



Iran's Opposition Is Sending Washington a Message

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Something profound is taking shape inside Iran. Mere months from the country's next presidential election, and in the midst of a U.S. push for reengagement with its clerical regime, recent days have seen new signs of life from—and coordination among—Iran's notoriously fragmented opposition.

As *The Foreign Desk* first reported, a new civic campaign launched by dissidents inside Iran has begun to percolate among opposition elements both inside and outside the country. The grassroots effort, dubbed "No to the Islamic Republic" (and boasting a distinctive graphic and anthem) has emerged in recent days in Iran's bazaars and public places in the form of pamphlets, graffiti and other media. Since then, Iran's former crown prince, Reza Pahlavi, as well as hundreds of influential artists, musicians and cultural personalities, have embraced its call for an abolition of clerical rule.

That convergence is noteworthy. Historically, Iran's opposition groups have been riven by deep ideological divisions and fractious ethnic politics that have prevented them from coalescing around a common vision or political agenda. By contrast, the current campaign is enjoying support from across the Iranian political spectrum, from "reformists" who previously backed a kinder, gentler Islamic Republic to outright atheists to those who support a restoration of the old monarchy. The common denominator appears to be a profound rejection of the country's current, clerical system of government—and of the unaccountable ayatollahs who administer it.

The new effort reflects the promise and peril now facing the Iranian opposition. On the one hand, the Islamic Republic is currently at its frailest point in recent memory. Nearly two years of the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" policy succeeded in profoundly weakening the Iranian regime, both economically and politically. In the process, the clerical regime's iron grip on the country has become noticeably less secure, inspiring those seeking domestic change.

That, however, isn't a permanent condition. This summer, Iranians will go to the polls in the country's next presidential election. The outcome of that contest, however, will ultimately be determined by Iran's clerical institutions, which wield veto power over candidates, procedures and overall electoral outcomes. Already, there are indicators that the institutions' preference for Iran's next president will be an ideological hard-liner. That, in turn, could set the stage for a consolidation of power by the regime and a massive clampdown on domestic opposition to it.

Such an outcome is even more likely if the regime is propped up anew by the United States. Since it took office earlier this year, the Biden administration has fast-tracked reengagement with Iran as a centerpiece of its Middle East policy. That effort is ongoing, despite Iran's unwillingness so far to restart direct talks over its nuclear program. Opposition elements fear this could eventually result in an arrangement that would significantly strengthen the country's current regime—at the opposition elements' expense.

That, after all, is precisely what happened before. Early in its tenure, the Obama administration's eagerness for some sort of deal with Iran's ayatollahs led it to stand by in the aftermath of 2009's fraudulent presidential re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, when activists took to the streets by the millions in what came to be known the "Green Movement." That fateful inaction telegraphed to Iran's leaders that they could repress their domestic opposition with impunity. Over the ensuing months, the mullahs did just that, throttling the "Green Movement" and imprisoning or eliminating its leaders. Thereafter, massive direct and indirect sanctions relief associated with the 2015 nuclear deal boosted Iran's internal stability and set its regime on a path of sustained regional hegemony.

Today, Iran's opposition confronts a similar danger. Since late 2017, Iran has been buffeted by persistent protests that—though more modest in scope than 2009's uprisings—have proven to be both resilient and broadly based. And unlike the "Green Movement," which held out at least some hope for reform of the existing system, today's opposition wave has profoundly repudiated Iran's clerical regime and its ideological system of government.

That's a message the new campaign is seeking to convey to the Biden administration. The hope among its proponents, clearly, is for the White House to recognize what they already know: It is the Islamic Republic itself that is the primary obstacle to civilizational advancement in their home country.

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