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Iran's Youth: Agents of Change

Summary

- Youth is the largest population bloc in Iran. Over 60 percent of Iran's 73 million people are under 30 years old.
- Iranian youth are among the most politically active in the 57 nations of the Islamic world. As the most restive segment of Iranian society, the young also represent one of the greatest long-term threats to the current form of theocratic rule.
- Young activists have influenced the Islamic Republic's political agenda since 1997. After the 2009 presidential election, youth was the biggest bloc involved in the region's first sustained "people power" movement for democratic change, creating a new political dynamic in the Middle East.
- The Islamic Republic forcibly regained control over the most rebellious sector of society through detentions, expulsions from universities, and expanding the powers of its own young paramilitary forces.
- But youth demands have not changed, and anger seethes deeply beneath the surface. The regime also remains vulnerable because it has failed to address basic socioeconomic problems among the young.

“Iran's population is one of the youngest in the world, in turn affecting the politics, the economy and social relations... The demographic bulge is now the single biggest threat to the status quo.”

Overview

Iran's youth have been politically active since the 1953 ouster of Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh. The death of three students in protests against Vice President Nixon's 1953 visit—to support the shah after a CIA-backed coup against the elected government—is still a national holiday. The young were key players in the 1979 revolution. Today, their strength is also in numbers. A baby boom after the revolution almost doubled the population from 34 million to 62 million in the first decade. Iran is now one of the youngest societies in the world, skewing politics, the economy and social pressures. The demographic bulge is one of the biggest threats to the status quo.

The youth bloc has been shaped by political and military crises. In the 1980s, they were the majority of combatants in the eight-year war with Iraq; even pre-teen Basij volunteers became human minesweepers. In the 1990s, Iranian youth demanded their post-war due in politics, the economy and society. By 1997, their growing numbers helped elect reformist President Mohammad Khatami. But as he failed to produce change, the young pulled back. The partial youth boycott of the 2005 presidential election was key to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's election. Their reentry into politics in the 2009 election seriously altered Iranian politics.

Iran's youth are increasingly pivotal to elections. After the 1979 revolution, the voting age was lowered to 15, but later raised to 16 then 18, as the theocrats recognized the youth's political power. The young constitute nearly 40 percent of the electorate, a number expected to grow over the next decade. Whether they vote, and how, will be a major factor in the 2013 parliamentary elections, the regime's next official test.

Conditions of Life

Three decades after the revolution promised opportunity, Iran's youth instead face growing problems:

- The government generates only about 300,000 of the roughly 1 million jobs needed annually to absorb young people entering the labor market.
- Unemployment among youth has almost doubled since 1990. Young people between 15 and 29 make up 35 percent of the population but account for 70 percent of the unemployed. Among males, roughly one in four is unable to find a job. Among women with higher education, unemployment is estimated at around 50 percent.
- In 2010, the government intensified its monitoring of youth activities and issued a list of approved men's hairstyles and women's clothing that affected mainly the young.
- Young Iranians have borne a large share of the regime's retributions for unrest in 2009. Thousands were detained in the tumultuous months following the disputed election. Many student activists were also given failing grades or threatened with expulsion from universities.

Key Issues

For Iran's youth, four problems are particularly sensitive. All have contributed to a deep frustration—and political dissent.

Unemployment: Even with a university degree, it takes about three years to find a job. And vast numbers of young people end up chronically underemployed, which has produced a widespread sense that their future prospects are bleak. Employment issues have contributed to other problems, including alcohol and drug abuse, prostitution and runaways, escape into marriages that end in early divorce, social unrest, and the flight of the educated class. Iran has one of the world's highest rates of brain drain, according to the International Monetary Fund.

Independence: Due to chronic job shortages and an even larger housing shortage, the number of unmarried youth in their twenties has doubled over the past generation. Up to three-quarters of Iranians in their twenties still live with their parents, partly because they are not able to afford living on their own.

Sexual crisis: Social interaction among young males and females who are not married is officially prohibited, albeit widely ignored in the privacy of homes. Rigid restrictions have spawned an underground social culture, despite stiff penalties. Drinking or dancing can lead to arrest by the morality police and punishment of 70 lashes. Many young people also face a sexual crisis.

"In the absence of any option for overt political dissent, young people have become part of a self-proclaimed revolution in which they are using their bodies to make social and political statements. Sex has become both a source of freedom and an act of political rebellion," Pardis Mahdavi wrote in her 2009 book, "Passionate Uprisings: Iran's Sexual Revolution." The government has encouraged "temporary marriage," which is allowed in Shiite Islam, as one solution. The sexual crisis has also contributed to increases in HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases and abortion. In

2009, the head of Iran's AIDS research association said the highest prevalence of AIDS was among people between 25 and 29 years old.

Drugs: Use of narcotics has become a serious problem among youth. Opium has been used for centuries in Iran, and cultivation of opium poppy was a large part of Persia's gross national product in the 19th century, before oil, according to the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime. It was outlawed in 1955. But drug use and the variety of drugs used began to grow again after the 1979 revolution, particularly among youth and women.

Statistics vary widely. In 2010, the Islamic Republic had some 1.2 million hardcore drug addicts, with another 800,000 casual users, according to the head of Iran's drug prevention program. The average age for users was in their twenties. Another 130,000 become addicted to drugs annually, according to Iran's police chief. But the U.N. 2010 World Drug Report reported that Iran had one of the world's highest rates of heroin addiction, with some 20 percent of the population aged 15 to 60 involved in illicit drug use, and up to 16 percent in that age group injecting drugs. Iran also consumed the largest amount of the opium not converted into heroin—a staggering 42 percent of the world total. Proximity to Afghanistan facilitated the trend. From 1996 to 2008, Iran accounted for more than two-thirds of all global opium seizures, much of it from across the 600-mile border with Afghanistan, the U.N. report said.

Political Actors

After the 2009 presidential election, youth activism played out in three phases. Phase one witnessed a spontaneous uprising for two weeks after the June 12 election. The original issue was alleged election fraud. Iran's youth—including students but also a cross-section of non-students—constituted a large percentage of the opposition that poured out on the streets in several major cities to protest alleged vote rigging in favor of Ahmadinejad. Protesters organized through the Internet and word of mouth. Neda Agha Soltan, a 27-year-old philosophy student gunned down during the June 20 street protests, became the symbol of the uprising.

Phase two played out in protests pegged to national and religious holidays in the fall. Demands grew to include calls for political change and condemnation of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Protesters took to the streets under cover of longstanding commemorations, such as Qods Day on Sept. 18; the anniversary of the U.S. Embassy takeover on Nov. 4; National Student's Day on Dec. 7; and Ashoura, the week-long Shiite holiday in late December. Students were the main organizers and participants. The second phase gained momentum after the abrupt death of dissident cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali Montazeri on Dec. 19, which sparked a huge outpouring in Qom—the first time the Green Movement spread to Iran's center of religious learning.

Phase three began with the crackdown that blocked all major protests in 2010, including demonstrations called for on Feb. 11, the 31st anniversary of Iran's revolution, and during the Iranian New Year in late March. But students kept the opposition movement alive in smaller protests at universities in Tehran, Shiraz, Isfahan, Mazandaran and Kurdistan. On May 1, Labor Day, some 2,000 students reportedly protested an unannounced visit by Ahmadinejad to Tehran University. Students quickly organized a march and chanted slogans urging unity among workers and students. On May 10, some 1,000 students, shouting "freedom" and "resign," protested another unannounced presidential visit at Shahid Beheshti University. Students in Tehran also protested lectures by Mojtaba Samaereh Hashemi, a presidential advisor, on Apr. 14, and Saeid Ghasemi, a Revolutionary Guards commander, on May 10. They used banners, chanted slogans, and demanded freedom for political prisoners. University of Kurdistan students went on a hunger strike to protest the execution of five political activists on May 9. Other demonstrations were held at Amir Kabir University,

Iran University of Science and Technology, University of Kurdistan, and Babol Noshirvani University of Technology. Tightened security throughout the country prevented protests on the first anniversary of the disputed election.

Youth Organizations

The Office for Consolidating Unity, or *Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat*, is Iran's largest student movement. It was known as the Students Following the Imam's Line when it was formed in 1979; it has branches in most state and private universities. Its national central council is elected annually. Its original agenda was to support the revolution and combat secular and liberal political trends. The group gained fame for the 1979-1981 U.S. Embassy seizure, an event it still commemorates annually. But its agenda gradually evolved from a focus on Islamic ideology to individual rights under Islamic rule. The group's calls for political and social openings contributed to the reform movement's birth in the late 1990s. Members were involved in 1999 student protests, the largest demonstrations until the 2009 election.

The umbrella movement fragmented over support for President Khatami and reform. In 2002, a minority faction met in Shiraz and elected its own leadership; it is called the Shiraz faction. The majority faction met later at Tehran's Allameh Tabatabai University and elected its central council. It is called the Allameh faction. Disillusioned with politics, Allameh favored a boycott of the 2005 presidential election; Shiraz supported Ahmadinejad.

Before the 2009 election, Allameh wrote the four presidential candidates with a list of demands, including academic freedom, free speech and release of student prisoners. Only Karroubi responded; he supported their demands, which led Allameh to formally endorse him. After the election, Allameh was at the forefront of Green Movement protests. They called people to the streets through social networks, and organized protests on campuses. Since the election, many members, including four of nine central council members, have been detained. Activists have also reportedly been given failing grades or expelled from universities in Tehran, Shiraz, Tabriz, Isfahan and Babol.

Independent student organizations, such as the **Students for Freedom and Equality**, tried to create a national student network and campaign against government agents on campuses. The left wing student group organized demonstrations in 2007 and participated in the 2009 protests. Several members were arrested. The **United Student Front**, founded in 1996, is a radical secular group that meets off-campus due to its unofficial status. Officials closed down its website and central office in 2000, forcing the group underground. It called on followers to protest after the 2009 election.

The Basij, or "mobilization of the oppressed," is a quasi-volunteer paramilitary organization with branches in most mosques, universities, government offices, and public institutions. Along with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the Basij prop up Iran's theocracy. The 'Ashoura' militia is the male wing; the 'Al-Zahra' militia is the female wing. The Basij network includes university Basij and student Basij. Student Basijis, called "seekers," are between the ages of 12 and 14; the "vanguard" are high-school students between 15 and 17 years old.

Ansar-e Hezbollah, or "Followers of the party of God," is a vigilante group that uses force but is not part of official law enforcement. Members wear plain clothes. Ansar-e-Hezbollah is often unleashed against protesters, notably during the 1999 student riots and the 2009 election.

Civil society includes hundreds of youth groups. Iran's youth have been active in the **One Million Signature Campaign** to alter discriminatory laws on women. The **Committee of Human Rights Reporters** was started in 2005 by student and social activists to record human rights violations. Members have been jailed. Founded in 1998 by student activists, the **Committee for Defense**

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This Peace Brief highlights how Iran's youth are one of the two main agents of change, along with women, now challenging the rigid Islamic rule. Since January 2010, the regime regained control over the opposition's protests in all public arenas—except for university campuses. This brief is co-sponsored by USIP's Jennings Randolph Fellowship Program and the Youth and Peacebuilding Working Group in USIP's Centers of Innovation. Co-author Omid Memarian is an Iranian-born journalist and blogger who specializes in youth and human rights issues, and Tara Nesvaderani is a research assistant at the U.S. Institute of Peace.



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of Political Prisoners advocates for prisoner rights and provides legal aid.

Factoids

- Iran is one of the most tech-savvy societies in the developing world, with an estimated 28 million Internet users, led by youth.
- Iran boasts between 60,000 and 110,000 active blogs, one of the highest numbers in the Middle East, led by youth.
- Despite prohibitions on women's dress and make-up, Iranian women account for almost one-third of all cosmetics bought in the two dozen countries of the Middle East, again led by youth.

The Future

- The impact of Iran's baby boomers, born in the 1980s, is only beginning to be felt. Now in their twenties, the boomers will become even more important as they age in defining—and potentially redefining—Iran's political, economic and social agenda over the next quarter century.
- Like the general population, a significant percentage of young Iranians are believed to support Iran's quest for nuclear energy as a key to economic development—and their own futures.
- Despite sanctions, Iran's young are better educated and more worldly than any previous generation. Most are exposed to global media, ideas and culture through satellite television and the internet. Most young Iranians are believed to want to be part of the international community and globalization.
- But given millennia-old Persian nationalism, even young reform advocates may be reluctant to compromise with the outside world on issues viewed as impinging on national sovereignty.