

Chaos and Control: The Competing Tensions of Internet Governance in Iran



*Kyle Bowen, an LSE Media and Communications alumnus who is now a researcher at **Small Media**, an NGO that seeks the free flow of information, particularly in Iran, discusses the implications of a new report on Iran's approach to internet governance.*

After several hours of intense debate, the 2012 World Conference on International Telecommunications (WCIT) descended into chaos. Convened to address global telecommunications policy issues, **Iran's delegation ground the UN-sponsored event to a halt** by pushing for a vote on proposed amendments to **International Telecommunications Regulations**.

This constituted a clear breach of protocol: resolutions at this type of event are supposed to be adopted by broad consensus from the global community rather than by majority vote. Yet beneath the procedural objections lay a more substantive cleavage between competing visions of how the Internet ought to be regulated. On one side are those, led by the US government, who support a limited role for the state in internet governance, and favour a multistakeholder decision-making process in which governments, civil society, and the private sector participate on equal footing. Opposing this faction is a loose coalition of countries (drawn primarily from the Global South), who seek the expansion of state policy-making powers.

Iran's intervention raises a number of questions. Was its move to force a vote simply the disruptive behaviour of an intransigent, rogue state? Or was it reiterating a position that the Iranians have consistently held, and that has a fairly broad base of international support?

Chaos and Control: The Competing Tensions of Internet Governance in Iran, a new report from **Small Media**, sheds light on these questions. The report assesses Iran's strategies across various global internet governance events by analysing public statements, examining its delegations, and comparing its global priorities against its domestic ICT record.

Advocating State Sovereignty

In terms of the long-running debate about the role of the state in internet governance, Iran has been a consistent advocate of the centrality of national governments. At the 2003 World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), the delegation sent by reformist president Mohammad Khatami **insisted upon** recognition of the "national sovereignty of all states" in the global administration of the internet. Not much has changed since then. In the lead up to last year's NetMundial conference in Sao Paulo, Iran released a **summary document** which underlined its commitment to expanding the power of national government over global internet policy decisions.

There are a number of possible explanations for Iran's preference for state-centric models of internet governance. The first concerns domestic ICT policy. It is no secret that Iranian cyberspace is subjected to a **vast government filtering apparatus**, which blocks popular social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook. A global regime of internet governance based on state sovereignty could justify and empower the Iranian government to perpetuate these filtering policies, and attenuate the perceived threat posed by social media activism.

At the same time, Iran's approach may simply reflect the widely-held criticism of multistakeholderism which holds that it puts developing countries at an unfair disadvantage in global debates. As **stated** by Julia Pohle: "multistakeholder processes actually tend to increase the

overrepresentation of actors from the highly developed Western world, while neglecting developing countries, which often lack independent civil society networks and strong business players.” In this light, Iran’s actions could place it as a dedicated advocate for Global South engagement in the internet governance debate, a characterisation that Iran has attempted to reinforce through its efforts on international ICT development.

ICT development

One of the more surprising findings of this report was that along with state sovereignty, Iran has demonstrated a firm commitment to ICT development. At global events, Iran has consistently stressed the centrality of the **Millenium Development goals**, a series of objectives aimed at eradicating extreme poverty. In addition to underlining the value of development initiatives internationally, Iran has also pursued domestic development policies such as those aimed at increasing internet connectivity within the country. Iran’s efforts have not gone unnoticed, with UNESCO **awarding** the country a special certificate for its expansion of telecommunication services to thousands of rural villages.

This sustained emphasis on development enables Iran to boast of demonstrable accomplishments in pursuit of internationally recognised objectives at global governance forums. Turning now to the domestic context, a close look at Iran’s engagement with a regional governance event led to additional unexpected findings.

Persian IGF

This study offers the first English-language overview of the Persian IGF, a regional governance event convened in 2014 that may offer hints of a new appraisal of multistakeholderism in Iran. In contrast to Iran’s typical, state-centric approach to internet governance, the Persian IGF’s organising process was spearheaded almost entirely by civil society—the government didn’t even express interest in getting involved until the event had been **formally announced** at the 2013 IGF in Bali.

What’s more, when the government finally did get involved, it participated fully in a multistakeholder process, on an equal footing with civil society and private sector groups. Due to a number of political and logistical hurdles, the event never really got off the ground, so it is difficult to draw any definitive conclusions from the process. However, the example of the Persian IGF does seem to suggest that the Iranian government may be open to making space for non-governmental stakeholders in internet governance debates.

It will be interesting to see whether this process marks the beginning of a long-term shift towards multistakeholderism in Iran. Iranian activists, civil society groups, and entrepreneurs have a great deal of knowledge and expertise to offer the global internet governance debate, and any moves towards their greater inclusion in domestic internet governance dialogues should be welcomed.

This post gives the views of the author, and does not represent the position of the LSE Media Policy Project blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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