Internet and Social Movements in Iran: Mapping Alternative Public Spheres in the Islamic Republic

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Abstract: The protests against the rigged presidential elections in Iran have provoked an enormous interest in the use of the Internet as a means of political dissent. This is not the first time that the Internet raises high expectations concerning its impact on authoritarian regimes. Yet so far, the actual effects of online communication on processes of democratisation remain unclear. This paper explores Internet use by three collective actors considered part of a broader social movement for democratising the Islamic Republic of Iran: the political reformists, the women's movement, and the Green Movement. It will be examined to what extent the Internet facilitates the activities of these movements. The theoretical guideline of analysis is provided by the main functions of media communication for social movements: informing the public, mobilisation of support, and internal debate.

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When protests over the presidential election broke out in Iran last summer, pictures and news of the demonstrations and their violent repression by the regime were mostly transmitted on the Internet. Due to the prominent role that social networks such as Facebook and YouTube played in informing an international audience about the sudden and massive upheaval of Iranians against electoral fraud, Western media hurried to announce the advent of a 'Twitter Revolution' in Iran. This account of the events in Tehran echoed a powerful myth that has accompanied the worldwide expansion of the Internet since the very beginning. Promising an unhindered flow of information and greater freedom of communication, the Internet is presented as an effective tool of democratisation, challenging dominant political forces and their control over the public sphere. However, the subsequent struggles of the Iranian protest movement to confront a power elite commanding a sophisticated machinery of coercion, stable economic resources, and the mass media have made clear that democratic change is not only about using a modern technology of communication. Various factors intervene in the complex process that is a political transformation. All the more, it is essential to develop a realistic and empirically grounded perspective on the use of the Internet by

political challengers and its possible contributions to their activities. Therefore, this paper explores Internet use by collective actors considered a part of Iran's broader movement for social and political change, namely the reformists, the women's movement and the 'Green Movement' that has emerged out of the election crisis. The theoretical framework of the paper builds on studies of social movements as well as research on the role of media in political transformations.

Social movements, media, and political change

An essential condition to the transformation of a political system is the formation and propagation of alternative views for the future of the society. In this process, social movements play an important role in bringing up new ideas and values challenging the existing order and aiming for broader change. Since these movements, if at all, have only limited access to political institutions, they generally rely on different strategies of discourse and protest to reach their goals. The capability of bringing their demands effectively into the public sphere is a major factor determining the success of social movements for they need to convince the greater public of the legitimacy of their agenda, gain new adherents and mobilise support. For this purpose, movements engage in the production and maintenance of meaning, actively interpreting and giving sense to their surroundings and occurring events. Through the "framing" of social reality, they seek to "promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (Entman 1993). This process also plays an important role for the internal exchange of a movement because members have to agree upon positions and strategies. Establishing a strong collective identity based on shared values and a common worldview is essential for social movements as it influences the commitment of the followers and their willingness to invest time and other resources.

It is obvious that in authoritarian systems like Iran, social and political challengers rarely get the chance to organise and communicate their cause openly since the ruling elites maintain control over the principal means of public communication and suppress undesirable activities of opponents and the civil society. If a movement's access to the mass media is blocked, a possible solution is the search for alternatives: a phenomenon that has been amply illustrated by the successful use of so-called small media (leaflets, cassettes, *samizdat*). The Internet, thus, seems to present itself as a perfect medium for social movements offering a decentralized and non-hierarchical structure, access to public communication at low cost and free of the usual

media "gatekeepers", as well as a quasi instantaneous and transnational diffusion of information. It has been suggested that the Internet and social movements entertain a mutually influencing relationship in which the different online applications provide opportunities for new and innovative forms of collective action that activists, in turn, have to adopt and implement, thereby shaping the Internet and its utilization. Nevertheless, research has shown that autocratic rulers not only succeed in limiting Internet use that is potentially challenging but also employ the technology for their own purposes and benefits. Factors like education, media literacy and political culture affect the Internet's possible role as a media of dissent too. Based on these theoretical reflections, the paper examines the online activities of political challengers in Iran focusing on the previously mentioned functions of media communication for social movements: informing the public, internal debate, mobilising followers and support.

Internet and politics in the Islamic Republic

Iran's reform process that was initiated in the 1990s and culminated during the first term of President Khatami has been followed by an authoritarian backlash. Supported by ultraconservative clerics in the key bastions of the regime, a hardline faction of the political elite closely affiliated to the Revolutionary Guards and the security apparatus has gradually taken hold of all state institutions. The ascendancy of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the presidency in 2005 intensified an already ongoing repression against the main proponents of reform within civil society, especially against women's and human rights activists, intellectuals, students and the press. However, this did not mean the end of the reform movement. While civil society adapted creatively to the new environment and outlived the attacks of the hardliners, the political reformers underwent a strategic reorientation realizing that the discourse of democracy and political liberties had alienated them from the lower strata of society who were above all expecting economic progress and social justice – promises of the Islamic Revolution Ahmadinejad then successfully revived with his populist postures. The reformists made an impressive comeback in spring 2009 when they rallied behind the candidacy for president of Mir-Hossein Moussavi. After 20 years of absence from the political scene, the former Prime Minister managed to present himself as a credible defender of revolutionary values while at the same time addressing hopes for a political opening within the modern middle class. The decision of the hardliners around Ahmadinejad to abort Moussavi's probable victory through an electoral coup subsequently backed by Supreme Leader Ali

Khamenei, and the violent repression against the demonstrating masses of deceived voters have pushed Iran's political evolution into a new phase. The regime, on the one hand, has seen its already fragile legitimacy further eroding, the narrowed ruling elite holding to power primarily by means of coercion. On the other hand, the protests against the rigged election have rapidly evolved into a broad social movement for civil rights demanding transparent elections, freedom of expression and liberation of political prisoners.

During the entire course of the struggle for reform in the Islamic Republic, the media and questions of control and access to public communication have played a major role. While state broadcasting was firmly in the hands of the regime, the press had developed into a forum of lively debate under Khatami, but consequently became the target of a judiciary campaign closing more than 100 publications within five years. During the same time, the number of Internet users grew rapidly from around 200,000 in the year 2000 to 5.5 million in 2003. Today approximately 23 million Iranians have access to the Internet. Without any doubt, there is a direct relation between the clampdown on the press and the rise of Iranian online media. Many authors of the closed reform publications turned to the Internet. After 2002, the emergence of weblogs opened up an additional possibility of communication which Iran's young population embraced enthusiastically. Since then, blogging has become a remarkable tool of individual and political expression.

With the growing expansion of the Internet, the state intervened, restricting an ambitious private sector in order to protect its own political and economic interests.[1] In 2001, all private Internet Service Providers (ISPs) were placed under the umbrella of the Ministry of Telecommunication and had to obtain access to the Internet from the state's main provider before passing it to their customers. Furthermore, the authorities developed one of the most substantial censorship systems for Internet content and usage worldwide. Filter software and human resources are combined to monitor and block online communication contradicting the political and cultural guidelines of the regime. Dissenting Internet authors are frequently subjected to juridical harassment and detentions. In parallel to restrictive strategies, regime actors actively engaged in the use of the Internet and produced their own content. Responding to the online shift of reformist media, the different conservative and hardline groups have respectively published their websites and blogs distributing news, political viewpoints, rumours and attacks against opponents. Iran's highly factionalized political landscape, thus, finds its expression also on the Internet.

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[1] (Private ISPs, for example, were offering cheap Internet telephone calls abroad challenging the monopoly of the national Telecom.)

Iran's reform movement and the Internet

Facing the closure of most of their newspapers, the Internet has become the major outlet for Iran's political reformers. Online media form the mouthpieces of the different reform organisations while individual authors and journalists use blogs to publish articles that do not find a way into the printed press. In addition, political events or causes often provide an occasion for the emergence of further news outlets. For instance, before the municipal elections in 2006 and the legislatives in 2008, two newly founded websites each published information concerning the reform candidates and their campaign. In autumn 2008, an initiative in favour of a renewed candidacy of ex-president Khatami for the next elections took off from a website established only for this purpose.

However, the authorities block access to most of the reform websites for the Iranian public, thereby severely reducing the number of their readers. Although the censored websites are still accessible to computer-savvy users able to circumvent the filter systems, such practices underscore the fact that the Internet is a "pull-medium": Users have to search systematically for the information of their interest. Access to the Internet and the ability to use it as such do not imply applications relevant to political change. The value of these reform-oriented online media, hence, is not in their impact on wider public opinion but within the circle of a politically motivated and engaged information-elite.

Established around 2000, the website *Emrouz* is among the oldest online media of Iran's political reformers. Close to the progressive reformists who backed the Khatami government and controlled the majority of the 6th Majles (2000-2004) before being pushed to the political sidelines through a massive disqualification of their candidates by the ultraconservative Guardian Council, *Emrouz* has been frequently filtered since 2003. In addition, a number of journalists and technicians working for the website were arrested and interrogated by a radical branch of the judiciary in 2004, partly undergoing torture and solitary confinement. Despite these restrictions, *Emrouz* continues its publication in order to – as one of its editors states – show presence on the Internet and spread news to reform supporters.

An analysis of the website's content of November 2006, a few weeks prior to the municipal elections, gives insight into the formation of the reformists' discourse and their programmatic reorientation one year after the shattering victory of Ahmadinejad. Compared to other online media of different political affiliation, Emrouz publishes a higher quantity of articles, certainly to compensate the reformists whose access to other media is blocked. Yet, the website is run only by a small editorial board and does not have the capacity to produce all

this content on its own. Most of the articles are not unpublished but selected from other reformist or moderate websites and the few remaining newspapers of similar political orientation. Other texts are editorials or analyses signed by well-known figures of the reform movement and published with their name and photo. Consequently, it is the choice and compilation of articles that constitutes a major element of the website's discourse.

The content of the website can be divided along general thematic categories such as economy, foreign affairs, culture, media and university affairs. A quantitatively important group of articles focuses on the economic and managerial difficulties of the Ahmadinejad administration which, at that time, attracted increasing attention and criticism. The municipal elections though, being an opportunity for the reformists to get a foot in the door of state institutions again, constitute the main topic on the website. *Emrouz* frames this issue from different angles. On the one hand, the website stresses the ongoing formation of a unified reform coalition capable of presenting qualified and experienced candidates who stand for pragmatic and economy-oriented policies. By highlighting these aspects, the reformists seek to overcome their shortcomings in the presidential elections of 2005: the failure to present a single candidate and the neglect of economic anxieties in the lower classes of society. On the other hand, the website pays equal attention to the difficulties the conservatives face in agreeing on a coherent list of candidates. These problems result mainly from the refusal of Ahmadinejad's self-confident followers to negotiate with other groups within the conservative camp. The articles of *Emrouz* depict the rivalries in detail, thereby contrasting the reformists' rational and consensus oriented approach to the power bickering of their opponents.

While all this appears to be a perfectly normal strategy of election campaigning, one has to bear in mind that this discourse is taking place in an environment with limited democratic qualities. The website thus informs about the disqualification of reformist candidates, their limited access to national media, and possible election fraud in Ahmadinejad's Ministry of Interior. Thereby *Emrouz* not only underlines the disadvantages the reformists are jointly facing and reinforces their sense of unity but also urges the need to act: If a further undermining of the republican institutions in the Islamic Republic is to be prevented, then an active participation in the elections is the only solution. Implicitly, the website refutes other strategies such as civil disobedience or election boycott that are frequently discussed by more radical opponents of the current regime. Taking this position, *Emrouz* confirms the reformists' moderate and democratic identity and their willingness to press for gradual but constant change within the framework of the existing Constitution.

Together with other online media and blogs of similar political orientation that relay, extend and accentuate this debate and the depicted framing of the municipal elections, *Emrouz* forms an alternative public sphere in which reform-minded participants, as active members of a social movement for political change, exchange opinions, discuss strategies, and negotiate a common identity – thus creating a foundation for collective action.

Women's rights activism and the Internet

Looking back on a more than 100 years long history, the Iranian women's movement is today considered as one of the most vocal actors in Iran's civil society. Although the presidency of Khatami provided room for different forms of gender activism and the establishment of numerous women NGOs, the failure of the reform government to substantially advance women's rights distanced activists from the political reformists and led to the formation of a more independent movement. Despite the increasing repression under Ahmadinejad, the women's movement has been able to build a broad and horizontal network expanding its outreach to society. It has initiated different campaigns focusing on specific demands that highlight the discrimination against women in the Islamic Republic. The campaign for the collection of one million signatures calling for a change of legislation is certainly the most famous one; others turn against stoning or demand the right for women to enter football stadiums. A common feature of all these initiatives is their independence from political institutions and donors as well as their reliance on the voluntary commitment of participants. It is especially the impact of the Internet that has strongly contributed to the current landscape of women's rights activism.

Following the general trend in Iranian reform journalism, the women's movement, too, has established a number of online media during the last ten years. Various websites like *Womeniniran* or *Zanestan* publish articles on women's issues not available in the press. Others represent the different campaigns of the movement, distributing information on the content and evolvement of the respective activities. In addition, many weblogs provide a space for further debate and elaboration. Yet, online content related to women's issues is particularly affected by state control so that activists continuously have to find ways for circumventing the filter mechanisms.

Due to persecution by the authorities, women activists had to retreat further from public meetings and initiatives. Consequently, the correspondence via emails and weblogs helped to prevent looming isolation. On the Internet, news about arrests and juridical harassment could

rapidly be spread facilitating the organisation of defences and, in the long run, avoiding the neglect of detainees' cases. The websites of the movement constantly publish articles about activists held in custody in order to follow up their dossier and keep their memory alive.

The intensified exchange provided by online communication also helped to draw women's activists closer to one another. The contacts between women in Tehran and those living in the provinces improved. Although most online media are produced in the capital, they provide a central platform for activists in the rest of the country too, facilitating a debate on content, goals and strategies of the movement. Moreover, the publication and discussion of activities on the Internet attracted new people so that today young journalists and bloggers are among the most active members of the movement. In addition, online media foster the creation of a shared identity. Individuals can add the banners and logos of the different campaigns to their personal sites, thus expressing adherence and solidarity. Portraits of single activists on the website of the one-million-signatures-campaign for example, serve as motivation and support for others.

Finally, in certain cases, women's rights activists successfully employed the Internet as a tool for mobilisation. In 2008, in a campaign against the 'Family Protection Law', a conservative legislation reinforcing current discrimination and encouraging polygamy, journalist bloggers published the mobile numbers of parliamentarians on their websites inciting people to make protest calls. Other websites provided special protest postcards to print out and send to the Majles. An additional effect of mobilisation lies on the international level, as women's activists are able reach out for international media and human rights organisations to increase foreign pressure on Iranian authorities. English sections on the campaign websites not only inform about the general goals of the movement but also the cases of detention and repression. The numerous international prizes Iranian women's activists have received in recent years attest to the increasing attention their struggle receives worldwide.

Certainly, state repression and other restrictions are at the bottom of a somehow forced re-adaptation of the women's movement and its use of the Internet. Nevertheless, the creative integration of online communication in its activities has helped the movement to endure a phase of authoritarian regression and to develop new forms of collective action.

Internet, the election crisis, and the Green Movement

Taking into consideration the use of the Internet by the Iranian political challengers examined so far, it is evident that during the presidential election of 2009 and the ensuing crisis, the opposition candidate Moussavi and the so-called Green Movement did not initiate a new strategy of online activism but built on habits and forms of Internet application previously established. With only limited access to television and the press that the government of Ahmadinejad controlled, Moussavi counted on the social capital and resourcefulness of his mainly young followers, thus coining the phrase "every Iranian, a campaign" (*har Irani, yek setad*). In addition to several news websites and blogs operating along the pattern described above, social networks like Facebook and mobile phone messages became important campaigning tools spreading the candidate's programs and mobilising for public rallies.[2] After the election coup of the hardliners, these communication structures of Moussavi's campaign transformed into a basis for the emerging protest movement.

When the first protests erupted in Tehran and foreign correspondents were either severely restricted in their work or had to leave the country altogether, films and snapshots taken by mobile phones and distributed on the Internet became the principal source of information for the international media. In addition, the microblogging service Twitter frenetically published news about the events in Iran to a world audience. All this amplified the impression that Twitter and other social networks were also the main media of mobilisation within the country. Although selected activists have certainly made excellent use of these applications to propagate their cause abroad and inform about the severe human rights violations, there is scarce evidence that compared to other traditional forms of protest communication, such as mobile phones and word of mouth propagation, Twitter had a significant effect on the participants in the demonstrations. Many of the messages were reposted and the number of people actually present therefore distorted. The heavy restrictions authorities imposed on Internet speed and access during the protests further prevented a massive impact in Iran. In that way, Twitter functioned more as a means of trans-border broadcasting than domestic mobilisation, but attracting international awareness and support can be considered as a positive outcome for the opposition.

Again, the Internet's significance for the movement of the 'Greens' is rather located in its

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[2] Already before the presidential election in 2005, mobile phones had become an important tool of mobilization. As for 2009, one cannot underestimate the impression made on Iran by the campaign of Obama and its apt use of social networks and online media.

role for the internal exchange of participants and the formation of a common identity than in the influence on a greater public. The leaders of the opposition use websites and social networks to distribute their viewpoints and communicate with their supporters. Moussavis Facebook account has already gained more than 120,000 followers who forward his messages on their part. On the Internet, the movement's members express adherence by colouring their profile photos or the titles of their blogs in green and by using shared nicknames. Last December, when the regime released a photo of the arrested student leader Majid Tavakoli covered in a *chador*, claiming he had tried to flee hidden under this traditional women's garment, thousands of male supporters responded in a massive act of solidarity by posting pictures of themselves wearing a headscarf on the Internet. The campaign sparked further debates on mandatory veiling in the Islamic Republic and the position of women within the Green Movement.

All in all, the exchange of information facilitated by the Internet has certainly added to the resolution of the Green movement to pursue its cause. It has undermined the regime's communication censorship by uncovering human rights violations and helped for a rapprochement between Iranian activists inside the country and abroad. With regard to the political process in the Islamic Republic, however, it is not insignificant that a considerable number of green supporters active on the Internet are currently not living in Iran and can influence the events in the country only to a certain degree. The limits of online mobilisation became somehow apparent on the 12 February 2010, the anniversary of the Revolution, when expectations concerning a sudden appearance of numerous protesters in the midst of official festivities were running high on the Internet, particularly fuelled by green supporters in exile, but on the streets in Tehran, the opposition found itself scattered and uncoordinated in front of a massive security presence.

Conclusion

It has been shown that the significance of the Internet for political challengers in Iran is above all a result of the authoritarian control of other media. Yet, the Internet cannot replace a lively press or the outreach of radio and television. Besides more general factors, such as access and education, the impact of online communication on public opinion is severely limited through the state's censorship. In addition, it became evident that the political culture significantly shapes Internet use relevant for democratic change: Only a vital and engaged civil society or opposition who creatively put the communicative potential of the Internet into

action will benefit from the technology. Furthermore, the Internet alone (or media in general) cannot compensate for other factors affecting the success of political challengers such as coherent organisation and determined leadership.

These restrictions notwithstanding, the paper has demonstrated that online communication encourages the internal exchange of all three collective actors. Websites and blogs form an alternative public sphere in which movement participants debate their viewpoints and agree upon common strategies. The social networks facilitated by the Internet open up innovative forms for building collective identities and sustaining commitment. Regarding the mobilisation of support and followers, the Internet is particularly effective due to its transnational outreach permitting movement actors operating in authoritarian regimes to attract the attention of international media and human rights organisations.