

Violence is putting the future of the Islamic Republic in doubt

Written by Afshin Shahi

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AFSHIN SHAHI, JAN 6 2010

It is not an exaggeration to claim that since the presidential election in June 2009, the ship of the Islamic Republic has been cruising in uncharted waters. The repercussions of the election have not only proved to be politically costly but have fundamentally jeopardised the very survival of the Islamic State. Week after week, the regime has been facing unprecedented challenges; the voice of the Iranian opposition, which is now known as the “Green Movement”, has reached every corner of the world. The global press, world leaders and international organisations have now recognised the serious challenge that the Islamic Republic is facing. The state, which used to claim to be one of the most stable regimes in the region has been unable to accommodate the crisis and has lost its legitimacy.

Since the beginning of the disputes in June 2009, the nature of the opposition has been primarily peaceful, with people only resorting to civil disobedience to express their political discontent and demand their civil rights.

The initial request of the protesters was nothing more than a fair recount of the votes after the controversial election. Nevertheless, the failure of the state to accommodate the opposition, as well as the heavy use of violence, gradually transformed the public demands. In the course of only six months, the single issue of the electoral fraud turned to questioning the role the Supreme Leader and the very existence of the Islamic Republic as a ruling system in Iran.

Indeed the extreme measures by the Islamic Republic – such as widespread killings and arrests, suppression of the press, show trials, torture and rapes – have progressively changed the mode of expression by the opposition. The failure of the state to settle the problems diplomatically has increasingly radicalised the opposition movement throughout the country. What is meant by radicalisation is not only the rapid change of political demands but the means and the techniques of expression.

In the recent protests, which took place in the final days of 2009, for the first time, we saw the images and the videos of some protesters who were on the offensive.

Although, the Green Movement has been primarily peaceful, there is a danger that things may get out of control. Clearly, if the Iranian opposition get more confrontational the regime will have the upper hand – the ability to suppress them. Nevertheless, at the same time, violence is an indication of the failure of a political system. Only when a regime is unable to accommodate the competing perspectives does it resort to aggression to maintain its supremacy. Thirty years ago, the regime of the Shah faced the same situation, all the political bridges were destroyed and the political system was paralysed to settle the disputes. Then the regime resorted to violence to resolve the problems. That only created a situation that a phenomenal social mobilisation took place, which was effectively channelled to a revolutionary force to topple the aggressive state.

For now, the Islamic Republic does not mind losing its monopoly of violence, because it gives the regime an excuse to harshly repress the opposition. However, this is a risky business since violence breeds violence. The further crackdown will only alienate the reform-minded opposition and will once again radically mobilise the people to demand nothing but the toppling of the state. There is a limit to the effect of aggression. The most important political product of violence is ‘fear’, which is vital for the survival of an authoritarian state, but what will happen when people

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are no longer afraid of the instruments of terror? This is a question, which the hardliners try to ignore. However given the level of internal and external pressures, they cannot be indifferent to such questions for very long. The regime has entered a very sensitive chapter of its history and if, soon, they do not minimise violence and open the political channels for dialogue, there can be no certainty about the future of the Islamic Republic.

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