

State and Social Movements in Iran: Phases of Contentious Activism

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ABSTRACT

Social movements are considered by sociologists as agents of social change. They are not isolated entities but an outcome of prevailing circumstances and at, the same time, result from continuity with the historical roots. Moreover, the mobility of contemporary movements can only be shown in comparison with previous kind of collective actions. Two revolutionary movements within one century (Constitutional Revolution 1905-06 and Islamic Revolution 1979), and eight years' Iran-Iraq war (1981-89) and globalization have significantly contributed to the evolution of distinctive nature of contemporary Iranian society. This makes it an interesting subject for research in general, and particularly the case of social movements and their transformation. The paper aims to give an overview of Iranian social movements from the constitutional movement to the recent Green movement of 2009. The intention is to find out, first, whether there was any continuity in social movements during this period; secondly, to investigate the differences of the recent Green movement from the previous social movements of modern-day Iran. An overview of social structure, the state-society relationship, causes of mobilization and the outcomes of each movement will be studied. Moreover, the complex relation between state and social movements that emerged overall will also be examined. The Touraine/Melucci model has been applied in Iranian milieu.

Keywords: Social Movements, State-Society Relationship, Mobilization, Green Movement, Islamic Revolution, Religion.

Introduction

The Revolution of 1979 in Iran and the aftermath which followed that event not only morphed the lives of millions but also sent the world into an inescapable shock including international policy makers and scholars. Before 1978, the country was hub for multinational companies and different nations but none of them could see it coming. It was never an interest for the academic scholars; consequently, there was not much research available on such important issues and the main reason was the limited number of international scholars who were conversant, both theoretically and practical, with the complex political system of Iran.

The recent Green movement in Iran is a proof that there is a continuous increase in the number of social movements in the different parts of the world but the main focus of the researchers, for a long time, is only on the Western movements and their impacts. As a matter of fact, the 20th century saw a large number of social uprisings in the Middle East and Asia, but the scholars mostly overlooked it and did not give

any substantial attention to it. The recent movements in Iran are an indicator that there is a dire need to understand the phenomenon and underlying causes of these social movements in non- Western societies.

Middle East is considered as the most diverse political region including Iran, which has a long and complex political history. Contemporary Iran came into existence through a long social revolutionary movement which resulted in the end of the political set up along with the monarch. However, the expectations from revolution were never fulfilled, and gloomier days followed. The old problems remained unresolved and resulted in the emergence of social movements in the coming years.

The reform movements in Iran are unique but with the help of specific models, it is understandable that there is a continuation of the pattern of past social movements. The case study of Iran provides us with a framework for study of social movements, their success and impacts. These social movements not only effected the Iranian politics but also had a deep social effect on its society. These movements had served as a catalyst for change in domestic politics and conditions and served as a substitute way for political involvement for the lower classes of Iran and initiated liberal tendencies for the upcoming years.

There is also a need to study the Iranian movements from a new, wider and different perspective. The 20th century brings along different rebellions, ethnic nationalist movements and coups. Therefore, we will study the conceptual framework behind these social movements with the help of the social literature available. There is also a need to find and understand the theoretical and comparative indicators about these movements.

This paper will focus on the social movements in non-western societies by taking the case study of Iran. There will also be discussion on the implications and significance of these movements. The paper will also provide a comparative and historical analysis of social movements in Iran with the help of Touraine and Melucci model. It rivets on the importance of social movements in socio-political history of Iran and how it affected the lives of millions of people.

Methodology

This research is based upon historical method and available content has been analyzed to draw conclusions. Data compiled from secondary and tertiary sources like journals, reports of international agencies, books, research papers, online research journals and committee reports will be analyzed to comprehend the importance and resemblance of different social movements in Iranian society. Furthermore, this research provides an insight that what are the factors which give rise to social upheavals and impact of these movements.

Understanding Social Movements

Though social movements and upheavals are a very familiar political phenomenon yet they are hard to define. In fact, definition is the cornerstone of any research because it allows the researcher to differentiate their subject of study from other available ideas and limit the research domain of inquiry. Generally speaking, a social movement is understood as collaborative approach, which is a gathering of masses for a long time period for some certain shared purpose. It will be pertinent to take a look at some scholarly definitions of social movements and revolution.

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The definition provided by Katawski is considered as the pioneer in the concerned field "There are two major reasons for scholarly confusion about the term 'revolution'. First, there is widespread disagreement about which phenomena are to be included among the referents of the term; and, secondly, scholars characterize revolutions differently, thus attaching different connotations to the term which consequently give it different meanings" (Katawski, 1984). There are some other more definitions such as Smelser defines, "collective behavior as mobilization on the basis of a belief which redefines social action" (Smelser, 1962). His definition is regarded as an amplification of Blumer's definition which regards social movements "collective enterprises to establish new order of life" (Smelser, 1962) However, Touraine's definition seems quite appropriate as it directly deals with the phenomenon of social movements, "Social movements are neither accidents nor factors of change: they are the collective action of actors at the highest level - the class actors - fighting for the social control of historicity, i.e. control of the great cultural orientations by which a society's environmental relationships are normatively organized" (Smelser, 1962)

In order to have a working definition, eleven different definitions from various scholars were compared and four common things were extracted. So, it can be inferred that social movements are 'intentional collaborative venture, latest thought, belief, engagement, intention, objective, or value', 'mobilizing social openings and limitations', and working against the contemporary set up in the social context'. And by combining these dimensions, the following new working definition comes up: Social movements are conscious and organized collaborative action, initiated by some new intellectual thought, motivated by different actors using different opportunities against the existing order.

Elements of Social Movements

As mentioned earlier, social movements caused by different factors, thus success and failure of any social movement depends on those factors. These various components of social movements assist us in understanding its dynamics and effects. Social movements are considered a display of people participation and also display a degree of homogeneity among people. The people usually remain differentiated but when there is a common goal or agenda, they get together and make a political unity.

McCarthy and Zald proposed a very useful typology of different type of people involved in social movements.

- Supporters– individuals and organizations that believe in the objectives of the movement.
- Constituents' – furnish means for it (time, labor and money).
- Likely beneficiaries – individuals or associations who are likely to gain from the achievement of movement's goals.
- Conscience constituents – entities who lend help to the movement but do not get any direct advantage from it.
- The bystander public – not sympathizers who do not support the movement and merely watch it's working.

- Antagonists’ – individuals, groups or organizations who are against movement’s objectives (McCarthy, & Zald, 1977).

The people and organizations motivated by social movements can extend their help in different ways. They attract new participants, they support the morale of the participants, help in gaining media coverage and ultimately shape public policy and state action. However, Olson observes “social movements often suffer from a ‘free-rider problem’: people who would benefit from the movement either do not take part in its activities or make only limited contributions at their own convenience” (Olson, 1965).

Goals are the second most important element of social movements and they vary from movement to movement. Some movements strive for democratic rights, some for the solution of local issues and some for the total over turning of the existing system and to replace it with a new one. Sometimes movements have multiple goals. The goals are not inflexible and steady but constantly adjusting and changing. This potential change adds immensely to the kinetics of the movement. Most social movements have a clear and shared understanding of the agenda they are pursuing. Another important element of social movement is the object which is specifically targeted. A social movement may target one or more actors at the same time. It can target a specific department or organization, or it can take on huge actors such as government or the whole system. All of it depends on the popular agenda and the number of people taking part in the social movement.

Importance and Impacts of Social Movements

Social movements are an unbiased indicator of a civil society. It is not a new phenomenon but an old one, existed for centuries and affirmed the presence of civil societies. Social movements are important for the society as well as for the people because they can stress for better governance and also promote a feeling of citizenship in the people. It also creates collective power and play an immense role in nation building and strengthening of democracy and it provides opportunities to cope with new issues that are important to the citizens.

Social movements, in the past, have successfully halted their governments on many issues such as on discriminatory government practices, failure to provide basic civic services. “Non-violent campaigns against authoritarian regimes across the Middle East and North Africa and protests against government policies in Hong Kong, Brazil and Venezuela have helped empower citizens to voice their concerns publicly” (Stephan, Lakhani, & Naviwala, 2015). The main importance of social movement is the activation of civil society in regressive times.

Concept of citizenship is linked with the provision of services and whenever they are breached, there is often a rise of social movement which indicates the awareness of people about their rights. Social movements motivate civil societies to create and assimilate collective power visible in demonstrations and grassroots activities. It also challenges a government’s capability to safeguard the fundamental and constitutional rights of its people and is really important tools in setting government agenda. Social movements provide early warning of emerging issues that matter to citizens. They provide indications to real problems before developing into issues.

Social movement is a necessary and important part of the process of change and reform but the link between them is hard to anticipate and understand. There is little

literature available why change happens and that's why there is a dire need to understand the cultural and institutional impacts at grass roots level. "Social movements are not homogenous but diffused entities, and change outcomes may be made possible by a host of actors, rather than social movements alone" (Giugni, McAdam, & Tilly, 1999). Social movements demand changes on behalf of those sections of the society which are marginalized and excluded from decision making. These movements mobilize masses and provide control over sources and access to basic and fundamental resources and greater presentation in political decision making. Movements against corruption and other such scenarios mobilizes the people to demand accountability and transparency. Right to Information (RTI) movement in India is the main example of the benefits of such type of social movements. It not only forced the government to increase transparency but also increased the people's participation in politics and local government.

Case Study of Iran

The emergence of Students and Green movements in recent years show, how social movements affect Iranian domestic politics and society. Social movements in Iran are an important tool to understand its internal dynamics and also provide the Iranian with the opportunity to get involved in politics. Even if the social movement is unsuccessful to bring about big institutional changes, they still manage to mobilize people in domestic politics. Iranian political system is diverse, and it provides opportunities for the opposition groups along with the threats. The parliamentary and presidential elections provide space for different factions of Iran to take part to some extent in the decision making. The founding ideology of Iran promotes the participation of people but only to some extent at which doesn't challenge the guardianship of the jurists along with Islamic Law. However, it also suppresses any opposition that is in favor of any moderate change in the system.

Adopted Model for the Research

There are many theories related to social movements presented by different scholars such as Touraine, James C. Davies, John Wilson, Herbert Blumer and Charles Tilly but here we will focus on only two theories presented by Touraine and Melucci. A general explanation of their theories is provided below.

Alain Touraine in his book, "*The Voice and the Eye: An Analysis of Social Movements*" presented his theory related to social movements. He thinks that social movements should always be understood in social contexts. He believes that "social movements are the expression of the collective will" (Touraine, 1981). Social movements can be weak or disorganized but according to him, they are the center of social life. Nature of social conflict decides the actor of the social movement and their action is bounded by social conditions. He says, "action is the behavior of an actor guided by cultural orientation and set within social relations defined by an unequal connection with the social control of these orientations" (Touraine, 1981).

According to Touraine, "a social movement as a struggle operates in accordance with four principal conditions: 1). A committed population. 2). It must be organized. 3). It must fight against an adversary ... which may be a social group, e.g. modernizing vs. anti-modernizing. 4). It should be a social problem concerning the whole of society" (Touraine, 1981). He is of the view that social movement is determined by the class and culture of the society and they cannot escape the cultural

pattern. The theory presented by Touraine covers many dimensions of social movements, but it doesn't answer the questions of the main variables acting in social movements.

Alberto Melucci is an important writer in this field and contributed through his models. According to him, collective action is a purposeful act and cognition is its important factor and individuals organize their behavior through cognition. "Individuals acting collectively construct their action by defining in cognitive terms these possibilities and limits, while at the same time interacting with others in order to 'organize' (i.e. to make sense of) their common behavior" (Melucci, 1981). According to his theory, collective actions are mostly dependent on collective identity. The collective behavior is located within the domains of: goals, means and environment. Social movements, for Melucci, are those collaborative actions which have three features: 'solidarity', 'conflict', and 'breaks the limits of compatibility of a system'. 'Solidarity' is "actors' mutual understanding that they are components of a uni-social unit (Melucci, 1981). Melucci's theory covers all the variables of social movements. But still there is a problem in his explanation; his theory doesn't provide us with a concrete model.

Constitutional Revolution of Iran

Russian revolution triggered a kind of a domino effect of revolutions and countries like Iran, Turkey, Mexico and China were deeply affected by it. It also brought different ideologies with confrontation to each other. The Iranian constitutional revolution is credited for the inauguration of parliament and a written constitution for the first time in history of the country. There are many actors which played an important role in this revolution and social democrats are considered as the heart of the revolution. It happened because of an initial hybrid coalition of different forces which included students, merchants, ulama (religious scholars) and workers. This coalition was formed earlier during the 'Tobacco protests' of 1892. So, the past experience helped a lot in the new scenario.

The Tobacco movement helped people in realizing their potential in the political matters of the country. The commercial cooperation between the states of Europe also made people aware of their rights from state. Hence the people were dissatisfied with their conditions which gave rise to their demands. Katouzian believes that socio-political issues were serious rather than the economic one at the start of 20th century. The despotic political system was blamed of all the problems even the economic ones, because it put the country under a lot of debt and made the life of people difficult. The political system was really unstable and because of this, Mozaffar-ed-Din Shah replaced five prime ministers within seven years. Despite the change of the prime ministers, there was no change in the policy of the government. The Shah was quite weak in power and that's why nobody had the ability to check the prime ministers from their heinous acts and the political system had begun to rely upon the foreign powers more and more. The loans and grants provided by Russia and the other countries were totally consumed by Shah and his allies and the condition of the people were becoming bad to worse.

The people, Ulema and the merchants, all were oppressed by the government's agents in the whole country. These groups had faced the oppression most and, consequently, they were the pioneers of the movement's initial rising. The newspaper also played an important in the provision of ideas. The Shiite Ideology

was the main mobilizing force of the movement. “The strategies which were designed in the proclamations, speeches, and newspapers declared that the people were against despotism and dependency and sought justice. In this respect they had their own justification according to their religious beliefs. One of the essential principles in Shiism, besides Towhead (monotheism), Prophethood, Resurrection, and Imam, is Divine justice. According to their belief, 'Divine justice means that Allah does no injustice and in both of His creational and law-making systems acts according to what is right and fair'” (Motahhari, 1991).

The Constitutional Revolution of Iran resulted in out casting the whole existing system and introduced a new type of democracy which was devolved at the grass root level, but it didn't happen overnight but took many years. It happened for the first time in the country that all the classes of the society were taking part in the political system. It also resulted in the opening of different Anjumans (voluntary associations), throughout the country. The support of the people for the newly established political order was never seen before.

If we study this revolution, from the perspective of Melucci's framework, it provides us with the concept of 'justice seeking' as the main motivation behind the rise of 'collective identity'. It can be observed that Iranians had arisen against the degenerated political system for the purpose of getting justice for themselves. The use of Melucci's theory resulted in the above interpretation of the Constitutional Revolution. The happening of this 'revolt' could be explained by applying three other concepts introduced by him: 'solidarity', 'conflict' and 'breaking the limits of compatibility' (Melucci, 1981). The solidarity was present among most of the groups: people, merchants, students and the religious clergy, all of them focused toward a solo purpose, 'seeking justice'.

If we consider the same series of events under the Touraine, it provides us with social deterministic point of view. The norms and value were redefined. The whole political system of the country went under scrutiny and the values of freedom and justice were promoted in the country for the first time. Hence, Touraine's deciphering and Scott's understanding of social movements could be usefully researched with a view to finding out more about the Constitutional Revolution from a conflict theory point of view.

Islamic Revolution of Iran 1979

Subsequent to the coup of 1953, Reza Shah Paharvi assumed the reign of power with the support of U.S but didn't pay due consideration to the national political forces. He relied most on the increasing oil revenues and introduced a centralized dictatorship and that resulted in alienation of national forces. It goes without saying that these forces were in the forefront against him in the Islamic Revolution of 1979. In fact, demonstrations started in October 1977 which evolved into a campaign of civil disobedience which included most of the social classes of the society and it intensified in January 1978 which paralyzed the whole country.

The Shah flew out from Iran into exile on 16 January 1979, as the last Persian monarch, delegating powers to a Regency Council and Shapour Bakhtiar was appointed prime minister. The mass uprising that swept Iran in the course of 1978 took most observers, journalists and diplomats, scholars and theorists of social change by surprise. Ayatollah Khomeini came back, and was greeted by millions of

Iranians. On 11 February, Khomeini took power and approved a new theocratic-republican constitution

Two different ideologies prevailed in these revolutions, one by Khomeini and the other one by Muslim intellectuals; however, Khomeini's became the predominant and the lasting one. "Independence, Liberty, Islamic government' and 'Neither the East, Nor the West, Islamic Republic' were two prominent slogans of the Islamic Revolution which resonated more than the other following three: 'Allah-o Akbar' (God is the greatest), 'La Elah-a EU-a Llah' (there is no god except God), and 'Down with the Shah'. (Rahnema, & Nomani, 1990). "As a matter of fact, the slogans represented the direction and the summation of the ideology of the revolution.

This revolution was different and unusual from other revolutions because it lacked many usual factors of revolution ranging from financial crisis, defeat at war and peasant rebellion. The country was progressing on many aspects and wasn't facing any financial challenge, but the political conditions weren't satisfactory which resulted into the upheaval. It also dawns the fact that state and society are two equal entities and need to be focused upon equally. It was a non-violent revolution and it also redefined the meaning of revolutions.

If we apply the Melucci theory on this revolution, it provides us another insight. The bitter feelings of the people against the Shah because of his despotic rule, served as a catalyst in the uniting of people. Thus, Shiism as the religion of the majority of Iranians came to occupy the spring of their 'collective identity', using Melucci's terminology. This 'collective identity' channelized bazaars, mosques and religious ceremonies and social gatherings as its 'means' and set a goal for the establishment of a new independent Islamic state. According to Melucci, the solidarity of the people was basically because of their common religion and their main target was the oppressive regime of Shah. The huge gatherings of protestors coupled with persistent strikes undermined the social, political and economic structure of the regime and 'broke the limits of compatibility of the system' (Melucci, 1981) but there is one shortcoming in the theory of Melucci, it doesn't explain the role of Khomeini in all the different aspects of the revolution. The theory also doesn't give the detailed view of some other important aspects such as why revolution took place at that specific time and why did Iranians stand up against monarchy and wanted its replacement with the new.

These answers are provided by social deterministic theories. The underlying social conditions of the Islamic Revolution could be either 'redefinition of norms and values', 'cultural class struggle', or 'social/political class struggle'. "The people's demand was for a total change in the political institution: abandonment of the Pahlavi's regime and establishment of an Islamic Republic, according to the dominant slogans of the revolution. Thus 'redefinition of the norms and values', at least in the political system, was their wish, according to Smelser's approach. To reach their objectives, they ought to have a cultural (Touraine) or social/political (Scott) struggle with the Shah's state" (Parsa, 1989).

Green Movement of Iran

Green Movement of Iran is one of the most significant movements, Iran faced in the recent past. It arose after 2009 presidential election, in which there was a sheer demand for the removal of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad from the office. Green

became the symbol of unity for those seeking for annulment of what they regarded as a snatching of their rights. Unlike the Student Movement of 2009, it was a pro-democratic movement. It challenged the basis of Iran's legitimacy after a long time and pushed the government on the back foot. The initial slogan in the protests, "Where is my vote?" was invoked by the opposition groups demanding their stolen votes and annulment of the election. Eventually, the demands expanded and targeted directly the Supreme Leader. And this climax came when the government was expecting that its carrot and stick policy would yield desired results; however, the expectations of the government reversed. There was a struggle between the opposition, but the appointment of Ahmadinejad transformed the political struggle all together. It shifted from conservative versus reformist to intra-conservative one.

Although, the movement started after the presidential election of 2009, there were some other motives underlying the main ones such as the economic problems, state repression, and the sudden checks on civil rights after the elections. "Although the Green Movement in Iran did not have an intact hierarchical structure, the reformist faction of the ruling Shi'a clergy, many intellectuals from universities, journalists, and a growing educated middle class took part in the Green Movement. Their organizational capabilities and links had increased with the help of the Khatami era reforms and strengthened in time" (Gheissari, 2009).

Shia Islam was the common motive behind the Green Movement just like the 1979 revolution. It attacked the government monopoly on Shia Islam by changing the meaning of injustice and by relating the government with the secular government of Shah. Protesters used the symbols values and stories of Shia Islam, they also resembled the martyrs of the Green Movement with Hazrat Ali (R.A). It was very similar to the events of the 1979 revolution.

The Green Movement lost its intensity when the IRI's government fostered the level of violent repression, but the movement was never totally dissolved. Although many thought it was unsuccessful when it waned, the Green Movement was actually a victory in two ways. First, the movement was successful in uniting the separate mobilized social groups with broader frames and peaceful tactics. Second, the movement silently continued, and changed Iranians' opinion, which eventually was reflected in the election of a reformist candidate in the first round of the 2013 presidential elections.

The Melucci model seems successful in explaining the Green Movement. Just like 1979 revolution, it was religion which provided the people rallying point and furnished them the reason of solidarity. They used the slogans and strategies of the past revolution and that too in the same pattern but this time the agenda and the results were also different. The Green movement wasn't able to achieve its main agenda but at least it was able to freshen up the civic societies of Iran which were in the shadow of despair for a long time and gave people more reason to participate in the political activities.

Conclusion

Iran has witnessed many social movements in the last 150 years. Some of them ended the long ruling monarchy; some resulted in the change of the political system while few others shook the government and compelled them to address the demands of the people. It cannot be said that all of them were able to achieve their goals but,

at the same time, it would be unfair to declare them as failures. The biggest achievement of any social movement is that how far it has been able to rally people for the cause which it espouses; and most of the Iranian social movements had been taken to be successful in this context. They had not only assembled people but also managed to promote solidarity, one of the most important functions of the society. Therefore, it may be commented that all the social movements in the history of Iran were significant in so far they had been able to cast varied impact on society.

Another significant aspect is the permeation of few factors in all the social movements of Iran. For example, the religion factor was involved in all of them though their quantum was different: it was more conspicuous in some, whereas, it was less pronounced in others. Likewise, the same can be observed as far as financial aspect is concerned: all the revolution, to some extent, also included matter of financial resources, especially the Constitutional Revolution of 1906. Still more, the socio-political scenario was equally important: even when the financial health of the country was better, non-availability of political rights was the reason of ignition.

A lot of research has been done on these issues in Iran but some aspects have been left unattended. A glaring conceptual gap that runs through the whole literature on Iran is the intersection of ethnicity and gender viewpoint in the social structure which needs to be addressed. New area of inquiry on Iranian social movements lies in the field of social history. There is a dire need for deeper understanding of the daily lives of Iranians.

Finally, one comes across a question: what lies in future store for Iran in social sciences? Prediction may be relative if not perfect. Lessons of the past are meant to forecast future, not in absolute terms. The research shows that social movements appear a recurring phenomenon in the history of Iran; secondly, there are some constant or permanent factors which were involved in all the social movements, and it can be predicted in relative terms that they likely be major influencing factors in the future social movements.

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