

The Silence of Fear Shattered by the Voice of Protests in Iran

Written by Afshin Shahi

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AFSHIN SHAHI, FEB 18 2011

For many people, February 14 is about exchanging red roses and expressing their sentiments to their loved ones. However, this year Valentine's Day coincided with mass political activism in Iran, which reinvigorated the Green Movement. After the heavy political repression, which was followed by the mass protests in 2009, there was uncertainty over whether, once again, people would come onto the streets to express their opposition. For about a year the politics of fear has been at its peak in Iran, as hundreds of people were arrested and the regime used every instrument of trepidation to prevent any further escalation. Despite the heavy crackdown on opposition forces, the turnout on February 14 was much more noticeable than had been predicted by many observers. More than numbers and slogans, the protests – which took place in Tehran and other major cities – had the major symbolic value of indicating that the veil of fear is no longer enough to silence the opposition.

Since the new year, almost every eight hours someone has been executed in Iran. Among them are many political prisoners who were arrested after the first major uprising in 2009. The "crime" of these executed prisoners, such as Kazemi and Hajaghaei, included filming and distributing videos of the protests that followed the controversial presidential election in 2009. Many prominent human rights lawyers shared the same fate as their clients. For example, Nasrin Sotoudeh has been jailed for 11 years on charges of "acts against national security", "anti-regime propaganda" and belonging to the Centre for Human Rights Defenders. An internationally recognized film-maker, Jafar Panahi, was given a six-year jail sentence as well as a 20-year ban on making or directing any movies, or giving any form of interview with Iranian or foreign media. Panahi was also banned from leaving the country. It goes without saying that such heavy-handed acts by the regime stoke fear in the heart of the opposition.

However, the escalation of protests on February 14 proved the regime's politics of fear can only work on a short-term basis. Tens of thousands of people responded to the call from the opposition leaders and went out onto the streets to defy the state. The slogans were even more daring and radical than before. Many protesters were calling upon the Supreme Leader to follow the path of Mubarak and Ben Ali and relinquish power. It seems that the unfolding events in Tunisia and Egypt inspired many Iranians to think the unthinkable. However, the regime has not been inactive in response to recent events. A few days prior to the protest, the security forces increased pressure on opposition leaders and arrested many influential people. On Monday, all the major streets in Tehran and other big cities were flooded by the security forces brutally preventing any mass gatherings. There were reports about many casualties and at least two dead among the protesters. Hundreds of people are reported to have been arrested and their fate remains unclear.

Following Monday's protests many MPs in the Iranian Parliament called for the execution of Mousavi, Kahrubi and the former president Khatami. Although hitherto a pragmatic state that has not persecuted these individuals, it is all too plausible to imagine that the regime will increase their pressure upon these political figures in light of the protests.

The protest on Monday demoralised the regime and it is expected it will resort to more violence to maintain the status quo. The Islamic Republic is not subject to pressure from global public opinion; hence the state does not need to be apologetic about using greater violence in dealing with what they perceive to be an existential threat. Unlike Egypt and Tunisia, the Iranian regime does not depend heavily upon the west. The Egyptian army could not be indifferent to

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public opinion in the US as a considerable part of its budget is from the US taxpayers. While Mubarak was keen to cling on to power, the army – which was an integral part of his repressive regime – saw him as a liability to its own credibility. Tunisia is equally reliant upon the west, so the regime could not be indifferent to public opinion abroad. Although both states were repressive by definition, they had certain “vulnerabilities” that the Iranian regime does not have. Unlike Egypt and Tunisia, the Islamic Republic of Iran can afford politically to cling onto the politics of fear without much consideration for global public opinion.

At this stage, the regime has no interest in compromise and political reconciliation. Hence, they will increasingly rely on the politics of the iron fist to maintain the status quo. However, the politics of fear can be effective only as long as it silences the opposition and prevents social disobedience. Once a state heavily depends upon fear to maintain the status quo it becomes fragile by default, because as soon as the veil of fear is removed its chains of monopoly start to evaporate. Indeed, the protest on February 14 made the regime’s repressive policies look ineffective, and has sparked a new beginning for the Green Movement. This does not necessarily indicate that the regime is losing control, but it shows that the opposition is taking measures to overcome the climate of fear and intimidation.

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