

PATRICK GIBBONS

Brutal ayatollahs may have pushed Iranians too far

As Iran's international face at the World Cup, its national soccer team should get the award for the tournament's gutsiest performance. Refusing to sing the national anthem at its opening match against England will bring retribution from a regime trying to quell ongoing protests in which more than 450 people have been killed, including at least 65 children, and tens of thousands arrested.

And the Iranian regime has form. Iranian climber Elnaz Rekabi, who competed at an international event without hijab (the mandated headscarf) in October and received widespread domestic and international applause, saw her family's home recently demolished by authorities.

The anti-regime protests that have enveloped Iran for almost

three months following 22-year-old Mahsa Amini's death after her arrest for not properly wearing hijab inflamed ethnic and regional tensions (Amini was Kurdish) and exposed the regime's internal tensions like never before.

By standing up against Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp that underpins him, Iranians, especially women, have achieved something that has not occurred for the past 40 years – a degree of anti-regime unanimity that transcends economic and social class, and increasingly religious institutions.

Recognising this, the regime's self-preservation instincts have kicked in. In the initial heavy-handed response protesters were denounced as foreign agents and death sentences were handed out

to at least five people, with many more to come and long jail sentences awaiting thousands of others. At the same time, the regime has tried to buy off others by increasing wages for civil servants and increasing subsidies for basic goods.

Many in the regime know that beating, shooting, imprisoning and executing protesters, particularly women, are what the Taliban does, not a country that views itself as one of the great civilisations. So in the past few days the loathed morality police reportedly have been disbanded and the Iranian parliament and judicial authorities are considering relaxing hijab laws.

But even this may not be enough. The widespread anger engulfing Iran has come at a dangerous time. Youth unemployment hovers at about 30 per cent but in all likelihood is significantly higher, and the middle class has seen living standards decimated in the past five years as US and allied sanctions bite.

Combined with an Iranian diaspora living in the West, feeding information back to an educated, IT-savvy and interconnected Iran, people know what is happening outside the country and, more important, the real cost of the regime's actions. Reports and images of the elite's children partying it up in Europe and North America this past northern sum-

mer while their peers were injured and slaughtered back home have further undermined what's left of the regime's legitimacy.

With Iran throwing in its lot with Russia through the provision of drones, "military advisers" and by some reports ballistic missiles to aid the barbaric invasion of Ukraine, its few defenders in the West have been loath to pursue any accommodation. Combined with it frustrating the Biden administration's stated intent of revising the nuclear deal, the regime now faces the prospect of a hardened US position, driven in part by the midterm elections delivering control of the House of Representatives to the Republicans. Consequently, Iran's economic problems are about to get worse.

While Iran sits atop the world's third largest oil and second biggest gas reserves, years of underinvestment because of sanctions along with meeting the energy needs of its 80 million citizens have resulted in Iran dropping out of the top 10 oil-exporting nations. It now receives about a fifth of its regional rival Saudi Arabia's export income, yet with more than twice the population.

More than oil, Iran's other economic potential lies in its extensive resource deposits, especially copper, where it claims to have the fifth largest reserves. This has attracted the interest of Australian miners, including

BHP, for decades. However, the combination of sanctions and Iran's (anti) foreign investment laws has resulted in China becoming the dominant source of investment. Iran is increasingly locked into a future as a subservient supplier of material to the agendas of China and Russia.

A turning point will come when 83-year-old Khamenei dies. Who replaces him as Supreme Leader and the method of transition will determine the fate of the Islamic republic. Whether it's his son, or President Ebrahim Raisi, or a third person such as Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's grandson Hassan, the Revolutionary Guard will be central. Given its willingness to murder Iranians, sponsor international terrorism and cause regional havoc, this does not bode well.

Yet even knowing this, ordinary Iranians, led by women such as Rekabi, have shown extraordinary courage. So too, in its own way, has the national soccer team.

With the exception of sanctions that directly target Iran's leadership and their families, this worries the regime more than anything else.

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