



CITIZEN ACTIVISM IN IRAN: BETWEEN GOVERNMENT PRACTICES OF CONTROLLING AND BOTTOM-UP MOBILIZATION STRATEGIES

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According to Sohrab Razzaghi, executive director of a Netherlands-based independent civil society organisation (CSO), the *Volunteer Activists Institute*¹, civil society in Iran “has various facets and faces, and is far from coherent and homogeneous²”. For a comprehensive knowledge of social forces involved in political and social activism in Iran it is necessary to first distinguish between that section of civil society co-opted by the Iranian authorities and, hence, instrumentalized by the Islamic

¹ To get to know more about programs and publications of the *Volunteer Activists Institute*, official website available at: <https://volunteeractivists.nl/en/>

² “Iran: a new generation of civic-minded, courageous activists is rising”. *Civicus*, 30 January, 2019
<https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/news/interviews/3706-iran-a-new-generation-of-civic-minded-courageous-activists-is-rising>



Republic itself for serving and legitimizing government policies and programs, and a marginalised generation of Iranian activists who aim for an independent, dynamic and bottom-up model of civil society³.

As explained by Paola Rivetti in her last book, *Political Participation in Iran from Khatami to the Green Movement* (Palgrave; 2020), by implementing exclusive policies of openness towards those subjects not perceived as dangerous and subversives of the *status quo*, Iranian authorities have contributed, albeit involuntarily, to establish a "surplus of participation", namely a counterpower made up of de-institutionalized and marginalised political agents⁴. The social mobilization known by the country in the last decade, from the 2009 Green Movement to the recent 2019-2020 protests, can therefore be understood as the unintended consequence of a gradual political process of top-down reformism which was immediately launched following the victory of the reformist candidate Mohammad Khatami in the 1997 presidential election.

A brief historical contextualization is required. At the end of 1990s, in the post-Cold war global scenario, Iran looked at the (western) liberal democracy model as the only way forward in embarking on a real transition towards "modernity". Indeed, concepts such as democracy, civil society, rule of law and dialogue between civilizations were repeatedly mentioned by the institutional reformist wing. More in details, *eslahat* (meaning "reformism" in Farsi) was immediately presented by reformists as a project "about democratising the public sphere, encouraging political and ideological diversity, and transforming the Islamic Republic of Iran from a marginalised ideological state into a

³ "Civil Society in Iran and its future prospects. A case study". *Volunteer Activists Institute*, (Report) September 2018. <https://openasia.org/en/2018/10/civil-society-in-iran-and-its-future-prospects-a-case-study/>

⁴ Rivetti, Paola. *Political Participation in Iran from Khatami to the Green Movement*, Printforce (the Netherlands), Palgrave Macmillan, 2020



modern country integrated in international politics and the global economy⁵". Islamic reformism, to be understood as an attempt for a modern and "democratic" interpretation of Islam, inside the Iranian context resulted in an institutional reformism.

According to Paola Rivetti, institutional reformism should be read as a selective socio-political engineering project aimed to support that type of socio-political activism recognised as the only legitimate by the political establishment. Hence, non-governmental organisations (NGO) which flourished during Khatami's two presidential mandates (1997-2005) were allowed to operate unhindered in the Iranian social tissue after negotiating with the government the "criteria in order to be a trusted and accepted organisation⁶". This government practice of controlling and disciplining activism continued even during the Ahmadinejad conservative era (2005-2013), where the effort to promote a "corporatist model of state-society interactions⁷" was very evident. For instance, in 2007 Ahmadinejad established, as a branch inside the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the *Department of Community-based Organisations*, a body aimed precisely to control and master NGOs and their activities.

However, alongside these other-directed social movements, in the last decade Iranian's civil society has increasingly made experience of a new form of political activism aimed to cross the legitimate domain of actions, as defined by government authorities, in order to create spaces and dynamics of independent advocacy. Thus, both the *eslahat* experience and the conservative turn during Ahmadinejad's first mandate paved the

⁵ Rivetti, Paola. *Political Participation in Iran from Khatami to the Green Movement*, Printforce (the Netherlands), Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, p.4

⁶ Rivetti, Paola. "Co-opting civil society activism in Iran". In *Civil society in Syria and Iran: Activism in authoritarian contexts*, edited by Paul Aarts and Francesco Cavatorta, 187-207 (chapter 9), Boulder (CO), Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2013

⁷ Rivetti, Paola. "Co-opting civil society activism in Iran". In *Civil society in Syria and Iran: Activism in authoritarian contexts*, edited by Paul Aarts and Francesco Cavatorta, 187-207 (chapter 9), Boulder (CO), Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2013



way for a multiplication of spaces of “underground” actions and reflections concerning the Iranian socio-political reality by autonomous political subjectivities, disillusioned with the original reformist project and in contrast with increasingly authoritarian government practices. Indeed, during the 2009 Green Movement’s protests, the slogan: “where is my vote?” shouted out loud by protesters who demanded the removal of Ahmadinejad from his office, after what had been regarded as a fraudulent election, was quickly replaced by claims for democracy, social justice, socio-economic rights and concrete measures to enhance government effectiveness and transparency. Regarded as the first real threat and challenge to the authority of the Islamic Republic, the Green Movement was violently repressed by police officers and intelligence services, and thousands of civilian activists and journalists were arrested and detained in Iranian jails.

In line with his predecessors, the current Iran’s president Hassan Rouhani (2013-) is promoting a selective socio-political engineering project aimed both to mute and marginalize by soft power means every form of dissent, and to repress by force all those associations that are struggling against the Iranian establishment for a real socio-political change. The freedom of speech from one side, and the freedom of association and action without governmental interference from the other one, are the main challenges which these autonomous subjectivities are faced with.

For what concerns the former, articles 498, 499 and 500 of the Islamic Penal Code are worth to be mentioned⁸. According to article 500: “Anyone who engages in any type of propaganda against the Islamic Republic of Iran or in support of opposition groups and associations, shall be sentenced to three months to

⁸ Islamic Penal Code of the Islamic Republic of Iran (book five).
<https://iranhrdc.org/islamic-penal-code-of-the-islamic-republic-of-iran-book-five/#:~:text=Article%20500%E2%80%93%20Anyone%20who%20engages,to%20one%20year%20of%20imprisonment.>



one year of imprisonment". Articles 498 and 499 declare that anyone who establishes (art. 498) or joins (art. 499) a group, society, or branch with more than two people, inside or outside the country, "with the aim to perturb the security of the country", constitutes a national security threat and, therefore, punished with imprisonment.

Regarding the issue of freedom of association and action without governmental interference, as the 2018 report *Civil Society in Iran and its future prospects* by Volunteer activists Institute rightly affirms, the two main obstacles to a governmental non-interference in the process of foundation, operation, and dissolution of CSOs are the lack of regulatory transparency from one hand, and the lack of constancy in laws and regulations passed by the *Majlis* and other legislative institutions, such as the *Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution*, from the other one. The resulting regulatory chaos leads to restriction of citizen's freedom and civil activism, limiting the scope of action for an independent civil society⁹.

Furthermore, it is needed to point out that the legal system of the Islamic Republic of Iran is a preventive system requiring permission before action: this means that in order for CSOs to acquire the status of legal entity, civilian activists need to obtain an operating licence from relevant authorities before registering their civil society organisation in the *National Registry Bureau of Companies and Non-Commercial Organizations*. A preventive step complicated by the aforementioned lack of transparency and constancy¹⁰.

⁹ "Civil Society in Iran and its future prospects. A case study". *Volunteer Activists Institute*, (Report) September 2018, p.34 <https://openasia.org/en/2018/10/civil-society-in-iran-and-its-future-prospects-a-case-study/>

¹⁰ Civil Society in Iran and its future prospects. A case study". *Volunteer Activists Institute*, (Report) September 2018, p.34-48 <https://openasia.org/en/2018/10/civil-society-in-iran-and-its-future-prospects-a-case-study/>



However, despite this authoritarian context, with its legal restrictions and its dominant security environment, the new generation of civilian activists engaged in challenging government policies on matters such as women's rights and environmental issues are still continuing to operate by pursuing a bottom-up model of civil society mobilization, in which online and virtual social networks have increased in importance. With regard to the role played by social media such as Telegram, Twitter and Instagram in what Philip Howard defines "cyberactivism", to be understood as "the act of using the Internet to advance a political cause that is difficult to advance offline"¹¹, the abduction and the execution last December of the journalist and activist Rohollah Zam is dramatically emblematic.

With his AMAD Telegram channel established in 2015 (AMAD is the Persian acronym for "awareness, combat, and democracy"), Zam played an active role in 2017 riots, which began in the city of Mashhad on December 28 and spread to over 140 cities across Iran over a two-week period. Even though, at first, the protests were triggered by rising prices on commodity and fuel, and by worsening socio-economic conditions, they immediately expanded their scope in embedding a widespread popular discontent towards the entire establishment, including the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. AMAD regularly published videos of the protests, news on confidential issues, successfully turning into a new source inside and outside Iran. It seems that the maximalist approach adopted by the regime in executing Zam reflects "Iranian officials' fear of the increasing influence of social networks"¹².

¹¹ El-Nawawy, Mohammed, and Sahar Khamis. "Political Activism 2.0: Comparing the Role of Social Media in Egypt's Facebook Revolution and Iran's Twitter Uprising". *CyberOrient -Online Journal of the Virtual Middle East* 6, issue 1 (2012): 8-34

https://cyberorient.net/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2020/03/CyberOrient_Vol_6_Iss_1.pdf

¹² Haqiqatnezhad, Reza. "Was Ruhollah Zam's Execution Payback for embarrassing Iran's Intel Agencies?". *Radio Farda*, 14 December, 2020



Social networks had already been an important asset for civilian activists engaged in the 2009 Green Movement protests, soon renamed as “Twitter revolution”. On that occasion, government officials underestimated the effectiveness of social media, especially Twitter and YouTube, as tools of popular mobilization. In this regard, it is important to highlight that besides being a useful tool for organization, by sharing information about how and when to protest, technology also allows people to establish what Asef Bayat calls “imagined solidarities”, namely identity politics who are engaged in collective actions and who are framed by shared images, videos, slogan and narratives, that contribute to a common interpretation of events that are taking place¹³. The systematic use of Twitter during the 2009 protests exemplifies this process of organizing and framing popular mobilization through social media, and to which the Iranian Cyber Army reacted defacing Twitter, taking it offline for several hours. Moreover, apps and communication channels contribute to put under the spotlight citizenry practices of everyday resistance in public domains. In this regard, women’s rights activism is an interesting case that helps us to understand activism practiced in “unconventional” ways. Indeed, inside Iran, women’s right activists face continuous threat of harassment and imprisonment by the state apparatus¹⁴, as the case of the Iranian human rights activist and political prisoner Saba Kordafshari demonstrates. In details, Saba Kordafshari was sentenced to 24 years in prison by the Revolutionary Court of Tehran in August 2019 for her peaceful human rights work for challenging forced veiling. The 24-year sentence consisted of 15 years for “inciting and facilitating corruption and prostitution” through promoting “unveiling”,

<https://en.radiofarda.com/a/was-ruhollah-zam-s-execution-payback-for-embarrassing-iran-s-intel-agencies-/31000415.html>

¹³ Tusa, Felix. “How Social Media Can Shape a Protest Movement: The Cases of Egypt in 2011 and Iran in 2009”. *Arab Media and Society*, issue 17 (Winter 2013) https://www.arabmediasociety.com/post_issue/issue-17-winter-2013/

¹⁴ Chubin, Fae. “From Empowerment to Advocacy: Innominate Identity Politics as Feminist Advocact in Iran”. *International Journal of Politics Culture and Society* 33, n.2, 2020, pp. 407-428

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10767-019-09339-2>



seven and a half years for “gathering and colluding to commit crimes against national security” and one and a half years for “spreading propaganda against the system¹⁵”.

The courage these women demonstrate daily through practices of everyday resistance is well expressed by *My Stealthy Freedom*. This campaign against compulsory hijab started in 2014 when the political journalist Masih Alinejad posted on her Facebook a photograph of herself running freely in the streets of London without hijab. Thanks to the media coverage achieved, especially among the Iranian women who started to send to Alinejad pictures of themselves in public spaces without a compulsory hijab, an independent campaign by Iranian women was born.

Through acts of peaceful civil disobedience, the campaign fights for women’s individual freedom to choose who they want to be and how to live their lives. Today, *My Stealthy Freedom* has created a number of initiatives through social media such as *My Forbidden Voice*, *Men in Hijab* and *My Camera is My Weapon*. In May 2017, the campaign launched the *White Wednesday’s* initiative where women who protest compulsory hijab laws wear white headscarves or pieces of white clothing to show their defiance against gender discrimination laws. At present, the campaign’s social media platforms have around 3.5 million followers, with around 80% inside Iran¹⁶.

Thanks to social media, even the 2018 *Girls of Enqelab Street’s* protests obtained international coverage, becoming yet another

¹⁵ “Iran: further information: young activist given 24-year jail sentence: Saba Kordafshari”. *Amnesty International* (campaigns): <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/2653/2020/en/> (last updated on July 6, 2020).

In November 2019 her prison sentence was reduced from 24 years to nine years. However, in March 2020 judicial authorities secretly increased her prison sentence from nine to 24 years.

¹⁶ To get to know more: “My Stealthy Freedom - Campaign against compulsory hijab in Iran”.

Official website available at: <https://www.mystealthyfreedom.org/>



expression of a bottom-up civil-disobedience movement. On December 27, 2017, Vida Movahed challenged mandatory hijab laws by tying her white hijab to a stick and waving it in Enqelab (*enqelab* means “revolution” in Farsi) Street, in Tehran, until the authorities arrested her. Photos and videos of Movahed’s defiance soon went viral and other young women started to follow suit, posting their pictures on social media with hashtags both in Farsi and English, such as #دختران_خیابان_انقلاب, which translates to #girls-enghelab-street¹⁷.

However, social media is a double-edged sword to the extent the government adopts social networks in order to spread counternarratives and to enforce its authoritarian policy. As stressed by Evgeny Morozov: “it should not be a given or an automatic assumption that social media, in and by themselves, will eventually push for political changes, introduce transformations to societies and liberate them from repressive regimes¹⁸”. The internet has afforded Iran’s security agencies new possibilities for surveilling and intercepting the communications of citizens. Indeed, since 2009, the Iranian government has improved and made more sophisticated its tools to circumvent digital threat, by making digital surveillance a core issue in its national defence policies. Paraphrasing Rebecca MacKinnon, Iran can be labelled as a “networked authoritarian regime¹⁹” in all respects.

¹⁷ Wright, Robin. “Hijab protests expose Iran’s core divide”. *The New Yorker*, 8 February, 2018

<https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/hijab-protests-expose-irans-core-divide>

¹⁸ El-Nawawy, Mohammed, and Sahar Khamis. “Political Activism 2.0: Comparing the Role of Social Media in Egypt’s Facebook Revolution and Iran’s Twitter Uprising”. *CyberOrient -Online Journal of the Virtual Middle East* 6, issue 1 (2012): 8-34

https://cyberorient.net/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2020/03/CyberOrient_Vol_6_Iss_1.pdf

¹⁹ Michaelsen, Marcus. “Far Away, So Close: Transnational Activism, Digital Surveillance and Authoritarian Control in Iran”. *Surveillance & Society* 15, n.3-4 (2017): 465-470



In May 2009, for instance, the *Majlis* passed the Criminal Cyber Law, a restrictive regulation according to which a Cyber Criminal Code Committee is engaged in filtering, updating, or shutting down websites with the intention to protect the integrity, the public security and morality of the country²⁰. In 2015 it is the cybercrime unit of the Revolutionary Guards to be established, formally entrusted with the overseeing of media content perceived as threatening national security²¹. Teheran often labels the online dissent of its citizenry as cyberwarfare orchestrated by Western enemies, namely the U.S, to subvert the Islamic Republic. Consequently, the advent of social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, and messaging apps, such as Telegram, are especially threatening given they challenge the Iranian government's long-standing monopoly over media and communications²².

To sum up, the emergence of a new type of civil society who aim for an independent, dynamic and bottom-up model of civil society can be understood as the unintended consequence of a gradual political process of top-down openness adopted by Iranian governmental authorities, that consider society as a useful tool of political legitimation rather than a real force for social change. Since the late 1990s, nothing has really changed and the civil society development model still follows a socio-political engineering path. As a result, as highlighted by Sohrab Razzaghi,

<https://ojs.library.queensu.ca/index.php/surveillance-and-society/article/view/6635>

²⁰ "Civil Society in Iran and its future prospects. A case study". *Volunteer Activists Institute*, (Report) September 2018, p.41 <https://openasia.org/en/2018/10/civil-society-in-iran-and-its-future-prospects-a-case-study/>

²¹ Michaelsen, Marcus. "Far Away, So Close: Transnational Activism, Digital Surveillance and Authoritarian Control in Iran". *Surveillance & Society* 15, n.3-4 (2017): 465-470

<https://ojs.library.queensu.ca/index.php/surveillance-and-society/article/view/6635>

²² Anderson, Collin, and Karim Sadjadpour. "Iran's Cyber Threat: Espionage, Sabotage, and Revenge". Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018, pp. 39-49

https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Iran_Cyber_Final_Full_v2.pdf



the only CSOs that are allowed to attend international gatherings, such as the annual summit of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, are organisations co-opted or directly connected to the Iranian government's security apparatus, "which operate to promote government policies"²³.

Despite this authoritarian context, where legal restrictions in terms of freedom of speech, association, and action without governmental interference obstacle the creation of an independent activism, a new vibrant and courageous civil society is expanding and challenging government policies on sensitive issues, such as women's rights and gender equality, by adopting "underground" or informal ways of civil disobedience. Keeping always in mind its double function, respectively as a tool of everyday resistance and a means adopted by the Iranian government in order to spread counternarratives and to enforce its authoritarian policy, social networks appear as an important asset for Iranian civilian activists. As well exemplified by the 2009 Green Movement and the recent women's civil-disobedience experiences, apps and communication channels contribute to organizing and framing popular mobilizations, giving them international coverage.

²³ "Iran: a new generation of civic-minded, courageous activists is rising". *Civicus*, 30 January, 2019
<https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/news/interviews/3706-iran-a-new-generation-of-civic-minded-courageous-activists-is-rising>