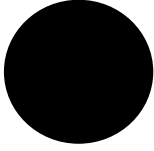


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Bloggers vs. Mullahs: How the Internet Roils Iran

Bill Berkeley

We Are Iran: The Persian Blogs

Nasrin Alavi

New York: Soft Skull Press, 2005

When I first traveled to Iran in 2003, the trip happened to coincide with my birthday. Far from home and family, in a land that for an American might have seemed far from friendly, I assumed the date would pass without song or fanfare. In the event, my last three nights in Tehran were taken up with three huge birthday parties, replete with mountainous spreads of rice and kabobs, tasty cakes, and one memorably erotic dance performance in my honor by a teenage Iranian girl in spiky hair and skintight pants. At the last of these occasions, I found myself surrounded by about two-dozen Iranians singing me a spirited “Happy Birthday.” But there was an embarrassed pause when they reached the line “Happy Birthday dear...” No one could remember my name.

For alas, it was not my personal charisma that attracted so many newfound friends, but the fact that I was American. Like many others before me, I was discovering that for all the harsh “Death to the Great Satan” rhetoric of Iran’s political leaders and the image the Islamic Republic projects as a beacon of radical Islam, Americans are actually well liked in Iran. So much so, in fact, that in my chance encounters with ordinary Iranians, from hotel bellhops to taxi drivers to merchants, I developed the habit of saying I was Canadian, not to avoid trouble but to avoid being drawn into prolonged conversation if I didn’t have plenty of time.

In three subsequent visits, I learned that Iranian attitudes toward America are more complicated than their personal hospitality might suggest, and they are evolving. With America at war in neighboring Iraq and Afghanistan, and with the drumbeat of Washington’s own harsh rhetoric about “regime change” and the “axis of evil,” Iranians high and low, left and right, still cultivate long-held suspicions about American foreign policy. But the deeper lesson of my warm personal encounters remains: Iran up close is not what it seems from afar.

These thoughts came to mind as I read *We Are Iran: The Persian Blogs*, a fascinating new book by a young Iranian journalist, Nasrin Alavi, which chronicles the rapid growth of the Iranian blogosphere. As in China, where the Internet is having a profound impact on political discourse, the Internet in Iran is challenging the Islamist regime’s ability to control news and shape public opinion, particularly among Iran’s well-educated younger generation. Alavi’s book, which combines extensive excerpts from Iranian blogs with an informative background narrative of the last century of Iranian history, opens a unique window on the political passions roiling Iran.

At a time of increasing bellicosity on all sides over Iran’s nuclear program, when Iran’s new hard-line president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, seems to be harkening back to the harsh anti-Western militancy of the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, *We Are*

Iran is a timely reminder that behind the menacing façade is another Iran, teeming with sympathetic voices. The “We” of the defiant title is a huge and dynamic young population that mostly despises its leaders, craves contact with the outside world, and yearns for nothing more culturally clashing than accountable government and the rule of law.

A Safe Space

In September 2001, a young Iranian journalist named Hossein Derakhshan, who had recently moved to Canada, established one of the very first weblogs in his native Persian. In short order, Derakhshan created a simple “how-to-blog” guide in Persian. Less than five years later, there are now more than 75,000 Persian blogs. In neighboring Iraq, by comparison, there are fewer than 50 known bloggers. Persian is believed to be the third most frequently used language in the blogosphere, behind only English and Chinese. These are astonishing developments.

“Blogging in Iran has grown so fast because it meets the needs no longer met by the print media,” Alavi writes. “It provides a safe space in which people may write freely on a wide variety of topics, from the most serious and urgent to the most frivolous.” She quotes one blogger writing in November 2004, “I keep a weblog so that I can breath in this suffocating air.... In a society where one is taken to history’s abattoir for the mere crime of thinking, I write so as not to be lost in my despair, so that I feel that I am somewhere where my calls for justice can be uttered.... I write a weblog so that I can shout, cry and laugh, and do the things that they have taken away from me in Iran today.”

The Persian Internet has its roots in the short-lived flowering of an independent press in Iran that followed the election of the reformist President Mohammed Khatami in 1997. Scores of vibrant newspapers began publishing critical commentary and

brave, if sometimes reckless and partisan, investigative journalism. But the ruling mullahs who hold real power in Iran, led by the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, soon fought back, shutting down more than 100 newspapers and jailing many reporters and editors. Now some of these prominent Iranian journalists use blogs to bypass strict state censorship and to publish their work online. Exiled Iranians worldwide also blog to communicate with those back home.

In April 2003, Iran’s regime became the first in the world to imprison a blogger. Dozens have since been jailed, many claiming torture. In 2004, Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi-Shahrudi, the head of Iran’s judiciary, one of the key coercive arms of the Iranian regime, denounced the Internet as a “Trojan horse carrying enemy soldiers in its belly.” He announced new laws covering “cyber crimes”: anyone “propagating against the regime, acting against national security, disturbing the public mind and insulting religious sanctities through computer systems or telecommunications will be punished,” he vowed. The announcement was accompanied by articles in state-controlled newspapers like Tehran’s *Keyhan* daily, which “exposed” the Iranian blogosphere as a “network led by the CIA conspiring to overthrow the regime.”

Unsurprisingly, many Iranians blog anonymously, yet some prominent bloggers still write under their own names. One is Bijan Safsari, former editor and publisher of several pro-democracy newspapers that were shut down over the last several years. In a typical pattern, each time one of his newspapers was shut down, it resurfaced under a new name. Safsari was eventually jailed. “At a time when our society is deprived of its rightful free means of communication,” he blogged in February 2004, “and our newspapers are being closed down one by one—with writers and journalists crowding the corners of our jails...the only realm that can safeguard and shoulder

the responsibility of free speech is the blogosphere.”

Estimates of the number of online users in Iran range from 4 million to 7 million, with thousands of Iranians buying computers every month and going online. That’s still a small percentage in a country of 70 million. But Alavi says the number of Iranians online is likely to more than double again in the next five years, in a country where two-thirds of the population is under 30, and many are technologically savvy. Interestingly, she reports, because of the education policies of the Iranian regime, those with access to higher education cut across a wide spectrum of Iranian society. Literacy rates for young men and women are more than 90 percent, even in rural areas. Young Iranians from very different social and regional backgrounds are gaining access to computers and the Internet.

Any foreigner who visits Iran is struck by the gap between the image projected by the regime to the outside world and the reality of Iranian society. The blogs quoted here vividly convey the bitter disillusionment many Iranians feel not just toward the hard-line mullahs, but toward the failed reformist project and its erstwhile leader, Mohammad Khatami.

The Damaged Generation

Iran’s hard-liners wield real power through nonelective institutions like the judiciary, the so-called Guardian Council, which can veto legislation and disqualify candidates for elective office, and the army, the Revolutionary Guard, and allied militias like the Basij and Hezbollah. Since around 2000, the hard-line “conservatives,” as they have come to be called, have successfully crushed the reformists, not just by shutting down the reformist press but by vetoing reformist legislation and disqualifying thousands of electoral candidates, and jailing, torturing and, in a number of notorious incidents, assassinating reformists and student activists. In his eight years as president, Khatami proved

powerless to stop this onslaught, and was seemingly disinclined to try.

A young student blogger wrote in January 2004: “You have heard the story of my generation many times. A generation that grew up with bombs, rockets, war and revolutionary slogans.... The girls of my generation will never forget their head teachers tugging hard at tiny strands of hair that somehow fell out of their veils to teach them a lesson. The boys of my generation will never forget being slapped five times in the face for wearing shirts with Western labels on them...all of us have hundreds of similar memories. My generation is the damaged generation. We were constantly chastised that we were duty-bound to safeguard and uphold the sacred blood that was shed for us during a revolution and war. Any kind of happiness was forbidden for us....”

Yet the student’s harshest words were reserved for Khatami, who time and again failed to stand up for student demonstrators who were jailed and beaten on his watch: “It’s unfair to say that he [Khatami] did nothing. We got concerts, poetry readings, care-free chats in coffee shops and tight manteaus [the mandatory overcoats for women]. But is this all that my generation wanted? It was also during this time that the students of my generation were labeled hooligans and Western lackeys...and again Khatami was silent.”

Iranian bloggers give eloquent voice to a painful history that many Americans are unaware of: Iranians have been struggling to build a constitutional democracy for much of the last century. Americans have figured prominently in this struggle, for both good and ill. That helps explain the ambivalence many young Iranians feel toward the United States, at once a kinship and a profound suspicion. It also explains why most Iranian democracy activists will be wary of accepting the recent proffer of financial support from the Bush administration, for fear of being seen as tools of American meddling.

In March 2003, one blogger marked the anniversary of the infamous 1953 CIA-backed coup that drove the elected populist Mohammad Mossadeq from power and ushered in three decades of the Shah's tyranny: "The most influential democratic leader in Iranian modern history died on this day. At a time when America is telling the world its aims are to bring democracy to the whole planet, the Mossadeq era proves all of America's protestations to be a long lie."

The 1953 coup came as a shock to many Iranians—not least Mossadeq, who regarded Americans as allies and had many American friends and supporters, including President Truman, who stood up to the British when they wanted to force Mossadeq from office. But the mood in Washington had changed when Dwight Eisenhower took office in 1953. To this day, Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamanei, justifies the regime's harsh rule by saying, "We are not liberals like [Salvador] Allende [of Chile] and Mossadeq, whom the CIA can throw out."

Yet Alavi reminds us that before the coup America was revered in Iran. She recalls that two unlikely heroes of Iran's earlier experiment with democracy at the turn of the twentieth century were Americans. One was Howard Baskerville, an idealistic young Princeton graduate who came to Iran to teach in a mission school and wound up championing the Iranian people's struggle for self-rule against the imperial powers, Russia and Britain, that ruled Iran through a puppet monarchy. Baskerville was killed in Tabriz at age 24 while leading 150 soldiers in battle against the monarchist forces. To this day, thousands of Iranians make pilgrimages to Baskerville's grave in Tabriz.

Then there was Morgan Shuster, a Washington lawyer who was invited to Iran in 1906 by the newly installed constitutional government to reorganize Iran's national finances. A supporter of Iran's fledgling liberal democracy, Shuster's reforms strengthened Iran but threatened Russian and British interests. When parliament was dis-

solved after a Russian invasion, Shuster was dismissed and reluctantly left the country. But he produced a memoir, *The Strangling of Persia* (1912), that poignantly recounted how Russia and Britain crushed the democratic aspirations of Iranians. From then until the 1953 coup, Americans were regarded as heroes of the democracy movement in Iran.

In August 2003, a blogger calling himself "Godfather" wrote: "We have been fighting against fascists for at least the last 100 years. Our great-grandfathers during the Constitutional Revolution (1906) tried to bring democracy to this land. But the British with their Anglo-Iranian Oil Company were against it and soon killed them off. Do they know about the democratically elected government of our beloved Dr. Mossadeq? Do they know that the CIA toppled him nearly 50 years ago and replaced him with (to paraphrase a remark attributed to Franklin Roosevelt) a 'son-of-a-bitch, but our son-of-a-bitch.' And the sick joke is now they want to give us democracy!"

The 1953 coup, and the decades of American support for the Shah, are not the only sources of abiding suspicion. Iranians are mindful that America provided covert assistance to Saddam Hussein's Iraq in its devastating eight-year war with Iran, sharing vital intelligence that enabled Saddam to use chemical weapons against Iranian troops. The Reagan administration wanted to contain Iran, fearing that it would overrun or inflame other oil-producing states and export its Islamic revolution. Moreover, America's Cold War allies, France and Germany, fortified Saddam's grip on power with weaponry and dual-use technology that underpinned Iraq's chemical and biological warfare programs. These are facts that Americans may scarcely recall. Iranians know them all too well, and they are not shy about reminding American visitors, as I learned more than once.

Yet paradoxically, Alavi writes, "Iraq's war against Iran was crucial in strengthen-

ing the power base of the radical clerics, because even those Iranians who opposed the Islamic Republic moved to Khomeini's camp in defense against foreign aggression."

A blogger wrote in September 2003: "What an era we are born in.... Remember all those piggy banks shaped like tanks and all the windows taped up? The rush to get to a shelter, the terrorizing sound of sirens and then total darkness...?" The blogger went on: "The best of our kind were disabled, maimed or died in the war and the worst of our kind rule us now. May God protect us and bring an end to this madness."

Mad Dogs and Satanic Yanks

Yet Iranians' abiding personal affinity for Americans persists. An American blogger living in Tehran with her Iranian boyfriend wrote in August 2003: "I like being an American here. Everyone is so nice to me. Everyone seems to think Americans are wonderful.... People shake my hand. They talk to me. Sometimes they tell me they don't like Bush, but they always tell me how much they like Americans. This is so refreshing after a couple of years of living in Europe, where all I heard was how evil Americans were."

The American went on: "I like the way Iranians are dissatisfied with their society and their government. I like the way they are working to change it (slowly). One thing I always complained about in the Netherlands is that Dutch people are too satisfied. Everything seems finished there.... In Iran (like America, I think) there is a sense that society is an ongoing project. Things are most definitely unfinished and moving forward."

Since September 11, 2001, the official line from Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, has been that the attacks on New York and Washington were coordinated by Israel and the United States as a "stratagem for world domination." The subsequent wars on Iran's immediate neighbors east and

west, Afghanistan and Iraq, are cited as proof. In the realm of the blogosphere, by contrast, where anonymous individuals are free to voice contrary views, one gets a very different take on those events. Soon after the attacks, one Iranian blogged, "So many dead.... Although the world only became aware of Islamic fascists on 9/11, as a society we have been forced to coexist with them for nearly a quarter of a century."

This blogger went on, "In the past they have served their purpose.... These mad dogs were well fed and used at the 'last stand' against Communism in Afghanistan.... Another rabid bunch, Hamas, were a valuable tool against a brainless but secular Arafat...and in 1953 in Iran, the CIA used some of them to topple the democratic government of Dr. Mossadeq. All societies have their mad dogs, but while theirs are marginalized, scorned and subdued with anti-psychotic medication...tragically ours have at times been very well fed by outsiders and nurtured by our own ignorance and desperation."

The Persian blogs capture well what some commentators have called the increasingly "post-Islamist" nature of Iranian society, the election last year of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad notwithstanding. After years of theocratic rule and Islamist propaganda, many Iranians roll their eyes at the Islamist fervor now sweeping much of the rest of the Muslim world. A blogger wrote in 2005: "Europe struggled for five centuries to banish religion and superstition from political and social life, making a lot of sacrifices along the way. Our country will be the first country in the Middle East to go on this journey in a relatively short time frame. We must make this hard and hazardous journey by ourselves. There are no chains harder and stronger than the chains of religion and tradition."

He continued, "Our people have not been very politically aware throughout their history. Today they know what they want and what they don't want. They have felt a

religious regime and its decomposed cultural traditions with their flesh and skin. There are not many families in Iran that have not paid a sacrifice on this journey...women, workers, teachers, student protesters, writers and journalists, on the Internet and in blogs and in the daily lives of ordinary people. They all call to account those thieves of the Revolution responsible for this brutal tyranny. Have you not heard their voices?"

Alavi writes: "Iran, uniquely, has been controlled and ruled by radical clerics, and people have lived through and suffered the consequences of the 25-year-forced march towards utopia promised by the godfather of Islamic militancy Ayatollah Khomeini. Iranians have no illusions to shatter. They are all too aware of the difference between the Paradise they were promised and the harsh reality of living under the rule of the Islamic fundamentalists."

In August 2003, the blogger called Godfather asked: "What is there to be done with our own Islamic fascists? Our electoral system does not give us the opportunity to vote against them. Have we put up a fight? Yes, for 25 years our prisons have been packed to the rafters, we have seen the best of our kind sent to the gallows and buried in mass graves. Are the fascists in the minority? Yes.... But they are armed and willing to kill for their beliefs and we are only willing to die for ours." The Godfather concluded: "They only hear the psychopaths among us. Don't they know that many like me believe in the maxims of Hussein [the grandson of Mohammad and patron saint of the Shiites], who said, 'If you are a non-believer, at least be a libertarian.' He did not practice our faith like these tyrants."

Another skeptic wrote in May 2003: "Twenty-five years of religious rule has had one long-term benefit.... For generations to come no Iranian will ever want to mix matters of state with religion. And if only those Muslim idiots in our neighboring countries knew about our failed experiment with an Islamic government they would come to

their senses too.... It's a joke they want to do now what we miserably failed at 25 years ago."

In a variation of this oft-heard theme, another blogger wrote in March 2004: "According to many of our social commentators, religion has ceased to be a unifying force among our people...the conduct of our rulers has pushed religion out of its sacred dimensions and has turned religion into something antisocial. No one can deny that after all these years if anyone admits to being religious or having faith...in the view of most people they are lined up alongside liars, hypocrites and even tyrants.... It was this religion that took away the people's right to vote...has taken away from them the right to be modern and resourceful, and denies them the basic pleasures of life...equality and freedom. I believe that if the older generation today still hold strong religious values, it is because they did not grow up under a meddling religious regime.... The older generation can never comprehend the level of humiliation, slander and insult that this totalitarian regime has poured down our throats under the guise of religious values."

"Death to Everybody!"

The election last summer of the hard-liner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president was difficult to square with this sort of widespread sentiment. The little-known mayor of Tehran had presented himself, ironically enough, as an antiestablishment candidate, campaigning against corruption and poverty. He owed part of his electoral success to a boycott of the elections by many reformist voters. Ahmadinejad won with the support of less than 40 per cent of eligible voters, even after suspected vote rigging and stuffed ballots, and the mobilization of his core support among the Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Basij militias. Of the votes he won, many were given to him because he was not a mullah, and in particular he was not Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, perhaps

the most hated mullah in Iran and a symbol of financial chicanery, who was his opponent in the run-off.

Ahmadinejad clearly has support, especially among the poor, whose voices are not well represented in this book. Nor do we learn much of the economic concerns that proved to be a decisive factor in his election. Alavi, like most political analysts I have spoken to, says the regime has diehard supporters who amount to perhaps 15 percent of the electorate. The regime's hard-line militiamen and their families are financially well looked after. Perhaps because their opinions are well represented in the state-run media, blogs kept by staunch supporters of the regime are rare. But Alavi says some bloggers do articulate the concerns of many hard-liners that Islamic principles are being eroded, and that a great injustice is taking place within Iranian society, where the righteous and pious are being marginalized and mocked by an elite that has been corrupted by the West.

More typical was acute despair and foreboding at Ahmadinejad's surprise win, though even in the blogosphere, some disheartened reformists cautioned against undue alarm. "Do not worry or become alarmed," one blogger wrote. "Nothing much has happened, except that we can see what has up to now been hidden. A fresh force outside the power structure has not been empowered...the force that during the last eight years held the real power is now come to the forefront and has only made itself visible."

President Ahmadinejad's bellicose declarations about wiping Israel off the map have drawn much criticism in the West (though little in the Muslim world), but they reflect long-standing ideology dating back to the revolution. For a quarter century, Iran's official position on Israel—in the words of the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei—has been: "The cancerous tumor of Israel has to be removed from the landscape." By most accounts, supported by my own conversa-

tions in Iran, this ugly demagoguery has little support among most Iranians, least of all in the blogosphere. A blogger wrote in May 2004: "Death to Everybody! Death to America! Israel! Britain! Imperialism!... Death to your mother, aunt and sister too!... Death! Death! Death! They have been chanting 'Death to America and Israel!' for 25 years.... Israel is still the bully of the neighborhood and the Palestinians are swamped in misery.... But I can't get over how we Iranians are considered the most fanatical people in the world—all because of a bunch of nit-ridden Mullahs.... When I was growing up, Hajji Yousef, the mullah who used to teach us the Koran...would say that Moses taught us wisdom, Jesus love and Mohammad life...so where did all these death chants come from?"

A year later, another blogger wrote: "I've been paying attention to the graffiti in the office toilet recently: Death to the Mullahs' ass lickens, Death to the Mullah pimps, Death to fake Muslim wolves dressed in Sheep's clothing."

One of the most prominent Iranian bloggers is Masoud Behmoud, a leading author, journalist, and social commentator in Iran for four decades, including stints in prison and more recently in exile. Behmoud has likened the growing use of the Internet to the famous audio cassette campaign mounted by Khomeini in the late 1970s to overthrow the Shah.

"Each day as I open and look at the websites and blogs by young Iranians, I am filled with a new spirit," he wrote in his blog in April 2004. "I say to myself how gratifying it is that our youth now possesses an outlet for their beliefs.... They value freedom and do not sell out to fanaticism. Their blogs are reflections of the unveiled and candid views of our youth and future generations of Iran.... In our day, everyone was looking for an opportunity to shout, and the louder their voices the more attention they would get. But today's generation is not like that. If they want freedom it is so that they

can coexist in this society and build a better world for the whole of humanity.”

The Iranian blogosphere may yet develop the kind of subversive impact that Khomeini’s famous cassette tapes had in 1978 and 1979. Alavi calls the changing consciousness of Iran’s younger generation “nothing less than a revolution within the revolution.” Revolution may be too strong a word, even for those who most fervently wish for change. Many Iranians, mindful

of their turbulent recent history, recoil from the idea of another revolution. The point is perhaps best expressed by Emadeddin Baghi, a leading journalist and human rights advocate who spent three years in prison: “Society itself, not the government, creates change,” Baghi has written. “And there are deep transformations occurring in Iran. Out of sight of much of the world, Iran is inching its way towards democracy.” ●