



Iran's New Revolutionary Moment

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Thirteen years ago, as the Bush administration and its "freedom agenda" entered its second term in office, *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman took the pulse of popular sentiment in Iran, and came away with some surprising conclusions. Iran, Friedman heard from Iranian expatriates and regime insiders, was the ultimate "red state," where the population did not share the ruling regime's hatred of the West and where people craved greater freedom and democracy.

Back then, the prediction turned out to be premature. Whatever its internal problems, Iran's clerical establishment succeeded in weathering discontent with its rule – both then and again just a few years later, when the fraudulent summer 2009 reelection of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad brought millions into the streets in popular protests that coalesced into the so-called "Green Movement."

But the assessment Friedman heard back in 2005 may be more apt now. That is because, over the past half-year, Iran has been convulsed by persistent protests that have presented its leaders with the greatest challenge to their legitimacy since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

The primary reason for the current unrest in Iran is undoubtedly economic. While the 2015 nuclear deal with the West engendered hope among ordinary Iranians of an economic "peace dividend," the years since have seen no such thing. Instead, Iran's ayatollahs have used the benefits of their agreement with the West to expand defense spending, deepen involvement in foreign theaters (like Syria and Yemen), and broaden support for terrorist proxies throughout the region.

Meanwhile, economic conditions within the Islamic Republic have gotten steadily worse. Unemployment in Iran (officially gauged at some 12.5 percent), is unofficially much higher – and now reaches as high as 60 percent in some cities. Poverty remains pervasive as well, with some 33 percent of the country's population (26 million Iranians) suffering from "absolute poverty," and six percent facing starvation. Meanwhile, commodity prices have risen significantly, while purchasing power has declined as Iran's national currency, the *rial*, has plummeted in value in recent months. This combination of domestic neglect and foreign adventurism has generated a massive domestic backlash within Iran.

But today's ferment possesses other causes as well. Unlike the 2009 uprising, which stopped short of calling for an outright abolition of Iran's clerical regime, today's protests embody a fundamental rejection of the country's current system of government. Widespread slogans like "Death to the dictator!" (a reference to Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei) and public signs of protest, like defiant unveiling by scores of Iranian women, make abundantly clear that many of the protestors now question the authority and legitimacy of Iran's unelected clerical elite.

Environmental concerns, too, have helped galvanize and sustain Iran's opposition. The Iranian government's chronic resource mismanagement, and its failure to fix the country's worsening drought conditions, has created deepening friction between Iran's population and regime authorities across the length and breadth of the country.

These factors continue to fuel public opposition to the Iranian regime, which has persisted since the last days of 2017 – and which has expanded anew in recent days.

This ferment, moreover, is poised to get much worse. Pursuant to the Trump administration's decision to formally withdraw from the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, the United States has begun to reimpose a broad array of economic penalties on the Islamic Republic. The first round of these sanctions, which were activated this week, will hit Iran's automotive sector and its trade in precious metals, among other targets. The second, more serious, round is slated to kick in in November, and will include a blacklisting of Iran's Central Bank – and sweeping penalties on the companies and countries doing business with or through it. Cumulatively, these restrictions have the power to fundamentally undermine Iran's already-ailing economy, which is now reeling from a veritable exodus of business from the Islamic Republic.

But to what end? Publicly, at least, the Trump administration isn't seeking an end to the Islamic Republic. Rather, as Defense Secretary Jim Mattis recently noted, Washington's objective is to force Iran's leaders "to change their behavior" and make the country a more constructive regional actor. But it has become apparent that, if Iran's clerical elites fail to do so, America's new Iran policy will shift toward seeking "regime collapse."

As current conditions within the Islamic Republic make clear, that is no longer an unachievable aim.

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