay. That movement now needs a coherent plan and more structured leadership.

By ABBAS MILANI

When millions of peaceful demonstrators took to the streets of big Iranian cities in June to protest what was widely assumed to be a stolen election, many in the West wondered whether the movement had the will and vision to sustain itself.

Apologists for the regime here in America and in Iran dismissed the democratic protests as the angst of a small minority of Westernized yuppies or discontented academics. Clerics loyal to the regime used the incendiary language of class warfare. They dismissed the opposition as accomplices of the Great Satan and a small minority composed of wealthy urbanites fighting to reverse the gains the poor—mustazaf—have made around the country.

Over the past six months the regime has killed dozens of demonstrators, arrested hundreds of activists, and forced hundreds of others into exile. It took false comfort in the belief that it had defeated what it self-deludingly claimed had been nothing but an American-concocted velvet revolution.



European Pressphoto Agency

Iranian protestors hold a boot, a baton and a bulletproof vest allegedly belonging to police during a demonstration on Dec. 27.

This weekend's bloody protests during the holiday of Ashura culminate a pattern of persistence and perseverance on the part of the opposition. There can now be little doubt about the movement's staying power.

Western countries dealing with Iran must now recognize that the specter of this democratic movement hovers over every negotiation. Sunday's protests might have even ended the regime's delusions that it can once again cow the population into submission.

In cities big and small, people have continued to engage in large and small acts of civil disobedience. In the city of Rafsanjan, demonstrators freed two prisoners about to be hung by the regime. And in Tehran, those unwilling to come into the streets and brave the baton-wielding basijis and gun-toting policemen astride motorcycles, go to their rooftops under the cover of the night and shout "Death to the dictator!"

Even the mostly dormant but economically successful Iranian-American diaspora is beginning to show signs of eagerness to help those fighting on the front lines of democracy inside Iran. There are increasing numbers of solidarity demonstrations, efforts to lobby politicians, and aggressive fund-raising effort to provide support for Iranians being pressured by the regime.

Those who, for so long, have implicitly apologized for the regime by claiming that the only problem with it is that it is not afforded enough respect by the world, particularly by the U.S., must now see the poverty of their argument. The last six months have shown unequivocally that the problem with the Iranian regime is the regime itself.

Much has been written about the fact that Iran's democratic movement today combines the three characteristics of a velvet revolution—nonviolent, nonutopian and populist in nature—with the nimble organizational skills and communication opportunities afforded by the Web. Less discussed has been the significance of the youthfulness and Internet-savvy nature of the Iranian population.

Seventy percent of Iranians are under the age of 30. And in a population of 75 million, 22 million are Internet users. In spite of the nominal leadership of reformists like Medhi Karroubi, Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mohammad Khatami, the real leaders of the movement have been the thousands of groups and individuals who work autonomously, and whose structure replicates the Internet.

Until now, this lack of structure has given the movement its power. But the democratic movement has reached its own hour of reckoning.

As Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and his cohorts come nearer to a crisis, as rifts within the regime deepen in coming weeks, as the regime ratchets up its ruthlessness against the democrats, and as the world, with anxious eyes on the nuclear issue, carefully watches the domestic situation in Iran, the democratic movement must develop a more coherent plan of action and a more disciplined leadership. And the world, particularly the West, must also let the regime know that it will not stand by idly as the people of Iran are brutalized by the regime.

To many in the outside world, the regime's brashness—its willingness to murder peaceful demonstrators in broad daylight and its adventurism in the nuclear arena—have been shocking. But to the people of Iran, who have long suffered the consequences of the regime's political despotism, its ideological sclerosis, and its economic incompetence and corruption, recent events are only egregious manifestations of what they have endured for three decades. It is the slow, sinister grind of this structural violence that has now turned

nearly every strata of Iranian society—save those who owe their fortunes to the status quo—into the de facto foe of the regime.

According to Transparency International, Iran is today one of the most corrupt economies in the world. It also has the ignominy of topping the list of all countries in terms of brain drain. Each year, between 150,000 and 180,000 of the country's best and brightest leave the country. The yearly cost to Iran for this brain drain alone is estimated to be almost equal to the yearly cost of the Iran-Iraq War, according to the World Bank.

Falling oil prices are now forcing the regime to reduce the almost \$100 billion of subsidies it pays to keep quiet a discontent population. The reserves it accumulated when oil prices were \$150 per barrel have long been squandered by Ahmadinejad on harebrained schemes like carelessly making loans to start businesses that ended up fueling a real estate bubble, rather than creating jobs.

But this inevitable reduction of subsidies is sure to further reduce the standards of living for the poor and middle classes. This will make the horizon grim for the triumvirate of Revolutionary Guard commanders, Khamenei and Ahmadinejad who now rule Iran.

A politically discontent population forced to experience an unexpected economic downturn was a key element of the recipe that overthrew the Shah from the Peacock Throne in 1979. Poetic justice that the same sudden change in the country's economic fortune—and even the same use of religious rites and rituals for political purposes that brought the clerics to power 30 years ago—is now coming back to haunt them.

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