

# GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2011

INTERNET RIGHTS AND DEMOCRATISATION

*Focus on freedom of expression and association online*



*This edition of Global Information Society Watch is dedicated to the people of the Arab revolutions whose courage in the face of violence and repression reminded the world that people working together for change have the power to claim the rights they are entitled to.*

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Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida)

The views expressed in this publication are those of the individual authors and not necessarily those of APC or Hivos

Printed in Goa, India  
by Dog Ears Books & Printing

*Global Information Society Watch*  
Published by APC and Hivos  
South Africa  
2011

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ISSN: 2225-4625  
APC-201111-CIPP-R-EN-PDF-0105  
ISBN: 978-92-95096-14-1

APC and Hivos would like to thank the Swedish International Cooperation Agency (Sida) for its support for Global Information Society Watch 2011.



## IRAN

### THE INTERNET AND CIVIL RESISTANCE: FREEDOMS AND STATE REPRESSION



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#### Introduction

In recent years, the Iranian political-civil rights movement has used the internet as an important tool for free access to and exchange of information. This has broken the government monopoly on news media, expanded social networks, built capacity and empowered both citizens and activists. However, the government is alert to this potential, and has launched its own cyber war on activists. This report highlights the important but ambivalent role the internet plays in social resistance in Iran.

#### The internet, human rights, and civil resistance in Iran

Blogs have played an important role in the social struggle and civic resistance of the Iranian people. Civil rights activists in Iran have depended on blogs more than any other tool for expanding social networks, and engaging in civil resistance. Blogs offer a vibrant field for challenging dominant ideological and theoretical assumptions, and for news reporting on Iranian victims of human rights abuses. Writing blogs has given many Iranian men and women the ability to express their beliefs, demands and interests without censorship. They can create their own “cyber identity” without fear of being discovered (with the concomitant consequences), and can make their “hidden self” public.

Blogs are one of the most important political advantages progressive Iranians have in the internet world. In the Iranian calendar year 1383 (March 2004-March 2005), Iran ranked highest in the number of blogs produced in the world – and although that ranking decreased slightly last year (2010), Iran is still one of the top ten blog-producing countries in the world.

The women’s movement in Iran was one of the first social movements to recognise the importance and influence of the internet. Women activists used the internet as their most important tool in information media for the purposes of advancing their social struggle. Iranian women have always been amongst the most marginalised groups in society,

and because of this they have always been looking for opportunities to create alternative civic spaces, and exploiting those spaces for advancing Iranian women’s collective struggle. For them the internet quickly transformed into an alternative civic space for social resistance, in place of the many political and social spaces in which women did not have and do not have much influence.

The women’s movement was able to use the internet as a communications tool for spreading news about the conditions of Iranian women, breaking taboos, and mobilising and organising women in protests against anti-women legislation. The internet also allowed the Iranian women’s movement the opportunity to connect with international women’s movements and coalitions and raise awareness about the plight of Iranian women within international circles.

One of the successful strategies for using the internet in the social struggle has been the One Million Signatures Campaign for Changing the Discriminatory Laws against Women in Iran. In a short time, this campaign allowed Iranian women to shine light on some of the limitations of Iranian society, while demonstrating their qualitatively different experience in the world.

In recent years, civic activists have created campaigns in cyberspace for human rights issues, victims of human rights abuses, and focusing on single-issue civic demands. The campaign against stoning is one such campaign. Here a group of human rights activists wrote a letter addressed to the Chief of the Judiciary demanding the nullification of the Stoning Law and circulated it online to gather signatures. This letter presented brief reports of people who were awaiting stoning sentences and expressed the activists’ criticisms about stoning being in conflict with Shariah (Islamic law), Iranian common law, and international human rights laws.

Other campaigns include: Opposition to the Imprisonment of Students Involved in the 1999 Tehran University Dormitory Attacks; Demanding Freedom for all Political Prisoners (presently 800 political-civic activists are imprisoned); the Campaign Against Sakineh Ashtiani’s Stoning Sentence; the Campaign Against Execution; the Green Protest Campaign; and the Campaign for Freedom of Assembly and Association in Iran.

Censorship and the shutting down of websites and blogs represent some of the major difficulties that civil resistance in cyberspace faces. Just as the government censors and limits access to and the exchange of information between Iranian citizens, it continually employs new methods for filtering internet use. In response, civic activists have invented numerous methods for bypassing filtering. These include using filter “breaking” sites, proxies, exploiting alternative software, and Google caches, amongst others.

Another act of resistance against the regime’s policies, especially the Iranian “Cyber Army” attacks – essentially online “troops” sent to stifle civil resistance – is the hacking of government sites and government-supported sites. In the last two years, civic activists have attacked government sites such as the Islamic Republic of Iran Presidency site, the Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) site, Fars News, Raja News, and many others – multiple times. Through this method, they have expressed their protest against government policies and programmes.

The Green Movement represented a qualitatively new experience in using the internet to further social militancy and expand civil resistance in Iran. This movement emerged from the womb of a wider-based social movement, which we can label the movement for political-civil rights. Its most visible moment of civic resistance was on 12 June 2009, the day of elections, when it took to the streets, demanding: “Where is my vote?” This movement constituted a reaction to the governing methods of Iran’s rulers, the imposition of a particular kind of existence, the widespread violation of human and civil rights, and corruption and disorganisation within Iranian society. It called for a government based on the rule of law, the expansion of democratic relationships, and a commitment to standards and criteria of human rights and peace within Iranian society.

By using the internet, this movement was able to communicate the voices of Iranians to the outside world. By using new forms of internet media as a political weapon, Green Movement activists successfully brought the government’s legitimacy into question, and dispelled the regime’s myths.

Facebook, news websites and video exchanges on YouTube have been some of the main tools of civic activists in the political-social struggle against government deception and the widespread violation of human rights. For example, the video of the murder of “Neda Agha-Soltan” was first published on Facebook and shortly sent shockwaves across the entire world.

Another useful experience in using the internet for civil resistance in Iran comes from the actions of a group of youths who used it for resisting government policies and breaking cultural taboos. A group of young boys and girls used Facebook to organise a public water gun fight at the Water and Fire Park in Tehran. On the morning of Friday 29 July 2011, a considerably large group of people gathered at the park, and some families came out with their children as well, to play with water guns and relish the joy of being outside. However, the security forces reacted forcefully and swiftly, stopping the event and arresting a number of participants.

Meanwhile, alongside the expansion of the political-civil rights movement in Iran by using new communications tools to help democratise Iran, the false government has also attempted to use these tools to solidify its rule and silence the Iranian people’s civil resistance.

### Policy and regulation

In 2009, a new political class was able to come to power by widely manipulating the tenth presidential elections, with the full support of the military. These actions resulted in the formation of a garrison state, the expansion of populism in the societal and political spheres, the renewed rise of ideological discourses, and the suppression of the middle class and cultural classes. During the past few years, this new political class in Iran has attempted to make itself the sole power and independent actor in the fields of politics, society, economy and culture within Iranian society. It has also attempted to have a determinant role in all fields of Iranian life, and to govern Iranian society based only upon its ideological and theoretical assumptions. Effectively, it wanted to occupy all civic spaces, preventing alternative discourses from politicising society, and destroy all associations engaging in political resistance. The ultimate consequence of all of this was the obstruction and constriction of civil and political society, the limitation of political-civil freedoms, and the widespread violation of human rights in Iranian society.

This new political class, in advancing its project to homogenise Iranian society and social thought, has likewise attempted to promote and make dominant a culture of inertia and silence in Iran. It aims to disrupt, obstruct and control access to and the free exchange of information.

The most important programmes that the Iranian government has used to limit the people’s right to access the internet, shut down communications and break up civil resistance in cyberspace include the following:

- Preventing the development of and investment in internet infrastructure, despite the fact that the Fourth and Fifth Five-Year Social-Economic Development Plans (2005-2009 and 2010-2014) emphasise the need to develop and invest in internet infrastructure.

According to statistics presented by Iran's National Internet Development Management Centre, by March 2011, 32.66% of Iran's total population used the internet through various methods. In addition to dial-up internet, ADSL has been introduced in the country, and now wireless internet on the WiMAX platform is available. Based on a report by MATMA (National Internet Development Agency of the Islamic Republic of Iran), most internet users in the country are GPRS subscribers, and use their mobile phones to connect to the internet – constituting more than 41% of all internet users in Iran.

However, by the end of the Iranian year 1389 (March 2011), 29% of all internet users in the country used dial-up telephone services to connect to the internet. Because of legal limitations for residential users, who constitute a large portion of internet users, high-speed internet bandwidth is only 128 kilobits per second in Iran (equal to 8.12 bytes per second), and high-speed bandwidth is generally limited. In addition to limited speeds, the high cost of high-speed internet and power instability can be added to the difficulties that Iranians face.<sup>1</sup>

- Shutting down access to and the free exchange of information and the obstruction of communication networks. The government has frequently resorted to disrupting or reducing Iranian internet speeds in the last two years – especially from 15-21 June 2009, and in the months following the 2009 elections. It is necessary to note that the Iranian government is the main provider of internet services in Iran through the Iran Telecommunications Company, and it can disrupt or obstruct internet access and the free flow of information at any time. In the year 1388 (March 2010-March 2011), a majority stake in the ownership of the government-owned telecommunications company was given to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps.
- Widespread filtering of sites and blogs is one of the other actions the government has taken to stifle civil resistance and prevent access to

and free exchange of information during recent years. Identifying “forbidden” pages and filtering them occurs via multiple methods. The common methods used are filtering based on IP addresses, domain names, page addresses, keywords and page content.

For expanding the reach of filtering, Iranian officials use full-featured blocking software, which has been purchased from China and Russia. The criteria for identifying and blocking websites are determined and announced by the “Committee for Determining Examples of Criminal Web Content” comprised of representatives from the security institutions. Censorship and filtering in Iran happen through the main gateways, combined with the blocking of certain URLs. Iran is one of the ten countries named as “Enemies of the Internet” by Reporters Without Borders in 2011.<sup>2</sup>

- Online attacks by the government's Cyber Army is another strategy used to foil civil resistance. The identity of the Cyber Army was at first unclear, until Ebrahim Jabbari, Commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Committee (IRGC) Ali Ibn Abi Taleb Ground Forces Regiment, announced on 20 May 2010, “Today, we witness that the IRGC has been successful in founding a cyber army that is only the second cyber army to exist in the entire world.”<sup>3</sup> In May 2009, the public relations office of the Revolutionary and Public Court of Tehran announced that, following a series of complex intelligence operations, 30 people suspected of participating in the group called “cyber wars” were arrested. This action followed a wave of attacks against anti-government websites and blogs by the Iranian Cyber Army.

Although the IRGC had clearly begun combating what it viewed as “immoral sites” through the creation of GERDAB (the Centre for Combating Organised Cyber Crimes), the IRGC did not begin confronting social-political media until a directive issued following the events of 12 June 2009, and the emergence of the Iranian people's political-civil rights movement. It appears that the IRGC, in addition to dominating all communications infrastructures and information networks in Iran, has direct responsibility for the guidance and management of “cyber wars” within the Iranian government. In addition to the Cyber Army, other institutions such as the IRGC

1 [www.mehrnews.com/fa/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=131042](http://www.mehrnews.com/fa/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=131042)

2 [march12.rsf.org/en](http://march12.rsf.org/en)

3 [english.farsnews.com/farsnews.php](http://english.farsnews.com/farsnews.php)

Department of Cyber Defence and the Security Police for the Exchange of Information (FATA) were also created in 2010. Alongside these institutions, “observational teams” and activity monitoring centres that track internet users are working hard, and the IRGC is making efforts to recruit hackers and computer security experts with very high salaries and benefits.

- Another of the government’s actions to fight the “soft war” against cyber civil society was the allocation of a budget of 500 billion to-mans (about USD 500 million) in the calendar year 1389 (March 2010-2011) to the Basij, paramilitary forces affiliated to the IRGC. The Basij have attempted to conquer Iranian cyberspace by producing pro-government content, using psychological warfare, and creating insecurity amongst Iranian social networks. In order to achieve their goal, namely, a “pure internet”, the government has recruited 8,000 Basijis for this work. The Communications and Information Technology minister first brought up the idea of a “pure internet” in 2010. The minister claimed that within internet networks, “rogue elements” exist that have become a serious problem in real-world communities, and, on that basis, the government must protect the Iranian people from such harm. On 16 April 2011, the Deputy for Supervision and Coordination in Economic Policies for the First Vice President announced, “The first halaal internet network, one that is pure from immoral websites, has been launched inside Iran.”<sup>4</sup>

### Conclusion

The experience of Iran shows that just as much as the internet can be a productive tool for advancing democracy, human rights, and the political-civil rights movement, it can also be used in the service of authoritarian regimes, who use it to repress and identify civil activists and consolidate their rule over society.

Civil activists in Iran have used multiple methods to protest in the last two years, ranging from street demonstrations to online campaigns, blogging, producing and publishing video files using mobile phones, writing graffiti on paper currency, and even hunger strikes in prison. The use of social networks and the internet has played a very important role in publishing pictures, videos and news stories about protests, and helping individuals express personal opinions, reflecting the reality of events both inside Iran and in the broader world. In this respect, internet use has been an important political act.

Nonetheless, the internet can also deplete the energy of the opposition, and create artificial feelings of satisfaction, the consequence of which is inaction in the real world of activism. The internet has also effectively turned the activist into a solitary, protesting computer user, fighting against multiple government computers. Meanwhile, as everyone knows, “The revolution will never happen without revolutionary people.”

### Action steps

Despite all of their inherent limitations and challenges, the internet and cyberspace remain the most important tool for civil activists and the political-civil rights movement for access to and exchange of information, organising, mobilising society, and democratising the nation.

In response to the widespread governmental programmes to limit and restrict access to the internet, including its cyber war programme, an important step is the development of software and educating users in Iran in order to secure communication among social and political activists at home and internationally. ■

4 [www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/158720](http://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/158720)

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2011 Report

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