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USADI Commentary

The six days that shook Iran

On July 9, 1999, six days of student-led uprising against the ruling fundamentalists shook the regime to its foundations, marking a new chapter in the history of Iranian people's two decades of long struggle to overthrow tyranny and establish a democratic and secular government. With the blessing of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and President Mohammad Khatami, uniformed and plain-clothes security forces brutally cracked down on students and thousands of other Iranians who had joined them. Several thousands were arrested and hundreds killed or wounded.

Nevertheless, if not suppressed, the uprising, which quickly spread to nearly two dozen other cities, had the potential of sweeping the theocracy from power. In a cover-page story, *The Economist* magazine billed the uprising as "Iran's Second Revolution" and a commentary in the CBS News said that "a sense of revolution has returned to Iran."

After nearly two decades of relentless struggle, the movement for democracy and popular sovereignty - the unfulfilled aspirations of the 1979 anti-monarchic revolution - burst out in the open on July 9 for the world to see. The student movement, always a vanguard in Iranians' century-long struggle against despotism linked up with nationwide resistance of Iranian people in demanding the overthrow of the clerical state in its totality. The students, chanting "Death to despotism, Death to dictators," exploded out of university campuses and into various neighborhoods where they were joined by thousands of citizens from all walks of life, particularly the young generation.

This year, the ruling mullahs, reeling from political and diplomatic fall-out of the sham parliamentary election in February, and having to deal with anti-government demonstrations and strikes since January, put into effect elaborate security and anti-riot measures to thwart this year's anniversary protests. The plan, under the absurd pretext of helping with the traffic, went into action several months ago and included flooding Tehran's major streets and intersections, especially around university campuses, with security and special anti-riot forces. Even more ridiculous was the excuse for shutting down Tehran University on July: "disinfect[ing] the campus because of cockroach infestation."

Reports from Iran indicate that hundreds of students were arrested in recent weeks and hundreds more summoned to courts for questioning. The Interior Ministry also banned any student gathering outside of the capital's main universities, saying it was unnecessary to commemorate the anniversary.

In a related development, dissident political prisoners in Tehran's Evin Prison, including many students who have been imprisoned in recent years staged a hunger strike to protest this new wave of crackdown and widespread arrest of university students and youths. Students at several other universities also joined the hunger strike.

Despite all these suppressive measures, reports from Iran indicate that as night fell on July 8, thousands of students and youths took to the streets in various parts of Tehran and other cities. Iranians called Farsi broadcasting media based abroad to reiterate their determination to defy the mullahs' security forces.

The July 9 student-led uprising had an undisputable impact on hastening the eventual fall of Iran's ruling tyranny. It gave Iranians self-confidence and a sense of power and legitimacy in their demands for democracy and justice. It tore the façade of the bogus champions of human rights and reform, such as Khatami. More importantly, it strengthened the historic ties between the student movement and the nationwide struggle for democracy.

The imprisonments, tortures, and executions, public stoning, amputations and floggings, however, have utterly failed in undermining the resolve of the democracy movement against ruling religious fascism to bring this regime down as a first step toward the establishment of democracy, secularism, popular sovereignty and the rule of law in Iran.

Since 1999, Tehran has continued to kill, maim, and imprison dissidents while Western democracies, particularly European nations, have expanded lucrative trade with Iran. Thanks to advanced anti-riot gear and other equipment bought from abroad, the mullahs are better equipped now than they were in 1999, to arrest, and torture students, women and the youths.

As Tehran is turning the heat on dissent inside the country and acted increasingly belligerent abroad by continuing its nuclear weapons program, spreading its fundamentalist network in Iraq and recruiting suicide bombers, the free world has arrived at a historic cross road: To continue to appease the mullahs ruling Iran or to side with Iranian people and their struggle to establish an Iran free of torture, terror, fundamentalism, and weapons of mass destruction.

The choice, no doubt, will have strategic reverberations in Iran, the Middle East and the Western world for decades to come. This is our chance to be on the right side of history by supporting Iranians and anti-fundamentalist democratic opposition forces who are indeed the true vehicle of change in Iran.

Associated Press

July 8, 2004

Rights Group Calls On Iran To Release Student Detainees

CAIRO -- Iranian authorities should release student protesters detained in violent demonstrations at Tehran University that began five years ago Thursday, a New York-based human rights group said.

Human Rights Watch, in a statement obtained by The Associated Press in Egypt, said an unknown number of students remained in custody out of the thousands it claimed had been initially arrested.

"Five years after the Tehran University protests, it's time for the Iranian government to release the peaceful protesters," Sarah Leah Whitson, executive director of Human Rights Watch Middle East and North Africa Division, said in the statement.

"The government also needs to hold plainclothes militia accountable for the attacks on students that year."

Human Rights Watch said several students had been sentenced to death, but authorities later commuted their punishments to time in prison. It also accused Iranian security authorities of torturing many imprisoned students and preventing them from seeing their lawyers.

"While many of those initially detained were released, an unknown number of student protesters remain in prison," the group alleged, including Ahmed Batebi, Abbas Fakhravar, Manouchehr Mohammadi, his brother Akbar Mohammadi and Mehrdad Lohrsabi.

The anniversary of the beginning of the 1999 protests is usually accompanied by student demonstrations against the country's hard-line authorities, which are controlled by ruling conservative Shiite Muslim clerics.

Subsequent protests marking the 1999 demonstrations, which were the biggest and most violent anti-government action since the 1979 revolution, have been met by strong crackdowns by Iranian authorities.

Agence France Presse

July 8, 2004

Rights groups target Iran regime on anniversary of student protests

TEHRAN (AFP) - Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch challenged Iran's clerical regime over what they said were widespread incidences of torture committed in the wake of student-led unrest five years ago.

In a statement released in London coinciding with the anniversary of the July 1999 disturbances, Amnesty called on Iran's judiciary to undertake an impartial review of the trials of detained demonstrators.

It pointed to the cases of two detained activists, Akbar Mohammadi and Ahmad Batebi, who have complained of being subject to torture -- including being held under a "drain full of excrement" -- to exact confessions.

"To Amnesty International's knowledge, no open, independent investigation has ever been conducted into the allegations of ill treatment and torture," the statement said, adding that several fleeing students were granted asylum in European countries "where they received treatment for a range of incidences of torture, including instrumental rape."

New York-based Human Rights Watch called on the Iranian government to "immediately release all student detainees still imprisoned for peaceful dissent".

"In the weeks following the protests, thousands of students were arrested, taken away by the busload, and held in detention centers and prisons. While many of those initially detained were released, an unknown number of student protestors remain in prison," the group said.

"In subsequent years, students across the country have commemorated the anniversary of the July 1999 protestors with peaceful demonstrations and public speeches. This year, however, with repression at its highest since 1999, the government's message to students is clear: those who speak out will be detained, punished, and worse."

During anti-regime protests last summer, some 4,000 people were arrested. On the anniversary itself in 2003, protestors merely took to the streets of Tehran in their cars, honking their horns, with the sidewalks and universities patrolled by huge numbers of police.

Meanwhile in Canada, the son of an Iranian-Canadian photographer who died in an Iranian jail a year ago Saturday, blasted a looming court proceeding on the case as a "farce." Zahra Kazemi, 54, was arrested in June 2003 for taking photographs outside Tehran's notorious Evin prison. She died in hospital on July 10, 2003 from a brain hemorrhage caused by a blow to the head.

"This trial is the same farce that it has always been," Kazemi's son, Stephan Hachemi told AFP on Thursday.

"Nobody has asked me to take part in the enquiry and no one has told me anything," he said.

International press watchdog group Reporters Without Borders marked the anniversary of Kazemi's death by warning that impunity would triumph.

July 9, 1999: A look back

Iranians Want Dictators Out, Associated Press, July 10, 1999: One day after a violent police raid on a Tehran University dormitory, thousands of demonstrators protested Saturday outside the school, demanding the resignation of powerful hard-liners in the Islamic government.

The protest and others that erupted Saturday around Iran were sharply reminiscent of scenes from the Islamic Revolution of the late 1970s. "Death to despotism! Death to dictators!" protesters chanted in Tehran, according to witnesses who spoke on condition of anonymity by telephone.

By late Saturday, 25,000 people had gathered -- including students from other universities and ordinary Iranians. Their shouts of "students unite" reverberated in the night.

Most protesters were students, but there were many others, including women and children, the witnesses said.

"This was exactly like the revolution," said one man at the rally where several supporters of hard-liners were badly beaten.

Students Plan Fresh Protests Despite, Reuters, July 12, 1999: Pro-democracy students in Iran planned fresh protests on Monday against a bloody crackdown on colleagues... Students had earlier vowed to continue their protests, which have grown in size and the radical tone of its slogans since they began on Thursday with a small peaceful rally supporting press freedom.

Students have stepped up demands for the resignation of senior officials in a crisis that has shaken the Islamic republic and put pressure on Khatami. Thousands of students, many wearing scarves on their faces to hide their identities, earlier marched in Tehran streets, confronting police which often retreated.

"I am going to kill my brothers' murderers," chanted students, many wearing scarves over their faces to hide their identities. Drivers honked their horns in support of the students, while residents offered them iced water to counter sweltering heat.

Tear Gas And Gunpowder Fill Night Air, Reuters, July 12, 1999: Tear gas, mixed with the stench of gunpowder and burning tires, filled the streets of central Tehran Monday, as police and club-wielding Islamic vigilantes set upon students to end five days of pro-democracy protests. Lines of ambulances headed down the main thoroughfares near Tehran University throughout the evening, as Islamic militants tried to storm student positions outside the main dormitory complex. Sympathy demonstrations by students were reported in several Iranian cities on Monday, including Mashhad, Yazd and Shahroud.

Tehran Bazaar Closes As Street Battles Spread, Reuters, July 13, 1999: Shops in Tehran's main bazaar closed on Tuesday after fighting between pro-democracy protesters and police and Islamic vigilantes spread to streets around the capital's main commercial district. Meanwhile, state television interrupted its regular programming to call for calm and warn about an enemy plot to cause internal differences and threaten Iran's security.

Top Official Vows to "Clean-up" the "Counter-Revolutionaries", Agence France Presse, July 14, 1999: Students arrested during the past two days of violent protests will be tried as "counter-revolutionaries," a top official told a pro-regime rally here Wednesday promising a "sweeping clean-up."

Those responsible for violent clashes with the security forces here on Monday and Tuesday are "bandits and saboteurs," said Hassan Rouhani, the deputy speaker of parliament and secretary of Iran's top security body, the Supreme National Security Council. "Our revolution needs a sweeping clean-up and this will help advance the cause of the regime and the revolution," he told the crowd.

"The atmosphere of our society has been dirtied over the past few days," he said. "Although our revolution has seen this kind of thing before it appears that we need a new cleaning again." Rouhani warned that those picked up over the past two days would be tried as "counter-revolutionaries" and as "corrupt of the earth." Both charges normally carry the death penalty.

He said that some of those arrested had "... are known members of counter-revolutionary groups."

Rouhani issued a stern warning against "foreign interference" in the unrest which has rocked the Islamic Republic and said Tehran would respond to any country supporting the demonstrations. He warned that Iran would "respond at an opportune time."

Sense of Revolution Has Returned to Tehran, CBS News (Internet Edition), July 14, 1999: ... CBS News Senior European Correspondent Tom Fenton reports that the protests were strikingly similar to those that broke out in Iran during the Islamic revolution, in which Iranian students took to the streets to topple the corrupt regime of the Shah.

But the revolution... has finally run out of steam. In recent years, public resentment has been rising against incompetent rule by mullahs who have grown corrupt in power... The recent clashes were not the first... but this time, there is the likelihood that things could spin out of control. Students' complaints -- which began with calls for greater freedom -- now include demands that heads roll at the top. Clerical heads.

Even Khatami is under fire. One student leader has said, "We are not going to be satisfied until people at the top resign. Khatami has to do something or resign."... After a 20-year hiatus, an unmistakable sense of revolution has returned to Tehran.

"These Are The Last Days of This Regime," The New York Times, July 15, 1999: After six days of nationwide pro-democracy protests... crowds staged counter-demonstrations ... The Government blocked all mobile telephone communication in Teheran in an effort to prevent speedy conversations among students, journalists and would-be saboteurs, officials said... The television did not show the people who left the rally here long before it ended or the Popsicle-licking marchers who preferred window-shopping to chanting... Plainclothes security officers carrying walkie-talkies carefully followed people who did not blend in, even following them into shops...

... Along the fringes of the counter-demonstration, there was a quiet chorus of dissent... An elderly man watching the demonstration from a side street, said over and over: "Have patience. Have patience." He said he had seen many things in his long life. "These are the last days of this regime," he said. "I'm old and experienced. I know what I'm talking about."...

Angry Iranian Students Lash Out at Khatami, Agence France Presse, July 15, 1999: Iranian students bitterly criticized President Mohammad Khatami on Thursday, saying he tricked them with empty promises after the Islamic regime crushed their growing pro-reform movement.

"I can't believe it's all over," said one disillusioned student, just a day after a conservative rally in the streets of Tehran effectively ended hopes Khatami would satisfy their demands for change in the Islamic republic.

"Now we can see he's just a mullah like all the others," said another, echoing the anger felt by many here after last week's protests against the closure of a popular reformist newspaper ended in a bloody crackdown by police.

In perhaps the harshest blow to the hopes of students, Khatami himself decreed Tuesday that the protests would no longer be tolerated by the government.

Tehran Blames Opposition For Student Uprising, Reuters, July 18, 1999: Iranian authorities said on Sunday that some of those arrested in last week's violent unrest were linked to exiled opposition groups. "It has been established that some of those arrested, with a major role in the riots and (orchestrating) slogans, have links with anti-revolutionary elements outside the country," the intelligence ministry said in a statement.

"Based on confessions, some of the more active ones were being supported and guided from abroad and continuously received money in their bank accounts," the statement said. The Mujahideen Khalq is the largest and most active Iranian dissident group.

What Next in Iran?, Voice Of America (On The Line), July 24, 1999: This month, Iranian students and others mounted the largest and most violent demonstrations since the 1979 Islamic revolution. Students, chanting "long live liberty, death to despotism," protested against government repression in Tehran and many other cities... Khalid Duran is a Middle East analyst and editor of the journal, *TransIslam*.

Khalid Duran: Khatami certainly is not what the world press has made him out to be over the last year or two... I worked in Hamburg in Germany for a number of years, and he was imam at the Iranian mosque over there... Khatami certainly did not impress us as an intellectual... he is a first-class conspirator,... he is an architect of this system, of this revolution... He had to reveal himself as a man of this regime, of the system, who just has that lovely smile, but nothing else than that.

... I think that some of the Iranian opposition forces have a hand in this protest. They have become stronger in recent years. The much maligned people's Mojahedin have turned out to be a force. They have been so many times declared to be almost non-existent. And it has been said that they are very propagandistic, and not as strong as they make themselves out to be. They have recently shown themselves to be a force to reckon with, inside Iran... Otherwise these protests, again, are not that unorganized as they are sometimes described here.

The US Alliance for Democratic Iran (USADI), is an independent, non-profit organization, which aims to advance a US policy on Iran that will benefit America's interests, through supporting Iranian people's aspirations for a democratic, secular, and peaceful government, free of tyranny, fundamentalism, weapons of mass destruction, and terrorism. The USADI is not affiliated with any government agencies, political groups or parties.

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