

**JOHN TIRMAN:** Hello, everyone. Welcome to this very interesting session that we'll be having on Iran and an outstanding book written by our guest. And before we begin, I want to remind you, for newcomers, that you will be able to ask questions using the Q&A function at the bottom of your screen once we have finished the main presentation.

So I want to encourage you to become involved with us in this one hour session. Today we're really pleased to be joined by Pouya Alimagham who is a renowned teacher here at MIT. And I say renowned because he won one of the most prestigious teaching awards, the Levitan prize for teaching. He's been here five years and he has produced a really remarkable book called, *Contesting the Iranian Revolution: The Green Uprisings*.

Which is not only exceptionally informative but also well-written. Not the easiest combination. And Pouya will be speaking for about 30 minutes and then we will open it up to questions. So without further ado, let me introduce Pouya Alimagham.

**POUYA ALIMAGHAM:** OK. Hello. And it's a pleasure to be here. It's very wonderful to be speaking at my home institution, even though I am not actually on campus. I am in California. But before we begin, I really wanted to first say thank you to the Center for International Studies. In particular, John Tirman, Michelle English, and Laura Kerwin.

In particular, I would like to thank Michelle because we've been planning this for a while. And we had hoped to organize this book talk last spring. But as with pretty much everyone else, COVID either ruined a lot of plans or delayed them. But here we are on the 42nd anniversary of the Iranian revolution.

And I'm very happy to be here to share a book that is on the uprising in 2009, but is very much intertwined with the history of the Iranian revolution. So if I may, I'm just going to share my slides with you real quick. I just always use slides. I love having slides. And here we go.

Before we begin, again, I wanted to take this time, really quickly to pay tribute to my grandfather. He passed away a few months ago and he is part of the origin story behind this book. My grandfather and my father who we can see at the right,

standing next to my grandfather along with my mother and my grandmother to the bottom left. All four of these people have been very much a part of my ability to foster a connection towards Iran and my Iranian heritage.

I am somebody who was born in Iran but I was raised in the United States. But really, through them, in particular my grandfather was able to develop this tie with Iran and this book is very much a product of that connection.

All right. So along with the family background, the book has an origin story. One of the reasons why I was excited about writing this book and passionate about it was because really, the Iranians themselves who are on the ground in 2009 captivated my interest.

When I saw the footage of the campaigners campaigning before the June 12th, 2009 vote, it struck me as a very interesting campaign. It really was much more than a campaign. It was a street movement. I remember my father and I were watching the footage and my father really was relieved that this was really more than a campaign, that this was some sort of revolution underway against the Iranian government.

And so from its very inception, I knew that this history that was about to unfold was very different and interesting. When it did begin to unfold post-election, the turmoil in the post-election period, I remember reading a lot about people talking about how this campaign, turned movement, turned uprising was still operating within the confines of some sort of reform movement within Iran.

They basically said this was a power struggle between the different factions within the Iranian government. I disagreed wholeheartedly. I thought this was an uprising, a bona fide uprising that was, in itself, a revolution. It wasn't really a reform, an outburst of reformist energy, not at all.

Not only was it a revolution in its own way, but it was very much tied to the revolution of revolutions in modern Iranian history, the Iranian revolution of 1978, '79. So we were all, in a way, captive to that history. I remember a lot of the journalists who were talking about this uprising in 2009 kept invoking the Iranian revolution.

This was the largest protest movement since the Iranian revolution. That's really how they phrased it. But really, what was interesting to me, was to see these demonstrators themselves harness the history of the revolution, to then come out against the outcome of that revolution, the Iranian government, the Islamic Republic.

So that, for me, was really fascinating and I wanted to push back against that rhetoric, that this was a reformist movement. When the dust had settled by February 2010 and onwards, there was a lot of talk that this was a failed revolution and that the uprising was over. I disagreed with that entirely.

I thought that sure, the revolution failed, or the green uprisings failed to aggregate the election results of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, for whom they thought he had won through fraudulent means. And then at the same time, they failed to overthrow the system that ratified his so-called election win.

But I didn't think of it, really, in those terms. I thought that sure, while those were failures in the uprising, it had many enormous successes. Too much to kind of list here. But really, I go through it in the book. Also, I didn't agree with the talk about the uprising being over.

You know, when Khomeini was exiled after the 1963 uprising, it wasn't over then, either. And he came back in 1979 at the helm of a revolutionary uprising. And I think that the uprising in 2009, while there's no more talk of, obviously, undoing Ahmadinejad's election win, everyone's kind of moved on from that. But the legacy of that uprising and its successes have pollinated future protests and uprisings that have happened since 2009.

So I actually don't think it's over at all. And I don't think it was a failure. And I really want to push back against those two narratives. I'd like to discuss with you the hopes and aims of the book. One thing for certain, is that I really wanted to center the Iranian people, those Iranians who made this uprising.

Oftentimes, we talk about history, we center the government or the state or great men of power. I really did a history that was very different. I wanted to center the men and especially the women who were on the ground who were the central agents of this history. And that's also why I chose this book cover. This book cover is

not about Mir-Hossein Mousavi, the opposition candidate who alleged fraud.

It's really about the person behind that poster. I specifically chose it because it was a woman, because women were so important to this uprising. But there's just so much to this image that resonated with this history. And that's why I thought it was an organic fit with the book. Not only because she's a woman, but because she's covering her face.

She's essentially concealing her identity because she's worried about political repercussions of having backed Mir-Hossein Mousavi or potentially being involved in this uprising afterwards. She's wearing green. Green is the color of the uprising. It was the first time in modern Iranian history that a color was adopted by a movement or a campaign.

This is also one of the allegations that the Iranian government leveled against the movement, that it was part of this conspiracy of color revolutions or velvet revolutions. I unpack that in the book, as well. But green is also the color of Islam and Mir-Hossein Mousavi is a descendant of the prophet Muhammad. He's a Sayyid. And so the campaign adopted green. And here she is, wearing that campaign color.

She's holding a peace sign or it could be a victory sign. I don't really know. I've talked to activists. Some have said this is a peace sign. Some have said it's a victory. Some have said that they're not mutually exclusive, and they could mean both. And so I think that this very much applies to the movement. It was largely a peaceful uprising. And they felt that their candidate was victorious. And when their candidate was snubbed, they were insistent that they were going to be victorious. And in many ways, as outlined in the book, they have been.

I also like the fact that she is wearing the chador, the full body veil. Really, because it pushes against that dichotomy. There's this common belief, especially in the West, that if someone is religious, then they support the Iranian government. And if someone is critical of the Iranian government, then they must be an atheist or a secularist. And so I don't think that's a very useful dichotomy. And you know, there's a lot of in between. And here she is, outwardly at least, showing signs of piety. But also visibly in support of the opposition candidate.

Another hope and aim of this book is to really extrapolate the Revolutionary

discourse. The Iranian government came to power through a revolution and then it institutionalized a lot of revolutionary symbolism and discourse to self legitimate. In particular, those symbols as they relate to Shiite Islam.

I wanted to show how the state does not have a monopoly over those symbols. And how, despite the fact that Islam can be used to legitimize or legitimate a state, it can also be used as a discourse of resistance and revolution against that very state. So that's, essentially, chapter 5.

I wanted to situate this uprising in 2009 as part of Iran's long genealogy of protest from the tobacco revolt of the 1890s, all the way to, even past the uprising in 2009. Such as the protests in late 2017 and early 2018. There's a lot of connectivity to this history and I want to situate the uprising within that genealogy.

In chapter 4, I really wanted to show why Iranians are more Catholic than the pope when it comes to Palestine. There's always this question, especially in the West, about why do Iranians care so much about Palestinians. They care more about Arab Palestinians and other Arabs than other Arab states, at least.

And so what I really want to do was explain why Palestine was so important to an entire generation that made the Iranian revolution. But also how the post-revolutionary government institutionalized the symbols of Palestinian Liberation, drove an entire generation raised under its authority, and how that generation, 30 years later in 2009, used that symbolism of Palestinian Liberation against the Iranian government that championed Palestinian Liberation, itself.

So it's very fascinating how they did it. It's their story and I wanted to put it down. The last hope and aim of the book is really to provide a reader a general history of modern Iran, but with an obvious emphasis of the past 40 years, from 1979 to the present.

All right. So if I had more time in this book talk, I would have actually played for you the preface to the book. I have an audio clip of the preface that I recorded and I posted it on Twitter and I share it when I can, really, because I wanted to emphasize in the preface what some of my political aims are for the book.

These are pictures from Behesht-i Zahra [FOREIGN LANGUAGE] the martyrs section

of this massive cemetery, Behesht-i Zahra in Tehran, where a lot of Iranians from the revolution and the war, fallen Iranians from the Revolutionary War are buried. It's one of the largest cemeteries in the world. It's a very solemn place, obviously.

I had the good fortune of visiting it in 2006. And I was there with my father and my cousin. And we went-- we were there on a Thursday. We didn't realize that a lot of families gathered by the graves of their departed on the eve of Friday.

And so there was a lot of people there and that took us by surprise and we spoke to many of them. And one thing-- and that's the picture of me at the cemetery. And one thing that one of them told me stayed with me. One of the mothers of-- her son had passed away during the war. She told me something that stayed with me and very much informed this book and the sense of duty I had to tell the story and to tell it right.

She basically said, I hope my son didn't die in vain and this generation fixes Iran's problems. This is something that weighed heavily on me throughout the long duration of writing this book. And really, a lot of what I do in my scholarship. But what I really wanted to do with the book is show how this generation in 2009, but also onwards, really is up to the challenge.

And that essentially, I hope that a lot of us who live abroad, especially in foreign governments, stay out of their way and let them do what they know is best for the country. I'm going to revisit this point on my last slide.

All right. The book's central argument. I argued that the Green Uprising is a manifestation of how large segments of Iranian society, including revolutionary leaders and clerics, are moving beyond the rigidity of the Islamist ideology in favor of a more pluralistic system.

That is not to say that this was a movement of atheists or a religion, but one that struck a civic rights over religious duties. To save religion from the state that operates under the rubric of a narrow religious interpretation. The book also situates the history of the Green Uprising within Iran's long history of contentious politics, as well as the Revolutionary history of the region.

Because the uprising predates the Arab uprisings, the book also considers it's

connectivity to 2011 and how the Arab Spring, in turn, impacted the Green Movement when opposition leaders tried to harness its momentum to rekindle their revolt.

There is this understanding that the opposition candidates have been under house arrest since 2009, when the uprising began. No. They've been under house arrest since 2011, when the Arab Spring uprisings began. Because when the Iranian government thought that this Green Uprising had been over, had been dealt its death knell in 2010, all of a sudden.

Mousavi, Rahnavard, and Karoubi, the opposition candidates in 2011, in February 2011, tried to harness the momentum of the Arab Spring, especially when Hosni Mubarak in Egypt fell, to then rekindle their own revolt within Iran. And that's when, essentially, they've been under house arrest, since 2011.

Methodology. So the Iranian revolution not only informs this book, but it also informed the protest tactics of those who were participants in the uprising in 2009. But to stay true to that history, the literature of the Iranian revolution also helped provide the framework and methodology through which I engaged with this history in 2009.

So like I said, I tried to censor the people who were the activists on the ground who made this history as opposed to the leadership or the government or states or anybody else. But really, the means by which I did this was through the British Marxist tradition as conveyed to me through Evarand Abrahamian through this history from below, or bottom up approach. The history is being told from the bottom, from the people on the ground.

But also, like I said, there's a lot of literature from the Iranian revolution of '79 that informed the study. Mansoor Moaddel's *Class, Politics and Ideology in the Iranian Revolution*, especially as ideology as revolutionary discourse was very informative for me and how I understood this uprising.

*The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran*, Charles Kurzman's book. I think it came out in 2003 or 2004. Also his whole theory of the importance of opportunity in uprisings and his work on anti explanation. I go through this in more detail in the book, very important.

Misagh Parsa's very important book on the Iranian revolution, *The Social Origins of the Iranian Revolution*. His work on resource mobilization and solidarity structures, very important to what I did. And the last book, probably the most important one, is Asef Bayat's *Making Islam Democratic* and his work on post Islamism. And the really interesting thing is, I'm a historian, but all four of these books are books of sociology.

So I ended up using a lot of methodology from sociology. Not that sociology is a better way to engage this history. You know, historians and sociologists and anthropologists and political scientists like to argue about their own methodologies. But I don't think there's any problem in borrowing from one another. And that's very much what I did.

All right. So real quick, I know we're pressed for time. But I only have two or three more slides left. Just an overview of the election. The election happened in 2009. That's the primary focus of the study. But obviously, we have to engage in history. In 2005 after eight years of Khatami reformist administration, his reformist policies kind of hit a stalemate.

And there was calls by the youth to boycott the elections in 2005. They felt that there was no point in voting. Voting legitimated the system and that real change can't come through the ballot box, as evidenced by the eight years of Khatami at the helm. And so there was a boycott and I think, typically, with Iran or in other countries, like the United States, when a lot of youth don't vote, oftentimes a conservative wins the election.

And that's essentially what happened in 2005. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a former revolutionary guardsmen came to power, partially because of that boycott. And then after four years with him at the helm, a lot of the youth understood that while the elections in Iran are very much vetted and screened and controlled, the outcome still made a difference in their lives, especially when someone like Ahmadinejad appointed a lot of revolutionary guards commanders to be part of his cabinet.

And these are people who didn't have a lot of experience in civil administration. They were guardsmen. And that helped with the securitization, the militarization of

the state. And so when there was renewed calls for a boycott in 2009, it fell on deaf ears. A lot of Iranians understood that, like I said, the elections may be highly controlled in Iran, they still have a material impact in their lives.

And so a lot of youth, a lot of women grew interested in the election. Part of their interest was sparked because of the televised presidential debates. Iran has long had televised presidential debates. But this was the first time they were one on one. And because they were one on one, they were much more adversarial.

And in one very massive showdown between the incumbent Ahmadinejad and the challenger, the main challenger Mousavi, it turned into this very ugly discussion and a lot of things were said about corruption and other things and people were stunned that these conversations were being had on national television. And they understood that this was going to be a different election. And so a lot of people became interested in the elections.

The other thing is, the Iranian government wanted them to be interested. Like every government, this is a state sanctioned election and by participating in it, you're participating in that state sanctioned process. And so you're essentially acknowledging or indirectly affirming the legitimacy of the state. And this is why there's always this calls for boycotts, especially from people abroad.

But the Iranian government wanted people to participate in elections because by voting in the elections, you're participating in a state sanctioned event. So a lot of the typical repression in the country was relaxed. A lot of the internet restrictions, a lot of the social media restrictions were relaxed, so that people could go on YouTube and Twitter. More on Facebook, actually, and talk about the elections and the candidates and debate and discuss and get excited and then go and vote.

But it had unintended consequences because the electorate sensed that something was different now. There was a political opening in the air. And this prompted many to take advantage of this opportunity to, not only campaign for their candidate, but then to air highly anti-government slogans.

So one of the slogans that was aired before the elections, before any allegations of fraud, was [FOREIGN LANGUAGE] death to the Taliban, whether in Kabul or in Tehran.

Essentially, saying death to the clergy wherever they are, but in particular, in Tehran. So these are things that you saw happening before, and then it morphed into a total street movement.

And this is when the IRGC commanders became very nervous. They essentially accused Mousavi, before the elections, of launching a velvet revolution and promised to nip it in the bud. Brief timeline, the elections happened June 12th, 2009. The results were announced that night. The next day, I think, a lot of emotions got the better of people and there was some rioting that happened because they didn't agree with those election results. They had alleged fraud.

In their campaigning before, actually the vote, they were airing slogans that showed they were worried about election fraud. They actually said, [FOREIGN LANGUAGE] If there is fraud, Iran will revolt. And then after 2012, after the vote, they said in their slogans, [FOREIGN LANGUAGE] we told you, if there's going to be fraud, there will be revolt. That was one of their post-election slogans.

So there's rioting June 13th. June 14th is really when you see the movement take shape. Much more organized, much more calm. Especially because they got a lot of bad PR. The government really focused on their rioting. Ahmadinejad came out and said, these are a bunch of [FOREIGN LANGUAGE] sore losers, riff-raff, street trash, sore losers.

And so people got angry and then they came out and they were much more calm and collected. And a lot of these protests were silent marches. And then June 15th is really when the uprising crescendoed. It was an epic March in Tehran, of all places. And it culminated at Freedom Square, where a lot of the momentum of the Iranian revolution came to culminate on the Ashura protests of December 10th, 1978.

I'm going to show you a slide, in the next slide, about this. It's a really good way of discussing my sources. June 19th was when Khamenei, Supreme Leader of the country gave a rare Friday sermon. He doesn't typically give the Friday sermons unless there's a big issue at hand. And so you he have this issue.

My father and I were in California and we stayed up until like 2:00 or 3 o'clock in the morning to listen to it and it was pretty intense. He basically said, in not so many words, that this is a legitimate election. The Guarding Council has verified it, has

done its due diligence and has verified it. And now the imperialists are at the doors.

And that if the protests continue, it now constitutes a security threat to the country and we will have to implement a full scale security crackdown. If any blood is shed, it is on the hands of the opposition leaders, specifically Mousavi, Rahmavard, and Karoubi.

While there was like crackdown before, it was a full scale one on June 20th and onwards, after his sermon. And on June 20th is when Neda Agha-Soltan was killed and Agha-Soltan became the poster girl of the uprising, especially because of her brutal death.

All right. So book sources. Abrahamian in his book on the coup, on the 1953 coup, the CIA coup against Doctor Mossadegh, he basically argues that even after 60 years, he can't get the government to respect it's own 30 year rule, and he can't gain access to all those classified files.

And this is a world renowned seasoned historian like Abrahamian saying that in his book. But really, what's interesting about 2009, is because a lot of it's digital. A lot of this footage is posted on YouTube. So if the Iranian revolution was the world's first televised revolution, the Green Uprising of 2009 was the world's first socially broadcast revolution.

They were their own journalists. There were citizen journalists that documented everything. They uploaded it or they sent it abroad for people abroad or their allies abroad to upload it on YouTube as an entire archive. And here's a really good case in point, this footage is from that June 15th epic march.

At the time, the mayor of Tehran acknowledged on a state run website that about three million Iranians had gathered in Tehran for this protest. And then that acknowledgment came down. Essentially, the Iranian government did not want to acknowledge the fact that three million people in one city had come out against it.

So the mayor of Tehran acknowledged it and then the website brought it down moments later. But that doesn't matter because the activists themselves documented everything. So here is footage. It's about a minute long. We don't need to watch the whole thing.

But here's footage of a civilian documenting, with their own camera. This is before the era of smart cameras, right? Smart cameras came about 2005, 2006 and onwards, but they didn't really reach Iran by 2009. So this is a camera from a typical flip phone at the time.

But you're going to see it. You're going to see that the Iranian government didn't have control over the information anymore. Let me make sure that the audio is working. It is working. OK.

All right. So really, the takeaway here is that the Iranian government tried to ignore the fact that this many people came out. But they documented it and then posted it online and created their own digital archive for researchers like myself. So I was able to use a lot of archives, a lot of stuff about the 1970s.

But when it came to 2009, I used a lot of stuff that was recorded, including social media posts and interviews that I did with activists themselves. And also activists penned pieces. They explained, in their own words, what they were doing, why they were airing certain slogans, and what their objectives were.

When my whole approach was a bottom up approach, I also let them do the talking. So all the sources are Iran based, Persian language sources. They're not Persian language sources from the BBC or Voice of America or Radio Farda or the Islamic State Department or British government funded sources. No. They are Persian language Iran based sources, including state media sources, because you have to contrast what the activists are saying, what the official government narrative is.

And really that's what I did with the sources. Now one thing that's really important, and we're really approaching the end, I promise. One thing that's important is that when the crackdown happened, full scale crackdown happened on June 20th, after the Khamenei Friday sermon.

The protest went from being every day to going underground and resurfacing on certain days. Which is why the book is called *Contesting the Iranian Revolution: the Green Uprisings*, and not uprising. Because it wasn't one continuous uprising. It became scattered, many. It unfurled across Iran's political calendar.

Like Jerusalem Day, like Azure, like the anniversary of the seizure of the US

Embassy, November 4th and December 7th. And so on these days, a lot of them are really important to the Iranian revolutionary government because they are dates important to the revolution, themselves. These activists came out on those days to protest the government that came to power through the revolution.

And they use slogans from the revolution themselves. So here's footage, about a minute long, from a high school, an all girls high school. The slogans are in Persian. They're about six of them. They are all translated to the left. But I'm going to play for you anyways, even those it's in Persian, because you're going to be able to sense the intensity of their slogans, anyways.

All right. So just to reiterate, they started using slogans from the revolution, like slogan two and four, on days important to revolutionary history, to protest the outcome of the revolution. This is why this uprising was so fascinating. Oh, just lost the screen. I'm going to get it back. OK. That happens from time to time.

My concluding points. The Green Uprising is part of a genealogy of Iranian protests informed by the past and impacting the future. Islam can be used to legitimate the state but can simultaneously be used to provide a subversive discourse against that very Islamist state. The state does not have a monopoly on Islamic truth.

And I've got to include this. Just because we're still dealing with it, even though the US administration has changed. Unilateral US sanctions on Iran have shrunk the already small space for contentious politics. Dissent is seen as part of a US conspiracy in 2009 and now.

Thank you. Please support the book. More than anything, please read it and when you're done with it, don't just put it in your bookshelves, collecting dust. Pass it on. Give it to somebody. Encourage them to read it, as well. Thank you so much for your time and thank you for being with me.

**JOHN TIRMAN:** Thank you, Pouya. That was fascinating. And I want to reiterate to our audience that it's just skimming the surface of a very rich and insightful book. So I really do want you to buy the book and read it.

Now we have a number of interesting questions. I want to go to the questions, rather than lob mine. And sorry, I've got a little problem. There we go.

One of the questions I thought was particularly interesting, and this comes from an anonymous attendee. At the time in Tehran, in June 2009, regime people claim that they had learned from it and would restructure their apparatus to address such protests better. What do you think they learned from the 2009 events and what did they do differently or not since then to pacify and control the potential for protests and uprising?

**POUYA**

**ALIMAGHAM:**

All right. That's a good question. I'll do what I can. I think one of the biggest lessons for the Iranian government is that-- I think they were in denial about the level of anger that a lot of people had for the government. So that was the first lesson learned, was that there are literally millions of people who are very unhappy with the political climate in the country. That's for certain.

But I think that we see this in the uprising, that the security personnel had become militarized. Kind of like in the United States, when we now see police, oftentimes we're surprised. They look like combat brigades. Iran in 2009 already looked like that. A lot of the security, a lot of the police were very militarized and they succeeded, actually, in driving the protest movement underground.

So I think, really, the question is, what did the opposition learn from 2009? Because the Iranian government learned that even if millions rise up, it can endure a storm. Think about it. This is 2009. Two years later, with the Arab Spring, countries like Egypt and Yemen and Libya, a lot of those countries imploded because of the massive uprising. The Iranian government not only withstood all that, but then it helped sustain one of those Arab Spring countries, like Syria.

So really, in a way, it taught the Iranian government that there is widespread animosity towards it. But also, that it has the number of the opposition. Because it was able to muster so much support for itself. This was evidenced in the [FOREIGN LANGUAGE] Bahman protests, the revolution day pro-government protests were literally, the government was able to bring out millions of its own supporters and that's really when the movement began to taper off, the Green Movement, because they were stunned by the level of support the government had.

So the government was able to muster that support but it also was very effective in deploying the multiple layers of security against the uprising. That's one of the

things that the Shah never had. The Shah had a secret police and then it had a military. And when the uprising, when the revolution unfolded, it basically deployed the military, a conscript army against the revolutionaries. And a lot of them ended up taking off their jackets and their belts and joining the revolution because there were conscripts.

They were trained to defend the territorial integrity of the country, not shoot protesters, many of whom were their family members and neighbors. So that's why the Iranian revolution, one of the reasons why it happened, was because the Shah's military began to unravel. The Iranian government in 2009 didn't have that problem because it didn't deploy the National Army against the Green Uprising.

It had developed multiple layers of security and it deployed those against the uprising and we only see one or two instances of security personnel taking off their helmet and the jackets and joining with the uprising. I think the lesson that was learned from the opposition was that while we may have failed to unseat Ahmadinejad or the system that ratified him, we have stripped, by and large, the Iranian government of a lot of its sources of legitimacy.

And so militarily, the Iranian government is still very much intact, maybe even more intact now, than 2009. But in terms of legitimacy, in terms of being able to harness those symbols that it has been cultivating for decades to legitimate itself, a lot of those have been robbed by the Green Movement. That's one of the successes that I really go into detail in the book. I don't know if I answer the question, but you know, we do what we can.

**JOHN TIRMAN:** Let me follow up with something based on what you just said. It strikes me that one of the problems of uprisings, wherever they are, some of them on Capitol Hill here and all over the world, really, is that without institutions that support an uprising, without platforms that are labor unions or the news media or educational institutions, or other kinds, not necessarily government, it's very hard to succeed.

And I wonder if that was one of the absences, so to speak, of the Green Movement in 2009 and subsequently.

**POUYA** Yes, I would say that's one of the absences with the Green Movement and with the

**ALIMAGHAM:** Arab Spring. I don't want to totalize and I don't want to pass this off as my own knowledge. This is something that Asef Bayat has really talked about in one of his latter books called *Revolution Without Revolutionaries*, by Stanford University Press.

He basically argues that neoliberalism has not only shaped the state and the economy, but has shaped the way through which the opposition expresses its opposition. So one of the things that went in favor of the Green Movement also went against it. In favor how? Because it didn't really have an ideology.

It became this canopy of resistance against a state. Anyone who had a problem with the Iranian government basically came underneath it. But they didn't have a real blueprint or even somebody that wanted revolution, like Mir-Hossein Mousavi did not want a revolution.

Whereas in 1978 and '79, Khomeini was resolute about revolution and was resolute about what he wanted. He wanted an Islamic government and he had laid it down in a book called [FOREIGN LANGUAGE] *Islamic Government*. And then he built institutions, even before he took power.

He established the Revolutionary Council before the Shah's military had fully collapsed on February 11th. And had an ideology. Ideology is really important. And this is the issue of the 20th century, there was ideology and the opposition was able to manifest this opposition in ideological terms so that if it won, then the preceding state, by default, would have to be destroyed.

A lot of the problems with the uprisings today is that they focus on the figurehead, like Hosni Mubarak, Muamar el Gaddafi, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, without addressing the system that has given rise to these types of people and these situations. They don't provide an alternative blueprint. They talk about human rights, civil rights, individual rights, women's rights, but how is that connected to power and the economy and the structure? None of the uprisings that I've seen, at least, I may be wrong, really address these issues.

**JOHN TIRMAN:** And how is it manifesting today? I mean, we have an election coming up in Iran in June or spring, in any case. Rouhani has been pilloried by the right, by the conservatives, in part because of the nuclear deal with the United States and the other European and Russia and China.

The COVID-19 epidemic has really ravaged Iran. So there's a lot of weakness at the center, if you consider Rouhani sort of the center technocrat, who has the support of a lot of reformists. Where is it going from here and where does the Green Uprising, where do the greens manifest themselves in this upcoming election process? Or is the election not really important? Are they doing other things to influence the future course of Iran?

**POUYA**

**ALIMAGHAM:**

OK. There's a lot of layers to that question. Before I try to answer, I just want to echo what you just said, that the Trump administration pulling out of the JCPOA, an agreement that was holding and was working, has very much undermined and polarized the politics inside Iran, the pandemic has accentuated everything in every country.

So if there was problems, those problems have been magnified everywhere. I would also add that the Trump administration has tightened sanctions on Iran during the pandemic, which is something that, it just has to be said, because it's so terrible. It's such a terrible and failed policy.

Having said that, I'll say that when we talk about the Green Movement or the Green Uprisings, we have to just understand, we're not talking about this thing that's steady and constant. It has been evolving and manifesting in different ways. So we know that when the Iran Nuclear Agreement was first signed, by then Ahmadinejad was gone. The Green Movement issues had faded. There was a new president.

But they came out and said, [FOREIGN LANGUAGE] it is great, it is grand, it is grand. The absence of Neda is at hand. So you see those issues still manifesting, it's simmering to the top. Neda being the one who died on June 20th in 2009. Or when Rafsanjani passed away.

Rafsanjani was sympathetic toward the Green Movement. During his funeral you see a lot of Green Movement slogans about Mir-Hossein Mousavi and stuff like that, because he's still under house arrest. Or when the uprisings that happened in 2017, 2018, and 2019, you don't see or hear anything about the Green Movement. But you see slogans that the Green Movement innovated, being aired again.

What was the one? [FOREIGN LANGUAGE] No to Gaza, no to Lebanon, my life is only

for Iran. That was a slogan that was aired in the Jerusalem Day protests on September 18th, 2009. So 11 years ago. You still hear those slogans. And that's really not anti Arab or anti Palestinian sentiment, although there's probably shades of that. I go through it in chapter 4 of the book.

But really, the Iranian government legitimates itself by saying that it champions the liberation of Palestine. And here they are negating that source of legitimacy, really to snub the Iranian government. So I don't anticipate seeing people wearing green anytime soon. But a lot of the legacy informs the trajectory that Iran is now on.

So when Rouhani was up for reelection, it was again at a time that they used another campaign color. It was like, purple. And they really said, purple, green, we're all the same. So they really, through color, connecting these campaigns or these movements or these grievances, really. So I think by now, after this long winded answer, I may have forgotten your original question.

**JOHN TIRMAN:** I didn't know how it was being manifested. You're answering it, for sure.

**POUYA** What's going to happen?

**ALIMAGHAM:**

**JOHN TIRMAN:** This election, I think, is going to be-- it'll be interesting to see how it does manifest in the election cycle that that's upcoming.

**POUYA** Yeah, I think--

**ALIMAGHAM:**

**JOHN TIRMAN:** I do want to get back to the questions of our audience.

**POUYA** Sure, OK.

**ALIMAGHAM:**

**JOHN TIRMAN:** One of them, particularly mischievous. I'm going to paraphrase it. How would you-- and it's relevant to what we were just discussing. How would you depict the Green Uprisings in Iran compared with the insurrection, January 6th, on Capitol Hill. And one thing you just said, while you're thinking about it, actually reminded me of it. And that is the America first element to this. Get out of forever wars. Come home. Take care of your own people.

**POUYA**

Yeah, all right. That is a pretty mischievous question. But I like it. I like it. Good. Keep on my feet. If I may, add a layer to the question. When the instruction in DC was actually happening, I had a Zoom call with somebody. And we were asking about each other, how our day was going. And he said something like, I'm just stunned about what I'm seeing on TV because it reminds me of scenes from Tehran.

And you know, I thought about it. And later, I was like, they're just not the same. Protesting and I know the question was about 2009. But protesting and seizing the US embassy in Tehran in 1978 was very much an anti imperialist act. Not to condone it, but Mark Bowden said this was Iran's version of the Boston Tea Party.

They were seizing the same US embassy that had overthrown the Iranian government in 1953. The United States, through the US embassy, had overthrown Mosaddegh. Comparing things that happened in Iran, oftentimes that are anti imperialist, what's happening in the capital of this global force, are just very different.

I would say that what happens in Iran is kind of like an anti imperialist event on the periphery of empire, whereas what happens with the insurrection is kind of like infighting in the headquarters of the global power. When I say global power, that's really a euphemism for something else.

How does the Green Uprising now compare to the January 6th insurrection? I think it's very different. I think that the insurrection on January 6th was fueled by a head of state that was basing everything on a bed of lies. Whereas the protesters in 2009, very peaceful by the way, very peaceful, and who were on the receiving end of violence, and who were not basing their actions on fake news or conspiracy or the dark web, I think there's a huge difference.

**JOHN TIRMAN:** Indeed. I want to thank Pouya. We're just out of time. And I want to apologize to our audience for not getting to all your questions, although I think he answered quite a few of them along the way.

Please do get this wonderful, deeply informed book, *Contesting the Iranian Revolution and the Green Uprisings*, Cambridge University Press. And thank you, Pouya, for coming on with us today and thank the audience.

**POUYA** It was my pleasure. It was my pleasure. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you to the

**ALIMAGHAM:** whole team. Thank you.

**JOHN TIRMAN:** A nice large audience. So see you next time, be well, and keep the faith.