Feminist Engagement in Contentious Politics in Iran

Middle East/North Africa

Amna Azam Butt

Abstract: Iran has had several feminist movements in recent decades that ended in brutal repression and government crackdowns. Yet today, women's rights groups continue to mobilize, even in a worsening climate of religious polarization and state intolerance. Why? My paper weighs two scholarly explanations: first, the increasing tenacity and will of activism; and second, the declining ability of the Iranian state to repress. Whereas the optimistic approach stresses the robustness and durability of societal dissidence, the statist approach places primacy on political and security institutions. Utilizing a simple theory of rational decision-making, I combine the two in a novel way. I argue that Iranian feminists continue to engage in contentious politics in order to innovate new types of resistance, as an alternative to traditional organized movements -- that is, as a way to *avoid* opposition crackdown. Using the One Million Signature Campaign and White Wednesday women's "non-movements" as dual cases studies, I show how Iranian feminist activism has shifted from a traditional mass movement to a contentious, non-movement that combines social dissent with organizational creativity. Social media and cyberspace have played a critical role in this elusive cat-and-mouse game of outpacing regime repression.

Introduction:

Iran has increasingly been at the forefront of International news coverage reporting the rise of feminist movements in the theocratic state in recent years. Interestingly, these acts of rebellion are not part of an organized, structured and large mass movement that plans protests and acts of resistance. Rather, these are random but consistent outbursts and seemingly small acts of rebellion that stem from an independent individual that represents grievances shared by the larger population of the marginalized group that they belong to. This phenomenon of using non-movements as a part of a larger resistance as a form of revolution constitutes as an instance of contentious politics. In that, the ability to interact and take part in the civil society to lead mass-movements and revolutions against regimes is an option that is not accessible to the most suppressed, marginalized and underprivileged class of the population. In order to explain how these groups are able to make their voices heard when they lack the space to have their grievances openly said, scholars study the instances in which underprivileged groups take part in contentious politics to track down non-movement activism.

In this paper, I want to explore how women in Iran have participated in contentious politics to fight against different types of restrictive laws, and how they have adapted to the changing activist landscape by using social media as a tool of resistance. I make the argument that the advent of social media as a platform to voice dissent has emboldened the Irani non-movement in their fight for gender equality by being mobilized through diffusion from women across the MENA region and on a global scale as well. Furthermore, a simple rational choice theory helps understand that in the wake of persistent and increasingly violent government crackdown, instead of activists taking part in mass protests by engaging in

the civil society, they opt to participate in non-movements as a form of resistance instead.

In the first section, I will give some historical background on the past feminist movements in Iran and how they fared. I will then go over the two main schools of thought in scholarship that argue against one another. The first pessimist take makes the case for why these movements have failed in the past and continue to do so now. Whereas the second optimist research asserts that these non-movements have a high survivability rate that is lended because of their adaptable nature. Next, I use the cases of the One Million Signature Campaign and state-imposed and mandatory hijab as examples to demonstrate how the non-movement has evolved and fares as of now. In these sections, I show how and the ways in which activists and social media influencers use and occupy cyberspace to contribute to the gender equality non-movement. Finally, I conclude by reinstating my argument that is in line with the optimist school of thought and assert that the feminist activists have evolved from engaging in traditional forms of resistance (i.e. mass protests) and the emergence of social media influencers has added to the adaptability and consequent survivability of this non-movement.

Historical Background:

Women are amongst one of the most marginalized groups of people in Iran today. Regardless of their religious beliefs (Islamic or otherwise), women are mandated to wear the hijab and dress modestly in accordance with the interpretation of the Islamic teachings as per the Irani government. They are not allowed to dance in public or associate with men they are not related to in the public sphere. A woman's testimony is only weighted half as credible to that of a man in courts, women are also only entitled to half of what their male family members get and very rarely are they granted custody of their

children in the case of a divorce or even the ability to ask for a divorce, to begin with. (Homa, 2018) Gender inequality has not been new for women in Iran. The lack of a constitutional agency only worsened after the 1979 revolution in an effort to diminish a Westernized Iran and to reinforce Islamization, religious clerics further regressed despite having initially encouraged women to protest during the revolution. (Samuels, 2018) The violent state-imposed crackdowns on women during protests, periodically on international women's day for example, has also drastically shrunk their space in civil society, and vastly increased the cost of publicly dissenting for activists. I posit that this brutal repression has lend to the non-movement nature of feminist resistance in Iran.

Additionally, the failure of the One Million Signatures Campaign that sought to repeal discriminatory laws across the board has made the feminist non-movement more streamlined and tunnel visioned. In that, they are now resisting specific laws and hijab is resented by many Irani women as it serves as "both the symbol and the instrument of official repression." (Maloney and Katz, 2019) The rationale here is that by targeting one oppressive law and dismantling it, others will soon follow.

Alternative Theories:

There are two main schools of thought that are shared amongst scholars, and most activists, in regards to the success of movements relating to issues of gender inequality. The optimistic take focuses on the resilient nature of activists despite having been on the receiving end of persistent backlash from the government. This view is shared amongst activists like Sotoudeh, who argue that with the help from the diffusion of global women's rights movements, they can revoke laws mandating hijab. Another activist -- Masih Alinejad, shares this outlook and asserts that there are only so many people

that the government can shut down. (Homa, 2018) A Nobel laureate human rights activist, Shrin Ebadi, has argued that the movement has stood strong despite the harsh state-sanctioned crackdown. (Samuels, 2018)

On the other hand, activists like Shadi Sadr have argued that the movement has weakened after the brutal 2009 violent state crackdown. (Samuels, 2018) Furthermore, researchers have also pointed that the "contributions [made by social media] to Iranian democracy and human rights were negligible and possibly even harmful." (Kumar, 2010) Notably, post-Ahmadinejad's election, humans rights abuses have gotten worse, "with mass arrests and detentions as well as brutal repression of the demonstrations." (Kumar, 2010) This further solidifies my thesis that the extreme government crackdown has lent to the non-movement nature of resistance amongst activists for gender equality today.

First Case Study:

One Million Signature Campaign:

Preceding the iconic social media tactics such as *#WhiteWednesday* and *Girls of Revolution Street,* resisting the state mandated hijab, was the One Million Signature Campaign. Irani activists used the lessons learned from Ahmadinejad's brutal crackdown and opted for a quasi-non-movement in the name of the One Million Signature Campaign that later transformed into a non-movement completely. In her official press release, human rights lawyer, Shirin Ebadi, announced a partially successful campaign to get one million signatures from Irani "men and women to protest against legal degradation." (Ebadi, 2006) This campaign was well within the legal parameters set by the regime as petition-signing is not banned. However, campaign organizers were still targeted by the government over arbitrary claims such as the spread of propaganda against the regime.

Two years into the campaign, it had over 100,000 signatures. (Beyerle, 2008) It received recognition and support from the international community, "such as the Nobel Women's Initiative Conference in Ireland, members of the Swedish parliament and other organizations associated with their Liberal party and the Rahavard Association in Aachen, Germany." (Olyaei, 2018) However, having faced relentless violent repression from the government in response to the campaign that increasingly got violent, activists ultimately absorbed into the Green Movement as a means to advance activism.

I. Timeline:

Starting from the first year in 2006 was aimed at the consolidation and expansion of the campaign, the second year had trouble with internal conflict amongst the campaign activists, the third year faced a decline on a national scale in Iran despite flourishing internationally; in its last years, in response to the violent and relentless government crackdown post-2009 elections, the OMSC merged with the Green Movement and advocated for its feminist agenda under the radar. (Olyaei, 2018)

II. Symbolic Gestures:

Campaigners incorporated symbolic gestures like "slogans, and songs that add a compelling new dimension to the campaign's messaging and communication strategy." (Beyerle, 2008)

III. Outcome:

Proponents who have seen the campaign as a success in that it was inclusive across socio-economic background amongst feminists, youth activists claim public and cyberspace and took into consideration and was mindful of the Muslim background of a majority of its supporters. (Olyaei, 2018) Another success of the campaign was the pivotal role cyberspace played in bringing together the diaspora and local Irani feminists and bridging the gap created because of regional distance. (Olyaei, 2018) This was

especially important because a faction of the diaspora includes exiled Irani feminists who are seasoned activists. This helped bring together a new generation of Irani feminists who could look to the diaspora for help, advice and inspiration. This laid down a network of transnational Irani feminists dedicated to the same cause that had access to and exchange of information, tactics and communication. This also helped build trust amongst the divided diaspora and local feminists about pro-or-anti western influence in their activism.

Second Case Study:

Mandatory Hijab:

Irani leaders have a longstanding history of using hijab as a tool of coercion to control women. With the banning of the hijab in 1936 in an effort to modernize Iran to the state-imposed compulsion of dressing modestly and wearing hijab, the underlying principle has always been weaponizing a deeply personal inclination that is not shared by everyone as means to an end. The end being the enforcement of a broader change and shift in status quo as brought by a new regime— from 'outdated' to 'modern' in 1936 to 'Islamic' from 'Western' in 1979. The only constant has been the politicization of a woman's attire and the state claiming monopoly over the choice women should have to dress however they want to. A critical observation to make about this non-movement is the use of social media by activists as a platform to display acts of resistance taken by independent individuals.

I. Divide:

There are several accounts on which women are grossly discriminated against that constitute to their second-class citizen status — in the job sector, in courts, inheritable rights. There exists a divide between women rights activists in Iran. A faction of these activists (largely from the diaspora) argue that there are bigger issues than resisting hijab, and by putting all their energy into

fighting against hijab, feminist activists are only conforming to Western perceptions of what a "free" woman looks like. On the other hand, local Irani activists have shown the deep discontent they feel towards the compulsory hijab and dress code. The results of a study conducted by the research center of the Irani parliament shows a steady decline in public support for the mandatory hijab, which includes answers from non-activists. (Maloney and Katz, 2019) Additionally, a four year old public opinion survey released by president Hassan Rouhani showed that "at least half the country believes that the government should not require or regulate a hijab." (Maloney and Katz, 2019)

II. Timeline:

Instances of contentious politics are inherently hard to pinpoint as seemingly harmless and small acts of resistance take place. In the case of the non-movement against state mandated hijab, the resistance took center stage when the exiled journalist, Masih Alinejad, "launched an innovative human rights campaign" that has mobilized activists to take part in contentious politics by encouraging women to share their acts of resistance online using creative hashtags so that it is also accessible and seen amongst everyone. (Maloney and Katz, 2019) Prior to this, women would wear *loose* hijab in personalized manners so they have bangs or strands of hair peeking out at the front that has now become the norm with which they are able to get away with without persecution.

III. White Wednesdays:

A picture an unsuspecting Alinejad posted on her social media account with her hair on display in a foreign country with a caption that echoed the sentiments shared among locals who also disagreed with the forced hijab went viral. This motivated her to start a Facebook page where women shared their pictures with their hijab taken off, even for a few seconds just to take the picture and

put it back on. This helped get rid of the preference falsification that is inherently a part of people living in authoritarian regimes who feel compelled to lie about their allegiances to the regime to avoid crackdown and persecution. Followed by this was a campaign that encouraged women to wear white scarves on Wednesdays to protest against the state imposed mandate. (Maloney and Katz, 2019)

IV. Girls of Revolution Street:

Vida Movahed silently waved her white scarf like a flag standing "atop a utility box on a busy street named for the country's 1979 revolution" for an hour before she was arrested in December 2017. (Maloney and Katz, 2019) This moment that carried larger implications of revolutionary resistance due to the historical legacy the location shares was captured and shared online quickly garnered a lot of support. This example epitomizes the truly remarkable aspect of non-movements as this seemingly small act of resistance was unplanned and unexpected. But the gravity and importance of Movahed's action is one that is understood by all feminist activists in Iran, who have since then started to reenact Movahed's actions on the same utility box. An action that seems harmless and insignificant, one that was not part of a mass mobilization movement with leader(s) strategically paving the way for the fight to freedom, has managed to spur a non-movement amongst Irani women whose actions resonate with each other as a mutual understanding of the hijab as the physical manifestation of their government's long standing legacy as a tool for controlling women. There are also Muslim-feminists in Iran who wear the hijab themselves but are in solidarity with their fellow activists in their fight against the state mandated compulsion.

V. Symbolic Gestures:

Another important aspect of the non-movement against attires is the creative use of symbolic gestures as a way to participate

in contentious politics everyday. Women are found "in colorful dress[es], wearing jeans to work, embellished shoes, and chunky jewelry, revealing perfectly manicured nails and bangs peeking out beneath the veil." (Council on Foreign Relations, 2018) By waving the hijab on a stick like a white flag individually on their own, women are successfully symbolizing their nonviolent non-movement by attributing and tying their grievances to objects (the hijab on a stick) and places (Revolution Street). They have also been redefining public spaces that share historical legacies denoting the 1979 revolution and turning it on its head by reclaiming those spaces as center stage to display their own resistance. An example of this is silently waving hijab on top of a utility box in Revolution Street, named after the 1979 revolution. It now carries the legacy of the starting point for the social media campaign, *Girls on Revolution Street*. An important distinction here to make is between what I mean as reclamation and redefinition of public spaces. It is important to note that these women are not mobilizing in forms of mass protests but rather changing the public perception and feeling of association that comes with these spaces. They may have not been able to physically claim the territory as their own but have successfully transformed it from Revolution Street to Girls of Revolution Street, thereby adding feminist connotations to its history and legacy. There are people in the government and in the public sphere that may not agree with their resistance but they cannot also erase the added legacy to cultural and historical landmarks like the Revolution Street.

VI. Outcome:

This non-movement is unfolding right now and we are witness to it in real time and space. Although there have not been any drastic changes made from the government, pressure has been increasing from activists in Iran, as well as from the international

community. Masih Alinejad has gone on to publish her book, *The Wind in My Hair,* that recounts her journey as an exiled activist. Her book has reached a much wider audience in the international community. Here, the rational choice for feminists is to use non-movements as a form of civil disobedience and protest against a repressive regime.

Conclusion:

Historically, while the women in Iran have been at the forefront of mass protests, they now increasingly participate in non-traditional forms of dissidence. That is, engagement in contentious politics provides them with a framework that enables them to voice grievances in a way that avoids brutal and violent government crackdown. A simple rational choice theory helps understand why feminist activists are able to make that decision; and the action of participating in non-movements is known as contentious politics i.e. the new emerging way in which a society's most suppressed are able to advocates for themselves.

This argues that the One Million Signature Campaign's transition from a semi-movement to a non-movement in response to the violent government crackdown laid down the base on which feminists are resisting the hijab mandate today. This is also largely affected by the increased social media landscape that has lent to the non-movement in terms of providing a space that feminists do not have access to otherwise.

References

Beyerle, S. 2008. Courage, creativity, and capacity in iran: Mobilizing for women's rights and gender equality. *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, 9*(2), 41-49.

Council on Foreign Relations. 2019. How Women's Small Acts of Resistance Threaten the Iranian Government. *Council on Foreign Relations*. December 5. Accessed May 02, 2019. https://www.cfr.org/blog/how-womens-small-acts-resistance-threaten-iranian-government.

Ebadi, Shirin. 2006. One Million Signatures Demanding Changes to Discriminatory Laws. Worldwide Movement for Human Rights. *International Federation For Human Rights.* November 22. Accessed May 03, 2019. https://www.fidh.org/en/region/asia/iran/One-Million-Signatures-Demanding.

Kumar, Nishi. 2010. The Boundaries of Digital Activism: Dissident Use of Social Media in Iran. *The Journal of Politics and Society*. Accessed May 3, 2019. https://academic commons.columbia.edu/doi/10.7916/D8KD1VWT.

Maloney, Suzanne, and Eliora Katz. 2019. Iran and the Headscarf Protests. *Brookings*. Accessed May 03, 2019.https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/iran-and-the-headscarf-protests/.

Olyaei, Shiva. 2018. A Critical Analysis of the Role of Law and Feminist Legal Approaches in Women's Life Advancement: A Case Study of the One Million Signatures Campaign. Electronic Theses and Dissertations (ETDs) 2008+. T, University of British Columbia.

Rahimi, Babak, and David M. Faris. 2015. Social Media in Iran : Politics and Society After 2009. Albany: SUNY Press.

Samuels, Meaghan Smead. 2018. Upgrading the Women's Movement in Iran: Through Cultural Activism, Creative Resistance, and Adaptability. Accessed May 3, 2019. https:// digital.lib.washington.edu/researchworks/bitstream/handle/1773/42101/ Samuels_washington_0250O_18678.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.