Protest, Iranian Style: A Two-Way Conversation?

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Abstract

Darrell West gets it right when he argues that despite their promise, digital technologies alone "cannot produce revolutions. To generate fundamental change, it still takes strong leadership, powerful ideas, and people willing to risk detention and imprisonment." West is writing about Iran—and the critical role that social networking has played in fostering social protest in the wake of a disputed election in that country. He also warns that oppressive regimes may turn the very same tool of protest against those fighting for freedom, by using digital technology to track protesters. Yet West underplays the importance of social networking for cracking the monolith of Iran—and the implications for human rights of the unfolding dialogue in words and images.

Keywords

Human rights, Social media, Dissemination of information, Propaganda, Iran

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The world has witnessed the protests in Iran thanks to average people's ability to capture images and share them via social networking sites, Twitter, and other technologies. Using cutting edge information technology is not new in the world of contentious politics in the late twentieth century. Protesters at Tiananmen Square used faxes—considered the latest technology in 1989— to avoid government censorship and alert the world to repression of protests in Beijing. Several years after, the Zapatista social movement for indigenous rights in Mexico mobilized followers globally through strategic use of Internet websites for conveying the messages of its masked leader "Sub-Comandante Marcos," and for marshalling international financial and political support.

Yet the Iranian use of technology has an added effect over and above that of previous protests. The varied images transmitted amidst the protests have helped crack the façade of what has often been regarded by outsiders as a monolithic society. These images illustrate not only the widespread opposition to the election process and results, but also show the supporters of the regime. They demonstrate that many people in the Middle East yearn for democracy—including those in Iran—and that it is not incompatible with the very civil and political rights that the current Iranian regime has dismissed as "Western" and alien.

This view into the protests in Iran has had multiple effects on human rights. First, it has provided fodder for the traditional "shame and blame" game that human rights activists are expert at playing —this time, in the interest of shaming the Iranian regime into reform. Second, the bird's eye view of the protests has helped humanize the protesters themselves in the eyes of those observing the protests (most famously, in the case of slain bystander Neda Soltani) while at the same time revealing the complexities of protests driven by internal divisions. This complexity should lead to caution: if outside allies want to "help" Iranians in their struggle for democracy, they will need to take their cues from Iranians themselves, who want to be heard but aren't yet clamoring for reform in a united voice.

Third, the new technologies harnessed by Iranians in defense of their own human rights are but one of many important resources that are essential to realizing rights. As Darrell West astutely points out, powerful ideas matter to the success of revolutions: Iranians need access to information about human rights along with creative ideas about how to reconcile these ideas with their own cultural values and institutions. The information exchange needs to be a two-way street: just as Iranians are resorting to extraordinarily creative measures to get their images of

rebellion out for the world to see, we on the "outside" must be creative in sharing information with them. Getting past the censors is only the first step. Sustaining the conversation is the critical second one. Listening (and looking) for cues from Iranian civil society is the greatest challenges the international human rights movement faces at the moment.

Shareen Hertel is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Connecticut, jointly appointed with the University of Connecticut Human Rights Institute. She has also served as a consultant to foundations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and United Nations agencies in the United States, Latin America and South Asia. She is the author of Unexpected Power: Conflict and Change Among Transnational Activists (Cornell 2006) and co-editor, with Lanse P. Minkler, of Economic Rights: Conceptual, Measurement, and Policy Issues (Cambridge, 2007).