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Iran, 1979 and 2010

By Dilip Hiro and Tom Engelhardt

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The Obama administration's Iran policy is a riddle wrapped inside a conundrum folded into a pickle. So many signals are being sent in so many directions that it's a wonder the Iranians (or other involved parties) have any idea what's going on. Barack Obama came into office pledging to reach out diplomatically to Iran. In fact, the administration did so in only a half-hearted way, even as the president quickly began setting deadlines for the Iranians to respond (on their nuclear program) in a way Washington considered satisfactory -- or face further "crippling" sanctions. Now, the latest of these deadlines, January 1, 2010, has passed and a move towards new sanctions, especially against companies associated with Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps, which controls significant parts of the country's economy, is evidently being prepared. But China, which holds the presidency of the Security Council for the month of January, recently rejected even a debate on the subject. Like the Russians, the Chinese are deeply involved in developing long-term energy relations with Iran, which means that no sanctions which might "cripple" that country's economy are likely to make it through the Security Council, no matter which country has the presidency.

In the meantime, rumors, circulating for years, about an impending Israeli attack on Iranian nuclear facilities (which is a polite way of saying Iranian military defenses of every sort) continue to fly. President Obama reportedly even used his supposed inability to hold the Israelis back as a way to urge China's president to fall into line on sanctions. Administration officials regularly repeat versions of the Bush-era formula: "all options are on the table." Recently, for instance, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen referred vaguely in public

to Pentagon contingency plans for an attack on Iran (“...at the same time preparing forces, as we do for many contingencies that we understand might occur...”). However, on the subject of such a military assault he sounded unenthusiastic in the extreme. Obama's influential Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has long been emphatic in his opposition to heading down such a path. From his 2006 confirmation hearings on, he has exhibited a clear sense of just how regionally catastrophic a military operation against those nuclear facilities would be (including a potentially globally crippling spike in oil prices).

The Obama administration is now evidently considering throwing greater support behind Iran's “green movement.” This movement of dissidents regularly in the streets protesting against the present regime and a fraudulent election would, as Dilip Hiro points out, instantly be undermined by either “crippling sanctions” or an attack on the country's nuclear facilities. All this, in other words, looks suspiciously like chaos as policy.

Hiro, an Iran expert and TomDispatch regular, has just written a new book -- it's being published this very day -- that puts Iran, the United States, China, and Russia into a global context. It's called After Empire: The Birth of a Multipolar World and I'm proud to say that it grew from an article Hiro wrote for this website back in 2007, “The Sole Superpower in Decline.” It offers the kind of balanced, knowledgeable assessment of our world that we've come to expect from him and which should put *After Empire* on every bookshelf. *Tom*

Regime Change in Tehran?

Don't Bet on It... Yet

By Dilip Hiro

The dramatic images of protestors in Iran fearlessly facing -- and sometimes countering -- the brutal attacks of the regime's security forces rightly gain the admiration and sympathy of viewers in the West. They also leave many Westerners assuming that this is a preamble to regime change in Tehran, a repeat of history, but with a twist. After all, Iran has the distinction of being the only Middle Eastern state that underwent a revolutionary change -- 31 years ago -- which originated as a mild street protest.

Viewed objectively, though, this assumption is over-optimistic. It overlooks cardinal differences between the present moment and the 1978-1979 events which led to the overthrow of the Shah of Iran and the founding of an Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. History shows that a revolutionary movement triumphs only when two vital factors merge: it is supported by a coalition of different social classes and it succeeds in crippling the country's governing machinery and fracturing the state's repressive apparatus.

Two Movements, Two Moments

A short review of Iran's 31-year-old revolution is in order. In February 1979, the autocratic monarchy of the Shah collapsed when the country's economy ground to a halt due to strikes not only by the religiously observant merchants of the bazaar, but also by civil servants, factory

employees, and (crucially) leftist oil workers. At the same time, the foundations of the modern state -- the armed forces, special forces, armed police, and intelligence agencies, as well as the state-controlled media -- cracked.

The street demonstrations, launched in October 1977 by Iranian intellectuals and professionals to protest human rights violations by SAVAK, the Shah's brutal secret police, lacked both focus and an overarching set of coherent demands articulated by a towering personality. That changed when Khomeini, a virulently anti-Shah ayatollah exiled to neighboring Iraq for 14 years, was drawn into the process in January 1978. From then on, the ranks of the protestors swelled exponentially.

Today, the key question is: Have the recent street protests, triggered by the rigged presidential poll of last June, drawn one or more of those segments of society which originally ignored the electoral fraud or dismissed the claims to that effect?

The evidence so far suggests that the protests, while remaining defiant and resilient, have gotten stuck in a groove -- even though on December 27, the day of the Shiite holy ritual of Ashura, they spread to the smaller cities for the first time. What has remained unchanged is the social background of the participants. They are largely young, university educated, and well dressed, equipped with mobile phones, and adept at using the Internet, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter.

In the capital, they are usually from upscale North Tehran, which contains about a third of the city's population of nine million. It is home to affluent families, many of whom have relatives in Western Europe or North America. They often spend their vacations in the West; and most are fluent in English and at ease with computers.

Naturally, then, Western reporters and commentators identify with this section of Iranian society, and focus largely on them, inadvertently or otherwise.

In the autumn of 1977, too, such people predominated in the street protests against the Shah. The difference now is one of scale. Since the Islamic Revolution, there has been an explosion in higher education. Between 1979 and 1999, while the population doubled, the number of university graduates grew nine-fold, from a base of 430,000 to nearly four million. The student bodies of universities and colleges have soared to three-quarters of a million young Iranians. That explains the vast size of the protests and their sartorial uniformity.

Now, the foremost question for Iran specialists ought to be: Over the past six months have significant numbers of residents from downscale South Tehran, with its six million people, joined the protest? Going by the images on the Internet and Western TV channels, the answer is "no." South Tehranis do not wear fashionable jeans, and any protesting women would appear veiled from head to toe and without noticeable make-up.

It is South Tehran that contains the Grand Bazaar, covering five miles of warren-like alleyways and more than a dozen mosques. That bazaar is the commercial backbone of the nation with its intricately woven strands of trade, Islamic culture, and politics. Its lead is followed by all the other bazaars of Iran. Because Prophet Muhammad was a merchant, there has been a symbiotic

relationship between the commercial class and the mosque from the early days of Islam. Iran is no exception and the importance of the bazaar's influence still cannot be overestimated. After all, it was barely a century ago that oil was first found in the country, while industrialization gained a foothold only after World War II.

So, have bazaar merchants begun to shut their shops in solidarity with the protestors -- as they did during the anti-Shah movement? No again.

Leaving aside the shuttering of stores, if some bazaar traders were simply to resort to setting up their own blogs and joining the protests online, that in itself would surely draw the attention of the regime of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamanei and might even lead it to consider a compromise with the reformers.

The Limits of 2010

So far the opposition has been led by the defeated candidates for the presidency -- Mir Hussein Mousavi and Mahdi Karroubi -- neither of whom has anything like the charisma or religious standing of a Khomeini.

Furthermore, the opposition suffers from the lack of a single overarching demand. During the 1978-1979 movement, Khomeini rallied diverse anti-Shah forces -- from Shia clerics to Marxist-Leninist groups -- around a maximum demand: Dethrone the Shah.

Then Khomeini managed to hold together this unwieldy alliance by championing the causes of each of the social classes in the anti-Shah coalition. The traditional middle classes of merchants and artisans saw in him an upholder of private property and a believer in Islamic values. The modern middle classes regarded him as a radical nationalist committed to ending royal dictatorship and foreign influence in Iran. The urban working class backed him because of his repeated commitment to social justice which, it felt, could only be achieved by transferring power and wealth from the affluent to the needy. The rural poor saw him as the one to provide them with arable land, irrigation facilities, roads, schools, and electricity.

Khomeini performed this superhuman task by maintaining a studied silence on such controversial issues as democracy, the status of women, and the role of clerics in the future Islamic republic.

Today, the most popular slogan of the protestors is "Death to the Dictator," meaning Supreme Leader Khamanei. (In Persian, "*Marg bur/ Diktator*" rhymes well.) Yet that is certainly not what either Mousavi or Karroubi wants.

On his website, Mousavi recently demanded the release of all political prisoners and the amending of the electoral laws, along with the enforcement of freedom of expression, assembly, and the press as stated in the Iranian constitution. In short, he wants to reform the present system, not overthrow it.

As it is, there is a mechanism in the constitution for the removal of the Supreme Leader. The popularly elected 86-member Assembly of Experts has the authority to appoint or dismiss him.

That Assembly is presided over by Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. As a former close aide to Ayatollah Khomeini, his revolutionary credentials are on a par with Ali Khamanei's.

Rafsanjani backed Mousavi in his presidential bid with funds and strategic planning. Now, if he decides, he can summon the Assembly of Experts for an emergency session to debate the present crisis caused by the divisions at the top. Normally the Assembly meets only twice a year. But being a shrewd politician, Rafsanjani would first consult senior Assembly members individually to test the waters. It seems so far that he has not succeeded in gaining strong enough support for a special session.

At the grass-roots level, the numerous oppositional blogs and websites rarely deal with the big picture. They are mainly focused on highlighting the brutal repression and arguing that Khamanei's regime has strayed wildly from its Islamic roots and its revolutionary promises of justice, freedom, and independence.

Their critique, however, covers only one major aspect of the situation. It is not enough to bring about regime change in the country. A second complimentary side would have to spell out some specifics about how the protestors want to see their vision of change realized in practice. At the very least, the opposition ought to debate the issue, which it is not doing now; or it could emulate Mousavi, who has dropped his earlier demand for a fresh presidential poll to be supervised not by the interior ministry but a non-governmental body. That gesture could, sooner or later, open the way for a compromise with President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad that might lead to a national unity government composed of his partisans and the opposition leaders.

One major difference between 1979 and 2010 is that the Internet provides a great opportunity for a kind of debate that was unthinkable until a decade ago. On the other hand, what the 1979 movement and the present one have in common is the idea of making political use of the Shiite religious days, the Islamic custom of commemorating a dead person on the 40th day of his or her demise, as well as of the martyr complex engrained among Shiites. It was Ayatollah Khomeini who pioneered such tactics. He consistently used the 40th day of mourning for the martyrs of the Shah's regime to draw ever bigger, ever more enthusiastic crowds in the streets, and used the holy month of Ramadan to charge the nation with revolutionary fervor.

The attempts of today's opposition leaders to emulate Khomeini's example have not succeeded chiefly because their camp lacks a religious leader of his stature.

The near-fatal blow that Khomeini struck at the Shah's regime lay in the fatwa he issued decreeing that firing on unarmed protestors was equivalent to firing at a copy of the holy Quran. Most of the Shah's soldiers, being Shiite and often young conscripts, accepted Khomeini's interpretation. Many of them had already lost faith in their commanders after bank employees revealed, in September 1978, that top army officers had been transferring vast sums abroad. Little wonder that, by the time the Shah left Iran in January 1979, the army's strength had plummeted from 300,000 to just over 100,000, mainly due to desertions.

By contrast, there is little evidence so far that the present regime's security forces -- the heavily indoctrinated Revolutionary Guards, the Basij militia, or the armed police -- are vacillating when ordered to break up demonstrations with force. On its part, the regime, aware of the danger of creating martyrs and of the historical precedent, has taken care to make minimal use of live fire in dispersing protesting crowds.

During the 12 months of the revolutionary movement that stretched from 1978 into 1979, the indiscriminate use of live fire by the Shah's regime led to between 10,000 -- the government figure -- and 40,000 -- the opposition's statistic -- deaths. In the six months of the street protest this time around, the total, according to the opposition, is 106.

Nationalism as a Factor

If this interpretation of the current situation in Iran has focused solely on internal political dynamics, that doesn't mean external forces are unimportant. Given the geo-strategic significance of Iran in the region and the world, any move by not-too-friendly Western governments against Tehran is bound to alter the domestic situation dramatically.

Were the Western powers, for instance, to succeed in ratcheting up economic sanctions against Tehran through the United Nations Security Council, the opposition would undoubtedly cease its protests and cooperate with the Ahmadinejad administration to face a common national threat under the banner of patriotism.

With a proud recorded history stretching back six millennia, Iranians have evolved into staunch nationalists in modern times. That is a simple, if overarching, fact which leaders in the West cannot afford to ignore.