Revolutionary Prefigurations: The Green Movement, Critical Solidarity, and the Struggle for Iran's Future

written by Danny Postel | May 28, 2010

A YEAR HAS NOW PASSED since the explosive appearance of Iran's Green movement in June 2009. Suspecting malfeasance in the official tally of the country's June 12 presidential election, millions of Iranians took to the streets. The historian Ervand Abrahamian, author of the classic *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, described the silent rally of June 15 at Azadi (Freedom) Square in Tehran (*London Review of Books*, 7/23/09):

> The call was heeded by around a million people — the conservative mayor of the capital put the number at three million. The scene was reminiscent of the rallies held in the same square during the 1979 revolution. … The rally drew all kinds of protester: old and young, professionals and workers, bazaaris and students, women with sunglasses and headscarves as well those with the full-length chador. Lines of protesters nine kilometres long converged on the square from the northern, better-off districts as well as from the southern, working-class ones.

A succession of protests has followed, and has occasioned — one might even say inspired — an array of interpretations and formulations. In the heady, early days and weeks following the June election, Slavoj Zizek characterized what was unfolding as "a great emancipatory event" (*LRB*, 7/23/09). "[I]t is indeed an intifada that has broken out in Iran," wrote Robert Fisk in *The Independent* (7/23/09). Hamid Dabashi described the situation as "something quite extraordinary, perhaps even a social revolution" (CNN.com, 6/22/09), though Dabashi's better-known argument is that the Green movement is essentially a civil-rights movement (which, he adds, "does not mean that the Islamic republic may not, or should not, fall") (*Daily Beast*, 1/2/10). Ali Javaherian of the Marxist-Humanist newspaper *News & Letters* rhapsodized that the upheaval heralds "a new reality," something "so unique and new" that it could "transform not just Iran but the entire Middle East, indeed the whole world" (unpublished manuscript).

So is it reform or revolution? Are we witnessing the metamorphosis of what began as a program of reform into something else, something more radical and ambitious?

I tend to agree with Iranian political scientist Hossein Bashiriyeh that this is a "potentially revolutionary situation" that, depending on several variables, "may well turn into a thoroughly revolutionary situation."[1] Will it turn into one? Of course, we have no way of knowing. How events will turn out, even what direction they're moving in, is simply impossible to determine.

What I think we can say, however, is that something very profound has taken place, and is taking place, in Iran today — something of enormous significance for Iran and its future. Whatever concrete outcome emerges, or fails to emerge, from the events unfolding, something very important has already happened. There is a widespread sense that things have changed in Iran, quite possibly forever — that there's been a crack in the mirror, a tectonic shift in the country, since June. I don't just mean the widely remarked-upon evaporation of Khamenei's "halo" due to his naked partisanship for Ahmadinejad, a development that has without question intensified the regime's already

protracted crisis of legitimacy. I'm talking about a deep-seated shift in the consciousness of millions of Iranians, in their ways of seeing and perceiving their political reality. Consider these reflections of a generally apolitical blogger, a young mother who writes under the name "Lady Plum," after attending a protest rally with her child and her mother:

> They had divided us by appearance. Devout, western, downtown [working-class], intellectual, pauper, and hooligan . . . [B]eing together has shattered this. This magic green bracelet has worked wonders on our culture, our feelings, and our hearts. We stand as our true selves. (Cited in *New Internationalist*, Jan. 2010.)

Again, it's hard to measure this kind of thing, but you can see it manifested in quite palpable ways, down to the level of bodily existence: amidst the upheaval, many Iranians have stopped eating and sleeping as usual. And yet they're intensely energized and animated, many of them in a way they've never known before. There's an awakening taking place (albeit a sleep-deprived one). This new sensibility is also on display in what Farideh Farhi has described as an "unprecedented willingness to confront the security forces" (Inter Press Service, 12/31/09).

Make no mistake: as dramatic a process as I believe this to be, I'm not suggesting that the entire population has been swept up in the Green wave, or that there's anything like a "general will" forming. This is, to be sure, a mass movement with millions of adherents, and it represents the sentiments of many millions more. But it does not represent the sentiments of all Iranians. Several other million Iranians are regime loyalists. A bitter pill to swallow though this may be, it is nonetheless a fact. The Green movement does enjoy broad popular support, but Iran is a house divided — irreducibly so — and the competing political visions are engaged in a war of position over Iran's future. The democratic forces realize they're in for the long haul. They will face setbacks, as they did on February 11 — although the regime's declared victory on that occasion was, as Scott Lucas has argued, largely Pyrrhic (*Enduring America*, 2/12/10). Such bumps in the road present opportunities for the movement to do some critical self-reflection and strategic thinking about its next steps, a process that could prove the movement's coming of age.

Neither is the Green movement unified itself. It does represent a broad alliance that has come together around a common set of animating ideas and impulses, but it's far from a monolithic movement. As the influential Iranian religious thinker Abdolkarim Soroush has said, "This is a pluralistic movement, including believers and non-believers, socialists and liberals. There are all walks of life in the Green Movement" (*Global Viewpoint*, 1/6/10).

One could add to this that there are many in the movement committed to nonviolence, while there are at least some who are prepared to do battle with the security forces. This issue has become a point of contention and debate within the movement, perhaps more than any other up to now.

It's also a movement very much in flux, responding to a dramatically evolving situation, and growing in the process. It's finding its voice and intellectual bearings. Particularly in the widely-discussed manifesto issued in January by five of Iran's leading religious intellectuals (Soroush, Kadivar, Mohajerani, Ganji, and Bazargan), we've seen the Green center of gravity shift from pure protest politics to a more layered, more affirmative mode, with the contours of a vision beginning to take shape (*Tehran Bureau*, 1/4/10). The manifesto was, in the words of Robin Wright (*LA Times*, 1/6/10), "the first concrete indication of what the opposition wants and what Iran might look like if [it] prevails." People are no longer asking "Where Is My Vote?" but rather, What kind of society do we want to live in?

"Maybe in the Next Stage"

"FOR NOW," SOROUSH HAS SAID, the Green movement has made a point of working "within the framework of the constitution" and has been "careful not to trespass those limits." "Maybe in the next stage," he continues, the movement will push harder against those limits and consider redrafting the constitution.

But some currents within the democratic movement have already begun to think outside the box of the existing system. Even before December's Ashura demonstrations and their brutal repression by the security forces — widely regarded as a turning point for the movement — there were signs of radicalization. Reports on the student protests of early December underscored this. "Fewer of the slogans were aimed at Ahmadinejad and more at Iran's theocracy-based political system," reported Borzou Daragahi in the *Los Angeles Times* (12/8/09), "a shift that could . . . further galvanize protesters and serve to destabilize the Islamic Republic." The protests, another report emphasized,

> showed a striking escalation in direct attacks on the country's theocratic foundation and not just on the June presidential election . . . [P]rotesters burned pictures of Ayatollah Khamenei . . . They held up Iranian flags from which the "Allah" emblem, added after the revolution, had been removed . . . [and] there were more chants aimed directly at Ayatollah Khamenei — a taboo that has increasingly eroded since the election (*NY Times*, 12/8/09).

In this same spirit, the appearance of the slogan "Iranian Republic" has made the post-theocratic or anti-theocratic point explicit.

These developments have produced critical tensions within the Green movement; debates are afoot over the most effective way to frame the movement's message. There is now much talk of a national reconciliation process, which has aroused fears that the movement's leaders might be preparing to cave in to the regime and sell out the movement. They may be unfounded or exaggerated — in some instances willfully distorted by the regime itself — but the concerns reflect something very real: a desperate desire for a new day, and an existential realization for many that this could be the only chance in their lifetimes to create far-reaching change. There is an ominous, now-or-never sense that if the Green movement's promise is dashed, there might not be another opportunity like this for a long, long time.

This uprising, to quote Dabashi once again (*Daily Beast*, 1/2/10), "has seen phases of civil disobedience and shades of civil unrest — but its skeletal vertebrae is a nonviolent drive toward democratic institutions that the current republic will either accommodate and survive, or else resist and be washed aside."

I'm not so sure I agree. I doubt very much that what Dabashi calls "the current republic" — or what we might call, invoking Rudolf Bahro, the Actually Existing Islamic Republic — is capable of accommodating the emancipatory and democratic demands of the Green movement. That surgical procedure would more than likely kill the patient. I believe that this regime is beyond that point. This is not the regime of 1997-2005, or even the subsequent one presided over by Ahmadinejad until this past June. In Ahmadinejad's "second term," the reverence for Khamenei is gone, the repressive state apparatus' gloves are off, the hardline elements are digging in deeper than ever, and the state is militarized to such a point that martial law is a real possibility. It's a stretch to fathom this regime accommodating even those demands contained in the Soroush-Kadivar manifesto, let alone the considerably more robust wish list of the grassroots movement, which only expands and gains

popular traction with each day. “There is no possible scenario,” Dabashi argues, “that will divert [the movement] from its main objective — of reaching the goal of liberty, the rule of law, democratic republicanism, civil liberties, civil rights, women’s rights . . . freedom of expression, freedom of peaceful assembly, freedom to form political parties, freedom to choose a democratic government.”

In this process of the unfolding of the movement’s demands and vision, the groundwork for a new set of arrangements is being laid. This is what Antonio Gramsci called prefigurative struggle. His point, as Carl Boggs argues in *The Two Revolutions* (1984, p. vii), was that

> a good part of what we call revolution actually precedes the conquest of political power, and it is this prefigurative dimension of politics that shapes the conflict of regimes, armies, organizations, and leaders . . . Beneath the level of insurrection and statecraft there must be a gradual conquest of social power, initiated by popular subversive forces emerging from within the very heart of [the] society.

The prefigurations of the current upheaval in Iran are of course hidden in plain sight. As several commentators have observed, many of the intellectual and political seeds now being harvested were planted during the reform period of 1997-2005. Today’s upheaval, the anthropologist Michael Fischer maintains, has been

> in the making for over a decade both via the cat-and-mouse game between state censorship and the press, and also via the networking of a student generation marked by the violent repression of demonstrations in 1999, and a growing determined women’s movement partly under the banner of the Million Signatures Campaign . . . launched in 2006 (*Cultural Anthropology*, forthcoming).

But of course the prefigurative arc extends back even further. Fischer speaks poetically of the “long fetch, the waves receding and returning, the long term respirations of the social revolution,” pointing to 1906-11 (the Iranian Constitutional Revolution), 1951-53 (the Mossadeq years of liberal-democratic nationalism), and, of course, 1978-79.

Critical Solidarity

DABASHI SEES VARIOUS POSSIBLE SCENARIOS, from the dismantling of the office of the supreme leader (which he calls an “undemocratic obscenity”) while keeping the rest of the constitution intact to discarding the very idea of an Islamic republic altogether.

Again, we have no way of knowing whether any of these scenarios will materialize. Martial law could be declared tomorrow, shutting the door on the process of building a democratic Iran — at least temporarily. But I see the mere articulation of such scenarios, the very act of thinking big, of imagining alternatives to the existing system, as a promising development. Indeed I think it’s a precondition for moving forward.

A s many have pointed out, this is a process that Iranians will undertake and work out for themselves. It’s not for outsiders to impose blueprints. We know all too well the legacy of foreign intervention in Iranian affairs. This is an Iranian struggle, and whatever resolution emerges from that struggle will be an Iranian one.

While foreign intervention must be opposed, however, international solidarity has a role to play

— not in some spurious neoconservative form, which lacks any semblance of credibility and is shot through with bad faith. I'm talking about the work of groups like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the Committee to Protect Journalists, and the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran. I'm talking about the solidarity work that international trade unions and labor organizations are doing with their beleaguered counterparts in the Iranian labor movement — the campaign of the International Transport Workers' Federation in support of Mansour Osanloo and the Tehran bus drivers, to take one example. (These are very much overlapping efforts: Amnesty has campaigned vigorously for the release of Osanloo, as a prisoner of conscience, and has deployed the felicitous slogan Workers Rights = Human Rights.) And I'm talking about the work of groups like the Campaign for Peace and Democracy and United for Iran.

This kind of solidarity work is vitally important, and Iranian activists strongly welcome and seek it out: Iranian labor organizers, for instance, have been developing relationships and building bridges with labor activists in North America, Europe, and Latin America. As important as this is, though, it's predominantly a negative form of solidarity — that is, it revolves mainly around denouncing repression and human rights violations, and otherwise pushing back against the boot on the neck of Iranian activists. It's vital work, but I'd like to float a few suggestions, in the spirit of what the late Fred Halliday called critical solidarity.[2] Meaning: we stand with you in your struggle and are prepared to contribute to it, but we also offer some food for thought and seek a bit of give-and-take about the movement's future.

In brief, what I'd like to suggest to the Green movement as it stands at this moment of decision, this pivotal juncture, is that it not hold off on thinking big — specifically that it not postpone addressing the looming economic questions it will inevitably face should it take power but rather begin to tackle them — openly and undogmatically — now.

It makes perfect sense that economic questions have not yet featured prominently in Green thinking. For one, political questions simply figure more immediately and pressingly in the movement's experience — it was, after all, a political event (a disputed election), rather than an economic one that was its primary impetus. The struggle to date has been for democracy, not for a particular set of economic arrangements. (This goes a long way in explaining why liberal and pluralist ideas have generally had a bigger influence on the thinking of Iranian dissidents and activists than have Marxist ones, something I've discussed elsewhere.[3]) Once democracy is achieved, once that boot is removed from our neck — the thinking goes — we'll have the breathing room and the mechanisms to deal with economic issues. Fair enough. And it is also true that pushing economic questions to the fore could divide the already diverse spectrum of Iranians marching together under the Green banner. Besides, there's only so much energy — the movement has its hands full, to put it mildly, just trying to survive in the face of constant state repression. One has to prioritize. Understood.

And yet, notwithstanding my sympathy for those who must weight such considerations, I want to suggest to Iran's Greens that they take a close look at the cases of Eastern Europe and South Africa. The democratic movements that by and large formed the post-Communist governments of the former Warsaw Pact countries faced a similar situation — different from Iran in many regards, to be sure, but similar in the crucial respect that their focus was political in nature and their platform consisted mainly of democratic principles and negative liberties. It was presumed that these were the most pressing matters and that economic issues would get worked out in due course. But what happened? To make a long story short, shock capitalism happened, and it brought the kinds of dislocations, dispossessions, and disfigurations that are its global trademarks. Because the democratic-movements-turned-governments hadn't given much thought to questions of economic structure or policy, they were unprepared to respond to the convulsions induced by neoliberalization.

This should serve as a cautionary tale for Iran's democratic movement. Postponing the economic question, saving it for later, could be dangerous, because the economic "default setting" of the global system is some form of neoliberalism. This may or may not be what the Greens decide they want, but if it isn't, they'd better get on the case, because it's what they'll end up with unless they actively steer clear of it and pursue an alternative path.

That means confronting, head-on, several major questions that all governments must face: Should Iran join the WTO? What policy on foreign direct investment would make the most sense? Can Iran learn from models other than the dominant neoliberal one, or is it fated to merely take its place in the neoliberal global system? What might it learn from the social-democratic model of Norway, another oil-rich state? What might it learn from Lula's Brazil? Or from the Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela?

This last one gets really thorny, because although I think there is a good deal to be learned from the Venezuelan experience, many in the Iranian democratic movement are so disgusted with the response of Hugo Chávez to Iran's June election and its aftermath — and to his enthusiasm for Ahmadinejad, more generally — that, unfortunately but understandably, they aren't open to learning from him. Recall the Venezuelan Foreign Ministry's June 16, 2009, denunciation of the Iranian street demonstrations:

> The Bolivarian Government of Venezuela expresses its firm opposition to the vicious and unfounded campaign to discredit the institutions of the Islamic Republic of Iran, unleashed from outside, designed to roil the political climate of our brother country. From Venezuela, we denounce these acts of interference in the internal affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran, while demanding an immediate halt to the maneuvers to threaten and destabilize the Islamic Revolution.

The damage this has done to Chávez's standing among Iran's democratic forces can't be overstated, and may be permanent. But as much as he has earned criticism on this point, and as badly flawed as his judgment has been with respect to Iran's internal politics, there are many aspects of Venezuela's attempt to construct an alternative to the neoliberal model that deserve careful study, and Iran's democratic movement would do well to take a close look at some of its achievements.

I would also, in a spirit of friendship and critical solidarity, suggest that the Green movement engage David Schweickart's important work on economic democracy, or what he calls market socialism. Likewise with Amartya Sen and Joseph Stiglitz — see what they're saying about the current global economic order and elicit their advice on how Iran might chart a progressive economic course. How about the Mondragón cooperatives, and the participatory institutions that Brazilians have built — not only the celebrated participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre and other Brazilian cities, but the Health Councils, the City Master Plans, and other experiments in bottom-up design and grassroots structures?

With its "horizontalism" and networking structures, Iran's Green movement has itself offered a model of organization and social movement that others are beginning to study, and I believe will continue to study for many years to come, whatever the outcome of its quest. It has, from its inception, been an innovative and imaginative force, in an open-ended and constant state of flux, building the road as it travels and re-inventing itself at every turn. It is for this reason ideally suited to open-mindedly engage with other models and movements around the world. It has always, from day one, been a bold and daring movement, so thinking big is in its very DNA. This might not be the

optimal moment for Iran's Greens to undertake a detailed analysis of the economic experiments of Brazil, Venezuela, and Mondragón, or to address the ideas of Schweickart, Sen, and Stiglitz (or any number of others), engaged as they are, right now, in a life-and-death battle. I would nonetheless like to encourage Iran's Greens not to wait until it's too late.

Leftist Confusion

BUT IN ORDER TO ENGAGE in *critical* solidarity with Iran's democratic struggle, we must first be in *solidarity* with that struggle. If we want to nudge Iranian progressives to the left in the ways I'm suggesting, we must have their ears. We can't engage them in critical dialogue about their vision and future without demonstrating our support for their overall cause. Sending messages in a bottle won't get the job done; we need to be in active dialogue with our sisters and brothers in Iran's Green movement, and especially the labor movement. (To follow developments in Iran's labor movement, go to www.iranlaborreport.com. To get involved with the Iran Labor Support Committees, e-mail me at dannypostel@gmail.com.)

Hugo Chávez is by no means alone on the Left regarding Iran. A steady stream of poison has issued forth from certain radical quarters, perhaps most notoriously from *MRZine*, which has become a digital bulletin board for the Islamic Republic.[4] Sadly, *In These Times* published a particularly vile piece in its April 7 issue that contained some of the worst distortions and clichés about Iran. Among multiple disfigurations, Matthew Cassel trots out the tired canard that the Green movement is a creature of the privileged elite while Ahmadinejad is a hero of the downtrodden masses. But the Iranian journalist Nasrin Alavi provides a healthy corrective to this lazy ritual incantation:

> A simple glance at the background of Iran's prominent student leaders tells you that, by and large, they are not the children of affluent citizens of north Tehran, but instead come from provincial working-class families or are the children of rural schoolteachers and clerks. The Western media cliché of an opposition limited to the urban upper class belies the current realities. These future leaders of Iran commonly hail from the very heartland of Ahmadinejad's purported support base (*New Internationalist*, Jan. 2010).

The democratic struggle in Iran isn't going away. The street demonstrations may have dwindled for now, but *a luta continua*. Which side are you on?

Footnotes

1. Danny Postel, "Counter-Revolution and Revolt in Iran: An Interview with Iranian Political Scientist Hossein Bashiriyeh," *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical and Democratic Theory*, Volume 17 Issue 1 (March 2010).

2. Danny Postel, "Who is Responsible? An Interview with Fred Halliday," *Salmagundi*, No. 150-151 / Spring-Summer 2006.

3. Danny Postel, *Reading "Legitimation Crisis" in Tehran* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2006).

4. *MRZine* has, among other things, reprinted speeches by Khamenei, published the Venezuelan government's denunciation of the protests in Iran, and sympathetically portrayed Iran's Basij paramilitary force as the victim of purported Green movement mayhem. Pieces hostile to the Iranian democratic movement have been written by James Petras, and Edward Herman and David Peterson

among others. For several outstanding rejoinders, see Reese Erlich, “Iran and Leftist Confusion,” CommonDreams.org, June 29, 2009; Hamid Dabashi, “Left is wrong on Iran,” *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 16 – 22 July 2009; Saeed Rahnema, “The Tragedy of the Left’s Discourse on Iran,” ZNet, July 10, 2009; Stephen R. Shalom, Thomas Harrison, Joanne Landy and Jesse Lemisch, “Question & Answer on the Iran Crisis,” Campaign for Peace and Democracy, July 7, 2009.