

CHAPTER 13 CONCLUSION: A CENTURY OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN IRAN

Only in a bazaar as long as history and as wide as geography, with its endless transactions, can the wealth and wits of this merchant be judged (Abdol Karim Soroush¹ 2000).

This study investigated how movement groups in Iran used, changed and amended master frames of mobilization over time in order to gain movement support. In particular, it chronicled the development of master frames of sovereignty during periodic cycles of protest from 1890 to the present. In general, Iranians began the 20th century framing their relationship with the West, and ended the century engaged with the same problem. One striking element of the current Iranian reform movement is the confidence that movement leaders have that their reformist program will be adopted. This confidence is related to the fact that past Iranian social movements have already struggled with how Iranians should define themselves with respect to the ideas of the East and the West. In effect, modern Iranian movements have the experiences of a century of social movement struggle to draw upon as they work to define Iran's place in the world during the 21st century.

Cycles of Protest and the Master Frame of Iranian Sovereignty

This work conceptualized the two primary issues confronting Iranians during the past century as a debate concerning: 1) *national sovereignty*, how the Iranian state should achieve independence in the world, and 2) *individual sovereignty*, the rights individual Iranians have in their political and social system. These issues of *Iranian sovereignty* had to be addressed by all movement leaders in order to gain support from movement adherents. In effect, movement leaders during the past century had to define Iran's place in the world and the rights that individual Iranians would enjoy in their political system.

Snow and Benford (1992) proposed that movement ideas often cluster around a specific theme, a *master framework*, that is used to organize a new worldview. This framework is amended, updated and sometimes rejected as protest continues over time. The master framework that enabled a century of Iranian social movement activity was clearly aimed at ending Western and Russian imperialism and re-establishing a strong Iranian society. This frame was negotiated over time with respect to who the imperial powers were, and which cultural norms Iranians should draw upon in order to achieve independence.

Frames of Individual Sovereignty During a Century of Social Movement

During the Constitutional revolution of 1907, Iranians engaged in a debate as to whether individual Moslems had “equal” rights as national citizens. Related to the issue of rights was whether individual Iranians could “make” law, or whether, as Moslems, they were bound to abide by existing religious law. Not surprisingly, many preeminent religious leaders argued that Iran was a Moslem country and that individual Moslems must follow *Qoranic* law. Indeed, a primary tenet of Islam is that an individual Moslems must completely submit to God’s will. Religious leaders—as a matter of theological interpretation—never claimed the ability to “make” law. Indeed, the primary argument they made was that only God is sovereign and that no man had the authority to make law. Instead, the *mojtaheds* claimed that their training enabled them to “interpret” divine law. This principle, expanded upon by Ayatollah Khomeini ([1970] 1981) and adopted after the revolution, currently gives the political Ayatollahs an elevated status in Iranian governance. At the same time, the current Iranian constitution also reinforces the idea that Iranians should enjoy individual equality in the governing system. Indeed, current reformers

argue that the principle of individual sovereignty in the constitution affords all Iranians equal rights under the law.

The current Iranian debate, complicated by the introduction of Western political philosophies during past Iranian movements, is an extension of the past movement frames that were negotiated during a century of social movement activity. Despite the fact that the tension between individual “equality” and clerical “authority” remains largely unresolved in the current Iranian Constitution, it would be a mistake to conclude that a century of social movement activity has failed to reconcile Iranian traditions with political modernity. Individuals in Iran have more rights than they had a century ago, and few would regard the period of the Pahlavi Shahs—despite whatever material advances were made during this period—as a time of social and political well-being in Iranian history. Obviously, future social movements in Iran will play a role in renegotiating the revolutionary ideal—the revolution will be reinterpreted and reinvented over time—and there is evidence that there will be a further expansion of individual freedom in Iran in the near future.

Enabling and Constraining Elements of Master Frames Negotiated Over Time

Some observers² of ongoing Iranian protests portray the movement as a rejection of the 1978-79 Revolution. This study asserts that although movements amend and update frames over time, a wholesale rejection of the organizing principles that guided a century of movement debate is not possible. Indeed, during all the movements chronicled in this study—each ostensibly resulting in a “winner” who had the opportunity to realize their movement ideas—the primary themes that arose in the subsequent protest cycle remained anchored to movement frames that had been previously “rejected.” For example, during the Constitutional revolution the

conservative clerical elite were ostensibly the “losers,” with Fazlollah Nuri ultimately hung for treason after the Constitution was re-established in 1909. But had he lived to see the 1979 revolution, he would have likely recognized his contributions to the current Iranian constitution. Likewise, members of the Tudeh, ostensibly “losers” during both the post World War II struggle for power and later during the 1979 Revolution, recognized that first Reza Shah (during the White Revolution reforms) and later the clerical elite (during the 1986 land reform debate) had adopted some of the resonant movement messages of the party. Indeed, with respect to the 1986 land reform bill, there was an implementation of a land reform program that the Tudeh had long advocated. In effect, although the Tudeh were formally the “losers” during movement struggles, their conceptions of social class, and some of their specific programs, outlived the dissolution of the party.

There are clear contradictions in the current governing system of Iran. Most notably both individual sovereignty and the special authority of the activist clerical elite are both codified into the governing system. Indeed, this is the contradiction that current social movements hope to exploit to their benefit in order to create greater individual freedom. And it is tempting, given the demographic composition of the current movement groups, to assume that a wholesale rejection of clerical authority may be possible in the future. Still, the evidence from this study would indicate that while clerical authority could diminish over time, it is unlikely—by virtue of a long established activism in Iranian politics—that clerical authority will completely disappear in the near future.

Frames of National Sovereignty During a Century of Social Movements in Iran

The resonant frame of *national sovereignty* established during the past century of social movement activity was first the need to be independent from the influence of Great Britain and Russia, and later from the Americans and the Soviet Union. During the post-World War II movement period and during the 1979 revolution all movement groups agreed that the authority of the Shah was an extension of Western power. The most enabling development with respect to movement goals designed to establish *national sovereignty* was the idea of “Westoxification.” Elements of the “Westoxification” concept were clearly evident in the discourse of Islamic traditionalists during the Constitutional movement, but there was also a strong movement ideal during this period that emulating the Western powers was a practical strategy for re-asserting Iranian national independence. Later, following a period of “nationalist” inspired development that borrowed heavily on Western ideas, Iranians largely rejected the concept that emulation of the West was the best way to develop. Indeed, Western power—at first conceived of in economic and military terms—eventually became conceived of as an insidious and pervasive “disease” that robbed individual Iranians of their self-identity. Undoubtedly, this frame was developed in response to the policies of the Pahlavi Shahs who likewise believed that changes in cultural values—effected by enforced dress codes, a national ideology that was hostile to Islamic belief, and compulsory military service—would help make Iranians “modern.” Following Jalel-e Ahmad’s publication of *Gharbzadegi* (Westoxification), both Islamic traditionalists and Iranian nationalists began to conceive of the West in similar terms, and this coalition of forces made the 1979 Revolution possible.

The current generation of reformers wants to establish a dialogue with the West. The desire for dialogue is different than a desire to become like, or to emulate, Westerners. Indeed,

the tenor of the discourse among modernist reformers is that Iranians, now secure in their identities following the revolution, can interact with the ideas of the West in a manner that does not threaten their identities as Iranians. Arguments supporting the goal of civilizational discourse, given the pervasiveness of the Westoxification discourse during the revolutionary period, are often difficult to make. In particular, the conservative clerical activists who have power in governance continue to employ the revolutionary frame of “Westoxification” in their rhetorical assaults against the reform movement. For example, in November 2002 one common placard evident during conservative students’ demonstrations against the reformers was: Reformism = USA. Likewise, conservatives continue to frame reformist ideas as part of an insidious plot being undertaken by the West to subvert the ideas of the revolution.

The Usefulness of Studying Cycles of Protest

A goal of this study was to demonstrate that movement frames develop over time, and that movements should not be studied as discrete events. When social movements are studied as isolated events it does not allow for an inquiry into either the continuity, or dynamic change, that occurs to a social system over time. As such, it is impossible to understand the current movements in Iran without investigating the ideas that were negotiated during previous protest periods. Indeed, current movement activists in Iran conceptualize their ongoing struggle in this manner. In this respect, movement groups in Iran see the current reform movement as an extension of the revolutionary ideal, not as a counter-revolution.

In the first chapter of this study it was stated that during conflict social movement actors manipulate *symbols* and *language* in order to create new ideas and new social identities, and that movement leaders anchor their speech and action to existing cultural symbols and narratives in

order to make them meaningful. The paradox is that while traditional narratives can unify and mobilize movement followers, movement leaders ultimately want to change the existing social system. This is the conundrum that current movements in Iran are trying to solve. The revolution ultimately established the legitimating ideology of current Iranian governance and changed Iranian culture. Paradoxically, current movement leaders, with respect to their goals of greater social freedom and dialogue among civilizations, have to renegotiate the cultural artifacts of the revolution. As such, new frames of sovereignty are currently reframing the picture of the “West” created during the past century, and amending the legitimating ideology of Iranian governance, the *Velayat-e faqih*.

Questions for the Future

Knowing the history of movement ideas is important. Social movement ideas have a history, and they are linked across time, but these histories are hard to resurrect because of the nature of ideas. Movement ideas are unruly, they penetrate social organizations, and they ultimately work their way into the fabric of the culture in subtle ways. In this manner, movement frames ingratiate their way into a subconscious, an institution, and a culture, and they affect the way people see the world. As such, histories of movement frames help reveal why movements were strong, or weak, at different periods of time. And these histories tell us how the movement goals of the present are related to the goals of the past. Indeed, historical knowledge allows people to speculate about, and ultimately create, the events of the future.

I began this project with the intention of telling a narrative history of movement frames in Iran, and ultimately had to confront a unique Iranian culture. Because this project was presented to a primarily Western audience it became apparent that an accounting, albeit incomplete, of

Iranian cultural ideas was necessary for understanding how Iranian movement ideas were created. Indeed, recounting a history of movement frames in Iran without knowing the rudiments of Iranian culture would be an impossible endeavor. The obvious question to ask is why would any social movement study ignore the importance of culture in the formation of movement ideas? If culture is necessary for understanding movement ideas in Iran, then an accounting of culture would seem necessary in order to understand social movements in the West also. When Westerners investigate movements in the West, we often do so from a shared vantage point, from a shared culture, so there is a tendency not to explicitly identify the cultural ideas that helped create resonant movement frames. As a result, the importance of culture in fashioning movement goals is often ignored when those reading an account share the same culture. Perhaps the primary benefit of cross-cultural research is that it inevitably forces people to reconcile themselves to the fact that culture is an important factor in social life.

In the end, this study used two different strategies in its account of the development of movement ideas in Iran over time. It first introduced the rudiments of an Iranian culture, and then demonstrated that movement frames, over time, were linked to resonant ideas that were made available by this culture. It then demonstrated the continuity, and dynamic amendments, that were made to these movement messages over time. This strategy is valuable for exploring other social movement histories. In particular, even if it is assumed that an audience shares the same culture, it is still important to remind people that their culture helps facilitate movement ideas.

¹ Soroush is a reformist scholar, who studied the History of Science and Ideas in Great Britain as a graduate student.

² For example, the most dynamic expatriate magazine, the Iranian Times (see www.iranian.com) consistently has contributors who regard the ongoing movement as a rejection of the 1979 revolution, despite the fact that most movement leaders are fairly explicit in stating that they regard the current movement as an extension of the revolutionary program. In general, the Iranian Times, part of “The Iranian” website, while primarily organized by Iranian expatriates, has a diversity of opinions on its site.