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Cyberspace, Ta'ziyeh symbols and the Public Sphere in Iran

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Abstract

The instruments of publicity and public engagement in the social, economic and political arenas are growing in power due to the development of communication technology and electronic media. At the same time, their capacity to play a manipulative role in forming the public sphere is disregarded. Drawing on Victor Turner's emphasis on the importance of symbols and his analyses of liminality, this article focuses on a liminal period in the recent history of Iran, namely the 2009 Green Movement, when a ritual performance such as Ta'ziyeh and its symbols played key roles in mobilising crowds and forming the public sphere. In this way, it demonstrates how, under such liminal conditions, trickster figures can employ cultural and religious symbols in the medium of cyberspace, social media and social networks to become influential in manipulating the public.

Key words: Public sphere, liminality, symbols, ritual, cyberspace, Ta'ziyeh, Green Movement, Iran

Historical background of the Green Movement

In the aftermath of Ayatollah Khomeini's death on June 3, 1989, the Assembly of Experts elected the president, Sayyed Ali Khamenei, as his successor. After Khamenei's approval, a national referendum was held alongside the presidential elections on July 28, 1989, to ratify the constitution by the majority of the voters. Thereafter, Khamenei was elected as the leader and Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was Majlis (the Islamic Consultative Assembly) speaker, was elected as the president of Iran by the popular majority vote. Initially, these dual power systems co-operated, with the aim of resuming collective clerical rule.

Despite the newly ratified constitution, which gave considerable power to the new leader, Khamenei, it was Rafsanjani, a millionaire mullah (cleric), who dominated Iranian politics since the 1980s. Among Khomeini's revolutionary followers, these two powerful figures, Khamenei and Rafsanjani, were joint advocates of *feqh-e puyā* (progressive Islamic jurisprudence) (Arjomand, 2009: 37). Regardless of their similarity and co-operation, they gradually began to compete for more power and supremacy. In this power struggle, they both used any opportunity to enlarge their circle of support and sovereignty. For example, Khamenei took advantage of his constitutional privilege to have mastery over military forces and upheld his network of clerical commissars in the various organisations, public sectors, security and intelligence forces, the Special Court for Clerics, and, importantly, the provincial and municipal Friday prayer leaders (Imam Jomeh) (ibid: 38).

Mir Hossein Muosavi (the leading figure of the 2009 Green Movement), who was an active member of the 1979 revolution against the King of Iran, served as the prime

minister from 1981 to 1989 but, after the constitutional referendum, the post of prime minister was abolished, putting the cabinet directly under the president as the head of the executive power. Since then, he was the president of the Iranian Academy of Arts. This expansion of presidential power helped Rafsanjani to launch economic liberalisation, to make his own nominations to key posts and to reduce social and cultural (but not political) controls during his presidency from 1989 to 1997. At the time, Rafsanjani consciously ignored the surrounding chaos in society, and instead focused on competing with the hardliners in order to obtain key positions of power. For example, he and his allies excluded radical wings of the opposition from the 1990 elections for the Assembly of Experts and also in the 1992 parliamentary elections for their own gain. According to Bakhash (2010), even the Iran Liberation Front, which was a centrist opposition party, was barely tolerated by Rafsanjani and his circle.

Rafsanjani's privatisation and development programme benefited a few, particularly those in his circle, but led to inflation and hardship in the wider society, which resulted in protests in several places from 1992 to 1995. Together with the steps towards cultural liberalisation, which failed to fulfil many of the shortcomings in Iranian society, this led to the election of conservatives and hardliner figures in the Islamic Consultative Assembly. Rafsanjani's obvious loss of the initiative to the hardliners convinced him to use his position and power to encourage and support the election campaign of Mohammad Khatami. In the 1997 presidential election, Khatami stimulated voters by highlighting the rule of law, tolerance for diverse views, respect for rights and improvement of social rights, building good international relations and special attention to the needs of women and youth, through applying Shia symbols. Subsequently, he won 70% of the vote in an 80% turnout. In the 2001 presidential election, his campaign on a reform programme won a second term by a similar margin. He followed Rafsanjani's policies for economic liberalisation and privatisation. Under his presidency, a new public discourse and vocabularies such as democracy, pluralism, modernism, liberty, equality, civil society, human rights, political participation, dialogue and citizenship were included in the daily debate in Iranian media (Abrahamian, 2008).

After Khatami's eight-year presidential term, Ahmadinejad, a hardline candidate, succeeded in winning the 2005 election. Reformists, led by Rafsanjani, lost the presidential election after 16 years governing, but they used all their potential power and any possible tricks to win the next election. Against their expectations, however, Ahmadinejad won a second term on June 12, 2009. The reformist candidate, Mir Hossein Mousavi, who was backed by Rafsanjani and his circle, disputed the result, suggesting it was arranged illegally. Subsequently supporters of Mousavi cried foul and ultimately clashed with riot police in Tehran, despite a ban on public protests. According to news agencies, thousands of supporters of Mousavi, some of whom were wearing his campaign colour of green, were chanting 'where is my vote?' and 'down with the dictator'. The supreme leader, Khamenei, called for calm, but the crowd continued to protest. Subsequently, there were clashes between protesters and the authorities. This protest was the starting point of the 2009 Green Movement. Amid an increasing regime of censorship, cyberspace use and social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, became increasingly popular, particularly among the young. Both sides, the reformists

and hardliners, employed religious and cultural symbols and images through cyberspace to justify their actions. Reformists used this opportunity to propagate their message.

Ta'ziyeh symbols

Anthropologists such as Turner (1967; 1982) and Schneider (1977) put a substantial emphasis on the concept of symbols and their meanings. A system of symbols may be understood as defining the culture of a society. In other words, the culture is created, developed and maintained by a system of symbols. In Turner's (1967) words, it is a forest of symbols and 'each symbol expresses many themes, and each theme is expressed by many symbols. The cultural weave is made up of symbolic wrap and thematic weft' (1977: 189-190). This intertwining of symbols and themes provides us with significant information about the natural environment, as observed and assessed by the ritual actors, as well as about their ethical, esthetical, political, legal and ludic ideas, ideals, and rules. Accordingly, symbols remain remarkably stable and the themes they represent and embody are persistently entrenched. Firstly, they travel from a ritual performance to other kinds of ritual, or even transfer from one genre to another, such as transferring from a ritual performance to an epic, a narrative, a myth, a speech, a painting, a poster, calligraphy, a fairy tale, a social network and even to a case at law. Secondly, they are characterised by variability and can be employed both for giving order and creating disorder in a society (Turner 1982). Turner extended his theory to give it a wider application to social, cultural and political dynamics, arguing that 'much of the imagery found in the rhetoric of politicians is drawn from ritual symbolism, from which it drives its power to move and channel emotion' (Turner, 1977: 194).

Shia symbols in Iranian culture can create powerful emotions and make a crowd laugh, cry and sacrifice, or alternatively to violate rules and hierarchy, destroy, fight, and lastly kill or be killed. According to Kamalipour (2010: 62), the use of signs, symbols, and the tradition of slogan chanting in the streets during the 2009 Green Movement created a revolutionary atmosphere. Similar to the 1979 revolution, demonstrators were chanting *allah-o-akbar* (God is Great), *azadi, esteghlal, jomohouri Irani* (Freedom, Independence, Iranian Republic), and some new slogans were also created, such as 'where is my vote?' They regularly recalled the symbols used during the 1979 Revolution through their protest activities, in both the streets and online (Rauh, 2013: 1316). In relation to the chant *allah-o-akbar*, Manoukian (2010: 246) argues that it makes the distinction between religious and secular irrelevant, foregrounding through citation its own history as its distinctive message; it finds its force in referencing the revolution as an ongoing event rather than as a past that has already ended. As such it was tactically deployed by the reformists' leaders, particularly Rafsanjani. After four years waiting, Rafsanjani wanted his selected candidate, Mousavi, to win the 2009 presidential election at any cost.

Indeed, the 2009 election was a battle and confrontation between Rafsanjani and Khamenei and they were using all possible opportunities and tricks to win the battle. After being disappointed with the outcome of the election, the reformists' leaders encouraged chanting *allah-o-akbar* and utilising the 1979 slogans and mottos, hoping that

the tactics of 1979 would work again. By reclaiming the revolutionary mottos, slogans, rhetoric and history through posters, photographs, slogans, graffiti and other visual and artistic activities, the protestors and their online supporters involved in the Green Movement tried initially to challenge the outcome of the 2009 presidential election, and later the legitimacy of the system. Mousavi and Karroubi, leaders of the Green Movement, neither questioned the leadership of Khamenei nor the system itself. They also never specified a particular form of democratic reform in Iran. However, utilising Shia symbols as a means to demand a re-election process could gather considerable crowds in big cities. This led diasporic Iranians, particularly cyberspace activists, to exaggerate the aim, size and scope of the movement. For example, in spring 2010, Abdolkarim Soroush, Mohsen Kadivar, Ataollah Mohajerani, Akbar Ganji and Abdolali Bazargan published online their own manifesto for the Green Movement for international use, calling it a 'reform-movement' (Soroush et al., 2010).

For the better understanding of Ta'ziyeh, it is necessary to review briefly the historical highlights of its emergence. After the decease of the prophet Muhammad in 632, Muslims divided gradually into two sects, the Shia and the Sunni (Homayuni 1989). While the Shia Muslims believe that the Prophet had identified Ali ibn Abi Talib as his successor in public, the Sunni Muslims claimed that the Caliph, or successor of Prophet Muhammad, should be elected according to ancient Arabian tribal tradition. Regardless of this division of beliefs, Ali did not challenge Abu Bakr or any subsequent caliphs, serving as an advisor to them instead. Abu Bakr, Omar, Othman and Ali were elected caliphs respectively. However, Ali's position only lasted between 656 A.C. and 661 A.C., as he was murdered. Thereafter, Ali's supporters became followers of his sons Hassan and Hussein, who were sons of Ali and his wife Fatima (daughter of Prophet Mohammed). Meanwhile Muawiyah, who founded the Umayyad dynasty and became the Caliph, started to fight with his son Yazid against Hussein and his followers' uprising. The war between them provided Shia Islam with its initial sacred narratives, which reveal how Hussein was killed on the ground of Karbala. These narratives, poems and rituals further developed and became part of the current Ashura rituals. Reciting Karbala developed gradually and became a form of spiritual theatre and ritual performance; a ceremony or tragedy merged with sacrifice, poetry, mourning and self-flagellation called Ta'ziyeh.

Ta'ziyeh, which means literally mourning, is a dramatic form of religious passion play and theatrical expression based on the battle of Karbala which is performed annually by Shia Muslims to commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad, an event which is conveyed predominantly through music and dramatic narration (Homayuni, 1989; Chelkowski, 1979).

Ta'ziyeh is performed on the tenth day of Muharram (the first month of the Islamic calendar). This day is called 'Ashura', which means 'tenth'. The main performance space is simple, blunt and curtain-less. Characteristically, the empty stage in Ta'ziyeh represents the uninhabited and deserted plain of Karbala; a basin of water represents the Euphrates River; a branch of a tree represents a palm grove; a *panjeh* (the hand/claw) represents the hand of Abbas and five sacred bodies (Mohammad, Ali, Fatimah, Hussein and Hassan); and or black flags marked with the name of Imam

Hussein and/or his family members represent the Shia colours and martyrs' names in the battle of Karbala.

Historically, symbols of Ta'ziyeh were employed by political actors to manipulate the Shia population in Iran. Aghaie (2004: 29) argues that the interaction between the Muharram ritual (especially Ta'ziyeh) and politics yielded evidence that the last three rulers in Iran, Qajar, Pahlavi and the Islamic regime, used Muharram and Karbala rituals and symbols to legitimise their own position. Likewise, Rahimi's (2012) study of Muharram rituals during the Safavid period also provides a depth of understanding of the public sphere in Iran during that period. Using historical evidence, he investigates that Muharram, which had been publically practiced since the seventh century, became a manifestation of state power during the Safavid dynasty, especially during the reign of Shah (King) Abbas I (1587-1629) and Shah Safi I (1629-1642). This historical evidence demonstrate how political actors and elites manage to use, reshape, reinvent and even eliminate rituals in different ways, in pursuit of their own goals, to transform a society, such as Iran, into a "theatre state" (carnivalesque celebrations) and to form the public sphere.

The delicacy of the public sphere

The concept of the public sphere, as a forum of communication between the state and society, was introduced by Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in the late 1950s and 1960s. It contributes to the modern understanding of democracy and rests on the idea of critical-rational debate, speech acts and deliberative process that are 'legitimated through a rational pursuit of collective interest, which also implies a fair degree of transparence of communication among the actors involved in the process' (Salvatore, 2007: 5). According to Habermas (1989), the public sphere is formed in a place where the otherwise private bourgeois come together and engage in rational debate.

The creation of new cyberspaces led to a novel development of the public sphere, which is rooted in normative Habermasian standards of communicative rationality, as it moved away from face-to-face debate to public debates through new online communication tools. The developments of this cyberspace technology brought new opportunities for publicity and public engagement in the social, economic and political arenas, and new ways to communicate speedily, to participate online in the political debate, to engage in social movements and revolutions and even to organise them. Today, we witness the spread of both cyberspace and cyberspace users through the whole world. For example, new mobile phones, particularly smartphones, computer technologies and cyberspace were used for the first time in history of Iran in 2009 to organise protest, report it, discuss and reflect it online nationally and internationally.

Habermas's model of the public sphere was criticised by social scientists such as Calhoun (1992) and Barrow (1993), based on Habermas's failure to acknowledge the intricacy and trickiness of the public sphere in terms of its historical and theoretical underpinnings. Salvatore (2007: 2) argues that Habermas 'underplayed the role of religious traditions in its formation'. Rahimi (2012: 85-6) referred to Islamic countries, where the politicisation of Islam and the Islamicisation of the public sphere contrast with

the secularization characteristic of Habermas's concept of the public sphere. Salvatore (2007: 8) highlights that the public sphere as introduced by Habermas 'is a model based on a particular crystallization of the dialectics between inwardness and publicness'.

Habermas (1989: 162), in his own arguments about the mass media, depicts his awareness of manipulative forms of publicity in certain conditions, but he obviously overlooked the role of religious and cultural symbols and images in forming the public sphere. Szakolczai (2013) explores this complexity and critiques the Habermassian concept of the public sphere in detail. His historical and anthropological studies of the public sphere illustrate the manipulative forms taken by publicity. The public sphere can be formed by rhetorical discourse, magical and verbal images, metaphoric language, comical inversions and theatrical performances.

The result is that far from being an arena of purely rational debate, the public sphere is one where modern communication systems and tools such as media, especially social media, are used to juggle and evade the truth or importance of an issue, by raising trivial distinctions and objections. Instead of a domain of free and equal interaction between citizens, the public sphere can easily become a mere market place with the public itself being turned in a market for consumption (ibid). This condition of the public sphere increases the ability of political actors and tricksters to manipulate the public, usually by employing religious and cultural symbols, and linguistic skills. The 2009 Green Movement in Iran is a contemporary example of such a transformation of the public sphere, illustrating how the symbols of a ritual performance can be utilised by modern communication technology to form and transform public discourse. Generally, it shows how disregarding of the role of religious and cultural narratives, myths, signs, symbols and images in social science, particularly in sociology and anthropology, is a serious deficiency on the part of social scientists.

Liminality and Tricksters

Historically, there is evidence of a strong correlation between the public sphere, liminality and the trickster. Trickster utilise available communicative methods, especially in liminal periods such as revolution, war and crisis, to manipulate the emotions of the public.

Plato (1997) was the first philosopher who aimed to understand the issues surrounding Athenian democracy. In his dialogues in Gorgias (449a- 458b), Plato diagnosed the issues that might be provoked by the practice of debate in the public arena. Likewise, he identified possible barriers that may be encountered in the public sphere. His dialogue *The Sophist* (231c-240d) demonstrates how the Sophists had used a variety of ways, such as their expertise in speech, to claim to know everything. They utilised words to trick people into regarding them as teachers, even though they did not represent the truth in reality. Therefore, Plato regarded Sophists not only as cheats and imitators, but also as experts at manipulation who lured innocent citizens into believing the false information they divulged. Thus, the Sophists are "tricksters", who utilise any possible tricks to approach their own aims. Ultimately, Plato's recognition of the Sophists as image-makers and suppliers of false words and beliefs was directly connected with his diagnosis of theatrocracy in *The Laws*. Such a connection between the Sophists and the theatre, which is central to *Ion* and *The Symposium*, 'also has strong theatrical aspects - it

even ends on the note of Socrates discussing the identity of writing tragedies and comedies' (Szakolczai, 2013: 31).

In the twentieth century, Radin (1956), in his study of American Indian mythology, described the characteristics of trickster. The trickster (or *wakdjunkaga* in Winnebago language, which means "the tricky one") '[…] knows neither good nor evil yet he is responsible for both. He possesses no values, moral or social, is at the mercy of his passions and appetites, yet through his actions all values come into being' (ibid: ix). He uses 'force and trickery to obtain all he wants' (ibid: 156). Recently, Armbrust (2013) introduced a trickster figure, Taufiq Ukasha, in his account of the Egyptian Revolution of 2011, which is known as the January 25 Revolution, to list the characteristics of a trickster in our modern times. In his observation of the rise of Ukasha, from the middle of 2011 to the middle of 2012, he describes Ukasha as a 'little Hitler': a trickster 'seemingly coming from nowhere', 'suddenly no longer a laughing-stock', 'suddenly frighteningly real'. When Armbrust returned to Egypt in 2013, he found himself in an Egyptian Weimar, where '[v]iolent clashes were occurring every day between supporters and opponents of the government' (ibid: 587).

The term "liminality" may be understood as characterising the second stage of rites of passage (the three stages of which are separation, transition and reincorporation). It was initially introduced by the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (1960) and then developed by Turner (1967: 93-111). According to Turner (1982), liminality refers to any situation or object being "betwixt" and "between"; a transition period, an inter-structural situation and a process involving moving from one stage to the other stage. Thus, liminality is a temporary break from the normal, daily and everyday activities. However, if this break, rather than being limited in time and space, becomes boundless, then, according to Szakolczai (2000), a permanent state of liminality will occur. The term "permanent liminality" was developed by Szakolczai (2000) in his book *Reflexive Historical Sociology* to express aspects of social life masked by conventional theories of modernisation and democratisation. This term, which may be interpreted as a state of permanent uncertainty, helps us to understand what the public sphere is in contemporary societies.

Recently, the concept of liminality and the trickster have been developed extensively by Arpad Szakolczai (2000; 2013) and other social scientists, and is increasingly applied to different fields within the social sciences. This paper employs these concepts to analyse how political actors utilised symbols and images during the liminal period of the 2009 Green Movement, to manipulate and control the crowd to reach their pre-planned goal. In this way, it demonstrates how they used modern communication technology to wangle, fudge and misrepresent citizens consistently.

Before explaining how cyberspace was employed during the Green Movement to manipulate the public, let us examine who Rafsanjani is and why we should consider him as a figure who has most characteristics of a trickster. As one of the most powerful figures during the first two decades of the Islamic Republic, Rafsanjani played a key role in slaughtering, imprisoning and torturing members of opposition political parties, such as the People's Mujahedin Organization of Iran (MEK) and Hezbeh Tudeh (the people's party), in the first years following the 1979 revolution. As Eshraghi and Baji (2012)

describe, he vanished Abulhassan Banisadr, the first post-revolution president, from the scene; he was responsible for executing thousands of political prisoners in the summer of 1988; he was in charge of the serial murders of Iranian intellectuals in the 1990s; he cultivated his reputation as the jack of all trades in the Islamic Republic; he was considered the symbol of wealth and corruption in society: and he was the epitome of power and ruthlessness. Akbar Ganji, a reformist journalist who, together with others, wrote the Green Movement manifesto, outlines in *The Red-Robed Eminence and The Grey Eminences* (Alijenab Sorkhpoosh va Alijenabanen Khakestari, 2000), which is a collection of his articles, the details of Rafsanjani's involvement in the chain murders (ibid).

At the same time as Rafsanjani was posing as anti-American in Iran, he sided with the US-led coalition to oust Iraq from Kuwait, helped win freedom for American hostages held by Lebanese militia (Bakhash, 2010), and co-operated with the US in order to defeat the Taliban in Afghanistan. He also began implementing his controversial development programme to rebuild the damage caused by the war with Iraq. Rafsanjani publicised himself everywhere as Sardar-e Sazandegi (Commander of Reconstruction), which resulted in greater private sector involvement, large quantities of foreign borrowing and therefore external debt, which fuelled corruption. Finally, he was a key figure and supporter of the 2009 movement.

Thousands of protesters of the 2009 movement were arrested, tortured and imprisoned; his children were accused and convicted of committing crime and corruption; his allies Mousavi and Karroubi are still living under house arrest and Khatami faces serious difficulties after the Green Movement; but the 81-year-old Rafsanjani still serves in key positions and is active in the political arena. He entered the race for the 2010 presidential election, but was disqualified by the Guardian Council. While he is still a member of the Assembly of Experts and heads the Expediency Council, he continues to seek greater political influence. He ran for the election of the Assembly of Experts on February 26, 2016. About one month before the election, on January 13, 2016, he uploaded an image of Mohammad Mosaddegh (Iranian popular prime minister from 1951 to 1953) and a page of his hand-writing on his website (hashemirafsanjani.ir) and social networks such as Instagram. Rafsanjani claimed that, 50 years ago, after the book *Al-ghazyh Al-phelestineh* (Issue of Palestine) was translated by him in 1964 and published in the most difficult circumstances, Mossadeq, who was under house arrest at the time, read it and sent him the message that it would be a pity if this book were left unread. Despite Rafsanjani supporting Ayatollah Khomeini, who targeted Mossadeq in several speeches, he needed Mossadeq's name to win the election. As a result, Rafsanjani won 15 out of 16 seats in the Tehran voting district. Ousting key hardliners, he is assumed to be an influential competitor for the Iran's next supreme leader. He seeks to maximise two things: his power and his wealth. He wants to be the supreme leader in Iran: therefore he employs any possible tricks to become the most powerful figure in the political arena.

The Green Movement and the battle of cyberspace

The struggle between politico-religious powers in Iran resulted in an intensification of liminality within an existing state of permanent liminality. In other words, while Iranian

society has been living in a state of uncertainty since 1979 (a permanent liminality), the 2009 Green Movement represented a further intensification of that state. Ta'ziyeh symbols were used during the 2009 movement to form the public sphere, but instead of the cassette tape, used to spread messages and speeches of Ayatollah Khomeini, cyberspace was employed to communicate with the movement's followers.

Rahimi (2011) focuses on the role of cyberspace during the 2009 Green Movement and argues that, for social movements, especially under a totalitarian system, cyberspace provides a social space wherein imaginaries of self and other, resistance and power, form ties and connections of interactivity. He describes this connectivity as "social affinities" that are disputatious and litigious performances and actions that illustrate strong emotions and narratives of protestation against power (ibid). Manoukian (2010) concentrates on a video clip of the 2009 Green Movement to analyse the event, considering images in relation to their sounds and subjects in relation to the disparate effects and sensations that run through them. He argues that 'investigating the relationship between experience and politics in contemporary Iran and elsewhere involves diverting the analysis of subject formation to underline the power and heterogeneity of sounds, images, words, actions, bodies, and affects, without reconstituting them into stable referents or mourning their absence' (ibid: 239-40). Dabashi (2011) sympathises with and dramatizes the Green Movement. Dabashi's (2005) article, 'Ta'ziyeh as Theatre of Protest', demonstrates his familiarity with the role of Ta'ziyeh ritual and its symbols in Iranian society. However, it seems to me that their positive approach is not because of their tendency to Islamic democracy, but is a reaction and protest against more than three decades of tyranny in Iran: a sense that anything must be better than the current totalitarian regime in Iran, even if a trickster such as Rafsanjani leads it.

During the 2009 presidential election, social media sites such as Twitter, YouTube and Facebook, as well as the availability of text messaging and emails, all contributed in fabricating a public sphere in Iran. Nonetheless, this could only be operated in big cities due to the limited coverage, access and availability of the internet in Iran. Therefore, the cyberspace media coverage was disseminated largely among the wealthy and middle class minority of the population. The cyberspace war between hardliners and reformists appeared to be a modern way of manipulating the public during and after the Green Movement. The hardliners created websites and social networks called *Sabz Alavi* (green Alavi[2]) and *Moasesseh-e Sabz Andishan Javan Alavi* (Institute for Green Thinkers of Alavi) or 'Sbznt' websites and they claimed that they have always been green, the true followers of the *ahl-e bait*[1] (Prophet Mohammad and his family members) (Kamalipour, 2010: 261).

Images and symbols of Ta'ziyeh were intensified on social networks and social media to illustrate and the dichotomy between "right/good" and "wrong/bad". Reformists demonstrated themselves as "right/good" by calling for the public to rise up and fight contemporary injustices. In contrast, the hardliners were elucidating the Green Movement as "wrong/bad". Slogans, symbols, signs and rhetoric that both parties uploaded on the social media online sites were crucial for understanding the impact of their actions, and also provided a means to be able to analyse the Iranian political cultural

landscape. Employing the *goriz* (elusion/escape/breakout) technique, which is a technique of improvisatory performance and a mood of play in Iranian theatre in order to relate two different events that occurred in past and present times, under the guise of the Karbala theme and Ta'zyieh performances evolved into becoming the dominant recognisable cyberspace media used in contemporary Shia society in Iran. Computer images from design programmes, such as Photoshop, were circulated to thousands of people who had access to the internet and new online mobile-phone technologies. Indeed, individuals, groups, reformists, hardliners and government agencies, with the aim of mobilising crowds, regularly linked contemporary events, movements and actions to the battle of Karbala. This way of linking the two events was also central to war films, TV series and videos in the post-revolutionary era, such as the late 1980s TV series 'Ravayat-e-Fath' ('The Story of Conquest'), directed by Sayyed Morteza Aviny. The effectiveness of images was correlated with use of the *goriz* technique, in that there was a relationship between images and their impact on audiences.

Importantly, to mobilise a considerable crowd, one must know how to employ the *goriz* technique properly, at the right time and place. For example, reformists utilised Ta'ziyeh symbols during Muharram ceremonies when the cleric Hussein Ali Montazeri died on December 19, 2009, on the third day of Muharram. Montazeri was deputy leader to the 1979 revolution's Supreme Leader, Khomeini, and was once the designated successor to him. However, a disagreement over governmental policies led to the breakdown of this relationship in 1989. In 2009, he was procured 'as a symbolic leader of the green movement owing to his public censure of the regime's violent suppression of the opposition' (Rauh, 2013: 1335). In Iran, a funeral ceremony is held on the third, the seventh and 40th day after the death. Therefore, thousands of people gathered in Qom city to attend Montazeri's funeral, followed by mourning ceremonies on the day of Ashura. This day was the key day for the leaders of the 2009 Green Movement. To be able to gather a considerable crowd for protests against the hardliners, they tried to use similar methods to the 1979 revolution, to employ the *goriz* technique at the right time and right place.

Despite that, people were making discourteous jokes about Montazeri for many years after the revolution, classifying him as an unwise, senseless and ridiculous cleric, nicknaming him *Gorbeh Nareh* ('the Tomcat') (Sciolino, 2000: 191). Nonetheless, now Montazeri was being treated with the same esteem as Imam Hussein. At his funeral ceremony, he was being called *Montazeri-ye mazlum* ('Montazeri, the oppressed one'), and the crowd chanted '*Ya Hazrat-e Masumeh! Montazeri Masumeh!*' ('oh holiness Masumeh (Fatima), Montazeri is innocent'). According Montazeri, the epithet 'the pure soul' was usually reserved for the Imams (Fischer, 2010: 502). Hazrat-e Masumeh (790-816 AD) is the sister of 'Imam Reza' (766-819 AD) and the daughter of the seventh Twelver Shia Imam 'Musa Kazim' (745-799 AD). Her shrine is the physical and spiritual centre of Qom city, and one of the most important Shia shrines in Iran. The word *Hazrat* means holiness/majesty/honour/excellency and the word *Masum* means innocent/sinless/immaculate. Thus, a translation of 'Montazeri-e Masum' would be 'Montazeri the innocent' and 'Montazeri Masumeh' would be 'Montazeri is innocent'. Together, the strength of this funeral and Ashura protests around the nation reflected in their slogans and images, by utilising similar *goriz* techniques, being copied, recorded and

uploaded on social media and networks such as YouTube, Facebook, blogs, websites and online news.

Neda, a mixed identity in cyberspace

The death of Neda Agha Soltan was probably the most disturbing and influential image that was reported and circulated online. However, there have been conflicting stories about her death. Some reported that Neda was shot from the rooftop of a building, as she was walking with her music teacher, whilst merely observing a street demonstration in Tehran on June 20, 2009. A medical doctor who was nearby put his hands on her chest to stop the bleeding, but Neda died immediately (Fischer, 2010). Alternative reports suggested Neda was killed by sniper fire on her way home when she briefly stepped out of a car to see why the crowd blocked the route (Naghibi, 2011). In any case, Neda's story helps us to explicitly understand how the public sphere could be formed and how the public could be manipulated through modern communications technology. A mobile video of Neda's death scene was instantly circulated and 'Neda's image moved from the grainy mobile video to artistic experiments in a variety of media: painting, sculpture, cartoons, a slide show, and collage' (Lotfalian, 2013: 1378). Subsequently, her death became an image associated with the 2009 Green Movement. Iranians living abroad actively circulated her images online in the immediate aftermath. The word Neda simply means 'voice' or, in a gnostic sense, 'call' or, alternatively, 'divine message' (Fischer, 2010: 509). This quickly became the cry, voice and call of the protesters and online activists who were supporting the Green Movement. The chant became '*Neda-ye ma namordeh, in dolat-e ke morde*' ('our Neda [our voice/cry], is not dead, the government is dead').

To frustrate the claims of reformists, the government blamed American agents or other parties for killing Neda, while also trying to declare Neda a martyr of the regime. Sohrab Arabi was also killed that day. Sohrab is the name of the famous hero in the national epic, the *Shahnameh,* who was killed unwittingly by Rostam, his father. Neda and Sohrab have become an iconic and symbolic pair who represent the Green Movement (ibid). Neda's death video became immediately the most popular video of the Green Movement on YouTube. 'Cable news stations played the footage of Neda's death on a loop, always with the caveat that what we were about to watch [again and then again] was extremely disturbing' (Naghibi, 2011: 61).

While acknowledging that Neda's death was a tragedy and a sad occurrence, we cannot omit the embedded political theatre and the use of *goriz* techniques for forming the public sphere. In fact, by romanticising, idealising, exaggerating and manipulating the footage of her dying, national and international political actors utilised it as a political tool to manipulate people's emotional responses to the protests in Iran. According to Naghibi (2011), Neda's involvement in political activities was indistinct: some reported her an innocent bystander, while others suggested that she had started becoming interested in politics and regularly attended Green Movement demonstrations.

Regardless, Neda's image and portrait was printed and circulated online to present her as a hero and martyr of the 2009 protest rally.

The spread of these images, veiled and unveiled, resulted in an outpouring of emotion from people across the globe, and 'the feelings of horror, grief, and compassion for Neda's death were transmitted through social media networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, and eventually through traditional news media outlets' (ibid: 61). Consequently, Neda's death sparked protests all over the world. Now, as cynical as it may be, the political actors had an innocent victim to use for their own agenda, and to evoke the emotion of the public.

In this way another young woman, Neda Soltani – originally identified as Neda Agha Soltan – became the face of the Green Movement, although she was still alive (see Figure 1). On October 2, 2012, at 01:32 GMT, Neda Soltani, who was a university lecturer in Iran, was interviewed by the BBC World Service. She explained that her photo was taken from her Facebook page, which then quickly became a fixed image of the protest movement (see Figure 1 and 2). Naghibi (2011) had already explained in his writings this mixed identity of Neda as utilised during the Green Movement, but it was the first time that Neda Soltani's voice was broadcasted directly from the BBC. Later, the full story was analysed and edited by Phil Coomes and published in the BBC Magazine on November 14, 2012.

In Neda Soltani's own words, the international media was using a picture of her, which was taken from her Facebook account, to accompany the footage of Neda Agha-Soltan's death. In fact, she had contacted several international journalists and explained that the use of her image was a mistake. She explained that she was not the person who had been shot dead. Disappointingly, the journalists who received her message did not react and her picture continued to be used. Indeed, CNN, Fox News and social media sites propagated the footage of someone who was being victimised by the use of her personal image without her consent. Their claim that she was killed by the Islamic regime during the protest was false, but seemingly it was too complicated for the public to realise that the person present in the image was still alive, or that Neda Soltani's photo was being used instead of that of the real victim, Neda Agha Soltan. Neda Soltani's victimisation continued as journalists persisted in spreading her images through social media and networks. Consequently, her photo was used by demonstrators (see Figure 2) and 'many people used her image as their Facebook avatars, and her photo remained online in some places as the face of resistance and the green movement' (Naghibi, 2011: 62). To complicate matters, Neda Soltani asked people to delete all of her photos and images off their websites, Facebook and cyberspace in general, as they were being wrongly used, but in return, she received plenty of hate messages. People accused her of being an agent of the Islamic regime in Iran, who had unlawfully gained access to Neda's Facebook account and wished to distort the face of their hero, the iconic symbol of resistance and opposition. In 2012, when the BBC interviewed her, she held the media and social networks responsible for the troubles and difficulties she had and explained how she fled to Germany, fearful for her life, and later she secured a US university fellowship.

In the meantime, Neda's bloodied face over a green background became a popular Facebook avatar. As Naghibi (2011) observed, many diasporic Iranians also

added Neda as their middle name on their Facebook profiles. Many of their websites changed their headline to 'we are all Neda' or simply to 'we are Neda', a forum where people could post comments and mourn her death. Neda's death and story also resulted in a short YouTube video, entitled 'I am Neda', as well as an award-winning movie made by Nicole Kian Sadighi called 'I am Neda', which became a finalist in the 2012 Cannes Film Festival's American Pavilion.

The articles, paintings, films, narratives, videos, blogs, websites and interviews romanticised Neda's youth and beauty. Her images were titled 'hero martyr' and 'angel of freedom'. In this way, circulating her images all over the world and demonstrating her desire for freedom and democracy formed a public sphere, particularly online, against the Islamic regime in Iran. As Figure 2 illustrates, people were believing, mimicking and following each other very quickly, even subconsciously. They embraced the culture of the crowd, without knowing whether its agenda, task, operation or mission were true or false. Likewise, they followed the signs and images the crowd carried, as they believed in the crowd, and could not see the hidden agenda of the trickster who manipulated it. Demonstrators did not know who Neda was, whether she was killed or not, or who was responsible for murdering her. In fact, they were carrying Neda Soltani's photo, who was still alive, wrongly considering her a martyr and chanting 'Neda did not die in vain' (see Figure 2).

The Green Movement and the formation of the public sphere

In the Ta'ziyeh play, performers who wear green dresses or any green attire are classed as playing Imam Hussein and his followers, while players dressed in red are identified as the opposing side (Yazid and his army). Thus, in Shia religion, red attire symbolises blood, evil, badness and oppression. However, in contrast, the colour green symbolises goodness and the garden of paradise. Mir Hossein Mousavi employed the green colour of Ta'ziyeh in order to mobilise a considerable crowd for the 2009 Iranian Green Movement. Subsequently, new communication tools were used to spread these symbols and images during the protests. Technology in all its forms was utilised, such as internet campaigns, mobile phone messaging and the use of social networks. In this way, 'Mousavi's revival of the paradigm was an act of proliferation and subversion of religious symbols' (Lotfalian, 2013: 1381), especially Ta'ziyeh symbols.

In Shia traditions, *ahl-e bait* (Prophet Mohammad and his family members) are symbolised by a handprint called *panjeh* or *panja* (palm of hand). The mourners carry *panjeh* while it is connected to the top of various implements, such as *alams* (the metal standards carried in 10 days of Muharram) and flags, to symbolise the battle of Karbala during the mourning processions of Ashura and the Ta'ziyeh performance. A similar image was illustrated on a small poster held up by a female protestor (see Figure 3). This image is representative of the *panjeh*. The middle fingers are coloured green, and the palm illustrated by the calligraphy 'Ya Hussein' (oh Hussein) across its diameter. This poster aimed to relate the Green Movement to *ahl-e bait*, particularly to Imam Hussein and the Karbala tragedy, as it is performed in Ta'ziyeh.

Mousavi and his wife's use of the green colour in their 2009 presidential election campaign was very strategic. It is the colour of Islam associated with *ahl-e bait,* particularly with Imam Hussein, and it also is one of the three colours of the Iranian flag. Thus, the *panjeh* poster in Figure 3, indicating a green colour V, reflects both the Green Movement's associations with the prophetic family, Shia faith and martyrdom of Hussein, and with its optimism about victory. As Rauh (2013: 1322 and 1338) illustrates and outlines, the *panjeh* poster that was modified with a V and 'Ya Hussein' in Figure 3 was separated and impaled with an arrow passing through an arm, as well as an *alam* to illustrate the digital logo of the Green Movement (see Figure 4). These two green right hands, where blood is seen dropping from the disconnected part of the arms, is intended to relate Mir Hossein Mousavi to Imam Hussein, incorporating the phrase 'Ya Hussein, Mir Hossein', below the hands. The logo is designed to symbolise the Green Movement so that it is a continued acknowledgement of Imam Hussein. In both Figures 3 and 4, Ta'ziyeh symbols and the *goriz* techniques are used to relate current problems to a past event. The arrows represent pain, suffering and injustice, and show that reformists and the Green Movement supporters are in the same situation as Imam Hussein and his followers were in the seventh century. Mousavi and his circles adapted these Ta'ziyeh symbols and images to legitimise their religious and political positions, similar to the 1979 Revolution.

The Green Movement supporters digitalised and modified Ta'ziyeh images and symbols by modern computer software and subsequently published them online. For example, images created by Deghati (2009) were uploaded as YouTube video clips by Akkasbashi to link the tragedy of Karbala to the 2009 protest, using the *goriz* technique. Figure 5 is a screenshot of one of these images, which illustrates the battle of Karbala amalgamated with the situation at the time. According to Lotfalian (2013), the original version of the image, which is taken from a popular nineteenth century portrait of Imam Hussein's family in Karbala, illustrates the tents, family and Zuljanah (Imam Hussein's horse) to exhibit the martyrdom of Imam Hussein. However, in Figure 5, the landscape to the right of Zuljanah has been manipulated to illustrate the forces of the regime attacking protesters in Tehran during the 2009 Green Movement. Likewise, the female faces are manipulated in order to represent the face of Neda, who was killed during the demonstration. In this way, the social media also adds to the translation of the image and the intended message. Compellingly, in the YouTube video, the details of this image and other images are displayed while mournful music can be heard in the background. The music of choice is called *nohe*, which is more commonly associated with mourning during Muharram and the day of Ashura when Ta'ziyeh is played out.

Living in permanent liminality

Many reformists predicted the end of the current Islamic regime by the anniversary of the 1979 Islamic revolution on February 11, 2010. However, at the end, after the day of Ashura, the regime declared victory over the Green Movement leaders, calling them *fetnehgaran* (seditionists). After overcoming the movement, the regime put the leaders of the Green Movement under house arrest and imprisoned anti-regime activists. Since then, there has not been another Green Movement demonstration, but Ta'ziyeh symbols

continue to be frequently and consistently used to benefit political actors and tricksters, which maintains the society in a state of permanent liminality. For example, similar Ta'ziyeh symbols were used during the seizure of the British embassy and its diplomatic compound in Tehran on November 29, 2011.

In modern democratic societies, the "public" or "people" is the main instrument of political actors. Through this mechanism, political tricksters design their actions and utilise images, symbols and signs to claim to represent the public will and desire and/or to transform the public sphere. In contrast, in Shia societies, such as Iran, the public's interest is often subordinate to the interest of the Shia religion. Therefore, the focal tools of political actors for forming the public sphere are Shia religious narratives, symbols, images and signs mixed with patriotic icons. The 2009 Green Movement was a consequence of the schism occurring between two tricksters, Khamenei and Rafsanjani. The ability of such tricksters in utilising cultural and religious symbols is potentially dangerous. In the twentieth century, we have already experienced the operations of these type of tricksters, such as Nazis, Stalinists and fascists, who employed symbols, images, signs, narratives, words and rhetorical skills to transform the public sphere and manipulate the entire population to reach their goals.

In our contemporary world, we witness many different faces of the trickster which nonetheless have similar characteristics. War, revolutions and popular movements in the Middle East have brought into existence new tricksters. Rafsanjani in Iran and Ukasha in Egypt are just two examples. We can find more trickster figures in the liminal time of the so-called Arab Spring, which was a series of uprisings and armed rebellions started in 2011 and which used cyberspace and modern communication technology to spread their message and activities, and for organising protests. As explained, in liminal conditions, tricksters employ symbols and interpret them to manipulate the occasion and present themselves as a human saviour, as compassionate leaders of the suffering people, and as sympathetic to the population. The tragic consequences of such hypocrisy and imposture are poverty, desolation, mass murder, ravage and chaos in society. A new example of a trickster figure in the Middle East is the self-proclaimed caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who is the leader of the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and utilises Islamic symbols, images and narratives through cyberspace, social media and social networks to attract followers from the whole world, even from the West. He has thereby formed an army to kill everyone who does not follow his faith. Modern electronic media and communication technology facilitate such tricksters to act and operate at both the national and international level. Their actions create reactions which can gradually build walls between tribes, groups, and nations. The recent Islamic State attacks in Paris and Brussels, and the current conflict between Shia and Sunni, are two examples for growing tensions and barriers, which are signs of a permanent liminality.

Conclusion

In the 2009 Green Movement, political actors utilised the *goriz* technique through cyberspace to form the public sphere and gain support for their agenda. This demonstrates that modern communication technology enables political actors and

tricksters to sell to the public anything they want more quickly than ever before. They are able to generate emotions and to shape the public's perception during periods of liminality. This ability of political actors or tricksters is potentially dangerous: indeed, through modern communication systems and tools, they can push a society into a state of permanent liminality. Clearly, human behaviour, action and reactions are not based only on rationality, and they can be corrupted by evoking emotions. Second, religious and cultural symbols play a key role in forming the public sphere. Third, the cyberspace innovations, which speed up the circulation of news, information and messages, are increasingly becoming tools for tricksters and political actors to manipulate and corrupt the system. This leads us to conclude that we do not need further cyberspace and technological innovation, instead we need to pause and should use the current communication technology to build trust and certainty, and to help our society to return to the most basic human values. This may help us to reduce tricksters' ability to manipulate the public and increase our ability to bring peace and certainty to our society.

Notes

[1] *ahl al-bayt* in Arabic.

[2] It is a branch of Shia Islam and the term Alavi Shia or Alawite Shi'ism denote the religion of the first Shia Imam, Ali ibn Abi Talib.

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Illustrations

Figure 1: Mixed Nedas.



Neda Soltani Neda Agha-Soltan

Source: BBC News Magazine (November 14, 2012)

Figure 2: Protesters wrongly carrying photos of Neda Soltani, who is still alive.



Source: BBC News Magazine (November 14, 2012)

Figure 3: Panjeh poster in Muharram protests during Montazeri's funeral. Qom, December 21, 2009



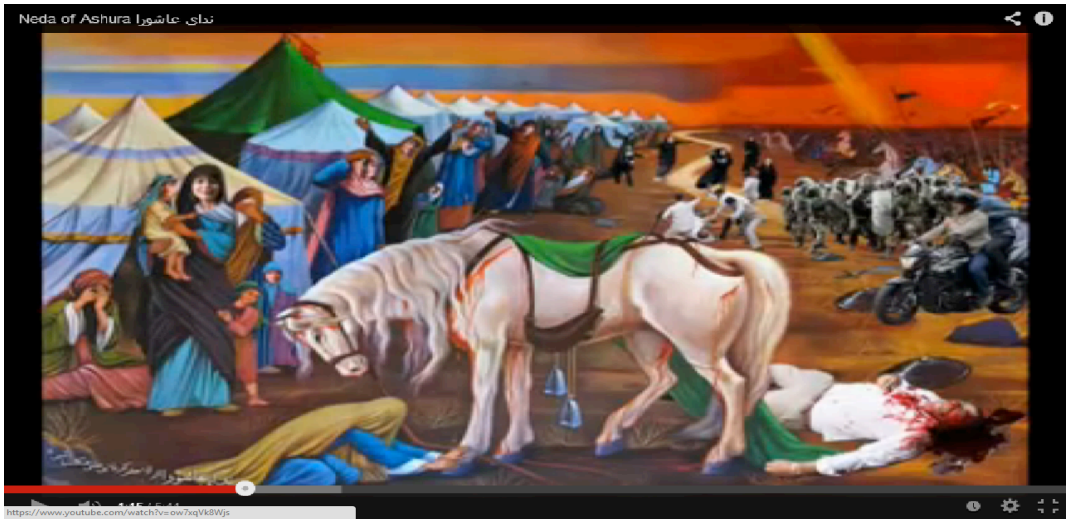
Source: Rauh (2013: 1317)

Figure 4: The 2009 Green Movement digital logo, combining the panjah, V, arrow, and invocation 'Ya Hussein, Mir Hossein'.



Source: Rauh (2013: 1338)

Figure 5: Neda of Ashura



Source: Deghati (2009)