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Iranian Events Provide Lessons for Russians, Moscow Journalist Says

By Paul Goble

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About this blog

Window on Eurasia covers current events in Russia and the nations of the former Soviet Union, with a focus on issues of ethnicity and religion. The issues covered are often not those written about on the front pages of newspapers. Instead, the articles in the Windows series focus on those issues that either have not been much discussed or provide an approach to stories that have been. Frequent topics include civil rights, radicalism, Russian Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, and events in the North Caucasus, among others.

Author **Paul Goble** is a longtime specialist on ethnic and religious questions in Eurasia. Most recently, he was director of research and publications at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy. He has served in various capacities in the U.S. State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the International Broadcasting Bureau as well as at the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He writes frequently on ethnic and religious issues and has edited five volumes on ethnicity and religion in the former Soviet space.

The events in Iran clearly demonstrate "that the presence or absence in any country of an opposition, of a real political struggle, in the final analysis of democracy does not depend how cruel the ruling regime is but on whether its people have political will," a Moscow journalist argues in an essay posted online Tuesday.

And consequently, while "the Iranian regime obviously is more cruel than the Russian, there is an opposition, political struggle, and," Kasparov.ru commentator Anton Semikin said, "even democracy" of a kind &mdash something that sets the Iranian people and its government apart from the Russians.

But having said that, the Moscow writer argues that no one, especially anyone who hopes for Westernization and liberalization of Iran, "should deceive himself relative to the essence and meaning of what is taking place" in that country. What is occurring now is "a manifestation of the same Shiite protest spirit, whose explosion in 1979 ended with the overthrow of the shah."

According to Semikin, Iran is likely to follow one of three courses, although at present it is

impossible to say just which. First, although there are "no cardinal differences" between Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Mir-Hossein Mousavi on many issues, the new wave of protests in Iran under the slogan "Where is my vote?" could lead to some important, positive and welcome changes.

"Mousavi's supporters," the Kasparov.ru commentator argues, "want their earnings to be spent for more than the development of nuclear and space programs and the growth of military power. They want to limit the interference of the clerics in the life of society, [and] they want greater openness for their country."

The very massiveness of the protests and the apparent emergence of divisions within the clerical elite on how to respond mean that they might succeed, but there is a second possibility: The powers that be in Tehran could break the opposition as the Chinese did at Tiananmen by showing that they are prepared to use massive force against it.

Yevgeny Satanovsky, a Russian expert on Iran, said the ayatollah regime can survive if "it is ready to shoot all, the entire crowd, and the crowd knows this and is afraid." But if the regime is not prepared to go that far, as Gorbachev was not in Tbilisi and Vilnius, then the regime is likely to fall.

And there is yet a third possibility for Iran, given the existence of a population prepared to show its political will, Semikin says. The current Iranian regime, just like the shah's, may be prepared to apply force and even begin to do so, but if the Iranians respond as they did then with "protests, sabotage and strikes" the powers that be may find themselves forced to back down.

Semikin said he very much hopes that "the voices of the opponents of Ahmadinejad, one way or another, will be heard and considered by the powers and that the current standoff will be resolved with as small a number of victims as possible," thus allowing "the shining mosque on the hill," the Islamic Republic of Iran, to continue its independent existence.

In making that declaration, the Moscow commentator said he wants to make his "own position" completely clear. Semikin says he "personally would not want to live in Iran, to live under the power of the clergy, under conditions of harsh restrictions on religion and one's way of life."

However, "looking at the slow but steady degradation of Russia ... at the tiredness and entropy of Europe ... at the U.S., whose policy as 'government No. 1' is opposed by at least half of its own citizens," he said he is "happy to observe a site of energy, development and enthusiasm which Iran represents in the contemporary world."

On the one hand, Semikin's article is a useful reminder of the distinction between regimes that cover themselves with the trappings of democracy but work to ensure that they are not subject to the popular will and those that are less democratic in form but, because of the activism of their citizens, may be forced to attend to that will.

And on the other &mdash and equally important &mdash his essay highlights both the possibilities that people have to promote their interests under a variety of regimes regardless of how repressive they may appear to be as well as the choice those regimes must make between drowning the opposition in blood or finding themselves swept away.

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