

Review and Critique of Recent Protest Movements in Iran

From an Iranian Anarcho-Syndicalist Perspective

Anarchist Front of Iran and Afghanistan

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Many revolutionary movements begin with emancipatory intentions, yet in practice end up reproducing the very patterns of power they rose against.

“Avoiding the reproduction of power” is not an abstract principle, but rather a set of practical and organizational methods that can be summarized along several key axes:

1) Horizontalization of structures

In anarchist thought, the emphasis is on the “abolition of hierarchy,” which in practice means enabling voluntary and direct participation of all through decision-making in general democratic councils (federalist/confederalist general assemblies), and avoiding the presence of permanent leaders. Horizontality can be slow, exhausting, or prone to “informal powers” (influential individuals).

2) Rotation of responsibilities and roles

One way to prevent the concentration of power is the temporary nature of roles; for example, a facilitator should only manage the discussion to maintain order during meetings, and individuals should be constantly replaced. No one should become a “permanent specialist of power,” because even in horizontal movements, roles are unavoidable.

3) Immediate and direct accountability

Every individual or group must be accountable to the collective for their words and actions without any hierarchy, and there must be the possibility of immediate removal of spokespersons, representatives, or coordinators. This means that the selection of such individuals is limited, temporary, and revocable.

4) Fast but collective decision-making

One common problem is either dictatorship or paralysis in decision-making. Therefore, for practical action, methods such as relative consensus (not full consensus) can be used. In this case, decisions are made quickly in small groups and on a small scale, without waiting for directives from a “center.”

5) Self-organization on a small scale

Instead of creating a “single center” and operating under a central command, small self-managed (autonomous) groups that network with one another should be formed. For example, forming groups of 5 to 15 individuals with relative trust, where each group makes its own decisions rather than waiting for orders. This is the model that can later evolve into a network.

Its advantage is that, on one hand, repression becomes more difficult, and on the other hand, concentration of power is reduced. Also, if one part is suppressed, the entire network does not collapse.

This model has been seen in many labor-syndicalist movements and anarchist actions such as occupations.

6) Transparency and free circulation of information

Power often arises from the monopoly of information. Therefore, to address this issue, there should be no backroom negotiations; all decisions must be public, and everyone must have access to information.

7) Prefiguration of the alternative

“Live as you want the future society to be.” This kind of alternative-building means: if the goal is freedom, the means must also be free; and if the goal is equality, the structure of the movement must also be egalitarian.

8) Resistance to the “leadership moment”

Almost all movements face a moment of pressure: “We need a single leader to be effective.” This is precisely the starting point of the “reproduction of authority” and a very serious warning, because even popular individuals can lead to the concentration of power. Practicing “saying no to power,” even within the movement, is one of the most important and difficult tasks. Therefore, if a person or current begins to exert excessive control, it must be openly criticized and limited, even if highly popular.

9) Continuous internal critique

Only movements that continuously critique themselves can survive, thereby exposing hidden class, gender, and charismatic power relations.

10) Complete independence from states and geopolitical powers

No financial, political, or media dependence on states, and maintaining independence in decision-making in practice — not just at the level of slogans — because any external dependency quickly creates hierarchical structures.

11) Attention to everyday life, not just the “moment of revolution”

If a movement is formed only around street protests, once it subsides, old powers return. However, if alongside it local-regional solidarity networks, mutual aid, and forms of socio-economic self-management are created, the imposition of power from above is eliminated or redefined to a minimum. Practical activities may include helping detainees and their families, the injured, those who have lost income, creating small local (or, if possible, regional) funds, and sharing resources (food, medicine, information). These actions build trust and, most importantly, move the movement from the “street” to “everyday life.”

12) Review and critique of the movement in Iran

If we apply these anarchist principles to the protests of recent decades in Iran, a complex picture emerges: on one hand, strong elements of spontaneity and horizontality; on the other, serious obstacles to stabilizing these models:

a) Horizontality and lack of centralized leadership

In many protest waves — especially in 2017, 2019, and 2022 after the killing of Mahsa (Jina) Amini — protests formed without formal leadership, and calls were mostly spread through social media and decentralized communication. This was and remains a major strength, as top-down control is reduced and repression or decapitation of “leadership” becomes more difficult. However, the lack of stable decision-making structures inevitably led to fragmentation and discontinuity.

b) Informal networks and self-organization

In practice, we observed forms of small local groups and informal coordination — for example in some neighborhoods, regions, and universities. This is close to a “network model,” but as usual remained short-term and reactive, not structured and sustainable.

c) Lack of durable grassroots institutions

One major weakness was the absence of stable collective decision-making structures through local-regional councils and general assemblies. That is, for example, protests exist, but what institution replaces them afterward is unclear. Without such institutions, power easily reconcentrates — whether by the ruling state or various opposition groups.

d) The issue of representation and appropriation of “voice”

At many points, groups outside the country — especially monarchists or media figures — attempted to become the “representatives of the protests” or the “voice of the movement.” This is exactly the moment when a movement from below can become a project from above, even without bad intentions, because “permanent spokespersonship” or “official representation” can lead to concentration of power. This is the same danger that signals a return to authoritarian patterns, including tendencies toward restoration of monarchy (under the leadership of Reza Pahlavi) or other forms of centralized state. Therefore, the principle must be strong and explicit opposition to having a single “face” for the movement. This shows that dissatisfaction with the current situation does not necessarily mean moving beyond the logic of domination, but may simply be “replacing one power with another.”

e) The role of livelihood and everyday life

In the economic protests of 2019, roots lay in everyday life and economic pressure; however, the movement led less to building sustainable networks of mutual aid and broad solidarity. If such networks had formed, the movement could have shifted from “protest” toward “alternative-building.” Connecting protest to real spaces (neighborhoods, workplaces, universities) and forming small, stable groups in these spaces could later evolve into real councils practically did not allow.

f) Severe repression as a structural obstacle

One must also be realistic: the brutal intensity of repression in Iran in practice did not allow many of these mechanisms to form. As a result, horizontalization and self-organization often remain at a “momentary” level and do not find the opportunity to become lasting institutions.

g) Moments of “prefiguration”

Fortunately, in some moments local-regional solidarities and spontaneous forms of cooperation were observed. These are important seeds, but they have not yet become stable structures. Therefore, a mass without structure either quickly collapses or is appropriated and led by others.

13) Conclusion

a) Anarchism acknowledges that there is no complete guarantee against the reproduction of power. Power always tends toward concentration, and the only way is to create mechanisms that constantly disperse it and keep it open to challenge. This is a “continuous process,” not a fixed state.

b) Protests in Iran have repeatedly shown that society can mobilize without centralized leadership; however, they have not yet shown that they can organize themselves sustainably without reproducing power.

c) For a movement in Iran (or anywhere else) to be less prone to reproducing power, it must start small (groups), remain horizontal (neither hierarchical nor leader-centered), grow as a network (not centralized), root itself in everyday life (not just the street), and most importantly: act from the beginning in a way that it is not meant to “take power,” but rather to distribute people’s power in communal societies through the formation of democratic councils.

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