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Report

Iran's Green Movement: Reality and Aspirations

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Introduction

Iran's Green Movement failed to formulate a new political discourse and seemed content with populist, impromptu slogans. The next period in Iran will focus on the Iranian opposition with its different sections, and its ability to withstand the burdens of change. It will, however, not focus on the Green Movement alone.

Today, no official or public figure in Iran would deny that the political, media and official presence of the Green Movement has been shrinking gradually since 2009. This has resulted in even the majority of Iranians believing that the true sense of the movement, which it embodied four years ago when it took to the streets and attracted five million protesters, has declined and started to disappear. However, the most recent protest rallies in which some of the merchants in Tehran's bazaar took to the streets en masse to protest against the devaluation of the Iranian Rial importantly point to a significant factor: that the slogans chanted by the bazaar merchants in Tehran are modified versions of the slogans used by the Green Movement a few years ago. The merchants chanted: 'Stop supporting Syria - focus on our situation,' and echo of the slogan chanted by Green Movement supporters four years ago when they shouted: 'Neither for Gaza nor for Lebanon; my soul is sacrificed for Iran.' This similarity verifies that the slogans of the Green Movement have become entrenched in the minds of ordinary Iranian citizens despite its absence from the political sphere and its leaders being under house arrest.

The Movement's Leadership and its Orientation

From the beginning, it was clear that Mir Hussein Mousavi was an undisputed popular leader, belonging to the left, who held great experience in organising anti-Shah student movements before the victory of the Iranian revolution in 1979. It is also clear that Mousavi was not merely a novice politician seeking some gains to include in his memoirs; he also developed a political theory that was tailor-made for the person who had previously served as prime minister before that office was abolished in 1988.

Mousavi's political thinking focused a great deal on the foreign aspect and he called for a re-evaluation of the foreign policies of the Islamic Republic. Mousavi also optimally used his experience as a former foreign minister in the government headed by Prime Minister Mohammad Ali Raja'i in 1981. The Iranian regime quickly realised the danger of the message contained in Mousavi's new thinking. This, perhaps, explains the violent response of the Iranian authorities against Mousavi and his supporters when they raised slogan 'Where is my vote?'. This followed the allegation that the Ministry of Interior had rigged the 2009 presidential election in favour of the incumbent president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Mousavi did not retreat, but went even further by challenging the supreme leader and requesting him to limit his powers and to reconsider the theory of Velayat-e-

Faqih (guardianship of the jurist) which is used in Iran to invest virtually absolute power in a single person.

The Intellectual Reality of the Green Movement

It is not an exaggeration to say that there are no clear set of ideas to have emanated from the Green Movement. Unlike most political movements which might arise suddenly and protest against their regimes, the Green Movement announced its demands before its ideas could crystallise and be tracked historically. Initially, the movement had just two main 'demands':

1. That the outcome of the 2009 presidential elections be reviewed
2. That the movement would stay on the streets till the first demand was met.

As time passed, Mousavi, Mehdi Karroubi and Green Movement supporters realised that they could not pin their hopes on such demands. Ahmadinejad thus won his second term as president with the blessing of the supreme leader, Ayatullah Ali Khamenei, and all official institutions – both military and constitutional. In this critical moment, the most influential and truest ideas of the Movement emerged and were exposed to wider interpretation, until the reformist leaders such as former president, Muhammad Khatami as well as historical and prominent Iranian figures such as Hashemi Rafsanjani, chair of the Expediency Council, quit the movement. Khatami and Rafsanjani both returned and participated in recent parliamentary elections which were held under the supervision of the interior ministry, led by a minister appointed by Ahmadinejad. This course of events was generally interpreted as an indication that the movement was in decline. Both men withdrew from the movement, ended their relationships with it and implicitly accepted the 2009 election outcome. However, the movement continues to call for ideas that may be summarised into three principles:

1. Iran's national interests and sovereignty

This is the most important principle of the Movement as it is considered a sensitive area considered taboo by the Iranian regime. It sparked the famous Green Movement slogan 'Neither Gaza nor Lebanon; my soul will be sacrificed for Iran'. Through this principle, Mousavi – and Karroubi to a lesser extent – called for transparency and for the state not to resort to secrecy regarding sensitive dossiers that are considered in Iran's regional interests, such as Iran's relationship with Hizbullah and Hamas, and the balance between supporting these groups and addressing the economic needs of the country.

This principle had succeeded in attracting important sectors of people such as university students and some intellectual and economic elites; in addition, it quickly captured the imagination of Iranians as the basis for any slogans associated with the movement's supporters. These supporters clearly adhered to this principle which is in contradiction

with some principles of Iran's Islamic revolution, including the idea of exporting the revolution beyond Iran's borders. In general, this principle is still gaining popular support. Indeed, it has turned out to be stronger, more obvious and more widespread than before. This became evident in the slogans echoed in the Grand Bazaar in Tehran recently when protesters called for the ending of support to the Syrian regime and giving special attention to the economic hardships suffered by Iranians as a result of sanctions.

2. Reconsidering Velayat-e-Faqih

This principle – that the notion of velayat-e-faqih should be reconsidered – represented the most dangerous idea propagated by the Green Movement since it provoked the regime directly. Of course, it also had enormous repercussions for the movement's leaders and supporters.

On the basis of the sedition principle, as the regime referred to it, the Green Movement came into open confrontation with the authorities which had decided to treat the movement as a seditious group that must be eradicated from society and the regime's institutions. Mousavi publically called for the Velayat-e-Faqih theory to be reconsidered as a valid political theory of governance, and called for more powers to be vested in the president of republic.

Both the Green Movement and Mousavi's supporters drew a red line at this. This saw some supporters stop and rethink their support for Mousavi; none of the regime officials who backed Mousavi to various degrees, could align with such principle, including, Hashemi Rafsanjani, chairman of Expediency Discernment Council of the System, Ali Larijani, the speaker of Parliament, Mohsen Rezai, former head of the Revolutionary Guards, Mohamed Khatami, the former president, and others. As a result of this principle, Iranian society was divided in two: one fully supporting Mousavi and his calls, and the other opposing Mousavi. This was no longer a grey area and the movement received a very painful blow.

At the political level, the Movement attained semi-pariah status even from some of its previous supporters. Further the regime utilised this and called on all of society to take a stand against Mousavi and his ideas. In turn the Green Movement became weakened and lost most of its influence. This continues till today, as some elites are unable to support the adoption of certain Green Movement requests.

In the public domain, the Movement's loss of figures such as Rafsanjani, Khatami, Rezai and others led many of Mousavi's supporters to withdraw their support. In doing so, the Green Movement gradually lost its popularity among the religious conservatives and reformist groups. Further the movement found itself in a new confrontation with leading

religious clerics in the city of Qom. All of this negatively impacted on the popularity gained by the Movement, and continues until today.

3. A sensible foreign policy and constructive relations with the world

This principle of a foreign policy that engages constructively with other countries is not considered a monopoly of the Green Movement. The reformists under the former president, Mohammad Khatami, adopted the same principle in practice by reconsidering Iran's relations with the Arab and Islamic world. Furthermore it looked to redraw the boundaries of relations with the world regardless of ideological positioning of exporting the Islamic revolution. That said, the matter of Iranian-America relations has remained exclusively within the power of the supreme leaders, who hold the sole and final decision-making authority. This has set the tone and direction of relations between Tehran and Washington. This is exactly what the Green Movement's leaders endeavoured to do, and specifically, Mousavi who attempted to devolve such powers from the Supreme Leader through two means:

- Except for the relationship with Israel, there are no prohibitions in the relationships between Iran and other countries, including the US, providing that all of such relationships are endorsed by Iran's establishments, specifically parliament as the authority representing the people. At the time this was considered to be a direct interference with the powers invested in the Supreme Leader.
- The Green Movement or its leaders are open to developing relationships with international human rights organisations and institutions that focus on issues around transparency. This issue was locally interpreted by the regime as an attempt to seek foreign intervention with regards to powers that are vested with the Supreme Leader.

These three principles formed the intellectual and theoretical basis of the Green Movement, and the primary element in delivering the political and intellectual discourse of the Green Movement. Issues around some of the principles, however, were not unproblematic – and exist until today.

Problematic Issues of the Movement's Current Discourse

Based on the current reality of the Green Movement inside Iran, we can list the problem areas of the Movement's political discourse as follows:

1. The leadership's popular discourse

The movement failed to deliver an intellectualised political discourse. Rather, it produced a discourse based primarily on popular and impromptu slogans emerging from the streets. The intellectual elite then sought to adopt these as they saw themselves as the

representatives of the people and their built-up frustration and dissatisfaction. Instead of intellectuals leading the public, the leadership found itself standing behind the mass of protesters. Leaders, such as Mousavi found himself facing high demands from the public without any majority support from across the different social sectors of the Iranian public. This has been an almost insurmountable problem for the Movement as you have both Bazaar merchants and university students still taking the lead in many rallies. The leadership has thus had to support them if it did not want to be accused of abandoning the popular voices emerging from the streets.

2. The seasonality of the movement

At the popular and elite levels, the political speech of Green Movement was subjected to so-called seasonality of events, as if the movement waits for an event to present itself in order to restore its status on the street. In so doing the Movement lost the vitality of a permanent presence. In addition this ruined its ability of being proactive and taking initiative, instead of having to deal with reactive situations.

3. Absence of an economic strategy

Unjustifiably, the Green Movement's discourse hasn't focused on economic issues but broader political issues. The movement was unable to justify its failure to deliver a new discourse based on an economy-centred strategy rather than a political one. Further, it failed to place emphasis on the most important economic issues facing Iran, including:

- The intensification of international sanctions against Iran over its disputed nuclear programme. In addition such sanctions were intensified to include the oil industry, which is the backbone of the Iranian economy.
- Partial failure of Ahmadinejad to increase the government's subsidisation of basic commodities was met with extreme popular reaction, which the Green Movement failed to capitalise on, unlike conservative political parties which took advantage of this situation.
- Fundamentally the Movement's major failure was its inability to feel the pulse of the people and reframe its discourse to address the most pressing public concern; that of the economy

The Public Realm

The last real political test of the Green Movement and its leadership's capability in the public domain goes back to August 24, 2012 when Mousavi's senior advisor reported that Mousavi had been urgently hospitalised due to heart failure. The advisor called the supporters of the Movement to take to the streets to demand that Mousavi and Karroubi's house arrest be lifted. On the same day, the Kalameh website (Mousavi's official website that is currently banned by the Iranian regime) called on Egyptian President Mohamed Mursi to speak out against the continued house arrest of leaders of

the opposition during his visit to Tehran where he was attending the Non-Aligned Movement summit.

Leaders of the movement both inside and outside Iran were surprised that no Iranians took to the streets during the summit and that Mursi did not speak out. These two events showed that the Green Movement had failed to mobilise the Iranian public. Furthermore, it had failed to gain the support of an Arab leader who had been democratically elected, and was unable to take advantage of the presence of 700 foreign dignitaries of NAM member states that were attending the NAM summit in Tehran. This begs the question: Why, despite the heightened levels of public discontent in 2009 due to economic hardships, did the Movement reach such a decline in popularity? The answer to this question might be determined through four factors:

1. Lack of any real and tangible accomplishments by the Green Movement during the years when it attempted to gain mass support from the public.
2. The success of the regime to root out the Movement ideas, by adopting a zero tolerance approach that saw brutal repression. This saw the Movement lose its ability to influence the structures of the state.
3. The failure of the Movement to maintain an Iranian-based leadership, that saw externally driven leadership of the Movement from outside the country. Protesters on the street resented that calls made by them would not see these leaders stand and up against the regime and bear the brunt of the regime's security structures.
4. The Movement's focus and core constituency being in the large cities and not the poorer, rural areas that was Ahmadinejad's constituency, whose support he had utilised to challenge reformists.

This saw limited popular support for the Green Movement. Despite its critics there are still those who defend Mousavi and Karroubi and uphold them as leaders who paid the price of standing up to the regime. It can be said that despite the deep decline of the Green Movement's popularity this should not be read that Iranian society is not in favour of the return of Mousavi and Karroubi to the national political arena, and indeed they may yet garner massive public support.

The Green Movement in a Regional and International Context

Iran's Green Movement seems to be surrounded by regional situations that don't serve the Movement's interests and future plans. At the regional level, the Arab uprisings have taken place around the Green Movement, and have been an unstoppable wave that has toppled regimes. Other uprisings, however, remain unfinished, and serve as striking examples of a people's determination to stand their ground in order to achieve national aspirations.

Some insist that sooner or later the Arab Spring will trigger Iranians to ignite their own uprising. However, it was problematic for Iranians who tried to compare their Movement to the uprisings, as the uprisings exposed that Iranians were not ready to make the type of sacrifices that would require the toppling of such regimes.

Today it seems that the Iranian public seems to believe that change does not rest in theorising about revolutions or a leader. However the provision is that change must emerge directly from the triggers of revolution – that is wide-spread public dissatisfaction. This point might serve the Iranian opposition as whole; however this will not be solely representative of the Green Movement as a popular opposition group. Indeed, all results of intensifying the blockade imposed on Iran regionally or internationally or targeting Iran by more of economic sanctions might create the conditions that will serve the interests of the Green Movement. The more that economic hardships are intensified, and the more errors the government makes in handling such economic challenges, the greater the likelihood that Iranians decide to take to the street en masse. This would see the Movement – in its criticism of the regime and its policies that resulted in such deteriorating economic circumstances – supported.

In this context attempts by the West to step-up sanctions are a result of the stance taken by the US administration to exclude a military option. That said, a military strike would serve the regime, as it could provoke national sentiments, and galvanise internal support, particularly around national security, a priority concern. This will detract from the economic suffering of the people of Iran. Rather, when a regime is hit hard by economic sanctions this creates an environment for the opposition to flourish, and the US is traditionally a supporter of the Iranian opposition camps. The US realises, however, that the Green Movement will not be able to implement change on its own. For this reason Washington decided to delist Mujahidi Khalq (MEK) from its Black List in order to exert pressure on the Iranian government. Washington is aware that MEK is able to achieve what the Green Movement failed to – and additionally the US has not forgotten that it was MEK which disclosed information on Iran's nuclear programme in 2003. The next period will likely see Iran's opposition re-assert itself, though this will certainly not only be the Green Movement. Some Iranian officials have begun considering lifting the de facto house arrest of Mousavi and Karroubi prior to elections which are less than a year away, which would then allow them to participate in the elections. However, considering that the traditional opposition has not managed to make major headways over the past thirty years and that many of the candidates from the Green Movement are living in exile, this is likely to have little impact.

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