

POLITICAL-ECONOMIC NETWORKS AND SOCIAL MOBILIZATION OF THE BAZAARIS IN THE PERSIAN SPRING 2009

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Abstract

This article examines the involvement and role of bazaaris in the Persian Spring from 2009 to 2011. As economic actors, these bazaaris participated in political activities that opposed Ahmadinejad's victory in the Iranian presidential election. This rejection sparked mass mobilization, fueled by religious fervor, political and social ideologies, and economic concerns. The qualitative research approach employed in this study utilizes political sociology, drawing data from literature reviews and digital fieldwork. The data analysis conducted in this research employs the theory of conflict and mass mobilization, yielding two significant findings. First, it reveals that the political-economic network of bazaaris is cross-border and multi-dimensional. Second, it highlights that the mass mobilization of bazaaris against Ahmadinejad is primarily motivated by political and economic competition. Consequently, the findings of this study contribute to enriching the discourse of political sociology, particularly in conceptualizing popular resistance movements against authorities based on political-economic conflicts. These conflicts are intricately woven into the fabric of magnetic field politics, which tend to be transactional in nature.

Keywords: political economy network, social mobilization, bazaaris, Persian spring

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji keterlibatan dan peran bazar dalam Persian Spring dari tahun 2009 hingga 2011. Sebagai pelaku ekonomi, para pedagang bazar berpartisipasi dalam kegiatan politik yang menentang kemenangan Ahmadinejad dalam pemilihan presiden Iran. Penolakan ini memicu mobilisasi massa yang dipicu oleh semangat keagamaan, ideologi politik dan sosial, serta masalah ekonomi. Pendekatan penelitian kualitatif yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini menggunakan sosiologi politik, dengan mengambil data dari tinjauan literatur dan penelitian lapangan secara digital. Analisis data yang dilakukan dalam penelitian ini menggunakan teori konflik dan mobilisasi massa, yang menghasilkan dua temuan penting. Pertama, penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa jaringan ekonomi-politik bazar bersifat lintas batas dan multi-dimensi. Kedua, penelitian ini menyoroti bahwa mobilisasi massa bazar untuk melawan Ahmadinejad terutama dimotivasi oleh persaingan politik dan ekonomi. Oleh karena itu, temuan-temuan dari penelitian ini berkontribusi dalam memperkaya wacana sosiologi politik, khususnya dalam mengkonseptualisasikan gerakan perlawanan rakyat terhadap penguasa yang dilatarbelakangi oleh konflik ekonomi-politik. Konflik-konflik ini terjalin secara rumit dalam jalinan politik medan magnet yang cenderung bersifat transaksional.

Kata Kunci: jejaring ekonomi-politik, mobilisasi sosial, bazaaris, persian spring

INTRODUCTION

In 2009, Iran was engulfed in social unrest, with one significant participant being the Muslim merchants, commonly known as bazaaris. This group not only represented the economic actor of the community but also emerged as a powerful symbol of political dissent. Central to their stance was the unequivocal rejection of Ahmadinejad's presidency, marking a pivotal moment in Iran's political landscape (Morady, 2011: 39-61). Ahmadinejad's triumph in the 2009 presidential election faced vehement opposition from various factions, accusing the electoral process of being tainted by systematic fraud (Mebane, 2010, 6-15). This contention was underscored by Ahmadinejad's substantial victory, securing 63% of the vote, while his opponent, Mir Hossein Mousavi, lagged significantly behind with a mere 34% of the vote (Niakooee, 2020: 22-24).

Following the 2009 presidential election, Iran once again appealed to the international community, particularly the United States, for political assistance. Despite Eric A. Brill's observation that the possibility of America intervening in Iran to alleviate oppression against Muslims is slim (Khosrokhavar & Ladier-Fouladi, n.d., 6-7). However, America has shown significant interest in re-establishing its influence in Iran since being expelled in 1979 (Wise, 2011: 11-12). This interest intensified with the eruption of the Persian Spring, especially given the favorable economic dynamics between Iran and America. Iran's exports to America totaled USD 280.4 million, whereas imports from America to Iran were a mere USD 64.6 million, resulting in a profit of USD 215.7 million for Iran (Bureau, n.d.).

In the lead-up to the Persian Spring, Iran's economic stakeholders were deeply disillusioned with the government's political strategies. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's policies from 2000 to 2007 led to rampant inflation, high unemployment, widespread poverty, and declining foreign investment (Ilias, n.d.: 5-8). Trade reports between Iran and the United States reflected this dissatisfaction, with deficits ranging from USD 151.9 million in 2000 to 28.4 million in 2007. It was not until 2008 that trade figures finally turned in Iran's favor, with a surplus of USD 579.0 million (Bureau, n.d.). Consequently, the upcoming 2009 presidential election became a crucial moment for economic stakeholders to seek stability by preventing Ahmadinejad from securing a third term in office.

The bazaaris orchestrated events in October 2008, a rare and striking occurrence for Iranians. Notably, the call for the strike came from influential leaders within the bazaar community, particularly those involved in the jewelry and carpet trades. These two sectors were pivotal in uniting the *bazaaris* and galvanizing collective action (Back to the Future: Bazaar Strikes, Three Decades after the Iranian Revolution Middle East Institute, n.d.). Against this backdrop, a significant portion of the bazaaris and the Iranian populace chose to align themselves with American agents rather than supporting Ahmadinejad's bid to retain power in the 2009 presidential election (Ballen, 2009: 5-11). This inclination towards external actors became increasingly pronounced with the rise of social media, which played a pivotal role in framing and organizing the ensuing wave of protests (Tusa, 2013: 5-11).

The series of protests known as the Green Movement should be recognized as a middle-class uprising (Harris, 2010a: 1-4). Leading up to the election and during the campaign period, political intermediaries established virtual platforms to mitigate public apprehension. Simultaneously, those without internet access were urged to engage in face-to-face interactions, as internet activism proved daunting for them. Despite the emergence of online activism, coordination of street protests remained crucial. These political intermediaries, primarily composed of Iran's middle class, leveraged the nation's developmental trajectory over the past two decades to wield social and political influence (Harris, 2012: 443-445).

Within the elite circles, the mass movement protesting against the government and the

outcome of the presidential election is viewed as a divisive force. These elites prioritize national interests over grassroots voices, sometimes forming coalitions that transcend the boundaries of winning and losing political camps. Parvin Alizadeh and Hassan Hakimian have coined the term “uncontrollable executive” to describe this phenomenon of politicians aligning with the elite. This group of executives remains internally cohesive, navigating a global political landscape overshadowed by American economic sanctions on Iran (*Iran and the Global Economy*, n.d.).

Ironically, while some bazaaris participated in political resistance, others formed a strong coalition with the government and the ruling ulama'. Driven by a sense of spiritual-religious allegiance, certain bazaaris cooperated closely with the ulama' (Keshavarzian, 2007: 128–130). Arang Keshavarzian terms this split within the bazaaris as the “social dilemma of the Islamic coalition.” This dilemma significantly contributed to the failure of the 2009 Green Movement during the Persian Spring. John Rahaghi further emphasizes that communication technology alone cannot replace essential components like organizational structure, leadership, grassroots mobilization, and concrete agendas. While technology can complement these fundamentals, it cannot serve as a substitute. Thus, the effectiveness of communication tools emerges as a crucial factor for successful mass mobilization and a winning strategy for the bazaaris (Rahaghi, 2012, 168-170).

This research delves into the Persian Spring, examining the intricate interplay between power mobilization and social conflict, which are pivotal factors in any protest movement or revolution. In the 2009 Persian Spring, power mobilization effectively rallied the bazaaris. However, internal conflicts within the bazaaris hindered the success of the revolutionary movement. While some bazaaris vehemently opposed Ahmadinejad's victory, taking to the streets and initiating strikes, others aligned themselves with clerics and rulers out of religious allegiance. Moreover, Iran's political reality, compounded by American economic sanctions, underscores the prioritization of national security over criticism of opposing factions.

Thus, this research can significantly map social movements along with actions and mass mobilization in contemporary Iran, ideas, actors, movements and framing of the opposition elite, labor groups, bazaaris, students and women. Meanwhile, with regard to the current context, Iran's political-economic constellation is strongly influenced by economic and political policies as well as the geopolitical role of Iran's rulers in the midst of nuclear sanctions and confrontation with the Americans and their allies, so mapping the political arena both domestically and globally is very necessary.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research employs a qualitative methodology incorporating literature review and digital fieldwork for data collection, encompassing analysis and observation via social media platforms and interviews conducted through digital channels. The advantage of the digital fieldwork approach is that it allows for flexible interaction between researchers and respondents so that data collection can be done quickly despite the ethical issues of transparency (Konken & Howlett, 2023: 849-850). Concurrently, the adopted approach is rooted in political sociology, focusing on the dynamics of power and the interplay between society, the state, and political discord. Through this approach, the study aims to elucidate how identities and group affiliations influence individual political behaviors, including voting patterns in elections, attitudes, and engagement in other political activities.

To scrutinize the impact of identities and group dynamics on individual political behaviors, the study draws upon political mobilization theory. This theoretical framework examines endeavors aimed at galvanizing mass participation to articulate and enact specific political agendas. Nevertheless, the mobilization witnessed during the Persian Spring was accompanied by internal divisions and conflicting interests within the Iranian Bazaaris. Social

conflict theory serves as a lens to analyze the factors precipitating and perpetuating these conflicts. According to this theory, individuals and groups within society are inclined towards conflict rather than consensus in their interactions.

RESEARCH RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Background to The Persian Spring

On June 12, 2009, Iran conducted its general elections, featuring incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and challenger Mir Hossein Moussavi. Ahmadinejad secured victory with 62.63% of the vote, while Moussavi garnered 33.75% support. Despite the official announcement of Ahmadinejad's landslide victory on Saturday, August 5, the Iranian populace deemed it unacceptable. Consequently, they swiftly mobilized to initiate protests.

Despite being on the losing side, Moussavi initially accepted Ahmadinejad's victory but simultaneously galvanized his supporters to protest in the streets of Tehran, triggering widespread international concern, particularly from the United States and Canada, regarding alleged irregularities in the election (*Ahmadinejad Hails Election as Protests Grow - CNN.Com*, n.d.). Following Ahmadinejad's triumph, the Iranian ruling regime escalated its repressive measures, prompting a significant reaction from the United States. For instance, on June 15, 2009, President Obama addressed the evolving situation in Iran, affirming his administration's vigilance over developments. Obama emphasized the importance of allowing Iranians to determine their future leadership, asserting the United States' respect for Iran's sovereignty and its commitment to refrain from interfering in the country's internal affairs. However, he expressed deep concern over the televised violence, underscoring the universality of democratic principles, freedom of speech, and peaceful dissent that deserve global respect (Levs, 2012).

These conditions actually aroused and strengthened the collective consciousness of Iranian civilians to reform the economic, social and political system in order to provide resistance to America and its allies in a geopolitical context (Rich, 2012: 480–481). These conditions actually aroused and strengthened the collective consciousness of Iranian civilians to reform the economic, social and political system in order to provide resistance to America and its allies in a geopolitical context (Shahi & Saleh, 2015).

The 2009 post-election protests that colored the Iranian public became a starting point for the reformist elite in activating bazaaris consciousness in the context of stabilizing economic and business markets that had been harmed by the regime's economic-political policies, which were eroded by nuclear sanctions and regional geopolitical constellations (Mohseni, 2012).

Protests were suppressed for almost a week. On June 23, as the violence grew and some Iranians urged the president to act tougher, Obama said, "The U.S. and the world are shocked by the recent threats, beatings, and arrests. This is unfair" (Levs, 2012) The violence after the June 2009 elections came from public frustration with oligarchs' manipulation in business and politics.

The mass mobilization and social movement in Iran demanded the improvement of the political-economic system, which later expanded to include Arab countries in the Middle East region and became a collective movement of civil society known as the Arab Spring (Kurzman, 2012).

The Political-Economic Network of Bazaaris in Iran

Bazaaris and American Economic Sanctions

During the Persian Spring, aside from the complex political and economic network of bazaaris, various issues emerged. Saeid Golkar points out how clerics have abused their power since 1979, using their influence to control many institutions and social groups. They employ different strategies to maintain control and defend against external threats, including policies to silence dissent and ensure loyalty to the Islamic Republic. This involves manipulating people's thoughts, bodies, and emotions, along with spreading propaganda and disciplining citizens. Additionally, the Islamic Republic uses a tactic called "the politics of grief" to instill despair among citizens, preventing them from challenging clerical authority. While these policies satisfy conservative groups, they suppress progressive movements. Despite widespread social unrest, the Islamic Republic has retained power through these unjust measures (Golkar, 2016: 146),

Progressives, perennially discontent with the policies of the conservative ruling faction, lean towards economic recovery amidst American sanctions. However, the United States' foreign policy, imposing economic restrictions and sanctions on Iran, unsettles progressives. These restrictions and sanctions trace back to 1979, following Iran's seizure of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran. Consequently, the U.S. State Department deemed it necessary to enforce various economic and political sanctions programs, thereby restricting access to all Iranian commercial enterprises in the United States (Hatzman, 2019: 17–20).

The U.S.'s rationale was driven by a sense of "retribution" for Iran's actions. This vindictive approach persisted in subsequent years, including during the Persian Spring of 2009, following the political upheaval sparked by Ahmadinejad's victory in the election. According to Akbar E. Torbat, the unilateral trade and financial sanctions imposed by the U.S. on Iran had a profound impact. The trade sanctions, evident in US-Iran trade data, inflicted substantial economic losses, resulting in a decline in public welfare. Furthermore, the financial sanctions imposed significant costs on Iran, manifesting in the form of increased foreign debt obligations and constrained financing for oil development projects (Torbat, 2005: 435–438).

Akbar E. Torbat further emphasized the substantial impact of the U.S. financial sanctions compared to trade sanctions. For instance, unilateral import sanctions imposed by America on Iranian crude oil have proven ineffective. Notably, the economic ramifications of these sanctions outweigh their political implications. Furthermore, the U.S. extended its sanctions to target influential clerics in Iran, aiming to enhance their effectiveness while mitigating adverse effects on the Iranian populace. These targeted sanctions are designed to exert pressure on influential clerics to relinquish their positions. The overarching objective of the U.S. is to counter the spread of Islamic fundamentalism in the region. Consequently, these sanctions are perceived by the U.S. as significant contributions to global peace efforts and improved relations with the West (Torbat, 2020: 439).

However, according to S.F. Dizaji and P.A.G. van Bergeijk, the substantial effects of financial constraints and economic/trade sanctions on Iran, impacting key economic indicators and the political system, are primarily confined to a short-term span. This effect is most pronounced within the initial two to four years following the onset of the initial sanctions episode. This limited duration is attributed to Iran's ability to adapt by reorganizing its economic framework to alleviate the adverse consequences of both economic and political sanctions imposed by the U.S. (Dizaji & Van Bergeijk, 2012: 14-16).

Dizaji and Bergijk have a point, given that the variables behind the U.S. sanctions against Iran are not singular. Sasan Fayazmanesh attempts to analyze the state of the U.S. economy after imposing major sanctions on Iran in 1979. According to him, the freezing of Iranian

government assets by the U.S. in 1979 was more inconsistent when measured against America's own national interests. The inconsistency can be seen from the role of sanctions, which made the United States apply double standards. For example, in the 1980s, the U.S. was more of a puppet of Israel than a voice for the economic and political goals of the American people. This is because, after the Iranian revolution, Israel's role in formulating and implementing the U.S. sanctions policy against Iran was decisive and visible, especially in the 1990s. In addition, there have been many lobbying efforts made jointly by U.S. companies. They rejected the sanctions imposed on Iran and wanted to fight them. The culmination of these inconsistencies is the increasingly incoherent and inconsistent U.S. sanctions policy towards Iran since the late 1990s (Fayazmanesh, 2003: 229-231).

Bazaaris and China Cooperation

Iran's changing economic landscape calls for a reassessment of its global partnerships, notably shifting focus from the United States to China. This strategic shift involves fostering a solid alliance with China while carefully navigating potential conflicts with American interests. By 2010, China emerged as Iran's primary trading partner, oil importer, and foreign investor, signaling Iran's proactive move to diversify its economic alliances and reduce reliance on Western allies. This transformation highlights the need for further analysis of Iran's evolving international engagements and their geopolitical and economic implications (Mackenzie, n.d.:7-9).

China and Iran have forged formidable political and economic bonds with far-reaching regional and global implications. According to Manochehr Dorraj and Carrie L. Currier, this deep-rooted relationship between China and Iran is anchored in historical ties, further reinforced by recent developments following American sanctions since the 1979 revolution. The alliance is driven by mutual interests, particularly in enhancing arms trade, facilitating technology transfer, and fostering long-term Sino-Iranian relations. Additionally, both countries share a common goal of securing energy resources, a critical priority for their respective national interests (Dorraj & Currier, 2008: 70-75).

China regards Iran as a significant ally due to shared interests and worldviews. Iran's role as a dependable oil supplier in times of strained relations with the U.S. is highly valued by China. Moreover, China perceives Iran as a resilient nation capable of standing up against American aggression. However, China is cautious not to engage in direct conflict with the U.S. on behalf of Iran, prioritizing the preservation of China-US relations, particularly concerning nuclear non-proliferation efforts. Consequently, while the Iranian nuclear issue remains a point of contention, it also serves as a potential stabilizing factor in China-US relations (Garver, 2013: 70-75).

In addition to contemporary issues such as the nuclear matter mentioned earlier, China and Iran share a long history of trade along the Silk Road. As highlighted by Mohsen Shariatinia and Hamidreza Azizi, Iran played a crucial role as the main bridge on this ancient trade route, connecting the East and West. This historical relationship holds significant potential for China to reassert its essential role in the new and modern Silk Road initiative. These historical ties influence Iran-China cooperation in the context of implementing the Belt and Road Initiative (OBOR) project, both strategically and operationally. Strategically, Iran sees the OBOR project as an opportunity to enhance its global economic standing, expand its international influence, and strengthen its relations with China, which it regards as a rising economic and political powerhouse. Operationally, Iran-China cooperation within the OBOR framework faces five main opportunities and challenges: policy coordination, enhancing connectivity, promoting unhindered trade, integrating financial systems, and fostering people-to-people exchanges. Among these aspects, facilitating trade connectivity and financial integration stand out as the most crucial factors (Shariatinia & Azizi, 2017: 49-53).

Economic actors in Iran possess a vast global network, extending beyond state-level interactions to include non-state actors within the Iranian community. Therefore, it is essential to examine Iran's economic networks from both macro (state) and micro (non-state) perspectives, mainly focusing on bazaaris, or Iranian economic actors operating within bazaars. Since the inception of the Islamic Republic era in 1979, the bazaaris have operated under state control, resulting in a clientelistic relationship between them and the government. Government regulations on trade and pricing have significantly constrained the autonomy of bazaaris, which are compelled to comply with these regulations. This coercive environment has led to a hierarchical structure within the bazaar, ultimately diminishing the economic capacity of bazaaris (Keshavarzian, 2007: 19-23).

The state's repression of bazaaris in Iran has historical roots extending beyond the 1979 revolution. According to Nimah Mazaheri, this repression was evident during the voluntary campaign spanning from 1975 to 1977. While some argue that this campaign catalyzed revolutionary mass mobilization among the bazaaris, Mazaheri contends that the entire revolutionary movement emerged from the repressive atmosphere of this period. Furthermore, the bazaar in Iran has deep ties with the middle and lower classes of society, serving as a vital economic indicator for the country. Mazaheri emphasizes the significant role of bazaar and bazaaris campaigns in galvanizing popular discontent with the pre-revolution regime in Iran (Mazaheri, 2006: 402-404).

The significant political-economic role of bazaaris in Iran is deeply intertwined with the prevalent ideology of clientelism, particularly within the framework of the Shi'a sect, the official state sect. Since the revolution, the state has been perceived as a "loan shark" entity, reliant on the accumulation of rents and taxes paid by individuals, companies, and foreign governments. This concept has fostered a dichotomy within Iranian society, with some groups striving for autonomy while others perpetuate patron-client relationships. The clientelism associated with Shi'ism inherently creates vertical power dynamics, leading to competition and autonomy among various groups without mutual support. For instance, the traditional institution of *Marja'iyat* Shi'ism has clashed with elected governments, criticizing their failure to uphold democratic promises and curb autonomous groups deemed detrimental to national interests. This disillusionment with state-sponsored reforms has prompted Iranian society, including bazaaris, to embrace pragmatism and utilitarianism. Meanwhile, the political landscape has shifted towards militarism, exacerbating existing tensions (Alamdari, 2005: 1296-1298).

State Pragmatism

The influence of non-state actors, such as bazaaris, significantly shapes the political landscape, particularly in the realm of foreign policy. The Iranian government, recognizing the pragmatism inherent in trade and business dealings, adopts a similarly pragmatic approach. This is evident in its efforts to foster cooperative relations with Israel despite frequent conflicts between the two nations (Sobhani, 1989: 59-60). Moreover, Iran's pragmatism extends to its relationship with the United States. According to Ray Takeyh, while the Middle East has undergone significant transformations post-Saddam Hussein's regime, the Islamic Republic of Iran remains steadfast in its priorities and policies. Despite appearing outwardly confrontational towards the United States, with a willingness to challenge American norms on issues like terrorism and weapons proliferation, Iran's stance reflects a pragmatic adaptation to regional dynamics.

According to Ray Takeyh, Tehran's international political orientation offers the opportunity to adopt a new approach to its relations with the United States and the regional order. Throughout the late 1990s, despite assumptions during Muhammad Khatami's reformist presidency, factional politics and competing power dynamics drove Iran's transition from a

revisionist to a pragmatic state. National interests were often sidelined in favor of revolutionary dogma. However, the urgency of the post-Iraq war period and the significant projection of U.S. power on Iran's periphery ultimately shattered old taboos, leading to a new consensus, especially in the context of a more moderate foreign policy. For the first time, clerics were willing to engage in agreements with the United States on various contentious issues, including the future of Iraq, the security framework of the Persian Gulf, and even nuclear weapons (Takeyh, 2003: 49-50).

In negotiating its nuclear program, the Iranian government increasingly employs strategies and tactics reminiscent of bazaaris. This includes dividing opposition at the international level, delaying international monitoring, negotiations, and sanctions, and adopting a combative stance when circumstances are unfavorable (Lin, 2012: 13-16). Moreover, Iran demonstrates pragmatism in its relations with countries beyond the United States, such as Turkey. Nilufer Karacasulu and Irem Askar Karakir highlight Iran's relationship with Turkey's A.K.P. Party, noting that both countries seek to maintain and expand their relations, particularly in security, energy, and economic domains, as part of a modified regional policy. While both Iran and Turkey are eager to enhance their mutual ties, they are also intent on solidifying their respective regional roles. Karacasulu and Karakir emphasize that the pragmatic approach of both countries is undeniable (Aşkar Karakir & Karacasulu, 2011: 116).

Another example of the government's pragmatism is evident in its pursuit of Iran's interests in the Caucasus region (Chiragov et al., 2015: 59). Mandana Tishehyar and Somayeh Barhami elaborate on how the lifting of international sanctions against Iran and the normalization of Western-Iranian relations have shifted the balance of power in the South Caucasus region. This change favors Iran and prompts it to challenge other regional powers, including Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and the Israeli occupation regime. To capitalize on its return to the South Caucasus in the post-JCPOA Era, Iran must leverage its strategic policymaking, grounded in its pragmatic approach thus far. The most effective means to enhance the Islamic Republic of Iran's power and presence in the South Caucasus region and beyond is through adopting a pragmatic foreign policy. This involves refraining from unproductive confrontations, eschewing state ideology in building relations with other countries, employing flexible tactics, and prioritizing goals and interests over ideological agendas (Tishehyar & Bahrami, 2018: 25-27).

In Iran, the government often follows the logic of bazaaris in its decision-making. Mohsen Rafiqdoust, a former vegetable seller, is a prime example of this. He went on to become a minister in the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and played a crucial role in welcoming Imam Khomeini upon his return in 1979. After retiring from the Revolutionary Guard, Rafiqdoust moved into the private sector, showing how bazaaris influence remains strong in Iranian politics (Harris, 2010b). Mohsen Rafiqdoust played a significant role in facilitating communication between Iran and the United States during a tumultuous period in their relations. Amidst the backdrop of the Iran-Iraq War, where the U.S. provided covert support to Iran, including sensitive weapons and military intelligence, Rafiqdoust emerged as a key figure in establishing channels of communication. With the assistance of French diplomat Eric Rouleau, Rafiqdoust initiated dialogue with Washington through Robert Oakley, a senior State Department official during the Reagan administration. Concurrently, Mir-Hussein Moussavi, then prime minister under Khomeini, engaged in secret discussions with U.S. representatives via his deputy Abbas Kangarlou. Khomeini also sought to establish other channels of communication through his confidant, Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Despite the historical setback of the U.S. Embassy hostage crisis in 1979, American policymakers harbored hopes of rekindling a more cooperative relationship with Iran. This covert diplomacy between the Obama administration and the Khomeini regime is well-documented. (Taheri, n.d.)

The political activism of bazaaris extends beyond the 1979 revolution, persisting into contemporary times. A notable example occurred in June 2018 when protests erupted in

Tehran. Bazaaris closed their shops and took to the streets to oppose the government's policy of devaluing the national currency against the dollar, a consequence of heightened U.S. economic sanctions on Iran. These protests marked the largest demonstration since 2012 (Jones & Newlee, n.d.: 8-9). The 2012 protests represented the apex of bazaar demonstrations, which were sparked by dissatisfaction with the outcome of the 2009 presidential election. Referred to as the Green Movement, these protests symbolized a widespread desire for fundamental political change and opposition to authoritarian government structures (Ansari, n.d.: 4).

In modern economic theory, the events of Iran's 2009 bazaar protests represent a common occurrence, highlighting economic grievances as a significant factor influencing citizens' inclination toward political protest. According to Thomas Kurer, rising levels of inequality and widespread economic hardships in society often drive citizens to voice their concerns. They argue that countries adhering to advanced capitalist democratic systems may experience a crisis of democracy alongside economic crises. Kurer supports their claims with data from the European Social Survey (E.S.S.) and EU-SILC collected between 2006 and 2012, covering political protests in 28 European countries. This data reveals that objective economic grievances enhance citizens' recognition of the direct correlation between economic downturns and political protest behavior (Kurer et al., 2019: 17-20).

Hence, economic setbacks resulting from structural factors, such as the 2009 election fraud and Ahmadinejad's leadership during the preceding period, effectively discouraged individuals from mobilizing for change. Iranians felt compelled to take action due to the persistent deterioration of Iran's economic prospects throughout the 2000s under Ahmadinejad's regime. Although economic conditions began to stabilize in the final two years of Ahmadinejad's tenure, it is unsurprising that citizens were reluctant to support his bid for another term in the 2009 presidential election. The anticipation of economic stability actually heightened citizens' political activism, leading to increased protests.

High levels of political mobilization weaken the link between personal hardships and political involvement. When people are actively engaged in politics, economic challenges no longer deter them from participating. This connection between economic crises and protests conveys a powerful message. If ordinary citizens understand organized politics and have a clear political vision, it shows their ability to influence the connection between economic issues and political action. Additionally, democracy, demonstrated through collective citizen action, can help achieve shared goals and maintain political fairness, preventing the decline of democracy (Kurer et al., 2019: 21-22).

The Persian Spring Network of Actors

Sadeq Mahsouli and Regional Networks

The Persian Spring cannot be understood without considering the intricate political and economic networks of the bazaaris, both regionally and internationally, alongside the prevailing political economy issues of the time. Regionally, public protests symbolized resistance against oligarchic groups, particularly the capitalists who wielded significant influence over state politics. For instance, Sadeq Mahsouli, a successful businessman and former Revolutionary Guard commander who served as Minister of Domestic Affairs, played a significant role in contributing to Ahmadinejad's victory in the June 2009 election (Wright, n.d.).

Sadeq Mahsouli, a senior politician, is suspected of having a significant involvement in Iran's presidential elections, including the 2021 elections, according to a report from the Telegram channel @poll1400, which has 136,000 subscribers, Mahsouli, a former IRGC officer and wealthy politician, assumed the role of Secretary General of the Paydari Party on December

20. Despite the party's historical association with figures like Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi and Agha Tehrani, Mahsouli has long been recognized as the primary driving force behind the party. He is commonly referred to as "the Godfather of Paydari" (*Leadership Change In Iran's Leading Ultraconservative Party Ahead of 2021 Elections*, 2020). Additionally, Mahsouli's close relationship with Ahmadinejad stems from their shared membership in the same political party.

According to Alireza Jafarzadeh, Sadegh Mahsouli maintains a close friendship with President Ahmadinejad and leverages his influence to establish oil bases and related businesses. This oligarchic elite's business activities date back to Ahmadinejad's victory in the 2005 elections, predating the Arab Spring that followed the 2009 elections. Mahsouli is commonly referred to as the Billionaire General, with an estimated net worth of US\$175 million and ownership of six mansions. Jafarzadeh further asserts that the operations of the Revolutionary Guards resemble those of a mafia organization (Jafarzadeh, 2007: 243)

Sadegh Mahsouli played a significant role in the 2009 presidential election. For instance, he was instrumental in the Iranian parliament's approval of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's choice of interior minister. This decision came after the previous minister was dismissed following a parliamentary vote due to allegations of possessing a fraudulent bachelor's degree. Subsequently, Sadegh Mahsouli, a former colleague of the President of the Revolutionary Guard, assumed the role of Interior Minister. Approximately seven months later, in June, Mahsouli was tasked with overseeing the elections ("Iran MPs Approve Ahmadinejad's Interior Minister," 2008).

Preparations for the June 2009 elections were long in the making, led by Ahmadinejad and his ally Sadegh Mahsouli. Surprisingly, Ahmadinejad did not announce his candidacy when he appointed Mahsouli. However, Mahsouli received support from 138 out of 273 MPs. Criticism towards Ahmadinejad's economic policies, which are causing significant inflation, persists among M.P.s. Initially considered for oil minister in 2005, Mahsouli withdrew due to criticisms about his wealth and lack of oil sector experience.

Hossein Moussavi and International Networks

If an incumbent like Ahmadinejad enjoys support from local business people such as Sadeq Mahsouli, Mir Hossein Moussavi, on the other hand, receives backing from international economic players. Thus, the resistance against Ahmadinejad's victory was not solely led by Moussavi but also by international business people who were heavily invested in Iran, particularly in initiatives like expanding internet networks. According to Faridun Sattarov, the defeat of Moussavi's supporters in the 2009 election represented a setback for moderates against conservatives. Ahmadinejad garnered support from conservative factions, particularly those less advanced in the information technology sector. Meanwhile, the moderates, less reliant on the business networks of the conservative elite, opted to protest Moussavi's defeat by taking to the streets. The bazaaris' political-economic objective was to liberalize the internet, a goal realized only in the subsequent 2013 elections. The moderate protesters of 2009 were eventually granted the authority to issue 3G network licenses, in collaboration with three mobile phone companies (Sattarov, 2019).

According to Chris Featherman, citing Malcolm Glawell's article in the pages of the 2010-2011 New York Times, the demonstrations in Iran were not solely attributable to public discontent with domestic politics. However, they were also facilitated by the expanding presence of social media within Iran during that period. The Iranian populace found themselves ensnared in the ramifications of Twitter's corporate rivalry with web-based information platforms, which coincidentally had aligned with the ruling regime's interests. Conversely, the adoption of Facebook and Twitter, two major American-based corporations, remained relatively limited in Iran. Consequently, it is unsurprising that the majority of demonstrators taking to the

streets to protest against the regime primarily comprise users of Twitter and Facebook (Featherman, 2015).

Facebook, established in 2004 and headquartered in Cambridge, Massachusetts, U.S.A., is not merely a neutral social media platform devoid of ideological inclination. Contrarily, as outlined by Jose Marichal, Facebook actively advocates for economic liberalization and democracy. Consequently, any political measures aimed at restricting access to the Facebook network can potentially undermine public discourse and civic engagement. Marichal further introduces the concept of the “Facebook revolution,” which aptly characterizes the intimate connection between Facebook as a medium and collective mobilization endeavors in pursuit of political objectives and aspirations (Marichal, 2012).

The utilization of Facebook by protestors cannot be solely regarded as a tool for mobilizing the masses; instead, it functions as a foreign political instrument aimed at defending and advancing economic interests within Iran. Similarly, Twitter, founded in 2006 and headquartered in San Francisco, California, U.S.A., shares Facebook’s non-neutral stance and transcends its role as a mere social media platform. As highlighted by John H. Parmelee, Twitter possesses significant potential for catalyzing revolutions and promoting specific political agendas. Many political leaders utilize Twitter as a powerful tool for engaging with the public more effectively and efficiently, leveraging its capacity to further their political objectives. Since 2010, Twitter has become a prominent platform for political campaigns, underscoring its growing importance in the realm of political communication (Parmelee & Bichard, 2012).

In the perception of the authorities, the protests stemming from allegations of fraud in the 2009 presidential election were viewed as a popular movement that lacked genuine grassroots origins and was influenced by foreign actors. This perception arose due to the prominent presence of foreign interests, which were evident in the mobilization efforts driven by foreign political agendas and economic objectives (Tusa, 2013: 5-11). According to Akbar E. Torbat, European nations, closely aligned with the United States, played a role in galvanizing protests in Iran during the 2009 Persian Spring, particularly against Ahmadinejad’s reelection. The vested interests of European countries in Iran were contingent upon Ahmadinejad’s defeat in the election, as they had harbored hopes since the 2005 elections for Rafsanjani to assume power in Iran, aspirations thwarted by Ahmadinejad’s victory. The failure to achieve Europe’s political and economic objectives in Iran during the 2009 presidential election marked another setback, akin to their disappointment in the 2005 election (Torbat, 2020: 152-153).

Mass Mobilization in the Persian Spring

The primary participants in the 2009 Persian Spring were the dissatisfied Iranian populace, discontented with Ahmadinejad’s previous administration yet still endorsing him in the 2009 presidential election. Concurrently, these protests aimed to counter the ascendancy of the conservative anti-industrialist faction. This resistance, epitomized by its media usage, is commonly referred to as the Green Movement, constituting a nonviolent opposition against the established power structures of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Kurzman, 2012: 163-164). However, these actors are influenced by agents advocating for their corporate interests, transforming social media into a pivotal tool for protest that significantly fuels the Iranian protest movement. Mass mobilization through social media is closely intertwined with the agendas of two major social media platforms headquartered in the United States: Facebook and Twitter (Featherman, 2015).

The Persian Spring protests primarily targeted the political economy of Iran. Esfandiyar Batmanghelidj noted that as soon as the government recognized economic challenges as a significant concern raised by the public, it promptly began seeking new avenues to address them. According to a survey, 20% of respondents expressed optimism about enhanced

relations with foreign countries, while others prioritized increasing domestic production. The public's aspirations include anticipating a diplomatic breakthrough to alleviate U.S. economic sanctions against Iran. Moreover, Iranian leaders are striving to diminish Iran's dependence on the global economy through the establishment of a "resistance economy" (Batmanghelidj, 2021).

Esfandyar Batmanghelidj suggests that politicians often exploit economic issues as a philosophical approach to garner popular support, particularly concerning Iran's economic development. Iranian policymakers increasingly advocate for a dual strategy, combining the principles of the "economy of resistance" with a new diplomatic approach. They recognize the significance of developing the domestic manufacturing sector but also acknowledge the necessity of technology transfer and foreign investment to achieve this goal and alleviate economic sanctions. This shift in approach would not only facilitate the growth of export commodities but also benefit the industrialized world in Iran.

This political mobilization, leveraging various economic rationales and concerns to garner mass support, was not confined to the lead-up to the 2009 presidential election but has evolved into an enduring consensus persisting to the present day. This persistent consensus is evident in the strategies adopted by presidential candidates to appeal to voters, emphasizing their commitment to both "new diplomacy" and the "economy of resistance." This pragmatic approach has remained consistent through successive election cycles, including the 2021 presidential election. For instance, Abdolnasser Hemmati, the Governor of the Central Bank of Iran, has declared his candidacy for the presidency. Hemmati aims to leverage his successful track record in improving Iran's economic landscape since assuming office in 2018, particularly amidst the reimplementing of severe sanctions by U.S. President Donald Trump. Additionally, Hemmati's extensive experience and pivotal role in Iran's economic diplomacy, including diplomatic visits to countries such as China and Iraq, further underscore his candidacy as a means to advance Iran's strategic interests (*A Look at the Candidates in Iran's Presidential Election*, 2021).

The same goes for Saeed Mohammad, who registered himself to run for president but was disqualified. Saeed Mohammad highlighted his experience as the head of Khatam al-Anbiya, an extensive engineering and construction company controlled by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, in circumventing American economic sanctions. Mohammad vowed to use his capacity at the international level to seek the removal of American economic sanctions on Iran and made the Iranian government's commitment and agreement to the Nuclear Deal the basis of his political campaign promises (*The Curious Candidacy of IRGC General Saeed Mohammad*, n.d.).

The expression of these underlying motives is to secure popular support, preceding and following the Persian Spring. This was particularly evident during successive presidential elections. Indeed, at a deeper level, the primary actors of the Persian Spring are those engaged in the pursuit of political-economic interests, namely the ongoing contest between conservatives and moderates. This struggle between these factions has persisted since the inception of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979. According to Sayed Hassan Amin, the elimination of many private sectors following the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran sparked a protracted political-economic conflict, particularly affecting progressive factions excluded from the more conservative centers of power (Campbell, 2009).

According to Bijan Khajepour, since the conservatives assumed control of Iran's political economy, the Islamic Republic of Iran has witnessed negative trends, particularly concerning the country's deteriorating economic and business conditions. These adverse economic conditions stem directly from revolutionary overreach, including state-led unilateral confiscations and arbitrary measures against proponents of industrialization. These issues constitute significant challenges for the nation, stemming from the government's missteps in

implementing its political economy policies (Khajehpour, 2000: 577-579)

The proponents of industrialism, commonly referred to as industrialists, emerged as prominent actors in mobilizing the masses against state policies, particularly following the 1979 Revolution. This mobilization persisted clandestinely, culminating in the 2009 presidential election, which sparked the Persian Spring or Green Movement. The industrialists galvanized public dissent against the predominantly conservative state elites. Considering the elite theory, the post-2009 election protests constituted a political mobilization orchestrated by progressive elites affiliated with the industrialist faction. This mobilization has evolved to encompass online media platforms, predominantly targeting millennial social media communities. The emergence of the Persian Spring underscores the pivotal role of socially active cyberspace users in catalyzing political movements.

As a result, the mass protests of the Persian Spring had a close relationship with industrialist agents. These industrialist agents are the ones who have a long-standing animosity towards conservatives, especially in order to seize economic resources in Iran. The mass protests of the Persian Spring were also the result of online political mobilization, whose service providers were located in America. At the same time, the industrialist agents, who were interested in winning Mousavi and denying Ahmadinejad victory, were global agents who had been planting their seeds since the 2005 presidential election in Iran.

CONCLUSION

The Persian Spring of 2009 epitomized the collective grievances of the Iranian populace, who found themselves embroiled in a multifaceted struggle between political elites and globalist actors vying for control over the nation's political economy. This contention manifested as a dichotomy between conservative factions aligned with the ruling regime and moderate factions advocating for industrialization and economic liberalization. Originating from the 1979 Iranian Revolution, this struggle has persisted through subsequent years, shaping the agendas of competing politicians who pursue pragmatic economic objectives alongside ideological interests.

Furthermore, these political elites often double as businessmen, leading to a convergence of state affairs with commercial sensibilities. Iranian entrepreneurs, particularly bazaaris, endured substantial economic setbacks due to U.S. sanctions policies. The sanctions issue divided Iranian society into two groups: the proponents of economic resistance, predominantly conservative groups, and the proponents of diplomatic breakthroughs.

This ideological divide continues to animate political discourse and electoral strategies, with politicians strategically leveraging these competing narratives to garner mass support. This intricate political landscape has given rise to a pattern of magnetic field politics, characterized by negotiations and bargaining aimed at advancing the interests of each faction. The Persian Spring, marked by protests and the calculated maneuvering of political actors, exemplified this dynamic interplay of ideological posturing and strategic positioning.

The Persian Spring emerged as a culmination of intricate dynamics within the political economy, particularly orchestrated by the diverse factions of bazaaris. This heterogeneous group encompasses government-affiliated individuals rooted in Shi'a-clientelism and termed conservatives, as well as progressive industrialists positioned in opposition to the regime. The interplay between these two categories of bazaaris has a palpable impact on the pragmatic functioning of the state, shaping the broader socio-political landscape.

The Persian Spring, in essence, reflects the mobilization efforts of bazaaris seeking to advance their respective political-economic agendas. While ostensibly appearing as a spontaneous uprising, it was, in fact, facilitated by progressive-industrialist groups advocating for an

industrial revolution, notably leveraging platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Behind the scenes, business people driven by commercial interests sought to capitalize on the unrest, aiming to introduce cutting-edge information technology in Iran. However, the Persian Spring ultimately faltered as the aspirations of progressive-industrialist bazaaris remained unfulfilled. It was not until the 2013 presidential election that these interests found validation, with the rulers granting them authority to introduce advanced digital networks in Iran.

In the context of Iran's Persian Spring, ideological conflict emerges as an inevitable reality. This phenomenon is akin to navigating the intricacies of an institution like prostitution, morally contentious yet seemingly unavoidable. Iran's political and economic landscape is characterized by a tendency to trade on ideological grounds. The ruling regime, defined by its conservative ideology, demonstrates inconsistency in governing both politics and the economy. Conversely, the opposition, situated outside of power, maintains a static-cooperative ideological stance.

The resurgence of political-economic conflict during the 2013 presidential election within the Persian Spring underscores the failure to reach a consensus. Ultimately, each faction prioritizes pragmatism over ideological convictions when it comes to achieving their economic and power-related

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