

PROTESTS IN IRAN AND THE FUTURE OF THE REFORMS

Walter Posch

At the beginning of 2018, nation-wide protests took place in Iran, which, however, were not the uprising against the regime Western media willed them to be. The number of slightly over 20,000 participants published by the Iranian security forces seems too small by far, but even critics of the regime admit that, as regards their number as well as the level of organisation, the protests came nowhere close to the mass protests of 2009. This time, furthermore, it was the economically disadvantaged strata of society which took to the streets. Despite this, however, it would be overly simplistic to trace the protests solely to the social situation. Rather, one of the reasons is the divisions within the regime.

A Regime Divided

These divisions conceal a conflict concerning the correct interpretation of the revolution and thus the regime's future. In this ideological struggle, proponents of an Islamic state, based on the rule of law and a strong parliament, are irreconcilably pitted against those who want to realize a permanent Islamic revolution and support an authoritarian state, headed by a strong leader. This dispute has existed from the very beginning without destroying the system's political capacity to act. Today, however, overcoming this rift is only possible at an exorbitant political cost, so that in the medium term it is a much greater threat to the survival of the Islamic Republic than a possible uprising of the masses.

At the political level, this discrepancy is expressed in two political camps: those

of the Reformists (*eslah-talaban*) and the Principalists (*osulgarayan*). They can only fall back on loose organizational structures because both are home to a variety of political groups and parties, some of which differ considerably with regard to social background and political vision. Statements to the effect that the clergy prefers one movement to the other are false. Both camps also have prominent supporters in the security apparatus.

Former President Ahmadinejad is also a member of the Principalists' camp. He is the only real populist in the regime, boasts a detailed knowledge of the structure and the inner workings of the Iranian security apparatus and, during the great crisis of 2009, almost got his hands on all key positions in the security ministries - against the express wishes of the Revolutionary Guards and those of the Supreme Leader of

the Islamic Revolution, who, at the last moment, finally brought him to heel. The eradication of the huge protest movement of 2009 was accompanied by a settlement at the level of the political elites, in which the brothers Ali Ardashir Larijani, the Speaker of Parliament, and his brother Ayatollah Sadeq Ardashir Larijani-Amoli, the head of the judiciary, reached a delicate political compromise between the Reformists, various movements within the Principalists, and the Ahmadinejad government.

Ruhani's Rivals

When Ruhani took office in 2013, and also after his re-election in 2017, Ahmadinejad did not leave politics, but immediately began to establish a new movement, whose political chances were regarded as limited, however. Ahmadinejad reacted to being banned from running in the 2017 election and to his most important collaborators and friends being arrested and sentenced shortly before the protests, with video messages in which he attacked the Larijani brothers, denounced the lack of justice in Iran, the human rights violations, the corruption, the impoverishment of the population, and called for social protests. Such calls were also made on a website of the Hezbollah of Mashhad and by Ayatollah Alamolhoda, the Friday prayer leader in Mashhad. The latter, in cooperation with the war veterans' organisation Ansar-e Hezbollah, fought the Ruhani government from day one. The goal was not to overthrow the government, but to prevent its reform promises being fulfilled and to support Alamolhoda's son-in-law, the failed presidential candidate Ebrahim Reissadati, called Reisi, in the creation of his own power base.

The influence of Ruhani's opponents in Mashhad is so great that the majority of Iranian commentators immediately put responsibility for the protests at their door. In this, the deliberate decision was taken

to accept that the protests would very soon also turn against the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution Khamenei himself and against the regime as such. In this way, Ruhani was to be forced to take decisive action and thereby destroy his liberal image, which is also popular internationally. In addition, armed groups of Hezbollahis wanted to prove their worth as brutal thugs fighting for the regime, a role Ruhani has denied them since he assumed office. Once again, the Hezbollahis and their supporters in the security establishment are responsible for the majority of the brutalities, while the majority of the security forces acted professionally and only intervened when - presumably due to agents provocateurs - violence was used against people and property.

In any case, the Ruhani government was able to bring the protests under control quite quickly and without too much loss of face. The President was open to most of the demands made by the protestors and, in turn, used the demonstrations to draw attention to the little room for manoeuvre he was granted politically. Neither he nor his adversary Ahmadinejad joined in the chorus of those who, like the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution, followed the line given out by the Revolutionary Guards, i.e. that the demonstrations were controlled from abroad. Ahmadinejad had a good reason for this: many of the demonstrators were actually his supporters.

Ruhani's Reforms

This raises the question of the future of the Ruhani reforms, which the protests were intended to thwart. The reforms are geared towards reducing tensions through de-escalation in domestic and foreign policy, connecting Iran to the international flow of capital, opening it up to investors, modernising Iranian industry through further liberal reforms of the economy,

reducing the country's unilateral dependence on oil exports, and thereby increasing prosperity. Ruhani's reforms, however, are not to be understood as solely economic liberalism. In 2013, he and his staff drafted a Civil Rights Charter, designed to reorganise the relationship between the state and its citizens at all levels. This concerns general issues of legal certainty, provincial administration reforms, as well as the unshackling of the economy. In political reality, this at first meant the conclusion of the nuclear agreement in 2015, which was to be followed by a far-reaching suspension of sanctions.

The fact that this did not become a reality due to American pressure is not sufficient explanation for the country's economic misery. Many problems are home-made; apart from huge corruption scandals, such as the partial collapse of the state pension system, it is especially the archaic Iranian banking system which is in dire need of reform. Above all, however, it is the extensive network of foundations which smothers Iran's economic life. Their functionaries not only benefit from tax exemptions, but also (ab)use their direct access to governmental offices for hostile takeovers of successful private companies. They are not squeamish in their choice of methods, which is why the term "economic mafia" (*mâfyâ-ye eqtesâdi*) has become established even in Iranian academic publications. Their economic power and political networks make it possible for the foundation heads to exert disproportionately large political influence and, as a rule, to prevail vis-à-vis the mayors and provincial administrations.

Reisi and the Un-Pious Astan-e Qods Foundation

Undoubtedly the richest and most important pious foundation (*bonyâd*) is the Astan-e Qods-e Razavi in Mashhad. Already in the 1990s, misappropriation and

embezzlement resulted in major scandals, which, for the most part however, did not produce any fallout. This foundation is also the largest landowner in the province, and Mashhad City Council regularly protests that infrastructure projects and urban planning are made impossible by the foundation's refusal to sell or lease land. Ruhani's reforms would not only curtail the economic influence of the foundation, it would also strengthen the position of city and provincial administrations. It is thus not surprising that resistance to Ruhani is particularly strong in Mashhad. This also makes the last election campaign appear in a different light: the head of the Astan-e Qods is none other than Reisi, the defeated presidential candidate.

From Reisi's point of view as well as that of his father-in-law Alamolhoda, preserving economic privileges justifies every political measure, even if this results in a serious domestic political crisis. Up to now, their approach does not seem to pay off: on the whole, the Ruhani government is stable, and Ali Motahhari, the independent MP, already demands that the pious foundations be made subject to taxation, i.e. exactly what the Mashhader vested interests believe should be prevented at all costs. The struggle for the future of the reforms is far from over, however, and, especially in the case of Reisi, there is another dimension: his involvement in the international Shia.

Reisi's Battalions

Ayatollah Reisi's international ambitions are reflected in his commitment to the younger generation of Shia militias in Iraq. Visits by representatives of the younger generation of Iraqi militia leaders are well documented: Akram Ka'bi from the Harakat Hizbullah al-Nujaba as well as Qais al-Khaz'ali from the Asaib Ahl al-Haqq are regular visitors to Mashhad. Both militia leaders are regarded as extre-



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mely anti-American and they employ their fighters in Syria. Like them, Reisi regards the struggle in Syria against ISIS also as a confrontation with Israel. In contrast to Ruhani, therefore, he stands for escalation in foreign policy.

Derivations and Recommendations

At their core, the latest protests are the typical transformation problems of a rentier state whose politico-economic elite does not want to accept the need for important reforms. At the same time, it seems that the divisions within the regime indicate a confrontation which has intensified in recent months. The protests must, however, also be interpreted as a stress test for the regime. The question remains how many more such tests the Islamic Republic can withstand given the deep rift within its political caste. It must be assumed that in the next confrontation Reisi's willingness to employ violence will increase and thus seriously threaten the regime as such. Much will therefore depend on how aggressively Ruhani can and wants to take drastic measures against Reisi.

There can be no doubt, however, that a success of the Ruhani reforms is in the European interest. Above all, because Ruhani's economic reforms are linked to the strengthening of civil rights, which, in turn, would strengthen the rule of law and legal security in Iran. In addition, containing the rank economic growth of the pious foundation in Mashhad would also curtail the support for radical Shiite militias.

- It is therefore very important that, at an international level, the EU demands fair play vis-à-vis Iran and insists on the suspension of sanctions as detailed in the nuclear agreement in return for Iran's compliance with its obligations.

- Concerning the intra-Iranian conflict between Ruhani and Reisi, Europe cannot do much more than analyse the interdependencies between 'pious' foundations and political violence and, if necessary, consider appropriate sanctioning mechanisms and travel bans.
- Ultimately, Iranians and Europeans must be aware that if Ruhani's reforms were to fail, it would entail incalculable risks for both sides and would destroy the positive political potential created by the conclusion of the nuclear negotiations.

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Note: This article represents exclusively the opinion of the author.