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Iran: End of the line?

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Six months ago, at the end of Iran's presidential election, I finished an article by speculating that the long-lived theocratic dictatorship in Iran may be a lot closer to its end than its beginning: ?If you can plausibly say ?This cannot go on forever,' you are also saying ?Someday this will come to an end.'?

That observation was triggered by the fact that the ?reformist' presidential candidate, Masoud Pezeshkian, unexpectedly won the July election. The previous president had been killed in a helicopter crash, and the regime had fumbled in setting up a snap election to replace him.

Pezeshkian was the only token ?moderate' in a field of four candidates, but he managed to make it into the last two for the second round ? and then, in the run-off vote, something remarkable happened.

Fewer than half the voters had bothered to show up for the first round of voting, because they assumed that the fix was in. Suddenly, however, the moderate candidate had a chance of winning ? and seven million extra voters showed up for the second round and carried the ?reformist' to victory.

It was only a small victory, because Pezeshkian is very timid (otherwise he wouldn't have been allowed even to run), but more importantly because the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has been the real and absolute ruler of Iran ever since Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini died in 1989. It just showed that the public would prefer somebody else.

That doesn't count for much in a theocracy. It just allowed for a bit of speculation about the long-term future of the country. But a lot has happened in the Middle East since last July, and none of it has been good news for the Iranian regime.

First, the vaunted ?axis of resistance' that Iran had created to keep Israel on the defensive and boost its own power has been largely dismantled in the past six months.

Hamas in the Gaza Strip has been mostly destroyed, the Hezbollah organization that dominated Lebanon is disabled, and the recent overthrow of the Assad regime in Syria has eliminated Iran's strongest supporter in the region.

That was a homegrown revolt by Sunni Islamists backed by Turkey, and it's part of a broader decline of Shia power in the region's politics. Shia Iran no longer has any allies in the Arab countries that border on Israel, and there is little chance that it can win them back.

Worse yet for Tehran, the tit-for-tat missile strikes between Iran and Israel over the past few months showed that Iran's missiles for the most part cannot get through, while the Israeli air force could and did destroy most of Iran's air defenses. The country is virtually naked militarily.

Even more dangerous for the regime is the accelerating decline of the economy. It was undermined by decades of overspending abroad to spread its radical religious message, but equally by under-investment at home since Iran's attempts to sponsor revolutions elsewhere led to stringent international sanctions against it.

The damage has been extreme. Iran's per capita gross domestic product in 1976, a couple of years before the Islamist takeover, was $7,600. Now it is only $5,700, despite all the oil and gas.

Per capita GDP in next-door Turkey, similar in size, resources and population but with little gas or oil, was only $1,270 in 1976. It is now $13,000. Which one would you prefer?

Most Iranians don't know those exact numbers, but they do know roughly what happened and why ? and the result, now unfolding for all to see, is a ruined economy.

Iran has the world's second-largest natural gas reserves and third-largest oil reserves, but the rot has gone so deep that it cannot even keep the lights and the heat on.

There were frequent brief power outages last summer, but this winter the electricity is going off for days at a time. Factories, steel plants, and the like are shutting down; schools and universities are teaching remotely. A lot of people are unhappy or downright angry, and they know who to blame.

There have been three episodes of prolonged mass protests against the regime (2009, 2019 and 2022), and despite the cold winter weather another one could be on the way now. Or not; these things are unpredictable.

But we can probably now say with some confidence: ?Someday SOON this will come to an end.?