

Is Revolution Brewing in Iran?

Written by Ramesh Sepehrrad

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RAMESH SEPEHRRAD, MAY 21 2018

On December 28, 2017, a local protest over fast-rising prices of basic food staples in the northeastern holy city of Mashad quickly turned into a massive uprising, with people shouting, “Down with the dictator”. In a matter of hours, the protest spread to nearby towns like wildfire in a dry forest on a windy day. Far from being a spontaneous and aimless rebellion of the poor or the hungry, where one would find stores and shops raided and looted, the uprising increasingly resembled a well-coordinated movement in terms of its goals, slogans and tactics – the genesis of a revolution. Astonishingly for an uprising which lasted almost 14 days, notwithstanding the regime’s effort to demonize the protesters by describing them as thugs and looters, there were no reports of looting or damaged shops.

Analyzing the data at hand, several recognizable patterns are noticeable. The protesters are mainly from the lower middle class who mostly have fallen below the poverty line in recent years. The active presence of indignant youth and women, rising above their own grievances and in unity with the poor and hungry, is also very noticeable. On January 3, 2008, Hossein Zolfghari, Iran’s Deputy Interior Minister, said: “The average age of more than 90% of detainees is under 25 years.”[1] The influence of opposition political forces who have promoted a campaign of greater public awareness and justice for the 1988 massacre of political prisoners, appearing in geographically-diverse locations, also stands out.[2]

This uprising was unprecedented in modern post-revolutionary Iran. The intensity, the speed, the breadth, the slogans targeting the entire regime – with all factions included, representing most socio-economic classes – caught the Islamic Republic by surprise. Over the course of 14 days, protests spread across Iran. Within five days, the Iranian regime was faced with concurrent protests in 65 cities, as shown in Figure 1.

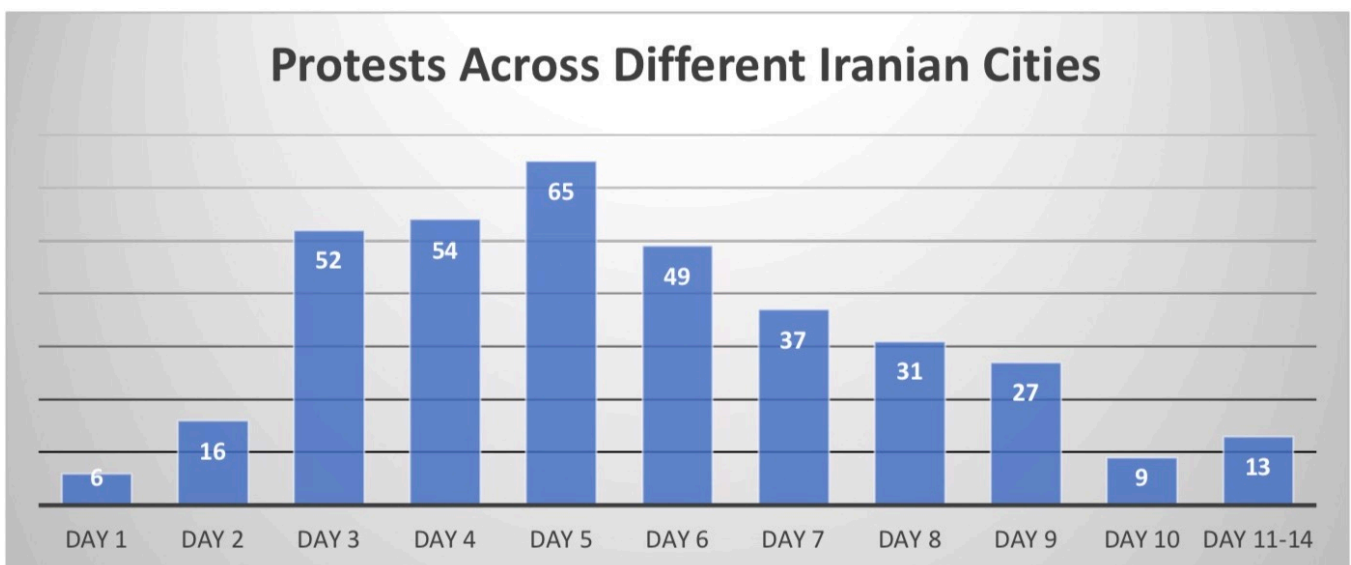


Figure 1. Daily protests count across Iranian cities over the course of two weeks

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Using mobile devices and popular social media platforms like Telegram, the protesters also participated in active data collection and information sharing across 140 cities, and with the outside world. These extraordinary datasets are instrumental for predicting the future of political upheavals in Iran. The datasets enable us to analyze the nature and message of this uprising. The data show the emergence of a new model through an intermeshing of various collective actions of diverse groups in different locations in Iran.

Using narrative analysis, we can see how the Iranian people are engaged in a revolutionary situation. By understanding their message and by recognizing the new model, the change agents and their direction, the signs of the forthcoming revolution in Iran can be detected. The data-driven analysis also offers a distinct difference with previous uprisings because it discloses:

1. The protesters, unlike 2009, had no intention of negotiating with the state. Their methods, targeted political actions, and clear message in their slogans targeted the entire regime and all its factions.
2. This was truly a nationwide movement and protesters were very organized and coordinated across the country, not just in Tehran or few major cities.
3. The use of social media allowed the protesters to shift the fear of retaliation from the public to the regime, particularly to the rank and file of its suppressive forces locally and nationally. Social media has enabled the protesters to bypass the regime's tight censorship controls.
4. The organic emergence of a solidarity movement amongst the poor, women and youth, the authentic political forces, labor movement, ethnic groups, and social classes, has unleashed an historically familiar revolutionary sentiment within Iranian society.

One can conclude that the resistance movement expressed at different times against the Islamic Republic over the last four decades is now morphing to a revolutionary movement. Iranians' everyday forms of resistance against the regime's misogyny, violence, corruption, embezzlement, fraudulent elections, coercion, blackmail, nepotism, and mafia-style governance have now converged in a movement indicating no further tolerance for the dictatorship.

As the world watched the video clips captured and circulated by local citizens online, the political and ideological unraveling of the ruling regime became more apparent. In the first two days, the two main factions blamed one another. With the emergence and rapid spread of slogans challenging both factions, the entire regime was in fear. Once the element of surprise dissipated, the do-or-die type of mobilization of security forces led to killings in the streets and the arrests of thousands. Yet, the uprising did not disintegrate; instead the protesters changed tactics and transitioned from nationwide protests to frequent daily acts of defiance scattered across many towns and cities. On January 24, 2018, one of the senior pundits of the so-called "reformist" faction admitted that these protests will come in waves and as they recede, "they will come back stronger."^[3]

Daily protests have continued in Iran, and protesters are becoming more savvy and sophisticated in their tactics and methods. For example, since late January 2018, protesters are utilizing a secure crowdsourcing tool to inform each other of planned protests, mobilization efforts, and the whereabouts of the security forces, and they capture videos to inform the outside world. ^[4]

Diversely Situated Groups in Different Locations

Since 1979, Iran has experienced many impressive occurrences of popular uprisings and protests. According to the Wall Street Journal, "Every decade the Islamist regime has been in power, an uprising has cost it an element of its legitimacy."^[5] But at no time has Iran seen such widespread, coordinated mobilization or such unified messaging and slogans across 140 different cities.

Unlike the 2009 protests, one of the most noticeable characteristics of the recent uprising was its vast geographical distribution. As captured in Table 1, using the data collected from December-January, the uprising spread across all 31 provinces in Iran.^[6] While protests took place in 29 major metropolitan or large cities, the majority of them took place in small towns or cities. This raises a key difference with the 2009 uprising, which was mostly concentrated in the largest cities including Tehran.

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The protests also included representation of Iran's diverse and rich ethnic groups: Turks, Kurds, Turkmen, Arab, Taleshi, Baluch, Lor, Bakhtiari, and Ghashghai. The data also reveal a strong correlation between cities with mass graves of the victims' of the 1988 massacre of political prisoners, and sites of the uprising.

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	Province	City / town	Count
1	Alborz	Karaj, Hashtgerd, Gohardasht	3
2	Ardebil	Ardebil	1
3	Bushehr	Bushehr	1
4	Chaharmahal va Bakhtiari	ShahreKord, Hafshjan, Lordegan, Farsan	4
5	East Azarbaijan	Tabriz, Meeyaneh, Khalaj	3
6	Esfahan	Esfahan, Kashan, Shahinshahr, Joy Abad, Homayoonshahr, Qahderijan, Najaf Abad, ShahrReza, Golpayegan, Zarinshar, Mobarakeh, Kaharsynk, Fooladshahr, Frieden, Golshahr, Ghortan, Dizicheh	17
7	Fars	Shiraz, Noorabad Mamasani, Jahroom, Hajiabad, Kazeroon	5
8	Gilan	Rasht, Hajiabad, Bandar Anzali, Lushan, Astaneh Ashrafieh, Roodbar	6
9	Golestan	Gorgan, Azad Shahr, Kordkoy, Gonbad Kavoods	4
10	Hamedan	Hamedan, Malayer, Nahavand, Lavashan, Asadabad, Tuyserkan	6
11	Hormozgan	Bandar Abas, Behdasht, Qeshm	3
12	Ilam	Ilam, Dehloran	2
13	Kerman	Kerman, Jiroft, Roodbar, Yazdanshahr	4
14	Kermanshah	Kermanshah, Mahidasht, Gilan-e Gharb, Kangavar, Islam Abaad Gharb, Sar-e Pol -e Zahab	6
15	Khorasan Razavi	Mashhad, Neyshabur, Kashmar, Ghochan, Sabzevar, Torbat e Heydarieh, Torbat-e Jam	7
16	Khuzestan	Ahvaz, Dezful, Izeh, Abadan, Shooshtar, Shadegan, Masjed Soleiman, Bandar Mahshahr, Behbahan, Sarband, Hamideyeh	11
17	Kohkiluyeh & Boyer Ahmad	Yasuj, Dehdasht	2
18	Kurdistan	Sanandaj, Saghez, Baneh, Marivan, Ziviyeh, Ghoreh, Kamyaran	7
19	Lorestan	Khorram Abad, Dorud, Boroujerd, Aligudarz, Nurabad	5
20	Markazi	Arak, Delijan, Saveh, Khomeyn	4
21	Mazandaran	Sari, Nowshahr, Ghaemshahr, Amol, Tonekabon (Shahsavari), Babool, Behshahr, Ramsar	8
22	North Khorasan	Bojnord	1
23	Qazvin	Qazvin, Takestan	2
24	Qom	Qom, Zanbilabad	2
25	Semnan	Semnan, Shahrood	2
26	Sistan & Baluchestan	Zahedan, Char Bahar	2
27	Southern Khorasan	Birjand	1
28	Tehran	Tehran, Shahriyar, Ghods, Mallard, Pakdasht, Islamshahr, Robot Karim, Nasimshahr, Varamin, Gharchak, ShahreRay, Damavand, Shemiran	13
29	West Azarbaijan	Oromieh, Khoy, Bukan, Piranshahr	4
30	Yazd	Yazd	1
31	Zanjan	Zanjan, Khoramdareh, Abhar	3
		Total Number of cities	140

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Table 1. Province, towns and cities protesting during the Dec-Jan timelines

According to a US-based Iranian sociologist, Hossein Ghazian, two major factors contributed to the high incidence of protests in the small cities. In his view, one “is related to use of social media and messaging platforms on mobile devices, in particular Telegram” and the other is “how the regime applies its censorship system.” Ghazian believes the regime’s focus for censorship and jamming of satellites is “concentrated in major cities” rather than smaller towns. This has allowed the protesters in “smaller towns to have easier access to satellite TV” and to mobilize without the regime’s censorship and tight control.[7]

Another Iranian scholar, Ali Haji-Ghasemi of Södertörn University in Sweden, believes the “uneven distribution of wealth and the concentration of capital and resources” in major metropolitan cities vs. smaller cities in recent decades contributed to the high occurrence of protests in the smaller cities. He notes that “lower middle class and the poor make up most of the population in the smaller cities.”[8]

While both views are correct, the concentrated and active presence of the regime’s most disciplined security forces are found in major metropolitan cities and not the smaller cities. The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp (IRGC) has the greatest presence in large cities. This gap created an important opportunity for protests and gave them the upper hand during the uprising. On January 19, 2018, Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei reluctantly acknowledged the effectiveness of the protesters’ strategy and said, “they were working on this plan for months with an intention to start from the small cities until they reach the capital.”[9] Deputy commander of the IRGC’s political wing, Rasoul Sanai Rad, added, “Their plan was to create chaos and then bring it to the capital. They knew because of the past incidents in the large cities, the experience and expertise of our security and defense forces in confronting the rioters would stop them. But in smaller cities, people are highly subject to instigation and the security forces do not have much presence there.”[10]

Emergence of a New Model

Over the last two years, there has been a steady stream of protests and expressions of grievances throughout the country. The uprising that began on December 28th has, however, a different political undertone, and it is not just an extension of routine protests seen in the past. The demographic makeup of these protesters speaks to a new truth. It carries a characteristic of deeper political rejection that has transcended multiple generations over the last four decades because of:

1. The tension between the regime’s control of all social and political affairs and the society’s inherent desire for greater individual freedoms, freedom of the press and freedom of association. Iran’s overall freedom score based on political rights and civil liberties is 17 out of a possible 100.[11] According to Amnesty International, Iran currently is unsurpassed with 51% of the world’s executions.[12]
2. The sharp increase in access to information and heightened social awareness, especially amongst educated youth and women. This has created an irredeemable and escalating conflict between the regime and the people. Over 48 million Iranians have mobile devices with secure access through various mechanisms, despite the regime’s continuous efforts to filter and block their access. Robust online discussions, information sharing, and contacts with exiled opposition groups and political figures have given the Iranian people an opportunity to bypass the fake news produced by the regime. Seeking truth and justice has elevated public awareness, and people now hold the Iranian regime accountable for the 1988 massacre of the political prisoners. Another example is the public response to political prisoners when their messages spread from one Telegram channel to the next. The news about their collective hunger strikes, and sit-ins by the families in front of the prisons, combined with worldwide calls for their defense, continue to motivate protests across the country.[13]
3. The ideological tensions between the regime’s fundamentalist worldview and conduct, and the determined rejection of it by a majority in society. The tension has grown over the years, and shows that the regime is inherently irreformable. Recently, Shirin Ebadi, Iran’s Nobel Peace Prize-winning human rights lawyer, acknowledged that Iranians are pushing for regime change because “reform is useless.”[14]

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4. The overtly biased distribution and access to wealth and economic opportunity between those within the regime and Iranian society at large. Over the years there have been growing reports, factional accusations and counter-accusations, and legal cases, all exposing the astronomical financial corruption of the most senior officials and their relatives. Systemic corruption by the ruling regime has been reflected in the report by Transparency International, where Iran is ranked 131 among 178 countries.[15] Unemployment and underemployment among youth and college graduates have reached an all-time high. According to the regime's official report, 35% of educated youths are unemployed. Educated women, with a rate of 52% unemployment, are the prime victims in Iran.[16]
5. The rise of poverty in Iran. According to the research center serving the Iranian parliament, the poverty line for urban households is \$675 per month, which means that 40% of the population is below the poverty line.[17] This ratio reaches 60-70% in smaller towns and cities.[18]
6. The regime's utter disregard for the housing crisis, wherein people are increasingly found living in places not meant for human habitation. The rise of shanty towns is most noticeable in the smaller cities and towns where a growing population is living in uninhabitable settlements on the peripheries of these cities. People in these areas are deprived of the most basic services. Based on the regime's own estimate, 25% of Iran's population is currently a victim of this crisis.[19]
7. The environmental crisis instigated by the regime, which has reached an unprecedented level in magnitude, pace, and severity, leading to further conflict between the people and the regime. According to Iran Human Rights Monitor, ongoing systematic mismanagement will lead to the drying out of 90% of Iran's wetlands, with dire impacts on the people's livelihood and health. For example, once Urmia Lake "completely dries out and is destroyed, around 14 provinces would be destroyed." [20] Mismanagement of water resources has led to a crisis for the farmers in the province of Esfahan, and that continues to be an irreconcilable point of conflict between the public and the regime. [21]

In the past, every one of the above grievances has led to routine protests, leaving some room for negotiation between the state and public. In this uprising and for the first time, all of these grievances converged in nation-wide collective action across 140 cities, with a clear direction and political message, forming an organic solidarity movement.

Collective Actions

The courageous acts and collective actions in these protests are very different than in previous uprisings. People conveyed a different and distinct political message through their protests acts and slogans. From day one, they had a specific course of action, direction, purposeful targets, and coordinated mobilization effort across the entire country. In many video clips, the active role of women in guiding and organizing the protests is noticeable. In one video, a woman surrounded by a group of security forces, repeatedly and defiantly shouts "Death to Khamenei." Qassim Abdullah, Chief Justice of Central Province, acknowledged the diversity of age amongst the protesters and recognized that, "High school students or younger individuals in Arak gatherings were among the protesters. Some of them even damaged public and state properties."¹

Purposeful collective action targeted the regime's apparatus in several key areas such as: local religious leaders and centers, security forces and personnel, government-controlled financial institutions and banks, judicial branches, and government offices. In several video clips captured and circulated by the protesters, the most energizing action by the crowd was the pulling down and the burning of the Supreme Leader's image, even in major city centers. Acts such as these have continued to date.

According to sample data in Table 2, in response to the use of brute and inhumane force by the state security units, protesters also engaged in destroying the security forces' vehicles. They used Molotov cocktails to attack governmental buildings, judicial and security centers. There were several attacks on bases of the notorious paramilitary Bassij. Multiple attacks also took place against state-controlled banks, broadcasting facilities and IRGC-owned telecommunications infrastructure. More explicitly:

1. The direct attacks on clerical training centers and offices of Friday Prayer Leaders, who are the most powerful local political and religious representatives of Khamenei, carry a direct and ominous message for

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the regime. Ayatollah Ghiyathoddin Teh-Mohammadi, Friday Prayer Leader of the western city of Hamedan, acknowledged for the first time, that “about 60 offices of the Friday Prayer Leader were attacked during the riots and this shows the enemy is angry.”[22] Ghorbanali Dorri-Najafabadi, former head of the Ministry of Intelligence and Security during Mohammad Khatami’s presidency and the current Friday Prayer Leader in Arak, explained, “My residence was attacked during the unrest while I was home. Those who participated in the recent unrest were very young, although they covered their faces, I could tell they were under 30 and even less than 18 years old.”[23] Shortly thereafter, Ahmad Khatami, the Friday Prayer Leader in Tehran, admitted: “The recent unrest targeted our religion, because 20 clerical seminaries came under attack.” [24] Targeted attacks by the youth on such figures, their residences, offices and religious centers are an indication of the regime’s moral and religious decay. They affirm the loss of legitimacy of the Islamic Republic at home and abroad.

2. The attacks on the regime’s security forces and personnel have gotten little or no mention by the official sources. Yet, the data indicate that protesters intentionally targeted the Bassiji centers and regime’s security forces because of their infamous repressive practices against the public. One of the most serious attacks took place in city of Tuyserkan (in the western province of Hamedan) during which the youth attempted to take over a prison building. There were other acts such as setting fire to regime security vehicles and motorcycles, and overturning hundreds of vehicles belonging to anti-riot forces as they entered the scene to confront the protesters. On March 11, 2018, Rouhani’s Interior Minister, Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli, confirmed the widespread attacks by the protesters and said: “Within a few of nights the protests were spread to 100 cities and in 42 cities we had active clashes with the protesters...and about 900 security forces were injured and wounded.”[25]
3. The attacks on the banks and financial institutions were also politically symbolic. In Iran, 50% of private and public banks are owned by the Supreme Leader, the IRGC, paramilitary forces such as the Basijis, religious foundations. On January 3rd, 2018, Reza Seraj, a security expert, revealed that “85 bank branches in the first three days of protests have been attacked.”[26] These powerful financial institutions also maintain predatory practices and significant influence over other banks, which has led to explosive public resentment and deep mistrust. In recent years, state-sponsored Ponzi schemes have led to extremely high losses of uninsured personal deposits representing life-long savings for many citizens in these financial institutions. In 2017, there were 965 protest acts by these victims, who are pressing the regime to take action. Instead, the regime has acknowledged the money “is gone and they should not expect the state to pay for their loss.”[27]
4. As shown in the sample data in Table 2, the protesters targeted key centers of government and institutions engaged in repressive practices. For example, the courts and judiciary, who have been the supreme leader’s instruments to repress the public, were targets for the protesters. Irantel and IranCell, companies owned by the IRGC that conduct intense surveillance on the public, were also targeted by the protesters.

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No	The purpose of the attack on protesters	Date	City
1	Set fire to Disputes Council (related to the Judiciary)	Dec. 30, 2017	Gohardasht of karaj
2	Attack on the Governors building	Dec. 30, 2017	Dorood
3	Attacking a Security Forces station	Dec. 30, 2017	Dorood
4	Attack on the government center	Dec. 30, 2017	Dorood
5	Set fire to the governors building	Dec.30, 2017	Khorramabad
6	Set fire to the governors building	Dec 31, 2017	Tuyserkhan
7	Attack on the prison building	Dec 31, 2017	Tuyserkhan
8	Attack on a Security Forces kiosk	Dec 31, 2017	Takistan
9	Seizure of the IRGC's headquarters, Brigade104, and setting it on fire	Dec 31, 2017	Shahin Shahr
10	Attack on City Hall	Dec 31, 2017	Shahin Shahr
11	Set fire to a Security Forces trailer	Dec.31, 2017	Khoramdarah
12	Set fire to a Security Forces kiosk	Jan 1, 2018	Nourabad Delfan
13	Seizure of courts building and burning court cases and official portraits of Khamenei and Khomeini	Jan 1, 2018	Karaj
14	Set fire to the courts building	Jan 2, 2018	Kahan
15	Armed attack on the governors building	Jan 2, 2018	Lenjan
16	Destruction of broadcasting towers belonging to State run TV and Radio	Jan 3, 2018	Khorramabad
17	Set fire to two cell towers and equipment belonging to IRGC's RightTel and Iran Cell company and	Jan. 3, 2018	Dizi-che (Esfahan)
18	Use of sound grenade against the security forces	Jan 4, 2018	Yaft Abad
19	Breaking into governors building	Jan 5, 2018	Arak
20	Set fire to a Basiji center	Jan 5, 2018	Ahvaz
21	Use of Molotov Cocktail against a Basiji center	Jan 8, 2018	Mobarake
22	Set fire to a 'Hemat' Basiji Center	Jan 10, 2018	Tehran

Table 2. Sample set of actions taken by protesters against the regime

Analysis of Protest Slogans

Focusing on 'content' and 'meaning' of the slogans of the protesters, the overall thematic message carries several important implications for the Iranian regime. Narrative analysis shows:

1. More than 65% of the slogans, captured in Table 3, calling for an end to the regime. The most popular slogan that continues to be used to date is "Death to the Dictator," which inherently shows that the public is not seeking to negotiate with the regime. More explicit slogans targeted both Khamenei and Rouhani, indicating a strong popular sentiment and desire to overthrow the entire regime. In previous protests, the

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factional infighting of the regime overpowered the deeper message and sentiment favoring an end to the regime. This time, the slogans clearly rejected all factions, including the reformers. In fact, in the first few days of the protests, the “reformist” faction quickly moved to distance itself from the protesters. Remarkably, there was no mention – not even in one instance – of support for Mir Hussein Mousavi or Mehdi Karoubi, the de-facto leaders of the 2009 uprising but widely viewed as an extension of the ruling regime. Nor was there a call for an end to their house-arrest. By all indications, such as the popularity of slogans “Reformists, Hardliners! your game is now over” and “Death to Rouhani,” it appears that the revolutionary nature of this uprising has put an end to the three-decade long myth of reform in Iran. Regime analysts have even concluded that the real loser in the recent uprising in Iran was the “reformist” faction which has now “lost much of their credibility among the youth and low-income layers.”[28]

2. Denunciation of the regime’s deceptive and depraved exploitation of Islam, its corruption, and mafia-style governance handled through the IRGC inside and outside of Iran.
3. Denunciation of the regime’s adventurist and very costly foreign policy, hegemonic goals, and relations with countries like Russia, the Syrian dictator and non-state entities such as Lebanon’s Hezbollah and Yemen’s Houthis.
4. Continuation of struggle and resistance until the establishment of a republic for the people and by the people. “Independence, Freedom, the Iranian Republic” was one of the most popular messages during the uprising. Some argue the wording of this slogan is a deliberate revival of the 1979 popular slogan “Independence, Freedom, the Islamic Republic” in order to manifest the long-denied desire for a secular republic. In some areas isolated slogans were observed in support of the Shah’s regime, which did not become widespread but generated the instantaneous counter-slogan “we don’t have a reverse gear.” In a few locations, there were some left-leaning slogans such as “work, bread, freedom” or “liberty, equality, social justice,” but traction for these slogans was also limited.

Table 3. (Download here) quantitative and qualitative analysis of slogans during uprising.[29]

The Regime’s Internal Analysis of the Uprising

The Iranian regime perfectly understands the strategic and consequential implications of these slogans, which have shattered the regime’s deceptive claim of representing Islam and the oppressed. Ironically, some “reformist” pundits initially insisted that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the hardliners had intentionally allowed for the protests to carry on. According to Abbas Abdi, a prominent figure in the “reformist” camp, “In 1981, when the MeK (Mujahedin-e Khalq opposition organization) came in with such a level of organization and coordination, and even took up arms against the government and mobilized tens and thousands of their supporters across the country, they were quickly confronted....What happened this time? How can we witness this and not see a swift response?”[30]

Another talking head of the “reformist” camp, Saied Hajjarian, acknowledged that the recent uprising was more radical than anything the regime had seen in the past and added, “The student protesters of 1999 were crushed and beaten with significant injuries and death. In 2009, protesters were shot at ... but in the 2017-2018, the IRGC appeared weak. This means the more radical the protests, the less suppression.”[31]

Clearly, the recent uprising has forced the regime’s “reformists” to tip their hand in favor of prolonging the ruling tyranny and encourage even more suppression of the protesters. The fundamental flaw in this thinking is the suggestion that the regime did not use brutal measures to crush the protesters. According to Asghar Jahangir, head of Iran’s National Prisons Organization, close to 5,000 people were arrested during the uprising.[32] The IRGC killed at least 50 people during the street clashes and ensuing detentions. More than 14 protesters have been killed since then under torture.[33]

On the third day of the uprising, Ali Shamkhani, Secretary of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council, announced that the Mujahedin-e-Khalq (MeK) is “carrying the banner” and the “scenario” for this uprising.[34] As the protest reached 54 cities on its fourth day, in a very unusual and highly humiliating measure by the head of government of a supposedly top regional power, Iran’s President Hassan Rouhani called French President Emmanuel Macron to

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criticize the MeK's "presence in Paris" and complain about how they were "provoking and persuading people" to engage in protests. Given that Maryam Rajavi, the leading figure of Iran's democratic opposition, is based there, Rouhani called on Macron to "to take legal action" against her.[35]

Meanwhile, Rouhani's Spokesman, Mohammad Baqer Noubakht, told a press conference that the MeK "is not sitting idle. The situation is most desirable for them. They are networking and preparing for bigger incidents to come." [36]

While some analysts inside and outside of Iran have argued that linking the uprising to the MeK is a ploy by the regime to scare people off – given the regime's decades-long horrific and bloody campaign against the MeK's members and supporters – the political and strategic cost of such a ploy far outweighs any benefit. After all, the regime has claimed many times over the last four decades that the "terrorist grouplet" MeK had been "uprooted" and "diminished" in Iran and elsewhere. A simpler explanation is that it was a futile attempt at intimidation. Based on data collected from statements of top officials and partisans of all factions, despite its nearly four-decade-long crackdown and massive demonization campaign aiming to uproot the MeK physically and politically, the regime considers this organization its most formidable and threatening opposition. Rather than being a ploy, these references to the MeK are a painful admission.

On January 9th, Khamenei said the plan for the uprising "was in the works for months" by the MeK – the key member of, as he termed it, a "triangle of enemies," along with the United States and Saudi Arabia. Khamenei acknowledged that the MeK had "called for" the uprising.[37] On January 27th, the deputy commander of the IRGC's political wing, Rasoul Sanai Rad, also said, "the worst clashes took place in Tuyserkan" where the MeK was the "leader and instigator" of the protests there. He acknowledged that among those arrested in that city were "many middle-aged women who are known for their affiliation with the group" and "had led" the MeK's protests during the 1980's.[38]

Who Are the Change Agents in Iran?

The Iranian regime has ample reasons to fixate on the MeK because they know other groups lack the MeK's level of organizational skill, network, dedication, resources and willingness to risk their lives to defeat the repressive theocracy. But why just MeK?

In general, the Iranian opposition groups fall into roughly three categories: The Monarchists, who are mostly in favor of the Shah's son; the Marxist groups, some of which at times have cooperated with the regime; and the MeK, which is a component of a broad-based, democratic, anti-regime political coalition in exile, the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI).

Regarding the Monarchists, there are some who attribute the initiation of the uprising to them. They argue that people are weary of the reactionary and anti-nationalistic nature of the regime and wish to return to the previous regime. They often cite the slogan "Reza Shah, may your soul be in peace" that was recorded in the city of Mashhad on December 28, 2017. According to eyewitness reports and related video clips of that day, the chant erupted as protesters passed by the Gohar Shad Mosque, recalling when in 1935 Reza Shah's armed forces attacked the clergy, killing dozens and injuring hundreds there. While this was a short-lived chant which was countered with the slogan "we don't have a reverse gear" by other participants in the Mashhad protest, it was more of a symbolic acknowledgement of Reza Shah's campaign to diminish the mullahs, rather than a nationwide call for a return to the previous regime.

The fact is that significant number of pro-monarchists and supporters of the Shah left Iran during the 1979 revolution or soon thereafter. While there may be some supporters of the previous regime in Iran, the social, political and economic demographics of those who participated in the recent uprising do not align with the pro-monarchist sector of the society. Moreover, the Shah's heir, Reza Pahlavi, and the exiled monarchists have rejected the protester's attacks on the government-related facilities and buildings and the "internal violence." [39] Lastly, the Pahlavi family is considered as one of the richest royal families in the world, a fact which strikes the wrong cord with the suffering and deprived sectors of the society who participated heavily in the recent uprising. [40] Given all that, there is little or no evidence that the Monarchists possess the organizational capacity and the popular base to be the change agents in

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the course of the forthcoming revolution in Iran.

There are others, mostly in cyberspace, who claim that slogans such as “work, bread, freedom” represent the presence of the Marxist groups involved in the uprising. A leftist Iranian sociologist, Dr. Asef Bayat at the University of Illinois, disputes the active role of Marxist groups, and explains: “In general terms, leftists have mostly disappeared. This, by no mean, is comparable to the early days of the revolution, where there were tens of socialist groups and hundreds and thousands of their supporters in the streets.”[41] As evidenced by the slogans during the uprising, protesters called for the end of joblessness, economic injustice, unemployment and underemployment of youth and college graduates. While some of these grievances traditionally align with the socialist or Marxist groups, these organizations are mostly underrecognized or few and far between, which makes it hard to be counted as change agents in Iran’s emerging revolutionary environment.

As for the MeK, their effective role in the recent uprising can be fully observed and assessed through the Iranian regime’s reaction. With each passing day, the regime has become more and more alarmed about the level of coordination and mobilization, and the spread of galvanizing messages, by prominent leaders like Massoud Rajavi.

Massoud Rajavi, known as the leader of the Iranian Resistance has branded the roadmap to end the Iranian regime with his “1000-Ashraf” strategy.[42] Rajavi’s reference to “Ashraf” is related to the MeK’s long enduring headquarters in Camp Ashraf, Iraq. For the Iranian Resistance, it is the embodiment of a bastion of struggle for freedom and resistance against tyranny. His reference to “1000” related to the goal of forming a distributed Ashraf-like network of resistance hubs throughout Iran after the closure of Camp Ashraf. Since 2016, Rajavi has been calling for operationalizing the “1000-Ashraf” strategy as a necessary and practical way to empower the popular protests and defeat the ruling tyranny.

Maryam Rajavi, known as the international face of the Iranian Resistance, also promotes the “1000-Ashraf” strategy in all her dialogues with officials, policymakers, and experts in the US, Europe, and the Middle East. In July 2016, Mrs. Rajavi said, “Today, the question is not whether or not the Iranian regime will fall. The question is what are the ways to get there faster? Our answer is to operationalize the 1000-Ashraf units. That is, a thousand units of struggle against religious tyranny.”[43] By all indications, the uprising that began on December 28, 2017 can be viewed as a successful test of the MeK’s 1000-Ashraf strategy.

Conclusion

Given the evidence at hand, no one can disparage the uprising as just another routine protest which every now and then takes place in Iran. Its remarkable coordination of tactics and messaging across the country, its arduous preemptive discipline, and its undeniable and unified desire to overthrow the regime, are far different than previous protests. Indeed, those who participated in this uprising, through their collective efforts, clarity of message and mission, have emerged as a revolutionary movement. The “reformist” camp can no longer hijack and derail the popular movement for real change because the movement now is calling for a revolution and not a phantom reform.

In her famous book on State and Social Revolution, Theda Skocpol says, “the causes of revolutions could only be understood by looking at the specific interrelations of class and state structure and the complex interplay over time of domestic and international developments.” [44] The converged causes of the recent uprising are a major departure from the previous movements that led to protests in 1999 and 2009 because of the change of specific interrelations between the people and the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Unlike the previous uprisings, these ongoing protests are more radical in nature. Protesters are leaving no room for negotiation with the state. They have rejected both factions of the regime and call for the end of the ruling theocratic regime in its entirety. By targeting the regime’s religious representatives across the nation, local repressive centers for the Basijis, and judicial and governmental buildings, and by burning the posters of Iran’s Supreme Leader, they have successfully shifted the burden of fear from the public to the state. The calls for continuation of protests, no matter when and where, are diligently carried out through collective action, mobilization and coordination.

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While women and youth have been at the helm of the everyday form of resistance, it is their collective efforts with the labor movement, the teacher's union, the farmers, the impoverished, the environmentalists, the families of the victims of the 1988 massacre, and many other oppressed sectors of the society that have now created a clear path to real and popular revolution in Iran.

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