

MIDDLE EAST NOTES AND COMMENT

The Whole World is Watching

by Jon B. Alterman

It is easy to be swept up by all of the images coming out of Iran and think that the days of dictatorship—in Iran and the rest of the world—are numbered. Overnight, normally innocuous social networking tools have swiftly turned political, and local events have found international audiences mere instants after they occur.

Four decades ago, when police and national guardsmen attacked protestors at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, the protestors shouted “the whole world is watching.” However arresting those images were, they could not possibly compare to the recent weeks’ flood of YouTube videos, Flickr photos, Twitter tweets, Facebook pages, and blogs dedicated to events in Iran. The world is not only watching—in an important way it is participating, as observers dig down for their own raw footage, reporting, and analysis pouring out of Iran.

Events in Iran prompted Verizon’s CEO, Ivan Seidenberg, to exult on the Charlie Rose Show this week that Iran’s efforts to manage public sentiments via restricting Internet access was a losing proposition. “The power of the people will override that without any question,” he said. “And it’ll happen sooner than they think because the technology is just too pervasive.”

If only that were true. The way the outside world sees Iranian protests is markedly different from the way Iranians themselves do, and the government is increasingly asserting its authority over the information space in the country. While many in the West see a potential revolution in Technicolor, the green banners of opposition activists from the election campaign are quickly fading to black.

The fact is that governments in the electronic age not only retain awesome advantages over their nongovernmental opponents, but technology gives them far more tools for managing restive populations than was the case a generation ago. It is still possible that the information age will crack authoritarian structures in Iran, but it is far more likely that the government will be able to use that technology to secure its own rule.

Governments have certainly ceded some ground in recent decades. The biggest change that information technology has brought has been the demise of government

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Marriages of Convenience

Elaborate weddings and furnished apartments remain the goal for many young brides, but the reality often falls far short. As the costs of marriage in the Middle East are rising far more swiftly than incomes, yet cohabitating remains taboo, many Arabs are paying increasing attention to alternative arrangements.

Misyar (or “traveler”) marriages, give a religious imprimatur to sexual relations but free husbands of the financial obligations of traditional marriages. Once mostly confined to Iran and the Arab Gulf, Egyptian clerics recently unleashed a storm of criticism when they endorsed such arrangements as an outlet for the millions of Egyptian singles over the age of 30 who are losing hope of ever having a legitimate sexual relationship. In response to widespread protests from Muslim scholars and laypeople alike, Egypt’s grand mufti seemed to underline his own discomfort with the arrangements, arguing that the ruling “shows how Shari’a is capable of satisfying the needs of human nature in different circumstances.” He emphasized that even without the husband’s obligation to support his wife under the arrangement all of the other obligations of religiously sanctioned marriage remain in effect.

Critics charge that misyar marriages are a form of legalized prostitution. Brides lose any guarantee of basic financial support or shelter, and the marriages are often annulled after short periods of time. In addition, the practice often results in children whose legal status is unclear and who end up being raised by single mothers with little income. ■ SA

Ambassador Zalman Shoval visits CSIS

Ambassador Zalman Shoval, a former Israeli ambassador to the United States and a close adviser to Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, spoke to a small gathering at CSIS on June 19th. Shoval spoke about Israeli perceptions of the president’s Middle East agenda. He also addressed the topics of Israel’s settlements and outposts in the West Bank, prospects for peace under Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, and the Iranian threat, which he argued should not be linked to resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Shoval expressed special concern about potential divisions in the U.S.-Israel relationship. He suggested that many Israelis consider the Obama Administration to be anti-Israeli, emboldening Palestinian obstinacy while doing little to defend an ally. Click [HERE](#) for the summary. ■

information monopolies. Censorship used to be a major industry around the world, but the pervasiveness of the Internet (combined with hundreds of satellite television channels and easily copied and distributed CDs and DVDs) has made the censor's job a losing venture. The information pipeline into most countries is far too wide to carefully monitor its contents.

At the same time, electronic information is spectacularly easy to scan. Using simple administrators' software, a security bureaucrat can search thousands of accounts for keywords, monitor users' Web activity, and create impressive network diagrams of how thousands of people are connected through a handful of connections to a single individual. Surveilling millions of written texts is infinitely simpler than tapping a million voice conversations and can be done with far less manpower. Activists can use encryption to safeguard individual messages, but doing so takes the spontaneity out of mass communications, and it serves as a red flag for security forces to monitor accounts more carefully.

Governments can also monitor modern communications far more surreptitiously than was done in the past, making it far easier to amass evidence and attack crucial nodes with patience and deliberation. In point of fact, the government of Iran is using many of the same methods to secure its rule as the U.S. government uses to keep Americans safe—albeit without any civil liberties protections.

The Iranian government's tools extend far beyond the realm of intelligence, however. Through slowing cell phone and Internet communications, and through aggressively shutting down foreign press reporting in Iran, the government has been able to frame the way many Iranians see the events of recent weeks. State-run television shows reassuring images of a government in control, not bedlam in the streets, and there are few avenues for Iranians to learn of any other reality. Arrests are matters of rumor rather than reporting, and rumors tend to silence rather than embolden oppositions. Rumors create caution and paranoia, not bravery, and people snatched from their homes in the middle of the night create few mobilizing images. Instead, they make those contemplating action wonder if there is any place where they are truly safe.

What we have seen, up to now, is an impressive show of force from the Iranian government. A government that swept to power on the shoulders of popular unrest in 1979 seems determined to avoid the shah's fate—and capable of doing so.

Still, the Iranian government is not yet secure. It still faces serious internal challenges. Those challenges, however, come not from hundreds of thousands of protestors in the streets, but instead from hundreds of senior clerics in the seminaries. Many of Iran's clerics turn a jaundiced eye toward displays of bald political power, and some reportedly fear that harsh actions against crowds impugn their legitimacy.

We cannot know how members of Iran's clerical establishment are viewing the events of recent weeks. We also have little idea how they view the actions of the leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, whose religious bona fides have long been a subject of derision among some. We know that some clerics have been quite Internet savvy, but we do not know how much they have suffered under the current crackdown on communication in Iran or what they think of it. Former President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, himself a cleric, has been visibly critical of both President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Ayatollah Khamenei; his chairmanship of the Council of Experts and the Expediency Council, as well as his awesome wealth, make him a potential wedge in Iran's ruling elite.

Should there be a serious rift in the religious establishment, Iranian politics may shift dramatically. Should they do so, however, the scenes we are constantly seeing will only be an indirect source of the change. People power makes memorable public images, but political power in Iran is still exercised behind closed doors. ■ 6/24/09

Links of Interest

The CSIS Middle East Program hosted a Gulf Roundtable event "*The Bet: Gulf Investment and the Future of Oil Demand.*"

Jon Alterman and Tony Cordesman conducted a [press briefing](#) prior to President Obama's trip to the Middle East and Europe.

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