

Expert Session on 'The Future of the Islamic Republic of Iran'

2 July 2009, University of Amsterdam

The events of the past month in Iran, unpredicted as they were, have raised many questions about the direction the Islamic Republic will take. In an attempt to create an opportunity for experts on the subject of Iran to get together and try to make sense of the situation and the possible outcomes, a seminar was held at the University of Amsterdam. The meeting was chaired by Paul Aarts and speakers included Touraj Atabaki, Shervin Nekuee, Maaïke Warnaar and Erik van Zuylen.

Not a revolution

In the most general terms, possible futures for Iran range between two extremes: revolution and military dictatorship. And the crisis has been playing out on two levels: on the street and at the top. To begin with, there was a consensus among the speakers that at this point there was *not* a revolutionary momentum. Despite some media perceptions, the popular street presence should be characterised as a civil rights movement, not a revolution. While the revolution of 1979 did in fact start with modest demands for human rights and an end to despotism, one speaker suggested that the crisis today is more similar to 1953. The sense of a crisis of legitimacy was severe then as it is now, while the '79 shouts of 'Shah must go' are not mirrored in today's protests. It was mentioned that the revolution had been about collectivist ideals, whether it be leftist or Islamist, while in the past thirty years Iranian society has been going through an accelerated process of individualisation. This is reflected in the form and demands of the movement; the movement has little formal organisation and concerns are related to individual rights and issues such as unemployment.

It was noted that the vitality of Iranian civil society has clearly survived the years of a hostile presidency and has been able to shape public discourse. Three out of the four selected candidates for the presidential elections acknowledged the existence of different sectors of society (e.g. women, artists) and addressed specific issues important to these groups. Only Ahmadinejad continued to speak in terms of the nation as a homogeneous entity. Activists have been learning to take a more businesslike approach to their work, e.g. listing their demands and petitioning to have them met. In the event that the movement is simply crushed this time, the participation of so many young people in it will have shaped their political aspirations for the future. One of the speakers suggested that Khatami's message of the importance of the rule of law, which he drove home for years, has apparently been heard by the new generation and they are at present acting to defend those values.

Factional power struggle

At the top, factional divisions have come to a head. While in the aftermath of the revolution the divides within the elite were obscured by the war effort and the nationalist drive necessary to sustain it, today they are coming out into the open. Ahmadinejad represents a new factional alliance of convenience of conservatives and the military. However, not all conservatives are entirely comfortable with this faction (e.g. Larijani) and one of the speakers said we should expect more traditionalists to swap sides in the near future. The clergy find themselves in a particularly awkward position. Their position in society may eventually be at stake and it is not clear who they should join forces with; the question is whether their fear of the military will prevail over their fear of losing power. Apart from the expected response from Grand Ayatollah Montazeri, several other high ranking clerics have also expressed their concern about the election result and subsequent treatment of the opposition.

All eyes will however remain on Rafsanjani, who is clearly in a unique position of political and economic power. There have been persistent rumours in the press suggesting that Rafsanjani is planning to depose Khamenei. If this rumour turns out to be true, the most likely scenario would be that the Assembly of Experts (or rather a triumvirate composed of Assembly members), which he is head of, would take on the tasks of the Leader, because appointing a new individual under these circumstances would be even more divisive. Ahmadinejad would be forced to step down and Speaker of the Majlis Ali Larijani would be the natural choice for an interim-presidency. However, both Rafsanjani and Larijani have subsequently made public statements which seem to be intended to dispel rumours of behind-the-scenes planning. With political opportunism among these key players being the driving force instead of clear-cut ideological divides, there is no obvious outcome.

The actions of the Supreme Leader have been a shift away from the type of leadership Khomeini used. Instead of the 'father of the nation' style of balancing out the factional divides, Khamenei is seen to have taken sides completely, thereby undermining the foundations of the Islamic Republic. One of the speakers tried to clarify the personal reasons behind Khamenei's actions. Because of the insecure nature of his authority – i.e. lack of sufficient religious seniority, overshadowed by Rafsanjani's power and influence among the bureaucracy – he has invested in coalitions with certain clerics and the military and security forces. His handling of the elections and the heavy-handed response to protests signal his desire to run the country on his terms only.

Militarisation of society

If we then consider the worst-case scenarios of a militarised Iran, there are several options. It was mentioned that if the current Leader and president remain in power they may well wish to distract from the issue of their legitimacy crisis by focussing on foreign enemies. Israel or the United States

may be goaded into attacking Iran. The expectation was that a complete military dictatorship, the 'Burma-option', was unlikely due to the position of the clerics in Iran. Because the country is so divided, it is deemed that power needs to be shared among the factions to be able to maintain stability. The Chinese model of internal repression and external détente could have huge economic benefits, e.g. growing foreign direct investments (in particular from the U.S.) and gas export to Saudi Arabia. Ahmadinejad's populism outweighs his fundamentalism, so he could easily be employed to sell the idea of détente to his supporters. However, one of the speakers suggested that labour reform would be needed to achieve a Chinese model and that Iran simply does not have the institutional capacity to make that happen.

There was some discussion about the likelihood of the 'Syrian' scenario of total state violence. While Ahmadinejad has already shown many signs of a move towards dictatorship – ignoring the constitution, bypassing parliament and now blocking peaceful opposition on the streets – it was pointed out that even among the Basij there is a taboo on (admitting to) the use of firearms. This illustrates their reluctance to engage in all-out war with the civilian population. These qualms would no doubt be thrown out the window if civilians were to start to arm themselves.

The speakers seemed to agree that a return to the pre-elections situation is unlikely. They estimate that the wound is too deep for people to accept what has happened. Unless the movement feels it has achieved some gain, it would be hard to keep people off the streets for long. Any type of compromise would mean a huge loss of face for the Supreme Leader and Ahmadinejad's faction. The events of the past month have reminded the world that Iran is not a homogeneous society, and that the legacy of the revolution on 1979 is broader than Ahmadinejad would have the West believe. A tradition of demanding that justice be done and that government is there for the good of the people has emerged on the streets again. The humanising effect of the footage coming out of Iran is of great importance on public opinion in the West, and will perhaps be of influence on negotiations.

Future research should focus on the civil rights movement which has established the depth of its support in no uncertain terms. Whether or not this movement succeeds in its aspirations, the impact of success or failure in the 'street' in the rest of the region is of interest. On the other hand, it is worth considering that whoever comes out on top in this power struggle, many things are likely to stay the same. For example, research pertaining to Iran's nuclear program and the related problems it is facing in the international community will continue.

This article is part of a series of reflections on the recent developments in Iran by researchers and practitioners linked to the Knowledge Programme on Civil Society in West Asia. This is a joint initiative by Hivos and the University of Amsterdam with the purpose of generating and integrating knowledge on

the roles and opportunities for civil society actors in democratization processes in politically challenging environments. This programme integrates academic knowledge and practitioner's knowledge from around the world to develop new insights and strategies on how civil society actors in Iran and Syria can contribute to various processes of democratization and how international actors can support this.