

PolicyWatch #1629 : Special Forum Report

How to Assess Political Fissures in Iran

Featuring David Cvach, Ali Alfoneh, and [Mehdi Khalaji](#)
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On February 5, 2010, David Cvach, Ali Alfoneh, and Mehdi Khalaji addressed a special Policy Forum luncheon at The Washington Institute to discuss developments in Iran that may indicate either lost ground for reform-minded activists or cracks in the very foundation of the Islamic Republic. Mr. Cvach is political counselor for the Middle East at the French embassy in Washington, D.C. Mr. Alfoneh, who recently wrote on the Basij militia's impact in Iran ([PolicyWatch #1627](#)), is a visiting research fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. Mr. Khalaji, who wrote on the Supreme Leader's potential to make political compromise in [PolicyWatch #1628](#), is a senior fellow at the Institute. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

David Cvach

The means for assessing political fissures in Iran are by nature very limited and have become even more so since the June 12, 2009, election. Independent studies and data on the Iranian public, such as opinion polling, are sparse and not useful, and the Iranian press follows very strict red lines in discussing politics. Western diplomats in Iran are also restrained from understanding the political environment due to the oppressively formal nature of relations with Iranian officials, who rarely discuss sensitive issues with their Western counterparts. The latter are thus forced to gather information anecdotally, in private meetings with business leaders, cultural elites, and journalists -- hardly a sufficient sample of Iranian society.

Given these limitations, it is difficult, if not impossible, to accurately assess the growing divisions between the Iranian people and the regime. Even to Western diplomats on the ground in Iran, only the biggest social developments, such as the demonstrations carried out by Green Movement supporters since June, can be clearly observed through the Iranian fog. And these are usually just as visible from Washington as they are from Iran.

One can, however, accurately evaluate the internal crisis afflicting the Iranian regime. Indeed, a deep rift has emerged within it since June 12, foreshadowed by the continuous rightward shift in Iranian politics over the past four years. The U.S. policy of engagement that began in 2009 played a major role in cracking the glue that was superficially holding together the regime's various factions -- today, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei no longer wields the power to balance these factions against one another.

For the West's policy of engagement to ultimately succeed, there must be viable leaders on the Iranian side who are willing to not only work for a nuclear deal, but also take risks in its pursuit. This is not the case today, as exemplified by the regime's calculated dithering over the recent uranium exchange deal to provide fuel rods for the Tehran Research Reactor. The last time the regime offered significant cooperation with the West was in 2002 regarding the removal of the Taliban -- an Iranian enemy -- from Afghanistan, and even then cooperation was difficult. The United States and its allies should keep the door open to engagement, but they must also increase pressure on the regime to persuade it of the benefits that engagement brings, compared to the penalties of international isolation.

Ali Alfoneh

It is nearly impossible to predict whether a political revolution is going to take place in Iran. A social revolution, however, has been underway there for at least the past 100 years. From the land reforms of the White Revolution begun in 1963, to the literacy campaigns of both the shah and the Islamic Republic, to the onset of rapid urbanization over the past fourteen years and the advent of the mass media and internet, Iranian society has been changing dramatically. Yet while society has changed, the regime's structure has not. Rather, the Islamic Republic has become more radicalized, degenerating into a military dictatorship.

In 1979, the shah's regime failed to adapt to the ongoing changes in Iranian society, and political revolution was the result. Today, there are some indicators that Supreme Leader Khamenei's regime is making the same mistake, and the result could be another political revolution.

The first and most profound of these indicators is the defection of regime elites -- the children and other close family members of regime officials who could inherit power if they simply stayed quiet but have instead chosen to join the protesters. These young elites -- such as Ruhollah Hosseini, son of an advisor to long-time Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) chief Mohsen Rezaei, but nevertheless killed while demonstrating -- have become disillusioned with the regime's slogans and the mythology of the Islamic Revolution. As a new generation of Iranians who did not vote in the 1979 referendum, they are searching for a new direction.

Another indicator of the growing divide between the regime and the people is the behavior of Khamenei, who has acted much like the shah lately. Both leaders are characterized by indecision, eagerness to intervene in all sectors of society, and unwillingness to accept responsibility for their actions. Khamenei is more insulated from some of his mistakes, however, given that his rule is institutionalized within other centers of power, such as the Basij Resistance Force and its millions of members eager to preserve the regime's survival. Likewise, the elites of the IRGC, the ideological branch of Iran's military, have strong economic incentives to intervene and save the regime. Hojatoleslam Ali Saidi, the Supreme Leader's representative to the IRGC, recently said that if the Guards had to kill 75,000 Iranians to uphold the regime, it would be worth it. Khamenei has also been shrewd not to take action against regime officials as a means of compromise with the opposition, such as prosecuting those who tortured protesters in the way the shah arrested many of his own cabinet members.

Mehdi Khalaji

Two key barometers of the growing divide between the Iranian government and people are the attitudes of the clerical class and the level of regime violence against the protest movement. First, the clerical establishment is very complicated and does not fit the neat "pro-government clerics versus anti-government clerics" division often assumed by foreign observers. Such a distinction cannot actually exist in Iran because Ayatollah Khamenei controls the entire establishment. Every imam in the country is appointed by the government. Those clerics who have recently been critical of the regime (e.g., Ayatollahs Ali Hossein Montazeri and Yousef Sanei) therefore have no significant influence in the establishment, and their offices have been shut down.

Instead, it is the mainstream pro-government clerics whose attitudes deserve the most scrutiny. These clerics are of two kinds. The vast majority are politically docile, distancing themselves from such issues while accepting the advantages of regime patronage. A much smaller minority are politically active and support Khamenei vociferously. In 2005, when President Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad first came to power, this smaller faction was very supportive of him and his hardline positions. Today, however, this characteristically loud group has fallen mostly silent when it comes to the president. As Ahmadinezhad's popularity plummeted following the June 2009 election, these clerics recognized that it had become too risky to support him publicly and thus did not even send him notes of congratulations upon his victory. If observers begin to suspect that this faction's support for the regime is eroding further, then Khamenei's grip on power may become increasingly fragile.

A spike in regime violence also indicates growing fissures. The government has begun to arrest more and

more people; currently, an estimated 4,000 political prisoners are being held. The government's strategy of intimidation has revolved around arresting prominent public figures while torturing and executing relative unknowns. If the regime continues to raise the level of violence against the protesters, the implied message will be clear -- Tehran is worried about its ability to control the political crisis. A violent crackdown would hurt the regime's legitimacy and popularity with the Iranian people and may actually backfire. That is, if the Iranian people see that nobody is safe from the crackdown -- not even Mir Hossein Mousavi's advisors, or the family of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, or the son of the founder of the Islamic Republic's judiciary system -- then they will feel they have nothing to lose and will be even less afraid to protest.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Cole Bunzel.

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