

Iran Protests: Changing Dynamics between the Islamic Republic and the Poor

2017년 마지막 날, 이란은 경제, 사회, 정치 분노를 표출한 시위의 물결에 휩싸였다. 다양한 구호와 요구들이 표출된 가운데 경제적 원인이 시위의 시발점 이었다고 볼 수 있다. 이 글은 금번 이란 시위의 배경을 1979년 혁명 이후 40년 간 이어온 국가와 저소득 계층간의 역학 관계 변화를 통해 밝히는 것을 목표로 하고 있다. 혁명 이후 저소득 계층은 혁명 정권의 주요 사회적 지지 기반이었으나 1990년대 초 정부의 신자유주의 경제 정책으로의 전환은 저소득 계층의 소외와 국가와의 관계 악화라는 새로운 역학 관계를 낳게 되었다.

In the final days of 2017, a wave of protests erupted in Iran, bringing to surface a host of economic, social, and political resentments. Despite the profusion of slogans and demands, the initial trigger is widely believed to have been economic. This article aims to contextualize Iran's protests by examining the changing dynamics between the state and the poor in the four decades since the country's 1979 revolution. A case is made that while in the first decade after the revolution the poor became the primary social base of the post-revolutionary state, the (neo-liberal) shift in economic policies since the early 1990s has cultivated new dynamics in which the lower economic strata are increasingly disenchanted with and disenfranchised from the state.

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People gather to protest over high cost of living in Tehran, Iran on December 30, 2017
Source: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

Rising Economic Indignation

For nearly two weeks in the final days of 2017 and early days of 2018, news about demonstrations in Iran made headlines around the world. The protests began in Mashhad, Iran's second largest city and home to some of the most powerful clerical figures in the Islamic Republic. From there, they spread quickly throughout the country, engulfing some fifty cities. Initially, government officials suggested this was simply an anti-government plot orchestrated by the supporters of Ebrahim Raisi, the hardliner candidate who had lost the May 2017 presidential election to incumbent Hassan Rouhani. A few days later, supreme leader Ali Khamenei blamed Iran's enemies for stirring up unrest. As popular dissent continued to ferment, however, Rouhani and other state officials acknowledged that protests were triggered by legitimate grievances over the economic situation, a lack of transparency, and corruption.

To be sure, not all participants in the demonstrations came from the ranks of the poor. Though its unmistakable impetus was pervasive economic dissatisfaction among the lower as well as the middle classes, the protest movement was animated by a diversity of grievances reflected in chants ranging from “down with price hikes,” to “down with the dictator.” While acknowledging this medley of disenchantments, the present article discusses some of the ways in which the changing dynamics between the Islamic Republic and the poor may have contributed to the rise of the recent uprising. A case is made that while in the first decade after the revolution the poor and the working classes effectively became the primary social base of the post-revolutionary state, the (neoliberal) shift in economic policies since the early 1990s has cultivated new dynamics in which the lower economic strata are increasingly disenchanted with and disenfranchised from the state.



Miners stage a protest against Hassan Rouhani as he visits a coal mine near Azadshahr, Golestan. They express outrage over lack of safety measures and protections.
Source: Fars News Agency, 7 May 2017

Pro-Poor Islamism and the 1979 Revolution

The reigning political regime in Iran, the Islamic Republic (IR), was created in the aftermath of a revolutionary movement that reached its zenith in February 1979 with the overthrow of the Pahlavi monarchy. Though the revolutionary movement was manifestly polyvocal in its discourses and heterogeneous in the makeup of its agents, the establishment of the IR signaled the fateful triumph of Islamists, united under the leadership of Ruhollah Khomeini, over other revolutionary forces. The latter consisted of a wide range of groupings from liberal-nationalists, to Third Worldists, and Leftists (of both religious and secular variety). Nearly four decades after its founding, the IR today looks vastly different from the political entity that came into being in 1979. Over time, the institutions, structures, and modes of legitimation of the post-revolutionary regime have undergone major transformations, creating ever-changing relations between the IR and various social classes, including the poor.

The rise of Islamists to power was made possible by an array of factors. Still, there is near consensus that by gaining the support of the lower and working classes in the critical final months and weeks of the revolution, Islamists secured a decisive advantage over their rivals and found an important social base of support. It was precisely in this period that Khomeini and his Islamist allies directed their attention to the lower classes, adopted an increasingly pro-poor rhetoric, and made pledges to eliminate poverty and create a socially and economically just order under the rule of an Islamic state. This discursive shift proved to be politically expedient. According to sociologist Asef Bayat, the adoption of the language of social and economic justice helped Islamists to mobilize the economically disenfranchised masses “under the banner of the Islamic Revolution” in the immediate period before and after the overthrow of the monarchy (Bayat 1997, xvi). Bayat’s contention that egalitarian concerns were only late additions to Khomeini’s discourse is corroborated by a number of other scholars. Among others, Ervand Abrahamian, a leading historian of modern Iran, argues that pro-poor concerns did not feature prominently in Khomeini’s writings and sermons prior to the 1970s (Abrahamian 1993, 27). In the late 1970s, however, Khomeini began to appropriate a revolutionary economic justice discourse that had been popularized since the 1950s by the secular and religious Left.¹

The Post-Revolutionary Welfare State

Consistent with Islamists’ then newly-adopted pro-poor discourse, in the first decade following the revolution the IR introduced a number of measures aimed at creating a more equitable society. These included an extensive anti-poverty program bringing housing, electricity, safe drinking water, health services, and schools to millions of urban and rural poor, as well as a generous system of subsidies for basic goods. The 1980s, then, may be considered the welfare state phase of the post-revolutionary state. A key architect of this phase was Mir-Hossein Mousavi, prime minister from 1981–1989, who represented the so-called left-wing of the IR. Mousavi’s government, one scholar argues, was generally successful in increasing “the relative share of income going to poor and middle income households” (Jafari 2009). According to another scholar, under Mousavi overall inequality fell substantially, “by about 10 Gini points”; though this pattern came to a halt in the subsequent period (Salehi-Isfahani 2009).

Aside from the coming to power of left-wing Islamists as well as the IR’s overall determination to gain political legitimation from the economically disenfranchised masses, at least two other factors contributed to the shaping of the IR’s welfare state phase. The first was the influence of the Left, represented in post-revolutionary Iran by a wide range of groups of both secular and religious variety, including the then widely popular People’s Fadaie Guerrillas Organization and the People’s Mojahedin Organization. Seeking to gain the upper hand over the Left in the battle for cultural hegemony, the Islamists doubled down on their pro-poor and pro-worker rhetoric and Khomeini called on workers to “repel” the Leftist opponents of the IR, who, in his description, committed their acts of “treachery in the guise of sympathizing with the laborers” (Khomeini 2008, 26). The protraction of this war of position throughout the 1980s, while subjecting the Left to increased suppression and censorship, nevertheless kept economic justice concerns front and center in Iranian politics.

The second factor was the outbreak of war with Iraq in September 1980. The continuation of the war for eight long and devastating years imposed exorbitant financial and human cost on both countries. And yet, perhaps ironically, the war itself was seen by Islamists as a ‘God-sent gift,’ allowing them to consolidate their power and take full control of the various institutions of the post-revolutionary state. The war also enabled Mousavi to insist

on (and ultimately convince Khomeini of) the need for a strong state, and the heavy handed regulation of production and distribution. As political economist Behzad Yaghmaian writes, “state involvement in the economy increased during the eight years of war with Iraq,” as the government put into effect “an elaborate system of ... subsidies, price controls, and other economic regulations” (Yaghmaian 2002, 185).

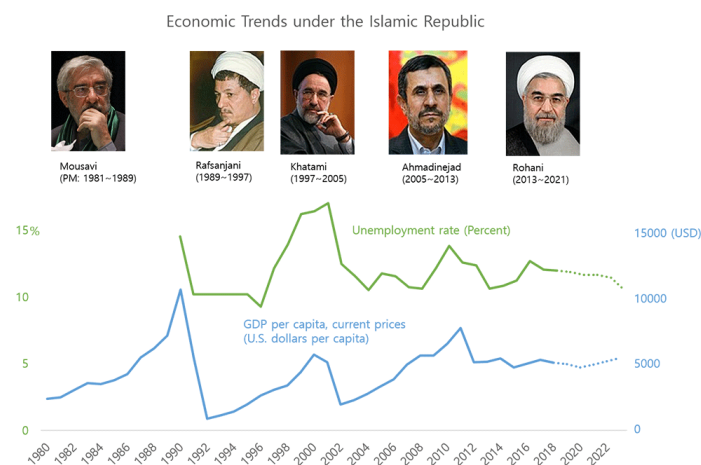
The Neoliberal Shift

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the IR began a gradual shift away from its initial egalitarian commitments and toward economic liberalization. By now the war with Iraq had ended, the Left had been effectively eliminated through a series of violent purges (including the mass executions of 1988), and with Khomeini’s death in 1989 left-wing Islamists had lost their main patron and backer within the IR’s evolving power structures. What is more, the coming to an end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet-led socialist bloc had the global effect of accelerating economic liberalization. In Iran, it was Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, president from 1989 to 1997, who first embarked on an economic liberalization agenda. According to economist Sohrab Behdad, the three main components of Hashemi-Rafsanjani’s economic policy included: “(i) exchange rate unification and floating the currency, the rial; (ii) decontrolling prices and eliminating subsidies; and (iii) privatization of the state owned enterprises” (Behdad 2000, 115). In the 1990s, the Iranian state also launched a program of demolishing shanty towns that housed large communities of the urban poor. The subsequent protests and riots by the urban poor during this decade – in cities including Tehran, Shiraz, Arak, Mashhad, Gazvin, Tabriz, and Khorramabad – signaled a shift in the relations between the IR and the lower economic classes (Bayat 1994, 10).

In 1997, Mohammad Khatami won a hotly contested presidential election with the promise of liberal-democratic reforms. Despite making references to social and economic justice issues early in his presidency, during his two-term tenure, Khatami, pursued for the most part the economic liberalization agenda of his predecessor. While Khatami’s lack of success in pushing forth his political reform agenda led to the disenchantment of some middle class voters, the continued implementation of neoliberal economics throughout the 2000s gave rise to a series of collective actions by workers protesting the deterioration of their rights and protections. Among the more visible instances of such actions were a series of demonstrations and strikes by schoolteachers in 2001 and 2003, as well as a 2006 strike by bus drivers in Tehran.

The 2005 presidential election took place in the context of rising political cynicism and economic dissatisfaction. The election saw the unexpected victory of the right-wing populist Mahmood Ahmadinejad, and the defeat of former president Hashemi-Rafsanjani. Despite his often aggressive criticism of the legacies of his predecessors, Ahmadinejad’s two-term presidency saw the continuation of the economic liberalization agenda. Mere months after taking office, Ahmadinejad submitted to the parliament the draft of proposed amendments to Iran’s labor law. The amendments sought, according to economist Mohammad Maljoo, to weaken the mobilizational power of workers by “giving employers the right of expedited dismissal while not recognizing workers’ right to establish their own independent trade unions” (Maljoo 2007, 10). Two years later, in 2008, the government submitted yet another major economic proposal to the parliament, this to reform the country’s subsidy system. The proposal was subsequently approved and became law in 2010, cutting subsidies on many staples, including fuel, food, and electricity.

While pushing forth this economic liberalization agenda, Ahmadinejad, whose two election campaigns focused on the message of socioeconomic justice and a return to the IR’s early egalitarian commitments, also introduced a number of ad-hoc wealth redistribution mechanisms, funded by then rising oil revenues. One such mechanism was justice shares, by which the government distributed at highly discounted prices 40% of the shares of privatized public assets among low income households. Similarly, just as subsidy cuts on basic goods



Source: Image – https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Presidents_of_Iran
 Graph–Unemployment rate – <http://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/LUR@WEO/IRN>
 Graph–GDP per Capita – <http://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDPDPC@WEO/IRN>
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were introduced, the government transferred cash subsidies to citizens in the form of monthly payments (Habibi 2013, 3). Assessing the impact of Ahmadinejad's cash transfer policy on poverty and inequality patterns, leading economist Djavad Salehi-Isfahani found that between 2009 and 2013, the policy of cash transfers kept poverty down and reduced inequality, with the country's Gini index falling from 0.42 to 0.37 (Salehi-Isfahani 2017, 130). Still, as Nader Habibi points out, the combined impact of the government's economic policies and the severe economic sanctions against Iran over its nuclear program drove inflation and unemployment rates high, thus "[eroding] the benefits of direct cash subsidy payments to low-income families, while pushing some middle-class families into poverty" (Habibi 2013, 7).

In 2013, Hassan Rouhani was elected president, having promised to solve the nuclear crisis and bring an end to sanctions. On the campaign trail, Rouhani famously said that "nuclear centrifuges should continue to turn, but so should the wheels of people's livelihoods." Despite these pledges, and even after reaching a nuclear agreement with the U.S. and five other world powers in 2015, Iran's poverty index has registered an overall increase under Rouhani's presidency (now in its second term). While the Ahmadinejad era cash transfers were steadily losing their value to inflation, Rouhani raised energy prices by approximately 50%; a decision which, in Salehi-Isfahani's assessment, increased poverty and "hurt the poor more than the rich" (Salehi-Isfahani 2017).

The continuation of the IR's neoliberal shift under Rouhani has also resulted in a sharp increase in workforce insecurity. In December 2015, Ali Beigi, chairperson of the High Coordinating Centre for Islamic Labour Councils announced that no less than 93% of Iranian workers were employed on the basis of temporary contracts, a statistical increase of at least 13% since the commencement of Rouhani's tenure. Within days of this report, the government announced a plan to lower minimum wage by 25% for workers under the age of 29. After his second electoral victory in May 2017, Rouhani also sought to dismantle the cash transfer program, and he included a proposal to this effect in his draft budget presented to the parliament in December 2017. The draft budget also proposed to raise gasoline price by 50%. In the aftermath of the recent protests, however, the parliament announced a freeze on the gasoline price, and Rouhani withdrew his proposed elimination of cash transfers.



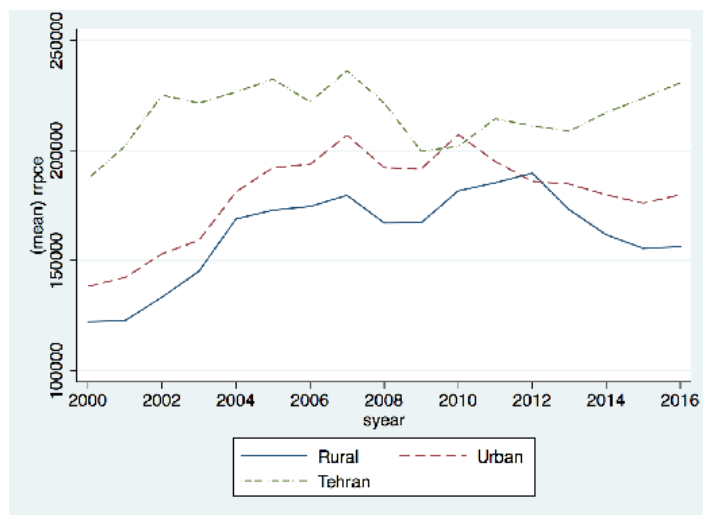
*Farmers from Varzaneh, Isfahan protest against the government's mismanagement of water resources by tuning their backs to state officials during a Friday prayer gathering. Drought and climate change have contributed to economic deterioration, especially in rural areas.
Source: Tweeted by Amir Ebtehaj (@amirebtehaj), 16 Mar 2018*

Assorted Grievances, Varied Inequalities

Since the advent of the Khatami-led 'reforms movement' in the late 1990s, and increasingly after the 2009 Green Movement (the months-long protest movement that broke out following the contested June 2009 presidential election), the bulk of media commentaries and scholarly works on state-society relations in Iran have focused on the sociopolitical grievances of the urban middle class. Such grievances are said to include political repression, denial of civil liberties, the growing weakness of elected vis-à-vis unelected state bodies, and an innate incompatibility between the preferred lifestyles of the urban middle class and the conservative state-imposed codes of public and private conduct. Accurate as they may be in identifying some of the potentially disruptive cleavages in contemporary Iranian society, these analyses have paid scant attention to livelihood-related grievances and festering resentments resulting from socioeconomic inequalities. These inequalities – be it between men and women, capital and periphery, city and village – continue to create various forms and degrees of disenchantment with the IR.

Despite considerable post-revolutionary progress in increasing women's access to healthcare and education, as well as in achieving high female university enrollment rates (exceeding 60% in 2007–2008), poverty and economic inequality remain markedly feminized. The gender gap is most

evident in employment and income. Mirsardoo and Batmanghelichi observe that in the period between 1996 to 2006, and despite an uninterrupted increase in women's education levels, "88% of the income of the country ... belonged to men." During the same period, male unemployment figures declined, while female unemployment recorded an increase (Mirsardoo and Batmanghelichi 2011, 86). The underrepresentation of women in Iran's job-market has continued throughout the past decade: according to a World Bank report, statistics from 2015 revealed "stark gender differences" in unemployment rates (9.3% for men vs. 19.4% for women), as well as in labor force participation rates (63.2% for men vs. 13.2% for women) (World Bank Group 2016). By 2016, unemployment rates for women had reached 20.7%, compared to 10.5% for men (Financial Tribune 2017). The persistent feminization of poverty and unemployment may help to partially explain the active participation of women in the recent uprisings.



Per capita household expenditures (in 2016/17 prices). Figures show a sharp decline in both urban and rural household expenditure since the early 2010s.
Source: Tyranny of Numbers – <https://djavadsalehi.com/2018/01/03/poverty-and-living-standards-of-iranians-since-the-nuclear-deal/>

Though not as stark as the gender difference, the disparity (in household income, employment, etc.) between Tehran and the rest of the country, as well as between urban and rural areas, is yet another facet of the multidimensional reality of socioeconomic inequality. That unlike the 2009 Green Movement, the recent protests began and found more support outside of Tehran ought to be understood in the context of rising inequality between the center and the periphery. As Salehi-Isfahani notes, in 2016, per capita household expenditures in cities and rural areas outside of Tehran were significantly lower than in 2010, while in Tehran the numbers were higher. In the same year, poverty rates in most urban and rural areas were higher than in 2013, while in Tehran no statistically significant change had been recorded. Consistent with these patterns, following the nuclear agreement, and as Iran's economy experienced a rapid growth, average real

per capita income grew unevenly across the country: 9.6% in Tehran, 5.9% in other urban areas, and only 3.4% in rural areas (Salehi-Isfahani 2018).

A major factor contributing to the rising disparity between urban and rural areas has been the effect of climate change and environmental degradation. Already in 2010, and pointing to the links between climate change and the deterioration of development indicators, one study warned that "the window of opportunity for avoiding the most damaging climate change impacts ... is closing" (Amiri and Eslamian 2010, 216). This cautioning is corroborated by a more recent study, which posits that low income farmers disproportionately bear the brunt of climate change. The study identifies "climate related poverty," as a multidimensional phenomenon the consequences of which may include loss of farm income, food insecurity, health problems, reduced household expenditure on education, and increased social conflict. The authors of this study also warn that "the frequency of climate-related shocks (i.e., drought) may keep poor farmers in a poverty trap" (Karimi, Karami, and Keshavarz 2018, 8).

Historically, droughts have resulted in mass migration of rural populations to urban areas. These economic migrants have often settled in city margins joining the ranks of the urban poor. Climate change has, predictably, exacerbated this pattern. A 2016 study of the impact of droughts in Esfejin village (in Zanjan county), found a 31% post-drought reduction in the rural population (Rezaei, Gholifarb, and Safa 2016, 62). Another study, this with a focus on the 2008 drought in the rural district of Jiroft county (in southeastern Kerman province) observed a 30% drought-induced decline in rural population, as well as a significant decrease in employment and annual income of rural households (Ghanbari, Bayad and Rezayi 2015, 56). Considering that both Zanjan and Jiroft were the scene of demonstrations last winter, there should remain little doubt about the existence of a direct link between climate related economic devastations and the surge of anti-government or anti-state dissent.

Whither Now?

Disenchantment with the IR among the lower classes is hardly a new phenomenon. As discussed earlier, since the early 1990s, protests and riots by the poor and the working classes have become common occurrences in Iranian cities and townships. Still, the recent uprising was far and away the biggest public display of a seemingly irreversible rupture between the

IR and a segment of Iranian society on whose behalf the revolution was fought and in whose name the Islamic state was founded. While nationwide demonstrations began to wane within nearly two weeks after their start, sporadic protests are still taking place around the country, most noticeably perhaps in Isfahan, where hundreds of farmers from the city's surrounding rural areas have been voicing their anger over water shortage and what they see as the government's mismanagement of water resources. Protests have also broken out in Ahvaz, capital of the oil-rich Khuzestan province, where workers have mobilized to demand overdue wages.

The Rouhani administration has pledged to improve the economic situation. The prospect, however, of seeing the kind of reform needed to reverse the ever-increasing disenchantment of the economically marginalized classes with the IR is distinctly inauspicious. As noted above, (neo)liberalization of Iranian economy has been pursued, with more or less equal vigor, by both Reformists (former left-wing of the IR) and Principlists (formerly known as the right-wing). There is little evidence to suggest that in the remaining three years of his presidential tenure, Rouhani will change this course. Yet, even if the government made it a priority to deal with widening economic disparities, its ability to move forward such as agenda is diminished by a range of problems that have plagued Iran's economy for the better part of the last two decades: rampant government and business corruption, sanctions, and the ever-expanding role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) in the country's economic affairs, only to name a few. The continuation of the present condition will likely lead to the recurrence of economically motivated protests. Given the decades long suppression of grassroots civil society activism (including independent workers' associations and Leftist organizations), there is a not-so-far-fetched fear that grievances will take the form of riots and civil unrest. To reiterate the cautioning of the above-cited concerned environmentalists, the window of opportunity for preventing the worst outcomes may be fast closing.

저자소개

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- 1 I distinguish between 'left-wing Islamists' and 'religious Left'. While in the period leading to the revolution, the former group pursued the overall Islamist goal of establishing an Islamic state based on Khomeini's theory of the 'guardianship of the Islamic jurist' (velayat-e faqih), the latter – whose inimitable paragon was Ali Shariati – held a markedly anti-theocratic position, even while it saw Islam as a compelling source of inspiration for waging revolutionary struggles against both dictatorship and capitalism. For a detailed discussion on this, see my article titled "Two Pro-Mostazafin Discourses in the 1979 Iranian Revolution," published in *Contemporary Islam*, Vol. 11, Issue 3 (2017): 287 – 301.

*본 기고문은 전문가 개인의 의견으로, 서울대 아시아연구소와 의견이 다를 수 있음을 밝힙니다.