

Political subjectivity - in action

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By Sadeq Rahimi

I want to leave a quick note for any and all of the friends who had started to get engaged with my [earlier postings](#) on the theme of political subjectivity, both to apologize for having disappeared, and to give a quick explanation.

I am definitely very interested in continuing that thread and will be back, hopefully before long, to continue our conversations. But meanwhile, I have been engaged and occupied quite intensely with what is going on in Iran -that is my country of origin.

As you have heard/seen on the news, there has been much unrest in Iran following a recent presidential election. While the word has not been used freely by the media and by those who are not closely familiar with the situation, it is actually a coup that has happened in Iran, and by a very dangerous group of people, I should add. Due to the public's serious and impressive resistance, the coup failed to succeed as quickly and easily as it had been expected by its organizers, and its fate continues to be uncertain. That is why I have continued to be closely engaged with the situation by offering my own small part in trying to claim back our votes and our freedom. And that is why I have not been able to spare much time to come here and write on 'political subjectivity'.

Before I stop, I would like to also copy here an analysis of the current situation in Iran by Slavoj Zizek, which I find highly accurate and insightful. He has offered this text to the online community free of copyright, which is why I feel free to copy it here, and you too should feel free to distribute it further, if you like.

My best regards to all of you, and hoping that the next time I write I can paint a less somber picture of the situation in Iran.

– Sadeq

PS, for those of you who speak Farsi (Persian), you can follow/contact me through my Farsi weblog, ['Cultural Logic' \(temporarily titled 'Where Is My Vote?'\)](#).

Will the Cat Above the Precipice Fall Down?

Slavoj Žižek on recent coup in Iran

When an authoritarian regime approaches its final crisis, its dissolution as a rule follows two steps. Before its actual collapse, a mysterious rupture takes place: all of a sudden people know that the game is over, they are simply no longer afraid. It is not only that the regime loses its legitimacy, its exercise of power itself is perceived as an impotent panic reaction. We all know the classic scene from cartoons: the cat reaches a precipice, but it goes on walking, ignoring the fact that there is no ground under its feet; it starts to fall only when it looks down and notices the abyss. When it loses its authority, the regime is like a cat above the precipice: in order to fall, it only has to be reminded to look down...

In *Shah of Shahs*, a classic account of the Khomeini revolution, Ryszard Kapuscinski located the precise moment of this rupture: at a Tehran crossroad, a single demonstrator refused to budge when a policeman shouted at him to move, and the embarrassed policeman simply withdrew; in a couple of hours, all Tehran knew about this incident, and although there were street fights going on for weeks, everyone somehow knew the game is over. Is something similar going on now?

There are many versions of the events in Tehran. Some see in the protests the culmination of the pro-Western “reform movement” along the lines of the “orange” revolutions in Ukraine, Georgia, etc. – a secular reaction to the Khomeini revolution. They support the protests as the first step towards a new liberal-democratic secular Iran freed of Muslim fundamentalism. They are counteracted by skeptics who think that Ahmadinejad really won: he is the voice of the majority, while the support of Mousavi comes from the middle classes and their gilded youth. In short: let’s drop the illusions and face the fact that, in Ahmadinejad, Iran has a president it deserves. Then there are those who dismiss Mousavi as a member of the cleric establishment with merely cosmetic differences from Ahmadinejad: Mousavi also wants to continue the atomic energy program, he is against recognizing Israel, plus he enjoyed the full support of Khomeini as a prime minister in the years of the war with Iraq.

Finally, the saddest of them all are the Leftist supporters of Ahmadinejad: what is really at stake for them is Iranian independence. Ahmadinejad won because he stood up for the

country's independence, exposed elite corruption and used oil wealth to boost the incomes of the poor majority – this is, so we are told, the true Ahmadinejad beneath the Western-media image of a holocaust-denying fanatic. According to this view, what is effectively going on now in Iran is a repetition of the 1953 overthrow of Mossadegh – a West-financed coup against the legitimate president. This view not only ignores facts: the high electoral participation – up from the usual 55% to 85% – can only be explained as a protest vote. It also displays its blindness for a genuine demonstration of popular will, patronizingly assuming that, for the backward Iranians, Ahmadinejad is good enough – they are not yet sufficiently mature to be ruled by a secular Left.

Opposed as they are, all these versions read the Iranian protests along the axis of Islamic hardliners versus pro-Western liberal reformists, which is why they find it so difficult to locate Mousavi: is he a Western-backed reformer who wants more personal freedom and market economy, or a member of the cleric establishment whose eventual victory would not affect in any serious way the nature of the regime? Such extreme oscillations demonstrate that they all miss the true nature of the protests.

The green color adopted by the Mousavi supporters, the cries of “Allah akbar!” that resonate from the roofs of Tehran in the evening darkness, clearly indicate that they see their activity as the repetition of the 1979 Khomeini revolution, as the return to its roots, the undoing of the revolution's later corruption. This return to the roots is not only programmatic; it concerns even more the mode of activity of the crowds: the emphatic unity of the people, their all-encompassing solidarity, creative self-organization, improvising of the ways to articulate protest, the unique mixture of spontaneity and discipline, like the ominous march of thousands in complete silence. We are dealing with a genuine popular uprising of the deceived partisans of the Khomeini revolution.

There are a couple of crucial consequences to be drawn from this insight. First, Ahmadinejad is not the hero of the Islamist poor, but a genuine corrupted Islamo-Fascist populist, a kind of Iranian Berlusconi whose mixture of clownish posturing and ruthless power politics is causing unease even among the majority of ayatollahs. His demagogic distributing of crumbs to the poor should not deceive us: behind him are not only organs of police repression and a very Westernized PR apparatus, but also a strong new rich class, the result of the regime's corruption (Iran's Revolutionary Guard is not a working class militia, but a mega-corporation, the strongest center of wealth in the country).

Second, one should draw a clear difference between the two main candidates opposed to Ahmadinejad, Mehdi Karroubi and Mousavi. Karroubi effectively is a reformist, basically proposing the Iranian version of identity politics, promising favors to all particular groups. Mousavi is something entirely different: his name stands for the genuine resuscitation of the popular dream which sustained the Khomeini revolution. Even if this dream was a utopia, one should recognize in it the genuine utopia of the revolution itself. What this means is that the 1979 Khomeini revolution cannot be reduced to a hard line Islamist takeover – it was much more. Now is the time to remember the incredible effervescence of the first year after the revolution, with the breath-taking explosion of political and social creativity, organizational experiments and debates among students and ordinary people. The very fact that this explosion had to be stifled demonstrates that the Khomeini revolution was an authentic political event, a momentary opening that unleashed unheard-of forces of social transformation, a moment in which “everything seemed possible.” What followed was a gradual closing through the take-over of political control by the Islam establishment. To put it in Freudian terms, today’s protest movement is the “return of the repressed” of the Khomeini revolution.

And, last but not least, what this means is that there is a genuine liberating potential in Islam – to find a “good” Islam, one doesn’t have to go back to the 10th century, we have it right here, in front of our eyes.

The future is uncertain – in all probability, those in power will contain the popular explosion, and the cat will not fall into the precipice, but regain ground. However, it will no longer be the same regime, but just one corrupted authoritarian rule among others. Whatever the outcome, it is vitally important to keep in mind that we are witnessing a great emancipatory event which doesn’t fit the frame of the struggle between pro-Western liberals and anti-Western fundamentalists. If our cynical pragmatism will make us lose the capacity to recognize this emancipatory dimension, then we in the West are effectively entering a post-democratic era, getting ready for our own Ahmadinejads. Italians already know his name: Berlusconi. Others are waiting in line.

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