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Endgame regime change?

Many believe that a new regime will automatically fix Iran's crises. But without civic education and social reform, democracy won't stand

Since Israel bombed Iranian cities for 12 days in a military campaign that breached international law, the prospect of a political shift away from the Islamic Republic has been dangled more explicitly and frequently than before. Potential contenders for leadership in a new regime in Tehran have been saying they are ready to lead a smooth and peaceful transition without engendering instability.

Powerful factions within the Iranian diaspora either endorsed Israel's war effort or ignored the huge loss of civilian life lest their denunciation of violence overshadowed the imminence of a desired regime change. And some disgruntled Iranians inside the country, weary of corruption and repression, found themselves in agreement.

The conviction that the ultimate solution to the ongoing political, economic and social crises implicating Iran is the replacement of its government appears to have been embraced by pro-democracy voices globally as preordained. Domestically, the idea has been gaining traction and larger numbers of Iranian taxpayers say they don't believe gradual reform can improve their lives. Still, the most vocal regime change campaigners are the exiles.

Silver bullet regime change?

Despite the multiplicity of diasporic opposition groups and advocacy organisations representing them, almost no structured study is available that captures the political allegiances of the wide spectrum of Iranian expats. Perhaps one statistical gauge of their sweeping antipathy to the ruling establishment is their reaction to Iran's electoral races.

In the 2024 snap presidential election, of the nearly 3.5 million eligible voters overseas, only a total of 88 000 people cast their ballot at 234 polling stations set up at Iran's consulates. Although a campaign of voter

suppression orchestrated by transnational pressure groups prevented many potential voters from going to the polls, the abysmal turnout carried an unmistakable message.

Temperamental social media reactions to events, manipulated by AI algorithms, can highly likely alter our perception of reality. But if social media are to be seen as windows into communities, the outpouring of morbid curiosity in Israel's attacks, often marked by schadenfreude, was the dominant thread in the online conversations of Persian expats. They were convinced the endgame would be regime change. But they weren't the only ones relishing in Israel's muscle-flexing.

The spectacle of the Revolutionary Guards commanders being killed in the first days of the attacks electrified some Iranians at home who were desperate and jaundiced. As the airstrikes expanded countrywide and ordinary citizens were killed indiscriminately, revulsion against the war and the denunciation of the aggressor grew in intensity.

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Notwithstanding the present ceasefire, leaders of the diasporic opposition, including the well-known figureheads, icons of Iran's former royal family and the more organised dissidents such as the Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization (MEK) remain the champions of a putsch. They say such a political rearrangement will transform life in Iran, reversing a long stretch of isolation.

Arguments against the urgency of fundamental change are at best deficient. The status quo is beyond unsustainable. Nearly five decades of cultural crackdown, economic disarray caused by crushing sanctions and incompetent leadership, and the persistent climate of fear surrounding minorities and women have spawned a state of lingering misfortune.

While Qatar and Saudi Arabia have been able to secure the hosting rights of the different editions of the FIFA World Cup, Iran spent nearly $23 million on renovating its oldest football venue, only to acknowledge after its re-opening that the work was done partially. The Azadi Stadium was crippled by a 17-minute-long electricity blackout during an international match in March.

The embarrassment was not just the power grid going off at a soccer venue. For the past several months, rapid outages have caused Iran's industries and businesses $219 million in damages every day. The challenge is the delusional thinking of an ambitious state that is not even equipped to supply reliable electricity to its citizens.

But if a democratic shift is inevitable, and if the proponents believe such a change is so urgent that it justifies foreign military intervention and increased economic punishment, there is a more substantive question to be answered first: How is the Iranian society going to reintegrate with the community of nations without any investment being made in the prerequisites?

The importance of civic education

Automatic assumptions about the aftermath of political transformation in Iran promise the vision of a country where the rule of law is swiftly restored, technological advances take off overnight, work ethics dominate the administrative setup, and human rights come to the forefront of policymaking. Iran's trials are painted as being created entirely by one source, namely the ayatollah, and they will allegedly be resolved once he is toppled.

No counterproposal to this fallacy absolves Iran's theocracy of the stagnation and mayhem it has wrought after years of failed governance. But the crusaders of change are yet to share their thoughts on how they plan to recalibrate the social fabric of a nation that has consistently been denied the chance to hear about the rule of law, civic engagement and tolerance.

Harrowing reports of honour killing, the continued practice of child marriage and the admissibility of polygamy in different regions of a country boasting an otherwise educated population are also part of the reality of the 21st-century Iran. These are condoned by the establishment, but don't originate from the presidential office. They are happening across villages and towns with unique ethnoreligious profiles, and in Tehran.

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Iran's school curriculum includes little to no material about criminal justice, travel, climate change, racial equity, reproductive health and sex education. A senior female seminarian said in a 2023 interview that in line with Islamic teachings, children must be nurtured to be 'ignorant' about issues pertaining to sexuality and gender. Moreover, both the primary and secondary school curricula have been repeatedly modified to accommodate heavily-indoctrinated materials around contemporary politics. Yet, the absence of a national context

on good citizenship does not end at the school where formal learning happens.

Last year, the Iranian Legal Medicine Organization reported that 19 435 people were killed in road accidents. In the World Health Organization's regional subset of the Eastern Mediterranean consisting of 20 countries, Iran's per-capita road traffic death rate is the seventh largest, even higher than Pakistan with a population three times the size of Iran.

The police dedicating the bulk of their resources to cultural surveillance has infantilised the value of safe driving in the national discourse, and a robust debate about responsible traffic behaviour has not ever happened.

Structural corruption

In addition, if the administrative bureaucracy is known for its sluggishness and inefficiency, it is not merely because the system cannot abjure excessive paperwork or innovate solutions. Structural corruption has implanted unethical arrangements into the everyday routine of the functionaries who have become viscerally resistant to transparency.

Draining sanctions that have blocked the presence of international organisations and non-profits in Iran mean corruption can metastasise when independent oversight is unavailable, afflicting the private sector and independent professionals, as well.

Physicians, lawyers and business owners are increasingly relying on under-the-table payoffs to do their daily tasks. Even foreign embassies in Tehran, which take instructions from their respective capitals, have become accustomed to these practices, accepting bribes from visa applicants to assign them appointments.

The TRACE Bribery Risk Matrix 2024, has listed Iran as the 185th country in a ranking of 194 nations assessed for the prevalence of bribery in their business and government sector and their compliance with anti-bribery measures.

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Now, if there is a valid argument that the unreformable Islamic Republic needs to be succeeded by a democracy so that these challenges are overcome, the commitment of the proponents to the process remains uncertain. They have not clarified how the social amendments that ensure any political

corrupt structures if they have indeed diagnosed the roots of the problem.

change would be lasting can be facilitated.

The contenders for power in a free Iran have similarly refused to state their views on how they will save millions of Iranians consumed by corrupt structures if they have indeed diagnosed the roots of the problem. We don't know their perspective on the importance of civic education, engagement with discordant voices, and cultural and religious tolerance.

As they presently fulfil the role of the spiritual chieftains of the diasporic collectives, there is no indication that they are preparing their de facto constituents to become global citizens of a democratic Iran. If anything, these leaders haven't honoured the notion of good citizenship by mobilising their staunch supporters to storm events and stifle speech online.

Let's picture the immediate overthrow of the Islamic Republic and a transitional process bringing an exiled luminary to power. How is the new leader going to change the collective identity of a society in which for the past 46 years, observing the traffic light, taking turns in a bakery line, and interacting with religious and sexual minorities as colleagues have not ever been questions to reflect on?



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