

Iran protests the angry cry of a deprived people

By Jason Shams

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Photo: Opponents of President Hassan Rouhani hold a protest outside the Iranian embassy in London. (Reuters: Simon Dawson)

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Iran's latest public uprisings — spontaneous but not unexpected — lack the scope and organisation of the Green Movement protests of 2009, and did not arise from the traditional political forces in the country. However, they're being closely watched from inside and outside the country, as are the efforts of the country's leadership to quell dissent by shutting down social media and sending riot forces onto the streets.

The spark for protests was struck on December 28, when Vice-President Isaac Jahangiri visited the holy city of Mashhad, in the country's north-east.

Why Iranians are protesting



The rising price of eggs was the last straw for angry Iranians and has sparked the biggest protests in the country for nearly a decade. But the unrest is unlikely to lead to major changes.

Ibrahim Reissi is a conservative cleric who portrayed himself as the voice of the poor and impoverished in Iran's last elections in May 2017, which he lost to Mr Jahangiri's boss, President Hassan Rouhani. Mr Reissi also happens to be from Mashhad, and has a core of followers that became organised during the elections.

It remains to be verified (and probably never will be) whether it was Mr Reissi himself or someone else who thought it would be a good idea to use this visit to stage public protests against Mr Rouhani's Government. During the visit, a group of individuals claiming to be followers of Mr Reissi raised their fists and voices and started chanting "Death to Rouhani". (Death to this and that is a regular slogan used in protest in Iran.)

Video: Iranian protesters scuffle with police, chanting 'death to dictator' (ABC News)

Mr Reissi's loyalist trolls were probably surprised themselves when they heard the boom of the crowd's feedback. Soon, throngs of people were demonstrating on the streets as the vice-president was ushered away. The protests quickly moved past the initial partisan conservative sentiment and shifted towards "down with the dictator", "down with [Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali] Khamenei", as more people joined in and overwhelmed the initial protesters.

And it spread like wildfire. A dozen were killed, many more arrested, and social media is down in Iran.



Photo: Crowds have directed at least some of their anger toward Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. (Supplied: leader.ir)

Provinces not feeling sanctions relief

When Mr Rouhani was elected President last year, his selling point was that as a centrist with progressive views and the support of the Supreme Leader, he was the one who had negotiated a deal over Iran's nuclear program and by doing so had lifted the burden of sanctions from Iran's economy. This is to say that although Iran's uranium enrichment program was a key issue in the elections, it was only so because of the economic frustration of the voters.

The change since then has been minimal, as sanction relief has not been absolute and wealth redistribution measures have not addressed core issues, including unemployment, inflation and poor air quality in Iran's big cities. People in the provinces have not felt change since sanctions were lifted, while infighting among officials has revealed their incompetence and corruption.

In hindsight this makes sense, but it was common belief one year ago that once Iran makes peace with the world over its nuclear program, everything will be fine.

Now, however, US President Donald Trump is threatening to pull out of the deal while the conservative right in Iran attack it for failing to deliver what it had promised.

Ahmadinejad comeback bid fuels uncertainty

In the meantime, Iran's conservative factions are stoking the flame on social media to gear up for a comeback after Mr Rouhani, and publishing insider stories on the corruption of this or that official or their families in order to gain followers for their campaigns. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, once the Supreme Leader's preferred candidate for president, rages against the judiciary, as multiple extortion cases against him and his close affiliates make their way through the legal system.

YouTube: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad says Iran can be better managed

The number of accusations being thrown around is unprecedented. Memes, investigative videos, and the sense of uncertainty towards the nuclear deal are fuelling discontent and anti-establishment sentiment that was already strong under the Islamic Republic. It was only a matter of time before someone would yell something in a crowded area and hear the people respond.

Emergence of a third movement

Iranians have a history of public civil dissent with pictures of revolutionary figures on their streets and their mantles.

Can Australia play good cop amid US-Iran tensions?



Australia has a working embassy in Tehran and a well-connected Iranian diaspora, so it could mediate between Iran and America, writes Saleem H Ali. This time, however, is different because what we hear is the angry cry of a deprived people, while the movements of the past 40 years have generally been masterminded and guided by a well-organised and experienced post-

revolutionary reformist movement amongst secular minded urbanites. Those protests culminated during elections into campaigns in support of a reformist candidate and dispersing in the years in between.

Rather than hundreds of thousands of people coming out in force in a handful of cities, these are fierce clashes of smaller groups of several thousand mostly young people across small towns throughout the country. This is not to say that what's happening in Iran lacks depth or scope, but rather that the activists lack the leadership, as well as the constraints, of running political movements that are deeply integrated into the country's political culture

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In the tug-o-war between Iran's reformists and conservatives, a third populist movement has burst violently onto the scene, and many of us are waiting to see what will become of it.

Jason Shams is an Iranian-American who has worked in Tehran and Washington as an analyst, interpreter, and journalist. He was deeply involved in the Green Movement and participated in the 2009 protests. He lives in Portland, Oregon.