

Quo Vadis Iran? The future of the Islamic Republic after the protests started in 2022

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Theme

This analysis examines the history of protests in Iran before and after the Islamic Revolution, the context and implications of the ongoing protests that began in September 2022, the political capitalisation of these protests by various actors and the possible short-term future of the Islamic Republic.

Summary

Modern Iran has witnessed numerous political and social movements that have manifested in popular anti-government demonstrations. Since the 19th century protests have been a common tool for citizens to express their demands and opposition to the government's political and economic decisions, and to call for reforms and changes in the political system, even under the present republic. The legitimacy of the Islamic Republic, established in 1979, like previous political regimes, has been challenged by these protest movements. However, the republic remains stable after more than 40 years of history. The protests that began after Mahsa Amini's death on 16 September 2022 are neither the first nor the last, but they are the most enduring and intense since 1979, and have again called into question the tense relationship between society and political power in Iran. Nevertheless, the resilience and adaptability of the political elite suggest the continuity and stability of the Islamic Republic, at least in the short and medium terms.

Analysis

The historical background of protests in Iran

The history of modern Iran has been marked by the emergence of numerous political and social movements in response to specific political events or situations. Protests have been a common tool for citizens to express their demands and opposition to the political and economic decisions of different governments, and to demand reforms and changes in the political system. Over the years, citizen demonstrations have played a crucial role in Iranian politics and have served as catalysts for significant changes in the country's political and social system.

Already by the end of the 19th century, important socio-political movements had developed in Iran, such as the Tobacco Revolts of 1890, led by bazaaris¹ and Shiite

¹ The commercial class and in general the workers of the bazaars (markets) in Iran, who traditionally controlled the country's internal and external trade.

clerics, putting the latter for the first time on the political stage thanks to the successful fatwa (religious edict) of Ayatollah Shirazi² calling for a boycott of tobacco consumption and trade. In 1905 a constitutional movement was initiated in the city of Tabriz, which quickly spread to other cities, deeply transforming Iranian politics, historically dominated by monarchical power. The Constitutional Revolution laid the groundwork for future changes that occurred in the 1950s and 1970s.

In the 1950s Iran experienced a great political upheaval following the Anglo-Russian occupation of World War II. Nationalists led by Mohammad Mossadeq managed to nationalise the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (later British Petroleum) in 1951 and raise Mossadeq to the position of Prime Minister. In 1953 strikes and demonstrations supported by the US and the UK weakened Mossadeq, leading to a CIA-backed coup and the end of the relative and incipient democracy that had emerged in the previous decade.

The Islamic Revolution of 1978-79 was the culmination of a complex historical process that drew heavily on the three preceding movements, and in which different political, social and religious groups participated massively. In this sense, the revolution meant the accomplishment of the main objective of the protesters, the fall of the monarchical regime. The new political system established in 1979 granted a predominant role to the Shiite clergy, with Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini at the head of the power structure. However, the triumph of the revolution did not prevent the eventual emergence of popular protests.

Among the most notable demonstrations since 1979 are the student protests of 1999, during the presidency of reformist Mohammad Khatami. The banning of the reformist newspaper *Salam* sparked mobilisations at universities throughout the country, which lasted two weeks and left at least three dead after security forces stormed the University of Tehran campus, and up to 1,500 arrested according to different estimates. In 2009 the 'green movement', born in response to the controversial re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the June presidential elections, generated a wave of demonstrations in Tehran and other major cities under the slogan 'Where is my vote?'. These protests spread over several weeks using mobile messaging services and emerging social networks to disseminate and organise demonstrations. Government repression resulted in 36 deaths, according to the authorities –or 72 according to human rights organisations–, thousands of arrests, and televised trials of various reformist personalities. The murdered young woman Neda Agha-Soltan became a symbol of the movement and opposition, as did Mahsa Amini in 2022. Despite the political and social tensions revealed by these protests, the Islamic Republic did not suffer a lasting crisis of legitimacy as some experts and political activists had predicted. The election of the pragmatist Hassan Rouhani in 2013 demonstrated that the Iranian population still trusted the political system and actively participated in the electoral process. However, the

² In December 1891 Mirza Hassan Shirazi, Grand Ayatollah and Marja-e Taqlid, issued a fatwa prohibiting the consumption and commercialization of tobacco throughout the country, considering it an offense to the Hidden Imam, Mohammad al-Mahdi. In this way, he managed to get the Iranian population to boycott tobacco production, forcing Shah Naser al-Din Qajar to cancel the concession for its exploitation granted to the German-born British entrepreneur Julius de Reuter (Baron de Reuter).

protests left a mark on Iranian society, increasing political awareness and social mobilisation among those disenchanted with the system.

In December 2017, during Rouhani's second presidential term, spontaneous protests arose over unpaid wages in a factory in Neishabur that quickly spread throughout the country through calls on the social network Telegram. As the protests intensified, the demands evolved into criticism of the political elite and violence, including attacks on police and Revolutionary Guard facilities. Government repression caused between 20 and 25 deaths, thousands of arrests, and the temporary suspension of the Internet and the banning of Telegram. In 2019 another wave of protests began after the announcement of a hike in petrol prices in the midst of an economic crisis exacerbated by sanctions imposed by the Administration of US President Donald Trump. These protests lasted a couple of months and were much more violent than the previous ones, leaving between 230 and 304 dead (including members of the security forces), thousands arrested and dozens of trials. The government also blocked access to the Internet for over 10 days in response to the demonstrations.

These two waves of protests highlighted the lack of social justice in Iran after 40 years of republican government, which questioned the legitimacy of the revolutionary ideology that had promised a fair distribution of the country's resources. The popular demands were considered legitimate by the Rouhani administration, although strongly questioned by the conservative establishment. Some Iranian academics theorised about a 'normalization' of protests and the acceptance by the political elite of a certain degree of presence in the streets as a pressure valve for social demands, without endangering the stability and continuity of the system, and without repression being the only survival mechanism. The lack of clear leadership and concrete objectives on the part of a mixture of protesters from diverse socio-economic and geographic backgrounds prevented a strong anti-system opposition from emerging. And the response of the state's repressive apparatus also prevented reformist or pragmatic sectors from unequivocally aligning with the protesters to capitalise on popular demands.

The 2022 protests

The protests initiated in September 2022 following the death in police custody of Mahsa Amini have already lasted for more than six months, becoming the longest, most widespread and violent since 1979,³ generating a new debate about the legitimacy and stability of the Islamic Republic. There are no completely verifiable sources to determine the magnitude of the protests in terms of victims, detainees and sentenced, as well as the reaction of public opinion, both national and international. Distrust towards official figures is not mitigated by data provided in part by organisations funded by states that promote regime change in Iran, which hinders accurate assessment of recent events.

³ The 2009 protests continued for months, with failed attempts to organise demonstrations on specific dates of the Iranian holiday calendar, such as the anniversary of the US embassy occupation on 5 November, Student's Day, and even the Revolution commemoration in February. However, the presence of protesters in the streets was prevented by the authorities, and only the virtualisation of the protests allowed the continuity of discontent and demands of a part of the Iranian population to be evidenced, unlike what has been happening since September 2022, with a sustained presence in the streets over time.

While some government officials and the Revolutionary Guard have publicly mentioned figures of 200 and 300 deaths in press conferences, the numbers provided from outside Iran greatly exceed those figures. Human rights organisations such as Amnesty International and HRANA (Human Rights Activists News Agency) mention between 400 and 550 deaths. The controversial [Iran International](#) page, financed until a few months ago by Saudi Arabia, even mentioned 5,000 deaths in the most critical month of protests. It is important to note that among the officially recognised dead, there are [24 security force members](#), including Basijis and police officers, revealing the violence unleashed by both sides. Most of the 29 death sentences collected so far are related to these deaths, including the four already executed between December and January.

Popular support for these protests and others motivated by salary and other demands is also difficult to determine, although there are independent initiatives, such as that of [Mark Pyruz](#), that have tried to shed light on the citizen presence in various gatherings throughout the country, based on visual empirical criteria to determine it.

[Social networks have been fundamental](#) in disseminating what happened with Amini and amplifying popular demands, as well as the evolution of protests and government repression. However, the partisan use of those social media, with the proliferation of fictitious accounts that artificially spread hashtags in favour of –or against– the Iranian government, has hindered the assessment of the impact of such protests on the international perception of Iran. In October 2022 [Marc Owen Jones](#) analysed 66 million English tweets and 350 million Persian tweets with the hashtag ‘Mahsa Amini’ up to that point, an unprecedented number in Twitter’s history, concluding that the majority of the accounts that spread the hashtag were created after the death of the young Iranian woman. Beyond the legitimacy of the cause, the real impact would have been distorted by the artificial reproduction of anti-system bot supporters. On the other hand, the amplifying effect of social media and support for protests by Iranian groups in exile have had a more significant influence on European and US public opinion, the main audiences of these groups, compared to other regions such as Latin America, Asia or Africa.

The coincidence of the protests with the Qatar FIFA World Cup, which featured the Iranian national team in the group stage with the US, England and Wales, represented an additional pressure for Iran and an opportunity to measure the impact of the protests. The three matches played by Iran, against politically sensitive opponents, generated expectations and concerns for the Qatari, Iranian and FIFA authorities. FIFA regulations prohibit any political demonstration within World Cup stadiums, so access with flags, jerseys or banners that evidenced any political positioning, either in favour or against Iran, was prevented. However, some pre-republican flags –that were not confiscated in the security check– could be seen in the stands during the three matches. Personal observation and recorded images during the matches showed that there were some very punctual attempts at protest, both inside and outside the stadium, but they were limited. It is also not known for certain how many Iranians travelled to Qatar during the World Cup, as many entered with passports of their second nationalities, primarily US ones. However, there are rising data in the number of weekly flights from Iran to Qatar, which went from [19 to 44](#) between the first and third matches.

The political capitalisation of the protests

One of the most complex issues regarding protests and demonstrations in Iran since 1979 is determining which actors can politically capitalise on anti-government protests. Reformists and pragmatists, opposition within the current system, and even neoconservatives were able to capitalise on some of the popular discontent in the 1997 (Mohammad Khatami), 2005 (Mahmoud Ahmadinejad) and 2013 (Hassan Rouhani) elections. However, reformists and pragmatists have practically disappeared from the political scene since the end of Rouhani's presidency in 2021, the death of Hashemi Rafsanjani in 2017 and the public marginalisation of former President Khatami since 2009. The still-popular former President Ahmadinejad has also been barred from the electoral arena after losing the support of the Supreme Leader and the conservative political elite. Therefore, no political figure or group within Iran has been identified that can capitalise on the current social discontent and channel it towards a specific political goal that questions the supremacy of traditional conservative factions. This is partly due to the reduction of the limits of 'legally permitted' opposition in Iran and partly because the segment of civil society that does not identify with the system has lost confidence in the political class in general, as well as hopes that change can occur 'within' the system.

In the current situation, the only actors who have systematically attempted to capitalise on this discontent are located outside Iran, mainly the heir to the last Shah, Reza Pahlavi, residing in Los Angeles, women's rights activist Masih Alinejad, who has generated both praise and criticism due to her close ties with [Donald Trump and Mike Pompeo](#), and Maryam Rajavi, leader of the controversial Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK) group, considered a terrorist group by the EU from 2002 to 2009 and by the US from 1997 to 2012, but alternately recognised as the representative of the Iranian people in both places. It is unlikely that these three actors, especially the latter, can become the focal point of an internal opposition in Iran seeking a change of political regime. Pahlavi, however, has managed to attract a large following in the US, both among the Iranian diaspora and among politicians in Washington. By adopting a non-assertive approach regarding his lost throne, Pahlavi has sought to attract both anti-monarchist and anti-clerical Iranians. This strategy, however, has generated criticism from more radical monarchist sectors in exile. In Iran, numerous chants mentioning Pahlavi's name have been heard during protests, leading many to think that there could be internal support for his return. However, it is difficult to determine whether these mentions merely represent slogans against the government or whether they actually reflect the desire of a segment of Iranian society for a monarchist restoration.

Despite the controversy surrounding opinion polls related to Iran due to the inherent political bias in their authorship and the conditions under which they are conducted, both within and outside the country, it is relevant to analyse some comparative findings of the three political personalities mentioned above. A survey conducted by [Gamaan](#) from the Netherlands in December 2022, which included responses from Iranians both inside and outside the country, positioned Pahlavi as the favourite candidate to be part of a possible 'Solidarity Council' tasked with managing a potential transition to a new political system in Iran, with 48% support inside and 67% outside. However, only 22% of respondents inside Iran and 25% outside chose 'constitutional monarchy' as an alternative to the current republican system. Alinejad, on the other hand, received 21% support inside and 48% outside, while Rajavi received less than 1% both inside and outside the country.

The same survey revealed a significant increase in support for a political regime change in Iran, rising from 39.9% in September 2021 to 41.5% in February 2022, and reaching 60.1% in December 2022.

Pending the publication of similar surveys, such as those conducted by the University of Maryland in cooperation with the University of Tehran, the most recent survey with which to contrast these data was conducted by [Gallup](#) in August 2021, just three weeks after Ibrahim Raisi took office. This survey is not particularly useful for evaluating the impact of the current protests, but it does show that Raisi had a 72% approval rating in contrast to the meagre 32% his predecessor Rouhani had obtained in December 2020, just months before his term ended. Neither is the June 2022 survey conducted by [Stasis](#), based in Washington, particularly helpful in shedding light on the drop in Raisi's popularity in less than a year in office, giving only a 28% approval rating. However, 49% attribute the reasons for the rate of disapproval of President Raisi to 'external political obstacles'.

The future of the Islamic Republic

The purpose of this analysis is not to delve into Iranian feminism or the demands of the Kurdish minority in Iran, [but the focus adopted from the West](#), emphasising these two aspects, has overshadowed a more basic issue: the fact that a person, regardless of their ethnic origin or gender, has died while under arrest by the morality police (Ershad). Iranian society protests demand respect for the right to life, political and civil rights, and the end of the repressive state, beyond the reasons for Mahsa Amini's detention. Furthermore, Iranians have been protesting since 2017 for better living conditions, decent salaries and job opportunities for the hopeless youth who see exile as their only option. However, a state of permanent mobilisation is not sustainable in any political system in the world. It either leads to a revolutionary or pre-revolutionary situation, or it culminates in the pacification, spontaneous or violent, of the demonstrations. The current protests in Iran have caused hundreds of deaths and thousands of detentions so far, and although their intensity and magnitude are lower, they do not seem to have concluded. This raises various scenarios for Iran's short-term future.

After the recent agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran signed in Beijing, media attention is now focused on Iran's regional actions aimed at normalisation with Arab neighbours and even reaching an acceptable nuclear agreement to replace the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).⁴ Regardless of the future of both agreements, and with the terms agreed still not clear, beyond the return to the old [bilateral security agreement signed in 2001](#), the priorities of President Ibrahim Raisi's administration and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei are focused on improving the country's economic situation to avoid increasing social discontent. This includes stopping the fall of the rial against the US dollar, controlling inflation, creating jobs and attracting foreign investment from neighbouring states to replace the no longer expected investments from Europe and the US. Regional détente, accompanied by improvements in economic indicators,

⁴ The JCPOA was the bilateral agreement reached between Iran, on the one hand, and the P5+1 group (the US, the UK, France, Russia, China and Germany) and the EU, on the other, on 15 July 2015, in which a series of measures were agreed to limit Iran's civilian nuclear programme and subject it to a set of restrictions over 30 years, in exchange for the lifting of all types of UN, EU and US sanctions related to the Iranian nuclear dossier.

would be a breath of fresh air for an administration that has not yet demonstrated many achievements in a year and a half in office and for a leader who needs to regain popular confidence in the Islamic Republic. The first of these aspects, related to regional détente, is already seeing its first fruits with various announcements regarding the possible normalisation of relations between Iran, Bahrain and Egypt, on the one hand, and the rehabilitation of the Syrian regime of al-Assad by Arab countries, on the other.

In this sense, considering what has been mentioned above about the 'normalisation' of protests in Iran and despite the numerous occasions on which the 'beginning of the end' of the Islamic Republic has been announced since before 2009, it does not seem that the bases of the system have been seriously affected by the current protests. The resilience and adaptability of the current system have been demonstrated after almost 40 years of opposition movements, wars and sanctions imposed by the US, the EU and the UN, as well as decades of isolation and being practically surrounded by military bases of hostile states. This is also evidenced by the devastating combined effects of sanctions, [falling oil prices and the collapse of exports during the global COVID-19 crisis](#). Therefore, although the current protests in Iran are significant, it does not seem that they have seriously affected the bases of the political system as a whole.

On the other hand, the much-debated eventual succession of the current Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, who is now aged 84, seems to worry those who expect it to have destabilising effects more than the Iranians themselves do. Dozens of possible successors have been mentioned in the past 20 years, but the truth is that there is currently no candidate mentioned by the leader as a possible favourite. However, there has been a theological and theoretical debate for years about the main characteristic of the Iranian political system, the predominance of the *velayat-e faqih* (rule of the Islamic jurist), in the seminary city of Qom, although the debate has not permeated the political class in Tehran.

Among the political class, however, a possible constitutional reform, returning to a republican system with a Prime Minister, and the eventual formalisation of political parties, has been frequent [at least until the rise of Ibrahim Raisi to the presidency in 2021](#). In any case, very few attribute a disruptive character to the eventual succession of the current political system controlled by the conservative elite with the economic, political and military support represented by the Revolutionary Guard. Since the conservatives have not shown signs of unity, despite their clear control of the political arena, a fierce internal dispute among the various factions that make it up to position their candidates for future leadership, or even a leadership council of three or five members, as provided for in the Constitution, is foreseeable. In this respect, the formal control of elective institutions such as the Assembly of Experts, and non-elective institutions such as the Guardian Council and the Discernment Council, will continue to be key to understanding how intra-factional disputes are resolved within republican dynamics.

Conclusions

The 2022 protests in Iran have shed light on the deep-rooted issues and dissatisfaction among the Iranian population, driven by a variety of factors, including economic hardship, political repression and the lack of social justice. Various political actors, both inside and outside the country, have attempted to capitalise on the protests, but it remains uncertain whether any of them can successfully channel the widespread discontent into meaningful political change or effectively challenge the supremacy of traditional conservative factions.

The future of the Islamic Republic depends on its ability to address pressing economic and social challenges facing the country, such as curbing inflation, creating employment opportunities and improving living standards. [Fostering regional stability](#) and improving relations with its neighbours is also crucial for Iran to attract foreign investments and alleviate the impact of international sanctions on its economy.

The current wave of protests, although significant, may not be enough to seriously undermine the foundations of the political system. While the resilience and adaptability of the Iranian political system have been tested throughout its history, these protests are a stark reminder that the Iranian government cannot indefinitely ignore the growing discontent and demands for change among its population.