



How Social Movements Can Change Iran

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By **Noushin ahmadi Khorasani**

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According to many in Iran, the country's June 12 presidential elections constitute a great "opportunity." It's important to note, however, that the so-called opportunity brought about by the election does not necessarily reflect a heightened degree of openness -- or of control -- of the political atmosphere; rather it is about the special political state in which Iranian society now finds itself for a short period of time. In fact, even if we consider the "elections" as "selections," even if we witness intensified security clamp downs in such periods, even if we see that our opponent has a full home court advantage, we still cannot ignore the situation and circumstances in which, due to the elections, the society now exists.

Already, diverse groups of equal-rights activists in Iran have taken appropriate advantage of this opportunity and formed a large alliance called the "coalition of women's movements to advocate electoral demands." This should be only the beginning.

An Opportunity for Solidarity Among Social Movements

Iran's elections mood -- this period of heightened civic engagement -- is always short-lived. If we really believe in the rightness of our cause and in its continuation, then we must capitalize on this election atmosphere for unity amongst the different social movements. This atmosphere can serve as a common playing field for social movements, the shared ground necessary for joint action. In fact, it is the existence of this common playing field that can form solidarity among social movements. These opportunities are rare in Iran and so we must be ready to act on them when they do appear.

By this I do not mean that social movements must exploit this election atmosphere by merely casting votes for or supporting particular candidates; what I mean is that the election atmosphere provides these movements an opportunity to find a common platform beyond the cliché and repetitious slogans. What is certain is the fact that these elections create a common playing ground much broader than the limited grounds of each individual social movement. Elections lay the valuable groundwork for a practical and common project among the various groups seeking societal change.

Now is the Time to Act

The minimal relaxation in the security and political atmospheres, and "the latent potential in different stages of elections" have created a golden window of opportunity for civil society activists and social forces in the country to vigilantly and prudently develop solidarity and joint actions. Demand-centered movements, such as Iran's women's and student movements, and even parts of the trade

union movement, are best aligned and most prepared to take advantage of the opportunity to join forces in, possibly temporary, alliances centered around practical joint action.

That is not to say that, if we wished to do so, the election could not be an opportunity to lay the grounds for a more lasting reconstruction of the internal relationships between social movements. In fact, changes of this nature have already taken place between large parts of the women's movement and parts of the student movement. Iran's social movements (the women's and student movements in particular) have suffered a demoralizing period of the harshest illegal violence and physical attacks on their members. These movements could seize this opportunity to recuperate their losses and once again invite the scattered groups of their movements to join forces and voices.

Fortunately, the women's movement has to a certain degree been successful in this regard. Almost forty equal-rights supporting women's groups and organizations, along with 600 Iranian activists and intellectuals, utilized the mood and opportunity of elections and alongside each other, shoulder to shoulder, formed a provisional and democratic coalition called "coalition of women's movement to advocate electoral demands." This is the first time that the women's movement in Iran succeeded in entering the elections environment fully independently in order to raise its demands.

This fresh and brave move cannot and should not be taken loosely. During the period of time since the inception of the "coalition," fortunately tens of articles have been published in various papers and websites both supporting and criticizing this innovative and united move. Various acting committees in Tehran and a few other cities have started working with hope and optimism. Educational booklets and leaflets of the "coalition" are being printed and distributed by volunteers among the public, and students in particular. Face-to-face dialogue with people and holding productive educational workshops are on the go. The substantial presence of young members of the "coalition" at the electoral headquarters and conventions of candidates; regular distribution of weekly "coalition" news bulletins; the renewed relationship between the women's movement and the student movement -- each is progressing. Yes, the women's movement in Iran is making a new comeback.

Fortunately, the student movement has taken a similar initiative and with an unprecedented will and determination is forming various, very broad, and independent alliances in order to develop unity and to attract new forces, and revive subdued ones, with a goal of creating "change" in the current society.

A Precious Opportunity to "Institutionalize"

One of the other prudent and wise approaches that civil activists could take during the elections is to make broader contacts with the public in order to form civic institutes in Tehran and other cities in the country. This smart move should, of course, involve any and all forces (be they political, civic or trade). But the question here is how and in which way this opportunity could be utilized to form popular groups and bodies.

Perhaps one of the ways is to have an eye on the electoral headquarters. At present, the headquarters of all the presidential candidates are active in Tehran and across the country. The active and motivated individuals at these centers (the office staff) are mainly from the reformist youth. The important point here is to recognize the presence of a very different atmosphere that forms only during the election periods: sectors of the society become active in a real sense in participating in the political destiny of the country. At these electoral headquarters, we can contact these young people without risk or fear, and interact and dialogue with them. Civic activists have access to these locations and to the vast number of young people who previously, due to the dominant political atmosphere, were almost unreachable. When people are organized, an opportunity arises for activists of civil society to raise awareness of their remand to and through these motivated individuals.

The Golden Opportunity Belongs to All Social Forces

This exceptional opportunity is not only available to us, activists of the women's or student

movement, but more so to the political parties who wish to change the status quo. The reformist political forces (regardless of ideological orientation) can also utilize this precious opportunity to expand and extend the popular institutions, and therefore boost and strengthen civil society. Instead of looking at the forces in the electoral campaign offices as auxiliaries and extras in the elections, they could positively plan to organize and institutionalize such forces (for the days after elections), without aiming necessarily to keep these young people under their hegemony and umbrella of their own party.

As with the women's and student movements, the reformist political forces all desperately need these popular institutions, from parties like Etemaad-e Melli (National Reliance) and Jebhe-ye Mosharekat (Participation Front), to Nehzat-e Azadi (Freedom Movement), Jebhe-ey Melli (National Front), and others. This is because if supporters of change win the elections and the presidential office, they will certainly need the presence and organized activity of these popular groups even more. In taking the presidential office at a time when military forces have dominated all the economic, political, bureaucratic, educational and social bodies of the country, perhaps the only hope for advancing economic policies and running the country as a civic society and not a militarized one, is through the support of such popular groups.

Just as Mr. Ahmadinejad and his allies adeptly move forward with their policies through the centralized organization of a part of society around the Basij (paramilitary militia), the reformist forces seeking change should also recognize that (even if they possibly win the elections) it is only through the organization of popular forces and formation of groups for change that they can hope to survive the next four years. Modern forces in our country, from social movements to political forces seeking change, have no other option in order to defend their demands but to organize themselves, regardless of ideological or political tendency.

With their experience of order and discipline in the military, the protectors of the status quo have been able to successfully create and establish simple yet disciplined and flexible organizations within key parts of society (their target audience), and in this way promote and advance their demands and policies, backed by popular organizations who save and protect their representatives in judicial, legislative and executive branches of power. Unfortunately, the modern and change-seeking forces in our society are suffering from dispersion, discord and dissent, and each day are squandering opportunities to organize themselves, perhaps the last opportunities to organize in a modern form and with minimal expense.

Considering these temporary circumstances, we have probably two paths in front of us. The first is to not bother to make connections with diverse strata and classes of society in this brief window of opportunity and walk by the electoral headquarters with indifference. Alternatively, we could grasp this relatively short and transient moment with both hands, with hope and motivation (and looking forward to tomorrow) in order to voice our demands even louder and to more broadly, strengthen our ties with various strata of society, reconstruct the internal relationships of the women's movement, access fresh, young people who defend equality, organize modern social forces, and create broader solidarity among civil and equality-seeking activists.

Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani is a key leader of the women's rights movement in Iran and one of the founding members of the One Million Signatures campaign begun in July 2006. She and 31 Iranian women were arrested in Tehran on March 4, 2007 just before the International Women's Day demonstrations. In 2007 she and several other women were sentenced to three years in prison for "threatening national security." Ms. Ahmadi is a journalist and author of several books about the women's movement in Iran and was the publisher of several banned publications, including *Fasl-e Zanan* (Women's Seasons), *Jens-e Dovom* (The Second Sex), and the blog Feminist School.

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