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Iranian regime expresses satisfaction over Egypt riots; reformists express support, frustration

The violent riots in Egypt drew considerable public attention in many countries this week, and Iran was no exception. Similarly to the fall of Tunisia's President Zine El Abidine Bin Ali on January 14, 2011, the developments in Egypt brought satisfaction to elements affiliated with the conservative camp in Iran. In the eyes of the Iranian regime, the developments in the Arab world reflect the ongoing weakening of moderate and pro-Western governments in the region, creating an opportunity to entrench Iran's regional status.

No significant participation of Islamic circles (mainly the Muslim Brotherhood movement) has been observed in the Egyptian riots so far. Nevertheless, official sources in Iran claimed there was a connection between the Islamic revolution in Iran (1979) and the latest riots in the Arab world, and even stressed the Islamic foundation on which, supposedly, they rest. Iran is marking the 32nd anniversary of the Islamic revolution this week. The proximity between the riots in Egypt and the revolution festivities give Iran a good opportunity to draw a parallel between the civil mutiny in Egypt and the revolution that toppled the Shah's regime in 1979.

Tehran Friday prayer leader Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami discussed the Arab world developments at a sermon given last Friday (January 28). He said that they were "aftershocks" of the Islamic revolution in Iran. He noted that rulers involved in a battle against religion, such as the Egyptian tyrant Hosni Mubarak, are prophesied by the Quran to fall sooner or later. Khatami argued that the world powers are trying to conceal the religious basis behind the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, claiming they are the result of a democratic, liberal worldview. According to Khatami, it is Islam that is the source of the developments in the Arab world. He cited as proof the fact that the demonstrators in Tunisia had chanted "Allahu Akbar" at the demonstrations, and that the first thing they had done after toppling the president was to organize mass prayers at Tunisian mosques. The senior cleric noted that the recent events reflected the formation of a new Middle East based on Islam and religious democracy (Fars, January 28).

The ultra-conservative cleric Ayatollah Mohammad-Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi also noted a connection between the Islamic revolution and the developments in Tunisia and Egypt. Speaking at a meeting with religion students, Mesbah-Yazdi said that, thanks to the Islamic revolution, the Muslim nations of Tunisia, Egypt, and other Arab countries were now also rising up against imperialism and the oppressive regimes, in accordance with the model provided by the revolution (ISNA, January 27).



Students demonstrate in front of Egypt's Interests Section in Tehran, January 29

One example of Iran's support for the riots in Egypt could be seen in the reaction of Foreign Ministry spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast to the events. He said the aim of the riots was to realize the just national and religious demands of the Egyptians. He called on Egypt's authorities to heed the voice of the people, avoid violent clashes with the demonstrators, and allow them to realize their demands (various news agencies, January 29). Majles speaker Ali Larijani also expressed support for the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia, saying that it was time to topple the "tyrannical puppet regimes" (IRNA, January 30).

Iran's satisfaction with the developments in the Arab world was also reflected in Iranian press, affiliated mostly with the conservative bloc, which referred to President Mubarak as the "Pharaoh of Egypt". The daily Jomhuri-ye Eslami, which in recent years has adopted a particularly aggressive stance towards the Egyptian regime, assessed that the expected fall of Mubarak's regime heralded the fate of other Arab regimes. The corruption in Arab states, the poverty, the class differences, the oppression, the Arab regimes' dependence on imperialist powers and the Zionist influence on them—all that has led to the "malignant disease" plaguing them, says an editorial published by the daily on January 29. The daily compared the statements made by U.S. top officials about the supposed stability of the Egyptian regime to the statements made by U.S. officials in 1978 about the stability of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's regime. It is impossible to ignore the revolutionary wave sweeping the Arab world from North Africa to the Persian Gulf, which is likely to topple tyrannical regimes in the Middle East and usher in a new age for the Islamic world, Jomhuri-ye Eslami argued.

The daily Keyhan also welcomed the developments in Egypt. In an editorial published on January 30, the daily stressed the major part played by Egypt in serving U.S. interests. Egypt worked towards strengthening the ties between the Arab and Muslim world and Israel, helped reinforce the status of the U.S. in the region, and was a balancing factor in that country's struggle against Iran's increasing regional dominance. The daily assessed that even the U.S. administration's support for Egypt would not save President Mubarak's regime this time. Whether the U.S. is ready or not, Keyhan said, the train of toppling tyrants in the Middle East is now on the move.

In recent days, elements affiliated with the Iranian reformist opposition also expressed support for the Egyptian people's struggle against President Mubarak's regime. Unlike the reactions by top Iranian officials and elements associated with the regime, the regime's opponents stressed the connection they said existed between the civil mutiny in Egypt and the protest movement that emerged in Iran following the presidential election in June 2009.



Cartoon by Nikahang Kowsar, from the Khodnevis blog, February 1

Following the demonstrations in Egypt, reformist opposition leader Mir-Hossein Mousavi issued a special memorandum of opinion with a first reaction to the dramatic developments in the Arab world. In the memorandum, Mousavi drew a parallel between those developments and the popular demonstrations which had broken out in Iran last year and, according to him, had been the “starting point” of the events in the Arab world. The slogan “Where is my vote?” chanted on the streets of Iran after the forgery of the presidential election results reached the streets of Egypt after the forgery of the Egyptian parliament election results, turning into the slogan “The people want to topple the regime”. Mousavi pointed out the common denominator shared by all collapsing regimes in the Arab world and the Middle East: such regimes battle the freedom of expression, impose severe restrictions on the media, internet, and social networks, and throw their opponents to jail. He claimed that Egypt’s “Day of Rage” was the result of government corruption, oppression, and executions in Egypt. Had the Egyptian regime respected the wishes of the people, had it not forged the election results, the people would not be calling for its fall. Clearly hinting at the connection between the riots in Egypt and the internal situation in Iran, Mousavi noted that the “pharaohs” only listen to the voice of the people when it is too late. Mousavi concluded his memorandum by expressing support on the Iranian people’s behalf for the struggle of the Egyptians and the Tunisians to realize their rights (Kalemeh, January 29).



From Mehdi Saharkhiz’s blog (<http://onlymehdi.saharkhiz.net>, January 27)

Bloggers affiliated with the reformist opposition also discussed the developments in Egypt. Similarly to the reactions stirred by the Tunisian coup, Iranian web surfers once again expressed frustration over the achievements of the popular protest movement in the Arab world compared to the failure of the reformist opposition in Iran.

One blogger compared Mohamed ElBaradei, one of the Egyptian opposition leaders, to Iran's opposition leaders, Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karubi. He noted that, unlike ElBaradei, who urges the Egyptian regime to step down and calls for the establishment of a new government based on democracy, Mousavi and Karubi have not challenged the principles of Iran's current regime, based on the concept of "rule of the religious jurist", settling instead for calls for partial reforms and a return to the constitutional principles of the Islamic republic (<http://irangreenrevolution.wordpress.com>).

Another blogger expressed his frustration by paraphrasing Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi's eulogy for King Cyrus at the 2500 anniversary of Iranian monarchy in 1971 ("Sleep in peace, King Cyrus, because we are awake"). The blogger wrote the following on his blog (vivaparasi.blogspot.com): "Pharaoh, are you awake? Your people have risen up. Sleep, Cyrus, because we are all asleep".

One month and a half into subsidy reform: Iranian officials say they are satisfied with program's impact

One month and a half after the launch of the subsidy policy reform, Iranian officials expressed satisfaction over its positive impact on Iran's economy.

In an interview granted by Economy Minister Shamsoldin Hosseini to Mehr News Agency, he noted that the positive impact of the program is already evident, mostly in energy conservation. He said the consumption of some energy products dropped by some 20 percent compared to pre-reform times. The drop in consumption has a considerable positive effect on Iran's economy, and is evident not only in the energy sector but also in the significant drop in wasting bread. It was Hosseini's assessment that the program would go on to make further achievements.

The minister reported that the government intended to continue depositing cash benefits in Iranian citizens' bank accounts once every two months, since that would allow for more efficient household management and reduce the expenses of Iranians. The minister also said that the amount of the cash benefits was not expected to change, even for families belonging to the weaker sectors of society (Mehr, January 31).

President Ahmadinejad also expressed satisfaction over the realization of the subsidy policy reform. In a speech given earlier this week to the Majles, the president said the drop in energy consumption achieved thanks to the reform was even larger than its preliminary estimates. All expectations that the reform would exacerbate poverty and distress in Iranian society were proven wrong, the president said. Some claimed that the program would hurt the people in the early stages of its implementation and subsequently would be good for them. Now, when it is apparent that it is good even in its initial stages, some say that the damage will become apparent later. The president expressed his confidence that, as time goes by, the economic situation will improve thanks to the reform. He also noted that prices are expected to drop starting from the beginning of the next Persian year (March 21, 2011) (Fars, January 30). It should be noted that this assessment is contrary to the forecasts of economic commentators, who say that the reform will likely continue driving prices up in the next months. Meanwhile, the Central Bank reported this week that the inflation rate for last month (December 23-January 22) reached 10.8 percent. This figure indicates that the inflation rate has been on a constant rise for the last several months: from 8.8 percent in the month of Mordad (July 23-August 22) to 8.9 percent in Shahrivar (August 23-September 22), to 9.2 percent in Mehr (September 23-October 22), to 9.7 percent in Aban (October 23-November 22), to 10.1 percent in Azar (November 23-December 22).

In an extended interview granted to Fars News Agency, conservative Majles member Mohammad Reza Bahonar also addressed the subsidy policy reform. Bahonar praised the government's performance in the reform's realization, claiming, however, that there are still numerous concerns about its future implications. One of the concerns raised by the Majles member was that the government would not invest the revenues from the reform to make the necessary improvements in the productive sector, the industry, and agriculture. Bahonar also questioned the government's ability to balance the budget deficit that will likely result from the fact that the government was forced to deposit the cash benefits in Iranians' personal bank accounts before the revenues from the subsidy cuts have been guaranteed. In this case, according to Bahonar, the government may need to borrow funds from the Central Bank, which would lead to inflationary consequences (Fars, January 30).

Individual ministerial responsibility in Iran: Majles sacks Transportation Minister for too many accidents

In an unusual move, the Majles impeached Transportation Minister Hamid Behbahani in a vote of no confidence. 147 Majles members voted against the minister, 78 voted for him, and nine abstained. The main reason for the minister's impeachment is his failure to deal with the numerous air and car accidents in Iran.

President Ahmadinejad and the Transportation Minister himself were not present at the discussion, for which they were strongly criticized by the Majles speaker and other Majles members who claimed that the minister's absence was unconstitutional and showed disrespect for the Majles on part of the president.

During the discussion, the minister was accused of failure to properly manage the ministry, non-sufficient development of the road infrastructure, and neglect of the airplane and train fleets, leading to severe safety problems (Farda, February 1). In recent years, Iran has seen several serious aviation accidents which claimed hundreds of lives. In addition, over 17 thousand people were killed in the first nine months of the current Iranian year.



The Majles discussion on the Transportation Minister's impeachment, February 1

Hamid Behbahani came under severe criticism following the crash of an Iran Air plane in northwest Iran in early January. Nearly 80 people were killed in the crash of the Boeing-747 en route from Tehran to the city of Orumiyeh. After the crash, the minister announced that the number of aviation accidents in Iran was still lower compared to the world average. The statement provoked strong criticism against the minister.

Behbahani's impeachment was the first in the current term of Ahmadinejad's government. Interior Minister Ali Kordan was impeached in a Majles vote of no confidence in November 2008 when it was exposed that his Ph.D. diploma was forged.

Crisis in Iran-Netherlands relations over execution of woman with Dutch nationality

This week, the Dutch government froze its diplomatic ties with Iran in protest of the execution of Zahra Bahrami, an Iranian woman with Dutch nationality, who was charged with drug possession and trafficking.

A native of Iran, Bahrami was arrested in December 2009 while visiting relatives in Iran, after taking part in the protest rallies that had broken out after the presidential election. At first, Bahrami was accused of compromising state security; then, however, authorities claimed that she was a member of an international network involved in smuggling drugs into Iran. The judiciary claimed that 450 grams of cocaine and 420 grams of opium were seized at her residence following the arrest, and that she had even sold 150 grams of cocaine. Also seized at her residence were Iranian, Dutch, and Spanish passports. According to Iranian authorities, the Spanish passport was fake.



The Iranian authorities reacted strongly to the Dutch government's announcement on freezing its ties with Iran, accusing it of meddling in its internal affairs. Kazem Gharibabadi, Iran's ambassador to the Netherlands, called on the Dutch government to respect the laws of the Islamic republic. He claimed that Iran did not recognize double citizenship, and therefore considered Bahrami to be a citizen of Iran. He noted that her trial had been fair, and that she had received all the rights to which she was entitled, including the right to an attorney and contact with her family. The ambassador noted that Iran made considerable efforts to eradicate drug trafficking, which claims thousands of victims in Iran every year and also affects European countries. Europe should appreciate Iran's war on drug trafficking, Gharibabadi said (Fars, January 30).

At the same time, the Foreign Ministry summoned the Dutch ambassador to Iran to present an official complaint about Holland's alleged intervention in Iran's internal affairs. Foreign Ministry Director-General Hamid Reza Shakeri-Niasar warned the Dutch government against giving protection to criminals and meddling in Iran's affairs. He noted that the Iranian legal system acted independently, treated all citizens in a fair manner, and did not allow drug dealers supported by foreign countries to act illegally in the country (Fars, January 31).

Prosecutor General Abbas Ja'far Dowlatabadi criticized the conduct of the Dutch government in the affair. In a conversation with journalists, Dowlatabadi said that the Dutch government should know that foreign governments have no right to meddle in the legal affairs of other countries. He confirmed that Bahrami had been arrested during the December 2009 riots, stressing, however, that it did not change the fact of her being guilty of drug possession (ILNA, January 31).

Tabnak, a website affiliated with the pragmatic conservative bloc, addressed the affair as well, claiming that Holland's decision to freeze the diplomatic ties with Iran was an expression of its delusion of still being an imperialist power, as it had been in the 18th century. The Dutch people must have forgotten that, in the late 18th century, they had been defeated by the ruler of the island of Kharg in the Persian Gulf, forever losing their presence there and their ability to meddle in Iran's affairs. The Foreign Ministry must make it clear to the Dutch government, Tabnak claimed, that Iran would never forget the imperialist crimes committed by Holland on its territory and against its young people, and that modern day Iran is not 17th or 18th century Iran, which allowed foreigners to meddle in its internal affairs (Tabnak, January 31).

Over 80 people were executed in Iran since the beginning of the year, most of them on charges of drug trafficking.

Pictures of the week: Majles approves Ali-Akbar Salehi's appointment for Foreign Minister

