‘WHERE IS MY VOTE?’
ICT Politics in the Aftermath of Iran’s Presidential Election

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Abstract

Iran’s 2009 presidential election was a controversial political event and came prominently into global media focus. Alleged large-scale frauds in the election led to widespread protests which faced repressive reaction of the regime. In the absence of independent media, the story of the political upheaval was brought to the world by the protesters’ extensive use of mobile phones and the Internet. This paper attempts to illuminate the role of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in the aftermath of the election and in the development of the opposition Green Movement. ‘Political Opportunity Structures’ – the cornerstone of social movement theories – was adopted as the theoretical framework. We argue that the Internet allowed the Green Movement to enhance its political opportunities through reaching international allies and by weakening the repressive capacity of Iran’s regime. Furthermore, the Green Movement used ICTs as an organizational resource to back-up demonstrations and gatherings. The ability of ICTs to promote a collective identity within the Green Movement and to create a discursive opportunity is also discussed.

Keywords: Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) – Political Opportunities – Green Movement – Mobile Phones – Discursive Opportunities
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Introduction

Iran’s 2009 presidential election was followed by widespread protests alleging large-scale fraud and vote-rigging. Having banned and controlled independent and foreign media, the regime ruthlessly repressed the protesters to immediately silence them. However, the protesters widely took advantage of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to disclose the regime’s brutality through posting photos and video footage taken by mobile phones on the Internet. The regime’s measures failed to control the flow of news and information going out of the country. The Green Movement, which emerged out of the protests, managed to use ICTs – particularly the Internet – as an effective organizational resource to keep the protests going. Satellite channels such as BBC Persian and Voice of America also played significant roles, particularly in disseminating news and information.

Some have called the post-election aftermath a ‘Twitter Revolution’ due to the astonishing role of social networking sites (Berman 2009). During the heated moments of the turmoil, the US State Department asked Twitter to postpone its planned maintenance to allow Iranian protesters to use the service for communicative purposes (Morozov 2009). Google and Facebook announced that they would add a Farsi version to their websites in response to widespread use during the protests (Ahmed 2009). The critical role of the Internet in the protests was recognised by the International Academy of Digital Arts and Sciences as one of the ten most influential Internet moments of the decade (The Ten Most Influential Internet Moments of the Decade 2009).

Research on the impact of new communication technologies on social movements dates back to the Seattle protests against the World Trade Organization conference held in 1999 (Levi & Olson 2000). A major part of the literature in this area comes from developed countries’ experiences in facing new social movements, such as environmental and human rights movements (Keck & Sikkink 1998; Castells 1997; McCaughey & Ayers 2003). While the Internet is a highly malleable and context-sensitive technology (Castells 2001), we believe that investigating the implications of this technology in a developing country’s context – such as Iran – will provide insights into the role of ICTs in contemporary politics. Despite the importance of the event, there has not been any scientific attempt to offer insight into the Internet’s role in the post-election protests.

A Brief History of ICT and its Politics in Iran

In most countries, both industrialised and developing, the Internet has been introduced by research institutes (Bazaar & Boalch 1997). In Iran, the introduction of the Internet was initiated by the Institute for Studies in Theoretical Physics and Mathematics in 1992 and remained an academic tool until 1997 when it started to be extended to government organisations, industries and the service sector. In general, the number of Internet users has grown exponentially: from 200,000 users in 2001 (The number of Internet users has grown fourfold 2004) to 25,669,000 in 2009 (Two thirds of the country’s population use mobile phones 2009), meaning that around one-third of the population now has access to the Internet. Additionally, there are currently 50,000,000 mobile phones and 25,220,000 landline phones in the country (Two thirds of the country’s population use mobile phones 2009).
In recent years the government has implemented a number of national programs such as the National Information and Communication Technology Agenda (TAKFA; www.takfa.ir) and e-government initiatives (Iran Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) Training and Research Centre 2005) to develop the infrastructure of the Internet. A recent report on worldwide ICT development shows that Iran’s ranking rose from 92 in 2002 to 78 in 2007 (International Telecommunication Union 2009). Universities, most public organizations and private companies now provide Asymmetric Digital Subscriber Line (ADSL) access to students and employees. In big cities personal computers in homes are now commonplace and connected to the Internet through a low speed dial-up system. Moreover there are Internet cafes available in cities and villages for those who do not have access to the Internet at home or for those who require faster services. Government projects to provide services such as online banking, virtual universities and commercial services necessitate gaining Internet access for basic needs.

Parallel to the development of ICT infrastructure, Iran experienced considerable growth in educational levels, paving the way for youth to adopt ICTs and blend them into their everyday life. The number of students enrolled in universities rose from 160,308 in 1979 to 2,089,283 in the 2008 academic year; 58.7% of which were female (Ministry of Science & Technology 2008). Additionally, a number of government plans were devised to promote ICT knowledge and skills to students and citizens. Under Iran’s national ICT Agenda (INICTA), several educational programs were implemented in schools, universities and State organizations (Kousha & Abdoli 2004).

Despite the government’s interest in the technological benefits of ICT, it has nevertheless been profoundly concerned about social, cultural and political consequences of such technologies. The regime has been concerned that these new technologies would undermine the Islamic ideological foundation of the State. Despite some small policy wavers, there has been almost a consensus within the body of the regime to block pornographic websites and those of political dissidents. The Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution – which has been the highest responsible organization for social and cultural affairs since the 1979 revolution – issued legislation entitled Overall Policies on Computer-Based Information-Providing Networks whereby all Access Service Providers (ASP) have to be equipped with blocking systems to restrict users’ access to prohibited immoral and opposition websites (Secretariat of Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution 2001). Article 6 of the bill clarifies that producing and diffusing materials containing the following are prohibited for both Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and users:

- Materials containing insults to Islam, the Supreme leader, and grand Ayatollahs (religious leaders).
- Distortion or humiliation of Islamic instructions, the values of Iran’s 1979 revolution, and the foundations of Imam Khomeini’s political views.
- Instilling cynicism in the public regarding the legitimacy and efficiency of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Secretariat of Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution 2001).

The above bill and a number of others have led to such broad blockages of websites that Iran has been counted as one of the leading Internet blockers in the world (Crampton 2009). Although the government claims that its control is mainly aimed at pornographic websites, nevertheless, political opposition, human rights, anti-Islamic, feminist and sexual education websites have also been blocked (Iran’s CSOs Training and Research Centre 2005).
Unhappy with the ease of communication between young people of the opposite sex, the government has conducted regular inspections of Internet cafes. In one case the police shut down over 400 Internet cafes in Tehran in May 2001 (Thomas 2004). A report on blocked sites during 2004-2005 showed that of 1147 surveyed websites, 40% of opposition websites were blocked irrespective of whether the language used was English or Persian (Internet Filtering in Iran 2005). Bloggers have been under strict surveillance and several bloggers have been prosecuted – accused of undermining national security through cultural activities (Dellio 2003; In Iran the struggle between the government and opponents will also play on the Internet 2009). Control over the Internet largely occurred from 2005 onwards, when Ahmadinejad was elected as president (Rahimi 2008).

The Emergence of the Green Movement

Iran’s presidential election in June 2009 came prominently into global media focus. The election was of much importance to the western world due to a number of issues including: Iran’s controversial nuclear program, the geopolitics of Iran (in the Middle East located between Iraq and Afghanistan) and its alleged role in triggering unrest in Iraq and its alleged support of international terrorism. All of these issues were prominent during Ahmadinejad’s presidency from 2005-2009 (Takeyh 2009). Ahmadinejad took a vocal anti-US position and his frequent rhetoric in denying the Holocaust raised many negative reactions throughout the world (Anger at Iranian Holocaust Denial 2009). The high price of oil during his presidential period gave him confidence to follow up his controversial policies.

The domestic atmosphere before his election was politically intense as well. Ahmadinejad’s policies in domestic affairs were radical and challenging. He came into power after the reformist president Muhammad Khatami who ran moderate policies in domestic and international affairs for eight years. Ahmadinejad drew on a populist policy which explicitly aimed to support poor people and systematically disregarded middle class demands in social, economic and political arenas. He aimed harsh rhetoric at his opponents, delimited political freedom and militarised the government body (Alamdari 2005). His radical foreign policy resulted in three United Nations Security Council sanctions, placing Iran’s economy under serious pressure. All these factors gave momentum to the opposition, who believed the election was their last chance of survival. They feared that the continuation of Ahmadinejad’s totalitarian policies would have completely overridden civil society, leaving no place for oppositional activities.

The regime, having controlled most media and power resources, took on a strategy to allow the opposition to organize its campaigns freely. The strategy purported to motivate people to vote in the election. For the first time since the 1979 revolution, there were heated TV debates on the State-owned TV channel between the presidential candidates (Iran releases presidential debate timetable 2009). This was an exceptional opportunity given to the political reformists and probably the only time they could broadcast their messages in public without censorship. The reformists’ pre-election campaigns drew unexpected support, as they allowed hope for change. Mass rallies, supporting the opposition, occurred nationwide throughout the campaign period (Twenty five kilometre human chain in support of Mousavi 2009). In the days leading up to the election people confidently chanted ‘Ahmadi [nejad] bye bye’ (Amanpour 2009).

The freedom to participate in these political rallies lasted until the night before the election when SMS services stopped and the mobile network was disrupted shortly afterwards.
Ahmadinejad was announced the winner with a landslide victory of 62.63% of the votes. The voting rate was markedly higher than previous presidential elections (around 85% of the eligible population). The victory announcement brought shock to both the opposition and the general public. Mousavi and Karoubi, the opposition candidates, did not accept the result and requested authorities to declare the election null and void. Rezai another candidate, who was close to the ruling conservatives, also raised serious questions about the reliability of the results. Unplanned protests spontaneously started in big cities and particularly in Tehran. The Internet was choked off, Mousavi’s newspaper was shut down and his website was blocked. Other newspapers were published under censorship from the regime. With the continuation of the protests the regime disrupted the satellite channels by sending jamming signals.

The State intended to cut off all means of communication among the public. Most leaders of reformist parties were arrested and demonstrations were declared illegal. However, the protesters came out and gathered in the central squares and streets of Tehran. Security forces used unprecedented force and brutality on the protesters. Protesters used their mobile phones to record the events, including the police brutality, and then uploaded these images onto the Internet. Hundreds of pictures and videos quickly appeared on the Internet and the links were shared on Facebook. Despite the slow speed of home Internet connections, people were successful in uploading their videos and photos. The wide geographical coverage and the amateur quality of the video footage indicated that these activities were of an unorganised nature and pointed to individual actions taken by individual people. The latest news on the protests was therefore available online. This was the only way of getting news out of the country, as all foreign news agencies had been forced to leave by then.

In the beginning the protests tended to start spontaneously, however, in later weeks and months, shared strategies, a collective identity, a loose structure and leadership, and visions for the future were gradually fashioned. Eight months after the election people still regularly occupied the streets and faced police repression. There was a cycle between the streets and the Net: people planned a demonstration, discussed the slogans and strategies on the web, actualised the plans in the streets and confronted the security forces, then turned back to the Internet and published the pictures, news and videos of the incidents, discussed the outcomes and prepared for the next demonstration.

These protests became collectively known as the Green Movement. Green was Mousavi’s campaign colour in the presidential election, however, in the post-election period, green became the colour for all opposition and reformists groups. Karoubi’s followers and even people who did not vote but were critical of the regime’s brutality against the peaceful protests began to use the colour. Green soon appeared at public events, football matches, festivals and so forth. Although Mousavi had attached religious meaning to this colour at the time of the election, by this time it was devoid of religious meaning, so secular people felt comfortable in using it to show their beliefs.

Theoretical Framework

In recent decades Political Opportunity Structures (POS) has been the dominant theory used to explain social movements. McAdam et al. in an integrative perspective...
introduced three interactive factors accounting for the emergence, development and outcome of social movements. These factors are labelled political opportunities, mobilizing structures and framing processes (McAdam et al. 1996). ‘Political opportunities’ refers to the ‘features of regimes that affect the likely outcomes of actors’ possible claims’ (McAdam et al. 2009: 263). These opportunities include:

(a) the multiplicity of independent centers of power within the regime (b) the regime’s openness to new actors (c) instability of current political alignments (d) availability of influential allies or supporters for challengers (e) the extent to which the regime represses or facilitates collective claim making (f) decisive changes in terms of a to e (McAdam et al. 2009: 263).

A change in any of the above factors can encourage mobilisation and enhance the likelihood of the realisation of the movement’s claims (McAdam et al. 2009).

‘Mobilizing structures’, the second factor, refers to ‘those collective vehicles, informal as well as formal, through which people mobilize and engage in collective action’ (McAdam et al. 1996: 3). This term has an encompassing scope covering social movement organizations, tactical repertoires and everyday life micro-mobilisation (McCarthy 1996: 141). Mobilizing structures entail ‘a wide variety of social sites within people’s daily rounds where informal and less formal ties between people can serve as solidarity and communication facilitating structures when and if they choose to go into dissent together’ (McCarthy 1996: 143).

‘Framing processes’, the third factor, mediates between opportunity and action and are the ‘strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action’ (McAdam et al. 1996: 6). In the absence of this factor, the existence of political opportunities and mobilizing structures are not sufficient to forge a social movement (McAdam et al. 1996: 5; Snow et al. 1986).

Social movements, like other aspects of human life, have been affected by the advent of new communication technologies. The impact of new communication technologies on politics and particularly social movements has attracted a number of scholarly investigations. Some have explored how new communication technologies influence political opportunities, mobilizing structures and framing processes (Garrett 2006). Ayres points to the ‘state-centric bias’ of political opportunities theory and argues that ICTs have developed ‘transnational opportunity structures’ (Ayres 1999: 135-137). In this global sphere, cyber-diffusion of strategies and tactics and the prospects for rapid transnational coordinated activities have opened new opportunities for social movements in the age of globalisation (Ayres 1999: 135-137; Tarrow 2005). In the domestic environment, the Internet weakens a State’s repression machine by enabling protesters to evade state regulations (Garrett 2006).

The Internet has consequences for the organisation of social movements through its ability to challenge the traditional top-down hierarchy of such organisations (Van de Donk et al. 2004) and its capacity to influence participation levels (Garrett 2006; McAdam et al. 2001). The Internet also has implications for framing processes by allowing social movements to circumvent established mass media organisations and gatekeepers. By virtue of the Internet, insurgents have obtained the ability to frame their messages independently and contest the narratives produced by mass media (Campbell 2005; Garrett 2006; Van de Donk 2004). In the next sections we investigate the role of the Internet in the aftermath of Iran’s presidential election. We explicate the episodes of the protests based on a political opportunity structures framework and explain the impact of the Internet on the process.
The Internet as an Organisational Resource

Interaction, collective claims and governments are the main components of social movements (McAdam et al. 2009). Communication among insurgents plays a vital role in the development of any social movement; without it the survival of a social movement is highly unlikely (Van de Donk et al. 2004; McAdam et al. 1996). In democratic contexts the importance of communication channels is markedly different from those within authoritarian contexts. Like the former European Communist States, Iran’s regime controls the main channels of communication and it is likely to block them at times of political upheaval (Oberschall 1996). After the 2009 election, Iran’s regime attempted to cut off all avenues of communication including satellite channels, newspapers, mobile phones and opposition websites (Iran blocks TV, radio and phones – but web proves more difficult 2009). Many leaders of reformist parties were arrested overnight in order to preclude any opportunity of them organising protests (Rafiee 2009).

A couple of weeks after the election, Mousavi, one of the opposition leaders, announced his plan to establish a broad coalition of reformist parties and other politically active groups to maintain the protests in a more organized manner. As expected the government denounced any type of oppositional political protest. As an alternative measure, Mousavi outlined an oppositional strategy of reinforcing and consolidating social networks. Based on the initial post-election success of social networking sites, he argued that online social networks had been highly effective and less vulnerable to State repression (Kazemian 2009). In line with Castells’ (2001) argument about movements within a network society, the network-based and loosely structured organization of the Green Movement fitted its thin ideological content. Opposition leaders and activists embraced the highly diverse fabric of the Movement, leading to the development of a non-violent and ideologically thin movement. After the first phase of the protests demanding the election be nullified, the Movement then broadened its scope and sought to pressure the regime to grant civil rights to all citizens (Dabashi 2009).

The Internet plays a large role in the process of scale shift. Scale shift is the ‘change in the number and level of coordinated contentious actions leading to broader contention involving a wider range of actors and bridging their claim and identities’ (McAdam et al. 2001: 331-333). Diffusion and brokerage are two pathways of the scale shift. While diffusion refers to the ‘transfer of information along established lines of interaction’, brokerage is ‘the linking of two or more currently unconnected social sites’ (McAdam et al. 2001: 331-333). In the case of Iran, the Internet coupled with satellite channels accelerated the diffusion of the Green Movement both nationally and internationally. Facebook, Twitter, blogs, emails, online newsletters, Short Message Services (SMS) and Bluetooth spread the protests and news to the farthest possible places.

Interestingly, Bluetooth technology assisted the process of brokerage. In Iran Internet bandwidth has historically been limited, to the extent that watching videos on Youtube and Facebook is usually painfully slow. This has led to widespread use of mobile Bluetooth technology so people can share videos easily, free of charge and watch them normally (Terman 2009; Ramezani 2008; Iranian mobile phones use bluetooth scatternet share videos 2009). Nearly three months after the election, the Iranian based website, Mowjcamp (a reformist affiliated website), started to put out Green Movement-related videos in Bluetooth-compatible formats on its website. As mobile phone users are socially more diverse than Internet users, the plan was to disseminate the videos to people who did not have Internet access or were not able to use it. In Iran, mobile users are nearly double the number of Internet users.
Diffusion of the Green Movement was accelerated incredibly by the Internet, allowing for access to Iranian networks all over the world. Pictures and videos of the regime’s gruesome brutality evoked strong feelings of sympathy among the Iranian diaspora. Unprecedented solidarity with the protest movement emerged from Iranians abroad and several demonstrations were held in support of the Green movement in the US, Canada, some European countries, Australia and Asia (Dubai and Malaysia) (Worldwide demonstrations in solidarity with the election protesters in Iran 2009). Iranians abroad called upon their host governments not to recognise Ahmadinejad as Iran’s president and to condemn the violation of human rights in Iran. In one case, a “green roll” was publicised in Paris. It was signed by thousands of Iranians from 167 cities around the world and stated that ‘Ahmadinejad is not Iran’s president’ (Pender 2009). All these coordinations, organisations and networks would have been inconceivable without the assistance of ICT.

Tactical Innovations and the Internet

Social movements are usually disadvantaged in accessing power resources, thus they take on strategies and tactics to offset their resource-poor position (Ayres 1999). Tactical innovations are employed within the wider political and organizational context. ‘Structure of political opportunities’ and ‘organizational readiness’ are determinant factors in this process (McAdam 1983: 735-736; Campbell 2005). McAdam et al. (1996) argue that the form and timing of social movements are shaped by broader political opportunities (McAdam et al. 1996). In Iran, the highly repressive post-election circumstances meant protesters were not granted the right to show their dissidence and organise rallies, meetings and the like. This led the Green Movement to adopt the tactic of hijacking regular State-run rallies which are held in Iran throughout each year.

Since Iran’s 1979 revolution, the post-revolutionary populist regime (Foran 1994) has planned regular rallies to celebrate and observe anniversaries of key events of the revolution, as well as days which are ideologically important to the regime (such as the Revolution Victory day, anniversary of the US embassy seizure in Tehran, the Qods day in solidarity with Palestinians against Israel, and so on). There are also several religious gatherings such as Friday sermons and Ashura (the anniversary of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, which is a highly important mourning day for Shiites). Each of these occasions provided a chance for protesters to gather. The government rallies and religious gatherings have usually been interpreted by the state’s media as proof of ongoing support from the population for the regime. These rallies, which have been run without interruption for about thirty years, have become profoundly institutionalised in Iran’s political culture. In recent years, the declining popularity of these ceremonies has led the regime to require students, soldiers and government employees to participate. In this context, protesters used these ceremonies as good opportunities to reclaim the streets (Black & Dehghan 2009). The Green Movement successfully put this strategy into practice, to the extent that the most prominent days of the Movement so far have fallen on the regime’s days (15 June, 17 July, 18 September, 4 November, 7 and 27 December).

Van de Donk et al. (2004) suggest that the Internet facilitates traditional forms of protests such as rallies and demonstrations. In Iran, the Green Movement effectively employed the Internet to disseminate information and to recruit and mobilise people to participate in the protests (Social Media and Iran Protests 2009). Before each rally, activists uploaded a great number of posters, video clips and songs on the Internet, in an attempt to attract large numbers of people to turn out. Many slogans were proposed by activists, and opposition leaders issued statements to encourage people to come out in support. During these
demonstrations, protesters captured eye-catching incidents with their mobiles, and sent them via ‘desktops to television screens’ (Bennet 2003: 164). Protesters, holding mobile phones up in the streets, created a ‘reversal Foucauldian panopticon’ for the security forces (Garrett 2006: 209). The use of ICT paved the way for many individuals to actively participate and to have their voices heard in this era of ‘mass self-communication’ (Castells 2007).

The above events illustrate the process of participatory journalism or citizen journalism. Goode defines citizen journalism as ‘a range of web-based practices whereby ‘ordinary’ users engage in journalistic practices’ (2009: 1288). Wide usage of new communication technologies empowered the protesters to create their own public sphere for communication and mobilisation purposes. We discuss this process in more detail in the next sections. The significance of this emerging battlefield was high, to the extent that Iran’s regime became dissatisfied with its restrictive policies and decided to enter into this public sphere to combat the activists.

The Internet itself turned into a battleground. Protesters published photos of Basij (the State militia) and the security forces on the Internet asking people to identify them publicly. People who knew those involved not only published their names, but also their home addresses and phone numbers, effectively intimidating the security forces out of further participation in the system of repression. In reaction, the regime’s affiliated websites published pictures of protesters asking people to reveal their names to the police (Athanasiadis 2010). Websites of both sides were under continuous cyber-attacks by hacktivists, which led to temporary disruption of the websites (Shachtman 2009). The Internet also effectively facilitated the quick coordination and organisation necessary to run online campaigns. For example, when it was circulated that Nokia and Siemens sold Internet surveillance equipment to the Iranian government, an online campaign began to boycott these companies’ products. This resulted in a considerable reduction of Nokia sales in Iran (Black & Dehghan 2009; Zetter 2009; Nokia sees mobile phones boycotted in Iran 2009).

The Internet and the Development of Political Opportunities

Emergence of social movements is dependent on the existence of political opportunities (McAdam et al. 1996). In the analysis of post-election protests, Bashiriyeh argued that the rift which appeared within the ruling elite at the time of the election brought about an unprecedented opportunity which eventually lead to the mass mobilisation of people under the authoritarian regime of Iran (Postel 2009) Indeed, the Green Movement’s leaders were insiders of the regime and well-known politicians on the domestic and international scene: for instance, Mousavi, was Iran’s prime minister during the period of 1981-1989, Rafsanjani and Khatami were Iran’s presidents during 1989-1997 and 1997-2005 respectively, and Karoubi was the parliamentary spokesman during 1999-2003. Since the 1979 revolution, there have been several instances of tense conflict between the two major bodies of power within the State. Nevertheless, they have always been settled through arbitration processes. This time, disunity and conflict was too intense to be resolved through conventional pathways (Postel 2009).

The above situation and the importance of the emerging opportunity became known to the people of Iran through the Internet. Political opportunities are objective features of existing political institutions; however, they need to be perceived by insurgents to become effective. McAdam et al. argue that ‘attribution of opportunity’ by protesters is crucial for the emergence of a social movement (2009: 264). Similarly, Kurzman (1996) contends that it is not the existence of opportunities per se but the perceived opportunities that make for the
mobilisation process. In Iran’s post-election context, we argue that in the absence of communication channels, the Internet together with satellite channels – notably BBC Persian TV – played important roles in discursively constructing the aforementioned opportunities and making them operative.

On the other hand, new communication technologies enable social movements to reach out to international allies through whom they can then put pressure on their own States: the boomerang effect (Keck & Sikkink 1998: 12-13). A direct consequence of this affordability is attracting the attention of international Human Rights Organizations to increase the security of movement activists (Davenport 2005). Almost all available photos and videos of crackdowns and police brutality were taken by mobile phones and were distributed over the Internet (see Iranian Green Movement Videoblog 2009). These videos resonated with the global media and gave rise to the reactions of several international Human Rights Organizations and Western States, who then urged Iran to respect Human Rights conventions. In an important action, the UN General Assembly issued a resolution on 18\textsuperscript{th} of December 2009, in which the Iranian regime’s cruelty against protesters was criticised (Rozen 2009).

The Internet might also develop the opportunities available to protesters through weakening the repressive capacity of governments (Garrett 2006). The Internet’s resilience against censorship and State regulation provides social movements with a valuable possibility to disseminate information, recruit people and organise events out of the States’ control. Having called the conflicts a cyber war, Iran’s regime seriously attempted to extend its controlling power to the virtual world in order to obstruct communication among activists (Thibodeau 2009; Rafiee 2009). However, the wide use of proxy servers allowed protesters to bypass the censor (Cowie 2009). After vain attempts, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) purchased a controlling stake of 51% in the Telecommunication Company’s shares – the company which is the main responsible organisation for the Internet and mobile system in Iran (Tait 2009a). All these measures failed to prevent the protesters finding innovative methods of communication online (IRGC issues strong warning to Internet users 2009).

Collective Identity and Discursive Opportunity

Social movements need to frame a situation and generate symbols and meanings to reinforce bonds of solidarity and to create a sense of ‘we’ (Casquete 2006). They need to contest other frames produced by the counter-movement groups or the State (McAdam et al. 1996) and the media usually plays a large role in such contests (Klandermans & Goslinga 1996). Influencing the media and becoming publicly ‘visible’ is critical for a social movement’s survival; without it, it is ‘literally meaningless’ (Koopmans 2005: 160; Rucht 2004). While mass media tend to favour existing institutions and political figures (Klandermans & Goslinga 1996), social movements usually have four types of reaction to the use of mass media: abstention, attack, adaptation and alternatives (Rucht 2004). The Internet has allowed social movements to create an alternative channel of communication and therefore to bypass the media ‘gatekeepers’ (Garrett 2006). In this sense, the Internet provides social movements with the opportunity to access the public sphere, thereby creating a new discursive opportunity (Koopmans 2005: 163; Castells 2001).

The narratives of Iran’s State official media regarding the aftermath of the election were in stark contrast to the protesters’ view. The State-crafted image of the protesters rested on two main components: (1) protesters were few in number, and (2) protesters were rioters and vandals. Ahmadinejad, in his first lecture two days after the election, called the protesters
‘dirt and dust’, to represent them as few people (Tait 2009b). The State TV broadcast pictures of damaged cars and buildings intending to show the protesters as disrupters. In reaction to these images, the protesters emphasised their peaceful nature by conducting ‘silence rallies’ and taking the slogan of ‘we are countless’. In addition, several videos were posted on Youtube showing security forces stabbing civilians’ cars and buildings in empty streets, revealing the secret plan of the regime to later accuse the protesters of causing damage. These videos attracted global media attention (Samwiss 2009).

Koopmans (2005) argues that repressive actions of States largely assist social movements by provoking support and gaining media attention. Iran’s case exemplifies this process in an interesting manner. In the absence of free media, the regime wished to stifle the protests in the shortest possible time by applying severe brutality and ruthless repression. However, large numbers of photos and videos taken by mobile phones unveiled the cruelty of the regime and disseminated this information globally. In one case, a video was put out that shocked the world. It was recorded on a mobile phone and was published on the Internet and contained the last moments in the life of Neda, a girl who was shot in the street by the Basij (Omidseaedi 2009). The video received incredible attention and evoked widespread sympathy throughout the world (Erdbrink 2009). President Obama described it as heartbreaking, Oxford University established a new scholarship in her name, and a street in Rome was named Neda (Ferani 2009; Messia 2009). Neda soon became both a symbol of the opposition movement and the ruthless nature of the regime. The opposition took the regime’s repression as a key means of attracting global media attention and successfully influenced the public agenda. All this was done by mobile phones and the Internet in a ‘micro-to-macro crossover’ (Bennett 2003: 161).

At the outset the protests were spontaneously formed to discredit the election, however, along the way, the contours of a collective identity appeared. The colour green became the broadest signifier of the Movement. Sawer argues that colours influence the ‘emotional life of social movements’ and help them to fashion collective identities (2007: 39). During the election campaign, Mousavi’s supporters used a green shadow over their profile pictures on Facebook. Furthermore, a large amount of artistic work served to promote an integrated sense of belonging amongst those involved in the Movement. An abundance of music, posters and video clips were made and published on the Internet by amateurs. The themes were about commemoration of the martyrs and the suffering of their mothers, hopes for a victory and a better future, and the regime’s cruelty; all of which served to reinforce the Green Movement’s collective identity.

Conclusion

In this paper we attempted to explain the role of ICTs in Iran’s post-election turmoil and the subsequent formation and invigoration of the Green Movement. In the absence of independent media and in the face of restrictive policies of the regime – which were evoked to inhibit any collective action – ICTs were used as effective communication tools allowing the protesters to solve organisational problems. Utilising the discursive opportunity afforded by the Internet, the Green Movement managed to enhance its political opportunities through extending its global reach, catching global media attention and raising human rights concerns. The regime’s measures for controlling the circulation of information were abortive due to the resilient nature of the Internet. ICTs allowed the opposition to maintain the protests and gave activists the opportunity to devise strategies and gain support on the web.
Iran's case shows that an authoritarian government's plans to develop ICT infrastructure ironically undermined its control over its own citizens. The aftermath of the election illustrated the dynamic within which the Internet can become an agent of democratising processes.

Iran's regime still faces unexpected consequences presented by new communication technologies; however, they seek to gain the upper hand by promoting surveillance equipment and colonising the Internet. Protests have not abated yet and a cyber war is in play. New ICTs have realized the capacity for democratic change in Iran; however, we would argue that profound structural change requires additional forces far stronger than mouse clicks.
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