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**INTERNET CENSORSHIP IN IRAN AND THE
FREEDOM HOUSE GOZAAR PROJECT**

by

**Karin Deutsch Karlekar
Freedom House**

My presentation will cover the growth and importance of the internet in Iran, the rise in censorship of the internet, and the role of international new media initiatives in expanding the breadth of news and opinion available inside extremely closed media environments. I'll close with a description of a current Freedom House project, *Gozaar*, which is a bilingual webzine in English and Farsi devoted to democracy and human rights issues that is intended to foster debate on such issues within Iran and to expand the range of information available to Iranians.

Increasing importance of the internet in Iran

- The general environment for media in Iran is extremely hostile; Freedom House's annual survey of press freedom for 2006, which covers print, broadcast, and Internet-based news outlets, placed Iran at 180th place of a total of 194 countries and territories worldwide in its level of media independence.
- Since 2000, Iranian courts have banned more than 100 newspaper and magazine publications critical of the regime, forcing reformist journalists to abandon the profession or turn to blogs and the internet in order to express their views.
- More than 80 percent of the population receives its news from television but the government directly maintains a monopoly over all broadcast media which presents only official political and religious viewpoints.

- However, polls conducted by the ISNA News Agency showed the Iranian citizens trust the Internet more than any other media outlet.
- Iran has experienced a dramatic growth in internet usage: out of a population of approximately 70 million, there were roughly 1 million users in 2001, approximately 7 million in 2005 (or 10 percent of the population), and an expected growth to 25 million by 2009.
- There are an estimated 75,000 blogs in Farsi and a myriad of news and information websites.
- Persian is one of the most common languages on the internet, after English and Chinese.
- The industry in Iran for catering to these many users is expansive and still growing. Iran has over 650 different ISPs, including 12 major certified ISPs.
- All of these factors (the increased censorship faced by traditional media outlets coupled with the growing number of Internet consumers in Iran) have increased the importance of Internet journalism in providing independent news to Iranian citizens.

Growth of online censorship in Iran

Laws on content and registration

- There are no internet-specific laws on content to date in Iran, however, the state imposes strong controls on internet material using the 2000 Press Law, which forbids the publication of ideas contrary to Islamic principles or detrimental to public right.
- Article 500 of the penal code states that ‘anyone who undertakes any form of propaganda against the state---will be sentenced to between three months and one year in prison’ and leaves ‘propaganda’ undefined.
- Current proposals would require bloggers inside Iran to register their complete information with authorities, a step which could radically decrease the number of citizens willing to blog openly from within the country.

ISPs

- The law requires ISPs to install filtering mechanisms that cover access to both websites and e-mails.
- Iran, along with China, is among a small group of states with the most sophisticated internet filtering system—a system which widely intensified with the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.
- ISPs could face legal action if they don’t comply with these filtering lists; as of 2005 more than 10 ISPs had been shut down for not installing filters.
- Individuals who subscribe to ISPs must promise in writing not to access ‘non-Islamic’ sites.

Specific blocking and online censorship

- Tests conducted by the OpenNet Initiative in 2005 showed that the sites most commonly blocked by the internet filters were ones containing material on sex, religion, politics, gay / lesbian / bisexual issues, and news in Farsi.
- In fact 100% of pornography sites or sites containing sexual images were blocked.
- In addition, compared to their English-language equivalents, Farsi-language websites are significantly more likely to be blocked by the censors.
- Similarly, internet censorship continues to be more of a problem for domestically-located Iranian websites than for international organizations.

Incidents of crackdown on internet dissent

- The government has sought to limit the spread of blogs by blocking popular websites that offer free publishing tools for blogs.
- In 2003, Iran became the first country ever to imprison a blogger for views expressed online.
- According to Article 19, since this first incident, over 28 bloggers and online journalists have been imprisoned on charges including insulting the Supreme Guide, propaganda against the regime, threatening national security, incitement to rebellion, and insulting leading political or religious figures.
- This trend increased in 2004, when the judiciary (relying on unaccountable intelligence and security forces) specifically began to target online journalists, bloggers, and technical support staff in an effort to quash this flourishing new medium.
- International websites are not as frequently censored; however in January 2005, the BBC reported that its Farsi website, the most popular of its non-English-language sites with 30 million page views a month, was blocked.

Result of the crackdown

- Despite considerable efforts on the part of the government to control the content of, and access to, the internet, Iranian websites continue to express opinions that the country's print media would never carry.
- However, the high incidence of imprisonment for internet dissent and blocking of website out of line with 'Iranian social values' has added an element of self-censorship to Iranian blogs that was not present on-line 5 years ago.

Role for international news media in heavily censored environments

- With the intensification of on-line censorship in Iran, international news media have an increased role to play in getting independent news and information to the Iranian public.
- While there are Iran-focused websites like the Iranian (www.iranian.com), Gooya (www.gooya.com) and Payvand (www.payvand.com) these serve as central portals for the Iranian diaspora and it is doubtful that these sites are accessible within Iran.
- Within the last few years a number of projects have arisen to bring independent information into and about Iran. Among them are the *Gozaar* project run by Freedom House, Radio Farda (run by RFE/RL and VOA), the Persian Impediment website run by Article 19 (www.persianimpediment.org), as well as Rooz Online (www.roozonline.com) and Radio Zamaneh, both funded by the Dutch government.
- Other Iran-focused projects exist but are operating quietly and do not publicize their work.

Freedom House's *Gozaar* project

- *Gozaar*, meaning transition in Farsi, is a monthly online journal devoted to the discussion of democracy and human rights issues in Iran and was launched in September 2006. Since then it has published six full issues.
- *Gozaar* offers the whole of its content in both Farsi and English while featuring a plurality of political views.
- Most documents published on the journal are originally written in Farsi by Iranians, both those inside the country as well as expatriates.
- *Gozaar* has proven successful at generating debate as its articles have been reprinted in other reputable journals, websites, and list-serves while the variety of ideas expressed by *Gozaar's* contributors have been heatedly discussed in other publications, the Iranian and international blogspheres, and in *Gozaar* itself
- Daily, *Gozaar's* editors receive e-mails offering candid views on the journal's content.

Access within Iran and success of dissemination

- The majority of the readership of *Gozaar* currently lives in Iran (over 35% of users), while 31% of users are from the US and the remainder are from Canada and a variety of European countries.
- There are already over 5,000 members on the mailing list and the website had over 1 million hits within the first three months of publication.
- The website is equipped with anti-blocking and anti-attack security precautions.
- The *Gozaar* website was first blocked in mid-December 2006 (three months after the launch) after a reference to *Gozaar* appeared on an Iranian blog.

- Now we change domain name once a week, then send out information to *Gozaar* subscribers on how to access it from within Iran. Basically, the aim is to take advantage of time lag between authorities finding out, and their blocking it.
- The period after the first block did see a drop in traffic, but since the new methods at evading the blocks have been implemented, traffic has increased to almost previous levels.

Summary

- One question raised by the *Gozaar* experience is whether it is better to publicize such efforts and raise awareness of them but then also have them be censored? Or try to keep such projects more underground and potentially able to function without being blocked?
- In such a closed media environment, international efforts remain key at helping to expand diverse and unfiltered channels of information and to offer solidarity and support to local journalists, bloggers, and activists.