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Facebook and Iranian Electoral Politics: An Actor-Network Perspective

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Abstract In the wake of social movements such as the Iranian Green Movement, the subsequent Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street, there has been much discussion about the role that social networking has played in mobilization and evoking political consequences. In this paper we present the experience of our first author, who introduced Facebook to the campaign of the Iranian presidential candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi in the lead up to the 2009 Iranian Presidential Elections. This unique story presented us with an opportunity to utilize theoretical concepts related to Actor-Network Theory (ANT) for providing a simplified narrative about the role of Facebook in the electoral politics of the Iranian Elections in 2009. We applied ANT as an *infra-language* as suggested by Latour (2011), in order to illustrate how Facebook was a key non-human actor—an *obligatory passage point*—throughout the campaign period as well as the subsequent era in which the Iranian Green Movement emerged and allegedly declined.

Keywords Actor-Network Theory; Iranian Green Movement; 2009 Iranian Presidential Elections; sociology of translation; infra-language; Facebook; Mir Hossein Mousavi.

1. Introduction

In this paper we recount the story of the 2009 Iranian presidential election and the subsequent social upheaval in order to map the arrangements of power and authority in Iran, locate the Iranian Green Movement in them and analyze the political consequences of introducing Facebook to the election campaign. Our first author's unique insight, as the head administrator for Mir Hossein Mousavi's Facebook page, has provided a critical perspective from which the role that social networking platform played in both the election campaign and the subsequent Iranian Green Movement will be analyzed. For this purpose, we employ a theoretical perspective based on Bruno Latour's meta-theoretical explanations¹ and later reflections² on Actor-Network Theory (ANT).

Latour (1996) suggests that ANT's greatest theoretical utility lies in its methodological applicability as an *infralanguage* which "has to be poor, limited, short and simple... enough to move from one net to the other, and the specific explication will always be a one-shot account exclusively tailored to the problem at hand" (377). Using this theoretical lens we will demonstrate how Facebook affected the election campaign as one of Mousavi's "devices of intersement" (Callon, 1986) and then later as the Green Wave transformed into the Green Movement, how this social networking platform transformed into an obligatory passage point (OPP) for the Iranian Green Movement.

We deploy the "sociology of translation" as introduced by Callon (1986), as it has been employed in subsequent research. Informed by the vocabulary of the "moments of translation", we will present the development of the "Green Wave" during the election campaign and its subsequent transformation to the Iranian Green Movement. These notions will provide a "simplificatory effect" (385) that will allow us to focus on the role played by Facebook in the transformation of various networks leading up to and following the 2009 election. The set of *how* questions suggested as "strategies of translation" by Law (1992)³ will guide our analysis.

¹ Latour (1996) describes ANT as "the fusion of three hither- to unrelated strands of preoccupations: 1) a semiotic definition of entity building; 2) a methodological framework to record the heterogeneity of such a building; 3) an ontological claim on the "networky" character of actants themselves." (373)

² Latour (2011) describes the core assumption of ANT as follows: "The ability of the notion of network to follow [the] strange movement that goes from substance to attributes and back, as if you could follow the movement of a fan that one could choose to close or to deploy, is at the heart of this rather (in)famous social theory known as actor-network theory, abbreviated in the felicitous acronym ANT." (799)

³ "How is the work of all the networks that make up the punctualized actor borrowed, bent, displaced, distorted, rebuilt, reshaped, stolen, profited from,

1.1. Theoretical Approach

The value of a perspective like ANT is that it offers us an open repository of terms, a set of sensitivities and ways of attuning ourselves to the world (Mol, 2010, 265). In this paper we present a story about political mobilization and social networking, which provides a fertile ground for the deployment of an actor-network vocabulary. Our approach is inspired by two previous ANT studies that utilized Callon's moments of translation for explaining the formation of a political movement in the lead up to the Quebec Referendum in the 1990s (Abramson, 1998) and the formation of a network through a social networking platform Flickr in the way of the 2007 London bombings (Potts, 2009). In both cases the authors' use Callon's moments of translation in order to simplify the narrative and stratify the process through which both offline (Abramson, 1998) and online (Potts, 2009) *actor-networks* form and transform⁴.

As Latour (2005) suggests, we will start by "following the actors" (12) in the following narrative; from the perspective of the first author we will explain how Facebook first became enrolled in the Mousavi campaign and later became an OPP for the Iranian Green Movement. Beginning first with the *enrollment* of Facebook in the election campaign we will see a correlation between web traffic to the campaign's Facebook page and the masses of people who would show up at campaign events and subsequent post-election protests. We will see how in the moment of *interessement* for the Green Movement, Facebook provides an *OPP* for Iranian political discontent.

2. Facebook and the Iranian 2009 Presidential Elections

In January 2009, our first author⁵ took the initiative to register a Facebook page for Mir Hossein Mousavi. The initial goal was to create a

and/or misrepresented to generate the effects of agency, organization, and power? How are the resistances overcome?" (386-387)

⁴ For Abramson the sociology of translation provided a useful lexicon to describe the formation of various networks in the lead up to the 1995 sovereignty referendum in Quebec. Positioning the moment of problematization at the creation of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, Abramson illustrated how the moments of translation can be used to understand political mobilization.

What Potts' paper provides is a clear example of how ANT can be used to understand the formation of networks through social networking platforms, like Flickr. Using a Flickr group that formed in response to the 2007 London bombings, Potts uses the moments of translation to illustrate how an online social networking platform can become an obligatory passage point. From these approaches we can see how ANT can be useful for understanding the both politically motivated mobilization and the role of a social networking platforms in that mobilization.

⁵ A dual citizen of Iran and Germany who was inspired by the role of social media technology in the success of the Obama Campaign in the US 2008 presidential elections (Metzgar & Maruggi 2009; Wattal et al 2009).

network of supporters for Mousavi's candidacy and to provide an alternative platform for his campaign since the state controlled media had previously demonstrated instances of bias towards the incumbent president (Ehsani, Keshavarzian and Moruzz 2009). We position this initiative as Facebook's initial *enrollment* into the reformist network which began to form based on Mousavi initial *problematization*.

2.1. The initial problematization

Mir Hossein Mousavi *enrolled* Facebook into his campaign as a *device of interessement* in order to contribute to "creat[ing] a favorable balance of power" in light of the bias of state controlled media and to appeal to reach internet savvy youth. This strategy was also intended to "help corner the entities to be enrolled" in the campaign (Callon 1986, 10). When Mousavi officially announced his candidacy in February, about 400 people had joined the network of his Facebook page (Khabaronline 2009).

By officially registering as a presidential candidate, Mousavi took on the role of spokesperson for the reformist movement in the Iranian 2009 election and established himself as an *OPP* for various *actor-networks* of Iranians from inside and outside of Iran who saw the infamous incumbent president as the most immediate problem. In March 2009, Mir Hossein Mousavi officially registered as a candidate with a formidable speech in which he addressed the political, economic and cultural problems of the country (Aftab News 2009). In this speech, he *problematized* cultural, social and political issues with his most immediate *device of interessement*: public statements.

Mousavi positioned himself as a "conservative reformer" (Macleod n.a.) in the 2009 electoral competition for presidency in Iran. In order to reduce the complexity of Mousavi's background and how he came to this political position, we turn to Latour's (2011) emphasis on picturing the "simplicity of the whole" instead of the "complexity of the parts"⁶. Simply put, Mousavi sat at the political intersection of reformists, conservatives and undecided voters in the electoral politics of this election. Consequently, Mousavi's definition of the problem *captured the interest*⁷ of other social groups such as pragmatist technocrats, moderate conservatives, and silent internet savvy youth.

2.2. Role definition and enrolment: "every citizen is a campaign headquarters"

A few days after the official announcement of Mousavi's candidacy, "every citizen is a campaign headquarters" was introduced as the main slogan for his campaign (Afshari and Graham Underwood 2009, 7).

⁶ Figure 1 in the annex shall demonstrate a reflexive perception of the political playing field in Iran as of January 2009, negotiated between the first and second author.

⁷ "Move one: Capturing others' interest" (Latour 1999)

Mousavi further explained this concept to be a decentralized approach for “steering and leading existing resources”, oriented towards reaching out to the “unknown layers of the society” and empowering grassroots initiatives (Asr Iran News, 2009).

Thereupon, various grassroots initiatives, ranging from small word-of-mouth campaigns to the broadcast and dissemination of campaign material by reformist and moderate conservative political organizations, began to flourish. Facebook in this context became increasingly significant; the campaign’s decentralized approach resonated well with the social networking technology of Facebook and its international connectivity. As we shall see, it proved an efficient *device of intéressement* for *cornering the entities to be enrolled* and reaching *unknown layers of the society*.

2.2.1. Enrollment: “The Green Wave”

Another significant *device of intéressement* was the color green⁸ which has been suggested by grassroots supporters and officially recognized as the symbol of Mousavi’s campaign by its central committee in early May 2009.

Throughout the election period, the central committee of Mousavi’s campaign acted as an OPP through which “a complex ecology of tributaries, allies, accomplices and helpers” could “subsist” (Latour 2011, 807) and engage in “multilateral negotiations, trials of strength and tricks that accompany the *intéressement* and enable them to succeed” (Callon 1986, 9). This *actor-network* became known as the “Green Wave” (Afshari and Graham Underwood 2009).

The resemblance of such *multilateral negotiations* and *trials of strengths* in context of the Green Wave has been recorded throughout the time leading to the Election Day. Mousavi acted as the OPP who, amongst others, *enrolled* the first author as a “spokesperson” on Facebook, at the intersection of 3 major networks as depicted in the annexed Figure 2⁹.

Facebook as a technological *device of intéressement* facilitated various campaign events across Iran, thereby moving the “leverage point” of the Green Wave “from a weak to a strong position” (Latour 1999)¹⁰. Having recognized this impact, the Iranian government blocked Facebook after Mousavi’s Facebook page promoted a campaign gathering on May 23rd,

⁸ The color green traditionally has significant symbolic meanings in the Iranian cultural, national and religious context.

⁹ Figure 2 provides a simplified illustration of the Green Wave, depicting its subsisting networks. A comparison with Figure 1 shows how the map of political actor-networks changed on the verge of the 2009 presidential elections.

¹⁰ Described by Latour (1999) as “Move two: moving the leverage point from a weak to a strong point” (146-149)

2009 in a 12,000-seat stadium in Tehran¹¹. Nevertheless, the use of anti-filtering software had been popular after a decade of experience with filtering, particularly amongst the internet savvy youth.

Consequently, Facebook and particularly Mousavi's page received international attention in context of the Iranian 2009 electoral politics (CNN 2009, May 23). When official permission for an event in a 120,000-seat stadium was denied by the authorities, Mousavi's Facebook page¹² called for a 19km human chain throughout Tehran on June 9th; the campaign mobilized for this event in less than 24 hours just a few days before the election (Erdbrink 2009). The moment of mobilization for the campaign was the cast of votes on the Election Day.

Figure 3 in the annex depicts a capture of Facebook Statistics depicting virtual interactions with the Facebook page of Mousavi in 2009. In this Figure, the steep increase of virtual interactions demonstrates the contribution of Mousavi's Facebook page to "moving the leverage point" of the Green Wave to a "strong position" (Latour 1999, 10).

2.3. Punctualization and de-punctualization of the Iranian Green Movement

The central political question in *the moment of mobilization* according to Callon (1986) is whether the spokesmen are representative of their network (12-13). On June 12, the question was whether Mousavi could bring particularly the silent and undecided votes to the polls with his campaign and would become the "guarantor" of the Green Wave¹³. The ultimate *action* that demonstrated the *punctualization* of the Green Wave came when an unprecedented number of voters took to the polls on June 12th (Freeman 2009). However, as Figure 3 shows, the highest increase in the number of "Likes"¹⁴ and daily interactions with Mousavi's Facebook page in the following days of the elections, is topped in the subsequent weeks.

What happened in the time leading to the summit of virtual interaction with Mousavi's page in Figure 3 resembles a *de-punctualization* process of the Green Wave, post-elections. The announced results were

¹¹ Mousavi himself was attending another rally in the city of Isfahan whereas Dr. Zahra Rahnavard, his wife, along with other prominent reformist figures attended the event (CNN 2009, May 23; Egbali 2009).

¹² By then escalated to a network of 25,000 supporters

¹³ Callon (1986) speaks of a "guarantor (or the referent)" of an elusive group or population, who came to a consensus about the constrictions of their network of relationships. "Once the long chain of representatives has been put into place", the guarantor in our understanding, guarantees the *punctualization* of the network; that is, the performance of voting for Mousavi. Hence, the "action" that *punctualized* the Green Wave was act of electoral participation.

¹⁴ "Supporters" according to Facebook at that point in time.

dubious¹⁵ and after an intimidating public speech by the incumbent on the day after the elections (Tait 2009), the biggest public demonstration ever since the 1979 revolution was performed in Tehran's nostalgic Azadi—Freedom—Square on June 15th 16. Facebook provided a synchronous platform for reaching a quick consensus about this demonstration—whereas Mousavi was still considered as the *guarantor*¹⁷—and increasing a sense of collective trust.

2.3.1. Marks of *de-punctualization*

The June 15th demonstration can on one hand be understood to “mask the networks” of the Green Wave which created it (Callon 1986, 385), and at the same time to mark its *de-punctualization* process; the context in which the problem and the roles were defined transformed. This transformation displaced the *punctualization* of the Green Wave and the enrollment of its *actor-networks* by giving rise to new *problematizations* and thereby to a new OPP¹⁸.

Few days later on July 19th in a Friday prayers¹⁹, the Iranian Supreme Leader²⁰ attested the election results, took the side of the incumbent president, reacted harshly to the June 15th demonstration and warned dissidents with violent crackdown if they insist on street demonstration. Consequently, several scattered demonstrations in the following days were accompanied by brutal exercise of Police forces. Figure 3 indicates this effect in the decreasing number of interactions after the peak on June 29th, when a young girl named Neda was shot in front of an amateur camera in a video that was quickly broadcasted around the globe.

¹⁵ Evidences of fraud are detailed in a study by Mebane et al (2009) as well as in articles by Sahimi (2010, August 11) and Sahimi (2010, December 09).

¹⁶ Despite incidents of violence and few cases of injury and death (Human Rights Watch World Report (2010), this demonstration went fairly peacefully.

¹⁷ Mousavi had immediately rejected the results, stating that he “will not surrender to this dangerous charade” (BBC 2009). After calls for demonstrations quickly emerged on Facebook and other social media, Mousavi supported this event support by promising to join the crowds together with Karrubi—the other reformist candidate who allied with Mousavi during and after the elections. Both filed an official request for nullifying the election results with detailed evidences of fraud.

¹⁸ One of the first themes that arose in the days following the election and drew international attention was the international “Where is my vote” campaign (Ferani 2009).

¹⁹ Traditionally takes place with the spokespersonship of a high religious authority on weekly basis. After the 1979 revolution, this event is organized by the political establishment and the spokesperson is an appointee of the Supreme Leader or, in critical situations, himself.

²⁰ Highest political authority and representative of the political establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran

Hence, protest through street demonstrations became increasingly dangerous²¹. Furthermore, the diminishing of a hope for an official revision of the election results dissolved the roles of political organizations, undermined the *intéressement* of various actors in the previous *problematization* and paved the way for new spokespersons for the dissidents. Nonetheless, the most prominent spokesperson for the Iranian Green Movement was Mousavi who banked on his statements as his main *device of intéressement*.

Facebook facilitated the interactivity and synchronicity of reaching a consensus in the controversy about how to protest the results. For instance, through crowdsourcing on Mousavi's Facebook page²², an alternative strategy which suggested demonstrating "green" symbols and campaign material in government-held demonstrations and supporting Mousavi's political spokespersonship went viral. Consequently, major demonstrations and events in the second half of 2009 were overwhelmed by green symbols and an unanticipated participation of Iranian Green Movement supporters²³. These events mark subsequent peaks of virtual interactions with Mousavi's Facebook page, as depicted in Figure 3.

It was not Mousavi who called for these demonstrations though²⁴; many other persons began to provide their own definition of the problem and claim spokespersonship for the movement²⁵. In this context, Facebook became the OPP for entering the negotiation process, particularly for the opposition of the Iranian political establishment in diaspora who became interested after the Supreme Leader demonized the Iranian Green Movement. The resonance of radical, regime-opposing *problematizations* with the increasing exercise of police force by the

²¹ Figure 4 demonstrates the moment of mobilization (First *punctualization* of the Iranian Green Movement) as the act of demonstrations faced the threat of crackdown.

²² With no officially recognized representation of Mousavi after the election.

²³ The first event took place on June 12, 2009 which gave a new momentum to the Iranian Green Movement by reducing the risk of crackdown (Slackman, 2009).

²⁴ For instance, when Ayatollah Rafsanjani—the pragmatist head of the Iranian Expediency Council—was announced to preach at the Friday prayer of July 17th 2009, the hope for a resolution of the conflict without opposing the political establishment once again began to grow. After his affiliates assured our first author that he was not going to admonish the people and Mousavi, the first author wrote an open letter to Mousavi, inviting him on behalf of his supporters to attend the Friday prayers (Daragahi, 2009), to which he responded positively (BBC 2009, July 16). This day is marked historic day due to rare occasions such as mixed-gendered performance of the prayers (PBS Frontline Tehranbureau 2009).

²⁵ For instance, an award-winning Iranian movie director claimed to be speaking on behalf of Mousavi and was later denounced due to their discursive divergence.

regime undermined Mousavi's non-violent approach²⁶ towards protesting within the framework of the Islamic Republic constitution. As a result, the strategy for attending the most significant government-held demonstration²⁷ outvoted Mousavi's approach on Facebook. However, this alternative approach was defused by the police force whereas February 11th 2010 marked the end of the stream of public demonstrations of the Iranian Green Movement (Abadi, 2010).

Facebook acted as an OPP for various candidates of spokespersonship for the Iranian Green Movement while undermining Mousavi's *problematization*. This social networking technology played an active role in the post-elections power displacements, particularly within the Iranian Green Movement. Once Mousavi was put under house arrest about a year later²⁸, the Iranian Green Movement was deprived of its most prominent spokesperson whereas its subsisting networks began to diverge, as simplified in the annexed Figure 5.

3. Conclusion

In this article, we recounted the story of how Facebook was used as a *device of intéressement* by the Mousavi campaign for the Iranian 2009 presidential elections. By using the vocabulary of ANT, we described how it became an OPP for spokespersonship in the subsequent rise of the Iranian Green Movement; Facebook provided an interactive and synchronous platform for various alternative *problematizations* and *enrollment*²⁹. In sum, Facebook has masked its *subsisting actor-networks*, including those inherited from the Mousavi's campaign and the Iranian Green Movement; thereby it has acted as an *OPP* in political displacements in post-2009 Iran.

²⁶ Despite Mousavi's repeated call for avoiding violence, the confrontation of protesters and security forces themed a protest held on December 27th as the day of Bloody Aashura (LA Times 2009). On this day, Mousavi's nephew was assassinated (CNN 2009, December 30), but instead of adopting a radical position, Mousavi in his last official statement proposed a resolution for the conflict insisting on the right of the people and further condemned any form of violence (Mousavi 2010, January 1).

²⁷ The anniversary of the 1979 revolution, celebrated with a symbolic demonstration towards Tehran's Azadi Square every year on February 11th ever since.

²⁸ As the Iranian political establishment embraced the Arab Spring, Mousavi and Karrubi requested an official permission for a rally in support of the Arab spring on February 14th, 2011. Although an official permission for this event was denied by the political establishment, people took to the street on February 14th, 2011. However, the political establishment which has demonstrated its extreme intolerance towards the Iranian Green Movement, has ever since put Mousavi, Dr. Rahnavard and Karrubi under house arrest in reaction to this event, where they still remain to this day.

²⁹ Mousavi famously noted that "[t]he Green Movement has been responsible for a wave of dialogue about important questions regarding our future. This event is incomparable to any other in our modern history. (Mousavi 2010, June 15)".

Our presentation this year at the CCA will investigate this hypothesis in context of the surprising victory of the current reformist Iranian president Rouhani. The repeated emergence of slogans affiliated to the Iranian Green Movement throughout the Rouhani campaign as well as the campaign's comprehensive social media strategy indicate Facebook's significant role in displacing the Iranian 2013 electoral politics.

Annexes

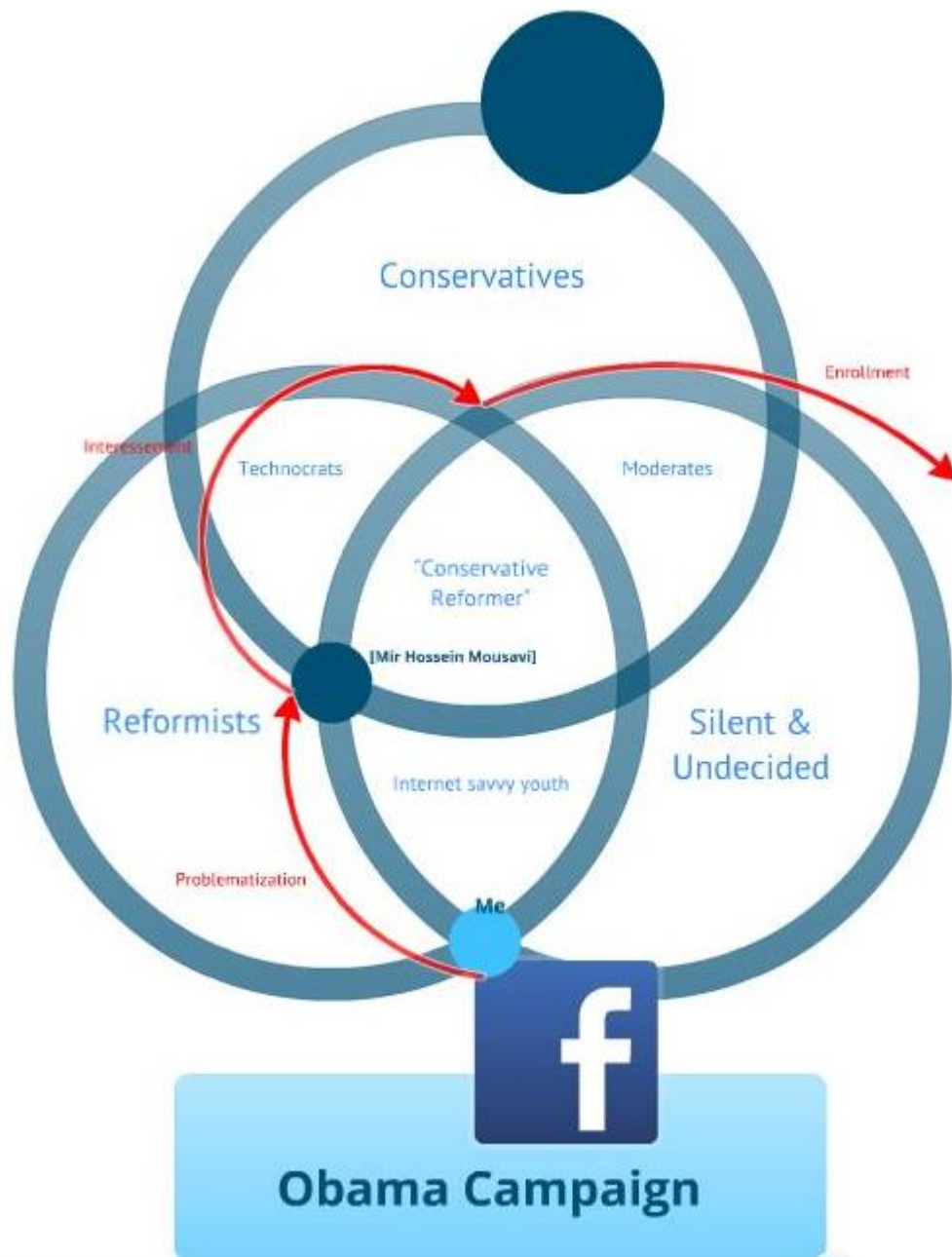


Figure 1

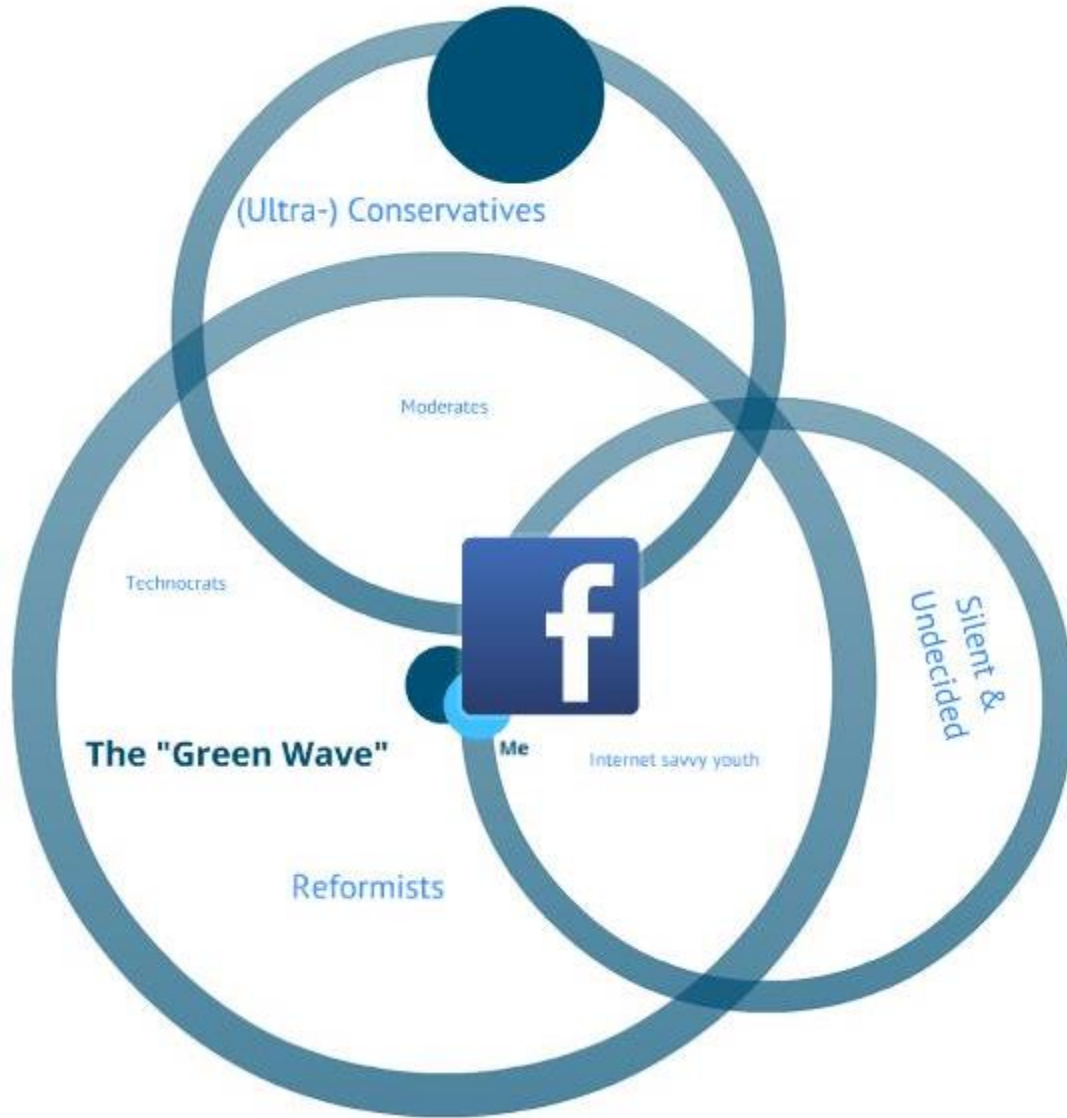


Figure 2

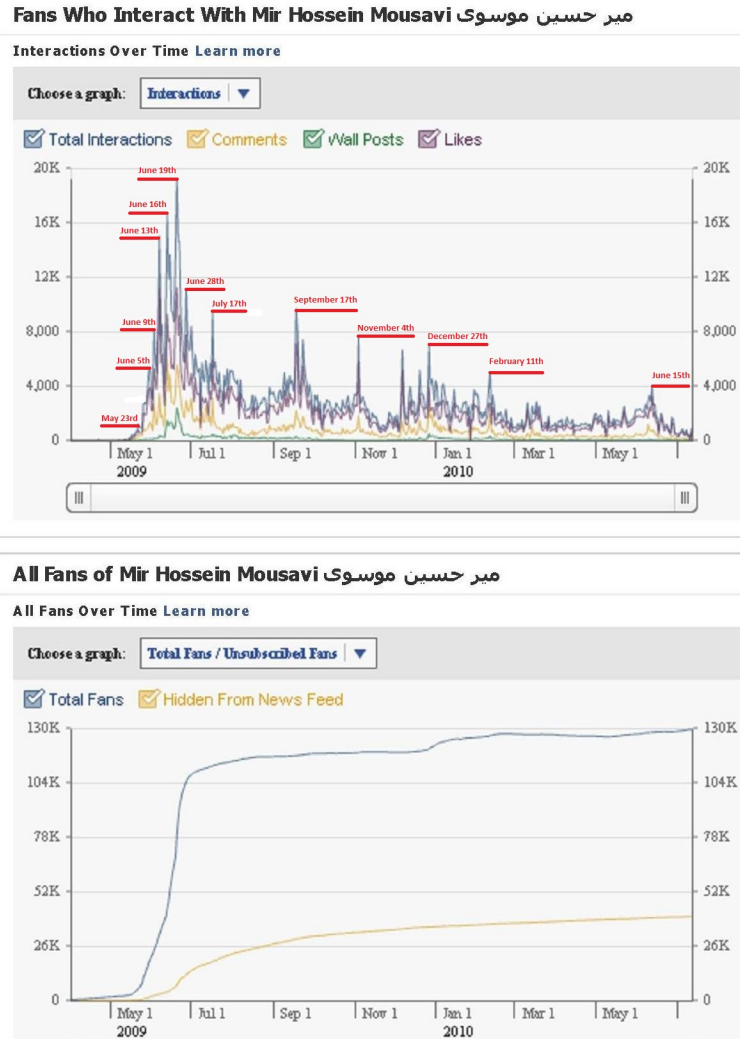


Figure 3

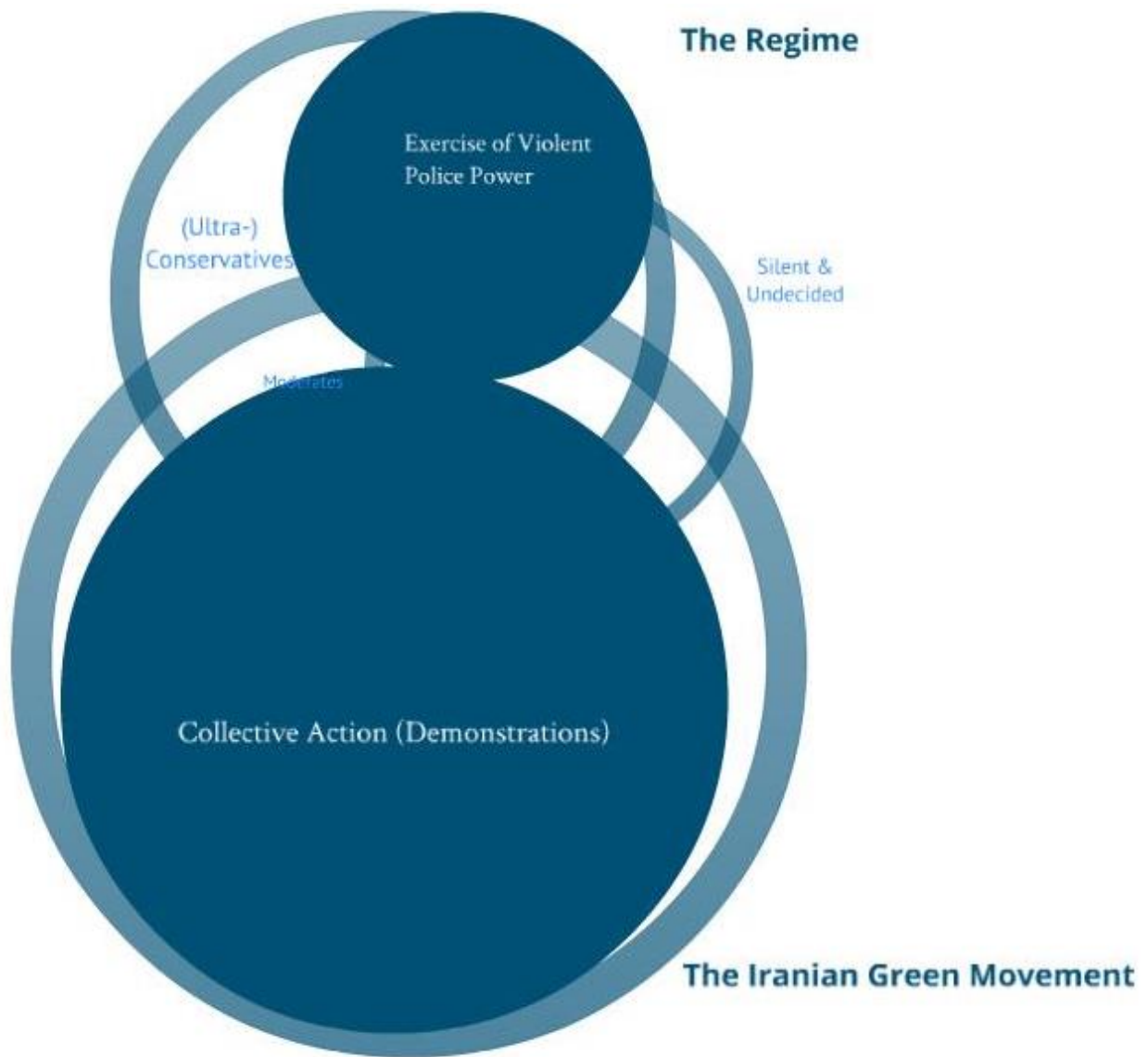


Figure 4

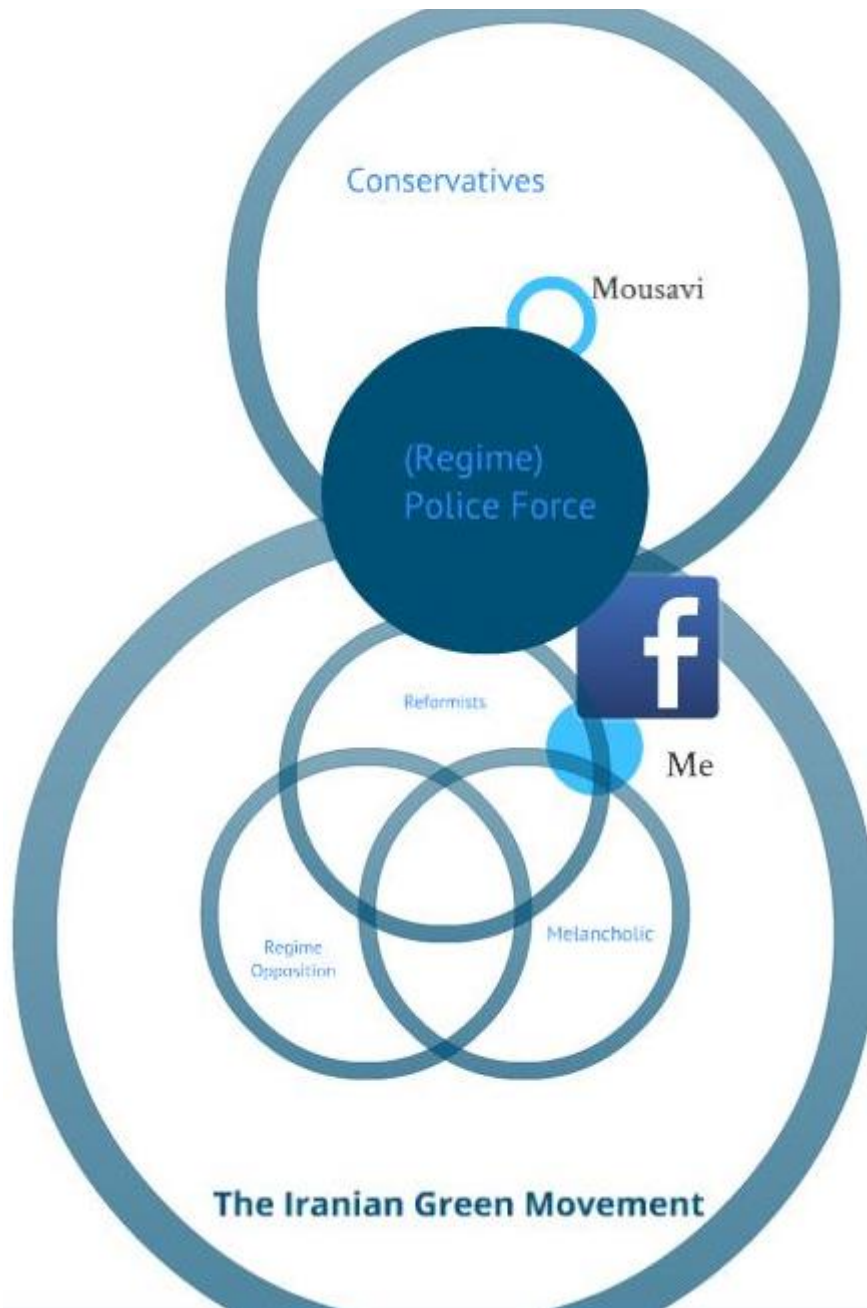


Figure 5

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