

## **The Student Protests and the Social Movement for Reform in Iran: Sociological Reflections**

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The student protests in early July 1999 were not unexpected. Nor was the onslaught by the conservative forces unforeseen. Both the student protests and the conservative reaction occurred in the context of: (1) growing grievances among the modern middle-class, intellectuals, women, and young people concerning political restrictions, economic difficulties, and the cultural strictures of Islamism; (2) a political opening created by the election of President Khatami, who represented the nascent social movement for reform; (3) the continued power and influence of Ayatollah Khamenei and the conservative forces; and (4) the expansion of global discourses and movements for women's rights, human rights, and democratization. Given these domestic and global factors – and given also the existence of “a political culture of resistance”<sup>1</sup> and of traditions of collective action that are part of the nation's cultural repertoire – it is unlikely that the cycle of protests will cease. However, considering the greater financial and organizational resources of the conservative forces, and considering also the stakes involved in the call for reform, it is equally unlikely that the conservatives will accede willingly to the fundamental changes called for by the reformists.

As Iranians, we are keenly interested in political events in Iran, in which we all have a stake. As social scientists, even as engaged social scientists, it is incumbent upon us to analyze events with objectivity and balance, deploying the appropriate theoretical tools to help explain events. The student protests in Iran inspire and encourage those of us who look forward to a democratic and progressive Iran. But how best to understand and explain the events of July, and the prospects for the success of a social movement for reform of the Islamic Republic? In the sections below, I address these questions from a sociological perspective.

### **Some Theoretical Considerations**

Like revolutions, social movements are set in motion by social changes that render the established political order more vulnerable or receptive to challenges. In Marxist theory, political change comes about with shifts in the mode of production, which trigger contradictions in the class structure, the relations of production, and relations of domination and subordination. Consequently, in Lenin's famous formulation, change comes about when the ruling class can no longer rule as before and the people no longer are willing to be ruled as before. These broad “laws of history” are of course subject to more specific factors and local conditions, including the kinds of political processes brilliantly analyzed by Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. Furthermore, Lenin noted the importance of mobilizing and organizing for change, especially in *What Is To Be Done?* In his view, spontaneous, grassroots movements, resources, and consciousness – such as trade unionism

– needed to be harnessed and more effectively organized and mobilized, mainly by an efficient party with a clear agenda, in order that the struggle could succeed. In the broad Marxist/Leninist framework, economic and political conditions and crises are equally important in understanding the origins, evolution, and outcomes of social movements and revolutions.

Contemporary sociological theory contributes to further understanding of political and social movements by emphasizing key movement dynamics. These are, in summary: (1) national-level political opportunities and constraints (including such issues as the relative openness or closure of the institutionalized political system, the stability of the political elite, the presence of elite allies within the society, the state's capacity and propensity for repression); (2) mobilizing structures (those collective vehicles, informal as well as formal, through which people mobilize and engage in collective action, as well as issues such recruitment, organizational resources, leadership, morale); and (3) "cultural frames" (the shared meanings and definitions that people bring to their situation; ideas and sentiments, values and cultures, collective identity).<sup>2</sup> Feminists have added insights by drawing attention to gender issues, including the role of women within the movement's rank-and-file and leadership, and the place of "the woman question" and of family issues in movement and state discourses.<sup>3</sup> These broad structural, political, cultural, and organizational factors are key to an understanding of the causes of social movements, of their strengths and weaknesses, and of their prospects.

### **The Political Context: Grievances, Opportunities, Constraints**

A broad movement for political reform is underway in Iran, and its impetus is both domestic and global. The political opening represented by the landslide victory of Hojatolislam Mohammad Khatami in the presidential elections of May 1997 was a significant one. President Khatami's call for civil society greatly encouraged those who yearned for more political, social, and cultural freedoms. The fact that he won with 70 percent of the vote suggested that support for political reforms and liberalization was widespread in the society. At the level of civil society, support for reform was found in the women's press, such as the magazine *Zanan*, and in the intellectual press, such as the magazines *Jame'eh Salem* and *Adineh*, along with newspapers such as *Salam*, *Jame'eh*, *Neshat*, and *Hamshahri*. Important, too, was that at the end of the 1990s, the political elite in Iran was less stable and united than in previous years, and there was a polarization between reformers who came to be associated with President Khatami, and the conservative wing associated with Ayatollah Khamenei (also known as "monopolists"). Support for reform was thus to be found among the political elite (e.g., those known as "moderates", "liberals", "technocrats") as well as within society. Also significant is the fact that the clerical caste has its own divisions. One important source of conflict pertains to the future of the institution of *velayat-e faghih*; another concerns the extent of *ijtihad* permissible.<sup>4</sup>

The outcome of the municipal elections in February 1999 contributed to the political opportunity structure – more pro-Khatami and independent candidates, including many women, were elected. These local elections were the first test of the political opening and they contribute to the greater participation at the local level. Finally, the global political context

is also relevant. The worldwide spread of discourses of human rights, women's rights, civil society, citizenship, and democratization offer a source of legitimacy for those who struggle at the local level in any region or country, including Iran. This combination of domestic and global factors constituted an opportunity structure conducive to the emergence of a social movement for political change.

In addition to political opportunities, a number of grievances lay behind the July protests. Since at least early 1997, a number of acts of political repression have alarmed and outraged citizens — particularly those members of the modern middle class, intellectuals, women, and youth who were already dissatisfied with the economic, political, and cultural environment of the Islamic Republic. These repressive acts include the arrest and harassment of Farraj Sarkouhi, editor of *Adineh*; the arrest and prosecution of Tehran's former mayor Gholamhossein Karbaschi; the harassment of liberal theologian Dr. Abdolkarim Soroush; the arrest and trial of Hojjatoleslam Mohsen Kadivar and the defrocking of Mohsen Sa'idzadeh; the assassinations of Daryoush Forouhar and Parvin Eskandari-Forouhar, long-time National Front members, and of the intellectuals Majid Sharif, close to the Freedom Movement, and Mohammad Mokhtari and Mohammad-Jaafar Pouyandeh, who were associated with the left; the disappearance and presumed death of the Marxist Pirouz Davani; the passage of two parliamentary bills (one restricts the public discussion of women's issues and the other calls for strict segregation of health facilities); and the closure of several well-known periodicals. On the part of many Iranian citizens, there is a long-standing grievance over the treatment of the left opposition and of political prisoners during the 1980s (including the mass executions of political prisoners in 1988), but the more proximate causes of the political unrest are the ones listed above.

The precipitating factor for the July protests was the attack on pro-democracy students who had been peacefully protesting the closing down of *Salam* newspaper and the introduction of a parliamentary bill that would muzzle the press. On at least two previous occasions (23 May 1998 and 14 May 1999), students and intellectuals rallied in support of President Khatami, demanding that his authority be enhanced and that the civil society of which he has spoken so eloquently be allowed to grow and flourish. At present, Ayatollah Khamenei and his allies have control of the army, police, judiciary, and the Pasdaran. In addition, the current Majlis is dominated by conservatives. Hence the slow pace of reform since Khatami's election.

During previous rallies and meetings, students had experienced the disruption of meetings, and fist fights initiated by gangs of Hizbollahi. This time, however, the attack was shockingly violent. On 9 July 1999, a vicious night-time attack by Ansar-e Hezbollah took place in the dormitories of Tehran University. We now know that one student, Ezzat Ebrahinejad, was killed, while hundreds were badly beaten and seriously injured. This untenable political situation — characterized by the absence of civil and political rights, by legal uncertainty, and by personal insecurity on the part of citizens — triggered three days of protests that finally erupted in a day of rioting before being put down by police.

Although President Khatami was quick to condemn the night-time attack on the students as "an ugly and bitter incident" and to dismiss two high-ranking security officials, he disassociated himself from the student protests in its final days. His denunciation of the

rioting was unnecessarily harsh and in effect a betrayal of the aspirations of the reform movement.<sup>5</sup> President Khatami has inspired much hope for change in the Islamic Republic, and he has spoken eloquently about civil society, tolerance, civilizational dialogue, and so on. But the events of July seem to have overtaken him.

At the same time, the state's capacity and propensity for repression remains unchanged. On July 14, Ayatollah Khamenei's men came out to reclaim the streets, yelling "our blood is our gift to our leader", screaming insults at the "mean and wretched enemies of Islam", and shouting the same old slogans: death to America, death to Israel, death to hypocrites. Many students were arrested, and their fate remains unclear.

The protests and the backlash underscored the polarization of politics in Iran, with the reformists and the conservatives in distinct and clearly defined camps. Unfortunately, the reformists are in a less advantageous position than are the conservatives with respect to institutional, organizational, and financial resources. Moreover, it is clear that President Khatami has disappointed many of his erstwhile supporters. What does this augur for the reform movement, for his leadership, and for his moral authority?

In a Chicago public radio roundtable on the Khatami presidency that was held after the May 1997 elections, I argued that two roads were open to Khatami. The first road, I said, was the Gorbachev road. In this scenario, Khatami would call for major political and economic reforms, albeit within the framework of the existing system (that is, an Iranian version of perestroika and glasnost without the radical disruption of a Yeltsin). The other road, I argued, was the Clinton road, whereby Khatami would disappoint the people who voted for him by not delivering on the promises made. The events of July would suggest that Khatami is no Gorbachev; he has neither the capacity nor the will to lead a social movement and a major reform process. Instead, he seems to have taken the second road, deeply disappointing many citizens who voted for him.

At this writing, then, the political opportunity structure is not conducive to the reformists, and it may very well be that the incipient social movement that expressed itself in July is now leaderless. But social movements have a life of their own, and some of their dynamics cannot be anticipated or predicted. Moreover, although the institutionalized political system remains closed, the political elite have not closed ranks and remain deeply divided. Thus the question of who will assume (or resume) leadership, and the timing of the next cycle of protests, remain to be seen.

### **Mobilizing for Reform**

A social movement consists of networks, groups, and individuals prepared to mobilize for protest actions to promote (or resist) social change. As mentioned above, reformers are found among the political elite and the clerical caste, and within the society. Social movement activists, however, are found mainly among students and intellectuals, including many women.

More specifically, within this broad movement, three strands may be identified. One is represented by university students, who are organized in various groups, such as *Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat*, the Association of Patriotic Students, and the Islamic Association of University Students and Alumni. Another is comprised of intellectuals, whose writings have

exercised the conservatives and who have lost several members to assassinations. They are organized in part in the Writers' Association, the Iranian section of PEN. They publish or write in a number of well-known magazines and newspapers. The third strand is comprised of women activists – lawyers, social scientists, and publishers. Their views can be found in the women's press, especially *Zan*, *Zanan*, *Hoghugh-e Zan*, *Farzaneh*, and sometimes *Zan-e Rouz*.

Although for the most part the women's press and the intellectual press remain separate, with separate priority concerns (family law issues for the women's press and democracy and freedoms for the intellectual press), there is some cross-fertilization. For example, women activists have written for *Jameh Salem*, *Adineh*, and *Rah-e Now*. In Iran, as in other developing countries, each of these social groups has a collective identity and a sense of mission.<sup>6</sup>

In the absence of any political parties in Iran, the political affiliations of students, intellectuals, and women activists are difficult to ascertain. Some prominent intellectuals, however, are known to have a left-wing background and would probably join or help found a social-democratic political party, were that possible in the contemporary Islamic Republic. Other intellectuals, and students as well, appear oriented toward a liberal-nationalist political stance, apparently in the Mossadegh tradition. It is known that the *Nehzat-e Azadi* (the Freedom Movement of the late Premier Bazargan) and the National Front have a presence and supporters in Iran.<sup>7</sup>

These three groups could be found in the two large rallies that took place in support of President Khatami and his reform program in 23 May 1998 and 14 May 1999. The first rally was held to celebrate the first anniversary of the election, and was led by President Khatami himself. According to one account, a line of young women in black chadors chanted: "The enemy of our society is prejudice and monopoly." Demonstrators carried banners reading "Freedom of the Press", "The Military Should be Reformed", and "Freedom of Thought is Everyone's Right". Khatami's supporters greeted him with whistles and cheers (which are considered decidedly un-Islamic) as well as raised fists.<sup>8</sup> In the second large rally, on 14 May 1999, some 2,000 students gathered at Tehran University to commemorate the election of Khatami but also to call for faster reforms. They were there in part to protest the limited powers given to the president.

In the July 1999 protests, the lead was clearly taken by the students, even though many intellectuals and women activists supported the students.<sup>9</sup> And who exactly are the students demanding change? In the absence of empirical research, one can only offer educated guesses, based on what we know about the social/class background of university students, and based on newspaper accounts and photos of the protesters.

Press accounts and photos suggest a diverse composition of the student protesters. Many of the young men had longish hair and were without beards or mustaches, signalling their liberal, modernist, or non-Islamist orientation. Others, however, sported mustaches and beards, suggesting that those of a religious persuasion are also represented among the reformists. The women who appeared in the photos wore scarves and manteaus, but there were also women in chadors among the protesters. One news account described how "female students in black chadors wept" in the protests that followed the Ansar-e Hezbollah attacks

on the student dormitories (*The Observer*, July 11). Slogans such as “Rise up, your brother has been killed” and “I will kill my brothers’ murderers” are more traditional than liberal (and more masculine than feminine), while the slogan “Either Islam and the law, or another revolution” draws on both Islamic and liberal cultural understandings. As such, these slogans both reflect the diverse social and cultural backgrounds of the students, and probably resonate with a cross-section of the population. More militantly political slogans, such as “Down with the dictator” and “Commander-in-chief, resign”, are audacious challenges to Ayatollah Khamenei and the status quo. Clearly, the students utilized both traditional and modern discourses and drew on the cultural and political repertoires. As such, they seem to have represented both traditional and modern social classes dissatisfied with the economic, political, and cultural status quo, including the continued power of the religious establishment.

I was in London when the protests took place, and followed the news daily via radio and the printed press. One of the many intriguing aspects of the student protests was the participation of women, as both student protestors and as outside supporters. In one newspaper photo (*The Independent*, 12 July 1999), a woman student in a headscarf and manteau, her face partially hidden by dark glasses and a kerchief, is chanting slogans with a raised fist. Behind her, a male student is carrying a photo of Khatami. In another photo (*The Times*, July 12), Faezeh Hashemi is marching in solidarity with the students, accompanied by several other chador-clad women and surrounded by protesting young men with masks. In another photo, a woman is wearing dark glasses and a napkin to cover her face (*The Guardian*, July 13, 1999). And in yet another photo (*The Independent*, July 14), a woman student in a light-colored manteau who has been overcome by tear gas fired by riot police, is carried to safety by a male student who is followed by other male and female students. Their appearance suggests modern middle class.

According to press accounts, hundreds of Tehran residents sided with the students (*The Times*, July 13). Press accounts also stated that along with the university students in Tehran, protests were carried out by university students and seminarians in Yazd, Khorramabad, Hamadan, Shahrud, Tabriz, Mashad, Isfahan, and Qom. It appears, then, that the student protests reflected the grievances of a cross-section of Iranian society: the modern middle class dissatisfied with economic difficulties, political repression, and cultural controls; young people of various social backgrounds frustrated by social restrictions and poor job prospects; women angered by social controls and soaring unemployment; intellectuals yearning for freedoms and rights; and even seminarians critical of establishment controls.

### **Framing Grievances and Demands**

Ideas and cultural elements are important in understanding the mobilization of participation in social movements. How political opportunity is interpreted, how injustice and grievances are framed, and the means by which organization and collective action are undertaken — these often derive from the “cultural stock” while also challenging it. As shown in the previous section, the July student protests drew from the cultural “tool-kit” and from Iran’s collective action repertoire, utilizing slogans and actions that are culturally familiar and acceptable, and that resonate with the population.

The demonstrations started out peacefully. Expressing widespread grievances, the students protested the closing down of *Salam* and the passage of the press law. This was reminiscent of the early days of the revolution, when intellectuals protested human rights abuses and the lack of freedom of expression under the Shah. But the student protests turned more militant after the violent night-time attack by the Ansar-e Hezbollah took place. The Hezbollahi attacks were widely condemned, and spurred the students to more militant slogans. These included, as mentioned above, "Either Islam and the law, or another revolution"; "Down with the dictator"; "Commander-in-Chief, resign". Many protesters wore white-and-red masks to disguise their identities, and waving their fists they yelled, "The students will die but they will never be humiliated! Muslims, stand up. Your brother is dead" (*The Guardian*, July 12), and "I will kill my brothers' murderers" (*The Independent*, 12 July 1999).

According to one press account, a student named Maryam said: "We had to take action because change is not occurring fast enough. The press law is anti-democratic. We are against the closing of *Salam* because it supports Khatami and Khatami supports the people" (*The Observer*, July 11). At Shariati hospital, where the wounded were treated, one injured student said that he was risking his life for reform. "The press law violates everything we are fighting for. We are struggling for democracy" (*The Observer*, July 11). Another student leader, identified as Kambiz, was reported as saying: "The students have independent power now. We call the shots. If the president does not meet our demands, he should resign". A student identified as Reza said, "We want the world to know that the police beat us. This is a totalitarian state" (*The Guardian*, July 12).

The language of the students is the language of rights, of citizenship, of the rule of law, and of international human rights. It is framed in both a secular discourse and a culturally Islamic discourse. The way the students frame their grievances and demands is also cast in a distinctly Iranian idiom, reminiscent of the 1963 protests and the 1978-79 revolution. Their grievances and demands are addressed to Iranian citizens of various backgrounds, to the government, to the media, and to the world. In a statement issued on July 18 and distributed across the Internet, the Islamic Association of University Students and Alumni wrote:

"What indeed are the demands of the students? Are demands for freedom of expression a crime that must be answered by violent means? Are demands for the trial of thieves and plunderers of public properties a crime that must be answered by baton, bayonet and tear gas? Are demands for the freedom of political prisoners and prisoners of conscience a crime that must be answered by the shedding of blood? Are demands for the trial of the plotters, leaders and murderers who carried out the gruesome killing of intellectuals and freedom loving dissidents a crime that must be answered by gun shots and machine guns? ... Indeed, for how much longer will the debilitating silence of the legal institutions continue in the face of these atrocities by the elements of the totalitarianism? Should we give up believing in the authority of the internal legal institutions? Should we rather ask for the help of international human rights organizations? Should we ask for the help of freedom loving Iranians everywhere outside Iran in support of their repressed fellow Iranians? Has history

witnessed a regime which has remained in power while shedding the blood of innocent citizens?

On more than one occasion, students have submitted their complaints to the respected President, and from now on, we will protest against the violations of human rights of citizens and violations of freedoms and rights included in the Iranian Constitutions to the world citizens. And yet, we ask Mr. Khatami to discontinue being a silent observer of the atrocities against Iranian people, and to address this situation. The Islamic Association of University Students and Alumni shall announce its plans later.”

One awaits the announcement of those plans.

#### In Place of a Conclusion

Despite the fact that major institutions, such as the police and judiciary, are under the control of conservatives and not under the president’s control, the students boldly protested the lack of freedoms. The vicious attack by the Ansar-e Hezbollah was meant to inspire fear, but instead caused revulsion and outrage. In this context, the rioting was entirely understandable and inevitable. Unfortunately, the counter-attack by the regime was also inevitable.

Meanwhile, the political situation is extremely untenable, almost surrealistic. Following the crackdown on the student protests, the authorities formally closed down *Salam* for five years, and its publisher, the left-Islamic Mousavi Khoiniha, was banned from publishing for five years. At the same time, President Khatami and his Interior Minister, Mousavi Lari, spoke publicly of the need for the formation of political parties, ostensibly part of President Khatami’s vision of civil society in the Islamic Republic. Mousavi Lari was quoted as saying: “We must find a strategy to best achieve this goal, given the new atmosphere created and emphasis in the constitution on the need for parties and people’s participation in the political process. We expect that parties will strive for greater transparency and play the rules of the game. We have to learn to tolerate each other, and no one is absolutely right” (*Chicago Tribune*, Aug. 9, 1999). President Khatami was brave in saying the following to an Islamic student group: “Some people are trying to disrupt the system in the name of Islam, and they assert that whatever they say is true Islam even if what they are saying is against the constitution and against the system. They are inviting the people, in particular the religiously-oriented people, to resort to violence” (*Chicago Tribune*, Aug. 9, 1999).

It is of course true that political development and democratization, not to mention the fostering of civil society, require the formation of diverse political parties. But given that the reformist wing of the Islamic Republican regime lacks sufficient organizational resources and institutional bases, and given the continued onslaught of the right wing, can we expect such changes to occur peacefully in the near future? Could change and political reform – including reform of the current system of Islamic governance – come about with a pro-Khatami parliament?<sup>10</sup> Or can we expect another round in the cycle of protests? The answer depends greatly on the continuing contention between factions in the political elite, on the capacity of the social movement for reform to remain focused and cohesive, on its ability to attract citizens across class and cultural divisions, and on its “political imagination”.<sup>11</sup>

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> John Foran, "A Theory of Third World Social Revolutions: Iran, Nicaragua, and El Salvador Compared", *Critical Sociology*, vol. 19, no. 2 (1992): 3-27.
- <sup>2</sup> Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, Mayer N. Zald, eds., *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).
- <sup>3</sup> Guida West and Rhoda Lois Blumberg, eds., *Women and Social Protest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Valentine M. Moghadam, "Gender and Revolutions", in John Foran, ed., *Theorizing Revolutions* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 137-167.
- <sup>4</sup> For these two reasons, Ayatollah Montazeri, Hojatoleslam Mohsen Kadivar, Dr. Abdolkarim Soroush, and Mohsen Saidzadeh (a cleric trained in Qom who has written articles on Islamic family law in *Zanan*), have had serious difficulties with the religious establishment. Seminarians are also divided along similar lines as those among the clerical caste. For example, in March 1998 *Payam-e Emrouz* published a letter from a Qom theology student concerning state intervention in the Qom seminary.
- <sup>5</sup> Some have suggested that the rioting was caused by *agents provocateurs*.
- <sup>6</sup> An important difference between the student movement and the women's movement is that the former is more confrontational while the latter engages in more consensus-building. The women's strategy may be deemed to have been more successful than that of the students, in that it has been able to overturn some highly discriminatory legislation passed in the early years of the Islamic revolution. On the other hand, the conservative parliament continues to pass reactionary laws that adversely affect women.
- <sup>7</sup> It is likely that the Mojahedin have some support in Iran, as does the Tudeh Party.
- <sup>8</sup> Fen Montaigne, "Iran: Testing the Waters of Reform", *National Geographic*, vol. 196, no. 1, July 1999: 2-33. The quotes appear on p. 33.
- <sup>9</sup> Faezeh Hashemi, a known "Islamic feminist", marched in solidarity with the students the day after the Ansar-e Hezbollah attack.
- <sup>10</sup> Parliamentary elections for the Islamic Republic's sixth Majlis are scheduled for February 2000.
- <sup>11</sup> This is a variation on C. Wright Mills' concept of the "sociological imagination", and refers to the need to imagine and also to propose an alternative political future for Iran. Given the many criticisms of *velayat-e faghih*, of the power of the clerical caste, and of the legal system that is based on Islamic theology, it may be judicious for Iranian reformers and dissidents to initiate a dialogue on Iran's constitution and its political institutions. An evaluation of economic policy and institutions is also in order.