

Divided we stand? The heterogeneous political identities of Iran's 2009-2010 uprisings  
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In 2009 and 2010, following the controversial re-election as president of the incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad amidst claims of electoral fraud<sup>1</sup>, Iran witnessed the largest demonstrations since the 1979 Revolution. For some, the protest simply signified a desire for their vote for presidential candidates Mir-Hossein Mousavi, Mehdi Karoubi and Mohsen Rezaei to be recognised, under the banner of 'Where is my vote?' For others, the popular uprisings were an expression of the desire for political change in the form of democratic practices within the context of the Islamic Republic, or a form of secular and/or democratic politics without the Islamic Republic. The uprisings were not restricted to the months immediately following the re-election of Ahmadinejad in June 2009 but developed into 2010, often referred to by those who participated in the protests and activists as the real *annus horribilis*. In fact, after the Ashura Day protest on 27 December 2009, activists were targeted with greater violence.

These popular uprisings, and those who were involved in them, are now generally associated with what has come to be called the Green Movement, or *Jibhih-yi Sabz*. This is a label, along with associated names *Mawj-i Sabz* (Green Wave) and *Rah-i Sabz* (Green Path) that emerged from Mousavi's presidential campaign, that has been given to what was essentially Iran's democracy movement as well as to Mousavi's and Karoubi's supporters both before and after the election. The term is also used to refer to activists involved in the 2010 uprisings. Thus, the 'Green Movement' has grown to represent the grievances of a significant portion of the population, convinced that Ahmadinejad's re-election was flawed and calling for varied levels of political change.

Mousavi and Karoubi are often considered as the Green Movement's leaders. This has more to do with their association with the movement in 2009 rather a leading role in Iran's broader democracy movement pre-2009. Apart from being Ahmadinejad's competitors in the 2009 election, both Mousavi and Karoubi are well-known politicians that, since the inception of the Islamic Republic, were aligned with Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini who established the Islamic Republic. Both were among the founders of the *Majma'-i Rawhaniyyun-i Mubariz* (Association of Combatant Clerics), the major faction of the Islamic Left, in 1988. Mousavi was prime minister between 1981 and 1989 after which he maintained a rather low political profile. Karoubi on the other hand, remained active. He was chairman of the parliament between 1989 and 1992, and 2000 and 2004; he founded his own party, *Etemad-e Melli*

(National Trust) in 2005, and took part in the 2005 and 2009 presidential elections. Despite their diverging biographies, they both became part of the Reform Movement, which emerged in late 1990s, and is often referred to as 'Khatamism' after former reformist President Mohammad Khatami.

Central to Khatamism is the concept of *mardumsalari-yi Islami* (Islamic democracy). However, the political demands of the protesters, many of whom are now in exile because of their activities during the uprisings, vary from Khatamism to ideas of *dimukrasi-yi libiral* (liberal democracy) and the rejection of the Islamic Republic, in addition to other ideas of secular politics. Thus, rather than referring to protesters only as the Green Movement, it is more appropriate to consider them in terms of protesters involved in the popular uprisings and, consequently, as bearers of diversified ideas in terms of political identity. Not all of those participating in the protests were activists involved in campaigns before 2009. Many publicly expressed their grievances during 2009-10 uprisings for the first time, or decided to join electoral committees in 2008 to counter Ahmadinejad's candidature. In this sense, the presidential election and subsequent protests represented an extraordinary opening up of the structure of opportunity, broadening the possibility for political participation.

While accepting that political identity is a contested concept, here Charles Tilly's understanding of it in the context of contentious politics is helpful. Tilly argues that 'Seen as social relations and their representations, all identities have a political side, actual or potential' (Tilly 2005, 61). Thus, 'identities are explicitly political' when people make public claims based on a particular identity and/or ideology and in turn when governments are either the object of that claim or a third party to that claim (Tilly 2005, 62). Consequently, as Tilly argues, 'Identities are political, then, insofar as they involve relations to governments' (Tilly 2005, 62). In relation to this case study, the 2009-10 uprisings represent a situation whereby a particular government identity (the Islamic Republic as constructed by Ahmadinejad and Khamenei) is being resisted. In reaction to this government identity, alternative claims regarding the nature of the government and how it should be represented and constructed are being made, as will be discussed below.

This chapter brings together two approaches to these popular uprisings. The first takes a 'top-down' approach deconstructing the Green Movement's political and intellectual elite discourses. The idea of elite in this context is complex. On the one hand, there are individuals who are part of the Islamic Republic regime as noted above. However, Mousavi and Karoubi have found themselves in opposition to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and Ahmadinejad because of how they perceive the Islamic Republic. This dynamic highlights a

conflict among Iran's political elite. However, in addition to this, Mousavi and Karoubi also take on the role of an intellectual and political elite in the context of the Green Movement. This is because of their role in defining and articulating what it means to be part of the Green Movement, even if they fail to be 'leaders' of the movement.

The second approach takes a 'bottom-up' perspective focusing on activists (those involved in the uprisings that have a political background preceding 2009, or who are perceived by the regime as political) and participants in the protests. This highlights the heterogeneity of articulations of political identity amongst those who participated in the protests even if not all of them necessarily see themselves as part of the Green Movement, which is considered by some to be too narrowly linked to Mousavi's campaign. The analysis unveils the complexity and fluidity of identity construction because of the co-existence of several, at times conflicting, political identities. Such an approach allows for a more holistic analysis of the popular uprisings and contributes to an understanding of why political change did not take place.

Antonio Gramsci's concept of the 'national-popular collective will' is a useful framework for understanding the conditions under which political change and/or revolution take place. For Gramsci, if revolution is to take place three elements are needed: a 'modern prince' in the form of a political party, an alliance including the masses, and an intellectual, cultural and moral reform of the masses. Together, these constitute the 'national-popular collective will.' A revolution whereby the existing hegemonic group is overturned in order to establish a new hegemon in the state only takes place if there is a 'national-popular collective will' (Gramsci 1971b, 125-205). Drawing on Gramsci's 'national-popular collective will', we put forward that political identity heterogeneity, both 'top-down' and 'bottom-up', suggests that not only is the Islamic Republic's position as the beholder of the 'national-popular collective will' under pressure, but also alludes to the lack of an *alternative* 'national-popular collective will' that would facilitate political change. Indeed, revolution was not necessarily the aim of those involved. Rather it was political change to varying degrees that was desired.

It is important to remember that in 1979, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi was overthrown. Those involved in the popular uprisings leading up to the 1979 revolution had varied and often contradicting political identities and aspirations. However, it was one political ideology that ultimately facilitated the revolution and the establishment of an alternative regime, namely the 'religious nationalism' of Khomeini (Ansari 2007). Thus, it can be argued that it was religious nationalism that facilitated the 'intellectual, cultural and moral reform' of the masses, and essentially involved them in a shared project with the

revolutionary elites while underpinning the ‘national-popular collective will’; and Khomeini was the ‘modern prince’ (Holliday 2015).

For those participating in the 2009-10 uprisings, a coherent political identity that ultimately facilitated consistency and unity of action did not exist. Nor was there an alternative unifying political ideology, or opportunity for a shared project to underpin the desire for change and facilitate the intellectual and cultural and reform. This is despite the evident opposition to the Islamic Republic as constructed by Ahmadinejad and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. Despite the prominence of Mousavi and Karoubi in terms of statements about the nature of the Green Movement and its demands, they essentially failed to become leaders of the protest movement. Consequently, there was not a modern prince character to bring together the subaltern masses under the banner of a unifying political identity and beyond class cleavages. Therefore, there was no *alternative* ‘national-popular collective will’ to facilitate political change.

The first part of the chapter examines the discursive construction of the Islamic Republic as the true representative of Islam and as inherently democratic. Discourse is the means by which ideology, that is, a set of values, is transferred, articulated or communicated. In other words, ideology becomes evident in discourse (van Dijk 1998, 14, 192, 103; Fairclough 2001, 64). Discourse is both a means of maintaining power as well as resisting it. To this end, Michel Foucault argues that ‘Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it’ (Foucault 1978, 100-1). Indeed, as is explored by David Howarth, ‘discourse always requires a discursive “outside” to constitute itself. The identity of a discourse, therefore, is dependent on differentiation from other discourses’ (Howarth 2000, 102). Thus, discourse can be both hegemonic as well as counter-hegemonic. Here, it will be shown that the Islamist democratic discourse of Mousavi and Karoubi is one that is counter-hegemonic in relation to the perceived hegemony of the discourse articulated by Khamenei and Ahmadinejad. The identity of the Islamist democratic discourse is evident on the repeated differentiation of their understanding of the Islamic Republic from that of Khamenei and Ahmadinejad.

This section also illustrates the complexity of political identity among the elites. Accepting that Mousavi and Karoubi are the representatives of the Green Movement, it is worth highlighting that support for them has also come from individuals such as Abdolkarim Soroush, Mohsen Kadivar, and Akbar Ganji. Formerly part of the Islamic Republic’s political elite, these individuals were part of the Reform movement, and have more recently

articulated a secular political identity discourse. This political identity diversity mirrors the complexity of the elites. However, despite there being elites, the movement is considered to be leaderless.

Existing alongside these elite discourses of political identity, are the political aspirations of activists and protesters participating in the uprisings. This is the focus of the second part of the chapter. For these activists there is not a neat clearly articulated discourse or political identity; rather, they articulate a number of political identities that sometimes complement those of the political elite, but also contradict them. This section rests on data collected during fieldwork and ethnographic research between 2009 and 2014 with Iranian asylum-seekers and political refugees in Turkey and Italy, which was preceded by fieldwork in Iran on civil society activism. The multi-sited field research allowed for an appreciation of the diversity present in the community of the activists. Apart from semi-structured interviews,<sup>ii</sup> participant observation was carried out since many activists shared their everyday life for long periods.

The issue of whether being outside of Iran has influenced the activists and protesters' accounts needs to be addressed. Cross-verification helped contain potential issues arising from flawed information and the purpose of the research was always clearly stated in order to clarify the researcher's role. It is noteworthy that the social class background of these protesters and activists is similar. The individuals interviewed belong to the middle class, albeit of diversified types (nuances of lower and upper middle class). This is in line with extant scholarship highlighting the relevance of the middle class to Iran's domestic politics and the uprisings (Harris 2012, Behdad and Nomani 2009). Finally, the age of activists and participants in the uprisings is also notable as they all are in their late 20s to late 30s. This resonates with the overall association of the protests with mainly young people.

**Political Elites: Top-down Heterogeneity and the Battle over the Islamic Republic**  
To consider Mousavi and Karoubi, or the Green Movement, in isolation limits the understanding of the uprisings. The Islamist democratic discourse of Mousavi and Karoubi reflects the reformism of Khatami's presidency (1997-2005) and the ideas of *Rawshanfikran-i Dini* (Religious Intellectuals) of the late 1980s and 1990s. In other words, it is the latest phase in Khatamism. As illustrated below, some activists, while working within the institutions of Khatamism, see Khatamism as the obstacle to political change. Thus, it is crucial to address this genealogy.

In terms of political identity and aspiration for the nature of government, it is Khatami's *mardumsalari-yi Islami* that can be considered the basic ideology. This is

‘government for the people’, integral to which are the rule of law and freedom and equality of citizens; and is to be achieved through civil society and upheld by the Islamic Republic’s Constitution (Holliday 2011, 114-21; Khatami 1377/1998, 18)<sup>iii</sup>. This idea of the compatibility of Islam and democracy is part of a wider movement; a post-Islamist movement whereby Muslims made Islam democratic (Bayat 2007). In Iran’s case, while this idea was advocated at the state level for the first time during Khatami’s presidency, its roots are in the Reform Movement of *Rawshanfikran-i Dini*, who, in the early 1990s, engaged in a critique of the Islamic Republic and the role of *vilayat-i faqih* (Dabashi 2006, 190). *Vilayat-i faqih* is the principle of the guardianship of the jurist, which legitimates the clerical rule and the office of the Supreme Leader. This principle, along with the *khat-i imam* (line of the Imam), are considered to be the foundation of the Islamic Republic. Among *Rawshanfikran-i Dini*, was the lay intellectual Soroush, from whom Khatami’s ideas and language regarding ‘democracy’ and ‘rule of law’ are said to be mostly taken (Mir-Hosseini and Tapper 2006, 29). While Soroush rejected Islam as a political ideology, the cleric Hasan Yousefi Eshkevari argued that ‘not only are Islam and democracy in the realm of state and government not incompatible, but, on the contrary, Muslim government cannot be undemocratic’ (Mir-Hosseini and Tapper 2006, 86).

Also, among these intellectuals was the cleric Kadivar, who advocated ‘power sharing, independent grassroots associations, political parties, the rule of law, and individual rights and freedom’ as supporters of *jami’ih-i madani* (civil society) (Kadivar 1997 cited in Moslem 2002: 252). However, unlike Khatami, he rejected the idea of *vilayat-i faqih* and equated it with monarchy (Mir-Hosseini and Tapper 2006, 35–6). For Kadivar, democracy includes ‘free and all-inclusive elections’; ‘transparent and accountable government’ and respect for ‘civil and political rights’ (Kadivar 2015). *Vilayat-i faqih* is also rejected by Ganji, a journalist, an important individual in Iran’s democracy movement and among *Rawshanfikran-i Dini*. For Ganji, a ‘modern democratic republic’, where ‘All adult citizens have the right to participate in elections’ and where no individual can be prohibited from participation because of their beliefs, religion or race (Ganji 1381/2002), cannot be realised within the framework of *vilayat-i faqih* (Ganji 1379/2000). It is important to highlight these ideas and individuals. Kadivar, Ganji and Soroush had been among the Islamic Republic’s founders. They then came to reject its foundation, *vilayat-i faqih*. However, in 2010 they pledged their support for Karoubi, Mousavi and Khatami, who do not reject *vilayat-i faqih* (NPQ 2010). Despite their rejection of *vilayat-i faqih*, they are part of ‘Khatamism’ because they are themselves products of the Islamic Republic, as indeed are Mousavi and Karoubi.

These apparent paradoxes of political identity among Iran's political and intellectual elites are symptomatic of the factionalised nature of the Islamic Republic. This has often been characterised as a 'balkanised' or 'factionalised authoritarianism', whereby elite fragmentation within state institutions is crucial to the maintenance of institutional balance (Keshavarzian 2005, Chehabi 2001, Moslem 2002, Buchta 2000, Kamrava and Yari 2004). Such a decentralization of power has thus been a guarantee of regime resilience, in contrast with, for instance, the centralization of power present in Zine el-Abidine's Tunisia or Hosni Mubarak's Egypt (Hinnebusch 2015). Along with elite factionalism, state institutions are also fragmented and 'taken over' by competing factions. This 'institutional balkanization' has enabled the regime to reproduce its power and remain in balance, while this pluralist, albeit limited, and decentralised elite system has historically allowed for internal ideological diversity within the political and economic elite.

The internal ideological diversity of Islamic Republic elites came to a head in the 2009-10 popular uprisings. Through a discourse analysis of Mousavi's and Karoubi's texts it is clear there is a battle over *vilayat-i faqih* and the nature of the Islamic Republic. This is illustrated in the binary relationship constructed between the 'self' (Green Movement) and the 'other' (Khamenei, Ahmadinejad and their supporters). It is evident that embedded in Mousavi's and Karoubi's Islamist democratic discourse, is the construction of the 'self' as inclusive and egalitarian, democratic, peaceful, true Islam, and as the rightful followers of Shi'ism's first Imam, Hussein. The hegemonic 'other', on the other hand, is constructed as totalitarian, tyrannical, violent and essentially un-Islamic. For Mousavi and Karoubi, these characteristics are attributed to the 'other' because of their role in the arrest, imprisonment, and in some instances killing of activists involved in the uprisings.

The binary relationship of the inclusive, egalitarian and peaceful 'self' versus the tyrannical and violent 'other' is evident in the statements made after the uprisings following the June election. For instance, towards the beginning of the '11<sup>th</sup> Statement: The Green Path of Hope', made on 5 September 2009, Mousavi criticises Khamenei, Ahmadinejad and their supporters by describing their actions as 'attacks carried out by official and unofficial security forces on peaceful demonstrations'. Mousavi goes on to state that 'the only way for the peaceful coexistence of tastes and attitudes, social layers, tribes, religions and beliefs that live in this great land, is to acknowledge this vast diversity in lifestyles and to gather around an ancient identity which links all of us.' (Mousavi 2009a) The '17<sup>th</sup> Statement: "Killing us will only make us stronger"', issued on January 2, 2010 reiterates this binary relationship. Mousavi describes the people who went to the streets without requests to do so from

Mousavi, Karoubi or Khatami as going ‘non-violently, without any radical slogans’. However, ‘yet again, the people were provoked. This time around, they were faced with unspeakable violence: people were run over; they came under open fire from plainclothes police, whose identity (as well as the identity of their leaders) is now known to everyone’ (Mousavi 2010b). He later ties the ‘self’ directly to the 1979 Revolution by invoking Khomeini. To this end, he states: ‘The kind of talk mentioned above reminds me of the words of the great Imam [Khomeini]: “Killing us will only make us stronger.” I am not afraid to be among those who have been martyred for expressing their religious and patriotic rights after the election’ (Mousavi 2010b). This invocation legitimises the peaceful self’ and delegitimises the violent ‘other’.

The peaceful ‘self’ is further legitimised by associating it with democratic values. In the ‘11<sup>th</sup> Statement’, Mousavi states that ‘A restoration of public trust is not possible without the acceptance of the right of the people to govern themselves, without obtaining their final approval of their ruling system, and without transparency in the affairs of the state’ (Mousavi 2009a). These sentiments are echoed in Mousavi’s 18th Statement, which explicitly outlines ‘The Green Movement’s Values’ and makes the human rights discourse explicit. Mousavi argues that the Green Movement ‘fully endorses’ human rights and the ‘the defence of human dignity’, which is independent of ideology, religion, gender, ethnicity, and social status’ (Mousavi 1389/2010, 2010a). For Mousavi, the defence of human rights is to be realised through a free independent press, an end to censorship, the strengthening of civil society and allowing non-governmental organizations to act freely, and perhaps most significantly, reforming ‘laws and regulations to eliminate any type of discrimination in society’ (Mousavi 1389/2010, 2010a).

The real resistance to what is constructed as the hegemonic violent and tyrannical discourse of Khamenei, Ahmadinejad and their supporters is embedded in the binary construction of the ‘self’ as the true representatives of Islam and the ‘other’ as un-Islamic. This is articulated in a number of ways. The first is in the democratic nature of Islam. The way that the relationship between Islam and democracy is constructed delegitimises Khamenei, Ahmadinejad and their construction of the Islamic Republic because Mousavi and Karoubi repeatedly show how values associated with democracy are at the core of the Islamic Republic’s constitution. For instance, Mousavi states that practices such as the provision of political and social rights, legal immunity and equality before the law, freedom of the press, freedom of political parties and people and the freedom to hold peaceful gatherings all have specific articles dedicated to them in the Islamic Republic’s constitution (Mousavi 2009a).



Mousavi goes on to state that ‘the Islamic Republic or the constitution is Islam itself’ (Mousavi 2009a). He also states that when Khomeini juxtaposed ‘pure mohammadian Islam’ with ‘the archaic Islam and American Islam, he was speaking of what is going on now [official responses to the protestors]. This backward interpretation might be named “Islam”, but is far from the real Islam. We want a return to the pure mohammadian Islam, this long, forgotten religion.’ (Mousavi 2009a) He also refers to the use of the colour green to symbolise the devotion of the Green Movement to ‘an Islam that had the kin of the prophet as its first educators’ (Mousavi 2009a).

A similar tone is articulated by Karoubi. In a statement made on June 20, 2010 to commemorate the anniversary of the Green Movement, Karoubi raises a series of questions regarding the conduct of the Islamic Republic and the institution of *vilayat-i faqih*. He asks how ‘*Vilayat-i faqih* can take an axe to the roots of the Constitution and the Islamic Republic that were founded on the people’s vote?’ This is followed by a question asking why the authority of *vilayat-i faqih* has been extended to such an extent beyond that which Karoubi doubts was given to the Prophets or the infallible Imams. Finally, he asks how votes are in opposition to Islam or *vilayat-i faqih* and how the demand for rights can be considered a crime against *vilayat-i faqih* when ‘in Islam, a dissident can debate with an infallible Imam even regarding the existence of God’ (Karoubi 1389/2010, 2010). Here, Karoubi associates the Green Movement with the original ideals of the 1979 Revolution and constructs *vilayat-i faqih* as inherently democratic. The Supreme Leader’s version, however, is not.

Not only do Mousavi and Karoubi construct the Green Movement as the true and proper Islamic Republic, but *also* as the true and proper representation of Islam as a whole. This is done by establishing plurality and diversity as part of Islam by arguing these values were the path of ‘divine prophets and their predecessors’ in the ‘great, ancient and pious family which is Iran’ (Mousavi 1388/2009, 2009b). He then argues that throughout history ‘whenever governments have aimed to abolish or dim the plurality and diversity that exists in society, they’ve had no choice but to resort to tyranny’. He significantly ends this particular section by arguing that such behaviour ‘is both impossible and inappropriate, according to the teachings of the Qur’an’ (Mousavi 1388/2009, 2009b). This discourse subtly constructs Khamenei’s Islamic Republic as un-Islamic.

This powerful Islamic/un-Islamic binary construction is also articulated by establishing the Green Movement as the true representatives of Shi’ism. This is particularly evident in Mousavi’s ‘17<sup>th</sup> Statement: “Killing us will only make us stronger”’ issued shortly after the Ashura protests in December 2009-January 2010. It is here that he establishes the

Green Path as the true followers of the martyred Imam Hussein. Ashura is an important day in the Iranian calendar as it commemorates the death of Imam Hussein, Shi'ism's holiest martyr. Reportedly, these protests were the largest since those that immediately followed the election and bore witness to violence whereby protestors clashed with security forces and several protestors were reportedly killed and arrested (Worth and Fathi 2009; Tait 2009a, 2009b; Telegraph 2009). Video footage of the protests shows that, unlike the June 2009 protests, protestors did not carry posters illustrating slogans. However, chanted slogans included those referring to Khamenei as Yazid (WashingtonTV 2009), the Umayyad Caliph whose army was responsible for the death of Hussein at the Battle of Karbala. Imam Hussein, the Prophet Muhammad's nephew and Imam Ali's (the holiest Imam in Shi'ism) son refused to swear allegiance to Yazid because he was believed to be unjust. Mousavi delegitimises Khamenei, Ahmadinejad and their supporters by constructing the 'self' as the rightful followers of Shi'ism's Imam, Hussein:

... I feel a burden of necessity to emphasize the Islamic and national identity of the green movement, its opposition to foreign rule, and its loyalty to our constitution. We are the followers of Imam Hossein. We are the devotees of the path that was led by that oppressed Imam. ... We are the followers of the first Imam of the Shi'ites, who could not tolerate taking something valuable from even one member of a minority in the vast Islamic nation. (Mousavi 2010b)

The 2009-10 popular uprisings reveal a battle over what should be the legitimate identity of Iran's political system. The 2009 election took place in the context of a regime with a particular political identity: the Islamic Republic as constructed by Khamenei and Ahmadinejad, which is constructed as tyrannical, violent and un-Islamic by the Green Movement political elite. This is contested by an alternative understanding of the Islamic Republic which is constructed as peaceful, democratic and as truly Islamic. This political identity is articulated through the Islamist democratic discourse of Khatamism. A crucial element of this discourse is the importance of human rights that comes across in the democratic aspirations of the elites whether in favour of the Islamic Republic or rejecting the basis of the Islamic Republic. However, despite the relevance of broad and shared values such as human rights, these elites are also strongly criticised, or even lack legitimacy in some cases, as they are the product of the very Islamic Republic they are opposing.

#### Activists and Protesters: Bottom-up Heterogeneity

The Green Movement and the 2009-10 uprisings have benefitted from both electoral mobilisation and the legacy of extant informal activist networks and social movements

among which, notably, are women, ethnic and religious minorities and student movements (Adelkhah 2012, Reisinezhad 2015). It is no coincidence that women's rights or the grievances and demands from ethnic minorities, which had been barely present in previous electoral campaigns, prominently featured in Mousavi and Karoubi's electoral program in 2009. This was the result of previous mobilisation and the attention that, since early-2000s, these issues have received.<sup>iv</sup> Such broad genealogy has enriched the 2009-10 movement, which has expanded its composition and demands also thanks to its life span, going well beyond the electoral moment and showing support for Mousavi and Karoubi. Such heterogeneity is well evidenced in the accounts of the activists and those who took part in the protests, who are from diverse backgrounds ranging from reformists' supporters to critics of the very existence of the Islamic Republic.

However, despite such varied backgrounds, activists and/or protesters also share some common themes. One of these is the belief that the Green Movement and the 2010 uprisings are connected to Khatamism and the Reform Movement, and even before to Hashemi Rafsanjani's post-war technocratic modernization plan during the 1990s. Although the Islamic Left fiercely opposed Rafsanjani's administrations (1989-1997), Khatamism and the Reform Movement partially recovered its legacy in terms of pragmatism and moderation. In fact, most of the respondents place their own political history within this political trajectory, for both autobiographical and ideological reasons. Zia, a journalist with connections to the main reformist political party *Jibhih-yi Musharikat* and the less influential reformist party *Hambastegi*,<sup>v</sup> declares that 'the project of the reformists [during Khatami's administration] has been the one of political development and change, ... Khatami was following Rafsanjani's project, the reformists should have realised that project.' He goes on to explain his view on the origin of the Reform Movement, which he dates back to the end of Rafsanjani's era:

The parliamentary election of 1996 showed that Rafsanjani's views were not welcome in society any more. So they decided to set up a party and participate in the 1997 presidential election with a governmental proposal [that was] different [from Rafsanjani's political outline and] that could have advanced the people's interests. They established an activist party" (Zia 2012).

Kaveh, who formerly worked for a publishing house connected to the Tehran branch of Azad University, was involved in a number of initiatives related to Mousavi's electoral campaigns and later in initiatives in support of political prisoners. He highlights how Khatami's role had been crucial in setting up the electoral campaign of Mousavi.

The electoral staff and committees were formed one year before the election, and they had the objective of reinforcing their presence among the people to boost political activism at large, since the people were very de-mobilised and had a cold heart after Ahmadinejad's administration [...] The website Mawj-i Sivum organised a series of activities and invited Khatami to become a candidate, but he refused. So, Mousavi inherited all this apparatus of people that previously worked for Khatami [...] even if many younger activists were not very convinced by Mousavi (Kaveh 2012).”

The link with Khatamism and the reform movement, however, does not prevent activists from advancing strong criticism of that project. In particular, the activists met during fieldwork seemed to be well aware of the limitation that being active in the Green Movement and in Mousavi's or Karoubi's electoral committees presented. In fact, the dominant feeling among them was that political expression and activism are confined to the regime's structures and that there are no alternative avenues for influencing the political elite. No naïvety is thus present among the activists, who are well aware of the ideological and political limitations they are doomed to cope with.

It follows that one critique of Khatamism and the Green Movement is that it is confined within the political ideology of the Islamic Republic. Majid (2012), who was involved in unionism in Iran, is realistic about the actual possibility for change in the country and he suggests the existence of *islahtalaban-i khalis* (complete reformists) to counter *islahtalaban-i hukumati* (government reformists). The latter is an expression that refers to those reformists whose political project falls within the limitation set by the constitution, such as the Green Movement's political elite outlined above. *Islahtalaban-i khalis*, on the other hand, are seen as those who seek real change from below and beyond the limits of the Islamic Republic. It is the 'complete reformists' who are paying for their political activism.<sup>vi</sup> A similar criticism is voiced by Amir. He comes from a political family close to the Nihzat-i Azadi, or Freedom Movement, a semi-legal political organisation whose main ideology can be described as religious-nationalist. Despite this affiliation, he defines himself as '*kamilan mukhalif* (totally against) the Islamic Republic'. He argues that '*mardum* (the people) were hopeful that Mousavi could come and fix the system'. However, as far as Amir is concerned, this would 'be impossible because the system is not what Mousavi and Karoubi are saying it is; the system is what Ahmadinejad says it is.' He continues criticising Khatami: 'Khatami got many votes because he said he was in favour of the people but it was not true... Khatami killed [people in] the movement, so many got arrested and killed. He [his political credibility]

was killed on 18 *Tir* 1388/9 July 2009 (Amir 2011).’ On that day, a major demonstration was called to celebrate both the discontent with the results of the presidential election and the tenth anniversary of the student protests of 1999, which resulted in sustained disorder and violence in the capital and in other cities.<sup>vii</sup> In 1999, the students supported Khatami’s reform plan while he did not defend them from the repression that followed the disorders. Back then, this event marked the beginning of the distancing of the student movement from Khatamism, and Amir evokes it to reiterate that Khatami’s political credibility, in his eyes, has not been restored. Saber, a Kurdish asylum-seeker, involved in a campaign of support to Kurdish political prisoners in Iran, also criticises Mousavi and Karoubi’s political project, which he *distinguishes* from the Green Movement: ‘for all the people of Iran, it is clear that the green movement was a genuine movement but ... the people know that its leadership [Mousavi and Karoubi] wasn’t so ... because they are *khat-i imam*’. He goes on to state that ‘If Mousavi or Karoubi became president, they would not have been any better than Rouhani or Khatami or Ahmadinejad... they are all together, and the system is one: *vilayat-i faqih* and *khat-i imam* (Saber 2014).’ Saber’s analysis is significant because it suggests that those who are loyal to *khat-i imam* and *vilayat-i faqih*, and therefore Khomeinists, are not genuinely part of the *people’s* Green Movement.

Khatamism is also critiqued for its limited scope in terms of political aspirations for change, which does not reach out the protesters’ desire for ‘democracy’. While the details of ‘democracy’ are not necessarily fully articulated, protesters and activists refer to ‘democracy’ as their political aim. However, here the term *dimukrasi* is used rather than the *mardumsalari* of Khatami, thus distancing them from Khatamism. Zia (2012), for instance, argues that ‘Khatami worked very little for *dimukrasi* and for the development of the people and society ... [he] did a lot for the national economy and for the development of the government itself.’ Zia goes on arguing that not only had reformists brought about an elitist version of reformism, but also that ‘they were rigid in pointing out the path to reform and the objective that should be obtained’. For Zia, the rigidity of the reformists is evident in the marginalisation of social movements. Another interviewee, Ali (2011), a writer who does not consider himself ‘political’, is explicit about his desire for ‘*nizam-i dimukrasi-yi libiral*’ (democratic liberal system). For him, the freedom of press is very important. As far as he is concerned, the ‘rights of the people of Iran’, ‘freedom of press’, a ‘*junbish-i madani*’ (civic movement) and ‘the rule of law’ are not possible in an Islamic Republic. Farzaneh (2011), a former NGO worker from Tehran, is also in favour of a ‘more democratic state’. This was her rationale for participating in the 2010 uprisings. She states that she is an NGO worker,

targeted by the *nizam* (regime), but she was not part of Karoubi or Mousavi's electoral structure.

The existence of a unifying, albeit very vague, political aspiration, democracy, does not disempower differences and conflicts within the movement. Reza (2012), a former student activist banned from university because of his political activities, refers to Mojtaba Vahedi's resignation from his position as Karoubi's spokesperson in 2012, as evidence of the existence of different tendencies within the Green Movement.<sup>viii</sup> Vahedi's resignation was motivated by an ideological contraposition to Karoubi, who, as noted above, believes in returning to the original aims of the Islamic Republic and the constitutional principles sustaining it. Vahedi, however, is critical of that original, Khomeinist project despite the important role he played in Iran's domestic politics and the Reform Movement during the 1990s and 2000s. Reza describes the Green Movement as divided between two tendencies, namely the likes of Vahedi, who came to the conclusion that the regime is not changeable by the means of democratic reforms and that its constitutional underpinnings are problematic; and the likes of Mousavi and Karoubi, who have faith in *vilayat-i faqih*. Indeed as Sara (2012), a former student activist currently involved in a number of campaigns in the United States, points out, there are different political models Green activists aspire to, well beyond the one offered by the Islamic Republic, and liberal democracy is one of them. Ali (2011) for instance prefers it because 'it favours peace'. Others, Sara explains, are in favour of liberal democracy because they perceive it to be in stark opposition to the Islamic Republic. These declarations highlight how the Green Movement has been inhabited by a diverse cohort of individuals and organisations. This is mirrored not only in the internal ideological diversity and the scepticism towards the leadership, but also in the structure of the movement which Kaveh (2012) links to its capability of surviving Mousavi and Karoubi's arrests. Kaveh compares the Green Movement to an army, namely an apparently hierarchical organisation, but claims that the lower levels were independent from and more relevant than the commanders. The generals are Mousavi, Karoubi, and the high echelons of *Jibhih-yi Musharikat*; the *afsar* (mid-level officers) are activists, such as himself, and finally are the soldiers namely the ordinary people. Kaveh states:

Two months after the election, the generals were jailed or arrested but the army was still at war. So, they [the security forces and conservatives in power] realised that the army, even with no generals, was still working and that the struggle was ongoing. So they reached the conclusion that they had to get rid of *afsar* as well ... They realised *afsar* were even more important than generals,

because *afsar* had the actual contacts with the people that took to the streets. Some of us [*afsar*] were already in politics, we had social capital we could build on the past ... but we also were intellectually independent ... we were in such a position that we could lead the movement and make decisions when the generals were jailed and not accessible anymore (Kaveh 2012).

The relative independence of the movement from the elite is also highlighted by Zia, who declares that the inspiration model is 'Poland, where the people established a movement and never stopped fighting and struggling through it.' He goes on to state: 'so the lesson we have to learn is that it is possible with the people's will to change things', regardless of the will of the leadership or political elites.

Given this variety and the strong criticism against the reformist political elite, it is pertinent to ask why critics engaged with electoral politics at all. All interviewees point out that the 2009 presidential election was not like other elections; it was special. Kaveh (2012) explains that 'we decided as a group to be active in the 2009 elections. The 2009 election was interesting because it was an important point in the political history of Iran.' Sadegh (2010), a political refugee and former member of the student organisation *Daftar-i Tahkim-i Vahdat*, refers to the fact that 'we wanted to chase out Ahmadinejad.' This is in line with what Mohammad Maljoo (2010) argued, that the tenth presidential election became so topical because of the deep division present in Iran. At the elite level, the consolidation of Ahmadinejad's power was to the detriment of the power of other circles but, apart from elite rivalry, the 2009 election became salient to Iranian citizens too, because of the state of electoral politics in the country. While the Iranian citizenry saw, since early 2000s, their electoral choice being narrowed down by the continuous disqualification of reformist candidates, the conservatives and hardliners showed little respect for the people's electoral will. The notorious slogan 'where is my vote' resonates with this background, and the willingness to 'chase out Ahmadinejad' was the objective that kept a diversified, 'unruly' movement and the reformist political elite together, albeit with limitation.

The pragmatism of engaging the 'best option available' even if it represents a 'second best' is well symbolised by Pouya (2010), a Marxist political refugee who was heavily involved in Karoubi's campaign and the Mourning Mothers, a group of relatives of the victims of the 2009-10 and previous government repressions. Pouya expressed annoyance with the fact that the majority of the events organised in Italy about Iran was pivoted on the Green Movement, which was depicted as a coherent and non-diversified group of pro-democracy liberals. While holding a very critical position on human rights and democracy,

perceived as liberal constructs, he saw the Green Movement as the only opportunity to mobilise in Iran. Similarly Amir G. (2012), a monarchist asylum-seeker who took part in the protests, explains that for him the Green Movement was a breath of fresh air, since it gave him and fellow monarchists the opportunity to express their views in the street. Amir talks about how during the protests they carried the *Shir va Khurshid* (lion and sun) flag. Outlawed by the Islamic Republic, this was the Pahlavi regime's flag which harked back to Iran's antiquity and is used today by monarchists in opposition to the Islamic Republic. Amir then states that 'no one said anything to us' and they began to realise that 'there were many of us among the protesters'.

The expansion of the structure of opportunity that took place before the election, with the establishment of the electoral committees, convinced many activists from different walks of life to participate. Majid, active in trade unionism and workers' campaigns, explains that he entered Mousavi's electoral staff because he saw in the electoral machine the opportunity of raising the issue of unionism more forcefully. He stated that 'It is very difficult to talk about trade unionism in Iran .... During the electoral campaign, candidates were somehow forced to look at labor-related issues ... Mousavi talked about workers' rights, and it was mainly propaganda, but I entered his committee to seize the opportunity of turning that propaganda into something real (Majid 2012).' In addition, Kaveh (2012) highlights that, in a country like Iran, where there is a tendency of abusing activists, it is important to be 'part of an organisation' from which activists can get 'protection.' This non-convergent multitude of political aspirations, strategies and identities reflect the lack of a united political identity that can facilitate an alternative national-popular collective will.

The complex organisation of the Green Movement, its ideological diversity, is also evidenced by the different takes that respondents have had on the issue of the movement's leadership. This mirrors the lack of a Gramscian modern price that, in the form of a structured organisation or a group of individuals, could aggregate the different ideological and identity leanings with the purpose of promoting change. In fact, not only were Mousavi and Karoubi ideologically challenged by the activists, but they also are *not* regarded as the leaders of Iran's opposition. When asked to define the opposition in Iran, Reza (2012) replies that 'it [the opposition] is all activists.' According to Saber (2014), the opposition does not have any leadership. He states that 'we would need someone separated from *akhund* (the clergy), the Shah and all the likes ... instead, the opposition flees from Iran, goes to Europe and reproduces old dynamics of lack of unity.' Jamshid (2012), an asylum-seeker and former member of the outlawed Islamist-Marxist organisation Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK)<sup>ix</sup>, is also



very critical of Mousavi and Karoubi as leaders: '[they] called on the people to mobilise and the people followed them. But today they won't do it again because they have lost faith in reformism.'

As highlighted by Saber (2014), and interestingly enough, many among the respondents referred to the broad spectrum of the Iranian opposition, both inside and outside Iran, as the political landscape from which a leadership should be emerging. Amir G. (2012) would not count the reformists, namely Khatami, Mousavi or Karoubi, as being the representative of the opposition and the leaders of the movement: 'reformists would not count as representatives, as they are *hukumati*, ... they are powerful because have the money of the government.' He mentions Jamileh Kadivar (Mohsen Kadivar's sister, and editor of the website *Rah-i Sabz*, also known as *Jaras*, linked to Mousavi and the Green Movement) and Ata'ollah Mohajerani (former Minister of Culture during Khatami's first government and Jamileh Kadivar's husband) as examples of why reformists do not represent the concerns of the people. He states that 'they have Rafsanjani's money who, it is true, had a lot of problems since 1388/2009<sup>x</sup> but are still *taraf-i Jumhuri-yi Islami* (supporter of the regime) ... but Rafsanjani's problems are issues related to the structure of the regime and factions in power, not to the people.' Amir G. concludes by stating that '*sabzha-yi ghayr-i hukumati* (non-governmental Greens) are the most important group, because the Green Movement was a people's movement, not a movement of the elite in power.' Despite identifying diverse sources for potential leadership, there is agreement over the lack of coordination within the broad front of the opposition. Reza argues that

there is a cultural problem ... and conflicts are dictated by the lust for power ... also the experience of the revolution of 1357/1979 ... has impacted forcefully on collective memory and everyone is worried that we are going to experience the same pain with no leadership able to smoothen the revolutionary process. (Reza 2012)

### Conclusion

The chapter has highlighted the complexity of what usually is called Green Movement by unveiling its fragmented composition, both at the elite and grassroots level. This heterogeneity has significant implications when it comes to the political identities present within the broad 2009-10 movement, which transcended the boundaries of electoral politics and went well beyond electoral support for the two reformist candidates, Mousavi and Karoubi. The resilience of mobilisations in 2009 and 2010 created the opportunity for more people and activists from diverse backgrounds to join the protests. This heterogeneous composition of the protesting crowd is also a characteristic of the political elite protesting the

results of the 2009 election. Elites and the elite's discourses on the protests have included diverse instances on crucial issues such as the relationship between religion and the state, the meaning of accountability and secularism. These multiple identities have not been absorbed by the presence of a modern prince, capable of dominating them with shared demands and making them hegemonic within society at large. Apart from the absence of a modern prince, class politics may also explain why the demands and positions of the 2009-10 movement did not reach hegemony in society. The reluctance of Mousavi and Karoubi to embrace the broader demands for change that emerged from early mobilizations has been a further obstacle to the establishment of hegemony within society. This reluctance seems to mirror a general caution towards political change that the activists had already noticed during Khatami's governments, namely the fear of mobilisations that may potentially overwhelm the elites themselves, engendering unleashed, radical change. The 2009-10 uprisings ended with a forced return to normalcy by the means of repression, forced emigration, as many activists had to seek refuge abroad, and by the unwillingness of the political elite to walk the path of political change. In this respect, Khatami's decision to vote in the 2012 Parliamentary election, in rapture with the extant debate about boycotting the vote, is quite symbolic and highlights the preference for continuity of this reformist elite (Dehghan 2012).

The election of Hassan Rouhani as president in June 2013 and the partial reintegration of reformist policy-makers<sup>xi</sup> seemed to mark the end of the protest cycle of 2009-10. However, it is relevant to point out the continued exclusion of more radical political identities and instances of change. In fact, while Rouhani's election successfully re-included part of the reformist elite and electorate, it is important to remember that a significant part of the identities and demands for change highlighted in the chapter remain excluded from institutional representation and positions of power. This long-term exclusion might have future consequences that are beyond the scope of this chapter. Its presence might engender new cycles of contention in continuity with the 2009-10 and previous mobilisations, as it happened in the case of the Arab uprisings which have built during decades of discontent and overlooked scattered mobilisations.

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<sup>i</sup> Mousavi, Karoubi and Rezai argued that there was evidence of electoral fraud (Ansari 2010, 5). In this context reports were published putting forward this argument (Mebane 2009; Ehsani et al. 2009).

<sup>ii</sup> In total, more than 60 in-depth interviews have been conducted by Paola Rivetti. However, only some have been used for this chapter.

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<sup>iii</sup> The Gregorian calendar is not usually used in Iran. Therefore the Iranian publication date is given with the Gregorian equivalent. When a text is available in both Persian and English both references are given.

<sup>iv</sup> Since the early 2000s, *Daftar-i Tahkim-i Vahdat*, one of Iran's biggest student organisations, established commissions and sister organisations according to ethnicity. See also Nagah (2009).

<sup>v</sup> *Jibhah-yi Musharikat-i Iran-i Islami* (Islamic Iran Participation Front), led by Mohammad Reza Khatami, the ex-president's brother, is now outlawed.

<sup>vi</sup> Among asylum-seekers and political refugees outside of Iran, the hierarchical structures that exist in the Islamic Republic, are reproduced. Government reformists usually get processed much more quickly than 'ordinary' asylum-seekers, who have fewer high profile political connections. It follows that pure reformists are willing and obliged to pay a higher price for their activism and, according to Majid, it is a marker of genuine political commitment. See Rivetti (2013).

<sup>vii</sup> For a chronicle of that day, see Mackey (2009). See also Rivetti (2012).

<sup>viii</sup> See Yazdanpanah (2012). Vahedi has been a crucial personality within the reform movement during the 1990s and 2000s and one of Karoubi's closest collaborator since 1980s. He was editor of a well-known reformist newspaper, *Aftab-e Yazd*.

<sup>ix</sup> Established before the revolution, MEK was marginalised by Khomeini and the clergy since 1979. It sided with Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war and carried out a number of bombings in Iran with the purpose of fighting against the Islamic Republic.

<sup>x</sup> Rafsanjani mildly supported the protesters and, because of this, some members of his family faced arrest, restrictions of freedom of movement and other sanctions.

<sup>xi</sup> This reintegration is quite evident in the case of governmental think tanks. The influential Institute for Political and International Studies, for instance, has been the theatre of intense factional conflicts and after 2013 the political analysts present in the pre-Ahmadinejad era have been re-installed.