Introduction

I would like to approach the topic on this panel from a different viewpoint, and focus on the short-term prospects of “success” of the current unrest in Iran, known as the Green Movement. I am going to proceed in a number of steps. In each step, I present an assumption and justify it by presenting some evidence. As arguments proceeds, I draw intermediate conclusions based on the previous assumptions, which in the end lead to my main conclusion.

Before I proceeds, I would like to emphasize that this is a tentative argument. The assumptions, justifications, and conclusions as well as the logic and methodology of the argument are open criticism, suggestions, and comments.

Step 1: The Nature of the Iranian Regime

Assumption 1: The Iranian regime is a personalistic regime.

There are various typologies of dictatorships: totalitarian vs. authoritarian, the classic
Weberian typology, bureaucratic-authoritarian, and the like. More recent typologies, that I am going to adopt here, categorize dictatorships in three main groups: single-party, military, and personalistic. Personalistic regimes have a distinct characteristic: There is no or very little constraint on the ruler. In other words, there are very little de facto institutional limits on the power of the leader. The classic examples of this type include the Pahlavi Iran, Stalin Russia, Hitler Germany, Somoza Nicaragua, and arguably Ceausescu Romania.

I argue that the Iranian regime is close to the personalistic type because Iran’s supreme leader entertains an almost unconstrained power. Although the power of the supreme leader can de jure be checked by the Assembly of Experts, this institutions is de facto powerless vis–à–vis the leader. The impotency of the Assembly of Experts in checking the power of the supreme leader is partly due to the processes via which its members are elected. The supreme leader directly chooses half of the Guardian Council who, in turn, evaluate the qualifications of candidates for the Assembly of Experts who are to check the leader’s power. Besides this constitutional deficiency, the patrimonial processes are in play to buy off the members of the Assembly most of whom are appointees of the supreme leader in one office or another. Corporate interest is another mechanism at work because all the members of the Assembly must be clergy. And, as if this is not enough, the younger generation of the assembly members are the students of the supreme leader in Islamic Jurisdiction. Whatever the mechanisms at work, I think there is little room for doubt that the Assembly of Experts, as the only institution that checks the otherwise unlimited power of the supreme leader, is incapable or rather unwilling to exercise its rights. Therefore, the power of the supreme leader is not constrained by institutional means.

That is not to say that the supreme leader can literally do as he pleases. I can’t think of a ruler in the history who did not have to take into account the distribution of power around him/her when making decisions. the claim is rather that there is little institutional constraint
on the Iran’s supreme leader, and hence the Iranian regime is closer to a personalistic type of dictatorship than to the other categories.

**Step 2: State Response to Popular Protest**

**Assumption 2:** *Personalistic regimes do not perform major reform (particularly, political reform) in response to popular unrest.*

To the best of my knowledge, and I acknowledge that I did not review all the revolution, revolutions happens in regimes of personalistic nature. By revolution, I mean an abrupt and relatively violent deposition of a regime by popular mobilization. One might imagine that the ruling elite, facing the threat of revolution, implement enough reforms to contain the popular grievances. However, the personalistic regime do not behave as such. Their reforms come “too little, too late.” Instead of going through various examples, I briefly mention two causal mechanisms that might account for the incapacity of the personalistic regimes to reform themselves in time and avoid revolution.

1. **Asymmetric information between the ruler and the people**: a class of the modern theories of war, attribute the occurrence of war to the asymmetric information between the parties about each others preferences and relative power. Under complete information, in a potential conflict, the parties should settle their dispute without waisting their resources in war. This idea can be imported to the comparative politics to explain some aspects of revolutions: If the ruling elite are aware of the nature and intensity of the grievances, and if the ruling elite and opposition are aware of their relative power, either the ruling elite should give in in time to avoid violent conflict or the opposition should avoid mobilizations leading to an unsuccessful revolution or protest. However, the information is far from complete. Individuals keep their true preferences in private, and publicly lie to
enjoy the perks that come with loyalty or to avoid the punishment that follows an expression of dissent. It has been argued that personalistic regimes are particularly vulnerable to this problem, because the agents of the ruler have more incentive to lie to their principle about the conditions of the country than to tell the truth. The ruler, detached from reality, only realizes the seriousness of the situation when people rush into his palace to arrest him, and he has “no other way out” but to escape from the roof of his palace with his personal helicopter.

2. The patrimonial nature of the personalistic regimes: One might argue that the personalistic regimes work based on the patrimonial style of the distribution of perks to buy loyalty to the leader. If this is the case, the leader might be largely constrained to take actions that address popular grievances because any serious reform conflicts with the interest of his clients who constitute the pillars of his/her regime. **Conclusion 1:** The Iranian regime will not implement a major political reform in response to popular protest.

**Step 3: Revolutionary Ideology**

**Assumption 3:** Historically, in successful modern revolutions—revolutions that deposed a modern state—the opposition(s) was equipped with an opposition ideology that sketched an alternative theory of state which was sufficiently distant/different from the official theory of the state they opposed.

In Iran 1979, this ideology was that of the Islamic state based on the theory of “the Guardianship of the Jurist”, proposed first by Khomeini in the late 1960’s, and developed further by his circle of disciples. Whatever the theory of state in the Pahlavi regime—a combination of nationalism with ideas of a super-human (read King of the Kings) as the leader of the nation directing it toward progress and prosperity—it was very different from the theory of Islamic state. In Russia February 1917, the main opposition ideologies were
some variants of Marxism vs. the Tsarist, barely Constitutional, Monarchy. In October 1917, it was Leninism vs. Liberalism/some variants of Marxism. In Nicaragua, Marxism vs. Monarchy. There is dispute whether the ideas of enlightenment played a significant role as a coherent ideology in the 1789 French Revolution. However, the Bourbon state was far from a modern state; furthermore, as state becomes more powerful from the late 18th century to the mid–19th century the existence of an opposition ideology in the time of revolution becomes more clear as one can identify Republicanism/Liberalism vs. Constitutional Monarchy in the 1848 French Revolution. Ideally, more cases should be cited, and each case should be elaborated in details for a thorough analysis, however, as I mentioned at the beginning, this is the sketch of an idea with some evidence, not a fully developed research.

Empirical regularities without causal mechanisms are very susceptible to spurious relations. Therefore, I very briefly propose two mechanisms through which an opposition ideology might play a causal role in a revolution. and, by no means, I claim that this is an exhaustive set of mechanisms.

1. **Ideology as an alternative**: new ideas are a form of innovation. The same way that technological innovation expand the possibility of production in an economic setting, ideas expand the space of choice/alternatives from which an individual chooses his/her actions. The set of alternatives available to an individual is constraint by structural factors, but also by her beliefs and world–view, and particularly by her religious beliefs if she is a religious person. Take the example of the religious sections of the Iranian society in the late Pahlavi era, and particularly focus on those with some orientation toward political activities. Before Khomeini proposed his theory of Islamic state, the Iranian religious political activists dissatisfied with the policies and orientation of the Pahlavi state, had a few alternatives: Western Style Liberal or Social Democracy, Constitutional Monarchy, or some form of communist state. The latter was totally un-
acceptable due to their religious beliefs. Constitutional Monarchy had not worked well since the early years of the Constitutional Revolution, and Democracy was susceptible to non-religiosity and non-Islamic ideas and deeds as the history of 1940’s and the early 1950’s had witnessed. Khomeini proposed an Islamic alternative theory of state to the Pahlavi theory of state which was immune, at least seemingly, to these problems, and as such expanded the space of alternatives from which the religious segments of the society could choose.

2. **Why sufficiently distant?** Although one might be dissatisfied with the status quo, the outcome of a significant change such as a political or social revolution is also uncertain. No matter how glorious and colorful the promises and plans, tremendous changes that are to follow a revolution involve unavoidable and unpredictable elements. At best, one expects the outcome to be something close to what has been planned. When the ideology of the opposition and the state they oppose are too close, and so are their theories of state, an individual, taking into account the uncertainties involved, might not effectively “distinguish” the status quo from the sketched/promised outcome of a revolution. This becomes particularly salient when the cost of such a change is tremendous, and the risks and sacrifices it requires are large as in the case of revolting against a modern state with a well-organized repressive apparatus.

**Step 4: The Ideology of The Opposition**

**Assumption 4:** The opposition associated with the Green Movement is, at best, hesitant to propose an alternative ideology. And, more importantly, their ideology is very close to the ideology of the Iranian regime.

Even a quick skimming of the declarations and speeches of Mousavi and Karroubi makes
it clear that they emphasize on working *within* the mainstream interpretation of the Islamic Republic, in which a Jurist has next to absolute power over the nation and almost all institutions of the state. Their opposition is rather pointed at certain policies adopted by the government of Ahmadi-Nezhad, the irregularity and fraud in the presidential election, and the repressive measures taken by the government or even certain officials. They claim that the current officials are “bad officials” and should be replaced by “good officials” but the framework is fine.

The more theoretical figures closely associated with the movement are Khatami and Montazeri. Khatami’s theory of “religious democracy” and Montazeri’s theory of Islamic state are distinct from the mainstream interpretation of Khomeini’s theory of Islamic state. However, Khatami’s ideas about “democracy” and “religion” have not quite been presented as an alternative theory of state, and Montazeri’s theory of Islamic state is a variant of Khomeini’s theory of the “Guardianship of the Jurist” upon which the Islamic Republic has been founded. By mainstream interpretation of the Islamic state, I do not mean the theory of Mesbah and others in his camp, but even milder and more “liberal” interpretations of Khomeini’s theory of the “Guardianship of the Jurist”.

That is not to say that there are not other theories of state that are sufficiently distinct from the mainstream ideology of the Iranian regime. Liberal Democracy and Social Democracy have been existing in the intellectual discourse in Iran for several decades. Moreover, some intellectuals such as Soroursh, among others, have developed an interpretation of Islam that is consistent with secularism. Rather, the claim is that the ideology of the opposition and those closely associated with them are too close, rather a variant, of the mainstream ideology of the Iranian state.
Step 5: Main Conclusion

Conclusion: If the Green Movement opposition does not propose a sufficiently different ideology from the ideology of the current Iranian state, the movement will not survive the state repression.

Disclaimer

I would like to emphasize that I do not claim that the existence of a sufficiently different ideology of the opposition is a sufficient condition for the movement to “succeed”. Rather, the claim is that such an ideology is a necessary condition without which the movement will not “succeed”. There are several other factors that influence the outcome of this conflict, among which are:

- The ability of the opposition to build a loosely unified coalition of different social forces including workers and the government employees. At this point, it is worth emphasizing that the proposed economic plan of the opposition does not emphasize redistributive elements that would appeal to the lower classes and workers. On the contrary, Mousavi has explicitly declared that his favored economic policy is to be very different from the highly redistributive, at least seemingly redistributive, economic policy of his premiership in the 1980’s. Supposedly, such emphasis on moving away from too much state intervention in economic life was to attract relatively well-off groups who would otherwise be scared off Mousavi’s redistributive reputation. However, if one thinks that a wide participation of the working class goes a long way to significantly increase the chances of success, then one might want to attract worker by proposing economic policies that address their economic grievances. I, personally, believe, and
this is an open question, that the middle class and the well-off sections of the society are willing to accept some redistributive economic policies to gain political liberties. That is, a more redistributive economic agenda of the opposition at this stage might attract the working class to widely join the movement while keep the support of the more well-off groups as well.

- The occurrence of an economic downturn that exacerbates the economic grievances of a wide range of social classes on the one hand, and hinders the capacity of state to bribe targeted groups of the population (via patrimonial means) who otherwise join the dissidents.

Three further points are worth emphasizing:

1. The nature of the Iranian regime does not need to stay personalistic: Personalistic rule in the Soviet Union ended with Stalin, and the regime survived under single-party rule for decades, and finally, dismantled itself and gave way to a more democratic regime.

2. There is slight chance of coup-like reshuffling within the ruling elite of Iran that might pave way for the movement to succeed. I think the chances of such reshuffling are slim, but the possibilities should be considered.

3. Finally, there is a first time for everything. This analysis is based on, or at least intended to be based on, historical evidence and social science theories that have been developed to explain the past. The human agency that accounts for many of the deviations from the regression lines is still out there. Future is still unwritten.

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