

Who's Really Running Iran's Green Movement

Nov 4, 2009



Articles & Testimony

Nearly six months after the demonstrations that followed June's disputed presidential election, Iran's pro-democracy "green movement" is as strong as ever. Rallies took place in downtown Tehran today, having been in the works for months through Twitter, blogs, and word of mouth. Iran, it seems, is on the verge of having a new, unified opposition party.

But the solidarity on the streets hides wide -- and growing -- splits within. The ostensible leaders of the movement, Mir Hossein Mousavi, Mohammad Khatami, and Mehdi Karroubi, are former high-ranking officials of the Islamic Republic who would likely keep much about the Islamic Revolution in place. Contrast this with the young men and women on the streets, and you see differences that go beyond the generational. The protesters are aiming to bring down the very system of which their leaders are a part.

Despite being lauded as modernizers, opposition front-runner Mousavi and his two green movement colleagues are deeply loyal to the ideals of Ayatollah Rouhollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic, and advocate a theocratic political system. Had Mousavi come into office following the June 12 presidential election, he would not have challenged the political order. He would have tried to fix the Islamic Republic's internal and external crises through slight policy tweaks. Nor would the West have seen an "opening" of the sort that some suggest. Indeed, Mousavi's rivalry with President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has little to do with the current regime's foreign policy and far more to do with internal power struggles, economic policy, and, to some extent, cultural agendas. A new leader would not have fundamentally changed Iran's position on nuclear policy or its regional role. The reason is simple: Everyone who ran for president concedes that foreign-policy decisions should fall to Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

So how did such moderates end up at the helm of a revolution? By accident. None of the reform candidates could have predicted that, following the mass vote-rigging during the presidential election, a popular movement would arise. These "leaders" had only a small role both in organizing and creating the movement, but they were swept into power by a spontaneous and improvised groundswell. The government had carefully vetted candidates, keeping anyone too reformist from running. So the grass-roots movement was left with a choice between two evils: Mousavi, the lesser one, and Ahmadinejad.

Mousavi reluctantly became the symbolic leader of the green movement, but he, Karroubi, and Khatami remain aloof. Today's demonstrations, for example, were imagined and promoted by bloggers and leaders of human rights and women's movements for at least two months. It was only last week, after these plans were well circulated (and the Grand Ayatollah had warned against them), that Mousavi issued a statement calling for demonstrations on Nov. 4.

So today, these three former officials find themselves at the helm of a movement whose views they do not necessarily represent. That gap -- between the green movement's leaders and the people in the streets -- is widening. Even in the midst of protests, there is growing discord. For instance, Mousavi and Karroubi have both criticized slogans like "No Gaza, no Lebanon -- I sacrifice my life for Iran" as "extremist," despite their being a widespread feature of current

popular action in Iran.

But the most fundamental split comes over what the movement makes of the Iranian Revolution. Mousavi and Khatami have reiterated their desired goal of returning to the ideals of late Ayatollah Khomeini and the original principles of the Islamic Republic. But those in the streets are conscious of the failure of past reforms and have little hope that the Islamic Republic -- a system in which the supreme leader has the authority to veto both Islamic and national law -- can be saved. And the green movement remains motivated by the notion of human rights and citizenship, both absent in Iran's Constitution. Hence, the part of the movement that first began to peacefully protest against the vote manipulation in this summer's election finds itself diametrically opposed to Ayatollah Khamenei and the Revolutionary Guard under him.

Khatami, a former president himself, is certainly cognizant of the split; in a recent speech, he tried to distinguish between those participating in current protests, who reject the entire existing system, and his own followers, who prefer to work within the political structure of the Islamic Republic with a ruling jurist above all.

But the bulk of the movement agrees less with the so-called leaders and more with the Islamic Republic's young third generation, who form 70 percent of the Iranian population and make up most of the demonstrators. The true leaders of this movement are students, women, human rights activists, and political activists who have little desire to work in a theocratic regime or in a government within the framework of the existing Constitution. This movement is much broader than the reform movement of the 1990s, when Khatami was president. Then, the number of people demanding reform on the streets never exceeded 50,000. According to Tehran's conservative mayor, Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, more than 3 million people protested in the wake of this year's June 12 election.

If you want to know the unconventional nature of this movement -- and what the people who have bravely taken to the streets really want - don't listen to Mousavi, Karroubi, and Khatami.

Since the true representatives of reform owe little to them, a successful green movement would likely push them aside anyway.

This is why it is not only the regime in Tehran -- but also the reformist "leaders" who pretend to lead this movement -- that fear the success of the green movement. Democracy in Iran will emerge only through a rupture with the late Ayatollah Khomeini's ideals and Islamic ideology -- concepts to which the accidental leaders of the green movement are still loyal.

Mehdi Khalaji is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on the domestic policy of Iran as well as the politics of Shiite groups in the Middle East. ❖

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