The Many Shades of Green:
Social Welfare in Iran and the Struggle for Hegemony

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Introduction

Recent revolutionary events mobilizing Arab populations throughout the Middle East and North Africa have thus far successfully uprooted two ruthless dictatorships that had previously been viewed as both stable and entrenched. Indeed the speed with which the regimes in Egypt and Tunisia crumbled in the face of peaceful mass protests surprised many. Almost immediately comparisons were being drawn between the Arab protesters and the "Green Movement" in the Islamic Republic of Iran, an opposition movement that dramatically emerged after the contested presidential elections in summer 2009 but which was ultimately unsuccessful in realizing any meaningful transformation of the Iranian political system. Activists, journalists and academics observing the successful revolutions unfolding in Tunisia and Egypt posed many questions about why the Iranian protests failed and even offered a few answers, mostly focusing on the limits of the Green Movement. For example, Maljoo (2010) intelligently critiques the Iranian opposition's failure to mobilize the working class. But in order to fully appreciate why revolutionary change did not occur in Iran, we must also consider the cultural and political forces that coalesced to preserve the established hegemony in the Islamic Republic, the ideas and practices that mobilized millions of Iranians behind President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Because even though the recent crackdown against demonstrators and opposition leaders may illustrate that the current government in the Islamic Republic

has become more authoritarian over the last two years, the Iranian state and society are also open and democratic in ways that many critics refuse to recognize.

Thus any failure of the Green Movement is also a testament to the level of popular support the government of the Islamic Republic continues to enjoy in Iran. That said, while the domestic conflict only became manifest to the outside world during the competing street demonstrations after the contested 2009 elections, the struggle for hegemony in Iran has been playing out on multiple levels each and every day since the revolution in 1979 established an Islamic Republic. In order to place recent events in a historical context, I adopt a Gramscian lens to examine the ongoing struggle for hegemony in Iran. I focus on two different fronts where competing blocs are regularly vying for power: within the institutions of social welfare in the Islamic Republic and inside the political discourses of the ruling conservatives and the opposition. My research is based on 25 unstructured interviews with Iranian scholars, journalists, religious leaders and government employees while doing fieldwork in Tehran during summer 2008 and in Beirut during summer 2009, as well as an analysis of newspaper and documentary coverage of the political rhetoric used before, during and after the contested presidential elections and subsequent protests. I believe this conceptual approach helps us to better understand why the Green Movement has so far failed to achieve its goals, as well as why the conservatives in power continue to be the dominant force in Iranian politics today.

Conceptual Framework

Antonio Gramsci (2005) incorporated culture into a Marxist reading of materialism to formulate a sophisticated theory of civil society and the struggle over hegemony. In

Gramsci's conception, civil society comprises both "the political and cultural hegemony…a social group exercises over the whole of society as the ethical content of the state" (Bobbio, 1988, 10). The state 'educates' consent (Gramsci, 2005, 259) when civil society both produces and reproduces the ethics of the state so that society consents to its rule. Hegemony is thus secured through civil society, offering a subtle but coercive means for the state and dominant class formation to preserve its social, cultural and political legitimacy (Gramsci, 2005, 57). This notion of civil society includes not only institutions like the mosque, social welfare and political parties but also what ideas are refracted through them and how they are likely to be interpreted. At the same time, however, Gramsci believed civil society also provides the space for ideological struggle, where competing blocs may contest popular 'common sense' and create a new hegemony with a different history, eventually contributing to the formation of a new structure of power (Bobbio, 1988, 88). Here 'common sense' is the repertoire of popular culture. According to Gramsci, the ideologies comprising 'common sense' can be conservative or progressive and are open to multiple interpretations. These ideas are fragmentary, fluid, heterogeneous and contradictory. They are the historical accretion or sedimentation of multiple and various beliefs from religion, folklore, science, art, language and philosophy. A bloc secures hegemony by articulating the ideas and beliefs of 'common sense' in ways that resonate with the populace but mobilizes them in new directions. Gramsci explained this struggle through his notion of a war of position, where the ruling bloc's legitimacy is continuously being contested in civil society by other reconstructions of popular 'common sense' with different kinds of political and social implications.

Subsequent scholars have further developed Gramsci's framework to create a more expansive conception of the modern state. For example, Althusser (1971) also weaves

culture into a Marxist framework to explain how states today maintain hegemony. Clark and Dear (1984) and Wolch (1990) suggest that these sites of class struggle are now being monitored and maintained by what the authors call the shadow state. Mitchell (1991) further suggests that our everyday actions and interactions are all manifestations of the state. In this way our society cannot be distinguished from the state because we are all active participants in constructing these relationships. Scholars of the Middle East also look to Gramsci's ideas to explain complex relationships of power in the modern world. Said (1979) famously built on Gramsci's framework to explain Orientalism, or the European post-Enlightenment project to transform the Middle East, or Orient, into an object of study, using scientific methodology to claim objectivity. Said argued that dissecting the Orient in this way distorts its social reality by disfiguring its particular mode of being. Bayat's (1997) excellent research on poor people's movements before, during and after the Islamic Revolution in Iran adopts a Gramscian lens to illustrate that, although organized and active, the Iranian working class was eventually outmaneuvered by the state in the 1980s. Bayat provides important insights into how the Islamic Republic secured hegemony over a divided Iranian society. This framework also enables us to better understand how the current government in the Islamic Republic has so far been able to withstand any challenges from the Green Movement.

The system of social welfare in Iran

One site of the hegemonic struggle in the Islamic Republic is social welfare. Iran's complex system of social welfare provision was expanded after revolutionary leaders promised a more equitable distribution of resources to the poor through the program of Islam, preaching an anti-colonial, anti-capitalist and especially anti-American

agenda. However these social forces also had to interlace this religious mission with the actually existing political economy of a modernizing state. As a result, the revolutionary ideology refashioned the system to include several innovations, such as the creation of powerful new para-state religious organizations[1] known as *bonyad*s that took control over the vast wealth of the former Pahlavi regime. The larger para-state sector in Iran includes both Islamic Endowments (*vaqf* in Persian, *waqf* in Arabic, *awqaf* plural in both) that have existed for over a millennium, as well as these new revolutionary foundations.[2] A *vaqf* is an "Islamic trust" or "pious endowment" that emerged as a religious institution about one century after the birth of Islam. By the end of the eighth century, *awqaf* had become a popular vehicle for the provision of public goods throughout the Middle East. According to Kuran (2001, 842) a *vaqf* can be described as "an unincorporated trust established under Islamic law by a living man or woman for the provision of a designated social service in perpetuity." Layish (1995, 146) finds that endowments have historically financed enterprises for economic development and supported a wide variety of important social institutions. Similar to *awqaf*, the newly created *bonyad*s are designed to serve as Islamic charitable entities providing important social services that are funded by properties, which range from agricultural lands to commercial enterprises. Many of the *bonyads* are now multinational conglomerates in control of hundreds of companies across dozens of industries. Estimates of their economic activities range between 30 to 40 percent of Iran's GDP, and they are thought to employ around five million Iranians (Maloney, 2000, 163).

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[1] According to Mirriam-Webster's dictionary, the 'para' prefix signifies something that is beside, alongside of, beyond or aside from, as well as something faulty or abnormal. http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary
[2] The word *bonyad* in the singular is Persian for "foundation"

And yet despite these vast commercial holdings, the para-state sector has not managed to become economically self-reliant and today receives large subsidies from the state's oil revenues, a situation which generates controversy. But while some in the government argue that this patronage undermines Islamic principles of a more participatory system of charity,[3] *bonyad*s have played a progressive role in rural areas as well as in reconstruction during and after the devastating war with Iraq (1980-1988), a long and bloody conflict which resulted in around one million deaths and as many wounded on both sides. Today the charitable activities of *bonyad*s are thought to reach millions of Iranians, especially those loyal to the state and most importantly the families of martyrs and the war disabled, building a particular kind of community. Only a few scholars have published research about *bonyad*s in Farsi or English.[4] Scholars such as Maloney (2000) and Saeidi (2004) as well as media reports mostly focus on the economic activities of *bonyad*s to call for liberal reform. And according to an Iranian business consultant, many foundations have, in fact, recently undergone a reform of management and accountability practices.[5] However focusing only on the economic aspect through a normative liberal lens does not fully account for the para-state sector's larger political project involving their social welfare and services. Adopting a wider cultural lens enables us to see how the Islamic Republic's para-state sector is helping to produce and reproduce the ethics of the state.

The Islamic Republic has also institutionalized a governmental social welfare program similar to the Western model, which allocates power to members of

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[3] Mohammad Sharifzadegan, the Islamic Republic's first Welfare Minister, questioned whether or not there could ever be justice from oil because of this rentier framework. Interview during fieldwork in Tehran on 13 August 2008.

[4] One scholar who assembled a collection of writing about the parastatal sector explained how he had difficulties finding experts on the subject. Interview during fieldwork in Tehran on 13 August 2008.

[5] Interview with a scholar during fieldwork in Tehran on 18 August 2008.

communities not serviced by the *bonyad*s. Government social welfare is comprised of bureaucratic agencies that do not operate based on revolutionary principles, but instead liberal ones. Government social welfare covers all formal wage earners, and thus supports only those individuals who are able to participate in the official capitalist or bureaucratic system.[6] Wage earners who are not formally employed, whether by choice or by necessity, do not have full access to this system. Government social welfare is generally financed by taxes and worker contributions, along with some revenue generated from investments and subsidies from the government. One example of this type of welfare is the Civil Servant Pension Organization, which provides assistance for government employees. Another example is the Social Security Organization (SSO), the largest bureaucratic welfare agency that currently services around 8.5 million contributors and 1.5 million pensioners.[7] The SSO provides three types of welfare: social insurance, means tested benefits, and individual savings accounts. The cultural mission of government welfare organizations may be less overtly pronounced, however according to government documents the system does highlight cultural development as one of nine key goals that are governed by principles within the liberal-capitalist framework.

Both welfare systems may be viewed as democratic depending on one's perspective. One system rewards those who participate in the revolutionary state, the other rewards those who participate in the bureaucratic government or capitalist economy. One prominent social scientist suggested that the government welfare institutions are conceptually associated with the democratically elected government, what in Persian

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[6] The SSO also continues to cover those who have contributed to the system for at least one year, according to documents provided by a representative from the SSO during fieldwork in Tehran on 11 August 2008.

[7] Interview with a representative from the SSO in Tehran on 11 August 2008.

is known as *dowlat*. While on the other hand, *bonyad*s are connected with the unelected revolutionary Islamic state, or *hokumat*.[8] However the *dowlat* institutions are less egalitarian in provision of services because they charge money for non-contributors, whereas *hukumat* hospitals are free for all.[9] Another scholar also agreed with the argument that *dowlat* is connected with the elected government and *hokumat* the entrenched state institutions, but pointed out that while *dowlat* was separate under former President Mohammad Khatami, a reformist, today *hokumat* actually comprises the entire system under the conservative President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.[10] An international development officer made another distinction, explaining how *dowlat* organizations focus on social welfare that builds human capacity, whereas *hokumat* provides services that relieve poverty, suggesting that the latter may even create dependency.[11] According to this kind of reasoning, one set of institutions builds technocrats, the other nationalists.

However as another Iranian scholar clarified, while many grassroots foundations may hold a traditional ideology, some of their practices are suitable with the capacity aims of government institutions, such as empowerment and independence.[12] Some may be offering these binary distinctions to differentiate what are thought to be two different political agendas, reflective of the ideological split between the two main groups struggling for hegemony in Iran today. *Hokumat* mostly represents the loyalist revolutionary state institutions supported by the conservatives currently in power and is associated with an anti-Western and Islamic outlook. Whereas *dowlat* largely

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[8] Interview with an Iranian scholar during fieldwork in Tehran on 4 August 2008.
[9] Interview with two graduate students from University of Tehran during fieldwork on 9 August 2008
[10] Interview with an Iranian scholar on 11 August 2008.
[11] Interview with a representative from the United Nations Development Program during fieldwork in Tehran on 3 August 2008.
[12] Interview with an Iranian scholar on 11 August 2008.

corresponds to the technocratic and reformist elements of the government as well as those who took to the streets to protest against the contested 2009 presidential election results, and who are perceived to be secular and liberal. However *dowlat* is often religious and communitarian, and *hokumat* can be democratic and rational. Furthermore both blocs have a diversity of supporters and interests. So instead of looking at *dowlat* and *hukumat* in oppositional terms, a Gramscian framework allows us to view competing hegemonies as simultaneously contradictory and overlapping. The rest of this paper will analyze the political discourses in Iran, another site of hegemonic struggle. Both the conservatives who symbolize the *hokumat* and the opposition reformists who represent *dowlat* are embracing key concepts, such as freedom, democracy and Islam, even though the two groups are articulating these ideas in very different ways to mobilize and empower rival social movements.

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