



IRAN DEMOCRACY MONITOR

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Radicalism and Reform in Islamic Republic of Iran

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Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Iran

Iran has been one of the countries hardest hit by the spread of the novel coronavirus known as COVID-19. Even before the World Health Organization declared the disease a pandemic on March 11th, it was clear that the illness - which originated in China's Wuhan Province - had become a major domestic crisis for the Iranian regime, which to date has failed to respond decisively and comprehensively to the illness. In this special issue of the Iran Democracy Monitor, we look at some of the most salient aspects of this rapidly-changing story.

A RAGING INFECTION

While Iranian authorities have tried to keep a tight lid on official infection and transmission statistics within the Islamic Republic, some useful data points are nonetheless leaking out. As of March 12th, The Johns Hopkins University - which operates one of the most comprehensive online coronavirus resources publicly available - ranked Iran third in the world in the number of coronavirus infections, behind only China, the origination point of the disease, and Italy, with over 10,000 reported cases within the Islamic Republic. However, outside observers say that, based upon the prevalence of cases that have been publicly noted, as well as the scope of infection in the ranks of the Iranian leadership, the real spread of coronavirus in Iran might actually be orders of magnitude greater. (*The Atlantic*, March 9, 2020; The Johns Hopkins University, March 12, 2020)

TALLYING REGIME LOSSES SO FAR

Just how significant of an impact has COVID-19 had on Iran's leadership? The answer appears to be "very." At the beginning of March, "about two dozen members of parliament and at least 15 other current or former top figures" were estimated to have contracted the virus - a figure that has risen significantly since. Among those now known to have been infected are the country's vice president, Eshaq Jahangiri, culture and tourism minister Ali Asghar Mounesan, and Reza Rahmani, Iran's minister of industry, mines and business. Most recently, a senior advisor to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, former Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati, also reportedly tested positive for the disease. To date, at least seven Iranian officials have died from the illness, including Mohammad Mirmohammadi, another advisor to Khamenei; former deputy foreign minister Hossein Sheikholeslam, and; parliamentarians Mohammad Ali Ramezani Dastak and Fatimeh Rehber. (*Washington Post*, March 4, 2020; *Doha Al Jazeera*, March 11, 2020; *Radio Farda*, March 13, 2020)

THE LIKELY CAUSE OF IRAN'S SUFFERING

Why has Iran been particularly hard hit by the coronavirus? The Islamic Republic's close and ongoing strategic relationship with China has emerged as a major contributing cause. Specifically, Iran's deepening economic and political relationship with the PRC in recent years - and the intensification of those ties in the face of America's "maximum pressure" policy, have made Iran increasingly dependent on Chinese commerce and assistance. "China Railway Engineering Corp. is building a \$2.7 billion high-speed rail line through [the Iranian holy city of] Qom," notes the *Wall Street Journal*. "Chinese technicians have been helping refurbish a nuclear-power plant nearby. There are also Chinese religious students studying at Qom's seminaries." These interactions have had concrete effects. "Iranian health officials have said the source of the outbreak is likely either Chinese workers in Qom or an Iranian businessman from Qom who travelled to China," the *Journal* notes. (*Wall Street Journal*, March 11, 2020)

THE COST OF "ISLAMIC MEDICINE"

The coronavirus crisis has helped to highlight the deep - and growing - disconnection between Iran's religious establishment and the rest of the country's population. Religious centers throughout the country, such as Qom, have become epicenters of infection, while the regime's response to the spread of the disease in those places has been hampered by the significant deference that has historically been paid to the authority and autonomy of the country's clergy - a deference that is now exacting real-world consequences. "In recent years, the Shia clergy's longstanding quarrel with the medical field has helped nurture a previously marginal trend: that of uncompromisingly rejecting modern medicine and promoting 'Islamic medicine' as the true science inspired by divine knowledge," Mehdi Khalaji of the Washington Institute explains. "Regime officials have systematically promoted 'Islamic medicine' in parallel to modern medical care, even though the phrase was coined not too long ago and lacks any deep historical tradition or legitimacy." (Washington Institute, March 9, 2020)

TEHRAN MOVES TO MUTE CRITICISM

Amid the mounting crisis, Iranian authorities have focused once more on pockets of opposition within the country - albeit for a different reason. Regime security forces are now said to be carrying out arrests of political activists and intimidating regime critics who have objected to way in which the Iranian government has been handling the current situation. In just one example, Mehdi Hajati, a former councilman in Shiraz and human rights activist, was recently detained for an online post in which he criticized official mismanagement of the current situation. (*Radio Farda*, March 12, 2020)