Special Report

Iran

Status: Not Free
Obstacles to Access: 19 (0–25)
Limits on Content: 24 (0–35)
Violations of User Rights: 31 (0–40)
Total Score: 74 (0–100) Population: 72.2 million
Internet Users/Penetration 2006: 18.2 million / 26 percent
Internet Users/Penetration 2008: 23 million / 32 percent
Mobile Phone Users/Penetration 2006: 15.4 million
Mobile Phone Users/Penetration 2008: 30.2 million
Freedom of the Press (2008) Score/Status: 85 / Not Free
Digital Opportunity Index (2006) Ranking: 105 out of 181
GNI Per Capita (PPP): $10,800
Web 2.0 Applications Blocked: Yes
Political Content Systematically Filtered: Yes
Bloggers/Online Journalists Arrested: Yes

Introduction

Although Iranians are active readers and producers of online content, the Iranian regime wields one of the world's most sophisticated apparatuses for controlling the internet and other digital technologies. Internet use in Iran began in 1995 at universities, then spread quickly via internet cafes to an otherwise isolated population with limited access to independent sources of news and entertainment. The government's censorship of the medium did not begin until 2001, but users today operate in an environment that features filtering of content—particularly domestically produced political news and analysis—together with intimidation, detention, and torture of bloggers, online journalists, and cyberactivists. As with restrictions on press freedom that date to the early days of the 1979 revolution, the Islamic Republic couches its restrictions on internet freedom in an opaque and arbitrary conception of Islamic morality outlined by the constitution, the press law, and the penal code.

Obstacles to Access

While the number of internet and mobile-phone users continues to grow, state-imposed and other infrastructural restrictions significantly constrain Iranians' ability to fully access these technologies and related applications. Estimates of Iranian internet users range from 18 to 23 million[1] in a country of just over 70 million people, putting the user penetration rate at over 25 percent. Most Iranians use dial-up service to access the internet via some 24 million land-line telephones and approximately 3,000 internet hosts. Over 1,000 internet cafes operate in Tehran alone, though intermittent government raids lead to temporary closures. Internet cafe owners must register with the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (MCIT).[2] Mobile phones outnumber land lines, with some 29 million mobile phones in use in 2007, according to the International Telecommunications Union (ITU). Despite the large number of users in urban areas, the high cost of dial-up access at home—particularly in rural areas—and at internet cafes makes the internet prohibitively expensive for most Iranians.

Use of high-speed internet was rapidly gaining ground until October 2006, when connection speeds above 128 kilobits per second were restricted by the MCIT.[3] Observers noted that the limitation

would make it more difficult for users to access, download, or share audio, video, and other large files. Universities and research institutions are now permitted to have fast connections, if approved by the MCIT, but internet cafes and home users are limited to the slower speeds. A small, wealthy minority of Iranians use satellite internet connections, which are free of any restrictions by the government. Social-networking sites such as Facebook are largely blocked; in the early days of the internet in Iran, the networking site Orkut gained significant membership before it was banned. The video-sharing site YouTube has been blocked intermittently since December 2006 but remains popular, including for coverage of political protests. Blogging sites such as Blogger and Persianblog are also blocked. The government, which is the sole provider of mobile-phone services, has been known to cut off access for political reasons. On June 27, 2007, after a day of protests over the state's gasoline-rationing program, the government cut off SMS (text messaging) service to Tehran overnight in an effort to prevent the organization of additional demonstrations.[4]

The Iranian government restricts access and content through a mutually reinforcing set of decrees, legal regulations, and institutions. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei first asserted control over the internet through a May 2001 decree and subsequent legislation by the Cultural Revolution High Council that forced all internet service providers (ISPs) to end their direct connections, obtain a license to operate, and purchase their bandwidth from government-controlled Access Service Providers (ASPs).[5] There are at least a dozen ISPs in Iran, the largest and oldest of which, Pars Online, is partly owned by the government. The mobile phone sector, previously a monopoly controlled by the government-owned Telecommunication Company of Iran (TCI), has opened considerably since 2006 with the entry of MTN Irancell into the market (although MTN Irancell is a private operator, its majority stake is held by a state-owned company). Further market liberalization is planned with the selling of TCI shares to private investors and the granting of additional mobile phone service provider licenses.[6] Competition has led to a significant rise in mobile phone ownership and usage over the past two years, with phones being used to send and receive SMS and photos, and to a lesser extent to access news and connect to the internet.[7]

Multiple government bodies deal with licensing and other regulatory issues. The Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance (MICG) is responsible for providing licenses for websites and blogs. The Committee in Charge of Determining Unauthorized Websites (CCDUW) is legally empowered to identify sites that carry forbidden content and report that information to the MCIT for blocking.[8]

Limits on Content

The Iranian government conducts some of the world's most extensive censorship of online content, particularly on issues of political and social reform. Nevertheless, users circumvent filtering and make use of temporary openings in subversive, innovative ways. Both online and offline expression can draw punishment if it is seen as insulting Islam, criticizing religious leaders and institutions, fomenting national discord, or promoting immoral behavior. In late 2008, the government boasted of blocking five million websites, mostly for pornographic content, but also for sensitive political, social, and cultural information.[9] Given the vague language of government blocking directives, many ISPs err on the side of caution by filtering more information than the government may actually require.[10]

International sites devoted to democratic development, freedom of expression, human rights, and civic mobilization are targeted along with domestic websites, and the sites of English-language news sources such as the New York Times and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) are sometimes filtered. Reformist websites and blogs are blocked the most frequently, though in some instances the interference is intermittent, perhaps to encourage self-censorship. At the end of 2008, the women's rights website Tagir Bary Barbary (Change for Equality) was blocked for the 18th time

in two years, and feministschool.com was blocked for the eighth time.[11] Hard-line and conservative political sites are increasingly being blocked by the authorities as well, as they sometimes present views that diverge from the official line of the Supreme Leader. For example, Baztab, a site operated by former Revolutionary Guard commander Mohsen Rezai, was blocked for a few weeks in September 2007,[12] and parliament member Ahmad Tavakoli's Farda site, which broke a 2008 scandal in which the newly appointed interior minister was found to have lied about his academic credentials, was also blocked. The government is especially sensitive to internet organizing by student activists, women's rights groups, and ethnic and religious minorities. It blocks, arrests, and otherwise threatens content producers who post news about the statements and organizing activities of these highly mobilized but repressed groups. Sites concerning gays and lesbians are routinely censored, though the Iranian homosexual community has gained an unprecedented voice via the internet (these sites are mostly based abroad), and has publicized the execution of homosexuals. Sites are also hacked and disabled when they become popular or feature politically provocative content.

The Iranian government's strategy for controlling internet content includes three general techniques: automated filtering, manually produced blacklists, and active posting of progovernment information. Automated filtering is enabled by SmartFilter, a commercial content-control software system developed by a U.S.-based firm, though company officials claim that the Iranian authorities are using it illegally and did not purchase it from them. All ISPs are required to install and utilize such government-mandated filtering systems. Automated internet censorship is supplemented by blacklists and blocking directives compiled by various unaccountable government bodies. At the end of 2002, the CCDUW was created to blacklist sites it deems anti-Islamic or a threat to national security. The committee consists of representatives from the Ministry of Information, the MICG, the Broadcasting Agency, the Cultural Revolution High Council, and the Islamic Propagation Organization.[13] Its lists are regularly updated, and ISPs are required to adhere to them and restrict content accordingly, but the lists are not made public.

In May 2006, an office was established at the MCIT in an attempt to centralize state filtering and surveillance efforts, but this effort has not yet fully materialized. Agencies outside the MCIT retain significant de facto power to control the internet, and these entities—including the Supreme Leader's office and the office of Tehran chief prosecutor Saeed Mortazavi—arbitrarily target certain sites, bloggers, and cyberactivists. Mortazavi, who has allegedly played a direct role in the torture of online journalists and activists,[14] announced in December 2008 that he had established a "special department for internet crimes," which will work closely with the intelligence service to block sites and monitor political messages and organizing.[15]

In addition to censorship, the state counters critical content and online organizing efforts by extending state propaganda into the digital sphere. Blogging sites for state officials such as the Supreme Leader and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad are also maintained. In late 2008, the government announced its intention to launch 10,000 blog sites to correspond with the 10,000 bases of the Basij, a gang-like paramilitary group responsible for violent attacks against student activists and women's rights organizers, although this rhetoric is yet to be implemented in practice.[16]

Self-censorship is extensive, particularly on political matters, and many bloggers and journalists write under pseudonyms. It is important to note that while the Iranian blogosphere and Iranian news sites do push the bounds of what is acceptable to the regime, the most socially and politically progressive sites are managed and staffed by Iranians living abroad. Since the short-lived era of relative press freedom under President Mohammad Khatami, many online intellectuals and activists have left the country. Iran's best-known bloggers—such as Omid Memarian, Roozebeh

Mirebrahimi, and Shahram Rafizadeh—are now writing from foreign cities and have been sentenced to prison in absentia.

Yet despite state efforts, blogging from inside Iran forms a large part of the Persian-language internet, with tens of thousands of writers discussing topics ranging from politics to poetry.[17] During 2008, students in particular used blogging platforms to raise awareness and organize support for environmental issues, and to expose the inappropriate behavior of a university official toward a female student. On both the internet and mobile phones, there are daily doses of satire about regime repression, the faltering economy, and the public's dissatisfaction with congested traffic, air pollution, and inadequate living standards. Antifiltering sites and technologies are banned, but users continue to find and engineer means to circumvent government filtering. BBC Radio, Radio Farda, and Voice of America television all supplement their broadcasting with affiliated websites, and they ensure open access by sending circumvention tools to large e-mail lists. The internet has also provided a key platform for international initiatives—such as Article 19's Persianimpediment.org, Freedom House's Gozaar, and Rooz Online—that promote freedom of expression and inform the Iranian public on human rights issues.

Most if not all leading civil society organizations and civic movements operate their own websites. A prominent example is the site of the One Million Signatures campaign for women's legal equality. Civic groups also use the internet to organize in ways that are prohibited by the regime. In 2007, underground rap-music groups used the internet to gather hundreds of young fans for an otherwise unpublicized outdoor concert in the town of Karaj, outside Tehran. Because concerts, particularly for Western-style music, are largely prohibited, the event resulted in mass arrests. However, it also garnered a great deal of attention among youth and loosened taboos against live music and large, mixed-gender public gatherings.

Violations of Users' Rights

Iranian internet users suffer from routine surveillance, harassment, and the threat of imprisonment for their online activities, particularly those who are more critical of the authorities. The constitution provides for limited freedom of opinion and expression, but numerous, haphazardly enforced laws restrict these rights in practice. The 2000 Press Law, for example, forbids the publication of ideas that are contrary to Islamic principles or detrimental to public rights. The government and judiciary regularly invoke this and other vaguely worded legislation to criminalize critical opinions. A comprehensive 2006 cybercrimes bill would have made ISPs criminally liable for content on sites they carried, but it was never passed by the parliament. A different bill, introduced in July 2008, would make some cybercrimes—promoting corruption, prostitution, and apostasy on the internet— punishable by death.[18] It passed its first reading with a vote of 180 to 29, with 10 abstentions, and was still under consideration at year's end.

Since 2004 the authorities have been cracking down on online activism through various forms of judicial and extrajudicial harassment. A increasing number of bloggers have been intimidated, arrested, tortured, kept in solitary confinement, and denied medical care, while others have been formally tried and convicted. According to Reporters Without Borders, the authorities arrested or questioned 17 bloggers during 2008, seven more than in 2007. Article 514 of the criminal code makes insulting the Supreme Leader punishable by six months to two years in prison, and Article 500 sets a penalty of three months to one year in prison for the distribution of propaganda against the state. Bloggers are typically charged with these offenses, and many practice self-censorship to avoid punishment. Even bloggers writing about art and culture, such as Omidreza Mirsayafi, author of the Rooznegar blog, have come under attack. In December 2008, he was sentenced to two years in prison for "insulting" the country's leaders and engaging in "publicity against the government"

though his blog focused on Persian music and culture.[19] Scores of women's rights activists associated with the grassroots One Million Signatures movement have voiced their demands online and consequently face routine intimidation, denial of travel abroad, arrest, exorbitant bail sums, and imprisonment, in addition to the blocking of their websites.13 Labor rights organizers are also subject to violations of their right to free expression online. At the close of 2008, Esmail Jafari was sentenced to five months in prison for blogging about a protest by 20 workers who had been dismissed at a factory in Bushehr.[20] As dissident clerics increasingly use the internet to criticize the regime, they too are being punished. A notable example is the November 2008 sentencing of cleric Mojtaba Lotfi to four years in prison, and a subsequent five years of banishment from the religious city of Qom, for posting Grand Ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri's criticisms of the government.14

Privacy rights are generally weak. Mobile-phone users must register and provide personal information upon purchasing a SIM card.[21] The Revolutionary Guard, the police, and the Basij have been known to stop people in public places to screen their text messages for content that is critical of the regime.[22] Regarding the internet, regulations were introduced in 2006 with the aim of further undermining online privacy. As part of the regulations, the MICG issued a directive on January 1, 2007, that required all owners of blogs and sites produced in Iran to register with the government by March 1. The directive required site owners to provide personal information and to refrain from specified content. The decree was largely ignored, however, and was deemed useless even by an authority from the MICT.

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[1] See http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/icteye/Indicators/Indicators.aspx# for statistics on fixed and mobile phone subscribers and number of internet users compiled by the ITU.

[2] http://xn-----btdb4d0zorfa.iranictnews.ir/T_____.htm,

[3] http://www.ict.gov.ir/forum/Default.aspx?g=posts&t=327, and http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,3705926,00.html

[4] "Iran bans negative petrol stories," BBC News, June 28, 2007, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/6249222.stm

[5] ONI report, Iran, http://opennet.net/research/profiles/iran, accessed March 16, 2009.

[6] "Telecom Stakes Up for Grabs," Iran Daily, http://www.iran-daily.com/1387/3317/html/economy.htm, accessed March 16, 2009.

[7] "Below Government Radar, Iranians Share Information via SMS", at http://www.audiencescapes.org/iran-sms-information-sharing/, accessed March 23, 2009.

[8] ONI report, Iran.

[9] "Iran Blocking Access to 5 Million Web Sites," RFERL, November 21, 2008, http://www.rferl.org/Content/Iran_Blocks_Access_to_5_Million_Websites/1351604.html, accessed March 20, 2009.

[10] ONI report, Iran.

[11] "Internet monitored and controlled, even in democracies," RSF,
http://www.rsf.org/rubrique.php3?id_rubrique=273, accessed March 20, 2009.

[12] "Offices of website closed, IFEX, September 24, 2007,
http://www.ifex.org/en/content/view/full/86497, accessed March 20, 2009.

[13] ONI report, Iran.

[14] "Iran: Remove Rights Abuser From Delegation at U.N.," June 22, 2006,
http://www.payvand.com/news/06/jun/1211.html, accessed March 20, 2009.

[15] http://www.autnews.us/archives/1387,09,00015035, and
http://www.radiofarda.com/content/f1_computer_crimes/477374.html, accessed March 20, 2009.

[16] "Iran's bloggers thrive despite blocks," December 15, 2008,
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[17] Mapping Iran's Online Public: Politics and Culture in the Persian Blogosphere, April 05, 2008
http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/publications/2008/Mapping_Irans_Online_Public

[18] "Authorities urged to quash 30-month prison sentence imposed on blogger," RSF, December
19, 2008 http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=29767, accessed March 20, 2009.

[19] Mirsayafi died in prison in March 2009.

[20] "Authorities step up Internet surveillance, cyber-dissident sentenced to five years in prison,"
RSF, December 11, 2008, http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=29653, accessed March 20,
2009.

[21] http://iranictnews.ir/archive/1387/10/3/D_89392_____.htm

[22] http://www.roozonline.com/archives/2007/01/post_679.php