



Evaluating the Prospects of Regime Change in Iran

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By Huzeir Ezekiel Dzulhisham

SYNOPSIS

Iran has faced the most severe protests since the collapse of the Iranian Rial in 2025. The main question now is what strategies will the regime use to survive?

COMMENTARY

In recent weeks, Iran has seen widespread unrest triggered by the collapse of the Iranian Rial currency and [nearly](#) 70 per cent inflation in food prices. There are reports of electricity and water shortages, aggravated by a longstanding [drought](#) with parts of Tehran, the capital city, running short of water. Conservative estimates [indicate](#) that more than 2000 people have been killed.

The country's regional influence has apparently weakened and with the high possibility of another Israeli attack. The critical question now is: What strategies will the Iranian government use to survive, and who is best positioned to take over if the government falls?

Survival Strategies

To suppress protests, the Iranian authorities usually rely on two strategies: de-legitimisation and coercion.

First, the regime characterises protestors as foreign agents, and protest movements as the work of Israel and the United States. In January 2026, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei [stated](#) that protestors were trying "to please the president of the US", while Iran's United Nations ambassador [accused](#) the US of "interfering in Iran's internal affairs".

These statements are designed to invoke the widely perpetuated [history](#) of Operation Ajax, the 1953 US-organised coup against democratically elected Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh, which led to the installation of the US-allied Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.

By linking the protests to foreign interference, the strategy de-legitimises calls for regime change and hopes to obtain the support of neutral constituents and, by extension, mobilise nationalism against perceived threats to Iranian sovereignty.

During the 2009 Green Movement Protests, nearly three million Iranians [protested](#) the election of conservative President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, while pro-regime [rallies](#) attended by hundreds of thousands demonstrated against the opposition. In the current protests, pro-regime rallies have been [reported](#) in seven cities, including one [attended](#) by Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian.

Second, coercive measures are key to the regime's suppression of protests. The official depiction of protests as foreign-based existential threats limits willingness for negotiation and intensifies the degree of coercion deployed. When a protest occurs, depending on the severity, the Iranian security authorities typically [restricts](#) internet speeds, even cutting internet access altogether, to prevent coordination among protestors and the spread of protests.

While the use of Starlink satellite internet has been made [accessible](#) to protestors by the US, the regime has [reportedly](#) used military-grade signal jamming to restrict access to Starlink, which explains why widespread internet access has not been restored.

To suppress protests, the Iranian security forces [mobilises](#) the special units of Iran's Law Enforcement Forces ([LEF](#) Special Units), and the Basij (Organisation for the Mobilisation of the Oppressed), a paramilitary force under the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

During the 2009 Green Movement protests, security forces used [well-documented](#) brutality to disperse protestors, and [occupied](#) streets pre-emptively to forestall protests. The Basij conducted [night raids](#) against anti-regime leaders and supporters, with the help of a well-organised network of civilian informants.

Similar intimidation tactics were [used](#) to diffuse the 2022 Woman, Life and Freedom protests that saw thousands protesting against repressive religious laws, particularly the requirement of the headscarf for women.

The effectiveness of the two strategies helps explain why the regime has endured mass protests for decades.

Weak Political Opposition

Regime change has not occurred in Iran because there is also no viable alternative political movement. Still, protests have taken place, mobilising thousands around popular issues such as rising costs of living and religious repression.

Widespread dissatisfaction does not automatically transform into revolutionary political movements. These require catalysts such as charismatic leadership and coercive capabilities that can directly challenge the legitimacy of government and its use of violence against citizens.

Many influential opposition Iranian leaders are either exiled or imprisoned, most notably Nobel Laureate Narges Mohammadi, jailed in 2021, while the theocratic rulers retain coercive control through the IRGC and the Basij.

Moreover, the most organised opposition groups have little legitimacy within Iran. The Marxist People's Mojahedin Organisation of Iran (PMOI) and its political wing, the National Council of Resistance of Iran, [gained](#) international attention by revealing the existence of Iran's secret nuclear programme in 2002. The PMOI [has](#) little domestic support within Iran, as it supported Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran in 1980.

Alternatively, there are the Monarchists who aim to restore Reza Pahlavi, son of the deposed Shah of Iran. Despite the high level of support from overseas Iranians, many of whom previously supported the late Shah, Pahlavi has reportedly [little](#) support within Iran.

Older Iranians remember the Pahlavi monarchy's authoritarian rule, with its systematic repression under the SAVAK secret police. Furthermore, US and Israeli [support](#) for Reza Pahlavi [reinforces](#) the Iranian regime's narrative of foreign powers colluding to undermine Iranian sovereignty.

While protestors in recent public demonstrations have reportedly chanted Pahlavi's name, this has been interpreted as [attempts](#) to antagonise and delegitimise the current regime, and a [nostalgia](#) for economic stability that existed under the Shah [rather](#) than genuine support for the return of monarchical system.

Structural Resilience

The decentralised political structure of the present government in Iran also allows it to absorb direct shocks. This explains why, despite the severity of Israel's assassinations of key military and political figures, the regime did not collapse.

While the theocratic Supreme Leader of Iran holds ultimate authority, political power is institutionally separated among the Presidency and the Supreme National Security Council with clear chains of succession to ensure continuity of government.

After the so-called 12-Day War with Israel in 2025, the Iranian Defence Council was [formed](#). It is composed of military generals, headed by President Masoud Pezeshkian and two representatives appointed by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. The Council was designed to ensure rapid crisis [response](#) and continuity of government, even in the absence of Supreme Leader Khamenei.

Thus, it is highly unlikely that a leadership decapitation strategy like those in Venezuela and Iraq could change Iran's political system. Case in point was the 2020 US assassination of IRGC General Qasem Soleimani, which did not cripple the IRGC as Soleimani was quickly replaced by General Esmail Qaani.

Dangerous Scenarios

While the Iranian government could theoretically endure current protests, the most dangerous scenarios involve regime fragmentation, the defection of a military general, IRGC commander or even the mass defection of disillusioned soldiers.

During the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the final straw that brought down the Pahlavi Dynasty was the [mass defection](#) of soldiers and generals, which crippled the Pahlavi government's coercive capacity to suppress protests.

Indeed, there is consensus among Iranian scholars that either of Iran's national military, the *Artesh* or the IRGC, is best positioned to succeed the current regime due to their institutionalised control over Iran's weapons and financial resources.

Another dangerous scenario would be if protestors managed to obtain weapons by capturing a military base. Most of the current protests are [concentrated](#) in Iran's Western provinces, which incidentally also [host](#) the majority of Iran's military bases and missile development sites. Possession of weapons could shift the balance of power in favour of protestors, but could potentially lead to civil war.

What Happens Now?

Yet it must be recognised that the present Iranian theocratic republic has been highly resilient, having endured economic crises, wars, protests, and foreign attacks since 1979. While the current protests are exceptional in scale and speed, they may lose momentum in the face of a determined regime which is still able to distribute power across overlapping organisations united in the common goal of retaining control.

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