

Women's Movement: A Model for the Green Movement

The experience of a non-violent campaign

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Following the 2009 presidential election, many activist women, not all belonging to the women's movement, were arrested. Some unprecedented verdicts were issued against them and some of them are still serving time for their charges. It seems that the prevailing atmosphere facilitated the harsh treatment against the One Million Signature Campaign. The members who were arrested, like many other social groups, were falsely accused and went through long interrogations. Many women activists were forced to leave the country and this was a high price paid by the women's movement after the election.

A year ago today Iran was on the verge of entering a new chapter in its history. During the days before the election, an ongoing dialogue among different factions about whether or not to participate in political decision making, and the enthusiasm and excitement in the streets and at election headquarters, particularly among the youth, placed Iran in a position to undergo some unexpected events.

Different groups inside the women's movement merged together and came to an accord over some minimum demands as their communal requisitions, and under the name of "convergence of the women's movement to set forth demands in the election" entered the stage of the electoral campaign.

Coalition members who were present at the election centers and assemblies distributed brochures and carried placards expressing, "we vote for the demands of women." This approach presented a new way for women to participate in the electoral process and seemed somewhat unfamiliar and unexpected for those members of society who were targeted by these messages, to a point where at times their inquiry about the nature of this practice and its place in the electoral process opened the door for lengthy discussions.

After the election results were announced, most people and social groups who were disappointed after all their efforts became desperate. In an attempt to compensate for their dismay and to claim their rights, they began to voice their protests collectively and with unprecedented unity. This was only the beginning of many aftershocks that went against all equations and became a reminder of the need for a new vision suitable for a

different setting.

The irony was that while the demands of the social groups did not materialize and their inherent right to political participation was not recognized, and because women were part of the people and were campaigning by their side, and most importantly because of their known activities, women were among the first ones arrested and forced to pay a higher price.

The question is did all these events and the high repercussions bring the women's movement closer to claiming its demands, or on the contrary is public awareness of the women's movement that was slowly gaining momentum in society now further away and the path to success now longer than before?

Journalist and women's rights activist Asieh Amini has an answer to this question:

"Our expectations of the issues, groups and movements must be based on reality. Before the election, social groups and movements, including the women's movement, had their own character and behavior and their interaction with society depended on the circumstances of time and place. The election disrupted all the political and social equations inside the country. This change was not limited to the relationship between the women's movement and the people, but was quite noticeable in other areas. Consequently we cannot expect that one social group remain unaffected by such a great event. The pattern by which the women's movement acted changed after the election. There was confusion among many groups and movements about how to maintain the usual trend of their activities. However, I believe that if we analyze this issue from different points of view, we may be able to draw different conclusions from what seems to be an "unpleasant event" and a "halt" in the process. As I witness how the role of the women's movement is becoming the subject of many analyses, or how the protest movements are adopting the non-violence approach, I see an extension of the women's movement in society, its development and success, and not its interruption."

Following the 2009 presidential election, many activist women, not all belonging to the women's movement, were arrested. Some unprecedented verdicts were issued against them and some of them are still serving time for their charges. It seems that the prevailing atmosphere facilitated the harsh treatment against the One Million Signature Campaign. The members who were arrested, like many other social groups, were falsely accused and went through long interrogations. Many women activists were forced to leave the country and this was a high price paid by the women's movement after the election. As Asieh Amini puts it:

"Even though the intensity of the arrests, the exodus of many citizens, the dispersion inside the country, the underground getaway, closure of internet sites, and the disruption of many demonstrations planned by women may be considered as negative, those who responded to the ensuing social movements were more than the one million individuals we expected in our Campaign, and this by itself is another noticeable accomplishment. In spite of the heavy price paid, it would be an incomplete analysis if we don't acknowledge that the demands of the women's movement are now being pursued in our society more seriously than before."

Khadijeh Moghadam, another women's rights activist, believes that the way people stipulated a main demand in their protest, "where is my vote," was something that was experienced before in the Campaign: "People, while not all aware of the Campaign's stipulation and function, brought up a specific and tangible demand. It was the unique experience of this movement that without any leadership, and quite peacefully, this demand became pivotal."

The change of demands after the election

Even though the convergence of the women's movement, which included a spectrum of both secular and religious members, happened before the election, another section of this body, including some members of the One Million Signature Campaign were not in agreement with the movement's new approach. They believed bringing up the demands of the Campaign in a new format in order to participate in the election would only serve to politicize an ongoing civil movement and would disseminate the potential of its members.

However, the women's coalition came to an agreement over "joining the convention to eliminate discrimination against women" and "changing discriminatory laws," and announced these as the demands of the women's movement. The result of the election, and disregard for the votes of political and social groups along with that of the public, transformed the demands and changed them into a common discourse. Per Asieh Amini:

"Women's demands after the election were not merely to change the laws anymore, but rather to seek democracy, to refrain from violence, to promulgate civil relations, to propagate civil protest and to dare say NO."

Non-violent campaign

The major points that the One Million Signature Campaign insisted on was to find ways to establish a dialogue with the regime and to achieve a cultural refinement of the public. These are its similarities with the Green Movement, which many activists believe has been copied successfully from the women's movement. What happened after the election was an overt aggression by the government, while the people persisted in continuing the campaign without violence, except for some occasional defensive behavior. Asieh Amini believes: "No excuse must distract people from the goal they believe in. If non-violent behavior is the pattern and the expectation, a peaceful and secured society must not allow any group to cause any deviation from this goal." The question is how can we make this behavior institutionalized?

This journalist believes: "One of the challenges of the Green Movement and other movements such as that of women is the lack of any plan as to how to continue defensive campaigning. A non-violent campaign needs some creativity. It seems as though the think tanks that were responsible for organizing coalitions and unions in other movements, such as the women's movement, which led to collective decision making were absent in the Green Movement. This was a serious void in what the Green Movement copied from the women's movement. On the other hand, an oppressive regime is nothing new. It has been seen throughout history how some political groups chose to use violence in response to a government's oppression and how its negative impacts lingered around for many years. The civil movements received positive responses from Iranian society for choosing the most civil approaches. Resorting to violence will take us further away from security, peace, and democracy."

Another factor is that women's presence in protests contributes to less violence. As Khadijeh Moghadam, another women's movement activist believes:

“If it were not for the presence of mothers and women in general in the public protests, there is no doubt violence would have escalated. A week after Neda was killed, the mother participants of the Green Movement, using the experience of the women’s movement, especially the Campaign, showed up in Laleh park and adjacent streets, Behesht-e Zahra, in front of Evin prison, the Revolutionary court, and the Judiciary building and demanded the end of killings, the prosecution of those responsible, and the release of those imprisoned for their beliefs. This was an unprecedented move in the history of the women’s movement in Iran.”

For aforementioned reasons, although the women’s movement is considered a model for the Green Movement in some cases such as the promotion of a non-violent campaign, in order to employ more practical solutions to institutionalize the non-violent campaign, the movement needs to seek more appropriate approaches compatible with the new circumstances of this society and offer it in a more effective manner. This is because admiring the philosophy of non-violence is not enough to address the questions of the young generation who, these days, are finding themselves alone and vulnerable facing the most serious types of oppression.