

Behind the 2009 Upheaval in Iran

Kamran Afary and Kevin Anderson

August 31, 2009

The upheaval in Iran has shaken up Iranian and even regional politics. Not since the Palestinian Intifada of 1987 has the Middle East seen such a massive and persistent grassroots mobilization. At the same time, the Iranian upheaval is also the product of deep divisions inside the nation's dominant classes.

On the one hand, reform-minded and pragmatic conservative regime leaders hold that things can no longer continue in the old way if the edifice of their Islamist regime is to survive. On the other hand, the more dominant regime conservatives believe the only way to survive is through heightened repression of a new generation seen as increasingly at odds with regimes Islamist ideological practices.

This split within the dominant classes, as exemplified by the post-election resistance to a blatantly stolen election on the part of reformist candidates Mir Hossein Moussavi and Mehdi Karroubi, has opened the most serious fissure in the institutions of the Islamic Republic since its inception three decades ago. Quick to grasp this opportunity, huge numbers of people have poured onto the streets, challenging the most reactionary sections of the regime: those around Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the state repressive apparatus, and implicitly, the authority of Supreme Religious Leader Ali Khamenei. As in other mass upheavals, the youth have formed its vanguard, but what is truly new – and not only for Iran or the region — is that young women have been an equal or even greater presence on the streets than young men. At the same time, the upheaval's origin as a campaign against electoral fraud has tended to hem it in within a certain "legalism," all within the authoritarian framework of the Islamic Republic.

But this too is a double-edged sword. Now that the opposition crowds have tasted their power on the streets, and now that their fear of the repressive apparatus has increasingly been replaced by burning anger, it is unclear if they will confine their protests to the legalistic parameters set by Moussavi, Karroubi, and former president Muhammad Khatami, let alone pragmatic conservatives like the very powerful Hashemi Rafsanjani. To

be sure, the more reactionary wing of the regime believes that it can choke off the protests by brute force, but as the reformist and pragmatic conservatives keep reminding them, this runs the risk of turning the protests in a truly revolutionary direction, if not now, then down the road.

I. Not a Mere Election Protest

The Friday, June 12 election was widely expected to be a somnolent affair in which Ahmadinejad coasted to a second term over some lackluster opponents. Instead, the Moussavi campaign quickly heated up, jarring not only the conservative establishment but also sparking a new and supposedly apathetic generation of youth into action. At a rally at the University of Tabriz, Moussavi appealed to youth alienated by the morality police. Students complained of political and gender repression, including cameras in classrooms to prevent conversation among students of the opposite sex.

The Zahra Rahnavard factor also took on great importance, reported Robert Dreyfuss: “Moussavi had another not-so-secret weapon: his wife, Zahra Rahnavard. A noted intellectual and sculptor, Rahnavard campaigned alongside her husband, sometimes holding his hand. Clearly a liberated woman, she called for an end to the much-despised harassment of women by the cultural police and backed equal rights for women. At a vast rally in downtown Tehran, I watched her mesmerize the crowd. ‘We are going to make a revolution in the revolution!’ she cried. Women in pink lipstick and with blond highlights in partly uncovered hair shouted beside women in black chadors” (“[Iran’s Green Wave](#),” *The Nation*, 7/20/09).

Rahnavard has been part of the Islamist establishment, but has evolved in a feminist direction in recent years. Independent women’s organizations also sprung up during the campaign: “Thirty-four Islamist and secular feminist groups coalesced to form the Women’s Movement Convergence, for instance, with nearly 700 activists gathering to hammer out a common platform. A week before the election, the Convergence held a debate with the representatives of the reformist candidates in the Office of the Islamic Revolution’s Women to assess which candidate would be most consistently committed to women’s rights” (Kaveh Ehsani, Arang Keshavarzian and Norma Claire Moruzzi, “Tehran, June 2009,” *Middle East Report Online*, 6/28/09).

Nothing helped to discredit Ahmadinejad more than the two weeks of television debates among the presidential contenders, which interrupted regime conservatives’ monopoly over the broadcast media. The mass debates on the streets during the late evenings

following the debates were crucial in convincing a large majority of the population to participate and to vote against Ahmadinejad.

During the TV debates, Moussavi attacked Ahmadinejad's practice of massive Stasi-like surveillance. He repeatedly denounced Ahmadinejad's bullying of activist students, and pledged to rein in the so called "morality police" who harass young people, especially women. For his part, Karroubi questioned Ahmadinejad about his statements (which he latter had denied) that he was protected by a "halo" from the 12th Shia Imam (the Madhi or Messiah) during his 2005 UN speech. Karroubi, a cleric who holds the rank of ayatollah, termed this the most crass charlatanism. In the June 6 debate, he also quoted a former head of Mossad, who had exulted on Israeli Arabic TV that Ahmadinejad's provocative language actually helped Israel: "If Mossad were to spend hundreds of billions of dollars on someone who would ensure Israeli interests — no one could do this better than Ahmadinejad." Karroubi added, "Every sentence that Ahmadinejad says against Israel makes things easier for Israel in the world."

After each debate, young and old, men and women, gathered in the streets of Tehran and the provinces to show support for their candidates and argue for or against their policies. The debates emboldened people to openly characterize Ahmadinejad as a compulsive liar. One could argue that a new form of Iranian rap/hip hop was born on the streets during these days. Comic chants and call and responses attest to this. Here is one example: One group would chant: "Should I say it" (mocking Ahmadinejad's ham-handed question to Moussavi during the debate before holding up a copy of Rahnavard's doctoral diploma to question her qualifications). The other group, posing as Moussavi, would say: "Go ahead, say it." Then they all would chant "2X2=7, 2X2=10. 2X2 equals whatever I want it to be." For the first time since the 1979 revolution, the streets of Tehran and other cities were filled with people debating policy with gales of laughter as a form of comic relief.

Four days before the election, on June 8, Ahmadinejad held a boisterous rally of tens of thousands in central Tehran, many of them members of the Basiji militia and their families instructed to attend. But that evening, Moussavi supporters created an even larger outpouring, a human chain that stretched for twelve miles along Tehran's major north-south axis, Vali Asr Street. The fact that they were able to mount this event in more working class South Tehran as well as more affluent North Tehran showed the breadth of their support.

The vast crowds and intense anger stirred up by the brief two weeks of open election campaigning undoubtedly shocked and frightened regime conservatives, who a month earlier had been expecting voter apathy and another low-turnout Ahmadinejad victory, as

in 2005. Although the office of the president has limited real power, Moussavi's campaign tactics seemed to suggest that he and Rahnavard would, were he elected, continue to use popular mobilizations to press for change. Moreover, with the opposition crowds growing by the day, there was probably worry as to what would happen had the election gone into a second round, which would have meant yet another week of boisterous reformist rallies. Thus, it is likely that this led regime conservatives to pull the plug at the end of the first round of the campaign, giving Ahmadinejad his stolen "landslide" in an improvised fashion.

There was a brief lull and widespread disbelief immediately after Ahmadinejad was declared the winner on Saturday, June 13. But within hours millions began asking, "Where is my vote?"

As vast numbers of people from all social classes took to the streets to protest the stolen election and its endorsement by Supreme Religious Leader Ali Khamenei, the world media seemed surprised at the movement's scope and persistence, even in the face of severe repression by the Basiji militia. During the week of June 15, demonstrations in Tehran were drawing over a million people, something not seen since the days of the 1978-79 Islamic Revolution. The street protests subsided somewhat by late June in the face of beatings, gunfire, and mass arrests of organizers. By late June, many experts and pundits were predicting that the movement on the streets would collapse or that people like Moussavi or Rafsanjani would compromise with Ahmadinejad and Khamenei. Instead, massive crowds of protestors have continued to appear when circumstances have allowed, as seen in the hundreds of thousands who took to the streets on July 17 as Rafsanjani denounced the repression of protestors in a major public sermon during a Friday prayer service broadcast nationwide over the radio. Moreover, after repression did not stop mass participation in the protests, even the regime conservatives began to argue publicly among themselves.

II. A New Media Culture

The upheaval in Iran has also been marked by new forms of media culture. Documentary production, news reporting, and opinion writing have converged to create a new type of citizen journalism that is both richer in content, more immediate, vastly more accessible to participants/audiences, and practiced by many more participants than was ever possible before the advent of the Internet.

Soon after the elections the government banned the international media from covering the protests from inside Iran. But scenes of citizens shouting from their rooftops, "God is

great, down with the dictator,” or street clashes with Basiji on motorcycles were captured and immediately made available to the whole world online. These were sometimes picked up by the international media.

Twitter sites have been set up to send a highly enriched form of “Morse” messages of 140 characters or less to communicate short lead sentences and provide links to longer articles with audio-visual materials. A Twitter site called [Iranbaan](#), hosted by Fereshteh Ghazi, a journalist who has served time in prison for her critical articles, has produced a constant stream of up to the minute “leads” on developments in the opposition movement. Ghazi and several other blogger-journalists have created an atmosphere of scrupulous honesty and strict adherence to reporting only verifiable facts.

The distorted coverage of the election and the concomitant defamation of mass protests in Iranian state media incensed the prominent academic Emad Afrough, a former Ahmadinejad supporter. His response illustrated a different type of interaction with global culture, the influence of Western Marxism and critical theory, to be discussed more below. In a July 18 interview with ILNA (Iranian Labor News Service), Afrough stated: “I feel the intellectuals named Gramsci and Adorno can analyze the media issues of our today’s society very well; Gramsci with the concept of hegemony and Adorno with the concept of culture industry.” Afrough added that Adorno provides an excellent analysis of how state media can operate to “fool the public and deceive them, and actually they could be means of presenting facts upside-down.” He concluded: “Today I am sorry to say that [head of state broadcasting] Mr. Zarghami’s media has played such a role.” (For a partial translation, see [Facebook](#)).

Several filmmakers, both inside and outside Iran, have also contributed to the movement. Soon after the fraudulent election results were announced, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, the renowned director of “Kandahar” (2001), went on the airwaves and spoke to the European Parliament asking that the electoral fraud not be legitimized. Another well-known director, Jafar Panahi (“The Circle,” 2000), was arrested on July 30 at Beheshte Zahra cemetery at a traditional Shia memorial marking the 40th day after the deaths of protestors on July 30, among them Neda Agha-Soltan, the young woman killed on June 20 who has come to symbolize the entire 2009 movement.

III. A Deep-Rooted Culture of Resistance

Rather than a sudden eruption, the present upheaval has deep roots in society, in the struggles over Islamic reformism, women’s rights, and cultural freedom since the 1990s. The first clear evidence of truly massive dissatisfaction with the fundamentalist regime

came over a decade ago, as a reformist cleric, Muhammad Khatami, easily defeated a hardliner in the 1997 presidential elections. Khatami's victory was one expression of the rise of Islamic reformism, and of a vast cultural and intellectual opening. In his campaign for second term in 2001, Khatami garnered an astounding 78% of the vote against a conservative challenger in a high-turnout election that drew 66% of eligible voters to the polls. During the years of Khatami's presidency, 1997-2005, independent newspapers were published, new journals of opinion were founded, and a whole range of philosophical discussions took place in which a broad swath of European and North American critical theory – from Hegel to Adorno and from Kant to Habermas and Foucault — was translated and debated.

Certain lines could not be crossed, among them directly criticizing the structure of the Islamic Republic or its founder Ayatollah Khomeini, let alone Islam. Moreover, these liberalizing developments were also met by a furious counterattack from the judiciary, the Supreme Leader, and other conservative dominated institutions. Some newspapers were shut down by judicial order, reporters and editors jailed, and vigilante attacks took place on the campuses.

Nonetheless, critical thought continued to find means of expression. Islamic reformist thinkers such as theologian Abdolkarim Soroush, who advocates a re-examination of Islam where they clash with religious tolerance, gained a wide audience. Others, such as cleric Mohammad Mojtabeh Shabastari, went further. Shabastari worked with more secular human rights activists like Nobel Peace Prize laureate Shirin Ebadi and journalist Akbar Ganji to support ratification of the United Nations Convention on Human Rights. The intellectual ferment also involved the translation of hundreds of studies in critical theory by European and North American authors. As late as 2005, one of the authors of this article observed a wide range of translated works in the bookstores near Tehran University, from Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* to Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, and from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* to contemporary studies in critical theory. Under the sponsorship of the philosopher Ramin Jahanbegloo, later arrested once Ahmadinejad came to power, Habermas and Negri each visited Tehran, speaking before huge audiences.

A whole range of feminist thinkers, publications, organizations and activists also emerged during the 1990s. *Zanan* [Women], founded in 1992, mixed advice columns with regular articles on social issues facing women like divorce, sexual assault, and domestic violence, also carrying out research on working women. In addition, the journal discussed Western feminist thought, while also working to develop pro-feminist interpretations of Shia

U.S. Marxist-Humanists

Islamic jurisprudence. *Zanan* survived until 2008, when Ahmadinejad had it shut down. At the level of activism, educated urban feminists continued to celebrate International Women's Day on March 8, usually resulting violent attacks on the part of the Basiji and other groups. The One Million Signatures Campaign, organized in 2006 by the Campaign for Equality, solicited signatures on a petition calling for equal rights for women. Its wording carefully avoided direct challenges to Sharia. Feminists also succeeded in blocking a retrogressive "Family Protection Law" proposed to parliament in 2008 by Ahmadinejad's government. At the same time, a number of women associated with the One Million Signatures Campaign have faced arrest and imprisonment, severely curtailing this movement. (For background, see Janet Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran* [2009].)

Part of the opening since the 1990s included the publication of Marxist works or discussions of Marxism in journals or even the daily press. Even under Ahmadinejad, a new, rigorous translation of *Capital* was published in 2008. (See "New Persian Translation of Marx's Capital [Translator's Preface]," in "[Iranian Voices in Translation](#)".) The edition quickly sold out and was reprinted. Among the Marxist works translated in recent years are Lukács's *The Young Hegel*, Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and Raya Dunayevskaya's *Philosophy and Revolution*.

Since the 1990s, youth have been in the forefront of many of the above developments. In July 1999, major student demonstrations took place at Tehran University to protest the closure of the reformist newspaper *Salaam*, which had published accounts of government assassinations of dissidents in 1998. President Khatami disappointed many of his supporters by abandoning the students, criticizing them instead of the violent repression loosed against them. For his part, Rafsanjani gave a speech justifying harsh repression. But by 2009, as the internal crisis of the regime deepened, both Khatami and Rafsanjani were instead attacking the repression of youthful demonstrators, and in some cases supporting them.

Other forms of resistance by youth were less directly political. Beginning in the 1990s, young women began to subvert the stringent dress codes enforced by the regime's morality police. Headscarves became more colorful and were slipped back, showing some hair. Bulky black cloaks were replaced by fashionable manteaus that showed some of the contours of the body. This was no mere fashion statement. Going too far can result in a beating by the Basiji, or worse in prison. In his first year in office, Ahmadinejad had the morality police carry out a vast dragnet, stopping and warning women about their "modesty." This resulted in a partial rollback, but also much resentment.

U.S. Marxist-Humanists

With contact between unrelated members of the opposite sex also subject to punishment, youth have devised ever more devious means to meet. Conservatives are particularly outraged by their behavior during the annual Shia Muharram festival, one of the few times that crowds of youth are permitted to be on the streets at night with the members of the opposite sex in close proximity. Youth quietly exchange papers with their phone numbers right under the noses of the Basiji, who catch some but by no means all of them.

Over the past decade, independent labor unions have also begun to reassert themselves, after labor was crushed during the harsh repression of the 1980s as the Islamist regime was consolidating itself. The Syndicate of Workers of Tehran and Suburbs Vahed Bus Company, which has supported the 2009 protests, has been the most persistent of these. The regime has tried to repress this union, and has kept its leader Mansour Osanloo in jail for most of the past two years.

In recent years, workers have also attempted to revive May Day celebrations not as regime propaganda events but as places where independent unions and workers can express their grievances. When 2000 workers attempted to gather in Tehran on May 1, 2009, they were attacked by security and intelligence forces and driven away. Many workers were beaten and a number of union activists arrested.

All of these struggles of women, youth, and workers have a long history in Iran. Both the protestors and the regime are very aware of this. In this sense, the 2009 protests were a long time coming and will be very hard if not impossible to extinguish.

[A slightly abbreviated version of this article has also appeared in [Logos: A Journal of Modern Society & Culture](#), 8:2 (Fall 2009).]