From Streets to Cyberspaces: The *Disembodiment* of Social Protests in Iran

A Comparative Time-Perspective

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Abstract – While recent protests against religious police in Iran have obtained world-wide attention due to their physical, embodied presence and visibility not only on the streets of Iranian cities and villages but also beyond the national borders, the recent evolution of 2022's *Women, Life, Freedom* protests has turned the mobilization into dis-embodied forms of protest. This disembodiment represents the result of three major observable social facts related to contemporary social mobilization in the Iranian context. In the first place, Iran is a hyper-connected country, where the online has, since the end of the 1990's, represented a wide spread and concrete opportunity for the young generations to express dissent and challenge Islamic governmental restrictions, such as mandatory veiling and gender segregation. Secondly, protests in Iran have been going hybrid (being both online and offline) since 2009's *Rahesabz* Green Movement, although back then, technological means were less sophisticated; nonetheless, the 2022's protests rely on a pre-existing significant experience of online mobilization. Third, the harsh, physical repression of the *Women, Life, Freedom* movement has made it almost impossible for protesters to maintain a continuity in their physical presence on the streets and in public places. From a comparative time-perspective, these three conditions characterize *Women, Life, Freedom* movement as a disembodied social movement.

Keywords: disembodiment – social protests – womens' rights – Islam – revolutions

1. Introduction: A Hyper-Connected Country

When in 1993 Dr. Larijani, director of the Tehran Institute for the Study of Theoretical Physics and Mathematics, sent the country's first e-mail, which was a greeting to the administrators of the University of Vienna, none would have expected that thirty years later Internet users in Iran would have become as many as 69.3 million. They would have represented 78.6 percent of the entire population.

Today, Iran is not only connected to the Internet, but has digitized almost any aspect of everyday life; even the use of cash has now been practically eliminated, considering that every single transaction within the country takes place through bank cards or phone apps[1].

[1] I. Berman, *Iranian Devolution. Tehran Fights the Digital Future*, in «World Affairs», 178, 2015, 3,

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Iran has had one of the fastest growing rates of digitalization in the world, becoming, in just a few years, the second country in the Middle East – preceded only by Israel – for the number of Internet users. Even the use of social media is now widespread among 48 million users who have at least one social account: this means that more than half of all Iranians use Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, Telegram, but also Badoo, BeReal, LinkedIn, to name but a few. Nonetheless, the massive use of the Internet shall not be perceived as necessarily in opposition to religious Government and the Islamic Shi'a Theocracy[2].

While in Iran the internet is today controlled and limited by the State, often in conjunction with protests or periods of great social mobilization, the use of the internet was, at least initially, promoted and strongly desired by the islamic government itself, especially to support the technological advancement of the country during the decade of the Nineties that followed the end of the Iran-Iraq war[3].

The Islamic Republic was originally enthusiast in welcoming the Internet, allowing the business and educational sectors to access the world wide web without interference, indeed promoting its diffusion, in a very different way compared to other Asian or Middle Eastern countries. While in China, for instance, technological innovation and the use of the Internet was adopted, initially, to connect the various sectors of government, i.e. as a form of intragovernmental communication from which the rest of society was practically excluded, Iran's first experience online was adopted within the university system, immediately including the student communities and the academic staff[4].

Until a few decades ago, most of Iran's national Internet connections were in fact based on academia, consisting of a national university network, then implemented later over time by additional external links established by the National Agency Communications Centers, which provided services to both enterprises and government organizations. The

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pp. 51-57; A. Arsanjani et al., *Challenges of the Iranian E-Banking Business Model in Digital Transformation*, in «Journal of Money and Economy», 14, 2019, 3, pp. 389-419. I refer here to my personal observation during my fieldwork stay in Iran, between June and July 2022.

2 A. Johari*, Internet Use in Iran. Access, Social and Educational Issues*, in «Springer Educational Technology Research and Development», 50, 2002, 1, pp. 80-84.

3 H. Amirahmadi, *Economic Reconstruction of Iran: Costing the War Damage*, in «Third World Quarterly», 12, 1990, 1, pp. 26-47.

4 G. Yang, *A Chinese Internet? History, Practice, and Globalization*, in «Chinese Journal of Communication», 5, 2012, 1, pp. 49-54.

link between the web network and the university meant that until the mid-nineties, the development of telecommunications was dynamic and relatively independent of state control[5].

Since the beginning of the second millennium, however, the first tensions have been in place between the state agency and the network regulation and control agency, i.e. the Data Communication Company of Iran (DCI) – and the private emerging sector. The problem was not so much to agree upon who should control what, with respect to the content conveyed by the network, but, rather, on how to improve the quality and availability of access to an increasingly necessary and popular technology; in short, the real question was how to make all of Iran wired.

Until 1997, the State had difficulty providing internet access to all areas of Iran and keeping up with the development needs of businesses even in the most remote parts of the country. It was above all the sector and private investments that sponsored the 'wiring' of the most peripheral areas[6].

As a result, state information agencies have been displaced in the domestic telecommunications market and have ceded the ground to much more competitive private Internet Service Providers (ISPs), some from China, India and others locally developed.

First appearing in 1994, ISPs have created the basis for the development of the Iranian Internet, thanks to the growing pool of computer engineers who have graduated from the country's popular ICT universities in those decades; wiring Iran has had the outcome, among other things, of promoting political activism online. As scholar Bruce Bimber noted back in 1998, in his analysis on the impact of the internet in the Northern American political context, in Iran the digital revolution gave rise to an «accelerated pluralism» and a movement towards the «fragmentation of the more traditional system of interest-based group politics and a shift toward a more fluid, issue-based group politics with less institutional coherence»[7]. For the first time, in fact, even in the most peripheral areas of the country, many Iranians have had the opportunity to cross cultural bound-

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[5] B. Rahimi, *CyberDissent. The Internet in Revolutionary Iran*, in «Middle East Review of International Affairs», 7, 2003, 3.

[6] E.T. Brooking - S. Kianpour, *Iranian Digital Influence Efforts: Guerrilla Broadcasting for the Twenty-First Century*, in «Atlantic Council», Report. February 11, 2020: https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/iranian-digital-influence-efforts-guerrilla-broadcasting-for-the-twenty-first-century/.

[7] B. Thermomix, *The Internet and Political Transformation. Populism Community and Accelerated Pluralism*, in «Polity», 31, 1998, 1, pp. 133-160.

aries of the nation without moving from their villages. This represented a push towards a deep change in the cultural framework of the first wired Iranian generation, in their way of perceiving personal freedoms and designing political issues: computer technology loomed as a remarkable development in human history as well as a potentially subversive tool[8].

The creation of IRANET (Information and Communication Network of Iran) in 1993 marked the first major step towards introducing the Internet to the Iranian public. Orby providing full Internet access, e-mail services, e-publishing and website design, IRANET has contributed to the online launch of many enterprises, organizations, institutions, information activities[9].

Since the beginning of the new millennium, the Internet has immediately shown itself in all its ambivalence: on the one hand it was clear that its scope was revolutionary and full of opportunities; on the other hand, it was equally clear that it would soon represent a great challenge for the Islamic Republic. As was already the case for literature, music and cinema, a censorship body had to be set up specifically dedicated to the web. Controlling the web would not just be limited to filtering online contents: depending on the different political events or urgencies, the government has decided to cut the connection of the entire nation for some periods (be they long or short), when the risk of protests became more imminent, or social unrest would be very high; government has thus invested in infrastructures that would make it possible to turn the connection of Iran on and off at will and depending on odds.

The ambivalent nature of the Internet in the Iranian context had implications to which the government reacted through choices that were never unitary nor linear. The digital revolution has represented further occasions for internal clashes within politics and parliament, enhancing antithetical positions.

For example, in May 2014, the body in charge of web censorship, the aforementioned DCI, passed a motion to ban the WhatsApp mobile messaging application; however, this decision was opposed by President Hassan Rohani and Mahmoud Vaezi, then Minister of Communications. It was not clear who had the last word, whether the censorship agency or the President of the Republic himself. The proposal to ban WhatsApp was in fact approved on April 30, 2014, i.e. shortly after the acquisition by Mark

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8 A. Adeniran, *The Internet and Emergence of Yahooboys in Nigeria Sub-Cultures in Nigeria,* in «International Journal of Cyber Criminology», 2, 2008, 2, pp. 368-381.

9 E.T. Brooking - S. Kianpour, *Iran and the Internet.*

Zuckerberg of the $ 19 billion messaging app, on the basis of the motivation (recurring in Iran) that American dominance in the country was displayed through the control of communication systems; for Rouhani, however, banning WhatsApp meant fomenting dissent and discontent among Iranians which would have represented an even greater threat[10].

Since all other censorship bodies were nominally subordinate to the Supreme Council of Cyber Space (then chaired by Rouhani), it was the first time that the DCI censorship body decided to filter or restrict digital content independently of the Council.

Rouhani's opposition was read controversially among the ranks of the government; the DCI felt weakened; at the political level, there was great confusion about roles and responsibilities with respect to internet regulation, both among the Cyber Space Security Council and among members of the DCI. Not everyone accepted that it was the Supreme Council that had the last word on the proposals for censure and prohibition already approved; there were many criticisms of President Rohani. This incident was emblematic of the great difficulty facing the Iranian government, which was in fact caught between two great opposing needs: on the one hand, to protect the smooth running of activities in a country that was now digitized in the educational, economic, political and even religious sector; on the other hand, however, the new digital revolution, could have led Iran directly out of the Islamic revolution[11].

2. The Ḥalāl Internet Utopia

The Supreme Council of Cyber Space was born in 2012. It included senior officials of the Iranian intelligence apparatus and the Revolutionary Guard Corps from the outset. Its main task was to carry out comprehensive monitoring of the national and international space with the power to issue sweeping decrees regarding the network and its use, acting as a coordinating body for Iran's international cyber policies. These include state guidelines, to which anyone who uses the network must be subject. For example, Internet cafes – which are still numerous in Iranian cities – are obliged to record customers' personal information, including their private and personal data such as names, identification and telephone numbers,

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10 A. Hamshemzadegan - A. Gholami, *Internet Censorship in Iran. An Inside Look*, in «Journal of Cyberspace Studies», 6, 2022, 2, pp. 183-204.

11 M. Michaelsen, *Transforming Threats to Power. The International Politics of Authoritarian Internet Control in Iran*, in «International Journal of Communication», 12, 2018, pp. 3856-3876.

as well as to install CCTV cameras to visually record all users' faces[12].

The effort to control almost 80 million users is, however, truly titanic, if not perhaps impossible. For this reason, the Iranian government has, over the years, tried to find effective alternatives to maintain the precarious balance between wanting to be a highly digitized country and, at the same time, wanting to maintain the external appearance of an Islamically correct nation.

One of the most ambitious projects in this regard was, no doubt, the creation of a national intranet as a substitute for the global Internet. It was a fairly original idea: a sort of nationalization of the network, in order to create a virtual world 'purified' of everything that was considered *ḥarām* (forbidden) in the global internet[13].

Gone online in August od 2012 «Internet ḥalāl», or «Second internet» was intended as a more sophisticated alternative to the filtering systems used by other authoritarian regimes. While these systems were limited, for example, to denying access to certain web contents, the Iranian *ḥalāl* Internet would simply redirect users to search engines, sites and online content already approved by the State.

In doing so, it would have cut off Iran's connection to the World Wide Web, while keeping the country connected; in short, it would have given the Iranian authorities the power to create an isolated reality approved by the regime, customized for its citizens, driven by Islamic culture and morality.

This cultural attitude is overall in line with attitudes toward any other kind of typically global products. For example, throughout the country there are no McDonald's fast food restaurants, but a thousand imitations of it and of fast food in general; American-style fast food is at least as popular as local restaurants, if not more so; the same goes with imitations of luxury goods: big global brands such as Gucci, Rolex, Nike are imitated, sold and bought, in Iran globalized items are camouflaged, hidden, Islamized, but very popular. In the same way, the *Ḥalāl* Internet would have provided a sort of legitimate, local copy of contents on the World Wide Web[14].

It was an impossible effort, however, to reduce the global to the local[15] or

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12 B. Rahimi, *CyberDissent*.

13 *Tightening the Net. Internet Security and Censorship in Iran,* Part. 1: The National Internet Project, London, Article 19 - Free World Center, 2016.

14 G. Golkarian, *Globalization and its Impact on Iranian Culture*, in «Universal Journal of History and Culture», 1, 2019, 1, pp. 1-11.

15 A. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis, University

try to flatten the multi-faceted identities to the religious, nationalist one that the Iranian government was sponsoring. The majority of the Iranian population grew up during the post-war reconstruction, in a cultural *milieu* full of contradictions: while a capitalist economy was developing[16], the Islamic framework was imposed with increasing vehemence. The nineties were characterized by relative economic growth, market liberalization, technological progress and a new consumerist logic resulting from the process of capitalization of the nation.

3. Going Hybrid. Online and Offline Protests

From a political point of view, the only ideology that has had its own appeal to young people in recent years and in the aftermath of 1979 Revolution, has been Islamic reformism, which, however, has quickly faded after the arrest of its main ideologues: the Kadivar siblings, its former political leader Mir Hosein Mousavi and his wife, the Islamic feminist reformist Zahra Rahnavard.

The deconstruction of Islamic reformism[17] brought about a vacuum over public life and political discourse, which turned politics into an unattractive sector for many young Iranian people.

The alternative to politics has been the great digital revolution that has determined new identities, aspirations and worldviews for this segment of the Iranian population[18]. A new anthropological type was born in contemporary Iran. The Islamized body has given way to the post-Islamic body, that is, a body that does not necessarily see itself hooked to the practices and dictates of religion, but rather to the dictates of fashions and lifestyles that transcend not only the boundaries of religion, but also those of the nation[19].

For this reason, the forms of mobilization and activism of recent years and starting from 2009's Green Movement, are also profoundly different

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of Minnesota Press, 1996.

16 R. Matthee, *Writing Capitalism into Iranian History,* in «Iranian Studies», 2023, 56, pp. 403-407.

17 K. Amirpour, *The Future of Iran's Reform Movement*, in «European Union Institute for Security Studies» (EUISS), 2006, pp. 29-40.

18 M. Kar, *Reformist Islam Versus Radical Islam in Iran*, in «The Brooking Project on US Relations with the Islamic World», Working Paper No. 4, 2004.

19 F. Vahdat, *Post-Revolutionary Islamic Discourses on Modernity in Iran: Expansion and Contraction of Human Subjectivity*, in «International Journal of Middle East Studies», 35, 2003, 4, pp. 599-631.

from those of previous generations.

Young Iranians, like their peers in other parts of the world, shifted from a constant reference to core political ideologies, which marked mostly the twentieth century, to softer, depoliticized, fragmented ideas[20].

The years of market liberalization in Iran have led to a path of depoliticization of the public sphere. The culture of purchasable services has been affirming: from healthcare to education, the privatization of public institutions has had a strong impact on Iranian society at large.

Young people have grown up attracted more by the possibilities and promises of consumerism and the perspective of improvement in lifestyles than by politics or religion.

The new opportunities to hold social ties through the web have revolutionized traditional gender relations, leisure, the way of planning family, lifestyles, sexuality – which has always been central to Iranian culture – overturning the patterns in which religion played a pivotal role. The relationship with sacred spaces, in particular with the places of worship, also reflect these changes.

The mosque, which was a multifunctional place serving as a meeting point for communities, strengthening ties, receiving moral and financial support, discussing politics etc., is now weakened and decentralized. Many of the mosque's traditional functions no longer take place within its walls, having been transformed into services that can be achieved outside, for example online[21].

Young Iranians have developed an a-political, disembodied, post-ideological orientation, as Hamid Dabashi called it, whose main characteristic would be determined by the absence of commitment to social issues[22], which instead represented the dominant characteristic of the previous generations and the 1979 revolutionaries.

Although protests over the death of Mahsa Jina Amini involved large numbers of demonstrators on the streets of Iranian cities and villages,

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[20] M. Giugni - M. Grasso, *Talking About Youth: The Depoliticization of Young People in the Public Domain*, in «American Behavioral Scientist», 64, 2020, 5, pp. 591-607.

[21] Z.M. Abdel Hady, *The Masjid Yesterday and Today*, in «CURS Center for International and Regional Studies», Georgetown University, No. 2, 2010.

[22] H. Dabashi, *Interstitial Space of the Art of Protest*, in E. Mohamed - A. El-Desouky (eds.), *Cultural Production and Social Movements after the Arab Spring: Nationalism, Politics, and Transnational Identity*, London, I.B. Tauris, 2021, pp. 223-238.

the initially embodied rebellion against the existing political structures was substantially different from those Iran has experimented in the past. For instance, traditional demonstrations interchanged and intertwined with flash mobs, which are emblematic of how the new generation of Iranians is really characterized not so much by a political affiliation, or by national identity, but by a belonging to transnational and planetary ideas that are shared by young people from other countries as well[23].

Even protests against compulsory veiling represented the changing goals, tools and modalities behind contemporary youth activism, which brings together climate issues, women's rights and personal freedoms.

Already a few years ago, in 2017, a young woman in her 30's named Vida Movahed had taken off her veil on the street, tied it to a stick and waved it silently like a flag, while standing in the crowd. Her act of civil disobedience was filmed and circulated online, prompting other Iranian women to organize similar public protests and express their desire for individual freedom and personal autonomy. The flash mob was replicated multiple times online, shared on the network and enacted by girls and boys either alone or in small groups.

The innovative and effective use of new media and virtual spaces[24] together with social networks such as Instagram and Telegram have been instrumental in disembodying protests: it is impossible for contemporary activists to not film, post or share flash mobs and demonstrations, given that technology has the power to amplify[25] even isolated, limited gestures[26].

The intense use of social media and the individualistic, direct and transitory nature of contemporary protests show how they are driven by a multiplicity of positions, often fragmented and heterogeneous, which assume dynamic forms of collective action, while often being ambivalent.

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23 H. Rheingold, *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution*, New York, Basic Books, 2022.

24 Which is replicated elsewhere: in Latin America, for instance. See M. Fuente, *Performance Constellations. Networks of Protests and Activism in Latin America*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2019, where the power of embodied and digital networks in confronting neoliberal sociopolitical regimes in the Americas is well described.

25 Amplification is grounded on the concept that borders between incorporeal and corporeal enunciation are therefore blurred, in any forms of human expression, including art. See, for instance, J. Dubatti, *Convivial Arts, Technovivial Arts, Liminal Arts: Pluralism and Singularities (Event, Experience, Praxis, Technology, Politics, Language, Epistemology, Pedagogy)*, in «Avances», 30, 2021.

26 A. Sadaf - F. Shahira, *Gatekeeping and Citizen Journalism: The Use of Social Media during the Recent Uprisings in Iran, Egypt, and Libya*, in «Media, War & Conflict», 2013, 6, pp. 55-69.

These forms of dissent are rooted in 2009's Green Movement, however they recently have had an immediate and disruptive effect not only within Iranian borders, but also at an international level. The 2022 *Women, Life, Freedom* movement has definitively blurred the boundary between online and offline mobilization, which meant blurring the dividing lines between national borders and the rest of the world[27].

4. Disembodying for Survival: Streets or Cyberspace?

The revolutionary passion has now been supplanted by an era in which Iranians come to terms with an increasingly globally articulated reality. From this perspective, the Islamic establishment seems weak and lacking the sacredness it enjoyed in the very early days after the Islamic Revolution. Politics is becoming secularized, and so does Religion: the bureaucratization and rationalization of daily life have transformed the organization of the clergy; highly institutionalized religious formation is now part of a routine emptied of mysticism and ideology; in this sense, public policies that affect people's bodies and lives perform the sole task of maintaining the appearance of a political religiosity that is in fact already secularized.

The most recent Iranian protests combined the cyberspace and the streets for their display, not only because social networks made it easier to practically organize mobilizations and keep a virtual community together, but also because the cyberspace was central for the construction of an Iranian identity outside the national borders and especially in the West.

After years *of damnatio memoriae*, it was only through the 2009 Green Movement that Iran came to be heard and seen in the West: images and pictures of young Iranian girls demonstrating with green *hijabs* were published and republished on mainstream western media, familiarizing non Iranians with an aesthetically fascinating Iranian youth, with phrases and Persian slogans – such as *Marg bar dictator* (Death to the dictator) – that even resonated as far as in Sweden, transforming the *Rahesabz* – a local protest – into a global one.

As a youth protest against the election results that had reconfirmed Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as President of the Islamic Republic of Iran in June 2009, the Green Movement lasted about a semester, then changed its external form, favoring other channels than those that had promoted it

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27 M. Gillen, *Human Versus Inalienable Rights: Is There Still a Future for Online Protest in the Anonymous World*, in «European Journal for Law and Technology», 3, 2012, 1.

from the beginning, surviving in the cyberspace, but disappearing from the streets. The spontaneous movements of the people dissolved to make room for a more radical politicization of the protest that took place between the stakeholders of the Iranian political scene of the time: the supreme leader Ali Khamenei, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and their opponents, represented then by the reformists Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi. Even then, the approximately 4000 people arrested during those protests[28], many of whom were keynote representatives of culture, jurisprudence and journalism sectors, contributed to suffocate the movement, pushing it to leave the streets. Something similar happened with the more recent *Women, Life, Freedom* movement. Suppression, mass arrests and public executions, pushed the mobilization from the streets to the cyber space[29].

What strikes as a great difference in these 2 similar patterns is the popular quests that underlie today's protests compared to those of 2009.

The Green Movement moved popular protest for greater rights, for respect for the Iranian constitution, and, above all, for greater freedom of management of public spaces, even if it did not explicitly aim at a secularization of state institutions, nor at a secularization of Iran at large; for the first time, however, in 2009, a delegitimizing discourse emerged not so much against the Islamic Republic itself, as of its present version, that is, corrupt, not guaranteed by an effective and charismatic supreme leader. The political discourse was reformist in all respects.

Moreover, while the 2009 protests had as their reference a political ideology, namely the reformist one led by Mir Hosein Mousavi, the protests of 2022 had none. Arising spontaneously, in a capillary and discontinuous way, *Women, Life Freedom* movement has appeared, perhaps for this very reason, fragile and uncontrollable and have clashed with highly repressive forms of authoritarianism. Recent years have in fact marked a progressive escalation of political repression in Iran and this was particularly evident with the presidential elections of 2021, which saw an electoral participation among the lowest in the history of the Islamic Republic, precisely because it had a list of candidates with a very low degree of popularity among voters.

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28 P. Misagh, *The Rise and Demise of the Green Movement*, in B. Rahimi (ed.), *Democracy in Iran: Why It Failed and How It Might Succeed*, Cambridge MA - London, Harvard University Press, 2016, pp. 206-244.

29 B. Rahimi, *Affinities of Dissent. Cyberspace, Performative Networks and the Iranian Green Movement*, in «CyberOrient», 5, 2011, 2, pp. 4-23.

Raisi's limited popularity and the progressive delegitimization of the government in general is also evident in the way the protests have changed. When systems are authoritarian, it is more likely that the protests do not have an organized political opposition, also because they lack a free press organ and even independent social organizations such as unions or student unions that can structure in a more unified way[30]. Participation in the protests was also transversal to social classes and income groups, and the leading role of women and youth was another hallmark of this latest movement. Finally, even the slogans were characterized, much more clearly than in the past, by phrases openly against the Supreme Leader, which explicitly called for the removal of Ali Khamenei.

The emergence of a transnational public sphere, of which many Iranians residing in the country are now a part, in dialogue with the Iranians of the diaspora, irrevocably determines the desire and the need for change that seems to be now an unstoppable, disembodied, process.

Conclusions

Women, Life, Freedom protests took shape in a precise space-time, in the Islamic Republic of Iran at the end of September 2022. Nonetheless, they must be understood through two fundamental elements:

the first is that the mobilizations must be read in continuity with a series of protests that periodically – starting from 2009 in an increasingly acute way – have shaken the country in recent years.

The second is that this protest in *particular* became almost immediately global, disembodied and detached from national borders, attracting international attention at large thanks to its nature.

Like all great mobilizations, *Women, Life and Freedom* began with a triggering event, immediately equipped itself with clear and easily recognizable symbols on a large scale by tradition and culture, and then overcame national borders thanks to disembodied flash mobs and demonstrations through social networks, the power of the images that accompanied it and the ease with which it was possible to identify with the political discourse of protest in its trivialized version: the liberation of women from an oppressive regime.

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[30] C. Boix - M. Svolik, *The Foundations of Limited Authoritarian Government: Institutions and Power-Sharing in Dictatorships*, in «The Journal of Politics», 75, 2, 2013, pp. 732-744.

Women, Life, Freedom is a spontaneous protest, perhaps for this reason it has a chance to endure: it is impossible to decapitate since it does not have a head or a leadership.

In cyclical waves, Iranians have taken to the streets for different reasons, most notably since 2009. What makes the current protests different from the past is that they are not part of a political project. Rather, it is the issue of the physical and social body that has taken hold, by becoming visible both online and offline; in this sense, the protests have to do with physical bodies that have entered a public space normally forbidden to them, through a process of disembodiment via cyberspace. There have been no political declarations; bodies have tried to reappropriate forbidden practices such as revealing themselves, seeking their autonomy, within the social space and through the virtual space. Hannah Arendt comes to mind with her notion of «space of appearance»[31]: if power operates with the aim of structuring public and private space in such a way as to make the appearance of some social bodies substantially difficult or impossible, appearing is in itself a form of protest, be this appearance online or offline.

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31 H. Arendt, *On Revolution*, New York, Penguin, 1963.