



# The New Faces of Iranian Protest

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In the summer of 2009, tens of thousands of Iranians took to the streets of Tehran and other major cities in what became months of sustained demonstrations against the Iranian regime. The catalyst was the reelection of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who had secured a second presidential term in a vote marred by glaring official fraud. But, over time, the protests became a more fundamental call for wholesale reform of Iran's political system. And, although ultimately unsuccessful, what came to be known as the Green Movement laid bare the simmering discontent of millions of Iranians who were chafing under the thumb of Iran's corrupt, unrepresentative theocracy and the clerics who run it.

A decade later, that dissatisfaction runs deeper than ever. For nearly two years now, renewed grassroots protests have taken place throughout Iran. While more modest in size and scope than those that characterized the Green Movement, these demonstrations have proven to be more diverse and more enduring. They involve activists from various social strata within the country and are aimed at everything from Iran's deepening economic malaise to the regime's misplaced foreign policy priorities. Most significantly, they increasingly reflect a fundamental rejection of the Islamic Republic as a whole.

This fact was made clear this past June when fourteen prominent Iranian civil society figures (among them professors, filmmakers, and human rights campaigners) marked the tenth anniversary of the Green Movement by issuing a public statement directed at the Iranian regime. In it, they laid out three demands that were striking in both their simplicity and their symbolism.

The first was for Ali Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader and unquestioned religious and political head of state, to resign. The second was the abolition of Iran's current constitution, which enshrines the concept of *velayat e-faqih* (guardianship of the jurist) that provides legitimacy to clerical rule. The third was for the convening of a national referendum for the purposes of drafting a new, secular constitution for the country.

That vision of a post-theocratic future lies at the core of the protests taking place throughout Iran today. A decade ago, many in the Green Movement still believed that it might be possible to reform the Islamic Republic, and to significantly modify both its domestic and international behavior. Today, few Iranians do. Instead, they see the regime as a closed ideological system – one that is resistant to reform and fundamentally at odds with democracy and individual freedoms. And, they say, since evolution is impossible, a new revolution has become necessary.

They have paid an exceedingly high price for those ideas. Most of the signatories of the June 2019 letter – as well as the fourteen women who signed a subsequent August missive decrying the regime's "gender apartheid" and calling for greater equality – are now in prison, having been rounded up by Iranian authorities and charged with assorted crimes against the state. But their message and their sacrifice have resonated throughout Iranian society, making the so-called "14+14" an inspiration for further anti-regime activism among the diverse strains of dissent now taking place within the Islamic Republic.

Yet their story isn't well known beyond Iran – at least not yet. That, however, will change if the Coalition of Committed for a Secular Democratic Iran has its way. The core mission of the Coalition, a civic group that is now being put together by journalists and activists outside of Iran, is to raise the profile of the "Council of 14" and what it stands for. The Coalition has begun doing so through television interviews, social media postings, and via a recent open letter to the P5+1 nations that requested formal recognition of the campaign for a secular, democratic Iran.

These efforts have a concrete objective. Unlike other Iranian opposition movements, the Coalition has a clear barometer for success. "If just five percent of the Iranian population- four million people – come out in the street against the regime," notes Coalition member Nazila Golestan, "the Islamic Republic will fall." That, she maintains, will be true notwithstanding the regime's extensive instruments of repression, chief among them the feared Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. "IRGC members have family in Iran, too. They understand their suffering, and they won't shoot them if they are out on the street."

Golestan's inspiration is Czechoslovakia's "Charter 77," the political document formulated by Vaclav Havel and other anti-communist campaigners during the Cold War that became the rallying point for a broader civic movement against Soviet rule. The Charter's call for free association and human rights inspired a generation of Czech political activists and laid the basis for the country's eventual Velvet Revolution in 1989.

Reza Pirzadeh is convinced that this will happen in Iran as well – provided the United States throws its weight behind the current movement. Yet what is advocated by Pirzadeh, another member of the Coalition, isn't just direct American aid to the protesters themselves (although financial support for ventures like a “strike fund” for activists is clearly sorely needed). Rather, he argues, the single most impactful thing the United States can do is “to upgrade its soft power capabilities and use them to communicate better with Iranians.”

To its credit, the Trump administration has begun to do just that. Over the past year, under the direction of its Special Representative for Iran, Brian Hook, the State Department has significantly ramped up its focus on social, humanitarian and cultural issues within the Islamic Republic – dramatically boosting its credibility with the Iranian people in the process. But such steps need to be augmented by a more broad-based informational offensive on the part of the United States. Pirzadeh stresses the need for still greater attention to things like women's empowerment, the environment, and human rights – the very same issues that now resonate with Iranians themselves. By highlighting those topics, and by showcasing the Iranian regime's repressive nature, the U.S. can both assist and inspire Iran's domestic activists.

Here, the Administration's most potent potential weapons are its official tools of outreach to Iran: the Voice of America's Persian Service and *Radio Farda*. Yet both have come under significant criticism in recent years for a multitude of failures, most glaringly their hesitance to robustly communicate American values and ideals to Iran's captive population. And while some notable reforms to programming and content have been made in recent months, it is clear that much more still needs to be done in order to make America's outreach to the Iranian people truly influential.

Meanwhile, the Coalition, and the broader domestic movement it represents, continues to gather steam. In the process, it has emerged as a potent antidote to the conventional wisdom in Washington, which holds that Iran's current protest wave doesn't have direction or leadership and is therefore destined to peter out over time. That, Golestan and Pirzadeh suggest, simply isn't true. Today's anti-regime activism actually has more than two dozen public faces. And if they become better known globally, these personalities could help galvanize still greater resistance to the country's clerical regime.

In order for that to happen, however, the United States will need to help tell their stories.

*Ilan Berman is senior vice president of the American Foreign Policy Council in Washington, DC. This piece is the fifth in a series of articles exploring the beliefs, ideas and values of different factions within the Iranian opposition. The first installment, covering the agenda of former Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi and his supporters, can be found [here](#). The second, outlining the worldview of the Mujahideen e-Khalq, appears [here](#). The third, examining the activism of Masih Alinejad and the broader Iranian anti-hijab movement, is located [here](#). The fourth, detailing the efforts of activists like Mariam Memarsadeghi and Tavaana to promote democracy within Iran, is accessible [here](#).*