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# Iran's Latest Revolution Won't Fade Away

**The Green Movement had lofty goals. These working-class protesters just want the life they were promised.**

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By [Geneive Abdo](#) and [Abdallah Hendawy](#).

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The proletariat rises. *Photograph: AFP/Getty Images*

The latest protests in Iran may be largely crushed for now, but the characteristics of this particular uprising suggest that, unlike the so-called Green Revolution of 2009 and other previous waves -- the unrest could continue sporadically for years to come.

Although the rioters -- largely workers and farmers from rural and religiously conservative villages and towns -- were not part of a unified or organized movement, they do have shared grievances that fueled the outrage, and this could be a game changer. Unlike past uprisings in Iran when demonstrators' outcries concerned lofty goals, such as democracy and free elections, these protesters' complaints are practical and urgent, because their lives are far more difficult than those of Iranians in major cities.

For example, the unemployment rate in Tehran --historically the center of political protest until now - is 13 percent <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-unemployment/unemployment-mounts-as-irans-economy-falters-idUSBRE88IOTA20120919>> , according to Iran's Interior Ministry. But in rural areas such as Bashagard and Hormazgan provinces the rate is above 45 percent, and in some cities it is reportedly up to 60 percent <<https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-unemployment-60-percent/28768226.html>> . In the fiscal year that ended in March 2017, the government said it had created 650,000 jobs <<http://www.ilna.ir/Section-economy-4/544308-iran-uneven-development-and-dispute-over-unemployment>> , but 1.5 million new jobs were needed to decrease unemployment.

The urban/rural divide makes this movement different from those in the recent past. First, the people protesting are those the famous Iranian intellectual Ali Shariati, who died shortly before the 1979 Revolution, called the "oppressed." His Islamic liberation theology was very influential in inspiring Iranians to revolt against the Shah's regime for the same reason they took to the streets last month -- the absence of an egalitarian society.

Second, in this recent protest, the urban middle class largely remained on the sidelines. Social movements, whether tightly organized structures or loosely defined uprisings, emerge when a group of people perceive injustice or experience mistreatment. In democratic countries, these grievances are addressed in courtrooms or freely elected parliaments. But in countries such as Iran, where the judiciary, the press and the parliament are all loyalists to the ruling elite, the government spares no effort in crushing an emerging movement.

When the protesters are left with taking their outrage to the streets, the regime often declares their demonstrations illegal. And, in the aftermath of the protests that the regime has declared "crushed," there are widespread reports that some of the demonstrators who were arrested committed suicide in prison.

There have been three main waves of significant unrest since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. In 1999, students from Tehran University began demonstrating when the government closed a reformist newspaper during a rare time when a free press was beginning to emerge. Although the demonstrations spread to some cities, it was primarily student-led, and was crushed after six days. One author of this article -- Geneive -- was on the streets with the protesters at that time. Their main shortcoming was that they could not inspire older, working-class Iranians to join their uprising.

The second round, between 2009 and 2010, came to be known as the Green Movement. The leaders of this uprising managed to mobilize millions of demonstrators in Tehran and around the country for more than a year. The protests began over the credible belief that the 2009 election

of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had been rigged. But the uprisings came to encompass more profound issues, such as the lack of electoral transparency.

In both rounds, the movement was primarily comprised of educated, middle- and upper-class Iranians who demanded free and fair elections, a free press and an end to supreme clerical rule. Some had resources and were able to flee the country to Europe to avoid arrest or simply to resettle for a better life.

In this third wave, outraged protesters are taking their demands to the next level, even though they have not managed to inspire the urban middle class to join them. While it might be true that the protests were triggered by Iran's economic crisis, chants such as "Death to the dictator" and "Death to Hezbollah" show a broader-scale resentment about Iran's ideologically motivated policies. Instead of improving the economy, Iran is spending billions on its military expansionism in the Middle East.

According to one estimate, Lebanese Hezbollah alone receives approximately \$20 million a month from Iranian coffers. Although Iran's leaders' rhetoric since the 1979 revolution has advocated for a pan-Islamic Middle East, where Sunnis and Shiites would unite under Iran's leadership, the country has in fact pursued a pro-Shiite military policy first in Lebanon and then in Syria -- to keep President Bashar al-Assad in power -- then in Iraq, and now in Yemen.

A look back at the statements that Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini made in 1979, shortly after he led the Islamic Revolution, provides a window onto the promises Iran made to its people then -- promises that 40 years later are yet to be realized. "I will bring the oil money to the people's tables," he pledged, according to the hard-line newspaper Kayhan. "In an Islamic state, there is no dictatorship," He added: "Don't buy houses, we will provide houses for all of you."

Khomeini's speeches raised the bar for Iranians' expectations. As the generations developed, younger people who were educated began to feel deprived because their college degrees did not result in jobs. Four decades later, the Iranians whom Khomeini seemed to have in mind, and who depend upon the regime for their economic well-being, have finally taken to the streets. They see that that the regime's hard-liners -- Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards -- care little about their livelihoods.

Khamenei himself controls billions of dollars in secret investments, according to a 2013 investigation <<https://www.reuters.com/investigates/iran/#article/part1>> by Reuters. They are part of an endowment administered by the Headquarters for Executing the Order of the Imam, which was originally founded by Khomeini to confiscate properties Iranians abandoned during and after the revolution.

So what is next? It is important to understand that movements similar to the present one in Iran may rise and fall, but they rarely die completely if the grievances have not been addressed. Under Iran's 2017-2022 development plan, the country would need \$200 billion in annual investment <<https://financialtribune.com/articles/economy-business-and-markets/71391/iran-close-to-finalizing-30b-foreign-finance-deals>> to create the 1.5 million jobs needed to avoid an increase in unemployment. Given Iran's enormous military spending in the Middle East, this level of investment is highly unlikely to be spent for domestic purposes.

As with any social uprising, the unpredictable factor when trying to gauge the longevity of this particular movement is the strength of the state. Just look at the cases of the Arab Spring revolts. In Libya, for example, the weak movements of February 2011 were poised to topple the sclerotic regime of Muammar Qaddafi. By contrast, the powerful and very organized social movement the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt crumbled in the face of the military-backed coup in 2013.

What we are witnessing in Iran now should not be viewed as an isolated outcry, but rather a work in progress, a hybrid momentum that started in 1999 and led by students who later became involved in the Green Movement. They are belatedly joining the current unrest, which is evolving to include new social classes of people who were not at the center of previous protests. As Karl Marx argued, unrest led by the proletariat is a game changer.

Although this momentum has not been linear, neither were the Arab uprisings in 2011. The Iranian demonstrators' demands -- food subsidies, jobs and lower prices -- are perfectly attainable if the regime re-allocates its resources from the military to the economy. The fact that it is highly unlikely to do so, coupled with the demonstrators' resentment, could inspire more protests in the near future that may forge a broader alliance between the middle class and the

working class. It is unlikely that this simmering social movement will wait another decade to rear its head.

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