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Tehran Events and Tiananmen Analogies

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With so many references to Tiananmen showing up in the news, we wanted to take a quick break from our time away to recommend a couple of the best uses of 1989 analogies (if we weren’t on hiatus, we’d also look at some of the worst, and there have been some pretty bad ones). One powerful rumination on the relevance of China’s 1989 for thinking about Iran’s 2009 is by Andrew Leonard of the "How the World Works" blog at Salon.com:

He begins as follows:

“In the spring of 1989, the fax machine was China’s Twitter — the miracle technology connecting Chinese democracy activists with each other and the outside world. In Berkeley, Calif., the apartment of one Chinese expat student who owned a fax became a 24/7 information clearinghouse. Documents produced by students camping out on the square would emerge magically from the machine in all their subversive glory”...

Make the jump to read all of his “Tiananmen’s Bloody Lessons for Tehran,” which went up on Friday and has provoked some interesting comments.

Also noteworthy, from early in the Iran crisis, was a post by Sam Crane at his “Useless Tree” site called "Tehran and Tiananmen."

Posted on June 16, it begins:

“Watching the extraordinary political events unfold in Iran, I am reminded of the massive protests that swept across China twenty years ago. Here are a couple of comparative ideas:

1) Protests of this sort start out spontaneously, in response to some unexpected political event (election fraud in Iran, Hu Yaobang’s death in China). But they create a self-reinforcing momentum, driven by the regime’s response to popular mobilization. In China, an editorial, reportedly written under the supervision of Deng Xiaoping, was published on April 26th that harshly (in PRC political terms) criticized the student demonstrators. This sparked the massive march of April 27th, which propelled the movement forward.

Are we at that moment in Iran? Whether yesterday’s big march develops into a more sustained political movement will depend, in large part, on how the regime proceeds. In China, as the government hardened its position and attempted to isolate and repress the movement, the students came to focus upon those actions as the rationale for protest. It could be that leaders in Iran have learned from that experience. Although there has been some early violent repression, the announcement that a recount will be undertaken could diffuse the situation. It creates a moment when protest leaders will have to reconsider their strategy. Should they stay in the streets (as more radical dissidents might prefer), or should they wait and see what compromises might be possible (as more moderate opponents might desire). Harsher government repression can unite radical and moderate dissident groups. If the regime is smart, it will avoid such repression. But hardliners in the government will want to heighten the crack-down. It is a critical moment right now...

2) Sustaining a movement of this sort requires a split within the regime. We like to think of popular struggles as being driven primarily from the bottom up, from the people in the streets. The popular facet is important. But just as important are the political dynamics within the regime itself. In China, as the protests of 1989 unfolded, a split emerged within the Communist Party, with Zhao Ziyang calling for a more compromising approach, and
Deng Xiaoping and Li Peng taking a sterner, hard line position. That split limited the state's response and gave the movement political space within which to operate.

Speculation about the role and influence of Ayatullah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani raise the possibility of a significant political split. But his positions at present may not be powerful enough to make a critical difference. He does not, it appears, have direct authority over any security forces. Zhao, by contrast, was the General Secretary of the Party, the highest formal ranking position in the Party with significant say over the use of force.

But there could be other splits emerging in Iran. Thus, while the drama in the streets captures our attention we should also keep an eye on the halls of power.

UPDATE: more thoughts on this comparison here, here and here.

Posted by Sam Crane at 08:56 AM in Politics | Permalink

Comments

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On your page, the Zhongwen.com's word of the day is 囚, which it describes as “a person confined.” Seems appropriate.

re: "Whether yesterday's big march develops into a more sustained political movement will depend, in large part, on how the regime proceeds ... Although there has been some early violent repression, the announcement that a recount will be undertaken could diffuse the situation."

Didn't you hear? Ahmadinejad said that Iran is the most stable country in the world. hehe.

Posted by: Bao Pu | June 16, 2009 at 01:37 PM