



PUBLIC PROTESTS IN IRAN 2017-18: ROUHANI'S TEST OR TRIUMPH?

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



The past few weeks in Iran have been rather turbulent. Thousands of protestors took to the streets to publicly demonstrate their anger and dissent over hiking food prices, unemployment and corruption in the country. The protests started on December 28, 2017 in the second-largest city of Iran by population, Mashhad which is also home to the most sacred religious site in the country. They spread rapidly like wild fire throughout the country panning over almost 72 cities, covering 29 out of 31 provinces.¹

Rallies gained momentum through the first week of 2018 spreading to the capital Tehran, where students also actively took part in the protests against the status quo.² Two days into the protests, internet services in most parts of the country were suspended by the government as the social media apps such as Telegram (a local messaging service), Instagram and Twitter were deemed instrumental behind the rapid spread of the dissent among the general public. For about a week, the unrest continued during which considerable damage to public property was reported by Iranian news agencies.³ About 3,700 people were arrested and 25 people were killed during the protests.

¹ Peyman Asadzade, "New data shed light on the dramatic protests in Iran", *The Washington Post*, January 12, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/01/12/what-data-show-us-about-irans-protests/?utm_term=.3584a660b3eb

² News Desk, "Rouhani defends right to protest but rejects violence", *AL JAZEERA*, January 1, 2018, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/12/rouhani-defends-protest-rejects-violence-171231193555086.html>

³ Tasnim News Agency, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1396/10/10/1616026/%D9%88%D8%A7%DA%A9%D9%86%D8%B4-%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%85-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%A2%D8%AA%D8%B4->

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and other governmental law enforcement agencies had to intervene in order to restore the law and order situation to a normal. After a week of mayhem, the protests died down as the international community and the United Nations expressed their concern over the worsening situation.

The leaderless and nameless protests are finally over and the government has also started to release the arrested people.

What caused the protests? Who led these protests? What would be the short and long-term impacts of these protests? These are the questions which remain to be answered. The causative factors for the most part were economic in nature, which later on also took on a political hue. High rates of unemployment, extremely high food prices and corruption was what brought people to the streets, which is particularly why the protests took up so rapidly in the smaller cities and towns. Prices of staples such as eggs rose up to 40%, while 35% of the Iranian population lives below the poverty line.⁴

Disenchanted people took to the streets as the third year starts after the nuclear deal of 2015 when sanctions were lifted and millions of jobs were promised. According to a Tehran based analyst, Saeed Leilaz, "There are more than three million jobless in Iran."⁵ While some understand that the trickle-down effect of the nuclear deal of 2015 would take time to reach the common man in Iran, but for the most part, patience of the general masses is running out. However, there were reports that the protests sparked upon the instigation of the hard-line political rivals of President Rouhani.⁶ However, the protests later on turned against the entire religious and political elite of the country. Further uproar was caused by the 2018 budget which Rouhani described as, "one that would work toward full employment, eliminating poverty and creating social justice."⁷ Unfortunately, it did not receive as much appreciation and confidence from people who saw it as yet another unfulfilled promise. Disgruntled public sentiments were further fueled by the hard-line political rivals of

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⁴ Associated Press, "Iranians Protest Rising Food Prices", *The New York Times*, December 28, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/28/world/middleeast/iranians-protest-rising-food-prices.html>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Vali Nasr, "What the Iranian Protests Were Not?", *The Atlantic*, January 10, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/01/iran-economic-protests-urban-rural-divide/550211/>

⁷ Reuters Staff, "Iran's Rouhani submits conservative 2018 budget as U.S tensions overshadow economy", *Reuters*, December 10, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-budget/irans-rouhani-submits-conservative-2018-budget-as-u-s-tensions-overshadow-economy-idUSKBN1E40I3>

Rouhani who were of the opinion that, "He has failed to improve living standards as much as hoped after the lifting of sanctions."⁸

Attempts to uncover the reasons behind these protests reveal more than what was intended. It not only discovers what caused the unrest, but also brings to light the rift that runs deeper than ever in the two political factions in Iran - the moderate government of President Rouhani and his conservative political rivals. Mashhad, where the protests started is also home to Rouhani's conservative political rival Ali Raisi whose father-in-law, Ayatollah Ahmad Alamolhoda has reportedly been summoned by Iran's National Security Council to explain his role in instigating the unrest.⁹ Former president of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's name was also being taken among the conservative politicians responsible for inciting the already volatile public sentiment in the country and was also reported to have been put under house rest.¹⁰ However, it may have been initiated at the behest of elements trying to put President Rouhani's government in a fix but it spiraled into a movement of sorts against the religious and conservative power centers of the country. President Rouhani in his budget presentation expressed serious concerns over the staggering amounts of funds being allocated to the religious seminaries and them being unaccountable regarding the spending of funds. This sentiment was taken up more furiously by the underprivileged of the society who can barely make ends meet.

The other aspect of the protests was objection to the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic. However, since the protestors were from smaller towns and cities majorly, the discontent focused on government money being spent on the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC). According to different sources, an amount of \$8 billion was allocated to the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC) which angered the public.¹¹ The government response to the protests showed that President Rouhani remains committed to his promise to bring about moderation and freedom of expression in the society. He discouraged the suspension of internet messaging services and emphasized that people must be given outlets to express their true sentiments over the policies that displease them.

These protests also provided an opportunity to Iran's rivals in the international community to rouse anti-regime sentiment in the public through statements and tweets. President Trump through a series of tweets 'welcomed' the unrest, while Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu dismissed

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Jamie Dettmer, "Did Iran's Hardliners Orchestrate Start of Iranian Protests?", *VOA*, January 10, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/a/iran-hardliners-role-iranian-protests/4192703.html>

¹⁰ Mark Moore, "Ahmadinejad arrested for 'inciting violence' in Iran: report", *New York Post*, January 7, 2018, <https://nypost.com/2018/01/07/ahmadinejad-arrested-for-inciting-violence-in-iran-report/>

¹¹ News Desk, "Clergy Demand More Money Amid Popular Anger At Economic Hardship", *Radio Farda*, January 13, 2018, <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-clergy-demand-more-money/28973467.html>

Israeli involvement behind the protests in Iran and called them 'heroic'.¹² However, apart from a few statements, Iranian reaction to the possibility of foreign involvement was balanced and the government focused more on internal reasons for the unrest instead of merely blaming the West.

There is a lot to be taken away from the protests in Iran and the response of the government. The protests managed to bring forth the real problems of the Iranian population into a more prominent light. The people made sure that their voice is heard. While removal of sanctions and the nuclear deal of 2015 were celebrated achievements for Iranian diplomacy, the government will now need to fix economic problems at home. The GDP grew almost 12.5% in 2016 due to the oil sector surge after lifting of sanctions, but that is not a true indicator of prosperity at home. These protests come as a blessing in disguise for Iran where public demands have come through quite clearly, laying down an exact roadmap for the present government to follow to satisfy the people. This has also unmasked the true sentiment of the population towards orthodox factions who hamper moderation and freedom of expression and has indirectly ratified Rouhani's presidency. Now, it remains up to the present government how to use the public sentiment for the people's own good to create a more progressive and moderate society in Iran.

¹² News Desk, "Netanyahu ridicules idea Israel behind Iran Protests, chides Europe for silence", *Time of Israel*, January 1, 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-denies-israel-behind-iran-protests-chides-europe-for-silence/>