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Iran's post-Islamist generation

By Pepe Escobar

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What has just happened in Iran?

There's no question the military dictatorship of the mullahtariat - that conglomerate uniting President Mahmud Ahmadinejad's faction, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and his clerical circle, and the military/business complex ruled by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) - very much followed to the minute the extraordinary chain of events in [Egypt](#).

And then suddenly they are confronted by a potential remix of Tahrir Square right in their own backyard (Azadi Square in Tehran).

What to do? They could not possibly relax their iron grip on the rules of their game; so to deal with their own protests, they resorted to the usual package of tactics - pre-emptive detention and repression, but stopping short of a bloodbath.

Thus, since early last week at least 30 Iranian activists and journalists got that knock on the door in the dead of night and then "disappeared". A threatening wave of text messages warned people not to attend the rallies. Internet speed was reduced to a crawl and search engines blocked from searching the words "25 Bahman", the date of February 14 according to the Iranian calendar.

This Monday saw hordes of anti-riot police and Bassiji militia on motorbikes riding two-by-two clutching clubs; an orgy of tear gas and paint ball guns; state media tarnishing the mostly young protesters as "seditionists", "spies" and "counter-revolutionaries" who should be crushed; and at

least 1,500 people arrested and transferred to sinister Evin prison, plus two confirmed dead. Shades of Mubarakism, anyone?

Former prime minister Hossein Mousavi is part of the old school establishment. His brand of opposition wants reform from within - not revolution; in this aspect, Iran is definitely not Egypt. Mousavi was very smart. He scheduled a march of solidarity with [Tunisia](#) and Egypt on the same day [Turkish](#) President Abdullah Gul was visiting Tehran.

Any hardcore repression would seriously shatter Tehran's regional reputation with the Arab street, to the benefit of [Turkey](#) - especially with Khamenei claiming that the 1979 Islamic Revolution was a key source of inspiration for Tahrir Square.

Which brings us to the key question of allowing the rally to proceed. The government said the demonstration was illegal. But then there were insistent rumors that Gul had asked the government to issue a last-minute permit - and that was accepted. Central Iranian state news confirmed it. But then Deputy Interior Minister Mahmoud Abbaszadeh Meshkini denied it.

The key point is that this time protesters went all out - targeting Khamenei himself, not Ahmadinejad. The most popular chant was *Mubarak, Ben Ali! Nobateh Seyyed Ali!* ("Mubarak, [Tunisia's] Ben Ali! Now is Seyed Ali [Khamenei's] turn!") And next in line was *Khamenei haya kon! Mubarak ro negah kon!* ("Khamenei, shame on you! Look at Mubarak!")

Estimates about the size of the crowds vary wildly, from only a few hundred involved in what could be characterized as a rebellion of wealthy north Tehran students, to no less than 350,000 people from all walks of life - as quoted by a Tehran bureau correspondent (affiliated to the US Public Broadcasting Service network), filling "a radius of about half a kilometer to 400 meters on both sides of Enghelab Avenue".

What seems to be very important is that for the first time working class areas of Tehran were part of the protest. The Ahmadinejad administration has slashed a lot of subsidies - and basic costs are ballooning; the cost of a metro ticket in Tehran, for instance, is quadrupling. Many people who voted Ahmadinejad in 2009 because of his trademark government handouts are now seriously angry.

Very much aware of Tahrir Square, the regime barred foreign media from any meaningful coverage. Lots of wobbly citizen videos anyway ended up on YouTube. When it did not solemnly ignore the protests, Iranian media whirled adjectives, like the IRGC-linked Fars news agency describing protesters as "hypocrites, monarchists, ruffians and seditionists" who didn't even chant anything vaguely supporting the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings.

Well, for the "seditionists" to take to the streets was in itself a victory - considering the hardcore repression in the summer of 2009. The problem is nobody knew where to go, what to do and how to coordinate the next steps.

Enter the new Green movement

Whether or not former regime loyalists Mousavi, Mehdi Karrubi and former president Mohammad Khatami don't want regime change, the fact is what so far has been known as the Green movement in Iran is now split - with a radical, youth wing openly advocating the end of *Velayat-e Faqih* (rule by jurisprudence). This can only mean all-out revolution - much as what youth groups in Tahrir Square had in mind three weeks ago.

This reborn Green movement is leaderless - just as in Egypt. How sizable it is, no one knows. Perhaps 25 Bahman could be considered ground zero for the real Green movement. What happens next becomes essential - because either the moderates or the more radicalized may have a chance to show to the [Middle East](#) and world public opinion how to call the regime's bluff; how can you possibly censor, beat and arrest the sons of the land as you laud the revolutionary youth of Egypt.

It's up to this new Green movement to prove they are not just an elite sect funded - or influenced - by the West, fighting a self-described Islamic Republic which serves the working class and the wretched poor while standing against American/Zionist imperialism. They must prove they encompass a very broad social base cutting across class, gender, religion and the city vs countryside divide, supported by diverse provinces, and oriented - even if they are leaderless - particularly by women, students, and the working classes.

Iranian banks such as Meli, Saderat and Melat Sepah are very short on cash. A bank run would certainly speed up the new Green movement's success. At the same time, they must show how the second Ahmadinejad term, supported by the supreme leader, has cracked down really hard on labor unions, arrested labor leaders, and repressed protests by everyone from [bus](#) drivers and sugarcane workers to oil workers and teachers.

It has changed labor laws against labor, and embarked on a privatization drive that only served to redistribute Iranian wealth towards the military-intelligence establishment, the IRGC-controlled state within a state.

Nothing less will do. Because now, for the new Green movement, the slogan, like in Egypt, is "We want the regime brought down".

The post-Islamist generation

It's always helpful in critical situations like this to turn to one of the West's top specialists on political Islam; Olivier Roy, director of the Mediterranean program at the European University Institute in [Florence](#).

Roy, writing in *Le Monde*, is one of the few already theorizing that a post-Islamist revolution is now on in the [Middle East](#). Essentially, this can be viewed as a refutation of Khamenei; young people, analyzing the record of the Islamic revolution in Iran, have concluded that it does not solve the practical problems of poverty, corruption, government lies and mediocre economic growth.

The post-Islamist generation is secular (separating politics and religion); pragmatic; non-ideological; and nationalist (without being fanatics of nationalism). It's pluralist and individualistic. It rejects corrupted dictatorships - as well as Islam as a political ideology - as much as it yearns for democracy. For them, even pan-Arabism is not attractive. The values they cherish are universal.

They have better education than their parents; better access to information; still live in the framework of a nuclear family; have less children; but vast legions are unemployed, or live at the margins of society. The fact they are wired and networked allows them to bypass political parties (which are forbidden anyway, in both Egypt and Iran).

Islamist regimes are de facto dictatorships; so they are not attracted to either Iran or Saudi Arabia. Thus those who protested in Egypt are very similar to those who protested against Ahmadinejad in 2009, and against the supreme leader this Monday.

Roy says "a revolt does not make a revolution. The movement does not have leaders, political parties or a platform, something that is coherent with its nature, but that poses the problem of the institutionalization of democracy".

He ranks as "not very probable" that the ending of a dictatorship automatically entails the birth of a liberal democracy, "like Washington hoped for Iraq"; although he could have stressed the difference between a peaceful, passive revolution (in Egypt) and the midwife to democracy being the barrel of a gun (former US president George W Bush's Greater Middle East being born in Iraq).

Additionally, what would be very interesting to compare is the end of the collective humiliation Arabs have felt for almost a century - especially after the Bush invasion and rape of Iraq in 2003 - as opposed to proud Persians defying the empire for the past three decades and now dreaming of Western-style democracy.

Roy also notes how the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) does not embody the young post-Islamist generation's search for another social and economic model; they are conservative in morals and practically neo-liberal in economics. Islamists have become marginal among social movements in the Nile Delta.

The left - as in union militants - is back. The MB from now on may be important as a bellwether of how change will develop. Especially because the middle class in Arab societies is conservative - most of all they want political stability. And Generation Revolt may in the end refuse to structure itself politically - just staying anchored in protest revolt and not plunging in the hard work of conceiving a new regime from scratch.

That old regime change hard-on

And that brings us to Washington's reaction to what has just happened in Iran - and is happening all across the Maghreb-Middle East arc.

For Washington, it's all about their Iranian obsession - and never about those scores of US client states from the Maghreb to the Middle East.

Protests were also brutally suppressed in absolute monarchy Bahrain - home of the US Navy's 5th Fleet, with the US Navy spending \$580 million to double its real estate holdings; Yemen - a failed state where 40% of its 23 million people live on less than \$2 a day and 35% face severe hunger; and Algeria, a brutal military dictatorship. Not to mention Jordan's merry King Abdullah and "Queen Youtube" Rania, an absolute monarchy with a brutal secret service keeping in check tribal leaders and a mass of Palestinian residents (tribal leaders are increasingly trashing Rania's life in the fast lane).

Bahrain is absolutely crucial. The Shi'ite theocracy in Tehran obviously encourages Shi'ites against a Sunni monarchy, while Saudis are literally freaking out, thinking of their Shi'ite-majority eastern provinces, where the oil is. Saudi troops may have already been deployed across the 20-minute causeway that links both countries. And Bahrain is not Qatar or the United Arab Emirates - able to shower petrodollars to buy the silence of anyone politically inclined (anyway they're trying hard).

To deal with all this Washington - not exactly at ease with revolutionary Egypt - seems to have developed a new narrative. Iran's regime is all-out "evil", while Mubarak's was "stable" and relatively OK.

United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton immediately accused the "awful" Iranian government of "hypocrisy" and then wished the Green movement "and the brave people in the streets across cities in Iran the same opportunity that they saw their Egyptian counterparts seize in the last week".

Is this the same Clinton who initially supported "stable" Mubarak against the Egyptian street? And while she's so revved up, why does she not wish the brave people in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Morocco, Algeria, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Libya "the same opportunity that they saw their Egyptian counterparts seize in the last week"?

Someone should urgently haul Olivier Roy to Washington so he may teach them one or two things about the post-Islamist generation.