



Evolution, Not Revolution

Major, Peaceful Change in Iran Is Possible; Will Take Time

Original Analysis by Chris Ferrero
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Is theocratic Iran at the precipice of collapse? This has been the fundamental question on nearly everyone's mind in the weeks following the presidential election. Many observers, particularly in the West, interpreted from events during the last two weeks of June that another revolution could be underway. This was and remains unlikely to be the case. Current circumstances differ in important ways from those of 1978-79, when protest and discontent built for months before culminating in revolution. This is not to say, however, that the 2009 presidential election and its aftermath will not have significant consequences for the future of the Islamic Republic. These consequences are more likely to unfold in *evolutionary* than revolutionary fashion, and the locus of change is more likely to be the seminaries, mosques, and meeting rooms of the holy city of Qom than the streets of Tehran.

Part One: Why Current Conditions Do Not Favor Regime Collapse

Several conditions favor regime survival in the near-to-medium term. Mir Hosein Mousavi is not a counter-revolutionary figure. He is instead a member of the political vanguard of the 1979 revolution, having served as Prime Minister in the 1980s. Rather than call for systemic change, Mousavi and the opposition have adopted the mantle of the 1979 Islamic Revolution to criticize the fraudulent actions of the current government. A June 20th statement attributed to Mousavi reads: *"We are not up against our sacred regime and its legal structures; this structure guards our Independence, Freedom, and Islamic Republic. We are up against the deviations and deceptions and we want to reform them; a reformation that returns us to the pure principles of the Islamic Revolution."* The chief desire of the protesters and opposition politicians is annulment of the election and liberalization within the existing framework, not systemic upheaval. Though recent government actions have certainly undermined the legitimacy of the theocracy for some, there does not yet appear to be sufficiently widespread support for regime change within Iran. Iran is a deeply religious society, and disaffection with the current government should not be automatically construed as opposition to Islamic government writ large (see this [study](#) for more on the relationship between religious beliefs and political views in Iran).

Even if sentiment for regime overthrow increased, important organizational factors would inhibit rapid change. Leadership is lacking; Mousavi lacks both the desire to undermine the current system and the charismatic authority to galvanize protest around revolutionary goals. In short, Mousavi is no Khomeini. Moreover, the current opposition lacks the comprehensive moral and organizational backing of the mosque network and clerical establishment. The 1979 revolution represented diverse actors and interests in Iranian society, but the Islamists and clerics were the chief instigators. The mosque was and remains the largest institutional network for civic organization and collective action in Iran. Today, the local mosque is more likely to recruit members for the Basij militia than serve as a focal point for organized protest against the government. The mosque and the Islamists were critical players in overthrowing the Shah in 1979; this institution and its chief political constituency show no signs of backing revolutionary regime change in 2009 or soon hereafter. Twitter and other social networking communications technologies will not be able to serve as potent an organizational role as long as the government has the ability to control access to such tools.

Finally, the corporate interests of the *bonyads* and security services favor regime survival. *Bonyads* are shadowy tax-exempt business conglomerates chiefly controlled by the clerical establishment. They are nominal charitable foundations free of financial disclosure requirements. Their interests range from manufacturing to real estate to minerals and natural resources. Bonyads constitute a large share of Iran's GDP and are the main reason that many Iran observers believe the clerics are motivated more by money than religion or ideology. Regime collapse would threaten the bonyads and the financial interests of many clerics. A threat to the bonyads would also be a threat to the financial interests of the regime's elite military organization – the Islamic Republican Guard Corps (IRGC). IRGC business units have become deeply involved in Iran's economy in recent years. They have won contracts to manage Tehran's airport, to develop gas fields, and to handle other large civil engineering projects. These growing business interests were the main impetus behind the 2007 US designation of the IRGC as a terrorist organization; such designation was a legal maneuver to apply selective sanctions on IRGC business interests.

As a unique military entity, the IRGC has even more fundamental institutional interests at stake. It was created by Khomeini to protect the Islamic regime, and its very existence may depend on the survival of the theocratic system itself. Militaries usually have independent corporate identities. Because of this, the military can safely withdraw support for the outgoing government in most regime-change scenarios; it knows that it will still serve an integral role for the state under the incoming regime. This is not so for the IRGC in Iran. Regime collapse would very possibly lead to a "de-Baathification" of the security services affecting all or most members of the organization. Iran has separate conventional military forces, so a new governing system could dispose of the IRGC without absolutely compromising Iranian national security. Even if the IRGC as an institution managed to survive regime change, its current leadership is comprised of Ahmadinejad and Khamene'i loyalists whose personal fortunes clearly rest on regime

survival. One can thus expect a persistent heavy hand in crushing protests despite possible scattered, low-level defections. Some analysts of recent events suggest that the IRGC is staging an internal coup and that they – not the clerics – are in control of the state. The possibility of Iran morphing from a theocracy into a military junta is compelling. Yet such a scenario might not be in the best interests of the IRGC. According to an influential academic study (Barbara Geddes, “What Do We Know about Democratization after Twenty Years?”), military juntas last an average of only nine years. Rather than pushing the clerics to the sidelines, the IRGC would be better served by maintaining a symbiotic relationship with them in the framework of the current system. This relationship would have to maintain some real balance of power between the two; a puppet Supreme Leader would be unlikely to sustain a true military dictatorship.

People Power through Strikes?

There *is* one tool that the current opposition could use to effectuate major change of some sort: general strikes. General strikes were used to great effect in late 1978. Street protests had dwindled by late summer because of the violent response of the Shah’s security services. The opposition turned to strikes which spread throughout Iran; by November nearly the entire country had stopped working. The Shah ordered oil workers back to the fields under threat of death.

General strikes that pierce the financial heart of the clerical and security establishments may be the best and only way for the opposition to achieve results in the near-term. Though the protest crowds of mid-June may have shrunk and an air of resigned melancholy may appear to have descended upon Tehran, it is worth remembering that the 1979 revolution ebbed and flowed and took roughly one year to play out. The question remains whether the current opposition is sufficiently organized and widespread to maximize the effects of tools such as strikes.

Part Two: Khamene’i Will Fall before the Regime Falls

The Supreme Leader of Iran is infallible – until his clerical peers determine that he is not. Few casual observers of Iran probably realize it, but institutional checks on the authority of the Supreme Leader do exist. The position of Supreme Leader is the keystone of the Islamic Republican system. The future of Iran is inextricably linked to decisions about the future of this position – decisions which will be made by senior clerics predominantly residing, meeting, and teaching in the holy city of Qom.

The Assembly of Experts: The New Most Important Body of Government

The Assembly of Experts is the governmental body charged by the Iranian constitution with selecting the Supreme Leader, monitoring his performance, and removing him if necessary. It is comprised of eighty-six senior clerics directly elected by the Iranian

people. The Assembly is currently headed by former President Hashemi Rafsanjani, a pragmatic conservative and rival of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamene'i. Rafsanjani was remarkably inconspicuous for more than two weeks after the June 12 election, leading to reasonable speculation that he was in Qom meeting with members of the Assembly and trying to marshal the votes to censure if not remove Khamene'i. The fall of Khamene'i would be remarkable but is certainly plausible. To understand why this is so, and to understand other potential scenarios regarding the future of the position of Supreme Leader, a brief theology/history review is in order.

The Foundations of Clerical Supreme Leadership

Iran is dominated by Twelver Shi'ism. Twelvers believe that twelve Shi'a Imams descended from the Prophet as the spiritual and political leaders of the Muslim community. These Imams were chosen by God; they were sinless and infallible, and had the unique ability to unlock the secrets of the Koran. The Imams were oppressed by Sunni caliphs; the Twelfth Imam is believed to have gone into occultation in the 10th century. He – the Mahdi – will return as the messiah at the end of days. Interpretation of Islamic sources of law in the absence of clearly legitimate leadership was a source of contestation for centuries after the Mahdi's disappearance. The concept of *ijtihad* was at the center of debate. Ijtihad is independent, reasoned interpretation of the sources of Islamic law. How widely could ijtihad be practiced? Who was qualified to practice it? Could it legitimately be practiced at all? A 19th century doctrinal debate appeared to resolve the issue. Only elite clerics called *mujtahid* could practice ijtihad. The laity must practice *taqlid*, or imitation, and follow the teachings and interpretations of a *mujtahid*, the most eminent of whom acquire the titles "Grand Ayatollah" (Sign of God) and "*Marja-ye Taqlid*" (Source of Imitation). This arrangement does include some democratic characteristics, however. One may follow the eminent cleric of one's own choosing. Moreover, the process of becoming a leading cleric requires teacher and peer certification. One is cleared to teach by his teachers and granted titles of eminence by his clerical peers. Ostensibly, the chief qualification to reach such a high level is command of Islamic jurisprudence, not political acumen. Indeed, until Khomeini, the ayatollahs acted as sources of guidance in people's personal and religious lives. Khomeini revolutionized the role by adding governance to the list of clerical duties. Under Khomeini's formulation of *veliyat-e faqih* (rule of the religious jurist), a most learned cleric must fill the role of political leader left vacant by the Twelfth Imam. As such, this Supreme Leader is to be an infallible religious authority capable of interpreting and promulgating God's law. In short, he is God's political stand-in for the Mahdi, and to question the Supreme Leader is to question God Himself.

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamene'i: Vulnerable but a Survivor

Ayatollah Khomeini was the first Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic. His following was large and though some opposed his idea of *veliyat-e faqih*, few doubted Khomeini's

overall religious qualifications. The same cannot be said for Khamene'i. From the standpoint of Islamic jurisprudence, Khamene'i is not a legitimate Ayatollah. His religious scholarship earned him the rank of *hojjat-ol Islam* (the rank held by Reformist former President Khatami). It is an admirable rank, but does not qualify one for religious Supreme Leadership. Khamene'i was elevated to the position for his *political* qualifications. The constitution was amended and Khamene'i granted the title of Ayatollah in a political maneuver. He was a compromise candidate judged best able to ensure the security and continuity of the regime after Khomeini's passing. For twenty years, Khamene'i's legitimacy has rested on his political acumen and utility. As soon as his clerical peers determine that he has become a political liability, Khamene'i could be removed from power. Some clerics have always resented his Supreme Leadership because of his deficiencies in religious scholarship. Opposition based on combined political and religious jurisprudential grounds could be fatal to Khamene'i. Already we have seen signs that Khamene'i may have miscalculated and seriously undermined his personal legitimacy and that of his position. The widespread chants of "Death to Khamene'i" and "Death to the Dictator" are reminiscent of calls thirty years ago for "Death to the Shah." The early-July statement by the Association of Researchers and Teachers of Qom – a body of clerics – calling the new government illegitimate is a further symbolic blow to the authority of Khamene'i. If discontent and/or disorder persist in such a way that the senior clerical establishment and Assembly of Experts believe threatens the system, Khamene'i may be replaced in an effort to revive the religious and political legitimacy of the position of Supreme Leader and save the clerical regime.

Though plausible and more likely than complete regime collapse, this scenario has its problems. Foremost are divisions within the Assembly of Experts itself. Khamene'i does enjoy support in the Assembly, and clerics have been harassed, intimidated, and even arrested in the past to prevent them from speaking out against the Supreme Leader. Khamene'i has built a large network of political loyalists through favors and coercion that spans both the clerical and military establishments. Mehdi Khalaji, a former Qom seminarian, argues [here](#) that Khamene'i has successfully marginalized his clerical opposition – for now. Even if a majority of senior clerics decided that Khamene'i must go in order to preserve the regime, the IRGC may take action to protect him, especially if senior IRGC leaders believe that their personal fate is tied to his. Finally, even if the Assembly of Experts decided that removal of Khamene'i was in the Islamic Republic's best interests, they may be unable to agree on a replacement.

Khamene'i has long proved to be a tactically-shrewd survivor, but there have also long been grumblings about his poor mental and physical health. He has appeared weak before and survived. How many lives does he have left?

Part Three: Generational Change and a War of Ideas

The most likely scenario for reform in Iran sees generational change and a war of ideas leading to evolutionary transformation of the Islamic Republic. Recent events have

profoundly affected Iranian discourse regarding the roles of religion and popular sovereignty in government. A war of ideas is being waged throughout Iranian society and within the clerical establishment of Qom. In time, a new generation of clerical leadership buttressed by the Iranian electorate may effectuate peaceful change in the system of Islamic governance. The outcome hinges primarily on divisions in the conservative political camp and the relative power and influence of competing clerics in Qom and on the Assembly of Experts. Ultimately, constitutional reform could lead as far as direct election of the Supreme Leader or diminution of the position to one largely of ceremony, akin to the British crown.

Influential Ayatollahs, Diverse Views

Veliyat-e Faqih is not without its clerical detractors. The late Ayatollah Shari'at Madari was the most popular and respected cleric in Iran during Khomeini's exile. He spoke out against Khomeini's innovative concept as the new government took shape, arguing that popular, not divine sovereignty was the legitimate source of law. Shari'at Madari, however, lacked the charisma and support of key political actors to ensure the primacy of popular sovereignty in the constitution. Nearly a decade later, Khomeini's anointed successor Ayatollah Montazeri criticized the Supreme Leader for having created a repressive dictatorship worse than that of the Shah. Montazeri's blasphemy led to years of house arrest and the elevation of Khamene'i. Though not fundamentally opposed to the concept of *veliyat-e faqih*, Montazeri – now in his eighties – has a decidedly liberal view of how the Supreme Leader should govern and has been one of the most vocal Qom-based critics of recent events. Finally, Shi'ism's most eminent Ayatollah today – Ayatollah Sistani of Iraq – opposes clerical involvement in government. Sistani, originally from Iran, has thus far withheld comment on events surrounding the presidential election.

A New Cleavage: Moderate- versus Ultra-Conservatives

There are, however, powerful clerics who firmly support the current system on religious and ideological grounds – including one who would take the system even further toward clerical dictatorship. Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi is the most prominent and important ultra-conservative cleric in Iran. He oversees seminary training in the Haqqani school of thought, which favors enforcement of fundamentalist Islamic tenets and the hastening of the return of the Mahdi. Mesbah-Yazdi, who sits in a high position on the Assembly of Experts, is believed to be the ideological mentor of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and other key members of the current government. He has expressed his preference for a system that eliminates elections altogether. Mesbah-Yazdi is at the forefront of the current clash within conservative ranks. On one side are ultra-conservatives such as Mesbah-Yazdi, Guardian Council secretary Ayatollah Jannati, and firebrand Ahmad Khatami (not to be confused with former Reformist President Mohammad Khatami). On the other side are more pragmatic, moderate conservative clerics such as Ayatollah Jaleddin Taheri and former President and current head of the Assembly of Experts Hashemi Rafsanjani.

“Reformist” and “conservative” have been the two main camps in Iranian politics for the last decade, but *moderate-conservative* versus *ultra-conservative* may become the more important cleavage in the years to come. The radicalization of the right wing in Iranian politics appears to be pushing moderate conservatives into alliance with reformers; we thus see the likes of former presidents Khatami and Rafsanjani – one reformer, the other nominally conservative – supporting the same candidate in Mousavi.

The implications of this cleavage are uncertain, but are likely to be manifested in the seminaries and training centers of Qom and in political bodies such as the Assembly of Experts. Qom is not only a center of religious scholarship; it is a center of ideological and bureaucratic training for functionaries of the theocratic government – both religious and lay. Which set of ideas will win in Qom’s centers of learning? Will ultra-conservative perspectives such as those of Mesbah-Yazdi be passed onto a new generation of clerical and civilian leaders, or will the more moderate-to-liberal views espoused by leaders such as Montazeri, Taheri, Rafsanjani, and Mohammad Khatami gain significant traction with future generations of religious and lay leaders? *US-Iran-Relations.com* posits that the greatest chance for significant change in Iran rests with victory for moderate-to-liberal ideas in Qom. A preponderance of relatively moderate clerics in Qom could ultimately shift the balance of power on the Assembly of Experts, setting in motion incremental or even significant systemic reform. Though it seems almost laughable right now, the Iranian electorate may indeed ultimately have the final say.

Key Medium-Term Events: The Death of Khamene’i and the 2014 Assembly of Experts Election

Ayatollah Khamene’i will not live forever. Barring earlier removal, his death will be a critical juncture in the history of the Islamic Republic. What kind of Supreme Leader will the Assembly of Experts choose to replace him? Were he to die tomorrow it is unclear who would replace him but certain that the selection process would entail profound contestation between radical and more moderate members of the Assembly. The future make-up of the Assembly is also uncertain, but *US-Iran-Relations.com* posits that if repression and discontent continue, the Assembly of Experts will take on a more reformist character over the course of a generation. The Assembly is popularly elected every eight years; the next election will occur in 2014. The Guardian Council, half of which is appointed by the Supreme Leader, vets candidates. Khamene’i and his loyalists can thus exercise influence on the make-up of the Assembly. Yet if the war of ideas currently being waged results in a large moderate-reformist alliance that significantly outnumbers a zealous but small ultra-conservative right wing, the Guardian Council may be unable to ensure a complacent and cooperative Assembly. Assuming that Khamene’i remains in power five years from now, the 2014 Assembly of Experts election could be the next galvanizing electoral event in Iran – even more galvanizing than the 2013 presidential election. Iranians know that the office of Supreme Leader is their country’s most important and powerful office. If dissatisfaction with Khamene’i or an equally-repressive and conservative successor persists, Iranians can be expected to

come out in droves to influence the future of the office. The regime could obviously attempt and succeed at vote-rigging in Assembly of Experts elections. Yet establishing rigging as a regular practice could carry its own risks and difficulties. If moderate conservative and reformist candidates gain enough traction and ubiquity, rigging the outcomes of eighty-six seats spanning nearly thirty provincial voting districts could resemble an exercise in electoral whack-a-mole. Patience may be required, however. A pro-moderate/reformist shift in the balance of power on the Assembly may take several years and a few elections (2014, 2022, 2030) to occur.

What a New Supreme Leader Could Mean

The Assembly of Experts cannot directly affect policy or initiate constitutional reform. Its effect on any major reform in Iran of either a policy or structural nature is to be realized through its selection of the Supreme Leader. Only the Supreme Leader can approve a constitutional amendment. If repression continues under Khamene'i in a way that delegitimizes *veliyat-e faqih* for a majority of Iranians, it is entirely plausible that a future Supreme Leader may call for constitutional reform minimizing the power of the position to one of religious guidance but not governance. In effect, the Supreme Leadership could assume a character more reminiscent of the Pope or the Queen of England while maintaining the imprimatur of an Islamic Republic and the attendant privileges of the clerical class (importantly including, to at least some extent, the clerics' economic interests). It would be a bold and largely selfless act, but would be generally consistent with the views espoused by Grand Ayatollahs Shari'at Madari and Sistani. A future Supreme Leader may also effectuate constitutional reform leading to direct election of his position. A survey by *TerrorFreeTomorrow.org* shows that eighty percent of Iranians would like to directly elect the Supreme Leader. This, too, would be consistent with the shi'a practice mentioned earlier of choosing one's own *Marja-ye Taqlid*. Finally, and least radically, the Assembly of Experts could select a Supreme Leader in the mold of Ayatollah Montazeri who maintains the current system but governs with a more compassionate and liberal hand.

Conclusion

The future of Iran is uncertain. Its diversity of actors and interests and labyrinthine power structure make it notoriously difficult to predict but allow for several compelling and plausible scenarios. *US-Iran-Relations.com* judges the most likely scenario of resolution and reform in Iran to be evolutionary change wrought by the victory of liberal-to-moderate ideas and a shift in the balance of political power among the clerical establishment, aided by the Iranian electorate. The fraud and subsequent repression of 2009 has left an indelible imprint on a young country. It may take years, but this formative political experience will manifest its effects. Though street protests are exciting and make for good television, the seminaries, schools, mosques, and meeting rooms of Qom are the primary locus of power and struggle. It is to Qom that we should continue to patiently look for a vision of the future of Iran.

