



Marking four decades of Iranian decline

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Next month, Iran marks the 40th anniversary of the 1979 Islamic Revolution that catapulted the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his followers to power in Tehran. As that milestone approaches, the country's leaders are working overtime to paint their clerical regime as a resounding success.

"In these 40 years 400 years' worth of service has been rendered to this country and we have had 400 years' worth of growth and progress; technology, gadgets, various equipment, population and lifestyle, and now it is totally different from the past," the Ayatollah Mohammad Yazdi, a member of the country's powerful Guardian Council, recently told the conservative Iranian Student News Agency.

The data, however, paints a very different story. A veritable mountain of statistical evidence points to the fact that, in the past four decades of clerical rule, the Islamic Republic has experienced a precipitous decline in domestic prosperity and global standing.

According to the World Bank, per capita GDP in Iran has declined by more than 30 percent in real terms since the mid-1970s, as the purchasing power of the country's national currency, the rial, has plummeted. Those same statistics indicate that Iran's economy has dropped from 17th to 27th place in the world in the four decades since the revolution — one of the steepest declines in modern history. In aggregate terms, economists say, Iranian citizens are now 30 percent poorer than they were in 1979.

Iran's leaders, however, are not. Massive corruption and graft have unjustly enriched the country's religious rulers — and done so at the expense of the masses. A 2013 investigation by the Reuters news agency found that Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, now controls a financial empire worth some \$95 billion, and that this fortune was amassed through property seizures, shady transactions and sweetheart deals. Other regime insiders — like Iranian parliament speaker Ali Larijani and Javad Zarif, the country's urbane foreign minister — are likewise said to have acquired personal fortunes worth tens of millions of dollars by leveraging their positions of privilege.

Ordinary Iranians, meanwhile, have been left to languish amid a range of societal ills. The rate of "absolute poverty" within the Islamic Republic has soared in recent years, and now encompasses a third of society, according to credible estimates. Drug use has also spiked. Iran today is among the most drug addicted societies in the world, with some 2.8 million Iranians (nearly three-and-a-half percent of Iran's population of 83 million) addicted to narcotics. That figure, moreover, has more than doubled over the past decade in a deeply telling indicator of domestic misery.

Joblessness, too, is rampant, because of a chronic inability on the part of the Iranian regime to create meaningful employment. Some 3 million able-bodied Iranians — 40 percent of them recent graduates — are now estimated to be without work, setting the stage for what experts warn could become a "crisis" of social cohesion.

It's no wonder ordinary Iranians are angry, and increasingly vocal about it. For more than a year, the Islamic Republic has been rocked by recurring grassroots protests in an unprecedented outpouring of discontent with the mismanagement and skewed priorities of clerical rule. Over time, and absent a meaningful response from authorities, these grievances have grown into a full-blown repudiation of regime ideology.

Against this backdrop, the remedial measures now being implemented by Iran's leaders — from the introduction of dedicated "anti-corruption courts" to the passage of new anti-money laundering legislation to attract foreign direct investment — are simply too little too late. After four decades of decline, Iranians understand all too well that, although the country's dire domestic conditions may now be exacerbated by U.S. sanctions, their root causes are in fact local. More and more, they have also become convinced that meaningful reform simply isn't possible, at least under the country's current leadership.

That's why the protests now taking place throughout Iran are bound to persist. And it is the reason the 40th anniversary of Khomeini's revolution will be a bitter one for Iranians, no matter what regime stalwarts might say.

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