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Whither Iran?

Posted By Farideh Farhi

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The confrontation that took place in the streets of several large cities in Iran on the occasion of Ashura has brought the acrimonious political fight among the Islamic Republic's elite into focus in significantly different ways than before.

Not only did many protesters demonstrate unprecedented willingness to confront the security forces, but the reaction by hard-line forces also suggests a determination to remain intransigent, fight crowds with crowds, and court the possibility of continued civil strife.

Unless Iran's security establishment and hard-line forces are persuaded to take up a more creative strategy that includes accommodation of some of the protestors' demands and redress for the egregious abuses that have occurred since the Jun. 12 elections, a dangerous deadlock punctuated by persistent street clashes that pits part of the population against another may be the coming year's most likely scenario.

These dynamics highlight the dysfunction and political paralysis of the Islamic Republic even more than its repressive strength or its potential crackup.

If, in the immediate post-election period, the iconic pictures streaming out of Iran were of crowds walking silently in unison with upraised hands calling for the peaceful reversal of the official election results, they were replaced on Dec. 27 with images of confrontations between groups of demonstrators and either security forces or groups supportive of the government.

One eyewitness described part of central Tehran as looking like a "war zone" with "shattered glass everywhere, dozens of overturned and smoldering garbage cans, several burned-out cars, and the skeletons of a couple dozen police motorcycles".

As in some previous demonstrations, the protestors showed that they are no longer fearful of the security forces or plainclothes vigilantes despite the threats of harsh treatment that were issued prior to the year's most important day of mourning for Shi'ites. But this time at least some went one step further and showed that they are angry enough to engage in street battles.

And the security forces — commanded by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) since the immediate post-election demonstrations — showed, in turn, that they are unable to control the crowds despite their use, in some cases, of lethal force that, according to the government's own numbers, left at least eight people dead.

The coincidence of Ayatollah Hussein Ali Montazeri's death on the eve of Ashura, the holy period that highlights the religious commitment to fighting injustice, was simply too powerful for the government forces to manage.

And the government killings on the day of lamentation for the murder of the righteous Imam Hussein and his companions at the hands of an oppressive and illegitimate Islamic government more than 1,300 years ago are bound to fuel further protests on upcoming holidays, including the all-important founding day of the Islamic Republic Feb. 11, when the government traditionally stages large demonstrations in support of the revolution.

Still, the widespread arrests of scores of reform-oriented civil and political activists on the day after Ashura and the harsh written statements issued by hardline-controlled institutions such as the Guardian Council calling for "blinding the sedition's eye" suggest that the government remains determined to deal with the protests only through force rather than to address at least some of demonstrators' major grievances.

To be sure, the Ashura protests have given more moderate conservatives, such as former Parliament speaker Ali Akbar Nateq Nuri, the opportunity to press their case for distinguishing between "a minority who disrespected religion" or "rioters," on the one hand, and "critics," or "protestors," on the other. The former, according to this view, should be punished harshly, while latter should be accommodated and allowed to express their views.

Another conservative Ali Mottahari, the son of one of the founding clerics of the Islamic Republic who was assassinated shortly after the revolution, has offered a seven-point plan for reconciliation that would require the presidential candidates Mir Hossein Mussavi and Mehdi Karrubi to acknowledge the legitimacy of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency coupled with an end to repressive measures, the release of all political prisoners, prosecution for those who engaged in abuses in Iranian prisons, and the re-opening of space for the critical exchange of ideas.

But it is not clear if the government is willing or able to pursue the path of accommodation to overcome the "corrosive disputes," in the words of the current Parliament speaker Ali Larijani, that are wracking the country.

Two fundamental reasons explain why the government has so far been unable to pursue a more sophisticated strategy that would combine repression with accommodation with the aim of

separating the more moderate critics of the regime from those who have now become convinced that the Islamic Republic cannot be reformed and must be replaced.

The first is the shadow of the events that culminated in the 1979 Revolution and the continued widespread belief among both the Shah's supporters and detractors that it was his decision to give in to some of the protestors' demands that emboldened the opposition and ultimately set the stage for his downfall.

By seeing the current events in Iran through the prism of 1979, the most hard-line conservatives are in effect reproducing the narrative that is also increasingly taking hold in the West — that Iran going through yet another revolutionary process that will eventually bring about the end of the Islamic regime. Standing firm, reacting harshly, and turning their own crowds out in the streets are their way of forestalling yet another revolution.

More moderate conservatives have no other choice but to stand with hardliners, it is argued, because the detractors' objective of bringing down the Islamic Republic will endanger them, too.

The second reason for the one-dimensional and rather uncreative approach taken by the government is another narrative that has taken shape among the most hard-line elements of the conservative coalition that now runs the country regarding what happened during the Jun. 12 election.

According to this narrative, by aiming to defeat Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the election, the Green Movement led by Mussavi, Karrubi, former president Mohammad Khatami, and children of current Expediency Council and Council of Experts chair, former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, and organized by two reformist political parties – the Islamic Iran's Participation and Islamic Revolution's Mojahedin – in close cooperation with foreign players, were effectively mounting a challenge against Leader Ali Khamenei, trying to take control of the "system" and re-directing it away from being an Islamic republic.

According to reported statements by the head of IRGC, Mohammad Jaafari, and other hardliners, the information regarding this "scenario" was gathered before the election and hence became the justification for the arrest of the leaders of the two parties and their subsequent mass public trials.

The widespread arrests of political and human rights leaders as well as journalists following the Ashura demonstrations suggest the intractability of such viewpoints in the minds of those who consider themselves to be first and foremost the guardians of the Islamic Republic.

Moreover, Sunday's clashes have given the hardliners another chance to press their case that a heavy-handed and decisive approach is the only way to respond to political forces whose intentions as well as deeds appear to be consistent with – if not directed by — the wishes of the regime's external foes.

In the weeks to come they will continue to face the argument about the ineffectiveness of this strategy. So far, however, their actions and words suggest they are more willing to court civil

strife in Iran rather than probe the possibility of a reconciliation within the framework of the Islamic Republic.