



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

# The role of social media in Iran's Green Movement

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## **Abstract**

This research attempts to examine the role of social media in Iran's Green Movement. In particular, by using a socio psychological framework, explores how social media had been used as a tool to facilitate the process of mobilization at the time of pre-election campaign, post-election demonstrations, and the period of dormancy of the Green Movement in Iran. This study is based on personal interviews with seven sympathizers of Green Movement who took part in demonstrations and observed the processes of formation and growing of the movement. The research will illustrate that social media had been highly effective tools in mobilizing masses of people and the formation of the Green Movement.

## **Introduction**

The process of globalization has provided broader availability to communication technologies via internet, which facilitate social connectivity. Social media tools (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, email, text messaging, photo sharing) have accelerated the process of circulating of information. These evolving tools have also created a new arena to communicate and exchange ideas by introducing new communication patterns and providing newfound interaction practices.

The function of these communication tools in the authoritarian states could be more significant in the absence of non-governmental media. Recently, the relation between social media and social movements is a controversial issue in academic debates. However, some media- and political experts consider social media, as not worthy tools in relation to social movements, there are authors who emphasize the potential and power of these tools in mobilizing masses in paving their way to freedom and social changes. Those who are optimists (Shirky, 2008) acknowledge social media as beneficial tools for democracy by reducing barriers of communication and facilitating dissemination of information while the pessimists (Morozov, 2011, p. 10) believe that these tools are more helpful for authoritarian regimes to suppress social movements easier.

What happened in Iran during the 2009 post-presidential election provides us with a well-known example for examining these claims. This instance demonstrates the potential of new

communication technologies and social media tools such as -Facebook, twitter, YouTube, text messaging, photo sharing and email- to play an effective role in social movements in terms of formation of mobilization potentials, organizing demonstrations, facilitate circulating of information for insider and outsider audiences, and providing motivations to participate in the movement.

About four years ago, on June 13, 2009, when the official result of the presidential election declared the victory of Mahmud Ahmadinejad and the defeat of Mir Hussein Mousavi, masses of Mousavi's supporters poured to the streets questioning the validity of the election's result with a simple slogan of where is my vote? This simple slogan was a powerful message against the apparently rigged election of M. Ahmadinejad to the presidency. That was the beginning of an important political movement in Iran called "Green Movement". Because the campaign color of presidential candidate Mir Hussein Mousavi was green and the protesters were dressed and decorated in green color as well.

In a short time, pictures and video clips of demonstrations were shared at internet and consequently, social media tools became a significant arena for protesters to organize demonstrations and sharing news and information. It happened despite intensive limitations and filtering imposed by the government on internet. Therefore, western media dubbed the movement "The Twitter Revolution" because of the use of that technology; "The Iranian presidential election of June 2009 was monitored by what was quickly labeled the Twitter Revolution, mass protesters tweeting messages of hope, inspiration, and alarm to the rest of the world. Twitter users were able to circumvent government censors who restricted access to mobile text messaging by utilizing the micro-blogging website Twitter, famous for its self-contained 140-character tweets" (Snow, 2010, p. 99).

On the one hand, some analysts (Aslan, 2010, p.311, Cole, 2010, p. 316) consider the Green Movement as the most important political event in Iran since 1979 revolution. On the other hand, some scholars like Picerkings (2011) and Simonowitz (2011) acknowledge the Green Movement as the catalyst for the beginning of the Arab Spring that caused the fall of two regimes in Egypt and Tunisia, civil wars in Libya and Syria, and revolutionary movements in Yemen and Bahrain. These considerations approve that the importance of "Green Movement" cannot be taken for granted.

During that remarkable social movement, new communication technologies especially Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and text messaging played a considerable role, but how and in what way are difficult questions to answer without examining the pros and cons of this movement. However, there are different debates (Morozov and Shirky, 2010) and several studies that have looked at the importance of social media tools in the Green Movement in Iran.

This study attempts to examine the role of social media in a process of mobilization individuals in the Green movement by providing a socio psychological framework. This study by using the "Klandermans' framework (regarding steps towards participate in social movements" (Klandermans, 1997, p.22), explore the role of social media tools in the Green Movement in Iran in terms of becoming part of the mobilization potential, becoming target of mobilization attempts, becoming motivated to participate, and overcoming barriers to participation (Klandermans and Oegma, 1987, p.519-531).

This is a worthy study because it tends to examine the Green Movement from the sympathizer's point of view. People that were witnessing the process of formation, growing and abeyance of Green Movement and observed how social media played a considerable function on that event, especially in the absence of an non-governmental media. They also experienced all limitations and blockages that government imposed over internet in order to hinder the movement.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, they observed that whereas Iran's government imposed enormous censorship and filtering over internet, especially after declaration of the election result, people cracked down that filtering to communicate, share news and diffuse their dissent to the glob through internet.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, this study attempts to shed light to the fact that restrictions could not prevent mobilization of masses that are seeking their civil rights in the society.

It is important to note that an important factor in the formation of Green Movement is that people who traditionally relied on face-to-face communication rather than mediated channels, perceived social media as useful tools and as safe way of communicating beyond the government's censorship and suppression. In addition, during Iran's post-presidential dispute,

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<sup>1</sup> Mentioned by participants in this research

<sup>2</sup> Stated by participants in this research

Iran's government attempted to prevent news to not be published by forbidding coverage of demonstrations, arresting a large number of journalists and protesters, who were sharing news and photos, and filtering or blocking Web sites and social networks, which were crucial means for transferring of information about uprising.

As final words, it can be claimed that it is almost impossible to find an accurate understanding about the nature of demonstrations in Iran without identifying the vital role of social media tools and new technologies.

## **Purpose and Research Questions**

This paper attempts to expose the role of social media tools and new communication technologies -Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Email, Text messaging or photo sharing- in the Green Movement in Iran. The main goal of the study is to answer the below question:

- What was the role of social media in the formation of Iran's Green Movement?

This thesis is aiming at answering this question through interviews with seven person who were involved in the Green Movement whether as participants or as an organizer. People who were witnessing the process of formation, growing and dormancy of Green Movement and they had several applicable experiences for this research.

## **Literature Review**

- **Green Movement and Internet**

There are different debates about the impact of social media and new communication technologies -Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and mobile phones- in Green Movement in Iran.

Part of critical scholars (Cohen, 2009) tend to consider the new communication technologies as depoliticized, privatized tools, and present them as personal and entertainment apparatuses. However, some media experts (Shirky, 2008) are utopians and see internet and new media as

beneficial tools for democracy; some are pessimist (Morozov, 2011) and believe that these tools possess negative potentials on social movements.

Clay Shirkey (2008) in his book, 'Here comes everybody: the power of organizing without organizations', assumes that internet and social media tools reduce barriers of communication and facilitate spreading out the information and organizing groups in social movements.

Furthermore, in his article in Foreign Affairs (2011), he stresses the role of new media on coordinating political collective actions and believes that banning internet by authoritarian regimes is an evidence for this argument. By mentioning to the Green Movement, Shirkey states "during the June 2009 revolt of the Green Movement, Iranians activists used every possible technological coordinating tool to protest the miscount of votes for Mir Hossein Mousavi, but were ultimately brought to heel by a violent crackdown" (Shirky, 2011), he names that movement as too "confrontational" to be effective.

In addition, Kurzman considers the electronic media as "one of the backbones" of Green Movement and claims that "[Mousavi's] Facebook page continues to be one of the central ways for the Green Movement to distribute information" (Kurzman in Hashemi and Postel ed., 2010, p. 7). He also emphasizes the role of internet on increasing global interest in political situation in Iran.

Moreover, Sreberny and Khiabany (2010), have a critical perspective about the effectiveness of internet in political movements in Iran. They argue that this is true that "new communication technologies are effective tools in popular social mobilization" (Sreberny and Khiabany, 2010, p. ix) however, there are difficulties facing intellectual activities in Iran, and that is why a large part of it now appears in the blogosphere" (Sreberny and Khiabany, 2010, p. 152). Besides, slowing down the internet, filtering, high connection, and high hardware costs are some of limitations that Sreberny and Khiabany (2010) believe that prevent many Iranians from access to the internet.

Malcolm Gladwell (2010) assumes that the ability of internet and new media to make communication easier could not consider as positive point for revolutionary movements because these links are weak ties and could not be enough for motivating individuals to participate in any off line action, therefore make that action impossible.

In addition, Evgeny Morozov (2011) believes that if social networking tools are not used properly, can be helpful for authoritarian regimes to sustain more power by virtue of the ability to monitor and even shut down these networks. He points to the Green Movement in Iran to approve his idea. This writer posits that "once the protests quieted down, the Iranian authorities embarked on a digital purge of their opponents...in December 2009 the pro-Ahmadinejad Raja News website, published a batch of thirty-eight photos with sixty-five faces circled in red and a batch of forty-seven photos with about a hundred faces circled in red. According to the Iranian police, public tip-offs helped identify and arrest at least forty people" (Morozov, 2011, p. 10).

He also considers blocking Facebook by Iran's regime during the Iranians' 2009 post election demonstrations as another example and explains, "Facebook is a very particular example when it comes to Iran because there were blockages and unblockages throughout the election campaign. If you closely study it from January 2009 to June 2009, there have been multiple instances where it was blocked, and then unblocked, and then blocked again. But, to me, the act that they blocked Facebook doesn't mean anything ... The point here is that they could do it and they did" (Morozov and Shirky, 2010).

John Rahaghi (2012) in his research article claims that, "The largest benefit of Twitter [in 2009] was informing the world of the events transpiring on the ground in Iran. This is a very important role and in different circumstances, Twitter may have helped organize the Iranian opposition in their efforts at protest but modern communication technology was rendered ineffective due to a lack of clear organization and leadership...depending on the circumstances, the capabilities of these technologies may be negated or used against protesters through monitoring by the government" (Rahaghi, 2012, p. 174). He mentions to intensive censorships and filtering on internet and mobile's connectivity during that event and argues, "The technology may be extremely versatile and powerful, but its effectiveness will be lessened if the target population does not have access to it" (Rahaghi, 2012, p. 175).

Moreover, he suggests that many of the organizational, identity, and networking processes essential for mass movements can be created with online activity and asserts that organizing, recruiting, and motivating is possible with the connections created by social media tools such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Furthermore, this researcher emphasizes the potential of these modern communication technologies to inform the outside world, from events



happening everywhere, quickly and easily. Nevertheless, he is critical about the way and circumstances in which these new technologies are used.

Henry Giroux (2009) is one of the authors who accentuate the importance of new media and communication technologies in the Green Movement in Iran. He mentions in his article in *Fast Capitalism* that "Perhaps, most significantly, the democratic protests in Iran that alleged electoral fraud in the election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on June 12, 2009, have rekindled questions about the relations between the new media and the terms on which politics operate. The new media's potential to revitalize the public sphere, and its construction of social practices and modes of communication cannot be defined exclusively within the power relations of the nation state"(Giroux, 2009).

This author also alludes to the government's attempts hinder outside world view of the coverage of the demonstrations in Iran by banning the social media, arresting the journalists and bloggers, and expresses that "it is impossible to comprehend the nature of the existing protests in Iran without recognizing the centrality of the new media and new modes of social networking" (Giroux, 2009).

Writers like, Merlyna Lim and Mark Kann (2008) consider internet as a "convivial medium with a greater scope for freedom, autonomy, creativity, and collaboration than previous media" (Lim and Kann, 2008, p. 77-107), however, they warn "there is nothing inherent in internet technology that automatically achieves this potential" (Lim and Kann, 2008, p. 77-107). In other words, they see internet as a useful tool in organizing efforts due to its ability to connect one-to-one and one-to-many and provide the possibility for mutual interaction. However, they stress that "face-to-face gatherings may be necessary to sustain, organize, and focus political movements over time" (Lim and Kann, 2008, p. 77-107).

Hamid Dabashi (2010) is another author that defends the idea that internet can play a significant role in political movements. He particularly accentuates the role of social networking sites like Facebook in the Green Movement and challenges the critical ideas about Iranian's limitations in accessibility to internet. Dabashi asserts "the issue of access to a personal computer or degree of computer literacy is entirely irrelevant, just as basic literacy was irrelevant...in the earlier periods, for all that is required is just one person per family, or a few per neighborhood, to account for the entire public domain" (Dabashi, 2010, p. 153).

## Methodological discussion

The research tends to gather information through semi-structured interviews with seven Iranians who lived in Iran before and after the presidential election in June 2009 and subsequent demonstrations. They were witnessing the process of formation, growing and dormancy of the Green Movement. The participants of my research, despite of their backgrounds, gender, and age are well educated and participated in the pre-election rallies and post-election demonstrations. Except one of the participants, who is currently living in Iran, another six interviewees moved to abroad due to educational reasons two or three years ago.

In additions, participants in this study include four women and three men, and their age, vary from 26 to 46 years old. Moreover, interviewees are from different political backgrounds; two of them are political activists. They also were active in the Green Movement in terms of organizing demonstrations, gathering, and sharing news with others in order to motivate them to engage in the movement.

However, other five participants in this study are personally interested in socio-political incidences in Iran. They normally follow the news related to political events but they are not part of any political organization. During the Green Movement, they did not have any active role to run the movement except participating in some of the demonstrations as normal civilians. In other words, while the first two participants had some years of experiences in political activities before the green movement, the other five participants of this study started being engaged in social activities after the birth of Green Movement.

In order to avoid any political problem for participants in this study, all the interviews were done thorough Skype because it was the safest method (according to a cyber-space expert in Iran) that might not be tracked by government. I ensured the participants that the interviews would be anonymous and answering to all questions was not mandatory (If they were not interested because of any reason, they were free to do not answer to the particular questions).

Moreover, It is important to note that I could not do some of my planed interviews with people who currently live in Iran just because they were afraid of subsequent political problems like become arrested by the Iranian government. Furthermore, there will be another presidential election in June 2013 in Iran, therefore government started to limit the political sphere as more as possible by imposing more control and filtering over internet.

Another important issue related to the methodology is that I divided chronology of the Green Movement into three periods in order to facilitate analyzing the information and reinforce the result of study. These periods consist of:

- First, the pre-election campaign (almost one month before the election).
- Second, the post-election demonstrations (June 2009 to the end of the year).
- Third, the dormancy of the Green Movement (January 2010 until now).

This divisions is significant because in each period the amount of filtering and censorship over internet imposing by the government were different; on the other words in the first period (the pre-election campaign) government let people to access some social networking sites which previously were blocked. However, one week before the election government blocked them again.

In the second period, the government imposed the most intensive filtering over the social networking sites as well as mobile phones. They also arrested many cyber activists and journalists.

In the third period, government blocked social networking sites periodically and arrested too many of cyber activists as well. During this period, doing any online or offline political actions is life threatening and have massive risks for dissents.

I chose to study the role of social media tools in Green movement by using qualitative methods such as in depth semi-structured interviews since the goal of my research was to perceive the in-depth experiences of the participants related to quality of using these technologies in the Green Movement.

On the one hand, this method gave me the opportunity to examine the role of social media tools in this movement more profoundly, on the other hand, provided a rapport between respondents and me that let us to follow interviews like a friendly conversation. Therefore, such a friendly environment helped the respondents answer to the questions free of any stress or pre-judgments.

Finally, participants in this study were asked to explain what was the usefulness of internet and communication technologies like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Balatarin, Email, text messaging, for them during the pre election campaigns, the post election demonstrations, and

in period of abeyance of the Green Movement. Interviews' results was expected to underline significant role of these mediated form of communication in terms of affect individuals to become part of mobilization potential, become part of mobilization attempts, become motivated to participate to the movement and overcome to the barriers of participate to the movement.

## **Theoretical Discussions**

There are massive books and researches exploring the role of social media and new communication technologies in the social movements or any collective actions. However, there is not any special theory in the media and communications studies that could exactly examine the connection between social media and social movements. Therefore, because of finding a gap in the field of communication studies supporting my questions about effectiveness of social media tools in formation and activation of social movements, I used Bert Klandermans' model regarding "four steps toward participation" (Klandermans, 1997, p. 22) to the social movements.

Klandermans (1987) explains four fundamental aspects to mobilization namely "Formation of mobilization potentials, Formation, and activation of recruitment networks, Arousal of motivation to participate and finally Removal of barriers to participation" (Klandermans and Oegma, 1987, p. 519). He lays stress on the role of individuals in social movements and utters that "in the individual level becoming a participant in a social movement can be conceived as a process of four steps: becoming part of the mobilization potential, becoming part of mobilization attempts, becoming motivated to participate, and overcoming barriers to participate" (Klandermans and Oegma, 1987, p. 519). Klandermans emphasize that these four steps are vital for participation in a social movement; the deficiency or strength of each step could reinforce or subtract the sum of participants in the movement. In other words, the first two steps are mandatory for the occurrence of the other steps, and more motivated persons have more potential to overcome the barriers for participate.

Moreover, Klandermans (1987) mentions that, "nonparticipation in a movement can be based on four reasons including lack of sympathy for the movement, not being the target of a

mobilization attempt, not being motivated, and the presence of barriers" (Klandermans and Oegma, 1987, p. 519).

Before moving forward, it is essential to clarify these four steps of Klandermans' model, it facilitates understanding how social media tools can play a role in each step towards participation in a social movement.

**Defining Social Movement:** Tarrow (1994) defined social movements as "collective challenges by people with common purposes and solidarity in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities" (Tarrow, 1994, p. 4). Klandermans (1997) by proposing this definition conclude that, "social movements, then, are populated by individuals sharing collective goals and collective identity who engage in disruptive collective action" (Klandermans, 1997, p. 2).

**Mobilization potential:** According to Klandermans' model (1997), in the first step, individuals should become part of mobilization potential. He illustrates that "Mobilization potential refers to the people in a society who in one way or another, may potentially be mobilized by a social movement, and accepted the goals of that movement. It includes everyone who has a positive attitude toward a particular social movement; hence, its boundaries need not coincide with those of the group whose interests it defends or represents" (Klandermans, 1997, p. 23). In the other words, to obtain the sympathy of some people in the society is a vital requirement to create mobilization potential for a movement. In addition, sympathizers feel unanimity with the goals of movement and have potentially willingness to engage to any forms of collective action. In addition, Klandermans (1987) in his article in American sociological review asserts, "People who are not part of the mobilization potential will not consider participating in movement activities, even if they are reached by attempts at mobilization" (Klandermans and Oegma, 1987, p. 519).

**The Formation and Activation of Recruitment Networks:** in this step as klandermans mentions in his book (1997), individuals who potentially mobilized by the movement, must become part of mobilization attempts. In the side of organizations, in this step they need to extend their recruitment networks, in order to do that they have to unite powers with other organizations and to connect with other existing networks. Actually, the recruitment networks of a social movement present the power of the movement in mobilization attempts; the higher the sum of networks, the larger individuals who become target of mobilization attempts. In

the other side, individual within a recruitment network, objectively need to be mobilized and subjectively try to mobilize others (Klandermans, 1997, p. 24).

Furthermore, Klandermans declares that individuals can be targeted by mobilization attempts through different paths namely mass media, direct mail, friendship ties, and ties with organizations (Klandemans and Oegma, 1987, p. 520). However, some scholars (McQuail, 1983, McCarthy, 1983, Mitchell, 1984 and McAdam, 1986; Martie, 1987) deny the effectiveness of mass media and even direct mail in convincing and activating individuals to participate in a social movement.

**Motivation to Participation:** Klandemans (1984) defines participation in a social movement as "a function of perceived costs and benefits of participation" (Klandermans, 1984, p. 583). The perceived costs and benefits of participation vary depends on kind of the movement, individual nature and circumstance. A social movement involves potential individuals in different forms of activities like demonstration, strike and so on, people who are not motivated enough, will not participate in any kinds of these activities even if be a part of mobilization potential or became target of mobilization attempts (klandemans, 1984).

In the other words, the arousal of motivation must positively influence the propensity to participate in the targeted people. In order to accentuate the importance role of motivation to increase the number of participants in a social movement, Klandermans (1997) offers the "motivational model" (Klandermans, 1997, p. 26). According to this model, "selective and collective incentives"<sup>3</sup> have a significant role in willingness to participate. He explains that "the value of an incentive can motivate someone if and only if he expects that participation will realize that incentive. As far as collective incentives are concerned each of the three different expectations of success that influence participatory decisions expectations about (a) the behavior of others, (b) one's own contribution to the achievement of success and (c) the perceived likelihood of success if many people participate must be above zero for the goal to motivate participation" (Klandermans, 1997, p. 28). Besides, providing both collective and selective incentives are essential requirements for motivating people to participate to a social movement (Klandermans, 1997).

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<sup>3</sup> Klandermans defines: collective incentives are related to the accomplishment of collective goals, they are all-inclusive it means everyone benefits of accomplishment of the goals. Conversely, Selective incentives (social or non social) impact only the individuals who participated in a collective action.

In addition, both inaction and interaction among participants could play a significant role in constructing the success expectations in a protest movement. Therefore, "the greater number of individuals, who believe collective action, will be successful, the more likely it is that mass action will materialized and that the authorities will have to respond, in the other side of the coin, if no person believes collective action, will be successful, mass action becomes impossible" (Klandermans, 1997, p. 28).

**Barriers to Participate:** According to Klandermans (1997, p. 25) motivation is a necessary condition however, there is not any guarantee that the motivated people who became part of the mobilization potential and targeted by mobilization attempts, will participate in the social movement. There is a mutual relation between motivation and barriers to participate; persons who are more motivated have more potential to overcome barriers to participate. Moreover, the number of people that participate in a social movement is related to the range of costs and benefits of participation on that social movement. Therefore, a social movement has to reduce the costs of participation as much as possible or in the other side attempts to increase motivations to participate.

### **The role of Internet in Klandermans' model (1987)**

Klandermans (1987) has not talked about the role of Internet or any social media tools in his model. However, this study attempts to provide some findings that could prove the importance of social media tools (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, social networking, Email, text messaging, and photo sharing) in the particular case of Green Movement in Iran.

Firstly, I have tested the idea that Internet can be useful in social movements in terms of helping organizations to gain mobilization potentials or affecting individuals to become a part of the mobilization potential. Moreover, that the Internet can provide the opportunity for sympathizers due to gain information and news about the goals of the movement in a shorter and safer manner (become part of mobilization potential). In addition social media sites inform people about the location, date, and time of demonstrations or any other activities related to the movement (become part of mobilization attempts). Internet also can affect people's tendency to participate in more activities related to the movement by sharing pictures or videos of success or failure of movement's goals (become motivate to participation). In the other side, this information, pictures, and movies help people to perceive cost and benefits of

participation to the movement and then they become more motivated to participate by overcoming to the barriers.

Secondly, this study tend to demonstrate that social media tools by providing an open arena for communication, increase the possibility of interaction among participants in a social movement and as Klandermans (1997, p. 28) mentions interaction among participants has a significant role in terms of constructing success expectations.

However, it is important to note that participation in a social movement also depends on "the nature of action, specific circumstances, each individual's particular characteristics and experiences, and his or her social environment" (Klandermans, 1997, p. 7).

Nevertheless, formation of mobilization potentials, activation of recruitment networks, and arousal of motivation to participate and even removing barriers to participation in the authoritarian societies is accompanied with limitations. In such society the costs of participation is high and dissent's organizations have more difficulties in mobilizing potentials. Moreover, in such states distributing of information is low or even impossible.

Surprisingly, social media tools and new communication technologies in such societies, in the absence of open media, and democratic political sphere have potential to play a significant role in terms of facilitating communication among individual and recruitment networks and increase the speed of mobilization, decrease cost of participation and reinforce motivations to participate.

According to my interviewees, internet and social media tools during pre-election campaigns, post-election demonstrations, and the period of abeyance of Green Movement played roles in different ways. Some of them just used social networks due to get information about the location and time of demonstrations also obtain knowledge about the goals of movement, for some of them social networks sites provided an opportunity for interact with other participants and get motivation to participate to demonstrations.



## Outline of results

My thesis deals with a group including seven sympathizers of Green Movement. The first part provides sympathizers' experiences in terms of using Internet at the time of electoral campaigns. It consists of a short background of this period and underlying informants' statements. Then it gives an analytical conclusion according to Klandermans' model (1987). The second part presents observations of informants in the time of post-election demonstrations. This part also includes a background about political sphere, and discussions about importance of Internet and social media tools during this period according to informant's statements. Then, it provides an analytical conclusion of the period. In the third part, the interviewees explain their experiences about capability of social media in the time of dormancy of the Green Movement. Then the study provides a conclusion based on klandermans' model of participation on social movements (Klandermans, 1987). Finally, the role of social media tools in the Green Movement will be examine based on klandermans' model, which will serve as an overall conclusion of the research.

### **1. Pre-Election Campaign (almost one month before the election)**

- **An Open Political Sphere**

The presidential election in Iran is officially based on people's vote, but 12-member Council of Guardians must approve candidates for the presidency. The 20th may 2009, the Guardian Council declared the list of approved candidates consists of conservative candidates: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (incumbent), Mohsen Rezaee (former Commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard), also reformist candidates: Mehdi Karroubi (former speaker of the Iran's Parliament) and Mir Hussein Mousavi (the last prime minister of Iran).

The campaign trail, give the candidates of presidency the opportunity to illustrate their plans and mobilize sympathizers through propaganda. Therefore, each candidate constructed some kind of official websites or newspapers in order to introduce his activities and related news to the people. They also established campaign offices in different parts of country that ran by their campaigners.

In September 2008, Mohsen Rezaee with reconstruction of his website entered to the election stage. Mehdi Karroubi's campaign established the website "tagheer.com"<sup>4</sup> that was his campaign slogan as well. Mir Hussein Mousavi the candidate, who became the most significant rival of the incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and leader of Green Movement, released a newspaper named Kalameh Sabz and his campaign ran two websites named Kalameh and Ghalamnews. Mousavi also was supported by the great number of Iranian youth through Internet whereby his official Facebook page<sup>5</sup> had more than one hundred thousand members in January 2011 (this number is now more than 288,000).

During the electoral campaign period, two of the seven participants in this research had facebook account and were active in this social media with political purposes, however, another participants despite having a Facebook account, neither were active nor used this tool politically until the days near to election. These participants used text messaging in order to communicate and gain information about the time and locations of activities supporting the reformist candidates. They also obtained the information through interacting with their friends during demonstrations on the streets or through campaigners. In addition, one of participants who worked in Kalameh<sup>6</sup> was gathering and sharing news related to this candidate both through this website and through Email. Moreover, none of participants mentioned the use of social networking sites like YouTube or Twitter due to political activities in this period. It is important to mention that some of participants created their Facebook account in this period. "I made my Facebook account during the period official campaigning, because I heard that it was a good arena that people exchange news and information about the election."<sup>7</sup> This statement could be a good prove that social media took a key role in the election game.

One interviewee who is a journalist and political activist mentioned that, "Before the 2009 presidential election the social media sphere particularly Facebook was not political and you could rarely find some posts or comments with political aims. But as we were closing to the election's day, the Facebook environment changed gradually and the number of political posts increased as well."

He stated that he gathered news and information through candidate's official websites and did not use Facebook as a kind of resource of news. Rather he (as an activist and journalist) used

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<sup>4</sup> Change

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/mousavi>

<sup>6</sup> Mir Hussein Mousavi's Official Website

<sup>7</sup> Stated by one participants in this study

Facebook as a tool to distribute information among people in order to motivate them to participate to the election and vote for Mir Hussein Mousavi.

This activist mentioned that, "Facebook increased the number of visitors of my articles or political ideas by providing the opportunity of sharing one post many times by my friends or friends of my friends. Therefore, it was a capable tool for distributing news and information about the election and to motivate others to participate to the election."

Another participant in my research believed that social media sites especially Facebook modernized the process of the 2009 election. He as a person who was active in Facebook during the electoral campaign, described the Facebook as a useful tool for both sympathizers and campaigners, in order to gather and distribute information about presidency candidates and to communicate with other sympathizers. "Facebook provided the opportunity that people with different viewpoints be able to communicate their ideas" he expressed. He added, "During that period the social media played a role as a soft power of people against the hard power of government."

Conversely, other participants preferred gain the information through communicating with their friends and acquaintances, SMS, Email, or through campaigners.

Throughout the time of official campaigning, giving the openness of political sphere by the government provided a sense of freedom among people as well as oppositions. In such situation the paths of communication were multiple and even the streets became a safe area for political discussions and face- to- face conversations.

One of informants mentioned, "During this period the political situation in the country was open, that situation gave us the opportunity to interact information about the election, freely through cell phones, SMS or even in the streets." Another participant also believed that "during the electoral campaign, the government had not been started to impose censorship yet, so it was possible to follow news and important information about election or presidency candidates through official TV, Radio, or newspapers and even through communicating with other people." Relatively, one of informants mentioned that the television debates between the candidates for the presidency were one of paths to know the candidates better. This informant also preferred to communicate information through personal connections with her friends by phone or SMS or interact with another people participated in pre-election demonstrations.

Because of such open political sphere, the networks of sympathizers formed and activated. The sympathizers interacted in the streets. Distributing messages of hope and success motivated people to participate to more activities supporting Mir Hussein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi.

- **The Conclusions of the Section**

The period can be clarified according to Klandermans' model. In the presence of organizations and formal activists, people with positive attitude towards movement mobilized. Social networks played an important role in increasing incentives for political participation. To increase incentives, face-to-face communications played more significant role than the communication through social media tools. However, the role of Facebook and online social networks in circulating information and news cannot take for granted.

## **2. Post-Election Demonstrations (June 2009 to the end of the year)**

On 12 June 2009, the result of the disputed election shocked the people who were waiting for Musavi's victory. According to the results, the incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won 63 percent of vote's casts and the opposition candidate Mir Hussein Mousavi got some 34 percent.

Following declaration of official result of the election, masses of Mousavi's supporters 'spontaneously' poured to the streets questioning the validity of the election's result with a simple slogan of "where is my vote?" That simple slogan was a powerful message against the apparently rigged election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the presidency. That was the beginning of an important political movement in Iran so called "Green Movement". Because the campaign color of presidential candidate Mir Hussein Mousavi was green, the Protesters dressed and decorated in green color as well.

One of the participants in my study mentioned that, "After that electoral coup, massive protests took place and the Green Movement was born." Another participant continued "under the situation created after the announcing of the election results, the soft power of people conflicted with hard and ideological power of government."

On the one hand, during that situation, the political sphere was not open anymore; the week before the Election, the government blocked access to Facebook and imposed massive censorship over the Internet. The night before the balloting the text messaging service of mobile phones was blocked. Then the security forces of government began to arrest Musavi's supporters, campaigners, and political activists. They also started to shut down opposition's websites and newspapers particularly Kalameh. According to 'Reporters without Borders' (2009), more than 100 journalists were arrested and 12 newspaper and journals were closed within six month after the election.

On the other hand, demonstrations were growing day after day. Despite the peaceful nature of demonstrations, the Police and a paramilitary group called Basij suppressed them by attacking people, shooting, or arresting them. The government confirmed the death of 36 people during the protest (AFP, 2009) but Mousavi's supporters reported that there have been more than 72 deaths (Lake, 2009).

At this stage of the movement, the Internet for the protesters became a path for circulating news and information as well as a tool for communication. Since the government banned all channels of face-to-face communication.

According to the participants in this research social media tools especially Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter played a considerable function in informing them about what was happening in the streets during the post election demonstrations. They found Facebook as a source for gathering and sharing information about the time and location of demonstrations and conceiving the costs and benefits of participation. They also mentioned to massive number of videos and pictures that shared by protests on YouTube and Facebook arena. The informants also talked about the effectiveness of those videos in providing them more incentives to participate in demonstrations against the fake result of the election.

- **Social Media as a Tool for Organizing Demonstrations and Disseminating Information**

One of participants who was an activist in Iran expressed, "Actually, Facebook was an effective communication tool for dissents because the government cut off text messaging services for a long time after the election and it was the only tool we had". He emphasized the role of social networking sites specially Facebook and said "Facebook as a mass media played a wealthy role in organizing demonstrations, disseminating information and motivating people

to participate in protests after the disputed election. In addition, that virtual space revealed this important fact that a large number of people sympathized with the movement, they were waiting for a signal from political activists and the main players, therefore when those reliable activists published something about running a protest in a specific time and location, they supported and started to share the information."

Another informant claimed, "Facebook was really an effective tool in bringing people to the streets." He stated, "It was just through the Facebook that you could get information about what exactly happening at the time of demonstrations, there was not any other paths." He added, "If you picked Facebook up from that situation, it was impossible the configuration of for instance that demonstration which millions of people participated (three days after the election, the 15th June 2009)." He also believed that "the centralization of Internet in Tehran was the most important reason for centralization of more demonstrations on the capital, but I think if people all over the country accessed to high speed Internet like in Tehran, the number of demonstrations became more as well."

Relatively, a participant believed that without Facebook, many demonstrations could not take place. He also named Facebook as a capable tool for getting and sharing news about time, date and the details of demonstrations. "For a long period of time after the election, the text messaging service of cell phones was cut off. Therefore, communication through SMS was limited or impossible, that was a reason for highlighting the important role of social media sites particularly Facebook and YouTube."

Moreover, one of participants in this research mentioned that after the election she became very active in Facebook, because "it was a good source for getting information about the time of demonstrations, news about events, the number of killed protestors and different information that you could not find on the official TV, radio or newspapers." She claimed the progress of Green Movement was influenced of Facebook because it was a useful tool in mobilizing people specially youth and bringing them to the streets."

One of informants uttered just after the election had bought high speed Internet and an proxy software in order to easier access to the Internet and getting information about demonstrations related to Green Movement through Facebook. "I think social media namely Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube played an important role in terms of disseminating of demonstrations'

news and about when or where people were supposed to participate to the protests." She added.

In addition, one informant who left the country about three months after the election, explain her observations in this way: "after the election, it was no longer possible to get accurate news and information about the movement through official media, therefore it was inevitable refer to the Internet. Besides the Green Movement was extended all over the city and people talk about that everywhere, hence, you could get the news through the streets as well."

- **Social Media; Arousal of Motivations, and Removal of Barriers to Participate**

According to my informants, Facebook and videos published on YouTube and Twitter, affected people in terms of becoming part of Green Movement, and become motivated to participate to demonstrations against the controversial results of the election. They believe that feelings emerged from Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and even the political sphere on the streets was horrors but despite of all risks, people became more motivated to continue their Movement. As reported by the participants in this study, five of them participated in all of post election demonstrations but two of them did not, because of their family and the costs of participation.

One of participants in my study believed that "when your friends or friends of your friends wrote a status on the Facebook and declared that she/he participates on protests and others confirmed her/his status in the comments, the process resulted in increase the number of people who would participate to demonstrations. Hence, Facebook was not only a tool for distributing information but also infused motivations to participation to participate to the Movement."

This Journalist also mentioned to the videos and pictures of protests that people captured by their cell phones and shared to the Facebook or YouTube, and added, "These videos were really effective in arousing people's incentives to participate to demonstrations despite all the risks. Because they knew that those videos was real and without any montage or edit, while usually the professional editors edited videos were published on official media. In fact, those videos and pictures made people so angry and motivated them to go forward their social Movement."

In his opinion the video related to the murder of Neda Aghasoltan was one the most influential videos.

Besides, one of informants talked about her feelings after visiting those videos. She said, "After watching those movies I felt both scared and honor, but I became more determined to participate to demonstrations in spite of all risks and dangers. Because I knew those videos were real and nobody edited them." She also accentuated that she could not find such videos like those in official media.

Another informant introduced these videos as documents that highlighted the legitimacy of Green movement and people more trusted to that by watching those videos and pictures of protests. "Those videos published in YouTube, Twitter, Facebook and even foreign media, watched by thousands of people, thereby, caused to more incentives for participation to the movement" he stated. This informant mentioned that he recorded and saved the videos related to post election protests and sent by Email to others who had not high speed Internet or could not participate in demonstrations.

Other participant in this research believed that news and videos published on YouTube, and Facebook helped people to perceive exactly what murders the government was doing against the innocent people, therefore provoked them to go forward their social movement. She expressed "those movies did not scared Green Movement's sympathizers; I was witnessing that people after watching the video of Neda Aghasoltan's murder by the government, came again in the streets. There were too many protestors on the streets even old people. This demonstrated that people did not frighten." "I did not scare too, because other people were beside me on the streets, we were not a few." She added.

In addition, one of informants who had experienced the 1979 revolution in Iran declared that "on that situation, when I was monitoring the political sphere on the streets or virtual space I felt like the period of 1979 revolution on Iran. The political sphere was horrible. The videos of protests were very influential and made me really angry but because of family I should be careful." She added, "those videos and pictures demonstrated that the Movement was growing, the more the government suppressed the more people came to the streets."

Moreover, another participant in my study described those movies as "orgasm" point of the movement and pointed to effectiveness of them in provoking people to more participation. He



also believed that those movies and news informed people of the cost of participation and could afraid them of the high risky political sphere.

One other important point related to the result of my research was that all participants mentioned to the intensive amount of censorships and filtering imposed over the Internet by the government. However, all of participants in this study expressed that they used different kind of proxy servers in order to turn around that censorship and access to the Internet especially pages like Facebook, YouTube, Balatarin, and other filtered websites. One of informants mentioned that he bought a high speed Internet (ADSL) because access to the Facebook and websites with a Dial up Internet was difficult or impossible.

- **The Conclusion of the Section**

As a result, according to the finding of this research, the stage of post election demonstration could be exactly explained according to Klandermans' model of participation in social movements. As the informants uttered; following the disputed election, the government banned many paths to restrict political discussions by means of imposing massive filtering and censorships. In such situation, Internet specially Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter became a safe and applicable arena due to bring people together and provide possibility to open discussions about the Movement. Here these tools were important in mobilizing potentials (sympathizers). In the next step, these potentials used social networking sites as a platform for disseminating, and exchanging news and information related to the movement. In fact, those potentials were targeted by mobilization attempts through Fcaebook, YouTube, Twitter, and opposition's websites. The next step is arousal motivations to participate. As klandermans mentions people who are not motivated enough will not participate in any kind of activities even if be part of mobilization potential or become targeted of mobilization attempts. During post election demonstrations, social networking sites played a role in providing collective and selective incentives in targeted people.

On the other words, capturing pictures and videos of street protests by cell phones and sharing them to the Internet, was effective in motivating targeted people to participation in the Green Movement. In addition, both offline and online inaction and interaction between targeted people positively influenced the construction of the success expectation in the Movement. The final step is overcoming to the barriers of participation. According to

Klandermans, motivation is a necessary condition to participate in a social movement but there is not any guarantee that the motivated people who became part of the mobilization potential and targeted by mobilization attempts, to participate in the social movement. Persons who are more motivated have more potential to overcome barriers to participate. Moreover, the number of people that participate in a social movement is related to the range of costs and benefits of participation on that social movement. As participants in this study uttered they participated on demonstrations despite all risks such as be arrested or killed by the government. Moreover, according to the informants, this period was the stage of formation and growing of the Green Movement and they were witnessing the most participation of the people.

### **3. The Dormancy Period of the Green Movement (January 2010 until now)**

- **Immense Suppressions**

It was on 11 February 2010 that the first unsuccessful demonstration occurred. The Green Movement sympathizers could not reveal their signs during the pro-governmental rally because they were few in compare with pro-governments participants and maybe they scared to uncover their green signs among a massive population of the Police and security agent (Abadi, 2010).

In fact, no massive demonstrations took place subsequently. In this stage of Movement, the cost of participation in any activities was very high. "The government could suppress the Movement and force people back to their home" as one of participants in the research, stated. In addition, the Movement's leaders perceived that the outcomes of thigh scale suppression by the government would be resulted in low participation in street demonstrations. Therefore, they did not demand no one take to the streets.

Afterwards, the security sources crushed the Green Movement and forced its leaders Mir Hussein Musavi and Mehdi Karroubi to silence. Since, 14 February 2011 until now the Green Movement leaders were illegally placed under house arrest and were not allowed having any connection with their supports. It occurred just after they invited people to hold a rally in supporting the freedom seeking revolts in Tunisia and Egypt against their authoritarian

regimes (BBC News, 2012). Mir Hussein Musavi and Mehdi Karrubi are still under house arresting.

One of my informants in description of the Internet sphere in this period expressed that: "in this time Fcaebook, that previously was full of political posts, comments and videos, shifted to casual problems, everything except Green Movement. This was really sad, and I was disappointed." He mentioned that he is active on Facebook yet and follow news about the Green Movement.

Another informant stated, "The Green Movement were suppressed in the real word, it affected the social networking sites as well. Number of political posts decreased and it was disappointing but there was a political sphere on the Facebook yet." He as a journalist continues to share the news, pictures, and videos related to the Green Movement on the Facebook.

In the opinion of another informant, in this period "The reason of using Internet especially social media returned to state of normal and not political." However, he is still tracking a few news of movements, which are being published and shared, on social media.

In addition, one of participants declared, "After the house arrest of the leaders of the Movement, there are not any street protests anymore, but I follow and read news that published in the Internet about the Green Movement and its leaders."

Other informant mentioned that he is interested to read news and information about the Green Movement and the only tool for this purpose is Internet, especially Facebook. "In this period, the government perceived that all the protests and consciousness of people are because of social media, therefore, the government increased amount of filtering on the Internet," he added.

However, in such situation the supporters of Green Movement believe that the Movement is alive but in the abeyance. There are different websites working with aim of supporting the Green Movement and publishing news about its leaders. The participants in this research also expressed that despite the suppressed of the Movement, they follow the news related to the Movement on the Internet.

- **Conclusion of Section**

As a result, we can conclude that in this period of abeyance of the Green Movement, the social media tools played a role not in terms of taking people to the streets rather in terms of disseminating news and information. Besides, the massive suppression by the government forced people back to their home. This state of lacking success spread to the virtual space, and people became disappointed. Therefore, the intensive costs of participation in any activities were a great barrier to arousal motivations. Thus, in this stage of the movement, the social media tools affected people in terms of become part of mobilization potential, and become a part of mobilization attempts, but it was not able to motivate people enough to remove barriers to participate. As Klandermans (1987) mentions people who are not motivated enough will not participate in any kind of activities even if be part of mobilization potential or become targeted of mobilization attempts.

## **Conclusion**

According to the results of this study, Iran's Green Movement demonstrated that the social media tools especially Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, text messaging, and photo sharing could play a consequential function in facilitating the steps towards participation in social movements. In the organizers side, these tools are effective in formation of mobilization potentials, formation, and activation of recruitment networks, arousal of motivations to participate and removal barriers to participation in the movement. However, in side of individuals the social media could affect individuals in terms of becoming part of mobilization potential, becoming part of mobilization attempts, becoming motivated to participate, and overcoming barriers to participate in the Movement. The important point is that these four steps are related to each other and lack of one of them, hinder the formation of other steps and as a result decrease participation. In the other words, the results of the study illustrated that the social media could be applicable tool in social movements in terms of helping organizations to gain mobilization potentials or affecting individuals to become a part of mobilization potential. Moreover, social media can provide the opportunity for sympathizers regarding the gain of information and news about the aims and goals of the movement in a shorter and safer way. In addition social media sites inform people about the location, date, and time of demonstrations or any other activities related to the movement. Social media also can affect people's tendency to participate in more activities related to the

movement by sharing pictures or videos of success or failure of movement. In the other side, this information, pictures, and movies help people to perceive cost and benefits of participation to the movement and become more motivated to participate by overcoming to the barriers.

On the other hand, the results of the study shed light to the fact that social media tools increase the possibility of interaction among participants in a social movement by providing an open arena for communication and as Klandermans mentions, interactions among the participants have a significant role in terms of constructing success expectations. In addition, the results highlighted the role of social media especially in the absence of an official media in authoritarian states.

Moreover, reviewing three periods of formation, growing and absence of the Green Movement, demonstrate that in the official campaigning period, regarding the presence of an political sphere, the process of targeting sympathizers could occur through face-to-face dialogues. In such situation, the social media just facilitate circulation of information among sympathizers.

However, during the post-election demonstrations in the absence of official media and organizations, and massive suppression by the government, the role of social media promoted the growing process of the movement and as the participants in this research mentioned the most street protests happened in this period. Besides, in the third stage of the movement the presence of barriers hindered participation, however, social media were still the only tool in opposition's hand due to circulating of information about the movement.

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