1. Introduction

The unexpected waves of protests across the Middle East, in 2011, have once again generated academic interest in social movements in repressive contexts. Despite the similarities in the beginnings of the uprisings, their trajectories have varied greatly from country to country (Brownlee, Masoud, & Reynolds, 2015; Povey, 2015). In Tunisia and Egypt, repression escalated the protests and eventually led to the overthrow of longtime dictatorships. In Egypt, after two years, conflicts flared up and the elected government was ousted by a military coup. The subsequent repression radicalized the protests, resulting in violent confrontations (Josua & Edel, 2015). In Syria, the substantial increase in violent repression immediately radicalized the protestors and led to a civil war between the government and armed opposition groups (Hinnebusch, Imady, & Zintl, 2016). In Libya, also, violent repression resulted in a civil war, with foreign military intervention that ended up with the government being overthrown (Fraihat, 2016). In Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, harsh repression resulted in demobilization of the movement (Holmes, 2016), and in Yemen concessions as a result of the 2011 popular uprising did not work and the continuation of clashes between the government and opposition groups ended in a catastrophic war (Fraihat, 2016). This variation in the outcome of repression on protests begs further understanding and explanation.

The case of the Iranian Green Movement (hereafter IGM), which emerged sixteen months before the Arab uprisings, presents an even more puzzling scenario. Different repression effects on a single social movement are identifiable over four years, from 2009 to 2013. The disputed June 2009 presidential elections and harsh repression afterwards sparked widespread and massive popular protests (repression caused escalation). Despite violent policing and street clashes, massive street demonstrations took place over eight months (no deterrent effect of repression). These were followed by a vast diffusion of online activism among protesters in 2010 (repression led to a tactical shift from offline to online activism). In 2011, after the house arrest of the movement leaders, Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mahdi Karroubi, when the state increased the level of repression, the movement saw a substantial decline in tangible activities (repression caused demobilization/deterrence). But during the 2013 presidential election campaign, the movement was reinvigorated by being active in support of a moderate candidate, despite the fact that there was still state repression.
of IGM activities (repression led to a strategic decision of shifting from movement politics to electoral politics).

To-date, there has been a tendency to explain the ebb and flow of dissident activities in repressive contexts as a function of repression. Clearly, the evolution of the Green Movement challenges such academic endeavors (for the summary, see Table 1). The primary aim of this dissertation is to develop a theoretical approach and present empirical findings to better account for variation in the effect of repression. To do so, I focus on IGM between 2009 and 2013. The variety of the form and intensity of activism accompanied by sustained repression makes the case unique for investigating variation in the repression effects.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-2009 elections campaigns</th>
<th>Repression level</th>
<th>Movement participation level</th>
<th>Repression-participation relationship</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009 elections</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Backlash</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-2009 elections protests</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Positive relationship</td>
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<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Offline low and online high</td>
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<tr>
<td>2011-2012</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Offline low and online moderate</td>
<td>Negative relationship</td>
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<tr>
<td>The 2013 elections</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>No relationship</td>
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This introductory chapter describes the theoretical approach, clarifies definitions and concepts which will be used throughout the dissertation, gives a brief overview of the case of the study, IGM between 2009 to 2013, introduces the research method and data and summarizes the scheme of the dissertation.

1.1 Theoretical and empirical gaps in repression research

There is a longstanding debate on the effect of repression on both protests (at macro-level) and political participation of individuals (at micro-level). Recent reviews on state repression have highlighted the contradictory effects of repression and note that the reasons for this variation are insufficiently studied (Davenport, 2007; Davenport & Inman, 2012; Earl & Soule, 2010; Johnston, 2012). Davenport and Inman (2012,
p. 620) recognize that works focused on repression-dissident relationships “[have] supported every relationship, including no relationship, with only a few scholars attempting to address this variation.” Scholars of repression effects tended to view repression as an independent factor and attempted to explain the intensity and form of protesters’ activism as the function of repression (e.g., Boykoff, 2006; Khawaja, 1993; McAdam, 1990; Rasler, 1996; Wood L. J., 2007). While these studies highlighted variation in the consequences of state repression (Beaulieu, 2014) - such as deterrence effect (Boykoff, 2006), escalation effect (McAdam, 1990), alternative effects on mobilization (Almeida, 2008; Brockett, 1993; Khawaja, 1993; Rasler, 1996), and tactical shift (Francisco, 1996)- they provided little insight into accounts for this variation of effects. I argue that the failure to explain the variation in repression effects is largely due to both theoretical and empirical gaps in repression research.

Dominated by the political process approach and resource mobilization theory, the focus of works tended to be at macro- and meso-level conditions, not on linking these conditions to the micro-level and ignoring micro-level mechanisms and processes, thus the explanations were not satisfactory (Coleman, 1990). As Earl (2014) observed, there is far less research at the micro-level on the effects of repression than at the macro-level – mainly because the data at the individual level are not easily available, particularly in contexts of severe repression (Wood L. J., 2007; Osa, 2003). Not only does the unavailability of data at the micro-level in repressive contexts constrain paying attention to micro-mechanisms and processes, even more important, most studies focus on constraints on individuals and do not see individuals as having *agency* (See Viterna, 2006; Moghadam & Gheytanchi , 2010). Contrary to the expectation of the repression literature that repression is a decisive constraint on protest and social movement activities, and political participation as a whole, people -as individuals or collectives- under repression have *agency* and can respond to repression by adopting different choices. For example, even in the most extreme repressive conditions of the Nazi death camps or Polish ghettos during World War II, prisoners and Jews had some agency over their actions and decisions (Maher, 2010; Soyar, 2014). In Islamic societies, everyday resistance against forced veiling and gender inequality shows agency in times of repression. Women, despite authoritarian rule and without any formal movement organization, resist inequality by their day-to-day practices that yield far-reaching changes (Bayat, 2013). Moreover, despite harsh repression, opposition leaders are still able to innovate and spread tactics, which lessen the risks of activities (Francisco, 2004) and make ‘massive, rapid and accelerating mobilization’, or backlash, possible (Francisco,
This shows that despite repression (i.e., constraints) individuals, groups, and movements have some sort of capability to act independently (i.e., agency). Therefore, repression literature tends to neglect people’s agency in responses to repression.

Other scholars (Linden & Klandermans, 2006; Moss, 2014; Zwerman & Steinhoff, 2005) recognized the lack of research on how individuals respond to repression. In fact, the macro approaches neglect the fact that individuals, though embedded within similar networks and structural contexts, respond differently to repression, as they perceive and interpret repression differently. As Goldstone and Tilly (2001) stated, the variation in the effects of repression on political participation lies in the fact that decisions in response to repression vary from one individual to another. Therefore, for solving the puzzle of variation regarding the effect of repression, diving into the blackbox of individuals’ motives, mechanisms and processes at the micro level seems necessary.

I argue that, to make sense of the variation in repression effects, theorization needs to move toward explanations about individuals’ responses to repression. This dissertation attempts to lay the foundations for such a theorization. Thus, this dissertation presents an approach that puts responses to repression at the center of accounts of repression effects. Attention to individual choices as a response to repression and attempting to uncover the underlying mechanisms on the micro-level links the macro to micro (Jasper, 2004; Meyer & Staggenborg, 2012) and provides a better understanding of macro phenomena (See also Hedström & Swedberg, 1998).

Using the so-called Coleman boat diagram (1990), I demonstrate where the study of responses to repression is placed in repression scholarship. Figure 1.1 illustrates how we can provide a better explanation for the variation in the effect of repression on dissident activities (at the macrolevel; See Arrow 0 in Figure 1.1). The boat diagram reads as follows: repression – coupled with other contextual factors – influences an individual’s motivations, perceptions and preferences (Arrow 1). Changes in motivations, perceptions and preferences influence the decision to respond to repression (Arrow 2). The aggregation of individuals’ decisions shapes political participation (Arrow 3).

The focus of this dissertation is on Arrow 2. I will delve into the micro-level, both to draw attention to responses to repression and to show that people have agency. I investigate underlying mechanisms and the process of individual strategic choices in
response to repression. In short, I attempt to lay the micro-foundation to explain macro phenomena.

After clarifying the concepts and terms that are used in this dissertation, I shall briefly introduce the context of the study. Then I shall provide an overview of the chapters and contribution of the study.

Figure 1.1 Different choices made by individuals end up with different repression effects at the macro-level.

1.2 Definitions of repression, political participation and responses to repression

In studies focusing on the effect of repression, generally, repression is considered to be an independent variable, while the dependent variable varies, depending mainly on the level of analysis.

1.2.1 Independent variable: Repression

From a macro perspective, ‘state repression’ – for brevity ‘repression’ – as Davenport (2005, p. 122) has defined it, refers to “actions taken by authorities against individuals and/or groups within their territorial jurisdiction that either restrict the behavior and/or beliefs of citizens through the imposition of negative sanctions (e.g., applying curfews, conducting mass arrests and banning political organizations) or that physically damage or eliminate citizens through the violation of personal
integrity (e.g., using torture, disappearances and mass killing)”. According to Davenport’s definition of repression, throughout this dissertation, the term “repression”, in a broad sense, refers to objective obstacles imposed by states (Beaulieu, 2014) to political participation.

In defining individuals’ perspectives on repression, I distinguish between experienced repression and perceived repression. I define *experienced repression* as individuals’ actual experiences of state repression, and *perceived repression* as individuals’ perceptions about obstacles and threats to political participation imposed by the state (for the elaborated discussion on the conceptualization of repression imposed, see Chapter 2).

### 1.2.2 Dependent variable: Political participation

Repression studies at different levels use different dependent variables relating to political participation. Political participation of individuals is the focus of attention in micro-level studies. *Political participation*, as conceptualized by van Deth (2014, p. 353), refers to the voluntary activities of citizens which take place in or are targeted toward the sphere of politics. In repression literature, this is operationalized by the willingness to participate or actual participation in the past. In this dissertation, the focus is on actual past participation in the movement activities.

### 1.2.3 Responses to repression

Existing research on repression effects tends to focus on overt public forms of political participation. However, I argue that individuals under repression can engage in a broader form of political participation (including covert activities), and use multiple strategies to manage the risks and to resist repression. *Strategies* have been defined as “a plan of collective action intended to accomplish goals within a particular context” (Maney, Kutz-Flamenbaum, Rohlinger, & Goodwin, 2012, p. xvii). Strategies can be collective and supplied by leaders and organizations, or they can be adopted individually by individual decisions. In this dissertation, I use *responses to repression* in its broadest sense to refer to all individuals’ strategies in dealing with perceived and experienced repression.
1.3 Context of the study

In the recent history of contentious politics in Iran, June 2009 is an important date. The presidential elections that took place that month were considered by people as an opportunity for change by unseating the radical incumbent, Ahmadinejad, and retransferring power to one of the two reformist candidates, Mousavi and Karroubi (Bayat, 2013). The large-scale participation of people in numerous public rallies and gatherings in favor of the reformist candidates raised the hope and expectations amongst people and “convinced an increasing number of Iranians that Ahmadinejad’s victory was not a foregone conclusion” (Ehsani, Keshavarzian, & Moruzzi, 2009). However, this outlook was thwarted. According to the government, Ahmadinejad won the elections with an unexpected and overwhelming 63% of the votes. Many Iranians immediately rejected the elections results and claimed that basic electoral procedures and laws were violated. To challenge these results, millions of supporters of the reformist candidates took to the streets, during which IGM emerged with the pro-democratic slogan ‘where is my vote?’ This so-called “reactive electoral mobilization” escalated into the most extensive street protests since the founding of the Islamic Republic in 1979 (McAdam & Tarrow, 2010, p. 534).

Through severe repression, the government attempted to silence the movement: by detaining political and civil activists, by overreacting and escalating violence and brutality of its protest policing in street clashes, by suppressing and censoring newspapers, and by cutting off the Internet, mobile phone connections, and other means of mass communications. Nevertheless, despite this severe repression, the massive demonstrations continued for eight months (See the large-scale protests in Figure 1.2). Eventually, at the end of 2009, the cycle of street demonstrations diminished after the demonstration on a Shi'a Holy Day (Ashura), which saw an escalation in violence. During that period, one could detect a halt to the physical presence of the movement in the streets. However, while the opposition’s leaders did not call for street protests, several novel and still non-violent tactics of protest took place on a smaller scale, such as writing on the wall (urban political graffiti) and writing political messages on currency notes. In addition to that, several protests supported by the Internet and/or on the Internet came to the fore in this period: online campaigning, hacking, civil boycott (boycotting a product), online petitioning, etc. (Honari, 2013).
At the beginning of 2011, the ousting of Ben Ali in Tunisia and the take-off of the uprisings in Egypt were received with a great deal of enthusiasm by the Green Movement supporters, as happened for other Middle Eastern countries. Many saw these events as an opportunity to regain IGM, which had not had any street presence for nearly a year. This enthusiasm soon galvanized into a call by the leaders for a march to express solidarity with Tunisians and Egyptians. The turnout for that day was higher than what the government expected and it demonstrated that despite the lack of physical presence for one year, the movement was still alive. The government again escalated the level of repression against the leaders of the Green Movement and has had put them under house arrest since then.

Disconnecting the leaders from the body of the movement and the overnight regime collapses in Egypt and Tunisia provided the ground for a huge rift between different factions of the Green Movement, i.e., revolutionary radicals and reformist moderates. Subsequently, movement activities decreased drastically. The parliamentary elections in 2012, the first elections after the 2009 elections, were perceived by the Green Movement’s leaders as ‘meaningless’ and ‘theatrical’. The Green Movement’s supporters united in boycotting the elections. But the boycott of the 2012 parliamentary elections did not result in any tangible achievements, in the sense that it did not revitalize the movement by uniting it.

After two years of silence in the streets, political observers expected that the movement would boycott the 2013 elections again. However, it surprisingly rose up, but with a voting tactic. The movement activists, particularly grass roots and young...
informal activists, stood up for one of the moderate candidates, Hasan Rouhani. This happened despite IGM’s highest decision-making body, Coordination Council for the Green Path of Hope, called for boycotting the elections one week before Election Day. To sum up, the movement which emerged from the disputed 2009 elections was revived by another uncompetitive election four years later, in 2013.

The story of IGM shows the variation in the effect of repression on the intensity and form of participation within a movement. We can summarize it as follows: Severe repression in the wake of 2009 elections escalated popular protests. The eight-month massive street demonstrations were followed by a tactical shifting (Lichbach, 1987): from the streets to the Internet. Then, both off-line and online activities substantially declined after the house arrest of IGM’s leaders in 2011 and a higher level of repression. During the presidential elections of 2013, a considerable increase in off- and online electoral activities was accompanied by strategic choice of engagement in electoral politics by the movement.

1.4 Research Design and Data

Conducting research on socially and politically sensitive topics in ‘authoritarian fields’ (Glasius, et al., 2018) is challenging, as it is in the Middle East (Clark, 2006; Romano, 2006) and other repressive contexts (Osa, 2003). In historical periods when expressing critical views is likely to be punished by the government, and mass media are suppressed and censored, conventional sociological methods such as face-to-face surveys, newspaper content analysis, and on-site observation – particularly to acquire data on politically sensitive topics – are problematic or even impossible. Even if the government were to give permission for conducting a survey, people tend to falsify their preferences and conceal their political activities (Kuran, 1997).

In Iran, too, in-country independent academic surveying, on politically sensitive topics – e.g., protests, political prisoners and opposition groups – are hardly possible. More problematic, after the emergence of IGM in 2009, the situation became more militarized and unfavorable for such field research (Saeidi & Rivetti, 2017). Difficulties in obtaining formal permission for field studies increase the tendency towards ethnographical approaches (Glasius, et al., 2018; Malekzadeh, 2016).

I acknowledge that “[r]esearch in less than democratic settings is by its nature extraordinary and requires extra measures of effort and patience on the part of the researcher” (Malekzadeh, 2016, p. 865). I made every effort to overcome barriers and
gather reliable and valid data at the individual level by relying on my own knowledge of the social context, a large, trustworthy network of political activists, and experience of years of political activism in Iran. I designed the research so that I was able to gather data from both ordinary ‘IGM supporters’ as well as expert informant ‘formal IGM activists’. I surveyed IGM supporters and interviewed a sample of IGM activists with a broad range of political participation in terms of form and intensity.

I define supporters as those who take a positive stand toward the movement. They form the “mobilization potential” of the movement, since they could be mobilized by the movement (Klandermans & Oegema, 1987). By IGM activists, I refer to IGM supporters who participated in IGM protests/campaigns to support IGM in mobilization, organization, etc.

To conduct a panel survey, I used online questionnaire to ensure that respondents could participate anonymously, which makes preference falsification less likely (Farrell, 2012). The online survey was conducted in three waves in 2013: in Feb (W1), April (W2), and June (W3). In total, I gathered three datasets. I only included eligible respondents of 18 years and older in our sample and excluded respondents living outside Iran, which yields the following datasets: Panel Data (N=153), and cross-sectional data W1 (N=743), and W3 (N=732).1

To hear the opinion of activists, I used semi-structured interview method. Interviews (N=26) with IGM activists, who were actively involved in activities of IGM, were conducted between March and May 2013. The semi-structured interview scheme was designed to cover a range of topics, including political background, the form of activities, and motivations.2

In summary, to answer research questions and to test the hypotheses posed and developed in the various chapters, I gathered and used two main sets of data: Survey panel data and Interviews.

1.5 Ethical Considerations

As Glasius and her colleagues (2018, p. 18) pointed out: “Authoritarian field research poses a number of ethical challenges. The most prominent of these is undoubtedly

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1 For detailed information on the question wording and answer categories of all variables see Table A1.2 in the appendices.
2 For questions and the checklist of interviews, see Appendices A1.3.
the potential risk to our respondents, but risk to ourselves, issues of informed consent, and potential misuse of findings by authoritarian regimes are also among them.” I considered these ethical issues in different ways.

My main concern in designing the research is about potential risk to interviewees and survey respondents. I used Skype to communicate with interviewees. As all of the interviewees had engaged in online activities to some extent, they were already familiar with secure call conversations through Skype. Skype itself also offers transport encryption, so that others spying on the network cannot read and listen to it (Communicating with Others, 2017). However, to be assured about the security of the conversations, before each interview, I checked and asked interviewees about the security of their Internet connection. For the online survey, I used the Qualtrics platform. Qualtrics guarantees a high level of anonymity. For those who provided me email addresses, the data were treated confidentially, i.e., I stored and analyzed the data anonymized and without any link to their email addresses.

Moreover, at the beginning of the interviews, for the sake of ethical concerns, I introduced myself, the university and the goal of my research. I also explained how I had obtained the interviewee’s name or why I had chosen to interview them. I not only assured the anonymity of interviewees during interviews and in the report of the study, but also recommended interviewees to not say anything linking the interviews to their identity. Similarly, in the online questionnaire, all participants were shown, at the beginning, an informed/consent page with an explanation of the goal of the research, information about the confidentiality of the data, estimated duration, and contact information (For the opening page, see Appendices A1.4). As IGM is a ‘redline’, i.e., it involves topics that are highly politically sensitive (Glasius, et al., 2018), I adopted a de-politicization strategy to reduce the sensitivity around the study (Glasius, et al., 2018; Malekzadeh, 2016). For instance, I framed the topic of online survey as ‘social-political participation’ in Iran, did not use ‘Green Movement participation’.

To be transparent and make research findings available to the public, I publicized the data and descriptive findings by creating a user-friendly website: [http://IranPolPartResearch.org](http://IranPolPartResearch.org) immediately after preliminary analyses. To reach a larger audience beyond academics, I also published a dozen essays in independent intellectual journals in Iran (See the list of publications by the author).