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Recent protests point to more instability for Iran

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Presented by



Amir Sadeghi/AFP/Getty Images

As Iranians clashed with police in the second round of violent street protests this year, experts say there are some important signs that suggest the Islamic state may be reaching a new level of political instability, even if it is not ready to tumble.

"It's not a good sign for the regime that the demonstrations have revived after being crushed during the summer," said Ted Carpenter, vice-president for defence and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute in Washington. "That is a sign that the regime's hold on power is more tenuous than the clerical leadership would like. Then there is the boldness with which the demonstrators are going after the police. This is not a victim mentality.

"But does that mean the government will be edged out in a few days or a few years from now? There's no way of telling."

Over the past few days, hundreds of thousands protesters have taken to the streets and have been involved in violent clashes with police. Opposition leaders say at least nine people were killed, including aides of opposition leader Hossein Mousavi as well as his nephew, Seyed. Other reports said 15 may have died.

There were reports that demonstrators set fire to banks and government buildings, including local headquarters of the feared basij militia, and that some police officers were refusing orders to shoot into the crowds.

In June, protests broke out after the disputed re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, which Mr. Mousavi said was rigged.

Mr. Ahmadinejad and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the country's Supreme Leader, who is considered the spiritual head of the theocratic government, denied the accusations.

That round of protests ended after mass arrests and violent reprisals by the government.

Richard Rubenstein, a professor of conflict resolution at George Mason University in Washington, said the fact these protests are taking place during Ashura, the holiest day of the year for Shiite Muslims, is critical.

"The fact that the regime responded with violence on Ashura is a major no-no. Anyone who sheds blood on Ashura

is evil in the eyes of Shiites."

Ashura commemorates the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, who was killed in battle by Yazid, a Sunni caliph. Some religious commentators say that Shiites view Hussein's death the way Christians view the crucifixion of Jesus.

Prof. Rubenstein said it is also notable to see protesters comparing Ayatollah Khamenei to Yazid, the epitome of evil.

"When people are screaming 'death to Khamenei' you have what the social scientists call a 'crisis of legitimacy,'" he said.

The TimesOnline reported that demonstrators were seen trying to tear down Ayatollah Khamenei's portrait and "trampling on street signs bearing his name."

Mr. Carpenter also thinks that having the protests break out during Ashura is another sign of the depth of the hostility toward the current government.

"It shows that one could be a good Shiite Muslim and oppose the government ... that the issue of challenging the government is so important that the opposition would take to the streets during this holiday. At its most basic, it's a message to religious leadership that they no longer speak for Shiites."

Mr. Carpenter, who has been following events in Iran for nearly 30 years, said that one of the great problems in trying to predict what will happen is that the opposition in Iran is not a single entity.

"The one thing that appears to unite the opposition is that they don't like the current government. But the Iranian opposition is probably a number of different factions. Some just have economic grievances and they would like to see reasonable policies in place because the economy stinks. There are others who are committed democrats and others who are reformists who are still Islamists but not as radical as the clerical hierarchy."

It is important to be restrained and realistic about our expectations for a future Iranian government, Mr. Carpenter said. For example, there is no guaranteed that a "reformist" government would give up its nuclear ambitions.

"That started under the Shah in the 1960s. This is not a goal confined to extremist Islamist elements."

He said any new government, if it should ever come, would probably be more flexible - "but that's a pretty low bar to clear."

"And I doubt that even a surprisingly democratic government would be all that friendly to the West, or Israel."

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