

Iran protests and the ghost of a revolution past

By Siavash Saffari

Published Jan 13, 2026 9:40 am KST Updated Jan 13, 2026 11:34 am KST

The historic plummet of the local rial currency in late December sparked protests in Iran that have spread like wildfire, challenging the state in its entirety. The accumulation over many years of variegated social, political and economic grievances has generated mass discontent with the country's rulers.

All this comes as Iran approaches the anniversary of the 1979 revolution. Jan. 16 marks 47 years to the day when millions-strong protests forced the country's last king, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, to abandon the throne and flee to Egypt. A fortnight later, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini returned to Iran following a 15-year exile, welcomed by millions of people.

Before his return, the elderly clergyman, whose obstinate rejection of the monarchy had earned him international recognition and a large following at home, had shown little interest in taking political power. His role would be limited to "spiritual guidance" in an Islamic republic "founded on independence and freedom" — or so he told reporters who visited him in the Parisian suburb where he spent his final months of exile. The Ayatollah's assurances that his proposed polity would uphold human rights and end inequality and injustice consolidated his position as a unifying figure among the diverse forces who opposed the king.



Siavash Saffari

I am a child of the revolution. The Iran to which I was born in the early 1980s was still ablaze with revolutionary fervor, though the unity between revolutionaries of different stripes had begun to fizzle out. The Ayatollah now sat at the helm of power as the supreme leader of the Islamic Republic. Having already quashed the royalists, the new state was at work to consolidate power by eliminating rivals, mainly those on the political left. During the 1980s, as an eight-year war that began with Iraq's invasion of Iran waged on, a specter of fear and fragmentation cast its shadow on the lives of many Iranians. While the Ayatollah's supporters revered him as an uncompromising maverick, others saw in him the face of a despot.

My family milieu was a tapestry of different identities and persuasions; a miniature of Iranian society at the time. My parents came from different economic and cultural backgrounds. But when a spirit of defiance swept Iran in the late 1970s, both embraced it. The revolution brought them together. The post-revolution disenchantment and fragmentation drove them apart.

In our extended family there were those who were religious and those who were secular; some were pro-monarchy, some pro-Islamic Republic, and some saw little difference between the diamond-crowned monarch and the black-turbaned cleric.

Occasionally, ideological differences caused friction; a heated argument here, a passive-aggressive comment there. For the most part, however, family members looked past these differences. My paternal grandmother, a deeply religious woman, was uncomfortable with one of her sons being an unapologetic atheist — but that had no bearing on her love for him. Her other son had been executed right around the time I was born; he had participated in the revolution but had turned against the ensuing clerical order. My grandparents resented the Ayatollah for the trauma that had befallen the family, but on visits to the homes of relatives, I noticed that some of them had framed pictures of him on the wall.

Political allegiances can be curiously mercurial. The framed pictures of the Ayatollah have long since disappeared from the homes of relatives who once saw the man as something of a saint. Some old revolutionaries look back at their past with bitter regret. Others remain faithful to their ideals, even as they oppose the post-revolutionary state. In family gatherings, politics still make for clamorous exchanges and snarky comments. Somehow, conversations always circle back to the revolution.

Most of those protesting today were born well after the revolution. They come from different backgrounds and their visions for the future of their country may not be entirely compatible. What brings them together is a shared sense of frustration with a repressive state that has proven too corrupt and incompetent to mitigate the heavy toll that decades of U.S.-imposed sanctions have taken on Iran's economy. Some young protesters blame the revolutionary generation for the crises their country now suffers. But in their resolve to write their own destiny, they evoke the same spirit of defiance that moved the 1979 revolutionaries.

As is always the case, amidst the volatility, there are those waiting in the wings to fish in troubled waters. President Donald Trump, who oversaw a June 2025 U.S.-Israeli attack on Iran that killed over 1,000 Iranians, has threatened intervention on behalf of protesters. His accomplice, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has been indicted by the International Criminal Court for war crimes against Palestinians, says he stands in solidarity with Iranians in their struggle for "freedom, liberty and justice." Israel's intelligence agency Mossad, on its Persian-language account on X (formerly Twitter), boasts that its agents are "on the streets" of Iran alongside protesters.

A segment of the Iranian opposition has aligned itself closely with the U.S. and Israel. The face of this cabal is the son of the last king — a political lightweight whose newfound popularity is owed partly to an Israeli-funded public relations campaign and manufactured nostalgia for the monarchy pushed by diasporic satellite TV and internet channels. Some Iranians have come to see the U.S.-based prince as a potential alternative to their clerical rulers; others see him as a foreign stooge or a surrogate for return to royal despotism.

To say that Iran is in urgent need of change is to state the obvious. Real change, however, can only come from inside, led by the people in their diverse voices and lived experiences. No matter the outcome, one thing is clear: The spirit of defiance is alive in Iran, and it will haunt any ruler — crowned, turbaned or otherwise — who stands in the way of the people and their legitimate desires for dignity and freedom.

Siavash Saffari is a professor in the Department of Asian Languages and Civilizations at Seoul National University.

