Reading Gandhi in Tehran

A decade later, the peaceful Green Movement continues to inspire Iranians worldwide.

Written by Ramin Jahanbegloo | Updated: June 17, 2019 12:04:05 am

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Ten years ago, the world watched in admiration the peaceful, non-violent protests of young Iranians in the aftermath of Iran’s fraudulent presidential elections of June 2009 that re-elected Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president. On June 12, interior minister Sadeq Mahsouli, an ally of Ahmadinejad, declared that the president had won the election with 62.6 per cent of the vote against 33.7 percent for Mir Hossein Mousavi, a reformist politician, who served as prime minister from 1981 to 1989. The protests in Tehran began by denouncing the presidential election results. When the administration clamped down, the people created a massive civil movement. In the days and months that followed, the state authorities were challenged by what came to be known as the “Green Movement”, the biggest non-violent challenge to Iran’s rulers since they gained power in 1979.

In what is now understood as a Gandhian moment in post-revolutionary Iran, young men and women from all walks of life protested for fundamental changes in the leadership of the Islamic Republic, its economic system, and many other civic issues. Also, for the first time in three decades, Iran’s public spaces saw extraordinary heroism from women demonstrators, who were beaten up, arrested, and killed. Neda Agha-Soltan, a 26-year-old philosophy student, who bled to death after being shot during a peaceful demonstration in Tehran, became the symbol of the fighting Iranian women.

The demonstrators condemned violence and the exercise of power without ethics by the authorities. The Iranian political society had abandoned ethical values since the constitutional revolution of 1906-1911 and adopted violence as a means to force regime change. So, the non-violent action by the Iranian Green Movement was proof of a new political maturity and moral integrity. The Green Movement chose civil disobedience, particularly silent demonstrations, to unify people, which gave it a “Gandhian” tone. This rather spiritual and peaceful spirit of the Green Movement that saw the participation of a large number of young Iranians, was a huge motivation for the young Arabs, who two years later, took to streets in Tunis, Cairo, Damascus and Bahrain to challenge the undemocratic order in their countries.

The Green Movement was quickly crushed by the authorities. But it impressed the civil society actors in Iran about the need to go beyond all forms of violence in political action. The brutal policies of the authorities, since the 1979 revolution, have made many people inside and outside Iran believe that only a violent showdown can force regime change in the country. However, the atmosphere that precipitated the Green Movement has promoted radically decentralised political associations and non-hierarchical values among the Iranian youth. Living through two revolutions, one coup d’état, one armed occupation and sporadic guerilla warfare in one century, several generations of Iranians are exposed to the horrors of violence.
In this context, the Green Movement is not only an important moment in Iranian history, but also a milestone in the history of non-violent initiatives across the globe. For those who seek a more tolerant, pluralistic and democratic order in Iran, the rise of the Green Movement represents an explosion of democratic thought and action, which created a “new unity of purpose” among Iranians around the world since the downfall of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in 1979. A decade since its eruption, the Green Movement is viewed as a promising indigenous movement for democracy.

It’s useful to remember that two out of three people in Iran today are under 35. They make up one third of the electorate in the presidential elections. These young Iranians, many of them well-educated, may not pose a threat to the regime in Tehran, which has vast paramilitary and police resources at its disposal. But given the demographics, policy decisions that do not factor in the views of the young Iranians could severely threaten the very foundations of the Islamic regime.

The idea of the Green Movement as a democratic learning community has not disappeared. Many Iranians see the moral claims made by it as a legitimate counter to the values claimed by the Iranian theocracy. Young Iranians will continue to read Gandhi in Tehran, though it may take another generation to make the Gandhian dream of non-violent political change a reality.

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