

Re-Tweet:
How Green Movement Youth Used New Media to Mobilize in Iran
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Introduction

The bustling and metropolitan streets of Tehran filled with hundreds of thousands of angered citizens on June 13th, 2009, following the Iranian Presidential Election (Iran Primer 2011). As the conglomerate of civilians took to the streets in protest, many shouted, “Where is my vote?”, expressing their outcry and disappointment towards the corrupt presidential election results. The people of Iran quickly and efficiently mobilized in the streets of their capital, calling for political and legal reform. What followed became an important period of political activism in Iran – the Green Movement – continuing through 2009 into 2010.

Though its degree of success is still widely debated, the Green Movement is renowned for being the first major world event to be broadcast almost entirely through social media platforms (*The Atlantic 2010*). Youth groups throughout the world are known to be spearheads of social or political movements and to utilize media platforms most often. This paper aims to evaluate the mobilization of youth members in the Green Movement through “new media.” Research on the use of platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook will be presented to investigate how Iranian youth used the media as a culturally relevant outlet for political expression as well as a means of obtaining greater independence and activism, education and knowledge.

Just a few weeks after the 2009 presidential elections, many began to call the movement Iran’s “Twitter Revolution” (Radio Free Liberty 2010). However, the question of whether or not the Green Movement mobilization was only reflected through the Twittersphere or was a product

of the direct Twitter campaign #IranRevolution is still up for debate. The former suggests that online social networks were only used to communicate and reiterate the events, ideals and attitudes of Iranians in the movement. The latter suggests that they were also used to unite activists in Iran to organize protests through these platforms. Under Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the conservative two-term president of Iran, Internet access was heavily censored; yet Internet and social media users found ways to circumvent restrictions to publicize events and raise support for the goals of the Green Movement.

The analysis of Iranian youth mobilization by means of new media platforms poses the following questions which this research paper will investigate: *What attitudes did the youth have towards the government and their society, and how can they be interpreted within the context of their actions? Did their mobilization cause a separation of youth groups, and if so, what was it based on? What were the youth doing to mobilize, how were they mobilizing, and what technological means of expression were they utilizing? What limits did the authoritarian regime implement to weaken the Green Movement's strength? How did the youth factions try to circumvent or respond to them?*

Hamid Dabashi, a Professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, has called the Green Movement a “prototype for a non-violent civil rights movement, and a perfect model for the region at large as the Arab and Muslim world goes through massive revolutionary changes” (Al Jazeera 2013). Understanding the youth’s involvement in the Green Movement and their mobilization through the media can lead to a greater understanding of youth’s potential for change on a global scale, as well as the effectiveness of internet and media

use, despite potential dangers in violating authoritarian regimes, in the sphere of social and political change.

Political Background

As previously noted, the Green Movement was sparked by the 2009 election results in which incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won. His defeated moderate challenger was Mir-Houssein Mousavi, former Iranian Prime Minister from 1981-1989. Maziar Bahari, an Iranian Canadian journalist who covered the presidential elections for *Newsweek*, suggests that Mir-Houssein Mousavi was favored to win the election despite receiving 34% of the vote (Bahari 2011). His campaign focused on increasing human rights and the transparency of Iran's international relations, and adopting more moderate and tolerant domestic policies. As reported by Abbas Milani, the director of Iranian studies at Stanford University, his campaign brought about a great deal of hope to many across the nation:

“Iran's nascent civil society, reformers, the women's movement and student organizations suddenly came to life. Vast networks of supporters appeared all over the country, connected through the Internet and social network sites” (The Iran Primer 2011).

In 2009, about 60% of Iran's population was under 30 years of age, and as of 2005 many perceived the youth to possess an untapped potential (Radio Free Liberty 2005). It was no surprise that a majority of Mousavi's supporters were youth demanding change. Bill Samil, author of the 2005 article “Iran: Youth Movement Untapped,” wrote that Iranian youth's potential for social and political change grew in proportion to their increased disappointment. This is similar to an argument made by Asef Bayat in *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, in which he describes the evolution of a disillusioned Iranian “third

generation” filled with disappointment in political leadership during the decades following the 1979 Islamic Revolution (2013).

April 1926 marked the beginning of the Pahlavi Dynasty, in which Reza Kahn assumed the title of Shah, Iran’s monarch. This dynasty stayed in power until 1978 when the Shah was exiled after a massive revolution, led by the youth, overthrew him and established the Islamic Republic of Iran. Iranian’s distaste with the Shah’s autocratic pro-western rule largely fueled the revolution. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini became the Supreme Leader in 1979 and established the office of the president. The success of the 1979 revolution promised the reestablishment of Islamic values through an authoritarian theocracy. However, what it delivered was radical change that evolved into a cultural revolution aimed at conforming Iranian youth into ideal Muslim men and women (Bayat 2011: 112). In 1980, universities throughout Iran were closed to protect the Muslim youth from the corruption of the western world.

In 1982, universities reopened and students began to flock to Iranian schools. By 1997, about 1.5 million students were enrolled in the university education system (Radio Free Liberty 2005). Despite their pursuit of success, many students were faced with adversity from inflation, poor job prospects, and an increasingly conservative country. Tehran’s generation of disillusioned youth can be characterized by runaway teenagers, drug addiction, sexual engagement, behavior disorders and counter-cultural subcultures (Bayat 2011). Students continued to attend the universities and were the instigators of social movements and demands for political freedom. In 2000, university students throughout Tehran led a movement demanding the dismissal of the national police chief. Their activism alarmed the government, and demonstrated the power of the youth demographic in Iran. Consequently, each candidate in the

2005 presidential elections targeted students in their campaign. According to Bill Samil, Iranian leaders could not ignore the youth “due to their efforts to emphasize unity, because students are traditionally and potentially politically active and represent a large number in a country with a voting age of 15” (Radio Free Liberty 2005). Despite the efforts of the 2005 presidential candidates, a segmented voting pool of disillusioned citizens lacking unity and political activism resulted. The election results were the beginning of the regime of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

By the time of the 2009 presidential elections, the Iranian youth’s mindset had changed. In the four years after 2005, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s presidency had established strict rule of the Revolutionary Guards¹, limited basic civil liberties, increased inflation and rates of unemployment, driven up housing costs, and allowed the formation of an elevated regime class. To counter the government’s encroachment on Iranian society, the Green Movement became a “post-Islamist drive to reclaim citizenship within a broadly religious ethical order, [that] articulated a long-standing popular desire for a dignified life free from everyday surveillance, corruption, and arbitrary rule” (Bayat 2011:170). From 2005 to 2009, the disillusionment of the youth had evolved into increased activism to achieve social change. On the day of the 2009 election, *Euronews* reported a quote from a young Iranian male in Tehran that encapsulates the sentiment of social change:

“In these elections, I want to vote for someone who defends the rights of young people...Our country is very young. We will vote for someone like us, who can give us the freedom we want. You can be sure that, based on the intelligence of our youth, Mousavi will win the vote” (Euronews 2009).

Responding to the Election

¹ The Revolutionary Guards were a branch of Iran’s military dedicated to preserving the Islamic system. They led a very assertive role in almost every aspect of daily life.

Turmoil spread through Iran when thousands of protesters congregated in the streets of Tehran on June 13, 2009 in response to the election results. Defeated candidate Mir-Houssein Mousavi denounced the elections as illegitimate and called upon his supporters to join in solidarity and demand justice. His defiance prompted street protesters to rise up to defend their rights. In the wave of protests that followed, over 30 people were killed and more than 1,000 arrested (Iran Primer 2011). *The New York Times* reporter Robert F. Worth documented the events of June 13th in an article entitled “Protests Flare in Tehran as Opposition Disputes Vote” (2009: A1) The previously nonviolent character of the Green Movement came to an end with the events of June 13th. Worth reported fatalities, fires, chants of “*Death to the dictator!*,” and makeshift roadblocks were observed throughout Tehran. To show their support and create a united identity for the movement protesters wore green, the color of Mousavi’s campaign. On June 15th, the protesters held the “Demonstration of Silence,” a silent march through Azadi Square, also known as the Liberty Square, in Tehran. Over the following days, protesters organized peaceful candlelight vigils, marches and public demonstrations. On June 19th, Supreme Leader Khamenei led a prayer service during which he denied the false accusations of corrupt elections, and asserted that further protests would not be tolerated. Again, Iranian activists expressed their dismay and anger towards the regime’s treatment, and another protest took place. The protest of June 20th was one of brutal police retaliation. During these protests, Neda Agha Soltan, a young 26-year old woman, was shot and killed by a sniper (Iran Primer 2011). A bystander was filming the atrocity. Neda Agha Soltan came to be the face of the Green Movement and a rallying cry for the protesters. Her death became an impetus for activists to continue raising support against the Ahmadinejad’s illegitimate regime and its attacks against

democracy. It also gave protesters the motivation to continue resisting the Revolutionary Guards and Basij² members despite episodes of violent retaliation.

The Green Movement also utilized holidays and national commemorations to orchestrate rallies (Iran Primer 2011). As the protests and anti-Ahmadinejad demonstrations continued through the Fall of 2009 and into 2010, activists began to develop sentiments against the Supreme Leader as well. Most of the protesters gathering in the streets were reformists who supported Mousavi. Fundamentalists, on the other hand, supported the Supreme Leader and did not participate in the movement. As the protests continued, the regime's response increased in both in physical force and cyber access restrictions.

Mobilization and the Media

The means by which youth mobilized in the Green Movement were diverse. Some define mobilization as the dissemination of information regarding the events of the Green Movement and advocating for their support. For others, it may also entail the explicit organization of public demonstrations and events. This paper outlines how the youth mobilized through new media platforms, and answer the questions proposed earlier by synthesizing examples from academics, journalists, analysis of the social media platforms, and an interview with Fatemeh, an Iranian graduate student at the University of Notre Dame.

The April 6th Youth Movement in Egypt is the quintessential example of how youth utilize new media platforms to coordinate political or social demonstrations. This movement began in 2008 when a small group of Egyptian activists created a Facebook page to coordinate a

² The Basij is a parliamentary volunteer militia that takes orders from the Revolutionary Guards. It was established after the 1979 Revolutions, and became an active force against activists during the Green Revolution.

strike protesting low wages and high food prices. Within a few weeks the Facebook page had over 70,000 followers and was the main driving force behind the riots on April 6th of that year. In addition to coordinating large assemblies, the Facebook group was utilized as an outlet of expression to debate civil liberties and political theory (The New York Times 2009).

One may expect to find a parallel scenario for the youth mobilization in Iran during the Green Movement. However, despite active use of social media platforms the youth in Iran did not habitually use them to coordinate as the Egyptian youth did. This was largely because Facebook had been outlawed in Iran through the SmartFilter system implemented in 2006 to ban prominent English sites. Although the ban was temporarily lifted in 2009, it was reinstated weeks prior to the election as support for Mousavi grew and threatened Ahmadinejad's campaign. With the augmentation of Iran's "National Internet" and the "Iran Cyber Army," internet censorship became too great for Iranian youth to organize demonstrations safely (Citizen Lab 2013). Despite increased control and surveillance, Internet platforms still played a constructive role in allowing Iranians to share their opinions and criticize controversial issues. In the interview, Fatemeh spoke about Internet censorship and the various ways Iranians were still able to communicate their ideals during the Green Revolution via new media platforms.

In 2006, Fatemeh came to the United States with her family at the age of 16 when her father assumed a teaching position at the University of Notre Dame. Following her graduation from high school her family decided to return home; however, Fatemeh stayed in the US to pursue her education. While her parents returned home to Qom, two hours outside of Tehran, her four brothers moved to Tehran, the heart of the Green Movement and home to 15-16 million Iranian citizens. Her parents traveled to Tehran multiple times per week for work. During the

2009 movement, Fatemeh often worried about her family. Her inability to sustain communication with her family brought an emotional toll upon her: “ I was really stressed out actually. One day I spent hours trying to reach them and I couldn’t get in touch with them. I just started crying.” Prior to the political unrest following the elections, Fatemeh spoke with her parents every one to two weeks. During the summer of 2009, she went six weeks without hearing from them. When she did have the opportunity to talk to her parents or brother, they could not talk about the political unrest in Iran for fear that the government was monitoring phone call conversations. When she tried to ask about the political situation in Iran, her mother often came up with excuses to avoid the conversation such as pretending there was no cell phone service.

In order to stay informed about the events of the Green movement, Fatemeh followed blogs of activists and scholars outside of Iran. She also became Facebook friends with her brother’s peers, many of whom were actively participating in the movement. The men did not directly call for public action themselves, but some of the articles and blog posts they circulated via Facebook did. Although the Green Movement has often been called the Iran’s “Twitter Revolution, ” Facebook and YouTube were essential to the movement for allowing extensive circulation of Western journalism, Iranian blog posts, and videos. Some, such as Golnaz Esfandiari, a senior correspondent for Radio Free Liberty and the editor of the award winning Iranian blog “Persian Letter, ” argue that Facebook and YouTube played a larger role than Twitter in mobilizing youth, particularly because of the sharing of YouTube videos on Facebook (Radio Free Liberty 2010).

Some Green Movement footage and propaganda videos have been watched over one million times. As of April 28, 2015, one video of Neda Agha Soltan's death had 1,832,035 views, and another had 1,393,502 views. In addition, Fatemeh mentioned that many videos of protests and national songs used in the revolution went viral as well. Two specific songs that she mentioned are *Yare Dabestanie Man*³ and *Bella Ciao*, an anti-fascist song that was used in the 1979 revolution to overthrow the Shah. According to Fatemeh, "The songs were used to mobilize people. They're about how it's our country and no one can help it but us. They wanted the world to hear it but they wanted it to be an Iranian movement." As Western media was banned from covering post-2009 election events in Iran, Iranian citizens made it their duty to keep the public aware. They utilized YouTube to share videos embodying the courage and defiance of Iranian activists in the face of the brutal retaliation and corruption. The posting of these videos created an open discussion forum for all to participate in.

Twitter was also instrumental in this movement, but in a different way than YouTube and Facebook. A 2010 article in the *Atlantic* written on the first anniversary of the elections noted: "The Green Movement *was* a Twitter Revolution; while social media fell short organizationally, it brought the violence of the streets of Tehran to the forefront of the geopolitical conversation." Live tweeting gave the international community a glimpse into the distress experienced by Iranian citizens, and the use of online social media platforms gave the Iranian youth a voice. Fatemeh agreed that protesters were mainly youth and university students who had circumvented the regime's Internet restrictions by installing anti-filter software systems. In addition to those software technologies, Citizen Lab and the OpenNet Initiative listed proxy portals and virtual

³ According to Fatemeh, this translates into "Oh you my friend from elementary school"

private networks as tools used to access the media by the members of this movement (2013). Like many others, Fatemeh acknowledged that without the use of social media platforms the Green Movement would have lost momentum. However, she also believed that a majority of the organization of protests and demonstrations took place within university settings and in interpersonal exchanges.

Uniting in the Streets

If “new media” platforms were not the method by which the Iranian youth were organizing their Green Movement demonstrations, it is likely that they accomplished this through text messaging and interpersonal connections. In his article “The Myths and Realities of New Media in Iran’s Green Movement,” Golnaz Esfandiari asserts that although social media platforms were effective in uniting activists and creating awareness of the movement, activists typically used word of mouth, text messages, emails and blog posts to organize protests because social media is oftentimes not ideal for *rapid* organization or mobilization (2010). We live in a society that often refers to social media as a tool that has revolutionized the way we interact, so it can be easy for outsiders to exaggerate their role in mobilizing large groups of people participating in political movements.

Universities and public spaces act as exceptional places for organization to take place by facilitating instant communication through face-to-face interaction. In *Life As Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, Asef Bayat details the phenomenon of unity that can occur through social interactions of everyday life, something he calls “art of presence” in which mundane practices have the power to oppose authoritarianism (2013:1-33). Bayat describes

non-movements as the exercise of the art of presence into the passive organization of a group with a common goal under a common identity. He explains that identities are formed through “‘passive networks’, the non-deliberate and instantaneous communications among atomized individuals that are established by the tacit recognition of their commonalities and that are mediated directly through the gaze in public sphere, or indirectly through the mass media” (110).

The Product of Assemblage

In the wake of the announcement of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s 2009 presidential victory, Fatemeh emphasized, the hearts of the Iranian youth were broken. Unwilling to tolerate for additional years of economic distress, government oppression, and isolation from the West, many Iranian youth were readily welcoming social change with the election of Mir-Houssein Mousavi. The youth were brought to the streets by their reformist political identity, stimulated by the disappointment that resulted from the 2009 elections. Once in the streets, religion, ethnicity and gender became irrelevant; the Green Movement was a time for youth to unite and demand change. Their active engagement with social networking sites brought global attention to the heart of Iran and called upon the global community to recognize the Green Movement.

“I’m in the group of people that believe the GM did what it supposed to do. It was supposed to say that the Islamic Republic under the governance of Ahmadinejad was neither Islamic nor Republic. These two Islamic scholars [Hussein-Ali Montazeri and Yousef Saanei⁴] who were very famous and very influential basically said the elections did not live up to the Islamic values and it was time to make a change.” –Fatemeh

⁴ Hussein-Ali Montazeri is a prominent Iranian scholar, Shiite democracy advocate and human rights activist. Yousef Saanei is an Iranian politician and a spiritual leader of the Green Movement. Both are said to have denounced the 2009 elections.

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