

The Arab Uprisings and Iran's Green Movement

By Akbar E. Torbat

October 19, 2011 "[Information Clearing House](#)" In December, 2010, a wave of revolutionary uprisings began in Tunisia and quickly spread to most Arab countries in matter of weeks. Why did these uprisings happen at this time and were they similar to the velvet revolutions such as the Green movement in Iran?

Views on the Arab Uprisings

There are several views to explain what has caused these uprisings. The first view is that these movements in the Arab World have the same pattern as color revolutions, the brain child of Gene Sharp, a former Harvard University researcher. Sharp developed a strategy for overthrowing undesirable regimes by nonviolent struggle, which is referred to as velvet revolution or soft coup d'état. As it appears, the use of hard power military force strategy in the Persian Gulf region has been costly and has largely failed to make desirable changes in favor of the West. Therefore the less expensive soft-coup strategy has now been adopted to change undesirable regimes in the developing countries. By using this strategy Washington wishes to de-stabilize the authoritarian states, decapitate their governments and install better client regimes that can be fully controlled. If this is not possible, destabilization would require military interventions by the US - NATO forces. Such operation was used in Libya under the cover of the United Nations Security Council no-fly zone resolution 1973, which was issued on March 18, 2011 for "protection of civilians". In reality, this was a battle for oil and not for protection of civilians' lives. The prize for the US - NATO air offensive is control over the vast amount of low cost oil in Libya. Needless to say, the countries in the Middle East and North Africa possess about three-fourth of the world's total oil reserves. It has been said that such operation is a part of the US grand strategy, which has been planned for some times by the CIA, the British MI6, and the Freedom House to destabilize certain strategically important oil-rich countries like Iran. To prepare public opinion for attacking or further sanctioning of Iran, the US launched a new propaganda campaign against Iran by filing a spurious lawsuit in court on October 11, 2011, tying the Iranian government with a conspiracy to assassinate the Saudi Arabia's ambassador to Washington.

Propaganda campaign for managing a soft-coup in Iran has been underway since the launching of the Green movement in June 2009. The soft-coup strategy is conducted under the cover of promoting democracy by means of propagandas through social networking, satellite TV, text messaging, e-mail, photo sharing, and so on. Social media technology helps people to communicate and organize uprisings, yet this technology is not well known to many people in the Third World. Even though, the State Department has recently launched Twitter accounts in Arabic, Persian and some other languages, still most of the propagandas are in English and do not seem to have much effect on the populous underprivileged class in these countries. If this has

been the strategy that Washington has adopted, it seems it has not gone in its favor so far. In fact, the use of social media has now hunted back the United States itself as it is used to organize protests against the influence of powerful financial institutions and large corporations in the US government. A movement called Occupy Wall Street began its demonstrations against corporate America in New York City's Financial District on September 17, 2011 and is ongoing. The demonstrations quickly gained momentum and spread to hundreds of major cities across the United States, including Atlanta, Austin, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, San Francisco, Seattle, and Washington DC.

The second view on the cause of the uprisings is that they are based on economic factors. The economic crisis of neoliberal capitalism that began in the US and UK in 2008 and then spread to the South and Eastern Europe, has now reached to some Arab countries and constitutes the cause of these uprisings. In addition, increase in population of the youth and educated has led to disproportionate youth unemployment in these countries and that has contributed to the uprisings. In fact, the uprising in Tunisia began when Mohammad Bouazizi, a young man who worked as street vendor in a small city of Sidi Bouzid, set himself on fire on December 17, 2010, to protest against unemployment and police brutality. That incident sparked a wave of uprisings in the Arab World. Other contributing factors are high food prices, poverty, and underfunded education in these countries. Some oil-rich Arab countries have been able to spend some of the oil money to deal with these problems, but others have encountered serious uprisings that are ongoing.

So far the uprisings in the Arab World have led to the fall of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia on January 14, 2011, and President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt on Feb 11, and it seems there are more to come. The Western media blamed Mubarak and Ben Ali for the problems in these countries and pretended that deposing these officials and making some cosmetic changes in their regimes would solve the problems in their countries and pave the way for transition to democracy. Nevertheless, the cosmetic changes have not calmed down the masses in these countries who want real economic and political change.

The third view is from the clerics in Tehran who view these uprisings as "Islamic awakening" to challenge the neocolonialism and the prolonged humiliation imposed on the Islamic World by the hegemonic powers. The clerics believe the uprisings are the continuation of the 1979 Islamic revolution that brought them to power in Iran. On February 4, 2011, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, in a sermon, and partly in Arabic, supported the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia and elsewhere in the Arab World and called them "Islamic Awakening". The Leader's speech was backed by millions of Iranians who rallied on February 11, to celebrate the 32nd Anniversary of the Iranian Revolution. However, on February 14, some demonstrators were back on the streets of Tehran chanting "Mubarak, Ben Ali, it is your turn Seyyed Ali." Their demonstration however did not gain momentum and was quickly repelled as turned violent.

The Green Movement in Iran

Various names have been used to demarcate political factions in Iran, including conservatives, hardliners, principalists, reformists, moderates, radical Islamists, etc. However, none of these

factions have any distinct class base as workers or impoverished class, or otherwise high status or affluent class. Traditionally the conservative clerics along with a circle of technocrats have backed the interests of the lower class in Iran, while the so-called moderate clerics along with the reformists' camp favor the interests of the affluent class. To discern Iran's Green movement, we have to know who are its key figures and their class base.

Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani is the principal supporter of the Green camp within the regime who himself was defeated in 2005 presidential election. He is a moderate cleric, a proponent of neoliberal capitalism who supports the interests of Iran's affluent and merchant (bazaari) class. He and his family members have acquired substantial wealth by using their influence in the regime. His family members have been charged with corruption in various occasions. For that reason, one of his sons, Mohsen, resigned as the Head of Tehran Metro Company on March 4, 2011. Another Son, Mehdi, fled to London after being charged with fomenting unrests following the 2009 elections. Rafsanjani himself lost his position on March 8, 2011, as the head of Assembly of Experts, which is a clerical body with the authority to dismiss and appoint Iran's Supreme Leader. Rafsanjani's ouster was a major setback for the Green movement. Nevertheless, Rafsanjani still heads the Expediency Council, an unelected arbitration body, which mediates between the Parliament and the Guardian Council that is a sort of clerical upper house.

Another cleric associated with the Green camp is Mehdi Karroubi who previously served as the head of parliament. During the American hostage crisis, Karroubi met with William J. Casey, then the campaign manager of the Republican Party presidential candidate Ronald Reagan. According to Gary Sick, a former National Security Staff in the Carter administration, Casey made a deal with the clerics in Tehran to keep the American hostages until Reagan succeeded to come to the Whitehouse. Casey had two meetings with Mehdi Karroubi in Madrid in the summer of 1980 to wrap up the deal. When Reagan became president in January 1981, He appointed Casey as the Director of Central Intelligence Agency. Taking and prolonging the captivity of the hostages was an economic disaster for Iran as it led to economic sanctions and freezing of the Iranian assets in the US. Besides that, Karroubi took bribe from a wealthy businessman that was brought to people's attention during the presidential candidates' debates in 2009. A third cleric associated with the Green camp is the former president Mohammad Khatami who could not deliver the promises he had made to the Iranian people during his eight-year reign.

Finally, the principal figure of the Green camp is Mir-Hossein Mousavi Khameneh who is a second cousin of the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. He is an architect and interior designer by education. In 1977, he joined a group of young Islamists called Militant Muslims Movement (Jonbesh Mosalmanan Mobarez) and became politically active. After the revolution, he had the title of prime minister in 1981-89 and was a marginal figure dependent on Ayatollah Khomeini for his decisions. Under his repressive premiership, according to Amnesty International, about three thousands political prisoners were executed in the Iranian prisons. Since 1989, Mousavi had remained inactive in politics until he unexpectedly decided to run for president in June 2009. He started his first campaign from a labor union headquarter; despite that, he could not get much support from the labor class in the presidential elections.

As is seen, the main figures of the Green camp have all served as key officials in the Islamic

regime. Their records speak for themselves. The candidates who run in the presidential election are handpicked by the Guardian Council. Mousavi and Karroubi decided to run under the existing election rules of the regime. However, after losing in the elections, they reneged by not accepting the election's results and said the election process had flaws. To put it in other words, they accepted the rules of the game to play but they reneged after they lost.

During the run up and after the election in 2009, the Western media boosted Mousavi's image versus the incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The Western media propaganda support for Mousavi created backlash and failed to turn away multitudes of voters who were supporting Ahmadinejad. Also, Ahmadinejad's self-reliant policies and his position against foreign domination contributed to his re-election success. Through its powerful media outlets, the West backed one wing of the Islamic Republic led by moderate clerics to fight the conservative wing of the Islamic Republic that holds total control over the Iranian government. However, replacing one wing of the regime with another is no progress towards democracy.

In the 2009 elections, Karroubi and Mir-Hossein Mousavi were in illusion that they were leading the opposition factions seeing the Western media outlets backing them. In reality, the Green camp did not support any movement for specific social or political issues, and did not oppose the status quo. In Iran, the genuine opposition groups are not led by these defunct officials. It is rather the Intelligentsia that leads the opposition groups in Iran. The middle class in the intellectual circles favor a secular government and contend the clerics do not have any divine right to rule Iran.

Many Iranians oppose government's restrictions on their social life. Especially Iranian women oppose the clerics' rules on their dress code, rules such as those that prevent them from serving as judges, or prohibit them from sole singing, and the legalization of polygamy. Also too much religious programs on state televisions and control over the press have turned away Iranians to the media outlets from abroad such as the Persian BBC, Voice of America, and a number of other television programs that broadcast from Los Angeles.

To summarize, the Green camp failed because their candidates had already served in the regime and their records were much worse than the incumbent president. The Green camp candidate's proposed policies did not support the interests of the lower class. The camp tried to de-stabilize the country based on unsubstantiated voting fraud allegations. Finally too much Western media propaganda in support of the Green candidate created backlash against the movement among the Iranian people.

The Main Differences of the Uprisings

Some media outlets presented the Arab uprisings as color revolutions similar to the Green movement in Iran and called them Jasmine revolution in Tunisia and April Six Movement in Egypt. However, there are differences in the class base and purpose of these uprisings. In Egypt and Tunisia, the uprisings appeared to be broad base bottom-up movements demanding economic and political change. In Iran, the Green movement was top-down upheaval by the affluent class concerning presidential elections and lacked the lower class participation. The Green camp could not gain support from the peasants, labor organizations, and the lower class

strata that is necessary for a broad base movement.

In reality, the Green movement was an election-related sedition instigated by a few defunct officials who supported the ideological foundation of the Islamic regime. The Green movement was quickly discredited because the disputes brought up by the candidates who lost in the elections could not be substantiated. Both Mehdi Karroubi and Mir-Hossein Mousavi claimed the government had rigged the elections, but they failed to show any credible evidence that they could have earned enough votes to win the election.

The media outlets in the West manufactured Mousavi and Karroubi as the leaders of the opposition in Iran. There are of course many opposition groups against the Islamic regime in Iran but their leaders are not known and surely are not Karroubi or Mousavi. The uprisings in the Arab world however did not have any specific leaders and were not election related, and were not Islamic movements as the clerics in Iran claimed. In the Arab uprisings, people wanted the existing client regimes cease to exist in their totality as opposed to the Green movement in Iran that agreed the existing Islamic regime remains intact.

While some Western analysts have claimed that the internal conflicts in the Middle East are based on religious differences such as Islamic fundamentalists versus moderates, sectarian Shias versus Sunnis, or ethnic issues, yet recent events show the common cause of the conflicts appear to be economic factors that have created class divisions. Social issues such as objections to wearing headscarf (hejab), drinking bans, or restrictions on pop music are not as important as economic issues such as jobs, food, shelter, and healthcare. For that reason, the social welfare policies have the support of the populous lower class in Iran who benefit from them.

Whether the uprisings in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, Bahrain, Morocco, Oman, Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere in the Arab World will lead to democracy and economic betterment remains to be seen.

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