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Ashoura Events in Iran: Observations and Predictions

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Recently, the protest movement in Iran has gained fresh momentum, seizing two opportunities: the heightened tension that accompanied the funeral of the Shi'a cleric Hussain Muntadhiri, who is widely considered to be the spiritual father of the call to reform *wilayat al-faqeeh* or « rule of the clergy » principle from an absolute to a constitutional limited rule; and Ashoura, a shi'a religious festival which masses can celebrate in public congregations without the need for a permit -something which the government has consistently refused to grant the opposition. The protests are another episode in a spiral movement that has continued since President Ahmadi- Nejad's re-election.

Observations about the Events

In light of the recent events, it is possible to make the following observations,

- 1- The events have demonstrated that the opposition is capable of initiating confrontation with the government. The recent protests have been pre-planned by the reformists, rather than a mere spontaneous or instantaneous reaction.
- 2- The Middle class is still the principal carrier of the protest movement –eventhough the government still implicates hostile elements from the Iranian opposition abroad in the protests.
- 3- Initially, the Ashoura events had appeared to be no different from past protests. But their slogans soon escalated to attacking the « rule of the clergy » principle and the Supreme Leader himself, no longer being confined to targetting President Ahmadi-Nejad. Slogans in support of Mir Hussain Mosavi, leader of the reformist camp have also been reported.
- 4- Protestors have clearly demanded reforming the *wilayat al-faqeeh* principle. In contrast, past protests had centred on the electoral dimension more than any other, and on Ahmadi-Nejad rather than the Supreme Leader.
- 5- The death toll was higher than in previous protests, even if the authorities have blamed « hidden » elements for the destruction and killings. It is also worth noting that unlike the last protests, the military establishment and Revolutionary Guards have not issued any warnings to the protesters this time. The government accuses the protest movement of thirsting for the loss of life in its ranks, particularly as some of its leaders had declared that there can be « No reform without blood ».
- 6- Recent protests have demonstrated Mir-Hussain Mosavi's ability to mobilise the street through the statements he issues (which had numbered 15 during the confrontation). These releases have determined the escalation's direction, occasion, and time, albeit implicitly, rather than explicitly. His last statement had warned the authorities of the escalation of protests during the Ashoura days, something which did materialise on the ground.

Significance and Repercussions

- 1- Recent events indicate that Mirr-Hussain Mosavi is the most prominent, indeed, the undisputed opposition leader, even if figures of considerable weight and influence stand along his side. This raises the likelihood of Mosavi's arrest or trial, and possibly worse. In other words, he will constitute the chief target for the protest movement's opponents, either within or outside the regime.
- 2- Recent events have demonstrated that the Iranian regime still lacks fresh options and new methods for dealing with protestors. This may be interpreted as the result of confusion on the the authorities' part as it is divided over the best means of dealing with the crisis. This would seem to apply to the military institution which has limited its political involvement with the protestors and confined itself to performing its security role, that is, to responding to the protests silently.
- 3- With Ayatollah Montazeri's death, demands for changing « the nature of the rule of the clergy » from an absolute to a constitutional rule have risen to the forefront of the opposition's demands. From the grave, Montazeri seems to have turned into an inspiring symbol for aspirants for change of this nature.
- 4- Certain sections of the oppsoition have claimed that crackdown on the recent protests had been overseen by the Supreme Leader himself. Others have, however, claimed that Khamenei is moving to resolve the issue in his own way, particularly as he had expelt Rafsanjani from the circle of his advisers on the crisis. This seems to indicate that negotiation is not one of his options at present.

Future of the Crisis and possible vehicles of resolution

Current indicators seem to point to an escalation of events, although the likelihood of the two sides rethinking their strategies remains present. Still, with recent developments, the crisis seems to have reached an advanced stage that might preclude any likelihood of a lull or resolution to the crisis.

If the situation continues in its current open state, circles close to the conservatives and to the authorities insist that the government would not resort to violence, relying instead on the street, clergy, and fatwas to confront protestors, since –as they claim- the majority is on their side. Preparations for such a response are said to be under way. On the other hand, both sides recognise that resolution of the crisis is one of the options on the table. A number of prominent figures in the establishment, like Hashemi Rafsanjani, are said to be capable of acting as mediators to facillitate such a reconciliation (in spite of the slurr directed at him by some conservatives), Ali Larijani, leader of the Iranian Parliament, or Mehdawi Qunni, leader of the conservative Munadhileen Association.

It is worth noting that Rafsanjani has maintained a distance from the political scene claiming that he is generally discontented with the entire situation. Those close to him maintain that Rafsanjani senses that the two sides would eventually turn to him to end the dispute. He is reported to have said « I will not interfere in the crisis since I am part of two important institutions in the regime (the Leadership Experts' Council, and the Identification of the Regime's Interest Council. I've already said all I have in my last Friday sermon after the crisis but my words were not heeded ».

Generally speaking, conservatives would not reject Rafsanjani's mediation should his close links to the Supreme Leader be restored or should they be driven to that by necessity.

Among the other possible candidates for mediation to resolve the crisis is former President Mohammad Khatemi, who is said to be currently trying to calm the situation and bridge the distance between the different standpoints. However, some dispute his loyalty to the 'rule of the clergy' principle, which may serve to weaken his position. The possibility of his assuming a mediatory role largely depends on his performance in the coming weeks and months, that is, after he defines his relation to the regime and its general identity. Khatemi is, in other words, a potential candidate for mediation at a future stage, not at present.

As to the means of resolution, the full picture is yet to emerge. Still, recent events have no doubt enabled protestors to build momentum for some of their demands, which may now be described as central. Should the authorities agree to begin negotiations with the protestors, these demands would centre on three important issues : honest free elections, a reduced role for the military in politics, and limiting the Supreme Leader to the jurisdictions stipulated in the constitution.

- 1- Honest Elections : The opposition calls for devising a mechanism or an independent committee to oversee future elections, insisting that these should be free from interference (or pressures) from the authorities. In response, the authorities claim that there are institutions in existence performing this function and that such demands must follow due process, that is, pass through existing constitutional institutions, which are available to all.
- 2- Limiting the role of the military -notably the Revolutionary Guard- and reducing the scale of their interventions in politics. Such demands, the opposition stresses, correspond with Imam Khomeini's directives. Champions of the Revolutionary Guards' role in Iranian political life retort that what the Guards had been warned against was granting one side advantage over the other, or disturbing the country's political equilibrium. There was never any question of their expulsion from politics altogether, in view of the regime's nature. In other words, a demand of this kind is incompatible with a state that operates in accordance with the « rule of the clergy » principle, but with ordinary systems, where the military plays no political role. The Revolutionary Guards' function, as stipulated in the Islamic Republic's legislations, is the protection of the « rule of the clergy » system from « inside and outside conspirators », a duty it could not perform if it were kept outside the political sphere altogether.
- 3- The third demand is limiting the authority and jurisdictions of the Wali al-faqeeh (Supreme Leader). This is dismissed on the ground that the Council of Leadership Experts is responsible for overseeing the Leader's performance to ensure its compliance with his jurisdictions and that its activation is possible. Anything beyond that is illegitimate.

Finally, we can say that as events unfold, the opposition appears to be acquiring new ideological features. The recent protests have explicitly borne the demand for reforming the « rule of the clergy » principle, thrusting the regime's identity into the heart of the political conflict. Some argue that developments within Iran are the outcome of foreign pressures. As proof of that, these point to the reformist camp's unwillingness to disclose its intentions

regarding the existing regime's future. The reformists, these maintain, are targetting the « rule of the clergy » -driven by loyalty for the West or fear from it- in order to keep Iran as an Islamic republic in appearance solely, while in reality being an exclusively nationalistic state. In other words, the very identity of the republic is at stake.

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