



INDEPENDENCE, FREEDOM, ISLAMIC REPUBLIC: TALKING ABOUT A REVOLUTION, AND ITS PROMISES

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The Islamic Republic, whose survival nobody would have betted on, still lives on. No matter what John Bolton [predicted last year](#) – “the Islamic Republic will not last until its 40th birthday” – or what common sense suggested in the early days of the revolution, when very few people thought it would have lasted more than six months.

The failure in predicting the survival of the revolution only matches the failure in predicting its very same outbreak. Besides then-US president Jimmy Carter [praising Iran](#) as an “island of stability in one of the most troubled areas of the world” just a year before the revolution began, we have CIA reports clearly admitting the failure of intelligence to grasp what was going on in Iran at that time: “I would suggest even Ayatollah Khomeini didn’t realize how well his force was moving along”, said admiral Stansfield Turner, then-Director of the CIA, in [an interview on February 4, 1979](#).

It is hard to overstate the importance of the Iranian revolution, the last successful revolution of the 20th century, whose significance extended far beyond Iran, with an impact on the Middle East and the broader Islamic world. The outcome of the revolution was manifold: from the spurring of opposition movements throughout the Muslim world – often imbued with radicalism – to an effort to produce Islamic alternatives to failed state institutions with the aim of creating a new civil society.

And many were its promises. The revolution’s main slogan “Independence, Freedom, Islamic Republic” perfectly summarises the major ideals in whose name it was fought, which were social and political, as well as religious. The Islamic Republic – this unique state conformation bringing together the imperative of “Islamic government” with the French Fifth Republic institutional structure – is maybe the most successful fulfillment of the revolutionary promises.

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But scarcely a year after the revolution the state of affairs was in flagrant contradiction with the hopes that had been raised in its early days. The very imposition of an Islamic Republic was the result of the purging of all other revolutionary voices. The ideals of justice were hijacked by the hyper-speculative economy set up by the founders, which went from being potential embodiments of the ideal of redistributive justice to mechanisms for enriching parasitic groups. This, together with the nationalisation and expropriation efforts carried out by the state as well as the emigration of a large proportion of the middle class, led to an increase in poverty. While failing to close the gap between rich and poor, this led to the emergence of new elites. A sullen atmosphere descended upon the effervescence of the early days of the revolution, with the nihilist reinterpretation of the ideology of martyrdom taking young Iranians' lives on the Iraq-Iran war front. The [secularization of religion](#) went hand in hand with an increasingly tense social situation and an economy that was in regression, in the context of a revolution that had gone adrift, together with the hopes it had embodied.

And yet, while the revolution had gone off course, the Islamic Republic survived. It survived by adjusting to the new reality and by putting the nezam, the "system", first. Contrary to outsiders' perceptions of the Republic as a monolith, it survived by opening – and closing – its gates to the different voices of Iran's vast political panorama. It survived by adapting the "neither East nor West" revolutionary slogan to the need of opening up to both East and West in order to endure. While the emphasis on "independence" has never gone lost, Iran has been able to compromise when the survival of the Republic was at stake.

Forty years later, mixed conclusions can be drawn from the revolution. The signals of crisis are manifold. Not only the economic crisis openly acknowledged by the government but, once again, the legitimacy crisis which has much to do with the slow but inevitable passing away of the old generation of revolutionaries, while the majority of the Iranian population – which is composed of under-40s – has not lived the experience of the revolution. Yet Iranian society is alive. Despite duplicitous US appeals to the Iranian population, aimed at showing a [fake and dangerous sense of empathy](#), what is sure is that Iranians do not seem to crave another revolution, either domestically born or instigated from outside.

The desire for change is ultimately a desire for a better life. The joy of the July 2015 celebrations for the nuclear deal appear in stark contrast with today's sense of hopelessness and disillusion among vast sectors of society, [who see](#) "the doors to the outside world closing again". What Iran has tried to show the world in these 40 years is that it is a normal country, made up of people and common aspirations. Too often the outside world has mistaken the people for the system, failing to understand that a country is both its people and its leaders.

And while there is a serious debate inside the country over "whether the Islamic Republic can survive in its present form", it's probably time for the outside world to acknowledge that, while the revolution is long gone, what was once looked at as a fragile experiment has evolved into a robust reality. Let's move on from there.