

Hope replaces fear in Iran

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On Feb. 20, people went out again to mourn the two youth killed during the demonstrations. The regime claimed that one of the martyrs, Sane Zhale, originally a Kurd, was in fact a Basiji and a spy for the secret police. The regime claimed that he was killed by the demonstrators. The opposition and the Kurdish political parties deny such a claim.

The regime in Iran felt 'stable' and claimed to have silenced the opposition through arrests and executions after the June-2009 revolt. Most of the members of that uprising had either been arrested or forced to flee the country. A few were executed, others simply went 'missing'.

However earlier, on 14th February 2011, thousands of men and women, mostly youth, took to the streets in capital Tehran and other major cities like Shiraz and Isfahan, to express solidarity with Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions.

Reformist leaders, Mehdi Karoubi and Hussain Mousavi, sought permission from the incumbent regime to hold peaceful and 'silent' demonstrations in Iran to 'express solidarity with the people's revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt'; their requests fell upon ears, deaf to the voices of change. Demonstrations were held anyway, but not silent ones; these were boisterous affairs with chants of 'Syed Ali! Go to Ben Ali', 'Ben Ali, Mobarak, time for Syed Ali' echoing everywhere.

There was a call for all protesters to gather at Azadi Square (*Azadi* in Persian means freedom or liberation) in the fashion demonstrators had gathered at Tehreer Square in Cairo, and camp out there. But Basij-the state sponsored mercenary militia and police had not merely blocked the paths leading to Azadi Square, they resorted to violence to pre-empt any such gathering. According to Al Jazeera, 10,000 police and security personnel were mobilized to stop demonstrations. Majority of the demonstrators couldn't even come close to Azadi Square, while Mousavi and Karoubi were held incommunicado under house arrest. The scenes broadcast from parliament the next day reflected nothing but chaos; members of the parliament were demonstrating, demanding to arrest Mousavi and Karoubi.

What was remarkable ---and what scared the regime---is the direct link between these demonstrations and spreading Arab revolution even when these movements have no leadership. In this context, the Iranian demonstrations, held despite warnings by the regime, signify that Iranians refuse to yield to heavy handed oppression measures. According to eye-witnesses, demonstrations did not mirror any sense of fear. The protestors were neither afraid of the much-detested secret police nor the militiamen in plainclothes who acted the way Mobarak's hooligans did at Tahrir Square on February 2, to silence the protestors.

At least two youth were murdered in cold blood and 1500 people arrested by the security apparatus on February 14. Relatives of the arrested activists have ever since camped outside the Evin prison. However, there are indications that most of the arrested activists have been shifted to an unknown prison in Kahrizak. This unofficial prison is run by ideologically motivated and extremely brutal paramilitary forces.

A Facebook report by a young female demonstrator which is making rounds in the blogosphere these days, describes the situation in these words: "On arriving home I switched to Al Jazeera on TV and saw some video clips showing what had happened that day. It did not reflect what we experienced... it was only then that I realized that my leg was badly hurt and there were bruises all over my body. It made me wonder about how long we would have to struggle empty handed against a force that is armed to the teeth and completely devoid of humanity. Images of the day are still fresh in my memory. An old man jumping over the barricades to evade arrest, but could not; a strong woman, red-faced with anger, her head hidden in hejab, gathering stones to give to us young ones to throw at the police; a young man lying unconscious in the stairs where we took refuge. As batons were swinging and teargas unleashed, an old woman locks my head in her arms to protect me amid all the tumult. She was telling me all the time 'don't be afraid, we are not doing anything wrong. Don't be afraid we are here for a walk. Don't touch my daughter'.

These demonstrations were a warning signal to the regime. Unlike June 2009, the demand was a change of regime. Slogans against Khamenai and the dictatorship (punishable by death under current Iranian law) dominated the demonstrations. The slogans have shaken the regime's stated 'stability'. On February 14, Iranians took back to the streets and revived hope after a period of painful silence. The demonstrators proved not merely to the world but to the social movements as well that fear has given way to hope".

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One of the February-demonstrators, M, believes that these demonstrations were a victory for opposition as it rekindled hope. M is a young artist, a feminist and lives in Tehran. He is active with different social movements.

When asked about the mood at these demonstrations, he said: "There was joy and determination. They were happy to be out and show resistance. However, despite repression, they were determined to stay peaceful. The ones I talked to wanted to have structural changes and not cosmetic changes. They wanted civil liberties."

He told *Viewpoint* after the demonstrations on 20th February, that he could see boys in their early teens mobilized by the regime as 'Basijis' on the streets of Tehran.

"These poor children were told to search people passing by, they arrested some as I witnessed but they didn't know what to do with them and whom to turn to. They were confused. All the way through Vali-e-Asr (a main street in the City) you could see crowd of Tehranis, who walked without daring to shout any slogans. The plainclothes and other forces just arrested people randomly' M said.

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