

# Iranian Public Sentiment Towards the Regime: Tensions, Recent Developments, and the Prospects for Change

Iran's Islamic Republic, established in 1979, has long faced internal challenges stemming from a growing divide between its theocratic leadership and a diverse, increasingly disillusioned population. Public sentiment towards the regime has deteriorated significantly in recent years, driven by economic hardship, social repression, and political exclusion. The 2022 "Women, Life, Freedom" movement, sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini in morality police custody, crystallized widespread discontent, while recent external pressures, including Israeli airstrikes in June 2025, have further exposed regime vulnerabilities. This article explores current Iranian public sentiment, recent developments, the likelihood of positive regime change, and the formidable obstacles to such an outcome.

## Public Sentiment: A Deepening Divide

Surveys and anecdotal evidence reveal a stark rejection of the Islamic Republic among a majority of Iranians. A 2023 survey by the Netherlands-based Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in Iran (GAMAAN) found that 81% of Iranians opposed the regime, with only 15% expressing support. This sentiment is particularly strong among the youth, who constitute nearly two-thirds of Iran's 91 million population and face unemployment, inflation, and restricted freedoms. Social media posts on X reflect this frustration, with users like @NiohBerg reporting widespread anger across social classes, from urban elites to rural villagers.

The 2022 protests, which saw over 4,000 demonstrations across all provinces, underscored this discontent. Demands for gender equality and secular governance evolved into calls for regime change, with slogans like "Death to the Dictator" echoing in the streets. However, the regime's brutal response—over 550 deaths and 21,000 arrests—quelled the movement, leaving a cultural legacy but no institutional change. Low voter turnout in the 2024 presidential election (39.9% in the first round, 49.8% in the second) further signals public apathy and distrust in the system. Economic grievances fuel much of this unrest. Sanctions, mismanagement, and corruption have driven inflation to around 30%, devalued the rial, and eroded living standards. The regime's prioritization of regional proxies, costing billions, over domestic welfare has deepened resentment. A 2024 Stasis Consulting survey found 78% of Iranians blame foreign policy for economic woes, with 63% saying it does not serve ordinary citizens. Environmental crises, like water scarcity, and ethnic discrimination against groups like Kurds and Baloch further amplify discontent.

Yet, the regime retains a loyal base, estimated at 10–20%, primarily among conservative clerics, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and the Basij militia. Nationalist sentiment, stoked by external threats, also rallies some support, as seen in pro-regime protests after Israeli attacks in June 2025. A Tehran-based analyst, Hamidreza Gholamzadeh, claimed only 5% of Iranians would actively protest, suggesting a unified front against foreign aggression. However, this view likely underestimates the depth of opposition, as independent polls and mass protests contradict such optimism.

## Recent Developments: External Pressures and Internal Shifts

Recent events have intensified pressure on the regime. The collapse of Iran's "Axis of Resistance" proxies— Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Assad regime in Syria—has weakened its regional influence, exposing military and strategic failures. Israeli airstrikes in June 2025 targeted nuclear facilities, military bases, and IRGC leadership, killing over 600 Iranians and wounding thousands, according to Human Rights Activists in Iran. These attacks, coupled with U.S. calls for "unconditional surrender" under President Trump, have humiliated the regime and sparked internal criticism. Reports of defections and elite infighting, including IRGC discontent over the failure to develop a nuclear deterrent, suggest cracks in the regime's cohesion.

Internally, the election of reformist President Masoud Pezeshkian in 2024 raised hopes for modest change. Pezeshkian acknowledged the regime's broken "social contract" and promised to address public grievances, but his limited power under Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and conservative institutions has constrained progress. His approval rating, at 39% in October 2024, reflects public skepticism about reform within the current system. Meanwhile, the regime's intensified repression—new hijab laws, internet restrictions, and arrests of activists like Narges Mohammadi—has further alienated society.

## Likelihood of Positive Regime Change

A "positive" regime change—defined as a transition to a democratic, inclusive, and stable government—faces significant hurdles but is not impossible. Several factors suggest potential for change:

- **Widespread Opposition:** With 80% of Iranians rejecting the regime, there is a broad base for change. The 2022 protests showed a willingness to confront the regime, even at great personal risk.
- **Regime Weakness:** Israeli strikes have decimated IRGC leadership and nuclear capabilities, while proxy losses have eroded strategic depth. Internal divisions, including criticism from within the IRGC, could weaken the regime further.
- **Exiled Opposition:** Figures like Reza Pahlavi, the exiled crown prince, and groups like the Mojahedin-e Khalq (MEK) advocate for a secular, democratic Iran. Pahlavi claims the regime's command structures are collapsing, and his calls for a political transition resonate with some nostalgic for the pre-1979 monarchy.

However, the likelihood of a positive outcome remains low due to several obstacles:

1. **Regime Resilience:** The regime's "coup-proofing" through loyalist appointments in the IRGC and Basij, combined with a vast security apparatus (over 600,000 personnel), enables it to suppress dissent effectively. Its history of surviving mass protests (2009, 2017, 2019, 2022) demonstrates durability.
2. **Lack of Unified Opposition:** The opposition is fragmented, with no cohesive leadership or agreed-upon vision. The 2022 movement's lack of structure led to its collapse, and exiled groups like the MEK lack grassroots support. Debates over federalism versus a unitary state further divide potential allies, risking ethnic separatism in a country where Persians are only 50% of the population.

3. **Risk of Chaos:** Historical examples (Iraq 2003, Libya 2011) show that regime change without a clear successor can lead to violence and instability. The IRGC, a powerful and hardline institution, could seize control in a power vacuum, potentially leading to a more repressive regime. Ethnic tensions among Azeris, Kurds, and Baloch could also trigger Balkanization.
4. **Nationalist Backlash:** External attacks, like Israel's, can rally nationalist sentiment, as seen in the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988). Some Iranians, even those opposing the regime, distrust foreign intervention, fearing it could label dissenters as traitors.
5. **Economic and Social Constraints:** Economic hardship and repression limit civic participation, while cultural and ethnic divides fragment society. Many Iranians are "leaderless, low-energy, and disillusioned" post-2022, reducing the momentum for revolt.

## Obstacles to Positive Change

The path to a democratic transition faces systemic and societal barriers. The regime's security forces, including the IRGC and Basij, are deeply entrenched, with the Basij embedded in communities to deter uprisings. The absence of independent political parties, trade unions, or civil society organizations hampers organized resistance. The Guardian Council's control over elections ensures conservative dominance, stifling reformist efforts.

Externally, U.S. and Israeli calls for regime change, as voiced by Trump and Netanyahu, lack a clear "day after" strategy, risking chaos akin to past interventions in Iraq and Libya. Many Iranians, wary of foreign motives, reject intervention, as articulated by activists who see Israel's actions as harming rather than helping their cause. Meanwhile, the regime exploits external threats to justify repression, labeling dissidents as foreign spies.

Internally, the lack of a unified opposition vision is critical. While some advocate for a constitutional assembly to draft a new system, others fear a power vacuum could empower the IRGC or lead to ethnic conflict. The regime's transnational repression, including cyberattacks by APT42 and assassination plots abroad, further intimidates exiles and dissidents.

## Conclusion: A Fragile Future

Iranian public sentiment is overwhelmingly anti-regime, driven by economic, social, and political grievances. Recent developments, including military setbacks and internal elite fractures, have weakened the Islamic Republic, raising the prospect of change. However, a positive transition to democracy is unlikely without overcoming significant obstacles: a resilient security apparatus, a fragmented opposition, the risk of chaos, and nationalist resistance to foreign intervention. While figures like Reza Pahlavi and grassroots activists offer hope, the lack of coordination and a clear successor government poses a stark challenge. As one scholar noted, "The plan for the day after is far more important than the war plans themselves." Without such a plan, Iran risks not liberation but instability. For now, the regime endures, but its legitimacy continues to erode, leaving the future uncertain.

If you seek further details, sources like Amnesty International or the Journal of Democracy offer in-depth analyses. Would you like me to explore a specific aspect, such as the role of women or ethnic minorities in this dynamic?