

Iran's latest revolution won't fade away

The latest protests in Iran may be largely crushed for now, but the characteristics of this particular uprising suggest that, unlike the so-called Green Revolution of 2009, the unrest could continue sporadically for years to come.

Although the rioters—largely workers and farmers from rural and religiously conservative villages and towns—were not part of a unified or organized movement, they do have shared grievances that fuelled the outrage, and this could be a game changer. Unlike past uprisings in Iran when demonstrators' outcries concerned lofty goals, such as democracy and free elections, these protesters' complaints are practical and urgent, because their lives are far more difficult than those of Iranians in major cities.

For example, the unemployment rate in Tehran—historically the centre of political protest until now—is 13%, according to Iran's Interior Ministry. But in rural areas such as Bashagard and Hormozgan provinces, the rate is above 45%, and in some cities it is reportedly up to 60%. In the fiscal year that ended in March 2017, the government said it had created 650,000 jobs, but 1.5 million new jobs were needed to decrease unemployment.

The urban/rural divide makes this movement different from those in the recent past. First, the people protesting are those the famous Iranian intellectual Ali Shariati, who died shortly before the 1979 Revolution, called the "oppressed". His Islamic liberation theology was very influential in inspiring Iranians to revolt against the Shah's regime for the same reason they took to the streets last month—the absence of an egalitarian society.

Second, in this recent protest, the urban middle class largely remained on the sidelines. Social movements, whether tightly organized structures or loosely defined uprisings, emerge when a group of people perceive injustice or experience mistreatment. In democratic countries, these grievances are addressed in courtrooms or freely elected parliaments. But in countries such as Iran, where the judiciary, the press and the parliament are all loyalists to the ruling elite, the government spares no effort in crushing an emerging movement.

When the protesters are left with taking their outrage to the streets, the regime often declares their demonstrations illegal. And, in the aftermath of the protests that the regime has declared "crushed", there are widespread reports that some of the demonstrators who were arrested committed suicide in prison.

There have been three main waves of significant unrest since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. In 1999, students from Tehran University began demonstrating when the government closed a reformist newspaper during a rare time when a free press was beginning to emerge. Although the demonstrations spread to some cities, it was primarily student-led, and was crushed after six days. One author of this article—Geneive—was on the streets with the protesters at that time. Their main shortcoming was that they could not inspire older, working-class Iranians to join their uprising.

The second round, between 2009 and 2010, came to be known as the Green Movement. The leaders of this uprising managed to mobilize millions of demonstrators in Tehran and around the country for more than a year. The protests began over the credible belief that the 2009 election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had been rigged. But the uprisings came to encompass more profound issues, such as the lack of electoral transparency.

In both rounds, the movement was primarily comprised of educated, middle- and upper-class

Iranians who demanded free and fair elections, a free press and an end to supreme clerical rule. Some had resources and were able to flee the country to Europe to avoid arrest or simply to resettle for a better life.

In this third wave, outraged protesters are taking their demands to the next level, even though they have not managed to inspire the urban middle class to join them. While it might be true that the protests were triggered by Iran's economic crisis, chants such as "Death to the dictator" and "Death to Hezbollah" show a broader-scale resentment about Iran's ideologically motivated policies. Instead of improving the economy, Iran is spending billions on its military expansionism in the Middle East.

What we are witnessing in Iran now should not be viewed as an isolated outcry, but rather a work in progress, a hybrid momentum that started in 1999 and led by students who later became involved in the Green Movement. They are belatedly joining the current unrest, which is evolving to include new social classes of people who were not at the centre of previous protests. As Karl Marx argued, unrest led by the proletariat is a game changer.

Although this momentum has not been linear, neither were the Arab uprisings in 2011. The Iranian demonstrators' demands—food subsidies, jobs and lower prices—are perfectly attainable if the regime re-allocates its resources from the military to the economy. The fact that it is highly unlikely to do so, coupled with the demonstrators' resentment, could inspire more protests in the near future that may forge a broader alliance between the middle class and the working class. It is unlikely that this simmering social movement will wait another decade to rear its head. **Bloomberg View**

Geneive Abdo and Abdallah Hendawy are, respectively, a resident scholar at the Arabia Foundation and a lecturer of sociology at George Mason University.

Comments are welcome at theirview@livemint.com

END

Downloaded from **crackIAS.com**

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com