

Blogging Iran's wired election

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You might say the most remarkable thing about the Iranian presidential election due on 17 June 2005 is how unremarkable it is. Iranians have grown so disillusioned and bored [1] with the political situation that the vast majority will stay home on election day.

Even Washington foreign-policy analysts seem to expect that the election will do nothing but confirm that the Iranian reformist movement has burnt its fuel and no longer presents a plausible vehicle for political change.

But if you look carefully, the election does display clear signs of gradual but radical change. In fact, it will probably be the most open and transparent election Iran has ever seen. The internet plays a major role: this is the first time that most of the major candidates (except the oldest ones) have their own active websites. One of them, Mostafa Moeen, even has a weblog [2] which he personally updates everyday.

This election is a unique occasion to explore the internal dimensions of Iranian politics with the internet providing an unprecedented window on Iranian political culture. As such, **openDemocracy** has invited some of the most respected journalists and bloggers in Tehran, Toronto, Washington DC and California to observe the elections over the next weeks in a weblog called *Iran Scan 1384* [2] (in the Persian calendar, 2005 is 1384).

All roads lead to Iran as the next big national security and foreign-policy focus for the Bush administration. For Iranians, this is a crucial point in history to be communicating with each other and the outside world. They have the opportunity to bust stereotypes and create greater understanding of the internal dynamics of the country.

Iran is no fairy tale. Many bloggers, journalists and activists in Iran are still in jail or under threat. Hundreds of political and non-political websites (such as *Orkut* [3], a popular social networking site) are filtered within the Islamic Republic, making them inaccessible. In the past eight years dozens of newspapers have been shut down by the judiciary [4]. A simple weblog like *Iran Scan 1384* would most likely be labelled a "spying outlet", especially as it is hosted by a London-based organisation (Iranians are obsessed with conspiracy theories about the British). Several of the weblog's authors already fear travelling to Iran.

By contrast, over 75,000 people regularly write weblogs in Iran, and the majority of them belong to the under 30s demographic. There are 70 million people in Iran, and 70% of them are under 30. This huge generation is growing more and more dissatisfied, and it is difficult for the government to keep up previous levels of repression. On a practical level, the money and manpower needed to close down dance parties and control the influx of music, fashion and drugs doesn't make it a sustainable enterprise.

In 2003 it was estimated that Persian was the fourth most popular blogging language. This explosion in internet traffic (there are between four and five million internet users in Iran) has made the craving for social and political freedoms even stronger. Journalists who are silenced in newspapers quickly find an audience for their writing in blogs or news websites.

It is precisely because so many of these affluent young people are online, that the candidates are reaching out to them on the web. So far, a dozen news websites have appeared in direct or subtle support of candidates in the pre-election period. They function as the unofficial public-relations machinery of the candidates, especially in the recent campaign wars.

The main newspapers would never dare author the kind of views that are expressed on these sites but they have no problem *quoting* them. In this way tough censorship rules are being circumvented and an unprecedented amount of information is available to the public.

Pre-election news has therefore been much more transparent. For weeks before former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani announced his candidacy on 10 May there was plenty of information about his intentions and about the journalists, scholars and politicians he has hired for his campaign.

It has never been as easy to follow an election from exile as it is now. One of the authors of *Iran Scan 1384*, Afshin Molavi, is a celebrated Iranian-American journalist, now working at the New America Foundation in Washington DC. He says, "I've been thinking of starting my own blog for some time. This will be a good start."

Laura Rozen is another *Iran Scan 1384* author. She covers foreign policy for several publications and in her own weblog warandpiece.com [5]. She says both American and Iranian readers send her comments and questions about United States involvement in Iran all the time: "A lot of Iranian expatriates want the Bush administration to take a tough line with the regime, but they are also really anxious about military action."

Both Molavi and Rozen are cautious about expecting anything too grand of the election. "These elections come after two previous elections that were highly anticipated, with great participation and a hopeful electorate. Now people are going to the polls reluctantly", says Molavi.

Of the impact of *Iran Scan 1384*, Rozen is circumspect, "I'm not sure what the effect of doing something like this will be. It's one of the few efforts that will help people talk across community lines. Think-tanks speak among themselves, and Iranians in both Persian and English communities stick to themselves too. Hopefully, this blog will help people cross-pollinate."

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