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## Cracks appear in Mousavi's 'Green Path'

By Shahir Shahidsaless  
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Iranian reform activists have in the past two weeks tried numerous times - unsuccessfully - to stage protests in both Tehran's bazaar and at Friday prayers.

To boost the morale of the pro-reformers and to remain relevant, Mir Hossein Mousavi, the defeated candidate in June's controversial presidential elections, announced the formation of a grassroots "social movement". By calling the new campaign "The Green Path of Hope", Mousavi envisions a continuation of the green movement that was formed during the elections. The new movement is not a political party, as emphasized by Alireza Beheshti, a senior aide to Mousavi. "The Green Path of Hope is in fact aimed at regaining people's denied rights," Mousavi has said.

Mousavi chose to brand the organization as a social movement for two reasons. First, in order to establish a political party, the Ministry of Interior's permission is mandatory. This go-ahead is impossible for Mousavi to obtain while the ministry is under President Mahmud Ahmadinejad's control. On the other hand, setting up a so-called "social movement" is not yet regulated. Second, while there are strict regulations for political parties, there are as yet no regulations to control a "movement".

According to Beheshti, Mousavi's campaign will be joined by two other heavyweight reformist clerics: Iran's ex-president Mohammad Khatami and former parliamentary speaker Mehdi Karrubi.

Massive street protests have been reduced to sporadic demonstrations even as the rift between supporters and opponents of Ahmadinejad lingers inside the regime. On August 17, in Tehran, a city with a population of 8 million, an estimated 400 protesters turned out at Haft-Tir Square to protest against the closure of the major pro-reform daily newspaper Etemad-e-Melli, according to Reuters. Anti-riot police quickly dispersed the protesters.

Although the dwindling number of demonstrators is partly due to the violent crackdown in

the aftermath of the June presidential elections, there are other factors that have led to the loss of zeal among the pro-reformists.

### **Movement's economic roots**

It was the Mousavi's camp's claim that the election was stolen and the pivotal slogan "Where is my vote?" that gave rise to the green movement. Disputing the election, millions of protesters fought to force the government to overturn the electoral outcome and hold a new election. Those demands no longer exist, nor does the enthusiastic devotion of the protestors supporting it.

Many observers, both in the West and inside Iran, didn't see the events as a simple protest against vote rigging. They assessed it as a popular uprising against the establishment, a theory that has strong merit. But if this is the case, why are the voices of dissent diminishing to a whisper?

The answer may lie in the inherent contradiction between the nature of the supporters and the core values and philosophies of the founders of the reform movement.

By reviewing the slogans, speeches and articles of the protesters following the June election, it is surprisingly apparent that despite the severe economic hardships that many Iranians are experiencing, economic demands do not occupy a spot in their list of expectations.

In fact, the dominant forces in Mousavi's camp are not those with economic motifs and concerns, but fierce supporters of civil liberties and opponents of a conservative Islamic order. Economic demands don't play a major role because the social base that shapes the movement is mainly in the middle and upper class. Among this group are many educated, young urbanites and - most notably - young women.

It is no surprise that in Tehran and Shemiranat, the northern part of Tehran were upper- and middle-class residents live, Mousavi beat Ahmadinejad. It also may explain why protests still linger in Tehran.

The middle class increasingly feels choked by Ahmadinejad's heavy-handed attempts to impose Islamic regulations. Under Ahmadinejad, the Basij - a paramilitary force that acts under the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) - has become considerably more visible in the streets patrolling for immodest and un-Islamic behavior.

### **Constitution guides the 'Path'**

What Mousavi claims to offer to his supporters is more freedom and tolerance. However, he repeatedly emphasized before and during the announcement of the Green Path that the Islamic Republic of Iran's constitution determines the framework of the movement.

The pre-election momentum was enough to draw massive crowds to the streets during the post-election demonstrations and form an historic challenge to the ruling power. As time marches on, the contradiction between Mousavi's ideology, which ultimately revolves around serving the Islamic government, and the opposition's passion for a free and possibly secular society, becomes more apparent.

During the 1978 revolution, on a day known as Black Friday, hundreds were killed and wounded but rallies involving millions of people continued until the fall of monarchy in February 1979. At the time, there was a slogan that encompassed the spirit of the revolution: "Independence, Freedom, Islamic Republic". Today, the slogan has been changed to "Independence, Freedom, Iranian Republic".

Both Mousavi and his wife, Dr Zahra Rahnavard, are devout Muslims who believe in a moderate version of Islam. Neither of them wants to make Iran "Westernized".

Pushing Iran's Islamic constitution as the supporting structure of the Green Path movement, means to accept the most controversial principle of the constitution, specifically the concept of *Velayate Faqih* (supreme leadership). On this point alone, Mousavi can lose large numbers of his supporters.

Mousavi faces other serious paradoxes. On one hand, he obtained eligibility to run for president from the Guardian Council. Among 900 candidates, only four were qualified. On the other hand, Mousavi rejected the ruling of the council on the election's outcome and questioned the council's impartiality. He invites citizens to fight for their rights within the framework of the constitution, but he defies Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's endorsement of the vote.

It won't be very long before the confrontation between Washington and Tehran over Iran's nuclear program will become heated. This distraction may be the toughest challenge Mousavi could face. As the conflict intensifies, Mousavi and his movement will be lost in the clamor of words and threats between the two governments. The longer and more vitriolic the discord between the two countries becomes, the more Mousavi will lose his relevance. He will be pushed to the margins and will remain a spectator because he cannot take an opposition stance as long as the tension prevails.

If the ruling elite - especially the IRGC, which plays a major role in the nuclear stand-off - continue to regard Mousavi as a potential threat, they may escalate the conflict with the US and maintain its intensity until the Green Path of Hope and its backers head off into the sunset.