

of narrow-mindedness. Meanwhile, a desirable future horizon can be built by recognizing diversity and protest, but national construction happens with social cohesion, acceptance of the other, and strengthening non-violent legal capacities. If we restore protest to its proper place, give it a worthy response, facilitate dialogue, and accept our own mistakes, problems will lessen. The central signifier of Iranian society is justice, and justice includes accepting and correcting mistakes. One of the necessities of our society, which has also lost many opportunities, is recognizing change and reform. If change and reform are not recognized in time, they turn into accumulated anger.

**So you believe the origin of the violence is this very weakness?**  
Yes, but this ground is not empty, and foreigners also ride on this violence. Therefore, in such conditions, I do not rule out foreign factors.

**What results does the increase in violence have for society?**  
Security is what every developing society is missing, and development itself is the tool for charting the future; especially for Iranian society, where every citizen sees that it has all the capabilities for development, but their own situation is not good. A society that is hungry, has livelihood problems and feels humiliation, and whose future is not bright, sees that this situation is not worthy of it, and that there have been better situations both in its own past and in comparison with other countries. I think we must contemplate this issue nationally, and in this national contemplation, there is no difference between reformist, principalist, nationalist, re-

ligious, and those who desire change. I see all of them. In the reform period, which entered the arena with the slogan of civil society and recognizing the other, inviting dialogue, and a sense of citizens' effectiveness, it leads to economic success. Because it can control many threats internally, regionally, and globally. So, by recognizing change, things can be done.

**So you can build economic achievements from social and political phe-**

**nomena?**  
Yes, in any situation, by prioritizing solving people's problems, things can be done. If we hear each other's voices and facilitate dialogue, even in this damaged society where many young people are anguished, worried, and harmed, when we accept all this, instead of saying 'let come what may,' these damages, weaknesses, shortages, destructions, and the loss of human, material, and spiritual capital must be seen, and we must strive to get out

of this situation. What I understand is that by recognizing protest and difficult conditions, a clear horizon can be drawn for society, and we can move towards it.

**Considering the current situation, what is the solution and what should be done?**  
When the answer to 'what should be done' becomes very difficult, we must think about 'what should not be done.' From a communication perspective, in

a dialogic space among elites, experts, civil institutions, and citizens, issues become clearer. The worst situation is the polarization of the public sphere and society. In a polarized space, everyone only seeks to gather evidence and documentation for their own interpretation and decision, rather than engaging in analysis. As social psychologists say, a 'crowd mentality' forms where emotion, imitation, and suggestion are prominent, and a reduction in rationality and degradation of analytical faculties occur. In these conditions, no words are heard. Sometimes this phenomenon can be seen in cyberspace; there are two sides that lead to one side, like an echo chamber where only the reflection of one's own words is heard and the other's words are eliminated. Our society needs to speak and be heard. The more we move away from a bipolar atmosphere by creating dialogic arenas and intermediary institutions for two-sided and comprehensive reasoning, the better the media can also do their job.

**What role do elites have in shaping a space for dialogue in this regard?**  
The ground for elites to speak must be prepared in society. In a bipolar space, 'words' are hard to hear. Some elites are disillusioned, and some see the future as so ambiguous that their words are not heard correctly and become costly for them. Providing arenas for dialogue and analytical, rational examination where they can articulate the share of every mistake and wrong approach is essential. In my opinion, it is better for elites to enter the arena and speak.

*The interview first appeared in Persian on IRNA.*



Residents stand amid charred ruins and rubble as smoke lingers over Rasht's bazaar following the January 8-9, 2026 riots in Iran. ● IRNA

# Understanding drivers of Iranian protests

By Mojtaba Lashkarbolouki  
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**ANALYSIS**

It is evident that the country's security, judicial, and law enforcement institutions will provide senior state officials with various reports on why the situation has escalated into protests. I recently had the opportunity to speak with several protesters (with those expressing dissent, not rioters or vandals). Some were first-time protesters, while others had protested before. Here is the essence of those conversations. Why do people protest? For five primary reasons.

**1) A Lack of horizon**  
In the early 2010s, a former minister on a study trip to China (around 15 years ago) remarked that the Chinese citizens he saw lived in miserable conditions. Their standard of living and healthcare was incomparable to Iran's at the time. Yet, they were remarkably hopeful because they witnessed their government periodically demolishing old buildings block by block and constructing new ones to hand over. People lived in hardship but had a clear vision. They told themselves, 'Not this month, but next month; not this year, but next year, our turn will finally come.' The protesters I spoke with have no clear picture of the future. (This is a crisis of collective national lack of vision.) The current sensitive juncture has resulted in us perpetually navigating one crisis only to prepare for the next – a policy of makeshift, short-term solutions.

**2) Lack of representation**  
A significant portion of the populace feels they lack any real or effective representative within the power structure. They do not know who effectively pursues their interests, concerns, and priorities within the establishment to see them through to a result.

**3) Lack of channels**  
Globally, political parties, trade unions, and civil society organizations serve as arenas for consolidating opinions, dialogue, and negotiation between the people and the government. In Iran, we lack straightforward, result-oriented channels for conveying opinions. To simply say 'let the people voice their concerns' raises the question: precisely how, and to whom? Suppose someone is critical of internet filtering policies; where exactly should they turn? A critic without a channel becomes a protester.

**4) Perception of parallel worlds**  
Protesters say that over the past decade, they consume less meat (according to statistics, red meat consumption has fallen to about one-third of levels ten years ago), travel less, and take more nerve pills, while respected officials speak of progress, growth, and development. It is as if we inhabit parallel worlds.

**5) Choosing the 'lesser evil' over 'much better'**  
Over the years, the public has repeat-

edly been urged to choose the 'lesser evil' option to prevent matters from deteriorating drastically. However, there are those (outside the establishment) who promise a 'much better' alternative (whether true or false). Today's protesters are the same people who have grown weary of the 'lesser evil' and have pinned their hopes on the 'much better' option.

A Simplified formula:  
Dissatisfaction (Reasons 1 & 5) + Despair (Reasons 2, 3 & 4) = Unrest and Unorganized Protests.

It is crucial to distinguish between unorganized protests and organized riots. Two Notable Observations from these Dialogues:

**1) Moving beyond the four traditional authorities**  
There was a time in this land when four primary intellectual and political authorities existed: Marja' (sources of emulation) and clerics, parents, intellectuals, and prominent political figures. The group of protesters I encountered have

moved beyond all these. Perhaps we are entering a society without reference points. I do not know. I only know that traditional authorities have long been set aside by society, and this, alongside an atomized society lacking organization, becomes even more concerning. Why? Because even if the state wished to negotiate with the protesters, with whom precisely and how?

**2) 50-year chasm**  
The heads of the three branches of government, the Chairman of the Expediency Discernment Council, and the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council are all in their seventies and eighties. Meanwhile, a significant portion of the protesters have not yet completed their second decade of life. This 50-year age gap makes dialogue difficult. Interaction between senior managers belonging to the top 7% of the age pyramid (over 65) and the 93% of society under 65 is not straightforward. A strategic question: These protesters (not the vandals) are the very people from the streets, the bazaars, schools, and offices. They are the nurses who sacrificed themselves during the COVID pandemic. They are the students and athletes who won gold medals for Iran in academic Olympiads and the Olympic Games. I believe that if called upon, these same protesters would stand shoulder to shoulder with military and law enforcement forces in defending this land's security against rioters, vandals, and mercenaries. But if the five reasons above persist, we may, through mere rhetoric, judicial and law enforcement action alone, and media restrictions, manage to dampen the visible flames. Yet, what does one do with the smoldering embers beneath the ashes?



People in Iran's northern city of Gorgan, Iran, rally on January 12, 2026, to condemn recent unrest on January 8-9, 2026. ● IRNA

*The interview first appeared in Persian on IRNA.*



Astriking generational divide exists, with elderly government leaders facing protests led by young people. This age gap hinders dialogue and highlights the need to understand the protesters' underlying grievances, not just suppress their actions.