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Iran's writing on the wall: Ethnic minorities and others assert themselves

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

In anticipation of a lifting of economic sanctions once a nuclear agreement has been concluded with permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and Germany, and coupled with President Hassan Rouhani's effort to reduce government interference in people's lives and loosen Internet restrictions, various segments of Iranian society are displaying a greater assertiveness to demand more rights and decry official abuse.

Commentary

RECENT MONTHS have witnessed a series of unrelated, nationwide protests in Iran by teachers demanding salary hikes as well as ethnic groups decrying government abuse and calling for greater rights. With the exception of the teachers, most of the protests erupted spontaneously sparked by incidents as well as pent-up anger and frustration.

The protests potentially signal that Iran is not immune to the winds of change blowing across the Middle East and North Africa that is locked in multiple, often bloody conflicts between social and political forces demanding political change and conservative governments determined to cling to the status quo.

To be sure, Iran's territorial integrity unlike that of Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Libya is not being called into question. Iran in contrast to many other nations in the region boasts a strong state, rooted institutions, an imperial history and a culture that dates back thousands of years.

Managing expectations

In addition, a majority of Iranians anticipate significant benefits from a lifting of crippling sanctions, which has created expectations that the government of President Hassan Rouhani will have to carefully manage. Notwithstanding Rouhani's effort to reduce government interference in people's lives and loosen internet restrictions, Iranians "want to be able to use credit cards and transfer funds, and they wonder when they will catch a direct flight to JFK(New York's John F Kennedy Airport) or LAX,(Los Angeles International Airport)" noted American scholar Ann Lesch after a recent visit to the Islamic republic.

Complicating the government's need to manage and meet expectations once sanctions are lifted is a greater restiveness among ethnic minorities in provinces like Sistan and Balochistan, predominantly Azeri East Azerbaijan, Arabs in Khuzestan and primarily Kurdish West Azerbaijan. Demands for greater social, economic and cultural rights are being expounded by opposition groups operating largely from exile among which the controversial Mujahedeen-e-Khalq has been the most prominent. It is difficult to independently assess what impact these groups have.

A mass rally

Nonetheless, the Mujahedeen who have sought to associate themselves with the teacher protests as well as protests on the soccer pitch in the oil-rich Khuzestan capital of Ahwaz, has successfully got itself taken off US and European terrorism lists. The group has won endorsements from an impressive list of Western politicians and former senior government officials and military commanders on both sides of the Atlantic despite its controversial history of targeting US officials and assets in Iran in the 1970s, and siding with Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war after it was expelled from France in 1986.

Though building a cult-like culture around its leaders, the late Massoud Rajavi and his wife and successor, Maryam Rajavi, the inroads made by the Mujahedeen in capitals across the globe is reflected in the extraordinary line-up of speakers for a mass rally in Paris this month.

Speakers include former chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff General Hugh Shelton, former FBI director Louis Freeh, former CIA director James Woolsey, former US Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge, former French foreign minister Bernard Kouchner, former French defence and foreign minister Michelle Alliot-Marie, former Canadian prime minister 'Kim' Campbell, former Algerian prime minister Sid Ahmed Ghazali, former Italian foreign minister Giulio Tertzzi and a host of other luminaries from the United Nations and the European Commission.

Rising tensions

The Mujahedeen appear to have focused on the demonstrations by teachers in a host of Iranian cities as well as Khuzestan where the group publicized recent protests on the soccer pitch at a time of rising Arab-Iranian tensions over the status of Shiite Muslim communities in the Arab world, the crisis in Yemen, and the outlines of a multilateral agreement that would curb Iran's nuclear program and return the Islamic republic to the fold of the international community.

Ethnic Arabs have long complained that the government has failed to reinvest oil profits to raise the region's standards of living. The World Health Organization (WHO) identified Ahwaz in 2013 as Iran's most polluted city. Authorities distributed in February tens of thousands of surgical masks and more than 26,000 gallons of milk in Ahvaz, a city of more than one million, when it was hit by a severe sand storm that forced the closure of schools and offices, the cancellation of flights, and prompted scattered protests. Some Arab commentators have called for Iranian Arabs to secede from the Islamic republic.

Getting on the bandwagon

Similarly, exiled East Azerbaijani nationalist groups got on the bandwagon of anti-government protests in Tabriz earlier this month that erupted after Traktor Sazi FC, one of Iran's top clubs and a symbol of Iranian Azeri identity was allegedly duped in a Premier League final to prevent it from emerging as champion. The incident was the latest of a number of overtly nationalist protests in recent years initially sparked by environmental grievances that carried secessionist undertones.

The protests in East Azerbaijan and Khuzestan like a riot in Kurdish West Azerbaijan earlier this month, exposed the gap between the government in Tehran and various ethnic communities. Riots erupted in the majority Kurdish city of Mahabad after a 25-year old hotel maid died jumping from a fourth floor balcony as she tried to escape from an intelligence official allegedly trying to rape her.

Iranian Kurds concede that hopes that the riot will ignite a wider spread protest are likely to prove wishful thinking with Kurdish groups hopelessly divided at a time that Kurds in Iraq and Syria have carved out entities of their own and the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) negotiates greater rights for

Kurds in Turkey with the government in Ankara. A prominent Istanbul-based Iranian Kurdish academic, Abbas Vali, is quoted by al-Monitor as saying: “All of these parties are frozen in the past and completely dependent on the Iraqi Kurds. They made no effort to create a clandestine movement inside Iran, believing that the regime would implode. Their calculation proved to be wrong.”

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