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Iranian have-nots dare to vent their rage against the elite



Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Picture: AFP

Hannah Lucinda Smith, The Times, 12:00AM January 2, 2018

When a yellow Porsche Boxster smashed into a tree in Tehran two years ago the impact was felt in every strata of Iranian society.

The driver was a young woman from a poor family, and her companion the car's owner, the grandson of a high-ranking mullah. He was engaged to a different woman but even if he had not been the country's strict religious laws — which his own grandfather had a hand in enforcing — banned them from being in the car together. The fact that he could afford such a vehicle was thanks to the vast wealth the mullahs have accumulated since the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

It is resentment of hypocrisies like these, which are shoved in the faces of ordinary Iranians, that has fuelled the protests. At their root lies the chasm between the super-rich elite and the impoverished majority. The mullahs and the politicians preach piety but many are wealthy beyond the dreams of the poorest.

President Hasan Rowhani has spearheaded an anti-corruption drive but the justice system is riddled with corruption and few perpetrators ever face trial.

This feeling that the whole system is rotten is what distinguishes today's protests from those of 2009. Then the fight was between supporters of the regime's hardliners and the moderates. Now the protesters want done with the lot of them.

[Death toll rises in Iranian protests](#)

The boldest have been chanting "Death to Khamenei", a swipe at the foundations of the system. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has ruled since 1989. Part sovereign, part deity, he controls the judiciary, the armed forces, the mosques and the council of guardians, which vets legislation. To oppose Khamenei is to oppose the Islamic Republic itself.

The protesters are angry, too, at the billions their government is spending in Syria to prop up President Bashar al-Assad. Tehran is estimated to be channelling up to \$26 billion to Damascus in investment and aid each year, and 1000 Iranians have died in the conflict there, according to an official statement. The true number is likely to be far higher.

That investment has bought Iran increasing clout across the Middle East over recent years — but hubris may well have blinded the regime to the groundswell of revolt at home. Now it has a similar dilemma to that once faced by the dictator it supports in Syria.

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