

4. IDENTITY POLITICS: ONLINE COMMUNITIES IN IRAN

by Kyle Bowen



Online platforms have opened up spaces for marginalised and niche groups to organise. Although the government attempts to filter and control online spaces, it is ultimately unable to control the parameters of online debate.

The Islamic Republic of Iran polices the morality of its citizens according to rigid conservative interpretations of Islamic law. This ideological imperative is entrenched in the Iranian Constitution, leaving many minority communities in Iran excluded from the public sphere.

While the state was rigorously maintaining the dominance of Islamic norms in public spaces, cyberspace emerged as a crucial alternative forum for free cultural, social and political activity. Online spaces have been colonised by a number of nonconformist groups.

This chapter explores how the internet has provided various social, political and religious factions with new spaces for activism and community building. We present three very different case studies to illustrate this point, focusing firstly on Iran's religious minority groups, before moving onto the LGBT community and, lastly, its religious conservative activists.

For Iran's religious minority and LGBT communities, the internet exists as a space of free expression that is unparalleled in Iranian society. The case of religious conservatives provides an interesting point of contrast: the establishment's push to get regime supporters onto the web demonstrates the growing centrality of the internet as a public forum in modern Iran.

Faith In Fiber Optics: Iran's Religious Cyber-Communities

Iran is host to a wide variety of faiths and religious sects. Despite this diversity, Iran's constitution denotes Shi'a Muslim as the country's official religion and only grants formal recognition to Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians. These groups, considered "people of the book," are permitted to "perform their religious rites and ceremonies and to act according to their own canon in matters of personal affairs and religious education" (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1979).

Despite being constitutionally protected, Iran's recognised minorities face challenges not experienced by the majority Shi'a population, including discrimination in education and employment, a ban on proselytism and, in isolated cases, violent persecution. For Iran's unrecognised minorities, such as the Baha'i, the situation is far worse.

Just as each of Iran's minority religious communities has endured unique challenges, so have their online communities devised unique strategies and solutions to ameliorate the difficult conditions they face.

In the following segment, we take a brief look at a number of faith communities in order to demonstrate how technology has supported the creation of new open spaces for community engagement for these groups.

Enemies of the State: The Baha'i Community

'Gems of Inestimable Value' - The Baha'i Institute of Higher Education

As an unrecognised religious minority, Iran's Baha'i community endures systematic persecution. Considered heretics by Iran's clerical establishment, Baha'is are banned from government employment and their businesses are routinely closed down by the authorities. Moreover Baha'is are categorically excluded from the country's higher education system.¹

1

There are numerous articles that discuss the expulsion of Baha'i students. For examples, see: (Human Rights Activists New Agency, 2011), "Baha'i Student Farnod Jahangiri Expelled from Babolsar University"; and (Mohabat News 2012), "Baha'i student expelled from the University of Zahedan"

Such exclusionary policies have had an adverse effect upon employment opportunities and socio-economic status. They also constitute a spiritual affront to the Baha'i community, who consider education to be of paramount importance. This oft-quoted line from a Baha'i holy text underscores the immense value this religious community places on learning:

Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom.

Baha'u'llah (Lawh-i Maqsud, 1881: 162)

In 1987, the community set up the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education (BIHE), an underground distance learning university that was initially dependent upon a network of couriers connecting students to volunteer teachers. Worksheets and exams were ferried back and forth between staff and students in a laborious process which often meant students had to wait months for feedback on completed assignments.

Face-to-face classes were also conducted in underground classrooms on a semi-regular basis. They took place either in rented buildings or the homes of Baha'i community members, though there always remained the risk of neighbourly tip-offs, raids and arrests. Such raids occurred on a massive scale in 2011, when the homes of around 30 staff were raided, and 16 Baha'i educators were arrested.

The harassment and restrictions are something that, sadly, the Baha'is of Iran have gotten used to. In terms of the BIHE, it's a repeat offense.

Diane Ala'i, UN Representative of the Baha'i International Community

(in Small Media, 2012: 31)

This repressive environment has prompted Baha'is to look for solutions online, with the BIHE making particularly bold moves to embrace the internet as a tool for distance learning. The integration of Skype-based lessons into the BIHE toolkit has allowed the organisation to perform classes in a dispersed and raid-resistant environment and to attract volunteer faculty from all over the world. The BIHE's Affiliated Global Faculty—consisting of Baha'i and non-Baha'i volunteers—has contributed immensely to the organisation's reconstruction effort in the wake of the 2011 crisis (*ibid*: 28).

In addition to facilitating safer and more frequent lessons, the internet has consigned the BIHE's trusty moped courier to history, with resources and examinations exchanged instantly via Moodle platforms (*ibid*). Security remains an issue for any online activities conducted by the BIHE and its students, but the Institute is able to lean on a global community of volunteers to help maintain the university's online security in the face of state attacks.

In sum, the BIHE has become a safer and more efficient institution since it incorporated online platforms into its teaching methods. Harnessing the power of the internet has enabled the BIHE to transform itself into a deep-rooted, resilient, and globally focused institution, which is benefitting from the talents and engagement of Baha'is the world over.

Conversion Denied: The Evangelical Christian Community

Unlike the Baha'i faith, Christianity is a religion formally recognised by Iran's constitution. Iranian Christians are theoretically entitled to practice their faith and live according to its precepts. In practice, Iran's Christians face myriad challenges ranging from state surveillance to raids on their places of worship (Ibid: 56). This section details these challenges and shows how Iranian Christians are increasingly turning to online spaces for solutions.

Instruments of God - Satellite TV and Christian Evangelism in Contemporary Iran

For many evangelical Christians, sharing the 'Good News' is an important duty of their faith. The Islamic Republic's laws against proselytism make it nearly impossible for evangelicals to practice their faith publicly. The fact that Iranian evangelical churches are often linked with churches in the West further fuels the paranoia of the Iranian authorities.

In the absence of open forums in which they can express their faith in Iran, evangelical Christians have organised themselves extensively online and built far-reaching networks with evangelical groups around the world. Illustrative of this trend is the work of the organisation Iran Alive Ministries, a US-based evangelical group that manages the Persian-language evangelical satellite channel Network SeVen, which has the stated goal of 'transform[ing] Iran into a Christian nation within this generation' (Iran Alive Ministries, 2014).

Network SeVen's evangelism campaign is spearheaded by the diaspora-based Pastor Hormoz Shariat, who presents a number of the religious programmes and services delivered to Iran via satellite broadcasts. These broadcasts are theoretically capable of reaching millions of Iranian citizens. Iran Alive Ministries also manages a number of online chatrooms in which interested Iranians may speak with volunteers from around the world, ask questions about Christianity, and on

occasions convert to the faith. Similar opportunities are available via the church's dedicated call-in service (Small Media, 2014a: 63).

This diverse evangelism toolkit offers Christians a means to proselytise inside Iran, and demonstrates the crucial international support that the community receives through online platforms. The strength of these networks has played a major role in enabling persecuted evangelical communities in Iran to persist and grow.

Services Will Resume Shortly - Online Church Attendance in Iran

Foreign evangelical organisations are not solely geared towards fostering rapid growth in Iran; they have also invested in substantial levels of technological infrastructure to support and defend Iran's Christian communities, members of which are monitored closely by the government and intelligence services.²

2

A 2013 report suggested that state agents frequently requested ID numbers from citizens upon entering and leaving churches, adding them to a database for further surveillance (Landinfo, 2013). This practice is less frequent as of 2014, given that all major publicly-operating evangelical churches in Iran have been closed down.

Church attendance has been in a state of decline for years, as a result of increasingly heavy-handed monitoring by the state, bans on Persian-language services (Landinfo, 2013: 11), and the outright closure of many of Iran's last churches (ICHR, 2013a). Muslim converts have always faced particular difficulties participating in public church services, as they are at risk of being charged with apostasy should they be identified by intelligence agents.

3

House church congregations splinter upon hitting a certain size (often around 10 people), in order to maintain small—and therefore discreet—prayer groups. (Landinfo, 2013: 19)

The Christian 'house church' movement arose as a reaction to this crisis, allowing Iranian Christians to come together in private homes to hold services. Rooted in the private sphere, the house church model aims to provide a secure environment in which Iranian Christians may congregate away from the prying eyes of state authorities.³

Although they are safer than public congregations, house churches cannot promise total security for participants. In recent years, authorities have intensified their efforts to smother the movement through infiltration and raids (Ibid: 10), often assisted by tip-offs from neighbours (Landinfo, 2013: 16).

House churches work as a team; the Zionists and Westerners have targeted our society's identity and people's religion; they want to create crises, mislead the society and deprive them of their identity.

Hojjat al-Islam Abbas Kaebi, Member of the Assembly of Experts, 2010 (ICHR, 2013b: 25)

Online and satellite platforms have provided safer alternatives for Christians to take part in religious services. Iran Alive Ministries has a channel named 'Church SeVen' which broadcasts church services into viewers' living rooms. This has enabled Iranian Christians to experience services without having to endure the risk of government harassment that attending an above-ground service often entails.

(Small Media, 2014a: 63)

We want you to know that my family and I put on our best clothes, got our chairs and our Bibles, and we sat down, watched the program together, and we attended church for the first time.

A Church SeVen viewer (Ibid)

These new online church services have made a significant difference to the lives of evangelical Christians in Iran, providing them with spaces in which they may partake in religious ceremonies with a greater sense of security and privacy.

Synagogues in Cyberspace - A Global Community of Persian Jews

Although Judaism is officially recognised and protected under the Iranian constitution, the country's Jewish community continues to face unique challenges. As well as being forced to endure the frequent anti-Semitic diatribes of clerics that clumsily conflate Judaism with Zionism, the community has been weakened considerably in the wake of decades of mass emigration.

Digital Diaspora: Jewish Responses to Mass Emigration

Around a third of Iran's Jewish population emigrated to Israel between the years 1948 and 1953, with a further 50,000 making the decision to leave the country between 1979-86 (Price, 2005). This has left old institutions and organisations with diminished memberships, eroding Iranian Jews' sense of community and endangering their ancient religio-cultural identity. As with Christians and Baha'is, Iranian Jews have increasingly sought solutions online.

Although Jewish communities have declined sharply in many cities, the rising popularity of social networks has allowed Jewish Iranians from geographically distant cities to build new connections. This process has served to ameliorate the sense of isolation and cultural decline felt by some Iranian Jews (particularly those from smaller towns and cities).

Hi, I am very interested to meet or speak with a Jew. If there is someone who can help or guide me, I'd be thankful.

'Nima', on a Persian-language Facebook page serving the Jewish community (Small Media, 2014a: 84)

This process spans the globe. Jointly run from Los Angeles and Tehran, the website 7Dorim was set up as a means for Iranian Jews the in diaspora to learn about the history and culture of their religious community through religious texts, historical accounts, and interactive tours of some of Iran's largest synagogues (ibid: 82). Such initiatives provide a valuable bridge between diaspora communities at high risk of losing their religio-cultural identities, and beleaguered communities back in Iran.

Seeking Refuge: Iran's LGBT Community

Iranians who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender (LGBT) are frequently subject to widespread state persecution and endemic societal discrimination.⁴ As a result, many LGBT people have been forced to leave the country, with the majority languishing in Turkish refugee camps for extended periods. However, many other LGBT Iranians have remained, contributing to the growth of Iran's increasingly tech-dependent LGBT community.

The internet has been a central pillar of support for Iran's sexual minorities. The web offers comparatively safe networking opportunities for LGBT people in the country, countering their isolation and allowing them to build wider social networks in which they may speak freely and honestly.

Proud Voices - The Growth of Online Activism

Online platforms provide a space for activism in support of the LGBT community. Whereas public discourses around homosexuality are dominated by intolerant religious conservatives, the internet allows LGBT Iranians to access and engage with more liberal viewpoints. In this way, online resources can attenuate the feelings of guilt and shame the dominant narrative often provokes in members of the LGBT community.

One prominent resource for LGBT Iranians was Ketabkhaneh88, an online queer book fair launched to coincide with the opening of Tehran's International Book Fair in May 2009.⁵ Originally hosting user-

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Same-sex sexual relations are forbidden under Iran's penal code. The Penal Code defines sodomy (*lavvat*) as sexual intercourse between two men, and prescribes the death penalty for both parties (provided they are mature, and that the judge receives either a confession, or the testimony of four witnesses). For juveniles, the law prescribes 74 lashes each. For lesbianism, the law prescribes 100 lashes for each party. An individual's fourth successive conviction potentially carries the death penalty (Islamic Penal Code: Book II, Chapter II).

5

In order to publish in Iran, authors must have their work approved by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, which rejects all books deemed to contain 'immoral' contentis being conducted in four primary, as well as texts written by openly LGBT figures (Index on Censorship, 2013). For more on literary censorship in Iran, see Chapter 5.

submitted works on the Blogfa blogging platform, Ketabkhaneh88 was quickly blocked by the government. Regardless, its content was later published on Blogspot, and made freely available to users employing circumvention tools (Small Media, 2012: 64-65).

In recent years, online publishers have enabled authors to circumvent the official application process and publish their works as e-books, with the online publishing company Gilgamishaan set up exclusively for the publication of LGBT titles. As well as offering authors the opportunity to have their forbidden works presented to a wider audience, Gilgamishaan and Ketabkhaneh88 also demonstrated to LGBT people that they can make valuable contributions to Iran's literary culture.

The internet does not serve as a wholly positive force in terms of advancing the position of LGBT Iranians. As an open forum it also provides a platform for homophobes and religious conservatives to air their views, which can serve to further entrench the prejudices that beset the LGBT community in Iran (Small Media, 2012: 51).

Meeting People - LGBT Dating and Networking

The internet also provides LGBT people with new opportunities for making connections. Due to the oppression of the LGBT community in Iran, traditional avenues for meeting new people are all but closed off. Whereas 'cruising' the streets of major cities is one (risky) option available to gay Iranians, technology has introduced countless new opportunities for connecting with potential friends, hook-ups, or partners.

A notable example of this is Manjam, a social networking website that utilises GPS and 'social discovery' technology to connect gay and bisexual men. This website is extremely popular with Iranians both inside and outside the country.

While websites like Manjam may provide a safer and more dignified option for meeting people than cruising the streets, they are not thought to be entirely danger-free. There have been isolated reports of government officials infiltrating these websites, and even joining LGBT Facebook groups in order to trap, harass, and abuse gay Iranians (ibid: 62-3). Even if this phenomenon is not particularly widespread, such stories are enough to instill a sense of fear and paranoia into the LGBT community in Iran.

LGBT-targeted mobile phone apps have also entered the Iranian market in recent years, with apps such as Grindr allowing users to chat and arrange meet-ups with ease. However, these platforms carry a number of significant security risks; a recent investigation into Grindr security flaws demonstrated that the app could be exploited to see the precise location of Iranian users, making them vulnerable to arrest and entrapment (America Blog, 2014).

Although the internet has empowered Iran's LGBT community with countless networking and organisational tools, it has also made LGBT Iranians much easier to track, identify, and entrap. At the same time, the government has been working very proactively to smother these emerging communities, using every means at its disposal to impede users' access to content,⁶ and promote the growth of conservative activism in cyberspace.

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For more information on the tools Iran uses to filter, track, and intercept internet users, see Chapter 2.

Counter-Culture: Iranian Government Responses to Online Opposition

Not all online communities in Iran are treated with such open hostility by the state. In fact, one of the most striking online developments in the past five years has been the emergence of the 'Arzeshi' community - Iran's extensive network of conservative and religious bloggers, united in their devotion to Supreme Leader Khamenei and the ideology of the Islamic Republic.

In the aftermath of the chaotic presidential election of 2009, the rising tide of anti-regime sentiment in cyberspace prompted the Ahmadinejad government and Revolutionary Guard (IRGC) to invest in the promotion of conservative online content. Although the movement was initially propelled by the efforts of the conservative establishment to play 'catch-up' with reformists, it soon took on a life of its own and fragmented. These divisions in the online community deepened over time, and thereby opened a window into the factionalism dividing conservatives in the Islamic Republic today.

Organised Resistance - The Emergence of the Arzeshi Community

Iranian officials have claimed the existence of tens of thousands of Arzeshi activists online, who are working to combat reformists and anti-government activists in cyberspace. Research conducted by Small Media has corroborated this, to an extent. A huge Arzeshi online blogging

network is in existence, comprised of over 67,000 blogs and websites (Small Media, 2014b). But these statistics cannot tell the full story; the vast majority of these blogs are essentially bare in terms of the content they offer, and receive no significant online traffic (ibid).

Furthermore, the Arzeshi does not seem to be a cohesive and purposeful political force working to disseminate revolutionary values, but rather a fractured online community of bickering conservative factions. This is borne out by their failure to rally around a single candidate in the 2013 presidential elections, and the poorly connected nature of the community: only 1.4% of blogs in the extended network are 'well-connected', receiving 25 or more links from other Arzeshi sites.

The fact that many of these conservative blogs are both poorly connected and content-poor further supports the notion of government involvement. While it is possible that a vast conservative blogosphere spontaneously emerged and was then almost immediately abandoned, a more plausible explanation is that the state wanted to create the impression of strength on social media by stimulating the growth of thousands of blogs, which were not subsequently maintained.

This state-backed effort was undertaken with specific goals in mind, having emerged out of an extraordinary political context. Public statements from governmental and IRGC officials⁷ suggest that thousands of conservative bloggers were trained in response to the growth of reformist-aligned online activism in the wake of the 2009 election controversy.⁸ The flooding of Iranian cyberspace with conservative content was designed to counter the dominance of Green Movement narratives online.

7

IRGC Commander Bahram Hosseini Motlagh announced the training of between 15000-20000 conservative bloggers in November 2010 (in Fars News, 2010) <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=890901176>

8

The reformist Green Movement made extensive use of social media in the aftermath of the controversial 2009 elections. For more on the role of social networks in the 2009 post-election protests, see (Moghanizadeh, 2013)

Overconfidence - Crackdowns on Conservative Online Activists

Although the government played a central role in bringing the Arzeshi community to life, once it became active, the authorities found it difficult to control. Factionalism has prevented a cohesive online force from forming, and has resulted in conservative bloggers causing trouble for authorities. Blogs have been closed down; bloggers have been arrested.

The story of regime supporter Amir Hassan Sagha illustrates this paradox. Sagha published a blog post accusing Sadeqh Larijani, the

head of Iran's Judiciary, and his brother Ali Larijani, the parliamentary speaker, of abusing their political power and silencing their opponents. Two days after the post was made, Sagha was arrested and his blog closed down. Regardless of one's political orientation, writing open criticisms of powerful members of the establishment remains deeply risky (Small Media, 2014b).

The fate of the Arzeshi community illustrates three important points about the internet in Iran. Firstly, by supporting a group of bloggers to do its rhetorical bidding online, the Iranian authorities have demonstrated how powerful they believe public discourse on the internet to be.

Secondly, the factionalism that came to define the Arzeshi demonstrates the unpredictable and contentious nature of the internet as a forum for debate, a forum over which the government is unable to exert much editorial control.

Thirdly, the persecution of some conservative bloggers illustrates the inherent risks associated with speaking out online, even for those advancing views that putatively cohere with the government line.

In short, the case of the Arzeshi underlines the complex nature of the internet as a venue for public discussion: it is a relatively open forum in which it is difficult for the government to control the conversation. Yet there is no guarantee that broaching certain topics won't be met with harsh reprisals on the part of the authorities. Although conservative bloggers do not receive the same level of online surveillance as sexual and religious minorities, they still need to watch themselves.

Blogging Is So Passé: Changing Spaces of Online Communities

The platforms of online debate and community building have changed dramatically over the past decade. Iran was once host to one of the most thriving blogging communities in the world, but the ascendance of social networking platforms has eroded the influence of 'Blogestan'.

Iran became a "nation of bloggers" between early 2000 and 2009, as a vibrant, diverse set of online blogs became the platform for expression for thousands of Iranians...Those blogs emerged as a space for active, intense, ongoing discussions on everything from politics to poetry.

Fred Petrossian, Arash Abadpour and Mahsa Alimardani (Washington Post, 2014)

Iranians are still engaging in online discussions, they've simply switched platforms. Whereas blogs were once thriving hubs of engagement, today social networks serve as the primary venues for community-building, debate, and activism.

From 2000 to 2009, most online communities organised themselves using blogs. More recently, the Iranian blogosphere has been in a state of rapid decline. One study found that only around 20% of the most prominent blogs active in 2009 were still online in September 2013 (Iran Media Program, 2014: 24). The bloggers who remain are far less active than they used to be, with 70% of respondents publishing one post per month or less (ibid).

While the Baha'is use Skype and Moodle to run their online university and develop education networks, and the conservative community has embraced blogs as a means of disseminating ideological and political content, commonalities between these groups also exist.

Facebook's popularity cuts across all of these communities, with even conservative communities openly flouting the ban on social networks to disseminate religious and conservative content more widely (Small Media, 2014b).⁹

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Although Facebook is blocked by the authorities, usage is ubiquitous owing to widespread usage of circumvention technology. For more on this topic, see Chapter 2.

Religious groups host social and theological debates on Facebook. Whereas some groups remain publically accessible in the hope of stimulating discussion with non-adherents,¹⁰ others remain closed or private, enabling participants to engage without the fear of being identified by Iran's police or intelligence services. Many LGBT groups are fearful of infiltration and entrapment, and remain closed and secretive as a result.

10

The Baha'is maintain one open group for Iranians with over 7000 members, whereas two evangelical Christian groups exist with over 3500 members each (Small Media, 2014)

Facebook groups generally provide a freer environment for community discussions than official organisational websites. Whereas the websites of Iran-based Zoroastrian organisations tend to be apolitical and strictly community-focused (thereby discouraging undue government attention), Facebook groups are far more provocative in their content.

An examination of active Zoroastrian Facebook groups quickly reveals the prevalence of pre-Islamic Iranian nationalism and anti-clericalism as dominant discussion strands within the community. This is because social networks are semi-private spaces in which community members can express their grievances without exposing public organisations to harassment and intimidation from state authorities.

Online Communities: Risks and Rewards

Online platforms have opened up spaces for marginalised and niche groups to organise and discuss. We have found these spaces to be particularly important for at-risk groups, who are often prevented from organising activities in public spaces. Although the government attempts to filter and control online spaces, it is ultimately unable to control the parameters of online debate.

Online platforms have been able to facilitate tangible improvements in the lives of oppressed individuals. Whether providing a Baha'i woman with a university degree, a gay man with essential support and information, or a Christian the opportunity to go to church in their living room, technology has driven massive improvements in the lives of millions of Iranian minority communities.

Many of the risks these communities face in society also carry over to online spaces. Although social media platforms provide space for alternative discourse, they are also a channel for the propagation of hegemonic conservative ideologies. Vulnerable minorities can also be verbally abused, tracked, and entrapped by the authorities in these spaces. While the future of cyber communities in Iran is difficult to predict, battles between the government and minority groups will increasingly be fought online. ♦

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