

IRAN'S SILENT REVOLUTION: THE RESTLESS YOUTH

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Today, Iran remains a highly sophisticated, well-organized, and Profoundly controlled society; better organized, more controlled and more sophisticated than Iran of the Pahlavis. Make no mistake about it.

As expected, the sagging economy and depressed cost of living which ranks near 1960s levels angers the population as do the many social restrictions placed on Iran's intermediate classes. Any presence of restlessness in the homes and streets of Iran, however, focuses on how to survive the economic and social constraints while changing the Islamic Republic's present conservative politics towards religious practice, political dissent and the fabled "West".

Iran's recent student "troubles" in Tehran and the sympathy protests on campuses of neighboring cities should not mislead foreign observers, however. Iran is not experiencing the beginnings of student protests similar to those of August 1977 in sympathy with the "cave-dwellers" of South Tehran. The University of Tehran students are repeating some of the 1977 demands of the liberal intelligentsia and Iranian Writers' Center for civil rights to demonstrate and to express political dissent, but few students outside of those attacked at the Tehran student dormitory had begun or are continuing widespread protests against the policies of the Islamic Republic. It is generally conceded that both the police attack on the Tehran dormitory and the six-day protests in response came as a surprise to the Government and to the general population in Tehran.

Iran's "silent revolution" is the significant political development in Iran these days. There is considerable evidence that segments of Iran's struggling middle class, portions of the high school and university student population, and growing numbers of urban professionals are carrying out a variety of "everyday forms of resistance" to the Islamic Republic's social and political prohibitions.

While students, working class faithful and religious leaders gather on the campus of the University of Tehran for the Friday public prayer at noon, other Iranians of both sexes are gathering privately throughout parts of Tehran around swimming pools, political roundtables, and well-curtained living rooms for "prohibited" parties, discussions and "forbidden" video viewing. On other days, the growing demands for access to the internet and the increasing availability of computer time are challenging the ingenuity of Iran's computer and technologically sophisticated youth. While cyber-cafes are as scarce as hen's teeth in the neighborhoods of Tehran's eight million inhabitants, the need to be online through library reference work, research centers' access to the international community, and the daily work of the commercial work is providing a small but important window to the worlds beyond Iran's "Islamic Curtain". Finally, the well-documented public interest in opening up Iran to "others" including Americans is now being embraced by President Khatami and a growing number of Iranians both in and out of public office.

In recent months, both the murders of Iran's former opposition leaders and the attack on the University of Tehran dormitory showed the weakness of the "reactionary" factions still ensconced in Iran's ministries including the Ministry of Intelligence. While striking out at highly-visible defenseless victims, the "reactionaries" attempt to embarrass the Khatami Government may well have backfired as Majlis members line up to condemn both attacks and seek punishment for the culprits. The consensus in a number of newspapers is that the Iranian public is very interested in accountability of its political leaders, civilian or religious alike.

The "silent revolutions" in Iran cannot be entirely identified, nor can be counted on to replicate the beginnings of Iran's volcanic-like eruptions of the late 1970s. It would be a mistake, then, to expect to see street confrontations, widespread civil disobedience or militant rioting that occurred in the twilight of the Pahlavi monarchy and US-dominated Iran. It is more realistic and, for the short term, more accurate to say that Iran is presently expanding its political wings. It is also experiencing creative forms of resistance to the social and political repressive injunctions of the Islamic Republic and innovative forms of alternative social and political engagement. In both cases, moreover, the forms of resistance and alternative engagement are being played out within the Islamic Republic of Iran rather than outside the society and polity of Iran. It would be a further mistake to second-guess the Republic's abilities to respond both the forms of resistance and to the new alternatives of social and political activism. Unlike Iran of the 1970s, present-day Iran is quite capable of acting independently and ruthlessly in controlling its population. The measure of its political maturity will, indeed, be its ability to tolerate the present forms of resistance, work with the alternative forms of engagement and bring the culprits in the Ministry of Intelligence to justice.

DISCUSSION

Dr. Ricks: I found your short essay illuminating and provocative. You mention that "... present-day Iran is quite capable of acting independently and ruthlessly in controlling its population." It seems to me that the clerical establishment has lost its grip on the youth, women, technocrats, and intelligentsia. No regime, I submit, can experience a silent revolution and yet manage to effectively hold its ruthless grip on the society for a long time. Something has got to give. I think conservatives' days are numbered. In those cases that Iran has acted independently—hostage episode, Salman Rushdie, and the Mykonos affair—the outcome has been counterproductive to say the least. This brings us to my question: how can the clerical establishment maintain its grip on society if there is a silent revolution in the making?