

Editorial: Danger in Iran

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Neither Tunisia's nor Egypt's revolutions were Islamic as Iranian leaders claim

Where next?" is the question people around the world have been asking following the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. Would it be Yemen, Algeria or somewhere else in the Middle East?

There have been protests in both the above countries, and in Bahrain. But it is not an Arab state that is pushing itself forward as the most prominent follower of Tunisia's and Egypt's lead. It is Iran. Clearly inspired by the uprisings there, anti-government protestors were out in their thousands in Tehran and other Iranian cities on Monday, hoping to achieve similar upheaval.

It is ironic given the apparently enthusiastic welcome for the Egyptian revolution from the Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei and leading government figures who claim the events in Egypt are an Islamic uprising comparable to the Iranian revolution of 1979.

They are wrong. Neither Tunisia's nor Egypt's revolutions were Islamic. They were secular and national. Moreover, in Egypt, the Muslim brotherhood will probably be the weaker as a result of the changes there. It was the only organized opposition to the regime. Now it is going to be just one among many.

The Iranian authorities made the claim for purely domestic purposes. Afraid the contagion would spread to Iran, they had already banned demonstrations in support of the Egyptian uprising. By trying to associate it with their own regime, they hoped to head off any similar popular revolt. It did not work — as Monday's protests showed.

The courage of those who took part in them is remarkable. They knew that the response was likely to be brutal. The mass anti-government demonstrations which followed the disputed presidential elections in June 2009 were met with massive repression. Since then, some 66 protesters have been hanged on varying charges widely seen as trumped up.

What happens now is unpredictable. One of the other reasons the 2009 protests petered out was that they lacked leadership. But the Egyptian and Tunisian uprisings showed that leaders are not necessary. That could swell the protest movement. There is clearly a deep well of public discontent. Claims by the authorities that the protests, which they have tried to pretend were miniscule, were organized by the Americans, British and Israelis have the same ring of absurdity as those by the Egyptian authorities before the fall of Mubarak that the demonstrations there were foreign-sponsored.

Continued repression may keep a lid on the situation in Iran. Or it may have the opposite effect — triggering public anger at the government's response. As in Egypt, people may lose their fears of the regime. They have a strong martyr complex as it is.

But the danger is that this will end badly. There is a hounding for blood on both sides. The demonstrators' chant on Monday was "death to dictators." In Parliament yesterday, the cry from conservative MPs was also for death. They want the opposition leaders Mir Hossein Mousavi and Medhi Karroubi who stood against President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the presidential elections and who were arrested on Monday to be executed.

It does not bode well for Iran's stability. And there has to be real concern that in its bid to hold on to public support, the Iranian government will try to externalize its problems.

