

AJISS-Commentary

The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies

IIPS

Institute for International
Policy Studies

JIIA

The Japan Institute of
International Affairs
(Secretariat)

RIPS

Research Institute for
Peace and Security

Editor:

Akio Watanabe

Editorial Board:

Masashi Nishihara
Naoko Saiki
Taizo Yakushiji

Online Publisher:

Yoshiji Nogami
President, JIIA

No.77. 14 October 2009

JAPAN'S NUCLEAR DIPLOMACY SHOULD TAKE A CLEARER STAND AGAINST IRAN

Ryoji Tateyama

Confusion in Iran seems to have abated somewhat now that more than three months have passed since Iran's presidential election. Yet three decades after the Iranian revolution, the Islamic regime appears to be suffering institutional fatigue.

The views expressed in this piece are the author's own and should not be attributed to The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies.

The most remarkable change in post-revolutionary Iranian society is the improvement of educational levels. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the literacy rate in the country improved from 47% in 1976 before the revolution to 85% in 2006. In particular, the female literacy rate more than doubled during the period, from 35% to 80%. The young Iranian woman named Neda, who was shot dead during a reformist demonstration after the presidential election and became the symbol of Iranian protesters after the video of her death circulated around the world, must have belonged to the new generation that is the product of the improved educational levels.


This new generation is expressing fundamental doubts about the existing revolutionary regime. The existing regime has suppressed criticism and discontent by force for now, but the demand for reform will continue to shake the foundations of the Islamic regime. Furthermore, even within the conservative establishment, a rift is widening between Islamic jurists led by Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamenei, and radical conservatives represented by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

The most common practice that a ruling establishment employs to unite its people in a time of division is exaggerating an "external enemy." Iran has plenty of external enemies. The focus will revolve around the country's nuclear development. Iran is accelerating its nuclear development program, insisting that it is designed for peaceful purposes and not for developing nuclear weapons.

US President Barack Obama says the United States is looking for opportunities to start dialogue with Iran. However, no dialogue has taken place between the two countries since they severed diplomatic ties three decades ago. A September deadline has passed for Obama's call for dialogue. Even if Iran responds to the US' call for dialogue, Obama stated earlier that he would review his dialogue policy toward Iran by year's end. Pressed for time, the US and major European countries are considering tightening UN sanctions against the country, but whether Russia and China will support the move is unknown. Israel is abiding by Obama's time frame, but it has not abandoned the option of military attacks.

Iran's nuclear issue will come to a head toward the end of the year. This has an important bearing on Japan too, for Ambassador Yukiya Amano of Japan will succeed Mohamed ElBaradei as the next Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on December 1, 2009. IAEA's inspections and reports have a decisive impact on the international community's handling of Iran's nuclear problem, especially that of the UN Security Council. ElBaradei has been torn between the demand for maintaining the neutrality of the IAEA as an international organization and the pressure from the US and other countries calling for tougher policies toward Iran. With the increasing call for tightening UN sanctions, the pressure on Amano will also intensify.

Of course, the stance of the Japanese government and that of Amano as the IAEA Director General in waiting are not identical. However, the Japanese government, which had strongly backed Amano's election to the position, can no longer stand on the sidelines on Iran's nuclear problem. Although Japan has maintained good relations with Iran, it will be required to take a harsher stance on Iran's suspected nuclear weapons program. North Korea must also be carefully watching international moves surrounding Iran's nuclear problem.

As the sole country to have suffered nuclear attacks, Japan has continuously advocated the abolition of nuclear weapons and regarded nuclear nonproliferation as one of its most important foreign policy agenda items. Japanese nuclear diplomacy has remained an ideal in a way. Taking advantage of Amano's election to IAEA Director General, the Japanese government must exercise practical leadership in real international politics at a time when Iran's nuclear problem is becoming a growing concern for the international community. 

Ryoji Tateyama is Professor of International Relations at the National Defense Academy of Japan. He specializes in contemporary Middle East politics.