

Shock at protests in Iran

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Previous large protests took place in 2009 in response to Presidential Elections. (Image: Kjetil Ree)

Protests have been taking place across Iran, with participants objecting to political repression and the poor state of the Iranian economy. At least 21 people have been killed in clashes with the police, and there have been over 1000 arrests.

The first protests took place on 28 December in Mashhad over the prices of basic goods. Protests have since raged across the country, with tens of thousands of people reportedly taking part. The mood of the protests is now a general anger at the government.

Although Iran has experienced small-scale demonstrations against economic hardship for years, nothing of this scale has been seen since 2009, when millions called for the re-run of the presidential election on claims of fraud. The result was upheld and the authorities stamped out the protests.

Originally, protests were sparked by the failure of President Hassan Rouhani's government to revive Iran's economy. Officially, unemployment is at 12.4 per cent, yet in some areas it is as high as 60 per cent. Inflation is at around 11 per cent, with the price of basic items, such as bread and milk, increasing by over 40 per cent in the last year. The government has also come under fire for spending too much on foreign conflicts in the Middle East. For example, the government supports Syria's president Bashar alAssad. There has also been explicit criticism of leading figures from the Islamic Republic, specifically the moderate President Rouhani and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Chants were heard in Tehran's

protests for “death to the dictator” and “death to Rouhani”.

In response, the President claimed that his people were “absolutely free to criticize the government and protest”, yet also stated that security forces would “show no tolerance to those who damage public properties, violate public order and create unrest in the society.” Authorities had also blocked access to social media sites in order to prevent the spread of the movement. The blocks have since been lifted, but the media retains signs of censorship, with disparity between reports from protesters and the official coverage. Rouhani has attributed this to the media’s ignorance rather than his own doing. Whatever the case, the full story is not being told.

Iranian authorities have attributed the protests to interference from foreign powers. The US has been most associated; it was one of the few countries to retain sanctions on Iran. Furthermore, the US State Department said it “strongly condemns” the arrests and calls for support for the Iranian protestors.

The protests have recently quietened, but the possibility of a resurgence in the near future is real. It is unsure whether the protests will prompt economic and political change, and what this will mean for Rouhani: the protests could be used to display himself as pro-reform, or it could provide a reason for his opponents to undermine him. However, it is clear that the Iranian people require some form of economic change to pull them out of mass poverty.



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