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SHORT COMMENTS

Analyzing the Why of Iran’s Ongoing Protests and its Prospects

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Athens, December 2022

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Analyzing the Why of Iran's Ongoing Protests and its Prospects

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Following the death of Mahsa Amini, on September 16th, 2022, Iran has witnessed unprecedentedly widespread protests and unrest in terms of the presence of diverse social forces, the participation of the Iranian diaspora and the duration of the turmoil. It is important to highlight the very large presence of teenagers, youths and their (virtual) networking as one of the prominent features of the recent protests.

Although on the surface it seems that the issue of the hijab or the Morality Police is the root of the recent protests, it would be naive to think that the heated reaction of the protesters is exclusively due to the issue of the Islamic headscarf. Amini's death in the Police department was just the spark to ignite the accumulated outrage. Several reasons can be listed for Iran's recent protests, which can be classified into economic, political, and cultural.

From an economic point of view, in recent years, Iran's economy has gradually weakened due to the severe US sanctions and the poor internal governance; therefore poverty has increased by an unprecedented percentage. According to statistics, the population below poverty line in Iran has increased in the last three years, and according to the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, approximately 38 percent of Iran's population lives in poverty and needs subsidies. According to the latest official statistics, there are a total of 24,901,696 Iranian households in the country that are receiving financial aid. These households form a total sum of 74 million people. In this sense, it seems that according to Iran's population of 84 million people, only 10 million people are not receiving subsidies. Another important factor is the widespread despair among citizens. Many young people and even senior citizens do not have a clear vision of the future. Iranian Students Polling Agency (ISPA) published the results of a survey in 2021, which shows that about 59 percent of citizens are convinced that the country's situation will not improve in the future.

From a political point of view, part of Iranian people perceive that it is no longer possible to change the ballot box result, and for this reason, more than half of the voters did

not participate in the last presidential elections of Iran (2021). In addition, many people who had believed in and were inspired by Ebrahim Raisi and voted for him have been disappointed after seeing his one-year weak economic performance. Furthermore, the failure to revive the JCPOA's negotiations has belied people's expectations for the future. A potential revival of the JCPOA's talks a few months ago, could have contributed in weakening social anger and curb the dynamic of the protests, by giving people some hope for the improvement of the country's economic situation. In addition, the Government's refusal to acknowledge the protesters' demands and its persistent claim that Iranian social unrest is stirred up by foreign powers has rallied demonstrators – who insist in their dynamic street reactions – and has polarized society. Protesters seek some form of recognition from the Government and as long as the latter refuses to accept their fair social fight people will keep on demonstrating unless the State starts to compromise with their demands. It should be underlined that the large number of people killed in November 2018 and in the recent protests has widened the political gap between the regime and the protesters.

Finally, one should take into account the cultural perspective of the turmoil. In the recent protests, two lifestyles clash with each other; the “*traditional-religious*” approach which the regime promotes and encourages and the “*liberal*” one that the protesters fight for. It is undeniable that Political and social mobilization has taken place in Iran and one of the largest groups of society, women, has become the poster child of these protests. At the epicenter of these dynamic demonstrations is the social rejection of the conservative religious way of life that the Islamic Republic has imposed on Iranian society. The symbolic removal and burning of the Islamic headscarves but also women cutting their hair in public – as people worldwide have witnessed through media – strongly confirm the attempt of the Iranian people to liberalize and modernize society by changing traditional and religious stereotypes. This cultural divide has created a wider potential for political and social mobilization that cannot be easily suppressed.

Trying to analyze current Iranian protests and taking into account all the above mentioned approaches, there are three possible scenarios for Iran's current protests:

The fall of the regime

One of the possibilities is the collapse of the regime and its replacement by a coalition of leaders who are committed to replacing it with a new model of governance. This scenario is very unlikely due to the strong coherence of the Government structures, the ruling elite which seeks to maintain its power in the internal political landscape, the ability of the regime to control state's security forces and to suppress the opposition and street protests, and the lack of solidarity of the majority of Iranian society towards protesters.

Reconciliation and fundamental reforms

The second scenario is a compromise between the regime and the protesters seeking on the one hand to end social unrest and on the other to promote a series of fundamental reforms satisfying social demands. This scenario is also not very likely either considering the strong animosity between the two parties, the absence of mediators, the Government's perception of the protesters as sedition-makers and agents of foreign interests, and finally the Government's reluctance to compromise as it would be perceived as a sign of weakness.

Suppression of the protests

If the protests continue and the violence between demonstrators and security forces is maintained, the latter is expected to strengthen its suppression, putting an end to social turmoil in the short term. But social demands will remain active like a fire under the ashes until another incident will trigger new protests and social unrest. This scenario is the most likely in Iran's current situation.

In any case, the current protests are considered as a turning point in Iran's political and cultural developments since 1979 as the country faces a strong challenge that could become an historic move forward. After almost three months of protests something has indeed started to change in the conservative way of life and the status of women in Iran, and there is no way back.





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