

Is Iran immune from the Arab spring?

Nazanine Metghalchi

»» Iran has so far remained relatively unaffected by the winds of change that have swept through the Middle East and North Africa. Yet this was not a foregone conclusion. Given the opposition's ability to build on a recent wave of mobilisation to revive the calls for protests triggered in 2009, why has it not taken advantage of the regional domino effect?

The Green Movement, too often over-emphasised by outsiders as a panacea for Iran's democratic future, failed to draw its lessons from the crushed 2009 protests. Today it remains too divided and ambiguous to constitute the key driver of change from within. Instead, Iran's potential for democratic change may largely depend on ongoing regional developments. In particular, the fall of the Assad regime in Syria would weaken the Iranian regime by isolating it regionally and fostering further splits within its leadership, thereby enhancing the prospects of political change.

A RECIPE FOR REVOLT

Reasons abound for popular protests in Iran. During its three decades of rule, the theocratic Iranian regime has become notorious as the world's number two executioner after China. The Mullah regime's iron fist makes it top the list of Middle Eastern governments likely to be overthrown by the rage of its sorely afflicted citizens. Moreover, several conditions commonly claimed to precipitate democratic breakthroughs are present in Iran. These include the level of internet activism, corruption and economic malaise. In all three areas, Iran's situation makes it more likely to trigger public unrest than either Egypt's or Tunisia's, according to the indexes released res-

HIGHLIGHTS

- Iran remains relatively unaffected by the Arab spring.
- The Green Movement is too divided and ambiguous to drive change from within.
- Iran's future democratic potential is more likely to be determined by regional power considerations.

»»»»» pectively by Transparency International, Freedom House and the World Bank.

Iran's 2009 Green Revolution marked the onset of citizen journalism and cyber activism. Otherwise known as the 'Twitter Revolution', this paved the way for the political efficacy of mobile social media that characterised Egypt's 2011 revolution. Iran is home to the biggest and most vibrant blogosphere (an estimated 60,000 blogs), in a country where the state's cyber army wages war against what it considers a threat to the regime's stability by means of institutionalised repression, monitoring, filtering, censorship and arrests. In April 2011 Freedom House ranked Iran last in terms of internet freedom.

Iran's structural economic malaise could add additional fuel to the revolutionary fire. Although access to reliable statistical data on the Iranian economy from Iran's authorities is very limited, a sense of disempowerment and frustration over the lack of economic opportunities is prevalent among the population. Notwithstanding the record income generated by oil as Iran's main source of revenue, the rate of inflation in the country is around 25 per cent and job creation is minimal, with unemployment estimated at around 15 per cent. International sanctions have raised the cost, time and inconvenience of all international transactions, thereby enhancing the risk of stagflation.

Anger over the widespread corruption of the ruling elite might also be expected to trigger popular revolt. In spite of claiming the moral superiority of piety since the 1979 Revolution, the Iranian government's upper echelon is highly corrupted. Notable instances include the disappearance of \$1bn from the Treasury as highlighted by a report from the National Audit office in 2009; or the 2010 implication of Vice President Rahimi in a fraud case involving up to \$1.1bn. A wave of privatisations launched by President Ahmadinejad in order to tackle the state's economic woes further reinforced the lack of transparency, and greatly benefited the Revolutionary Guards, who were awarded a majority stake in the state telecommunications company.

Despite all this, the Iranian authoritarian regime remains firmly in place. This apparent paradox points to the variety and complexity of factors that determine the unfolding of revolutionary potential in each individual country. For the moment, it seems that Iran is unlikely to experience any abrupt political change. While many features increase its vulnerability to pro-democracy unrest, a number of deeper structural factors have contributed to the country's relative immunity to the 2011 Arab spring fever.

Firstly, the opposition's internal divisions have hampered its effectiveness. Arguably, even with its leaders kept under house arrest, the Green Movement is far from inactive. The Movement's leadership, however, does not seem to have learnt any lessons from the mistakes made in 2009. Although external analysts acknowledge that the Green Movement is somewhat incoherent in its goals and lacks a consistent strategy, many still overrate it as the main driver of change. Two years after the 2009 fraudulent presidential elections that triggered mass protests on Tehran's streets, renewed mobilisation in February 2011 showed that the Movement's internal disagreements over both goals and strategy remain unresolved. After a 14-month long period of silence, some protestors came to show solidarity to their neighbours whilst others were shouting slogans against the Supreme Leader. As long as the Green Movement asks for 'demonstration permits', or urges demonstrators to go home instead of advising them to remain in the streets, no democratic Persian revolution is on the horizon.

Secondly, the strong backing from the army contributes to the strength of Iran's authoritarian regime. The Egyptian army has traditionally been perceived as the guardian of civilians rather than the right arm of the Executive, and eventually sided with protesters to topple Mubarak. In contrast, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps stood firmly behind Supreme Leader Khamenei in the 2009 post-election protests and spearheaded the massacres. Since then, in an unprecedented reinforcement of the regime's security apparatus, the Republic has gradually transformed into a military dictatorship.

Iran is unlikely to experience any abrupt political change

Thirdly, the country's oil wealth seems to work against its chances for democratic governance, as in several other Middle Eastern countries. Iran's oil revenues approached \$100 billion in 2011 according to the IMF, representing a 25 per cent annual rise. Soaring oil prices, which have kept most authoritarian oil rentier regimes firmly in place, are not likely to drop anytime soon. Nevertheless, other rentier regimes such as Libya and Algeria have been shaken by popular protests. In Libya, popular discontent reached a turning point when oil revenues no longer sufficed to veil disastrous structural economic shortcomings and the failure to provide citizens with employment, food and basic services. A similar scenario could potentially unfold in Iran.

Notwithstanding these unfavourable

conditions, a number of more recent developments could substantially weaken the regime in the mid-term. These factors include, most notably, the increasing divide between different factions of the Iranian leadership, and regional developments spurred on by the Arab spring.

FACTORS OF CHANGE

Iran's theocratic order is facing increasing delegitimation. Divisions within the regime are currently more likely to trigger systemic change than the kind of popular uprising witnessed in the Arab spring. More recently, a split has been escalating between the traditional conservatives under Supreme Leader Khamenei, and the so-called 'deviant current', a term used by the director of the Revolutionary Guards to describe Ahmadinejad's and his inner circle's emphasis on the cultural-national components of Iran's identity, rather than its Islamic values.

The novelty of the current controversies lies in the unprecedented level to which they are being

publicised in mosques and the media. Tensions reached their peak when the Khamenei recently reversed President Ahmadinejad's decision to dismiss Intelligence Minister Moslehi, resulting in a stand-off between the President and the traditional camp. The latter cannot afford to embarrass itself by removing Ahmadinejad from office and will consequently have to entrust the Revolutionary Guards to set very strict conditions for the parliamentary elections scheduled for March 2012. Ahmadinejad's followers have little electoral chances as they lack support both amongst the reformist-minded public and the religious traditionalists. Yielding power over the most repressive organs of the establishment, the Supreme Leader is most likely to gain the upper hand. However, Ahmadinejad has proven to be a master of manipulation and political survival. He is now widely considered to represent the new opposition given his appeal to the broad public through populist measures, as well as to the most secular-minded voters via his nationalist narrative.

Such deep cracks in the unity of the Iranian leadership may be reinforced by ongoing changes in the regional balance of power. Three years ago, polling data revealed that Arab citizens considered President Ahmadinejad one of the most popular leaders in the world. Today, Syrian protestors shout 'Down with Iran!', and Bahrain's Shiites ask Iran not to meddle in their affairs. This plunging loss of support, as echoed in a recent study by the Arab American Institute Foundation, may well turn into a problem for Ahmadinejad's government.

Even more importantly, the advance of pro-democracy unrest has challenged Iran's capacity to exert influence in its turbulent neighbourhood. While the distraction caused by the Libyan crisis has halted the nuclear diplomatic agenda, the turmoil has weakened Iran's position vis-à-vis key regional players such as Syria, Egypt and Turkey.

Iran's biggest concern is losing influence in Syria, its most important ally since the war with Iraq and with whom it shares a comprehensive defence pact. A stable alliance with Syria is key to Iran's continuing ability to exercise pressure on Israel and

»»»»» the West. A possible overthrow of Assad's regime and Iran's consequent loss of its most faithful client could trigger the demise of Hezbollah, and greater isolation for Iran. Tehran's fear that Damascus might adopt regional policies more in line with its Arab brethren and become a Saudi client led it to provide direct assistance to the crackdown against protesters in Syria.

Although Egypt allowed two Iranian warships passage on the Suez Canal, there is nothing to suggest that Egypt will make any advances in formal state-to-state relations. Egypt is likely to develop its relations with the Hamas government in Gaza. This could foster increased competition for the role of patron of the Palestinian cause and work against Iran's desire to project its power.

Mounting anxiety about the outcome of the Syrian conflict is having an adverse effect on Iran's relationship with Turkey as well. The Revolutionary Guards warned their neighbour about their policy towards Damascus, as Turkey has hosted Syrian opposition gatherings and weapon transfers. Turkey also appears to be seeking to secure an alliance with post-Mubarak Egypt to provide a counterweight to the Iranian influence. Increasingly fierce competition over regional clout is testing Turkish-Iranian ties.

It is true that Iran has recently toned down its unconditional support for Syria and urged the regime to grant concessions to the protestors, but Tehran still fears the destabilising effects of losing an important ally. An Iranian regime pushed ever further into regional isolation would end up weakened both internationally and domestically. Significant shifts in the regional power balance might also alter the international community's positions towards Iran, possibly leading to a more active and less ambiguous support to domestic forces of change.

CONCLUSION

The Iranian regime's apparent stability has deep cracks under the surface. A Tahrir-style bottom-up

popular revolution as seen in several Arab countries this year is not currently a likely option for Iran. What will happen to the regime's stability will not initially be determined on the streets. The Green Movement currently lacks the means and clout to mobilise the masses to the degree needed to shake the fundamentals of the regime. It would therefore be a mistake for the international community to focus its assistance entirely on this movement.

The Iranian regime's fate is more likely to be determined by current regional power shifts. In particular, the fate of the Assad regime in Syria will be decisive for Iran's standing in the region. The development of relations between Syria and key players Egypt and Turkey, among others, may further contribute to the possible isolation of Iran. This would also weaken the regime domestically and provide opportunities for pro-democracy forces.

Iran's prospects of change will also depend on the extent to which the EU and other international players push for the downfall of the Syrian regime. Frustrated with the lack of meaningful breakthrough on the issue of nuclear power, the EU seems to have chosen a cautious strategy of non-intervention. Sensitivities over Iran are seen as a key driver of the EU's inaction towards the Syrian bloodshed.

Iran's stability is at risk due to its lack of soft power. The regime's fall might come about as a by-product of its increasing incapacity to adapt to the new regional power panorama. If Iran does not engage in a more active diplomacy, playing a constructive role with the aim of solving regional crises with moderate solutions, the Arab spring might ultimately weaken the regime's regional position to such a degree as to provoke its downfall.

Nazanine Metghalchi is visiting junior fellow at FRIDE.

**e-mail: fride@fride.org
www.fride.org**
