

## The Storm after 30 years of silence

For several days, the Republic Islamic of Iran has been shaken by a “civilian earthquake”. Following the Iranian presidential election of June 12<sup>th</sup> and the announcement of a sweeping victory by incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a wave of protests arose from the reformist opposition. These protestors are supporters of Mir-Hussein Moussavi and Mehdi Karroubi, the defeated candidates of the reformist camp.

The question at hand is: Is this only a temporary crisis or rather a persistent discontent with vaster implications? Is it the dawn of a “green” revolution or an attempted “coup d’état”? It may be too early to answer these questions, nevertheless, some facts deserve to be looked at more closely and analyzed in more detail.

### *The Protestors*

Iranian society is characterized by a huge gap between the different social classes, and, among the protestors, we can observe this social class distinction. The majority of the protestors are intellectuals, university students, the middle class and the Iranian bourgeoisie, although some of the worker class has started to join the movement. The various demonstrations have taken place not only in the Iranian capital (Tehran), but also in the other urban cities (Shiraz, Isfahan, Tabriz).

Iranians who are protesting see this confrontation as an opportunity for change. They hope that it could have a profound effect on the regime’s nature and policies. Nevertheless, many also fear the reaction of the security forces. The *Basij* force<sup>1</sup> and the riot police are trying to take back control of the streets – by repressive and often brutal means – and the latest developments indicate they have now succeeded in doing so. Due to the *Basij* force and riot police tactics, at least 30 people were killed according to official sources (unofficial figures put the death toll as high as 150). Moreover, more than 100 political activists and journalists were arrested and taken to unknown locations. No information has been provided on who and where these people are. Security forces refer to the “security of the nation” to legitimize the detentions. Officially, the protestors are accused of “sabotage”, “rioting activities” or “conspiracy against the Islamic Republic”.

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1 The *Basij* is a volunteer-based Iranian paramilitary force. They serve currently as an auxiliary force engaged in activities such as law enforcement, emergency management, providing social services, organization of public religious ceremonies etc. More controversially, they are also active as a “morality police” and the suppression of dissident gatherings.

When Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei announced a sweeping victory of Ahmadinejad a few hours after the polls were closed, many voters felt anger and betrayal. Thousands of citizens took to the streets to express their dissatisfaction that resulted in today's political crisis. During this campaign, the Islamic Republic had seen its first live debates on state TV between the various candidates. Many first time voters were encouraged by this very dynamic electoral campaign, and turnout was very significant (more than 80% of votes counted), but, after the results, some Iranians declared this would be the last time that they would go to the polls.

According to the Iranian Constitution, the Guardian Council is in charge of monitoring presidential elections. Legally, three days are provided after the polls are closed to receive and scrutinize complaints from losing candidates. Ali Khamenei clearly violated this rule by the rapid announcement of the result. In a large country like Iran, with multiple groups living in mixed urban and far-distant rural communities, it appears surprising that an exact result could be disclosed within hours after the closing of the polling stations.

The government's reaction to the protests also fuelled the demonstrator's suspicions and contributed to confusion and mistrust regarding the results. The blackout on all methods of communication such as TV (restricted and selective news), cell phones, Facebook, Twitter, soon after the protests started, contributed to allegations about irregularities and encouraged questioning of the legitimacy of the vote. Putting members of the opposition and their staff into police custody did not help to ease the pressure either.

The Iranian protest today is not just a youth or student movement against the current figures of the regime but a broader civil movement against the social and economic management of the Islamic Republic's system. Recently, the trade unions of bus drivers (*Vahed*) and the most important car industry in Iran (*Khodro*) also joined the protests. This is not only a contestation of the electoral results, but also an expression of general dissatisfaction with the system and about how the country is run. Frustrations have been mounting in recent years due to the imposition of greater restrictions on social and personal freedoms as well as the catastrophic economic situation. In a highly centralized system such as Iran's, responsibility for this situation is first and foremost attributed to the Supreme Leader. The President with his limited powers is subordinated and held less accountable. Today's civil movement could therefore be seen as a turning point, an attempt to contest the way power is distributed in and through the system. This might well result in a new form of political factionalism in Iran. This political earthquake will most likely be followed by aftershocks, fundamentally shaking the structure of power within the Islamic Republic, such as a growing mistrust regarding the system, nation wide strike, stagnation and political and economic paralysis.

The timing for a general protest movement seems well chosen. The world has watched Iran and the regime's behaviour with growing interest (and concern) over recent years. With the spotlight on Iran over the elections, those dissatisfied with the regime might have seen a unique "window of opportunity" to express their wish for change. Whether they will be successful remains to be seen. So far, Iran's Guardian Council<sup>2</sup> has agreed to a partial recount of the votes; however, any claims of a rigged election have been completely rejected. No matter the outcome, it is clear that the elections have had a profound and lasting effect on Iranian politics and society.

### *A schism inside the system*

Tension and rivalry inside the system and the Iranian government are not new. The current political crisis did not start with this schism between elites, but it has served to exacerbate pre-existing conditions of mistrust and competition between rivals inside the system. During the electoral campaign, the candidates were openly accusing each other of corruption, nepotism, favouritism, dishonesty, and other forms of misconduct, which until recently, the ruling elite denied had any roots within the Islamic Republic. The irony is that the Islamic Republic presents itself as a "pure" Islamic state, free from such corruption and immorality. After 30 years, this ideological state which is based on "Islamic values", is now witness to insiders blaming each other for widespread corruption and immorality.

Indeed, the current political turmoil has caused a polarization of the ruling elite and a power struggle between these competing factions. Rivals have resorted to airing each others dirty laundry over the last thirty years. Ironically, these measures have compromised the ideological values of the revolution that brought them to power thirty years ago. The focus has now shifted from a war against an external enemy to political infighting within the Islamic Republic.

Inside the system, Khamenei and Ahmadinejad would like to keep the status quo and preserve their power. Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (former President of Iran from 1989 to 1997, and current head of the *Assembly of Experts*<sup>3</sup>) aims to gain more power and influence, while Mir-Hussein Moussavi, Mehdi Karroubi, and the reformist camp still hope to seize power and insert some changes and reforms in the system in order to satisfy their constituency's demands.

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<sup>2</sup> The Guardian Council is charged with the interpretation of Iran's Constitution. Before running for presidential or parliamentary elections (or for the Assembly of Experts), candidates need the approval of the Guardian Council.

<sup>3</sup> The Assembly of Experts is a deliberative body of 86 members (clerical), it represents the only group that is empowered to elect or to remove the Supreme Leader and supervise his activities.

### ***A challenge to the Supreme Leader***

As outlined before, the issue at hand now in Iran is not who won or lost the election. The debate on electoral irregularities, a fraudulent election, or the legitimacy of Ahmadinejad's victory do not constitute the essential disagreements. Iranians, especially those protestors know that the Supreme Leader is in fact the ultimate arbiter of power. Therefore, it is the Supreme Leader himself who faces mounting opposition and a challenge to his very legitimacy.

Even if opposition and internal friction have always existed in Iran, it is the first time since the Revolution of 1979 that a powerful front has united reformists, the parts of the clergy who support Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, and Iranian civil society. According to some rumours, the *Assembly of Experts* held some meetings where Rafsanjani supposedly proposed to replace the position of the Supreme Leader by a "Supreme Council", which would mean, in case it was approved, that clergy leaders would openly question Khamenei's integrity. This claim might have been developed only in some internet blogs and then be taken up and exaggerated by others. But what it clearly shows is that the Supreme Leader is not sacrosanct anymore. Challenges to his leadership are now more common and accepted among the political class, which had since the Revolution been always loyal to the principles of the system, including the unquestioned support of the Supreme Leader. Once questioned, this of course raises the question of Khamenei's succession.

A coalition of reformers and clergy, with Rafsanjani's backing, could have challenged Khamenei's choice for the next Supreme Leader. Khamenei, who is by some analysts believed to wish to be replaced by his son Mojtaba, would understand this as a direct and imminent threat to him and his family.

Although, the protestors may not represent a majority in Iran, taking all of this into account, one can justifiably argue that the very foundation of the Islamic Republic and its habits of rule for the past three decades are on shaky ground. It is impossible at this stage to predict exactly the full implications of these developments; however, it is sure that this crisis is profound and large enough to suggest that the nature of governance in the Islamic Republic of Iran in the future has been shaken to its roots – a circumstance most ripe for political change.