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Okata, Frank

Monterey, California. Naval Postgraduate School



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Regime Change in Iran: An Analytic Framework

Strategic Insights, Volume II, Issue 10 (October 2003)

by Lt. Frank Okata

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Iran, the largest country in the Persian Gulf and member of President George W. Bush's "Axis of Evil," perplexes many astute observers of international relations. Iran became the first Islamic theocracy in the world promising its inhabitants the benefits of divinely guided social justice and prosperity. Twenty-four years later, none of these benefits have materialized. A variety of public opinion polls over the last 18 months show widespread discontent within the Islamic Republic led by the *valy-e faqih* (Supreme Leader) Ali Khamanei. Given the increasing discontent in Iran, can we expect the Islamic Republic to endure in its current state for the foreseeable future?

As the United States considers the policy conundrums presented by such issues as whether and/or how to promote regime change in Tehran and how to address Iran's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) program, there is a model that can help explain the ways in which the theocratic state can succumb to civil unrest inside the country. The model is based on the conclusions drawn by a social scientist and scholar of revolutions and political discontent, Theodore Robert Gurr whose 1970 book, *Why Men Rebel*, analyzes how discontent can be politicized leading to violence against the regime. Gurr's framework starts with the people first focusing their discontent against the regime's institutions, personalities and policies. This leads to the theory of Relative Deprivation—the people's perceived discrepancy between two values: reality and capabilities. If the discrepancy reaches a given magnitude, political violence is likely because the people will find relief in venting their anger since other means of recourse are apparently closed to them.^[1]

Gurr matches the capability of dissidents to rock the foundations of the establishment against the latter's resilience, called the *coercive balance*. The dissident capability to shake the foundations of the establishment is mentioned because when studying social uprisings, the fall of the established powers is never guaranteed unless it is being studied post facto. The last element in Gurr's analysis is the end state. Will the regime collapse, be overthrown, or remain in power? Arriving at an end state directly flows from the tension inherent in the *coercive balance*. How does this apply to present day Iran?

Institutions, Personalities, and Policies

Iranian society has focused its discontent towards the institutions, personalities and policies which have set the country on its present course, namely the *valy-e faqih* (Council of Guardians), *bonyads* (Islamic charitable foundations), and the *basiji* (organized band of government sponsored thugs). The personalities are current *valy-e faqih*, Ayatollah Ali Khamanei and President Mohammed Khatami. The policies in this case are suffocating controls on social freedom, and the continued overt animosity towards the United States.

The *valy-e faqih* according the creator of the position, Ayatollah Khomeini, constitutes the representative of the twelfth Imam on earth. Iran, home to most of the world's Shi'a, must be ruled in his name.^[2] In 1978-79, a popular consensus developed to overthrow the Shah, but there was no agreement as to who would replace him. After the Shah stepped down, a chaotic period ensued until Khomeini consolidated his

position after the hostage crisis in November 1979. The Shi'a clergy represented the only cohesive organization opposing the Shah that had the three most important ingredients for a successful social movements: ideology (Islam), leadership (Khomeini), and institutions (mosques). While Khomeini was a charismatic and learned cleric, he was not a Grand Ayatollah. Nonetheless, Khomeini possessed the religious credentials and political expertise necessary of a *valy-e faqih*.^[3] Khomeini's death soon revealed the institutional fragility of the *valy-e faqih*. His successor Khamanei lacked the appropriate religious credentials but had political expertise. Khamanei has therefore been a very shrewd politician, but as *valy-e faqih* the spiritual path of Iran is in question because he does not live up to Khomeini's reputation.^[4] This is a problem with charismatic dictators because one cannot expect the next ruler to be of equal caliber to the predecessor.

In Iran's system, the Council of Guardians selects candidates for public office. There are two important criteria for selection as a political candidate, the first being "practical adherence to Islam", and the second, "acceptance of the concept of *valy-e faqih* and commitment to the political system." As their name suggests, the Council has been the staunchest protector of the revolution. In 1997 only four candidates were allowed to run for president out of the 230 that applied.^[5]

The third important institution in Iran are *bonyads*, or charitable religious foundations. They are the interface between the Iranian people who being predominantly Muslim, must practice the fourth pillar of Islam, called *zakat*, in which Muslims are required to give a portion of their income to charities. *Bonyads* such as the Foundation for the Oppressed, Martyrs Foundation, and War Wounded own collectively over 100 billion dollars in assets and control over 40 percent of the non-oil sector of the Iranian economy. There is a very low rate of private capital accumulation in Iran and the foundations are one of the few means the government has at its disposal for internal economic investment.^[6] The *bonyads* are a major economic impediment to the diversification of the Iranian economy. Iran has experienced significant contraction in its economy. In 1977, the gross national product (GNP) was 85 billion dollars shrinking to 82 billion dollars in 1986. In 2001, the Iranian GDP was valued at 115 billion dollars. If the 1986 figures were transposed to 2001, the GDP would have to be valued at \$135 billion. Stated another way, the Iranian economy has lost one seventh of its value in real terms over the last 24 years.^[7] The *bonyads* stifle entrepreneurs and the *bazaaris* not affiliated with *bonyads* suffer because the latter dominate the export and import businesses. Thanks to their status as Islamic charities, the *bonyads* are tax-exempt and receive favorable exchange rates.^[8]

The *basiji* are religious inspired thugs who act on behalf of the clerics with the *bonyads* as their key sponsors. The *basiji* are not centrally controlled from Teheran, but command is outsourced to local mosques that are accountable to the *valy-e faqih*. The *basiji* supplanted the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) after it refused to suppress the 1994 Ghazvin riots. The *basiji* was deployed quelling the riots there and in Teheran in 1999 and 2003 became the regime's "storm troopers" receiving generous allowances from the government. Forty percent of the vacancies at universities are reserved for *basiji*. This is substantial given their suspect academic qualifications. The *basiji* are a vital constituency for the present regime, which goes out of its way to keep it loyal.^[9]

The key personalities are Ali Khamanei because of his suspect religious credentials and President Khatami, the reform minded president elected in 1997 and 2001. Both the position of *valy-e faqih* and its occupant are despised by many Iranians. President Khatami did not convert his overwhelmingly popular mandate to produce concrete reforms. Ironically, his landslide elections were manipulated by the *mullahs* to validate the *valy-e faqih* system due to the large turnout. Although Khatami is popular abroad, he has not been able to use his popularity to bring the clerics to a crossroads.^[10]

In the public policy arena, the lack of social freedom especially for women remains an acute source of discontent. Iran differs from its Arab neighbors in that women are active participants in the work force.^[11] Their mobilization in the work place contrasts with significant social restrictions and diminished opportunity in a saturated job market.

The last policy aspect is the collision course between the Iranian theocracy and the United States. The average Iranian does not bear ill will against America, as evidenced in the large turnout for a pro-America rally to sympathize with the victims of 9/11. The animosity brought about by the Iranian government's sponsorship of terrorism is devastating to Iran's economy because much needed American expertise and capital for the oil sector is unavailable and the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act of 1996 limits the amount of investment from other nations.[12]

Relative Deprivation

The mullahs have either willingly or reluctantly given Iran what Gurr would call societal conditions that increase the average level or intensity of expectations without increasing capabilities thus increasing the amount of discontent.[13] Some of the contradictions can be considered critical variables in *Relative Deprivation* (RD) theory. Different parts of the Iran populace are affected. The *bazaaris*, for example are one such bloc. During the Shah's reign, they were undercut by large foreign retailers. When the *mullahs* came to power, the *bazaaris* not allied with *bonyads* were weakened because in the import-export business, they have to pay market prices for hard currency whereas the *bonyads* and partners trade at the much cheaper official rate. Before 1979, lucrative business was reserved for the Shah's associates, and there has been little change since the *bonyads* have supplanted the latter.[14] To make matters worse, Khomeini told people to have more children during the 1980's because of the tremendous losses in the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88). These children have come of age and in their most productive years there are few jobs and many seek to emigrate.[15]

Sanctions by the United States further complicate economic life for the *mullahs*. Iran has a \$23 billion external debt against reserves of \$15 billion. Because the United States has the most votes in the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Iran has difficulty borrowing money. It also cannot deal with the Paris Club of Bankers, therefore, Iran must make separate financing agreements with about 20 countries thereby increasing costs.[16] By allowing the *bonyads* to use the official foreign exchange (forex) rate, the *mullahs* are forced to operate at a net loss. This will in the future lead to a diminished ability to patronize the *bonyads* to which many *basiji* are outsourced. It is therefore in U.S. interests that Iran has little access to foreign capital. The lack of capital accumulation curtails entrepreneurship which can employ the thousands of high school and university graduates flooding the job market. By creating an uneven playing field in the bazaar, the *mullahs* have imposed a handicap upon themselves which really propagates discontent that they must deal with.

On the political front, people need to feel pride in their leaders and country. The *valy-e faqih* is accountable to God and is above all politics; the ultimate arbiter of right and wrong.[17] Khomeini's heirs lack his legitimacy and appeal and since the whole *valy-e faqih* concept was based on that, a significant prerequisite for political upheaval has been met because the regime is immobile and inflexible. The clerics act mostly to preserve their own power therefore becoming a barrier to change.[18] The proportion of political elite (*mullahs*) to political participants is very low. If the regime fails to respond to pressures for reform, participatory RD increases to a point where violence is directed towards the establishment. In the Hashemi Aghajari controversy, the great upheaval surrounding his death sentence made the decision float from appeal to appeal because of the *mullahs'* reluctance to face the consequences of his execution.[19] This is what can be explained in RD theory as the last resort that transforms a legitimate form of government (because of the *mullahs'* claim of popular validation through elections) into an illegitimate institution.[20]

It is difficult to live within the confines of "divine legitimacy" when it is clear that those who consider themselves God's messengers are flawed. This is accentuated by the state deciding upon the definition of the Almighty. Hence a serious condition where the *valy-e faqih* operating as the ultimate authority and accountable to nobody.[21] The Iranian situation gives Iranians a sense of helplessness and a need for reckoning. The longer the reconciliation is delayed, the greater the violence needed to settle them. In Iran's case, violence is likely because the clergy which shielded the people from the government's arbitration is now oppressor. If the clerics leave power peacefully they regain a medium of credit and trust which may permit their return.[22]

The Iranian Coercive Balance

Coercive Balance is the potential for force and counterforce during prolonged periods of civil unrest. Recent events such as the intense rioting in June 2003 inspired by Los Angeles based satellite TV and the Aghajari controversy show that the clerics may have lost the upper hand. In these riots, the rioters actively confronted the state's forces. The *mullahs* had no choice but to use force to repress the dissent. Gurr's cycle of force and counterforce is thus observed.^[23] Force is resident with the dissident movement in Iran because they are the agents of change while counterforce is associated with the regime because they must respond to popular instigation. Scholars of social revolution agree that for change to occur, the regime must suffer a general military breakdown. Dissidents cannot prevail against a well disciplined, led, and funded force. To be successful, incumbents and dissidents must have ideology, leadership, and institutions.^[24]

The *mullahs* are not a monolithic bloc because many of them oppose the regime including Ali Montazeri, at one time was Khomeini's successor. The ruling *mullahs* have three different factions based on ideology. The Line of the Imam (LOI) who are Khomeini's most faithful supporters advocate exporting the revolution. Prominent during Khomeini's rule, they fell out of favor with Khamanei because he was insecure and wanted a subdued LOI. The next religious faction is the Combatant Clergymen Association (CCA) which came to prominence when President Rafsanjani (1989-1997) broke with Khamanei because the Supreme leader merged the *komiteh*, IRGC, and the Gendarmerie in 1992. Khamanei did this because he could not control multiple factions as Khomeini could. The security services merger alienated Rafsanjani from Khamanei because LOI members were purged. The CCA controls the most important *bonyads* and are the biggest sponsors of the *basiji*. The last faction is the Servants of Construction (SOC) led by Ali Rafsanjani, a very influential *mullah* also known for his prolific corruption. The SOC controls the Central Bank and IRNA, Iran's official news agency.^[25]

Iranian dissidents are very fragmented and range from monarchists to the notorious *Mujaheddin Khalq* (MEK) which was allied with Saddam Hussein. The virtual elimination of social freedoms make it hard for Iranians to be team players for any cause. The opposition is very fragmented, not unlike the opposition to the Shah. There is a yearning for a charismatic leader who can unify the opposition but as witnessed with Khomeini, this is not a desirable track. The lack of dissident unity makes them prone to targeting by Iranian security forces.^[26]

The balance seems lopsided in the *mullahs* favor, however, the sub theory of *fleeting* versus *consistent compliance* must be taken into consideration. *Consistent compliance* is preferable because the leaderships directives are followed at the penalty of sanction. Parallel to discipline and cohesion for security services. With *fleeting compliance*, the regime's coercive functions are not standardized and loyalties are suspect for example, the IRGC voting for Khatami in 1997.^[27] To fix *fleeting compliance* sanction or patronage must be imposed or a more loyal group enhanced. Patronage raises a vulnerability because if the money runs out, the regime loses the *basiji*.

End Game

The magnitude of unrest can be described as internal war, turmoil, or conspiracy. Internal war is an all out civil war between factions with even coercive capability. Turmoil is a slow approach taken when the balance is lopsided in the regime's favor and the opposition lacks organization. In a conspiracy, the balance favors the incumbent but the dissidents are organized and the regime has a specific vulnerability that can be exploited. This is unlikely in Iran because the *mullahs* are fragmented but will unify to protect their interests. *Coercive balance* can be settled in two ways, one group either runs out of resources or attains the capacity of genocidal victory over its opponents. The latter was the case in Saddam's Iraq where the balance was totally in his favor. For that to happen, the people must be destitute enough to give up dissidence because they are preoccupied with subsistence.^[28] Iran is not in such a situation and the dissident movement is a low cost operation goaded by the internet and Los Angeles based satellite TV which ties up the *mullahs* coercive apparatus at considerable expense.

Regime change is accomplished by either a collapse or overthrow. Overthrow requires success in an internal war or conspiracy. Since these two options are difficult to foresee in Iran, regime collapse is the most viable option. Increasing reliance on the *basiji* and patronage has made co-optation the bond between the ruling clerics and the enforcers. A serious downturn of the Iranian economy could cause an erosion of loyalty from the *basiji*, IRGC, and the military. Another factor seldom mentioned is the civil service which helps make the state governable. If significant numbers of civil servants go uncompensated for a prolonged periods, acute paralysis may overcome Iran leading to the regime's collapse.

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