

## Iran's aspirant youth pose challenge to Islamic Republic's rulers

Police action against teenagers reveals regime's struggle to deal with modernising forces



Young Iranians in a shopping mall in Tehran © Getty  
Najmeh Bozorgmehr in Tehran JUNE 17, 2016

When 14-year-old Iranian student Donya spotted on social media that thousands of teenagers were going to celebrate the end of the school year, she jumped in a taxi and headed to the shopping mall where the gathering was taking place.

But after a 45-minute drive through Tehran, she was shocked to find that security forces, armed with tear gas, had arrived to prevent the formation of what they seemed to fear was the beginning of a new “social movement” — a celebration by happy adolescents.

That such a seemingly innocent gathering last week by the youthful revellers set off alarm bells among the Islamic Republic's rulers illustrates the paranoia of some within the regime. It also highlights a challenge it is grappling with: how to cope with the desires of young Iranians who want a lifestyle free of the restrictions imposed by a clergy that deplores celebrations involving opposite sexes.

A widening gap between modernisers and conservatives, the result of an increasingly modern society characterised by highly educated young women, has put the future of the Islamic Republic's ideology at stake.

It is happening as growing numbers of young, city-dwelling Iranians push back against conservative traditions and religious restrictions to embrace a western-style modernity.

“When I reached there the doors of Kourosh [mall] were closed and many [teenagers] were stuck inside,” said Donya, who comes from an upper middle-class family. “As I was wondering why

kids in the streets were being arrested; I started coughing and later realised it was because the police had used tear gas and pepper spray to disperse us.”

Inspired by Turkish soap operas broadcast on satellite television, Donya said she wanted “only to have fun and meet boys” at Kourosh, which is one of Tehran’s newest shopping malls.

Iran’s hardliners consider secular social movements by young men and women a conspiracy encouraged by outside forces — notably the US — to undermine the Islamic society. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran’s supreme leader and ultimate decision maker, warned earlier this month against “vulgarism in cultural issues”.

The security apparatus at times reacts with the type of crackdown that occurred at the mall. Yet the pace of generational change in Tehran and other cities, aided by the wide use of social media and satellite TV, has made suppression increasingly counterproductive.

Indeed, pro-reform politicians insist it is necessary to address the demands of a generation that cares little about who rules Iran, but is filled with social and economic aspirations.

“It is a secular and apolitical movement by a generation which wants to party and be happy without any intention of posing security threats, but is ready to impose its will on the Islamic Republic,” said Mohammad-Ali Abtahi, a former reformist vice-president.

The police action at the mall also highlights differences within the political establishment, with the centrist government of President Hassan Rouhani, showing sympathy towards the teenagers.



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Mohammad-Reza Rostami, deputy minister of sports and youth, defended the Kourosh gathering, saying a dearth of fun events for teenagers had caused depression and isolation among the youth.

“We have to respect our teenagers’ rights,” he said. “And it is us who have to try to understand them.”



Sociologists say as society modernises, political, nationalist, religious and family bonds are being weakened, with the youth suffering from an identity crisis.

“They are neither nationalists nor religious or anything else,” says one. “The new generation has little attachment to the society because authorities who ask kids to behave responsibly do not feel responsible to address their wishes.”

Goli, 14, says her friends “only think of today, not tomorrow” and pursue western ideals, which to them mostly means open relationships between boys and girls.

The widespread use of smartphones means teenagers spend most of their spare time on social media, notably Telegram, a popular messaging app, and Instagram.

They join Telegram groups that have thousands of members across the country and function like online dating websites, while providing platforms for discussing western films.

Almost all of Goli’s classmates listen to Iranian rap music, she says, and gather for “rap battles” in parks or shopping malls in groups of 15 or more.

“It is as if our kids are being brought up in Harlem,” says a mother of one of the teenagers.

And while parents are concerned about their children’s future, they quietly and happily think the kids will take “revenge” on hardliners who suppressed them when they were youths.

“These kids serve this regime right,” says a middle-aged woman as she watches children in a park. “When they [rulers] sow suppression, they should expect to reap rebellion.”