



# National Iranian American Council

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## HAS IRAN REACHED A BREAKING POINT?

With the government growing increasingly desperate—and violent—the clashes on the streets in Iran yesterday may very well prove to be the breaking point of the regime. If so, it shows that the Iranian theocracy ultimately fell on its own sword. It didn't come to an end due to the efforts of exiled opposition groups or the regime change schemes of Washington's neo-conservatives. Rather, the Iranian people are the main characters in this drama, using the very same symbols that brought the Islamic Republic into being to close this chapter in a century-old struggle for democracy.

Protests flared up again yesterday because of Ashura, the climax of a month of mourning in the Shiite religious calendar. It is a day of sadness for the death of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, Imam Hussain, who was martyred in 680. And this year the commemoration coincided with the seventh day after the death of dissident Grand Ayatol-

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lah Ali Montazeri, adding to the significance of the day. Ashura is also a reminder that the eternal value of justice must be defended regardless of the odds of success. This has provided the relentless Green movement with yet another opportunity to outmaneuver the Iranian government by co-opting its symbols and challenge its legitimacy through the language of religion.

This battle cry for justice in all its simplicity is where most political conflagrations start. It is the deafness of the powers that be that often make them the kernel of something larger and more earth shattering. It is testimony to the arrogance of power that a simple and rather

modest call for accountability and justice is beaten down only to return, demanding more, and less willing to compromise and accommodate.

And it wouldn't be the first time. In 1906, the call for a house of justice went unheeded and was followed by demonstrations, and eventually transformed into a demand for a written constitution. Similarly Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, in his imperial ineptitude, brought on himself an increasingly anti-monarchical coalition, ranging from liberals and communists, to the victorious Islamists who forged the Islamic Republic in 1979.

Ashura, with its story of perseverance and martyrdom in the face of overwhelming force of oppression, was a perfectly stylized allegory for the struggle between the mighty state of the Shah and the revolutionaries at the end of the 1970s. The Shiite mourning rituals with



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their revisiting of the dead on the 3rd, 7th and 40th day of death provided the demonstrators then, as well as now, with the opportunity to both remember those who died for the cause as well as re-iterating their opposition and condemnation of that state repression. This played an important role in bringing the simmering political discontent to a boiling point and wearing down what was perceived as the all-powerful Pahlavi state in 1977-78.

It is even more important this time around since there is no extensive leadership structure that steers the opposition. The ability to bring out crowds for important days of the calendar, religious and revolutionary ones, reminds everyone that they are not alone in their opposition to the current government.

No one can predict a revolution nor say with certainty when an authoritarian state loses its footing if not its grip. For it is not necessarily its ability or will to repress that will falter as much as ordinary people's unwillingness to allow themselves to be cowed and intimidated. It is a battle of wills where, on the one hand, the constant mobilization and tension pervading a discontented and rebellious society tests the state machinery's ability to endure as they try to perform their functions (including repression). Weighing in on the other side of the balance is the patience and ca-

capacity to stomach pain and suffering of the protesters and their sympathizers in all quarters of society.

Today a significant number of the original revolutionaries of 1979 are imprisoned or being harassed by shadowy groups from the borderlands of state authority. The constituency of the Islamic Republic is becoming increasingly alienated as the hard line faction ruling Tehran demands loyalty to an increasingly surreal understanding of, and vision for, Iranian society. Not much is left of the dynamism and visions that fuelled the revolution of 1979—but having learned from that experience the demands of the reformist movement today are much more sophisticated and their abstention from violence so much more promising for the future.

The State's ability to use the language of religion to repress these developments is failing. Again and again religion has proven itself to be much better suited as a language of resistance than governance. This became increasingly clear to Khomeini himself after the success of the revolution. In the constant bickering within the revolutionary elite, Khomeini increasingly invoked reasons of state for justifying actions, demoting religion to the role of ideological veneer. By the end of his life he stated that the state could abrogate the basic principles of Islam if it deemed

necessary for the survival of the Islamic Republic.

Instead of a system where religious thinking controlled and wielded state power he ended up with an arrangement where the state utilized religion for its own purposes, emptying religion and its language of substance, discarding it on the growing heap of unfulfilled promises of the revolution.

Ashura, the commemoration and the principle it invokes, proves to be relevant yet again, as those who hold the reins of power in Tehran unleash violence against their own people. Undoubtedly the people of Iran will persevere in their quest for greater freedom and justice through their non-violent transformation of the system from within. It will indeed be ironic if the Iranian theocracy begins to crumble on the most important religious day of the Shiite calendar.

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