

The 2009 Uprising in Iran: The Need to Dispel Prevailing Misconceptions

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The recent uprising in Iran, which started in the summer of 2009, has raised a number of major issues for debate in the international media and among politicians, academics and activists. This *Development Viewpoint* discusses the background to the uprising, its social composition and demands, and its implication for Iran and the region. In the process, it seeks to dispel some of the prevailing misconceptions about the nature of this mass movement.

The Background

Most analysts in the West portray Iran as a religiously conservative country, ignoring its momentous socio-economic transformations since the 1979 revolution. Especially during the 1990s and until today, Iran has undergone massive changes and has achieved substantial progress in human development.

A few statistics are illustrative. Seventy per cent of the population is urbanized. Female life expectancy is 71 years while male life expectancy is 70. Contraceptive prevalence is 77%; and 65% of university students are women. The literacy rate is 85%, including a 89% rate in urban areas and a 75% rate in rural areas. As a result, a young, educated population has emerged to support a powerful democracy movement and challenge the very state that has brought about these impressive developments.

The slogan of the 1979 revolution was independence, freedom and justice. Independence was achieved with the overthrow of the Shah's regime as the client state of the US. Under the Islamic Republic, the majority of the population has continued to struggle for freedom (for political inclusion and civil and individual liberties). But they do not regard Islam and modernity to be incompatible, or Islam to be inimical to personal freedoms.

In this regard, it is misleading to view the Islamic state in Iran as either totalitarian or archaic. It is an authoritarian, patriarchal and ideologically exclusive system that exerts power through modern state institutions (Bayat 2009). Moreover, prominent 'religious new thinkers' who are influential members of the democracy movement believe that religion cannot be imposed on the will of the people. They believe, instead, that religion's role in politics must be legitimized through popular support.

Such proponents are both inside and outside the system, and are often willing to ally with secularists, democratic nationalists and the left. They have far broader grassroots support than other parts of the democracy movement. In this context they refuse to be dragged into endorsing binary opposites, such 'the modern versus the traditional' or 'the West versus Islam'. Hence, they reject the view that their movement is imitating or following Western culture.

During the Iran-Iraq war, the struggle for political inclusion and civil and



Rally outside state TV station in Tehran on June 16, 2009

individual liberties was shoved to the sideline. It was the movement for post-war reconstruction and development that revived the struggle for democracy. In the 1990s social pressure from below led to the Reformist government of Mohammad Khatami, and to a period of the expansion and empowerment of civil society organizations, the media and social activism. At this time, some of the elements within the reform movement began calling for a massive extension of democracy.

Also during this same period, economic policies associated with neo-liberalism, privatisation and the shrinking of the social welfare system intensified the level of both poverty and corruption. As a result, in 2005, the conservative candidate Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who campaigned on an anti-poverty and anti-corruption platform, succeeded in becoming the president. However, after the election, poverty and corruption still increased, the privatisation process intensified, inflation soared to 25% and unemployment reached 10%.

Government restrictions imposed on free press, free assembly and free speech created obstacles in the path of democracy activists. But the constant threat of war and sanctions from the West also served to intensify the level of domestic political repression.

The Nature of the Movement

In the June 2009 election, President Ahmadinejad was allegedly re-elected for a second term. As is well known, millions of protesters throughout the country challenged the election result. They wore green ('the colour of Islam') in support of Mir-Hossein Mousavi (the defeated candidate) (see Ansari 2009). In the street demonstrations, a number of people died, and thousands were injured and imprisoned. Leaders were tortured and forced to confess that they were conspiring with foreign powers.

But the democracy movement resolutely regards Iran's independence as a hard-earned reality, which was achieved with great sacrifice as a result of the 1979 revolution. Foreign agents will not be allowed to manipulate the movement (Adib-Moghadam 2009). Indeed, many protesters displayed pictures of former Prime Minister Muhammad Mossadeq, arguing that they would not 'let history repeat itself'. In other words, they wanted democracy but not any kind of foreign intervention, such as the 1953 British and US coup that overthrew the Mossadeq government.

Contrary to much speculation in the West, the protest movement is not based on an 'urban modern secular middle class', represented by Mousavi, which is pitted against 'rural traditional religious working classes', represented by the government. The democratic opposition and pro-government forces derive their support from both constituencies.

Many people on both sides of the struggle have benefitted from state subsidies, state investments and the proceeds from oil income. But the majority is opposed to political repression and corruption. And they are supported, in fact, by a number of very influential clergy.

The Implications of the Movement

With the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, the Islamist movement that had played an important role in the overthrow of the Shah was transformed into a Shi'a government based on the theory of *Velayat – e faqih* (the Governance of the Jurist). However, from the early days of the government, Grand Ayatollahs, such as Mottahari and Montazeri, argued that religious theory and the religious community can be separated from politics and state authority.

Following these two Grand Ayatollahs, well-known dissident clerics, journalists and educators, who represent the 'religious new thinkers', have recently challenged the ruling orthodoxy and advocated a separation of religious values and secular realities.

They believe that it is possible to bring about just Islamic governance, which would be similar to the regime in early Islam under the leadership of Imam Ali, the first Shi'a Imam. During this regime, justice and human rights were accorded special importance. The discourse of these Iranian

clergy is similar to that of Grand Ayatollah Fadlallah, the spiritual leader of Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Grand Ayatollah Sistani in Iraq.

These Shi'a Islamic clerics have revived the concept of *ijtihad* (which is meant to be a bridge between divine injunctions and the practical requirements of any particular time and place). This approach, which is crucial to formulating an Islamic interpretation of modern developments and circumstances, is shaping the discourse on democracy in the region.

The movement for democracy in Iran has repeatedly disassociated itself from the influence of Western governments, which it believes are more interested in opposing the Iranian nuclear programme and the country's stance against Israel than in promoting democracy. In fact, the development of the country's nuclear energy programme is widely supported by Iranians, even by those who are critical of their government.

The opposition leaders in Iran do not favour dismantling the Islamic state; and they do not favour recognising the state of Israel or reducing Iran's influence in the region. They also oppose Western sanctions because they can have catastrophic humanitarian consequences in Iran.

Any covert operations by intelligence agencies and external funding by Western governments for a so-called 'velvet revolution' will only serve to undermine the grassroots democratic movement in Iran. The future of democracy in Iran (as well as in the region) depends not only on challenging domestic repression but also on opposing imperial domination. The success of the democratic movement will also depend on overcoming the growing divide and misunderstanding between the West and the Muslim world.

This Development Viewpoint is based on Elaheh Rostami-Povey's forthcoming 2010 book, *Iran's influence: A Religio-Political State in its Region and in the World*, Zed Books.

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