

Understanding the 2017-18 Iran Protests

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In the space of less than a decade, Iran has witnessed two major mass uprisings, sending shockwaves through the body politic of the Islamic Republic. These uprisings, by far the largest expressions of dissent in post-revolutionary Iran, have deepened the Islamic Republic's seemingly chronic crisis of legitimacy, and they have transformed in no uncertain terms the dynamics between the state and the various classes within Iranian society.

The first of these uprisings, dubbed the Green Movement (*jonbesh-e sabz*), erupted in June 2009 in the aftermath of a controversial and hotly contested presidential race that saw the victory of incumbent conservative president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, over his main rival, the reformist eMir-Hossein Mousavi. Convinced of widespread electoral fraud, scores of Mousavi supporters took to the streets in protest, carrying green-colored signs (green being Mousavi's official campaign color) as well as banners reading "Where is my vote?" (*ray-e man kojast?*). Soon, many others joined the protests, either in solidarity with the pro-Mousavi demonstrators, or else to voice their own variant sociopolitical grievances. It took the state and its security apparatus several weeks, and numerous rounds of mass arrests, to fully suppress the protests and regain control of the streets. In the largest of these protests, an estimated three million demonstrators rallied in Tehran, an unprecedented act of defiance and expression of political disenchantment.

The second mass uprising took place more recently, for nearly two weeks in December 2017 and January 2018. The fact that some chants from the Green Movement were heard again on Iranian streets during the recent winter protests may suggest the existence of some continuity between the two movements. A closer look, however, reveals important differences between these two defining episodes in the life of Iran's now four-decade-old Islamist state. For one thing, while the 2009 Green Movement was for the most part centered in Tehran, the recent uprisings began and found popular support in cities and townships outside of the capital city. Indeed, the protests began in the northeastern city of Mashhad, and from there they spread to dozens of other cities including: Neyshabour, Kashan, Kerman, Kermanshah, Kashmar,

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Rasht, Esfahan, Arak, Bandar Abbas, Ardabil, Qazvin, Hamedan, Sari, Babol, Amol, Shahinshahr, Shahrekord, Shiraz, Khorramabad, Zanjan, Gorgan, Zahedan, Urmia, Dorud, Yazd, and Shahroud.

Furthermore, while the social constituency of the Green Movement was largely represented by the urban middle class residing in Tehran and a few other large cities, the 2017-18 uprising composed primarily of lower income strata residing in provincial townships and city margins. This demographic distinction is directly related to the types of grievances which gave rise to the two movements in question. Whereas the Green Movement, born as it was in the context of a controversial election and its contested results, gave popular expression to the sociopolitical grievances of the urban middle class, the unmistakable impetus of the 2017-18 protests was pervasive economic dissatisfaction among lower income classes. In fact, the initial trigger for these protests was a sudden hike in the price of basic food items, including a 40 percent increase in the price of egg. Unsurprisingly then, one of the first chants heard in the initial Mashhad rally was "Down with price hikes" (marg bar gerani).

Turning from cause to effect, one may observe that the winter protests marked a clear – perhaps irreversible – shift in the dynamics between the Islamic Republic and the poor. The ramifications of this shift may be far and wide, if for no other reason than the simple fact that after the 1979 revolution, the poor and working classes were regarded as the primary social base of the newly founded Islamist state, which came to be known as the Islamic Republic. Indeed, in the months and weeks leading to the anti-monarchy revolution, Ruhollah Khomeini, the charismatic leader of Iran's Islamist movement who later became the founder and the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, spoke frequently about the plight of the poor and made pledges to eliminate poverty and create a socially and economically just order under the rule of an Islamic state. Consistent with these pledges, in the immediate aftermath of the revolution the Islamic Republic introduced a number of egalitarian and pro-poor measures, including an extensive anti-poverty program bringing housing, electricity, safe drinking water, health services, and schools to millions of urban and rural poor, as well as a generous system of subsidies for basic goods.

Starting in the late 1980s, in the post-Cold War context of a global turn toward neoliberalism, the Islamic Republic too began to move away from its early egalitarian commitments and to increasingly adopt economic liberalization measures. This gradual shift began during the presidency of Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani (1989-1997), and continued under his successors: Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005), Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013), and Hassan Rouhani (2013-present). The key components of the Islamic Republic's economic liberalization measures over the past nearly three decades have

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included: floating the currency; decontrolling prices and eliminating subsidies; privatizing state owned enterprises; and deregulating labor standards. Dissatisfaction with this neoliberal turn among the lower classes led to a number of protests, labor strikes, even riots, throughout the 1990s and 2000s. Some of these included: 1990s riots by the urban poor in cities such as Tehran, Shiraz, Arak, Mashhad, Gazvin, Tabriz, and Khorramabad; a series of country-wide demonstrations and strikes by schoolteachers in 2001 and 2003; a 2004 workers' sit-in at a copper smelting plant in Kerman province; and a 2006 strike by bus drivers in Tehran.

Beginning in the early 2010s, the economic situation took a turn for the worse, particularly for the lower strata of the population. This was less evident in Tehran, but much more so in the rest of the country. Indeed, by 2016, per capita household expenditures in cities and rural areas outside of Tehran were significantly lower than in 2010. Moreover, by 2017 unemployment had reached an all-time high. Official statistics revealed 36 percent unemployment among young college-educated men, and 50 percent among young college-educated women. An additional factor contributing to the rise of poverty and economic disenfranchisement in rural areas and provincial townships is the impact of climate change and environmental degradation. A streak of drought years has deprived many farmers of their livelihood, causing waves of rural-urban migration. Several studies have recorded substantial declines in rural population caused by drought-related migration to cities. These populations often settle in city margins, joining the ranks of economically disenfranchised and politically disenfranchised urban lower classes.

While protests and riots by the poor and the working classes have become common occurrences in Iran since the early 1990s, the fact remains that the recent uprising was far and away the biggest public display of the rupture between the Islamic Republic and a segment of Iranian society on whose behalf the revolution was fought and in whose name the Islamic state was founded. The prospects of the eruption of similar uprisings in the near or midterm future are real. The Rouhani administration has pledged to improve the economic situation. However, there is little evidence to suggest the Islamic Republic may abandon its economic liberalization course in favor of, say, a return to the welfare state economy that was implemented in the first decade after the 1979 revolution. Yet, even if the government makes it a priority to deal with widening economic disparities, its ability to implement such an agenda will be diminished by a range of problems that have plagued Iran's economy for the better part of the last two decades: rampant government and business corruption, the ever-expanding role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) in the country's economic affairs, and debilitating (US-imposed) economic sanctions, only to name a few.

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