

Silence, Silencing, and (In)Visibility: The Geopolitics of Tehran's Silent Protests

A. MARIE RANJBAR

This article examines the use of silent protests to resist state denial and appropriation of activist narratives. Drawing from feminist literary studies, I conceptualize silence as a pluralistic, multifaceted, and multi-sited force. Through an analysis of several modalities of silence employed during Iran's 2009 election protests, I explore tensions between acts of silencing and silence as an act of dissent. I argue that silent protest is both an effect of—and resistance against—geopolitical conditions that subject Iranian citizens to state silencing. In this article, I examine: (i) the geopolitical conditions that enabled the silencing of Iranian citizens; (ii) meanings and interpretations of silent protests within Iran and internationally; (iii) the relationship among embodiment, scale, and visibility of Iranian protesters. I conclude with thoughts on reading silences across borders, while questioning the efficacy of silent protests in places considered geostrategically insignificant to the international community.

There is a way between voice and presence
where information flows.
In disciplined silence it opens.
With wandering talk it closes.
—Mawlavi Rumi

The largest protest in Tehran since the 1979 Iranian Revolution occurred three days after Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was declared the winner of the 2009 presidential elections. These protests signified the beginning of the Green Movement (*Jombesh-e Sabz*), a pro-democracy civil rights uprising that emerged in opposition to what many Iranians considered a coup d'état (Dabashi 2011, 55). The June 12, 2009 announcement of Iran's election results, less than twenty-four hours after the polls had closed, was met with incredulity by both Iranians and international spectators. The impromptu slogan "Where is my vote?" attracted international attention as Iranian citizens grappled with Ahmadinejad having allegedly won 62.6% of the vote while the widely anticipated frontrunner, Mir-Hussein Mousavi, received a mere 33.7%.

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The initial days following the election were marked by protests that began in Tehran's Azadi (Freedom) Square, as millions of citizens took to the streets to demonstrate for their civil rights.¹ Demonstrations quickly spread to other parts of the country, and to Iranian embassies worldwide.

Whereas many US spectators excitedly proclaimed these protests to be the beginning of a revolutionary movement, Iranian government officials swiftly labeled the unrest a product of Western intervention with the end goal of a velvet revolution.² These interpretations undermined narratives of Iranian citizens participating in demonstrations. Protesters initially called for new presidential elections with controls for transparency and, more broadly, advocated for an expansion of civil rights. They publicly disavowed both revolution and international intervention. Despite their stated reasons for gathering in protest, the actions of millions of Iranian citizens were hastily, and I argue deliberately, interpreted by Iranian and US media through an ideological Western/Islamic binary. It is within this milieu that Mousavi and Green Movement activists began to organize silent protests.

This article examines the use of silent protests to resist state denial and appropriation of activist narratives. Through an analysis of several modalities of silence employed by protesters, I explore tensions between acts of silencing and silence as an act of dissent. I argue silent protest is both an effect of—and resistance against—geopolitical conditions that subject Iranian citizens to state silencing. Building on insights from feminist political geography, I examine how these silent protests traversed geographical scale, signifying a “turn” away from the ideological designations forced upon demonstrators by the Iranian government and US media. I conclude with thoughts on reading silences across borders, while questioning the efficacy of silent protests in places considered geostrategically insignificant to the international community.

SILENCE, SCALE, AND GEOPOLITICS

Like a zero in mathematics, silence is an
absence with a function, and a
rhetorical one at that.
—Glenn 2004, 4

SILENCING AS HERMENEUTICAL INJUSTICE

As central to speech acts, the voice is understood as an expression of self and a means of contesting agential harm. Feminists of color and postcolonial feminists have written extensively on the historical and systematic silencing of marginalized groups, arguing that the ability to speak and be heard on one's own terms are integral components of agency and recognition (see, for instance, Lourde 1977; Mohanty 1988; hooks 1989; Spivak 1998; 1999; Abu Lughod 2013; Malholtra and Rowe 2013).³ José Medina's

theorization of hermeneutical injustice, and epistemic violence more broadly, is particularly useful for conceptualizing the multiple, intersectional ways that marginalized groups are silenced specific to their respective sociohistorical, and I will add geographical, context. Medina writes, “Hermeneutical injustice will be treated, roughly, as the kind of injustice that appears when there are wrongful interpretative obstacles that affect people differently in how they are *silenced*, that is, in their inability to express themselves and to be understood” (Medina 2013, 91). Despite historical associations of silence with passivity, Medina distinguishes being subjected to silencing from an intentional use of silence. He identifies public silence as a deliberate refusal to speak, which is a strategy used by marginalized populations based on an awareness of one’s vulnerabilities and the potentially high risks of speaking out (101–104). By drawing from feminist literary studies, I conceptualize silence as a pluralistic, multifaceted, and multi-sited force that can be strategically used to resist acts of silencing, and more broadly, political violence (Glenn 2004, 13–15; Ackerly 2008, 155–60).

Whereas much of the scholarship on epistemic violence focuses on the experiences of individuals or marginalized groups within specific local and national contexts, this article juxtaposes meanings of silence that are particular to Iran with interpretations of the Green Movement’s silent protests internationally, all within the context of hostile relations between Iran and the US. Through a feminist, geographical analysis of silent protest in Iran, I examine how the 2009 silent protests in Tehran’s public squares were seen, “heard,” and interpreted throughout the world. I extend conceptualizations of public silence by examining the scale of Green Movement protests and how a mass refusal to speak increased the visibility of Iranian demonstrators internationally.

My focus on the multiple meanings of silence during these protests differs from conventional geopolitical accounts of Iran that silence local narratives in favor of the articulation of state practices. Feminist geopolitics provides the necessary theoretical framework to forefront the voices, perspectives, and marginalized accounts of those most affected by international conflict (see, for example, Dowler and Sharp 2001; Pain and Smith 2008; Fluri 2009).⁴ A feminist geopolitical analytic connects silent protest to increased visibility of the conditions of—and resistance to—precarity and corporeal vulnerability of Iranian citizens, subject to national and international political violence. The silence that followed the 2009 presidential election signaled the limits of speech in this particular political moment, but more significantly, it demonstrated the ability of *protesters to reverse an effect into a cause*. Silent protests amplified the “voices” of protesters, however briefly, enabling them to reclaim their own narratives. This is critical to recognizing political agency when, seemingly, all political possibilities appear to be foreclosed.

In the sections that follow, I examine the rhetorical functions, significance, and limitations of silent protest, with emphasis on the particularity of Iran’s historical and geographical context. My analysis of observations and interviews I conducted in Iran reveals the ways in which a rhetoric of silence can subvert dominant state narratives, instead making visible resistance to various forms of state silencing.⁵ I discuss the potential of silence to unify protesters, and the ways in which protesters used public

silence both for protection and to maintain the possibility of negotiations with the Iranian government. I also examine the association of silence with nonviolence, juxtaposed with the regime's use of force in response to civil disobedience.

THE GREEN MOVEMENT AND SILENT PROTESTS

I have been witnessing the glowing presence and the lively and sacrificial efforts of my dear and dignified sisters and brothers, old and young, in the campaign for the 10th presidential election. Our youth demonstrated their presence on the political scene with hope and good spirit, in order to achieve their rightful demands Unfortunately, however, this opportunity was wasted in the worst possible way. Such election results were declared that no wise person in their right mind could believe . . . They [the regime] attacked the children of the nation right in front of national and foreign reporters, and used astonishing violence against defenseless men and women and the dear students, injuring and arresting them. And now they are trying to purge activists, intellectuals, and political opponents by arresting a large number of them, some of whom have even held high positions in the government of the Islamic Republic.⁶

IRAN'S 2009 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

In the months preceding Iran's 2009 presidential election, four main candidates emerged. The incumbent, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and Mohsen Rezai ran as conservative candidates, and Mehdi Karroubi and Mir-Hussein Mousavi campaigned on reformist platforms. Mousavi was widely viewed as the frontrunner of the campaign and had amassed a huge and energetic following, notably among young adults frustrated by high levels of unemployment, restrictions of social freedoms, and limited mobility as a result of Iran's political isolation within the international community. Mousavi positioned himself as a reformist, critiquing the regression of civil society and social rights, government corruption, and Iran's declining reputation in the international community under Ahmedinejad's administration. Mousavi's criticisms of the regime—as opposed to the government—were much more subtle. He refrained from directly challenging Iran's Supreme Leader, Grand Ayatollah Khomeini, or any of the religious and political institutions that uphold the Islamic Republic.⁷

As part of his campaign strategy, Mousavi transformed his role in the 1979 Iranian Revolution and his appointment to Prime Minister (1981–1989) by the late Ayatollah Khomeini into political currency. By referencing his relationship with Khomeini, Mousavi cleverly framed his reform agenda as a return to the vision and democratic promises of the Revolution. Mousavi emphasized his role as an insider to confront what he viewed as a derailment of the Revolution, while simultaneously positioning himself as an outsider to the regime by questioning the direction of the country and proposing a new, more democratic future. Within Iran, this was widely read as

condemnation of Supreme Leader Khomeini's leadership, and the mounting tension between Mousavi and Khomeini would later extend to the regime's treatment of Green Movement leaders and protesters.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE GREEN MOVEMENT

Despite widespread support for Mousavi, fewer than twenty-four hours after polls closed, Ahmadinejad had officially been reelected as president. The government referred to the high voter turnout, 85% of the voting population (40 million), as evidence of the legitimacy of the election process. Independent Iranian and international election observers condemned the official results. Mousavi, Karroubi, and Rezaei filed complaints of election fraud with one of Iran's most powerful institutions, the Guardian Council. Allegations of vote-rigging and ballot-stuffing were substantiated by cast ballots exceeding the number of registered voters and sudden swings in voting patterns, such as Mousavi losing his home province. Although Mousavi had been the front-runner with the most to lose, even the conservative presidential candidate Rezaei asked supporters to send him their national identification numbers to prove that he had garnered more votes than officially accounted for. Despite fraud allegations, Ahmadinejad gave his victory speech on June 14, with Khomeini's blessing.

Social media was alight with debates over who had orchestrated the election outcome. During my interviews, respondents emphasized the confusion, incredulity, and ensuing anger following the elections. "When the election results were announced, we couldn't believe it. We all voted for Mousavi. We were walking around outside asking people if they could believe it."⁸ Given the geographical breadth and the extent of reported irregularities, the election was commonly referred to as a coup d'état. Facebook profile pictures were replaced with *Raiyeh man kojast?* (Where is my vote?), which became the rallying slogan across the country. Mousavi's response, however, mirrored his nonconfrontational campaign strategy. Rather than directly accusing election officials of fraud, Mousavi contested the election results and rallied the masses to demand a new election. He rejected the Guardian Council's proposed partial recount, which was later used to substantiate the regime's narrative that Ahmadinejad fairly won the election but by a lesser margin.

In the days following Ahmadinejad's acceptance speech, Tehran was the site of Iran's largest demonstrations since the 1979 Iranian Revolution with upwards of three million people gathering in Azadi Square, a significant landmark of the Revolution. Mousavi's campaign color was green, which his supporters wore as they gathered en masse; these protesters became known as the Green Movement. The regime responded to the peaceful protests with violence. On the evening of Ahmadinejad's acceptance speech, paramilitary forces targeted university dormitories, killing five students from the University of Tehran and seven university students in Shiraz. Hundreds of university students from across the country were detained, and mass resignations and purging of university faculty followed.⁹ During several of my interviews with parents of university students, they spoke about their opposition to the

regime but forbade their children from participating in protests. One mother talked about the constant fear of having her sons—all three of whom were university students in 2009—targeted by local police: “Everyone came together. They made a decision to resist. They made decisions to call each other and spread information about gatherings and support each other. They [students] were brutally oppressed. They were murdered in the streets!”¹⁰ The regime also cracked down on civil society, closing many nongovernmental organizations and newspapers, revoking journalists’ licenses, and detaining activists throughout the country.

KHAMEINI SPEAKS

In the week that followed the election, Ayatollah Khomeini was conspicuously quiet, refusing to publicly comment on the ongoing protests. He finally broke his silence on June 19 during Friday prayer, a historically important political platform. Khomeini’s Friday sermon was significant in two respects. First, his hardline stance eviscerated any hope of a political compromise. Khomeini used this speech to reject an annulment of the vote by emphasizing the legitimacy of the election process, citing high voter turnout as proof of public trust in the election process and, thereby, the political system. As the highest authority in Iran, Khomeini signaled the regime’s position moving forward. He sought to silence protesters through threats, specifically warning opposition leaders that they would be responsible for bloodshed if protests continued. Second, Khomeini effectively dismissed protesters’ grievances by blaming unrest on foreign intervention, stating: “They wanted to create chaos The violators are not the public or the supporters of the candidates. They are the ill-wishers, mercenaries and agents of the Western intelligence services and the Zionists.”¹¹ Khomeini accused foreign powers of fomenting instability to incite a velvet revolution by destroying trust in Iran’s political leadership, particularly through the international media’s negative analyses of the elections. During one of my interviews, a woman who was a university student in 2009 described her memory of Khomeini’s speech:

The first few days after the election, Khomeini didn’t say anything. We were still in disbelief [from the election results]. Then Khomeini requested that he lead Friday prayers. We thought he would annul the election and hold another one. But we were shocked when he said, “My opinion is close to Ahmadinejad’s.” Then the pressure exploded. There was a war in Tehran! Not other cities, but in Tehran. There were special guards on top of towers shooting people. I saw the images on TV and I couldn’t believe it. I cried so much and my father turned off the TV. We were broken hearted! We were depressed. We are still depressed.¹²

Following Khomeini’s speech, the Guardian Council announced the results of their investigation of 646 complaints of election fraud. Citing their recount of ten percent of cast ballots, the Guardian Council rejected an annulment of the vote (*The Telegraph* 2009). The council acknowledged that cast ballots exceeded the number of

eligible voters in fifty cities, but attributed this to Iranians voting outside of their registered districts. Further, the Council described this election as the “healthiest” since the Revolution. It is worth noting that six of the twelve council members are appointed directly by the Supreme Leader; the others are selected by the Chief Justice of Iran, who is also appointed by Khomeini.

Protesters responded indignantly by continuing demonstrations the following week, all in spaces of particular significance to the 1979 Revolution. Former president Mohammed Khatami also called for peaceful mass stand-ins at the bazaars to disrupt commerce. In light of these events, and with the world watching, Mousavi and his supporters organized several silent protests throughout the summer of 2009.

SILENT PROTEST AND ITS FUNCTIONS

SILENCE AS UNIFYING

An important function of silent protests was to unify Iranians concerned with the outcome of the election without necessarily proposing a political agenda, thereby increasing overall political participation. In the initial stages of this movement, it is notable that protesters chose to silence themselves and their differences in support of a broader, and arguably less radical, political project. The creation of an inclusive space for political participation protected the nascent Green Movement from fragmenting as it began to coalesce, which mirrored Mousavi’s moderate position on reform. Although the election process was riddled with irregularities, reaching critical mass for demonstrations was challenging, especially given the regime’s history of violently suppressing opposition. Since the Revolution, the only major nationwide protests were the student-led uprisings in July 1999. The immense government crackdown and targeted assassinations of intellectuals following these protests quelled dissent, and significant repressions in civil society followed. Green Movement organizers needed a unifying message to encourage as many people as possible to attend demonstrations. The prominent rallying cry—“Don’t be scared, we are with you!”—is illustrative of attempts to gain strength through numbers.

A male university student living in Tehran whom I interviewed described a silent march on June 15: “Silence was unifying. It was something that we could all do to show unity.”¹³ Demonstrators marched peacefully until sunset, when paramilitary forces began to threaten protesters. The student recounted how fellow demonstrators formed a huge circle for protection, holding hands adorned with makeshift green bracelets. An older male activist from the Mazandaran Province described the unity displayed during demonstrations:

The Green Movement was a silent movement against the government. We are not with you! No death to anyone! [referring to the “Death to America/Israel” regime-sanctioned chants]. The Green Movement is the

majority of Iran. We are the silent majority—against the regime. We are unspoken members of any color movement against the regime. But the Green Movement was temporary. It was killed in the womb.¹⁴

SILENCE AS PROTECTION

Public silence functioned as a pragmatic and legally strategic form of self-protection. In a political landscape shaped by mass arrests and disappearances, demonstrators chanting anti-government slogans risked their own and other protesters' safety. However, Article 27 of Iran's constitution guarantees freedom of assembly and permits marches if they do not violate Islamic principles. A common charge against demonstrators in Iranian courts is the incitement of *fitna*, which generally refers to political unrest. A demonstration without chants, however, is not technically categorized as an illegal gathering. Protesters refused to justify their presence through words or identify themselves through political positionings; their silence provided both protection and anonymity. My interviews with demonstrators also indicate that chanting agitated the police, and silence reduced the likelihood of violence.

This excerpt from an interview with a retired professor provides a nuanced account of the ways in which silence protected protesters from the state. The professor and his wife, an artist in her fifties, traveled four hours to Tehran to participate in the June 28 silent protest and were detained shortly after arriving:

We walked on sidewalks, not streets. We walked on Enghelab (Revolution) Street, past the University of Tehran. We passed Enghelab Square, and crossed Azadi Square. It was so crowded but no one said a word. It was so crowded that you could not drop a needle into the crowd. There were *no slogans*. On one street close to Azadi Square, someone grabbed me and my wife I was hit hard with a baton. They [security forces] threw us into a truck full of men and women. I landed on the knee of a woman. There were 25 people in the back of the van; I counted. We couldn't move. A woman in a chador was thrown in. She was sitting on my lap, and I was sitting on another woman's lap. We couldn't move We couldn't breathe from the exhaust! Traffic couldn't move because of the protests. We were totally blocked. People were walking silently and there were vans with arrested people along the streets. We sat for 45 minutes in the van . . . They took us to a military garrison. We were led into a big salon for prayer. They put us into a big room separated by gender. They kept adding people. There were up to 2,000. We couldn't move. A man walked throughout the room. He started writing names, addresses. Asking questions like, why did you come? How did you hear about the protest? He asked any question you can think of. What are your mother and father's name? I gave all wrong information. They began coming in

with tuna fish, beans, and bread. I thought, they are planning on keeping us here. Fuck these idiots.¹⁵

This account emphasizes that, despite the diversity of grievances of the tens of thousands of people in attendance, everyone present was committed to silently demonstrating without using slogans. The refusal to provide accurate information functioned as a strategic use of silence, and was particularly effective given the sheer number of detained demonstrators. The professor also pointedly critiques the Iranian regime's treatment of female protesters. The regime derives its legitimacy through the enforcement of Islamic law, particularly the separation of gender in public space. Yet, paramilitary forces beat and detained women protesters and, in this account, forced men onto the laps of women in chador, a more conservative form of hijab in Iran.

SILENCE, NONVIOLENCE, AND MOURNING

The Green Movement used the association of silence with nonviolence to its advantage. During protests, nonviolent resistance provided a small modicum of protection to avoid provoking security forces, although disproportionate force was certainly used against protesters. The use of nonviolent resistance tactics also positioned protesters as ethical and lawful, particularly in relation to the increasingly violent responses from the state.

Following dormitory raids and the widespread detention of university students throughout the country, a silent protest was held on June 15, 2009 in Tehran. This massive demonstration ended in chaos when seven protesters were killed by paramilitary forces.¹⁶ Mousavi declared June 18, when the "Green Wave in Black Silence" march was held, as a day to commemorate lives lost since the election. Attendees marched silently with candles from Imam Khomeini Square to the Ghoba Mosque, donning black and green clothing. Green symbolizes Islam, and was also the color of Mousavi's campaign. Black represents mourning and is ubiquitous during Shi'ite commemorations of martyred saints. Banners for the prayer gathering included the phrase *Ya Hussein*, a subversive double entendre for Mir-Hussein Mousavi and Imam Hussein. Imam Hussein, one of the most revered figures in Shi'ite Islam, was killed alongside peaceful followers in Karbala by the Umayyad caliphate in 680 CE.¹⁷ This allusion draws parallels between the two Husseins, nonviolent leaders robbed of their status as leaders by corrupt regimes. These same religious tropes were also central to Ayatollah Khomeini's political campaign during the Revolution, and continue to function as highly nationalistic symbols for the Islamic Republic of Iran. Through the appropriation of religious nationalist symbols, demonstrators sought to pacify the regime by signaling that they opposed the election process but not the Revolution itself, which is the basis of the regime's legitimacy. Simultaneously, by invoking the Revolution, protesters held leaders accountable for not fulfilling the promises of the Revolution, namely the protection of civil rights.

Holy sites also functioned as sanctuaries for protesters, such as a July 2009 demonstration held in Shahcheragh, a Shiraz mosque significant in that it once served as a

place of refuge for persecuted Shi'ite Muslims. Acts of state violence within places of religious significance were politically impossible, especially given the regime's sensitivity to international media coverage.

IMAGES OF THE GREEN MOVEMENT

In stark contrast to the pervasive images of male religious and military leaders symbolizing key moments of Iran's modern history—particularly the 1979 Revolution and the Iran–Iraq War—the Green Movement was markedly different in that images of protesting Iranian women dominated media accounts (Hashemi and Postel 2010, 37–40). During the first week of election protests, an iconic image emerged of a young woman clad in a green scarf against the backdrop of Azadi Tower. She is shouting and triumphantly raising her green ribbon-wrapped fist in the air.

The face of Neda Agha Soltan quickly supplanted social media images of women in green hijab, flashing peace signs while marching through the streets of Tehran. The murder of Neda followed Khomeini's June 19 pronouncement that the regime would respond violently to future protests. Neda—a twenty-six-year-old philosophy student—was shot in the chest by paramilitary forces during a June 20 protest, which was recorded on a camera phone. The video of Neda's death went viral hours later on YouTube and Facebook, galvanizing protesters and provoking international condemnation. Neda—whose name means “voice” in Farsi—became the face of the Green Movement, symbolizing all of the innocent lives lost in the wake of election violence.

As Iranian protester's continued to struggle against state appropriation of their narratives, images of Green Movement demonstrations played a critical role in mobilizing activists globally. However, photographs circulating internationally largely affirmed what was already familiar to Western audiences, namely political repression, human rights violations, and the violent suppression of peaceful protesters. Yet, these very images that reified a Western imaginary of Iran were also subversive.

The global uptake of Neda's image speaks to a Western fascination with Muslim women in public space, the seemingly paradoxical image of an oppressed woman in hijab demanding her civil rights (Puwar 2004, 141–45; Ahmed 2006, 112–20; Fernandes 2013, 32–38). Although the Green Movement's use of Neda's image resembles the ubiquitous tactic of exploiting women's bodies to advance political goals, the symbol of Neda as the “voice” of a silenced civil rights movement challenged the global perception that Iranians—and Iranian women in particular—lack political agency. Just as silent protest both affirmed and resisted state silencing, Neda's image affirmed and resisted orientalist imaginaries of Iranian women.

SILENCE, EMBODIMENT, AND ASSEMBLY

In considering the significance of context-specific functions of silence within Iran, it is critical to examine the ways that silent protest was read and understood by

international audiences, given that this was an explicit component of the Green Movement's efforts to position the international community as witnesses to state violence. Judith Butler's theory of assembly as an act of plural performativity is especially useful for conceptualizing the political potential of silent protest across borders. Butler emphasizes the power of assembly to make visible and challenge conditions of precarity:

It matters that bodies assemble, and that the political meanings enacted by demonstrations are not only those that are enacted by discourse, whether written or vocalized. Embodied actions of various kinds signify in ways that are, strictly speaking, neither discursive nor prediscursive . . . forms of assembly already signify prior to, and apart from, any particular demands they make. *Silent gatherings*, including vigils or funerals, often signify in excess of any particular written or vocalized account of what they are about. (Butler 2015, 7–8; emphasis added)

Butler's theory of collective performativity extends the concept of public silence, which is generally theorized at the individual and group level, instead inviting us to consider what can be expressed and signified beyond discourse through assembly (Butler 2015, 70–75). The *scale* of protest activity is significant, not only in terms of the millions of Iranians who gathered silently together, but also the duration of protest activity throughout the summer of 2009 that commanded such high visibility internationally. At the individual level, it is difficult to imagine using silence as an effective means of resisting interpellation of Iranian activist narratives. However, the public silence enacted during protests was a powerful rhetorical strategy that resisted hermeneutical injustice by signifying a “turn” away from an ideological binary that preceded them (Butler 1997, 106–31). The scale of silent protests enabled demonstrators to reclaim the right to expression, despite formidable limitations imposed by the state. In conditions that foreclose the right to express oneself on one's own terms, assembly is a highly visible means of reclaiming “voice” through the mass occupation of public space (Butler 2015, 70–71). Silence marks the limits of speech in this political context, but paradoxically, a collective embodied silence amplifies “voice” and makes visible the resistance against oppressive geopolitical conditions.

GEOPOLITICS AND THE LIMITS OF SPEECH

Iranian protesters had already been preceded by three decades of a tense geopolitical climate in which their demonstrations were coded and appropriated to further the ideological agendas of the Iranian and the US governments. The silencing of protesters' narratives was enforced through multiple arenas, and despite the complexity of Iran's political landscape, protests were framed by both the Iranian and US media through the all-too-familiar ideological binaries of East versus West, Islam versus secular, theocracy versus democracy. Local and international journalists covering the election were closely monitored by the state to limit what information was available

to Iranian and international audiences. Following the election, there was an almost impenetrable media blackout, with foreign correspondents deported from the country.

Social media, therefore, offered an important platform for protesters to share their own views with the world. Although much of the protest organizing was communicated privately amongst family and friends, activists used popular social-media platforms to disseminate information about demonstrations. Consequently, the Iranian government blocked sites like Facebook and Twitter. Social media also led to a proliferation of people from outside Iran offering their own accounts of Iran's unrest. Although many of these efforts were meant to express solidarity—such as Twitter users switching their account information to reflect Iran's time and obscuring IP addresses to aid demonstrators in posting up-to-date information—too often they obscured first hand accounts. English-language sources (not necessarily from multi-lingual protesters) were used by US media to construct narratives that did not reflect the diversity of protesters' views. Media coverage was geographically skewed, ignoring important events taking place outside of Tehran, with limited translations of events described in Azeri, Arabic, Farsi, and other indigenous languages spoken throughout Iran. This was undoubtedly due to the complexity of Iran's political landscape, the speed with which protests and other acts of resistance emerged, and a relative absence of information due to media restrictions and Iran's three decades of political isolation. Consequently, the nuances of protesters' grievances were lost as their narratives circulated from the streets of Iranian cities through international media, despite protesters' efforts to mediate meaning through their own social-media accounts.

As post-election protests continued to attract international attention, Iranian citizens were cognizant of how their actions were misinterpreted by international media. US media coverage of protests, in particular, added another layer of complexity for Iranian demonstrators. US media emphasized political rights as the driver of unrest, as opposed to the broader civil rights goals of protesters (Dabashi 2011, vii). The implication was clear, if not stated outright: political rights are the domain of the Western world. This discourse effectively shifted attention away from protesters' actions, instead centering the US as the global champion of political rights. US media were either ignorant of—or neglected to include—anti-imperialist and anti-intervention critiques that were an explicit message of the demonstrations.

US political pundits speculated about how long the Iranian regime would last and the potential for a pro-Western revolution, driven by Iran's sizable youth population. The phrase "largest protests since the 1979 Islamic Revolution" was pervasive in media accounts following the election. This conveyed the extensiveness of the protests and, perhaps more significantly, suggestively signaled hopes for regime change, this time one more amenable to US interests. Media coverage of post-election Iran labeled the Green Movement pro-Western, pitting a progressive Mousavi against an anti-Western Ahmadinejad and Khomeini. Although Green Movement leaders disavowed revolution, media pundits excitedly compared protests to events leading to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Op-eds about the Green Movement in US newspapers proliferated, with evocative titles such as "Iran's Revolution," "Iran's Velvet Revolution?" (Gillick 2009), and "Iran at the Crossroads" (Bani-Sadr 2009). This fed

into Khomeini's accusations of US attempts to destabilize Iran by denigrating and isolating Iran's leadership, with the end goal of a velvet revolution.

Demonstrators battled the regime's counter-narratives while trying to resist appropriation of their efforts by US media. They simultaneously fought to keep the world's focus on Iran. Despite protesters' initial attempts to frame their grievances through a nationalist revolutionary language, Khomeini's infamous Friday sermon delegitimized protesters' grievances by attributing demonstrations to foreign intervention. Likewise, using a rights-based discourse led to interpretations by the US media that the Green Movement was a pro-Western revolution. This pushed protesters into an impossible and highly ideological binary that severely limited the space of speech. The inability of protesters to create and circulate their own narratives, the geopolitical conditions that made it impossible for them to be heard on their own terms, and the ideological appropriation of their grievances, made silence one of the few strategies available to protesters.

LISTENING FOR SILENCE

My intention in this article has been to demonstrate the power of silence as a tactic of resistance. I was motivated to write this account out of concern that "silence," as the defining characteristic of these protests, would be categorized as a continuation of silencing that marginalized groups systematically experience at multiple scales, thereby resulting in an erasure of Iranian resistance. The Green Movement protests, however, challenge assumptions that silence necessarily signifies passivity, silencing, and absence. These protests demonstrate the value of silence as an act of resistance, and as a critical rhetorical tactic that warns against misreadings of silence. Remaining silent during demonstrations was a practical way for protesters to protect themselves against multifaceted violences, but silence was also deployed in imaginative ways that pushed back against protesters' words being used as tools of state oppression. Using their assembled bodies as a highly visible form of silence, Iranian demonstrators forged an important liminal space outside of imposed ideological binaries that foreclosed political speech.

This is not, however, a celebratory article. Silent protests emerged precisely because of the limits of speech, and the paucity of options available to Iranian protesters to register their many grievances with both the Iranian regime and global politics. Iranian activists were, and continue to be, silenced in a myriad of ways—discursively, through the cooptation of their struggles, and the production and circulation of counter-narratives. Despite being subjected to multiscalar political violence, Iranian protesters resisted certain instances of being silenced by using silence in innovative and powerful ways. Through silent protests, activists reversed an effect into a cause.

Given this article's engagement with hermeneutical injustice, it is important to acknowledge that silence is effective rhetorically only when there is an audience that is both willing to hear and capable of hearing (Dotson 2011, 251). It is not lost on me that Iran continues to command significant geopolitical importance, which translates to higher visibility in moments of political unrest. The US media's fixation on

the 2009 protests betrayed hopes for a revolution, one that would produce an Iranian state more amenable to US interests in the region. The international community also watched the protests closely given that Iran is enmeshed in a number of regional conflicts, and international negotiations regarding its controversial nuclear energy program are ongoing. Although I have demonstrated how protests in Iran were not only intertwined with but exerted influence on global politics, the question remains: In places—and times—of “lesser” geopolitical importance, is anyone listening to silent and silenced voices?

Silence is but one strategy of resistance, and its effectiveness is inextricably linked to the geopolitical landscape.¹⁸ In response to an interview question about the potential for future mass protest, an Esfahani university student responded: “We had a revolution [1979] for democracy. Not for this. . . . We are like embers. We just need one match for protests to begin again.”¹⁹ Smaller-scale silent protests continue in Iran amid brutal repression but are overshadowed by other geopolitical events. While the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action was being negotiated, Iranian teachers and laborers silently protested low pay and dangerous working conditions in 2014 and 2015. Within Iran, activists continue to be threatened, detained, and subject to physical, psychological, and sexual torture. Green Movement leaders including Mir-Hussein Mousavi, Mehdi Karroubi, and their spouses, remain under house arrest since being detained on February 28, 2011. Although the everyday lives of Iranians are profoundly affected by punitive economic sanctions and Iran’s continued political isolation, these accounts are conspicuously absent in international media. If we are to take seriously silence as resistance, we must challenge the geopolitical conditions that make speaking impossible while listening intently for—and attentively to—silent speech.

NOTES

It is with the deepest gratitude and admiration that I thank my many hosts, colleagues, friends, and family in Iran. The generosity of Iranians is legendary, and I am deeply indebted to several families who advised and nurtured me during my travels to Iran. Although I cannot publish your names, I thank you all for opening your homes to me, and sharing your memories and hopes for a better future.

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1. There are conflicting figures about the number of protesters in international media accounts of post-election demonstrations, which was largely due to the media crackdown in Iran. In this article, I use figures that were most frequently cited in both English and Farsi-language news articles.

2. The term *velvet revolution* refers to nonviolent democratic transitions, and was first used to describe Czechoslovakia's transition from a communist state to parliamentary democracy. This term is frequently invoked by the Iranian regime to denounce US pro-democracy efforts, which Iran interprets as a core component of US foreign policy to facilitate regime change in the Middle East. Dissidents within Iran are often accused of conspiring to incite a velvet revolution, and common charges against opposition leaders include acting against national security, cooperation with enemy governments, and propaganda against the state. The Iranian government's suspicions are shaped by the history of the US interventions in Iran, particularly the 1953 overthrow of nationalist Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh and US military aid to Iraq during the 1980–1988 Iran–Iraq War. The Iranian regime also cites US militarization of the region, wars with Iran's neighboring countries (that is, Afghanistan and Iraq), and hostile US rhetoric toward Iran (for example, George W. Bush's 2002 "axis of evil" State of the Union address). For more information, please see Keddie 2003; Abrahamian 2008; and Dabashi 2011.

3. I draw from feminist literary studies that emphasize the plurality of silences, and the myriad meanings of silence in different cultural, social, and political contexts. Feminist scholars have paid particular attention to what silence conveys rather than what it does not say, and the ways in which the many uses of silence are interpreted differently based on one's identity and positionality (Glenn 2004; Oliver 2004; Dolar 2006; Fricker 2007; Malholtra and Rowe 2013).

4. As a feminist geographer, I am interested in how spatial approaches to silence and its uses can disrupt simplistic (and uneven) binaries between speech and silence, public and private, local and global. Feminist political geographers have long challenged scholarship that privileges state relations, sovereignty, and territoriality to the exclusion of everyday life. Through reconceptualizations of spatial modalities, feminist geopolitics has contested hierarchal, vertical notions of scale that delimit social processes, obscure relationality, and render the intimate and everyday invisible. Rather, feminist political geographers argue that the global and local are co-constituted through a dialectical relationship, which disrupts the tendency to frame analyses of large-scale events through static, hierarchal approaches that, far too often, reduce events to what is recognizable through a US-centric lens (see, for example, Dowler and Sharp 2001; Katz 2001; Hyndman 2004; Mountz and Hyndman 2006; Pain and Smith 2008; Fluri 2009; Wright 2009; Koopman 2011; Sharp 2011; Pratt and Rosner 2012; Fernandes 2013; Pain and Staeheli 2014).

5. This article draws upon my research on rights pluralism in Iran, in which I employ a diversity of research methods, including observation, in-depth and semi-structured interviews, and discourse and textual analysis. Throughout this article, I include quotes from thirty-two interviews that I conducted during six months of ethnographic research between 2013–2015 in the Iranian provinces of Mazandaran, Tehran, and West Azerbaijan. These quotes are based on interview respondents' reflections of Green Movement protests, as well as commentary on the general state of civil and political rights in the country. All of my interview respondents either attended Green Movement protests, or have family members who participated in protests.

6. The late Ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri (1922–2009) released this statement in support of Mir Hossein Mousavi. Montazeri wrote a number of *fatwas* during the summer of 2009 criticizing the regime's role in the contested elections and questioning Ayatollah Khomeini's legitimacy as a leader. Montazeri was once the successor to Ayatollah Khomeini; however, following his condemnation of the regime's treatment of opposition leaders and political prisoners, Montazeri was subjected to constant surveillance and periodic house arrest from the late 1980s until his death. An English translation of Montazeri's statement is provided in Sahimi 2009.

7. When considering the challenge to power that Mousavi represented, it is important to differentiate between the government and the regime. For the purposes of this article, the Iranian government refers to elected government officials and democratic institutions, including the Parliament. The regime refers to the Supreme Leader and the institutions of unelected representatives that Khomeini oversees, notably the Guardian Council, the Expediency Council, the Revolutionary Guard, the Basij, and the military. Candidates perceived as critiquing the regime are routinely deemed unqualified by the Guardian Council, which administers election vetting as part of its duties. This is a critical distinction as it indicates the possibility of challenging the government without necessarily opposing the regime; Mousavi's campaign reflects this exact strategy. More important, this distinction reveals that there is not one unified voice of—and dissent exists within—the regime. The Supreme Leader ultimately has the final say, especially during periods of political instability.

8. Interview, February 22, 2015, West Azerbaijan, Iran.

9. Students from the University of Esfahan, University of Tabriz, University of Babol, University of Hamedan, and others universities were detained, although the numbers of those arrested varied or were unconfirmed in media accounts. For information on those arrested, charged, and/or killed during this period, please see the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (<http://www.iranhumanrights.org> [accessed February 16, 2017]).

10. Group interview, November 20, 2014, Istanbul, Turkey.

11. For the translated text of Khomeini's speech, please see the USG Open Source Center 2009.

12. Interview, February 23, 2015, West Azerbaijan Province.

13. Interview, November 13, 2014, Tehran Province.

14. Interview, November 4, 2014, Mazandaran Province.

15. Interview, November 4, 2014, Mazandaran Province.

16. For more information on the detention, arrests, and deaths of Green Movement activists, please see International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, <http://www.iranhumanrights.org> (accessed February 17, 2017).

17. On the importance of Twelver Shi'ism and the role of political Islam in Iran, see Keddie 2003; Dabashi 2006; Abrahamian 2008; Ghamari-Tabrizi 2008.

18. I would like to thank Cheryl Glenn for this important insight.

19. Interview, February 24, 2015, Tehran Province.

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Statement on Human Subjects

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