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Transformation of the political culture in Iran and the future of the regime's legitimacy

A study in light of Iran's protests that broke out in December 2017

Mohammad Ahmad Adawi (Ph.D.)

Professor of Political Science at King Saud University

Some of the most important issues facing political institutions and systems in the 21st century relate to legitimacy, acceptance and public satisfaction. When analyzing such issues it is important to bear in mind the transformation in political culture, which has taken place, especially among the new generation and the impact of globalization, which has interconnected cultures around the world. Both have contributed greatly to shaping political awareness among citizens in the world. Also, this ever-increasing political awareness has led to further challenges to political systems as peoples aspirations, and hopes have been reshaped.

The question of illegitimacy in Iran was raised by the December 2017 demonstrations, which continued until the beginning of 2018 in many Iranian cities. They witnessed a wide participation of young people, in which the images of the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and President Hassan Rouhani were torn up. The mass protests raised many questions about the future of political stability in Iran, considering the transformation of political culture among the new generation of Iranians. The Iranian regime has primarily ensured internal stability through weakening the organizational capacity of the opposition to challenge its power, which has enabled it to use many resources to serve its expansionary foreign policy. This has happened through a political structure that gives a great role to the leader (Vali-e Faqih) in governance and elected institutions that are mainly installed to help him. These institutions try to mould the political culture of the people to enhance their support for the ruling regime led by the Supreme Leader, subsequently laying the foundation for the legitimacy of the system and its policies. This legitimacy was questioned during the events of December 2017 that indicated a rejection of governmental economic, social and foreign policies. They then expanded to include the rules and foundations of the political system itself and its leaders, opening the door to a new stage of evaluating foreign and domestic policies in Iran. Considering these transformations and events, this study attempts to answer some of the questions related to the sources of legitimacy on which the ruling regime in Iran depends, the nature and characteristics of the political culture of the Iranian people and its most prominent transformations. This is along with the similarities and differences between the political culture of the masses and that of the elite in Iran. Also, this study attempts to explain the demonstrations of December 2017 and their aftermath, as well as the implications of the demonstrations when it comes to the legitimacy of the Iranian political system. In this context, the study is divided into several axes: the first deals with political culture and legitimacy evolving between theoretical frameworks and reality in Iran. The second discusses the developments and causes of the demonstrations in Iran. The third axis highlights the significance of the demonstrations and their impact on the legitimacy of the Iranian political system.

Political culture and legitimacy: Theoretical frameworks and reality in Iran

There is a relationship between political culture and its nature, and the legitimacy of the political system prevailing in a country, since legitimacy is primarily the perception of citizens and their perceptions about the political system. Thus, the features and characteristics of political culture can be an important input in interpreting the legitimacy of the political system or even the governing body of a country. This raises many intricate and complex issues relating to legitimacy and political culture such as:

» **The concept of political legitimacy and its sources**

The concept of political legitimacy and its sources has witnessed several transformations and variations based on the nature of the political system.

• **Defining political legitimacy**

Legitimacy, in terms of politics, refers to public satisfaction of the performance of the ruling establishment or the acceptance of the framework and rules set by the standing regime. There are two levels to discuss when analyzing the concept of legitimacy. The first level is the governing body and how it leads the state, while there is a second level of the political system itself. There is no doubt that the level of legitimacy and its variance that exists between the ruling body, the ruler or the political system leads us to deal with different issues. Hence, the indicators used to measure the two levels vary. We find that many countries in the South (developing countries) mix between the ruling body and the political system, and even the state itself, the ruler in some of these states says, "I am the state; the state is me, "which we can call, "The Personalization of Political Systems". This is has been happening in Iran since 1979 and this leads to repetitive crises of legitimacy for various reasons. Legitimacy stems from a set of practices, actions and rules, and this means that it may change and vary from one stage to another. The state of satisfaction in the previous conception requires us to think about its elements, which include economic, legal, cultural, social and political dimensions. The governing body or the political system may not be successful in all areas or previous dimensions. Rather, it depends on degrees of success and failure and depends on the prioritization of these areas by citizens.

• **Manifestations of political legitimacy**

There are several manifestations that can indicate legitimacy. The most important of these manifestations are: the acceptance of policies and decisions issued by the political leadership or governing body, the acceptance of rules regulating political interaction with the state, the participation of citizens in selecting leaders, whether through elections or addressing authorities and governing bodies, support given to leaders and policies, the growth of citizens' sentiments of loyalty and citizenship, political stability and ministerial stability.

• **Sources of legitimacy**

As for the sources of legitimacy, many political systems in developing countries continue to give special importance to the president, as a result of popular leadership, its role in independence and the development process. When dealing with the crisis of illegitimacy, it makes us point to the fact that regimes derive legitimacy mainly from the existence of constitutional rules, a framework governing the various practices and institutions of the state, interaction with

internal/ external environments, and their relevance to the prevailing political culture in society. Political systems, as well as ruling political elites, derive their legitimacy from a variety of sources, including personal sources (charismatic leadership) - religious sources - policies and performance - community traditions and customs – and through constitutional or legal legitimacy.[1]

The most widespread source of legitimacy in the 21st century is policy and performance. These two are the most important sustainable sources of stability and power. Political analysts focus on factors such as justice and equity in policies to assess political systems and to evaluate political stability. This was asserted by reports on human resources in various years, especially the report issued in 2011.[2] The role of charisma, as well as social and religious values in legitimacy has dwindled, while the role of policies and performance has grown. This was focus of the publication "Millennium Development Goals" which evaluated the performance of countries in the field of development, education, health and environment. This was in accordance with the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2000.[3] This comes amidst the spread of global reports that monitor the performance of states in various policy sectors, the impact of globalization and social media. The legitimacy of leadership and trust is now dependent on the level of governmental/leadership performance, especially domestically. In his study on political systems, David Easton was keen to link legitimacy with the system's output, such as policies, decisions and programs.[4] It cannot be ruled out that the collapse of legitimacy and even the political systems of Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen and Libya in 2011 and 2012 was the result of poor policies and performance over long periods of time that neared half a century.

• **The political culture**

The definition of political culture differs according to the intellectual background of researchers. We will propose the most common definition, before discussing the detailed issues concerning Iranian political culture. The Oxford Dictionary defines culture as "the set of attitudes, beliefs and values of a people".[5] Almond believes that any culture has three aspects: the first is cognitive. It is related to one's knowledge of the political system; the second is sensory related to personal attachment to leaders and institutions; and the third is evaluative related to judgments and opinions on political phenomena.[6] Doverger's definition is that political culture is "the political aspects of the prevailing culture in a society as these aspects constitute a coherent set of parts."[7] It can be said that the roots of the concept belong to the Latin language as the word "cultura" means in Latin "plowing and development of the land'. It evolved to mean the development of the mind.[8] It is undeniable that the internet and the information revolution have contributed greatly to a transformation in the political culture of citizens in many countries of the world.[9]

Culture is inclusive of frameworks governing human behavior, whether ethical, moral, religious or societal. They govern the actions of individuals, determine their attitudes towards life and their awareness of what is happening around them. If a political authority wants success in some field, it is necessary for it to look at the dominant cultural values, analyze existing frameworks regulating human behavior, support what is useful, and try to change what prevents or adversely affects it from reaching its end. It has become known that local culture affects national policies as a whole.[10] Culture can - and should - be changed according to specific frameworks.[11] This is confirmed by the Asian development experience which made us reconsider the role of Confucianism in development.[12] Culture is the determinant of public reaction and the level of policy success or failure in countries.

States have a range of subcultures, including:

• **Culture of the elite**

It is represented in studying the values and trends of the elite in different areas and those that have an interest in political affairs or can influence the evolution of the political system. So, we find some political studies focusing on the ruling elite, economic elite, and influentials in national and local communities.[13]

• **Subculture of communities**

There may be more than one tribal or sectarian group in a society. And it is important not to separate these subcultures from the general culture of the state; otherwise the latter will suffer from a crisis of identity and belonging, given the necessity of respecting the other subcultures.

• **The culture of the public**

This refers to the set of values or trends of the people, which are specific to political development, as well as the criteria defining legitimacy of the ruling regime. They reflect the attitudes and values of citizens towards the performance of the system, and thus determining the criteria for satisfaction with its performance.[14]

Almond's analysis of political culture drew a separating line between three types: "local culture", "culture of dependency" and "culture of participation". The local culture inclines to local subsystems such as the village, clan, nation and region without the political system as a whole. The culture of subordination or submission makes people aware of the existence of the political system, but they adopt a negative position towards it, waiting for its benefits and services. They, fear its repression and do not see themselves able to influence it. The culture of participation, on the contrary, is believed by citizens to be able to influence the functioning of the system and the political process in various ways and means.

This includes elections, demonstrations, grievances and forming lobbying groups. According to Almond, every type of political culture is matched by a kind of political structure, which is a system of government relevant to it.

The level of harmony that exists between the political culture and the structure of the political system is essential for the stability and well-functioning of the system and any disparity between the two threatens it. This makes the system's ability to adapt to cultural changes and transformations crucial to its stability. This is the theoretical framework on which this study is based to examine the situation of Iran. This study examines the degree of similarity and dissimilarity between the dominant culture of the ruling elite and the people. It is important to note that, large disparities or contradictions are not supposed to threaten the stability of the political system, although complete symmetry is also elusive, which prompts us to study political culture and its characteristics in different sectors and factions in Iran.

• The relationship between legitimacy and political culture in Iran

Elites in different political systems, through their role in the process of formation, and their symbolic or moral function, attempt to promote a set of traits and general characteristics that they wish to instill in the general culture of society. This is important for these elites to achieve stability, reach their objectives or gain support in the main issues that they focus on. Iranian leaders have consistently sought to gain legitimacy by focusing on religious aspects, as well as Iranian nationalism, to build their legitimacy and ensure that such legitimacy continues by establishing a political system that guarantees their authority.[15] The role of the Iranian leadership has been critical in building a political culture that gives them legitimacy and this can be determined by looking at the institutions of the state and how they consolidate the religious dimension. This happened through the theory of Velayat-e Faqih, which Khomeini and his comrades worked to establish and disseminate among the various classes in Iran, in secret at first. Then it turned into an ideology. Shiite intellectuals have emphasized that the epistemological and philosophical characteristics of the experience of the Iranian revolution cannot be removed. Religious doctrine was the basis of Khomeini's political project.[16] This meant that the Iranian political system was characterized as being closed, secret, and based on a kind of religious fanaticism and a tribal-like loyalty.[17] This happened despite Khomeini's attempt to turn the theory of Velayat-e Faqih into a more open program of action until it was institutionalized through the Iranian political system.

The evolution of the political system shows that Khomeini, by presenting his theory on the jurist leadership, Velayat-e Faqih, and by exploiting the Twelver Shi'a doctrine officially adopted by Iran under the Safavid rule, made this doctrine a religious and cultural identity in Iranian society and state, especially after the

victory of the revolution. The situation allowed: First, the implementation of Sharia [Religious Law] in the Islamic Republic, and secondly unifying the Iranian nation to a religious and mystical link by considering the state as being connected to the Infallible Imam. According to Khomeini's interpretation, the Iranian state is a prelude to the emergence of the Mahdi at the end of time who will spread justice on earth which is drowning in inequality and injustice.[18] Khomeini used his philosophical, persuasive, and cognitive abilities to convey these ideas in society and among the various groups. He made these tenets as axioms that every Iranian should be convinced of. He mobilized his followers and his comrades to consolidate those tenets in the culture of Iranian society, and even every Shiite in the world. Both Khomeini and Khamenei went too far beyond this point, considering themselves as the defenders of Islam, the sacred sites of Muslims as well as their plight across the world.

To achieve this end, Khomeini and his supporters exploited the ancient Iranian heritage and the people's tendency towards philosophy, their feelings of identity and distinction.[19] They exploited the diversity and fragmentation in the subcultures of different communities in Iran: "For centuries, many peoples and communities have lived together with their own cultural specificities and religious beliefs. These cultures interacted and influenced each other's culture and thought, so that we could learn about the common culture and characteristics of Iran throughout the society, on the one hand, and the cultural characteristics of each ethnicity or people within Iran on the other". Therefore, the general culture of the Iranian people is "a blend of the cultures of Iranian and non-Iranian peoples and communities that ruled Iran throughout history and handed down their political and social culture".[20] Although it is found that many subcultural aspects have been changed by rallying behind the Iranian revolution. It can be said that this subcultural dilution can be attributed to the absence of organized party work, the weak institutionalization of parties, the division between political currents, and their failure to provide a model consistent with the religious and cultural diversity in Iran.[21]. The movement of partisan institutions, as well as social and political movements, was restricted by constitutional provisions and laws banning a violation of revolutionary principles or damaging public order. Also, laws weakening the role of institutions in building and developing political culture and its role in Iran were issued. The regime in Iran was keen to nurture Iranian nationalism, to instill pride and distinction among Iranians and to focus on their historic glory. While at the same time stating that there were existential threats to the Iranian nation from its enemies abroad, which requires unity. The decline of the so-called "School of Deconstruction", which opposed Khomeini's "School of Philosophy ", contributed to an increase in Khomeini's dominance in directing Iran's general culture. This deconstructionist school, considered itself the basis of the Shiite sect, called for living by religious texts and refused the interpretation of

religious beliefs to justify policies, as Khomeini did. This school depended on four main tenets:

» Separating philosophy and mysticism from revelation and the Quran
» Adopting the apparent meaning of narratives and avoiding interpretations
» Depending on revelation in interpreting religious affairs
» Religious knowledge's superiority over worldly knowledge.[22]

Khomeini took advantage of the political instability witnessed by Iran in various periods of its monarchial rule in the 20th century. As well as the reign of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and the citizens' feelings of anger towards his unjust policies,[23] which resulted in the regime isolating itself from the people. He promised that Iranians will see prosperity, justice, and freedom and that the government will not be isolated from the people.

Khomeini founded the theory of Velayat-e Faqih on the basis of some kind of absolute rule. And he got rid of his opponents from the beginning including jurists who advocated the principle of Shura and rejected the rule of the Supreme Leader. He sought to establish legal and constitutional legitimacy through his supporters who controlled the elected council to draft the country's constitution in 1979. He established his authority through the constitution that gave him power over all apparatuses. Although there was an elected authority such as the head of state and the Shura Council in Iran, as well as parallel non-elected institutions, all of them were subordinate to him. He became the constitutional leader and constitutionally ran the institutions of the state.

Khomeini, as well as his successor Khamenei (who lacks the charisma of Khomeini but has inherited a powerful position in Iran) established religious and political legitimacy through the fact that the Supreme Leader is the one who is connected to the infallible imam.[24] Therefore he works under his directives and the people must obey him. He also established his authority through the Iranian Revolutionary Guards (IRG), that is directly linked to him. The IRG performs tasks such as maintaining internal security and protecting the revolution from external threats or opponents. The strength of the IRGC lies not only in its 120,000 members, its high level of weapons or in its budget, which exceeds the one of the Iranian army, but it lies in its control of social and economic institutions. A specialist describes the IRGC as extending into all spheres of Iranian society, protecting the revolution, implementing its plans, and displaying loyalty only to the Supreme Leader of the "Islamic Revolution."[25]

The strength of the IRGC and its influence on political life in Iran is seen through its branch of the Basij, the mobilized force of civilian volunteers, who reach 2,500 battalions of 300 each with a total of 750,000. Its role was prominent in facing the Green Movement that broke out in Iran in 2009, which spread in schools, universities, public and private institutions in many areas of the state and brackets

of society.[26] This led to political repression. Any opposition representing a kind of counterrevolution, was branded as a stooge, whereas the ruling leadership, especially the Supreme Leader, were represented as the ones protecting, the state from its enemies home and abroad.

After the success of the revolution in 1979, the ruling leadership of Iran succeeded in establishing a political system based on the principle of, Vali-e Faqih, and granting it constitutional and legal legitimacy through the Iranian constitution and its amendments, as well as through the institutions of the state. At the same time, the regime worked to demonstrate the democracy of the political system through elected institutions –even if they were not effective – along with forming a pastoral and supportive political culture that relied on state institutions to run their affairs. At the same time, the regime instilled the fear of oppression and violence by institutions such as the IRG and other security services that directly follow the Supreme Leader as its Commander-in-Chief, while employing institutions such as religious schools, social and cultural institutions, Marja'yyas and clerics of the seminary in Qom to disseminate the values of the revolution. At the same time, the regime worked to weaken political organizations and civil society institutions. It granted them the opportunity to work only within the system. This is evident in the pseudo rotation of power and political competition between the so-called reformists and conservatives in Iran. This proved not to reflect in a shift in public policies when taking over by either of the two groups because of the domination and power of the Supreme Leader.

The developments and the roots of demonstrations in Iran

Demonstrations broke out in Iran on December 28, 2017, and spread from Mashhad and Kermanshah and extended to more than 34 cities, including Tehran. The youth were its main leaders. There were no political leaderships or parties involved as we saw with the Green Demonstrations in 2009. The slogan raised at the Green demonstrations was 'Where is my vote'.

The regime suppressed the demonstrations through the Revolutionary Guards, and the most important figures of the reformist movement such as Mir Hussein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, were arrested in the aftermath of the protests.[27] The protests broke out mainly due to the rigging of the presidential election in favor of Ahmadinejad. There were no political movements or civil society organizations that stood behind the 2017 demonstrations, despite reports that Ahmadinejad or some elements of the regime were behind them, but the evidence points to other dimensions when analyzing their root causes.

We can say that a rejection of failed government policies at home and abroad were the main catalysts behind the recent demonstrations, which can be summed up as follows:

» **Rising prices:** the rise in price of commodities in general, such as eggs and chickens, after the government had executed millions of chickens for bird flu.[28] Also, the government had signaled a cut in the subsidy budget.

» **High inflation:** inflation reached 8%, as the nuclear agreement and the lifting of economic sanctions did not lead to a decline in inflation at the required pace, which aggravated public suffering. Therefore, some called the protests "the demonstrations of the hungry,"[29] which made the US President Donald Trump say in one of his tweets, these demonstrators were demanding food. According to data 40 million of the 80 million Iranians live below the poverty line.

» **Unemployment:** The unemployment rate reached 12.4% in 2017, an increase of 1.4% over the previous year, according to the Iranian Statistics Center, because of weak economic policies, a poor economic structure which depends on oil, extractive industries and tourism.[30] Also, economic activities have not been developed to accommodate the number of young people entering the labor market.

» **Corruption and mismanagement**: President Rouhani himself warned of the dangers of graft,[31] and the consequences of political leaders' protecting corrupt figures, who are not being held accountable.

» **Discontent against the government**: It increased after government austerity. This discontent was demonstrated by the slogans raised by the demonstrators against President Rouhani, such as "Death to Rouhani" and "Death to the dictator," as well as against the Supreme Leader Khamenei, the government and the institutions of the state.

» **Foreign policy:** The slogans of the protesters showed their opposition to the intervention in Syria and the support of Tehran to Hezbollah and Hamas. The demonstrators raised slogans like "neither Syria nor Gaza, nor Lebanon, I redeem Iran with my life". They expressed their anger that their government is focusing its efforts and funds on regional issues and not to improve internal conditions.

Despite a peaceful start to the demonstrations, there were attacks on the offices and centers of the IRG, and several police stations in different areas. Thousands of demonstrators were arrested, according to some estimates, 3,700 citizens, and 21 Iranians died.[32] The total number of deaths at the end of the protests was 25.

Indications of the protests and the legitimacy of the political system in Iran

The position of some state institutions in Iran showed understanding towards demonstrators. President Rouhani, as well as the Supreme Leader admitted to this fact in some of his speeches, and he stressed the need to commit to peacefulness and unity to preserve the revolution and its gains. Accusations were leveled at the United States and Israel for being behind the demonstrations and that the demonstrations were a foreign plot. Some sources said that President Rouhani and the reformists may have been behind these demonstrations. Others suggested

conservative forces such as Ahmadinejad and his supporters may have been behind the protests to embarrass President Rouhani and his government to prove its failure.

There was news about the arrest of Ahmadinejad, although from analyzing and investigating the demonstrations there are no indications that Ahmadinejad and his supporters were involved in stirring up the demonstrators. The principal perception is that these demonstrations were spontaneous in reaction to government policies, austerity, corruption in government institutions and the misappropriation of government spending, particularly with regard to spending on military adventures in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Hezbollah in Lebanon. As well as generous spending on the IRG, religious schools and scientific seminaries while giving little support to the people. The Iranian Prosecutor General of the Revolutionary and General Courts announced the release of 440 citizens arrested after the unrest.[33] It was rumored that most detainees were released as the government appreciated their position and the spontaneous nature of the demonstrations.

The demonstrations indicated several important signs regarding the political culture and the legitimacy of the Iranian political system, including:

» Fundamental changes in the political culture among the young. They want to live well which is being denied to them because of austerity and Shiite asceticism. Also, because of Iran's global blockade, because of its political positions towards its neighbors, and its nuclear program. Even though Iran signed the nuclear agreement, the livelihood of Iranians has not improved.

» Criticizing the nature of the Iranian political system, which produces a state of dominance. The Supreme Leader is directly responsible for Iranian policies, and he cannot be held accountable.

» The importance of modern means of communication, and the intensive use of technology by Iranians We find 20 million Iranians use the Telegram application, and 8 million use Facebook. Iranians are ranked 12th globally when it comes to the use of Instagram.[34] Iranians have had a great ability to circumvent the government's ban on applications or internet sites, forcing the government to completely block them during the demonstrations.[35]

» The emergence of a new political culture among Iranians who comprehend that there is no difference between the positions and policies of the reformists and conservatives considering the nature of the current political system in which the Supreme Leader controls the institutions and policy making. Also, the Supreme Leader controls soft tools for rallying support such as scientific and religious seminaries, as well as solid security institutions such as the IRG.

» The younger generation rejects the IRG grip on state apparatuses and institutions. Some studies have shown that 60% of the Shura Council members

have a military background.[36] It is a tool for securing the system and guaranteeing its direct subordination to the Supreme Leader in Iran. The IRG has become a subject of criticism with young people seeking to apply the principles and foundations of good governance to hold all institutions accountable and to give the public a greater role in policymaking.[37] The young people believe that this will lead to the public being heard, when there is state interaction with their demands.[38] Also, it will boost the state's focus on development.[39] This confirms an important dimension of legitimacy that transcends the institutional and constitutional parameters and instead focuses on policy,[40] reducing corruption and not allowing certain elites and special interests to control the institutions and policies of the state.[41] This was clear in the political culture of the Iranian youth through the events of December 2017 and January 2018. As the disapproval of corruption, poor institutions, and policies were the main demands of the younger generation.

» Despite the tactics used by the ruling regime, such as the ordering of supporters to stage demonstrations to show support of the regime, raising religious slogans, supporting Jerusalem and condemning America and Israel,[42] the regime also resorted to using force against demonstrations and threatening to use it excessively. Also, it exploited the lack of organization and the absence of a political leadership, which facilitated the government's mission to disperse and end the demonstrations. The demonstrations showed the high level of dissatisfaction and the absence of legitimacy for the Iranian political system among the young people. The recruitment of loyalists or the use of force does not create legitimacy but reflects the crisis of illegitimacy and potential confrontation between the sons of the nation. This heralds, the possibility of renewing the demonstrations in the future. They may turn more violent, widen, have more specific demands, and a clear strategy for becoming stronger.

» The Iranian Shura Council is keen to carry out secret hearings with leaders of the security services and the Revolutionary Guards to investigate the extensive nature of the demonstrations and the real reasons behind them. This reflects its understanding that security confrontation is not sufficient to overcome such demonstrations.

» The statement by Khamenei about reducing the involvement of the Revolutionary Guards in the economy after it had taken control of nearly one third of the country's economy,[43] reflects the regime's recognition of the negative effects of such interference on state policies. This was in reply to President Rouhani's vision about the importance of market policies in growth, improving economic performance and overcoming unemployment.

» The demonstrations reflected a crisis in the political culture in Iran, which extended to legitimacy, especially of the ruling elite. This dilemma developed between the supreme leader, clerics and the conservatives on one side, and the

reformists and pragmatic politicians on the other side. This pushed the IRGC to warn of opposition to the policies of Khamenei. It threatened those seeking change in February 2018. The IRGC remarks came in response to comments by Ahmadinejad and President Rouhani who called for meeting the demands of the protesters to achieve political stability and to end the standoff between the wings of the regime. The IRG went on to call for not ignoring public anger on the 39[th]anniversary since the toppling of the Shah who paid no heed to the demands of citizens nor the voices of reformists, pundits and advisers.[44] There was a call for invoking an article in the Iranian constitution regarding holding a referendum to end the crisis.[45] There is a disparity in the political culture of the youth and that of the ruling elite. The youth are not convinced with the system of Velayat-e Faqih as clerics are not to be called to account. They have full control over the political system through the constitution and state institution. They are discontented when it comes to political life and all sectors in Iran. These gaps, especially the latter, reflect an important manifestation of the legitimacy crisis disclosed by the recent protests.

The demonstrators exposed the failure of the intermediary institutions that should link them to state institutions, such as parties and civil society organizations. These organizations have become confined to the ideology and rules of the regime. In case they speak up, they will be accused of treason. Therefore, the Iranian youth have become cognizant of the fact that these institutions have been seized by the regime willingly or unwillingly. There is no room for any religious or social institution but for those supporting the regime and working to consolidate its grip on the country. This situation led these institutions not to partake in the protests. It reflects a crisis facing the regime, as representation is closed. This opens the door for a new wave of protests to break out at any time in the future.

Conclusion

The Iranian protests in December 2017 and January 2018 indicated that the political system, not only the leadership, suffers from a legitimacy crisis. It is rejected by a big portion of the Iranian people, especially the youth, who are no longer able to stomach the idea of exporting the revolution and whitewashing the internal crises through external interventions. While claiming that the Iranian state and people are threatened by imperial powers that stand against its religious mission which is aimed to spread justice and help the oppressed.

The political culture of Iranian youth is inclined to hold the supreme leader and the regime accountable for the worsening political, economic, social and cultural situation and the demonization of Iran and Iranians abroad due to its involvement in regional conflicts. This no doubt strips the regimes leaders, the political system and its institutions, especially the IRGC of legitimacy. This was evident in the

dispute between the wings of the regime. The protests indicated that the political culture of the Iranian youth has become more participatory, and this requires developing the political system to be on par with this new culture.

The political system requires new rules for interaction, as well as redefining the role of its institutions, to help in meeting domestic demands for political and economic reforms. This is important in particular in light of the IRG's political dominance, as well as its dominance over security. The IRG is expected to limit its economic presence to allow national and foreign investment which is feared by Iranian leaders themselves, who are cautious given the fear of foreign domination over the Iranian economy. The economic challenges are the most prominent factors here, whether they are linked to the continuation of economic sanctions or the spread of corruption in Iran. The extent to which the Iranian regime can deal with these challenges, will determine its political legitimacy and absorb the demands of protesters in the future.

The crisis between the reformist and conservative political elites is widening, yet the external threat will lead to consensus between them, so that the conservatives will make some concessions to meet domestic demands. While, the reformists will agree with withdrawing their demands to counter external threats to the Iranian regime.

The demonstrations are expected to be repeated from time to time, but there are factors that limit the likelihood of success in changing the regime or its main orientations, such as the lack of organizational capacity, the regimes capacity to use counter-demonstrations, violence by the regime, and the weakness of the United Nations. This will weaken the support given to future protests, as there are more important issues for super powers in the region, especially in Iran and Syria. This in addition to the growth of a clear Russian-Iranian-Turkish axis that will support the Iranian regime.

There is no doubt that protesters threatened with kidnap or arrest, allegations of being traitors and stooges, and the warning of the IRGC that it would use force undoubtedly led protesters to retreat. The protests ceased and public support dwindled. This led to pretense stability, which does not support the goal of legitimacy nor does it meet the aspirations of the new generation.

In the end, the stubbornness of the Iranian regime especially the Supreme Leader, and the IRGC will results in protests breaking out again. They may be bigger and more violent. Therefore, the leaders of the regime should realize the youth have become more open to the world and they have become more aware of their role in political life. They have become less trusting in religious interpretations employed by the Supreme Leader to tighten his grip on the political system.

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