

Why Egypt and Not Iran?

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We have just witnessed a modern popular change of government---a revolution of sorts.

Most Egyptians appear to have agreed on one thing: to end of the rule of Hosni Mubarak. Tunisians in the streets rid themselves of their long-time dictator a couple of weeks earlier. Everybody in the Middle East is watching and waiting to see which other autocracies crumble. Iranians are watching too---their Islamic dictatorship with alarm and the public with bitterness that their 2009 attempt failed.

The Egyptian uprising resembles the 1979 revolution in Iran, not that of 2009.

o Youth Culture. Both had unhappy youth tired of authoritarian rule. The young in both countries wanted more economic opportunities and an end to corruption. In Iran in 1979, the oil bubble had burst and all the development plans made by the Shah when money was plentiful had to be curtailed. When rising expectations are foiled, people become bitter.

Iran in 1979 had many young people educated in the US and Europe who had witnessed the youth revolts in both places during the late 1960s and early 1970s. They knew how to organize demonstration, write and Xerox propaganda, and take their issues to the streets. In Egypt, the Internet, foreign education, and the social networks have provided the same organizing skills.

o Population Bulge. A big population bulge of young people makes for restlessness and their religious and social cultures frustrate youthful hormones. Both Iran and Egypt had this.

o The Military. The military in both countries, providing decades of stability, ran into trouble. The senior officer corps were loyal to the government, but the junior officers and recruits were rife for radicalization. This happened in Iran-and it may well be the same in Egypt.

o Religion. Religious factions sided with the revolutionaries. Although they had very different agendas and plans for governing, these differences were downplayed until the government was made to fall. In Iran's case, nobody realized how powerful were the religious factions (Shiite clergy) until too late. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood has deliberately sided with the revolutionaries-but their ultimate plans are unknown until an election is held. They have foresworn violence-but so had the Ayatollah Khomeini.

o Labor Strikes. Little attention has been paid to the role of labor strikes. When the labor unions in the Iranian oil fields went on strike, it finally brought down the government. In Egypt, the labor strike at the Suez Canal was also the final straw that pushed the government to yield to the demonstrators.

So why not Iran in 2009? The poor, professionals, and students played a gallant role. But they never succeeded in getting labor unrest going. And today's Iranian military is a feeble force indeed because, like the Soviet army, they are dogged by a parallel army of religious thugs who watch their every move. The Soviets had a parallel military that watched the Russian army for "incorrect thoughts," which Ayatollah Khomeini adopted.

If the Iranian people are to take down their noxious government, they will need the support of the people who run the bazaars (merchant class) and key labor unions. And they need to know that their leaders, unlike Mubarak, will not step down without bloodshed. The clerics have nowhere to run because they have nothing but enemies in the world. Certainly not even the Saudis would take them in.

For now, the Iranian dictatorship is hanging on. They have declared the 2009 opposition leaders the "disloyal opposition" and have charged them with "fighting against God." There is an internal struggle between the Ayatollah and President Ahmadinejad. Might a Fascist dictatorship replace the Islamic dictatorship? The nuclear project is in trouble. A computer worm has ruined their centrifuges and they have frightened off their Russian technicians.

Subsidies to the poor have been cut. Fuel prices are skyrocketing yet food and taxi prices are frozen by the government. The government has shut down university

humanities departments and cut out foreign cooking shows to halt \223foreign influences.\224 And a binge of executions is creating a reign of terror. How much longer can this go on?

679 words

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