



By: Kian Tajbakhsh

Is Iran internally ready for a post-Islamist order?



Speculation about the end of Iran's Islamic Republic has surged in the wake of Israel's astonishingly effective bombing campaign, which succeeded in degrading and destroying much of Iran's offensive capability in just under two weeks.

Some commentators, like the economist Nouriel Roubini and the Stanford political scientist Abbas Milani, **see** regime change as plausible or imminent.

Others, like the strategist Richard Haass, **argue** that the necessary preconditions for a democratic breakthrough are still absent.

A third group does not advocate regime change at all. While they find aspects of the Islamic Republic objectionable, they largely regard Iran as an aggrieved postcolonial state struggling for autonomy and dignity.

Figures such as the exiled Iranian scholars Djavad Salehi-Isfahani and Esfandiyar Batmanghelidj have expressed **variations** of this view.

Many in this camp reserve their deepest hostility not for Islamist zealots or domestic oppressors but for foreign powers, especially the West.

And they continue to insist – despite the jailing of opposition politicians and the dismantling of civil society – that a viable democratic reform movement is always on the **verge** of breaking through, only to be thwarted by meddling outsiders and a few uncompromising hard-liners. (It is striking that the people making this argument are largely secular expatriate Iranians who would almost certainly be arrested if they expressed themselves freely inside Iran.)

Regime change is far harder than many assume

My view – based on two decades of research and years living in the country (including time **served** in the infamous Evin Prison) – is that

democratizing reform or regime change is far harder than many assume.

The authoritarian system is deeply entrenched, and civil society and opposition groups are much weaker than often imagined.

This power imbalance between state and society is so pronounced that in the short to medium term, only external forces could weaken the regime and create the conditions for a domestically led transition to a different form of rule.

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But a full collapse of the Iranian state is no longer unthinkable, even if it is far from guaranteed.

The Islamic Republic is under immense pressure following the Israeli military campaign and successive waves of protests and economic distress in recent years.

If it were to fall, what happens next would depend less on ideology and more on logistics – namely, how a country of more than 80 million people, spread across a territory larger than France, Spain, and Italy combined, continues to govern itself.

Backbone of a post-Islamist order

In that case, Iran would be more ready for a stable, democratic regime than many may think.

My academic research on Iran's administrative and political institutions and hands-on experience promoting democratic local governance and international cooperation (the work that resulted in my imprisonment) has revealed a robust institutional scaffolding that could serve as the backbone of a post-Islamist order.

This architecture, which links central ministries to elected authorities in more than 1,000 cities and 35,000 villages, matters now more than ever.

In 1999, the regime attempted to calm unrest and improve public services by **creating** an entirely new tier of elected local councils. Nearly 200,000 positions were filled in the first election alone.

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Though intended to legitimize the state, these institutions became spaces of real civic engagement. Citizens ran for office, deliberated over budgets, and began navigating the basics of public accountability.

In my **book** *Creating Local Democracy in Iran*, I documented how Iranians embraced these roles with energy and determination.

Even as the regime gradually stripped away the councils' democratic substance, it never dismantled the system.

This resulted in what I call dual-use institutions: created to serve an authoritarian order, but structurally available to support democratic transition – if given the chance.

Competent civil servants

Crucially, this is not just a story about local-level institutions. Iran's intergovernmental system connects national ministries, provincial administrations, and municipal authorities in a vertically integrated structure.

Competent civil servants are in place at every level. This is what would set Iran apart from other post-authoritarian transitions – most notably Iraq in 2003.

The challenge facing a post-Islamist order

would not be to invent governance, but to reactivate the dormant network of state machinery already embedded in towns, cities, and ministries.



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True, it could be repurposed to serve a weakened but more repressive regime. As we saw in Afghanistan, institutions alone do not determine the character of governance.

But if a government that upholds human rights and democratic norms emerges, then Iran's existing institutional scaffolding could become the foundation for a more liberal and stable political order.

Moreover, there is already a technical **roadmap** for reform. Priorities include modernizing Iran's dysfunctional municipal finance system and empowering councils to make credible, transparent budget decisions.

International institutions, including the United Nations, the World Bank, and global municipal networks, are ready to offer expertise when Iranians invite them.

We should not expect any transition to be smooth, or even democratic. But pessimism must not blind us to the groundwork that has already been laid.

As someone who has seen the promise – and paid the price – of reform, I believe it would be a grave mistake to ignore the country's institutional assets hiding in plain sight.

The world's attention is rightly focused on nuclear risks and regional instability. But when

the moment comes, Iran's democratic future will be built not only by the political elite in the capital's palaces, but also by the people who have kept the country's administrative institutions functioning against all odds.

That could very well mean the difference between chaos and continuity, and it should reframe how we think about Iran's future.

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