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OPINION

Iran's Democratic Manifesto

The opposition leader has issued a clear call for democracy, the separation of mosque and state, and a gentler foreign policy.

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By ABBAS MILANI

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Ten days before the June 12 anniversary of last year's contested presidential election, Iranian opposition leader Mir Hossein Mousavi called for his supporters to protest in the streets as they had one year before. Then he rescinded his own message. Many Iranian democrats derided this about-face as defeatist. Here in America, observers took Mr. Mousavi's gesture—and the fact that only 400 people were reportedly arrested in Tehran on the anniversary—as the death knell of the Green movement.

But two days later, on June 15, Mr. Mousavi issued a working draft for what he calls the "Covenant of the Green Movement." Though the document has gone largely unnoticed in the Western press, its message is remarkable both for what it articulates and leaves unsaid.

The covenant is Mr. Mousavi's most defiant critique of the status quo, calling the regime "institutionalized corruption hiding behind a pretense of piety." He laments the fact that Iran has the world's highest per capita rate of executions, and points to the fact that public coffers are plundered by government officials. The suffering and heroism of the people, he says, has torn asunder "the curtain of hypocrisies and duplicity manifest in the behavior of those wishing total domination (*tamamiyatkhah*)" in the regime.

At the same time, he offers some clear strategies and goals for the democratic movement. He clearly places himself and the Green movement in the 100-year-old tradition of Iranians advocating for modernity, democracy, secularism and the rule of law.

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For a century, the defining battle of Iranian politics has been between those, in the tradition of John Locke, who advocated for popular sovereignty as the

only legitimate source of authority, and those who believe in divine legitimacy. The battle between these two paradigms was first joined in 1905, when a new constitution was written that made monarchy—once a divine gift, with the king claiming to be "shadow of God"—dependent on popular will and limited in scope.

Opposed to this view, Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979, and now Ayatollah Khamenei and his concept of *Velayat-e Faqih*—which claims that one man, the *faqih* or jurist, rules in the place of the last Shiite imam who is now in hiding—are forceful proponents of divine legitimacy. Mr. Mousavi makes it clear that he is on the other side. The Green movement, he writes, wants nothing short of "popular sovereignty." In the face of a regime that "breaches and disdains the law," the movement's ultimate goal, he says, is free and fair elections, with no vetting process, to finally establish the will of the people.

The people's only path to victory, Mr. Mousavi argues, is sustaining a vast, democratic

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movement that is inclusive, pluralist, averse to revenge and violence, and prone to dialogue and forgiveness. While he admits that in any future Iran religion "will have a presence," he clearly advocates the independence of "religious institutions from institutions of the state." This is as clear a call for genuine secularism as has been in recent political discourse in Iran.

Iran's Green movement, Mr. Mousavi says, respects international standards of human rights and believes in full equality before the law, "irrespective of ideology, religion, gender, ethnicity and geographical location." This beguilingly simple proclamation stands in sharp contrast to Iran's current Shariah-based legal regime that systematically privileges men over women, and Muslims over Zoroastrians, Jews, Christians and members of the Bahai faith. He also advocates a foreign policy that is "rational and transparent," and that favors dialogue and "diplomacy over adventurism and chicanery."

Surely some of Mr. Mousavi's ideas and demands have been articulated in the past by secular Iranian intellectuals. Some of them were in fact part of the demands that together spurred the 1979 revolution. But the coalition that toppled the shah and brought the ayatollahs to power was an unwieldy coalition of incongruent ideas and forces. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Mr. Khamenei represent the most reactionary forces of that coalition.

With this manifesto, Mr. Mousavi has come to fully represent the democratic elements of that coalition. His humble disposition, his invitation for critical dialogue about ways to improve the document, and his defiance in the face of constant threats by the regime and its thugs, all point to a new turn in Iran's democratic movement. This once radical prime minister, beloved by Khomeini, has come to represent the aspirations of Iran's prudent democrats.

The world today faces a clear choice: the regime, with its brutal policies at home and its confrontational nuclear policy abroad; or the possibility of a democratic Iran with an accountable foreign policy. The world must serve notice that any attack on Mr.

Mousavi will bring about the regime's total isolation—not unlike apartheid South Africa. A democratic Iran is the only solution to the world's Iran problem, and Mr. Mousavi's new statement provides a promising blueprint for achieving this goal.

Mr. Milani is the director of Iranian Studies at Stanford University where he is also a research fellow at the Hoover Institution. His latest book is "Eminent Persians: The Men and Women Who Made Modern Iran, 1941-1979" (Syracuse University Press, 2009).

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