



IRAN IN THE YEAR 2020

DR. RAZ ZIMMT

November 2015

The image features a large, ornate dome of a mosque, likely the Shah Cheragh in Shiraz, Iran. The dome is covered in intricate blue and white tilework with floral and geometric patterns. To the left, the Iranian national flag is partially visible, showing its green, white, and red horizontal stripes and the central emblem. The foreground shows a white wall with several arched windows and some green foliage.

IRAN IN 2020

In this report, Wikistrat Senior Analyst Dr. Raz Zimmt analyzes Iran's stability by looking into four future scenarios for the regime through the year 2020, concluding with strategic takeaways for each.



SCENARIO 1: REPUBLIC AND ISLAMIC

Summary

In this (most likely) scenario, the status quo of 2015 is preserved in 2020, with the main factor shaping the regime's stability being the preservation of the delicate balance between the revolutionary and republican axes. Though social evolutionary developments continue, they do not turn into political demands or lead to major political change.

Scenario

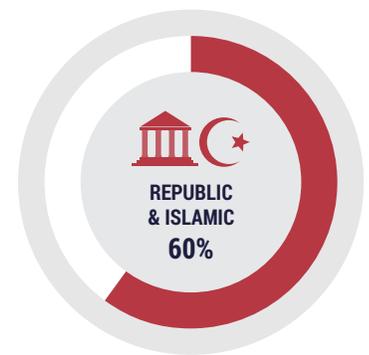
The removal of Western sanctions in January 2016 brings economic improvement to the Iranian public. Nevertheless, the gap between the regime and the people – especially the youth – continues to grow, raising concerns in Tehran over the possible renewal of protests in the near future. In the meantime, there are no signs of political unrest, and the reformist opposition has not yet recovered from its repression after the 2009 riots. In July 2017, Hassan Rouhani is reelected for a second term as president. Eight months later, Ayatollah Khamenei dies during emergency surgery brought on by his prostate cancer. On May 8, 2018, the Assembly of Experts nominates the former head of the judiciary, Ayatollah Sadegh Larijani, as the new Supreme Leader. In his first speech, he promises to follow the legacy of both Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and to preserve the “sacred principles of the Islamic Revolution.”

On August 2, 2018, Larijani meets with President Rouhani. Rouhani tells the new Supreme Leader that moderate civilian reforms, including reduced enforcement of the Islamic code and lifting the ban on social media, are essential to preventing possible protests driven by the educated middle class.

Larijani tells Rouhani that the reforms initiated in 1997 by former President Khatami had proven to be catastrophic for Iran and eventually led to the 2009 riots. Under no circumstances is Rouhani to carry out civil or political reforms; instead he should concentrate on improving economic conditions in Iran.

During Rouhani's second term as president, economic indicators continue to improve – though he fails to deliver on his promise of one-digit inflation. Unemployment declines from 12 percent in 2015 to 10 percent in 2019, and economic growth reaches only 3.4

Likelihood



High (~70 percent)

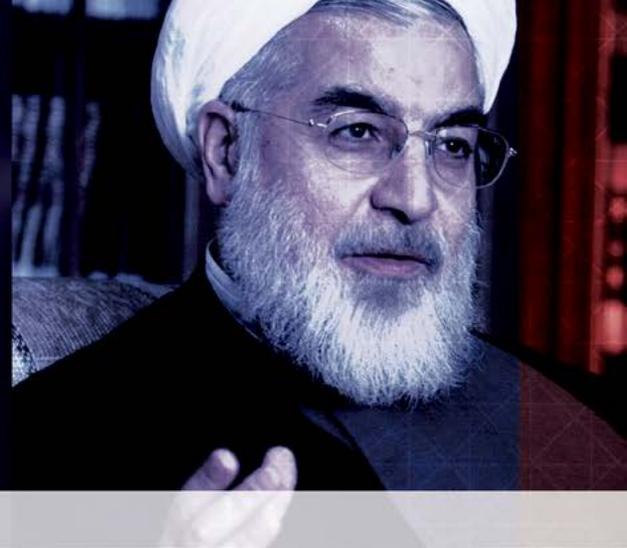
percent in 2018 – lower than expected. In March 2020, a new Majlis (Iran’s legislative body) is elected with no significant change in its composition. More than 250 MPs (out of 310, following the 2017 increase in number of MPs from 290 to 310) are associated with the Osulgarayan (Conservatives). Ali Larijani (brother to Sadegh Larijani) is re-elected as speaker.

Iranian social media continues to reflect growing defiance against the Islamic dress code among the youth and negative attitudes towards the clerical establishment. In February 2019, several hundred students gather outside the president’s office to mark the eighth anniversary of Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi’s house arrest. Iranian police intervene, use tear gas to disperse the students and arrest forty.

During his speech ahead of the Iranian New Year on March 19, Supreme Leader Larijani denounces the students’ demonstration and accuses them of collaborating with the U.S. and Israel. He says that it is more proof that the U.S. is continuing with its efforts to infiltrate Iran in order to encourage regime change and that the “Great Satan” should never be trusted.

STRATEGIC TAKEAWAYS

- » This narrative maintains the current status quo in Iran. The ability of the Islamic regime to retain its power despite growing public demands for change depends mainly on its success in delivering economic solutions that address popular demand for economic improvement.
- » Public demands for political change (especially among educated, middle-class youth) are not likely to disappear and might even grow following economic improvement. But the majority of the Iranian population might prefer political stability over political freedom if their economic conditions improve.
- » In the long run, however, the regime will have to agree to carry out at least some moderate civilian reforms (e.g., reduced enforcement of the Islamic dress code) in order to meet growing demands from the younger generation for less governmental involvement in their daily lives.
- » **Characteristics of Change:** The distribution of power among Iran’s political institutions and main centers of power will remain balanced.



SCENARIO 2: MORE REPUBLIC, LESS ISLAMIC

Summary

In this scenario, Iran is more stable by 2020 than it is today, as the republican axis is strengthened and the Islamic regime adopts more representative characteristics at the expense of its revolutionary and authoritarian institutions.

Scenario

On July 13, 2017, Hassan Rouhani is elected for a second term as president. On November 17, he meets with Ayatollah Hassan Khomeini, who is nominated as the new Supreme Leader after Ayatollah Khamenei's death from prostate cancer four months earlier.

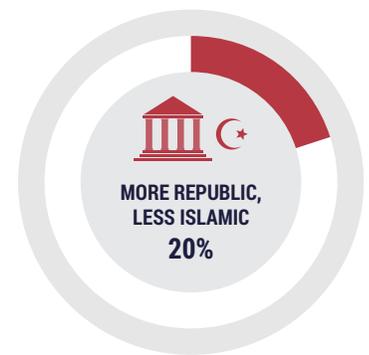
Following this meeting, the Supreme Leader's office announces that Khomeini and Rouhani have agreed that in order to "preserve the Islamic Revolution" – and taking into consideration the demographic, social and cultural developments in Iran – certain political reforms are required. Ayatollah Khomeini asks President Rouhani to draft a proposal for reforms to guarantee that the Islamic Republic of Iran "continues to be a role model for the entire world as a symbol of Islamic justice, sovereignty of the people and prosperity."

Proposals are submitted by the government to the Majlis on April 10, 2018, approved on May 23, and approved by the Guardian Council on June 14. Following the approval of the reforms by both the Majlis and the Guardian Council, the students association at Amirkabir University announces that it welcomes the reforms, but demands:

- » The release of all political prisoners
- » A lifting of all bans imposed on 23 newspapers since 2014
- » An end to the Guardian Council's authority to disqualify candidates for parliamentary and presidential elections

Iranian citizens on social media express their overall satisfaction with the reforms. While several users say they are not enough, the majority of Iranian users on Facebook and Twitter react positively, thanking President Rouhani for his initiative and expressing hope that the economic situation will continue to improve. On June 15, thousands of

Likelihood



Low (~20 percent)

students take to the streets in support of the reforms, using slogans like “Thank you, Rouhani!” and “We love you, dear President!”

During his televised speech on March 20, 2019 (on the occasion of the Iranian New Year) Ayatollah Khomeini announces it is time to reconsider Iran’s relations with the United States. He says that while the U.S. still has not proven its trustworthiness, Iran might consider expanding direct dialogue with Washington from issues concerning the 2015 nuclear deal to regional and bilateral issues as well.

STRATEGIC TAKEAWAYS

- » The scenario ends with an Islamic republic that is still ruled by an unelected leadership, but is more representative of its citizens and less authoritarian. Its ability to maintain some of its undemocratic and repressive characteristics depends to a large extent on its success in improving the economic and social conditions of its citizens. If the economic situation improves, a majority of the population might prefer stability over additional freedoms.
- » There are several possible variants to this narrative:
 - Adding checks and balances to the Supreme Leader’s power – for example, by turning the Assembly of Experts into a more effective monitoring institution, limiting the power of the IRGC (Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps) and its involvement in political and economic affairs
 - Reducing political repression
 - Establishing collective leadership after Khamenei’s death
- » Reforming Iran’s political structure might follow or be followed by opening up the country to the West. While a strategic change in Iran’s policy towards the U.S. is not likely as long as the current Supreme Leader is in power, a more moderate policy towards the West is possible, as it reflects the views held by the moderate political faction and the majority of Iranian public opinion.
- » **Characteristics of Change:** Some moderate change will come from above, although it is at least partly driven by public pressure from below, thereby triggering the regime’s decision to allow moderate reforms and increase public participation in the political process. It is an evolutionary and nonviolent change.



SCENARIO 3: ISLAMIC RATHER THAN REPUBLIC

Summary

In this scenario, the revolutionary axis is strengthened at expense of the republican axis – leading to autocracy and increased political oppression as Iran turns into an autocratic military regime by 2020. As a result, the regime’s stability – while appearing stronger than in 2015 – depends totally on the use of brutal force against opposition, full control of the media and social media, and severe punishments for anyone caught defying the regime.

Scenario

On June 23, 2017, presidential elections are held in Iran. Hassan Rouhani had promised during his campaign that if re-elected, he would initiate civilian reforms to reduce governmental involvement in the daily lives of Iranians, and remove limitations on media (including social media).

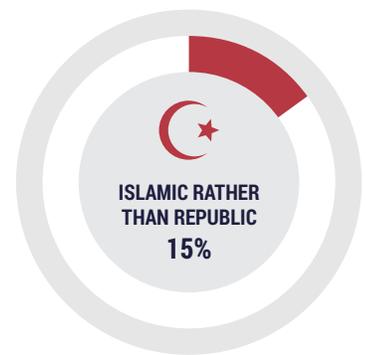
Three hours after the polls close, Interior Minister Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli announces that Qasem Soleimani, former commander of the IRGC Quds Force, has won 56 percent of the vote, with Rouhani winning only 23 percent.

On June 25, thousands of students take to the streets, shouting “Death to the dictator!” and “We don’t want the IRGC commander as our president!” Police intervene and arrest 60 students. Demonstrations escalate over the following days, with thousands of citizens participating in gatherings in major cities.

On July 13, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei calls upon the new president and the IRGC to “act decisively” against “anti-revolutionary” elements supported by the CIA and MI6. President Soleimani says in a televised interview that the Iranian public should know that his government won’t allow “criminal elements” to continue their actions against the regime and the majority of the people.

Following several months of unrest, Iran’s Supreme National Security Council decides in March 2018 to declare a state of emergency, giving the IRGC unlimited authority (including to overrule government decisions) so as to crush any threat to the regime’s stability. In May 2018, President Soleimani nominates IRGC commander General Mohammad Ali Jafari as Minister of Interior.

Likelihood



Very low (~15 percent)

By early 2020, 5,200 civilians have been arrested and 800 executed, 13 newspapers have been banned, and social media is for the most part blocked.

In December 2019, the Supreme Leader announces that due to internal security developments and the support given to Iranian rioters by the U.S. and European governments, Iran has decided to suspend the nuclear deal signed in 2015. In addition, President Soleimani instructs his Foreign Minister, Saeed Jalili, to expel the U.K. ambassador from Tehran and close down the British embassy (which had reopened in 2016). The IRGC declares that in case of American military action against Iran, the Quds force is ready to take retaliatory measures against U.S. forces in the Persian Gulf, American and Saudi military bases, and “the Zionist regime.”

STRATEGIC TAKEAWAYS

- » **Characteristics of Change:** Revolution – though not necessarily violent – comes from above, but the result is intensified political repression and violence perpetrated against the opposition.
- » Such change is more likely under exceptional circumstances such as:
 - Internal political, economic or social unrest
 - Dramatic external developments (e.g., a military attack against Iran or escalating conflict between Iran and its neighbors)
 - Political instability following Khamenei’s death
 - If Khamenei’s death is followed by political turmoil, the IRGC might consider the possibility of taking state affairs under their control (either temporarily or permanently). A growing rift between the President and the IRGC over policy or presidential attempts to carry out reforms considered an anathema to the interests of the regime, its ideology or the IRGC could also lead to direct IRGC involvement in internal politics.
- » Public demands for political change (especially among educated, middle-class youth) are not likely to disappear and might even grow following economic improvement. But the majority of the population may prefer political stability over political freedom if their economic conditions improve.
- » This scenario ends with the Islamic Republic practically becoming an autocratic military regime, increasing political repression and human rights violations. IRGC involvement here increases in both political and economic affairs. Iran is likely to adopt a more defiant and radical foreign policy towards Western countries, especially the U.S., as well as towards its moderate Sunni Arab neighbors. It could potentially increase its involvement in terrorist and subversive activities in the region.



SCENARIO 4: REPUBLIC RATHER THAN ISLAMIC

Summary

In this scenario, Iran has witnessed a regime change by 2020. Driven by popular sentiment from below, the change is violent, swift and revolutionary – leading to a complete change of ideology and political, military and economic elites.

Scenario

In July 2019, Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi is appointed by the Assembly of Experts as Iran's new Supreme Leader after Ali Khamenei's death from prostate cancer. In February 2020, following a series of mass student gatherings in Tehran and other major cities across Iran demanding the release of all political prisoners and calling for political reforms, the new Supreme Leader announces that he will not tolerate any attempts by "anti-revolutionary forces supported and incited by the U.S., the Zionists and the BBC" to exploit the situation.

On February 28, the Minister of Intelligence in President Qasem Soleimani's government announces that the Ministry has discovered a cell in Amirkabir University in Tehran which planned to distribute leaflets throughout the city demanding political reforms. On March 2, thousands of IRGC and Basij members enter 15 universities in Tehran, Isfahan and Mashhad, and arrest 850 students who are then transferred to Evin prison. At the same time, the Ministry of Islamic Guidance announces that six newspapers have been banned and that all social media – including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Telegram – have been blocked until further notice.

The next morning, more than 500,000 demonstrators in major cities around the country take to the streets. The Grand Bazaar in Tehran remains closed and the workers in the Abadan oil refineries do not show up. For two weeks, and despite brutal repression by IRGC and Basij forces, the demonstrations continue – and escalate after thousands of protesters enter Evin and release all political prisoners.

On March 27, the Supreme Leader announces his departure for Najaf in Iraq (where he was born in 1948), and that President Soleimani has resigned.

Likelihood



Extremely low (~5 percent)

The new interim government established on April 14 announces that free parliamentary elections will be held on June 13, and that the government has asked 34 law professors, reformist leaders returning from exile following the 1979 Revolution, and high-ranking liberal clerics in Qom to begin drafting a new constitution. The Islamic Republic of Iran will henceforth be called the “Republic of Iran”.

The new president, Mir-Hossein Mousavi, appoints former diplomat Seyyed Hossein Mousavian as his new foreign minister and announces that Mousavian will visit Washington the following month to discuss the resumption of bilateral diplomatic ties. President Mousavi also states that he has already sent special envoys to Riyadh, Cairo, Baghdad and Ankara to discuss bilateral relations between Iran and its neighbors.

STRATEGIC TAKEAWAYS

- » In this scenario, Iran ends up a democratic/liberal republic more representative of its people’s sovereignty. Its ideology is likely to be more pro-Western and less Islamic-oriented, though it is unlikely to adopt a radical nationalistic and anticlerical policy like that adopted by the monarchist regime prior to the 1979 Revolution.
- » Iran is likely to attempt to develop friendlier relations with its Arab neighbors, but will probably not abandon its traditional ambitions to maintain its position as a regional hegemon.
- » **Characteristics of Change:** This scenario is more likely to occur following exceptional circumstances such as:
 - Severe and sudden economic crisis
 - Unusual political repression (e.g., execution of political prisoners, arrest of politically moderate figures, direct regime involvement in election results, or unusual repression of public gatherings or the press)
 - Unusual external developments (e.g., military action against Iran or escalation of conflicts along Iranian borders)
- » A revolutionary change depends to a large extent on the ability of different sections of the Iranian population, especially the educated middle class and the workers, to form an effective coalition capable of toppling the current regime despite its repressive mechanisms.

GENERAL STRATEGIC TAKEAWAYS

- » **The growing gap between the Islamic regime and the Iranian public, especially the younger generation, is expected to affect internal developments in Iran under any scenario.** Young Iranians face dire economic hardship, and their support for revolutionary principles has consistently declined. This gap presents the regime with two main options: It can either adapt itself to public demands and carry out certain civilian reforms, or increase domestic repression to maintain its power.
- » **Economic issues are expected to remain the Iranian public's main concern.** Economic improvement might provide the Iranian regime with the capability to successfully meet public expectations – at least in the short term. Over the long run, however, it is doubtful that economic improvement alone can be enough in light of the public's civil and political expectations. Furthermore, economic improvement could even help accelerate further demands for political change.
- » **The prospects for violent and revolutionary change in Iran remain low.** The Iranian public seems more interested in evolutionary changes following years of revolutionary transformation, a prolonged war, political and economic instability, and international pressures. Therefore, the probability for revolutionary change increases only under exceptional circumstances, such as unusual political repression, economic crisis, or other dramatic internal or external developments.
- » **The Iranian political system is likely to continue to be characterized by internal power struggles,** especially between those who are elected (the government and the parliament) and the unelected (especially the Supreme Leader, the Revolutionary Guards and the religious establishment). A sudden change in one of those institutions – e.g., Khamenei's demise or the election of a new president with a different political orientation – could bring about a significant change in the interaction within the regime and affect its stability.



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