

As Iran Election Anniversary Approaches, Green Movement Keeps Hope Alive



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POSTED:05/27/10

The Green movement is simmering in Iran. On June 12, the one year anniversary of last year's disputed presidential elections, people around the world will look East, watching expectantly to see if it bubbles over.

In recent weeks, the movement has been quieted but not silenced. The recent **hangings** of five Kurdish "terrorists," **sentencing** of Newsweek reporter Maziar Bahari and **incarceration** of countless other journalists, dissidents and human rights activists have, of course, intimidated the public. Most are afraid to protest in the streets. They know the Revolutionary Guard could arrest, torture and even kill them. And although the government stymied contact between members of the movement through Internet censorship, dissidents are still considering new communication portals. With aid from the United States and other governments, they could learn to skirt the regime's Internet stronghold. The movement isn't over, like Stephen Kinzer **reported in the Global Post**.



That's because this isn't a "bumper sticker" revolution, according to Gary Sick, a senior research scholar at the Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs

Middle East Institute. "We seem to believe that if the demonstrations are big, the regime will fall in a day, and if there are no demonstrations, the whole movement has disappeared," said Sick. "Neither of those are true. It's not that simple." The Green movement hasn't vanished; rather, it's adjusting to the escalation of intimidation tactics and communication surveillance.

"From the activists I've spoken to, I think there's this understanding that they are in this for the long haul, " said Matthew Duss, a national security researcher and blogger at the Center for American Progress. "June 12 was a major moment, and then the regime found its legs and found ways to frustrate those demonstrations. [The activists] understand that it's a challenge, but there's guarded optimism. There is still momentum."

A Year of Protest and Suppression

The days following last year's disputed presidential election on June 12 reminded the world of the country's 1979 revolt. Enraged citizens flooded the streets, fearless and confident of their power.

Mehdi Khalaji's father was one of those angry citizens. An original Iranian revolutionary in 1979, Mohammad Taghi Khalaji once criticized the Shah in public speeches and was arrested three times.

Last June, he was again inspired to fight injustice in Iran. "He did not revolt against the shah in order to establish a regime that beat up peaceful demonstrators and shot innocent people," wrote Mehdi Khalaji, a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, in an article in Foreign Policy. **According to the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran**, Basiji militias and the Revolutionary Guards used batons, tear gas, pepper spray, water cannon, chains, live ammunition and plastic bullets to attack the protesters. **Amnesty International reported** 115 executions of convicted prisoners in the 50 days after the June elections.

Khaliji's father began to deliver political speeches condemning the human rights abuses of the regime. He was subsequently arrested, and locked away in Evin prison. Released on bail only recently, Mehdi says his father still doesn't know the charges. "This is a revolution that eats its own children," Khaliji wrote. "It places its survival at risk."

Staying Strong for the Battle Ahead

The regime's violent attempts to discourage activism and peaceful protests have alienated people like Khaliji's father: Iranians who were once staunch supporters of the Islamic Republic. Now, most are united on one front: human rights and democracy.

"The democracy movement in Iran is broad-based and strong," said Akbar Ganji, a Iranian dissident journalist who spoke with Duss at the Cato Institute recently. "But what we lack right now is the ability -- the tools to get our message out to the Iranian people."

Social networking and Internet communication largely contributed to the movement's success last year. Iranians are more active online than any other Middle East country, and had about 60,000 active blogs as of last June.

On February 11th of this year, the anniversary of the 1979 revolution, Iranians attempted another set of demonstrations. Their plans were all but thwarted by the regime, which slowed Internet speed almost to a halt, blocked opposition websites, scrambled television signals and spied on the messages of alleged dissidents. It even introduced a "cyber-crimes" bill, and plans to ban access to Google's Gmail.

In March, the United States licensed the first **anti-censorship encryption software, Haystack**, for export to Iran. Haystack, with the motto "good luck

finding that needle," helps circumvent censorship by shrouding its users in anonymity. Haystack prevents the cyber police from identifying the Web activity of an individual citizen.

If the government shuts down Internet access entirely, all hope is not lost. According to Sick, much of the opposition's communication takes place on the street through Bluetooth cell phone signals. Because the signals are short range, Bluetooth is difficult for the government to block. And even if the regime disables the Internet, the connection is still "spotty" and works in some areas, Sick said. "It's very hard to keep people from communicating these days," Sick said. " There are so many ways to do it. There are still ways to get around this system."

Sharing information online is crucial because most customary meeting places are forbidden to dissidents in Iran. "Traditional networks [like mosques and religious centers] are monopolized by the government," Khaliji said. "The only hope for the Green movement is coming from the outside." Outside sources like BBC Persian are crucial for information dissemination, Khaliji said. More than 30 percent of Iranians have access to satellite television.

But even if members of the Green movement are able to circumvent government media censorship or pick up satellite television signals, the international community shouldn't expect huge demonstrations on June 12 in Iran. "If the Green movement wants to take action, they have to surprise the government," Khaliji said. " If they plan for something, they give the Iranian regime the opportunity to plan for a crackdown."

Now, most experts are preaching patience. The movement could take time to get back on its feet in light of recent intimidation tactics. In the meantime, some, like Roxana Saberi, are calling for increased activism domestically. In an **op-ed last week**, Saberi decried Iranian human rights abuses, and called on American citizens to protest and denounce Ahmadinejad's regime. Saberi suggests

participating in domestic protests and rallies on June 12, supporting human rights groups with Iranian campaigns, and taking part in letter-writing campaigns to flood Iranian officials with criticism. Reminding the opposition that they are not alone could empower the movement, she says. And when ordinary citizens protest the actions of the hardliners, "Tehran has a tougher time asserting that their calls have been masterminded by foreign governments."

While most Iranians support the government's pursuit of nuclear power, despite global controversy and new **sanctions**, most of the nation is angry about the treatment of its citizens. Ahmadinejad's regime is sensitive to that.

"Human rights is [an issue] where the Iranian regime clearly feels vulnerable," Duss said, pointing to the criticism it attracted after the failed bid for a spot on the UN Human Rights Commission. "They claim to be a just government, but when you point out these abuses, this is criticism to which they've shown to be pretty sensitive."

Hillel Fradkin, a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute and director of the Center for Islam, Democracy and the Future of the Muslim World, is confident Ahmadinejad will eventually fall. "The regime is coming a bit unglued," he said. "There is a factional split in the regime between Ahmadinejad and Moussavi, and it is very dependent on the Revolutionary Guard -- that itself is divided. There is weakness on the side of the opposition, but tremendous fissures on the side of the regime. In the long term, that means the regime will collapse."

It may not collapse on June 12 or even on July 12. But the experts are encouraging the world to keep hope alive. The score of the revolution game isn't set yet. "The first round went to the opposition and the second round has gone to the regime," Fradkin said. "We'll see where it goes from here."

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