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A Critique of the Mass Mobilization Strategy

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This post is reposted from a tweet by Daikatuo. This critique is expressed by post-left anarchists based on their experience in other social movements.

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In the literature of social movements, the mass mobilization strategy refers to a family of strategies that rely on massive gatherings, massive physical presence, and symbolic-material pressure from the population to break down the political order. In this strategy, population accumulation is equated with power accumulation, and it is assumed that the force of repression becomes powerless or hesitant in the face of a very large mass of people. However, these assumptions are now the subject of serious criticism.

It is undeniable that a large crowd can serve a symbolic function in boosting protesters' morale, but a large crowd does not necessarily translate into greater power. Political power requires effective and flexible organization and structure, tactics, and strategizing; while a large population cannot be maneuvered, environmental conditions can have unexpected and uncontrollable effects on it. Since this tactic works with minimal order and relies on the number of people and collective emotions and thoughts, even small disruptions (informational, communicative, physical-psychological, etc.) can create a cascading effect, break cohesion, and ultimately cause the entire

tactic to fail. On the other hand, many people do not share a clear common goal, the same idea of the next move, or the same level of risk tolerance. In a moment of crisis, this heterogeneity leads to confusion and divergence.

From a strategic perspective, an effective force must be able to change direction, stop, advance, and retreat in a timely manner. But a mass movement has assent to varying degrees; the transfer of decisions is slow; emotional reactions are amplified; and, as a result, this strategy has low flexibility and has utility only once. Essentially, this strategy counts on a peak moment and assumes that if the street fills up once, everything will change, but since this strategy is tied to a specific time frame, it cannot be repeated indefinitely (its shock effect decreases with repetition) and it cannot tolerate stresses because each time the mobilization of the people becomes more difficult than before, and if it is postponed or stopped, it quickly declines. In practice, if that peak moment does not come to fruition, there will be severe psychological erosion and a physical human cost, because the cost of defeating a mass mobilization tactic is much higher than the failure of smaller protests, and can lead to the depletion of the capacity for collective action. All this while the current governments are prepared to control that specific moment, based on the experience of revolutions and classical movements.

Another false assumption regarding the climax is that the forces of repression, faced with a large crowd, are expected to understand the will of the majority and join the ranks of the people. But the forces of repression, especially in our country of Iran, where everything is now clear and transparent, are fully aware of the will of the majority of the people and do not need to see it openly on the streets to believe it. Our people cannot promise these greedy and incompetent military men, who are devoid of the minimum human values of thought and feeling, anything that will surpass their current interests. Therefore, under no circumstances will they conclude that joining

forces with the people will be in their best interests. Most of them also have the blood of the people on their hands and see no way back for themselves. In fact, the main enemy of our people is the military men themselves, and we must plan, organize, and work to defeat them. We cannot ask the military to help bring down politicians because the military class itself, like a mafia-security gang, holds all political and economic power.

It should also be noted that the concentration of the population increases the risk of human casualties, especially when we are faced with a government that has no qualms about mass murder. In such circumstances, inviting a million people to a mass protest means making decisions about the lives and security of a large number of people, without the ability to fully control the consequences. In this strategy, individuals are reduced to a mass of the population and a number. From this perspective, the mass mobilization strategy can be considered equivalent to the outdated and immoral war strategy of the “human wave,” which uses human lives as a tool by devaluing them. It is worth noting that the voluntary and enthusiastic participation of individuals in advancing this strategy does not reduce its moral burden, as in the Iran-Iraq war, the Iranian people apparently went to the field willingly, but today the actions of the commanders of that war are condemned.