



Dispatches From an Unfinished Uprising: The Role of Technology in the 2009 Iranian Protest Movement

Citation

Fathi, Nazila. "Dispatches From an Unfinished Uprising: The Role of Technology in the 2009 Iranian Protest Movement." Shorenstein Center Discussion Paper Series 2012.D-75, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, August 2012.

Permanent link

<https://nrs.harvard.edu/URN-3:HUL.INSTREPOS:37376520>

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**Joan Shorenstein Center
on the Press, Politics and Public Policy**
Discussion Paper Series

#D-75, August 2012

**Dispatches From an
Unfinished Uprising:
The Role of Technology in the
2009 Iranian Protest Movement**

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PRESS • POLITICS



• PUBLIC POLICY •

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Introduction

On June 13, 2009, Iran plunged into six months of chaos, after official results granted a second term to President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The majority of people believed that he rigged the elections amidst a strong anti-incumbent mood. His main rival, Mir-Hossein Mousavi, immediately claimed that he was the legitimate winner of the election and denounced the results as fraudulent, announcing that his representatives at the polls had witnessed numerous irregularities.

Another pro-reform candidate, Mehdi Karroubi, a former speaker of Parliament, backed Mousavi and demanded election results be nullified. They believed that the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the Revolutionary Guards, the armed forces founded in 1979 to protect the regime, had backed Ahmadinejad to steal the elections. Many referred to it as a coup d'état that paved the ground for the rule of the military—the Revolutionary Guards.

The Green Movement, a newly formed group that had supported Mousavi during his campaign, began staging anti-government protests. It galvanized hundreds of thousands of people in peaceful rallies around the country demanding new elections. The regime used its loyal forces, including the *Basij*, the state-sponsored militia, to crush the demonstrations.

This paper will look at how the Green Movement, which became an umbrella for various forces who opposed the regime, managed to stage massive demonstrations. What techniques did it use under the repressive environment that the regime had created? What was the movement's intention? And, finally what did it achieve?

Saturday, The Day After the Election

My phone woke me up at 8 a.m. on Saturday, June 13, 2009.

"Any change in the count?" asked *The New York Times* editor. I was serving as the Tehran correspondent for the *Times*. It was before midnight in New York and the editor wanted to update the story on the presidential election in Tehran.

I stumbled to my living room, where I had left the television on two hours earlier.

“Not really,” I said.

All signs leading to the election had suggested that the incumbent president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad would lose to his more moderate rival, Mir-Hossein Mousavi. But an early count right after the polls closed on Friday put Ahmadinejad ahead.

The first sign of tension came a little before midnight, when Mousavi called for a press conference. Reporters, local and foreign, crammed in a small room at a newspaper office in northern Tehran. Mousavi was directed into the room through a back porch instead of the main door. He claimed he’d won the majority of the votes but Ahmadinejad was rigging them. This was the first time a candidate was accusing the government and an incumbent of election fraud.

As the vote count progressed throughout the night, the likelihood of a Mousavi victory seemed dimmer to me and to my colleague, Robert Worth, with whom I was covering the election. He had come to Iran for the first time only a few days earlier. Together we watched reports on the live program that announced Ahmadinejad’s votes far ahead of Mousavi’s. I had finally gone to bed at dawn while Robert crashed on a couch in my home-office. There was no point returning to his hotel if he needed to update the story.

Hearing my voice now, he staggered into the living room and glanced at the screen.

It was impossible for anyone who’d witnessed the excitement for Mousavi during the run-up to the election to believe the results. The excitement translated into the long lines of voters, curling around polling stations on Friday. People held their red-jacketed birth certificates—the only document they needed to vote with—and secretly flashed their fingers in a V victory sign. It meant they backed Mousavi, but they were not allowed to hint support for any of the candidates on the election day. Now the government was acknowledging a historic turnout: 85 percent. But it claimed that 24 million votes had gone for Ahmadinejad while only 13 million were cast for Mousavi. The votes for the other two contenders including a reformist candidate, Mehdi Karroubi, remained as low as a few hundred thousand.

The morning newspapers shed little light on what was happening. *Kayhan*, the hard-line daily loyal to Ahmadinejad, carried a front-page headline: “Minister of Intelligence Warns Against Demonstrations.” There had been early celebrations before the elections but no protests. Was the regime anticipating them now? Another newspaper reported that the government was shutting down universities for a week, starting today. Although these institutions were usually hotbeds of activism, they were quiet at this time of the year while the students were taking final exams.

A reformist newspaper appeared with half of its front page completely blank. Local journalists complained the night before that the judiciary had sent monitors into printing houses, authorized to shut down newspapers trying to publish controversial material. Either the editors had nothing to replace the censored item with, or they had left the space blank as a sign of protest. Other newspapers refrained from commenting on the results entirely.

During the campaign, the candidates had relied heavily on text messaging, which the government shut down early Friday morning when the election began. This also stymied the plan of Mousavi’s campaign team to monitor the health and process of the election by having its representatives at the polls text message into a monitoring center in Tehran. The service was still down.

Robert returned to his hotel to contact his government-assigned translator in order to conduct some interviews. I was not able to connect the dots. What was happening? Was it possible that Ahmadinejad, as Mousavi had predicted, would steal the election? Would the millions of Mousavi supporters, known as the “Green Movement,” simply accept the results? Would all the reformist politicians who had supported Mousavi remain silent? Mousavi had served as prime minister during the first decade of the revolution. He still had powerful allies and deep ties to the regime compared with Ahmadinejad who’d climbed the ladders of politics only in the last few years.

I picked up the phone to contact political analysts to find out more. Perhaps they had some information.

“Ms. Fathi, forgive me, but I cannot talk,” said a newspaper columnist I’d called.

“I promised my wife to avoid getting myself arrested this time.”

I apologized and wished him luck. A mere phone call from *The New York Times* could land him in trouble. I needed to speak to experts who could explain what was happening, but I was also reluctant to get anybody in trouble.

I dialed the number of a newspaper editor. He was a liberal activist, well-connected, and able to analyze complicated situations objectively. His answer was almost identical.

“They summoned all the editors last night,” he explained when he recognized my voice without elaborating who “they” were. It was clear he was referring to government forces.

“They have warned us not to speak to foreign reporters. I am sorry.”

I was not a foreigner but found myself treated as one because I reported for a foreign outlet.

In the meantime, news websites were reporting the increasing arrests of activists, politicians and local journalists during the night. One website reported that government forces stopped a former vice president while he was driving with his adult son the night before. They shot pepper-gas spray into his son’s face and dragged him out of the car. The men climbed into the car and beat the former vice president. The violence attracted a large crowd. They watched as the forces pulled out the vice president with a bleeding head.¹ Pictures on the Internet showed the car stained with blood. The assailants took the former vice president and his son to prison. The charges against them were unclear.

I threw on my headscarf and slipped into my *manteau*, the overcoat the regime required women to wear in public. I had to go out and get a sense of what was happening on the streets. I called Reza, the driver who’d taken me around the city for the past few days and told him to meet me outside the convenience store on our street. The store was often my first stop for some honest conversation with total strangers. They opened up quickly, probably because Karim, the smiling young man who ran the store, knew that I was a journalist and spoke his mind to me without hesitation. Ordinary people liked speaking to journalists too as long as they knew they could trust

them. The place was packed with jars, cans, bottles, boxes and a few customers who had to apologize and squeeze their way around the shop. I usually threw a question at Karim, and others jumped into the conversation.

On this day, I picked up a carton of milk and asked Karim, “Did your candidate get elected?” The 14-inch TV installed just below the ceiling was playing on mute but was tuned into the same channel I had been watching at home.

“I did not vote,” he said, showing his white teeth. “It would have made no difference anyway, right?”

“You were wise,” a middle-aged man quickly interjected. “They are thieves. This was the second time I’ve voted in 30 years and certainly the last.”

“Miss,” a middle-aged woman broke in. “I was just at the bank and everyone there was appalled too.” She looked at me with her eyebrows raised, as if to ensure that I understood every word. “So many of us have immigrated to Tehran from different cities and still have relatives there. We have a sense of how people vote even in small towns. No one believes that 63 percent of people voted for Ahmadinejad.”

They both looked like people who lived in my neighborhood—upper middle class. I paid for the milk and spotted Reza outside the store. We drove downtown. The streets were unusually quiet. We went to Ahmadinejad’s neighborhood, a lower middle-class district in eastern Tehran where he had a large support base. There were no signs of celebrations. People reacted with sheepish smiles when I asked if they were happy about his victory.

No one knew exactly what had happened, but the suspicion around the numbers had raised all sorts of rumors. Many were referring to the elections as a coup d’état by Ahmadinejad and the Revolutionary Guards, the armed forces responsible for protecting the regime.

In the afternoon, as I was speaking to people on a street near the Ministry of Interior where the votes were counted, a group of some hundred protestors appeared. “Death to the dictator,” they chanted, and “Death to the Islamic Republic.” With their fists clenched, men and women shouted at the top of their lungs. Pedestrians joined them: A

man with a briefcase got off a passing bus and chanted with the protestors for a few minutes before leaving. Shopkeepers came out of their stores to watch. Drivers waved to signal their support. The outpouring appeared to be unorganized, spontaneous and emotional.

A colleague called my cell phone to say that she was at the scene of another rally. I called Robert and he said that he was also at another protest. Demonstrations were breaking out around the city.

Within an hour, the *Basij*, the government militia force, arrived on their motorbikes. Before turning off their engines, they revved them and cast venomous looks at people. Behind them followed a bus filled with Security Forces in dark olive-green uniforms. They stepped off the bus wearing helmets and holding shields.

An officer with three golden stars on his shoulder asked people on a handheld speaker to disperse.

“Please go to your homes, no permit has been issued for any kind of demonstrations,” he said.

“Death to the dictator,” the crowd continued chanting.

The Security Forces pulled out their clubs. Some of the *Basij* also had heavy chains. Together, they rained upon the protestors, kicking, punching and clubbing them. A few protestors grabbed a motorbike and set it on fire. Black smoke spiraled in the air. The forces dragged and shoved people into black vans. I ran to the car.

Another crowd of demonstrators approached to rescue the protestors being attacked. The Security Forces started firing tear gas. People torched garbage bins and held newspapers in orange flames—smoke alleviates the effects of tear gas.

Government forces continued to beat the unarmed protestors. A *Basij* pounded on the hood of our car. “Move,” he shouted. Reza lit a cigarette and put it between his teeth. We were coughing, our eyes streaming because of the tear gas. At the sound of the second blow on the hood, Reza turned on the engine and we moved away.

I returned home to find my mother and my husband, Babak, glued to the television screen. They knew what was happening on the streets. They were watching footage of

the clashes, not only in Tehran but also in other large cities, on the BBC Persian channel that we received through satellite TV. The whole country was immersed in chaos. People had taken dozens of videos with their cell phones on the streets and sent them to the networks.² I recognized some of the scenes from where I had just been—the same street and shops.

Despite a government ban, satellite programs were easily accessible and most people around the country watched channels like BBC, Voice of America Persian program, or one of the 20 other opposition networks. People trusted these channels more than the state-run media, which they considered the propaganda arms of the regime. The government was embarrassed to admit the popularity of the foreign networks, but even according to official sources some 40 percent of the population owned satellite TV³—a vast understatement, going by anecdotal evidence. I'd seen the aluminum dishes popping up over mud houses in the most remote and impoverished areas around the country.

Now, these news channels showed footage after footage of government forces beating people violently—scenes that could fuel further anger even among those who were staying home. My mother and my husband cursed the forces.

“Look at this beast,” Babak said as we watched one muscular *Basij* punch a young man in the face, then tilt his head back with one hand while dragging him by the arm on the pavement. Three green-clad forces clubbed another young man.

“How many against one?” moaned my mother.

A middle-aged woman threw herself between the man and the forces to protect him, but they continued beating him, and started beating her too.

I left my mother and Babak in front of the TV and went to my computer to check the news website and my emails. Many of the websites were operating from outside the country and had become news hubs. Mousavi and Karroubi still used their websites, *Kalemeh* and *Sahamnews*, to post their statements, interviews and news. Satellite networks relied on these websites too.

Even though the authorities had slowed the Internet to a crawl, people managed to post dozens of videos from around the country. They'd learned how to circumvent government restrictions years ago when the government blocked access to independent news websites. People shared software via the bluetooth feature on their cell phones, while travelling on buses and subways, and even at the protests. The software enabled Internet users to upload and download videos while connected to the Internet at slow speeds. Other software allowed users to view blocked websites. Civil servants and students used the faster Internet connections at government buildings and universities.

News websites were filled with speculations about the results. Some suggested that the numbers were meant to settle scores with the candidates depending on how harshly they'd criticized Ahmadinejad during the campaign. Karroubi, the most outspoken critic, finished with the lowest number of votes, a little over 300,000 votes. The newspaper he published joked that he'd come in fifth even though there were only four candidates; his votes were even less than those declared void. The other candidate, Mohsen Rezai, fared slightly better, with a little over 600,000 votes. He claimed on his website that his representatives at the polls had monitored between 3.5 to 7 million votes cast for him. Many believed him, since he was a war hero who had served as the commander of the Revolutionary Guards during the war and had repelled Iraqi forces from two southern Iranian provinces, including his own hometown.

Mousavi's 13 million votes seemed generous compared to the other two numbers, although many believed that the figure represented only a fraction of the votes he had likely legitimately received.

Mousavi and Karroubi had both issued statements, vowing to stand by their supporters. Elections, they said, were a legal right of the people and they would not allow the government to take it away from them. They formed an alliance but declared their loyalty to the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, the man who has the final word on state matters and the constitution.⁴

In the midst of all the violence that people had seen, one single message calling for calm and unity was making the rounds. I had received it several times in my inbox from

different senders and it was posted on almost all news websites. The Green Movement was inviting people in Tehran and over 30 other major cities to stage a silent rally the next day:

Tomorrow afternoon at 5, Ahmadinejad, the president elected by the Supreme Leader, will celebrate his fake victory. But Iranians who are loyal to their vote and are opposed to this coup, will join to support Mr. Karoubi and Mousavi, the two coalition leaders who are the winners of the election. We will march at the same time on Valiasr Street in Tehran, between Valiasr Square and Tajrish Square. We will hold green and white napkins in a sign of unity. Kurds, Azeris, Baluchis, Turkmen, Bakhtiais, Arabs, Persians, Sunnis, Shiites, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, Dervishes, Baha'is—this country belongs to you. The armed forces will certainly try to discourage us. Let us spread the word by phone, text messaging, on the Internet chat rooms, websites, blogs, by word of mouth and all other possible means of communication. Iranians will meet tomorrow at 5 p.m. Hand in hand we will unite and give flowers to the Security Forces. Merchants of the Bazaar, close your shops tomorrow and join us. If we allow this coup to prevail today, we will have to grieve for many years.⁵

By naming all ethnic and religious groups, including Bahais, followers of a faith that the Islamic Republic had long persecuted and referred to as heretical, the Green Movement was trying to bring the scattered storm of protests under the same umbrella. Its strength lay in the numbers it could galvanize. It also urged Iranians abroad to stage protests in front of Iranian embassies.

Sunday, The Government Tries to Impose Information Blackout

I went to Ahmadinejad's press conference the next day with a colleague, Roger Cohen, a columnist with *The New York Times*. Seated in a chandeliered hall, behind a table decorated with flowers, Ahmadinejad dismissed allegations of fraud and asked if reporters had managed to speak to all 40 million voters. He said he was the first president to win with such a high number of votes in the end: 24 million.

While we were at the press conference, tens of thousands of people responded to the message of the previous day and marched in silence on Valiasr Street. The crowd occupied several miles. There were no reports of clashes. The images captured from rooftops showed a sea of people dotted with green ribbons, shirts and scarves.

Emboldened by the numbers they galvanized, the opposition called for another massive rally for the next day.

That night, *Ershad*, the bureau for foreign media at the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, the office responsible both for our safety and monitoring our activities, faxed several letters to me. The government was trying to limit our coverage of the events. The letters were directives banning journalists from reporting on the streets and suspending the work of government-assigned translators immediately. Resident journalists like me were banned from leaving their offices. Another directive declared that visiting journalists could not extend their visas. This meant that Robert and many other foreign reporters would have to leave in a day or two. Roger could stay for another 10 days. He had luckily or mistakenly received a three-week visa.

As for the next day, the opposition called for another massive rally.

Monday, A Historic Day

Despite the ban on reporters, I felt I had to venture out on Monday afternoon. This was the biggest story I'd covered. Roger and I headed to the rally together under a scorching sun. In the absence of an official translator, I decided to interpret for him, and do my daily reporting job. I kept my notebook in my bag so as not to give away my identity as a journalist. Roger, with a nearly hairless head, blended in among darker haired Iranians.

As we approached the rally, the crowd swelled. The smell of car fumes began to dissipate as the number of vehicles grew sparser. There were so many marchers that the sidewalk seemed to shrink. Despite a ban beamed repeatedly on the state radio and TV, men and women from different classes were marching toward Enghelab Street, meaning

Revolution, a lower middle-class neighborhood in central Tehran. Many carried backpacks and sweaty water bottles. People exchanged meaningful looks and smiles.

The silence was palpable once we reached Enghelab Street. The eight-lane street was packed with people, like a silent river, now streaming west toward Azadi Square—meaning Freedom. Normally bustling with roaring cars, screaming vendors and swarms of motorcyclists veering into the traffic and onto sidewalks, the street was now packed with people and dominated by quiet. People taped their lips to show their peaceful intent. Every few minutes one could hear a “shush” coming from far away.

Groups of police in black riot-gear were slumped down, sitting on the pavement, with their batons and shields scattered around them. It was an embarrassing scene; the demonstrators must have surged on the streets in such unexpected numbers that riot police could neither confront them nor flee. In an act of compassion, demonstrators offered their water bottles to these parched men, whose task was to club protestors.

Roger and I interviewed people to find out why they’d dared to come out.

“They have insulted our intelligence,” whispered a young woman.

“We are not violent, and we are not the enemy. But the regime must realize that we are not ignorant.”

“What’s your name?” I asked her.

“Iran,” she said. “We all have the same name and the same voice today.”

After an hour the crowd stopped marching, no longer able to move forward toward Azadi Square, the largest square in the capital, capable of holding hundreds of thousands of people. We climbed the squeaky stairs of a pedestrian overhead crossing at Enghelab Street, to get a clearer view of the six-mile street and the square. Hundreds were already on the steel bridge wielding cameras and cell phones to capture the scene below.

We inched our way to the top and found the scene below mesmerizing. Enghelab was jammed with marchers, even on the side streets. In the middle of the silent crowd was a long green banner, nearly a mile long.⁶ The abundant cloth danced gently in the air, as hundreds held it over their heads in silence.

More than three million people attended the rally. More significant than the turnout was the behavior of the crowd. They'd expressed their dissent in a civilized fashion. Had the crowd veered off a few blocks south of Enghelab Street, they could have engulfed Khamenei's compound. They never did.

The demonstrators remained silent, restrained and peaceful until later that afternoon when a few men ran toward *Basij* headquarters. Fearing that they would climb the wall, an armed watchman opened fire on the crowd and killed seven people.

That night, the *Basij* forces raided a student dormitory. Student dormitories were always easy targets for government forces where they could beat and intimidate young activists. They beat five students to death that night.

Thursday, Looking for Tweeters

The silent rallies jammed downtown Tehran everyday until Thursday. Iran dominated the international news and everyone was eager to find out if this massive outburst would force the regime to back down.

One of my editors called from New York and asked for a story on the role of Twitter in organizing people.

"What about it?" I asked.

She explained that the protestors were tweeting from protest scenes and that Twitter had become an important platform.

I told her that I would inquire and write a story but I was surprised at the suggestion. For one thing, cell phones never worked in areas where there were protests. Secondly, most people could not get Internet on their cell phones. Only one small company sold prepaid phones that offered Internet access at such a slow speed that it was almost useless. Besides, people had suggested that they relied on Facebook and blogs but never on Twitter.

Nevertheless, I raised the issue with some protestors I met at the rally that afternoon, in Imam Khomeini square, where hundreds of thousands had gathered. People held pictures of young men who had been killed at previous demonstrations. Authorities had

acknowledged over a dozen were killed so far. I began asking people how they had heard about the rally, whether they knew of Twitter or used it. They spoke of the role of websites, satellite TV and word of mouth, but no one had heard of Twitter.

I began to follow *The New York Times'* Lede Blog, which was increasingly relying on Tweets by Iranians, who were not in Iran but pretending that they were, and I noticed that their 140-character messages were doing a great service. Twitter played an important role in reflecting Iran's events outside the country and showing the immense gap between society and the government. Without those lines, exposed to everyone and everywhere, the West would not have known the depth of people's resentment toward the regime. This reality changed the regime's international standing. Muslims in neighboring countries saw the messages, revealing government cruelty under the name of religion.

Sometimes there were mistakes in the coverage of the Lede Blog, like when it called the uprising "a green revolution" that intended to overthrow the regime. But there were flaws in the newspaper's coverage, too. We reported that people were text messaging during the protests, which was impossible because the service had been shut down since the election day and remained so for over a month. Such mistakes happened because the story was big and I was the only correspondent on the ground from three days after the election until July 1, when I left the country (Roger Cohen was a columnist and worked for the editorial section of the paper). The desk could not reach me during the day when I was out on the streets and cell phones did not work in areas where there were protests. It contacted other correspondents outside the country who were familiar with Iran to contribute to the story. The Lede Blog, on the other hand, was getting immediate reporting from Iranians who spoke and read Persian, had relatives in the country, and were committed to getting the message out. I felt the Lede Blog was more immersed in the conversation on the ground than the newspaper coverage, partly because of the Lede Blog's language and partly because of the unlimited space on the Internet.

Friday, June 19

On Friday, June 19, 2009, exactly a week after the election, Ayatollah Khamenei took the podium at Tehran University to lead the Friday prayers. All eyes were set on him even though he had already indirectly backed Ahmadinejad by congratulating his victory a few days earlier. Massive, peaceful rallies had rocked the country for a whole week, sending a loud and clear message: people openly referred to Ahmadinejad's victory as a coup d'état. Khamenei had the final word on all matters and could call for new elections. His predecessor, Khomeini, was famously quoted as saying the regime depended on the vote of the people.

After all, Mousavi was not a liberal. For Iranians, the difference between him and Ahmadinejad was like a choice between the lesser of two evils. The Guardian Council, the regime's watchdog assembly, whose members were appointed by Khamenei, had screened and approved Mousavi. Why cheat him out of the election when the Guardian Council could simply have barred him from running like they did hundreds of others?

Khamenei stood at the podium, one hand resting on a rifle. As a child I had heard my teachers explain that the weapon, which all Friday prayer leaders carried, was meant to strike fear in the hearts of the enemy and suggest that the leader was prepared to fight for Islam.

In a firm voice, now Khamenei denounced the protests. "Flexing muscles on the streets after the election is not right," he said. "It means challenging the elections and our democracy."

Without naming Mousavi and Karroubi he warned: "If the political elite ignore the law – whether they respect it or not—they will be responsible for the ensuing bloodshed and chaos."

With these words, he lost any claim to impartiality that he may have had. He put himself at the forefront of the battle by openly siding with Ahmadinejad.

Karroubi ignored Khamenei's warning and challenged him that very same day by sending a letter to the Guardian Council, demanding that the election results be nullified. This was a symbolic measure since it was common knowledge that the Council

was under Khamenei's thumb. He'd appointed its members. But for the first time since the revolution a member of the establishment was publicly disputing the Leader. In political terms, it was a slap on Khamenei's face. Karroubi's letter stated that by ignoring the people's demand, the regime would intensify their rage.

And so, the opposition refused to bow. Announcements on various websites called for another rally on Enghelab Street the next day. Roger and I headed there at 3 p.m. amidst a flood of people. No one doubted that Khamenei's forces would use violence against the protestors. He'd used the word "bloodshed." Yet, people were streaming down the streets in running shoes, and wearing bright green shirts or wristbands, the signature color of the Green Movement.

Swarms of pro-regime forces in olive green fatigues, black Robocop outfits and civilian clothes, stood at every corner leading to Enghelab street. To prevent the protestors from forming the massive rallies of the previous week, government forces had been deployed in great numbers, armed with clubs, chains and weapons. On a narrow street, perhaps only 20 feet from Enghelab, a group of *Basij* forces attacked people. They screamed religious Shiite slogans, "Ya Hussein," referring to the grandson of Prophet Muhammad, as though he endorsed their crusade against the protestors. The protestors ran away. But within minutes, they returned in larger numbers.

Our car got caught in the middle of the second disruption. This time a group of regime gunmen showed up in front of our car. Over a hundred people began running in the opposite direction, jolting us from side to side. One gunman in his early 20s stood before our car with his gun pointed at the crowd as he moved it in a circle. Then he lowered it until it was pointing straight at me. Our eyes met through the windshield and I held my breath. Menace glared in his eyes but he didn't fire; instead, he grinned maliciously.

Roger and I realized it was better to be on foot than trapped in a car. Government forces were everywhere so we agreed to minimize our conversation to avoid attracting their attention with our English. As journalists, we were not even allowed to be there.

Marching with a group of about 50 protestors, we reached Enghelab Street. The crowd was smaller than the demonstrations of the previous week but more tightly knit. They stayed close to one another and looked around hesitantly. A woman's voice broke the silence. "Don't be scared, don't be scared, we're all together," she shouted the words rhythmically in Persian. Everybody began chanting.

Within minutes, a rumbling of rushing feet drowned their voices. People behind us were under attack. We began running, perhaps more than a hundred of us in one direction. At the intersection, the crowd turned right, and Roger and I stopped at the corner, in front of a shuttered store. Several hundred protestors had formed a front on the opposite side of the intersection.

Women, young, in non-traditional short *manteaux*, dominated the front row. They wrapped their scarves around their faces, to hide their identities and had bags slung over their shoulders. Some leaned forward with a bent knee as though ready for a race.

They waited until the protestors disappeared into the street and the intersection cleared. The *Basij*, in their white shirts hanging over their pants, emerged from behind the running crowd. Some were on foot, and some were on red motorcycles, two on each.

A roar erupted from the dense rows of the protestors, "*Hamleh*," attack! From their sling bags, the women pulled out rocks to hurl at the forces. The *Basij* on foot staggered and turned back. Those on the bikes veered to the left and right. The protestors outnumbered them. Like a wave, they advanced into the middle of the intersection.

Victory. Hundreds raised their arms in the air and shouted with joy. The store shutter went up and a few men emerged in the middle of the street. Among them was a young security force soldier, in a green fatigue. In a dance-like move, he tossed his hat in the air.

"Men of no honor, get lost!" he shouted. People patted him on the back. He was a defector.

As we were standing at the intersection, organized rows of Security Forces, in green uniforms, helmets and shields, appeared on the street, across from us. The protestors quickly pulled together. Again, it was the women who took the lead.

“Get up and collect some rocks,” a slim woman shouted at a male spectator sitting on the curb. He looked up in awe.

“Quickly!” she snapped.

Protestors were running into side streets, seeking construction sites, looking for rocks and pieces of brick.

“*Hamleh*,” the call for attack rose again and the protestors began throwing rocks at the forces. But this time, the Security Forces held shields over their heads and marched on unharmed. The sounds of rocks banging on their shields echoed in the air. They moved into the middle of the intersection. The gunmen behind them shot tear gas towards the protestors and people began running. Roger and I were following them when a canister with white smoke billowing out landed in front of us. I pulled my scarf over my nose and mouth as I jumped over it. I felt a sharp sting in my lungs and began losing my balance.

I slowed down, pulled out my bottle and poured water on my scarf to relieve the souring in my chest. Bad idea. That made it worse. I began to stagger with my eyes shut. I’d been tear-gassed before, but it had never been this bad. I heard the sounds of footsteps running by me. Blinded by the teargas, I did not know where Roger was.

A strong hand grabbed my arm and pulled me along for a few minutes, directing me to a quieter street.

“Open your eyes,” said a male voice. “Let me blow cigarette smoke into your eyes.” I used my fingers to separate my wet eyelids. We were in a dead end alley with chaos around us. He puffed smoke into my face but it did not help. I pulled open the side of my eye and located a fire. I took a step toward it. Perhaps the smoke would reduce the affects of the tear gas. An old man shuffled out of a house with a pile of newspapers for demonstrators to burn. Residents opened their doors and ushered people in.

Voices in the distance chanted, “Oppressor get lost,” referring to the forces. The sounds of gunshots pierced the air. “They are coming,” people near me said.

A door opened and the same hand that had pulled me into the alley drew me inside. It was cool and I slumped down on the floor. A man was moaning in pain.

“Keep quiet,” a woman whispered.

“They will come in if they hear you.”

I finally felt better after a few minutes and was able to open my eyes. There were a dozen of us inside the hallway of a small apartment building. I spotted Roger sitting against a wall, taking a drag on a cigarette. He smiled. His eyes were red and teary.

Two men were carrying a long-haired fellow down the stairs. He had no visible injuries but had been hit by a stun baton and was in great pain. He was murmuring and cursing: “May they burn in hell. I did not have a father as a child because my father was fighting for this regime as a Revolutionary Guard in the war. This is how they repay their guards.”

I turned and thanked the man who’d rescued me. His shoes were worn-out and pointy, the cheap kind that were trendy among the poor.

A nervous woman appeared in a traditional floral head-to-toe *chador*. “They have moved up the street. Please leave now,” she begged. “We’ll get into trouble if they find you here.”

I recognized her voice. It was the woman who’d urged us to be quiet. The injured man could stay behind, she said. We decided to leave in pairs every five minutes to avoid drawing attention.

When Roger and I emerged into the street, we saw government forces arresting people and shoving them into black vans. One officer in a Robocop outfit pulled up a young man from the back of his collar and shot spray into his face. The man screamed in pain and raised both hands to his face. Pepper spray.

“Give me your phone or I will spray again.”

The young man dropped the phone and the black-clad security fellow stamped on it. Then he threw the young man in the van.

Roger and I looked down and walked away. A few blocks to the west, we reached a large intersection called Nosrat. It was another battlefield, with women leading the attacks, advancing and retreating. We stood watching for a while. People were standing on the curb, taking videos with their cell phones.

The Face of the Uprising

A few blocks north, on Kargar Street, a 27-year old woman, named Neda Agha-Soltan was in the backseat of a car with her singing instructor, Hamid Panahi, an older man. They were caught in the traffic behind a protest scene. It was hot. She unknotted her headscarf under her chin and tied it behind her head, revealing a long pale neck—an unacceptable act in Islamic Iran.

Neda had not voted and was not interested in politics. But her entire life, interests, and goals were shrouded in politics. She loved dancing, singing, and most of all discarding her headscarf. The regime had banned singing and dancing, and made the headscarf mandatory before she was born. All her adult life, Neda had defied the restrictions. She had set herself up as a tour leader and taken like-minded Iranians to neighboring Turkey—a popular destinations for its beaches, discos and bars. When her marriage turned sour, she divorced her husband and chose a boyfriend 15 years her senior. She ignored the ban on singing and took lessons privately.

Now, she found herself out on the street in support of the pro-democracy protestors. Government forces were attacking the demonstrators and firing tear gas. The air in the car was suffocating. People around were getting out of their vehicles. Neda and Hamid stepped out too and retreated into a side street for some fresh air.

Suddenly Hamid heard a shot. He turned around to see Neda fall to the ground, her knees bent as she landed on her back. A bullet had pierced her chest. Hamid rushed over to her, reaching her side at the same time as a young man who said he was a doctor. The doctor bent over and pressed his palm on her wound to stop the bleeding. Another man approached with his cell phone, recording the scene.

Neda's eyes opened wide. "*Sookhtam*," she said. "It burned me." She opened her mouth as though to breathe. Instead, a thin stream of blood ran down her chin and neck. She died with her eyes open. Blood poured from her mouth, nose and eyes.

When I returned home, the video had already gone viral on the Internet. The government had no control over the flow of information despite its efforts to intimidate reporters. Television networks around the world, along with Persian language satellite

networks, broadcast it repeatedly. Dozens had died so far, but Neda, with her large dark eyes and arched eyebrows, became the face of the Iranian uprising. Karroubi called her a martyr, ushering her into a realm that had so far been dominated by men.

My mother was weeping when she called me that evening. “What had she done?” she asked.

She had been talking to her friends and they were angry. Many of them had children who were protesting on the streets. The video had captured the whole sequence of the events, from the moment Neda was hit until she died.

In her young eyes, my mother said, her friends saw their own children.

“First they stole the election and now they silence people’s children with bullets.”

Technology Evolved Faster than Government Repression

Late that night, the VOA Persian television broadcast a program that taught people how to shoot videos with cell phones.

“Stretch one arm with the phone. Hold your other hand under the stretched arm like a tripod to prevent it from shaking. Move the stretched arm slowly if you need to move the camera,” one man explained as he showed how to do it.

The next day, the opposition posted a message on websites calling for a protest in Vali-Asr Square in central Tehran. Dozens were killed on Saturday but the opposition could not back down.

On the 2 o’clock news, only two hours before the opposition’s rally was expected to begin, authorities announced that pro-Ahmadinejad forces would stage a demonstration in the same square. They were planning another confrontation.

Roger and I headed that way and found thousands of government supporters who’d been bussed in. We began speaking to them. Some of them said that they’d come from the industrial city of Karadj, 45 minutes west of Tehran. They’d parked the buses half a mile away and people were carrying huge banners to the square. Women walked separately in black head-to-toe *Chadors*. Bearded men strolled along with big grins. Many held small silver juice packages and sipped leisurely through a straw in the

blistering heat. Their outfits and attitudes set them apart from the protestors the previous day.

There was no visible sign of the opposition. Only a few young people, their political affiliation unclear, sat listlessly in front of shops.

Then I heard a whisper: "The rally moved to Vanak," said a young woman. I turned around and looked at her. She was carrying a plastic bag with a box of diapers. Vanak Square was 10 miles north of Valiasr Square, but the woman passed without looking back at me. A few minutes later a man holding a watermelon approached me and whispered, "Go to Vanak." The whispers continued.

The organizational ability that had emerged in such a repressive climate was amazing. The authorities had arrested over a hundred activists and former politicians, potential leaders, who'd sided with Karroubi and Mousavi. Even those who'd gone into hiding had been traced through the signals on their cell phones and were picked up. Thousands of other demonstrators were arrested. Even though the Internet was slowed down to a crawl, people were still posting videos and messages on the Internet. And on this day, people who had disguised themselves as shoppers spread the message via word of mouth.

We lingered to talk to the buoyant demonstrators, chanting slogans in support of Ahmadinejad. I was interviewing a *Basij* commander an hour later, when one of his men rushed over to say, "Demonstrators have gathered in Vanak Square."

"Send the forces there," ordered the short round commander.

The *Basijis* gunned the engines of their motorbikes and rode away with their front wheels raised "wheelie" style, in a show of intimidation for the spectators who were casting loathing looks at them.

We hopped into a taxi. There was no sign of the usual traffic until we got close to the square, cars could no longer move. We got out; many others were walking in the same direction, casting gentle looks at one another, as though sympathizing for the violence they'd faced.

The scene at the square amazed me. Hundreds of thousands had jammed the square and the street north of the square. The tree-lined street was once again packed with protestors. They marched in silence and held their fingers in triumphant V signs. Some Security Forces stood idly on the side not knowing what to do with the massive crowd. It was another show of strength.

This time, protestors had ditched technology and reverted entirely to word of mouth to mobilize a massive crowd. But thousands also stood on the curb holding their mobile phones exactly in the same posture that the VOA program had instructed them to do the night before.

Conclusion

Iranians used technology in 2009 to build the largest protest movement in the country's recent history. For six months, they galvanized tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands around the country to stage anti-regime protests. The Internet, email, satellite television and cell phones helped not only to organize people but also to shape public opinion.

The demonstrations were initially an act of civil disobedience, protesting the theft of the elections by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. But the use of extreme violence by the regime persuaded many that the Islamic Republic could not be reformed. People retreated from the streets when it became clear that the regime was resorting to extreme violence. Even though the protests could not bring any tangible change and left some 150 people killed, the uprising marked a new beginning. The lessons drawn from the Iranian uprising can be summarized as follows:

1. People used images captured on their cell phones and then broadcast to millions on satellite TV to change public opinion in profound ways. Ayatollah Khamenei called the media worse than "atomic bombs" in a speech at the height of the uprising.⁷
2. Even though the role of Twitter inside the country was exaggerated, it played a major role telling the western audience what was happening inside the

country. It laid bare the depth and scale of dissent in the country and became a source of embarrassment for the regime.

3. A breach opened in Iranian society. Since the uprising and despite the repression that followed, a series of issues have become legitimate areas of inquiry. The absolute power of Ayatollah Khamenei, for example, has become a topic that even his supporters question now.

Those massive protests shook the foundation of the system and shrunk its popular base. The regime no longer tries to mask its coercive nature. One day, when the Islamic Republic finally collapses, historians will look back at the events of June 2009 as the time when the tide began turning against the Islamic Republic.

Endnotes

¹ <http://ramazanzadeh.wordpress.com/tag/یرگیستسد-،-هداز-ن-اضمر-،-ن-وخ-،-ن-یشام/>

² “Internet Pictures, e-mails, text-messages and alike were coming into BBC Persian TV in London at the rate of between six and eight minute at the height of the upheaval. And as for the non-existent audience, the IRIB State TV estimated between 12 and 14 million regular viewers of BBC Persian TV—a figure backed up the country’s Institute for Strategic Studies,” wrote Stephen Willians, Executive Editor for Asia Pacific Region at the BBC and Fellow at the Shorenstein Center in Fall of 2009 wrote in his paper titled “The Power of TV News: An Insider’s Perspective on the Launch of BBC Persian TV in the Year of the Iranian Uprising.” P. 4.

³ ISNA Student News Agency quoted Ali Daraei, a senior official at Iran’s Sate broadcast TV on November 14, 2009, that 40 percent of people watched Satellite TV channels.

⁴ Mousavi’s statement number 2, Sunday June 14, “We pursue our demands within the constitution of the Islamic Republic, which we believe in and consider the rule of the Supreme Jurist (Velayat Faqih) as one of the principles of the establishment.”

⁵ Author’s translation.

⁶ The banner travelled around the world and finally came to New York few months later in 2009. When Iranians marched with it on the Brooklyn Bridge, the scroll covered the entire bridge.

⁷ Sept. 24, 2009, the speech is available on Khamenei’s Website at <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=8094>.