

# Protests in Iran in comparative perspective

A revolutionary state in trouble

CRU Report

Hamidreza Azizi  
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# Summary

Successive protests in 2009, 2019 and 2022 have poignantly laid bare the much reduced social and political legitimacy of Iran's ruling elites. Reform-from-within is no longer viewed as credible. Even former pro-reform leaders like Mousavi have abandoned hope and call for regime change. While further protests are inevitable, it is nevertheless unlikely that they will produce a revolution that overthrows the regime in the short-term, as long as their national organisation and leadership remain weak, Iran's ruling elites cohesive, security forces loyal, and the administration continues to function. The country has witnessed hundreds of protests every year for the past few years, in addition to those of 2009, 2019 and 2022, but calls for fundamental change continue to go unheeded. The hope of the ruling elite is that the mix of repression and Iran's dire economic situation will prevent protests from recurring. At best, quasi-reforms will provide some band-aids. In both scenarios, the Islamic Republic of Iran is no more in the sense that it lacks legitimacy among large segments of the population. It has also shed the elements of republican governance it used to have. And yet it lives on because it remains a capable state with a fairly cohesive ruling elite and ample coercive power. Iran is on course to become a classic one-party authoritarian regime, which may shed some of its 'Islamic' orientations once its Supreme Leader leaves office for reasons of age. It remains to be seen how sustainable this will be given the crescendo of protests.

# Introduction

Iran ended 2022 in a significantly different shape than it began.<sup>1</sup> The anti-government protests that started in mid-September continued in various forms into 2023, though they decreased in intensity and frequency. From street demonstrations to student protests, from strikes to protest hashtags on social media, no day passed without protests. They have turned into a war of attrition between the state and society. Neither side is willing to back down and believes that time and persistence will bring victory. On the one hand, the socio-political legitimacy of the Iranian government to rule has been fundamentally called into question. On the other hand, protestors lack the means to force the government to change its ways as long as it firmly controls the coercive apparatus of state.

It was the brutality of the Islamic Republic's 'morality police', in the form of the death in custody of Mahsa (Jina) Amini, a young Iranian Kurdish woman, that triggered the protests.<sup>2</sup> But almost from day one and in contrast to some earlier protests, slogans targeted the entire political system and its Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, rather than the police or the Ministry of Interior. This points to a shift to an anti-systemic and anti-political class sentiment that is widespread among important segments of Iranian society. It has accumulated over time and will not be satisfied by halfhearted measures or promises of reform. Fundamental tensions between government and society have become more pronounced, which will have a profound and long-term impact.<sup>3</sup>

In order to go beyond such headlines and be more specific about the nature of such fundamental tensions and the consequences they may bring, this brief examines the 2022 protests in comparative perspective. That is to say, it

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1 We warmly thank Sanam Vakil (Chatham House) for her helpful review of this brief. Its contents naturally remain our own responsibility.

2 Iran protests: Mahsa Amini's death puts morality police under spotlight, BBC News, 21 September 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-62984076>.

3 Paraphrasing Sydiq, one can argue that 'a new socio-political generation has emerged from the 2017-2019 protest cycle that matured during the 2022-2023 demonstrations'. See: Sydiq, T., 'Youth Protests or Protest Generations? Conceptualizing Differences between Iran's Contentious Ruptures in the Context of the December 2017 to November 2019 Protests', *Middle East Critique*, 2022, 31:3, 201-219.

compares and contrasts them with the protests of 2019 and 2009 (The Green Movement) based on three indicators: 1) what were the demands, instruments of protest and constituencies for change at different points in time?; 2) what was the potential for reform, i.e. the attitude of the ruling elite towards reform?; and 3) how did the government respond to the protests? Before and in between the protests of 2009, 2019 and 2022, there were smaller waves of protests but the three we analyse were turning points in terms of their extent and the severity of the challenge they posed to the power structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

# Situating protests as a type of demand for political change

A comparative analysis of the evolution, prospects and repression of protests in Iran in 2009, 2019 and 2022 is greatly facilitated by developing a conceptual framework that helps assess how these protests were related (or not) and how they were linked to situational changes occurring in the same period.<sup>4</sup> Given their proximity in time, it is only by tracing such connections between the protests that one can shed light on their real meaning. To accomplish this aim, we conceptualise protests as a form of political contention on a wider continuum that ranges from routine and moderate methods for making claims to disruptive and radical ones.<sup>5</sup> Voting, parliamentary debate, court proceedings and petitions are for example situated towards the moderate side of the scale; referenda, strikes and protests hover in the middle; and mass uprisings, political assassinations, insurgencies, coups and revolutions veer towards the radical end of the spectrum.

What all these manifestations have in common is that they seek to bring about political change in the social order, often with a focus on the nature of rules and the distribution of benefits. Nearly all such manifestations can be peaceful or violent in their initial orientation, but hybrids are also possible. Demands for change can be limited to a particular issue (e.g. teacher salaries or a rezoning plan), to a particular place (e.g. in a specific region of a country) or targeted at particular actors (e.g. a certain political body or certain politicians). Demands can either fit within the existing system(s) of rule, require their adjustment, or demand their overthrow. The more unlimited and unspecific demands for change

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4 Protests can be disconnected (unique), indirectly connected (e.g. by contributing to a collective memory) or directly connected (e.g. they are part of Tarrow's (2022) longer 'cycles of contention' that can evolve geographically as well as from a single issue to multiple issues via innovations in repertoires of mobilisation and contention).

5 By political contention we mean the dialogues, disputes and fights between political parties, factions and social groups to imbue a country's social order with as many of their ideological and policy preferences as possible. In this understanding, we build on Tilly, C., *European revolutions, 1492-1992*, Oxford: Blackwell 1996 and Tarrow, S., *Power in movement: Social movements and contentious politics*, Fourth edition, Cambridge: CUP, 2022.

are, the more likely it is that methods of political contention will shift to the radical end of the spectrum.

A country's system of rule usually determines which part of the spectrum is meaningful and establishes which actors have access to what claim-making methods in processes of political contention. Generally, the more disruptive and radical part of the spectrum is heavily regulated or prohibited under both more democratic and more authoritarian forms of government, but for different reasons. In more democratically governed countries, it is because more moderate forms of political contestation are more widely available, more accessible and more likely to be effective.<sup>6</sup> In more authoritarian countries, prohibitions apply for the opposite reason, i.e. more radical methods are often the only method to bring change about.<sup>7</sup> Even though Iran's system of rule features democratic elements, such as elections and competing factions as a mechanism for intra-elite contention, its primary orientation is authoritarian.<sup>8</sup> This was especially clear in 2021 when the country's authoritarian elements curtailed its semi-democratic procedures so severely that the emphasis in the 'Islamic Republic of Iran' definitively shifted from 'republic' to 'Islamic'.<sup>9</sup>

It is the primacy of authoritarianism in Iran's governance that suggests a closer look is required at the more radical and revolutionary end of the spectrum, namely the features of, and relations between, protests, mass uprisings and revolutions. In authoritarian systems, protests usually start locally due to the lack of an organised political opposition, a free press, or even independent social organisations like trade or student unions. Protests are often dangerous to undertake, and those clamouring for fundamental political change especially so. Protests may nevertheless achieve local or issue-specific objectives provided these fall within the existing boundaries of the system of rule. More commonly, they are repressed, which is also relatively easy due to the lack of political accountability and the impunity of security forces under conditions

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6 Nevertheless, more radical forms of political contestation also occur in mature democracies. Consider the (illegal) referendum on Catalan independence of 1 October 2017 (Spain), the Capitol attack of 6 January 2021 (US), and the storming of Brazil's Congress on 8 January 2022.

7 Svobik, M., *The politics of authoritarian rule*, Cambridge: CUP, 2012.

8 Brumberg, D. and F. Farhi, *Power and change in Iran: Politics of contention and conciliation*, Indiana, IUP, 2016.

9 The Guardian Council prohibiting nearly all reformist candidates from running for either parliament or the presidency.

of authoritarianism. In our reading, a mass uprising can occur when protests manage to connect organisationally across towns or regions against the odds, synchronise disruptive activities, and jointly advocate for a shared minimal objective (usually a negative, i.e. what protestors want to eliminate). Thus, under conditions of authoritarian repression, turning a protest into a mass uprising requires overcoming the collective action barriers of leadership, organisation and communication at the national level.

A revolutionary situation arises when (a) new or alternative political contender(s) claim(s) state sovereignty for its/their own, such a claim is supported by a significant part of the population, and ruling elites are unwilling or incapable of suppressing it. Revolutionary success, i.e. a forcible transfer of power resulting from a revolutionary situation, lies within grasp only when the state is unstable. This can be described more precisely as a triple-lock on revolutionary potential: a) when ruling elites have become divided and dissent; b) when security forces stand by, desert or change sides; and c) when core state functions can no longer be carried out.<sup>10</sup> Historically, most efforts at revolution have failed.<sup>11</sup> Where they have succeeded, political change has often been less lasting and less radical than revolutionaries professed to aspire to.<sup>12</sup> For example, one can argue that the Iranian revolution replaced a monarchic autocratic system of rule with a religious autocratic system of rule – bringing both change and maintaining continuity.<sup>13</sup>

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10 Tilly (1996), *op.cit.*; Lawson, G., *Anatomies of revolution*, Cambridge: CUP, 2019; Tarrow (2022), *op.cit.*

11 *Ibid.* Which is not to say that mass uprisings and/or revolutionary situations cannot have profound political effects short of immediate radical change. See: El-Houri, W., *Beyond failure and success: Revolutions and the politics of endurance*, Radical Philosophy, [online](#), 2018; Sydiq (2022), *op.cit.*

12 Specifically, many revolutionary changes become undone in the post-revolutionary phase due to counter-revolutionary resistance and recourse to despotism or violence. See: Lawson (2019), *op.cit.*

13 It is when the forces of revolutionary change 'defeat' reactionary forces that durable revolutionary regimes emerge, according to Levitsky and Way. Nevertheless, it would be surprising if violent contention of this order led to anything but a continuation of repression, which in itself presents a form of continuity and a brake on seeing revolutionary change in practices of rule. See: Levitsky, S. and L. Way, *Revolution and Dictatorship: The Violent Origins of Durable Authoritarianism*, Princeton: PUP, 2022. For a critique: Anderson, G., *By Whose Authority? Times of profound revolution*, Literary review of Canada, [online](#), December 2022.

# The evolution of demands for change in Iran

The **2009 Green Movement** began in response to widespread fraud in the 12 June 2009 presidential election.<sup>14</sup> Following the announcement of the election results that named Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as winner, supporters of two pro-reform presidential candidates – Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi – took to the streets with the demand that the election results be annulled. Mousavi and Karroubi’s direct call for people to come to the streets played an essential role in the rapid fermentation of large-scale public demonstrations that were unprecedented in the history of the Islamic Republic.<sup>15</sup> In other words, these two figures, especially Mousavi, played a key role by acting as the movement’s leaders. The 2009 protests started in Tehran and remained limited to the capital and a few big cities such as Isfahan, Shiraz, and Tabriz – though there were smaller-scale protests in other cities as well. This limited geographic scope resulted from the movement’s social base, i.e., the educated middle class.<sup>16</sup> Student organisations – the proto middle class in training, so to say – also organised protests and participated in demonstrations. In the early weeks, the protestors’ slogans primarily targeted Ahmadinejad and centred on the demand to annul the election results. When the government crackdown intensified, slogans against Khamenei also appeared.<sup>17</sup> However, the movement’s leaders never raised the notion of overthrowing the Islamic Republic. In other words, the Green movement protested *within* the system and not *against* it. Mousavi and Karroubi also spoke out against foreign support or intervention,<sup>18</sup>

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14 Mehdi Khalaji and Robert Pastor, *How Ahmadinejad Stole an Election — And How He Can Fix It*, Foreign Policy, 20 August 2009, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/08/20/how-ahmadinejad-stole-an-election-and-how-he-can-fix-it/>.

15 Karim Sadjadpour, *Iran’s Clerics Face Unprecedented Unrest*, Carnegie Endowment, 18 June 2009, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2009/06/18/iran-s-clerics-face-unprecedented-unrest-pub-23296>.

16 Raz Zimmt, *Iran’s Middle Class: An Agent of Political Change?*, INSS, 3 October 2017, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/irans-middle-class-agent-political-change/>.

17 The changes in the slogans of the Iranian people against the Islamic Republic; From 1988 to today, Independent Persian, 27 September 2022, <https://www.independentpersian.com/node/271751>.

18 Mousavi: The Green Movement has no affiliation with foreign countries, Radio Farda, 9 February 2010, [https://www.radiofarda.com/a/F11\\_Iran\\_Postelection\\_Mirhosein\\_Mousavi\\_Statement/1952359.html](https://www.radiofarda.com/a/F11_Iran_Postelection_Mirhosein_Mousavi_Statement/1952359.html).

although those on the streets were calling on the United States to take a clear stance in support of the movement.<sup>19</sup> In terms of support from within the ruling elites and institutions, the reformist faction, which was in power between 1997 and 2005, was the main supporter of the Green Movement.

**The 2019 protests** began on 15 November in response to the government's decision to increase the price of gasoline by 200 per cent which, in turn, was a bid to reduce the impact of Iran's deteriorating economic situation on the public budget.<sup>20</sup> From an issues perspective, the 2019 protests can be seen as a culmination of the December 2017 and January 2018 protests, which were also triggered by economic issues.<sup>21</sup> In all these cases, protests also started spontaneously and had no clear leadership. However, in terms of geographic scope, the level of challenge to the government and, especially, the unprecedented level of violence in the government's response, the 2019 protests were different and represented a turning point in the history of protest in contemporary Iran.

Geographically, most violent protests occurred in smaller cities and in poor neighbourhoods of big cities like Tehran. Within a week, the protests had reportedly spread to 29 provinces (out of 31)<sup>22</sup> and at least 104 cities (out of 451).<sup>23</sup> In other words, they were nationwide in scope. The mainly economic nature of the protests also meant that the protestors on the street were mostly from the less privileged segments of society. However, protest rallies also took place in some universities.<sup>24</sup> Although protests started peacefully at first, the

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19 America and protests in Iran; From the Green Movement to the Bloody November, Independent Persian, 13 November 2021, <https://www.independentpersian.com/node/191941/>.

20 The primary drivers of this economic deterioration were: a) widespread corruption, b) the government's inefficiency in managing the economy and c) the economic sanctions Washington imposed in May 2018 following US withdrawal from the nuclear deal (JCPOA) – in spite of Tehran's compliance with its provisions at the time.

21 *Iran protests: Why is there unrest?*, BBC News, 2 January 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42544618>.

22 IRGC official says '29 provinces and hundreds of cities' were the scene of protests; Arrests continue, BBC Persian, 29 November 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-50602825>.

23 Summary of the bloody protests of November 2018 – the second edition, HRANA, 3 December 2019, <https://www.hra-news.org/periodical/a-70/>.

24 Blacklisted Tehran University Student Activist Detained Incommunicado, Center for Human Rights in Iran, 16 December 2019, <https://iranhumanrights.org/2019/12/blacklisted-tehran-university-student-activist-detained-incommunicado/#>.

government's violent response prompted the protesters to resort to more radical moves such as storming government buildings.<sup>25</sup> Despite having been triggered by an economic issue, protestors' slogans also targeted the entire political system and the Supreme Leader.<sup>26</sup> International reactions remained limited to condemning the repressions and imposing limited sanctions. The US government for example sanctioned Iran's Minister of Information and Communications Technology Mohammad Javad Azari-Jahromi for his role in shutting down the internet,<sup>27</sup> while the EU imposed sanctions on eight individuals, including the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commander, Hossein Salami, and Police Chief, Hossein Ashtari, as well as the entire management of three Iranian prisons.<sup>28</sup>

In contrast, economic factors played only a marginal role in the **2022 protests**. Instead, they started with a clear focus on basic civil rights, i.e., rejecting compulsory wearing of the Hijab and promoting women's rights in response to the violent treatment of Iranian women by the morality police. The 2022 protests were similar to those of 2019 in terms of their spontaneous nature and lack of leadership. In terms of their geography, the 2022 protests were the most widespread in the history of the Islamic Republic.<sup>29</sup> In the first weeks, all 31 provinces of the country and over 100 cities witnessed street protests. This included both large and small cities and almost all neighbourhoods of the capital, Tehran. Border regions, such as Kurdish-majority areas in the west<sup>30</sup> and

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25 One of the worst crackdowns in decades is happening in Iran. Here's what we know, CNN, 3 December 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/12/03/middleeast/iran-protests-violent-crackdown-information-intl/index.html>.

26 Protestors also raised slogans against President Hassan Rouhani, which is more in line with the economic trigger of the protests, but these were far fewer.

27 U.S. imposes sanctions on Iran's information minister, Reuters, 22 November 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/iran-usa-sanctions-idUSW1N272001>.

28 The European Union sanctioned IRGC and Basij commanders for allegedly suppressing the protests of November 2018; Iran's reaction: Comprehensive talks are suspended, BBC Persian, 12 April 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-56720038>.

29 The result of a study: Protests are not limited to a certain geography in Iran, Radio Farda, 23 November 2022, <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/protest-in-iran/32145266.html>.

30 Alexander Smith, Matthew Mulligan and Matteo Moschella, *Iran's violent crackdown against protesters escalates in parts of the country*, NBC News, 26 November 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/iran-protests-mahsa-amini-crackdown-kurdistan-government-forces-shoot-rcna58496>.

Sistan and Baluchistan province in the east,<sup>31</sup> saw the most intense protests – as well as the most violent government repression. In the same vein, participation in the protests was nearly universal, cutting across social classes and income groups. The leading role of women and young people<sup>32</sup> (the so-called Generation Z)<sup>33</sup> was another distinctive feature of the latest movement. Also, for the first time in the last 44 years, nationwide strikes became an important aspect of protests, extending to vital economic sectors such as the oil industry in a way that was reminiscent of the protests that toppled the Shah.<sup>34</sup> Protest slogans were moreover anti-systemic from the beginning, i.e., against the political class (ruling or not) and against the Islamic Republic, calling for the removal of Khamenei. There were barely any slogans targeting President Ebrahim Raisi as he is considered irrelevant. Among the political factions inside Iran's system of rule, former and current reformists showed the most sympathy for the protests. However, most of the protesters considered them complicit in the status quo and, therefore, not representing their demands. Finally, international reactions were unprecedented, both in terms of condemning the Islamic Republic in international forums such as the United Nations and the active support of the Iranian diaspora for the protests. For instance, in December 2022, Iran was expelled from the UN Women's Rights Commission.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, by the end of January 2023, the US had imposed four rounds of sanctions against Iranian individuals and institutions involved in the repression<sup>36</sup> while close to 80,000 Iranians from all over the globe gathered in Berlin on 22 October to show solidarity with their compatriots back home.<sup>37</sup>

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31 *Iran: At least 82 Baluchi protesters and bystanders killed in bloody crackdown*, Amnesty International, 6 October 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/10/iran-at-least-82-baluchi-protesters-and-bystanders-killed-in-bloody-crackdown/>.

32 Parham Ghobadi, *Iran protests: Iran's Gen Z 'realise life can be lived differently'*, BBC News, 14 October 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-63213745>.

33 Individuals born during the late 1990s and early 2000s.

34 *Iranians Start Three-Day Nationwide Strikes To Oust Regime*, Iran International, 5 December 2022, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202212052265>.

35 *Victory: How Iran Was Expelled from the U.N. Women's Rights Commission*, UN Watch, 22 December 2022, <https://unwatch.org/victory-iran-expelled-from-u-n-womens-rights-commission/>.

36 *Iran Responds to EU, UK Sanctions With Some of Its Own*, VOA News, 25 January 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/iran-responds-to-eu-uk-sanctions-with-some-of-its-own/6934030.html>.

37 *Tens of thousands gather in Berlin to protest against Tehran regime*, Euro News, 22 October 2022, <https://www.euronews.com/2022/10/22/tens-of-thousands-gather-in-berlin-to-protest-against-tehran-regime>.

# (Im-)possibilities of reform across protests

After 2009, Iran gradually shifted towards a more authoritarian political system with a narrowing scope for state-led reforms. The **2009 Green Movement** was basically a reform movement – both in terms of its demands and the political forces behind it – that did not, however, lead to meaningful reform. Before the June 2009 presidential election, the two pro-reform candidates and their supporters repeatedly warned that corruption, inefficiency, populist domestic policy, and an aggressive foreign policy – all hallmarks of the Ahmadinejad presidency – were not sustainable and would negatively affect national development.<sup>38</sup> After the elections, and after the protests had been suppressed, leaders of the Green Movement and the political factions supporting them continued to emphasise the necessity of fundamental changes in the political system – but stopped short of calling for its overthrow. Disillusioned with the level of repression but still hoping for change, the movement’s social base gave the reformists another chance to initiate changes from within the system. In the 2013 presidential election, the reformist faction, including former president Mohammad Khatami, convinced people to participate in the elections,<sup>39</sup> resulting in a landslide victory for Hassan Rouhani. From an affiliation and intellectual point of view, Rouhani was never a ‘reformist’.<sup>40</sup> Still, the leaders of the reformist camp concluded that Rouhani was the most capable person to represent their agenda and their best bet in view of the widespread disqualification of their own candidates. Although Rouhani failed to make fundamental changes in domestic politics, as expected by the people and reformist parties, his landmark foreign policy achievement, i.e., the nuclear deal (JCPOA), convinced people to give

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38 The full text of the debate between Mirhossein Mousavi and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Donya-e-Eqtasad, 6 June 2009, <https://donya-e-eqtasad.com/fa/tiny/news-510534>.

39 Khatami and Hashemi Rafsanjani announce their support for Rouhani, BBC Persian, 11 June 2013, [https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2013/06/130611\\_i39\\_rafsanjani\\_khatami\\_rouhani\\_ir92](https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2013/06/130611_i39_rafsanjani_khatami_rouhani_ir92).

40 During the 1997 presidential election that brought Mohammad Khatami to power and formally heralded the birth of the reform movement, Rouhani was a member of the conservative ‘[Combatant Clergy Association](#)’. It supported Khatami’s rival Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri. Rouhani’s 16-year record while serving as the secretary of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council (1989-2005) also does not align well with reformist progressive ideals.

him a second chance. He scored an even greater victory in the 2017 elections as a result.<sup>41</sup>

But his second term in office also marked the end of hopes for the reformability of the political system and the end of ‘reformism’ as an effective political faction in Iran for several reasons. First, only a few months into Rouhani’s second term, public protests against the economic conditions were met with severe repression. Less than two years later, the government responded to the **2019 protests** in an even more brutal manner. The President, as the head of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) and as overseer of the Ministry of Interior (responsible for the police), was indirectly in charge of the government’s repressive apparatus and discredited both himself and the reformist movement by condoning the violence. It is at this juncture that the popular belief emerged that when push comes to shove, there is no difference between hardline, moderate or reformist factions. Hence the popular slogan ‘Reformists, Principlists, the game is over!’ during the 2017/2018 and November 2019 protests.<sup>42</sup> The reformists’ gamble on Rouhani cost them their political credibility among the people. Second, the benefits of the JCPOA as Rouhani’s only tangible achievement – i.e. a more open economy and the prospects of international normalisation and better standards of living – went up in smoke when the US withdrew from the agreement in May 2018 and reimposed sanctions. The economic situation rapidly deteriorated shortly after. Ultimately, Rouhani’s gamble on the JCPOA cost him his credibility.

The **controversial 2021 presidential election** was the last nail in the coffin of reform and reformism in Iran. In this election, all candidates supported by reformist or moderate political factions were disqualified by the Guardian Council so that Ebrahim Raisi, the conservatives’ favourite candidate, could win.<sup>43</sup> If there was any lingering hope of reform from within the system among some segments of the population or the political elites, the conservatives’ manipulation of the 2021 election put an end to it. The low turnout in the election

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41 *Iran: Hassan Rouhani wins landslide in huge victory for reformists*, The Guardian, 20 May 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/20/iran-hassan-rouhani-set-for-landslide-in-huge-victory-for-reformists>.

42 *Iranians’ Attitudes toward Political Systems: A 2022 Survey Report*, GAMAAN, 31 March 2022, <https://gamaan.org/2022/03/31/political-systems-survey-english/>.

43 *Iranians vote in presidential election marred by disqualification row*, BBC News, 18 June 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-57510763>.

(48.8 per cent) expressed popular disillusionment.<sup>44</sup> Instead of pushing for reform, the new administration moved towards implementing Khamenei's idea of the 'second step of the revolution', i.e. re-ideologising domestic and foreign policy and granting military institutions (specifically the IRGC), an even greater role in the governance of the country.<sup>45</sup> For instance, most provincial governors appointed by the Raisi administration are former IRGC generals.<sup>46</sup> Vice President Mohammad Mokhber Dezfuli, as well as some of Raisi's top advisers and cabinet members, have also served in the IRGC. In other words, the people and government were in agreement on at least one basic point on the eve of the **2022 protests**: none of them wanted reforms or reformists anymore.

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44 In both previous presidential elections, the turnout was over 72 percent and the turnout had never fallen below 50 percent since 1993.

45 The "Second Phase of the Revolution" Statement addressed to the Iranian nation, Khamenei.ir, 11 February 2019, <https://english.khamenei.ir/news/6415/The-Second-Phase-of-the-Revolution-Statement-addressed-to-the>.

46 *Criticism of the widespread appointment of military governors in the administration of Ebrahim Raisi*, BBC Persian, 17 November 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-59309503>.

# Government responses to protests

Although the nature and intensity of public protests in Iran have evolved over the past 14 years, the government's response to the protesters has been relatively constant and included the following elements: engaging in systematic violence and massive arrests (along with torturing detainees to obtain forced confessions); restricting public space and expanding censorship; and attempting to morally, politically and ideologically delegitimise protests. However, the share of each element in the government's overall response has changed over time, with the use of dissuasive tactics giving way to unrestrained violence. This, in turn, is directly related to the gradual marginalisation of reform as both a concept and as an agenda. In none of the three protest episodes of 2009, 2019 and 2022 has the government taken any practical or conciliatory step towards accommodation of key protest demands.

More specifically, the **November 2019 protests** shifted the government's response to major and direct repression – systematic killings – in addition to mass arrests.<sup>47</sup> While at least 80 people were killed during the few months of **protests that followed the June 2009 elections**,<sup>48</sup> Amnesty International indicated that at least 321 people had been killed by the security forces in just one week in November 2019.<sup>49</sup> Other sources estimate the number of dead towards 1,500 people.<sup>50</sup> The number of deaths in the **2022 protests** has also been significant. According to HRANA, an Iranian human rights news website, as

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47 *Iran: No Justice for Bloody 2019 Crackdown*, Human Rights Watch, 17 November 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/11/17/iran-no-justice-bloody-2019-crackdown>.

48 Simon Jeffery, *Iran election protests: the dead, jailed and missing*, 29 July 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/blog/2009/jul/29/iran-election-protest-dead-missing>.

49 *Iran: Details of 321 deaths in crackdown on November 2019 protests* [July 2022 update], Amnesty International, 29 July 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/2308/2020/en/>.

50 *Special Report: Iran's leader ordered crackdown on unrest - 'Do whatever it takes to end it'*, Reuters, 23 December 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-protests-specialreport-idUSKBN1YR0QR>.

many as 507 people were killed at the end of 2022, 69 of whom were children.<sup>51</sup> At the same time, 66 government agents were also killed, which is an indication of the cycle of violence that resulted from heavier repression. In the same period, more than 18,500 people, including at least 665 students, have been arrested – an unprecedented number compared with previous protests, even those of 2019. Also, Iran’s judiciary has sentenced a growing number of protesters to death on the charge of ‘war against God’, at least two of whom had been executed by the end of December.<sup>52</sup>

Limiting access to the internet, social networks and media has been another constant tactic of the government against the protests. In 2009, Facebook, Twitter and an array of international news websites were permanently blocked. In the same year, extensive restrictions were placed on the activity of foreign journalists in Iran, especially with regards to protest coverage. In 2019, the country’s internet was completely cut off for several days. Since September 2022, popular mobile applications such as Instagram and WhatsApp have been blocked, internet completely or partially cut off, and dozens of journalists and reporters arrested.<sup>53</sup>

In terms of the official narrative, the Islamic Republic authorities and the state media often try to humiliate the protesters and, at the same time, accuse them of being the agents of foreign ‘enemies’. This has been a common feature of the 2009, 2019 and 2022 protests. In 2009, Ahmadinejad called the protestors ‘dirt and dust’,<sup>54</sup> and Khamenei described the protests as an attempt at a ‘velvet

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51 A Comprehensive Report of the First 82 days of Nationwide Protests in Iran, HRANA, 8 December 2022, <https://www.en-hrana.org/a-comprehensive-report-of-the-first-82-days-of-nationwide-protests-in-iran/>.

52 The Islamic Republic sentenced three other protesters to death, Radio Farda, 9 January 2023, <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/32215123.html>. Note that the applicability of the underlying religious concept (‘mohaareb’) to the actions of protesters in the religious-criminal sense is subject to major disagreement among Iranian clerics and jurists themselves.

53 Number Of Reporters Arrested In Iran Rises ‘Alarminglly,’ Says International Federation Of Journalists, RFE/RL, 14 December 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-reporters-arrests-rise-amini-death/32176597.html>.

54 Borzou Daragahi, Ahmadinejad levels new broadside at opponents, Los Angeles Times, 8 September 2009, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2009-sep-08-fg-iran-ahmadinejad8-story.html>.

revolution' in Iran.<sup>55</sup> After the 2019 protests, Khamenei called the protesters 'vile, mean and petty people'.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, he called the 2022 protests 'scattered disturbances', which have been 'designed by the enemies'.<sup>57</sup> The Islamic Republic authorities also widely employ the term 'hybrid war' to refer to the ongoing protests.<sup>58</sup> They claim that 'enemies' are trying to instigate unrest in Iran through a mix of direct and indirect action that includes a media war, propaganda, protest, incitement and violence. Instead of considering at least some protesters' demands, the Iranian parliament proposed new laws to further limit public and media spaces for protests and their coverage.

A final aspect of the state narrative common to the 2019 and 2022 protests is the attempt to spread fear of a repeat of the 'Syrian experience' in Iran as a result of protests, i.e. civil war.<sup>59</sup> Through this analogy, the government tries to transmit the message that people must choose between freedom and security. However, this tactic seems to be less successful in the current protests than it has been in the past. Iran's population has become angrier and more frustrated with the restrictions and inefficiencies of governance in the Islamic Republic as it became more conservative and reform prospects dwindled.

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55 Friday sermons in Tehran, Khamenei.ir, 19 June 2009, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=7190>.

56 Reza Haghghatnejad, Khamenei's face in November 2018; The commander of killing and the leader of post-repression, Radio Farda, 15 November 2020, <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/30951263.html>.

57 Khamenei: The protests are designed by the enemy because of the "Hello Commander" anthem, Independent Persian, 12 October 2022, <https://www.independentpersian.com/node/275336>.

58 What happened in Iran was a full-scale hybrid war, Kayhan, 10 December 2022, <https://kayhan.ir/fa/news/255493/>.

59 Enemies were trying to 'Syrianize' Iran: civil defense chief, *Tehran Times*, 29 December 2019, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/443536/Enemies-were-trying-to-Syrianize-Iran-civil-defense-chief>.

# Comparing protests to gain new insights

Table 1 below provides a short summary of the 2009, 2019 and 2022 protests against the three indicators outlined in the introduction: 1) what were the demands, instruments of protest and constituencies for change at different points in time?; 2) what was the potential for reform, i.e. the attitude of the ruling elite towards reform?; and 3) how did the government respond to the protests?

Table 1 A summary overview of key dimensions of the 2009, 2019 and 2022 protests

Indicator	2009	2019	2022
Trigger	Election results	Gasoline prices	Police brutality in relation to women's rights
<b>Indicator 1 – Demands for change</b>			
Demands	Annulment of election results, then anti-conservative ruling elite, including the Supreme Leader  (protest within system)	Reinstitution subsidies and cost of living support, then anti-system  (from protest within to protest against system)	Removal of entire political class, including Supreme Leader  (protest against system)
<b>Indicator 2 – Potential for reform</b>			
Constituency	Educated middle class, students	Lower-income groups, students	Cutting across class and income
Organisation	Election campaigns and post-election leadership of Mousavi and Karroubi	Spontaneous and improvised	Spontaneous and improvised
Scope for reform among ruling elite	Reformist leaders were relevant, reformist factions powerful, there was hope in 'reform from within', but also strong resistance	Reformists, as well as Rouhani, discredited themselves, the reform agenda faded	Conservative and military elites seek to re-ideologise institutions and policies, delegitimise the reformist faction
<b>Indicator 3 – Government response</b>			
Government response	Gradual repression	Harsh repression	Harsh repression

Using the conceptual framework outlined at the start of this brief as a lens to read Table 1 enables making several observations on the nature of political contention in Iran. To begin with, it becomes clear that the hardline/principlist factions of the country's political elites have effectively closed off the moderate side of the spectrum of political contention. They have done so by means of three methods:

- They used the Guardian Council to eliminate nearly the entire reformist political faction as a legitimate political competitor by disqualifying its candidates for presidential and parliamentary office.
- They increased the level of violence to repress protests (note that this also happened during President Rouhani's tenure).
- The political-economic institutional networks of Iran's conservative clerics – its *Bonyads* (state-owned foundations), the Guardian Council and the IRGC industrial-commercial complex – have frustrated serious past efforts at reform going back as far as Khatami and Rafsanjani.<sup>60</sup> The result is that large segments of Iran's population no longer view the notion of reform-from-within as credible.

Reading the practice of protests in Iran through conceptual lenses also shows that protest demands for change have shifted from issue-specific to anti-systemic, and from limited to unlimited. This suggests that methods of political contention will swing towards the radical end of the spectrum in the future, in line with the nature of claims as they are made. This does not mean that future contention will necessarily become more violent, even though that is likely, but it will certainly be even more confrontational.

Finally, the shift to a demand across class and ethnicity for the full dismissal of Iran's entire political class – reformists and principlists alike – also points to the much reduced social and political legitimacy of Iran's ruling elites. In turn, this means that the ideological appeal and doctrines of the Islamic Republic will be of limited use as incantation or guardrails to mitigate future political contention.

In brief, the dialectic between Iran's principlist elites closing off the moderate part of the spectrum of methods for political contention and the escalation of protest claims increasingly means that change in Iran can only be brought about

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<sup>60</sup> Lawson (2019), *op.cit.*

by radical means. The paradox is that a product of revolution has now come around full circle to face its own past. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that the recent protests will produce a revolution that overthrows the regime in the short term as long as protest organisation and leadership remain weak at the national level (which is to be expected under conditions of authoritarianism),<sup>61</sup> ruling elites remain cohesive, security forces loyal, and the administration continues to function.<sup>62</sup>

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61 The Iranian government tries hard to prevent the emergence of a national protest leader, which is why progressive reformists like Mustafa Tajzadeh remain in prison (he was arrested before the current protests).

62 For a set of revolutionary 'preconditions', see also: Safaei, S., *Iran's protests are nowhere near revolutionary*, *Foreign Policy*, 17 January 2023; also: Levitsky and Way (2022), *op.cit.*

# Conclusion

The Islamic Republic is no more, but it lives on nevertheless. On the one hand, it lacks legitimacy among large segments of the population but on the other hand a cohesive principlist elite remains capable of large-scale repression to maintain its rule. More precisely, the Islamic Republic may still be Islamic but it is no longer republican. Iran has set a course to become a more classic one-party authoritarian state, shrouded only by a vestige of clerical leadership – 44 years after the 1979 anti-hegemonic revolution by an eclectic mix of leftists and believers. Events that could cause serious turbulence among Iran’s ruling elites in the near term – the decease and succession of Supreme Leader Khamenei and an IRGC power grab that sidelines the clerical establishment<sup>63</sup> – are likely to lead to more authoritarianism and repression since they represent systemic continuity, which can now only be maintained by coercive threats and means.

The paradox is that further protests are inevitable and calls for fundamental change will remain unheeded<sup>64</sup> as long as elite cohesion and security forces’ loyalty persist.<sup>65</sup> If protests radicalise or turn more violent, far harsher and more bloody repression is likely since elites are too implicated in the many episodes of violence out of which the Islamic Republic was born and throughout which it has prevailed. Many rank-and-file security forces are also tied to the state by a bloody past and ideology, as well as salaries. Consider the role of the security forces in the thousands of executions between 1981 and 1985, or the hundreds killed during the 2019 and 2022 protests. Fearful of vengeance and with much to lose, elites and security forces are likely to stick together and resist in a Syria-style scenario, where the Assad regime has demonstrated a similar cohesiveness. Nevertheless, there are a number of emergent factors in play that could change the equation in the longer term:

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63 <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/irgc-main-player-in-irans-amini-protests/>.

64 We purposefully avoid terms like ‘success’ and ‘failure’ in relation to protests because they are manifestations of grievances that can recur, diversify and intensify across time and space to unexpected effects, which makes normative framing both hard and inappropriate. What is in fact more remarkable, based on the comparative perspective this brief offers, is the endurance of protestors in Iran. See: El Hourri (2018), *op.cit.*

65 Both may yet waver as a result of targeted activist strategies. See: Chenoweth E., A. Hocking and Z. Marks, ‘A dynamic model of nonviolent resistance strategy’, *PLoS ONE* 17(7), 2022.

- Domestic and exiled opposition activists have started to work on a roadmap for transition to a post-Islamic Republic that includes ways to facilitate defections. For example, activists have started to contemplate distinguishing between those ordering repression (e.g. mid- and top-level officers) and ordinary rank-and-file security forces. Should such thinking come to fruition, it could become a powerful way to invite and promote dissent among regime forces.
- Mousavi spoke of the need to develop a new constitution leading to a new political system in early February. He also publicly retracted his view of the past 13 years that meaningful reforms are possible within the existing constitution.<sup>66</sup> Even though Mousavi's mobilisation capacity has decreased significantly since 2009, his emphasis on the need for regime change matters because many pro-reform figures remain attached to the current system of governance. Those who still consider Mousavi as their point of reference may now conclude that demands should focus on reform of the system.
- Key figures of the Iranian diaspora opposition seek to create a unified opposition front.<sup>67</sup> Should it be possible to overcome serious disagreements within the diaspora and get diaspora and domestic opposition elements to join forces, change will become easier to achieve as long as the people living in Iran remain the actual drivers of change.

The hope of the ruling elite is that the mix of repression and Iran's dire economic situation will keep the frequency and intensity of protests low. They may consider limited and symbolic measures to placate the population, such as the recent announcement of prisoner releases.<sup>68</sup> Even if this happens, however, Iran has already entered a state of transition in which a return to the status quo pre-2022 is unlikely, while the current situation is not sustainable either.

The possibilities for European states to defend human rights and reduce violence in Iran are limited by the domestic nature of the political confrontation, but also by the fact that there is not much left to sanction or ostracise. In this sense, the EU's tacit acceptance and docility in following the US withdrawal from

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66 <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202302049934> (accessed 20 February 2023).

67 <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-exiled-opposition-figures-talks-unite-against-government-2023-02-10/> (accessed 20 February 2023).

68 Lawson (2019), op.cit.

the nuclear deal in 2018 now leaves it without options. It has little leverage to influence Iran's calculations on such pressing foreign policy issues, let alone Tehran's domestic politics. At a minimum, European states can avoid making the error of expelling Iranian ambassadors or closing down their own embassies in Tehran. Expelling diplomats will only shut one of the Iranian government's remaining windows on the world and vice versa (except intelligence officers masquerading as diplomats). The Syria experience shows how such a one-off symbolic move had little effect but turned the country into a black box for European diplomats and decision makers, at least in analytical terms.

On a more positive note, European countries can put generous asylum policies in place for Iranian dissidents (akin to the initial welcome of Syrian and Ukrainian refugees). They can also create a transition fund to assist in the relocation of fleeing Iranian journalists, academics and other opinion makers and enlist them in developing a better information position on the stakes and the state of domestic contestation in Iran. At least then, any ramifications for Tehran's foreign policies may be understood and mitigated.