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What we have in Iran is an unfolding revolution

By Waleed Sadi

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Though Iran's elections last June were fraught with irregularity and pitted the conservative leadership headed by the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, against reformists led by Mir Hossein Mousavi, they have also set the tone for the future course of the nation, both domestically and externally.

Khamenei openly sided with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad during the post-election turmoil, and remained steadfast in his support even though Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, the former chairman of the Iranian Parliament who was also a presidential candidate, openly declared that the presidential elections were rigged.

Hundreds of thousands of pro-reform Iranians took to the streets once Ahmadinejad was declared the victor: scores were killed by state police and thousands were arrested. The situation came as close to a revolution as you could come. Recently some of those detained were hurriedly tried and sentenced to death. Some of them have already been executed.

This, therefore, represents an unfolding revolution in Iran. The process has yet to come to fruition but it bears all the hallmarks of being deeply rooted. For this reason, enemies of the reformists have consistently alleged that the reform movement is in cahoots with the West. This conspiracy theory rests on the premise that the United States and its allies, including Israel, are

determined to weaken Iran and deny it a nuclear capability that might threaten regional security and stability.

Indeed, Iranian officials are fully aware that Western powers are concerned about recent pronouncements by Ahmadinejad serving notice to other Middle Eastern capitals that no regional conflict, including the Arab-Israel conflict, could ever be resolved without the consent and cooperation of Tehran. Iranian warnings to Saudi Arabia not to “meddle” in the affairs of Yemen were another ominous signal that Iran, under its current leadership, aims to extend its hegemony over the entire region. Iran already has strong leverage with Hizbullah in Lebanon and strong influence over Syria and Gaza. Recently it has been trying to build bridges with Turkey, another regional power.

Against this backdrop, the conspiracy theory suggests that Western countries have long concluded that armed conflict with Iran could get out of hand and, as a result, another strategy to contain Iran is needed. Western powers, therefore, have come to the conclusion that instead of waging a war against Iran, they must seek to change the regime from within. Ending the Iranian dictatorship and its strict theocracy would mean the end of Iran’s military nuclear program.

The tug of war between the hardliners in Iran and the reformists, however, is poised to continue for some time yet. Obviously, though, the wind of change has already swept through the Iranian landscape and there is no turning back. Sooner or later, the rigid and ultra-conservative Iranian regime will have to change, as all revolutions do. Khamenei is also aging and his years in active political life are limited. The recent announcement by Washington that it will deploy “defensive” missiles in four Arab Gulf countries, Qatar included, is meant to apply additional pressure on Iran’s current leadership.

Iran has a long history of succumbing to external pressure only to renege when the pressure subsides. The current Iranian leadership contends that time is on its side and believes that as long as it can succeed in avoiding an open confrontation with its foes, it will come out ahead. Still, the leadership should not underestimate the impact of economic and financial sanctions on its ability to confront both internal and external enemies. With Moscow apparently now closing ranks with Washington, London, Paris and Berlin on the standoff with Tehran, Beijing remains the only major capital that has not yet totally committed itself to the US-orchestrated strategy vis-à-vis the country.

The heat on Iran can therefore be expected to increase in the foreseeable future, both from within and without. Nevertheless, with Iran having recently celebrated the 31st anniversary of the Islamic revolution that toppled the late shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the regime remains defiant. Recently, Ahmadinejad announced that Iran would begin to produce 20 percent enriched nuclear fuel.

There is only one explanation for such a defiant mood: the government does not believe that a war against it is a viable option for the United States. Tehran is also aware that an attack against it would require a United Nations Security Council resolution. Given that Beijing and Moscow would not necessarily vote in favor of any such resolution, Iran’s resolve to defy Washington and the West remains high.

Nevertheless, the internal and external standoffs over the future course of Iran can be expected to come to a climax sooner rather than later. For now, though, the odds are evenly divided on whether that will entail the country becoming more cooperative with the international community.