

The Green Movement

Abbas Milani

- The Green Movement took its name from a green sash given to Mir Hossein Mousavi by Mohammad Khatami, Iran's two-term president and the reform movement's first standard-bearer.
- The Green Movement reached its height when up to 3 million peaceful demonstrators turned out on Tehran streets to protest official claims that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had won the 2009 presidential election in a landslide. Their simple slogan was: "Where is my vote?"
- The movement soon embodied the frustrated aspirations of Iran's century-old quest for democracy and desire for peaceful change.
- Mousavi and his wife, Zahra Rahnava, are the nominal leaders. Mehdi Karubi has been its most radical and relentless advocate. Former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani embodies politicians who vacillate between supporting the movement and siding with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.
- The movement has no hierarchical structure. Its global reach resembles the Internet it uses. But its amorphous structure is both its strength and weakness.

Overview

A new opposition was born after the disputed June 12, 2009 presidential election that changed the face of Iranian politics – and Iran. A nation long maligned – for a regime of corrupt zealots that harbored terrorists and took diplomats hostage – suddenly became a beacon of democratic hope. The movement was widely seen as a new non-violent, non-utopian and populist paradigm of revolution that infused twenty-first century Internet technology with people street power. In turn, the regime's facade as a populist theocracy, led by a divinely sanctioned "guardian" and supported by a deeply pious nation, was torn asunder.

Over the next six months, the Green Movement evolved from a mass group of angry voters to a nation-wide force demanding the democratic rights originally sought in the 1979 revolution, rights that were hijacked by radical clerics. Every few weeks, protesters took to the streets to challenge the regime and its leadership. But by early 2010, the regime had quashed public displays of opposition. The Green Movement retreated into a period of soul-searching and regrouping.

Origins

The Green Movement is, in its composition and genealogy, both old and new. The revolution of 1979 was the result of a historically incongruent alliance between

modernizing middle and technocratic classes, the urban poor, women's and students' groups, some disgruntled members of Iran's new industrialist class, members of the bazaar and "de-modernizing" forces led by revolutionary leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The foot-soldiers of the revolution were the new urbanites – culturally religious, conservative and a-modern, if not anti-modern, peasants who had come to the cities in search of their share of petro-dollars.

Since 1941, this class had been assiduously courted by radical Islamist groups. They played an important role in the 1979 revolution. They have since splintered into factions that are today pitted against each other. They were part of the incongruent coalition that overthrew the shah. Included in that coalition were Mir Hossein Mousavi and his activist wife Zahra Rahnavard, who represented the moderate religious elements of the unwieldy anti-shah coalition. At the other end of the coalition were forces today represented by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his allies in the Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) and Basij. They represent the Nietzschean resentments of the new conservative urbanites and their déclassé leaders.

After Ali Khamenei succeeded revolutionary leader Ayatollah Khomeini as supreme leader in 1989, he needed to find a political and social base of his own. He lacked charisma, and his religious credentials were weak. He increasingly relied on and strengthened these forces, particularly the IRGC. Khomeini had banned the IRGC from politics, but Khamenei encouraged both political and economic involvement.

Mousavi emerges

Ahmadinejad's election in 2005 marked the beginning of this group's political rise. The 2009 election was crucial to consolidate its hold on power. But then Mir Hossein Mousavi announced his candidacy for president. He had been prime minister during Iran's war with Iraq between 1980 and 1988. After the constitution was amended to create an executive president and remove the prime minister, Mousavi returned to his roots as an architect and a painter. His eclectic buildings resembled the new style of Italian Renzo Piano.

In 2009, the Guardian Council, responsible for vetting candidates, allowed Mousavi to run. Rejecting his candidacy would have been difficult. The conservative camp apparently calculated that Mousavi's lack of charisma and long absence from politics hurt his election prospects. But 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. Mousavi was often met with large and enthusiastic crowds.

Election turmoil

The day after the June 12 election results were announced, hundreds of thousands of people poured onto Tehran's streets to protest. The regime was caught off

guard by the Green Movement's demonstration. Security forces were initially paralyzed by the numbers. But then the regime unleashed security forces, including Revolutionary Guards, units of the Basij paramilitary units, and plain-clothed paramilitary forces called *Lebas Shakhshi*. Thousands of protesters were beaten, hundreds were arrested and dozens were killed by snipers.

On June 18, Khamenei delivered a Friday prayer sermon that dismissed the protesters' complaints and endorsed the election results. It reflected the regime's formal announcement that it would not tolerate the Green Movement – and would do whatever it took to suppress it. The new confrontation was symbolized by the death of 26-year-old Neda Agha Soltan, an aspiring musician, on June 20. She was shot by a sniper, as she stood at the edge of a Green Movement protest. A cell phone video that captured her dying on the pavement was circulated around the world. Neda and pictures of her blood-spattered face became symbols of the Green Movement.

For the next six months, an array of groups under the Green Movement umbrella used public holidays and national commemorations to rally on the streets of several cities. In the past, the government had bussed in people to attend events and used them to claim popular support. In 2009, however, it dispatched security forces to get the people off the streets. With each new round, the government grew more repressive, yet also appeared increasingly vulnerable.

Fall protests

During demonstrations in the fall, the issues shifted from alleged election fraud to challenges of the system and the supreme leader himself. "Death to the dictator" became a common refrain at protests. Others chanted, "Khamenei is a murderer. His rule is null and void." Students were particularly active. The key events included:

- **Sept. 18 – Qods Day, or Jerusalem Day.** In the past, Iranians shouted "Death to Israel" at rallies. In 2009, protesters instead shouted "Death to Russia," because it was the first government to recognize Ahmadinejad's election.
- **Nov. 4 – Anniversary of the U.S. Embassy takeover.** Pupils traditionally get the day off and schools bus them to the old American compound for a rally. In 2009, thousands turned out on the streets to instead protest their own regime, not the United States. Chants of "Death to America" were replaced by cries of "Death to No One." Some even shouted, "A green Iran doesn't need nuclear weapons." More pointedly, others shouted, "Obama, you are either with us – or with them."
- **Dec. 7 – National Students Day,** commemorating the deaths of three students in protests around the time of Vice President Nixon's 1953 visit to Tehran. The turnout was the largest since the summer and spread to campuses across the

country, despite increasingly harsh government tactics, including alleged torture, rape and deaths in prison.

- **Dec. 19 – Montazeri’s death.** The death of Grand Ayatollah Ali Montazeri, Iran’s leading dissident cleric and spiritual father to the Green Movement, sparked more mass demonstrations. Crowds were enormous in the holy city of Qom, earlier off-limits to protests, and elsewhere. Montazeri had been the clerical face of the opposition since 1989, when he was fired as heir apparent to Khomeini, for criticizing the regime’s mass executions and failure to live up to its revolutionary promises. The government responded to the outpouring by redistributing the statement about Montazeri’s dismissal as supreme leader 20 years earlier.
- **Dec. 27 – Ashoura,** the holiest day of the year for Shiites as they commemorate the seventh century martyrdom of Hussein, the Prophet Mohammed’s grandson. Hundreds of thousands turned out in mass protests. In response, government forces opened fire on unarmed civilians in the streets. Turmoil spread to at least 10 major cities. There were several confirmed deaths, scores of injured and hundreds of arrests. The fact that a clerical regime had opened fire on peaceful demonstrators on the day of Ashoura was a serious departure from a long tradition of non-violence on that day.

Show trials

As momentum grew behind the Green Movement, the government response was increasingly tough. In the fall of 2009, more than 100 of the Green Movement’s most important leaders, activists and theorists appeared in show trials reminiscent of Joseph Stalin’s infamous trials in the 1930s. They included:

- **Saeed Hajjarian,** architect of the reform movement and senior adviser to former President Khatami.
- **Mohammad Abtahi,** former vice president under Khatami.
- **Moshen Miradamadi,** head of the largest reform party, former member of parliament, former head of parliament’s foreign affairs and national security committee, and one of three masterminds of the U.S. Embassy takeover.
- **Behzad Nabavi,** co-founder of a reform party and former deputy speaker of parliament.

The accused were forced to confess on television to several crimes against the nation. But their confessions seemed designed to make a similar point: The Green Movement was a creation of the United States and its goal was to weaken the Islamic regime. Not all the detainees made it to trial. The torture and death of prisoners in the Kahrizak prison became a lingering source of political embarrassment for the regime.

The regime also shut down newspapers, magazines and websites close to the Green Movement. Iran became the country with the most imprisoned journalists. To

help fight the reform movement's use of the Internet, the Revolutionary Guards became majority owner of Iran's telecommunications giant.

Soul-searching

In 2010, the Green Movement tried to mobilize demonstrations for the February 11 anniversary of the revolution. But the advance crackdown was so pervasive that leaders of the movement called it off. Public demonstrations were basically over.

The Green Movement moved into a phase of soul-searching. The key question was whether the movement was in temporary retreat, regrouping to develop a new strategy and tactics, or had simply been defeated. A few activists even talked about the need to reconcile with Khamenei and his allies, given signs that the conservative camp had also begun to see Ahmadinejad as a liability.

Some in the Green Movement also talked of a post-Mousavi phase. His unwillingness to criticize Khamenei and his insistence on working within the constitution convinced some Iranians that he no longer reflected the movement's views. Yet another group, led by Mousavi himself, attempted to formulate a more precise platform. A proposed covenant issued in June 2010 was his first step.

A new covenant

One year after the Green Movement's birth, Mousavi published a proposed new covenant. He said the regime represented "institutionalized corruption hiding behind a pretense of piety." He placed the Green Movement in context of Iran's 100-year-old quest for democracy. He was silent on the *velayat-e faqih*, but he clearly stated that a government's legitimacy can be founded only on the will and support of the people. Nothing in the constitution is sacrosanct, he declared, and every article of the law should be the subject to debate and reconsideration.

The current regime, he wrote, disdained, ignored and broke its own laws. In contrast, the Green Movement insisted not only on the rule of law, it also called for laws to reflect international standards on human rights and democracy. Iran's democrats, he added, would insist on equality before the law, irrespective of gender, religion and ideology. Finally, he demanded a "separation of institutions of religion from institutions of the state," although he acknowledged that "religion will certainly have a presence" in Iran's democratic future.

Foreign policy

In foreign policy, Mousavi's covenant differed sharply with the regime. He insisted that Iran should enjoy all the rights afforded law-abiding nations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. But he was emphatic that a new democratic Iran would have full transparency in its relations with other nations and the international

organizations – and would not seek a nuclear bomb. Mousavi and other Green Movement leaders have blamed the regime’s “adventurism” for U.N. sanctions.

The future

- Short-term, the opposition faces political purgatory. The regime has been willing to use unprecedented brutality to maintain power.
- Long-term, Iran’s many challenges are likely to be solved only in a more democratic environment. The pressures include a dominant, Internet-savvy youth, an assertive women’s movement, structural economic difficulties (including double-digit unemployment and inflation), badly needed investments in oil and gas industries, and a troubled private sector.
- To survive, the Green Movement must offer a more cohesive leadership and a more cogent platform. It must also find a way to surmount the regime’s cyber-jihad, which uses Western, Russian Chinese and Indian technologies to stifle the opposition’s voice.
- The most serious potential problem for Iran’s democratic movement is the threat of war. Smart sanctions focused on weakening the regime’s ideological and oppressive apparatus can facilitate the maturation of this movement. A military assault could sideline or kill the movement for the foreseeable future.

Abbas Milani, author of “The Myth of the Great Satan,” is director of Iranian Studies at Stanford University, where he is also a co-director of the Iran Democracy Project at Hoover Institution.