

## Assumed Political Responsibility of the 'Youth of Iran'

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1979 and the beginning of an Islamic Revolution was a starting point for remarkable changes in Iran, which in the truest sense of a 'revolution' changed and turned Iran's cultural, social, economic and political life upside down.

The most fundamental and significant of these changes was the population structure and population policies misguided by ill-advised religious philosophy that Iran must create an army for Islam for its successful expansion and infiltration.

An assessment of the rate of population growth and numbers indicate that in 1891 Iran's population was 7,645,000 with an increase of only around 0.6% annually until 1926 reaching over ten million.<sup>26</sup> The beginning of sharp increase in the population numbers dates back to eighty-five years ago with an almost three fold increase in the rate of growth to 1.5%. This was unprecedented and with an estimated growth rate of 3.1% by 1956 (1335) and Iran's first official national census, the population was recorded at 18,954,000.

This increase in population numbers and the consequent necessary planning requirements for primary services provision meant that the pre-revolution government accepted a United Nations population control project devised for Iran which was implemented. On behalf of the Statistical Centre of Iran I was in charge of the nationwide execution of the necessary field work for the implementation of this project in Iran and through much dedicated work by relevant authorities the growth trend was successfully reversed and reduced to 2.7%.

With the onset of the Revolution and the rule of Islamic ideology, as introduced by Ayatollah Khomeini, population control/contraception was deemed immoral or gravely contrary to the Sharia law. The onslaught of war and Islamic expansionism goals meant that the 2.7% achieved with much hard work was increased to 3.9% in a space of ten years.<sup>27</sup> This was one of the many erroneous policies introduced and applied by the revolutionary government. The growth of the population rate was a source of pride for the revolutionary government and then Prime Minister, Mir Hossein Mousavi, boasted on national television that Iran had achieved one of the fastest growing population rates in the world.

As a result, lack of planning and foresight confronted the regime with its own inadequacies and the population with social and economic hardship. They were forced to rethink their population policy and not govern under the misapprehension that 'God will provide'. Nevertheless, the dramatic change in the population structure had taken place. Iran now has a young population that can be one of its strongest assets in shaping and bringing about change yet repeatedly the question of 'Iran's youths' is used and abused.

This generation of 'youth' has developed its own identity. It is alert and aware of world progress and keeps informed through advances of communication technology. Attempts to indoctrinate and shape them into an army of Muslim soldiers have failed. Their needs and aspirations are far removed from that of the Islamic regime.

The positive or negative role of the 'youth' is crucial in Iran's tomorrow. Without adequate planning the present underlying pathology and dissonance will only worsen. On the other hand this 'youth' is struggling and fighting for a solution and a way out of its present predicament.

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<sup>26</sup> National Statistics Annual published February 2010 – page 92

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

The Islamic regime has behaved irresponsibly towards this generation. It incites and excites them into political participation at election times to claim popular legitimacy in the eyes of the world but when this mobilised 'youth' actually thinks for itself and demands a better life it is beaten violently into silence and submission. In 1997 the voting age was reduced to fifteen, in 2001 as part of promises of 'civil society' and 'rule of law' and in 2009 abusing their desire for change, pre-election activities were organised, encouraged and tolerated.

This created clear expectation of accountability that led to the protests after the 2009 election and gave birth to the 'Green Movement'<sup>28</sup> which has been used since to refer to the popular movement in Iran. It is worthy of note that in true recognition of the merits of a pluralist society even when they were being beaten by the regime's forces the 'youths of Iran' would stop anyone bringing harm on the soldiers and men and women alike physically shielded them from understandable crowd anger.

As in all other societies in transition, unwittingly a group of these 'youths' have become 'heroes', 'role models', and 'pride of Iran' and referred to with many others such adjectives. They look to a better future beyond the factional fighting of the Islamic regime. While shaping and writing a defining point in the pages of Iran's history, they are paying heavily for their vision and courage with their safety and liberty. They are a group of young men and women who are equally aware of the gender disparity, of ethnic and religious discrimination and persecution, and the deceit and duplicity of the ruling elite. They understand the needs of the society at large regardless of political loyalties and the fact that economic hardship affects all Iranians. If they want change and a better future they want it for all equally. Unarmed, they have become the most effective threat to the Islamic regime. They are standing up and advocating change through non-violent means, which must be respected and supported. They are claiming ownership of equality and freedom. Nonetheless, the brutality of the regime means that they are distrustful and work in small numbers and groups. They do not benefit from a cohesive unified movement. The culture of mistrust and fragmented disjointed actions hinder the speed with which change can occur.

They could be divided into several groups:

- Some remain in Iran and in the face of brutal suppression fight for a better future. They risk continuous intimidation, imprisonment, torture and even death 'accidental' or by execution.
- Some were forced to flee following the disputed 2009 presidential elections in Iran:
  - Understandably, some are absorbed into a 'normal life' and pursuit of further education – something they were deprived of in Iran - and have consciously removed themselves from activism;
  - Others without paying attention to the possibilities and opportunities that life outside Iran offers them remain committed and engaged with the day-to-day struggle in Iran. They have dedicated their time to raising awareness of the plight of those left in Iran;
  - The last group - the better known or with identifiable potential - taking refuge in western countries or countries that have a vested interest in Iran are snapped up by international media and organisations. They believe they can influence and inform policy and decision makers and thus remain active in this manner.

While this piece is looking at the political responsibility the 'youths of Iran' have assumed, it must be noted that they cannot effect change in isolation from the rest of the population. Real lasting change will happen when the experience of the older generation is passed on. Without a doubt, shaping the future of Iran requires each generation to assume its own responsibility and duty.

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<sup>28</sup> Immediately after the elections The 'Green Movement' was only concerned with 'Where is my vote?' The 'Green Movement' today is complex and no longer concerned with the actual election results. It refers collectively to popular democratic movements in Iran that may or may not agree with each other's political aims and strategies. The common denominator of the various groups and movements today, is the clear need for change from the existing system. In my book, 'The Parliament of Minds' I have detailed the Green Movement extensively.

In view of the thirty year period of the Islamic Republic and the present population structure these could be divided into those who are (a) fifty to sixty years old and over, (b) the forty to fifty year olds and (c) those below the age of forty who make up the largest part Iran's population today. The fifty to sixty years old generation in Iran has clear memory and experience of the revolutionary ideals and excitable impulsive actions; while the remainder were either not born or too young to know anything different. It should also be kept in mind that 37.5% of those below forty years of age in Iran today are actually below nineteen years of age<sup>29</sup> creating further unanswered demands for higher education, jobs, housing, health and social welfare.

While the public debate is dominated by worries about declining moral standards, growing divisions between rich and poor and institutional and systematic discrimination experienced by the majority of the population the force for change needs political planning with a clear sense of direction and purpose. As Iranians, young and old, we must have faith in our own abilities and learn to trust each other again. The events of the last three years have shown the global community – and Iranians alike – that the Islamic Republic cannot maintain the present status quo. Political and/or economic expedience for a few who without a doubt exist may buy the regime some time but change is inevitable.

The 'youth of Iran' have chosen their future. They are working towards a fair, just society founded upon equality and rule of law. They are fully cognisant of Iran's national interest and engage the global community respecting theirs. They ask for the same awareness and respect from the global community. National interest of all nations is best served with peace and stability. A democratic stable Iran best serves the interests of the country, the region and the global community. Fully aware of the risks involved this is the chosen political path and responsibility of many among the 'youth of Iran' and with clear strategic political planning this vision is an achievable reality.

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<sup>29</sup> National Census 2006