The Green Movement and Technology: What the Free World Can Do To Help

Mariam Memarsadeghi

Abstract

The origin of the struggle for human rights in Iran dates back to the months leading to the 1979 revolution. With the re-emergence of this process through the Green Movement, and the subsequent Arab Spring, the American "anything by Bush" policy stands in need of re-examination. Concrete steps and a holistic approach to the pivotal issue of access to information is at the heart of this re-examination.

Biography

Mariam Memarsadeghi is the founder and director of TAVAANA: E-Learning Institute for Iranian Civil Society. Recognised as a "Transatlantic Young Leader" by the Bertelsmann Foundation and the German Marshall Fund, she was awarded an educational grant from The Washington Post. She studied political science and political theory at Dickinson College (BA) and the University of Massachusetts, Amherst (MA). She is an expert on free media and Internet initiatives for repressive regime contexts and helped found the bi-lingual web magazine Gozaar: A Journal on Democracy and Human Rights in Iran while serving as Senior Program Manager at Freedom House.

The Green Movement and Technology: What the Free World Can Do To Help

Nearly two years ago in Iran, well before civic uprisings erupted throughout the Arab world, outrage over a stolen election galvanised nonviolent protests the likes of which the Middle East region had not seen since the 1979 Iranian revolution. Collective strength conquered fear as millions protested peacefully in cities throughout the country, day after day. Empowered by mobile phones and Internet technology, Iranians of various political stripes and social backgrounds in country and across the globe came together under one banner, melding fractures that had inhibited a beleaguered opposition for decades. Iranians' consciousness, reflected on the streets and on social networks, was one of hope for an imminent, progressive breakthrough toward liberal governance, universal human rights and an open society at peace with the world. Green Movement protestors braved one of the world's most repressive regimes to press for freedom and an end to corrupt, theocratic rule. Regime fissures and a Green Movement leadership that included political "insiders", namely presidential candidates Mousavi and Karroubi and former President Mohammad Khatami, played heavily into hopes for a peaceful democratic transition.

Despite the heavy momentum of million-strong marches, sustained cyber-activism and outpouring of global solidarity, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei managed a slow but calculated, pervasive and brutal crackdown. Stalinist-style show trials, forced, televised confessions, executions, systemic rape and torture, widespread Internet control and surveillance and high-tech shaming campaigns against dissidents became standard features of the regime's assault. The crackdown continues today, and Iran's leading student activists, feminists, reformist politicians, artists, intellectuals, and journalists are either behind bars, in hiding or have left Iran as part of a new mass exodus reminiscent of that following the 1979 revolution. Yet despite the severe risks, Iranians do continue their non-violent street protests, albeit sporadically and in fewer numbers. Watching the Arab Spring, there is among activists and society at large bitterness about missed chances, lost opportunities and

betrayal from the free world but also the lingering sweet taste of a still closer, undeniable future of democratic breakthrough.

When the Green Movement was first born, it demanded international recognition and support for its cause, if not formal recognition of Mir Hossein Mousavi's electoral victory over Ahmadinejad. As the world's tyrants, lead by Russia, rushed to support Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the Iranian regime, the Green Movement looked with exasperated hope to the free world. Protest slogans such as, "Barak Hussein Obama! Ya Ba Oona, Ya ba Ma!" meaning, "Barak Hussein Obama, You are either with them [the regime] or with us [the protestors]," prevailed on the streets as protestors sought to force the US to make a moral choice and to unambiguously side with the masses against the repressive state.

Yet the outbreak of the Green Movement coincided unluckily with a brand new, unshaped Obama foreign policy, one marked more by an 'anything but Bush' mentality than any substantive stance on how to support Middle Eastern democrats, much less full-fledged, civic movements for democratic breakthrough. Committed to ending the Iranian nuclear program via diplomacy and containing the Iranian regime rather than forcing its collapse, the Obama administration refused to budge. Concerned that support for the Green Movement would jeopardise a nuclear deal, the administration, having just reached out directly to the Supreme Leader with two letters, at turns justified the lack of American support for the Green Movement as an attempt to avoid infringement on Iranian "sovereignty", and at other turns publicly questioned whether it would make any difference for the US if the real winner of the presidential election would take office. Beyond late and muted condemnations of human rights violations, the administration was not willing to do more. America effectively snubbed pro-American Iranian protestors yearning to join the free world. How much this decided restraint on the part of the leader of the free world vis à vis the Green Movement cost the struggle for a democratic Iran, not to mention US interests, is difficult to measure. But already among Iranian civic activists and intellectuals, there is widespread scepticism about America's Iran policy, with some claiming that if in 1953 the US thwarted democratic development via a CIA-backed coup, now, some sixty years later, it had again caused a democratic setback, but this time as a result of appeasement and debilitating caution.

Now, in the wake of the Arab Spring, American rhetoric on people power movements for democracy has been forced to shift toward an acknowledgement, at times reluctantly, at times heartedly, of fundamental social and political change in the Middle East and beyond. At the same time, significantly the US and other governments are launching more robust initiatives for the promotion of Internet freedom.   In just the last few months, the US has committed $30 million in new funding for global Internet freedom initiatives, the Swedish government has launched a $23 million for the same and other governments, especially the Dutch and Canadian, are increasingly prioritising Internet freedom programming as part of their international human rights programming. Private companies, led most notably by Google, are broadening their commitment to expand free and safe access to the Internet by those living in repressive regimes. Yet much remains in flux, and in the case of Iranian cyberspace, the lack of safe, unfettered access at critical times in the development of the Green Movement, combined with debacles such as US government support for the not only dysfunctional but unsafe Haystack circumvention program have frustrated Iranians willing to believe the free world is supportive of their struggle for democracy.

For the renewed commitment to democracy promotion in the Middle East to bear fruit in Iran, and for the new Internet freedom funds to work effectively for Iranian cyberspace, the following public policy, private sector and programmatic commitments will be necessary:

- A robust political commitment from Washington and European capitals to support Iranians' free access to information. Bold, unapologetic backing of the Green Movement's need to communicate domestically and with the free world should be consistently provided. This support should come from legislatures, as has already been the case, and from official statements from executive branches as a key part of foreign policies towards Iran. Open support of the Iranian people's struggle for freedom builds hope and provides invaluable moral solidarity. Historic precedents providing such solidarity and assistance to people fighting for their freedom in other totalitarian regimes, particularly through Radio Free Europe, demonstrate how support for democracy in Iran is a moral calling and an essential exercise of the national interest of all free nations.

- Disbursing immediately the $30 million authorised by the US Congress for Internet freedom globally and the $20 million for Internet freedom in Iran under the VOICE act. The funds can provide for an urgent increase in the use of circumvention tools.

- Europe's provision of technology funds in support of Iranians' free access to technology. The EU should match the US commitment, and each European country should aim to match the dollar commitment of the Swedish government for global Internet freedom ($23 million) and at least match the funds dedicated by the Netherlands for Iran specific Internet freedom initiatives ($1 million).

- Donors' prioritised support for access to technology over the development of Web-based content. Iranians are already capable of producing informative and engaging online content about human rights, democracy, the rule of law and non-violent resistance. What is needed is greater attention to free access.

- Using varied and diverse technological solutions to combat repression. Multiple technologies should be explored to provide free and secure satellite, Internet and mobile phone access to overcome Tehran's sophisticated use of technology against its people. Donors should convene conferences to discuss all technological options. Transparency, trust building and collaborative action among donors and implementers should be a priority. Technological assistance has thus far been provided too opaquely and competitively, resulting in redundancies in some areas and a lack of attention in others.

- Increasing support to proven circumvention technologies that combat Internet censorship and to promote long-term sustainability of such technologies, their continuous improvement and user-friendly distribution. Server capacity for the most effective circumvention tools is now severely limited for Iranians. With more funds, well-established, tested circumvention tools can rapidly provide free access to the Internet for tens of thousands more Iranians.

- Ensuring circumvention tools undergo usability studies to ensure good aesthetics, ease of use, and adequate support for users. Many Iranians know about circumvention but not know how to do it safely and effectively. Circumvention tools supported by donor agencies should demonstrate their effectiveness through transparent displays of usage data per country.

- Donor testing of Internet via satellite. Initially costing US$2,000 per user per year, satellite Internet access may quickly catch on among Iranians, opening up a (albeit black) market that already exists for satellite television.

- Promoting cooperation between the US, the EU and satellite-television providers to counter the regime. Satellite television is a ubiquitous communications channel much prized by Iranians. But the Iranian regime has recently improved its ability to

jam VOA and BBC satellite airwaves. Eutelsat has threatened to cut off the regime's own satellite infrastructure, provided by the company, if Tehran does not cease jamming EuroTel's foreign broadcasts. VOA and BBC, if not the transatlantic community, should ramp up its pressure on the Iranian regime via Eutelsat. There is no good reason for the Iranian regime to be allowed to continue its broadcasts via Eutelsat when it is jamming VOA and BBC via the same service.

- Making inverse reforms to US and European economic policy towards Iran. As it toughens international sanctions against Iran, the US should amend its own sanctions regime to allow for the maximum provision of freedom-enhancing technology. Europe needs to take immediate steps to reign in the selling of equipment and expertise used to repress the Iranian people.

- Preventing further sales of technology that aid the regime's repression. The EU should facilitate development of a voluntary code of conduct among European companies seeking business in countries with repressive regimes. Such an initiative has been proposed by telecommunications companies themselves as a way to even the playing field toward more ethical behaviour by the industry, but little has been done to implement it. As part of the voluntary code of conduct:

- Businesses should agree not to sell equipment, services or expertise that can facilitate repression in any country ranked "Not Free" by Freedom House. Adherence to such a code will remove pressure on firms to compete in such markets.

- All sales of technology and related services and expertise to Iran should be centrally tracked by the EU using existing mechanisms such as arms-control databases.

- A human-rights impact assessment (similar to domestic privacy impact assessments) of any technology that may be sold to Iran should be performed by an independent group.

- Publicising the limitations of technologies. Donors funding and encouraging the use of technology for civil society development should also educate users in repressive regimes about potential dangers. Such regimes can exploit cell phones, for example, to identify instantly activists' locations, making targeted surveillance and arrest easy.

- Supporting new, innovative uses of the Internet such as virtual classrooms and e-learning initiatives, socially networked advocacy initiatives, awareness campaigns, virtual press conferences, events and global political actions. This could be coordinated with established universities in the US and Europe, as well as with NGOs, media outlets and civic associations.

- Developing fun, animated, Web-based awareness-raising campaigns about cyber-security to help inform unaware activists of the possibilities and the dangers of technology.

- Sharing ideas and talent with Iran's leading cyber-activists as they develop appropriate tools, practices and training. Iranians can engineer home grown solutions to their technology needs. Understanding these needs, collaborating virtually with and advising activists can be as important as providing the technology itself.

- Funding and facilitating security audits for established cyber-activism projects, blogs and news sites, particularly those managed in Iran.

- Expanding knowledge of time-tested, basic protection skills such as decentralised storage of communications, routine destruction of communications, call trees in case of trouble, media advocacy, pseudonymous publishing, closing e-mail accounts of those arrested, and tip sheets describing safe travel options, hospitals, and ground rules before coordinated non-violent actions. Often the best protection mechanisms for activists using technology are non-technological.