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The Islamic Republic of Iran Four Decades On: The 2017/18 Protests Amid a Triple Crisis

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BROOKINGS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Throughout its tumultuous four decades of rule, the Islamic Republic has shown remarkable longevity, despite regular predictions of its impending demise. However, the fact that it has largely failed to deliver on the promises of the 1979 revolution, above all democracy and social justice, continues to haunt its present and future. Iran's post-revolutionary history has been marked not by totalitarian stagnation, but rather by a constant struggle between state and society over the course the country should take. In fact, as the 2009 Green Movement and the 2017/18 protests demonstrate, the century-old struggle of Iranians against tyranny and for democracy continues unabated.

In November 2019, new protests erupted across Iran, sparked by a surprise tripling of fuel prices. These protests were, analytically speaking, a continuation of the nationwide protests that took place in 2017/18, known as the Dey Protests. While the November or Âbân (referring to the Iranian calendar month) Protests were distinct from the Dey Protests in a number of ways, some analysts have proposed that both are part of an Iranian version of the “long-term revolutionary process” that has been underway throughout the Arab world since 2011.

This paper, which was written with a focus on the Dey Protests, aims to provide a useful contextualization of recent events and proposes to read the Iranian protests of the past two years within the context of what I call the Islamic Republic's “triple crisis.” It argues that, given the ongoing nature of this crisis, the need for fundamental domestic change in Iran remains pressing. In fact, over the past four decades, the Islamic Republic, with its theocratic and semi-republican system, has shown itself to be quite immune to meaningful reform, despite multiple pressures from below.

The first part of the paper looks at the socio-economic and political causes of those nationwide protests, as reflected in their powerful anti-regime slogans, by focusing on their contingent drivers. Turning to structural factors, the second part lays out the Islamic Republic's triple crisis—socio-economic, political, and ecological—which poses a veritable threat to regime security. In conclusion, the

paper addresses what the regime fears most and revisits the lessons to be learned from the 2009 Green Movement, before highlighting the need for intersectional alliances in Iran to produce real social transformation.

The paper argues that, within the socio-economic, political, and ecological triple crisis, the political crisis constitutes the center of gravity. If the political crisis were solved, through meaningful reform of the governing system, the resolution of the other two crises—socio-economic and ecological—would be facilitated, while not guaranteed. Overall, this triple crisis, which is likely to prevail as its generating factors will probably remain unaltered or worsen, has heralded a new era in the history of the Islamic Republic, marked by turmoil and potential instability.

In order to bring about real transformation in Iran, it would be necessary to form an organized intersectional alliance. Such an alliance would need to bring together the social bases and main demands of the Green Movement (the middle class, calling for political liberalization) and the Dey Protests (the lower classes, calling for social justice). In this way, it would encompass all the constituent social movements of modern Iran, including the workers', students', and women's movements, enabling them to coalesce around and collectively forward a social, economic, and political agenda. For such an alliance to take shape, a "reform of reformism" would be an important precondition, which would then allow it to reach out programmatically and practically to the lower classes in order to include their grievances and interests.

Given the magnitude of Iran's triple crisis and the absence of meaningful policies to address it, there is little indication that Iran will be able to solve any one of the crises. As Iranian society finds itself trapped between a precarious present and uncertain future, a number of scenarios could play out, including a militarized Islamic Republic, de facto led by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). Yet, even such a scenario would neither resolve Iran's triple crisis, nor extinguish Iranians' indomitable desire for social justice and good governance.

What happens to a dream deferred? / Does it dry up / like a raisin in the sun?
/ Or fester like a sore— / And then run? / Does it stink like rotten meat? / Or
crust and sugar over— / like a syrupy sweet? / Maybe it just sags / like a heavy
load. / Or does it explode?

—“Harlem,” Langston Hughes¹

NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

The Persian transliteration uses French for words that are derived from the latter (e.g., *dictateur*, *néolibéral*, *referendum*).

INTRODUCTION

As protests swept Iran at the turn of 2018, prominent University of Tehran politics professor Sadegh Zibakalam suggested in a state radio interview that if a referendum on the future of the Islamic Republic were held at the time, more than 70 percent of Iranians would say no—from all walks of life, including the affluent, academics, and clerics, from urban and rural areas alike.² One year later, facing intensely challenging domestic and international environments, the Islamic Republic of Iran marked its 40th anniversary. Throughout its tumultuous four decades of rule, the Islamic Republic has shown remarkable longevity, despite regular predictions of its impending demise. However, the fact that it has largely failed to deliver on the promises of the 1979 revolution, above all democracy and social justice, continues to haunt its present and future.³ Iran's post-revolutionary history has been marked not by totalitarian stagnation, but rather by a constant struggle between state and society over the course the country should take. In fact, as the 2009 Green Movement and the 2017/18 protests demonstrate, the century-old struggle of Iranians against tyranny and for democracy continues unabated.⁴

In November 2019, new protests erupted across Iran, sparked by a surprise tripling of fuel prices. These protests were, analytically speaking, a continuation of the nationwide protests that took place in 2017/18, known as the Dey Protests.⁵ Despite similarities in terms of social bases and demands, the November or Âbân (referring to the Iranian calendar month) Protests were distinct from the Dey Protests in a number of ways: (1) there was an almost five-fold increase in the number of protesters (200,000 compared to 42,000, according to interior ministry figures), making the Âbân Protests the largest anti-regime demonstration since the 1979 revolution; (2) people's resolve was much more ferocious and they expressed their anger more openly; and (3) the state response was unprecedented, with a bloody crackdown resulting in the deaths of up to 1,500 protesters (plus at least 2,000 wounded and 7,000 arrested). The state crackdown was carried out during a near-total internet shutdown and thus hidden from national and international scrutiny. The nature of the regime's unprecedented response also affected the middle class and the economy much more than the Dey Protests did.

As such, the Âbân Protests marked a watershed moment, whose effects are still being felt today.⁶ Some analysts have proposed that the Dey and Âbân Protests are part of an Iranian version of the “long-term revolutionary process” that has been underway throughout the Arab world since 2011.⁷ While this paper was written with a focus on the Dey Protests and concluded before the outbreak of the more recent Âbân Protests, it hopefully will provide a useful contextualization of recent events and offer relevant insights, as it proposes to read the Iranian protests of the past two years within the context of what I call the Islamic Republic’s “triple crisis.”

Sociologist Misagh Parsa has stressed that the Islamic Republic’s rulers are presented with two broad options: (1) to fulfill popular demands and promises dating back to the 1979 revolution by implementing fundamental changes, including relinquishing their privileges, democratizing the polity, and granting civil and political liberties or (2) to retain their exclusive privileges and turn toward repression, thereby radicalizing the public and the opposition and paving the way for the rise of more radical democratization movements.⁸ Parsa also stated in his 2016 book that the Islamic Republic’s contradictions had “generated irreconcilable conflicts and set the stage for protests and clashes that ... [had] yet to reach a climax.”⁹ This paper argues that, given the Islamic Republic’s acute triple crisis, the need for fundamental domestic change remains pressing.¹⁰

In fact, over the past four decades, the Islamic Republic, with its theocratic and semi-republican system, has shown itself to be quite immune to meaningful reform, despite multiple pressures from below. This analysis paper discusses the Islamic Republic’s acute internal crises, which reached a climax with the 2017/18 protests. The first part of the paper looks at the socio-economic and political causes of those nationwide protests, as reflected in their powerful anti-regime slogans, by focusing on their contingent drivers. Turning to structural factors, the second part lays out the Islamic Republic’s triple crisis—socio-economic, political, and ecological—which poses a veritable threat to regime security. In conclusion, the paper addresses what the regime fears most and revisits the lessons to be learned from the 2009 Green Movement, before highlighting the need for intersectional alliances in Iran to produce real social transformation.

THE 2017/18 DEY PROTESTS: THE EXPLOSION OF CONTINGENT AND STRUCTURAL GRIEVANCES

Nationwide leaderless protests shook Iran from December 28, 2017 through January 3, 2018 (or during Dey 1396, according to the Iranian calendar).¹¹ Initially, protests deplored economic hardship, government corruption, and high unemployment, but they soon embraced political slogans against the regime.¹² This wave of protests, henceforth referred to as the Dey Protests, has been novel in two respects: (1) it encompassed an unprecedented geographical range, including 70–100 cities and provincial towns across the country, and (2) the slogans chanted were much more radical compared to previous protests, such as the 2009 Green Movement.¹³

Over ten days, tens of thousands of Iranians—mainly economically dispossessed youth and members of the lower-middle class, but also students and pensioners—took to the squares of mostly small cities to voice their anger and frustration. This “angry class” has been described as the “middle-class poor”: an urban precariat with middle-class qualifications and aspirations that remains socio-economically deprived.¹⁴ The lower and working class Iranians who protested have conventionally been understood to be an integral part of the regime’s social base, or at least loyal to it, due to welfare-state provisions and their alleged religious piety.¹⁵ However, during the Dey Protests, for instance, 60 Friday prayer offices were attacked, according to the Friday prayer imam of the city of Hamedan; this is notable because the Friday prayer imam in every city represents the supreme leader.¹⁶

Following staged pro-regime demonstrations on January 3, 2018, the authorities announced the end of the Dey Protests. The Fars news agency, which is affiliated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), described the January 3 rallies as “the revolutionary outburst of Iranian people against lawbreakers.”¹⁷ On the same day, then-commander of the IRGC, Mohammad Ali Jafari, said he had deployed forces to three provinces (Isfahan, Lorestan, and Hamedan), while proclaiming the end of what he called the “fetneh,” or the sedition, of 1396 (referring to the Iranian year).¹⁸ In 2009, “fetneh 1388” was the term used by conservatives and hardliners in their attacks against the Green Movement.

The Dey Protests eventually died down as a result of two main factors: (1) repression by the coercive apparatus of the regime, which classified the upheaval at the

highest security threat level and even dispatched IRGC forces and (2) the lack of active involvement by other parts of the middle class, due to reasons including fear of reprisal or destabilization, as well as class resentment.¹⁹ Concerns over destabilizing the country and plunging it into chaos were actively invoked by the regime, which deployed scaremongering tactics, such as putting up billboards on highways warning Iranians that the continuation of protests might turn the country into “another Syria.”

The Dey Protests were interpreted in various ways. On one side of the spectrum, mainstream commentators, many of whom supported President Hassan Rouhani, regarded the protests as merely a wake-up call for the administration to improve its economic performance.²⁰ On the other side, they were read in more radical terms. According to Nobel Peace Prize laureate Shirin Ebadi, the protests ushered in the final chapter of the Islamic Republic: “I am convinced that these protests are the beginning of the end of the Islamic Republic. We are dealing with a process. But the demise of the regime has started, even if it may take years.”²¹ In this vein, others argued that, with the Dey upheaval and ongoing protests, Iran had entered a “revolutionary phase.”²²

The rebellion’s immediate trigger was a protest on December 28, 2017 staged by Rouhani’s ultra-conservative opponents in Iran’s second-biggest city, Mashhad, which used rising food prices to attack the administration’s economic performance. Those initiating the Mashhad protest were allies of Rouhani’s 2017 presidential opponent Ebrahim Raisi, who had been appointed by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei as chairman of the Âstân Qods Razavi, a clerical-commercial complex located in the northeastern Razavi Khorasan province and Iran’s largest “bonyâd” or para-statal religious foundation. The foundation, which administers the donations made to the Imam Reza shrine complex in Mashhad (the world’s second largest Muslim pilgrimage destination after Mecca), is by far the largest landowner in the province and controls the trade tied to the large Mashhad gas reservoirs.²³ The Mashhad protest, however, quickly spiraled out of control, igniting the entire country with a combination of social justice and anti-regime slogans. This illustrated how the ultra-conservative instigators behind the Mashhad protest underestimated popular anger toward the entirety of the regime—as one senior journalist said, it “boomeranged” back on them.²⁴

According to a 27-year-old protester from the northern city of Rasht, the egg price hike was only the spark:

I want my rights as a woman, I want respect. I want to decide myself whether to wear the hijab or not. I want to travel, also outside of Iran, without the permission of my father or brother. They accompany me [to the protests];

they, too, have the same demands. At the end of the day, it is about human rights, whether for men or women. We want a better economy, more jobs. The authorities rob their people. They embezzle funds. We have good oil resources, but they sell the oil to other countries and take the money for themselves instead of investing in the country and its people. I don't know what the solution would be, perhaps we want a revolution, but I don't know whom best to follow.²⁵

The protests' rapid diffusion was made possible through online social networks, above all Telegram.²⁶ According to Iran's interior minister, 42,000 people, 90 percent of whom were under the age of 25, participated, but the real number may be higher.²⁷ State repression resulted in over 20 people dead (again, merely an official figure), about 4,000 jailed (almost one in ten protesters, according to the above-mentioned ministry figure), and an uncounted number injured.²⁸ On January 5, 2018, four special rapporteurs of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) called upon Tehran to respect the rights of protesters and to stop blocking internet and messaging services.²⁹

The Dey Protests were driven not only by structural features of the Islamic Republic, but also by important contingent factors that emerged in the preceding months. Arguably, a new level of discontent with regime elites had materialized. This prompted me to speculate in May 2017 that the mix of socio-economic malaise and lack of avenues for meaningful political participation—also present in countries affected by the Arab Spring—would create “the potential for unrest and uprisings,” and, in December 2017, that a recent wave of protests by workers, pensioners, teachers, and students might “only be a forerunner of more to come.”³⁰

In fact, the Dey Protests constituted the climax of a high number of protests over the preceding one and a half years. From March 2016 until the 2017/18 protests, 1,700 social protests took place, according to the Islamic Revolution Devotees Society [*Jamīyat-e Isârgarâ-e Enghelâb-e Eslâmī*], a conservative party of which former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was a founding member.³¹ Over the course of 2017, workers, pensioners, teachers, and students staged hundreds of protests. Labor protests continued due to low and unpaid wages, neoliberal economic policies, security force repression of labor organizing, and arbitrary layoffs.³² While waves of labor protests had already taken place throughout the Ahmadinejad presidency (2005–13), President Rouhani's stance against labor rights and a decent minimum wage exacerbated the situation.³³ Moreover, Student Day 2017 (December 7) witnessed a wave of university protests, with students demanding social justice and an end to political tutelage, while highlighting that the climate for activism had become even worse under Rouhani.³⁴

EXPLORING PROTEST SLOGANS AND DEMANDS

Slogans have assumed a prominent role in all waves of protest throughout Iranian history and provide precious insight into protesters' motivations—volumes have been published on the subject.³⁵ A look at the slogans chanted during the 2017/18 Dey Protests undermines the previously mentioned reading that Iranians were merely looking for better economic performance from the Rouhani administration, offering instead a much more radical picture. Despite their heterogeneity, the Dey Protests' slogans can be categorized into three, overlapping themes: calling for economic justice, critiquing the entire ruling establishment, and linking Iran's regional policies to its domestic shortcomings.³⁶

Economic justice and socio-economic frustration

Rouhani, who in August 2013 assumed the presidency pledging to make economic and political improvements, failed to solve the crises he inherited. Chief among his campaign pledges was his promise to improve Iranians' living conditions via the removal of sanctions following the implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). However, economic conditions did not improve for average Iranians. As a result, socio-economic demands—including those pushing back against corruption, unemployment, and wealth inequality—were at the forefront of the Dey Protests. Some of the key protest chants combined socio-economic and political demands. For instance, echoing arguably the key slogan of the Arab Spring, Iranians shouted “Bread, job, freedom” [*nân, kâr, âzâdi*].

The protests were initially sparked by a sudden 50 percent rise in the price of eggs over the preceding week, following a year during which prices had already risen by 50 percent. The price hikes have been attributed to a mix of avian influenza affecting the egg industry and mismanagement in the agricultural sector that led to a parliamentary impeachment process against the minister of agriculture.³⁷ Protesters estimated the egg price rises as being tremendously higher than official accounts.³⁸ For poor households, which cannot afford meat products, eggs are a core food staple. Moreover, according to calculations made by BBC Persian on the basis of data from the Statistical Center of Iran, the preceding decade has seen a considerable reduction in the consumption of basic foodstuffs such as red meat, vegetable oil, and sugar—ranging between 30 percent and 50 percent—with the exception of chicken and eggs. Over the same period, the prices of the latter two items, taking into account levels of income and overall prices, have risen to a smaller extent than those of other food staples, especially the prices of red meat and bread. Meanwhile, the share of food in overall household expenditures is higher in economically weak provinces, in many cases

reaching one-third of their overall budget.³⁹ Hence, the sudden egg price rise, which sparked protests in Mashhad, was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back, having been preceded by a decade of price rises for core food staples.⁴⁰ Adding to the economic pressures for ordinary Iranians were higher rental costs and rising real estate prices. For instance, in Tehran, where especially the outskirts saw protests, residential real estate prices quadrupled between 2002 and 2014, making housing unaffordable for the population at large.⁴¹ Given this rise in the costs of living, the chant "No to high prices" [*Nah beh gerâni*] was omnipresent during the initial phase of the protests.

In addition, Rouhani's mid-December 2017 unveiling of the upcoming annual budget provoked widespread public anger. The budget proposed cutbacks (including a significant reduction of the cash payouts established under his predecessor Ahmadinejad) and higher fuel prices, while simultaneously calling for large funding increases for bonyâds. When announcing the budget, Rouhani "admitted that his government had no say over large parts of the spending and complained about the lack of transparency over the funds going to the foundations."⁴²

Some of the major contingent factors behind the Dey Protests were financial scandals, including bad loans, embezzlement, and bankruptcy in the banking sector. These factors have destroyed the savings of millions of Iranians. Starting in the mid-2000s, an estimated 7,000 credit institutions were privatized by then-President Ahmadinejad, benefitting individuals who were close to the regime. Then, the working and middle classes, suffering from a 40 percent inflation rate, were lured in by the private banks, which offered interest rates of around 20 percent—i.e., double the rate offered by regular banks. These financial institutions, which had been approved by the Central Bank of Iran, started to declare bankruptcy by 2013, due to unprofitable capital investments in the real estate sector, coupled with corruption and a lack of regulation, accountability, and transparency. Small towns populated by many dispossessed investors became key sites of the Dey Protests and many banks were attacked during the upheaval.⁴³

In addition to the factors mentioned above, it is important to note that, while Iran's gross domestic product (GDP) grew at an average rate of 5.1 percent from 2014 to 2017, economic growth per se cannot be considered a reliable indicator to measure socio-economic development.⁴⁴ In fact, Iran's economic growth during those years was not inclusive—rather, it was the elite who benefitted from the partial revitalization of trade and investment; one year after the January 2016 implementation of the JCPOA, when nuclear-related sanctions were lifted, it was reported that around four-fifths of the post-deal commercial contracts had benefitted state and semi-state entities and, above all, the economic empires of the IRGC and the supreme leader.⁴⁵ However, given the

Islamic Republic's political-economic structures, which only allow the private sector a marginal role, this lopsided result cannot come as surprise.⁴⁶

Moreover, under Rouhani, poverty and income inequality continued to increase, especially in smaller cities, which became hotbeds of the Dey Protests.⁴⁷ Poverty rates for urban areas (home to 74 percent of Iran's population) have risen steadily since 2012, while rates in rural areas rose sharply during Rouhani's first year in office and stayed high.⁴⁸ However, Djavad Salehi-Isfahani argues that, rather than poverty, unemployment and unfulfilled economic expectations may have fueled the Dey Protests.⁴⁹ There is in fact some evidence that points to socio-economic frustration as a core driver. After all, despite the Rouhani administration's promise that economic dividends from the JCPOA would reach Iranians at large, they almost exclusively went to regime entities, with the resulting economic growth not being inclusive.

Following the inflow of oil money—which saw a spike after the conclusion of the JCPOA—Iran's income distribution usually gets worse.⁵⁰ Moreover, income inequality had increasingly come to public attention prior to the Dey Protests. On the one hand, a year before the protests, pictures were circulated of homeless people sleeping in empty graves, shocking the country.⁵¹ On the other hand, the “âqâzâdeh,” or offspring of regime affiliates, were engaged in ostentatious displays of wealth, which Iranians from all walks of life observed on Tehran's streets or through their smartphones, enraging them. According to sociologist Ahmad Naghibzadeh, such perceptions of Iran's elite could translate into public distrust: “The Islamic Republic loses its greatest support base—meaning the people. People develop a highly negative view of the elite.”⁵²

Furthermore, in early 2017, Masoud Nili, Rouhani's economic advisor, complained that the top 10 percent of Iranian earners only paid 3 percent of all income taxes.⁵³ In December 2012, then-President Ahmadinejad claimed that only 300 people controlled 60 percent of the nation's wealth.⁵⁴ Such wealth inequality, as Kamran Matin states, is the result of “more than two decades of illiberal neo-liberalization, in which state institutions and their rentier appendages have engaged in a ruthless ‘accumulation by dispossession.’”⁵⁵

An incisive example demonstrating the above points were the protests that swept Qom. Often referred to as a “holy city” because it is the Islamic Republic's center for Shiite seminaries, Qom now has over one million inhabitants. In late December 2017, almost 2,000 people took to the streets, chanting a variety of slogans, including in favor of Reza Shah—the iron-fisted modernizer who ruled from 1925 to 1941 and father of the last shah—who is known for having reduced the power of the clergy.⁵⁶ According to Mehdi Faraji, this “unprecedented

dissent” in Qom, a city that had been simplistically regarded as a conservative regime stronghold, reflected long-standing grievances and rising social discontent against “clerical class privilege.” This “profound anger towards the clergy” by “almost everyone regardless of their political or class affiliations” came about because the ulema have economic privileges that those “not connected to the clerical system” do not. In fact, since the Ahmadinejad administration, a comprehensive welfare system for clerics and seminarians has developed, including “free comprehensive health insurance, low-interest loans, high-value gift cards, housing supplements and well-paid wages to cover their needs, all of which are unavailable for ordinary people.”⁵⁷ Since 2005, religious institutions in Qom have seen drastic increases in their budgets, including the rises proposed by Rouhani’s 2018 budget.⁵⁸

A two-class system has emerged in Qom: on one hand, a clerical welfare state and, on the other, a neoliberal state for the vast majority that includes privatized education, deregulated labor laws, suppressed unions, and reduced public spending. As a result, rising inequality that benefitted those with regime connections was at the core of the discontent seen in the city. In this sense, the situation in Qom is not categorically different from that of the rest of the Islamic Republic, as Faraji explains:

The anger and grievances I witnessed in Qom, on the streets of Iran and aired in private encounters, were not just about the overall poor economic situation or high levels of unemployment, but also included a sense that there was a growing inequality at the personal and societal level between a privileged clerical class and the rest, which for many was deemed unjust and violating the moral compact of the revolution and the sacrifices of the Iran–Iraq war.⁵⁹

Rage against the regime: The elite, anti-clericalism, and nationalism’s revival

The second category of slogans chanted during the Dey Protests was directed against the entire ruling system of the Islamic Republic, including its clerical and military components, as well its hardline and moderate political wings. Slogans directed at the IRGC included “Sepah [the Corps, or the IRGC] are traitors.” More prominent were anti-religious and anti-clerical sentiments, which castigated the regime’s abuse of religion, such as the chant “You’ve turned Islam into a tool to oppress the people” [*Eslâm-râ peleh kardid, mardom-râ zeleh kardid*]. Other slogans expressed political anti-clericalism and the rejection of a theocratic system, such as “We don’t want to be ruled by clerics” and “Mullahs, go! Leave the nation alone” [*Akhound-hâ hayâ konid, mamlekat-râ rahâ konid*].

The slogans also targeted the heads of both the system’s theological and semi-republican pillars, for instance: “Seyyed Ali [Khamenei], excuse us, [but] it’s time

[for you] to leave” [*Seyyed Ali, bebakhshid, digeh bāyad boland-shin*]; “Seyyed Ali, go! Leave the nation alone” [*Seyyed Ali hayâ kon, mamlekat-râ rahâ kon*]; “Death to Khamenei” [*Marg bar Khamenei*]; “Death to the dictator” [*Marg bar dictateur*]; and “Death to Rouhani” [*Marg bar Rohani*]. Chants highlighting the wealth gap between ordinary people and the privileged elite were also heard, such as “The nation is begging, the supreme leader acts like God” [*Mellat gedâ’i mikonad, Âqâ khodâ’i mikonad*].

Other slogans rejected both the Islamic Republic and the “Islamic Revolution”: “Islamic Republic, no more, no more” [*Jomhuri-e Eslâmi, nah digeh, nah digeh*] and “What a mistake I made, by making the revolution” [*Cheh eshtebâhi kardam keh enqelâb kardam*]. In this vein, the famous 1978–79 revolutionary slogan, “independence, freedom, Islamic Republic” [*esteqlâl, âzâdi, Jomhuri-e Eslâmi*], was modified to “independence, freedom, Iranian Republic” [*esteqlâl, âzâdi, Jomhuri-e Irâni*], thus calling for a secular republic. The latter slogan was also heard during the Green Movement. In opposition to the Islamic Republic as a political system, it was chanted “Referendum, referendum, this is the slogan of the people” [*Référendum, référendum, in hast sho’âr-e mardom*].⁶⁰ This call expressed the desire to hold an internationally supervised referendum through which Iranians could freely choose their future political system. Political demands were also voiced, such as “Political prisoners should be released” [*Zendâni-e siâsi âzâd bāyad gardad*], a slogan that was also chanted during the Green Movement.

Anti-clerical slogans were also in some cases accompanied by chants in favor of Iran’s monarchical and nationalist past, such as “Reza Shah, bless your soul” [*Rezâ Shâh, rouh-et shad*] and “The King of Kings, bless your soul” [*Shâhanshâh, rouh-et shad*], especially in “religious cities” such as Mashhad and Qom—arguably a reflection of the above-discussed clerical class privilege.⁶¹ In addition to the latter factor, these chants ought to be contextualized within a recent revival of nationalism and secularism in Iran driven by demographic (bulk of Iranians born after the revolution) and ideological (post-Islamism) changes, which Pejman Abdolmohammadi argues have the potential to reshape Iran’s political landscape.⁶²

Despite efforts by some pro-royalist circles to interpret the pro-Reza Shah slogans chanted during the protests as expressing a wish to revive the last shah’s monarchy, these slogans were arguably intended to push back against the clergy, as mentioned previously. Moreover, the image the overwhelming majority of protesters (who had only experienced the post-revolutionary era) have of the monarchical ancien régime has largely been created through their parents’ narratives and those offered by the popular London-based Iranian TV station Manoto, which is sympathetic to Iran’s royal past. Combined with a sense of Iranian hyper-nationalism, these narratives can indeed produce a glorification of the

monarchical past. However, such pro-Shah expressions primarily indicated protesters' rejection of the social, cultural, economic, and political conditions under the Islamic Republic, rather than a clear desire to re-install the monarchy, for the above-mentioned nationalist revival was accompanied by an increased interest in democracy and constitutionalism.⁶³

As I wrote during the Dey Protests, a number of key events in 2017 caused popular frustration and disillusion with the regime in its entirety.⁶⁴ In May 2017, after a deadly mine explosion in northern Iran, angry miners attacked Rouhani's armored car when he visited the site.⁶⁵ In mid-November, when heavy earthquakes hit the western Kermanshah province, many Iranians felt that the regime did not sufficiently provide for their most vital needs—from the social housing built under then-President Ahmadinejad, which collapsed and buried inhabitants under rubble, to the Rouhani administration's hesitancy to provide relief to the 70,000 people left homeless, who were only provided with temporary housing containers for many months.⁶⁶ A man from the affected Kurdish area said that "the government has helped everyone: Bosnia-Herzegovina, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq ... but not us," echoing complaints also made in other parts of the country.⁶⁷

Over the summer of 2017, the nepotism of elite reformists became the subject of national outrage. The starting point was a July 20 interview with the son of leading reformist politician Mohammad Reza Aref, who credited his "good genes" for his professional success. Iranians took to social media to call out more cases of such *âqâzâdeh* obtaining lucrative jobs through nepotism.⁶⁸ As I previously wrote, "On the one hand, this further undermined the tarnished reputation of the reformists, making clear that they were clearly part of the ruling elite and not on the side of the people they pretended to represent. On the other, the structuring wall erected after the revolution between regime insiders (*khodi*), who enjoyed access to state resources and privileges, and outsiders (*qeyr-e khodi*), seemed to be insurmountable for most Iranians."⁶⁹ Moreover, corruption cases within the Rouhani administration (including one involving the president's brother and close advisor, Hossein Fereidoun) showed many Iranians that this phenomenon was not limited to Ahmadinejad's previous administration.⁷⁰

As a result of these events, and in contrast to the Green Movement, the popular rage during the Dey Protests encompassed the establishment's reformist wing. The protesters viewed both hardline and moderate elite factions as having betrayed their hopes and aspirations. In line with this, they rejected the idea of having to choose during presidential elections between a larger, hardline evil, and a lesser, reformist or moderate one, as indicated by the slogans "Reformist, Principlists: The game is over" [*Eslâhtalab, Osoulgarâ: digeh tamoum-e mâjarâ*] and "We neither want Mir [Hossein Mousavi] nor a [Supreme] Leader, we neither want bad nor worse."

Linking Iran's regional ambitions to its domestic shortcomings

Iranians have increasingly criticized their country's expansive engagement in the region over the past few years. For instance, university students have forcefully questioned the regime's rationale for its military intervention in Syria on the side of Bashar Assad, which it justified as a means of fighting against the Islamic State (ISIS) terrorist group and Wahhabi extremism, as well as protecting holy Shiite shrines. They have also vociferously accused the regime of being complicit in the mass killings of Syrians. Some politicians, such as the former popular mayor of Tehran, Gholamhossein Karbaschi, have also questioned Iran's heavy use of its military across the region, leading them to be attacked by the Rouhani administration and regime hardliners alike.⁷¹

Protesters maintained that, rather than providing for Iranians' domestic needs, the Islamic Republic had prioritized imperial ambitions in the region, providing billions of dollars to Lebanon's Hezbollah, Syria's Assad, and Islamist groups in Gaza. In this context, protesters chanted slogans such as: "Leave Syria alone, think about us" [*Souriye-hâ rahâ kon, fekr-i beh hâl-e mâ kon*]; "Neither Gaza nor Lebanon, I'll sacrifice my life for Iran" [*Na Ghazeh, na Lobnân, jân-am fadâ-ye Irân*]; and "Both Gaza and Iran: Down with the tyrants."

A new radicalism: "Be afraid, be afraid!"

By the end of the upheaval, protests also took place outside of prisons where thousands of young Iranians were arrested and in some cases tortured. While during the Green Movement the popular slogan "Don't be afraid, don't be afraid, we're standing together" [*natarsid, natarsid, mâ bâham hastim*] was chanted to heighten protesters' morale, the radicalization that emerged with the Dey Protests was visible in this alteration that was heard outside of those jails: "Be afraid, be afraid, for we're standing together" [*betarsid, betarsid, mâ bâham hastim*].

REGIME ELITE REACTIONS

Uniform condemnation from hardliners and reformists alike

In routine fashion, Supreme Leader Khamenei blamed the Islamic Republic's "enemies" for the protests: "In the events of the past few days, the enemies of Iran are deploying every means at their disposal, including money, arms and political and intelligence support, to coordinate making troubles for the Islamic establishment."⁷² President Rouhani merely acknowledged popular frustration over the state of the economy, corruption, and lack of transparency, adding that "People are allowed under the constitution to criticize or even protest but [...] in a way that at the end they

lead to a better situation in the country for the people.”⁷³ However, the president’s affirmation of protesters’ rights lacked credibility, as his own minister of the interior, Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli, was engaged in the crackdown on protesters and had vilified them for the “spreading of violence, fear, and terror.”⁷⁴

The reformist and centrist “moderate” wing of the elite was overwhelmingly skeptical, if not openly hostile to the Dey Protests. Leading reformist figures, such as former President Mohammad Khatami, condemned the protests, echoing their hardline counterparts’ pejorative labeling of protesters and the narrative that it was partly sparked by Iran’s foreign enemies.⁷⁵ Likewise, Khatami’s former advisor and prominent reformist strategist Saeed Hajjarian likened the protests to “hooliganism” and “vandalism.”⁷⁶

According to Mostafa Khoshcheshm, an analyst close to the hardliners and a former editor-in-chief of the IRGC-affiliated Fars news agency, all elite factions were unified in their reactions: “This is one of the rare cases when different camps—from even the Green Movement supporters to the reformists to the principlists—are standing all together; they are standing behind the government and the establishment, stating that people are entitled to shout their protests at economic flaws and faults. But they are all standing against riots.”⁷⁷ This cross-factional condemnation also facilitated the Dey Protests’ swift repression.⁷⁸

Causes and consequences of the reformist elite’s stance against the Dey Protests

The reasons for the hostility of many prominent reformists toward the Dey Protests were manifold, and included their rejection of revolutionary change and non-institutional forms of political contestation. According to the conventional reformist strategy, political change in Iran ought to be sought through polling stations rather than protests or revolution.⁷⁹ Reformists view mass mobilizations as largely problematic because they could provoke more repression from hardliners, or drive Iran into civil war, turning it into “another Syria.” As Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi aptly explains,

Despite a recognition of the economic and political drivers of the unrest, reformists were adamant in their insistence that protestors refrain from violence, looting, or the damage of public property. While hardly unique to Iran’s reformists there was a pattern of sorts—a decided fear of popular mobilisations which failed to correspond to pre-determined institutionalised forms of contestation.⁸⁰

Also, it certainly did not escape the reformists’ attention that the Dey Protests not only failed to voice support for them (as the Green Movement had), but actually condemned them. Moreover, the Dey Protests’ social base clearly differed from their own urban middle class one.

In brief, the reformists clearly displayed a preference for the status quo in the Islamic Republic. For this reason, according to Hamid Dabashi, the Dey Protests have shown that Iranian reformism has ultimately lost historical legitimacy.⁸¹ Or, as Sadeghi-Boroujerdi said, in the Dey Protests’ “vocal denunciations of factionalism and the entirety of the political elite, we might well be witnessing not only a historic low point but what Gramsci famously termed an ‘organic crisis’, where ‘the old is dying and the new cannot be born’ in the two-decade-old articulation of reformism still cleaved to by a significant portion of the Iranian political class.”⁸²

The reformist leadership’s lack of solidarity with the Dey Protests massively tarnished its image as an agent for political change in Iran. However, while the reformist leadership exhibited an unsympathetic and even hostile stance toward the protests, other reformists expressed cautious support for people’s right to peaceful protest, as reflected by a declaration published by 16 reformist intellectuals post-Dey Protests.⁸³ In addition, an intra-reformist schism emerged, with younger low- and mid-ranking reformist activists criticizing their leadership’s views on the protests and their fear of street mobilizations.

A wake-up call for the elites

The Dey Protests pushed various officials to contemplate their causes, with some (such as Masoud Nili) pointing to economic structures and others (such as Vice President Eshaq Jahangiri) to wide-ranging and systemic corruption. Ali Shamkhani, secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, pointed to corruption, arguing that once people lost trust in the regime, the collapse would begin.⁸⁴ Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani warned that if the massive challenges were not addressed in a timely manner, even larger ones would emerge.⁸⁵ In other words, officials largely focused on the Dey Protests’ economic dimensions, while hardly mentioning the inseparable political ones. Interestingly, however, publications close to the IRGC have provided remarkable analyses of the protests’ combination of socio-economic and political demands, alluding to the fact that those elite circles are well aware of the underlying grievances and potential threats.⁸⁶

THE DEY PROTESTS’ SPECIFICITIES

In sum, the seriousness of the phase ushered in by the Dey Protests was marked by a number of partly novel factors: (1) protest slogans exhibited an unprecedented level of politicization, targeting all factions of the regime, without sparing the moderates, in contrast to the Green Movement; (2) an irreversible

chasm formed between state and society; (3) the social base of the Dey Protests was the alienated lower socio-economic strata—conventionally conceived of as the regime’s social base—in contrast to the Green Movement, whose social base was largely the urban middle class; (4) the moderate elite forces, including Rouhani and the reformists, lost legitimacy, marking a deep crisis of factional rule in the Islamic Republic; and (5) Iran’s security establishment acknowledged that the main threat to national security did not emanate from outside, but rather from inside.⁸⁷

Moreover, the Dey Protests shifted the understanding of potential agents for change, undermining the long-held premise that the poor and marginalized formed the regime’s support base, while the urban, “enlightened” middle classes—who had taken part in the Green Movement—constituted the authentic opposition to the system.⁸⁸

PROTESTS SINCE 2017/18

Since the 2017/18 Dey Protests, anti-regime protests have continued in myriad and innovative ways, but decreased in number.⁸⁹ According to the BBC’s Persian service, between May 1, 2017, and May 1, 2018, Iran saw 17 protests and strikes on a daily basis, which were organized by workers and activists. In the first half of the Iranian year 1397 (which started on March 21, 2018), there were more than 2,000 protests over economic complaints and unemployment, or almost 11 per day, according to a senior official of Iran’s largest charity, the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee.⁹⁰ According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) database, about 4,200 protests took place between January 2018 and October 2019, overwhelmingly led by workers, at a rate of almost six per day.⁹¹

Post-upheaval protests have included: (1) women’s civil disobedience protests against the compulsory hijab;⁹² (2) environmental protests against water mismanagement;⁹³ (3) workers’ protests and strikes, such as the labor strikes by Haft-Tappeh workers due to months of unpaid salaries and by truck drivers throughout the summer of 2018;⁹⁴ (4) protests by dervishes against state repression;⁹⁵ (5) the late June 2018 Tehran Grand Bazaar protests and strike;⁹⁶ (6) the September 2018 general strike in Iranian Kurdistan;⁹⁷ and (7) others driven by a combination of socio-economic, political, and environmental grievances, such as those in Ahvaz and Kazeroun.⁹⁸ During these demonstrations many of the Dey Protests’ slogans were re-chanted, in addition even more radical ones, such as “Our enemy is right at home, they always say it’s America” [*doshman-e mâ haminjâst, hamash migan Âmrikâst*].

THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC'S TRIPLE CRISIS

An acute triple crisis is plaguing the Islamic Republic—socio-economic, political, and ecological—and has been driving protests since at least the 2017/18 Dey Protests. Each one of these elements constitutes a potentially existential threat to the political system and, in the case of the ecological one, even the country. Thus, the second part of this paper undertakes an analysis of these underlying drivers.

THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC CRISIS

The socio-economic situation of Iranians cannot be discussed separately from the country's political economy and economic policies. Iran's economy is shaped by two important factors: (1) the Islamic Republic's power structure and (2) neoliberal economic policies implemented since the 1990s.

Regarding the first factor, the Islamic Republic's power structure is composed of institutionalized state–business–military relations. It has been described as a “monopolistic-capitalist, religious-commercial system” or “a capitalist state with a paramilitary polity and theocratic rule.”⁹⁹ It is comprised of the economic empires of the IRGC, the *bonyâds* (which are run by both regime conservatives and reformists), and Supreme Leader Khamenei, who in 2013 was believed to control a financial empire worth \$95 billion, now estimated to be much higher.¹⁰⁰ The second phenomenon involves “illiberal neo-liberalization,” as Matin has put it, which Rouhani has implemented through austerity budgets, clientelistic privatization, deregulation, and the favoring of capital over labor.¹⁰¹

Aside from the vast economic activities connected to state and semi-state entities, there is also a private sector that came into existence during the Hashemi Rafsanjani presidency, which accounts for one-fourth to one-third of GDP. Yet, according to Iran's Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, the private sector provides four-fifths of employment opportunities. This shows that the most capital-intensive sectors remain under state control (above all the energy and petrochemical industries), while the most labor-intensive ones are relegated to the private sector.¹⁰²

Iran's socio-economic malaise is exacerbated by an ideologically grounded political economy, which favors regime loyalists, as well as the absence of much-needed structural reforms. Its economy has endemically suffered from mismanagement, cronyism, nepotism, corruption, "brain drain," and the flight of financial capital.¹⁰³ In terms of corruption, Iran ranks 138th out of 180 countries, according to Transparency International's 2018 Corruption Perceptions Index.¹⁰⁴

Iran is now facing a recession, as a result of: (1) falling exports and consumption on the demand side; (2) a contracting industry sector on the supply side; (3) high inflation (which quadrupled from 10 percent in May 2018 to 40 percent in November); and (4) the loss of its currency's value over the past few years.¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, U.S. extraterritorial sanctions were re-imposed over the course of 2018. Although U.S. sanctions have had important negative repercussions for Iran's economy (especially by leading to the collapse of its oil exports), their overall impact on the country's economic situation has been overrated.¹⁰⁶ Lastly, Iran's economy suffers from low levels of capital formation and of productivity. In the absence of reforms, the country is poised to become stuck in a so-called low economic growth trap, which would only exacerbate the unemployment crisis, paving the way for new waves of protests.¹⁰⁷

Arguably, what could be called Rouhani's neoliberal-authoritarian model paved the way for the Dey Protests. His administration's budgets were consistently predicated upon two pillars: (1) neoliberal economic policies, which relied strongly on austerity measures and (2) budgets that allocated significant funds to security organs. The result of that mix was socio-economic degradation, which saw income inequality rise, while authoritarian structures were sustained.¹⁰⁸

Poverty, inequality, and precarity

Despite conventional thinking, Iran's socio-economic indicators are similar to those in countries that were affected by the Arab Spring. Assessments of the state of poverty in the Islamic Republic remain highly contested. On one hand, absolute poverty has sharply declined, according to international poverty indexes. In contrast to the pre-revolutionary era, today most Iranians enjoy access to basic services and infrastructure. However, one-fifth of Iranians live below the national poverty line (two-thirds of them female), and almost half of them live near it—thus, a clear majority of Iranians suffer from socio-economic precarity.¹⁰⁹ When it comes to absolute poverty, some scholars argue that the rate is generally low—Salehi-Isfahani claims the rate was 4.7 percent for the country as a whole in 2016/17—while others estimate the figures to be much higher—Hossein Raghfar said in 2018 that 33 percent of Iranians, or 26 million individuals, suffered from absolute poverty, and 6

percent from the risk of starvation.¹¹⁰ Even official sources state that 12 million live below the absolute poverty line.¹¹¹ Estimates assume that one-third of Iranians, and 50 to 70 percent of workers, are in danger of falling into poverty.¹¹² According to Iranian pension officials, 70 percent of workers and pensioners only receive a minimum wage or pension payments, thus effectively putting them below the poverty line.¹¹³

Precarious housing is a result of such poverty levels: 14 percent of Iranians live in tents, according to the Statistical Center of Iran, and one-third of the urban population lives in slums.¹¹⁴ In 2015, the president's advisor for women and family affairs, Shahindokht Molaverdi, stated that there were 15,000 homeless individuals in the country, one-third of whom were women.¹¹⁵ As indicated by the above discussion, poverty and precarity in Iran tend to center on women, workers, and pensioners.

High youth, graduate, and female unemployment

Official employment figures, such as those calculated by the Statistical Center of Iran or the International Labour Organization (ILO), must be treated with caution.¹¹⁶ These organizations count as employed any person who works over one hour per week (even without receiving payment), as well as groups such as housewives, soldiers, and students, leading to a considerable underestimation of the employment challenges facing the country.¹¹⁷

Among the chief failures of the Islamic Republic has been the lack of job creation; even during oil booms, there has been only jobless growth. The overall unemployment rate stood at about 12 percent between 2016 and 2018.¹¹⁸ According to the Iranian Parliament's research center, the unemployment rate will increase anywhere from 16 to 26 percent by 2021, the year during which the next presidential elections are to take place.¹¹⁹

Unemployment rates are especially high among youth (aged 15- to 24-years-old) and women. As of June 2018, youth unemployment remained high at 28.3 percent, and, according to some estimates, as high as 40 percent.¹²⁰ The situation of Iran's rural youth is especially alarming; according to the 2019 Rural Development Report, 22 percent of the world's 27.6 million rural youth facing the most severe challenges are from Iran, constituting potential for destabilization.¹²¹ The labor market is also characterized by a gender gap: women's unemployment stood at nearly 20 percent from April to June 2018, double the rate of men's unemployment.

Iran's ethnic-minority provinces and their grievances

The Dey Protests emerged in the provinces; it was only on the third day that they reached Tehran. Most Iranian border provinces are majority non-Persian, with

important cross-border ethnic, family, and business links. In contrast to the Green Movement, ethnicity has become an important driver of the Dey Protests. Compared to the Persian-speaking heartland, these border provinces disproportionately suffer from: (1) socio-economic hardship (lower income levels and social services, with higher unemployment rates); (2) the impact of ecological damage; (3) linguistic and cultural discrimination; and (4) higher political repression, including much higher execution rates.¹²² These regions include Iranian Kurdistan in the west, Khuzestan in the southwest, and Sistan and Baluchestan in the southeast. A member of parliament from the latter province, Hamid-Reza Pashang, stated in 2015 that 70 percent of its residents lived under the poverty line.¹²³

Changing class dynamics and potential agents of future revolts

The Dey Protests must be considered as a major expression of the changing class dynamics in the Islamic Republic, with the lower classes and the “middle-class poor” becoming potential agents for change, thus shifting the focus away from the urban middle class involved in the Green Movement.

The emergence of the “middle-class poor” is rooted in two parallel developments that started in the 1990s: on one hand, the introduction of neoliberal economic policies and, on the other, the vast expansion of the university system (over the past two decades, the number of graduate students increased almost ten-fold).¹²⁴ Asef Bayat defines the “middle-class poor” as those Iranians who have middle-class qualifications and aspirations but suffer from socio-economic precarity, and has identified them as the Dey Protests’ social base.¹²⁵

In this respect, Iran displays similarities with the rest of the region. Scholars have identified a new social class that emerged in the contemporary Middle East as a result of the neoliberal shift in economic policy that took place in large parts of the global south starting in the 1980s.¹²⁶ They introduced various terms for this class, including “middle-class poor” (Asef Bayat), “would-be middle class” (Farhad Khosrokhavar), and “blocked middle classes” (Rachid Ouassa), all of which referred to well-educated people who expected a middle-class life but who ended up being marginalized either by unemployment or precarity.¹²⁷ It has been argued that these individuals’ deferred aspirations pushed them to participate widely in the Arab Spring.¹²⁸

In Iran, the economic policies pursued since the revolution have helped define the state’s relationship with various social classes. In the first post-revolutionary decade, the 1980s, the new regime pursued a pro-poor, welfare state policy, and inequality fell substantially, leading the poor to become its primary social base. However, from the early 1990s, it introduced neoliberal economic policies that produced social inequalities, establishing new dynamics in which the lower economic strata became increasingly disenfranchised from the state.¹²⁹

The Islamic Republic's relative achievements in the fields of education and literacy, combined with its failure to create jobs, have produced a socio-economic paradox: Iran's job market simply cannot absorb the hundreds of thousands of university graduates, leading to some of the world's highest youth and graduate unemployment rates, with women being disproportionately affected. In 2014, Ali Rabiei, minister of cooperatives, labor and social welfare, stated that 1.1 million of over 2.5 million unemployed young Iranians were university graduates.¹³⁰

Youth unemployment must also be viewed within the wider social context of the Islamic Republic, which adds to socio-economic frustration. For Bayat, the combination of neoliberal economic policies and socio-cultural restrictions has resulted in a socially explosive mix:

The youth not only want a secure future—that is reasonable jobs, a place to live, get married, and form a family in the future—they also want to reclaim their ‘youthfulness,’ a desire to live the life of youth, to pursue their interests, their individuality, free from the watchful eyes of their elders, from moral and political authority. This dimension of young people's lives adds to the existing social tensions in Iran.¹³¹

In addition to these economic and socio-cultural policies, Iranians face a structural impediment to socio-economic opportunities (as mentioned previously), with so-called regime insiders, or *khodi*, enjoying privileged access to jobs and state resources.

As a result of all these factors, Iran has experienced high levels of “brain drain,” even under the Rouhani administration. With no solution in sight to address these problems, and with Iran continuing to rely heavily on oil exports that have been heavily restricted by U.S. sanctions, the “middle-class poor” are likely to continue to drive further protests and even upheavals.

The neoliberal shift has produced another class segment that is an important driver of social protests: the working-class poor. The dire social status of young working-class men, many of whom took part in the Dey Protests, is an oft-neglected issue.¹³² Anthropologist Shahram Khosravi, who coined the term “Iran's other half,” offers a striking description of their living conditions:

About 11 million Iranians, around 50 percent of the work force, work in irregular employment, according to Iran's Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs. Almost all young workers I met during my extended fieldwork in the past 15 years have been in irregular employment, rarely paid on time, with little protection from exploitative employers. Between 10 million and 13 million Iranians are entirely excluded from health, work or unemployment insurance.¹³³

The difficulties faced by the working-class poor are partly connected to accelerated rural-urban migration, which forces workers to struggle for work, housing, and services, while irregularly pitting them against the police and authorities.¹³⁴ The result of the massive economic grievances held by both the middle- and working-class poor is that any protest displays a spontaneous revolutionary potential, according to political economic and labor expert Mohammad Maljoo.¹³⁵

THE POLITICAL CRISIS

The Islamic Republic suffers from a number of political crises, which have deepened over the years. Most important among these is the crisis, or rather failure, of reformism, as authoritarian structures continue to suppress a relatively weak civil society.

“The game is over?” The crisis of factional politics

The Islamic Republic faces a political stalemate. As the Dey Protests’ various slogans demonstrate, its hardline and moderate factions, as well as the clerical establishment, have faced popular rage, leading the entire regime’s legitimacy to be questioned.¹³⁶ This has heralded an unprecedented stalemate in the Islamic Republic’s factional politics, which have defined the country for decades. In the wake of the Dey Protests, Mohsen Rezaei, secretary of the Expediency Council and former IRGC commander, made an unusual admission on state television about the fate of factional politics in the country:

The truth is that the era of administering the country fractionally is over. The roots of the country’s problems can no longer be solved with the dichotomy of principlism–reformism. This game is over. If political actors haven’t realized that they cannot run the country with this game, one should say it is either because they are not paying attention, or they have realized it but are so much entangled in their own mental issues that they have lost their sense of responsibility.¹³⁷

The Islamic Republic and the question of reform(ism)

Whether the Islamic Republic offers the necessary space for reform has been a matter of strong political and academic controversy. Proponents of the possibility of reform within the framework set by the “nezâm,” or system, highlight the numerous and regular elections held since the revolution. Their unpredictable outcomes—especially those of presidential elections—can indeed lead to political changes and new power distributions among the political elite. Despite the fact that the Guardian Council vets candidates for regime loyalty, the electoral component of the political system’s

so-called republican pillar allows for some degree of dynamic political participation among voters during campaign seasons. It has been argued that the system's inherent contradictions allow for a "pluralistic momentum," with space for civil-society activism and the potential to move toward democratic reform.¹³⁸ In this vein, Iran's political system has been described as a form of electoral authoritarianism.¹³⁹

However, recent research has argued that the adherence to such semi-competitive elections has not led to the overcoming of authoritarianism or a path to democratization, but has de facto ensured authoritarian resilience. For the elections, as they take place within the limits defined by the regime, help ensure the latter's longevity.¹⁴⁰ Therefore, one could conclude with Karim Sadjadpour that "Iranian elections are designed to produce maximum drama before the vote, and minimum drama (and change) after the vote."¹⁴¹

The impossibility of reform is also attributed to the legacies of reformist or "moderate" administrations, particularly those of presidents Khatami (1997–2003) and Rouhani, who largely failed to deliver on their promises of reform. As Borzou Daragahi stresses,

... throwing around fancy terms like 'civil society' or 'democracy' won't resolve Iran's myriad problems. Time and again, the reformists have failed to match their rhetoric with action, seemingly bowing before the hardliners when challenged, as when Khatami ultimately caved to pressure and condemned the student protesters in 1999.¹⁴²

Ahmad Batebi, an iconic figure of the 1999 student protests who previously sympathized with the reformists, explained why he later changed his mind about the reformists, as follows: "I realized that their priority was not democracy, freedom and reforming the society. Their only priority was the preservation of the regime. Many of the reformists and [conservative] principlists are relatives [of people in power] and they benefit from preserving this regime."¹⁴³ In a widely noted spring 2018 interview, Shirin Ebadi also said: "Reform is useless in Iran ... The Iranian people are very dissatisfied with their current government. They have reached the point and realized this system is not reformable."¹⁴⁴

There has also been a recent tendency to deny the ability of the Islamic Republic to reform, which has been exacerbated by the experiences of the Dey Protests. As Daragahi observes,

The general failure of the reformists to fundamentally shift Iran's direction, either domestically or globally, has convinced many Iran watchers inside and outside the country that there is no significant change possible in the Islamic Republic without overthrowing or dismantling

the regime ... It is a rueful, sometimes painful, conclusion to which many longtime Iran observers have also arrived, including diplomats who served in Tehran and Iranian opponents of Western intervention, who take issue with the hardline agenda against Tehran that some in Washington tout.¹⁴⁵

Arguably the key point regarding the reformists' inability to act as agents for change in the Islamic Republic is that they have refrained from challenging the material foundations of the system, while continuing to benefit from it. As Sadeghi-Boroujerdi has stated about the reformist "religious intellectuals," "The focus of their critiques tended to reside with competing religious discourses and the hermeneutics which governed their construction as well as the sources of normativity and their desired model of social change, instead of the material forces which defined social reality and imbued it with content."¹⁴⁶ According to Mahdi Khalili, a Tehran-based political scientist, "The active parties inside Iran [the hardliners and the so-called moderates or reformists] are all superficial and demagogic, and seeking material interests while contributing to unfair wealth distribution."¹⁴⁷

The fact that reformists and centrists have neglected to structurally address the "social question" in a country with deep-seated socio-economic problems has contributed significantly to their relative weakness, and has paved the way for the re-emergence of right-wing populism in Iran—a kind of vicious cycle inherent to contemporary Iranian politics. It was according to this logic that the Khatami presidency was followed by that of Ahmadinejad, whose main campaign slogan was to put the oil money back onto the people's dinner table, while Rouhani was challenged in the 2017 presidential campaign by ultra-conservative contender Raisi, who won a remarkable 38.3 percent of votes. While Iranian reformism has refrained from addressing the economic hardships experienced by a large portion of society due to ideological, political, and economic reasons, right-wing populism purports to engage in wealth redistribution, without actually doing so once assuming power. As a result, quite predictably, Rouhani's socio-economic failure has paved the way for right-wing populist forces to gain in strength.¹⁴⁸

It can therefore be argued that, while meaningful reform within the system has remained elusive, the political elite's moderate faction has rejected even the prospect of such reform. As such, the Islamic Republic has to a certain extent been immunized against significant change from within.

Unabated authoritarianism and the repression of civil society

Authoritarianism and repression have been constant features of the Islamic Republic, thus complicating prospects for change to emerge at the societal level.

Iran experiences a striking lack of political freedoms, including: (1) the political repression of dissidents, minorities, women, students, workers, and their respective social movements; (2) the world's highest execution rate; (3) press censorship; (4) a record-breaking journalist detention rate; and (5) the violent restriction of cultural and academic freedoms by ultra-conservative pressure groups.¹⁴⁹ The 2017 International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) Global Rights Index, an annual survey of violations of trade union rights, ranked Iran in its worst category, in which no rights are guaranteed, lamenting that the independent trade union movement has faced regular acts of repression, executions, and extra-judicial murders.¹⁵⁰

To conclude, much of Iran's political crisis is arguably connected to two important impediments to change, from the top and the bottom: the failure of reformist state elites and the repression of civil society.

THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

In the past, ecological aspects have only played a marginal role in Middle Eastern studies, with the notable exception of water issues in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.¹⁵¹ However, in recent years, as climate change has been elevated to a primary global concern, more attention has been devoted to environmental issues in the region. According to the most recent assessment report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 2014, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is one of the regions most affected by global warming.¹⁵² This finding, combined with the region being among the world's worst in terms of autocratic political systems and key socio-economic issues, serves as a reminder of the region's multifaceted and extraordinarily deep-seated challenges.¹⁵³

Aside from socio-economic and political crises, Iran is facing an ecological crisis, which has become a source of economic hardship, ill health, social disruption, and political protests. The country suffers from environmental degradation that is largely homemade, consisting of water shortages, disappearing lakes and wetlands, polluted air, sandstorms, desertification, biodiversity loss, and shrinking forests (including the criminal logging of trees).¹⁵⁴ If the root causes remain untouched, in the long run entire ecosystems risk disappearance and regions risk becoming uninhabitable. Some official estimates are highly alarming. According to Iranian authorities, half of Iran's provinces will be uninhabitable in 15 years and, over the next 20 years, 50 million Iranians will need to leave their homes. It is further estimated that, by 2050, when Iran's population is expected to reach 100 million, the country could turn into a desert.¹⁵⁵

Key ecological challenges facing Iran

Iran's groundwater resources are almost fully exhausted, due to: (1) demographic explosion; (2) a thirsty, inefficient agricultural sector, which is responsible for 90 percent of groundwater consumption; and (3) declining precipitation. Due to decades-long shortsighted water management and climate change, the largest lakes and rivers have started to transform into vast, extinct salt basins. Droughts have occurred more regularly, affecting 96 percent of the country. And, despite the massive floods that took place in spring 2019, cities and towns with a combined population of 28.6 million—one-third of the country's total inhabitants—are suffering from water shortages.¹⁵⁶ Soil erosion ensuing from the droughts has accelerated the countrywide "Waldsterben," or forest dieback, contributing to a massive rise in sandstorms and air pollution.¹⁵⁷

Experts have argued that what Iran is suffering from is socio-economic drought, i.e., a so-called water bankruptcy where water demand exceeds supply.¹⁵⁸ The water shortage is also anthropogenic, the product of poor management of natural resources.¹⁵⁹ Here, the excessive construction of dams has played an important role, with many considering it to be the biggest challenge to the sustainable management of Iran's freshwater resources.¹⁶⁰ Iran has more than 150 dams with a total capacity of 60 billion cubic meters of water, with half of the dams filled after the massive spring 2019 floods and other irregular rainfall, so that water availability is not a problem per se but rather water distribution.¹⁶¹ The Ministry of Energy has pledged to solve water shortages until 2021, yet the economic crisis and U.S. sanctions are impeding investment in water systems.¹⁶²

The government has initiated a number of responses to these water-related challenges, including investing more in water infrastructure, promoting awareness about saving water, and cooperating with international partners.¹⁶³ However, there are doubts that these relatively modest steps will sufficiently address the problems, not least given the state's securitization of environmental protection.

Air pollution is another major problem, posing health risks for millions and regularly forcing authorities to close down schools and offices. Iranian cities, especially in the south, are among the highest polluted worldwide. The anthropogenic nature of air pollution can be witnessed in Tehran, where 71 percent of pollution comes from motor vehicles, mostly outdated, whose registration numbers increased over eight-fold from 2001 to 2014.¹⁶⁴ In Tehran alone, which harbors around one-eighth of the country's population, the cost of such air pollution has been estimated at \$2.6 billion a year in terms of human-health effects only.¹⁶⁵ The total economic cost, however, would have to include reductions in agricultural productivity, visibility, quality of life,

and days of education (due to closed schools), as well as long-term damage to cultural sites and infrastructure, according to the Iranian Parliament's Majlis Research Center (MRC).¹⁶⁶ Therefore, the total economic cost of air pollution, which is especially rampant in the capital and in southern cities, would be tremendously high if calculated.

Another symptom of the ecological crisis is land subsidence, i.e., the gradual settling or sudden sinking of the earth's surface. As was mentioned, Iran is in the midst of a drought crisis, which requires massive quantities of water to be pumped from underground for agricultural purposes, leading land to subside and sinkholes to emerge. Land subsidence can damage inter alia farmland, urban areas, wastewater lines, and water and energy pipelines.¹⁶⁷ Taking up longtime warnings from independent environmentalists, the director of Iran's National Cartographic Center and his technical deputy expressed alarm in fall 2019 about the issue of land subsidence, thus bringing the problem into the public spotlight. In an interview with state media, the former said: "Our country is slowly dying, because the ground has lost stability through the loss of groundwater reserves." In a press conference, the deputy explained that the problem of land subsidence varies across regions, affecting highly populated areas and critical infrastructure in particular.¹⁶⁸ In Tehran's southern parts, where up to five million people are estimated to live, land subsided more than three meters between 1989 and 2005. Around Tehran's airport, the rate of subsidence has reached two centimeters per year. Between 1999 and 2001, the average of Iran's overall land subsidence was 20 to 25 millimeters.¹⁶⁹

The state has reacted by setting up 150 observation sites across the country, some of which need technological updates. The deputy of the National Cartographic Center added that, given scarce financial means, countermeasures have not become a state priority.¹⁷⁰ While the center has provided details about land subsidence and its associated risks, it would be up to the Ministries of Energy, the Interior, and Agriculture to implement measures. According to a consultant to the National Cartographic Center, the greatest challenge is a lack of legal regulations.¹⁷¹

Food security is another key challenge. Although Iran has been among the world's top 20 agricultural producers, reaching a peak ranking in 2007, its level of production has not recovered from a severe drought in 2008. Thus, it has been increasingly dependent on food imports, which it relies on to cover half of its needs. Vulnerability to food insecurity has been on the rise, due to volatile agricultural production, natural disasters, food price hikes, subsidy cuts, and high levels of unemployment and underemployment, limiting Iranians' economic access to nutritious food.¹⁷²

Securitizing environmental protection

Iran's existential environmental crisis is primarily man-made. Decades of misled policies have exacerbated the effects of external factors. For this reason, the crisis that is posing a threat to the livelihood of tens of millions of Iranians has become a political issue par excellence. In the wake of the Dey Protests, Iran witnessed a wave of detentions of environmentalists—one prominent individual, Kavous Seyed-Emami, who was a trustee of the Persian Wildlife Heritage Foundation (PWHF), even died in jail. Six out of the eight environmentalists who have been jailed since January 2018 were handed heavy prison sentences on November 2019, ranging from six to ten years each.¹⁷³

Another example is that of Kaveh Madani, an environmental scientist who had lectured at Imperial College London, before assuming the position of deputy head of Iran's health ministry in September 2017.¹⁷⁴ He had voiced criticism against those detentions and was detained by intelligence services close to the IRGC for several days.¹⁷⁵ Around the same time, the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council said that security organs would investigate suspicious activities by some non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that operate in the fields of health, environment, water, and women's issues. Madani, after his release, said that he did not have any access to his online social networks. After that, he was placed under surveillance, before he fled Iran in mid-April 2018.¹⁷⁶

Environmental protests in socio-political context

A number of ecological problems have occurred in border provinces with sizable ethnic minorities, such as the ecological collapse and drying up of Lake Urmia in West Azerbaijan, floods and extreme drought in Sistan and Baluchestan, and toxic levels of air pollution in Khuzestan. Crucially, fall 2017 was the driest in over 67 years, according to Iran's National Drought Warning and Monitoring Center.¹⁷⁷ During the Dey Protests, an explosive combination of unemployment, environmental disaster, and policy failure could be witnessed, with many of the protests' centers located along the Karun river. Between January 2018 and October 2019, 261 environmental protests, mostly water-related, took place across Iran, many of which faced repression by security forces.¹⁷⁸

The ecological crisis has arguably become a national security threat. The regime obviously fears protests driven by the environmental catastrophe, which brings its own heavy responsibility to the fore. There is little doubt that the crisis will sustainably alter the Islamic Republic's economic, social, and political landscapes. As Walter Posch aptly noted in 2017, "Politically-motivated eco-activism is still in its infancy, but in combination with minority questions and student protests, it may become a nationwide political force over the coming years."¹⁷⁹

As indicated at the beginning of this section, there is ample need for further research on ecological degradation and what it means, including its effects on: (1) different geographies (rural and urban areas, coasts) and their social, economic, and political landscapes; (2) food shortages; (3) conflicts; (4) migration; (5) forms of protests and contestation and their level of resilience relative to other movements; and (6) how, why, and which authorities are challenged. Aside from such “threat scenarios,” attention needs to be devoted to the potential for regional cooperation, as ecological degradation is a region-wide, cross-border problem.

CONCLUSIONS AND PROSPECTS

Iranian tolerance is legendary, but when it breaks, it breaks big.

The political elite are aware of this reality, and that explains their paranoia.

—Ali Ansari¹⁸⁰

Echoing my analysis of the Islamic Republic's triple crisis is the conclusion made by a Stanford Iran 2040 Project paper, published in June 2019, which argues that Iran's major challenges are intimately connected to its governance:

Today, as a result of the low and non-inclusive growth of the past four decades, the signs of stress in the Iranian economy and society are multiplying. Widespread poverty and growing inequality, low labor force participation and high unemployment, human capital flight, declining productivity, banking and pension crises, high and rising public debt, loss of social capital, and serious environmental issues are among the challenges currently facing the country.¹⁸¹

In other words, within the socio-economic, political, and ecological triple crisis, the political crisis arguably constitutes the center of gravity. If the political crisis were solved, through meaningful reform of the governing system, the resolution of the other two crises—socio-economic and ecological—would be facilitated, while not guaranteed. After all, the causes behind the persistent socio-economic and ecological crises are to a large extent political in nature.

Overall, this triple crisis, which is likely to prevail as its generating factors will probably remain unaltered or worsen, has heralded a new era in the history of the Islamic Republic, marked by turmoil and potential instability. Given the magnitude of each of the three crises and the absence of meaningful policies to address them, there is little indication that Iran will be able to solve any one of them.¹⁸²

REGIME FEARS AND SECURITY PRECAUTIONS

Despite the regime's successful crackdown on the Green Movement and the Dey Protests, it remains extremely fearful, if not paranoid, of protests. Hav-

ing learned the lessons of Iran's own history and that of the region, Tehran is cognizant of various scenarios that could jeopardize regime survival: (1) a mix of socio-economic and political grievances, which Ayatollah Khomeini and others successfully mobilized in order to topple the Shah; (2) neither an arrangement (see the case of Libya's Moammar Gadhafi) nor a full-blown war with the United States (see the case of Iraq's Saddam Hussein); (3) the excessive use of violence against protesters that could backfire, as in the case of Syria's Assad; (4) the danger posed by opponents based abroad (as in the case of Khomeini in France), as indicated by several assassination attempts against dissidents in Europe over the last few years, despite the danger of alienating European capitals at a time when their support was needed to salvage the JCPOA; (5) known or unknown figures emerging from leaderless protests; or (6) a Black Swan event emerging from socio-economic and political grievances, such as a "Bouazizi-style incident in Qom," as a senior establishment figure confided to me just a few months before the Dey Protests.¹⁸³ A major paradox inherent to this context is that the very repression the state unleashes may feed the revolt it seeks to avoid.¹⁸⁴

Furthermore, since the 2009 Green Movement, the regime has reinforced its coercive apparatus, especially its security forces and technological capabilities. Crucially, it has re-arranged its security apparatus—consisting of the police, the Basij paramilitary, and the IRGC—in view of suppressing popular revolts. The first line of defense, the police force (or NAJA) has been horizontally and vertically fortified. Its budget has dramatically increased since the Dey Protests, its forces have been massively expanded in number and presence across the country (especially in Tehran), and it has been better equipped with conventional tools for crowd control, as well as intelligence-gathering infrastructure that aims to penetrate protest movements.¹⁸⁵ In addition, the leadership of the Basij and the IRGC, which represent lines of defense that were not fully deployed during the 2017/18 Dey Protests, has been re-arranged.¹⁸⁶ If need be, another layer is added to the coercive apparatus, as demonstrated by the deployment of hundreds of Shiite proxy troops in the wake of the massive spring 2019 floods—a decision aimed at preventing lower-ranking members of the security forces from sympathizing with or eventually joining protesters.¹⁸⁷ On the technological front, especially after the Green Movement, during which organizing online played an important role, the state significantly expanded its capabilities by creating the Cyber-space Police (or FATA) in 2011, enhancing facial recognition technology, banning popular social media applications (such as Viber, Telegram, and Instagram), and expending efforts toward creating a state-controlled internet (dubbed the National Information Network).¹⁸⁸

IMPACTS OF THE U.S. “MAXIMUM PRESSURE” STRATEGY

The Trump administration’s “maximum pressure” strategy has hardly facilitated a positive transformation in Iran. The economic sanctions, whose costs the state has externalized onto the civilian population, have produced a number of negative effects.¹⁸⁹ As in the past, sanctions have complicated the everyday lives of Iranians, forcing them to focus increasingly on economic survival, and thus making it more difficult for them to engage in political activism.¹⁹⁰ Civil society activism is also becoming more complicated, as it is effectively trapped in a triangular dynamic between an authoritarian state, on the one hand, and counterproductive U.S. policies, on the other.¹⁹¹

Politically, U.S. policy has rallied various elite factions around the flag of regime survival. In political-economic terms, sanctions have played into the hands of those (mostly hardline) groups possessing the means to benefit from them.¹⁹² At the societal level, U.S. President Donald Trump’s policies have led to a fragmentation of Iranian society, which now encompasses a disparate spectrum, from those rallying round the flag to those wishing for U.S. military action to remove the regime. However, given the reduced appeal of the regime’s revolutionary rhetoric, as witnessed during the Dey Protests, pressure from outside has not produced the same rally-round-the-flag effect among Iranians as was seen during the George W. Bush administration. In fact, protests with anti-regime slogans have continued, with Iranians blaming the deteriorating economic situation on the regime, rather than on U.S. policy or sanctions.¹⁹³

Economically, sanctions have dramatically impacted state income from oil sales, which comprised 40 percent of the government’s budget for the Iranian year that ended on March 19, 2020.¹⁹⁴ Accordingly, in October 2019, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) reported a dramatic 9 percent contraction of Iran’s economy for the same Iranian year, which experts say is notable on a world-historical scale.¹⁹⁵ This recession follows a massive cut to Iran’s oil exports, which was due to the United States ending waivers for major Iranian oil importers in May 2019. Iran’s economy is expected to stagnate in the medium term (2020/21–2021/22), based on the optimistic assumption of oil exports of 500,000 barrels per day (bpd).¹⁹⁶ Meanwhile, the inflation rate is set to remain over 20 percent officially (unofficially higher), disproportionately affecting food prices and rural areas, while being considerably higher than in other countries of the region.¹⁹⁷ However, over the next few years, the massive depreciation of the currency (now relatively stabilized, as compared to the September 2018 low) could

make Iranian goods and services more competitive regionally, helping close the fiscal deficit that has recently widened due to the oil sanctions, reduced tax income, and higher social protection spending.¹⁹⁸ In this manner, the negative trend of the poverty rate is likely to be sustained, with cash transfers (the main driver in poverty reduction from 2009 to 2012) eroded by high inflation in real terms.

REVISITING THE GREEN MOVEMENT: LEARNING THE LESSONS

In order to chart possible ways forward, it is necessary to look back at a previous instance of mass protest that shook the foundations of the Islamic Republic. The Green Movement, which emerged from the contested presidential elections of 2009, displayed an ambiguous nature.¹⁹⁹ Its social base largely drew from the middle class and included sections from the student and women's movements—but, importantly, not from the labor movement.²⁰⁰ The ambiguity of the Green Movement consisted, on one hand, of its reformist political agenda, which was promoted by its leadership (founding figures of the Islamic Republic, Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karubi) and reflected in its “Green Charter.”²⁰¹ This agenda was epitomized by its most prominent slogan, “Where is my vote?” [*ray-e man kojâst?*], which implicitly accepted the flawed nature of elections in the Islamic Republic and thus called for pursuing reform through the ballot box. It is against this backdrop that the Green Movement has been described as an intra-elite struggle for regaining state power.²⁰² On the other hand, many protesters demanded more radical change, as demonstrated by the slogan “death to the dictator” [*marg bar dictateur*], which was also heard during the Green Movement. Arguably, it was due to such combined participation of regime insiders and increasingly radicalized protesters that the regime considered the Green Movement to be a serious threat to its survival, and thus engaged in large-scale repression.²⁰³

The Green Movement's rapid decline, however, was not merely due to repression, but also to the fact that it failed to create an intersectional alliance between the middle and working classes. Wary of the protests' radical elements, the Green Movement leaders at some point stopped convening protests. They also failed to address Iran's pressing, structurally-embedded socio-economic grievances and never reached out to the working classes, who in the preceding decade had been heavily engaged in strike actions to protest the state's economic policies.²⁰⁴ In brief, as sociologist Azadeh Kian put it, the Green Movement ended up being a “movement without revolution.”²⁰⁵

THE NECESSITY OF AN ORGANIZED INTERSECTIONAL ALLIANCE TO PUSH FOR REAL CHANGE

According to Parsa, the Iranian system's resistance to reform, the inadequacy of the gradual change promoted by reformists, and the lack of separation between state and religion restrict future democratization options to one of fundamental change, involving revolution rather than reform.²⁰⁶ Moreover, revolutionary regimes, emerging from intense ideological and violent struggles, have proven to be more durable than other authoritarian systems, not because of the grip of their revolutionary discourse, but rather due to their elimination of independent power centers and powerful ruling parties, their invulnerability to coups, and their strong coercive capacity.²⁰⁷

The Dey Protests created hope that activists and groups inside and outside the country could utilize the momentum to organize and coalesce around a common political agenda and push for change in Iran. However, this hope remained unfulfilled, partly because of ideological and class divisions. The absence of a viable political alternative to the Islamic Republic and, concomitantly, its dominance over the means of repression inevitably entrenches the status quo.

Arguably, only an intersectional alliance would be powerful enough to challenge the regime. The social, economic, and political peculiarities of the Islamic Republic, as well as the lessons that can be drawn from what Gilbert Achcar terms the Arab world's ongoing "long-term revolutionary process," suggest the need for the formation of an intersectional alliance to bring about real transformation in what one analyst calls Iran's "long-term process toward democratization."²⁰⁸

When it comes to the question of organization and leadership, important lessons can be learned from the Arab Spring. While in the initial phase a leaderless movement like the Dey Protests has the advantage that it cannot be co-opted by those in power, leadership is needed in the ensuing phase in order to relay the movement's demands to those in power and enter into negotiations with them. That leadership, however, should be a network of grassroots organizations, rather than a single charismatic leader. A prime example is the Sudanese Professionals Association, formed in 2016 as an underground network of teachers, journalists, doctors, lawyers, and other professionals, which constituted the driving force of the popular uprising and then, as part of a larger coalition of forces including feminist groups and some armed ethnic anti-regime groups, entered into negotiations with the army and eventually formed a governing body.²⁰⁹

In the Iranian case, such an alliance would need to bring together the social bases and main demands of the Green Movement (the middle class, calling for political liberalization) and the Dey Protests (the lower classes, calling for social justice). In this way, it would encompass all the constituent social movements of modern Iran, including the workers', students', and women's movements, enabling them to coalesce around and collectively forward a social, economic, and political agenda.²¹⁰ Such a goal, however, has been complicated by rising economic pressure that may result in two scenarios: (1) the hollowing-out of the middle class will lead them to join the lower classes and adopt their demands or (2) the increasing economic struggle of the middle class will entrench their class thinking, pushing them to accept the status quo rather than align with the lower classes to push for radical change.

For such an alliance to take shape, a "reform of reformism" would be an important precondition, which would then allow it to reach out programmatically and practically to the lower classes in order to include their grievances and interests. Ideally, the politico-ideological spectrum of such an alliance should be as inclusive as possible, including pro-change reformists, nationalists, constitutional royalists, liberals, and pro-federalism ethnic minorities, while pushing out extremists such as the MKO cult and Persian supremacists.²¹¹ Ideally supported by a council of prominent Iranians abroad who could influence key foreign governments' policies toward Tehran, such an alliance would be organized under a leadership council and formulate a political manifesto with a concrete action plan.²¹²

Meanwhile, in addition to the regime's lack of political will to enact meaningful reforms, its ability to effectively address the triple crisis is constrained. Dwindling state resources and considerable popular discontent also lessen the efficacy of a re-emerging economic populism. In early 2019, Mohammad-Reza Tajik (a sociologist who served as President Khatami's advisor and his intelligence vice minister in charge of psychological warfare) offered a trenchant summary of Iran's precarious present and uncertain future during an interview with the IRGC's Tasnim news agency: "Iranian society finds itself in decay, in a situation where the past is dying and the future cannot emerge, nor the ability to reform."²¹³ This echoes Antonio Gramsci's famous saying that "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear."²¹⁴ The "morbid symptoms" that might appear in Iran could include a militarized Islamic Republic, de facto led by the IRGC.²¹⁵ Yet, even such a scenario would neither resolve Iran's triple crisis, nor extinguish Iranians' indomitable desire for social justice and good governance.

ENDNOTES

¹ Langston Hughes, “Harlem,” Poetry Foundation, accessed December 18, 2019, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46548/harlem>.

² Farnaz Fassihi, Twitter post, 5 January 2018, <https://twitter.com/farnazfassihi/status/949285948021526528>. For Zibakalam’s take on the Revolt, see Sadegh Zibakalam, “Tajrobeh-ye talkh râ tekrâr nakonim” [Let’s not repeat bitter experience], *Shargh*, January 7, 2018, <https://web.archive.org/web/20180107220457/http://www.sharghdaily.ir/News/149419/%D8%AA%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%AA%D9%84%D8%AE-%D8%B1%D8%A7-%D8%AA%DA%A9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%86%DA%A9%D9%86%DB%8C%D9%85>. Four years earlier, he made similar remarks, arguing that “The Islamic order is increasingly placed in a minority situation and will experience the fate of the Soviet Union”; Sadegh Zibakalam, “Zibakalam: Israel râ beh rasmîat mîshenâsam” [Zibakalam: I recognize Israel as a state], *Fars News Agency*, January 31, 2014, quoted in Misagh Parsa, *Democracy in Iran: Why It Failed and How It Might Succeed* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 5.

³ See Ali Fathollah-Nejad, “The Revolution’s Broken Promises,” in *The Iranian Revolution at Forty*, ed. Suzanne Maloney (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2020), 8–17 and Fathollah-Nejad, “Four decades later, did the Iranian revolution fulfill its promises?,” *Order from Chaos* (blog), July 11, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/07/11/four-decades-later-did-the-iranian-revolution-fulfill-its-promises/>.

⁴ However, this struggle has neither been continuous nor uniform. See Fakhreddin Azimi, *The Quest for Democracy in Iran: A Century of Struggle against Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008) and Hamid Dabashi, *Iran: A People Interrupted* (New York: The New Press, 2007).

⁵ See “The Iran Protests 2017/18 and 2019 Amid the Islamic Republic’s Triple Crisis,” author’s personal website, accessed February 24, 2020, <https://www.fathollah-nejad.eu/research/iran-protests/>.

⁶ See Ali Fathollah-Nejad, “Why Iranians are revolting again,” *Order from Chaos* (blog), November 19, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/11/19/why-iranians-are-revolting-again/>; Fathollah-Nejad, “Iran’s bloody protests are just the beginning,” *Deutsche Welle*, November 28, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/opinion-irans-bloody-protests-are-just-the-beginning/a-51450365>; Suzanne Maloney, “Iranian protesters strike at the heart of the regime’s revolutionary legitimacy,” *Order from Chaos* (blog), November 19, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/11/19/iranian-protesters-strike-at-the-heart-of-the-regimes-revolutionary-legitimacy/>; Nader Hashemi, “Violence ‘reflects the Iranian regime’s desperation,’” interview by Azadeh Fathi, *Qantara.de*, December 4, 2019, <https://en.qantara.de/content/interview-with-nader-hashemi-on-the-protests-in-iran-violence-reflects-the-iranian-regimes>.

⁷ See Rahman Bouzari, “An Iranian crisis of representation,” *openDemocracy*, November 22, 2019, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/iranian-crisis-representation/>. See also Paul Salem, “Three uprisings in search of a better future,” Middle East Institute, December 18, 2019, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/three-uprisings-search-better-future> and Arash Davari et al., “Roundtable: Iran’s Domestic Politics and Political Economy (Part 2),” *Jadaliyya*, December 2, 2019, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/40288/Roundtable-Iran%E2%80%99s-Domestic-Politics-and-Political-Economy-Part-2>.

⁸ Parsa, *Democracy in Iran*, 30–31.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁰ A preliminary version of this paper was presented in a talk entitled “The 2017/18 Iranian Revolt: Causes, Comparative Characteristics, and Consequences,” given as part of the Liberal Arts Lecture Series at Texas A&M University at Qatar, in Doha on April 16, 2018. That talk drew from two of my articles: “Causes behind Iran’s protests: A preliminary account,” *Al Jazeera*, January 6, 2018, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/iran-protests-preliminary-account-180105232533539.html>, and “There’s more to Iran’s protests than you’ve been told,” *PBS NewsHour*, April 3, 2018, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/opinion-theres-more-to-irans-protests-than-youve-been-told>.

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“That aspect of the modern crisis which is bemoaned as a ‘wave of materialism’ is related to what is called the ‘crisis of authority’. If the ruling class has lost its consensus, i.e. is no longer ‘leading’ but only ‘dominant’, exercising coercive force alone, this means precisely that the great masses have become detached from their traditional ideologies, and no longer believe what they used to believe previously, etc.” (266–76).

²¹⁵ See Fathollah-Nejad, “Swamped in a Triple Crisis,” 125.

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