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## Green Energy

Have the leaders of the Green Movement really sold out?

Abbas Milani February 2, 2010 | 11:50 pm



Is the Green Movement finished? That is what the Iranian government wants the world to believe. And it has recently been trumpeting a few pieces of evidence to make its case.

First came a statement by Mir Hossein Mousavi on New Year's Eve, which offered five conditions for ending the current impasse. But because it did not directly repeat Mousavi's oft-quoted notion that the June elections were rigged, *Kayhan* and *Rajanews*—the two news outlets closest to Khamenei and

Ahmadinejad—tried to claim the statement as a major victory for the regime.

Then in late January came reports of a “confidential” letter of repentance written by former Iranian president (and leading reformer) Mohammad Khatami, addressed to Khamenei. The letter supposedly recognizes the legitimacy of Ahmadinejad's presidency. Again, *Kayhan* and *Rajanews* reported on the letter, construing it as a sure sign of the Green Movement's defeat.

Finally, there was the alleged coup de grace: a statement reported by *Fars News Agency*, the government-run Iranian news service, from Mehdi Karroubi—known as an uncompromising and defiant leader of the reform movement. In the statement, Karroubi seemed to accept Ahmadinejad's presidency. “Karroubi: I recognize the president-elect of the Iranian people,” the *Fars* article was headlined.

These reports come at a sensitive moment for the regime. That's because February 11, the official anniversary of the 1979 revolution and the date of the next big government-sponsored demonstration, is quickly approaching. As it has with other official celebrations in the past, the Green Movement plans to transform this event into a peaceful show of force by the opposition. The government, of course, is desperate to stop this from happening—which is why it wants to convince Iranians that the Green Movement is on its last legs.

But, unfortunately for the government, this simply isn't true. For one thing, as Mousavi, Khatami, and Karroubi have repeatedly said, they are only the nominal leaders of the movement. If all three leaders were to compromise and "make peace" with the regime, it would certainly be a blow to the movement—but it would hardly be its death knell. As long as there are millions of Iranians who remain frustrated with the regime, the Green Movement is not going away.

And we know that the Green Movement retains mass appeal—even if, these days, it sometimes has to resort to oblique ways of showing it. Consider an unusual event that happened four weeks ago on, of all places, an Iranian soccer show (and which I learned about from reports on the normally reliable Roozonline and other Persian websites, as well as conversations with people who had seen the program). The show, called "Navad"—which means "90" in Persian, for the 90 minutes of a soccer game—features questions that the audience can vote on through text messages. About an hour before the program began, Green Movement advocates urged supporters via the web to vote for option three regardless of the question. As it turned out, the third option was probably the least reasonable response to the soccer question being posed—yet, by the end of the program, at least two million people had voted, and approximately 80 percent had voted for option three.

Moreover, the allegedly conciliatory statements by Green Movement leaders may not have been what they at first appeared to be. The hype surrounding Mousavi's supposedly conciliatory gesture, for example, was recently punctured when his wife—considered by many to be Mousavi's top adviser—made the following unambiguous statement: "I want to emphasize that we neither recognize the Ahmadinejad government nor will make any backroom compromises." And yesterday, Mousavi himself launched a broadside against the regime, saying on his website, "Dictatorship in the name of religion is the worst kind. ... I don't believe the revolution achieved its

goals.”

Just this week, Khatami lambasted media reports about his alleged letter. While he did not deny the letter’s existence, he made clear that there were no words of contrition in it. We want Khamenei to be “a leader for the entire nation” and not “just for a faction,” he said pointedly.

As for Karroubi, he was, in essence, trapped by the regime. His office and his son both subsequently made clear what really happened: As Karroubi emerged from a meeting of a reformist group, regime reporters-cum-interrogators from Fars News Agency asked whether he accepted the constitution and Khamenei’s leadership. Though Karroubi has never been known for his eloquence, he came out with perfectly parsed words to escape the legal trap: “I still hold my previous position that this government has come to power through a fraudulent election and amongst many doubts and ambiguities. ... I still believe there was widespread rigging of the election but since Mr. Khamenei has approved [Ahmadinejad] I recognize him as the head of the current government.” Needless to say, the original Fars report did not include the less conciliatory parts of the quote.

More importantly, every statement Karroubi has made since that time has left no doubt that he is still very much a staunch supporter of the Green Movement. In fact, only four days ago, he and Mousavi held a well-publicized meeting and issued a statement afterwards, condemning recent acts of violence by the regime—particularly the execution of two men on charges of “fighting God”—and inviting their supporters to participate in the February 11 demonstrations.

Even Hashemi Rafsanjani—a pragmatic politician whose caution and opportunism make him the most likely candidate to compromise with the government—appears to be holding steady. Khamenei declared two weeks ago, in what seemed to be a thinly disguised threat directed at Rafsanjani, that the days of sitting on the fence and of ambiguous declarations have now ended. The Khamenei statement was followed by a blistering attack on Rafsanjani by Ayatollah Yazdi, a notoriously conservative cleric. But Rafsanjani soon shot back, reiterating that the demands he laid out in July at a Friday prayer—where, among other things, he argued for the release of all political prisoners—remain the only way out of the crisis. He also let it be known that he would soon publish a letter exposing Yazdi’s past—in particular, his attempt to block

Khamenei's appointment years ago in the Assembly of Experts.

Top clerics in the regime soon got involved and asked both sides to step back. Yazdi has accepted the ceasefire, but there is no sign that Rafsanjani has done the same. (The back and forth was detailed by the Iranian outlet Aftab News.) If even Rafsanjani is declining to cave, that is good news for the Green Movement. Which, in turn, is very good news for the people of Iran.

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