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Iran's Pre-Political Revolt

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June 16, 2009

Iran's cosmopolitan and liberal middle classes and its students are making a revolutionary bid without intending a revolution. The Islamic Republic is not in danger. At least not now.

Few think that the demonstrations in Tehran, and now in other Iranian cities, can produce a change in regime. The government's police power, and that of the Revolutionary Guards, with the support of the farming and working-class population that believes it has a defender in Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, make that convincing.

What is being challenged is the reactionary social and political form the Iranian system has assumed under Ahmadinejad and the most conservative clerics. The Islamic state itself is not, or at least not yet, in real danger.

This is a peculiarly modern "revolution," where the call is not to overturn the Islamic system but for young people, and not only the young, to have a private life and speak freely to their companions, to play popular music and freely see and make movies – for girls to let their hair escape from under the veil and wear a touch of cosmetics.

It might be called a pre-political revolt. The countries this kind of revolt will eventually affect most, after Iran, will be Saudi Arabia and the other Muslim countries that are at the same time rich and repressive and suffer hypocritical male ruling elites.

The increasingly bizarre Col. Muammar Gaddafi of Libya visited Italy last week, accompanied by his bodyguard of Amazons. He asked to speak on women's rights to an audience of a hundred prominent Italian women. The audience was assembled and the colonel said that it was absurd that in some Muslim countries women had to ask the chief of state for the right to drive a car. He

said that's something "their husbands or brothers should decide" – and seemed taken aback by the wave of laughter that followed.

Can you be an observant Muslim woman and drive a car, or wear cosmetics, or work outside the home? There are observant Christian and Jewish women, and Muslim women as well, who do this in the Western or Westernized countries. But Israel has thousands of strictly observant Orthodox Jewish women who accept a role not unlike that of Muslim women. Nuns have always played a vital role in the Catholic Church, although they at least rule their own convents and ways of life. This is a deep cultural matter, and an individual choice of life – so long as it is not arbitrarily, and forcibly, imposed.

There are two revolutions impending in the Muslim world, and while they run on parallel trajectories, they have to be distinguished from one another. One is the social revolution of modernization, peculiarly difficult and potentially traumatic in Muslim societies where, unlike in the secular or Christian West, no distinction is considered possible between religious and civil law and norms. In Islam, there has never been the equivalent of independent church and state, each with its own recognized legitimacy. Islamic Sharia law is universal.

The other revolution is the political revolution of representative government to replace theocracy, as in Iran, or theocratic monarchy, as in Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, and Morocco.

This is even more difficult, for exactly the same reason.

Representative government has been regarded as un-Islamic. In Islamic countries, it has been advocated by Marxists, or by consciously secular reformers, like Ataturk in Turkey, or the leaders of the secular Ba'ath parties of Iraq and Syria, meant to be representative but ending up in dictatorship; or by the Arab socialist regimes like that of Nasser in Egypt in the 1950s, also a dictatorship.

Lebanon has been the only democracy in the Arab Middle East, functioning within a strict and mutually agreed sectarian division of public offices (now under great stress).

One wonders to what extent the young people on the streets of Tehran this week are conscious of just what they do want from a new government. They would undoubtedly be happy with a vote recount that gave them Mir Hossein Mousavi as president, and if possible an end to the morality police who patrol in search of symptoms of modernity to stamp out. But if they got this, they would find that it was not enough. That there are far more difficult problems ahead.

The Machiavellian rule on revolutions is to throttle them in the cradle, which is what the regime in Iran would like to do. The regime undoubtedly understands that while the Iranians are not warlike, with no history of aggressive war, they are a revolutionary people.

Popular demonstrations and uprisings forced the shah out twice – once to be restored to power by the CIA in the 1950s, and again in 1979, when he had to be flown out of the country by the United States. The Ayatollah Khomeini flew in to replace him, promoted by the power of tape-

recorded sermons passed hand to hand by the young people of another generation, stifled by another repressive regime.