CHAPTER 7

Iran 1998–2008: Insight on the Containment of Risk

Sara E. Davies

Abstract

In the decade from 1998 to 2008, Iran experienced a period of continued political contestation and upheaval. During this period there were a number of political events that challenged the authority of Iranian regime (1999 student protests, Afghanistan and Iraq border conflicts, and the 2005 Presidential election). This chapter explores why two particular events, the 1999 student protests and the post-Iraq post-2005 Presidential election, did not ‘trigger’ a situation where the Iranian state engaged in mass atrocities to (re)assert regime stability. The use of violence to quell political opposition is a rational choice that many regimes engage in, with immediate and resounding success. However, the Iranian regime – despite consistently identified as having a high risk of genocide – has appeared reluctant to publicly sanction police and army to carry out mass atrocities. This chapter contends that the fragmented but hierarchical political system provides a delicate power balance that, for now, provides greater benefit for political and security sector in maintaining the status quo and avoiding bloody confrontation with Iranian citizens.

Keywords


1 Introduction

The Islamic Republic of Iran (Iran) exhibits many features of a country with a high risk of mass atrocities being perpetrated against its citizens, particularly those of minority faith (Christian, Jewish, Sunni and Bahai), ethnicity (Azari and Kurd), and those who express strong political opposition to the Islamic Republic.\(^1\) In the decade from 1998 to 2008, the focus in this chapter, Iran

---

experienced a period of continued political contestation and upheaval. During this period there were a number of political events that challenged the authority of Iranian regime. The most dramatic event during this decade was the university student protests in 1999 – Iran’s most significant and sustained public protests since the Islamic Revolution. Before these protests, and after, there were (sometimes violent) efforts by the conservative establishment within the Republic to curtail the reforms enacted by President Khatami, who was popularly elected in 1997. The 2005 election of Ahmadinejad, an extreme ideological conservative, saw Iran take a further backward step in terms of the rule of law and democratic processes, particularly for women and minority groups. Unemployment and inflation increased during his first term. This internal political instability was potentially further intensified with the geopolitical impact (refugee flows, presence of rebel insurgents and religious/ethnic rivalry) from the United States-led coalition intervention in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003).

This chapter explores why these events, combined with a history of social, economic and political exclusion, have not ‘triggered’ a situation where the Iranian state has engaged in mass atrocities to assert regime stability during two particular events when its authority was threatened: the 1999 student protests and the post-Iraq post-2005 Presidential election. The use of violence to quell political opposition is a rational choice that many regimes engage in, with immediate and resounding success. However, the Iranian regime – despite being identified by one genocide watchlist as having a high risk of

---

2 The 2009 Presidential Election Protests were larger in number, but the focus in this chapter is on 1998–2008.

3 Reformist President Khatami in 1997 returned with the largest majority and highest turnout of any presidential election since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.


