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# Iran in Ferment

## THE GREEN WAVE

*Ali Afshari and H. Graham Underwood*

*Ali Afshari is an Iranian political activist, former NED Reagan-Fascell Democracy Fellow, and winner of a 2006 Helman-Hammett grant from Human Rights Watch. H. Graham Underwood is a freelance researcher and journalist who specializes in Iranian affairs. Their essay “Iran’s Resilient Civil Society: The Student Movement’s Struggle” appeared in the October 2007 issue of the Journal of Democracy.*

In early May 2009, with not much more than a month to go before Iran’s presidential election, it looked as if incumbent Mahmoud Ahmedinejad would easily win a second term. Conservatives who might have taken votes from him, including Tehran mayor Mohammad Qalibaf, had opted not to run, as had reformist ex-president Mohammad Khatami. Voters looking for an alternative were left with Mehdi Karrubi, who had failed to get to the second round of the 2005 presidential election, and Mir Hosein Musavi, a charisma-challenged former prime minister who had over the preceding two decades spent more time on art than on politics. Whatever their level of discontent over their country’s dismal economic plight and increasing international isolation since 2005, many Iranians felt resigned to another four years of Ahmedinejad.

All this would change with startling speed, however. Within just a few weeks, a fast-cresting popular movement known as the Green Wave would pick up speed and carry Musavi into an eagerly anticipated election day on June 12. Immediately thereafter, the Wave would surge into a tsunami of protest that transfixed the world when authorities claimed, with just two-thirds of the votes counted, that Ahmedinejad had beaten his rival—and with him the forces of reform—by a none-too-credible 63 to 34 percent. As the marching, chanting, and rooftop cries of *Allahu akbar!* spread and the regime’s repressive tactics grew more brutal, the Wave continued to gather size and strength.

Soon the Wave would sweep along members of Iran’s high-profile national football team, who sported its trademark green in bands on their

wrists and arms during a June 17 World Cup qualifying match in South Korea. Who made up the rest of the Wave's many adherents, and what empowered them to brave truncheons and bullets by pouring into the streets to mount the largest demonstrations that Iran has seen since the toppling of the Shah in 1979? The Wave drew its unusual scale and force from a decentralized organization that brought together civil society leaders, political activists, regime insiders, and (importantly) new leaders from groups that had not previously been politically active. The common motive at first was a shared desire to turn Ahmedinejad out of office; later this would be joined by deep fears about the country's future as hard-liners attempted to bypass the "republic" part of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The best way to view the organization and make-up of the Green Wave during the period leading up to June 12 is through the lens provided by Musavi's slogan *har shahrvand, yek setaad* ("for each citizen, one camp"). The idea is that all Iranians, regardless of class, ethnicity, religion, or background, should have a "camp" (the word might also be rendered as "headquarters")—in essence, a loosely organized political or interest group—toward which they can feel a sense of belonging. Some of the leading figures in camps that tended to identify (however broadly) with Musavi's candidacy were people with no previous record of activity in politics or civil society organizations (CSOs). The Internet played a major role as well, whether through well-known social-networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, or through large e-mail listservs such as 88camp (88 being the current Iranian year), which boasted nearly four-hundred-thousand subscribers. Established CSOs and political activists did important work in encouraging people to vote, while Khatami and other political figures helped to convince reform-minded citizens that Musavi was worth backing. Even though open to such prominent voices, the Green Wave remained decentralized and drew sustenance from the diversity of its membership and nodes of support.

Before June 12, the Wave's greatest unifying force was Ahmedinejad himself. During Iran's first-ever televised presidential candidates' debate a week and a half before voters went to the polls, the incumbent shocked viewers by leveling personal attacks at various of his rivals and their relatives (including wives) before following up with dubious statistics purporting to show that Iran's economy, well known to be badly ailing, was actually in top form. This display typified the brazen manner in which he had been governing, reminding people of his outrageous and embarrassing statements about Israel and the Holocaust as well as his mismanagement of an economy that had flagged badly under his stewardship despite the record-high prices commanded by Iran's oil exports.

Musavi and Karrubi capitalized on this with calls for change. They spoke of how things had gone backward under Ahmedinejad. Taking a page from Barack Obama's successful campaign for the U.S. presiden-

cy, a widely viewed YouTube video showed Iranians silently holding signs expressing their desire to see the country turn a new corner.<sup>1</sup> Given the various “camps” that were all wearing green, what “change” was supposed to mean was never precisely defined. The candidates spoke of strengthening civil society as well as protections for the rights of women

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and minorities; securing economic empowerment; and a range of other issues. Whatever the candidates’ detailed programs, in the final analysis it was a desire to leave Ahmedinejad behind more than any vision of the future that drove their campaigns.

Since the election, the street protests, and the crackdown, the Green Wave has entered a new stage. Before June 12, it was a heavily (though by no means solely) upper-class movement. After the elections, many members of the lower and middle classes joined its ranks. There were protests and scuffles with security forces in poorer parts of

Tehran, and members of a sizeable middle class with little record of political activity became mobilized overnight.<sup>2</sup>

The political and religious backgrounds of those involved, moreover, bespeak a fundamental shift. Earlier protests, such as the 1999 student unrest, invariably involved only slices of society. What is going on now is far more broadly based. Religious moderates and reformist-leaning regime insiders are lining up with a broad swath of the Iranian public against a small cadre of regime hard-liners and their minions. The signs were there early on. Troops sent out to stop protests stood by smiling at cheering marchers. Worried clerics spoke out against the regime’s harsh tactics. Even some officers of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps made restive noises. Regime stalwarts such as Majlis speaker Ali Larijani and former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani fretted publicly over the regime’s decisions and the public support they were costing.

The generational shift is palpable too. A couple of years ago, we wrote in these pages of Iran’s young people and their de facto forms of political opposition.<sup>3</sup> Their presence in the streets and leading roles in the Green Wave show that they are no longer politically indifferent and have gone beyond personal, apolitical signs of defiance. Indeed, what we are witnessing is the demise of the relative apathy that had plagued this generation after Khatami left office in 2005 with so many reformist hopes unrealized. Neda Agha-Soltan, the 27-year-old woman whose videotaped gunshot death on June 20 became the protests’ iconic image, is but one example of a younger, apolitical Iranian (she had not voted on

June 12) who turned out to protest the regime's actions. When authorities rounded up leading activists or cut their communications, young people rose to new prominence as organizers of the biggest demonstrations that Iran has seen in thirty years.

As the Green Wave's make-up changed, so did its demands. Chants of "Ahmedeni-bye-bye" and *marg bar dictator* (death to the dictator) gave way to *azadi baraye Iran* (freedom for Iran) and *mimirim, mimirim; harfesh nemipazirim* (we will die but never compromise). The election was no longer about whether one man could stay in office; it was about the future of the country. The Islamic Republic has always rested on a contradictory mixture of popular and religious legitimacy. The "electoral coup" that fabricated a win for "Landslide Mahmoud" sparked fears that the republican aspect of the country's political system—already long compromised by powerful unelected bodies and extensive candidate bannings—was about to be done away with forever.

Much as Ahmedinejad had given the Green Wave its immediate reason for being before June 12, its (unintentional) moving spirit after that date was Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Musavi grew into his role as the face of the opposition, but even he admits that he was an "accidental leader" who was not guiding the protest movement. It was Khamenei's words and actions—all quite hostile—that gave the opposition strength and a common cause. The Supreme Leader's public warnings against a "velvet revolution" and labeling of protesters as foreign agents and rioters backfired, bringing people into the streets in greater numbers. The brutal methods used against peaceful protesters turned many, even regime insiders and Ahmedinejad backers, against Khamenei. His first Friday sermon after the vote, in which he blamed opposition leaders and "agitators" for the violence, only stoked fears of where Iran was heading.

The most pressing question for the Green Wave is where it goes from here. One of its major strengths—its decentralized structure—could become a weakness. The movement has avoided factionalism—so far. But how long will the unity last? Musavi's newly-formed "Green Path of Hope" will have to take pains not to infringe on the autonomy of spontaneous local networks while at the same time channeling their energy into coordinated action. This loosely grouped political "path"—named as such to avoid the legal obstacles involved in formally registering a political party or movement—has a central council with six members (the three named so far are Musavi, Khatami, and Karrubi) but still lacks a clearly defined structure or an agenda for future action.

The movement also needs central leadership. Musavi might be a rallying figure, but the regime is essentially holding him incommunicado. His window of opportunity for stepping decisively forward is closing rapidly. The ideal new leader would also not have the 68-year-old Musavi's history as part of the regime.

Above all, the Green Wave needs strategic direction. Can it continue

to work within the legal framework of the Islamic Republic, or is it time to take a more radical stance and challenge the system root and branch? During Khatami's tenure there was debate as to whether one could reform the system from within, but judging from recent events it seems that reformist elements will not even be allowed inside in the first place. Given that many Green Wavers do not want a wholesale overthrow of the regime, treading a more moderate line seems prudent for the time being. Yet more radical elements within the movement will want to see results from this approach.

Despite these obstacles, there is reason to be optimistic about the Green Wave's future. It is indisputably the largest and broadest opposition gathering in the Islamic Republic's three-decade history, and it has galvanized Iran's massive younger generations like nothing before it. The Wave has defied all odds and shown impressive staying power in the face of brutal repression and serious obstacles, even overcoming the regime's best efforts to stop it by clamping down on its leaders. Faced with the ugly reality of mass repression since June 12, even some regime insiders are balking, and may yet prove powerful opposition allies within the political establishment. Most important of all, the Wave's impetus has swept it past the comparatively narrow issue of who is running the country, and has focused it instead on the future of the country itself.

## NOTES

1. Available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=zEfk1IDImMI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zEfk1IDImMI).
2. Abbas Amanat, "A Middle-Class Uprising," available at <http://roomfordebate.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/06/16/where-will-the-power-lie-in-iran/#abbas>.
3. Ali Afshari and H. Graham Underwood, "Iran's Resilient Civil Society: The Student Movement's Struggle," *Journal of Democracy* 18 (October 2007): 80–94.