



REVIEW ARTICLE

IRANIAN NUCLEAR PROGRAMME AND SOCIO-POLITICAL TRANSITIONS

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ABSTRACT

The civilian nuclear enrichment specifically focuses on economic development and technological advancement of the country. The paper raises a central question on the link between the nuclear programme and socio-political transitions in Iran. People of Iran had a significant historical role in determining the socio-political structures of the country. For instance, Islamic revolution of 1979 was resultant in establishing Islam-centric political and social system in the country. This such change would not be a longer solution to protect the interest of the citizens since the political mobility has been set in the very early period after the revolution. Mobilities such as these and subsequent changes have been empowered by the different domestic and external political factors. A new policy variable that was a nuclear programme put forward by the Islamic Iran in 1981 and got support from all the factions irrespective of their difference, and they held on no ambiguity on states' affairs. New factions' influence escalated in Iranian politics, notably since the last phase of the 1980s, which laid divisions in the approach of the people towards the nuclear enrichment. Then, it was not only the subject of international players but also the important parameter of domestic political factions in Iran. The article examines the changes in the socio-political spectrums of Iran from the standpoint of the development of the nuclear programme and confrontations. It analyses the dynamic political mobilisations and the impact of the nuclear deal (P5+1) on the socioeconomic profile of the country.

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INTRODUCTION

Iranian nuclear programme is an important issue, the central part of discourse, negotiation and strategic business of international players. Nuclear enrichment and subsequent confrontations especially since the Islamic revolution developed with the Cold War politics. U.S is a major among countries cooperated with the imperial Iran to develop nuclear energy, and it had certain interests that were: to promote President Eisenhower's 'Atoms for Peace Programme and build Iran as a challengeable country in the Middle East to resist the Soviet Union. Also, Iran itself since the imperial period had the desire to become a nuclear power and concluded nuclear energy agreements with major European countries. In a post-Islamic revolution, certain developments occurred in uranium enrichment programme, Iran suspended itself the nuclear-enabled facilities built by the imperial regime. The supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khomeini declared that Islamic Iran would not go ahead with nuclear developments certainly it was against the principle of Islam. Also, America itself suspended nuclear collaboration when Islamic government of Iran opted an isolation policy towards the West.

The common people of Iran themselves made significant socio-political changes in the country by the Islamic revolution of 1979. All the segments of the people were the part of the revolution to dethrone Shah of Reza. It does not mean Iranian society was not ideologically fragmented and they united irrespective of their ideological differences to defend the common threat factor. After the success of the revolution, political factions began to interfere in the in the domestic and external affairs of the country. The new factions in Iran as pro-moderates and reformists have a distinct outlook from the traditional conservatives. The latter are overwhelmed the power structure of the country. All factions in Iran put forward different perceptions in the important affairs of the state, and it would be a grand overarching political strategy. Likewise, the nuclear programme is a policy variable to get predominance in the domestic politics. No doubt, factional confrontations in the nuclear programme encouraged the Western intrusion to Iran's internal affairs, and U.S violated the Algiers Accord of 1981¹. The rest of the article would discuss the Iranian nuclear developments and multi-pronged socio-

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¹Algiers Agreement was ratified after the settlement of 444-day hostage crisis between U.S and Iran and it was a non-Intervention arrangement in Iranian Affairs. U.S pledged that it would not intervene, directly or indirectly, politically or militarily, in Iran's internal affairs (www.parstimes.com)

political transitions in the country. The first part of the paper discusses the development of the nuclear programme and different perceptions of factional spectrums of Iran and second part analyses the impact of the nuclear programme in the domestic politics of the country and also the socio-political implications of the P5+1 negotiations.

Paradigm shift in the domestic perceptions on nuclear policy

In 1981, the Islamic government of Iran itself decided to resume the enrichment of uranium focused on protection of civil and defence interests of the nation. The sense of insecurity was the key motive behind such a decision which was escalated by the attack of Iraq in 1980-88. The war made an acute challenge in the defence system of the nation, and it brought severe hazards. Secondly, Iranians were humiliated and victimised people by the subjection of outsiders since the ancient period. Thus, Iranian leadership argue that they wanted to relieve nation from the burden of hundred years of dishonour. Thirdly, Iran had to maintain the balance of power towards U.S and Israel who makes grave security threat since 1979. Fourthly, common people of Iran had ambitious their country to be a regional nuclear power and wanted a separate state identity in the Arab world. Fifthly, conservatives and reformists had similar interest irrespective of their ideological differences that were the security of the nation. Ayatollah Ali Khomeini, the first supreme leader, considered the nuclear warheads as a strategy for regime survival and export of Islamic revolution. The defence-oriented nuclear procurement was the specific strategic security policy option of the country since the imperial period that continued by the Islamic Iran. The revolutionary administration had a scientific temper and unambiguous political outlook on nuclear enrichment programme.

Initially, revolutionary Iran had no intention to build indigenous nuclear plants, and it likely to continue the outsourced nuclear developments. Since 1979 all its nuclear energy partners have suspended consecutively civil nuclear partnership with Iran due to the pressure from the U.S. France initially declined the agreement and Shah's regime already paid one billion to Erodif, a French company. Germany had not completed Bushehr Power Plant, and later U.K and Argentina also ceased their agreements with Iran to protect the interest of America and Israel. This such approach from the nuclear energy partners forced Iran to revive its Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) and supreme leader assigned the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps² (IRGC) to mobilise the multifaceted operations to achieve nuclear-enabled weapons. IRGC founded the 'Unit for Special Nuclear Research in the IRGC's central research complex Parliament. Hashemi Rafsanjani, speaker of Majlis and also a pro-moderate, summoned previous AEOI's experts and assigned them to resume activities at the nuclear agency. He promoted nuclear deterrents of the nation since his pre-presidential period, and he said that "the chemical weapons as poor man's deterrents"³. It indicates that irrespective of ideological differences all the factions in Iran wanted the security, stability and survival of the nation through the nuclear deterrents.

The traditional conservatives widely supported the regime and a multitasks defence system possible only through the development of atomic bombs. Khomeini's perception also promulgated by the new supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and he told that "the nuclear program has come to embody the revolution's core themes: the struggle for independence, the injustice of foreign powers, the necessity of self-sufficiency and Islam's high esteem for the sciences"⁴. It reveals nuclear energy as well as atomic warheads such policy emerged from the sense of insecurity, a counter-defence against U.S and Israel, technological advancement of the country. All sects of Iranian people thought that these such objectives would possible only through the nuclear development and advanced technology.

Since the mid of the 1980s, the political factions such as reformists, fundamentalists, Green Movement, Mujahedin-e-Khalq Organization (MKO) and National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) confronted each other on the nuclear programme of the country. In post-Iran-Iraq war period, Rafsanjani government was busy with the reconstruction of the uncertain economy and not interested in hard debates on the nuclear issue. He likely resumes the diplomatic relation with U.S that intensified controversy between the conservatives and reformists in the defence and security policies of the country. The conservatives insisted on continuing the nuclear proliferation with the military dimensions that would be the sovereign right of the country; nobody could challenge the aspiration of Iranian people. NRCI's, an inclusive and pluralistic opposition wing, perception is different from others, and its ultimate aim is to dismantle the Islamic-based rule and install a secular administrative system in Iran. NRCI supposed to use the nuclear proliferation as a political tool to harm the government of reformist as well as conservative. NRCI declared the secret information about the nuclear programme in 2002, and it acts as a link with U.S that makes challenge to carry out even the civil uranium enrichment.

Reformists' perspective is, of course, different from others and their attitude on the nuclear programme changed well when they entered into power in 1989. Their prime foreign policy objective was to resume the diplomatic ties with West especially U.S and settle the nuclear issue with America and conservatives. Iranian links with terrorism and its uranium enrichment are the major obstructions to make a rapprochement with U.S. They had to avoid the publicise the nuclear activities and debated with the fundamentalists to reach a consensus on the nuclear programme. In response to the West's concerns, reformist leaders declared that Iran had no nuclear-capable warheads and no plan to make the atomic bomb in future. It continued civilian nuclear energy activities without the intention of military dimensions. Mohammed Khatami, the then president of Iran, said in an interview with CNN Television in New York in 1998, "we are not a nuclear power and do not intend to become one. We have accepted International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards, and that agency routinely inspects our facilities"⁵. The reformist

²In 1983, the IRGC founded the Unit for Special Nuclear Research in the IRGC's central research complex. This special and clandestine center was located in the northern quarters of Tehran, near Vanak Square, and employed top nuclear experts from various universities

³ Speech by Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Tehran Domestic Service, 19.35 GMT, October 6, 1988, Translation in FBIS-NES, October 7, 1988, p. 2.

⁴Karim Sadjadpour, The Supreme Leader, the Iran Primer, United States Institute of Peace
www.iranprimer.usip.org.

⁵Mohammad Khatami, President of Iran, interview by British-Iranian journalist-CNN Christiane Amanpour. 1998. *Transcript of interview with Iranian President Mohammad Khatami* (January 07).

government also permitted IAEA agency for regular inspections in the nuclear plants. It concerned about the security interest of the nation and focused on the friendly relations with US and Israel in place of nuclear deterrents. They believed security, and economic developments in the country could secure by the diplomatic ways and encouraged Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) to establish bilateral relations with standoffish nations. Reformist was ready to reach a compromise with U.S, reveal the work in progress of nuclear activities, accept the guidance of NPT and comply with the IAEA agency. The reformist government signed the Paris Agreement with EU+3 (France, Germany and UK) countries in 2004 and Iran voluntarily suspended the Production of Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU) likely to be ensured the transparency in nuclear activities. As a result, IAEA Board governors not referred nuclear programme to the UNSC despite the U.S pressure. It informed the international community Iran concurred with the agency would not convert processed uranium into the atomic weapons. However, U.S and Israel asserted that Iranian nuclear programme must be halted otherwise that would lead the production of weapons-grade uranium. Iran reacted as it was only for the civilian requirements and question of transparency is substantiated by the partnership with other countries. However, the stiffness of U.S and Israel not disappeared well and argued to declare unidentified nuclear plants in Iran.

Escalation of nuclear discourse and socio-political transitions

In 2005, Ahmadinejad, President of Iran, opened the secrecy of uranium enrichment and declared country would continue the weapon-graded nuclear process. In 2006, Iran announced that enriched uranium about 3.5 percent produced at Natanz Plant for the first time and activated hexafluoride at Isfahan plant⁶. Consequently, EU+3 halted negotiations with Iran and suspended Paris Agreement. Since Iranian nuclear programme became the epicentre of confrontations between the internal factions. Externally, it was not only a larger problem of America and Israel but Arab countries and international community also.

Pre-and during Ahmadinejad's period, perspectives of Iranian nuclear procurements were different, and he challenged West his country was at the verge of making the nuclear bombs. He used the 'nuclear deterrents' as a policy option to dominate in the domestic politics and defended the country at the regional and global arenas. His presidency made many advancements in the nuclear proliferation consequently heightened the confrontation with the reformists as well as U.S. His opponent reformists forced him to avoid unwise public comments and bring transparency in the nuclear policy. They also forced the government to follow the NPT and recognise the P5+1 negotiations since 2006. In fact, no development occurred in the negotiation during the period of Nejad, and he made hardcore political steps inside the country against the reformists and the West. Nuclear issue and subsequent sanctions made significant transitions in the Iranian societies and its domestic politics widely embodied by the nuclear policy. All political and religious factions predominantly pursued the different approach on state's nuclear policy.

The supreme authority and fundamentalists are not ready to change and even reach a consensus with the reformists as well as the P5+1 negotiators. Uranium enrichment was a stumbling block policy option in the fundamentalist circle to prevent relation with the West especially U.S. Since 1979, Iranians learned themselves to survive well over the economic and political strikes from outside the country. All governments of Iran, except Ahmadinejad, succeeded to make Iran as an independent and self-reliant nation, but he failed due to the acute sanctions and his oblivious position in the external affairs. "The change in Iran's domestic scene was forcefully manifested in June 2009 when President Ahmadinejad was re-elected in a *de facto coup d'état* backed by the Revolutionary Guards Corps"⁷. It indicates that reaction of the certain people who were not legitimately satisfied on election outcome and they made political cracks across the country. It questioned the authority to rethink about the popular election verdict well. The conservatives promoted traditional based economic structure, and they confronted with the reformist's policy of liberalisation and privatisation. Iran disconnected largely from the world market and out of the influence of globalisation more than two decades. The Iranian economy is overwhelmed by the combination of domestic and foreign economy, and they could overcome the impact of sanctions at a large scale. However, the sanctions had massively cut down the social, economic and political links to Iran with rest of the world.

The anxiety of the conservative on the nuclear deal (P5+1) is that it would make socioeconomic and political shifts in Iranian societies. They perceived the nuclear deal would open the western companies to resume and increase their investments in Iran. It would restructure the market system that would make an impact on the traditional livelihood and bazaar market system of Iran. In the social field, the spread of western products and interference of outside people would break the traditional lifestyle and Shia-Islamic cultural belt of Iran. It makes challenges to the fundamentalists' perception of separate national identity for Iran in the region. The conservatives exploited the nuclear issue as a blockade to prevent the westernisation in the socioeconomic and political realms of the country. They wanted Iran to be self-reliant less western influence, regional pre-emptive nuclear power country in West Asia.

The power structure of Iran challenged the reformist government to reach a consensus on the nuclear deal with negotiators in early periods. The reformist's Presidencies could not overwhelm the SNSC decisions. Therefore, the nature of nuclear policy had not changed when Hassan Rouhani government reached a consensus with the nuclear deal negotiators in 2015. The position of principlist especially the supreme leader is not conditionally concurred with Rouhani government to move with P5+1, and their perception is that must be required a comprehensive framework to settle the rest of the issues between U.S and Iran. The conservatives' acceptance of nuclear negotiation in the respective of escalation of massive unemployment, inflation and political setbacks in the country. Conservatives realised that Iran had no other alternative option to get relief from the broad belt of economic sanctions and isolation made by U.S and UN.

⁶ Arms Control Association: www.armscontrol.org/factsheet/Timeline-of-Nuclear-Diplomacy-With-Iran

⁷ Janne Bjerre Christensen Strained Alliances Iran's Troubled Relations To Afghanistan And Pakistan, Report of DIIS-Danish Institute for International Studies, P.06. 2011.

The conservatives' postures indicate that Iran does not have an immediate plan to establish a strategic relationship with U.S and instead, they are looking for either a US free West policy or policy without U.S. Since the nuclear deal Iran began to resume strategic and bilateral relations with the others especially East Asian countries. By the nuclear deal, America could only remove the nuclear threat from Iran, and it regionally benefited to Israel. The future of nuclear deal is not only accordingly follow the guidelines of JCPOA⁸ but also the stance of Iran and U.S especially American Middle East policy. U.S had pressure from many countries and questioned the harsh isolation policy against Iran in UN and other platforms. They demanded to find a solution for Iranian nuclear issue and they had to maintain balance in the geopolitical profile of the region. International community cooperated much to achieve the desired goal of U.S in the sanctions and isolation policies. In post-nuclear deal context, the question is that whether the original goal of U.S over Iran accomplished. America had an implicit and explicit policy of regime change since 1979. Importantly, sustain of nuclear deal depends upon the perception of next America president, and he had a different stance. The deal is not in a full-fledged manner, and it has not addressed the whole problems between U.S and Iran. Moreover, negotiators could not frame a satisfactory agreement in the deal for the three parties U.S, Israel and Iran. The success of nuclear deal has no more relevant to discuss until both sides implemented the provisions in the accord. However, during the nuclear programme and confrontations made significant changes in the Iranian societies. The present position of the nuclear deal also raised new prospects as well as challenges for the Iranian people to a large extent.

Conclusion

The nuclear programme was originally the internal policy of Iran and no question of conflict in the early period of revolutionary government between the factions. The outside world especially America was not conscious about the nuclear enrichment of Iran and in place, it was concentrated on proving Tehran's link with the terrorism and proxy war groups. Since the reformist came to power, the nuclear proliferation became the most controversial policy of national politics of Iran especially Khatami's period. The reformists called for peaceful negotiations with West on the nuclear issue and conservatives never recognised their rapprochement. Since 1979, conservative governments shaped the Iranian nuclear policy around eighteen years and could not evidently claim had finished nuclear warheads except the vociferous arguments. On the other hand, reformist officially or not made many efforts around sixteen years to bring consensus among conservatives and U.S. In fact, Iranian political factions confronted each other, and they mobilised the people about the pros and cons of the nuclear programme. Gallup survey (www.gallup.com) indicates that 68 percent people wanted Iran to be a nuclear power. In fact, the nuclear programme is a dynamic subject that changed the political and social profiles of Iran well since the 1990s. It often brought shifts in the nation's approach from confrontation to conciliation and vice versa with the West.

⁸On July 14, 2015, the P5+1 (China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States), the European Union (EU), and Iran reached a Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) to ensure that Iran's nuclear program will be exclusively peaceful. October 18, 2015 marked Adoption Day of the JCPOA, the date on which the JCPOA came into effect and participants began taking steps necessary to implement their JCPOA commitments. U.S Department of State (www.state.gov)

The nuclear programme and subsequent sanctions affected the daily life of entire people of Iran and they could be able to react towards the posture of the various factions in the country. People elected the different political factions with the aim of bringing significant changes in the domestic and external policies of the country. They also allowed consecutive term for the same political faction to be continued in power. No people in the world like Iranians, who significantly mobilised by the internal and external policies of state affairs.

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