

Fesal Iqbal,
Ph.D Secholar
Deptt of Political Science,
JNU.

'N' for Iran: The Nuclear Program, Green Movement and Hope for Democracy

INTRODUCTION:

Any discussion on the Islamic Republic of Iran has been dominated by the sanctions against nuclear program of Iran by the International community and the deals as well as negotiations following such sanctions. This article explores the nuclear deal and sanctions against Iran as well as the simultaneous changes marking the new contours of protest and demonstration overtly while reflecting upon the continuity of the culture of protests for democratic reforms in the past. The first sanctions were imposed following the Iranian revolution in 1979. In 2006, the United Nations (UN hereafter) introduced its first sanctions on Iran to halt its uranium enrichment program. In 2012, the U.S., UN and the European Union (EU) tightened sanctions introducing an oil embargo and banning financial transactions with Iranian banks. The attempts to deter Iran's efforts at developing nuclear missiles were not only in the form of sanctions but also extended into the world of technology through a computer worm, dubbed 'Stuxnet', which infected several Iranian industrial sites first in 2009 and appears to have

been designed specifically to target the computers controlling Iran's centrifuges. Iran signed the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons Treaty (NPT) in 1968 as a non-nuclear weapons state and ratified the NPT in 1970. Iran, under the former rule of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, was provided assistance by USA under the Atoms For Peace program for its nuclear program even when it was a member of Non-Proliferation Treaty. Subsequently, the nuclear program was not continued by the new religious leader and founder of Iran as an Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khomeini as the country was caught in the doldrums of the war with Iraq. The Nuclear program has assumed the central place in the internal political vocabulary during elections and the ways in which Iran relates to the rest of the world. The ability to enrich uranium that can be used to generate power or for a weapons program or both has made it the bone of contention between USA and Iran. While the nuclear program became the platform for interaction, negotiations and contestations for Iran, it also gave impetus to the Green movement and strengthening democratic culture within Iran.

THE NUCLEAR POLITICS:

Did you hear that the Iranian government has just designated the date as the national fruit? —Why the date? —Because it gives energy and has a nucleus! —Iranian joke (Yaphe, 2010)

The discussion around nuclear program among people of Iran until 2002 was marked by ambiguities and lack of information

but most of the people opposed it. The discussions related to nuclear program, no matter how technical, scientific and expertise demanding, entered the public discourse. The conditions changed in 2002 when the Iranian dissident group revealed the development of two undeclared nuclear sites, a domestic uranium capability in Natanz and a heavy water reactor in Arak. The external pressure by the international community and International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and internal pressure by the contentious political conditions of protests against the Islamic rule made the issue of nuclear program a major part of public discourse and the developments regarding the same became a matter of great debate opening up the floodgates of public perusal of political decision making and state policies. The end result was, as Yaphe points out, in a country known for its authoritarian ways, was ironically a relatively open field for discussion, with opposing elite points of view regarding one of Iran's most important foreign policy and security issues. The nuclear program became enmeshed with the nationalist agenda with development of nuclear technologies as a matter of national pride. While some part of it has been cultivated by the government, other is credited to the "popular perception of United States as an antagonist" (Perkovich, 2005) creating obstacles in the path of Iran's industrialization. The declaration by George Bush on January 29th state-of-the-union speech to Congress called Iran as "an axis of evil" thereby

bringing a moral angle to the issue of foreign relations and international (in)security. The moral hierarchy certainly created hostility towards United States amongst the people of Iran covering the issue of nuclear program with a national flag. This is reflected in one the statements of Iran's chief nuclear negotiator, Hasan Rouhani "Our people feel great pride because of our young Iranian scientists can produce nuclear fuel, the most important part of the fuel cycle, despite all of the sanctions and pressure from the West" (quoted in Perkovich, 2005). After the election of hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad the Paris Agreement of 2004- according to which Iran agreed to temporarily suspend both enrichment and conversion activities, including the manufacture and operation of centrifuges- fell out and there was less vocal criticism under the conservative rule in the government. However the move to stop or limit the development of nuclear technologies was seen as a step of complacency and timidity. After the decision of Ahmadinejad to carry out Uranium enrichment at several sites, Iran case was referred to UN Security Council by the IAEA board of governors. In 2006, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1696 and imposed sanctions after Iran refused to suspend its uranium enrichment program. Ahmadienijad's policy on Nuclear nonproliferation was expressed in Iran's 2009 NPT PrepCom statements and its stand on the Nuclear Weapons Free Zone in the Middle East. The hostility of USA towards Iran as the

potential threat in the region were underlined by pragmatic foreign policy decisions rather than moral underpinnings yet lacked the consistency when it came to Israel as pointed out by Iran. Iran expressed its faith in the Nuclear Weapons Free Zone which would require Israel to meet its disarmament obligations under NPT.

In September 2009, President Obama, revealed the existence of an underground enrichment facility in Fordow and argued that "Iran's decision to build yet another nuclear facility without notifying the IAEA represents a direct challenge to the basic compact at the center of the non-proliferation regime" (Lee, 2009 cited in Sterio 2016). 2009 was also the year for presidential elections wherein the moderate, better known as reformist, leader Mir Hossein Mousavi expressed similar positions on nuclear program as that of conservative. He further criticized Iran's suspension of enrichment from 2003-2005 as a tool to deprive Iran of having access to nuclear technology. However, such a stance was only practical given the place nuclear energy development had assumed in the imagination of common people. This is reflected in a World Public Opinion poll released in April 2008 wherein the data revealed that most Iranians supported the country's program for energy production. It also indicated that six in ten Iranians considered nuclear weapon as contrary to Islam. This showed the general support for nuclear energy production but not nuclear weapons thereby complying

with the peaceful use of nuclear energy for civilian projects.

Green Movement:

The Green Movement took its name from a green sash given to Mir Hossein Mousavi by Mohammad Khatami, Iran's two-term president and the reform movement's first standard-bearer. After the presidential elections June 12, 2009 a new opposition was created by nearly 3 million peaceful demonstrators on the Tehran streets to protest official claims that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had won the 2009 presidential election in a landslide. Their simple slogan was: "Where is my vote?" Many commentators dubbed this as the extension of Arab Spring. The beacon of democratic hope was defying the 'rules of the game' thereby focusing on the prospects of substantive democracy rather than mere procedural rituals. Hence 2009 was not only the year of strained relations of Iran with USA but also the stressed relations with the Iranian people who once again revived the memories of 1979 revolution to shed light upon the demand for free and fair democratic elections and democratic regime. As Abbas Milani deftly noted, tracing the threads of Green movement to the 1979 revolution, that the "The Green Movement is, in its composition and genealogy, both old and new. The revolution of 1979 was the result of a historically incongruent alliance between modernizing middle and technocratic classes, the urban poor, women's and students' groups, some disgruntled members of Iran's new industrialist

class, members of the bazaar and "de-modernizing forces led by revolutionary leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The foot-soldiers of the revolution were the new urbanites—culturally religious, conservative and a-modern, if not anti-modern, peasants who had come to the cities in search of their share of petro-dollars". While many Iranians were supported by the unfolding Arab Spring and emboldened by the demonstrations of on 14 February held in solidarity with Tunisia and Egypt and in defiance of the authorities, those demonstrations, which turned into the first anti-government street protests in more than a year, also resulted in the house arrest of the main leaders of the opposition movement, Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mahdi Karroubi. Many regard the Green Movement as a key catalyst for the Arab Spring.

Security forces were initially paralyzed by the numbers. But then the regime unleashed security forces, including Revolutionary Guards, units of the Basij paramilitary units, and plain-clothed paramilitary forces called Lebas Shakhsi. Thousands of protesters were beaten, hundreds were arrested and dozens were killed by snipers. On June 18, Khamenei delivered a Friday prayer sermon that dismissed endorsed the election results. It reflected the regime's formal announcement that it would not tolerate the Green Movement and would do whatever it took to suppress it. The new confrontation was symbolized by the death of 26-year-old Neda Agha Soltan, an aspiring musician, on June

20. She was shot by a sniper, as she stood at the edge of a Green Movement protest. A cell phone video that captured her dying on the pavement was circulated around the world. Neda and pictures of her blood-spattered face became symbols of the Green Movement.

This movement marked the changing contours of protest culture in Iran. The Green movement is also dubbed as the twitter revolution suggesting the widespread use of social media and role of twitter as a platform to communicate with the world and seek solidarity for the common cause of democracy and human rights. The social media served as the platform for the exiled Iranians to become part of the Iranian civil society through social media updates and holding demonstrations and marches outside Iran in tandem with the movement within Iran. Some of the demonstrating people in Iran during 2009 protests even shouted, "A green Iran doesn't need nuclear weapons."

JOINT PLAN OF ACTION:

After several rounds of negotiations, an interim agreement on the Iranian nuclear program was signed on November 24, 2013, by the parties to the Agreement: the United States, Russia, Great Britain, France, China, the European Union, and Iran. The interim agreement—the Joint Plan of Action—was signed in Geneva, Switzerland. It provided for a short-term suspension of portions of Iran's nuclear program in exchange for decreased economic sanctions, as the countries continued to work toward a

long-term agreement. The IAEA also began "more intrusive and frequent inspections" under this Interim agreement. The interim agreement was formally implemented on January 20, 2014.

Under the terms of the Agreement, Iran agreed to limit its nuclear program in several ways. First, Iran agreed to decrease its stockpile of low-enriched uranium by 98 per cent; the Agreement contemplates that this reduction will remain in place for fifteen years. According to the agreement first, during the same fifteen-year period, Iran will be limited to enriching uranium to 3.67%, a percentage sufficient for civilian nuclear power and research, but not for building nuclear weapons. Second, Iran agreed to place over two-thirds of its centrifuges in storage and to limit any enrichment capacity to only the Natanz plant, which will be monitored by the IAEA. Third, Iran agreed to refrain from building any new uranium enrichment facilities for fifteen years. Under the terms of the Agreement, Iran may continue research and development work on enrichment, but that work will be restricted to the Natanz facility and will be subject to enumerated limitations for the first eight years. Fourth, Iran agreed to cease enriching uranium at the Fordow facility for at least fifteen years; instead, the Fordow facility will be converted into a nuclear physics and technology center. Fordow, an underground facility, had been at the center of international anxiety because many believed that Iran was enriching uranium in centrifuges at this facility. Fifth, Iran will implement an Additional Protocol

agreement, which will continue in perpetuity for as long as Iran remains a party to the NPT. Iran's acceptance of the Additional Protocol is particularly important, because it represents a continuation of the monitoring and verification provisions after the entire nuclear Agreement is implemented. Sixth, Iran agreed to a comprehensive inspection and verification regime by the IAEA. The IAEA will have continuous monitoring access to Iran's declared nuclear sites, such as Natanz and Fordow. This agreement was celebrated as an achievement of Obama's regime.

The election of the moderate leader Hasan Rouhani in 2013 signaled the shift in the internal politics of Iran with the verdict against Ahmadinejad showing the Iranian people's demand for greater personal freedoms. The political adventurism that led to the economic sanctions damaged the economy of Iran. The strains on the economy were animated in the life of Iranians through economic hardships such as unemployment. This may not be the reason behind the protests but is conducive to the widespread participation in the protests and winning of Rouhani in 2013 as well as in 2017. Sanctions against Iran have had a negative impact on the economic growth as the economy has gradually contracted as a result of the limited markets. Since the tightening of sanctions in 2012 growth dropped to negative 6.8 and 1.9 percent in 2012 and 2013 respectively, with oil production dropping by one million barrels a day. Production in

the auto industry declined by half and in the construction sector by 3.6 and 3.1 percent in 2012 and 2013 respectively (World Bank, 2015). However, the labour market in Iran has deteriorated to such a level that it is estimated that the Iranian economy needs to create five million jobs over the next 5 years to keep the unemployment rate at 10 percent (ibid.). Rouhani emerged as not only the speaker for greater freedoms, transparent regime and decision making but also the moderate negotiator for nuclear deal which lifted the economic sanctions thereby reviving the economy.

CONCLUSION:

The justification for economic sanctions against Iran are clouded not only in the form of foreign policy decisions but also moral stand for democratic reforms by United States. United States assumes the role of a moral police for democratic reforms. Even after the sanctions are lifted, they may 'snap back' in place in case Iran doesn't comply with the agreement rules. The development of Ballistic missiles has become another area of contention. The demand for democratic reforms and support for moderate and liberals within Iran has taken the shape of sanctions such as the recent sanctions on the head of Iran's judiciary and ceasing foreign assets of Iranian companies and businessmen. However, with the moderate leaders Rouhani and his support for democratic reforms, the moral underpinnings behind United States foreign policy decisions regarding Iran

should be made clear. Meanwhile the nuclear program development has also led to the development of democratic regime and greater deliberative environment within Iran.

REFERENCES:

- Devarajan, S., Mottaghi, L., Ianchovichina, E., & Esfahani, H. S. (2015). Economic Implications of Lifting Sanctions on Iran. MENA Quarterly Economic Brief" Washington, DC: World Bank, July.
- Sterio, M. (2016). President Obama's Legacy: The Iran Nuclear Agreement. Case W. Res. J. Int'l L., 48, 69.
- Perkovich, G. (2005). Changing Iran's Nuclear Interests. Policy Outlook, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, www.carnegieendowment.org/files/PO16_perkovich_FINAL2.pdf (accessed 27 September 2006).
- Bruno, G. (2010). Iran's nuclear program. Council on Foreign Relations, 10.
- Milani, A. (2010). The Green Movement. The Iran Primer: Power, Politics, and US Policy, 41-44.
- Tusa, F. (2013). How social media can shape a protest movement: The cases of Egypt in 2011 and Iran in 2009. Arab Media and Society, 17, 1-19.
- Dabashi, H. (2013). Iran, the green movement and the USA: The fox and the paradox. Zed Books Ltd..

Nader, A. (2010). The Revolutionary Guards. The Iran Primer:
Power, Politics and US Policy.

Yaphe, J. S. (2010). Nuclear Politics in Iran. NATIONAL
DEFENSE UNIV WASHINGTON DC INST FOR NATIONAL
STRATEGIC STUDIES.

[http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/meast/06/16/iran.elections.
timeline/index.html](http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/meast/06/16/iran.elections.
timeline/index.html) Accessed on 17 February, 2018

[http://www.gsdr.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/137-Impact-of-
lifting-economic-sanctions-on-poverty-and-growth.pdf](http://www.gsdr.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/137-Impact-of-
lifting-economic-sanctions-on-poverty-and-growth.pdf) Accessed
on 17 February, 2018

<http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/green-movement> Accessed
on 17 February, 2018.

☆☆☆