7. Conclusion

The aim of this dissertation was to develop a theoretical approach and present empirical findings to better account for the variation in the effect of repression on political participation. To do so, I focused on political participation of IGM supporters between 2009 and 2013. There are several important areas where this dissertation makes an original contribution.

7.1 Contributions

Theoretically, this study makes a major contribution to understand the paradoxical effect of repression on individuals’ political participation. I theorized and empirically tested that to better account for, rather than to simply describe, the effect of repression on protest, we need to pay more attention to the micro mechanisms and processes that lead to choices of actors in response to repression. Moving theorization toward explaining responses to repression also integrates individuals’ choices, as an element of agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), into the scholarship of resistances under repression. In most of the existing research on repression, power and agency are largely attributed to States, but not to social movements and individuals (Zwerman & Steinhoff, 2005). By shifting the attention from state repression to individuals’ responses to repression, this dissertation speaks for an approach that goes beyond the victimization of people toward seeing States and dissidents equally as strategic actors having choices and agency (Zwerman & Steinhoff, 2005, p. 90). Investigating the factors which determine the individuals’ choices to respond to state repression link macro to micro (Jasper, 2004; Meyer & Staggenborg, 2012). It also provides a broader picture of activities under repression and suggests paying more attention to activities that are not public and disruptive but rather widespread and crucial, i.e., such as everyday forms of resistance and diverse strategies to manage the risk of political participations.

Methodologically, the dissertation contributes to the conceptualization and operationalization of both response to repression and perceived repression. The study of repression suffers from blurring conceptualization and operationalization of perceived repression. This dissertation disaggregates the concept of repression into its several empirically interrelated components and dimensions. I made the distinction between objective repression and subjective repression. I also
distinguished between perceived and experienced repression and showed the advantage of these distinctions. In Chapter 3, I identified and conceptualized different dimensions of perceived repression; the importance of the repression, the external assessment of this repression, and the internal assessment. In Chapter 6, I suggested the measurement of responses to repression as a decision of resisting or refraining.

Additionally, this dissertation presents seldom-found data gathered by a challenging method (online panel survey) from a repressive context. To gather data from opposition activists and supporters, to my knowledge, for the first time in Iran an online survey was used. It is a pioneering effort to face the challenges and initial pessimism. Gathering panel data successfully from social-movement supporters under severe repression on a red-line topic can stimulate other scholars to attempt to gather data even from a very hostile environment. The survey panel data encompassing the measuring of about 200 variables are now available for the use of other scholars and students (http://IranPolPartResearch.org).

Empirically, the main contribution of this dissertation is twofold: firstly, it contributes to the growing area of research on how repression may work online (Beaulieu, 2014) by providing a micro-account of the interrelation between online and offline movement activities in Chapters 3, 4 and 6. The growing academic interest in the impact of online activities in protests, particularly in authoritarian contexts (Farrell, 2012), enhances the need for an explanation of dynamics between online and offline activities within social movements. I, specifically, investigated the crucial factors which determine activists’ choice between the offline and online activities under repression. The findings indicated that, whereas offline participation of IGM supporters on the eve of the 2013 elections was more strongly associated with emotional drivers, online participation was more importantly driven by instrumental motivations.

Secondly, the dissertation addresses the striking research gap in the relationship between elections and social movements by investigating Iranian Green Movement supporters’ shift between voting and boycotting during the 2013 presidential elections. Within the social movement literature, research on the topic of repression tends to neglect elections as well as institutionalized activities. However, there are important linkages between social movements and elections (McAdam & Tarrow, 2010; 2013). For instance, elections, even if unfair and controlled, can agitate massive protests of prodemocracy movements in the aftermath of elections incumbents (Beaulieu, 2014; Bunce & Wolchik, 2006) and lead to an increase in the
level of repression or votes *per se* can unseat the incumbents (Howard & Roessler, 2006) and end up with a decrease in the level of repression. The interrelation of social movements and repression is substantially influenced by elections, which needs to be considered if one seeks a fuller understanding of social movements under repression. Yet, there is not much systematic work on the interaction of repression and social movements with regard to elections.

Practically, this dissertation aims to be used by both pro-democracy activists and reformist politicians in the region of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and other less-democratic contexts. I worked on, according to Philip Howard (2011), the most interesting and puzzling recent pro-democratic movement in the MENA region. The protests in the aftermath of the 2009 presidential elections were unprecedented in post-revolutionary Iran (McAdam & Tarrow, 2010) in terms of size, time-span and geographical distribution, and marks “a watershed in the history of struggle for democracy in the Middle East” (Bayat, 2013, p. 284). The movement was also a pioneer in using the Internet in mobilization attempts and publicizing the movement in the region. IGM neither deterred nor radicalized, despite sustained severe repression. It can be a unique example for other movements in the region which seek democratic change by insisting on the use of nonviolent means.

Activists under sustained repression sometimes feel depressed and frustrated, as they see no prospect of situations improving or restraints on political activism loosening. Shifting our attention from state repression toward a response to repression can be used by activists to think about ways of activism despite repression. As one of my interviewees cited, “We will either find a way, or make one.” In Chapters 2 and 3 I identified and proposed different strategies which can be adopted by activists as well as social-movement organizations to tackle repression. Moreover, elites and political leaders of social movements should rely more on and trust in grassroots and rank-and-file activists. In Chapter 5, I explained how activities of informal activists during the 2013 presidential elections yielded a significant shift in the Iranian political landscape by making Hasan Rouhani president, which had an important impact on domestic and foreign policy.

Finally, this dissertation is in nature more moral than practical. The study is inspired by a critical view to the mainstream Westo-centric perspective to political changes in societies like Iran. The perspective rooted in ‘Orientalism’ (Said, 1978) views societies in the Middle East as monolithic, statistic and peculiar (Bayat, 2007). This implies that changes should occur “primarily by individual elites, military men, or
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wars and external power” (Bayat, 2013, p. 3). In fact, this perspective has been legitimizing and justifying the policy of ‘regime change’ from outside in the Middle East countries since one century ago (Kinzer, 2007). The regime-change policy of the West involves wars, military invasions, public opinion manipulations, coups d'état, and economic sanctions in the Middle East. This policy left, in the region, one-hundred-thousand deaths during the war and military invasion in Afghanistan (Crawford, 2016) and Iraq (Burnham, Lafta, Doocy, & Roberts, 2006), the overthrown of Mosadegh’s truly democratic government (Abrahamian, 2013; Kinzer, 2003; Rahnema, 2015) and the interruption of an indigenous democratization process in Iran (Dabashi, 2007), and humanitarian catastrophes as a consequence of economic sanctions in Iraq, Syria and Iran (Weiss, Cortright, Lopez, & Minear, 1997). In the current Trumpist era, when the author of ‘To stop Iran’s Bomb, Bomb Iran’ (Bolton, 2015) with other warmongers are in office and “bring us closer to war in the Middle East” (Cockburn, 2018), it is a moral responsibility to speak for an approach to provide a realistic picture of the Middle Eastern societies. I hope that this dissertation adds to the understanding of pro-democracy movements in Middle Eastern societies. The very fact that the Iranian Green Movement and other bottom-up struggles for democratic change in the region exist implies that these societies are not impotent and incapable. Even under severe repression, their citizens are not powerless (For the same argument about Solidarity and the Polish society under an authoritarian communist government, see Touraine et al. 1983). This is my morally driven contribution to the Iranian Green Movement, which reveals capabilities and capacities of Iranian people to accomplish a more democratic society and shape their own country’s destiny.

7.2 Potential limitations and necessary cautions in interpretation of findings

This dissertation is not without limitations and shortcomings. I categorize the limitations into three groups: limitations related to data, research design and theoretical approach.

The most important limitation related to data lies in the fact that the survey data have been gathered only through online channels. Nevertheless, given the fact that choices available to independent researchers in authoritarian fields are “determined by what is possible, and safe” (Glasius, et al., 2018, p. 22), it is reasonable that I recruited respondents via the Internet as I explained earlier. To the best of my knowledge, my data are the only panel data that we actually have from this repressive period on this
sensitive topic of political participation of IGM. Needless to say, it is hard to tell to what extent my convenience sample accurately represents the total population of IGM. The young and well-educated are probably overrepresented in my sample, but the knowledge that I obtained through a long-term and deep engagement in online activism from the emergence of IGM to 2013 enabled me to get an appropriate sample of IGM. Most importantly, representativeness is not my main goal. The main goal of the chapters for which I used the survey data was to test theoretical propositions about what predicts (changes in) political participation of IGM supporters; no representative sample is necessary for this goal (cf. Opp & Gern, 1993, p.664). In panel designs, attrition is the main concern. In my data, those who dropped out did not differ significantly from the other respondents in terms of demographics and major independent and dependent variables; except in age, drop-outs in waves two and three were younger, on average. This difference can be explained by recalling that I used email addresses to invite respondents for participating in Waves 2 and 3. Older respondents may use emails more often, while younger respondents use social media heavily. Further research could compare my survey data with some other data that were gathered in the same period or on the same topic using other methods such as telephone surveys (iPOS, 2013; 2015).

Another potential limitation which could have affected the findings of some of chapters, particularly Chapter 5, would be the 2013 elections ‘outcome effect’; “the tendency for respondents to adjust their cognition of an event to its outcome” (Opp & Gern, 1993, p. 665). Since the third wave of the survey (June 2013) was conducted immediately after the elections, whose result was perceived as a great success of IGM, respondents could have reported higher levels of election efficacy and more positive emotions at Wave 3, especially if they were highly active. In advance, I expected that the 2013 elections would be dynamic, but the results were, for me, unpredictable at the time. Further work is needed to fully disentangle the outcome effect from the pre-elections changes in individuals’ motivations and social-psychological factors. An interesting area of research is also to investigate the effect of elections results \textit{per se} on IGM supporters.

For all studies, the causal effect claims it requires three main conditions: ‘covariation’ between two variables, ‘time ordering’ of the variables and ‘the elimination of other causal factors’ (Asher, 1983, p. 12). In this dissertation, panel survey design as well as measuring multiple variables and including them as control variables in analyses were used as strategies to overcome the reverse causality (i.e., time ordering) and spurious correlations problem (i.e., elimination of other factors). Yet, throughout the
dissertation, I always interpreted significant relationships with caution. Where it was necessary and possible, I included qualitative data to the study and used a mixed method to have a better interpretation of statistical analysis (For instance, in Chapter 5).

7.3 Recommendations for future research

This dissertation focused on certain research questions and explanations and did not explore all possible extensions. This could be a fruitful area for future work.

Chapter 3 suggests that three dimensions of perceived repression should be considered: the importance of repression, external assessment of repression, and internal assessment of repression. The findings of this chapter, also, reveal the dissimilarity of the effect of experienced repression resulting from objective repression and socially shaped perceived repression. Further studies need to be carried out to validate the role of different dimensions of perceived repression in altering the effect of perceived repression. Moreover, different responses to repression of those who had already experienced repression before with those who have not could be investigated.

Furthermore, in the same chapter, I identified different strategies to resist repression. But in investigating social-psychological factors and mechanisms contributing to adopting these strategies, the chapter was limited to the choice between refraining and resisting. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 touched upon tactical and arena shifts, but strategies and political activities in resisting repression are more diverse, as I identified in Chapter 2. By acknowledging the variety of activities and strategies to resist repression, future research could include other strategies of responses to repression concentrating on motives, mechanisms and processes. Future studies would need to delve deeper into strategies to ascertain who would do what and in which circumstances to resist repression in authoritarian contexts. It would also be interesting to assess the outcomes of adopting different strategies.

Moreover, the two-sided strategic interaction of state repression and activism (Moss, 2014; Ritter & Conrad, 2016) should be acknowledged. This study limited its attention to one side, namely strategic responses of online activists to state repression. Additional research could be conducted to investigate the dynamics of State actions and activists’ strategic responses.
Finally, although the focus of the dissertation is limited to the case of the Iranian Green Movement, its contribution is obviously also relevant to scholars who focus on political participation and social movements in other contexts. Comparison with other cases in the region or other repressive contexts would be worthwhile. Even in European established democratic countries, repression effects beg further understanding. Increasing support of violent tactics among right-wing supporters and radicalization of immigrants in Western Europe can be better understood if we delve into micro-mechanisms and the process of response to perceived and experienced repression.