

*Prospects for Democracy in Iran  
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Democracy is a gift only a nation can give itself. Even then, it can give it solely after its body politic has reached certain maturity, and has developed the requisite organs of political mediation—from civil society and a propertied middle-class to a culture of religious tolerance and epistemological and political pluralism. There is, then, an implicit historic law of democratic determinism. And the history of modern Iran has been, hitherto, a tragic tale of rulers and intellectuals ignoring these laws, trying to bring democracy too soon, or halting its overdue arrival. The Islamic Revolution of itself was the result of a modernizing but authoritarian monarch realizing only too late the force of this democratic determinism. Ironically the very clerics who hijacked that democratic movement and went on to create a theocratic despotism are still harboring the delusion that they can ignore the very laws that brought them to power. They have now pinned their hopes first on sheer brutality, and secondarily on emulating the China model, or more specifically of affording people the economic benefits of a controlled market economy, while ruling over them with an iron fist.

The hope is but a chimera. Long before becoming a fad, that model was tried by the Shah, and though he delivered on the economic part of the pact, with Iran becoming a magnet for investments, as China is today, and though the Iranian economy was having, like China today annual double-digit growth rates, and though Iran enjoyed a level of religious and cultural tolerance that was unprecedented in modern Iran, the plan failed.

Today the regime has a failed economic policy, with living standards barely reaching the level they had before the revolution. There has been, in recent years, a massive flight of capital from Iran. Moreover, in the early years of the revolution the regime's zeal to create a larger *Hezbollah* for itself has now created, particularly in light of the regime's economic failures, a demographic time bomb. They need to create about a million jobs a year to just keep the unemployment level at its current double-digit figures (anywhere

between low double-digits according to the regime, and thirties according to economists.) Add to that a rising middle class, a million students in albeit inferior colleges, fifteen million boys and girls in schools, a highly wired society, with one of the largest per capita number of bloggers in the world, a fractured regime led by septuagenarians, and threatened by younger men with young Cassius' "lean and hungry looks," a powerful Iranian Diaspora, politically disorganized but committed to the still inchoate idea of a free, secular and democratic Iran, ethnic and religious minorities deeply disgruntled, and finally a women's movement that has been nothing but heroic in its war of attrition against the misogamy of the regime, and one conclusion is, I think, unavoidable. Never in the history of Iran's century-old dream of democracy, have the conditions for actualizing that dream have been more ready than today. But these are both the best and worst of times.

There is a regime that still has the support of a small but dedicated part of the population, and it has the economic power to sustain the heavily subsidized economy, and its handmaidens in the region like the Hezbollah in Lebanon. Moreover, the youthful population is "de-politicized" as the result of the failures of the Reform movement, and of the regime's decision to implement a calculated policy of opening a small space for the youth's private enjoyment—a space that is infested with drugs, seven million people addicted to opium and heroin, and a problem of AIDS and infected needles and with anxiety-laden opportunities to watch satellite television and attend private parties. Finally, the failure of the opposition to develop a coherent alternative, and the ability of the regime to use the poverty of programs from Diaspora media as a sign of the poverty of the opposition have combined to create a widespread pessimism amongst analysts and activists and convince some that they must write an obituary for the democratic movement. But just as the optimism of those who claim the regime is a simple nudge away from total collapse is false, the pessimism of those who see an intractably well-entrenched despotism is also wrong. The regime is strategically vulnerable but tactically powerful and nimble.

Eventually, the most basic human demands of women for equality, and of the youth for jobs and simple pure joys of living, and of the Iranian society at large to live their lives in twenty-first century, free from the force of dogma and of obscurantist will deliver democracy to Iran.

But the question of democracy in Iran is unfolding in History's interminably slow place but it is now entangled with the urgent nuclear question. The two clocks work at discordant times and tunes. The regime's nuclear program is to make itself impervious to outside pressure. The great bulk of the regime's leaders, including Revolutionary Guard commanders are the new rich, with their hands in a fifty billion dollar a year annual trough. They want to continue their lucrative hold on power. An attack on Iran will do for the regime what it wants from the bomb: it will rally public support for it, and it will also allow the regime to openly pursue the bomb. After an unprovoked attack, it is likely that Russia and China might more openly support the regime's nuclear program. Iran's nuclear problem has no military solution. Not only the nuclear issue, but the other thorny issues like the regime's support for terrorism, and its ability to threaten stability in the region has one solution, and it is for the rise of a democratic government in Iran. An effective opposition, relying only on the support of Iranian society and its Diaspora, can help expedite that transition.

But many analysts and activists in the Iranian opposition are stilled sadly mired in paradigms of politics that were at best suited to another time. While the left is trying to revive its old organizations, the right, still awed by the power of leftist intelligentsia is also trying to emulate the left and its methods. In a pseudo-totalitarian society like Iran, the quotidian is potently political. Only a new paradigm that recognizes the power of the seemingly apolitical grievances of the people and can channel it into a political force to overthrow the despotic regime can bring democracy to Iran.