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Iran's 'Now What' Moment

By Farideh Farhi

February 17, 2010

After eight tumultuous months, during which attention from all sides of Iran's political spectrum as well as anxious watchers around the world focused on a series of street clashes between protesters and the government's security forces, an eerie calm has taken hold in Iran.

The government's ability to control the aesthetics of street demonstrations on the occasion of the revolution's 31st anniversary on Feb. 11 has once again confirmed the robust nature of the Iranian state, which used its long experience with government-sponsored demonstrations to stage what it now claims was a decisive "show of unity" involving "50 million" people "to bury the corpse of sedition."

This is a significant development insofar as it disabuses policymakers outside Iran, as well as a large number of Iranian exiles, of the fantasy of the impending doom of the Islamic Republic or the belief that substantive change in Iran can or will come quickly.

Yet, despite the government's proclaimed unity, nothing that happened on Feb. 11 suggests that the fundamental cleavages that have rocked Iran in the past few months have been overcome.

Indeed, the only message of Feb. 11 is that, by spending a tremendous amount of resources and energy on security, arrests and mobilization, the government can control the crowds.

Reports from a variety of participants suggest that many supporters of the opposition that has come to be known as the Green Movement did come out, but simply did not know what to do or how to make their presence felt in the streets. In addition, the regime's deployment of abundant numbers of security personnel ensured that anyone who did make his or her presence known was swiftly pulled out of the crowd, led away or arrested.

In other words, the security and intelligence organizations managed the stage so effectively that, despite the attendance of more than 400 foreign journalists and photographers, the presence of the government's supporters dominated the coverage.

This was achieved not only by the massive security presence, but also by limiting the movement of foreign journalists; restricting – and, at times, even preventing – access to the Internet and cellular communications networks; the pre-emptive arrest of suspected protest organizers; and preventing the participation of recognized Green leaders, notably Mir Hussein Moussavi and his spouse Zahra Rahnavard, Mehdi Karroubi and former president Mohammad Khatami, through intimidation and pre-meditated mob attacks.

The fact that, unlike the protests during Ashura on Dec. 27, no one was killed last week added to the impressiveness of the government's efficiency in controlling the streets, a striking contrast to the eight months that followed the disputed June elections.

But managing the stage and controlling the crowds on any given day are not the same as actually resolving the problems and grievances that have repeatedly brought protesters into the streets. Unless some of these are addressed, the Iranian state will remain on edge, vigilant, and engaged in a permanent crackdown that will effectively undermine the country's economic and regional ambitions.

The fact that some Green Movement activists may now be less inclined to use official holidays to mount their protests — or even be pushed underground — will make dissent less predictable and thus significantly more difficult to control without the expenditure of even more state resources for the purposes of repression.

It is this dilemma that the Iranian leaders must address in the coming months. Even if it is accepted that the Green Movement is disheartened and the government "victorious," the country's multi-voiced and faction-ridden leadership cannot simply walk away from the events of the past eight months and avoid the "what now" question.

The country, after all, remains the same as before Feb. 11.

Iran's political system, with its bickering elites, remains as dysfunctional as ever. And President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's administration is still perceived as incompetent even by many of its conservative backers at a time when the government faces the dual challenge of embarking upon what it calls the "economic surgery" of reforming the country's unwieldy subsidy system and thwarting growing foreign pressures to curb the country's nuclear program.

To be sure, facing simultaneous economic and external challenges is nothing new for the Iranian leadership. During the Iran-Iraq War, the government did precisely that by relying on the post-revolutionary spirit of sacrifice and unity in the face of extreme adversity.

But, as pointed out by the conservative editor of Ayandehnews, Foad Sadeghi, the still-unaddressed internal divisions have turned Iran's dual challenge into a triple one, making overcoming the first two unlikely, if not impossible, without addressing the third.

It must be considered a sign of the raw nerve this conundrum struck that Sadeghi, whose brother was killed in the Iran-Iraq War and who was himself an active member of Basij militia while studying at the highly politicized Amir Kabir Technical University in the 1990s, was arrested on the very eve of the anniversary celebration, soon after publishing his commentary.

The Islamic Republic has always made the point that its standing in the world — its moral integrity and its ability to project power — is based on unity at home and on the way it has conducted its domestic affairs.

This was why the anniversary's show of unity was so important to the regime and why President Ahmadinejad himself was so careful not to use polarizing language, as he has done in the past, in his nationally televised address to the crowd gathered at Tehran's Azadi Square.

But a show, as impressive as it may appear, cannot substitute for policies that effectively narrow the wide and persistent gap between government supporters and foes. Mere rhetoric in support of unity cannot overcome the divisive trail of newspaper closures, arrests, beatings, and the abuse and murder of prisoners.

Even Mohammad Khosh-chehreh, a former conservative member of parliament, bemoaned the fact that "the cultural and political persuasion that needed to take place after the election has not taken shape."

"The attempt made to compensate for this weakness through the incurring of security and military costs," he went on, has not led to "correct answers" that require "rational governance" as "the main condition to [achieving] balance."

Khosh-chehreh's point, which is increasingly voiced by other conservatives, is that "extremism" does not belong to elements within the opposition alone. It exists on both sides of the ongoing crisis and propels the drive to expunge the other side from the Iranian political system.

Within the opposition, extremism expresses itself through the calls for the regime's downfall, in effect denying that the Islamic Republic and its current government have any popular base of support beyond those who are "bought" by the system to become its foot soldiers. At the same time, extremism on the conservative side uses violence and arrests not merely to suppress the crowds, but to purge its political foes.

Whether the Iranian leadership opts for a permanent crackdown as the way to manage Iran's highly contentious system or instead takes a more conciliatory route by releasing prisoners and

prosecuting individuals or vigilante groups who have engaged in especially egregious abuses against non-violent protesters in order to reduce some of the pent-up anger remains unknown.

Triumphalism over last week's successful stage management may trump the need to rehabilitate the Iranian state along lines that are more consensual than polarizing

But if there is an eventual move to heal the wounds of the past eight months, it will have to be based on the premise that the permanent-crackdown mode will not be without substantial costs to the regional and domestic ambitions of the Iranian state.

And if there is going to be a change of direction, it is the calculation of these costs that will ultimately help push aside — not purge — those who believe or have a vested interest in repression.