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# **THE IRANIAN GREEN MOVEMENT One Year After**



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June 2010

# **The Iranian Green Movement (IGM)**

## **One Year After**

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The Iranian Green Movement (*Jonbeshe Sabz*) is almost one year old. Last year, on 12 June, when Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was declared the winner of the presidential elections, huge demonstrations developed spontaneously in Tehran and some other large Iranian cities. Protestors dressed and decorated in green colours and shouted a single slogan: *Where is my vote?* accusing the government of extensive electoral manipulation.

The crisis continued at high speed until 11 February, the day of the 31st anniversary of the victory of the Islamist revolution. On this occasion, the regime organised huge demonstrations in support of itself. There were only a few modest and sporadic demonstrations from the opposition. Was this day a turning point? Has the IGM lost its momentum and will it perhaps gradually disappear as a powerful movement?

A large part of the answer to these questions is found in the very causes of *Jonbeshe Sabz*, the IGM. The real causes of the crisis are twofold: A deep discontent among a significant portion of the regime's nobility and a profound social and political malaise in the Iranian society, among young people in particular. These two rivers met at the confluence of the presidential elections of June 2009.

### **Inner Dissension: Power-Sharing**

Dissension between revolutionaries is almost the general rule in all revolutions. The Islamist revolution is no exception. Khomeinism was merely an umbrella embracing various factions, associations and personalities that had neither a common platform nor a shared programme of government. Thus, the latent original dissension had coexisted in a rather peaceful atmosphere. They shared the power between them in a rather balanced manner. This power balance prevailed as long as an acceptable equilibrium existed. The equilibrium shifted gradually in favour of one side which came to occupy more and more of the vital sphere of political life. A new actor emerged after having accumulated massive military, economic and political might by controlling important and vast sectors of Iranian society. The new actor that has provoked a rupture in the inner balance of power is no one but the Pasdaran (the Revolutionary Guards), at least their main factions.

At the moment, these factions are represented by the clique of Ahmadinejad and have captured willy-nilly the favour of Khamenei, the Supreme Leader. In this way, the balance has shifted dramatically to their benefit. The other half of the regime represented by moderate Pasdaran as well as a conglomerate of various groups – all loyal to the revolution and to the regime, and personalities like Rafsanjani, Mousavi, Khatami, Karroubi and their allies in the media, at the

universities, in the administration and financial sectors – is in practice excluded from the sphere of power. The *crisis of legitimacy* is the direct consequence of this rupture in the then established balance.

To those who are decisively against the Islamic regime as a whole and are for a regime change, this crisis is a major one that is challenging the legitimacy of the entire Islamic Republic. But to those who are directly involved in the internal power struggle – people like Mousavi and Karroubi (two other presidential candidates) – the legitimacy crisis is not so much a substantial one as a personal one. They claim that the legitimacy of ayatollah Khamenei as *Leader* is being questioned since the Leader who is supposed to be the Leader of the whole Islamic Republic and in this position is expected to function as the ultimate arbiter, has chosen sides and has become the leader of only one faction. Therefore, Khamenei cannot be recognised any longer as the rightful successor of Khomeini. Khamenei has lost his position as *Maximum Leader* to become merely a *minimum Leader*.

In March 2010, Mousavi explained why he is nostalgic about the Khomeini era. He said that under Khomeini's leadership, the Imam was not the leader of a faction or a sect. He preferred collective reasoning and avoided being sectarian ([www.kaleme.com](http://www.kaleme.com) – *Kaleme* is Mousavi's homepage on the Internet). Put into the language of power, this statement means that Mousavi is saying to Khamenei, the current Leader, that "when Khomeini was the leader, you were the president and I was the prime minister. Now, you have become the mighty Leader and I, and people like me, we don't have any share in power!"

Mousavi and Karroubi are aware that Khomeini's rule was not really democratic. However, at that time, everybody from the different tendencies among those who believed in the revolution and had fully accepted the indisputable leadership of Khomeini, had the benefit of sharing power. Now, the situation is different. Power has become monopolised by leading Pasdaran circles and as Mousavi described it: a 'garrison state/*Hukumat-e padgani* governs Iran' (*Kaleme*, 8 April, 2010). This statement clearly indicates that the struggle conducted by Mousavi and Karroubi is not so much a struggle to establish a genuine liberal democracy, but rather a struggle to be integrated into the circles that have the power in their hands. Therefore, we are dealing here with the logic of power-sharing and not so much with claims for democratic rights.

In this perspective, what is particularly interesting and will help us understand the rise of the IGM lies in the fact that Khamenei's legitimacy crisis coincides with the deep discontent in business circles. The UN sanctions, together with the sanctions of the USA and the EU, have had a real impact on trade and investment in Iran. A number of Iranian banks are blacklisted which prevents the allocation of credits and other services to Iranian businessmen. This situation results in growing stress among the new Islamic capitalism which is best represented by the rather vast circles of Rafsanjani, both in Iran and in Dubai, Malaysia and Europe where Iranian businessmen are particularly active. Here, we observe a conjunction between the disenchantment in business circles and the *fronde des nobles*, constituted essentially by the Mousavi-Karroubi tandem.

## **Social and Political Malaise**

The Iranian revolutionary regime is thirty-one years old. Three decades is a long period, especially in a digitalised and globalised fast world. The regime, which is based on religious dogma, has difficulty maintaining the dogma intact and at the same time, proceeding to necessary changes required by today's world. The incessant repetition of the same discourse, the same symbolism, the same ideals and for the most part, the same men in power (often elderly men in the inner circle of power) has inevitably created an atmosphere of monotony and stagnation.

The profound social malaise that began already during Khatami's first presidential period was resumed in the rise of the youth with new claims for free access to global communication, rights of expression and actions. There is a clash between two diametrically opposed discourses: the discourse of modernity on the one side and on the other, the archaic discourse, religious and sectarian in essence and turned towards the past with a dogmatic vocabulary, symbolism and ceremonies. Roughly, two thirds of the Iranian population are under 25 years of age and only eight million of the seventy million Iranians were born before the revolution. There is an inevitable clash between gerontocracy, in both age and discourse, and the huge number of young people. In addition to this element, we have to note the high rate of inflation (between 15 and 25%) and the high rate of unemployment, especially in urban areas.

The malaise has also reached the circles of the Iranian establishment. Iran has an old administrative tradition and Iranians have administered large empires both before and after Islam (words like *vizir*, *divan* and *serail* that now belong to the universal bureaucratic jargon are of Persian origin). During Ahmadinejad's presidency, the establishment has become weakened, humiliated and disgraced. Over a period of only three years, Ahmadinejad has changed the governor of the Central Bank three times, many ministers and ambassadors have been recalled and replaced unexpectedly. In relation to human rights, Iran was declared the largest prison for journalists in 2009. And next to China, Iran is the country with the highest number of death penalties and executions. According to the organisation Freedom House, Iran was one of the five most liberticidal countries in 2009, followed by Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, North Korea and Burma.

## **The IGM: a Wikipedia**

The Green Movement is still in its formative process and as such, it is under permanent development. Some Iranian observers have compared it to Wikipedia: Everybody can add something to it and today's configuration is quite different from yesterday's as well as from that of tomorrow. The IGM possesses some trends that are new in relation to Iranian political culture and behaviour and is somehow in contrast with the actions, symbolism, slogans and even the body language of the demonstrators during the events of the revolution in 1979.

Firstly, the actors are predominantly *young* (both sexes). Secondly, the IGM is a *non-violent* movement. In clear contrast to the 1979 revolution, demonstrators exercise self-control, avoid

destruction, looting, setting things on fire as was characteristic of a series of events during the Khomeini revolution. The slogans are also different. At the beginning, the main slogan was clear and simple: "Where is my vote?" – a strong message against the allegedly fraudulent election of Ahmadinejad to the presidency. Other slogans were launched in support of Mousavi as well as in support of the students. Also, claiming the regime change: "*Johuri Irani*/Iranian Republic", in contrast to the existing 'Islamic Republic'. The only violent slogan was: "Death to the dictator!" which, at the beginning, was addressed at Ahmadinejad alone. Then slowly, it came to point in the direction of Khamenei together with attacks on placards of Khamenei, and in one incident, Khomeini's portrait got a rough treatment by some of the demonstrators.

Yet another distinct characteristic of the IGM resides in its *ideological elasticity*. The IGM is neither a religious movement nor a movement with a clear political belonging to a specific political party, nor to an ideological doctrine and orientation. Demonstrators are apparently representing an agglomerate of reformists of various tendencies as well as the anti-regime tendencies (liberals, socialists, republicans and monarchists). The same amorphous configuration was visible in connection with gender. Both women dressed in full chador and women wearing light scarves were present in protest demonstrations, crying: "*Ba chador, bi chador, marg bar dictator*/With or without chador, death to the dictator!" Not a word about ethnic separatism or in favour of the atomic issue.

As to the *leadership* of the movement, it is a movement without a well-defined leadership. Mousavi and Karroubi have never claimed to be the leaders of the IGM. On the contrary, they carefully avoid any explicit claim in this direction. This situation has deprived the IGM of having a clear and systematic direction. Whether the lack of clear leadership in the current phase should be considered a weakness or perhaps a strength constitutes an open question. The IGM's proclaimed aims following the electoral disputes may be summed up in a few points as follows: a) the release of prisoners who were arrested in connection with the presidential election in June 2009, b) the application of the constitutional provisions that have been neglected and are related to free demonstrations and free elections.

Another weakness of the IGM lies in its purely *urban character* and in the fact that the zones of influence are limited to Tehran and a few other big cities in Iran. Even in the large urban agglomerations, the IGM does not benefit from the support of organised social forces (workers, teachers, public servants and so on).

If we compare the IGM to East European anti-totalitarian movements, the IGM, due to its shapeless character, does not correspond to any category of this kind of movements. East European movements can be divided into four categories: 1) corporate-led movement (*Solidarność* in Poland), 2) intellectually led movement (Czechoslovakia), 3) military-based in alliance with the masses (Rumania) and 4) Establishment-led movement (Hungary). At the moment, the IGM represents quite a different category – a *Twitter* movement – with its anarchistic tendencies and sporadic manifestations.

In totalitarian regimes, opposition as a recognised, respected and potential alternative is non-existent. There is only *resistance* under different forms, often with high costs and with instances of sporadic and individual heroism. What happened in Iran is that, for the first time in the history of the Islamic Republic, an *opposition* actually emerged as a consequence of inner dissension. This opposition is loyal to the Constitution of the regime and fully recognises the legitimacy of the revolution.

## **Any Hope, any Future?**

It is hard to make qualified remarks about the future of the IGM and with it, the future of Iran under the presidency of Ahmadinejad. However, it is already possible to observe three facts: Firstly, the 'Reformist' faction of the IGM, led by personalities like Mousavi and Karroubi, is facing an inherent contradiction. Their claims for a full application of the Constitution and free expression and free elections are in clear contradiction with each other. The lack of freedom in Iran is especially a result of the application of the very same Constitution which is based on discrimination (gender discrimination, discrimination between Muslims and non-Muslims, between Sunni and Shi'a and so on). It is also conditioned by the Islamic rules that are being interpreted by the 'clerical' members of the Guardian Council who are nominated by the Leader. Therefore, the 'Reformists', who constantly reaffirm their full loyalty to the Constitution and to the Revolution, will have great difficulty in cutting the vicious circle.

Secondly, the 'Radicals' are also facing their own difficulties. Contrary to the Reformists, the Radicals are for a regime change. Their weakness lies in their fragmentation, their internal political opposition and antagonism and in a general lack of organisation. They are also the objects of severe oppression, risking their lives, which is not the case, at least for the moment, for the Reformists.

Thirdly, the government is also facing great problems, both internally and in relation to the international society. It is aware that the crisis is not over and the IGM is still active and the pressure from the outside against the policy of the Khamenei-Ahmadinejad tandem in the atomic issue becomes increasingly strong.

All these elements indicate that the situation has reached a deadlock and the course of future events has therefore become rather unpredictable. In such a situation, accidents and incidents sometimes play a critical role. The sudden disappearance of the Leader, an attack on Iran, widespread social unrest due to the coming economic sanctions are types of events that could result in unexpected changes in Iran. Otherwise, it would be no surprise if a new era of political apathy were to arise. An apathy perhaps even more profound than the one that the Iranians experienced after the eight years of Khatami's unsuccessful presidency.

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