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Reports

Anatomy of the Iranian Protests: Popular Grievances or Political Infighting

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Iranians, supporters of the National Council Resistance of Iran (NCRI), protest on (Getty)

On December 28th, 2017, several hundred Iranians protested against rising living costs in Mashhad, Iran's second largest city. The protestors who chanted "Death to Rouhani" were angry at rising prices as well as discussions about the government's plans to increase the costs of some key commodities such as gasoline and bread. The Mashhad protest in isolation was not surprising, considering that the city is a religious and conservative city, and is home to Rouhani's two main contenders in the 2016 presidential elections, namely Ebrahim Raisi and Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf. In fact, Rouhani was only able to win 42 percent of the vote in Mashhad, compared to 56 percent for Raisi. What was surprising however was that the protests soon spread to other Iranian cities, some of which were very small and had never witnessed such demonstrations, even in the aftermath of the 2009 presidential elections.

Since the protests were not organized by a specific political movement, it has been somewhat difficult to pinpoint the exact reasons behind them, with theories ranging from a conservative conspiracy to undermine Rouhani's government to foreign intervention by the United States and Israel. This article argues that the primary reason that led to the protests were the economic grievances of the Iranian public who had become disillusioned about the benefits of the Nuclear Deal, putting the Rouhani government in a precarious position. The protests eventually died away after about a week, however the root causes of the protests and its implications are still debated in Iran today. Several hypotheses have been cited regarding the protests.

One Causality or Various Interpretations?

First, the protests were provoked and even organized by the Conservatives who had badly lost the 2016 presidential elections to Rouhani. This proposition was propagated by pro-Rouhani factions in Iran. Raisi who is the current chairman of Astan Quds Razavi, a powerful Waqf (endowment) in the city of Mashhad, and his father in law, Ahmad Alamolhoda, the local

Friday Imam (prayer leader), are openly and harshly critical of the Rouhani government, and their stance reinforces the argument for a deliberate act of anti-Rouhani mobilization.

It was widely reported among pro-government circles that Alamolhoda was summoned to the powerful National Security Council, which is headed by the President, to be questioned about his role in igniting the anti-government protests. Even though the story was never officially confirmed by the NSC, the allegations became so widespread that the office of Alamolhoda had to issue an official letter, strongly denying the story and [declaring](#) that during the protests the Friday prayer leader had not been in Mashhad and had been visiting the city of Sabzevar.

Deadly protests in Iran

- Demonstrations since Dec 28
- Reported deaths



Casualties in Iran’s protests (AFP)

Second, it was widely cited by Western politicians and media that the protests were intended to overthrow the entire political establishment rather than to rally against Rouhani. From this perspective, the protests were due not only to economic issues, but more importantly they were triggered because the Iranian people opposed the domestic and foreign policies of the Islamic Republic. During the early phases of the protests, U.S. President Donald Trump [tweeted](#): “Many reports of peaceful protests by Iranian citizens fed up with regime’s corruption & its squandering of the nation’s wealth to fund terrorism abroad.” Later on, Trump tweeted again about Iran [considering](#) the protests “time for change”. Vice-president Mike Pence also commented [arguing](#) “the bold and growing resistance of the Iranian people today gives hope and faith to all who struggle for freedom and against tyranny. We must not and we will not let them down.”

As the protests went, on a war of tweets erupted between the U.S. and Iranian officials After Trump tweeted “the people of Iran are finally acting against the brutal and corrupt Iranian

regime. All of the money that President Obama so foolishly gave them went into terrorism and into their pockets.” Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif responding on his twitter [asserting](#) that “Iran’s security and stability depend on its own people, who — unlike the peoples of Trumps [sic] regional ‘bffs’ — have the right to vote and to protest. These hard-earned rights will be protected, and infiltrators will not be allowed to sabotage them through violence and destruction.”

According to the Western narrative, the people of Iran resented their government’s foreign policy, and wanted their leaders to focus on domestic issues rather than “supporting terrorism” abroad, something that went along the position of the U.S. administration. During the protests, White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders explained how Trump would “certainly like to see [Iran] stop being a state sponsor of terror. I think that’s something the whole world would like to see.”

Such a view of the protests was also highly propagated by the Israeli lobby in Washington. In his [article](#) “Iranians Are Mad as Hell About Their Foreign Policy” published in Foreign Policy, Dennis Ross, an important member of the pro-Israel Israeli community and senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, argued that “the Iranian public is making it clear it is fed up with the costs of the country’s expansion in the region. Highlighting these costs could stoke the public’s dissatisfaction further. The more the Iranian regime believes that its foreign adventures may shake its foundations on the inside, the more tempered its behavior is likely to become.”

A close reflection on the protest dynamics proposes a couple of observations:

First, the primary reason behind the protests were economic grievances and rising living costs. While some protestors chanted anti-establishment slogans, the majority of the protestors were angry about their economic well-being. This logic of this hypothesis is that while the official [unemployment rate](#) in Iran is 12.6 percent, the unemployment rate for the 15-29 year olds is 26.4 percent. Moreover, detractors of the Tehran government point out that the official rate counts a person who works at least one hour a week as “employed”, whereas a person working for just a few hours a weeks is not really employed neither can he make ends meet. These informally-informed critics have [argued](#) that the real unemployment rate might be as high as 35-40 percent.

Second, there is also an assumption that agents working for foreign governments, namely the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, were working behind the scene to fuel the protests in Iran. This hypothesis was widely propagated by Iranian state TV and state owned media outlets. Some analysts have pointed to the arrests of some protesters connected with the Mojahedin-e-Khalq Organization (MKO, also known as MEK). This militant organization, which is accused of causing thousands of civilian casualties in Iran over the past several decades, openly declared its support for the protests. Furthermore, the government declared that the 25 fatalities of the protests were not killed by police, since they were not carrying firearms while dealing with the protests. The list of the dead included a number of the Iranian security officers. Along this interpretation, the state-owned Mehr News Agency claimed that an “evil axis” made up of the US, UK and Israel, together with Saudi money and local proxies such as the MKO, were behind the protests. The first line of the article [quotes](#) U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson declaring that the Trump administration seeks regime change in Iran. The echo of this trajectory triggered an interesting reaction from the Iranian leadership. President Rouhani [underscored](#) the fact that “our success in the political arena against the United States and the Zionist regime was unbearable to (Iran’s enemies). Iran’s success in the region was unbearable to them. Don’t you expect that they would seek revenge? Don’t you think they would provoke some people?”

In Search of the Root Cause of the Protests

The exploration of the root causes behind the protests of December 2017 and January 2018 derives from the complexity and interconnectivity of several factors. In contrast to the 2009 protests, the new demonstrations were not organized and supported by a specific political movement within Iran. They did not have an identifiable leader or spokesperson, who could declare grievances and make demands. Moreover, the protests were spread geographically, unlike the 2009 protests. It would be misleading to cherry pick a few slogans chanted by a small group of individuals and project them, as a central grievance, on *all* the protestors. Nevertheless, this tendency of interpretation, not necessarily explanation, is exactly what happened. For example, the United States and Israel are at odds with Iran in the Middle East, and on this very basis they sought to turn the protests into an issue of Iranian foreign policy. One particular slogan was often [quoted](#) in Western media: “Not Gaza, not Lebanon, my life for Iran.”

One should recognize that some protestors chanted this type of slogans in 2017 as well as in 2009. It would be inaccurate to make it the central theme of the protests, especially the foreign policy was a non-issue in many small cities across the country. Like in other countries, foreign policy remains a subject of debate among the more affluent and educated class; and is not usually a priority in small cities where local communities are not doing well economically.

It would also be incorrect to put the entire blame of the protests on foreign governments. It is obvious that the Americans and the Israelis would like nothing more than a regime change in Iran, and have arguably worked towards this goal in the past. Nevertheless, the recent protests stem from the internal weaknesses of the country. This does not mean that they did not support, advocate and even sought spreading the protests. One can argue that the weakness of the Iranian economy served the discourse of foreign powers. Moreover, the perception of individuals protesting in the street cannot dismiss they could as ‘agents’ of foreign powers while the majority of the protests were peaceful, particularly in the first few days.

We must distinguish between the violent riots that took shape in the final days of the protests and involved burning banks, looting shops, and the attempt to take over police stations, and the peaceful protestors that had real, and arguably rightful, economic grievances. Ironically, the protests started to die away after they became violent. The riots by a minority of the protestors pushed the peaceful majority to stay at home.

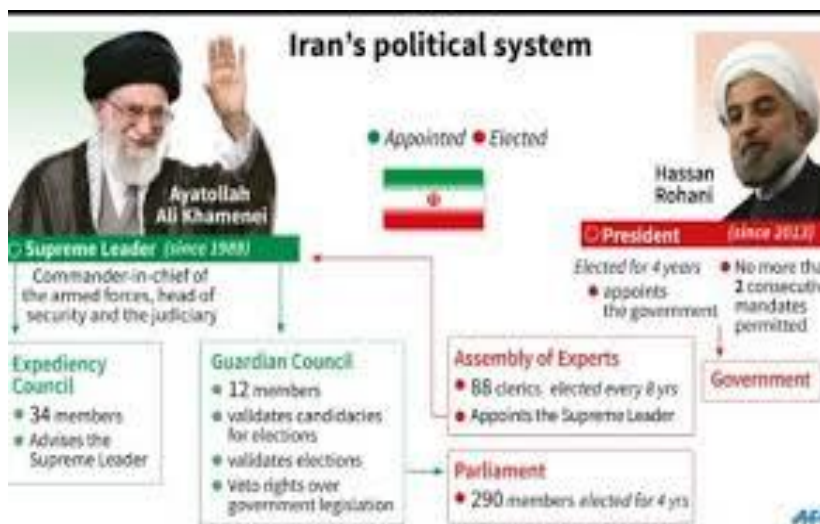
To help with better understanding of the recent protests and popular demands across Iran, one should analyze recent trends of the Iranian public opinion. The University of Maryland’s Center for International and Security Studies at IranPoll, an independent institute based in Toronto, Canada, have provided a poll, which can argued to be the best window into the views of Iranian society. The poll was conducted after the protests between January 16 and January 24, 2018, and presents some interesting data that can be [summarized](#) in the following points:

- 1) **A solid majority of Iranians do not seek an overhaul of the political system:** When asked if “Iran’s political system needs to undergo fundamental change” only 4.9 percent of respondents “strongly agreed.” 11.5 percent somewhat agreed, while 23.2 and 53.5 percent somewhat and strongly disagreed respectively.
- 2) **A majority of Iranians support Iran’s regional policies:** When asked if “Iran’s current level of involvement in Iraq and Syria is not in Iran’s national interests,” 30.1 percent

strongly disagreed and 31.1 percent somewhat disagreed, while 15.4 and 17.2 percent somewhat and strongly agreed respectively.

- 3) **A large majority of Iranians believe that the economy is in a dire state:** When asked “In your opinion, how good or bad is our country's general economic situation?” only 2.5 percent of respondents chose “very good.” 27.6 percent said somewhat good, 28.2 said somewhat bad and 40.7 percent chose very bad.
- 4) **A strong majority want the government to do more in the economic realm:** 86.1 strongly or somewhat agree that the government should not increase the price of gasoline. 95 percent believe “the government should do more to keep the price of food products from increasing,” and 95.7 percent want the government to do more to fight “financial and bureaucratic corruption.”

As a takeaway from the new data, the main concern of the Iranian public is essentially Iran’s economic status, and not changing the political system or shifting the foreign policy. These findings seem to reinforce the third Hypothesis discussed above (economic grievances and rising living costs) as the primary cause of the protests. Of course, this does not mean that every single person who protested had similar grievances. It also does not mean that foreign powers had zero role to play, nor the fact that Conservatives have been heavy-handed in their criticism of Rouhani’s government in recent months. Rather it shows that a sizeable portion of the Iranian public has serious concerns about the state of the economy, an issue that will weaken Rouhani as well as his supporting political movements. Also, the claim that the Conservative movement in Iran organized the protests has not been supported by any factual evidence. Even if one accepts that the original protests in Mashhad were provoked by the Conservatives, it is very doubtful whether the Movement has the capacity to spread it to so many other cities. In short, these hypotheses seem to disregard the real economic grievances of the public in favor of conspiracy theories.



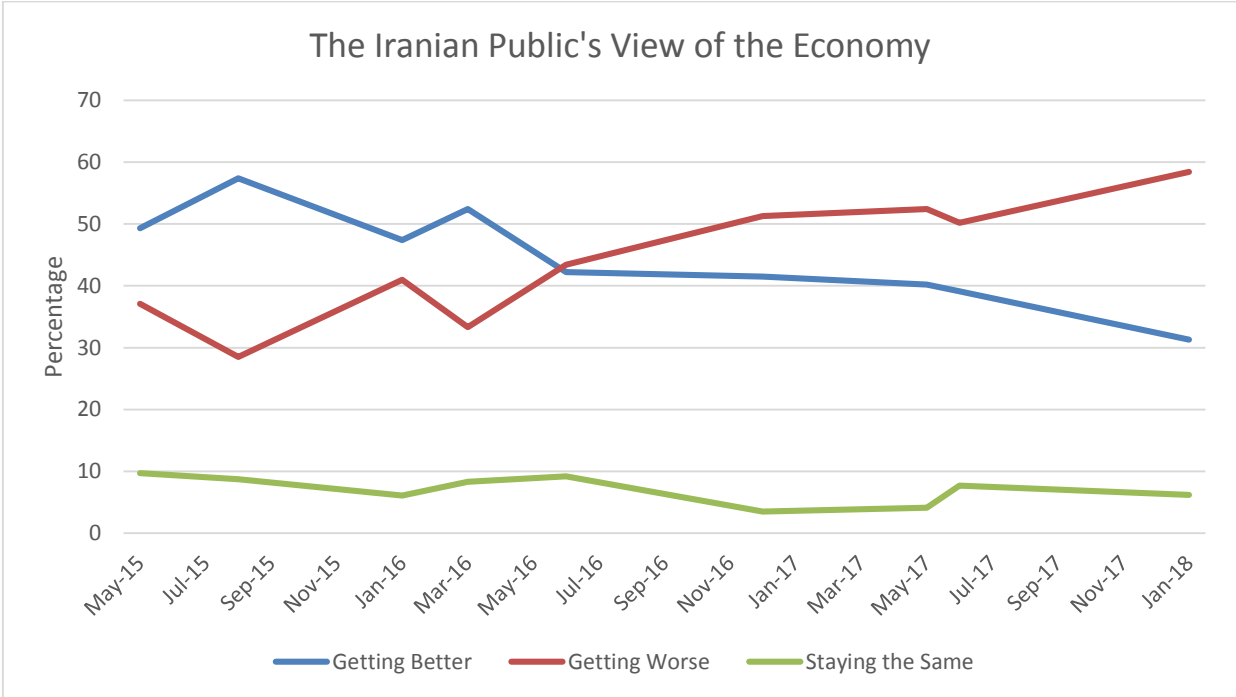
Iran’s Political System (AFP)

Rouhani’s Precarious Situation

Hassan Rouhani came into power in 2013 with the mandate of improving the economy after reaching a Nuclear Agreement with the P5+1 (five permanent members of the Security Council and Germany). His government successfully concluded the nuclear deal in May 2015 and the economy has arguably improved in several areas. The government rightly asserts it

has [reduced](#) inflation from 39 percent to 10 percent today. Iran’s GDP growth rate has shifted [positively](#) from -1.9 percent in 2013 to 12.5 percent in 2017.

However, these economic gains have not trickled down to the Iranian masses. The public expectations from the Nuclear Agreement were much higher, partly due to Rouhani’s own rhetoric about its would-be benefits. Another direct factor is the rising food prices that have led to 68.9 percent of the public believing Iran’s economy is doing very badly or somewhat badly. The recent poll showcases another revealing trend; 58.4 percent of participants believe that the economic conditions are getting worse compared to 31.3 percent who believe otherwise. From a comparative perspective, the numbers were [reversed](#) at 37.1 percent (getting worse) and 49.3 percent (getting better) in May 2015 one month before finalizing the Nuclear Deal. There is a clear trend of deepening pessimism toward the country’s economic performance among the Iranian public, as illustrated in the following graph.



The Iranian Public's View of the Economy (Source: N. Ghalagher et al. (2018) “Iranian Public Opinion After the Protests”)

Since candidate Rouhani was primarily elected to improve the economy before he president Rouhani invested heavily in the Nuclear Deal, the deal will ultimately serve as his Achilles heel. This has become even more pronounced with the electoral victory of Donald Trump. Not only is Washington implementing new sanctions on Iran on a regular basis. The new White House has put the entire future of the deal in jeopardy. Consequently, Rouhani’s government has been unable to deliver the kind of economic benefits it had promised to the Iranian people. As Polls conducted after the protests surveyed the participants “How confident are you that the United States will live up to its obligations toward the nuclear agreement?”, 86.4 percent of them [replied](#) either they were not confident all or not very confident.

The Way Ahead

A growing tendency toward pessimism vis-a-vis the performance and future of the Iranian economy has led to the recent protests in Iran. This socio-economic development has undermined Rouhani’s popularity and put his government in a difficult situation. For example after the protests, the government in Tehran backed away from proposals to increase the price of gasoline prices by 50 percent. By not doing so however, it will have a budget deficit next

year. More importantly, unless Rouhani is able to introduce an effective economic reform to ease up the plight of ordinary Iranians in the next two years, his allies and the Reformist movement are bound to suffer a defeat in the upcoming parliamentary elections scheduled for 2019. In case of losing the parliamentary elections, they will ultimately pave the way for a conservative victory in the 2021 presidential elections.

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