

# Grassroots Movements and Everyday Resistance in Iran

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## Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
  - **Chapter 1** Markets as Arenas of Power: The Bazaari Strikes of 1977–79
  - **Chapter 2** Mosques, Guilds, and Merchant Networks: Pre-Revolutionary Infrastructures
  - **Chapter 3** From Street to State: Revolutionary Mobilization and Its Legacies
  - **Chapter 4** The War Years: Survival Networks and Quiet Resistance
  - **Chapter 5** Labor and Factories: Wildcat Strikes and Union Repression
  - **Chapter 6** Students and Campuses: Cycles of Protest and Reform
  - **Chapter 7** Women’s Organizing: Gendered Spaces and Everyday Defiance
  - **Chapter 8** Ethnic Peripheries: Kurdish, Baluch, and Arab Mobilizations
  - **Chapter 9** Urban Poor and Neighborhood Committees: Mutual Aid under Pressure
  - **Chapter 10** Cultural Production: Music, Film, and Satire as Dissent
  - **Chapter 11** Religious Authority, Clerical Dissent, and Countermobilization
  - **Chapter 12** Media Ecologies: Satellite TV, Print, and the Persian Blogosphere
  - **Chapter 13** The Green Movement: Networks, Frames, and 2009 Protests
  - **Chapter 14** Digital Organizing: Telegram, Instagram, and Encrypted Platforms
  - **Chapter 15** Repression and Adaptation: Policing, Surveillance, and Tactical Innovation
  - **Chapter 16** Economic Shocks: Sanctions, Inflation, and Protest Waves
  - **Chapter 17** Environmental Movements and Resource Conflicts
  - **Chapter 18** Teachers, Nurses, and Professionals: Sectoral Strikes and Syndicates
  - **Chapter 19** Diaspora Linkages: Transnational Networks and Resource Flows
  - **Chapter 20** Leadership without Leaders: Horizontalism, Hubs, and Brokers
  - **Chapter 21** Framing and Narrative: Symbols, Slogans, and Collective Memory
  - **Chapter 22** Data and Methods: Event Catalogs and Network Analysis
  - **Chapter 23** Countermovements and State-Sponsored Mobilization
  - **Chapter 24** Outcomes and Backlashes: Policy Change, Reform, and Re-entrenchment
  - **Chapter 25** Futures of Mobilization: Scenarios, Risks, and Opportunities
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## Introduction

This book examines how grassroots movements in Iran emerge, sustain themselves, and interact with state power across different historical moments and social arenas. It argues that popular mobilization in Iran is best understood as an evolving ecology of tactics, networks, and repertoires that connect bazaars, neighborhoods, campuses, workplaces, places of worship, and digital platforms. Rather than a single, continuous movement, Iran's contentious politics comprise overlapping waves—some highly visible, others deliberately quiet—whose effects accumulate over time in institutions, memories, and everyday practices.

By beginning with bazaari strikes and culminating in the Green Movement and subsequent waves of protest, the book traces continuities and ruptures in organizational forms and collective action. Bazaar networks illustrate how commercial trust, religious affiliation, and guild structures can power sustained collective action. Later cycles—student mobilizations, women's organizing, labor strikes, environmental campaigns, and professional syndicates—demonstrate how diverse constituencies adapt to shifting political opportunities, economic shocks, and policing strategies. Across these cases, we see a repertoire that ranges from public demonstrations and strikes to symbolic acts, cultural production, and the subtle arts of everyday resistance.

Our analytical lens integrates qualitative case studies with network analysis. Event catalogs, protest chronologies, and media archives are paired with interviews and secondary scholarship to map how actors connect, how information travels, and how brokerage and hubs shape outcomes. Network measures help illuminate why certain coalitions cohere while others fragment; why some tactics diffuse quickly; and how repression can rewire connections by removing brokers or pushing coordination into new channels. The result is a layered portrait of mobilization that is attentive both to stories and to structures.

State power is a central interlocutor in this narrative. Iranian authorities have deployed a wide array of tools—legal, coercive, ideological, and infrastructural—to shape the terrain of contention. Yet contention is not merely suppressed or permitted; it is negotiated. Movements anticipate surveillance, adapt to censorship, and recalibrate tactics in response to arrests, media blackouts, or discursive counterframing. Periods of heightened repression often produce tactical innovation, while moments of relative openness can expand coalitions but also expose fault lines over aims and strategies.

Digital media occupy a pivotal, though ambivalent, role. The spread of blogs, social networks, and messaging applications created new publics and accelerated diffusion of frames and tactics. At the same time, these tools introduced vulnerabilities—traceability, infiltration, and rapid rumor cycles—that movements have had to manage. This book treats digital infrastructures not as external add-ons but as arenas where organizational forms, storytelling, and state-society contestation are

continuously reconfigured.

Finally, this study is anchored in the experiences of civil society actors—merchants, workers, teachers, students, artists, clerics, environmental advocates, and professionals—whose everyday choices make mobilization possible. Their actions, often constrained by risk, sustain networks over years and knit together localized grievances into broader claims. By analyzing how these actors build trust, share resources, and craft frames that resonate across social divides, the chapters that follow seek to explain not only when people mobilize, but how they endure and what legacies they leave behind—whether in policy adjustments, institutional reforms, or transformed expectations about citizenship and authority.

The chapters proceed from historical foundations to sectoral and thematic analyses and conclude with assessments of outcomes and possible futures. Throughout, the aim is not to prescribe a singular pathway for change, but to clarify the mechanisms that link tactics to networks and networks to results. In doing so, the book offers a framework for understanding grassroots movements and everyday resistance in Iran—and, by extension, provides comparative insights for scholars and practitioners interested in popular mobilization under authoritarian and hybrid regimes.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: Markets as Arenas of Power: The Bazaar Strikes of 1977-79**

The Iranian bazaar is far more than just a collection of shops and stalls; it is a sprawling, labyrinthine universe, a beating heart of commerce, culture, and, crucially, political life. For centuries, these covered trading areas have served as vital economic hubs, places where national and international trade converge, where news and gossip are exchanged, and where diverse social classes rub shoulders. Indeed, the bazaar in Iran has consistently proven itself to be a potent force in either supporting or opposing the country's rulers, and its influence on the 1979 revolution is a testament to this enduring power.

By the late 1970s, under the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, the bazaar found itself in a paradoxical position. While it had undeniably benefited from a prolonged period of economic growth fueled by oil revenues, the Shah's aggressive modernization agenda increasingly alienated the traditional merchant class. The Pahlavi monarchy, with its penchant for Western-style development, openly expressed a desire to replace the bazaar with modern shopping centers and channel financial support towards heavy industry, seeing the traditional marketplace as an outdated relic. This disdain for the traditional ways, coupled with broader economic grievances,

set the stage for a dramatic confrontation.

The Shah's government, grappling with rampant inflation stemming from rapid economic growth, heavy government spending, and surging oil prices, implemented a misconceived anti-profiteering campaign in 1977. This campaign, ostensibly aimed at identifying and prosecuting alleged profiteers, directly targeted bazaar merchants, accusing them of price gouging and hoarding. Security forces were dispatched into the bazaars, and state-run media branded the protesting bazaaris as "wealthy leech-like people" and "smugglers." This aggressive stance, rather than quelling dissent, ignited widespread anger and resentment among merchants.

The bazaaris, accustomed to a degree of autonomy and possessing deeply entrenched networks, did not take kindly to this state intervention. For millennia, the bazaar community had largely managed its own affairs, with informal mechanisms like arbitration, promissory notes, and multilateral credit systems fostering cohesion. This dense web of trade networks connected merchants across the country, meaning an attack on one could easily provoke a reaction from hundreds, even thousands, of others. Furthermore, the bazaar's financial support of the clergy had long allowed clerics to influence the local population and act as charity providers, further linking the bazaar to the lower classes and the urban poor.

The anti-profiteering campaign proved to be a catastrophic misstep for the Shah's regime. Not only did it fail to address the underlying economic issues, but it also galvanized the bazaar against the government. Throughout the spring of 1977, bazaaris began to participate in and support protests and demonstrations, even before many other social groups, including a significant portion of the clergy, had joined the revolutionary surge. This early mobilization highlights the bazaar's inherent capacity for collective action, driven by economic apprehension rather than solely religious fervor.

The strikes, which began in late 1977 and intensified through 1978, were not isolated incidents but rather coordinated nationwide closures. These closures, often initiated by powerful guilds, such as jewelers and carpet merchants who maintained particularly close-knit relations, demonstrated the bazaar's ability to act as a unified, solidaristic entity. The impact was immediate and profound, as the stoppage of trade choked the flow of goods and money, severely disrupting the national economy. The Shah's government, caught between concessions and repression, found itself in an increasingly precarious position.

The alliance between the bazaar and the clergy, a historical force in Iranian politics, proved crucial during this period. While not always a perfectly aligned partnership, their shared grievances against the Shah's secular modernism and economic policies provided a strong basis for cooperation. The clergy, often financially supported by bazaaris, leveraged their influence to mobilize wider segments of the population.

Mosques, often physically integrated into the bazaar's architecture, became natural centers for political organization and the dissemination of anti-regime messages.

As the strikes gained momentum, they attracted support from other disaffected groups, including students and intellectuals, creating a broad-based opposition movement. By October 1978, government workers had joined the strikes, followed by oil workers on October 31st, bringing the crucial oil industry to a halt. This widespread withdrawal of labor and capital inflicted immense pressure on the Shah's regime, exposing its vulnerability and dependence on a functioning marketplace.

The bazaar's role extended beyond mere economic disruption. It provided not only material resources but also a vital infrastructure for communication and coordination for the nascent revolutionary movement. Informal religious circles and expansive kinship networks within the bazaar facilitated the rapid spread of information, rumor, and calculation, effectively making the bazaar the "nervous system of the revolution." Financial contributions from religious merchants, in the form of tithes, directly supported striking workers, political prisoners' families, and the relatives of those killed in protests, freeing the clergy from financial dependence on the government and fueling the movement.

The strikes of 1977-79 were a potent demonstration of how economic grievances, when channeled through well-established social networks and articulated by influential actors, could transform into a powerful force for political change. The bazaar, with its unique blend of economic power, social cohesion, and historical ties to religious authority, proved to be an indispensable arena of resistance against the Pahlavi monarchy. Its actions not only inflicted severe economic damage but also fostered popular discontent and provided the logistical backbone for a revolution that would fundamentally alter the course of Iranian history.

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