

The Green is not fading out

How the Iranian opposition organizes and continues to fight.

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In a live broadcast on Iranian state television a mullah gives spiritual advice. An in-caller is talking about her marital problems, then she suddenly says: "Coincidentally, my husband has the same name as our newly elected president, Mir Hussein Mousavi," The moderator silences, the program is interrupted. On money you will nowadays often find a green victory sign or the words "Down with the dictatorship". Or a thumbnail portrait of Neda, the best known dead from the unrest in the days after the election in June. The print works give a professional impression, instructions circulate on the internet.

A football match in Isfahan, many spectators wearing green. The television cameras are trying to avoid these images. However, Green is the colour of the football club in Isfahan; now the club is requested to find a different colour.

The movement for democracy is visible in Iran, despite of all repression, torture and show trials. It is not strong enough to stop the Ahmadinejad government. But it is strong enough to keep the country in tension. Because meetings are banned, official occasions are subverted, eg. last Friday: During the anti-Israel Quds rallies tens of thousands held their fingers up forming the V-sign, demanded the release of imprisoned reformers. On this day, an experience from June repeated and changed the psychology of society: It is possible to take to the streets and defy prohibitions. It is dangerous but possible.

Another hidden source of energy is feeding the green movement; it has conciliated generations in families, bridging the gap between the old, who revolted 30 years ago, and the young, suffering from the outcomes today. Thus, sons started talking with their fathers again.

Every Saturday afternoon, the mothers of the killed protestors gather silently in Tehran's Laleh Park, all dressed in black. Other women surround them in silent solidarity. On a list of 72 dead, who are known by name, there are also workers, shoe salesmen, small employees. How the battle lines harden can be observed by the violation of previously existing taboos. Muhammad Khatami, the ex-president, was pushed to the ground last Friday, his black turban torn down. In the first place, the usually moderate Khatami had accused the regime of "fascist" methods. There is almost no way back after such actions and words. The events in Iran roll forward with a tenacious implacability. But whereto? And can anyone control this process?

The young, the students whose creativity influenced the aesthetics of the movement, still burn for the hope of something great to happen, a radical change - in the system as in their lives. More prudent Iranians fear the power vacuum of a regime falling apart rapidly.

The 68-year-old Mir Hussein Mousavi, a candidate in June, remains the figurehead for all sides; but it is the width of the movement which makes him virtually incapable of acting. Coming from the system himself, the former prime minister wants to win as many of Ahmadinejad's conservative opponents as possible. For the moderates within the nomenklatura, Mousavi offers a great advantage, an insider explains: "You know, he might take away their power, but not their lives." But at the same time Mousavi has to appear unyielding, if he doesn't want to lose the support of the young, and of the modern middle classes.

On the street outside his home, the regime has installed surveillance cameras. When Mousavi leaves home, a double cordon accompanies him: his own people and a troop of the Revolutionary Guard. The danger of being arrested is become greater for the leading group, so earlier plans for founding a party or a mass organization were discarded. The movement for democracy is to expand as a "network" which can't be banned.

"Everyone appreciating the Iranian and Islamic identity of the country as a value and the constitution as the fundament for action is welcome" said Alireza Beheshti, a close adviser Mousavi. "The framework of the Islamic Republic should remain, but with corrections", can be heard in Mousavi's vicinity. Especially the civil rights under the constitution should show to advantage, including freedom of expression and freedom of assembly.

In his statements "to the people of Iran", which Mousavi only can send out on the internet, he calls for: a reform of the electoral law, press freedom, the licensing of private radio and television stations, a law prohibiting the military to intervene in economics and politics, the release of political prisoners and the penalisation of atrocities in the prisons. In Tehran, it is said that along with this minimum catalogue subject-specific sections have begun "with the preparations for a new government". Members of the current administration as well as Iranians living abroad are said to be involved in these groups.

Replacing the powerful revolutionary leader, a group of five to eight clerics should directly be elected by the people for a limited period of time. They should represent a religious pluralism equivalent to the freedom of choice in Shiite everyday life, where believers are free to choose the teachings of a scholar they want to follow. In future, nobody should be allowed to rely on divine authority. Mousavi: "Nobody has the right to say: How I look at the Islam is the one and only valid way."

This will be no quick go. Sustained pressure and a progressive wearing down of Ahmadinejad's regime could force him to resign over the medium term, that is the hope. Mousavi does not insist in replacing him. To gain time for the elucidation of the population, an intermediate solution might be necessary. This could look like this: Ahmadinejad resigns in favour of the Tehran mayor Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf. The moderate, popular conservative had recognized the width of the People's Movement in June, when he estimated the demonstrators to be in the three millions.

Mousavi seems to be aware of being severely influenced by three decades of Islamic Republic, so not to be able to represent Iran's future. As a strict Muslim, he constantly would struggle inwardly to meet the youth's demand of a liberalized lifestyle. Iranians drinking alcohol should have a place in the movement - but Mousavi does not want to sit down at a table where the wine is drunk.

Mehdi Karubi, the second reform candidate, is acting much more aggressive. In recent weeks, the fine-boned clergyman was the real challenger of the regime. He published that men and women were raped in detention - which has deeply shaken many Iranians, even the more simple, religious people in Ahmadinejad's clientele. Karubi wouldn't make a leader who is appealing the masses, but he has made the cracks in the system visible.

Mousavi is resembling the figure of the king in chess: small moves, in case of danger retreat, always covered by his men. It is not cowardice. His fellow campaigners assume the movement to slide into the underground, to radicalize and to narrow dangerously, if Mussawi is detained. He sees himself as someone who can open an unbloody way to change. But then the people have to decide which system they want to live in.

For the first time since the Iranian revolution of 1979, the Iranian opposition abroad has found a common language with the forces of change within the country. This opens up options that were unthinkable only recently. In the case Mousavi and Karubi are arrested, the leadership of the Green movement would automatically be taken over abroad. Soon a statement will be released in Tehran, saying a five-member committee in the diaspora - the names are not disclosed - is authorized to replace the leadership in case needed. The symbolic gesture says a lot in a country where the fear of foreign agents is almost obsessive. And Mousavi signals the regime: Look out! If you arrested me, you obstruct the peaceful path to change.

In the diaspora, former bitter enemies have reconciled. The monarchists are relegated to irrelevance, while the advocates of a secular republic criticize Mousavi only mutedly as for the time being. Several prominent heads of the reformers are currently in the West, among them the former Culture Minister Ataollah Mohajerani in London, the film director Mohsen Makhmalbaf in Paris, and

reform theologian Mohsen Kadivar in the US.

Kadivar, currently teaching at Duke University, appealed to "the Iranian bourgeoisie" to provide funds for a new, independent national television. "The cost of a green medium have to be borne by Iranian investors." The Iranian women are requested to donate their jewels as a patriotic gesture. Free, uncensored and genuine Iranian Radio and satellite television: That's what currently is worked for in four countries. In Amsterdam, Mehdi Jami as a former head of the farsi speaking Radio Zamaneh has a lot of experience with bloggers in Iran. Now he wants to establish citizen journalism as a new generation of broadcasting, giving the young Iranians a national platform, who constantly provide their clandestine videos on YouTube.

Thus, networking, making various voices audible and being virtual, is the strength of the green movement - and its weakness. It lacks a clearly audible voice, which eg comments on the resuming nuclear negotiations between Iran and the international community, beginning 1 Oct. Suspicion about Ahmadinejad buying legitimacy abroad which he is denied at home is rampant even among those who want the dialogue, basically. In Mousavi's vicinity they say that "what ever is agreed now has no validity until it has been reviewed by a legitimate, new government of Iran." Mousavi does not want to seek confrontation in this highly sensitive issue.