

Protecting Reformist and Citizen Journalists in Iran

Claudia Mendoza and Saba Farzan

Abstract

In their contribution, Claudia Mendoza and Saba Farzan, draw attention to the current situation of citizen journalists in Iran. Their analysis begins with the gravity of repression young journalistic voices are confronted with. The authors continue to express how the international community can and must seek steps to support citizen journalism inside Iran.

Biography

Claudia Mendoza is a Research Analyst at the Legatum Institute. She works on a variety of topics related to foreign policy, security, and the Middle East, with a particular focus on Iran and the Gulf. Prior to joining the Institute, Claudia was an Associate Fellow for Middle East, at the Henry Jackson Society. She is also a former Legacy Heritage Fellow at the Transatlantic Institute in Brussels. She has published articles in various publications including Standpoint Magazine, the New Statesman, the Jerusalem Post, and the Daily Star Lebanon. Claudia has a Master's degree in Middle East Studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies and a Bachelor's degree in Biochemistry from the University College of London.

Saba Farzan was born in Tehran and grew up in Germany. She is an independent writer for major German, Austrian and Swiss newspapers as well as the European edition of the Wall Street Journal on Iranian civil society, Iran and the USA, as well as German-Iranian relations. She holds a Master's degree from the University of Bayreuth in Theatre studies, American Literature and Sociology with research stays in New York and at Yale University. She currently lives in Geneva, Switzerland.

Protecting Reformist and Citizen Journalists in Iran

Reporters without borders once famously referred to Iran as the 'largest prison for journalists'. As well as having the largest number of jailed journalists in the world, 'free' journalists live in constant fear of being arrested. Access to and free flow of information is a major key to advancing freedom, human rights, and social justice around the world. The US and others should continue to encourage freedom of expression worldwide and invest in technology and training programs to make access to, and free flow of, information more accessible.

By launching numerous reform-oriented newspapers and countless blogs over the last two decades, Iranian civil society groups have taken courageous steps in order to express their views on Iranian and world politics. In doing so, they have been able to reveal what they call the 'true Iran'.

Since the brutal crackdown on Iran's Freedom Movement in the summer of 2009, the days of relatively tolerant debate in print media have completely disappeared and there are no reform based newspapers left. Even opposition leader Mehdi Karroubi's newspaper, Etemad-e Melli, has been banned. During her interview with Radio Israel in Farsi, Mitra Khalatbari, the former editor, expressed further difficulties that journalists inside the country faced – both politically and financially. For example, articles ready to go to print were never actually published as the authorities banned the newspaper. As a systematic way

of discouraging critical journalists, writers would not only never see their work published but they would also never receive payment. Khalatbari was one of many forced to leave Iran in the summer of 2009.

With printed reform oriented newspapers under threat, it is just as well that old-fashioned media in the form of basic print and broadcast platforms are no longer the only sources of information available to the outside world. The widespread use of social media, notably Facebook, Twitter and YouTube has meant that information platforms have grown exponentially and the Internet is now essentially the biggest and fastest growing means of effective communication, playing a huge role in journalism, specifically citizen journalism.

The progressive role of technology in Iranian civilian protests is not new. Iran's history is rich in revolutionary uprisings and every revolutionary step had, in its time, a modern means of communication. During the Constitutional Revolution at the beginning of the 20th century, for example, it was the telegram that helped demonstrators organise their protests. The Freedom Movement of the 21st century organised mass demonstrations using the modern communication channels previously mentioned.

In the June 2009 protests, the death of a young protestor, Neda Agha Soltan, which was captured on a protestor's mobile phone and uploaded to YouTube, came to symbolise the plight of the Iranian people who had suffered under the brutal and oppressive leadership of the Islamic Republic for 30 years. This is but one example of how citizen journalists have functioned as the eyes and ears of the international media.

Unfortunately, the monitoring system Nokia Siemens delivered to the Islamic Republic has made a crackdown on social media stations much easier to facilitate, resulting in the detention of thousands of peaceful protestors. The journalist Isa Saharkhiz was arrested and sentenced to prison after regime officials monitored his communication links using this system. He and his son have started a lawsuit against Nokia Siemens and its delivery of monitoring technology to the Iranian regime. A political prisoner starting a lawsuit against both the regime and a company is unprecedented in Iranian history. Despite the grave human rights violations, Iranian civil society, both inside the dark prisons and outside, have managed to remain vocal.

What Can Be Done to Help Iranians in their Quest for Freedom?

The reluctance of the Obama administration to convey support for the protests in 2009 was borne out of the fear of tainting the pro-democracy movement as a western-inspired plot. It was branded as such, regardless. His silence during the protests angered the Iranian people who chanted, "Obama, Obama — either you're with them or you're with us."

The US has learnt some hard lessons and during the recent wave of protests sweeping across the region. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton intensified pressure on Middle East governments to ensure open access to the Internet, claiming that "those who clamp down on Internet freedom may be able to hold back the full impact of their people's yearnings for a while, but not forever." This is especially significant as social media sites continue to play a central role in organising political movements across the region.

The world has witnessed the dominant role of new technology used by demonstrators peacefully demanding freedom in Tunisia and Egypt - the monitoring system in Iran however means that the Iranian Freedom Movement has not been able to triumph accordingly. Using

all political means necessary, Europe and its partners should prevent business deals like the Nokia Siemens one taking place in the future.

According to the Legatum Institute's Prosperity Index, almost 60% of Iranians own mobile phones, well above the global average. The potential for information dissemination both internally and externally among mobile phone users is vast given the technologies attached to modern phones. However, because of the sophisticated state-mandated, draconian Internet filtering system, their scope is limited. The international community should be protesting Iran's attempts to block broadcast signals, a violation of international law, as well as helping to get Iranians the technology to overcome censorship.

There are some limitations to citizen journalism given that the operators are usually dissenters and, therefore, politically motivated. Nevertheless, in the face of media restrictions, their work is essential to ensuring the free flow of information and with proper training citizen journalists can effectively fill the information void.

The training should be two fold – firstly, they must be taught to report only what they see; answering the essential questions such as where and when an event took place. In order for their work to remain unbiased and valuable to banned professional journalists, it must lack the narrative. Secondly, in order for citizen journalists to remain securely online and avoid the risk of government crackdown, their privacy must be protected. There are some very simple tools for doing this, which are available on special training websites. Funding and supporting these sites will allow more people to continue their activities safely.

Following the easing of US export controls, Google made a number of its products available to Iranian users in January. Notwithstanding this positive development, there are still a fair number of Google products that are blocked as a result of being over prudent and not wanting to violate the Iran Sanctions Act. Despite assertions from the US government that these websites are allowed to be active, these sites retain a strict interpretation of the Act. If these websites are playing a leading role in disseminating information, they have a responsibility to act rather than avoid a solution on 'non political' grounds.

Also, these websites must customise their services by designing products in a way that make them easy to access inside Iran. This is entirely possible as evidenced by the launching of 'Facebook Zero', a stripped down version of Facebook that allows users to sidestep slow bandwidth which otherwise acts as an obstacle to accessing the site from mobile phones. Subsequently, many more Indians and others who suffer from slow bandwidth have been able to access the website using their mobiles.

Civil society, NGOs, and the media should all be asserting pressure on these websites to customise their products so that Iranians and other citizens of repressive regimes are able to access information more freely.

Finally, moral encouragement as a tool for change should never be underestimated. Being reminded that others on this path have succeeded would be a huge and much needed morale boost for the Iranian people who look at the successes in Tunisia and Egypt with a combination of hope, envy and despondence as they have yet to make progress in their own quest for freedom.

On February 11th, exactly 32 years after Ayatollah Khomeini took power in Iran, Hosni Mubarak was ousted from Egypt. Instead of Iran hailing this as 'the echo of its voice in other

parts of the Muslim world', it should serve as an eerie reminder to Messrs Khamenei and Ahmadinejad and their henchmen that fervent defiance of popular demands is not sustainable.