DYNAMICS OF CONTENTION
MEDIA AND SOCIAL MOVEMENT IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY IRAN

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Abstract: Extensive media coverage of the highly visible and often violent repression of political activism following Islamic Republic of Iran’s contested 2009 presidential election has emphasized that any given regime’s actions are strongly influenced by the everyday actions of citizens which are publicized by mass media, even when the political system does not grant the right to free, fair, and contested elections. With the Islamic regime resorting to violent oppression of spontaneous non-violent public protest episodes for which the ordinary police force was unprepared, the Green movement’s use of media has arguably contributed to the regime’s various and pre-existing legitimacy crises. However, given that the Principalists and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad are currently in power and endorsed by the highly powerful Ayatollah Khamanei, there is little hope for movement success via substantive institutional or structural change.

Keeping these conditions and limitations in mind, it is argued that a broader, more dynamic approach focusing on the dynamics of contention and processes of social movements rather than movement origins is the necessary framework for the analysis of contexts such as that of Iran’s Green movement. While addressing authoritarian systems which utilize socializing mechanisms such as the institutions of education, religion, and mass media to not only pacify but sometimes blatantly repress political opinion, equal attention must also be paid to the way in which ordinary citizens subtly utilize the public sphere for the purposes of initiating a contentious dialogue with the otherwise reluctant regime. This paper asks what effect the introduction of new media has had on these cycles of protest and repression, which constitute the interaction between social movement actors and political authority.
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“If a writer knows enough about what he is writing about, he may omit things he knows. The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one ninth of it being above water”

- Ernest Hemingway
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Figure 1. Middle East Internet Users, September 2009
Figure 2. Internet Users per 100 People

LIST OF TERMS
Basi\textsuperscript{j} (literally “resistance”), paramilitary force of war veterans and volunteers
CSS Center for Strategic Studies (a reformist presidential think tank)
DTV/OSU/OCU, Daftar-e-Takim-e Vahdat, Office of Consolidating Unity, Office for Strengthening Unity, the organization of Iran's student movement
IRI Islamic Republic of Iran
ICRTC International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran
ICT Information communication technology
IRGC Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
IRIB, Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting
IRNA, Islamic Republic News Agency
Kayhan, influential conservative Iranian newspaper
Maghreb, enmity against God
MIRO Mojahedin of the Islamic Revolution Organization founded 1991 (reformist)
MOIS Ministry of Intelligence and Security
NCSPO National Center for the Study of Public Opinion
pasdaran (Revolutionary Guards) SCC Society of Combatant Clerics (conservative)
SM(s) Social movement(s)
Velayat-e faqih (the Rule of the Jurisprudent)/ Supreme Leader

\textsuperscript{1} a paramilitary volunteer militia founded in November 1979 consisting of war veterans and volunteer militia members
“In authoritarian systems, where nonviolent protest would be smartly repressed, opposition movements have become skilled at mounting unobtrusive, symbolic and peaceful forms of distribution that avoid repression while symbolizing contention.”

- Sidney Tarrow, Power in Numbers

Introduction

More than three decades after its establishment, the overall legitimacy of the current Iranian regime is being questioned by over half a year of protests following the highly contested June 2009 presidential elections. Given a recent shift of emphasis from Islamic obligations and principles originally set forth by the Iranian revolution towards an emphasis on the rights of citizens and the republican features of the Iranian political system, can mass media communication and information computer technology (ICT) emerge as a rallying point for what Asef Bayat refers to as the socialization of the state? In order words, can society utilize media outlets in order to force the state into being more responsive to its socio-political demands?

Through an examination of the historical use of media and other public spaces as a way of circumventing the exclusionary politics of the Islamic Republic, this paper seeks to examine how the rapid growth of Internet usage over the last decade (2000-2010, Figure 1^a and 2^b) has influenced political participation and activism. The mobilization and communication tactics of previous reformist generations show that in the absence or severe restriction of formal political opinion, media has often served as a solution to these limits on freedom of expression and assembly under the authoritarian regime. While it is argued that the use of the Internet before and after the 2009 elections has been extremely influential for movement mobilization, this fact is overshadowed by the reality that the state has complete control over any and all resistance possibilities.

Chapter one begins with an overview of social movement theory as it applies to post-revolutionary Iran, drawing in large part from author Asef Bayat’s concept of nonmovement in its passive and active forms in order to explain the social movements of the 1990s reformist period.
Comparing conventional perspectives of social movements with more recent interpretations, it is shown that due to the recent regime crackdown on the public sphere, the Green movement’s members must rely on far more subtle strategies than even nonviolent protest in order to express their opinions and avoid being reprimanded by the harsh hand of the regime. Thus in a strategic move for survival, the movement has retreated back to its usual use of media as a forum for discussion and strategic planning for the future.

In Chapter 2, it is argued that this movement tactic was first utilized by the post-Islamist trend that originated in the early 1990s. Members of the reform movement that emerged from a re-evaluation of Islam moved to Internet activism around 2003 due to the regime’s selective use of violence and repression from 1998 onwards (Chapter 3). What has now been labeled as the Green movement is a continuation of the reformist movement. Moving from a passive to active network in the aftermath of the 2009 election, the movement has now returned back to its passive nonmovement repertoire due to another round of repression by the regime (Chapter 4).

A critical aim of the last chapter and the conclusion is to determine if the recent drop in protests are a sign of movement shortcomings or simply a regrouping of the movement after massive losses in the form of activist arrest, torture, and execution. It is hypothesized that the result will more closely resemble something in between the two aforementioned options, as contentious politics rarely fit seamlessly into any one category. Social movements are not single-episode expressions that melt away under an act of repression, but rather “they are prolonged, many-sided processes of agency and change, with ebbs and flows, whose enduring ‘forward linkages’ can revitalize popular mobilization when the opportunity arises.”

Through an examination of various contentious episodes, we seek to learn more about the interaction between the conservative Islamist regime and its reformist challengers.

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Chapter 1: Dynamics of Contention

From a classic perspective social movements commonly try to pressure opponents or authorities to fulfill social demands or claims. These movement actors, or challengers, are often viewed as external entities that aim to reform the governmental structure or influence the current regime. However, this is a limited and therefore unreasonable framework for our analysis of contention. As Asef Bayat claims, even if social movements are not engaged in a political campaign, they may still be involved in what Alberto Melucci calls cultural production.\(^3\) A key example for both of these efforts is the mobilization of Iranian women and students during the 1990s. By practicing the art of presence and persistence, these groups were able to successfully place claims upon the state, even despite their organizational inferiority and resource disparity.

Antonio Gramsci perceives the state as the unity of consent and coercion and rejects the separation between civil society and the state. His concepts “war of position” (a strategy of the subaltern to establish societal hegemony and encircling the state) as well as “passive revolution” (the political elites’ strategy to avert social movements by appropriating their aim, so that “the state, the original target of change, takes charge of the process,”)\(^4\) help account for the continual shifts in power between the state and the subaltern. While passive revolution may result in some degree of reform, its ultimate goal is demobilization of social movement actors.

Noting this dynamic interaction, Asef Bayat claims that social movement analysts should not write of social movements as if they are groups, but rather as consisting “of sustained interactions between challengers and authorities.”\(^5\) Like many other scholars of social movements, Bayat claims it is rare that a single, unified group make the challenge but rather that movement organizers seek to build coalitions under invented names and disciplining participants to maintain the illusion of a united front. Drawing attention to the routine nature of social protest and repression, Bayat quotes

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\(^3\) Bayat, *Making Islam Democratic*, 94.
\(^4\) Ibid., 90.
\(^5\) Ibid., 195.
Charles Tilly in saying, “the whole apparatus bears a remarkable resemblance to that of electoral campaigns.” In this view, the cycles of mobilization and repression actually serve to reinforce and sustain one another.

1.1. Social Movements: Beyond political opportunity structures to relational fields

Classic social movement theories such as resource mobilization involve factors such as Charles Tilly’s concepts of “opportunity” (factors that facilitate action) and “suppression” (factors that restrict it). This perspective views activists as repressed outside forces that fight states, whereas Jack A. Goldstone argues that our analysis of social movements needs to “be situated in a dynamic relational field,” where the continuous actions of “state actors, allied and counter-movement groups, and the public at large all influence social movement emergence, activity, and outcomes.”

This broadening of social movement actors to the public at large drastically diverges from traditional SM theory, which typically focuses on the individual or society as a starting point rather than seeing SMs as a dynamic, ongoing process.

While the blurred boundaries of formal-informal action originates with earlier scholars of the field, Jack A. Goldstone further blurs these boundaries by proving how social protests and routine political participation are complimentary, citing striking parallels between protest and institutionalized politics such as elections. For example, he mentions how it is not just political parties, but also social movements, which influence the outcome of electoral contests. In his relational approach, Goldstone names two very simple principles relating to political opportunities and protests. First, societies with any stage of democratic institutions are likely to show persistent social movement activity involving both institutionalized action and protest. Second, major protest cycles are likely to be triggered by major society-wide crises. Also, in following with Jess Goodwin

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6 Charles Tilly, History, Sociology and Dutch Collective Action, via Bayat Making Islam Democratic, 149
7 Ibid, 149
9 Bayat, Making Islam…, p 18-21, Goldstone, 334
10 Goldstone, “More Social Movements…”
and James Jasper, Goldstone notes three major shortcomings of the concept political opportunity structure, concluding that in actuality, “open and democratic societies encourage protest, generally making it more useful and attractive.”11 Like Bayat, Goldstone sees social movements as involving a wide range of actors and as encompassing formal as well as informal action. While this dynamic framework allows for a comprehensive perspective on what exactly a social movement entails, further explanation is necessary in order to identify and evaluate our particular case.

1.2 Social Movements and changes in the “public”

With the development of trans-border and satellite communication, Jayne Rodgers identifies two senses of ‘public’, both of which are challenged by attempts to control media organizations.12 The first is “the equation of public with institutionalized political power, contrasting with private, non-state activities.”13 Rodgers argues that there can be a second interpretation of ‘public’ in which the concept is available to the general public, signifying visibility or openness. This unclear definition leads to a blurred distinction between private and public life in Iran. Thus, as Rodgers explains, with the increasing use of the Internet, public political activity will intrinsically be linked to the private realm.

Similar to Rodgers’ bifurcation of the public, Asef Bayat’s Life as Politics distinguishes two factors that render the streets as an area of protest. First is the use of public space as a site of contestation between the actors and the authorities. In this sense, what makes the streets a political site is the active or participative (as oppose to passive) use of public space. This is because these sites (sidewalks, public parks, intersections, etc.) are increasingly becoming the domain of state power, which regulates their use. The state ensures these domains remain orderly, and expects users to operate them passively, as an active use of the street actually serves to challenge the authority of the

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13 Ibid.
Secondly, the streets create a passive network among the people who use and operate the public space. In other words, this network represents “instantaneous communication among atomized individuals that is established by tactic recognition of their common identity, and which is mediated through real and virtual space.”

By successfully using the art of presence, the nonmovements of Iranian women and youth succeeded in socializing the state to meet its needs. Asef Bayat claims a nonmovement may use the art of presence to subvert authoritarian state rule because the state rules by “weaving its logic of power” (through norms, rules, institutions) “into the fabric of society,” what Bayat calls socialization of the state. Taking Goldstone’s idea of both political parties and social movement’s influencing institutional outcome one step further; Bayat develops his own concept of “nonmovements,” consisting of both active and passive networks. Nonmovements, or the collective endeavors of non-collective actors, constitute a key vehicle through which active citizenry might be recognized. This is because of the nonmovement actors’ constant mobilization against, and negotiation or engagement with, the dominant powers (in this case, the state). Not only do nonmovements cause significant change in the actors’ life-chances; they may in the meantime “evolve into sustained social movements and contentious politics when the opportunity arises.” In this sense social nonmovements are fragmented and often inaudible collectives, but their power in numbers allows them to act collectively when needed in order to protect a common interest.

Bayat mentions four main distinctions between nonmovements and social movements, with the last two points being of most significance. First, while SM actors are involved in “extraordinary
deeds of mobilization and protestation that go beyond the routine of everyday life, nonmovements are made up of practices that are part and parcel of the ordinary practices of everyday life,” such as a woman trying to go to college or work in public. Second, nonmovements are carried out by fragmented groups, whose power lay not in the actors’ unity, but rather in their “power of numbers.” This power in numbers is a key notion of Bayat’s nonmovements, described as when a large group of people acting in common has the “effect of mobilizing and legitimizing those acts that are otherwise deemed illegitimate.”

Passive networks are a key feature in nonmovements, defined as instantaneous communications between atomized individuals, “which are established by tactic recognition of their commonalities directly in public or indirectly through mass media.” This model is in contrast to active networks, where individuals with similar positions are brought together deliberately. Nonmovements are the prevalent form of activism in regions like the Middle East because authoritarian states, which are often intolerant of any organized dissent, tend to fragment the subaltern. Practicing the art of presence means finding a space where you can subvert the dominant ideology. Iran’s Green movement, which has contested election fraud and demanded democratic reform, has its roots in various nonmovements, which “then burst collectively into the open,” once a political opportunity arose in June 2009.

The significance of this concept lies in the idea of imagining a movement of atomized individuals who are largely deprived of organization and deliberate networking. Similar to Benedict Anderson’s notion of imagined communities, Bayat’s concept of “passive network” implies that individuals may be mobilized to act collectively without active or deliberately constructed networks. Consequently, passive nonmovements are more common, as they require no physical space in

Finally, it is critical to remember that nonmovements are not carried out by small groups of people at the margins. Rather, they are common practices of everyday life carried out by millions of people who albeit remain fragmented. In other words, the power of nonmovements does not lie in the unity of actors, which may then threaten disruption rests on the “power of big numbers.”

20 Ibid., 14.
21 Ibid, 22-3.
22 Ibid., 250
which to convene. The street as a public space has an intrinsic feature that makes it possible for people to become mobilized through establishing passive networks. Although they are a fragmented union, once the atomized actors’ are confronted by a threat, their passive network turns active for the purposes of defending their common interest. In 2009 the threat to individual Iranians came through harsh government repression of nonviolent protestors. Thus, in the weeks and months following June 12th, 2009 elections, the Iranian people began to create an active nonmovement of their own, which is struggling to survive but still active today.

1.3. Social Movements and Media; the Internet as Politics

Douglas Kellner explains how developments of the technological revolution have transformed and expanded Jürgen Habermas’ original idea of the public sphere. Whereas Habermas previously had distinguished between ‘production’ and ‘interaction’, Kellner observes these same distinctions can no longer be made. He claims the most important shift brought about by the revolution is the fact that now, new media and computer technologies are increasingly serving the interests of the people rather than the corporate elites, leading to a new opportunity for advances towards democratization.23

From a more realistic viewpoint, Ruud Koopmans claims all actors involved in social movements “use the mass media as a crucial source of information on each other’s views and behavior, and evaluate and adapt their own strategies as a result of the reactions they bring about in the public sphere.”24 However, in non-democratic contexts, governments do not have as much of a problem with violently suppressing those who are threatening or even just positioning themselves against the ruling elite. It is partially for this reason that so many social justice movements in the third world depend on (and sometimes even require) communication with the international

23 Kellner, Douglas Habermas, the Public Sphere and Democracy, 16.
community in order to avoid arbitrary arrests or torture of citizens who are simply verbally criticizing or critiquing the regime, rather than posing a risk to its security.

While claiming “the Internet provides the possibility of an alternative symbolic economy, forms of culture and politics, and instruments of political struggle,” Kellner also recognizes that it is up to the oppositional movement to make proper use of this tool. In regimes like Iran, explicit dissent is extremely risky, as authoritarian regimes are often better equipped at suppressing dissent than movements are at mobilizing. Larry Diamond claims a reason for this is because there is cross-regime communication about repression tactics. Although the communicative potential of the Internet is undeniable, the critical question is if political inclusion in the cyber world can translate to concrete political achievements. In this context, it will be shown that this medium has the potential to mobilize people both on and offline. For our purposes, the advantage of the Internet is the potential it gives actors “to challenge this spatialization of politics and to contribute to the ongoing reconfigurations of political practices which have been taking place for decades.”

Similarly, Koopmans asserts that media is a new public sphere which hosts the primary, although indirect, interaction between social movement actors and political authority. During a time when the distance between state and society seems to be constantly growing, non-hierarchical platforms such as the Internet may help to balance out the inequalities of the social movement process. Despite this claim, the political and historical context must always be taken into account when assessing a social movement’s progression over time. As Jayne Rodgers suggests, a “paradox of the spread of the Internet as a tool of political activism is that states are necessarily both drivers of the technology and among those who have the most interest in controlling certain aspects of its

development.” Despite the advantages of social networking sites such as YouTube, these benefits are often limited, entirely absent, or may actually serve to repress political expression under draconian regimes such as that of the IRI.

The presence of public mobilization followed by high levels of repression and finally a retreat back to more subtle forms of resistance is a recurring trend among Iran’s post-Islamist movements. In this cycle of repression and mobilization, the regime has utilized a strategy of selective displays of violence as well as the tactic of passive revolution. In the words of Charles Tilly, “their strategy resembles that of many old-regime European rulers, who lack the capacity for continuous surveillance and control of their subject population,” and thus respond to popular protests “with exemplary punishment—rounding up a few supposed ringleaders, subjecting them to hideous public execution, and thus warning other potential rebels of what might befall them.” Tilly concludes by asserting that this strategy is ironically most successful when the “specialists in coercion,” the state, “never actually has to deploy their violent means.” Through the selective and often excessively harsh punishment of reformists, the regime is attempting to intimidate other political activists from publicizing their opposition.

While the reformists have been successful in occasionally gaining control of segments of the public sphere for the purposes of movement mobilization, validation, and enlarging the scope of contention, the reality is that the media in Iran is under strict control of the conservative elite. Using Gramsci’s strategy of passive revolution, powerful political positions such as the velayat-e-faqih present the illusion of reform while in reality co-opting the movement under control of the state’s institutionalized politics. The strategic use of media by Iranian activists to publicize unjust treatment by the regime and to broadcast their displays of contestation has been temporarily allowed by the

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30 Ibid., 223.
state, but given the reality and limitations of social movements, activists are eventually forced into submission.
Chapter 2: The Emergence of a Post-Islamist Society

The idea of “political development” (tawsī-yi siyasi) originated in the early 1990s from “religious intellectuals’ examination of Iran’s closed political structure.” Sa’id Hajjariyan, one of the most innovative strategists of the Islamic left founded the Political Bureau of the President’s Center for Strategic Studies (CSS) in 1989, which then became the organizational and intellectual base for the reformists. The result of women and student nonmovements of the 1990s was the victory of President Mohammad Khatami in May 1997, confirming effective mobilization from below, expanding through the activism of the youth, students, women and the middle class. This shift from post-Islamist movement to government was “the first time in Iran’s history that intellectuals had converged with both the grassroots and the state,” and signaled the beginning of a new cycle of resistance. Through the nonmovements of the women and students, the Iranian public began making its first demands for a more democratic and representative governance. Consequently, reform (islahat) became the primary method employed by emerging SMs to realize the post-Islamist goal of democratizing the Iranian polity.

Tremendous population growth during the 1980s due to the almost decade-long governmental ban of contraceptives greatly hindered the state’s ability to provide as many social resources. This resulted in a crisis of loyalty and a shift away from formal politics. As Azadeh Kian-Thiebaut suggests, “Any state incapable of assuring the livelihood of its employees and armed forces can neither control them nor command their allegiance for very long.” High unemployment and a struggling economy in the mid-1990s suggested the state was losing its ability to maintain loyalty, and was thus entering a crisis of legitimacy.

During President Khatami’s two terms in office, Iranians became increasingly independent of the state and shifted towards creating a strong civil society in order to fill the deficit left behind by

32 Ibid., 94
33 Ibid., 97
34 Kian-Thiebaut, Azadeh. Political and Social Transformations in Post-Islamist Iran, 14-15.
an incapable government. Due to the blurred line between the religious and the political, ordinary citizens were given the opportunity to influence religious issues by participating in politics. Thus, the various cleavages within the religious sector of Iranian politics were now forced to compete for public approval through debate and negotiation.\(^{35}\) This independence was sustained throughout President Khatami’s two terms and came to strongly influence future public displays of contention, especially the actions of the Green movement during the post-2009-election unrest.

2.1. Initial Challenges to Islamic politics,

Throughout the first decade of its existence, the Islamic Republic of Iran was successful in socially indoctrinating and institutionally consolidating its conservative Islamic ideals upon the Iranian political sphere, funneling the revolutionary fervor of a broad based coalition into a religious and greedy plot. The end of an almost decade long war with Iraq allowed Iranians to take a step back and really assess what had happened since the revolution. Antonio Gramsci believes to successfully achieve a revolution, there needs to be a control over institutions and society. While Ayatollah Khomeini and his strict Islamic code permeated the political structure of Iran, there was never a respective Islamization of society. This experience of an Islamic revolution without an Islamic movement initiated Iran’s first post-revolutionary demands for increased secularization of governmental policies, essentially calling for a change in policy to better fit with the experience of citizens’ everyday lives.

The year 1989 witnessed the development of a new public and the emergence of an urban Iranian individual, creating a variety of new actors in the post-Islamist game, while the conservatives attempted to thwart these new social spaces and forces. Through the state’s 1990s attempt to rebuild what they saw as an eroding Muslim identity, the Islamic regime was trying to return the population to Islam by resurrecting public religious sites and rituals. However, the constant contradictions of political Islam made this task nearly impossible. The social mobilization of the rural-urban migrant

\(^{35}\)Kian-Thiebaut, Political and Social Transformations in Post-Islamist Iran
youth through education was made possible by government subsidies and university quotas which reserved 40 percent of university slots for families of martyrs and members of the pasdaran (Revolutionary Guards) and basij (literally “resistance”). Despite attempts to instate Islamist educational policies in higher education, universities resisted these changes. Ironically, by preserving the secular universities, these government-funded schools would later breed some of the regime’s future oppositional leaders.

After the long-awaited Iran-Iraq ceasefire, the public began to make economic, social, and political demands. Realizing that the regime would not hold for much longer without irreversible repercussions upon its reputation, the government allowed for increased freedom of the press in order to quell the immense discontent among the majority of its constituency. This openness was in part what allowed for the election of Mohammad Khatami in 1997. However, tremendous difficulties faced by the president would deem his eight-year term in office a disappointment regarding the possibilities of successful reform carried out by those in state power.

According to Asef Bayat, the post-Islamist polity called for secularization (institutional separation of religion and state), but not secularism (diminishing the significance of religion in society). Some of these reformist religious intellectuals were originally adamant supporters of Ayatollah Khomeini and even took part in the American Hostage Crisis, but had since intellectually matured and reformed their political stances. For the post-Islamist actors, the significance of religion was not in the velayat-e-faqih or in rituals, but rather in its ethics and morals. They believed that if the position of supreme leader was necessary at all, the post should be publicly elected and accountable to the people.

These debates regarding the reform of the Islamist regime largely emerged in the pages of the budding 1990s reformist press. These publications gave a voice to the un- or underrepresented
segments of the Iranian public. Established in 1992, the feminist monthly Zanan was the sister publication of Kiyan, a journal written by religious intellectuals who reject the notion “Islam huwa al-
hal” (Islam is the solution) and draw a stark distinction between democracy and the Qur’anic notions of shura (consultation) or bey’a (allegiance). This new religious thinking gained popularity not only among the literate public, but also in the hawzehs or seminaries of Qom. While 1991 signified the beginning of the reformist press, this freedom was short lived, as in 1998 Kami’yyih (Society), the first daily of civil society was shut down, followed by many other reformist and leftists publications.

Both challenges and contradictions of political Islam caused the emergence of new movements. The rising power of reformist and dissident figures such as Mohammad Khatami and AbdulKarim Soroush during the 1990s, as well as a newly liberalized media became the first sign of tensions between state and society over altering Islamic laws, institutions, and norms to fit societal preferences and interests. Having lost its original revolutionary fervor, the Islamic republic and the clerical monopoly on state power was about to face its greatest collective challenge in the form of the reformist movement.

The overwhelming popular election of President Khatami in 1997 was the first occasion where the Iranian public explicitly and genuinely expressed their desire for reform within the traditional political structure of the Islamic regime. By granting Khatami over 70% of the eligible vote, Iranians from all political orientations had proven their ability to transcend religious, economic, and ideological barriers in order to unify under the larger aim of overall system reform. Running on a platform of bringing the rule of law to an Islamic system which lacked this form of legal legitimacy, as well as promoting a more free press and the advancement of an Islamic civil society, Mohammad Khatami seemed to be the exact candidate the Iranian constituency was looking

40 Although it eventually appeared again under three different names
41 Bayat, Asef. Making Islam democratic, 91, 118
42 Which was immediately retracted due to a huge surge in birth rate which left the state less capable of accommodating these new populations
for. However after sharing political power with others the conservative clerics began to regret their decision once they witnessed the tremendous popularity of reformist ideologies within both secular and Islamic segments of the population. Deeming this development a grave threat to their stronghold on power, the conservatives immediately sought to limit President Khatami’s ability to enact the reforms he had promised his constituency during both of his terms in order to thwart any future reformist sentiment.

This post-Islamist space of relative inclusion and dialogue “invoked a sense of openness and freedom that stood in sharp contrast to the rigid regimented geography of Islamism,” causing supreme leader ‘Ali Khamenei and other conservatives clerics to warn about the erosion of Islamic identity throughout the country, thus the state initiated several pro-Islamic public projects and expressed outrage against this new thinking in hard-line publications by harshly criticizing concepts like promoting the presence of women in the public sphere.44

2.2. The Emergence and Fragmentation of the Student Movement

With the erosion of other civil society platforms since the late 1970s and subsequent ban on all media outlets, Iranian universities flourished as a center for intellectual thought and discussion. However, as Eva Egron-Polak warns, “we must not fail to underline that the rules and functioning of civil society are laid down by the state.”45 She claims that for the state, “education is one of the influences, perhaps the most important influence, in the creation of sound citizenship and morals, and of industrial efficiency.”46 Ironically, Iranian campuses have also historically been some of the most powerful sites of resistance, which is why many authorities view “education as ‘dangerous’ and in need of being controlled.”47 But despite the regime’s wishes, student activists were and still are

43 Bayat, Aref. Making Islam democratic: p 56
44 Ibid, 58
45 Egron-Polak, Shahrzad Mojab: The State, University, and the Construction of Civil Society in The Middle East (1998), 661-663
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
determined to push towards their goal of socializing the state towards a more inclusive, representative, and tolerant governance.

A 1995 poll revealed that while over 85 percent of Iranian youth spent their leisure time watching television, only 6 percent of them watched religious programs, and a “staggering 80 percent of the nation’s youth were indifferent or opposed to the clergy, religious obligations, and religious leadership.”

Given the harsh social controls placed upon the youth, they resorted to legitimate norms and institutions to assert their youthful claims, and in doing so they creatively reinvented and subverted the meaning of those norms and institutions. Through the subversive accommodation the religious ritual of Muharram and *sham-e ghariban* (10th night of Muharram), the youth turned to these institutionalized forms of public expression, manipulating religious ceremonies into social events by establishing ‘Husayn parties’. The reformists had called for a love of life and socio-political tolerance, and in doing so supplied the youth with a political platform, unintentionally sparking Iran’s youth movement, which called for individuality through everyday struggles. But these quests for self-expression were not unique to Iran.

Because the state suppressed the oppositional press and monopolized media broadcasting, the university remained one of the only public outlets difficult to silence, and thus it emerged as a new public sphere. While Egron-Polak admits the suppression of Middle Eastern universities is often bloody, oddly enough, the secular structure of Iranian higher education actually made universities an optimum gathering place for political intellectuals and activists. Iranian universities encourage students to challenge what they are taught. Subsequently, an inherent but unintentional generational opposition movement began to emerge out of the nation’s scholars.

According to Bayat, where moral and political authorities converge, draconian state control gives rise to unique youth and other social identities and collective defiance. Additionally, the post-

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49 As Doreen Massey notes “Across the world, even the poorest of young people strive to buy into an international cultural reference system: the right trainers, a T-shirt with a Western logo, a baseball cap with the right slogan” – via Bayat, *Making Islam Democratic.*
Islamist reform movement moved beyond religious and nationalist ideologies in order to consciously embrace modernity, pluralism, and human rights while also preserving faith and spirituality, all qualities that could help foster the strong foundations of a more democratic structure. The cooperation and coordination of the youth movement and the women’s rights movement led to the unique public debates of the 1990s over such concepts and definitions of terms like “joy”, “leisure”, or more seriously “justice”, “freedom”, and other words which would normally be associated with a republic. These discussions exemplified the fact that Islam cannot only be the subject of revolution, but also its object. In other words, Islam can be the target and the aim of a movement.

Founded after a September 1979 meeting of Islamic Student Associations, the Office for Strengthening Unity (Daftar-i Tahkim-i Vahdat, DTV) has emerged as an important platform for these debates taking place in university campuses. As of 1999, the DTV had 50 voting member associations from state universities and 30 nonvoting ones from the Islamic Azad University system. The associations in this latter group are closely controlled by the state. Encouraged by top state officials who worried about the increasing radicalism of the DTV, a conservative student by the name of Heshmatollah Tabarzadi joined the organization. Tabarzadi’s actions within the DTV council led to the creation of two factions – one leftist and the other, his own more conservative faction. In 1987 Tabarzadi broke with the DTV completely and created the Islamic Union of Associations of University Students and Higher Education Centers (also known as the Tabarzadi Group).

The DTV officially split into the conservative Shiraz and reformist Allameh factions in 2002. The latter, more leftist faction created national organizations such as Students for Freedom and Equality and helped organize the protests of 1999, 2002 and 2009. A similar organization founded in 1996, The United Student Front, began to hold more informal meetings off university

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camps, but the conservative parliament succeeded in closing the organization’s office and website in 2000, forcing the student group and others like it to go underground. In order to keep dissent under control the regime founded Ansar-e Hezbollah, or "Followers of the Party of God," in 1995. A vigilante group that uses force but is not part of Iran’s official law enforcement, the organization’s members wear plain clothes, and are commonly called upon to, often violently, suppress nonviolent protesters as they did during both the 1999 student riots as well as the unrest following the 2009 election.

While debates about and demands for reform was gaining momentum on and off university campuses, on the political front, Islamist conservatives, using a previously popular tactic of Ayatollah Khomeini’s era, were trying to distracted reformist efforts by first acknowledging them and then drawing the public’s attention towards a more imminent threat. Similar to Ayatollah Khomeini’s strategic use of events such as the American hostage crisis and the Iraq war to distract from his rapid seizure of political power, the conservative opposition during Khatami’s presidency sought to defer the reformists from their path, thus hindering possibilities of democratization. Additionally, the clerical elite had invested political and social capital in powerful organizations such as the Council of Guardians, the judiciary, the Revolutionary Guards, as well as large charities such as the Martyrs’ Foundation, and they would not give up such great stakes without a fight.

The battle between President Khatami and Ayatollah Khamenei illustrates the tremendous difficulties of the reformists while in political power: Khamenei simultaneously supported President Khatami while also lashing out against his reforms in order to be viewed in a favorable light by a public who revered their president. Consequently, the movement that had emerged to curtail the supreme leader’s power was put in a position where it unintentionally contributed to its legitimacy.

52 As can be seen by the Shi'a myths and actions such as the fatwa called against Salman Rushdie, the distraction of the conservative overhaul on power by focusing instead on the uncertainties of war and post-revolutionary restructuring.
53 Brumberg, Daniel. “Dissonant Politics in Iran and Indonesia” Georgetown University Political Science Quarterly, 382-395
54 Bayat, Making Islam Democratic, p 126-7
The reformist movement was further undermined by the conservatives’ strategic distraction from President Khatami’s “Twin Bills,“ which many viewed as the official indicator of the possibility of Islamic reform. As the title suggests, Khatami’s intention for the bill was two-fold: first, to eliminate the Council of Guardian’s ability to screen candidates for the election of the Majlis and the Assembly of Experts, and second, to increase the power of the position of president, including the right of the leader to suspend rulings which he saw as unconstitutional. The conservatives responded to this demand by distracting from the bill through the sudden issuing of a court order to execute prominent post-Islamist intellectual Hashim Aghajari on November 7th, 2002. The Guardian Council rejected both bills and eventually President Khatami officially withdrew the attempt at reform in April 2004.

Outrage at the court ordered execution sparked the first reemergence of student protests since they had been viciously silenced in 1999. The DTV called for general protest by students and faculty. Even the newspaper Kayhan and state television director Ali Larijani criticized the ruling, representing public discontent all across the political spectrum. After ten days of nation-wide demonstrations, Ayatollah Khamenei was compelled to ask for a careful reconsideration of Aghajari’s case. While February 2003 announcement of the reduction of Aghajari’s sentence from death by execution to a four-year prison was a victory for the reformists, it also reiterated the superior power of the supreme leader as the extra-legal arbitrator of state policy. Still, by using the street as politics, Iranians had successfully changed the regime’s decision. Meanwhile the DTV still remained fragmented over whether or not to vote in the 2005 presidential elections. By late 2004, the leftist wing of the DTV had called for a nation-wide boycott. Although the reform movement had successfully gained formal political power, they also faced, “the classic dilemma of a parallel

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56 Ibid., 128
57 Ibid.
power structure in which Islamist opponents, through their control of coercive institutions and economic networks, managed to intercept any reformist progress. However, the heavy vetting of reformist candidates by the conservatives led to the 2004 walkout of 144 Majlis members. The reformist party was now out of power while its constituents still wanted socio-political reform. 

Asef Bayat attributes this trend of socialization of the state to modernity, which “offers unparalleled opportunities for many people to thrive, forge identities, and get ahead in life, and yet excludes and ravages the fortunes of many others.” Modern capitalist economy and science, urbanization, education, and the idea of citizenship are closely tied to the flourishing youth, and public women who foster new forms and spaces of social existence as well as engender particular demands. However Bayat warns, “While sharing state power may enable social movements to turn some of their ideas into public policy, failure to do so, even though due to opponents’ sabotage, would undermine their support base in society, thus rendering them powerless.”

After witnessing the failure of a top-down approach, it became clear that the reform movement needed to “go beyond discursive struggles for democratic polity by consolidating their institutional foundations within the fabric of society, to link up intimately with the subaltern constituencies.” This is something earlier reformists could not accomplish under President Khatami, but a task at which the Green movement, as a more bottom-up attempt at reform, may be more successful at achieving.

2.3 Politics of Fear, State Strategy of Selective Violence and the Power of Principalists

Ever since the coming to power of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, his Principalist regime has sought to thwart or co-opt all attempts at political reform and has demonized efforts towards such aims as acts against the state. The regime’s strategic singling out of human rights and reformist activists is intended to be a warning for other Iranians who may be inclined to challenge

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60 Bayat, Asef, *Making Islam Democratic*, 198
61 Ibid, 130.
63 Ibid.
the power of the government. The intensification of these acts of repression by the state following the disputed 2009 elections are identified and analyzed below and in greater detail throughout chapter four. By resorting to violence and the violation of citizenship during the most recent cycle of mobilization and repression, the Iranian regime has shown it has been influenced by the actions of the Green movement. Now all social movement actors have been using the Internet to both monitor opposing groups as well as to construct their own movement strategies.

On May 2010, Mehdi Karroubi wrote an open letter to the former head of the judiciary, Ayatollah Mousavi-Ardebili, claiming that instead of providing security to the Iranian people, the judiciary has turn into an institution of intimidation. This speaks to the recent tendency of the Islamic Republic’s Revolutionary Court to disregard several articles of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), such as the right to a fair trial. Numerous show trials held during August and September of 2009 have been recognized as a violation of human rights by various international organizations and continue into 2010. At least sixteen activists have been condemned to death, and seven have already been executed. On March 7th 2010, Tehran Prosecutor Abbas Ja’fari Dowlatabadi announced that a special branch of the Revolutionary Court would be formed inside of Evin prison. Upon this announcement, Nasrin Sotoudeh told the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran that “judges are now housed in an environment that is entirely under the oversight of the Ministry of Intelligence.”

Just like the passive revolution of Twin Bills through a court case distraction, the actions of the Green movement may end up granting protestors false concessions while the regime simultaneously demobilizes the movement through exemplary confessions and executions of activists broadcasted by the state. Like the reformists movement of the 1990s, superior power and resources over the nation’s media leaves the movement under the control of the state, which

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65 International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, April 2010
tolerates just enough of an opening of the public sphere to pacify its citizens and then proceeds to swiftly crackdown on dissent, signaling that the wave of liberty is over.

While the Green movement ceased to publically display its numbers on the street after 2010, this was not for a lack of support or motivation, but more on the grounds of being rational actors in the social movement process. On January 28th 2010, just two weeks before the 31st anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, Tehran’s Prosecutor announced that Mohammad Reza Ali-Zamani and Arash Reahmanipour had been executed by hanging that morning. The Revolutionary Court had convicted both of moharebeh (enmity against God) on account of their “alleged membership” in Anjoman-e Padeshahi-e Iran (API), a banned group that supports a restoration of the monarchy, as well as “harming national internal security.” On May 9th, 2010 state-run news organization Islamic Republic News Agency announced another series of executions on the grounds of moharebeh of four men and one woman including Farzad Kamangar, Ali Heydarian, Farhad Vakili and Shirin Alam-Holi along with Mehdi Eslamian who were all members of Iran’s Kurdish minority and convicted of involvement with banned groups. Kamangar, Heydarian and Vakili were arrested in 2006 and sentenced to death due to their activities involving the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK).

Despite these exemplary executions and confessions, the following two chapters explain how media communication such as the Internet has allowed civil rights activists to properly communicate with supporters all over the world. Although the Internet cannot stop every unjust execution or sentencing from happening, it does have the power to report and permanently archive these injustices. Although the Green movement does not necessarily want to gain institutional power, it is still obligated to adhere to whatever system or structural limitations are put in place by the state, and its members’ behavior influences the overall field of contention in which the social

67 Alam-Holi was accused of belonging to another Kurdish group, the Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (known by its Kurdish acronym PJAK), an armed group that is banned in Iran. Eslamian as executed for allegedly providing financial assistance to his brother who was executed in early 2009 for his alleged bombing of a mosque in Shiraz during April 2008. Despite long prison sentences and bail, to date, many of these decisions have been reviewed and either reduced or retracted due to sever international pressure.
68 a Turkish armed opposition grouped that has been fighting the Turkish government
movement process is carried out. Concerns about the current situation in Iran are over the control of institutional shifts in the judiciary as well as the torture and deaths of several Green movement activists. Most importantly for our purposes, the continued state monopoly of media is exemplified by the recent selling of the state’s telecommunications sector, Telecommunication Company of Iran (TCI) to a company directly affiliated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), or Sepah in September 2009 under the guise of privatization as part of the country’s five-year development plan. This disguised state monopoly of media is yet another example of the regime’s insistence upon maintaining exclusive control of the Iranian public sphere.

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Chapter 3: The Switch from Traditional to Digital Communicative Media

Having realized that the state political system was made by and for the clerics and their supporters who have a monopoly on the nation’s resources, Iranians began to feel alienated from the Islamic regime just as they had felt toward the Shah in the years before the revolution. The extremely low turnout for the 2003 municipal elections and the 2004 parliamentary boycott are clear signs of this sentiment, as well as a loss of faith in the prospects of any future Islamic political liberalization. This alienation resulted in a shift of disenchanted voters to the realm of informal politics. Banned from traditional media, many Iranian intellectuals and journalists began publishing work online as an alternative. With an estimated 30 million Internet users and between 60,000-110,000 active blogs in a population just over 70 million, Iranians have and will continue to flood the Internet with their presence.\(^70\)

The medium was originally introduced to the country in 1992 for (mostly religious) academic purposes. However, as early as 1993 the Internet had a steady presence in more prominent Iranian households. The state holds a virtual monopoly over legal television broadcast and all national phone lines. Thus, unsurprisingly, it also (as least indirectly) owns all Internet Service Providers (ISPs) within the country, and keeps them strictly monitored. Unlike other countries in the region, the Iranian regime has encouraged the expansion of the Internet and has participated actively in its development. From the late 1990s-2003, many Iranian ISPs operated relatively freely, at times even openly defying the state by offering unfiltered services to the public. In fact, it was “not until 2003 that the Iranian government produced any systematic strategy to block Internet websites or filter content.”\(^71\) This was due to the fact that many traditional journalists, writers, and other critiquers of the regime began increasingly using the Internet as a space to express their opposition after the regime crackdowns of 2002-2003.

\(^70\) See Figure 1 and Figure 2 on page 50.
Ruud Koopmans recognizes that direct engagements between protesters, authorities, and the public have not disappeared completely, but they are on the decline. He aims to show that in this absence, the news media has been where the “most relevant part of the mutual observation and interaction” between citizens and authorities takes place.”

The result is a mediated, indirect interaction between state and society replacing more traditional manifestations of public contestation. Instead of participating through voting in elections or reading or watching the daily national news broadcast, individuals will instead seek information online which covers specific issues that personally interest them. This can be seen as an increase in the individualization of the population while simultaneously becoming members of the international digital community.

Unlike elections and other institutionalized forms of participation, the fluidity of media forms such as the Internet allow the informational consumer the control to engage in selective information seeking. Thus, despite the 1999-2002 crackdowns on media, by 2003, “student organizations, women’s groups, NGOs, political parties, and private individuals were supplying uncensored news, analysis, and poor quality political satire to a domestic Internet audience that had grown to more than three million.” Asef Bayat shows how despite these crackdowns on the media, there was a balancing effect in the growth of youth and women’s NGOs to compensate for the repression. For instance, Iranian youth NGOs numbered 400 in 2001 while in 2003 there were 1,110.

William A. Gamson and Gadi Wolfsfeld outline three reasons why a movement would want the attention of mass media: mobilization, validation, and enlargement of conflict scope. Each of

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75 Ibid., 126
76 3 purposes for which movements need the news media (William Gamson and Gadi Wolfsfeld)
1. mobilization (public discourse, media important here)
2. validation—“Receiving standing in the media is a necessary condition before targets of influence will grant a movement recognition and deal with its claims and demands. Conversely, a demonstration with no media coverage at all is a nonevent, unlikely to have any positive influence on mobilizing followers or influencing the target…” (Gamson, Wolfsfeld)
3. scope enlargement: “Finally, movements need the media to broaden the scope of conflict…”
these three factors brings the movement more out into the public sphere and subsequently increases its chances of gaining recognition and representation in the governing coalition. Koopmans also argues that Gamson and Wolfsfeld must recognize that that media is crucial for the flow of information in the reverse direction as well. He claims movement activists depend to a considerable degree on the mass media for information on the standpoints of authorities, third parties, and the larger public on issues that concern them, and- because of the shift from immediate to mediated interaction- they learn about others’ reactions to their actions from the news media. As he explains, all actors involved in social movements “use the mass media as a crucial source of information on each other’s views and behavior, and evaluate and adapt their own strategies as a result of the reactions they bring about in the public sphere.”

However this free access to information is not fully realized under repressive regimes such as that of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Thus, despite access to tools such as the Internet, the censorship of such forms ignites resentment towards the limitations imposed upon them. Pippa Norris argues the increasing gap between the individual and the nation-state results in the emergence of a “new type of deeply critical global citizen, who is excited about the ideals of democracy but is losing confidence in its national practices.” In other words, while technology such as the Internet might bring the idea of democracy to countries like Iran, actual democratization still necessitates a political system and a society willing to work diligently towards achieving reform.

3.1. The Influence of Media in Post-Islamist Iran

A 2003 article by Laleh Ebrahaimian presents the preliminary findings on the impact of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and explores how the social-economics of Iran and other developing countries can benefit from technology upon overcoming challenges

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77 Koopmans, Ruud. “Movements and media.”
encountered under oppressive governance. Iran’s usage of information and communication technology is characterized by continuous internal friction between the conservative and liberal parties. The conservatives are concerned with the socially negative effects of the Internet, and therefore argue that Internet regulation is necessary in order to prevent corruption and to protect Iranian society.

The regime went as far as to institutionalize digital media regulations, but this draconian repression actually exposed the vast potentials of the Internet, making the medium even more attractive as a tool for public dissent. A month before the June 2001 presidential elections, Tehran police shut down 450 Internet cafes, leaving only those in the region that had speeds of 64 kbs/sec or less. Similarly the 2002 closing of dozens of reformist papers caused cyberspace to become an alternative arena for public opinion, as more people turned to the Internet for their source of information and communication. Iran has one of the most repressive systems of Internet censorship in the world, second only to China. In 2006 the Islamic republic was the first and only nation in the world to implement a cap on the bandwidth Internet speed in households to an extremely slow maximum of 128 kbs/sec. This restriction is intended to prevent Iranians from gaining access to or sharing multimedia resources on the Internet such as detailed images and video material.

The government backlash against this virtual mobilization can most clearly be seen during 2003 and afterwards with the arrest of several bloggers and increased censorship in the years between 2003 and 2005. The proliferation of the blogosphere and the subsequent growth in repression of online publishing can be credited to Hossein Derakhshan, otherwise known as the blogfather, who gained his nickname in 2001 for posting easy step-by-step instructions on how to create a weblog in Farsi. According to Asieh Amini, since the initial election of Mahmoud

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79 Efrahimian, Laleh D. Socio-Economic Development in Iran through Information and Communications Technology (2003), JSTOR, p 98
80 Ibid., 98
81 Although broadband and WiMax have become available over the last year, the high price of subscription to these services still leaves them out of the reach of the average Iranian
82 Mojtaba Saminejad and Arash Sigarchi were both arrested in February 2005 for criticizing government policies online, otherwise known as the “Case of the Bloggers”
Ahamadinejad in 2005, the new government views civil society as “a means through which the enemy worked to influence Iranian society.” Thus, the principalists began to increase pressure on journalists, campaigners, and ordinary citizens alike.

Sina Motallebi was the world’s first blogger to be arrested in 2003 for writing in his weblog Rooz Negar about a popular political dissident, Akbar Ganji. Motallebi was freed after 23 days in prison and in a January 2004 interview with Mark Glaser, he gives full credit to blogs, online petitions, and foreign press coverage for his release. He claims that the Islamic regime has underestimated the costs of arresting a freelance journalist, not thinking that there would be such a global movement to defend and fight for the writer on the Internet. Referencing fellow influential bloggers such as Hossein Derakshan, Motallebi emphasizes that even English-language weblogs by Iranian expatriates help solidify the movement by introducing Persian bloggers to the rest of the world, thus promoting a more realistic image of ordinary Iranians. After seeking asylum in the Netherlands after his release, Motallebi is now based in London and has become the founder of ZigZag Magazine.

Similarly, a large number of Iranian expatriates and other international actors have become increasingly involved with circulating information about the movement. As the Harvard University study *Mapping the Persian Blogosphere* claims, “Bloggers have been sent to jail, websites are being blocked, and user bandwidth is restricted, but the Internet continues to be one of the best hopes for homegrown democratic change in autocratic Iran.” Spokesmen and key activists of the Green movement such as Mir Hossein Mousavi have used the Internet as a vital platform to broadcast updates on upcoming events, host discussions, and to disseminate information for the knowledge or mobilization of Green movement actors.

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84 Ibid.
86 Cyber Dissident Database, Sina Motallebi Profile. <http://www.cyberdissidents.org/bin/dissidents.cgi?id=30&ce=1R/.
Not only is weblogistan’s membership large, but it is also incredibly diverse. For instance, Seyyed Mohammad Ali Abtahi, a popular reformist cleric and former vice-president under President Mohammad Khatami created his first weblog in 2002. Known as the “blogging mullah”, Abtahi is notorious for his activity on popular Persian sites such as Facebook, YouTube, and Balatarin. After launching his website www.webnevesgtega.com (“web writings”), it quickly became one of the most visited Iranian blogs. Many younger Internet activists commend such developments, seeing them as proof that the Internet is truly an open and equal marketplace for discussion. Following the lead of others, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad launched his own blog in 2007. His site www.ahmadinejad.ir, is available in English, French, and Arabic, but still is not nearly as visited as more popular blogs such as that of Abtahi. The use of the Internet by those in political power is by no means a new development. As early as the 1997 Iranian presidential elections, both candidates -Mohammad Khatami and Abdollah Nuri- had their own websites which provided Iranian voters with outlines of their political platforms and campaign information.

In his 2003 article entitled, Cyberdissent, The Internet in Revolutionary Iran, Babak Rahimi argues that the Internet has played an important role in the ongoing struggle for democracy in Iran by opening a new virtual space for political dissent. Rahimi states, “The greatest problem for the Iranian government has been the curiosity of the Iranian public, whose demand for the Internet cuts across age, class, gender, and religious boundaries.” While this statement is entirely correct, the author failed to foresee that similar to previous forms of media, the regime will do everything within its power to maintain absolute control of its regulation and use. As in the past, media is either liberalized as a concession to the disenchanted public, or banned if deemed to be a substantial threat to the regime.

The same year Rahimi’s technologically optimistic article was published was the first time the Iranian government began actively filtering the Internet in addition to its policy of encouraging the

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use of new media technologies for its own purposes such as e-government websites and other regulatory practices. As Rahimi explains, the turn of the 21st century marked the simultaneous development and regulatory practices of the regime in the sector of telecommunications and initiated a new decade of restrictions on the freedom of expression as well as a further blurring of the public-private divide.89

Despite these new developments, Lance Bennett’s New Media Power explores “some of the ways in which digital communication networks may be changing the political game in favor of resource-poor players who, in many cases, are experimenting with political strategies outside of conventional political channels such as elections.”90 Bennett argues the overlap and interplay of various forms of media grants the movement the “capacity to communicate messages from desktops to television screens” and vice versa. The following examples of media censorship circumvention by Rooz daily and VOA Persia will further demonstrate the strategic use of digital communication.

3.2 Use of Internet in Selective Political Openings, Rooz online and VOA Persian

The digital daily newspaper Rooz was founded in April 2005 and soon became one of the most frequently visited political news sites in the Persian language. Rooz had reached a daily visitor rate of over one million (60% of whom live in Iran) before it was blocked by authorities in February 2007.91

However, due to its grassroots activism, the publication was able to quickly bypass the ban, and in the very same month that it was shut down, activists began to e-mail complete issues of Rooz to a list of 40,000 Iranian individuals daily.92 After being sent to the initial subscribers, these e-mails are then forwarded and disseminated to other activists, all at very little cost due to the digital nature

89 Rahimi, Babak. "Cyberdissent...."
90 Bennett, Lance. New Media Power, The Internet and Global Activism. 2003.
91 for example, the editorial by Masoud Behnoud, the satirical column by Ebrahim Nabavi and one more piece from the review section) and thus spent a relatively long time on the Rooz website.
of the journal. Also, because Rooz’s editorial board is based outside of the country, these supporters are at no immediate risk of being arrested or censored by the authorities.

Using a similar tactic, Voice of America Persian announced to its viewers that the news agency was aware of the blocking of their website by the Islamic regime in the aftermath of the summer 2009 presidential elections. In response, they informed viewers that they could send e-mails to VOA news and that the organization would respond to the e-mail with the day’s missed news as well as an attachment for circumventing the government-imposed filters. This is an example of a common circumventing technique referred to as Real Simple Syndication (RSS). While the Islamic regime is working on attaining more sophisticated web-filtering programs, for the time being, Iranian Internet users can access unlicensed traffic via their e-mail inboxes. Similarly, many Iranian bloggers have now learned to subscribe to the RSS feed of their favorite blogs in case the main website or server is suddenly blocked by the regime. The period between 2003 and 2006 saw a rapid increase in online arrests, filtering, and censorship. Despite these obstacles, bloggers continued to use anti-filtering software in order to circumvent government censorship. Meanwhile, the ruling conservatives are also concerned about their own presence and reputation online, which has led them to take various actions in order to beef up the regime’s online resume as seen by the launch of the basij blogs and an emphasis on Qom as the primary city of technology.

3.3. The Rise of the Principalists

The alarmed Principalists reacted to public dissent by increasing repression not only on activists but also ordinary citizens, not only over digital platforms but also everyday life through initiatives such as the 2007 Social Safety Project and the unjustified use of terror and intimidation. The project’s primary aim is to combat inappropriate dress, which is enforced by special Guidance Police. Officials identify women with bad-hejab, load them into vans and take them to local

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93 VOA Persia, broadcast July 2009 via satellite in Iran
detention centers until a family member can bring them appropriate attire. However, because there is no clearly defined standard for dress within the law, officers are left to judge how “appropriate” a woman is dressed.\textsuperscript{94} Although the reformists attempted to fight against the 2007 Social Safety Project, their efforts remained fruitless.

Similarly, the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (ICRRC) was banned in 2007 despite complying with all Iranian laws, and the organization’s president, Sohrab Razzaghi, was arrested. After recognizing that the demonstrations (which demonstrations, protesting the arrest?) were continuing in a cyclical manner, the regime brought in the help of the special military force, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in order to handle the unrest and despite costs to the government’s already marred reputation.\textsuperscript{95} The 2007 banning of Zanan, the leading women’s rights publication that had been in print for nearly sixteen years as well as the closing of several other reformist publications served as a massive blow to the movement’s progress. There was also a 2007 conference on blogs where the regime established that from now on, digital media would be treated just as or more seriously than traditional media.

Actions such as these led to further societal shifts away from formal politics. During the 2008 parliamentary elections only 27% of Iranians voted.\textsuperscript{96} Sensing the need to regroup and strategize for the scheduled presidential elections in the face of an obviously disenchanted public, various independent civic organizations constructed their own unique approaches to pre-election activism. Human and women’s rights advocacy groups, student associations, and various other organizations activated in order to educate the Iranian public about the importance of elections.

Having learned the lessons of previous decades - the hindrance and disruption of revolution, the difficulty of Islamic reform, all combined with the last decade’s warning of what happens when

\textsuperscript{95} Arseh Sevom, 2005-2010 Report on Civil Society in Iran < http://www.arsehsevom.net/.
\textsuperscript{96} … as only 47% of those eligible to vote actually did so, The Systematic Repression of Women’s Rights Movement. International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran. / http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2009/01/repression-women/.
no one votes- the passive non-movement stepped cautiously back into formal politics before the 2009 presidential election. Highly educated and seasoned activists, these groups were careful to remain as neutral as possible, given the corruption of previous elections, while still trying to raise awareness and gain information and commitments from the potential candidates.

After the student-led boycott of the 2005 elections due to their religious rather than legal justification as well as heavy government repression in recent years, civil society organizations soon came to learn from their past mistake and began planning for what to do in the 2009 elections. Many of these groups initiated or began to mobilize members online, such as the One Million Signatures Campaign, which launched back in 2006. Douglas Kellner mentions that sites like weblogs and Wikipedia network people around common interests. Similar to these sites, other social networks such as LinkedIn or Facebook allow its users to gather around partially shared or common topics as well as creating linkages and testimonials between friends and family members. These networks lead to trust between members, which allow virtual relationships to flourish offline as well. All the while, these new friendships build upon the pre-existing communities of interest and caring.

Despite minor successes such as Rooz online and VOA news, the battle between state and society over control of the public sphere is far more complex and dynamic. While there is rarely a clear winner, it is often safe to say that the ruling elite have the upper hand when it comes to influencing institutionalized as well as informal norms and regulations. Stanford University director Larry Diamond believes over the past few years, countries like Iran and China have started to use technology more effectively than their critics claiming "authoritarian regimes have probably made more progress in suppressing, controlling, and manipulating, the use of the Internet and related digital technologies than democratic and civil society forces have made progress in utilizing them to advance freedom." Part of the reason for this development is that authoritarian countries are

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working together to silence dissent. As Diamond reports there is growing evidence that authoritarian regimes are actively sharing their methods and techniques and even “transferring software and technical skills across borders” in order to maintain the authoritarian censorship of the Internet. Not only has the regime attempted to stop Iranian bloggers, but also increased sanctions and turbulent foreign relations are forcing some companies to pull out of the country all together to avoid any future complications.

The increasing popularity of religious blogging was helped along in October 2005, when the first public introductory course about blogging was offered in the city of Qom under the auspices of the recently founded Office for the Promotion of Religious Blogs. Also, the Iranian cyber army was established under the IRGC, and was responsible for the hacking of Twitter and other globally recognized websites, replacing the given website’s homepage with pro-government banners or slogans. In a recent Foreign Policy Magazine article Abbas Milani claims, “the Iranian government trains its cyberjihadists in everything from how to influence chartrooms to the semiotics of cyberspace.” For example, the IRGC site of Ayatollah Khamenei, Gerdab.ir, features photos of demonstrators, seeking in effect to crowd-source surveillance. During the post-election unrest, Gerdab.ir was utilized by the regime in order to publicize pictures of protest scenes in an attempt to identify individuals who had participated in the demonstrations. Similarly the actions of the Iranian Cyber Army were published in pro-government media such as IRNA, Kayhan, and IRIB in order to create an atmosphere of fear and paranoia.

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99 The e-mail service of Google Inc, Gmail, was officially shut down by the Iranian authorities on the anniversary of the Islamic revolution, February 11th, 2010. Reports claim that during this fragile time the telecommunications networks of the country have been drastically slowed down, virtually cutting Iranian opposition members off from communicating about the post-election events as well as organizing for future demonstrations. Similarly, human rights websites, blog hosting and website hosting has been shut down by companies like Bluehost and others due to sanctions on Iran.
102 Ibid.
103 Ibid., 55-61
Chapter 4: The War of Words; the Communicative Power of New Technologies

Discussion of citizen participation in Iranian elections of the 21st century must take into account the structure of the electoral system itself. From the very beginning the revolution, the Assembly of Experts made sure that the sovereignty of the people would not be the government’s source of legitimacy. According to this body, the supreme leader’s absolute power over the entire governmental system does not stem from the consent of Iranian citizens, but rather from the divine authority of the Twelfth (or Hidden) Imam and the regime’s strict interpretation of Shar’ia law.

Because elections have proven themselves as nothing but administrative procedures gaining their legitimacy from pre-election vetting and postelection approval of candidates by the unelected Council of Guardians, many Iranians chose to retract their votes once again after the disappointment of President Khatami’s two terms in office. Thus in the repressive aftermath of the 2005 elections, civil-rights actors, women, students and human rights activists decided to boycott the presidential elections and instead organize robust civil society organizations that might be able to negotiate with the government as independent entities.

4.1. The 2009 Elections: A New Plight for Representation in the Public Sphere

The state broadcasting of the 2009 presidential debates became the inspiration of many Green movement slogans and was a major reason why some Iranians decided not to boycott the elections and instead come out to the polls. The following pre-election instances of formal, institutionalized political activism by women and student groups prove that the Iranian public was interested in the 2009 elections far before the accusations of election fraud and the international media frenzy. Although feeling vulnerable and isolated due to the merciless repression of civil society during the previous period, each social group took its own unique approach to maximize the brief political opening made available to them before the summer 2009 election. Regardless of regime type, one of the most critical factors for democratization is an educated and active citizenry.
By refusing to boycott elections again, the Iranian public showed the regime that from now on it wants to be involved.

Student unions could not boycott participation in the upcoming election because the regime would not allow for such a stance. Thus in early May 2009, DTV, the nation’s largest student’s union, released a long list of demands, including issues specific to universities as well as more general requests. Some of these items included a call for full religious and minority rights, democratization of the electoral system, judicial reform, gender equality, labor rights, human rights, and more. These lists were then sent to both reformist candidates with request for a response.

From May 14th to May 15th 2009, the student union held a seminar entitled “Civil Society, Agenda-Based Action, and Accountable Government” in which both Karrubi and Mousavi attended and participated. After a debate with both reformist candidates, the students’ union decided that Karrubi answered their demands most concretely and then took pragmatic steps over the next few weeks to use his campaign in order to promote human, women’s, and civil rights in the streets of Iran. These efforts proved highly successful as “for the first time in the history of voting in the Islamic Republic, candidates had found themselves forced to rewrite their platforms in response to concrete demands,”105 framed by these relentless passive movements which had become active. However, the immediate and violent repression of the post-election unrest is a testament to the regime’s determining influence.

In the area of human rights, Shirin Ebadi, founder of the One Million Signatures Campaign, and others formed a coalition entitled the Committee to Defend Free and Fair Elections. Despite repression by the regime, the organizations continued to document and disseminate information on the elections; publically stating on May 18th, 2009 that “the upcoming elections were not meeting minimal standards of freedom and fairness.” 106 Another Iranian human rights group published a list of demands on the eve of the election, calling on candidates to seek the abolishment of the death

106 Ibid.
penalty and to respect the human rights of all Iranians. These activists also routinely attended campaign rallies displaying signs and distributing leaflets of these and other demands, such as an end to the use of violence against women.

The Iranian Women’s Movement Coalition brought together over forty groups which focused narrowly on two goals. First, the coalition sought to reform Articles 19-21 and Article 115 of the 1979 constitution (allowing for Shari ‘a-based gender discrimination) as well as securing Iran’s adherence to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). However like most other campaign activists, these women also refrained from endorsing any particular candidate. After convincing both Mehdi Karrubi and Mir-Hossein Mousavi to pledge their adherence to CEDAW, the coalition declared its success at “raising public awareness about gender issues” and announced its plans to dissolve on June 6th, right before the 2009 elections.107

Despite this organization and activism, the state still managed to use Facebook in a strategy of passive revolution in an attempt to demobilize the Green movement. Despite the early uses of the medium, it was arguably the more wide-spread availability of the Internet after the turn of the 21st century which caused the 2009 election to have such a stark difference in political participation as compared to the previous 2005 election which brought Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to his first term. In January 2009, only five months before the June 12th election, the Islamic republic lifted the ban they had previously placed on the social networking site Facebook in 2006, sparking rapid mobilization of Iranians to join what they already known to be a very popular site worldwide. Many skeptics questioned the regime’s sudden decision to unblock the site in articles on the web such as “Why did Iran Un-block Facebook?”108 Some suspected the gesture to be a government ploy to keep close surveillance on its citizenry.

However, when not only Facebook but also various reformist candidate websites and even mobile phone services were suspended before, during, and for days after the 2009 election, the message was clear: The Islamic Republic may go through its ebbs and flows with regard to freedom of speech, but the bottom line is that it has unlimited control and is able to enact such measures without being answerable to anyone.

4.2. Media Coverage of Non-Violent Collective Action: The Cases of Neda and Majid

As Samuel Huntington argues, the presence of the public sphere allows for citizens to put pressure upon their government to be more transparent. The free flow of information undoubtedly promotes pluralism in the political, social, and cultural sphere. In the past, the government has had a strong grip on the control of mass media legally available in Iran, and to this day tries to maintain this power. However, parallel to this rapid development, the movement’s tactics for circumventing governmental restrictions have also matured over time. Such tactics have been used since the days of print media (changing the title of a publication), and state-run television broadcasts (the wide-spread presence of illegal satellite dishes). Now with the uses of anti-filtering software and online mobilization tactics (allowing users to access blocked websites), Iranians continued to find creative ways to circumvent media restrictions. The emergence of rapidly expanding communication technologies during the 1990s was a time in which the Islamic regime went from being the pinnacle of power to having to stay on its toes in order to ensure its survival.

In the most recent wave of demonstrations following the election, participants did not stop at the utilization of state-sponsored religious traditions as a means of subversive accommodation. Students also staged demonstrations via cell-phones and the Internet during the popularly celebrated anniversary of the American Hostage Crisis (November 4th) as well as the 16th of Azar or (National Student’s Day, December 7th). The popular Iranian website Balatarin109 and other social networks

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109 Balatarin is a popular news and events website published in Persian with a majority of its readers coming from inside Iran. What is interesting about the website is that users may vote up (+) or down (-) depending on how important they view the issue, allowing articles to be pushed to the site’s front page based on viewer feedback.
such as Orkut and Facebook played a large role in organizing the protests of September 2009 celebration of Quds day as well as many of the remaining demonstrations of the year. Although previous celebration of this occasion expressing solidarity with Palestine has been sporadic in Iran, the Green movement used its art of presence to influence any and every space available to them.\footnote{Azad, Azadeh. “Iranian people changed the Quds Day into the Iran Day”, Sept 18th 2009. < http://www.iranian.com/main/blog/azadeh-azad/iranian-people-changed-quds-day-iran-day>}

Not only have new developments in media helped recruit participants for these events, mass media has also served to inform the international community of individual human rights violations and the type of regime the non-violent activists must challenge. Two figures in the post-election momentum have received immense coverage both the online and in the international news community. First, the graphic video of the death of twenty-seven year old student activist Neda Agha-Soltan during a street protest on June 20\textsuperscript{th}, 2009 went viral on YouTube shortly after her death and served as a symbol of unity amongst protestors. For weeks after she passed away, Iranian demonstrators marched bravely against the extreme repression of the state, chanting slogans of solidarity such as “Don’t be afraid, don’t be afraid, we are all together.” The Islamic cycle of mourning\footnote{Religious ceremonies are traditionally held on the 3\textsuperscript{rd}, 7\textsuperscript{th}, and 40\textsuperscript{th} day after the person’s death.} for the deceased served to pre-schedule the dates to commemorate the young martyr, even despite government repression and restriction.

A few months later, student activist Majid Tavakoli also emerged as a unifying symbol for Green movement activists who circulated information and initiated Internet activism regarding his arrest in December 2009. Despite the government’s attempt to humiliate and shame the activist, the nonmovement’s reaction simply proved to be another blow to the legitimacy and reputation of the Islamic regime. After making a speech at Amir Kabir Technology University on December 7\textsuperscript{th}, 2009 in which he criticized the position of Supreme Leader, Tavakoli was arrested. Within a few days, the government released a photograph of the detainee dressed in full hejab on state-run television. In an attempt to humiliate him, the state news reported that he tried to flee the scene dressed as a woman.
However, the regime’s plot backfired, further questioning its ability to regain control in the post-election climate. Over six months after the contested presidential elections, Iranian (and non-Iranian) men around the world responded to this state propaganda by uploading self-portraits to the Internet dressed in hejabs as a form of solidarity with the prisoner, using the slogan “We are all Majid Tavakoli.” Like Neda, Majid immediately became an iconic symbol for Iranian protesters.112

What is important about the media coverage of Neda’s case was that it made the regime’s responsibility and deceit regarding her murder more transparent. Rather than admitting to the state’s responsibility for the activist’s death, there was a few week period where the government publically blamed her killing on foreign actors, denied that she was really dead, and even went as far to say that the young woman was an actor and had staged her own death with the help of her friend in order to disrupt the public. However, “For Neda,” a documentary of her family filmed unlicensed just months after her death by journalist Saeed Kamali Dehghan and released by HBO as well as the confessions of “The Wrong Neda” have both exposed and archived the government’s blatant lies.113

In January 2010, Majid Tavakoli was sentenced to eight years in prison, given a five-year ban on political activism, and was also banned from leaving the country.114 Although this is certainly not the end of such cases, the Green movement has proven that the Iranian public will not stand idly by while their government commits civil and human rights offenses against innocent citizens. Through the subversive accommodation of the public sphere in order to serve their own purposes and the use of rapid communication forms, the movement essentially began using the regime’s own words against itself. These self-generated works support the movement in a variety of innovative ways. However, despite all of this dialogue and interest on the Internet, Tavakoli remains behind bars,
Neda is dead, like too many other Iranians who shared her fate in the past, and freedom of speech in Iran has steadily been on the decline since last summer.

According to Zizi Papacharissi, changes in media have turned its consumers into creators of the medium. This development can lead to a subset of these creators becoming critical contributors due to the collaborative communications inherent in the Internet. The emergence of new models of citizenship or civic engagement have stemmed from growing disinterest in conventional forms of political participation as well as a curiosity with innovative uses of evolving technologies. These new models “inject the representative model of democracy with direct communication opportunities and propose a mutation or deviation” from traditional representation. Papacharissi points out that a common thread in all of this literature is that it emphasizes the ability of the ordinary citizen to potentially become a “gatekeeper” or “watchdog” of the state. But contexts such as that of Iran raise much doubt about the validity of these claims.

Iranian regime’s media restrictions and censorship prevent any opposition member from truly fulfilling such a role, as the regime ensures that surveillance is always a one-way street. Just like previous forms of media, the state is trying its best to gain draconian control over the emergence of the new public sphere provided by the Internet, proving Jane Rodgers right about the paradox of the spread of the Internet as a tool of political activism. Despite the advantages of social networking sites such as YouTube, these benefits are often limited, entirely absent, or actually serve to further repress the expression of political opinion under authoritative regimes such as that of Iran.

4.3. The Movement’s Return to Passive Network

While from June 2009 until the end of the year there were relatively steady protests forming a cyclical pattern, there was a virtual freeze in collective public displays of contention beginning in

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115 Gillmor, Dan. “Toward a (New) Media Literacy in a Media Saturated World”
116 Ibid.
118 Ibid.
2010. It is argued that this drop in contentious action does not signify movement weakness, but rather the Green movement’s rational and strategic decision-making.

In addition to the exemplary executions mentioned in Chapter 2, Jaras, an online oppositional news agency that supports the Green movement reported that the IRGC has stepped up its arrests and harassment of human rights defenders. The agency states that special emphasis is being put on those who are members of human rights organizations such as the Defenders of Human Rights Center, Human Rights Activists in Iran, the Committee for Human Rights Reporters as well as member of the One Million Signatures Campaign. Those who are arrested are put under heavy pressure to make scripted false confessions. In March 2010, the regime’s Press Supervisory Board closed Etemaad-e-Meli, Irandokht and Sina, three of Iran’s most prominent reformist papers, without stating a specific reason. Since the disputed elections in June, Iran has shut eight newspapers and has imprisoned more than 100 journalists and bloggers. Show trials and the strategic use of the execution of political dissidents mentioned earlier have created a dangerous and frightening atmosphere for the future of dissent in Iran.

New institutions and policies have been put into effect, such as a new special branch of the Revolutionary Guard, which was formed inside of Evin prison on March 7th, 2010. The policy virtually put judges entirely under the oversight of Iran’s Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS). Similarly, a rating system for politically active students was introduced in early 2010, ranking students according to the presumed threat they pose to the regime. As it has been argued, similar to previous media forms, the Islamic regime is quickly securing its superior control of new media.

The regime recently called for a need to increase basij presence in Persian blogosphere, further confirming that, as least currently, the power play is over cultural production. Radio Free

121 Dehghan, Saeed Kamali, “Iran steps up pressure on journalists” The Guardian, 8 March 2010. / http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2010/mar/08/iran-pressure-journalists/
122 Nasrin Sotoudeh statement for International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, April 2010).
Europe/Radio Liberty reports that on November 2010 the commander of Iran’s basij force, Mohammad Reza Naghdi, announced the creation of a new body called “The Organization of Basij and the Media” in order to increase the presence of basij forces on the Internet.\textsuperscript{123} Naghdi claims more basij forces must enter the public sphere of media in order to fight the “soft war” which the regime blames on Western influence.\textsuperscript{124}

Despite these acts of resistance, the reformists continue to organize. In July 2010 opposition leaders Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi held a meeting during which they discussed the latest post-election developments. Mousavi drew attention to the plight of post-election political prisoners, especially those who were less known to the general public stating, “We read about the bad news coming from the prison wards of unknown prisoners, especially from the women’s ward which is cause for sadness and distress.”\textsuperscript{125} He then went onto criticize the regime’s designation of the post-election unrest as being instigated by foreign powers. During the cyber press conference, the reformist candidates responded to questions posed by various websites and sectors of the Green movement, most of which were regarding last year’s events or about the movement’s future plans.\textsuperscript{126}

Mehdi Karroubi criticized the state-media’s reference to the post-election protests as “sedition” stating, “Sedition is nothing but engineering the people’s votes and neglecting their opinions. It is nothing but the daily slanders from podiums and using media belonging to the people.”\textsuperscript{127} At the end both men called on the people to form social networks and to “produce content and clear statistics in relation to the different parts of the country.”\textsuperscript{128} They added that social networks are crucial in confronting the government’s wrong and fabricated figures and claims. These representatives of the movement explained, “experts and intellectuals active in different sectors of

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[126] such as Kaleme, the Green Voice of Freedom, Jaras, Saham News, Mizan, Norooz, Emruz, Tahvole sabz and Advar News
\item[128] Ibid.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
the country should present accurate figures and explain the current conditions more transparently” in order to help the people in decision-making and planning for the future by raising Iranian society’s awareness.129

Meanwhile, the government has admitted to there being Green movement supporters inside the powerful IRGC, which has been much more active since the post-election unrest due to the limitations of the ordinary Iranian police force. On July 26th, 2010, the commander of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps officially announced, “Some members have been supportive of the country’s opposition movement”. Interestingly enough, General Mohammad Ali Jafari said that it is better to convince guards who support the opposition than to get rid of them.130

Potential hope for the future includes promoting more accountable, transparent elections and insisting upon the government’s respect of human and civil rights. Most importantly, any possible solution must be indigenous. Given the regime’s suspicion of external interference in its politics, this necessitates socio-political change from within the country, a task that could at least partially be achieved through granting Iranians free access to the web.131 However, the movement has been successful in gaining international sympathy by expressing grievances through frameworks of injustice. After being sentenced to death in November 2009, Ali Saremi who still remains in prison after having his original sentence repealed wrote an open letter, stating: “I would like to bring it to the attention of everyone around the world and all humanitarians, that the regime is seeking to take me, people like me, or some of the young people and prisoners to the gallows so that it can intimidate and terrify the people with our corpses.”132 Saremi has been in Iranian prisons for 23 years cumulatively, both under the current regime and under the shah.

131 Ide, William, “In Iran, Internet is Lifeline and a Noose”. Voice of America News. 9 July 2010. Internet both helps and hinders in Iran. June 2010. How bloggers and the state have stepped up the power-play over
Conclusion: Explaining the Drop in Protests

An October 2010 report of demonstration leaflets being passed out and graffiti on city walls urging the public to come out in December to protest on the national holidays of December 7th and Ashura ceremonies prove the Green movement is still alive despite a massive drop in public protests.\textsuperscript{133} In an interview with human rights group Persian2English.com, key 1999 activist Ahmad Batebi claims, “When the ruling establishment is so powerful, this is the result. Before, people attended protests on 20-30 specific days and they were successful.”\textsuperscript{134} However, he explains that on February 11th, 2010 (anniversary of the Islamic Revolution), the people were not able to protest because of the regime’s organization stating, “This was not due to the movement’s weakness, but it was because we did not have the same resources that the regime has at its disposal.”\textsuperscript{135}

Batebi argues against those who believe public protests are necessary to have a movement, offering an explanation of social movement learning instead. No longer visible, but inspired by last year’s activism, many within Iran have turned “Green.” Despite the drop in street protests, “the fact that [the Iranian people] write slogans [on walls and banknotes] in the color green and distribute cassettes and CD’s demonstrates that the movement is alive,”\textsuperscript{136} explaining, “the movement is learning how to stay alive without incurring deaths and arrests.”\textsuperscript{137} Supporting his claim that the movement is in a transitional phase strategically preparing for its next move, he confidently asserts, “this time, when we have protests in June, we will have less people arrested, less people killed, and that is how people will learn.”\textsuperscript{138} Media communications allow the movement to make quick, last minute decisions about organizing and offer movement activists a platform for dialogue and information exchange.

\textsuperscript{134} Batebi is well-known for his public displays of opposition, such as the picture he posted on his Yahoo blog after fleeing Iran in 2008, along with the words for the Islamic regime stating, “Your hands will never touch me again”\textsuperscript{139}.
\textsuperscript{136} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{137} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{138} Ibid.
Iranian-American lawyer Melody Moezzi emphasizes the importance of the movement keeping the media updated on all instances of human rights abuses, noting that this will result in the media publishing and broadcasting these abuses, and consequently, “governments will pay attention.”139 Fear of being beaten, arrested, or sentenced to execution has kept many Iranians from challenging the status quo. However despite growing fears, some people are willing to stand up out of pure rage. Pointing to the high stakes of activism, Moezzi claims the movement cannot create change unless people are willing to die for their beliefs, stating, “the concept of martyrdom is important and will help push the revolution forward. But as long as the regime keeps creating martyrs, it creates its own demise as well.”140 It seems that rather than carrying out exemplary executions and executing harsh sentences as planned, the regime is ironically creating national symbols for the Green movement through its selective violence against its members.

While these individuals are vilified as maghreb by the state, the majority of Iranian society does not perceive them as social menaces, but rather remember them as martyrs. In this way, governmental repression serves to increase movement mobilization. Although the decades-old checklist of democratic reforms has yet to be realized, the events surrounding the controversial June 12th, 2009 presidential elections are clear proof that the Iranian public is in search of socio-political change. Strategically dispersing from the streets and returning to their safe haven of the Internet, those Green activists who made it through the most recent wave of jailing and executions have once again gone back to a strategy of passive networking. As Ahmad Batebi replies to an interview question about the low demonstration turnout this year on the election’s anniversary, “It is natural that the government learns how to suppress people and the people learn how to resist.”141

The publicized accounts of the harsh repression of Green activists over the last year leave no doubt regarding the tremendous risks involved with participating in public social movements.

141 Ibid.
However, despite the harsh repression of online dissent, “the Internet continues to be one of the best hopes for homegrown democratic change in autocratic Iran.”\textsuperscript{142} It serves this purpose by being one of the only public spaces in which all social actors may interact and engage in dialogue with one another without joining the traditional hierarchical structure of state-societal relations.

Despite their new form, the bottom line is that these repertoires of contention are nothing new. Media has been utilized as an effective mechanism of mobilization and demobilization by the IRI, the reformist, as well as various other regimes and movements. However, a government that is unable to meet the demands of its own people is a government in trouble indeed, no matter what the regime type. Thus even under authoritarian systems, it is normal for the political authorities to learn new ways of suppress emerging forms of mobilization and for movement activists to learn and accommodate new tactics in order to circumvent these restrictions and move towards achieving its movement goals.

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**Figure 1. Middle East Internet Users, September 2009**

**Figure 2. Internet Users per 100 People**