Media and information: The case of Iran

The election of Mohammad Khatami as president of Iran in May 1997 launched what many of his supporters hoped would be the most ambitious attempt in the Islamic world to bridge the divide between the public and private spheres. In the years since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the conservative clerical establishment had systematically eliminated almost all traces of the democratic pluralist currents that had helped feed the original rebellion against the U.S.-backed shah. What is more, they fortified Iran's traditional political despotism with an equally despotic reading of the Shiite Muslim faith, forcing dissent, debate, and differences of opinion to take refuge behind closed doors. Now the progressive movement that first began to take shape in the early 1990s and which later chose Khatami as its leader aimed to break the conservative clerical establishment's monopoly on public discourse.

The slogans and themes that emerged from the Khatami election campaign--and came to dominate his presidency--reflected many years of discreet discussion in reading circles, on the boards of small specialty journals, and in the halls of the religious seminaries. Their debut on the public stage, in the run-up to the election, was the opening shot in a struggle to reshape society and the state. At first, they decided to run only as a way of introducing their ideas to the public at large. Among their most prominent slogans were promises to introduce the "rule of law," to foster "tolerance" for competing ideas and to create a true "civil society" within the Islamic system.

These goals were extremely ambitious considering Iran's history of some 2,500 years of autocratic rule. Whether it was clerics in charge of the state, or the elites under the Pahlavi dynasty and its predecessors, public opinion had no role to play in influencing state affairs. Different elements of society did indeed create an otherwise unlikely alliance around Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to bring about the 1979 revolution. But this coalition of nationalists, liberal Islamists, secularists, and leftists was soon sidelined as the clerics began to rule the state.

The Khatami experiment was designed to address the imbalance between two competing visions of Islamic Iran that emerged in aftermath of the revolution. Was it an Islamic state ruled by the clerics, or a religious republic ruled by the people? In other words, the 1997 election was a resounding vote for enlarging the public sphere at the expense of what had become the private preserve of the ruling conservative clergy. Even in mundane ways, society expressed its desire to come out of hiding. Young men and women began socializing together in restaurants, cafes and parks--which was illegal. Rather than the chador, women began to opt for a more modern form of veiling--a long overcoat and headscarf--and the headscarves began slipping farther and farther from the forehead, revealing more and more hair. But despite society's readiness to embrace a reform movement, the Khatami effort to establish republican rule was short-lived.

Among the many myths about Iran in the United States is the notion that the level of public discourse that occurs--generally criticism of the Islamic state--could never be achieved in an Arab country. The lively debate in Iran, often on display in the press, gives the misleading impression that the potential for a free society is far greater than in most Arab societies. For example, there have always been opposition voices to
varying degrees in the Iranian press since the revolution. And there were never official state newspapers such as Soviet Russia's Pravda. But the roots of ultimate clerical control over the press date back to the Constitutional Revolution of 1906-1911, when the senior clergy secured for itself final say over freedom of expression in the name of religion. In fact, public discourse in Iran today has vast limitations and in no way compares to the kind of discussion we now see on al-Jazeera television and on other independent Arab networks and web sites.

One reason is that it is easy to circumvent state censorship through satellite channels and the Internet in the Arab world. These types of news channels do not exist in Iran. But the main reason for this difference is that Islam in Iran is used to stifle free expression. By contrast, no Arab government would invoke religious reasoning for censorship. In Egypt, for example, it is a crime to insult President Hosni Mubarak or his family in the press, and journalists have been jailed for doing so. But whether Islamic principles are trampled upon is a far more ambiguous charge to make and is used as a weapon only among the Islamists themselves--not by the secular state.

So why did the experiment carried out by Iran's reform movement one that would expand public discourse--fail to bridge the gap between the private and public spheres? The earliest and most enthusiastic supporters of the Khatami movement were largely drawn from the ranks of revolutionary propagandists, journalists, and other intellectuals. Khatami himself was a former newspaper publisher who had been recalled from Hamburg, Germany, by Ayatollah Khomeini to run the large Kayhan publishing house that was nationalized by the revolution. Many of these activists came to realize that loosening the restrictions on the media was an effective means of stimulating public discourse--not to mobilize support for state policy but as an end unto itself. For the first time in Iranian history, they argued, there would be no predetermined outcome; society itself should be left to its own devices. In what later proved to be a fatal miscalculation, the reformists ignored virtually all other building blocks of their proposed civil society, such as the creation of true political parties or the building up of grassroots networks. Instead, they relied almost exclusively on this "media strategy" to challenge authoritarian rule. This was their critical mistake because the levers of power controlled by the clerics could easily shut down the newspapers--and this is precisely what happened.

But not before the reformist press enjoyed some very real successes. The first real free newspaper, Jameah, began publishing in 1998. The founders of Jameah were intellectuals who were involved for many years in a Tehran discussion group that was in large part the basis for Khatami's future rise to power. It is worth noting that some of these same intellectuals had originally favored creation of a political party or front, to be called, appropriately enough, the Coalition of Religious Intellectuals. But legal and political obstacles put up by jealous and fearful state functionaries barred the way, and so they devoted their energies to founding a mass-circulation newspaper.

Jameah was created to change all that: it would appeal to the millions who had elected Khatami as a first step toward a civil society. It would bring out what appeared to be a strong public calling for change by introducing the power of public opinion onto the political stage. The first edition of Jameah made this clear: "Greetings to Society" read the banner headline. The second edition went further, proclaiming directly: "We hope, God willing, we will perform our duties in order to create a civil society in Iran.
This model (for civil society) for the first time has been transformed from the limited circle of Iran's intelligentsia into a national issue by the reform movement."

The other aim of Jameah was to take charge of public discourse and unleash public discussion from clerical control. Instead of publishing the supreme leader's latest utterances on the front page--the way the other newspapers did--Jameah played the stories according to the editors' own sense of news value. The leader's comments, in fact, were often pushed to the inside pages. On the front page were photographs of beautiful women--definitely the kind of "news" that readers preferred. Others featured scenes of real life: restless youth huddled in city parks, lonely nomads with their flocks, even a woman violinist. According to Mohsen Sazegara, one of Jameah's three founders and a former student aide to Ayatollah Khomeini, the newspaper sought to recapture some of the joy and beauty of life that had been lost to years of revolution and the war with Iraq. Jameah set out to win the hearts and minds of the Iran's enormous youth population, a segment too young to remember the revolution or share many of its initial goals. It sought to launch what Sazegara calls a "renaissance by happiness."

On February 5, 1998, Jameah exploded onto the Iranian scene. Within just a few weeks the newspaper hit its break-even point of 100,000 in daily sales--a considerable figure in a country with little tradition of newspaper readership. By March 20, the end of the Iranian solar year, circulation reached 140,000, and it soon went as high as 300,000 copies per day. Jameah opened up a hidden world to a reading public thirsting for something more than official pronouncements, clerical sermons, and scripted rallies in support of the establishment's domestic and foreign policies. It broke taboos and challenged the notion of the so-called red lines, the vague no-go areas comprising the fundamental political, religious, and social spheres of the hard-line clerics who dominated the system. "One can criticize the decisions of an Islamic government" and still remain a good Muslim, a lengthy interview with a leading intellectual cleric assured readers. Jameah launched regular coverage of foreign films, including Quentin Tarantino's Jackie Brown--officially banned in Iran but widely available on the ubiquitous black market.

For the first time, readers could find the latest news of Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, a prominent theologian who was barred from publicizing his views and from teaching his popular seminary classes. On April 29, Jameah shocked the nation when it quoted the head of the Revolutionary Guards as telling his troops the "necks and tongues" of political opponents should be severed and that the scores of new publications unleashed by the Khatami administration threatened Iran's national security. Previously, such addresses to the elite guardsmen would have gone unnoted and unreported to the public at large, which could only guess how deeply polarized Iran's ruling institutions had become.

The rise of such a potent independent voice alarmed the clerical establishment, which was accustomed to dictating the public debate. And it did not take long for the ruling clerics to exercise their power to reclaim public discourse. First, Jameah was banned. Then, the same editors created a second newspaper under a different name--Tous. In Iran at that time, it was possible to borrow or to buy a newspaper license from another publication to start publishing again. But a harsher response came from the establishment. "In the name of freedom, newspapers and magazines of today are
committing all sorts of wrongs," proclaimed Mohammad Yazdi, then the head of the judiciary. "This is an Islamic country. I expect the minister to act before someone has to step in and act on his behalf." The next day, the Tehran justice department closed Tous, citing violations in the press law. Some of the editors were hauled off to prison but later released.

In all, it took the conservatives about 18 months after the shock of Khatami's election to realize that they could stop the rapid rise of the reform movement simply by shutting down several dozen leading independent newspapers and hauling their editors and publishers before the courts. The newspapers had become so popular that government surveys in 1999 found that 86.2 percent of respondents in Tehran followed the newspapers, with more than half the group describing themselves as daily readers. More than one-third read at least two newspapers a day, and more than one-fifth read three or more. The average reader devoted 38.2 minutes a day to the daily press. Readers told researchers they were looking for truthful and comprehensive content qualities they had never found in the domestic press.

Inspired by the positive response from the public for Jameah, Tous, and others, independent newspapers and journals mushroomed. Encouraged by the Khatami government, which was determined not to overlook the more remote provinces, the newspapers were able to link readers in the countryside with those in the city, expanding the public sphere in an unprecedented fashion. Generally, Iranians living outside urban centers had few clues of the politics and the turmoil sweeping the state; but now, the visitor to the provinces found local readers avidly debating many of the same issues and personalities that dominated budding public life in the capital Tehran.

Soon, the newspapers were revealing the dark secrets of the regime. The biggest scandal the newspapers unveiled was the grisly murders of secular intellectuals, presumably carried out by hard-line agents in the Intelligence Ministry. It had all the elements of a spy thriller, including rumors that clerics had given secret religious sanction to the murders. One of the architects of the murders, who was believed to be ready to tell all, was reported to have committed suicide in prison by swallowing hair removal cream. Few believed the story.

Editorials each day demanded the resignations of high-ranking officials in the Intelligence Ministry, one of the most feared institutions in the country. Finally, the newspapers put so much pressure on the state that the intelligence service had to admit that rogue agents within its own ranks were responsible for the murders. This gave President Khatami the green light to launch a private investigation into the ministry—an act that exceeded his limited formal powers as chief executive. Emboldened, the press even forced the resignation of the hard-line cleric who headed the ministry.

The newspapers achieved their greatest success in February 2000, when candidates endorsed by the reformist press won a majority of the 30 seats from Tehran in the Iranian parliament. The newspaper list, as the slate was called, swept to victory, proving that in a short time the clerical establishment had lost control of public opinion.
The election results were too much for the establishment to bear. In April 2000, a few weeks after the parliamentary election, supreme leader Khamanei announced that the reformist newspapers had become what he called "bases of the enemy." He said he was not against a free press, but warned that some newspapers had created mistrust between the people and the system. Three days later, the judiciary answered the leader's call and closed 14 of what would in the end be a total of some 50 reformist newspapers and journals eventually banned. The parliament, now dominated by reformers, tried to save the press movement by attempting in August of that year to liberalize the press law and to roll back new restrictions imposed by the outgoing legislature controlled by conservatives. But Ayatollah Khamenei, as the supreme leader, took an unprecedented step and killed the bill, saying it was religiously illegitimate and had to be stopped. Even though the bill would never have received approval from the Guardian Council, a body of conservative clerics who scrutinize all legislation, the leader wanted to put his personal mark on ending the press movement. Khamenei's intervention revealed the fundamental weakness of the Iranian press and its inability to serve as the basis of a new, civil society within the Islamic system. Nonetheless, the press movement should be credited with a lasting expansion of public debate that has become more apparent over time.

The newspapers made public what was private by pushing back and even crossing the unstated but widely understood "red lines" the clerics had imposed on public discourse. Evidence of this extension of public debate was visible among university students. The newspapers mobilized students who had been silent in their criticism of the regime or who followed the mainstream reform movement's credo that activism should stay within the confines of the red lines. But once criticism of the regime entered the public realm, students began protesting and expressing their complaints with the state. When one progressive newspaper, Salam, was ordered closed in July 1999, students staged the bloodiest protests since the aftermath of the Islamic revolution. They took to the streets for six days in Tehran and across the country, calling out for freedom of expression. The state deployed its security forces, including the Islamic basij militia and shadowy security thugs to stop the protests. But by expanding the public debate, radical students within the mainstream university movement that supported Khatami's agenda for gradual reform went their separate way and formed a more radical faction within the student movement.

The student protests that occurred in Iran in November 2002 were, in fact, evidence that public debate has been expanded in Iran for the long term. Even though predictions that the protests would lead to a final clash between the reformers and conservatives turned out to be wishful thinking on the part of some, the student demonstrations no doubt proved that the long, slow process toward a civil society has taken root. And more important, the students demonstrating this time made clear that they had lost faith in Khatami's ability to fundamentally change the system. They also broke taboos by openly expressing their dislike for the supreme leader. These sentiments went beyond the demonstrations in 1999 and showed that the public debate has widened.

Another profound and even more important legacy of the press movement was its effect on the clergy. The newspapers brought issues rooted in theology out of the seminaries and into the public sphere--issues that have remained part of public debate even after the closure of many of the leading newspapers. The case brought against
Mohsen Kadivar, the theologian who gave the opening address to the New School conference at which this paper was delivered, is a good example. Hojjatoleslam Kadivar wrote a series of essay in a reform newspaper called Khordad in which he declared that the conservative clerics running the state employed the same authoritarian tactics as the deposed shah. Specifically, Kadivar challenged the absolute powers of the supreme leader to prevail over decisions made by the clergy and all branches of the state. These powers, set in motion by Khomeini, were expanded by Ayatollah Khamenei once Khomeini died. Kadivar argued that absolute obedience to the supreme leader was in contradiction to the entire history of Shiite theology, which had relied upon learned theologians, called marja, or sources of emulation, to make religious decrees by consensus. Although this general topic--that the ruling clerical system had distorted the true nature of Shi'ite theology--was discussed within the confines of the seminary, it was not part of the public critique of the system. The issue is at the essence of the Islamic republic and is considered absolutely taboo. After Kadivar's essays were published, he was charged before a clerical court with violating Islamic principles and sentenced to 18 months in prison.

A public discussion of how Khameini's interpretation of the role of the supreme leader violated Shi'ite tradition was expanded further by a cleric named Abdollah Nouri. Nouri was the editor of Khordad and used the newspaper to expand public discussion about religion. When Nouri was charged before the clerical court for violating religious principles, he used the courtroom to put the regime on trial. He charged the supreme leader with violating the spirit of the Islamic revolution by putting himself above the people, the state, and the clerical establishment. Nouri was sentenced to five years in prison but was given an early release.

Iran has historically been a country where what takes place in private is very different from what occurs in public. It is not a coincidence that Iranian houses, especially in major dries, are hidden behind high walls. Inside the walls are often massive gardens. And family and social life is often a great departure from the traditional and repressive behavior on display in the streets. The clerical establishment has fought to ensure that life in private never becomes public.

One way the regime tries to contain what becomes public is through its rhetoric and imagery, based on ideology. To express any opinion outside official state ideology is condemned as un-Islamic. Today in Iran, diverse newspapers are still publishing, representing different points of view. But none is as radical as those that were shut down in the late 1990s. More than two decades after the Islamic revolution, Iran is at a stalemate: the flow of information is stymied by state censors, and severe restrictions have been placed on information entering the country. The most blatant attempts by the clerical establishment to limit what is in the public sphere are the routine closings of Internet cafes and the periodic crackdowns on satellite dishes, which are officially banned. The clerics know all too well that opening Iran up to the information age could destabilize the regime. Thus, in the case of Iran, making public what has traditionally been private is not a matter of moving toward modernity but a threat to the regime's very existence.

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