

# Is Iran on the verge of another revolution?

And will it be a 'Kaveh' or an 'Alexander the Great' who leads it?



Iranian protesters flash victory signs during a protest after Friday prayers at a university in Tehran on July 17, 2009 [File: Reuters]

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This week, amid the fallout of tough US sanctions and growing political uncertainty, many Iranians are marking the 10th anniversary of the Green Movement. Ten years ago, mass protests erupted after suspicions arose that the general elections had been rigged in favor of the incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Reformist candidates Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mahdi Karroubi rejected the results and their supporters took to the streets to express their anger at what they saw as the trampling of democratic procedures in Iran.

Today, 10 years later, many are wondering whether Iran is on the eve of another Green Movement or even a revolution. Indeed, some scholars have pointed out that there are many socioeconomic and political factors that could make mass unrest in the short term highly likely. Others, however, have been arguing Iran is

not on the verge of fundamental change at all. So which one is true? Will Iran see another wave of unrest and revolution or will the status quo prevail as the Islamic Republic resists foreign pressure?

In its long history, Iran has witnessed many revolutionary movements and upheavals, perhaps more than many of its neighbors in the Middle East. Today, four decades after the Iranian revolution of 1979, the country retains its revolutionary spirit, maintained by a vibrant civil society and a strong and rebellious intelligentsia.

Iran also has a very young and educated population; nearly 10 million out of its 81 million inhabitants have university degrees and currently, some four million are studying at institutions of higher education. Historically, Iranian university campuses have always been politicized, while students have been at the forefront of protests, alongside clerics, workers, and the merchant class.

Iranian society is also quite tech-savvy and well-connected to the outside world; some 64 percent of Iranians are internet users, while mobile penetration has reached more than 110 percent (that is, some Iranians have more than one phone).

At the same time, large parts of the population have become increasingly frustrated with the Islamic Republic and its failure to deliver on the political, social and economic fronts. Many have completely lost hope that change can be ushered in through reforms, especially after President Hassan Rouhani, who has been seen as moderate, failed to live up to his electorate's expectations and bring about political and social liberalization along with economic prosperity.

The regime's economic mismanagement and massive corruption, as well as continuing political and social suppression have convinced many Iranians that there is no way out except through fundamental social and political change – that is, “regime change”. In the face of growing political, social, and economic crises, the Islamic Republic is struggling with maintaining its legitimacy.

In this sense, the situation in Iran is ripe for another wave of unrest. Already last year, protests erupted across the country and even reached areas that had been until then relatively quiet. It is quite likely that the country will witness massive upheaval that would affect various layers of Iranian society, including both the urban and rural population.

But like forecasting an earthquake, it is difficult to say when this would happen and how long it would last. What is clear, however, is that popular mobilization is unlikely to result in a massive change or indeed the toppling of the current regime.

As American sociologist James DeFronzo has theorized, there are five critical factors that guarantee the success of any revolutionary movement: public frustration, dissident elites, unifying motivation, political crises, and a receptive international community. While some of these conditions exist in Iran today, others are absent.

Although there is indeed massive public dissatisfaction with the status quo, this sentiment is hardly “unified”. The Islamic Republic has successfully atomized Iranian society and suppressed any online and offline channels or networks which could lead to mass mobilization. The opposition, which mostly lives in exile, is split along ideological lines and does not have a social base inside the country. While social media platforms help break the regime’s monopoly over information, they have also been used to spread misinformation and identify and suppress activists.

At the same time, while there may be some disagreements within the regime, both reformists and hardliners are committed to the wellbeing of the Islamic Republic. They also agree on the necessity to use the repressive apparatus to ensure the survival of the regime. Thanks to substantial investment in equipment and human capital, the Islamic Republic has developed multilayered and ideologically committed security forces, which are trained to and willing to suppress any form of civil disobedience.

At the same time, despite the growing pressure from the US-Saudi-Israeli axis, the international context is not necessarily conducive to a successful revolution in Iran. It is in the interest of both Russia and China that the Islamic Republic survives the ongoing crisis and they would not hesitate to back it, should it face any existential threats; the same is true for its regional allies, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, and other Shia militia groups in the Middle East.

Many Iranians are aware of this situation and live in despair, while actively trying to emigrate. The number of people who would like to move out of the country is dramatically increasing. Even official statistics reflect this trend; according to a

recent study, some 30 percent of Iranians would rather live in any other country but their own.

Others have reached the point where they would welcome any US military intervention and see it as the only way to get rid of the clerical regime. Talking to people back in Iran, I have heard this sentiment quite often; it reminds me of 2003 when many Iraqis welcomed the invading US army as a “liberating force”.

Unable or unwilling to calculate the devastating consequences of a military conflict, one of my interlocutors repeated a poem from the Iranian poet Mehdi Akhavan-Sales written a few years after the CIA-sponsored 1953 coup triggered a wave of repression by the Pahlavi regime: “No Kaveh will be found, Omid! I wish an Alexander would be found.” Kaveh is a mythical Iranian hero who liberates the country from a foreign despot; Alexander is the ruler of Macedon, who effectively put an end to the Persian Achaemenid dynasty 2,300 years ago.

The man who recited the point, like its author, had succumbed to such despair that he saw no hope for a Kaveh appearing – for Iranians setting themselves free; instead, he wished for a foreign invader, an Alexander, to come and topple the Islamic Republic.

But that hope, too, is in vain. Despite all the US posturing, a foreign force is unlikely to invade Iran. While the country may witness another wave of unrest, it is unlikely to loosen the regime’s grip on power. Indeed, Iran will continue to sink deeper into a political and economic crisis, as the Islamic Republic fights for its survival.

***The views expressed in this article are the author’s own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera’s editorial stance.***

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