

Middle Eastern Upheavals

Mixed Response in Iran

by Ali Alfoneh

It is too early to tell whether the revolutions sweeping across the Arab world will prove the long awaited “third wave of democratization” or will merely substitute Islamist totalitarianism for the existing secular, authoritarian regimes. It is clear, however, that no regional regime is immune to their impact, not even the self-proclaimed vanguard of permanent world revolutions, the Islamist regime in Tehran.

Perceptions in Iran of the nature of the “Arab Spring” vary. While describing it as an “Islamic awakening” inspired by Iran’s 1979 revolution, the clerics have not failed to indicate their determination to suppress future dissent and to rebuff any foreign intervention. By contrast, despite tracing the Arab revolts to Iran’s June 12, 2009 presidential elections, the opposition has thus far refrained from publicly challenging the regime though more radical forms of resistance may be brewing beneath the surface. Thus, the winds of change have apparently radicalized both rival sides.

PEOPLE POWER IS GOOD FOR SOME ARABS ...

Both regime and opposition responses to the Arab upheavals have varied from case to case, but there has been a clear consistency in the opposition’s moral support for all pro-democracy movements whereas the regime has endorsed “people power” only in countries allied with the United States but not in those aligned with Tehran, such as Syria. There was also a great deal of caution in both the regime’s and the opposition leadership’s responses during the first phase of the uprisings though ordinary opposition members found quick inspiration for their cause as the events unfolded in the region.

Public protests against Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali broke out on December 17, 2010, and by January 15, 2011, the Saudi government announced that it was hosting the former Tunisian president and his family for an unspecified period of time.¹ The first official Iranian coverage of the Tunisian events appeared on the Islamic Republic’s Arabic language al-Alam TV on December 28, eleven days after the protests had begun.² The first newspaper editorial on Tunisia appeared in the January 4 edition of *Iran*, more than three weeks after the beginning of the Tunisian uprising.³ On January 16, the day after Ben Ali’s arrival in the Saudi capital, Ali Larijani, speaker of parliament, made the first official comment on the situation, accusing the United States and the West more generally of being “behind repression and pres-

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1 Al-Jazeera TV (Doha), Jan. 23, 2011.

2 *BBC Monitoring* (London), Dec. 28, 2010.

3 *Ibid.*, Jan. 4, 2011.

asures imposed on the people of Tunisia under the rule of its former president.²⁴ Surprisingly, the otherwise opinionated President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad made no comment on Tunisia before January 19⁵ while Supreme Leader Ali Khamene'i made his position known on February

The regime's analysis of the Libyan experience has strengthened its resolve to pursue its nuclear goals.

4. Addressing the people of Tunisia and Egypt in Arabic after delivering the Friday prayer sermon in Tehran, Khamene'i portrayed himself as "your brother in religion," described President Husni Mubarak as a "traitor dictator," and said that the events in Tunisia and Egypt were "natural ex-

tensions of Iran's Islamic revolution in 1979."⁶

The Islamic Republic's official responses to the Egyptian revolution were swifter than in the Tunisian case. The first protests in Egypt started on January 25, 2011, and on February 11—the anniversary of Iran's 1979 revolution—Mubarak resigned his post and handed over power to the Supreme Military Council.⁷ Again, Larijani was the first official to refer to the situation, toward the end of January⁸—two weeks after the protests had begun but well before Mubarak stepped down. Khamene'i's statement of February 4, which also preceded Mubarak's resignation,⁹ shows that the Islamic Republic had an easier time taking a position on Egypt. A few hours before Mubarak announced his resignation, Ahmadinejad, addressing the crowds on the occasion of the anniversary of the 1979 revolution, claimed ownership of the revolutionary movements in the entire region.¹⁰

Yet from Tehran's point of view, people power is good for some Arabs but not all Arabs.

Though there was little love lost between the Islamist regime and those in power in Libya and Yemen, Ramin Mehmanparast, the Foreign Ministry spokesman, condemned NATO's airstrikes, which aimed at defending the very same people to whom Tehran had extended its rhetorical support, catching the regime in a bit of a contradiction.¹¹ As for Damascus, it was completely exempted from the regime's rhetorical support for people power as there were no commentaries and very little press coverage of the Syrian protests, which began on January 26.¹² Instead of supporting the protesters, Larijani met Syrian prime minister Muhammad Naji Otri on March 10 to discuss the regional developments.¹³

Official Iranian responses to the crisis in Bahrain came fast but were generally more cautious than reactions to the Egyptian and Libyan crises though some Iranian authorities have claimed the tiny Persian Gulf emirate, with its majority Shiite population, as Iranian territory. *Kayhan* editor Hossein Shariatmadari, Khamenei's unofficial spokesman, has on several occasions described Ahmadinejad's trip to Bahrain as "a provincial trip."¹⁴ The Bahraini opposition declared February 14 an anti-government "Day of Rage," and by March 16, the Bahraini security forces, supported by Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) units, had succeeded in suppressing the opposition.¹⁵

The first Iranian editorial on Bahrain appeared in the February 16 issue of *Quds*, which stressed the need for reforms in the emirate.¹⁶ Stepping up the criticism, on February 17, an unidentified source at the Iranian Foreign Ministry described, in an interview on the English language Press TV, the developments in Bahrain as an "internal affair" but called on Manama to "exercise restraint."¹⁷ On Febru-

4 Ibid., Jan. 16, 2011.

5 Ibid., Jan. 19, 2011.

6 Ibid., Feb. 4, 2011.

7 Al-Jazeera TV, Feb. 14, 2011.

8 *The New York Times*, Jan. 29, 2011.

9 *The Christian Science Monitor* (Boston), Feb. 4, 2011.

10 Ibid., Feb. 11, 2011.

11 Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting World Service (Tehran), Mar. 21, 2011.

12 Reuters, Mar. 30, 2011.

13 *BBC Monitoring*, Mar. 10, 2011.

14 *Asr-e Iran* (Tehran), Nov. 20, 2008.

15 Reuters, Mar. 16, 2011.

16 *BBC Monitoring*, Feb. 16, 2011.

17 Ibid., Feb. 18, 2011.

ary 19, Amir Abdollahian, the Foreign Ministry's director-general for the Persian Gulf and Middle East, stressed that "the demands of Bahraini people can be achieved by democratic and peaceful means; it is regretful to see that the police have resorted to violence in that country."¹⁸ Again, Larijani took the official lead by accusing Washington of complicity in a "violent crackdown of popular uprisings" in Bahrain while addressing the parliament on February 20, 2011.¹⁹ He was followed three days later by 191 Iranian parliamentarians who issued a statement condemning the "merciless massacre of Muslim people in Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, and Morocco."²⁰ On February 27, 2011, Hassan Firouzabadi, chief of the General Staff, attacked the United States as well, calling it "the flag-bearer of neo-racism."²¹ Khamene'i, however, did not comment on Bahrain before his March 21 New Year address.²²

... BUT BAD FOR IRANIANS

The Islamic Republic may, at least rhetorically, support the idea of people power for the Tunisians, Egyptians, the Bahrainis, and the Yemenis, but Iranians apparently belong to the same category as the Syrians for whom people power is bad.

On February 6, Mehdi Karrubi and Mir-

18 Ibid., Feb. 19, 2011.

19 Ibid., Feb. 20, 2011.

20 Ibid., Feb. 23, 2011.

21 Ibid., Feb. 27, 2011.

22 "Payam-e Nowrouzi-ye 1390," Office of the Supreme Leader Sayyid Ali Khamene'i (Tehran) Mar. 21, 2011.

Photo will not display.

In his Friday sermon on February 4, 2011, Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i (standing in front), hailed the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings as "natural extensions of Iran's Islamic revolution in 1979" that would inflict "irreparable defeat" on U.S. and Israeli influence.

Hossein Mousavi in a joint letter asked the Interior Ministry for a permit to demonstrate "in solidarity with popular movements of the region, especially the liberation seeking revolts of the people of Tunisia and Egypt."²³ Not surprisingly, the permit was denied, and the two opposition leaders, together with former president Mohammed Khatami, were put under house arrest.²⁴ As the state-controlled media pounded the opposition movement as "seditionists," Basij militia chief Mohammed-Reza Naghdi warned that the "Western spy agencies are trying to find a mentally degenerate person [to] self-immolate in Tehran so they can liken this with the beginning of the events in Tunisia and Egypt."²⁵

Ignoring the demonstration ban, the opposition rallied on February 14 and March 1 with slogans connecting the fate of the Tunisian and Egyptian dictators with Supreme Leader Khamene'i: "Mubarak, Ben Ali, it is now the turn

23 *Rah-e Sabz* (Tehran), Feb. 6, 2011.

24 Bloomberg News (New York), Feb. 28, 2011.

25 *Asr-e Iran*, Feb. 13, 2011.



Though Bahrain, with its majority Shiite population, had long been claimed by Tehran as its own, official Iranian responses to the crisis in the emirate were generally more cautious than the regime's reactions to the Egyptian and Libyan crises, with Washington—rather than Riyadh, which had sent troops to suppress the protests—being accused of a “violent crackdown of the popular uprisings.”

of Seyyed Ali [Khamene'i],”²⁶ “Khamene'i, Mubarak, congratulations with your marriage!”²⁷ and “Those in Iran with motorcycles or those in Cairo with camels, death to the dictator.”²⁸

Although limited to the major population centers and incapable of mobilizing the millions who had joined the protest movement in the immediate aftermath of the 2009 elections, the anti-regime demonstrations unmasked the duplicity and double standards of the Islamist regime: People power is good for some Arabs but not for Iranians.

LESSONS LEARNED

The regime has concluded that it must decisively suppress dissent to prevent it from

²⁶ “Mubarak, Ben Ali. Now It's Time for Seyyed Ali,” YouTube, Mar. 1, 2011.

²⁷ Iran Press Service (London), Feb. 14, 2011.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, Feb. 14, 2011.

snowballing into a major crisis yet seems neither willing nor capable of liberalizing the political system once the crisis is over. Khamene'i's March 21 speech in Mashhad derided the opposition forces in Iran as “[Western] agents, weak, ghoulish individuals who are prisoners of their egos.”²⁹ Such words leave little room for mutual accommodation.

The regime's analysis of the Libyan experience has also strengthened its resolve to pursue its nuclear goals as well as its intent to shape regional developments according to its worldview. In his address, Khamene'i specifically referred to Libya's cooperation with the West, which he believed had led to Mu'ammarr al-Qaddafi's problems: “In recent years, he did a great service to the West,

which realized that a very simple threat drove this gentleman to dismantle his nuclear capabilities.” Khamene'i continued:

Take a look at the position of our nation and the position [the Libyan regime] finds itself in. Our nation witnessed a U.S.-led offensive against Iran's nuclear quest, making military threats, pledging an attack, and what not. The Iranian authorities not only did not retreat when confronted by the enemy, but every year they increased their nuclear capabilities. Over there [in Libya], the people saw that the regime, in the face of Western threats, or Western incentives as they call it, gave the orders to dismantle its nuclear capabilities. Like putting a sour lollypop or chocolate into a child's mouth, they gave them incentives, and they lost everything forever! Well, the nation sees this, its heart bleeds, and its pride

²⁹ “Bayanat Dar Haram-e Mottahar-e Razavi Dar Aghaaz-e Sal,” The Office of the Supreme Leader Sayyid Ali Khamene'i, Mar. 21, 2011.

is wounded. This can be seen in all the countries in which the people revolted.³⁰

Such statements do not provide much hope for a peaceful solution to curbing the Islamic Republic's nuclear ambitions. Khamene'i also indirectly warned Washington's allies of U.S. perfidy:

These countries [the United States and its allies] have always supported the dictators. They supported Husni Mubarak to the last possible moment, but upon realizing that he could no longer be saved, threw him away! Let this be a lesson to the heads of state dependent on the United States. When they are no longer useful, it will throw them away just like a piece of old cloth and will ignore them!³¹

The opposition, however, may also have learned at least one lesson: the need for a division of labor, or even a split, between such reformists on the one hand as Mousavi, Karrubi, and Khatami, who against all wisdom continue to call for reforming the system, and on the other

hand, a clandestine, radical opposition, which no longer believes the regime is capable of self-reform and, therefore, might pursue revolutionary goals.

CONCLUSION

The winds of change sweeping across the Middle East and North Africa have indeed reached the shores of Iran though at no point did the 2011 anti-government demonstrations threaten the regime's survival. Better geared to suppressing internal dissent than other regional dictatorships, the clerics probably have better prospects of weathering the current crisis, but as long as they are unwilling or incapable of liberalizing the political system, increased repression may result in the surfacing of more radical opposition movements inside Iran.

At no point did the 2011 anti-government demonstrations threaten the regime's survival.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.



Palestinians Dream of a Caliphate

Ramallah (Wafa)—A new survey by Near East Consulting (NEC) published Wednesday revealed that 72 percent of Palestinians surveyed believe that the Palestinians do not have a partner for peace in Israel.

About how the respondents identify themselves, the majority, 57 percent, identified themselves as Muslims; 21 percent identified themselves as Palestinians first, 19 percent as human beings first, and 5 percent as Arabs first.

The increase in adherence to religious identity is also reflected in the system preferred by the Palestinian people.

About 40 percent of the respondents said that they believe that the Islamic caliphate is the best system for Palestinians; 24 percent chose a system like one of the Arab countries, and 12 percent prefer a system like one of the European countries.

The survey was conducted on a random sample of 844 Palestinians over the age of 18 in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, including East Jerusalem.

Palestinian News and Information Agency, May 4, 2011