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Iran: Drought, incompetence, and maybe revolution

by GWYNNE DYER

Twenty years of strict sanctions on Iran by both the United States and the United Nations did not bring down the regime of the ayatollahs. Half a dozen major waves of non-violent protest involving several thousand deaths have not brought it down either. Even last June's massive bombing campaign by Israel and the United States did not bring it to heel.

But the lack of water may do what all those other challenges failed to do: destroy the rule of the religious extremists who seized power in Iran in 1979 and have turned the country into an international pariah. The oldest part of every religion is purely transactional, and in Tehran the imams are praying for rain.

They should pray quite hard, because President Masoud Pezeshkian warned last month that ?There is no water behind the dams. The wells beneath our feet are also running dry... If it doesn't rain, we'll have to start rationing water in [November].?

Well, it hasn't started raining yet and we are running out of November, so what should people do next? ?If the lack of rainfall continues past that, we simply won't have water and will have to evacuate Tehran,? Pezeshkian said. All ten million people? Where would the government put them, given that the other 80 million Iranians are also suffering from a drought now in its fifth year?

Nobody knows. If President Pezeshkian sounds well-intentioned but hopeless and basically useless, that's because he's not really the government. For the past 45 years, all the big decisions in Iran have been made not by the elected parliament but by the unelected ?Supreme Leader', a role that has been filled since 1989 by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Ayatollahs are the supreme religious authorities in the Twelver strand of Shia Islam that prevails in Iran and Iraq. They are not necessarily secular leaders, but in the turbulent aftermath of the Iranian revolution of 1979 that overthrew the monarchy an ayatollah called Ruhollah Khomeini sought and gained absolute power in Iran.

Khomeini only lasted 10 more years, but his designated successor Ali Khamenei is still in office 36 years later at the age of 86. As one would expect, he heads a regime that sees matters of faith and morals (like ensuring that women's hair is properly concealed) as more important than mere material concerns like looking after the water supply.

This general neglect of practical matters by the regime also opened the door to widespread corruption among those in charge of the economy, which partly explains why Iran's GDP per capita is still stuck at about the same level as it was in 1985. The other reason is the sheer incompetence of even those officials who don't take bribes.

Iran is a mostly arid country with tens of millions of farm families, so it would make sense to import crops that need a lot of water like rice from abroad while growing less thirsty crops at home. After all, a well-run Iran would have lots of oil money to pay for food imports.

Instead, the government has aimed at ?strategic self-sufficiency', including in food, and the amount of land being cultivated has doubled in thirty years in some areas. There are around a million deep wells (80-200 metres) for irrigation, and groundwater is vanishing. Subsidence is now as big a problem in Iran as in the areas of the Arctic that are losing permafrost.

Now add in an unprecedented multi-year drought that is hitting city dwellers as well as rural people. Rainfall was down by almost half in last year's rainy season, so there was very little water left behind the dams when the winter rains failed to arrive in late October this year.

The great unspoken fear in the minds of Iranians who are paying attention is that this may not be just wayward weather. It could be the leading edge of permanent climate change: five years is a long time for a random deviation from the norm.

In the shorter run, however, it could be the trigger for an uprising that finally dispatches a regime that has overstayed its welcome. All the other challenges to the regime over the years could be blamed on wicked and godless foreigners who were stirring up impressionable locals, but this problem is entirely home-grown. No excuses available.

There are no reliable opinion polls in Iran, but the best guess is that after 45 years at least half the population of Iran actively dislikes the regime while most other people just accept it as inevitable. If the rain doesn't come soon, and especially if they start evacuating cities, a decisive shift in the balance of opinion is entirely possible.