

Iran has lost the battle of global public opinion

Written by Afshin Shahi

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AFSHIN SHAHI, JUN 22 2009

The current political crisis in Iran and the ban on foreign media has proved that modern technology is challenging the monopoly of information management by the state. Today, modern technology is acting as an alternative instrument to expose matters, which the regime prefers to hide from the outside world. Indeed, personal cameras and mobile phones have enabled everyday individual to act as correspondents within fields where media access is denied. As the censorship continues to undermine freedom of expression, the internet plays a vital role to voice the “silent majority” and mobilise the opposition.

Since the presidential election of 12 June 2009, Iran has been going through turmoil. Some people have gone as far as claiming that a coup d'état has taken place. In a climate where almost all foreign correspondents were ordered to leave or stay silent in their offices, there have been difficulties accessing reliable news. Saturday 20 June 2009 was the height of the political crisis so far. It was also the first day that I gave up on professional news agencies since they had no one in the field covering events. Instead, I relied on messages and images directly reaching me through Facebook, Twitter and You Tube. Later that afternoon, I decided to consult some of the mainstream media to see if I could get any further information and I was stunned to see even the professional news agencies themselves have been relying on the very materials I had been receiving all day.

I was also astonished to see how promptly iconic images, which were recorded by ordinary people, have reached the global audience. These short videos, which often show the heavy crackdown on protesters, beating people, smashing cars and breaking windows, have galvanised millions of people throughout the world. Although, they all spur-of-the-moment and are badly filmed, they have shed a different light on the existing political dynamics in the Islamic State. Particularly, I can refer to a clip that petrified me the most. It explicitly showed a young girl who was shot in heart. She was on the floor, covered in blood and her distressed father was helplessly crying on her side. People were surrounding her; they were trying to save her. But what could they do? She passed away on front of a camera. Two hours later, these painful images reached the global media. The clip was shown in many major news agencies and soon she became the “symbol of struggle”, in many weblogs, she was called “the angle of Iran”. Initially, the Western states were conservative about commenting on the political crisis in Tehran. After all, the new administration in America has been determined to stick to its new policy of engaging Iran diplomatically. Hence, they did not want to anger the Islamic Republic by criticism about their internal politics. Nevertheless, once those first hand images reached western citizens, western leaders had no option but to react to public opinion. In that light, on Saturday night, their statements went further than before and finally the American president spoke more firmly and expressed serious concerns for violation of human rights in Iran.

From the beginning of the electoral crisis, the Iranian government attempted to cut most communicational instruments in the country. “Unfriendly” news websites were filtered and for a while telephone lines were cut and text messaging services were completely dismantled. Nonetheless, people found ways to break the filters and work around restrictions. Furthermore, the state unsuccessfully attempted to prevent people receiving news from satellite channels such as the Persian BBC and Voice Of America, but as usual some people were still finding ways to receive signals from these mediums.

These news channels were relying on “citizen correspondents” inside Iran. Ordinary people were calling them, sometimes from the crowded streets while one could still hear the chaotic background noise, describing the scenes

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and reporting the violence. Most people throughout the country saw the images and received their news from the Persian BBC for the first time. No wonder the Iranian government has criticised Britain for “orchestrating” the riots and “interfering” in Iranian domestic politics.

Apart from providing information, alternative media and new technology have been mobilising and organising people in Iran. Although, the mainstream media in the country was under heavy censorship, people have been finding ways to communicate with and, more importantly, inform the outside world about the violation of human rights in their country. Of course many of these so-called “citizen correspondents” may not be as impartial as a professional news agency nor they are fully unbiased in the way they record and report the events. Nonetheless, in the vacuum of information where access to independent media is denied there are no other options. Without them, the world could not witness the ongoing violation of human rights in Iran. For example, the image of that teenage girl dying in her father’s arms [viewer discretion advised] has become a powerful image to increase the global pressure on the Islamic state to reconsider its policies.

In this situation, one would only hope that the Iranian government would be attentive to some of these pressures, so they could maintain some legitimacy in the international community. Although the regime has proven that it has an upper hand in suppressing the unarmed protesters, it has lost the war of public opinion, inside and outside the country. This was only possible through circulation of restricted information, which only became possible with the blessing of new technology!

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