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darkmatter hub • Issue-17 Woman, Life, Freedom: The Sounds of A Revolution

From the Depth We Shall Rise: In Praise of Grassroots Organisation During the Woman Life Freedom Movement

Kaveh Abbasian¹

¹University of Kent

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The events following the killing of Jina Mahsa Amini in September 2022 took many observers of Iranian politics off-guard, in the same vein as revolutions often do. This, of course, did not result in a ground-breaking revolution that topples the existing order and brings about a new world. And yet, any attempt at analysing the events that have come to be known as the ‘Woman Life Freedom movement’ immediately presents us with the complexities often found in revolutions and revolutionary movements. With that in mind, while acknowledging the revolutionary potentials of the ongoing socio-political movement, it is equally crucial to address its limitations as well, for it is only through such analysis that we might be able to shed light on the road ahead.

One of the most important elements of successful revolutions that the ongoing movement in Iran lacks is revolutionary organisation. Whether we like their outcome or not, most successful revolutions have revolutionary organisations at their core, with certain ideologies and plans of action, who manage to use the opportunity to seize power and bring about historic changes. From the October Revolution of 1917 to the Chinese Revolution of 1949, Cuban Revolution of 1959, and even the Iranian Revolution of 1979, revolutionary organisations played a crucial role in delivering the final blow to the crumbling orders of their times. Considering the social dynamics of the Iranian society, domestically speaking, the Islamic Republic is indeed at a low point, but cleverly enough, and of course brutally enough, it has managed to prevent the formation of that organised revolutionary opposition. That is one big reason why these many thousands of sacrifices have so far not led to an end to the tyrannical rule of the Islamist capitalists in power in Iran.

But let’s be positive, and freshen up our minds with revolutionary hope, because there is another crucial element of successful revolutions that the ongoing movement in Iran has managed to summon, and that is solidarity from below. For the sake of comparison, let me give you an example from the time when I was a student activist in Iran.

When I entered university in Tehran in 2002, the reformist movement was at its height. This was a popular movement that was energised by people’s demand for change; unfortunately, however, it was led by a section of the ruling elite who used and abused this popular movement to negotiate for its own share of power. At that time, the student movement did not have organic connections and collaborations with other social movements such as the worker’s movement and the women’s movement. Please let me remind you that in the aftermath of the 1979 Revolution, in order to consolidate their power, the Islamists brutally crushed the student movement, as well as any other grassroots social movement. In a process which they called “cultural revolution”, they shot down universities for three years and purged them from anyone, student or academic, whom they deemed non-Islamic. Years later, in the 1990s, when the Iranian student movement gradually gained a new life, it found itself in the grip of a reformist leadership. Student leaders looked for allies among the ruling elite. As a result, powerful reformists used the student movement as a pawn in their negotiations. One reformist theorist, Saeed Hajjarian, called this process “*Feshar az paeen, chaneh-zani az bala*” (Pressure from below, negotiation from the top). No matter how large our demonstrations or occupations were, we never achieved any of our demands.

Student leaders would meet with this or that reformist leader who would advise them to do this or that, and then eventually after gaining some leverage in their own negotiations, they would ask the students to calm everything down.

So, the movement did not achieve its goals, and this led to years of disappointment, hopelessness, mass migration, and generally an atmosphere of doom. But as the general public was losing hope in reformism, a new generation of student activists began to look beyond the tired argument of ‘reform’ and looked towards finding allies among other grassroots social movements. This was the beginning of a great shift in the political dynamic of Iran’s social movements.

Since then, the people of Iran have come a long way. They no longer have any faith in any section of the ruling elite. They find allies and solidarity among themselves. This is evident in grassroots collaboration among various social movements, in neighbourhoods and among local communities from Kurdistan all the way to Baluchistan. They are now aware that their demand for freedom and equality can never be asked from or negotiated with the Islamists in power. That is why they insist that their current movement is indeed a revolutionary movement.

As Iranians living outside Iran, we are filled with hope and fear about the state of the movement and its future. During the early days after Jina’s death, we weren’t sure what exactly we needed to do; testimony to that lack of organisation I was talking about earlier. We organised demonstrations here and there and some public figures started to appear in high-stake official forums and conferences to discuss the situation with Western powers. They raised certain demands and expected these Western powers to back them. This issue perhaps presents us with the other pitfall of the movement: the over-reliance of some of the diasporic oppositional figures on acknowledgment and help from certain Western powers, and often from some of the most right-wing warmongering circles in them. But motivations of these state powers are, as always, questionable, to say the least. We all know the stories about how the West backed the Islamists against the socialists during the 1979 Revolution. Even today, these Western powers’ approach toward the Islamic Republic is not always what it immediately appears to be, and definitely not what could be beneficial to the Iranian masses. For instance, while the Islamic Republic was removed – in December 2022 – from the UN Commission on the Status of Women (yes! Funnily enough, it was a member!), they have just been chosen to chair the UN Human Rights Council. Incredible! Isn’t it? And as fuel prices and cost of living rises in Europe, it shouldn’t come as a surprise that the West tries to normalise relationship with the Islamic Republic, despite all those photo-ops with Iranian oppositional figures.

On the other hand, and on a different level, similar to what was happening inside Iran, a more grassroots network of solidarity started to be formed among the diasporic Iranian community. These initiatives comprised of activists from previous generations, many of whom old-time revolutionaries and in exile from decades ago. Many others were indeed from the younger generations, even in their teens and twenties. They organised demonstrations, solidarity networks, and generally helped raise awareness regarding the situation in Iran. Here,

I would like to draw your attention to two of those initiatives, mainly because I know more about them as I was involved in organising them.

The first one is an academic network of solidarity and support called **Faculty for Woman Life Freedom**. The initial petition of this network was signed by 400 academics from around the world. These included, apart from many Iranian academics, figures such as Angela Davis, Judith Butler, Slavoj Žižek, Etienne Balibar, Wendy Brown, Cornel West, and Silvia Federici. Here are a few lines from this petition which include a call to action:

- *We call on students, faculty members, and academics of all disciplines around the world to join us in condemning the actions of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Moreover, we ask for your support to establish a more enduring initiative in support of the movement for “Woman, Life, Freedom”. We believe that it is through the creation of a grassroots network of solidarity with the people of Iran that we will prove most effective in raising awareness about the Iranian peoples’ struggles for freedom, equality, and democracy.*
- *As academics from various countries and continents, we pledge our utmost to prevent the state institutions of the Islamic Republic and representatives thereof from having any presence in global higher education, be it physically or virtually i.e. ongoing cooperation with institutions of the state comprising its executive, legislative, and judicial branches, security, military, and intelligence apparatuses, as well as state officials who hold office in any of the aforementioned institutions.*
- *Furthermore, we shall use our academic influence and capacities to create an international network to support Iranian protesters and dissidents including students and academics who have come to harm or face intimidation and threats at the hands of the Islamic Republic. We invite you to contribute to these support and pedagogic networks as well as pools of scholarships and fellowships for precarious students and scholars at risk in Iran, and boycott events and initiatives expressly backed by the Iranian state or in which officials of the Islamic Republic play an active part.*

The second initiative that I would like to mention here is the **Association of Iranian Film and Theatre Artists Abroad**. The ongoing movement in Iran has been so energising and empowering that for the first time ever, Iranian filmmakers and theatre artists abroad found the courage, motivation, and energy to organise themselves on a broad scale, because they too realised that great change is only possible through grassroots organisation. This initiative started with a small core group of founders from both film and theatre but soon found a momentum among the diasporic Iranian community as well as supporters among non-Iranian film and theatre professionals. These supporters included figures such as Ken Loach, Mike Leigh, Joana Hogg, Benedict Cumberbatch, Deborah Hofmann, Mike Figgis, Paul Laverty, Avi Mograbi, Mark Cousins, and Ben Rivers.

As well as successfully calling for artists to join as members to help create and run the association, their initial [statement](#) included a few clear demands. Here is how this statement ends:

Our Demands

- *We demand the immediate release of all political prisoners, including artists. We shall try all possible paths to reach this goal.*
- *We ask all film and theatre artists to stop or avoid working with the Islamic Republic's security apparatuses and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps.*
- *We ask all festivals, cultural establishments, and arts and academic institutes around the world to stop or avoid any collaboration with the Islamic Republic's state-affiliated institutions.*
- *We expect the international community to put widespread pressure on the Islamic Republic for an immediate cessation of death sentences and for answering for their inhumane crimes.*

Let's create a solidarity through which we can amplify the voices of Iranians, especially those of children and women. United we can give a new meaning to international solidarity.

So, with all that in mind, remember that this is an ongoing movement. It has high points and low points but like every other historic change, it has to take its time. And for our revolutionary movement to reach its goals, we need to turn our attention from the ruling elites, either in Iran or outside it, and their media conglomerates, to the ordinary people and their grassroots solidarity.

Kaveh Abbasian is a documentary filmmaker, scholar and a lecturer in Film and Media Practice at the University of Kent, with a special interest in archive-based audiovisual research, Kurdish cinema, refugee filmmaking, and the Islamic Republic's propaganda film culture. In Iran Kaveh was a student activist and a founding member of Students for Freedom and Equality. In 2008 and during the countrywide crackdown on the organisation, Kaveh had to leave the country and reside in the UK as a political refugee. He continues to live and work in the UK.

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