



News Flash: The Islamic Republic Is Far From Popular

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Just how durable is Iran's clerical regime, really? For years, Iran's ayatollahs have worked diligently to convince the world that their Islamic revolution is a popular—and permanent—enterprise.

The reality, however, is very different. Forty-three years after the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's Islamic Revolution swept the shah of Iran from power and turned that country from an erstwhile ally into an implacable adversary of the United States, the legitimacy of its radical ideology is clearly waning.

That's the conclusion of the newest survey published by the Netherlands-based GAMAAN institute. The poll, the results of which were released in late March, asked nearly 20,000 Iranians (most of them inside the country) about their political preferences and their thoughts regarding the system that should ideally govern their country. The responses were striking—and amounted to a profound repudiation of Iran's clerical regime and its priorities.

"The results show that 88% of the population consider 'having a democratic political system' to be 'fairly good' or 'very good,'" the GAMAAN study lays out. By contrast, "67% of the population consider 'having a system governed by religious law' to be 'fairly bad' or 'very bad.'" Moreover, just 22 percent of those polled supported the idea of an "Islamic republic," with the rest preferring everything from parliamentary democracy to the re-establishment of the shah-era monarchy. Moreover, nearly three-quarters (72 percent) of those polled opposed the head of state being a "religious authority," and a whopping 66% did not agree that that person should be appointed for life.

These attitudes should matter a great deal to the West—and most of all, to the United States. Since taking office last year, the Biden administration has made revival of the 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1 powers (the U.S., UK, France, Russia, China and Germany) the centerpiece of its Middle East policy. It has done so over the objections of regional allies like Israel, Bahrain the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia—all of whom are threatened by an increasingly aggressive and adventurist Iran. And it has proceeded despite numerous other demerits baked into the current agreement, including the fact that it would significantly weaken Western sanctions on Russia by providing that country's nuclear agency, ROSATOM, with a \$10 billion carveout for civilian nuclear work with its Iranian counterpart.

Moreover, the push for some sort of new deal with Iran has proven to be remarkably resilient, despite significant opposition at home. Even now, with negotiations stalled over Iran's controversial demand that the U.S. remove its clerical army, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, from the government's Foreign Terrorist Organizations list, more than a few supporters of renewed engagement with Tehran are holding out hope that some sort of deal might still materialize.

If it does, though, the results would run counter to the desires of most Iranians, as the GAMAAN findings amply show. That's because a new agreement would have the effect of strengthening Iran's clerical regime—and doing so at the expense of the Iranian people and their political choices. Moreover, it would take effect at precisely the time that Iran's current government is arguably at its weakest point in four decades as a result of multiple domestic crises, from a deepening water deficit to intensifying protests over rising food prices to declining religiosity among ordinary Iranians.

It's no wonder, then, that Iran's rulers have latched on to the idea of a new nuclear agreement as a lifeline for their ailing and increasingly unpopular regime. Team Biden, many of whose principals were stakeholders in the original 2015 nuclear deal, seems wedded to the notion as well. But the most likely outcome of such an arrangement, a reinvigorated Islamic Republic, is not what the vast majority of Iranians themselves want.

Surely, that is relevant.

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