Contingency of Structures: Triggers and the Social Geography of Revolutionary Episodes in Iran 2017–2022

Transcript

Professor Neil Ketchley

Okay, everybody, why don't we get started? I am absolutely delighted to be able to introduce my friend and co-author, Ali Cardevor, who is visiting us this week from Harvard, where he is currently a fellow and also an associate professor in sociology and international studies at Boston College. Ali is one of the leading political and comparative historical sociologists. of protest and mobilization and of Iran. He's published in every major sociology journal. He's got a really pioneering Princeton University Press book looking at the importance of mobilization and democratization outcomes. He's written extensively on street-level contention and unruly contentious politics in Iran and elsewhere. This talk could not be more timely. Can we please welcome our guest, Ali Khalehar?

Dr Ali Kadivar

Thank you very much, Neil, for the generous introduction. It's my honor and pleasure to be here to share my research with you. So I will be speaking about anti-regime protests or revolutionary protests for the period of 2018 to 2022. Before I get into the detail, I also want to say this is part of my bigger project. where I look at different arenas of mobilization since the Iranian Revolution of 1979. I look at protest mobilization, top-down mobilization, and electoral mobilization throughout the period. So this is a piece of that bigger puzzle. And also, I want to recognize my co-authors. As I will get to the data section, you will see this project has been based on massive data collection, which I couldn't do by myself and no one here could have done it by themselves. This is a result of teamwork and I want to give credit to all my co-authors. Okay, so I start with the spatial spread of revolutionary episodes. That's what I speak about today. which means when we have a revolutionary outbreak or anti-regime protest, different regions in the country engage in different rates. Some districts or regions protest more, some less. And the question is that, what drives these differences? The geographic spread matters. It's one way through which protest movements and social movements build power through space. It particularly also matters for this anti-regime protest or revolutionary protests. Because when protest is widespread, the forces of repression cannot concentrate. They have to also disperse. And Mark Beisinger in his book shows that revolutionary episodes that have mobilization outside the capital are more likely to succeed. Obviously, mobilization in capital is key, but this is an important dimension.

And along with the long tradition in studies of movements and contentious politics, I also take an episodic approach. And I look at three distinct episodes. But my main question is why some regions join in higher intensity than others. We can recognize two major sets of answers in the literature. The first approach I call the structural approach, which argues that some regions are predisposed to higher or lower rates of revolutionary participations. And within this approach, we have had class analysis, I mean, starting with like workers or peasants. and/or ethnic composition of different regions or engagement of different regions in extraction of natural resources. This could be all part of the contextual matters that shape the spread of revolutionary protest. This approach has been also recognized in political science or political sociology as the cleavage theory, the arguments that in different, especially in democracies, social cleavages regulate into electoral participation. But the point that has been made is that social cleavages by themselves do not lead to collective action. There should be some agents such as political parties. who do this translation. So in this particular project, our argument is that in very repressive context, when you don't have those type of organizations or they are very weak, the triggers, these events that start the protests shape which structures become activated in that episode and which stay dormant. And we do build on some of the work that Neil has done about focal points and this whole tradition on that matter. Which brings me to the second approach, which is the contingency approach. The contingency approach would tell us that regardless of the pre-existing conditions in a country, when protest breaks out, there are processes that unfold within the episode. which is about spread of information, heightened emotions, and how they bring in processes of imitation and inspiration. These approaches mostly, however, focus on what happens during the episode. What makes our argument distinct is that we point out to the beginning of the episode how the episode starts. So if I want to just synthesize these major approaches, we have the structural approach and we don't reject the importance of context, but why some context matters in some episodes and not in some other. And the distinction with the contingency approach is that we focus on the beginning of the episodes rather than what happens during the episode. So our clear argument here is that the distinct character of the trigger, and the trigger is the event that marks the beginning of the episode, and the first protests are clearly referring to that event somehow. It shapes the activation of structure and accordingly the different geographies of protest during the episode. So the classical theory in social movement or before there was social movement, I'm talking about Smelser and Charlemers Johnson and those people, they recognized the importance of social structures. They referred to them as structural strain. And they argued that the sparks matter. The spark comes and activates the structural constraint and it leads to collective behavior through collective hysteria. But this approach was then later criticized by political process theory and they dropped social structure and sparks. They said social structures don't matter as much, it's about political structures. Then the whole structuralist approach was criticized and they said everything is about

processes and contingencies about emotions, strategies, and so on. So what we do, we are bringing back social structures, but without bringing back the hysteria part. We show that the social structure matters through the trigger, but instead of hysteria, we use all the mechanisms that have been highlighted by recent literature, such as framing, coordination, organizing, and so on. Why the trigger makes different effects? It's because these initial events are seen differently by different communities. They have different understanding and that different understanding leads to different patterns of mobilization and different geographies of protest. So we looked, we used, there's a data set of all revolutionary episodes that Mark Weisinger has put together. We looked at the urban episodes from 1990, and we tried to classify all the triggers. And these were the major categories we came up with. And here we present hypothesis that how each type of trigger would activate certain fault lines or certain social cleavages, which would lead to different geographies of protest. In our case that I will go through in a moment, we do not have all of these triggers, but we have two types of these triggers present that we can trace and see how they unfold. So what's the case? The case is Iran between 2017 and 2022. In this period, there were three distinct episodes of anti-regime protests. which enables us to compare these episodes. At the same time, Iran is a country that has multiple fault lines of contention or multiplicity of social and political cleavage. So we can compare across episodes which structural fault lines or social cleavage is active or not. And these episodes each had a distinct trigger. The triggers were different, so this also enabled us to compare. I mentioned multiple fault lines of contention. So these are some of them. Iran has a hybrid regime, a combination of electoral and non-electoral institutions. The literature argues that these type of regimes are more prone to contention and unrest. Iran is one of the most diverse countries in the Middle East in terms of ethnic diversity. We have multiple ethnic groups in Iran. There is a majority Shia religion, but also religious minorities. We have oil production, which has its own geography. And Iran has had an active middle class that has been expanding and has engaged in different forms of collective action for decades now. So their literature tells us that middle class or educated class has been an agent of change. It has participated in electoral participation. It has also participated in protests. The issues about women and freedom of women, autonomy of their body has been part of the demands of the middle class. And non-movements also has been described as a phenomenon when large segments of middle class engage in behaviors that defy rules without coordinating. And I'm talking about when the law is for women to wear hijab, but women, millions of women do not wear hijab. But this is not coordinated. It's just people are aware and see that from each other. This is not. So in terms of ethnicity, Iran has multiple ethnic religious groups. This is a type of classification that is done through some of the major cross-national data sets of ethnicity, Andrea Swimmer and others. So Farsi speakers like myself make the dominant group where they have access to political power. Most of the power lit in Iran are from the Fars regions. In terms of socio-economic indicators, also Persian-speaking

districts in general do better. We have junior partners in power, the Caspians that are living next to the Caspian Sea, Azeri, Turks, and Lors. They have some representation within the power elite and in some socio-economic indicators they do better than others. And in general, courts by Luch Arabs and Turkmenians are classified as excluded ethnic groups. and these, which they don't have access to political power, like there's no Baluchi person in the leadership of Islamic Republic, or there is no Turkmen among them. And in terms of, for example, literacy or income, some of these groups don't do as well as the other Persian regions. These groups also, Azeris, courts, Baluchi, Arabs, and Turkmens have previous histories of ethnic mobilization, ethnic unrest, even separatist movements in some cases. Ethnicity has intersection with religion. So Iran is majority Shia, but we have Christian, Jews, and Zaristarians. These are recognized minorities. They have assigned seats in the parliament. We have Baha'is, which are not recognized, and they are most persecuted groups. And then we have Sunnis. Sunnis, in one way, are more important than those other groups, and it's simply their size. They make a significant electoral block, and there is an ethnic dimension to them. All of the, most of the Baluchis, almost all Turkmans, and about maybe half of the Khords are Sunnis. And Sunnis also are discriminated in terms of access to political power. Some of the high offices of Islamic Republic are saved for Shiism. And the official religion of the country, obviously, is Shiism. Oil. Iran has been an oil-producing country for a long time. It has been a major issue of dispute with great powers. It has been also a sector in the country that has contributed to unrest. Oil strikes during the Iranian Revolution are most famous in that. So this is just my very briefly going through some of these fault lines of contention. Now I'm going to review those three episodes of anti-regime protest. So the first episode happened in December of 2017 and January of 2018. It lasted for 10 days. Initially, it was supposed, it was organized by hardliners against the moderate administration of President Rouhani, that at that time had signed a nuclear deal. But on the first day, the protests escalated in the sense that the slogans were supposed to be just against the president, but people started chanting slogans against the whole entirety of the regime, and then it spread throughout the country in the next few days. During this protest, also, this one woman took off her hijab and went on that thing in the street. which became a source of inspiration for further events that happened in the country. The government managed to suppress this episode with about 22 people killed and thousands arrested. After this was right before that President Trump violated the nuclear deal and imposed unilateral sanctions on Iran that continue to this day. The campaign of maximum pressure that has led to the current war started in this peak, which at that time, Iran couldn't sell its oil, and the Iranian government decided to cut the oil subsidies. This resulted in a sudden hike in fuel prices, like overnight, 200% increase in the price of gasoline, which led to protests starting gas stations and then more confrontational protests. Again, spread to several dozens of districts across the country. 300 people were killed. And after seven days, the government suppressed protests. It was also the first time that a complete internet

shutdown was enforced in the country. In the previous episode, there was like a partial an internet shutdown. So in this, usually these are known as anti-regime protests or because of the price of gasoline. What we show later in the analysis is that the trigger, because the trigger was about the price of fuel, it activated some of the grievances that existed in the oil-producing regions. What are these type of grievances. So we can distinguish 2 main types. One is about allocation of resources from oil regions. Residents of these oil districts usually have had this perception that the wealth is coming from their land, but they're not benefiting from it. And One practice that is common in oil district is that usually the technicians that work in the oil sector are brought from outside and they have privileges in their jobs, type of houses they live in, even having access to restaurant parks and so on. So the residents have a perceptions of visible inequality. Oil facilities also lead to environmental degradation because of the flare. They create amount of sulfur dioxide. It's a level of pollution that people can easily smell. We did a case study of a district of Mahshar, which became iconic in that wave of protests. Dozens of protesters were killed. And our analysis shows this was not random. Mahshar has the largest number of oil petrochemical plants in the country. And there was some ethnographies conducted before protests that documents the grievances of Masha residents. We looked at the videos and we looked at people who were killed also in Masha. I'm happy to go in more details about it. So this was the second episode, 2019. And then the third episode, maybe you have heard more about this one. This one lasted longer. It started with the death of Gina Masamini, a young woman that was arrested by the morality police in Tehran for not fully or properly covering her hair. This at that time, or even until now, this has been the longest episode of anti-regime protests. Women had a leading role, they took off their scarves, they burned their scarves, they cut their hair. This became very iconic and the images were circulated against all around the globe. But this aspect of this episode is more known, probably what is less known to you is that Mahsamni was not just a young woman. She was Kurdish and she was Sunni. And as we document in our analysis, Kurdish and Sunni districts have, they became basically the hotbed of protest. They had higher rates of protest. And we looked through the Kurdish social media, they didn't just frame or understand this as death of a young woman. They saw this as death of a Kurdish person that came along the previous examples of government violence towards Kurds. And then about two weeks in among Baluchis, which are on the other side of the country, but they are a major Sunni group. A story about the rape of a young woman by a police chief started to be circulated and started also protests in that area. What is interesting is that Baluchis are the most deprived social ethnic group in Iran, but also they are very conservative. So at the surface level, it would be ironic to see women protest take traction to that higher rate in a region like the Baluchistan. So if I just want to summarize the case so far, we have three episodes. The first one, the trigger was hardline turned anti-regime, second was fuel price hike, and the third, death of a Kurdish woman. And I should say all three episodes do not present equal evidence for our arguments. The

third episode presents the most compelling argument. It was also longer, so we can look how different groups talked about the protests and what were the conversations. The first two were shorter, and then the first one mostly operate as a counterfactual. What we can see in the first episode is that just on the first day, 5 districts had protests and four of them are a stronghold of hardliners, where hardline candidates received more votes than others. But we do not see this pattern in the next days because the dynamic of protests changed. In the second episode, we see more protests in oil districts and in the third one in Sunni and Kurdish districts. But in all of them, more populous districts also protested more. And in the 1st and 3rd one, more educated districts also had higher rates of protest. But how do I know all of this? It's because of the data that I'm going to speak about in a minute. Before I go to the detail of the data, I also want to speak about the context of Iran, where collecting data is not so easy for two reasons. One is government repression and the fact that It's just the government doesn't provide data in a matter that you can go and just download it. I've done before cross-national research where you just go to the web, to the site of World Bank and you have GDP population and so on. But even for the data you can get from Iran's Statistical Center, right now you cannot get it because of internet shutdown. But even when you can get it, the data comes in a form that you have to process it to bring it to a level that is ready to. And other form of data, you have to start from the raw material. That is 1 limitation. The other limitation is sanctions. So Iran is also sanctions from this side. So in my institution, Boston College, for example, for qualitative research or anything, that for you to come into contact with subjects, you have to do IRB, and they reject any IRB in Iran in principle, even online conversation with someone. So we have done all this data collection under these limitations. So for our protest data, we initially started with our own original data, which we collected from different websites or news agencies outside the country, because newspapers are highly censored. Traditionally, protest data is generated from newspapers, but in this context, when they're censored, you have to look for alternative sources. We looked at many videos that protesters took and uploaded on YouTube and elsewhere, opposition websites, human rights groups, even government news agencies. Aklet is a cross-national source of events data. When we started our data collection, our data was better than Aklet, but Aklet has many resources and a big team. And as we progress, we realized that because Aklet updates their older data, we realized that we cannot compete with our small team with Aklet's big team. So, and they have better coverage now. So now we use ACLAD as the main data, but we also have our original data to basically show that both data reveal similar patterns. So based on this ACLAD data, in the day protests, we have 216 protests in 96 districts, second 244 in 98 districts, and the third over 3,000 protests in 126 districts. Here you can see the map of the protests and then this is just the population map that shows you most of the population in Iran live in the west. There are some big deserts in this part and it's because of the climate trees and that population concentration is mostly to the west and northwest of the country. For our contextual factors, so oil is the

first one. Again, Iranian government do not release any district-level data on oil. So what we did, we used remote sensing and satellite images to capture the volume of annual flare across districts. This would reflect both the volume of production, but also its quality, which is related to pollution. Here we are not trying to tease out which mechanisms connect oil. We just want to see how it operates differently across episodes. One issue with flare is that some oil facilities may not have flare, like refineries. So we also collected our own binary data, and we used the flares and our binary data to do to generate an index from factor analysis to account for that issue. This shows you the oil index and you see the concentration of most of the oil and gas in the country on these sites. During the recent war, there were some attacks on Iranian oil facilities that you can see there. The next contextual matter is ethnicities. There is, again, Iranian government doesn't collect any data on ethnicities. It's considered a security matter because there has been separatism. Even in the war, you remember that President Trump spoke about arming cords. So this remains a security issue. So what we did is that there's only one nationwide survey of languages in 1986 that basically captures percentage of villages in different districts that speak Farsi, Kurdish, Arabic, Turkic languages, Lori, Caspian, and maybe one other that I don't remember. And, but yeah, so the issue is that it's from 1986. We are not trying to capture the exact number of people currently speak a language in a district. This would give us a good proxy for social or ethnic foundation of different districts. Because administrative units change across Iran, we took all these villages from 1986 and we matched them with current districts and we used the current population to account for that. We also looked at the research because there is inter-ethnic marriages, there has been migration from different parts of the country, the literature reassures us that most of the marriages still are done within ethnicities, and most of the migration has been within the same cultural milieus. We don't have massive migration of ethnic groups from one region to another. So from this data, we generated this map. You can see different speakers of languages. more cross-validation, for example, it does a very good job in explaining the electoral variation of reformist versus conservative vote. captures co-ethnic voting. We also collected an alternative source of data from Wikipedia. We accounted for each of these languages, whether it's mentioned as minority, with no weight, or as majority. And the correlation with this data is 0.7 or higher than that. For religion, we also use similar strategy because, again, Sunni, matter is a security issue. Government doesn't release. We create an ordinal variable from zero to three for Kurdish presence. We also validated this from another data I have from martyrs of the war. And so we captured the percentage of Sonni martyrs out of all, which again, you show valid. So this map shows Sonnis throughout the country. or other variables. We have prior protest mobilization, electoral mobilization, educated population, lower income. We also look at another form of protest, which is, you can call it ordinary protest or routine protest. Not all the time people go out in the streets in Iran to oppose the, to call for the toppling of the regime. Most of the time it's workers, teachers,

nurses, they want better wages, they want better contracts, and that kind of protest happens almost every week in the country. So we use that both as a control and as a point of comparison to see the patterns that we find are commonplace or different from previous patterns. In terms of methodology, we use two types of methods here, event history analysis, which basically I don't go very technical here. This basically captures the onset of the protest. What is the effect of these contextual factors on the time for each district take to have the first protest? The unit of analysis here is district day. We also use a spatial regression, which again, I won't go technical. This takes the number of protests in a district by the end of the episode. So conceptually, this captures the intensity of protests. So for these contextual matters, we look to see if there is a correlation association with the time to the first protest and also intensity of protests by the end of the episode. I have some regression tables that are very hard to look at, and please don't worry, I will just share the findings with you. I'll also just show you this more visualization. So we have these three episodes here, and these are our two sets of models. These are the spatial, top are onset. And here we have the Sunni, Kurdish, and Oil. These are the most important results. So Maybe just we can go from here. So look, this is the Sunni variable. In the third episode, the identity of Mahsa Amini as a Sunni person arguably resonates with Sunni districts more. This is the effect of Sunni variable in the third episode. It's like very different. For the chords, again, The effect is very clear from these two episodes. In the second episode, the trigger was sudden hike in the fuel prices, which arguably resonated more than residents in the oil districts. And here you see the effect here. On the top, you also find similar patterns, which I'm not going to go through because it's just repeating. We have tried a number of robustness tests because of the character of data. We tried to basically switch. We used our original protest data. We used the Wikipedia version of ethnic data. For religion, we used the proportion of Sunnis that were killed during Iran-Iraq War. For income, we switched the bottom. deciles, with the middle deciles, with the top deciles. And for oil production, we just use the flare or we also use the amount of sulfur dioxide in the air because it's highly correlated with oil production. But all of this basically reproduce our main results. So here we present an eventful analysis of revolutionary spatial expansion or anti-regime spatial expansion. We highlight the role of triggers in activating fault lines. I talked about Iran, but I can maybe make some examples about two other countries. In Tunisia, my friend and our colleagues, Christopher Barry, who took his PhD from here, has a sub-national analysis of the spread of the Tunisian revolution. And that Tunisian revolution started with a fruit vendor whose cart was confiscated. So it was something about a lower plus person. And the subnational analysis shows that in the early phase of the revolution, it is spread in districts that are underdeveloped economically. Similarly, there is a subnational analysis of Syrian revolution within its First year, again, it started, the trigger was also just ongoing unrest, but in Syria, it was in the city of Dar, a number of school children were arrested. This was a Sunni neighborhood, and the subnational analysis shows that Sunni districts were significant, but Kurdish districts

are not. But Kurds are also marginalized and persecuted in Syria, so maybe the trigger did not resonate with them as much. So for future research, we can look further on those typologies of triggers that I showed. And I think the triggers matter not just for the social geography of protest, but for their character and for some of the other qualitative aspects of protest. And there could be cross-country comparisons of how different triggers maybe shape different trajectory and outcome for anti-regime revolutionary protests. Thank you very much for your attention, and I look forward to your feedback.