



Iranians Are Looking Beyond Ayatollahs And The Islamic Republic

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What happens when most of your population wants you to go out of business? For Iran's ayatollahs, the answer may come sooner rather than later, as evidence mounts that the captive population they control is seeking fundamental change.

Just how much is showcased in the most recent survey of Iranian attitudes by GAMAAN, the Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in Iran. The GAMAAN poll of over 20,000 Iranians in 31 provinces, carried out last month, found that some 53% of respondents self-identified as outright proponents of regime change, while an additional 26% supported "structural transformation and transition away from the Islamic Republic."

By contrast, merely a fifth (21%) of those polled by the Netherlands-based center expressed support for the principles undergirding the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's Islamic Revolution or said they preferred to work within the current system in order to amend it.

The figures are striking. They put the lie to the tired Western trope that a profound struggle for political direction is taking place within the current regime in Tehran. For years, a bevy of analysts and experts sympathetic to the Islamic Republic have argued that such a contest is underway between Iran's reformist elements and its conservative ones — and have coaxed the U.S. to soften its policy toward Tehran as a way of empowering the former.

As the GAMAAN survey makes clear, however, such a split is at best a marginal one in today's Iranian body politic. Rather, the defining schism today is between those who want to preserve Khomeini's system of *velayat e-faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurisprudent) and those who repudiate it outright. Its findings serve to confirm what opponents of the current Iranian regime have long asserted: that, more than four decades after the 1979 revolution, the ideological bonds keeping Iran's clerical regime together are more brittle than ever before.

It's a reality that Iran's rulers understand all too well, even if Western leaders still don't. That's why, in the fall of 2019, the Iranian regime authorized overwhelming force against protestors in an attempt to quell — or at least temporarily mute — a persistent tide of opposition on the Iranian "street."

In that clampdown, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei reportedly authorized the country's security forces to "do whatever it takes" to suppress the uprisings. The resulting crackdown left more than 1,500 dead in the worst cycle of internal repression in the Islamic Republic's history. Yet the same conditions that animated those protests (among them official corruption, intolerant religious rule and massive economic mismanagement) still obtain, and have contributed to the widespread disaffection documented in the GAMAAN study.

None of this, of course, means that the Iranian regime is ripe for collapse. Iran's ayatollahs have weathered challenges to their rule before and survived. That they have is attributable in large part to their willingness to use their internal organs of repression to preserve their hold on power — and by the willingness of the international community (including the United States) to allow that brutality to take place without a serious response.

Yet the GAMAAN data suggests that the arc of Iranian history may be bending once again toward fundamental change. At the very least, more and more Iranians have come to grasp the notion that the Islamic Republic is a closed ideological system that is incapable of reform. That, in and of itself, is an important turning point. After all, history tells us that when evolution becomes impossible, revolution becomes probable. In the case of Iran, the big question is precisely when such a transition might happen. Iran's rulers, of course, will try to delay finding out the answer as long as possible.