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Iran's Youth: The Protests Are Not Over

Summary

- Iran has the most politically active youth among the 57 nations of the Islamic world. As the most restive segment of their society, Iranian youth also represent one of the greatest long-term threats to the current form of theocratic rule.
- Young activists have heavily influenced the Islamic Republic's political agenda over the past 13 years. After the 2009 presidential election, youth and women were the two biggest blocs behind the region's first sustained "people power" movement for democratic change, creating a new political model in the Middle East.
- The Islamic Republic has forcibly regained control over the most rebellious sector of society through mass detentions of young activists, expulsions from universities and widening the powers of its own young paramilitary forces.
- Nevertheless, the demands from young people have not changed over the past year, and their anger is boiling just beneath the surface. The regime also remains vulnerable because it has failed to address basic socioeconomic problems among youth.
- The impact of Iran's youth on the political, economic and social agenda of the country over the next 25 years is important for U.S. policymakers to consider when facing complex decisions in balancing Iran's nuclear program and its internal political turmoil.

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A Defining Political Force

Iran's youth have a long history of political activism, dating back to the Constitutional Rebellion between 1905 and 1911, and again after the 1953 upheaval that ousted Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh. The deaths of three students in protests during the 1953 visit of U.S. Vice President Richard Nixon—who came to show American support for the monarchy after a CIA-backed coup against a democratically elected government put the shah back on the throne—are still celebrated as a national holiday. Young people also played key roles in the 1979 revolution that ended two millennia of dynastic rule. But, youth are notably active in Iranian politics today. Their political activism today is ironic since the theocrats after the revolution had called upon women to “breed an Islamic generation.” And they did just that, almost doubling Iran's population from 34 million to 62 million within the first decade since the revolution. Today, Iran's population is one of the youngest in the world, in turn affecting the politics, the economy and social relations. Youth, as defined between the ages of 15 and 29, account for 35 percent of Iran's total population of 72 million. The demographic bulge is now the single biggest threat to the status quo.

Because of Iran's demographic bulge, the young are increasingly pivotal to elections. The voting age after the 1979 revolution was lowered to 15 years of age, but later raised to 16, and finally

changed to 18 in 2007, when the theocrats recognized the potential political power of youth. More than 60 percent of Iran's population is under 30, but young people constitute nearly 40 percent of the electorate, a number expected to grow over the next decade, making them even more influential politically. Whether they vote, and how, will be a decisive factor in the 2013 parliamentary elections, the next official test for the regime.

The youth bloc has been shaped by several political and military crises. In the 1980s, the majority of combatants in the eight-year war with Iraq were youth; even preteens became Basij volunteers to serve as human minesweepers. During the relative peace of the 1990s, young people began to demand their post-war due in politics, the economy and society. By 1997, the pressures of the burgeoning young led to the election of the first reformist president, Mohammad Khatami. But as he failed to produce change in the early 21st century, youth pulled back from politics. Their boycott of the 2005 presidential election was a key factor in the election of hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Their reentry into politics in the 2009 election seriously altered Iranian politics—and potentially the course of the revolution.

A Pivotal Year

Youth activism has played out in three phases over the past year. The first phase was the spontaneous two-week uprising after the June 12, 2009 election. The original issue was alleged election fraud. Iran's youth—students as well as a wide crosssection of non-students—represented a large percentage of the opposition that poured into the streets in several major cities to protest the massive vote rigging in favor of Ahmadinejad. Neda Agha Soltan, a 27-year-old philosophy student who was gunned down during the June 20th street protest, became the symbol of the uprising.

The second phase played out in protests pegged to national and religious holidays beginning in the fall. The issues evolved to include demands for political change and the condemnation of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Protesters took to the streets under cover of longstanding traditional commemorations, such as Qods Day on September 18, 2010, the anniversary of the U.S. embassy takeover on November 4th, National Student's Day on December 7th, and Ashura, the weeklong Shiite holiday in late December. This time, students were the main organizers and participants. The second phase gained wider momentum after the death of dissident cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali Montazeri on December 19th, which sparked a huge outpouring in Qom—the first time the protests spread to Iran's center of religious learning.

The third phase began with the crackdown that stopped all major protests in the first five months of 2010, including the demonstrations planned for February 11th, the 31st anniversary of Iran's revolution, and during the Iranian New Year in late March. But students kept the opposition movement alive in smaller protests at universities in Tehran, Shiraz, Isfahan, Mazandaran and Kurdistan. Students have even confronted top officials, including the President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Mojtaba Samaereh Hashemi, Ahmadinejad's top adviser, and Saeid Ghasemi, a Revolutionary Guard commander. They used banners, chanted slogans and demanded freedom for political prisoners. On May 20th, students at Khajeh Nasir University in Tehran doused green paint—the color of the opposition Green Movement—on a car carrying Maj. Gen. Aziz Jafari, the Revolutionary Guard chief. Azad University students in Tehran turned out for two days of protest against the June 12 presidential election results, leading to subsequent mass arrests and expulsion of student activists on May 22-23. Classes had to be cancelled. The regime has responded by tightening security at most universities and sentencing student activists to long prison terms. Two Tehran student leaders, Bahareh Hedayat and Milad Asadi, were sentenced in May to nine-

and-a half and seven-year prison terms for violating national security and promoting propaganda against the regime.

Nevertheless, students and others are calling for protests on June 12th to mark the anniversary of the election and the Green Movement uprising, even though the regime is certain to attempt to prevent public unrest.

Conditions of Life

Youth activism has been further spurred by the regime's ineffectiveness in addressing their basic needs. Three decades after the revolution promised opportunity, Iran's youth instead face growing problems:

- The government is able to generate only about 300,000 of the more than one million jobs needed annually to absorb young people entering the labor market.
- The educational system has been unable to keep up with the demands of the burgeoning demographic. Even though public university enrollment has increased nearly seven-fold since the revolution, some 80 percent of the more than one million who take the university entrance exams are turned away.
- Even with a university degree, it takes an average of three years to find a job.
- Unemployment among youth has almost doubled over the last two decades. Young people between 15-29 years of age make up 35 percent of the population, but account for 70 percent of the unemployed.
- Among males, roughly one in four is unable to find a job. Among women with higher education, unemployment is estimated around 50 percent.
- With a chronic job shortage and an even larger housing shortage, the number of unmarried youth in their 20s has doubled over the past generation.
- Up to three-quarters of Iranians in their 20s still live with their parents.

Iranian Youth Organizations

Youth groups reflect the nationwide political divisions. The main organizations active in Iran are described below.

The Green Movement is an informal movement that emerged spontaneously after the June 12, 2009 presidential poll over alleged vote-rigging. Former Prime Minister Mirhossein Mousavi and former parliamentary speaker and 2009 presidential candidate Mehdi Karroubi are the unofficial leaders, but youth and women were critical in organizing the initial protests, sustaining public opposition for six months, and organizing a multifaceted civil disobedience campaign. Their activities included a boycott of consumer goods advertised on state-run media, anti-government graffiti on the national currency, and Web site campaigns to identify security forces involved in the crackdown. Many young people loosely linked in the Green Movement are not members of any student group or political party.

Iran's largest student movement, the *Office for Consolidating Unity*, or *Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat*, was formed in 1979 and has branches in most universities. Its national leadership, or central council, is elected annually and became famous for the takeover of the U.S. Embassy from 1979 to 1981, an event it still commemorates annually. Its original agenda was to support the revolution, and combat secular and liberal political trends but gradually evolved from a focus on Islamic ideology to individual rights under Islamic rule. Its members' calls for political and social openings contributed to the birth of the reform movement in the late 1990s. Members also were involved in the

1999 student protests, the largest public post-revolution demonstrations until the 2009 election. In 2002, *Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat* split into two factions due to reform issues. A minority faction elected its own leadership; it is now known as the Shiraz faction. The majority faction, which met a few days later at Tehran's Allameh Tabatabai University, is known as the Allameh faction. The **Allameh faction** favored a boycott of the 2005 presidential election because of disillusionment with politics; the Shiraz faction supported Ahmadinejad.

Before the 2009 election, the Allameh faction sent letters to the four presidential candidates with a list of demands, including academic freedom, free speech and release of student prisoners. Only Karroubi responded; he supported their demands, which led Allameh to formally endorse him. The Allameh faction was at the forefront of Green Movement protests calling people to the streets through social networks, and organizing protests on campuses. Since the election, hundreds of its members, including at least four of nine central council members, have been detained for various lengths of time. Several have reportedly been victims of torture and sexual abuse. Since the government crackdown, student activity has increasingly depended on local leaders from individual campuses.

Independent student organizations such as the *Students for Freedom and Equality*, a leftwing student group established about 2006 have tried to create a national student network and campaign against military and intelligence agents on campuses. It organized demonstrations in 2007 and participated in the 2009 protests. Several were arrested. The **United Student Front**, founded in 1996, is a radical and secular group. Officials closed down its Web site and central office in 2000, forcing it underground. It called on followers to protest after the 2009 election.

There are also youth groups supportive of the regime. After the 2009 election, the regime's paramilitary organization and allied militia groups were deployed throughout major cities. **The Basij**, or "mobilization of the oppressed," is a quasi-volunteer paramilitary organization with branches in most mosques, universities, government offices, and public institutions. There are three million active members of the Basij, in which 600,000 are members of armed military units. The "Ashura" militia is the male wing; the "Al-Zahra" militia is the female wing. Student Basijis, called "seekers," are between the ages of 12 and 14; the "vanguard" are high school students between 15 and 17 years old. Members come from lower-class families as membership includes a small stipend, exemption from required military service, and the possibility of a reserved admission spot in a university. **Ansar-e Hezbollah**, or "Followers of the Party of God," is one of the loosely allied militia groups in the wider Basij network. The vigilante group uses force but is not part of official law enforcement. Members wear plain clothes. Ansar-e-Hezbollah is often unleashed against protesters, notably during the 1999 Iran student riots.

Iran has dozens of **political parties**; some have youth wings. Major reform parties include the Islamic Iran Participation Front, Islamic Revolution Mojahedin, the National Trust Party and the Freedom Movement of Iran. The Youth Party of Iran, formed in 1998, is a small reformist group. Major conservative parties include the Alliance of Builders of Islamic Iran, Islamic Society of Engineers, and Combatant Clergy Association.

Civil society includes hundreds of youth groups. Young women and men have been active in the **One Million Signature Campaign** to alter discriminatory laws on women and children. The **Committee of Human Rights Reporters** was established in 2005 by student and social activists to document human rights violations. Several members have been jailed. Founded in 1998 by 50 student activists, the **Committee for Defense of Political Prisoners** advocates for prisoners rights and provides legal support.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This Peace Brief highlights how Iran's youth are one of the two main agents of change, along with women, now challenging the rigid Islamic rule. Since January 2010, the regime regained control over the opposition's protests in all public arenas—except for university campuses. This brief is co-sponsored by USIP's Jennings Randolph Fellowship Program and the Youth and Peacebuilding Working Group in USIP's Centers of Innovation. Tara Nesvaderani, the author, is a research assistant in the Jennings Randolph Fellowship Program.

Conclusions

U.S. policymakers face complex decisions in balancing Iran's nuclear program and its internal political turmoil. The so-called nuclear clock may be moving faster than Iran's political clock. But three factors are critical to all policy deliberations.

- The impact of Iran's "baby boomers," born in the 1980s, is just starting to be felt. Now in their 20s, the boomers will become even more important in defining—and potentially redefining—Iran's political, economic and social agenda over the next quarter century.
- Like the general population, the majority of young Iranians are believed to support Iran's quest for nuclear energy as a key to economic development – and their own futures.
- Despite sanctions, Iran's youth are better educated and more worldly than any previous generation. Most are regularly exposed to global media, ideas and culture through satellite television and the Internet. Iran boasts between 60,000 and 110,000 active blogs, one of the highest in the Middle East. Most young Iranians are believed to want to be part of the international community and globalization. But given millennia-old Persian nationalism, even youth reform advocates may be reluctant to compromise with the outside world on issues viewed as impinging on national sovereignty.



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