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“We Are Not This Free:”
Weblogs, Reform, and Conceptualizing Modernity in Iran

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A Note on Weblogs

Due to their informal nature, citing and quoting weblogs can be a confusing and difficult endeavor. Because most weblog authors do not carefully edit their writing before they post them, spelling, punctuation, and grammatical errors are common. Additionally, difficulty with the English language also often leads to mistakes. Throughout this paper I have made an effort to remain truthful to the original presentation of the text that I have cited and quoted. In some cases this has meant keeping seriously flawed sentences intact. Despite this, I hope that the significance of these passages is not lost.

Introduction

“This is a blog by an Iranian for himself and others” –Mr. Behi¹

During the past five years the world has witnessed an explosion in the number of Iranian weblogs created on the Internet. With an estimated 100,000 “blogs” written in Persian, the twenty-eighth most widely spoken language in the world is now the second most common type found on the web.² In addition, even more Iranians blog in English and other languages. An estimated 100,000 active Persian blogs are maintained from within Iran.³ Out of seventy million people inside the country, 7.5 million Iranians have online access, accounting for nearly half of all usage in the Middle East. In a region with an exceptionally high growth rate for Internet usage, Iran is the fastest with a 2,900.0% increase between the year 2000 and 2005.⁴ As a result, the U.S. and world media have paid increasing attention to the Iranian blogging community, noting the Internet’s potential as a space for expression and discussion in an otherwise restricted society.

Within Iran, blogs have begun to play a significant role in the discussion of social, cultural and political issues. For many advocates of reform, blogs are an important means of communicating ideas and disseminating information inside Iran as well as

¹ Mr. Behi, *Adventures of Mr. Behi* [Weblog], <http://mrbehi.blogs.com>.

² Ben Macintyre, “Mullahs Versus the Bloggers,” *Times Online*, December 23, 2005, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,1068-1957461,00.html> (accessed February 2, 2006).

³ Ibid.

⁴ “Internet Usage in the Middle East and the World,” *InternetWorldStats.com*, November 21, 2005, <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats5.htm> (accessed February 1, 2006).

interacting with the outside world. The three most prominent groups using blogs-intellectuals, feminists and the youth⁵- have also played a central role in the creation and development of the reform movement that began in the mid 1990s. However, the use of weblogs is not restricted to these groups. Even prominent religious and political figures and organizations, realizing the influence of blogging on Iranian society, have begun maintaining their own blogs. The government has turned its attention to monitoring and censoring the weblog community, an indication that it is perceived as a significant threat to the current regime. However, the anonymity of the Internet continues to be used successfully as a means of subverting authoritarian oppression.

Despite the novelty of blogs, important connections should be drawn between it, the decade-old reformist movement and the broader history of conceptualizing modernity in Iran. Today, technology continues to play an important if confusing role in the discourse of Iranian modernization. The popularity of blogs is emblematic of the Euro-American influence that dates back to the importation of Western military tactics and weapons during the nineteenth century. However, as the past two hundred years of Iranian history have demonstrated, these imported aspects of Western modernization have often been used to develop a distinctly non-Western socio-cultural identity. The views expressed through blogs and the Internet reveal the struggle between the influence of Euro-American culture and technology on Iranian society and the desire to maintain a separate, often independent identity. Western capitalist and liberal (including feminist) ideologies continue to be debated in Iran, as does the place of Islam in politics and

⁵ Farhad Khosrokhavar, "Postrevolutionary Iran and the New Social Movements," *Twenty Years of Islamic Revolution*, ed. Eric Hooglund, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 3-18.

society. These issues have provided fodder for the continued debate over modernity and modernization in Iran throughout the past two centuries. The discussion within Iranian society about blogging and the recent reform movement to which it is often attached bring up many of the same issues that have surrounded the discussion of modernity and modernization.

In order to discuss Iranian perceptions of modernity, terms such as “modern”, “modernization” and “westernization” must be more thoroughly considered. The meanings of these concepts are often presupposed, yet a moment’s reflection reveals their abstract and highly ambivalent nature. Indeed, definitions of these terms often shift between periods and contexts. Perhaps the most ambiguous of these is the ideological concept of “modern” and its corollary “modernity.” The divergent uses of this term have been the cause of endless confusion, not least in the context of Iran. In the most basic, obvious sense modernity is often understood as meaning a temporal here-and-now. It is perhaps because of this colloquial definition that much of the confusion over modernity arises, since what constitutes the present is continually shifting and evolving. Attempts to identify current ideas, actions or events as either “modern” or “un-modern” are in some sense categorically doomed to failure, since everything occurring in the present is in some sense unequivocally “modern.” In the case of Iran, the controversy over the definitions of modernity and tradition is no different. Conscious attempts to withdraw from modernity are impossible, for they merely reflect the acknowledgement of modernity, and thus these actions themselves become a component of its historical trajectory.

Beyond this common colloquial meaning is a far more extensive and specific ideological definition of modernity. For some time now the ideological perspective of Europe has heavily influenced interpretations of contemporary realities in the world. Throughout imperial, colonial, and postcolonial periods of history the ideologies of European modernity, born out of the European Enlightenment, have been a significant factor in shaping various perceptions of reality and identity throughout the rest of the world. As a result, Enlightenment ideals such as “respect for human rights, the role of law, the democratic process, and individual liberties”⁶ are most often associated with “modern” political ideals.

These ideals can be seen as having played a significant factor in even self-proclaimed “anti-modern” movements, such as Iran’s 1979 Islamic Revolution, which implicitly contained the call for modern forms of political representation, social freedom and economic prosperity. As Jahanbegloo notes, the distortion of modernity in Iran encompasses misperceptions about what modernity can and does represent: “Our present-day situation in Iran shows us that the quarrel between the ‘antimodernists’ and the ‘modernists’ must be redefined as a form of schizophrenia. There are neither antimoderns nor moderns... but only simulacra of our fragmented selves.”⁷ Today, despite deeply engrained disputes over modernity’s reification, nearly all Iranians advocate similar modern principles. However, these principles, which are both connected to European experience and independent of it, have historically been the subject of misperception and manipulation.

⁶ Ali Mirsepassi, *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 191.

⁷ Ramin Jahanbegloo, ed. *Iran: Between Tradition and Modernity*, (New York: Lexington Books, 2004), xi.

Of course, none of the characteristics of a European-derived modernity can be said to be uniquely modern, just as they cannot be said to be solely European. Some scholars have located thoroughly “modern” ideas far from Europe in both time and distance. The philosopher Abbas Milani, for instance, locates an indigenous development of “modern” ideas in Iran long before its encounter with European modernity.⁸ Such considerations confirm the separateness of modernity from Europe. While the two are certainly connected, modernity can be and is constantly conceived of in non-Western forms. In fact, as Ali Mirsepassi points out, the most important foci of interpretations of modern ideology are found outside of Europe: “the current struggles in the non-Western world are for the heart and soul of modernity.”⁹ Mirsepassi notes that this runs contrary to inaccurate yet common Euro-centric conceptions about the “universal” nature of modernity: “We have seen... how the supposedly universal representation of modernity is an inflation and abstraction of Europe’s particular experience of modernization, raised to the level of a categorical truth for humanity, and externally imposed accordingly.”¹⁰ He contends that this perception is due for an overhaul in light of the experiences of non-Western countries with modern ideology.

Modernization, the process by which the European-originated concept of modernity is virtualized, is therefore separate from (though often related to) westernization, which is merely the imitation and imposition of western European

⁸ Abbas Milani, *Lost Wisdom: Rethinking Modernity in Iran*, (Washington, D.C.: Mage Publishers, 2004), 9, 38.

⁹ Ali Mirsepassi, 185.

¹⁰ Ibid. 187.

civilization.¹¹ As Monica Ringer puts it, “Due to the fact that modernization first developed in the West, it is to some extent ‘Western.’ However, it is empirically false that the two are equal and indistinguishable.”¹² Ringer goes on to indicate culturally neutral processes of modernization based on Max Weber’s understanding of the term. She outlines its main components as the implementation of modern market economies, the codification and systemization of law, the intellectual pursuit of knowledge and science, and the bureaucratization, centralization and rationalization of government. These processes have seemed to characterize countries attempting to become part of the “modern” global community. However, as the case of Iran demonstrates, the relationship between these processes and a coherent understanding or interpretation of commonly accepted modern values and ideals is not straightforward. Oftentimes these values are marginalized and even sacrificed through the false assumption that being (anti)modern is simply being (un)Western.

The history of modernization in the non-Western world was and continues to be a story of adapting European-derived modern modes of thinking to an indigenous context. In Iran, from the beginning there has been a misguided notion about the relationship between westernization and modernization. This “modernization dilemma,”¹³ due to the context surrounding the introduction of European modernity in Iran, has progressed through a number of stages of interpretation. Each step has been marred, however, by the

¹¹ References to the West throughout this paper refer to Western European countries and the United States. Generally, my conception of the “West” revolves around those European countries (and the US) that dominated the imperial/colonial period of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

¹² Monica Ringer, “The Discourse on Modernization and the Problem of Cultural Integrity in Nineteenth-Century Iran,” *Iran and Beyond: Essays in Middle Eastern History*, ed. Rudi Matthee and Beth Baron, (Mazda Publishers, Inc, 2000), 56.

¹³ Ibid.

inability to provide a sturdy ideological platform upon which to build a stable society. Instead, Iranians have created a dualistic notion contrasting “modern” Western-based ideologies with indigenous, “traditional” customs to imagine their contemporary context. By first trying to embrace the dominant modern ideology through imitation of Europe during the first part of the twentieth century, then later attempting to reject it through the refutation of westernization, Iranians have run the gamut of Western-centered interpretations of modernity. It is hard to imagine that these series of perspectives have not taught Iranians the fallacy of this dichotomy.

In fact, an independent response to the question of modern identity does seem to be present in Iran. Throughout Iran’s successive phases of modernization, calls for political representation, civil society, individual responsibility, the rule of law and justice have been voiced. Often these desires momentarily manifest themselves at political and ideological turning points in Iran’s history. This seems to be the case with the current ten-year-old reform movement, as calls for these modern ideals have begun to resurface. Though the reform movement is closely linked with Western conceptions of modernity, both the impetus and the justification for this movement are solidly rooted in a uniquely indigenous modern experience.

While the reform movement provides hope for positive changes within Iranian society, it is important to note the effects of ongoing controversy and conflict within the country. Many observers from the West have painted a rosy picture of the implications of the push for reform in Iran. However, the uncertainty of the situation must be taken into account for there to be a realistic analysis of the situation. In this light, it is useful to use the Iranian “blogosphere” as a means of gauging the social and political climate in

Iran. While bloggers continue to comprise a relatively small and narrow portion of the population, they provide helpful clues about the actual situation within Iran.

Additionally, their strong connection with the reform movement makes them an important demographic to follow and understand. What they have to say can help inform on the larger social and political issues within Iran today.

Bridgebloggers, people who use their blogs to link one culture to another, play an especially important role as the lynchpin of the blogging movement. As the history of Iran's blogging movement reveals, bridgebloggers have been central in efforts to help Iranians create a public space on the Internet. They have also facilitated the connection between the Iranian blogosphere and the larger global cyber-community. Particular attention will thus be paid to them.

Overall, blogs are playing a key if nuanced role in articulating a changing modern identity in Iran. Bringing them into a more generalized discussion of Iranian interpretations of modernity both sheds light on the trajectory of this process, and also highlights the importance of blogging as a social movement. How much weblogs will directly impact the modernization process is still to be seen. However, merely the development of such a phenomenon is worthy of investigation.

A History of Conceptualizing Modernity in Iran

Iran presents an interesting and useful context through which to explore the construction of non-Western modernity. While the phenomena of the Internet and weblogs are new to Iran, in many ways the issues surrounding them contain the same dilemmas and complexities that have plagued the discussion of modernization for the last two centuries. Over this period, a central problem has been disentangling modern values from their European and American roots. Like much of the rest of the colonized and semi-colonized world, Iran's continued encounter with Euro-American modernization has brought to the surface tensions and paradoxes that complicate the Western concept of modernity. As Monica Ringer notes, "At the heart of the modernization process in non-Western countries is the issue of the maintenance, or safeguarding, of cultural integrity."¹⁴ Throughout modernization Iranians have been continually re-interpreting their identity in an attempt to address this issue. As a result, Iranian society has oscillated between the acceptance and rejection of different characteristics of Western modernity. With each change a new face of modernity has surfaced, leading to further re-evaluations. Today, Iran seems to be on the cusp of such a period, suggesting the potential for substantial change.

The trajectory of Iranian modernization discourse can be divided into four phases. The first phase, during the late nineteenth century, can be characterized as the initial period of limited reform, which sought to adopt modern Western technologies and

¹⁴ Ringer, "The Discourse on Modernization," 57.

institutions without internalizing the corresponding Western ideology or culture. New equipment and tools supplemented the military and bureaucratic reforms that were to revitalize Iran's faltering attempts to compete with the European colonial powers. However, a despotic power structure and disjointed formal social relationships (for instance, between the monarchy and the religious order) hampered the success of these reforms. Instead, the introduction of European ideas empowered a small portion of Iran's elite to call for more encompassing changes to the social and political order.

The second phase began with the pseudo-populist constitutional movement at the turn of the twentieth century. The Constitutional Revolution from 1906 to 1911 sought to incorporate a more inclusive and representative system of governance, echoing some of the fundamental ideals of Enlightenment and modernist thought. However, rather than meaningful institutional reform, this period ushered in another authoritarian dynasty, one that heralded material and cultural manifestations of Western modernity while ignoring the more fundamental and universal aspects of the modernist project. Instead of replicating modern social, legal and political institutions, the Pahlavi Shahs mimicked European and American cultural norms and modernizing policies.

By the 1960s and 70s, a third ideological response to modernity began to be formulated. This time the movement sought to distance itself from the West and the authoritarian rulers who associated themselves with it. Seeking authentic forms of equality, liberty and justice, the population looked to political Islam as a means of confronting the hypocrisy and inequality of their current "modernizing" society. Modernity, with its association to westernization under the Pahlavi dynasty, became

viewed as a threat to Iranian identity. The 1979 revolution represented the culmination of this ideology and remains the dominant political paradigm in Iran.

The reform movement of the 1990s, which is closely linked with the blogging community, has begun to shake these foundations and question the revolutionary rhetoric of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. These changes have suggested the introduction of a new fourth ideological phase in which some Iranians have moved beyond attempts to segment, imitate and reject modernity in order to adopt it more whole-heartedly and unambiguously.

Iran's first stage of modernization can be described as the period of military reform and bureaucratic centralization carried out under the Qajar Shahs during the nineteenth century. In this period European "modernity" was introduced into Iranian society, which began a "revitalization" process in Iran. This European notion of modernity put forth found its roots in the scientific and rationalist ideologies of the European Enlightenment. Its fundamental underpinnings- aspects like technology and science, ideologies such as democracy, liberalism and secularism, and market economy and free enterprise- were presented to Iranians wrapped in the socio-cultural norms of Europe. The introduction of European modernity in this way helped formulate a discussion of modernity set in very specific terms. Perceptions and assumptions about the nature of modernization and its relationship to westernization, traditional Iranian culture and Islam were constructed as a consequence of the manner in which modernization was pursued during this time. Accordingly, this era had enormous influence over the structure of the discussion of modernity in Iran.

Modernization began under the Qajar dynasty in response to the perceived twin threats to Qajar rule during the early nineteenth century: European expansionism and internal political vulnerability. The limited reforms of Crown Prince ‘Abbas Mirza, begun in the 1810s, focused exclusively on bolstering the kingdom’s military and defensive capabilities. These measures, which continued throughout the century, were in part a response to the external threat posed by expansionist European countries. Russia and Great Britain specifically both maintained an especial interest in controlling Iran, each for its own strategic and colonial reasons. Wars with Russia’s modernized military led to defeats in 1815 and 1828, reinforcing the perception that Iran’s military was in desperate need of reform. The Qajar Shahs of the nineteenth century hoped to imitate European methods and technology in an effort to counter them militarily.¹⁵

However, the imposed changes sought to do more than simply update an antiquated military; rather they were an attempt to systematically impose “modern” forms of control imported from Europe.¹⁶ The Shah saw in European modernization a means of consolidating his tentative rule over his fragmented kingdom. Decentralized sources of authority, such as the ulama and regional tribal lords, posed a threat to the Qajar regime’s power. The European modernization project, which championed rationalization and centralization, thus held special appeal for Qajar rulers attempting to maintain their control. In this way reforms to the Iranian military and government, which focused on rationalization and centralization, took on distinctly modern characteristics heretofore

¹⁵ Jamshid Behnam, “Iranian Society, Modernity, and Globalization,” *Iran: Between Modernity and Tradition*, ed. Ramin Jahanbegloo, (New York: Lexington Books, 2004), 4.

¹⁶ Monica Ringer, *Education, Religion, and the Discourse of Cultural Reform in Qajar Iran*, (Costa Mesa, California: Mazda Publishers, Inc., 2001), 8.

unprecedented in Iranian reform initiatives. Unfortunately, Iranian rulers found that by borrowing these tactics and ideology from Europe they also inevitably allowed European socio-cultural influences to “infiltrate” Iranian society, result they continually, and ultimately unsuccessfully, attempted to minimize.

The strategy pursued by Iran’s rulers during this time set up some fundamental paradoxes in the process of Iranian modernization. First of these was the contradictory roles played by Europe. Reforms to the military were pursued both in the hopes of mirroring European power and of confronting it. Europe thus stood as both the model for change and the threat that forced this change. This dualistic role, while initially seen during the period as unproblematic, eventually led to major conflict in perceiving the advantages and costs of modernization. A second factor in complicating perceptions of reform was Iranians’ common conception of their own socio-cultural superiority. The centuries old notion of Western cultural inferiority to the Islamic East continued to dominate the Iranian elites’ attitudes towards Europe. As Ringer points out, “Europe was associated with Christendom, infidel customs, and a less developed moral code.”¹⁷ Early nineteenth century travelers to Europe commented on the wonders of the Western world, but they did not perceive social or cultural superiority.¹⁸ The Iranian elite previously viewed Europe not only as its strategic enemy, but also as an inferior civilization. Later, the seemingly sudden reversal of the perceived relationship between Iranian and European civilization would lead to a feeling of inadequacy, with which the Iranian psyche was woefully unprepared to deal.¹⁹

¹⁷ Ringer, “The Discourse on Modernization,” 59.

¹⁸ Ringer, *Education, Religion, and the Discourse of Cultural Reform*, 63.

¹⁹ Ringer, “The Discourse on Modernization,” 59.

These two factors were central to shaping the strategy of modernization in Iran during the nineteenth century, and had important ramifications for future modernizing projects. As a result of this situation, the Iranian elite proceeded with very limited and focused reforms in an effort to acquire the European products of modernization while avoiding any larger socio-cultural influence. If during the early part of the nineteenth century European modernization was coveted when it concerned itself with tactics and technology, it was a different case altogether when it came to the importation of European culture, institutions and ideology. The actions of the Qajar rulers made it clear that their interest in modern Europe was confined strictly to achieving military parity. Envoys sent by Qajar Shahs to Europe during the first half of the century were under strict orders not to stray from their specified tasks of collecting pertinent information. Throughout the early modernization process an effort was made to minimize the incursion of European social and cultural influence. This “modernization dilemma,” as Monica Ringer has termed it, was an attempt to separate modernization from westernization.²⁰ The Iranian rulers hoped to import specific modern technologies and institutions without Europeanizing their social and cultural ways. However, as Jamshid Behnam notes, the inability to formulate a comprehensive modern ideology independent of Europe led to enormous difficulties in separating European values and ideology from the manifestations of modernity.²¹ The resulting paradigms of the twentieth century would increasingly pair modernization with westernization.

During the second half of the nineteenth century the modernization dilemma became even more intense as the Iranian elite’s sense of civilizational superiority began

²⁰ Ringer, *Education, Religion, and the Discourse of Cultural Reform*, 11.

²¹ Behnam, 4.

to crumble under European political and military hegemony. As Iranian officials and intellectuals began to comprehend the more expansive requisites of modernization, they increasingly came to imagine a division between modern and traditional society. Foreign ideas and values, imported from Europe, were associated with a sense of civilizational progress, while indigenous socio-cultural norms became increasingly identified as regressive and “pre-modern.” This differentiation was to become the basis for the oppositional ideological system that pitted a Western and secular “modernity” against a local and Islamic “tradition.” As Ramin Jahanbegloo, Ali Mirsepassi and others have noted, it was this bipolar categorization that has been the basis for the misunderstanding of the role of modernization from both Iranian and Western perspectives.²² Only with the failure of the utopian promises of various twentieth century ideological projects, including Pahlavi westernization and political Islam, have a very recent generation of Iranians firmly questioned this imagined relationship. It remains to be seen however whether or not this new society will be able to disentangle itself from old perceptions or if they will once again be compelled by simplistic relationships.

The views and policies of Naser al-Din Shah, who ruled Iran from 1848 until his death in 1896, are indicative of the fear of westernization as a potential facilitator of fundamental change to Iran’s socio-political and cultural fabric. In Naser al-Din Shah’s case, of paramount importance was the threat to his power that liberal and republican ideologies of Europe could have. While an unprecedented number of reforms were introduced during his reign, they were performed while emphasizing the minimization of Western ideological influence. Throughout his rule Naser al-Din Shah worked to limit

²² Jahanbegloo, *Between Tradition and Modernity*, xi; Mirsepassi, 54-5.

the flow of European ideas and culture into Iran. As Ringer points out, despite the reforms implemented, Naser al-Din Shah's reign was notable rather for the lack of change in educational standards.²³ Among his measures were a ban on student travel to Europe, the closure of the "pseudo-masonic" secret society of the *Faramushkhaneh* (which was accused of espousing "republican" ideals²⁴) and the suppression of progressive newspapers and journals.²⁵ While Naser al-Din did proceed with educational reforms, including the opening of schools with European-style curriculum, the purpose of such schools was to limit and control the influx of European ideas by dictating the nature of westernized education.²⁶ Though he appreciated the benefits of having an Iranian bureaucratic elite to implement centralization of his government and use modern European technology, it is apparent that he was quite sensitive to the threat populist, egalitarian, and republican ideas could be to his traditional ruling authority. As Abbas Milani notes, Naser al-Din Shah's own accounts of his travels to Europe were "shaped by his desire to hide some truths about the modern West and contain the subversive potentialities of others."²⁷ Policies such as the ones enumerated above were meant to buffer Iranian society from the "subversive" ideas that underlay the manifestations of a modern nation-state he so craved. Ironically however, it was this ambivalent attitude that eventually set up the defeat of the Qajar dynasty. In attempting to adopt only very limited aspects of European modernity for his own uses, he failed in both maintaining legitimate authority over his kingdom and controlling the flow of ideas from Europe.

²³ Ringer, *Education, Religion, and the Discourse of Cultural Reform*, 260.

²⁴ Ibid. 96.

²⁵ Ibid. 260.

²⁶ Ringer, "The Discourse on Modernization," 61.

²⁷ Milani, 53.

The beginning of the twentieth century would see the demise of Qajar despotic rule, vindicating to many the superiority of Europe.

The early twentieth century marked the beginning of a new phase in Iran's encounter with modernization and modern European ideologies. While generalizing distinctions between periods is somewhat arbitrary given the continuum of such historical processes, it is clear that in many ways the constitutionalist movement, which precipitated the Constitutional Revolution of 1906 to 1911, represented Iran's second major response to its modernization dilemma. As Ali Ansari notes, the Constitutional Revolution "was and has remained a pivotal moment in the formation of the modern Iranian identity. It established the parameters of political discourse and provided a reference point for all subsequent political movements."²⁸ This phase can be distinguished from earlier periods by the more profound (aggressive, dominating, even totalizing) influence the ideological mechanisms of European modernity had on Iranian political and intellectual discourse. Western liberal and nationalistic ideology, inadvertently introduced via increasing access to European markets, literature and people during the late nineteenth century, breeched and eventually overwhelmed the barriers set in place against it by the Qajar rulers and their advisors. Attempts by the likes of Naser al-Din Shah to regulate how a young generation of Iranian elites used newfound European information and ideas ultimately failed. Graduates from his westernized schools, the new bureaucratic elite, became proponents of Europe and westernization.

Eventually, the political revolution at the turn of the century, brought on by the social and political demands of a modernizing populace, would pave the way for the rise

²⁸ Ali M. Ansari, *Iran, Islam and Democracy*, (Great Britain: Chameleon Press Limited, 2000), 29.

of Reza Khan's modern authoritarian state and the nationalistic ideology that glued it together. However, despite the newfound faith in European notions of modern government and civil society, issues with defining modernity persisted. More often than not, reformers emphasized a connection between modernization and westernization, responding to the failure of the Qajar regime to successfully adapt reform as its own. In order to avoid the appearance of imitating their vulgar enemy, Iranian politicians and intellectuals justified Europeanizing reform by conceptualizing these changes as "authentic" to Iranian culture. The westernization as modernization ideology became full blown with the ascendancy of Reza Khan's Pahlavi dynasty, which substituted the socio-cultural trappings of Europe and the United States for real changes to the power dynamics in Iran. Ultimately, though the strategies changed, Iran's rulers continued their attempt to exploit European ideas in order to maintain their own political domination.

The 1906-1911 Constitutional Revolution stands as an example of the confusion and contradiction of various modern interpretations in Iran. The event itself, which sought to inhibit the arbitrary rule of the Shah and initiate the liberalization of the Iranian government, symbolized an important shift from the Qajar period of the previous century. In securing the first formal structures of modern political representation, reformers signaled their implicit adherence to principles of citizenship and participation necessary for accountable governance. The constitutional movement drew from both Western and non-Western influences, revealing the inherently non-specific, supra-cultural nature of modernist discourse. Ali Mirsepassi notes how events throughout the non-Western world, as well as philosophical and religious discussions within Iran, contradict the notion that the democratizing and liberalizing movements of the early twentieth century

were exclusively Western importations. He cites the noticeable influence other non-Western democratizing and modernizing movements in the Ottoman Empire, India, Czarist Russian and Japan had on the constitutional movement in Iran.²⁹ Perhaps more importantly, he suggests that the initial acceptance of many modernizing and liberalizing reforms by Iranians, including notably members of the *ulama* (clergy), revealed a sense of cultural compatibility with such ideas: “It may be interesting to note that the liberal Western model of modernity was not initially perceived as something totally and ontologically different from the historical or cultural contexts of the Iranian society.”³⁰ In other words, modernist discourse, introduced primarily during this time as European-derived, was in many cases congruent with Iranian historical experiences and perspectives. Hence, as Mirsepassi puts it, in the case of the clergy, “Many Shi’i clerics... adopted aspects of modernity without thinking that it clashed fundamentally with their own cultural sensibilities.”³¹

That the constitutionalist movement was initially spearheaded (and to some extent popularized) by the alliance of two religious scholars (*mujtahids*)³² stands to support Mirsepassi’s point. Contrary to its representation both at the time and since then, the 1906-1911 Constitutional Revolution was not simply an imitation of European modernity. Its context and nature illustrate that there was indeed space available to imagine a modern Iranian republic without relying on Euro-centric ideology. However, intellectuals and political leaders at the time failed to incorporate Iranian history into their perspective in a meaningful sense, instead opting to Europeanize their experience. This

²⁹ Mirsepassi, 58.

³⁰ Ibid. 56.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ansari, 28.

paved the way for Iran's second phase of contemplating modernity, in which Iranian intellectuals and leaders more often than not viewed modernity as completely and exclusively European.

Clearly there was room to imagine a genuinely non-Western interpretation of modernity during this period. That the leading intellectuals and politicians of the early twentieth century did not formulate such a perspective was the result of their conscious decision to westernize, a choice based on the experiences of the previous century and made while unaware of the contradictions this would later create. The direction taken by the self-proclaimed "modernists" during and after the constitutional movement can be seen primarily as a consequence of the first phase of modernist discourse in Iran during the previous century. The growing perception of technological inferiority to Europe, amplified by the ambiguous position taken by the Qajar rulers, spilled over into the socio-cultural realm. European science, as opposed to "old" Islamic science, helped facilitate this expansion of the borders of modernity, as an increasingly widening spectrum of Iranian customs and social practices came to be seen as "irrational" and "unscientific."³³ Unable to conceive of a valid alternative ideology, Iranian intellectuals adopted Western rhetoric and ideology as their own.³⁴

A narrow and rigid interpretation of modernity, based not only on modern technologies and science but also increasingly on European socio-cultural values and norms, began to pervade modernist discourse in Iran. Thus, despite the wide array of influences on the 1906-1911 Constitutional Revolution, constitutionalist rhetoric championed westernization as a strategy for modernization. As Mirsepassi puts it, "But

³³ Mirsepassi, 62.

³⁴ Ringer, *Education, Religion, and the Discourse of Cultural Reform*, 270.

for all the richness, the diversity of visions and voices, the dominant trend in this movement called for the imposition of the Western narrative of modernity in Iran.”³⁵

This discourse, rooted in nineteenth century experiences, epitomized the modernization dilemma. It would take half a century for this self-deprecating doctrine of westernization to be discarded.

The ultimate consequence of the constitutionalist discourse was a concentration on imitating the trappings of European socio-cultural nationalism, rather than incorporating less Eurocentric ideas like civic participation and social equality. Despite their unabashed reverence for Europe, reformers of the early twentieth century nonetheless sought to link their changes with Iranian history and culture by invoking the specter of an ancient, lost Iranian civilization. That these alleged historically-justified reforms bore more resemblance to Europe than they did to contemporary Iranian society was no doubt a reason why the new vision of modernity had its critics, especially among the religious hierarchies that had the most to lose from shifting social and cultural capital. Indeed, the inconsistencies of the new westernized view, dubbed by Mirsepassi as “the paradox of the Mashruteh [constitutionalist] discourse,”³⁶ allowed a space for opponents to criticize its dependence on Eurocentric ideals and values. As a result, the process of westernization begun during this time would eventually come to be identified with the negative aspects of European influence, most notably the ideology of colonization. The perception of a dichotomy between a European-derived modernity and an Iranian, primarily Islamic-based traditionalism became more entrenched as a result of the discord

³⁵ Mirsepassi, 61.

³⁶ Ibid.

between European rhetoric and the realities of the non-Western, semi-colonial experience.

Reza Khan's ascendancy to power in the aftermath of World War I represented an attempt to act on the intellectual and political modernizing discourse evoked during the constitutionalist movement. Many Iranian intellectuals and elite viewed him as a "savior" who would reverse the country's perceived civilizational regression and implement the sweeping (deemed authentically "indigenous," but in actuality thoroughly westernizing) reforms needed to regain the country's influence and dignity.³⁷ European countries, most notably England, had been gradually increasing their influence in the Iranian economic and political arenas. Several expansive economic concessions had been forked over to English companies during the second half of the nineteenth century. During World War I Russia and England divided up Iran's territory between themselves, reflecting both a disregard for Iran's sovereignty and their own expansionist ambitions. Iranians were looking for someone to preserve their country's autonomy and restore its luster. When Reza Khan led a coup d'état in 1921, and later in 1925 assumed the reigns of power by becoming Reza Shah, they thought they had a leader strong enough to accomplish this.

Despite its utopian promises of political and cultural revitalization, the Pahlavi dynasty ultimately revealed the hegemonic and colonial nature of the Western modernism. Instead of ushering in democracy, liberalism and civil society, "The Pahlavi state offered a brutal iron cage of modernity to Iran."³⁸ Top-down reforms forcing the secularization of Iranian society, the privatization of religion, and the reinforcement of

³⁷ Ansari, 30.

³⁸ Mirsepassi, 61.

government authority produced the superficialities of a European nation-state without creating any fundamental change in the dominant political and social ideology. As Ali Ansari notes, “He [Reza Shah] was a traditional patrimonial king with the trappings and tools of bureaucratic authoritarianism. He and his key lieutenants provided the myth of the 1906-1911 Constitutional Revolution with its material dimension: a modern, bureaucratic, centralized state- secular, industrial and fervently national.”³⁹ In effect, Reza Shah was able to reproduce the despotism of the previous Qajar dynasty while appearing to move towards the goals of the revolution. However, in that the true underlining causes for the constitutional movement stemmed from the desire to acquire non-Eurocentric characteristics of socio-political modernization, such as civic participation, representation, and justice under law, the Pahlavi regime denied Iranians a modern ideology that could be separated from westernization. Reza Shah’s rule instead built upon the mistaken Eurocentric model of modernization developed around the turn of the century.

The first twenty years of Pahlavi rule were marked by Reza Khan’s nationalistic, authoritarian rule. When the fascist leanings of Reza Khan led the Allied Powers to force him to abdicate the throne in 1941, his son, Mohammad Reza Khan took his place. Without the political clout of his father, Mohammad Reza Khan was initially less successful at handling the reigns of state. From World War II until 1953 Iran witnessed a period of political democratization and pluralization in which Iranian mass politics first truly came into being.⁴⁰ During this time a number of political parties were created, most notably a coalition consisting of the Communist Tudah party and the anti-colonial clergy,

³⁹ Ansari, 30.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 31.

brought together by Prime Minister Dr. Mohammad Mosaddeq under his National Front, which during the early 1950s conducted a nationalizing campaign, including the nationalization of Iranian oil. In 1953, facing opposition from Mosaddeq and a popular revolt in the streets, Mohammad Reza Khan fled the country. However, almost immediately, a C.I.A.-backed coup overthrew the new government and reinstated the Shah. From this point forward Iran was ruled with an even tighter fist than during the days of Reza Khan. This event would afterwards become an important rallying cry amongst opponents of the regime for the defense of Iran's national sovereignty against the neocolonial ambitions of the West, and primarily of the United States. As both Ansari and Mirsepassi note, Mosaddeq's removal and the subsequent suppression of the burgeoning political parties drove critics of the regime and of westernization away from normal modern oppositional spaces to more private modes of resistance.⁴¹ Under these conditions radical alternatives to westernized institutions, policies and ideologies became increasingly attractive.

It was under Mohammad Reza Shah's rule during the 1960s and 70s that the third major ideological shift in Iran's conceptualization of European modernity was initiated. The political and social movements of this period can be seen as a reaction against the failures of the Pahlavi state to live up to the expectations implied in the constitutional movement and in the westernization-as-modernization project. Simultaneously, and as a consequence of both various worldwide anti-colonialist movements and the Western-centric focus (the *Mashruteh* paradox) of the Pahlavi dynasty, these political and intellectual thinkers (including a new politically active clergy) began rejecting

⁴¹ Ibid. 38; Mirsepassi, 70-1.

categorically the hegemonic construction of Euro-American modernity. As Mehrzad Boroujerdi notes, “These two types of other-ness in relation to the state and the West became inextricably bound as secular intellectuals came to perceive the Iranian regime as an extension of a larger entity called the West.”⁴² Nativism, the anti-colonial response to Eurocentric orientalism, became the intellectual and ideological weapon against the “othering” process produced by the state and the westernization project. This movement allowed secular and liberal leaning Iranians to embrace the development of a nationalist identity based on religion, which was beginning to be promulgated by some of the more radical *ulama*. The confluence of political Islam and the nativist discourse eventually led to the popularly supported 1979 Islamic Revolution. However, far from resolving the dilemmas of Iranian modernization, the revolution and its supporting ideological framework complicated the concept of modernity even further.

The reasons for creating nativist and political Islamist discourse can be found in the policies pursued by Mohammad Reza Shah’s regime between 1953 and 1979. As noted above, the strangling of political opposition, through banning political parties and suppressing political groups through coercion forced critics of the regime to find more indirect and subversive means of expressing their dissent. The inability of secular political parties like the Communist Tudah party to prevent these steps from being taken resulted in the loss of their public support. Discredited capitalist and Marxist ideologies were (ostensibly) discarded by many Iranians, leaving a space open for new concepts to develop.⁴³ Following a period of political inertia during the late 1950s, the 1960s saw a

⁴² Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 53.

⁴³ Ansari, 38.

new approach to the Iranian modernization project manifest itself. Al-e Ahmad's book *Gharbzadegi* (translated as "Westoxization" or "Occidentosis") revitalized the intellectual opposition movement by shifting it into the anti-colonial nativist discourse that was developing throughout much of the colonized world. Al-e Ahmad's concept of *gharbzadegi* was predicated on the notion that the source of Iran's social woes was the importation of European and American modern standards and values. Modernization, as Al-e Ahmad viewed Iranian westernization to be, was a disease that afflicted Iranians and was destroying the "authentic," often described as Islamic, roots of Iranian society.⁴⁴ Other intellectuals built upon this precept to mount a significant critique of the Pahlavi regime and the Western modernity it tried to impose. In this endeavor they also drew on the experience of colonialism in other parts of the world and the new non-Western responses to it. Anti-colonial movements in Africa and Asia helped inform the new counter-hegemonic discourse of Iran. After first ignoring the need for an alternative ideology, and then acquiescing to westernization, Iranian intellectuals began to form modernist ideologies consciously separate from the West.

Ali Shari'ati provides a pertinent example of the new generation of nativist intellectuals. The most important intellectual figure of the pre-revolutionary period, Shari'ati attempted to take Al-e Ahmad's critique of Western modernism and create a coherent ideology that could counter it. Like Al-e Ahmad, Shari'ati was educated in the European tradition. Attending university in Paris, Shari'ati became politically active in the exiled Iranian National Front circles and participated in the Algerian movement for

⁴⁴ Mirsepassi, 106-7.

liberation from France.⁴⁵ It was here and during his subsequent return to Iran in 1964 that Shari'ati decided that Iran needed to break free from Western hegemonic ideological paradigms such as capitalism and Marxism. Believing that Islam held the essence of Iranian identity, he focused on constructing a feasible political ideology based on Shi'i Islam. Many of Shari'ati's ideas were to guide the supporters of the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

The work of religious intellectuals like Shari'ati came at an opportune time for the empowerment of religious ideology. Mohammad Reza Shah's elimination of any secular opposition consequently increased the political role of the *ulama*.⁴⁶ The Shi'i religious hierarchy, whose power and authority over Iranian society had been progressively marginalized by the Pahlavi regime, was nonetheless practically the only remaining politically active organization. While the religious community had played significant roles in the modernization movements of previous generations, the new intellectual movement placed religion at the center of its revolutionary anti-modernist discourse. Additionally, the regime's modernizing policies of the 1960s and 70s produced economic dislocation and aggravated social disparities. Some of the more radical members of the clergy capitalized on these changes by focusing on a more political interpretation of Islam. Most notable among this group was Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the charismatic leader of the 1979 revolution. The key to Khomeini's success was his adoption of modernist rhetoric that appealed to the nativist intellectual movement without alienating more traditional religious Iranians. As Ali Ansari notes, "Khomeini was able to appeal to democrats and nationalists through his overt populism, and to the orthodox

⁴⁵ Ibid. 115.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 82.

ulama through theocratic authoritarianism.... [He] was a highly complex character who valued and understood the importance of popular participation.”⁴⁷ Khomeini was thus able to mobilize mass support for his vision of an Islamic state governed by *velayat-e faqih* (supervision by a religious jurist). In the end, as Mehrzad Boroujerdi notes, Islam became an attractive, thoroughly modern response to the incoherent modernity (i.e. westernized, semi-colonial modernity) of the Pahlavi regime exactly because it fit into the oppositional niche created by nativist intellectuals: “Islam became an ideology par excellence, capable of such functions as granting identity and legitimacy upon and integrating and mobilizing the masses. Politicized Islam, in turn, promulgated the otherness of the state, the West, and the secularists.”⁴⁸

One of the most fundamental paradoxes of the time was that nativist and Islamic movements appeared to be at once rejecting *and* building off previous attempts at Iranian modernization. The goals of the nativist discourse in many ways mirrored those of the intellectual project earlier in the century in their attempt to find sources of Iranian identity and honor that were feasible in the contemporary context of modernization. As with earlier periods, Iranian intellectuals were obsessed with the maintenance of a moral society. Unlike earlier periods, however, these intellectuals made a point of explicitly connecting the trappings of Western modernity with the perceived lack of moral attitudes in the West. The nativists and radical Islamists, along with the earlier progressives, utilized the European-constructed and thoroughly modern paradigm of nationalism. Whereas earlier Islam’s role had been marginalized, later it was emphasized. Like the earlier constitutionalist movement, the intellectuals of the 60s and 70s were influenced by

⁴⁷ Ansari, 47.

⁴⁸ Boroujerdi, 77.

the ideas and events coming from Europe as well as the non-Western world. These events however were no longer the democratization of societies through European liberalizing policies but political and ideological revolt against colonial (and neocolonial) oppression. The religious-secular alliance that had made possible the 1906-1911 Constitutional Revolution and Mosaddeq's 1950s National Front movement was also present here- and often purposely sought out by both secular nativists and religious intellectuals, as well as some of the clergy. However, now it was a radically new interpretation of political Islam that was being used as the cornerstone for a revolutionary movement. Ultimately, despite its ambivalent relationship with Iran's previous interpretations of modernity, the new ideologies most often served to perpetuate and develop further the misconceptions that had plagued Iranian modernization since the nineteenth century.

Likewise, the subsequent Iranian revolution that was born out of the conjunction of these two groups both resembled and diverged from previous Iranian political upheavals. Mohammad Reza Shah, with his seemingly impotent and discredited Western-secular nationalist ideology, could not prevent the downfall of his regime in the face of a popular movement armed with a poignant and well-articulated counter-ideology. Although both westerners and revolutionaries perceived the radical Islamic doctrine as "anti-modern," it was as Farhad Khosrokhavar notes, "the result of the modernization of Iranian society, and as such it bore many features of this modernization."⁴⁹ Mass politics characterized the revolution. Technology and mass media were vital to the dissemination of revolutionary ideas. Although it helped oppositional leaders to distance themselves

⁴⁹ Khosrokhavar, 3.

from the Western modernization of the Pahlavi dynasty and Euro-America, they inevitably created a modern revolution.

Even the anti-colonial and anti-Western ideology of the revolution was deeply embedded in a Western narrative. Although they relied upon the idea that the European modernization project was bankrupt, in reality the revolutionists sought to achieve many of the same political aspects of modernization that earlier constitutionalists had wanted. Citizenship, representative government and political accountability were part of what the revolution sought, and can be seen in the construction of the Islamic republic in the aftermath of the insurrection. However, these aspirations were somewhat compromised by the Islamic national ideology that defined the movement. As political Islam became a legitimate form of opposition, the less radical clergy also gained a new level of power. This conservative clergy were less willing to accept the liberal ideals of the nativist movement. Once the popular uprising had accomplished the overthrow of the Pahlavi regime, the empowered conservatives took measures to entrench their authority. The revolution, which had sought to address Iran's modernization paradox, ultimately failed to avoid essentializing the idea of modernity. While the revolutionaries successfully refuted Eurocentric discourses, they did so while continuing to work within the bipolar modern-traditional narrative created by westernization. Taking up the idea of tradition and inverting it into an ideal rather than a defect was a logical and relatively easy strategy. However, the fully modernistic nature of "tradition" itself would soon bolster the "schizophrenic" nature of post-revolutionary Iranian identity.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Jahanbegloo, *Iran*, xi.

Once in control of the revolution, the clergy were then able to manipulate the subsequent socio-political climate to their benefit. The initiation of the 1980s Iran-Iraq War provided a context in which the conservative elements of the new government could accomplish their consolidation of power. “The war with Iraq,” Ansari notes, “encouraged authoritarianism but prevented the resolution of the many contradictions inherent in the political structure.”⁵¹ Authoritarian powers were ceded to the government on the grounds that the 1979 Islamic Revolution had to be protected. The conflict galvanized Iranians to support their government and renewed their sense of identity and honor, making criticism of the regime’s policies more difficult. Additionally, as the war dragged on, the radical politics of the leaders of the revolution gave way to a more moderate political discourse.⁵²

Due to these factors the decade after the revolution allowed for the ruling clerics to entrench themselves in their position of power. In the aftermath of the war many groups within Iranian society came to realize that the Islamic Republic had not lived up to their expectations. As Ahmad Sadri puts it, “Reform was born with the postwar cooling of a central core of the Islamic Republic that was expressed in a new interest in liberal democratic ideals and a turning away from charismatic authority.”⁵³ Disillusioned with the fallibility of the religious leadership, many Iranians began to question the legitimacy of governance through a religious jurist, or *velayat-e faqih*. Even some of the staunchest supporters of the revolution began to question the authoritarian direction that

⁵¹ Ansari, 49.

⁵² Ibid. 50.

⁵³ Ahmad Sadri, *Iran: Between Modernity and Tradition*, ed. Ramin Jahanbegloo, (New York: Lexington Books, 2004), 119.

the government took. Once again, the same discontent apparent under the Pahlavi regime eventually resurfaced.

The election of reformist Ayatollah Mohammad Khatami in 1997 signaled the beginning of yet another chapter in Iran's encounter with modernity. Three identifiable social movements spearheaded the call for reform that began during the 1990s.⁵⁴ The first was the new generation of intellectuals, who reevaluated the 1960s and 70s movement to politicize Islam and now advocate for secular government. The second social group is the youth movement, which has viewed the government with increasing criticism for impinging on their social and political freedoms. The third group is the feminist movement, which has become critical of the social, economic and political inequality women continue to suffer despite the 1979 Islamic Revolution's promises for justice. All three of these groups have broken from the explicitly anti-western, anti-modernization ideology that served as the underpinnings of the 1979 revolution, suggesting the development of yet another alternative, non-Western modern perspective. This new movement is characterized by ideals such as political representation, social equality, rule of law, individualism and nationalism. While previous phases have contained aspects of these principles, in the new generation of Iranians their meanings have become more nuanced in light of Iran's history of modernization. Most importantly, adherence to these principles is more likely to be justified in light of Iran's own experiences, rather than on the basis of Western or anti-Western polemics.

Exactly how far the ideas of these segments of Iranian society have moved from the dualistic notion of West vs. East, and what impact they have had on the larger

⁵⁴ Khosrokhavar.

population are questions that deserve attention. Within this context weblogs may provide a basis upon which to investigate the discourse of this new generation, as well as its relationship with other demographics of the population. Weblogs, used primarily by intellectuals, feminists and the youth, pose a unique means of exploring the new modern Iranian perspective. “Iran,” Ramin Jahanbegloo writes, “has never been more a country of paradoxes and contradictions than it is today.”⁵⁵ As the investigation of weblogs and the reform movement behind them reveal, the complexities of its history of modernization remain central to understanding the direction of Iran’s ideological development.

⁵⁵ Jahanbegloo, *Iran*.

Digital Landscapes and Reevaluating “Modernity” in Post-revolutionary Iran

Iran’s past reveals the importance of the connection made by Iranians between new technologies and modernity. This association has also continually played a major role in connecting modernity to the West. During the twentieth century, the Pahlavi dynasty’s reforms were focused on the appropriation of European technology. The twentieth century demonstrated the problematic connection between acquiring Western technology and replicating modern Western social dynamics. Though the 1979 Islamic Revolution ostensibly disavowed Western modernism, it also depended on thoroughly Western tools and methods. In the late 70s, for example, cassette tapes of Ayatollah Khomeini’s speeches were smuggled into the country to be played at mosques and in the bazaars. During the revolution Iranians also used the BBC’s radio news broadcast to keep informed about signs of political discontent throughout the country.⁵⁶ Clearly the Islamic oppositional forces utilized Western technology and media to counter Euro-American socio-political hegemony during the revolution. Nonetheless, since that time the rhetoric of the regime has done anything but disentangle the historical association between modern technologies and westernization. Conservatives within the regime have made especially good use of this perceived historical connection, accusing these technologies of infiltrating Iranian society and undermining its “traditional” Islamic culture.

⁵⁶ Steven Barraclough, “Satellite Television in Iran: Prohibition, Imitation and Reform,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 37, no. 3 (July 2001): 35.

Within the last decade, however, a new generation of Iranians has begun to utilize new technologies in ways that diverge from previous methods under the Islamic Republic. Modern equipment and mass media are once again being used to undermine political oppression, this time against the regime that once effectively harnessed them to gain political power. A new coalition of marginalized groups within Iranian society is now questioning the ideology of the ruling oligarchy. Modern technology and independent media have served to facilitate this opposition, both by bringing up new issues surrounding the acceptability and ethics of their use and in providing a venue through which expression and/or discussion are possible. Communication networks created by this new access are taking a primary position in reinterpreting and renegotiating the relationships of power and authority between and within government and society. The surfacing of this opposition through the popularity of new technologies has also considerably widened an ideological gap within the regime over what policies should be pursued in the name of the Islamic Republic. In this way the values and goals of the 1979 revolution that brought about the regime are themselves being questioned and reinterpreted to fit a worldview that conflicts with the dualistic ideology of the nativist movement and political Islam.

Satellite television can be characterized as one of the leaders of the new wave of technologies made available to Iran, and is an important precursor to the Internet. The discourse surrounding the introduction of satellite television is telling of the circumstances that led to the mushrooming of the use of new communication networks. However, there are also some important differences that have affected their use. Satellite television has been much more accessible to the general population than the Internet, due

to affordability, and the need for less hardware and infrastructure. As such, satellite television has been much more popular and wide reaching within Iranian society, and arguably harder to repress. In addition, unlike the Internet, it is not interactive, making it perhaps less troubling for the regime. These are important distinctions that become apparent when the two are compared.

The introduction of satellite television during the early 1990s had a profound impact on the dynamics of social and political discourse in Iran, due to the cultural influence, both imagined and real, that the thoroughly westernized satellite programming had on Iranian society. Importantly, the regime's ignorance of the potential of new technologies and its sometimes ambivalent policy dealing with them allowed satellite to take seed in the country. The government's response to satellite television in part reflected a general vulnerability to political discord between factions of the government.

From the beginning, the Islamic Republic has reflected a number of competing visions within the government with regards to social and political policy-making. While in the early years of the Republic a brutal process of eliminating and marginalizing oppositional groups and ideas was pursued, there was and continues to be a relatively significant space for contending visions of how political Islam should be pursued. Daniel Brumberg defines this characteristic of the regime as "'dissonance' because it points *not* to a coherent system (or ideological synthesis) but rather to the deliberate and uneasy linking of competing notions of political community."⁵⁷ The regime's "dissonant" character became more apparent during the 1990s as a result of several factors, including the prolonging of the Iran-Iraq war and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini. These two

⁵⁷ Daniel Brumberg, "A Comparativists Perspective," *Journal of Democracy* 11, no. 4 (October 2000): 130.

events were most significant because they undermined the regime's ideological consensus. Nearly a decade of war with Iraq had slowly desensitized Iranian society to the revolution's rhetoric so that it no longer held as powerful grip on the people. Failures and scandals associated with the regime during the war had discredited their infallibility.

The wartime nationalist and anti-Western ideologies that maintained the people's will to endure the shortcomings of the Republic were no longer as effective when peace came. Additionally, Khomeini's charismatic leadership and pragmatic style could not be counted on to mitigate differences between factions of the government. The result was the government's increasing vulnerability to counter-hegemonic ideas. The government attempted to counteract this trend by replacing the worn-out political, military and macroeconomic threats of Western imperialism with the danger of cultural infiltration. The fear of the Western "Other," which for so long had been based on an overt military threat, was transformed into a cultural conflict and thus utilized in the postwar period. This "culture war" became the rallying point for conservatives against the forces of globalization.⁵⁸

However, the popularity of technologies like satellite television, and later the Internet and blogs, forced Iran's leaders to accommodate at least to some extent the wishes of the people. Introduced to the Iranian population in 1993, by 1995 there were an estimated 500,000 dishes in Tehran alone.⁵⁹ Furthermore, this number does not reflect the true number of people watching satellite, since one home tended to house an entire extended family, and since a single dish often serviced the whole apartment building.

⁵⁸ Barraclough, 26.

⁵⁹ "Containing Cultural Contamination," US-Iran Review, January 1995, cited in Barraclough, 30.

These facts are especially interesting given the that the programs broadcast during that time had very little Iran-specific content, and barely any programs in a language that the majority of viewers could understand. Other types of media, such as Persian BBC's World Service Radio, served as much more accessible foreign sources of news and information. Steven Barraclough has concluded that the main attraction of satellite television was its content, which included dancing and music, entertainments that were forbidden in Iranian society. The mere access to such proscribed material was itself a major factor in its popularity.⁶⁰

The government's initial attempt to ban the use of satellite dishes in 1994 sparked massive social protest. An intense debate in the Iranian parliament ensued. Moderates in the government, led by President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, used the issue to widen their support base and sought to convince conservatives of the impracticality of banning dishes. Instead, they advocated improving Iran's own public programming which, by most accounts, was inferior to foreign programming. Conservatives rejected this solution, seeing the mere presence of satellite dishes as a betrayal of the values of the 1979 revolution. Some even compared dishes to American flags, revealing their loyalty to the anti-Western ideology propagated by Islamic intellectuals like Al-e Ahmad and Shari'ati during the 1960s and 70s. Generally, conservative rhetoric voiced the idea of an irrevocable clash between competing civilizations.⁶¹

In the end both policies were followed, though neither one as far as its backers hoped. After a lengthy period of ratification the ban went into effect, although aside from periodic crackdowns, widespread covert usage continued. Implementation of the ban was

⁶⁰ Ibid. 30.

⁶¹ Ibid. 31-2.

not a priority for the government, since most government officials were concerned only with the symbolic effect that the dishes had. As long as the dishes remained hidden, the image of the Islamic Republic was not threatened.⁶² Reform of the government-run television company, the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), was also initiated. Channels were both expanded and specialized. An effort to expand airtime for entertainment was also made, where producers were forced to utilize Iran's rich cultural history in creative ways to create a number of documentaries and historical dramas. Outsourcing projects increased the quality of programming, but the IRIB and the government continued to ensure that they had complete control over what was aired. All programming, even entertainment, needed to present a moral or ideological message that reflected the opinions of the government leadership.⁶³ These relatively limited changes have not been enough to stem the taste Iranians have for foreign programming.⁶⁴

The issue of satellite television set the tone for how both reformers and conservatives would confront later technologies. During his 1997 presidential election campaign, reformist candidate Reza Mohammad Khatami emphasized his support of a more open policy with regards to media and communication technology. Like the followers of his moderate predecessor Rafsanjani, Khatami acknowledged the infeasibility of banning new technologies. According to him, "digital, computer and

⁶² Ibid. 34.

⁶³ Ibid. 37-40.

⁶⁴ "Go-Karts, Paintball Appeal to Young Iranians," *ABC News*, January 3, 2006, <http://abcnews.go.com/WNT/story?id=1467301> (accessed January 9, 2006); Nahid Siamdoust, "Iran Cleric Struggles to Get Alternative Views to TV Screens," *LA Times*, January 9, 2006, <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-saba9jan09,1,6911495.story?coll=la-headlines-world> (accessed January 9, 2006).

satellite borders are jokes.”⁶⁵ Likewise, the conservative response was distrust of foreign technologies. Many among them pointed to the United States’ overt attempts to use technology as a political tool- for instance their funding of anti-regime satellite stations- as evidence supporting their fears. Their arguments continued to be based on a politicized vision of Islam. Katerina Dalacoura has characterized this as a form of culture taken as politics. Unlike the reformists, who tried to complicate essentialized differences between the “modern” West and “traditional” Islam, conservatives still attempted to base their decisions on a formulaic political interpretation of religion.⁶⁶

While serious debate over censorship in satellite television developed relatively quickly, real contention concerning use of the Internet took a longer time to foment. Cost and accessibility were the two biggest factors in this time lag. The Internet was first introduced in Iran when it and the Institute for Studies in Theoretical Physics and Mathematics at Tehran University became linked in the mid-1990s through the state-run Data Communication Company of Iran (DCI).⁶⁷ Since then Internet access has grown significantly, with private Internet service providers (ISPs) increasing accessibility to the public. As with satellite television, initially the Internet was regulated through somewhat unsophisticated and ineffective means. The government’s primary objective in filtering the Internet was the blocking of pornographic material. This was done mainly by coercing private ISPs into blocking servers that hosted banned websites. ISPs that did

⁶⁵ “Khatami Talks to University Students,” *Tehran Times*, May 8, 1997, cited in Barraclough, 42.

⁶⁶ Katerina Dalacoura, “A Critique of Communitarianism with Reference to Post-Revolutionary Iran,” *Review of International Studies* 28 (2002): 87-8.

⁶⁷ Mark Graham and Shosravi Khosravi, “Reordering Public and Private in Iranian Cyberspace: Identity, Politics, and Mobilization,” *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 9 (2002): 225.

not comply were often closed down. However, secrecy and confusion over what sites were officially banned led to an inconsistency in the content that was blocked among different ISPs. It took until 2001, when Internet usage began taking off, for the regime to implement a comprehensive policy that placed all ISPs under state supervision.⁶⁸

There are several reasons for the lack of coherence in the government's Internet policy during the late nineties. One reason was that conflicting opinions of policy, or "dissonance" continued to play a part in Iranian politics and had in fact greatly increased during the mid 1990s with the rise of the reformist movement. The disagreements over satellite dishes continued to remain relevant with the Internet case. Moderates and reformists, while no doubt agreeing to the blocking of pornographic material, advocated a much more open policy with regards to other types of Internet censorship. As stated before, in 1997 Khatami ran on a platform that sought to defend the rights to access media and communication technology. Another factor that contributed to initially less stringent regulations was the fact that the Internet was not seen as a direct threat to the regime. Despite many utopian dreams about its inherently democratic value, it has been demonstrated that the Internet itself is not necessarily threatening to oppressive regimes.⁶⁹ As Mark Graham and Shosravi Khosravi note, "The Iranian state itself exploits the Internet to reach Iranians abroad in corners of the Iranian diaspora that would otherwise be inaccessible."⁷⁰ The fact that many high-ranking officials, including the Supreme Leader himself, have their own websites that they use to disseminate propaganda reveals

⁶⁸ "Internet- Iran," *Reporters Sans Frontiers*, http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=10733 (accessed April 11, 2006).

⁶⁹ Peder Jensen, "Blogging Iran- A Case Study of Iranian English Language Weblogs," (masters thesis in Media and Communication, University of Oslo, Norway, 2004), 12.

⁷⁰ Graham and Khosravi, 226.

the Internet's potential use as a tool of the regime. Additionally, in restricting Internet access they would have forfeited a considerable economic market. Finally, especially early on, there was likely a disinterested ignorance about the Internet altogether among many leading clerics.⁷¹

The regime's haphazard and reactionary policy towards Internet censorship, similar to its policy with satellite dishes, reveals the confused role technology plays in the Islamic Republic. As noted before, despite its anti-modernist stance, Islamic revolutionaries were quick to use new technologies to facilitate the revolution. Likewise, today the regime continues to attempt to use television and the Internet to propagate their ideological program. However, the difficulty in effectively controlling satellite television and the Internet point to an ambivalence about whether these technologies are a direct threat towards the regime or whether instead it is only their potential use that is the danger. That the regime did not opt for full control of the Internet, as the oppressive government of Burma has with its heavily regulated state-run or state-associated ISPs and its country-wide Intranet (called the Myanmar Wide Web⁷²), signifies the conflict over the role of modernity at the very heart of the dominant anti-Western political ideology.

Within the last few years the Iranian government has begun implementing a much more exhaustive Internet filtering campaign, mirroring the techniques used by China, Singapore and other leading Internet-censoring states. The number and variety of sites filtered has increased dramatically. Political sites have become the new main target of

⁷¹ Omid Memarian (blogger), personal interview, October 31, 2005, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH. This has changed considerably, although there is still generally a divide in interest between conservative and reformist leaders.

⁷² "Internet- Burma," *Reporters Sans Frontiers*, http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=10748 (accessed April 11, 2006).

filtering, making them often harder to access in Iran than pornographic sites.⁷³ In 2004 the government earmarked eight million dollars to go towards implementing Internet censorship laws.⁷⁴ However, despite the increased filtering, the Internet has continued to be used by a relatively significant percentage of the population.⁷⁵

The primary reason for the increased censorship is that the Internet has become an increasingly popular space for many sections of the population to access, disseminate and discuss materials that are forbidden in more physical and traditional public places. Like satellite dishes during the early and mid-90s, the Internet has become a threat to the regime because it reflects ideas that are in conflict with the precepts of the ruling oligarchy. However, the Internet presents a much more complex and in many ways more dangerous threat because Iranians within Iran itself are able to interact with this media, bypassing restrictions and boundaries put in place to control conventional civil society. Its power to expand the borders of the public sphere into previously private spaces has revealed a diverse array of opinions, experiences and ideas that diverge from the official ideology of the regime.⁷⁶

Conservative elements inside the regime, following the discourse of the 1960s and 70s that defined Western influence as a poison to the society, have always kept strict control over political, social and cultural life in Iran. During the 90s, the popularity of satellite television, and later the Internet, revealed a population chafing under the

⁷³ "Internet- Iran," *Reporters Sans Frontiers*.

⁷⁴ "Iran has spent \$8 million for filtering," *Stop Censoring Us*, <http://stop.censoring.us/archives/011021.php> (accessed January 10, 2006).

⁷⁵ An estimated three to seven million Iranians have access to the Internet. During the last several years the rate of usage in Iran has outpaced other Middle Eastern countries. "Internet- Iran," *Reporters Sans Frontiers*.

⁷⁶ Graham and Khosravi, 243.

restrictions of their government. Reformists, hoping to gain a political advantage by appearing to work with, rather than against, the forces of globalization, adopted the issues of media and communications censorship as part of their platform. Their overwhelming success in all parts of electoral government at the end of the decade reflected the mass discontent with the current regime's policies. However, conservative elements that still control non-elected parts of the government have since refused to allow the population to succumb to what they still saw as a hostile invasion of Western influences.

The expansion and contraction of social and political freedoms set the stage for Internet weblogs to become one of the most important forms of popular expression available to various marginalized groups. Promises of the reform government that swept into power between 1997 and 2001 advanced the hopes of the population to an unparalleled extent. Ladan and Roya Boroumand have argued that reformists within the government never intended to open up the possibility of reinterpretations of political participation and citizenship.⁷⁷ However, as Daniel Brumberg notes, whether or not reformists realized it, they did in fact introduce this concept to the public as a real possibility.⁷⁸ In fact, a major shift in the interpretation of the ideals of the Islamic Republic was represented in the new political reform movement. Questions about democracy and government by and for the people, aspects of political discourse in Iran since the end of the nineteenth century once again resurfaced. Conventional modern rules of governance and society, such as the "rule of law," which have been repeatedly called for by Iranians and repeatedly denied by their rulers, were once again revisited in

⁷⁷ Ladan Boroumand and Roya Boroumand, "Reform at an Impasse," *Journal of Democracy* 11, no. 4 (October 2000): 114-128.

⁷⁸ Brumberg, 131-2.

the context of the conservatives' reactions to issues such as technology. Despite efforts by conservatives to maintain ideological hegemony, alternative concepts of Iranian society remained on the surface of political discourse. They did so by finding refuge in cyberspace, where the regime's authority was not as pervasive. This realignment found a natural home in the weblog community, whose structure and capabilities in many ways suited the desires of these repressed groups.

One of the most important and illustrative examples of the transition from public space to cyberspace was the development, suppression and subsequent resurfacing of the press. With the rise of the reformist movement new independent journals and newspapers began to proliferate. These new liberal publications were in fact vital to the movement, since they both gave the public alternative access to media covering domestic issues and allowed them to voice their own opinions on various subjects. In short, these publications sought to "take charge of public discourse and unleash public discussion from clerical control."⁷⁹ Amongst a population deprived of access to such resources, and with an 80 percent literacy rate,⁸⁰ these publications soon became incredibly popular. In Tehran, a 1999 government survey found that 86.2% of the respondents followed such newspapers. Nor was the phenomenon restricted to urban areas. President Khatami and his administration helped encourage the widespread growth of newspaper readership in rural areas, which had traditionally been more ignorant of national political affairs.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Geneive Abdo, "Media and Information: The Case of Iran," *Social Research* 70, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 880.

⁸⁰ CIA World Factbook, "CIA- The World Factbook- Iran," March 29, 2006, <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ir.html#People> (accessed April 11, 2006).

⁸¹ Abdo, 882.

Conservatives soon realized the threat that politically active journals and newspapers posed to their ideological and political hegemony. Reported scandals revealing the corrupt nature of the government created discord, resulting in massive social unrest and, in some instances, violence. In 2000, shortly after reformist candidates swept the parliamentary election, Supreme Leader Khameneh'i announced that reformist newspapers were becoming "bases of the enemy."⁸² Soon after, the judiciary banned more than a dozen liberal newspapers. The new reformist government attempted to ease the laws concerning the media, but Khameneh'i once again stepped in and halted the legislation. Such action was unprecedented in Iranian politics, and highlighted the increasing tension between the public attitudes connected to the reformist movement and the fears of the conservative clerical oligarchy.⁸³ Over the next few years, in repeated waves of crackdowns, the judiciary closed approximately one hundred publications, including over forty daily newspapers.⁸⁴ Scores of journalists were also harassed and arrested. In July of 2003 an Iranian-Canadian reporter was detained in Tehran for photographing a local prison and beaten to death while in custody.⁸⁵ Under the continued repression many journalists and political writers decided to halt their futile efforts to publish news and stories. For many, however, the relatively unrestricted Internet soon provided an alternative medium.

As the story of the Iranian blogging movement's birth reveals, the suppression of the press played a key role in the proliferation of this media. Nearly every English

⁸² Ibid. 883.

⁸³ Ibid. 884.

⁸⁴ Nasrin Alavi, *We Are Iran*, (Brooklyn NY: Soft Skull Press, 2005), 2.

⁸⁵ "Canadian Journalist 'Beaten to Death,'" *BBC News Online*, July 16, 2003, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3070895.stm, (accessed April 11, 2006).

newspaper and journal article that plots the creation and development of the Iranian blogging community points to one man, Hossein Derakhshan, as its catalyst. A member of Iran's post-revolutionary generation, Derakhshan was also a writer for one of the start-up reform newspapers of the late 1990s. After the paper was shut down, Derakhshan relocated to Toronto, where he started his Persian weblog, "Editor: Myself." In 2001, he posted guidelines on how to start blogging in Persian. Within a few short months the phenomenon had caught on. Starved of social, political and creative outlets, blogs appealed to Iran's highly literate urban population. Other banned journalists began using the medium as well. Indeed the personal and decentralized nature of weblogs appealed to many Iranians, but especially those journalists who did not have to rely on a publisher or worry about having censorship or rejection by the government through strict press laws. Blogs, which function in a similar temporal fashion as newspapers, soon became an important source of information, news and discussion, taking the place of banned newspapers.

But journalists could not claim weblogs entirely for themselves. During the first few years of the twenty-first century the Iranian blogosphere exploded with users. By 2004 there were an estimated 64,000 Iranian blogs, making Persian the fourth most common language found on the web at the time.⁸⁶ Two years later, this figure had nearly doubled, with Persian becoming the second most popular Internet language.⁸⁷ An overwhelming number of these blogs were created by younger people, whose ability to socialize or have their voices heard in the conventional public space was suppressed by the regime. Socializing online was one important aspect of this, since public interaction,

⁸⁶ Jensen, 24.

⁸⁷ Ben Macintyre, "Mullahs Versus the Bloggers."

especially between sexes, has been highly restricted under the Islamic regime. Other marginalized groups, such as women, minorities and homosexuals also found the Internet, and especially blogging, a valuable sphere for public discourse.⁸⁸

As with censorship of television and other Internet sites, the regime was not far behind in attempting to harness popular forms of dissent and counter-hegemonic ideas. Within a year of the weblog explosion the judiciary began informing ISPs that certain blogs that did not conform to the regime's ideology should also be banned along with pornographic material. In 2003 Sina Motallebi was the first person to be arrested for blogging.⁸⁹ Soon after other arrests followed. However, the government found it increasingly difficult to threaten bloggers physically due to the anonymity of the Internet. Instead, their most potent weapon has been their increasing control of ISPs and online access. Despite calls from reformers to halt Internet censorship, the judiciary, with the blessings of the Supreme Leader, has continued its crackdown.

The coalescence of the Iranian blogosphere as a space for public participation and discourse is a result of the interactions between new technologies and Iran's political and public spheres. The dissonant character of the government, as noted above, created the opportunity for technologies laden with both modernist and Western values and cultural norms to subvert the regime's attempt to shelter Iranians from foreign cultural and political influence. Political, social and cultural oppression by the regime in the name of "Islam" during the post-revolutionary era has repressed public life to such an extent that Iranians are desperate to find alternative outlets.

⁸⁸ Graham and Khosravi, 224-5, 233-5.

⁸⁹ Alavi, 2.

During the 1990s new technologies began to provide one such outlet. The result was an attempt by the public to renegotiate the meaning of the revolution and the nature of the Islamic Republic. Reformists within the government have striven to adapt some of the social demands in order to preserve the Islamic Republic. However, conservatives within the regime have refused to risk losing their authority over nearly all aspects of public life for fear of sacrificing their vision of a “pure” Islamic society. They continue to support the anti-Western intellectual notions of the 1960s and 70s that provided the ideological buttress for the revolution. This ideology contrasts from the perspective that reformers have projected through print media, Internet websites and blogs. Their conception of the goals of the Republic has increasingly relied on democratic rhetoric. While access to weblogs has remained limited due to social and economic factors, their popularity shows that many marginalized Iranians are seeking to voice their opinions. This is nearly as telling as what they actually have to say.

Reform in the Context of a Multifaceted Weblogging Community

From the English-language media coverage of Iran's blogging phenomenon a somewhat utopian depiction of its influence and importance has emerged. Articles commonly focus on the demographics of Iranian bloggers, who reflect a young, Western-oriented generation that is at the heart of the decade-old reform movement. These same articles also often tend to rely on rhetoric championing the Internet's reputation as an inherently free and open space that facilitates democratic change. Many observers thus interpret the sprouting of the reform movement and the popularity of blogs as signals of an impending blossoming of social, political and even cultural reform in Iran. Opponents of the regime both within and outside Iran have pointed to an impending shift from the "traditionalism" of political Islam towards the "modernism" of Western contemporary society.

Events such as the waves of government Internet censorship and the election of ultra-conservative President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005 have brought about a reevaluation by some of the blogosphere's impact on traditional Iranian society and politics. These critics deemphasize the impact blogs have had on traditional Iranian social dynamics and question whether they have been helpful in creating a more meaningful civil society. In some cases these critics even include bloggers and Iranian reformists themselves.

An exploration of the Iranian blogosphere and the literature concerning it reveals that in truth blogs fit both descriptions. Iran's "weblogestan" reflects the oppression

experienced by much of the population during the post-revolutionary period. Those whose access to traditional civil society has been marginalized by the Islamic regime have been able to more easily express their perspective through blogging. The reformist movement, which represents a recent shift in the social and political dynamics of Iran, has found refuge via blogs and the Internet. As such, blogs have been able to voice perspectives that have otherwise been generally suppressed by the government. Calls for citizenship, representative government and equality under law are finally being heard over the hypocrisy and authoritarianism of official discourse.

On the other hand, what many foreign observers miss is the reality that blogs and the Internet houses social hierarchies that have been renegotiated rather than abandoned and whose character is heavily influenced by both access to technology and limitations set by traditional political and ideological divisions. Cyberspace, while relatively free, is also susceptible in various ways to class conflict, political bickering and bigotry. Coherence or meaningful discussion is not implied in the characterization of this new civic space. The Iranian weblogestan is indeed a place where Iranian conceptions about modernity, modernization and the West are being reexamined and reinterpreted. However, this does not mean that the blogging movement now represents, or ever will represent a coherent response to the regime or to political religious fundamentalism. Avoiding simplistic models is key to understanding its impact within traditional civil society.

Blogs in Iran undeniably provide an alternative and often oppositional space for Iranians to voice their ideas and opinions. As the last chapter posits, the social and political oppression implemented by the Iranian Islamic Regime, the development of

reformist parties, and the simultaneous (and connected) popularity of newly introduced technologies have been integral in bringing about the blogging movement. These factors may explain the disproportional representation of Persian-language blogs and other websites on the Internet.⁹⁰ Nasrin Alavi's *We Are Iran* is replete with confirmations by Iranian bloggers of the liberalizing and democratizing power of blogs. Alavi, whose book explores the authors behind the 100,000 plus Iranian blogs found online, translates numerous posts that reveal a population urgently searching for a means of expressing themselves. As one blogger writes,

I keep a weblog so that I can breathe 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.⁹¹

English language Iranian blogs from inside Iran mirror this sentiment. A post by Mr. Behi,⁹² who hosts a popular reformist-oriented blog from Tehran, comments,

Adventures of Mr.Behi is my second home, where I can release my imagination and review my life... Adventures of Mr.Behi is a record of my thoughts and ideas for the past year now... Something that makes this blog a better place than just a diary for me is the amazing collection of ideas Mr.Behi received as comments. Thanks to those who kindly left their memories here [*sic*].⁹³

⁹⁰ Macintyre, "Mullahs versus the Bloggers,"

⁹¹ Alavi, 2.

⁹² Mr. Behi is a pseudonym used by the author of the blog "Adventures of Mr. Behi." Due to arrests and harassment of bloggers in Iran during the past several years, many reform-minded bloggers have turned to using false names and otherwise obscuring their identity. In general, most of the weblog authors cited in this paper use pseudonyms.

⁹³ Mr. Behi, "One Year With Mr. Behi!" *Adventures of Mr. Behi* [Weblog], November 29, 2005, http://mrbehi.blogs.com/i/2005/11/mrbehi_is_one_y.html (accessed January 29, 2006).

This post also highlights the importance of cyberspace as a surrogate public sphere.

While the connectedness of blogs is a fundamental reason for their popularity in any society, it is an especially important feature for Iranians because of the limitations imposed on real-world social interaction. Iranian Girl, another English-speaking blogger inside Iran, writes about this incentive:

in opposite of what you guessed - feeling a need for blogging- no, it was not that at first, but now i see that i have opened a kind of window that i can talk to different people around the world (through my blog i mean) and its so nice, it's a good opportunity... just know that what i write in my blog i would never ever been able to publish them in a magazine or newspaper. we are not this free, also if i had written my real name plus my family name in this blog i wouldnt feel safe then, right now i feel safe cause i think its not that easy to find me. in the real life i dont feel free to say what i think is right, it could be dangerous [*sic*].⁹⁴

The explicit understanding that blogs fill a specific social and emotional niche is demonstrated throughout the blogosphere. The expansiveness and anonymity of blogs and the Internet become increasingly important when contrasted with the repressive nature of traditional society.

Iranian Girl's description of her blog as a window echoes the paradigm outlined by arguably the most famous Iranian blogger, Hossein Derakhshan. His description utilizes the metaphors of Iranian blogs as windows, bridges and cafes.⁹⁵ Weblogs can bridge divides between individuals and groups within a community who have different views or opinions and who would otherwise rarely interact. Blogs can also provide windows into a culture or society through which outsiders can gain a point of access to an

⁹⁴ Fatema, "Friday, July 15, 2005," *Iranian Girl* [Weblog], July 15, 2005, <http://iranian-girl.blogspot.com/2005/06/what-made-you-open-blog-why-did-you.html> (accessed April 7, 2006).

⁹⁵ Ethan Zuckerman, "Hoder's Talk At Berkman," *My blog is in Cambridge, but my heart's in Accra* [Weblog], December 10, 2004, <http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/ethan/2004/12/10#a635> (accessed January 28, 2006).

otherwise segregated community. Finally, blogs are also places where individuals can meet to discuss and socialize, much like a cafe. These three uses are suggested by the above quotes. They help explain the potential of blogs within a society like Iran. For instance, Derakhshan points to the influence these uses have already had on the June 2005 presidential elections.⁹⁶

Considering the benefits afforded by the Internet and weblogs, it is no wonder that groups marginalized within Iranian society make up the majority of Iranian bloggers. Farhad Khosrokhavar categorizes the backbone groups of the decade-old reform movement as intellectuals, the youth and women.⁹⁷ These groups can also be seen as representing the majority of bloggers.⁹⁸ Each of these groups has separate but related motives for participating in the reform movement. These motives are reflected in their uses of blogs. In this sense, technology has facilitated an urge within the population to redress the contemporary Iranian views of Islam and the role of the West. Correspondingly, the relaxation of social and political restrictions resulting from the increasing influence of reformist political ideology has created higher expectations of civil society. The recent reversal of reformist policies during the last several years appears to signal the demise of reform within the government. However, the reform movement's political failure has not mitigated the significant ongoing unrest amongst marginalized groups.

⁹⁶ Hossein Derakhshan, "Weblogestan: How Weblogs are Affecting Iran," *Editor:Myself* [Weblog], April 29, 2005, <http://hoder.com/weblog/archives/013982.shtml> (accessed January 23, 2006).

⁹⁷ Khosrokhavar, 3.

⁹⁸ Omid Memarian (blogger), personal interview, October 31, 2005, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH.

Academics, journalists and political thinkers have all played a central role in both the reform and the blogging movement. These intellectuals continue to formulate the arguments and ideology that articulate the desires of the reformist movement and many bloggers. Khosrokhavar notes that these intellectuals have reexamined the conclusions of a previous generation of thinkers, including Al-e Ahmad and Shariati.⁹⁹ They have come to question the legality of the Islamic Republic, the legitimacy of political Islam, and the divide between Iran and the West. Ramin Jahanbegloo calls this young group “Fourth Generation Iranian Intellectuals” and distinguishes them as less ideologically driven than the previous generation.¹⁰⁰ Many of this Fourth Generation now feel that they have learned the consequences of the 1979 revolution and of ideologically motivated politics. They hope to be able to implement citizenship, law and justice into the social and political structure without shedding blood or defining oneself against a cultural or ideological “Other.”

For example, during the 2005 presidential elections, a political English-language blogger from Iran named Windsteed voiced his concern over jeopardizing reformist gains in the name of idealism:

A Great Iran cannot be created overnight.... Let's be patient this time, let's do not destroy everything again. Let's don't listen to those who just want to spread violence and hatred. Let's move on, however slowly, with what we have started and have sacrificed for it. Let's prove for once that Iranians know what they want and they know how they want it [*sic*].¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Khosrokhavar, 12.

¹⁰⁰ Ramin Jahanbegloo, “The Role of Intellectuals,” *Journal of Democracy* 11, no. 4 (October 2000): 136.

¹⁰¹ Windsteed, “Let's be patient this time!” *Iran Hopes* [Weblog], May 26, 2005, <http://iran-votes-2005.blogspot.com/2005/05/lets-be-patient-this-time.html> (accessed March 1, 2006).

Another blogger, Mr. Behi, describes himself “as someone who believes in reform and hates revolution.”¹⁰² Thus, although these blogger-reformists want change, they do not want it through violent political revolution. It is probably not surprising that this Fourth Generation has found a home on the web, given both the fact that the Internet was first introduced in Iran by academics and that the most vocal champions of the reform movement, the journalists, resumed their efforts on the Internet after their newspapers were shut down by the government.

In their paper on the political power of blogging, Daniel Drezner and Henry Farrell have considered the importance of connections between news agencies and bloggers. They surmise that these connections have been vital in making bloggers socially significant.¹⁰³ This link is probably more important in the Iranian context, since the lack of reliable news has meant that weblogs play a much more vital role in supplying information and opinion to the general public. A 2004 survey conducted by the Iranian Student News Agency revealed that those polled thought that the Internet provided the most trusted news coverage.¹⁰⁴ While the role of blogs is limited due to accessibility to the Internet, it does extend beyond Internet users via coverage in conventional newspapers and journals, as well as by word of mouth.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Mr. Behi, “The Chocolate Cloak,” *Adventures of Mr. Behi* [Welog entry], December 21, 2005, http://mrbehi.blogs.com/i/2005/12/the_chocolate_c.html (accessed March 1, 2006).

¹⁰³ Daniel Drezner and Henry Farrell, “The Power and Politics of Blogs,” Presented at the 2004 American Political Science Association, August 2004, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iranian_blogs (accessed May 19, 2005).

¹⁰⁴ Hossein Derakhshan, “Internet: Iran’s Most Trusted Medium,” *Editor:Myself* [Weblog], September 14, 2004, <http://hoder.com/weblog/archives/012114.shtml> (accessed January 29, 2006).

¹⁰⁵ Graham and Khosravi, 229.

The fact that intellectuals have come to play a major role in the Iranian blogosphere also has no small part to do with their economic stability and their knowledge of English, two factors that influence Internet accessibility. Both the poor and many rural communities (often one and the same) cannot access the space provided by the Internet because of these factors. Evidence of this disconnect may be seen in the disparity between political opinions and discussions in the Iranian blogosphere leading up to the presidential elections in June 2005 and the results of those elections. Most debate focused on reformist candidate Mustafa Moin and whether or not voters should boycott the elections, while few blogs even mentioned the eventual winner, Mohammad Ahmadinejad, whose platform championed the poorer classes.

Additionally, and especially early on in the blogging movement, knowledge of a European language (or at least of European script) was necessary for navigating the Internet and online blogging subscription services. For those who didn't know English, a majority of Iranians, this created a further obstacle in accessing public cyberspace. Some online Iranian intellectuals acknowledge this barrier, admitting that English is the lingua franca of the Internet. In one of his earliest entries the legendary Hossein Derakhshan writes, "It's almost impossible to say something in your own language and the Internet world can hear you, unless your voice is in English. So, this is the reason I started to keep an English weblog of mine here, beside my Persian weblog."¹⁰⁶ Derakhshan has advocated blogging in English, noting the benefits of blogs that attempt to connect one

¹⁰⁶ Hossein Derakhshan, "Globalization," *Editor:Myself* [Weblog], June 11, 2002, <http://hoder.com/weblog/archives/005664.shtml> (accessed January 29, 2006).

culture with another.¹⁰⁷ Bloggers thus have a specific audience: other Iranians from their own socio-economic class, the Iranian diaspora and curious foreigners. They are not speaking primarily to or with poorer or more “traditional-minded” Iranians, nor is access easily afforded to these groups.

These issues of access are changing, with a rapid increase in the accessibility of the Internet in Iran and the introduction of Persian-oriented online services, including blogging server sites like PersianBlog.com that cater to a Persian speaking audience. However, limiting factors continue to contribute heavily to the segregation of the web. Despite its diversity, the Iranian weblogestan tends to inherently favor a specific section of the society, one whose ideas and opinions are heavily influenced by the secular and reformist intelligentsia.

Alongside and supporting the new wave of intellectuals in both the reform movement and the blogging movement have been Iran’s youth. As many domestic and foreign observers have noted, Iran’s population is made up primarily of young people, with over seventy percent of the population being under thirty years of age. Young Iranians, primarily university students, were integral to the successful election of reformist president Mohammad Khatami in 1997 and again in 2001. This demographic, benefiting from better access to education and higher literacy rates stemming from the

¹⁰⁷ Blogs that attempt to connect cultures are referred to as “bridgeblogs.” Iranian bridgeblogs will be dealt with extensively further on in this paper. For more information on the definition and origin of the term “bridgeblogger” see Ethan Zuckerman, “Meet the Bridgebloggers: Who’s speaking and who’s listening in the International Blogosphere,” (Presented at “The Power and Political Science of Blogs,” University of Chicago, September 16-17, 2005, revised December 23, 2005), 2, ethanzuckerman.com/meetthebridgebloggers/draft.pdf (accessed January 3, 2006).

regime's policies, has also taken advantage of the new technologies, including blogs, that have been introduced and popularized by the intellectual movement.

While the interests and goals of Iran's youth have often coincided with those of intellectuals, their ultimate interests in reform are not always identical. Khosrokhavar notes that though a significant number of university students are intent on opening up access to the political and public sphere, many Iranian students and teenagers simply hope for less restrictions on social interaction and personal freedoms: "For Iranian teenagers, modernity has come to mean, among other things, the ability to dress and consume without restraint or moral barriers and generally to live one's life without the interference of the state in the name of morality."¹⁰⁸ Khosrokhavar notes the importance of individualism and personal responsibility in their actions and opinions, and cites these characteristics as evidence of the failure by the regime to "Islamicize" formal education in Iran. Paradoxically, the better access to education under the regime has only led to less widespread support of the Islamic Republic and politicized Islam.

The desires of the youth are played out in their online personas. Blogs present an ideal space in which young Iranians can claim their own identity and maintain control over their environment. This sensation is described by many young bloggers in their posts, occasionally in creative and poetic ways. In one of the most colorful posts translated by Alavi in her book, one blogger pronounces,

My blog is an opportunity for me to be heard... a free microphone that doesn't need speakers... a blank space... Sometimes I stretch out on this place in the nude... now and again I hide behind it. Occasionally I dance on it... Once in a while I tear it up... and from time to time I draw a

¹⁰⁸ Khosrokhavar, 8.

picture of my childhood on it... I think... I live... I blog... therefore I... exist.¹⁰⁹

In addition to providing a secure personal space, blogs also set up a place for young Iranians of the opposite sex to mix and mingle. In contrast to the restrictions placed on interactions between males and females in the conventional public sphere, the relatively open and anonymous nature of the Internet allows young people to meet, converse with and date fellow Internet users. The profiles and entries of young bloggers reflect this purpose.¹¹⁰ Many blogs are explicitly non-political and often focus on sexuality, love and relationships. Iranian Doughter [*sic*], a religious and conservative non-political blogger from Isfahan, writes (in English),

Why we try to **hide** our real feelings.
If we like, even love some body why we avoid **expressing** it!
It is our certain right to love or to be beloved and also **show** it.
I believe that whom he does it, is a murderer! He kills his best and divine feelings [*sic*].¹¹¹

Iranian Doughter, like many other young Iranians, also blogs about Valentine's Day which, although severely criticized by conservative officials and newspapers, has become extremely popular with young people. Although Alavi notes that many critics within Iran view this trend as yet another manifestation of Western cultural imperialism, she contends that many young Iranians and Iranian bloggers "have made the day their own" by celebrating Iran's rich cultural and literary history concerning love.¹¹² The popularity of social networking services such as Orkut is another indicator of the Internet's use in

¹⁰⁹ Alavi, 5.

¹¹⁰ Omid Memarian (blogger), personal interview, October 31, 2005, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH.

¹¹¹ Eftekhar, "Thursday, Januray 15, 2004," *I am an Iranian Doughter* [Weblog], January 15, 2004, <http://iraniandoughter.blogspot.com/2004/01/why-we-try-to-hide-our-real-feelings.html> (accessed April 11, 2006).

¹¹² Alavi, 18-9.

meeting others. The fact that the government has officially filtered Orkut and many blogging services may hint at their fears of the effectiveness of these technologies in undermining the system.¹¹³

Expression of sexuality and “public” interaction with the opposite sex are especially pertinent when talking about women’s issues in Iran. Due to the ruling clergy’s interpretation of *sharia* (Islamic law), post-revolutionary Iranian women have fewer legal rights than men. However, the situation for women is complex in post-revolutionary Iran. While women’s legal status has been constricted, there have been many positive developments as well.

Education has been one of the most substantial places for development, with as many and in some cases more girls now attending primary and secondary school than boys. Women also attend universities in much larger numbers. This increase in the level of education has led to a larger social role for women, despite the restrictions placed on them by the regime’s laws.¹¹⁴ However, the new levels of education and better job opportunities have not made women more satisfied with the regime. Many women have jobs outside the home, and even represent a large percentage of jobs in some areas of the government.¹¹⁵ Much as they did during the Islamic Revolution of 1979, women played a key role in the sprouting of the reform movement during the 1990s. Disillusionment with the regime and increasing expectations have turned many daughters of the revolution against the laws of the regime.

¹¹³ Hossein Derakhshan, “No blogging, no social networking,” Editor:Myself [Weblog], January 6, 2005, <http://hoder.com/weblog/archives/013115.shtml> (accessed April 11, 2006).

¹¹⁴ Khosrokhavar, 15-6.

¹¹⁵ Women hold forty six percent of jobs in the Ministry of Education and forty two percent of jobs in the Ministry of Health and Medical Higher Education. Ibid.

On the Web, women have found a means of fighting for more equal representation and protection under the law as well as in the public sphere. One of several like it, “Women in Iran” was a site set up in 2002 by a group of Iranian feminists. The site, whose goal is to track political and social issues concerning women in Iran, provides news coverage as well as op-ed pieces discussing Iranian and Muslim gender topics. It also links to numerous blogs maintained by Iranian women inside and outside Iran. In its English “About” section, the site’s authors explain their motives:

The Women in Iran web site tries to open a window, however small, to the life of Iranian women -- this always hidden half of our society. This web site, with the slogan of "Women's Right Is Human Right", tries to tell the story of struggles, issues and successes of Iranian women, and in this way we would like to extend our hands to and welcome all those who believe in the social and intellectual equality of women and men.¹¹⁶

Out of the over four million hits the site has received since its inception, the majority have come from Iran, suggesting that it has been effective in reaching people inside the country.¹¹⁷ More recently, the regime’s efforts to filter the Internet have targeted political sites like “Women In Iran.” As a result it and others have experienced a significant decrease in daily traffic.¹¹⁸ In an effort to avoid filtering, the site’s authors have had to move its address several times, from womeniniran.com to womeniniran.org to finally (so

¹¹⁶ “About Us,” *Women in Iran English Edition*, <http://www.womeniniran.org/archives/EEX/000964.html> (accessed January 25, 2006).

¹¹⁷ “Women in Iran: My statistics/summary,” *Webstats4u.com*, <http://www.webstats4u.com/s?tab=1&link=1&id=1906787> (accessed January 29, 2006).

¹¹⁸ “Related info for: Women in Iran,” *Alexa*, http://www.alexa.com/data/details/traffic_details?&range=2y&size=medium&compare_sites=&y=r&url=www.womeniniran.org#top (accessed January 19, 2006).

far) womeniniran.net.¹¹⁹ Nonetheless, this solution is only temporary and will not be sufficient to avoid censorship for long.

While the increasing access and specialization of Internet technology has created a more insulated and introspective Iranian blogosphere, it still maintains connections with both Persian and non-Persian speakers abroad. This is partly due to politics and partly due to the Western-orientation of the Internet. A number of important bloggers have left Iran due to political repression and even violence in some cases. Hossein Derakhshan founded the Iranian blogging movement shortly after immigrating to Toronto. Sina Motallebi, after being imprisoned for comments made on his blog, fled the country for the Netherlands. Likewise, journalist and political activist Omid Memarian left Iran to study at the University of California at Berkeley after being arrested in October 2004 along with several other bloggers on vague charges.¹²⁰

Recently emigrated bloggers are not the only people outside Iran connected to the Iranian blogosphere. Many in the large global Iranian diaspora have utilized the Internet

¹¹⁹ Azadeh Moaveni, "Slamming It's Doors on the World," *Time.com*, January 23, 2006, <http://www.time.com/time/archive/preview/0,10987,1149388,00.html> (accessed January 29, 2006).

¹²⁰ Omid Memarian was arrested without charge on October 10th, 2004. "Iran: Journalism Detained in Internet Crackdown," *Human Rights Watch Online: Human Rights News*, October 15, 2004, <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2004/10/14/iran9506.htm> (accessed March 1, 2006). While eventually explicitly charged with "Hostile behaviour towards the authorities which undermined national security," Reporters Without Borders surmised that the arrest had to do with Memarian's involvement with pro-reformist websites. "Online journalists Omid Memarian and Shahram Rafihzadeh freed," *Reporters Sans Frontiers*, December 3, 2004, http://www.rsfs.org/article.php3?id_article=11793 (accessed March 1, 2006). By his own account, Memarian thinks he was arrested for his involvement in various NGO activities both in Iran and on the web as an example to others. Omid Memarian (blogger), personal interview, October 31, 2005, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH. The ambiguity of Memarian's charges highlights both the lack of due process in Iran and the oppressive authority of the regime.

and blogs to become or remain connected to Iran for a number of reasons. Political exiles, second and third generation immigrant Iranians, families and friends use blogs and other forms of Internet communication to stay in touch. Persian-language blogging communities have sprouted up in Toronto, Los Angeles and other cities where there are large Iranian immigrant populations.¹²¹ The content, motives and influence of these blogs vary enormously. Many have been set up to socialize, much as they are used in Iran. As in Iran, blogs also provide the diaspora a fast means of receiving news.

Some political blogs, like Derakhshan's Hoder.com, remain popular inside Iran. However, many blogs that attempt to influence Iranian social and political debate from abroad are viewed with reservation or ignored altogether.¹²² Nationalist pride and a sense of autonomy are very prevalent in the Iranian blogosphere, and many Iranians perceive the diaspora as oblivious to their problems and out of touch with the actual issues facing the country. Even liberal/reformist bloggers despise negative commentary from the diaspora. One feminist blogger cited in Alavi's book had this to say:

A lot of the older Iranians here [in the United States] are so discouraging about Iran. They are basically stuck in the exact year they left Iran. Anything that happens in Iran they view cynically.... It is really frustrating to be confronted with people far away from Iran- who view everything bleakly and just curse at every single thing.¹²³

This is similar to Iranian's reactions to the political propaganda beamed into Iran by monarchists and other anti-regime groups based in L.A. via satellite television.¹²⁴

¹²¹ Mark Corcoran, "Iran: cyber dissidents," Australian Broadcast Corp [video recording], (New York: Filmmakers Library, 2004).

¹²² Omid Memarian (blogger), personal interview, October 31, 2005, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH.

¹²³ Alavi, 185-6.

¹²⁴ Barraclough, 35-6.

The interaction between Iranians and the diaspora has shaped the weblogestan in a number of ways. With greater access and greater freedoms the Iranian community outside Iran (notably those in North America and Western Europe) has been able to take a more active role in Iranian society through blogs. Their interest has relied greatly on the popularization of blogs within Iran, which has been made possible by the reform movement and facilitated by the restriction of Iranian public life. Interestingly, Mark Graham and Shahram Khosravi have noted that the desire to gain public recognition has influenced both domestic and foreign participation, albeit for different reasons.¹²⁵ Inside Iran, barriers set in place by the laws of the regime and social norms prohibit the freedom of expression of intellectuals, journalists, women and the youth. Similarly, Iranians in other parts of the developed world find before them barriers to public participation due to their socio-economic and immigrant status. Thus Iranian immigrants with little social, economic, cultural or symbolic capital can find a community on the Internet where they retain some social importance. Graham and Khosravi call this form of social capital “cybercapital.” While the immigrant’s desire for cybercapital is similar to those of marginalized groups in Iran, the dynamics of social power are different between the two.¹²⁶

Along with the diaspora, the entry of major political figures into Iranian weblogestan has altered its landscape. While major political players have used the Internet and the government for years- both 1997 presidential candidates Mohammad

¹²⁵ Graham and Khosravi, 239-40.

¹²⁶ It would be interesting to examine the statistical differences in age, gender, orientation, etc. between the diaspora blogging community and the Iranian weblogestan. While this investigation is beyond the scope of this paper, the results might provide more insight into Graham and Khosravi’s hypothesis and explain better the motives and impact of the diaspora on the Iranian blogosphere.

Khatami and Hashemi Rafsanjani had their own websites, as did the government, where the election results were posted¹²⁷ - some officials and candidates have recently taken to blogging, heightening weblogestan's profile. During the June 2005 presidential elections all candidates had their own websites, with the leading reformist candidate Mufasta Moin including a blog on his. In late 2003 Mohammad Ali Abtahi, a ranking member in President Khatami's cabinet, was the first major political figure to host his own personal blog. Shortly afterward he added English and Arabic sections. Since then Abtahi has encouraged others to start blogging and has been an advocate for bloggers' rights. He has also engaged in various debates over issues that have come to dominate weblogestan, such as journalist and activist Akbar Ganji's hunger strike during the summer of 2005.

In December 2005, a new website, khatamionline.com, made big news in weblogestan. Purportedly the new blog of ex-President Mohammad Khatami, the first three entries registered over three thousand comments in less than a week. Most of the comments were brief notes welcoming him to the world of weblogging: "Greetings to Mr. Khatami. It will be great and very interesting to see your comments of the weblog and learn from what you write."¹²⁸ Many of the positive comments thanked the former president for his service to Iran. For instance, one comment read, "I love you. You have gone through so much for these people. I wish they would understand that."¹²⁹ However, there were also a few posts that criticized Khatami and charged him with misleading the Iranian people:

¹²⁷ Graham and Khosravi, 226.

¹²⁸ Farad, "*Akhar post modern*," Khatami Online [Weblog], December 20, 2005, comment posted at 10:16 a.m., <http://www.khatamionline.com/2005/12/post.html#comments> (accessed April 9, 2006), translated by Zalmai Yawar, "RE: khatamionline.com," April 2, 2006, personal e-mail.

¹²⁹ Ibid. comment posted by "Mina" on December 19, 2005 at 9:50 p.m.

Mr. Khatami, I don't know if you will be reading this or not but I am writing anyways. I don't exactly know how I feel about you now... I know that a few years ago I loved you a lot. I was ready to do anything so that I could come and see you. But now I am not sure. You disappointed me and you disappointed a lot of others.... You made a lot of promises but you failed, there was no action.... What do you believe in? Freedom, justice, humanity and human rights or to this regime? Is this regime more important than these issues [*sic*]?¹³⁰

Soon after, Khatami clarified that he had kindly refused to make use of the site, which had apparently been a gift to him from some friends.¹³¹ However, the event sheds light on the increasing importance of dialogue within the Iranian blogosphere. It also implies the potential for an increasing official political presence on the Internet. With more attention being paid to blogs and the Internet, conservative politicians as well as reformists can hardly avoid acknowledging Iranian cyberspace communities.

While much Western media attention about the Iranian blogosphere has been directed at reformist voices on the Internet, few articles mention the presence of a significant number of conservative-oriented blogs. Pro-regime blogs, often called Hezbollah blogs, make up a community within the Iranian blogosphere that stands in opposition to reformist blogs. As with the rest of weblogistan, Hezbollah blogs are authored by a diverse set of people with differing ideas and opinions. According to Farid Pouya, this sub-community is highly active, well interconnected, and growing more organized. Sites such as the Muslim Bloggers Committee (www.muslimbloggers.ir) are examples that prove his point. Set up by several Hezbollah bloggers, this site/blog is dedicated to denouncing secular bloggers and promoting pro-regime ideology.

¹³⁰ Ibid. comment posted by "soheil" on December 19, 2005 at 6:45 p.m.

¹³¹ Farid Pouya, "Iranian Blogs and 2005," *Global Voices Online* [Weblog], December 27, 2005, <http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/globalvoices/2005/12/27/iranian-blogs-2005> (accessed January 29, 2006).

Requisites for membership include following Shiite Islam and supporting the Iranian Islamic Republic. News and information about Islamic politics, forums, and links to other Hezbollah blogs can be found on the site. The “Hadid Hacking Team” (hadid-group.blogspot.com), another Hezbollah site hosted by Blogspot.com, proclaims (in English): “We demolish security of the dirty data to unravel evil’s program.” While some sites appear quite militant, many seem hardly concerned with politics at all.¹³² Nonetheless, affiliation with other Hezbollah blogs and sites make it clear that reformers share the blogosphere with pro-regime bloggers.

Tensions within weblogestan between different communities goes far beyond Hezbollah bloggers and reformists. For instance, indications of conflict between intellectual bloggers and the larger blogosphere have been recognized as well. Alireza Doostdar has interpreted some of the online debates between different groups of bloggers as an indication of competition over who holds authority in Iranian cyberspace.¹³³ His investigation of what he deems the “Vulgarity Debate” reveals that some intellectuals within the blogosphere feel threatened by a vast number of bloggers who seemingly thwart “intellectualist” hegemony. Doostdar’s analysis is based on alternative and creative uses of language used by many bloggers. The syntax and style of Persian writing on these blogs parallels altered forms of English used on similar online media, including blogs, instant messaging software and email. However, aspects of this speech are also culturally unique to Persian blogosphere and distinct from English online usage.

¹³² Farid Pouya, “Iranian Hezbollah Goes Blogging,” *Global Voices Online* [Weblog], December 12, 2005, <http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/globalvoices/2005/12/12/iranian-hezbollah-goes-blogging> (accessed January 29, 2006). See Appendix A.

¹³³ Alireza Doostdar, “‘The Vulgar Spirit of Blogging’: On Language Culture and Power in Persian Weblogestan,” *American Anthropologist* 106, no. 4 (December 2004): 651-62.

Characteristics such as the style of speech, the designation of pauses between phrases and the use of “emoticons” borrowed from instant messaging services have been used to mirror Persian verbal habits of speech and conversation. These stylistic effects contribute to making Persian blogs distinct from the rest of the global blogosphere.¹³⁴

Some have taken the idea of the vulgarity of blogging one step further, complaining that the Internet dilutes authentic social interaction. Detractors of a new cyber subculture note the crippling effect online habits can have on traditional customs. For instance, some have pointed to the diminution of traditional Iranian etiquette, known as *ta'arof*, in online social interaction.¹³⁵ The eloquence of Persian niceties are often lost in written conversational dialogue, where even creative uses of the keyboard cannot compensate for the spoken word, or where online participants simply discard pretensions of politeness for the sake of brevity. Doostdar, however, points to evidence that in some cases traditional Iranian customs gel easily with the blogging culture. He notes for instance that “did-o baazdid,” (or mutual visiting) a traditional custom of courtesy, is commonplace in the Iranian blogosphere.¹³⁶ From this perspective it seems that, least in some cases, Western technological culture and the norms of traditional Iranian society have blended together in the Iranian blogosphere to produce a composite culture that shares both traditional and foreign features. However, how this trend is perceived and how it influences traditional social interaction may vary between demographics.

¹³⁴ Ibid. 654-5.

¹³⁵ Graham and Khosravi, 237-8.

¹³⁶ Doostdar, 656. “Did-o Baazdid,” literally “seeing and re-seeing,” as Doostdar explains, “is based on and named after the offline Iranian custom of visiting friends’ and relatives’ homes and having them as guests in return.” In the blogosphere, this custom translates into returning the favor of linking to ones’ site by likewise posting a link to the visitor’s site.

Katerina Dalacoura notes that the politicization of Islam finds its roots in the modernist project: “Fundamentalism and political Islam are by definition modern phenomena because they involve the transformation of Islam from a lived tradition into an object and an ideological programme [*sic*].”¹³⁷ Since 1979 Iran has been experiencing the consequences of this response to modernity. As Dalacoura notes, “The identification of religion with ideology and political power has led, as many contemporary *mullahs* begin to recognize, to Islam becoming the victim of petty politics. The mismanagement and incompetence of the Iranian regime are becoming associated in the popular mind with Islam.”¹³⁸ Many Iranians have lost faith in the ideological battle of the 1960s and 70s that rose as a major response to Western modernity. The reform movement represents an attempt to negotiate with the regime for the liberalization of Iranian society. Many segments of the population that have been shut out of the public sphere, such as intellectuals, women and young people, placed their hopes in a section of the ruling body that has recognized the disconnect between the utopian ideals of the revolution and the reality of the Islamic Republic.

Within this context the Internet, and specifically blogs have served as a platform for marginalized groups to express their ideas and opinions publically. However, the Iranian blogosphere is far from a cohesive community. Consensus is often hard to find even among reform-oriented bloggers. Despite common themes of justice, equality and individualism, weblogestan hardly acts as a single entity. Much of this stems from the diverse reasons different segments of the population have for supporting the reformist effort. Since the reform movement itself has had a hard time formulating a concrete

¹³⁷ Dalacoura, 87.

¹³⁸ Ibid. 88.

oppositional platform, there is also a fragmentation of focus. Finally, differences of class, status and ideology still divide groups within Iranian society today.

Mark Graham and Shahram Khosravi have aptly described Iranian cyberspace as neither a utopian nor a distopian community. Rather, they have deemed it a heterotopia, recalling Foucault's imagined virtual space where "other ways of acting and ordering than those which are permitted in official places exist and indeed proliferate."¹³⁹ Within the context of post-revolutionary Iran, the heterotopian cyberspace has acted as a useful place for marginalized voices to create an oppositional civil society. However, the Internet's character does not prohibit it from being used in other ways, by other groups, and for other means. Additionally, while blogs have come to influence politics and society in specialized ways, they have yet to prove themselves as facilitators of political and social upheaval. Weblogs have become the latest space within which Iran's historical modernization dilemma is yet again being reinterpreted. While the social and political dynamics of blogging have put into focus many of the shortcomings of past paradigms of modernity, they by no means simplify the discussion.

¹³⁹ Graham and Khosravi, 223.

Bridgeblogs, Elections, and the Development of a New Modern Identity

In many ways, the online discussions surrounding the 2005 Iranian presidential elections provide a strong impression of the ambiguity and contradiction surrounding the Iranian discourse on modernity. Although during this period the focus of bloggers was not explicitly on modernity, their concentration on the elections provided numerous opportunities to allude to the topic. In their posts bloggers tackled issues such as the role of religion in politics and society, the effects of Euro-American influence, concepts of “modern” versus “traditional,” and the process of modernization and globalization. These topics have continually been at the center of Iranian debates over the idea of modernity. Throughout successive phases, Iranians have attempted to define themselves in relation to an overpowering concept of Western modernity. Now, within the last ten years, alternatives to the dominant ideology of the 1979 Islamic Revolution are beginning to be discussed. These alternatives build upon past experiences of segmentation, imitation and refutation of Western modernity. As the 2005 elections demonstrate, this new ideology is still wrestling with the task of avoiding the pitfalls of earlier ideologies. Bloggers, and more specifically “bridgebloggers,” have been especially vital in defining this new phase, as well as illustrating its drawbacks and inconsistencies. During the presidential elections bridgebloggers simultaneously witnessed the political death of the ten-year-old reform movement and the continuation and development of the vision that inspired initial calls for change.

Bridgeblogs, a term coined by Mark Zuckerman and Xiao Qiang, are defined loosely as “weblogs that reach across gaps of language, culture, and nationality to enable communication between individuals in different parts of the world.”¹⁴⁰ Within the Iranian blogosphere, as in many non-Western blogging communities, bridgeblogs have been present from the very beginning. This is due primarily to the disproportional role Europe and the U.S. have played in the creation and development of the World Wide Web. Hossein Derakhshan, one of Iran’s first bloggers, whose own blog (hoder.com/weblog) can be characterized as a bridgeblog, has used the concept of bridgeblogging to describe one of the important functions of the Iranian blogosphere.¹⁴¹ He has championed the idea of connecting Iran with the rest of the world via blogs and the Internet, and has used his influential role as the founder of Iranian blogging to increase the number of bridgebloggers.

In the Iranian context bridgeblogs represent a small but important group of Iranians that has been at the heart of the movement for change. The vast majority of these bloggers were involved in the reform movement that sought to shift the ideology of the republic away from its anti-Western, fundamentalist foundations. In disavowing the ruling clergy and refuting political Islam itself, these individuals have returned to central questions about the nature of modernity and the West that have been central to the history and identity of Iranians throughout the last two hundred years. Their ideals are reflected in their writings on the political and social character of Iran. Their blogs have become an important and informative source for understanding their perspective.

¹⁴⁰ Zuckerman, “Meet the Bridgebloggers,” 2.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

The presidential elections of 2005 served as a helpful context in which to analyze and understand the dynamics between the blogosphere and the Iranian socio-political landscape. Preceding, during, and after the election process the blogosphere involved itself in intense debates on a number of issues, including comparisons between the candidates, questions about voter participation, the role of the reform movement and the nature of the Islamic Republic. Bridgeblogs not only relayed these internalized debates to the outside world, they also contributed their own thoughts and opinions that reflected their position as some of the staunchest advocates for change. The elections furthermore allowed observers to compare the positions of these bloggers to the popular views of greater Iranian society. Aspects of the election such as candidate platforms and campaign strategies, as well as the election results themselves, provided information about the similarities and differences between the perspectives of bloggers and those of Iranians not represented in the blogosphere. The elections helped contextualized blogger discussions.

From the series of bridgeblog topics and discussions that focused on the 2005 elections, three key impressions represented a contemporary conception of Iranian modernity. These views were by no means comprehensive, consistent, or entirely applicable to either the Iranian blogosphere or the larger Iranian population. Indeed, one of the greatest lessons learned from the 2005 elections was the lack of a coherent opposition to the regime. However, there was a consensus on the need for an ideology and identity to replace the current paradigm. The first idea put forth by these blogs was the complete rejection of the governmental and political systems of Iran, which were consequences of the previous (and still dominant) modern Iranian ideology. The second feature was an ambivalence towards westernization. This ambivalence existed despite

the ostensible popularity of Europe and the United States among bridgebloggers, and reflected an understanding of the role Western imperialism has played in Iranian history. The third perception was the desire for more representation, transparency and responsibility. These values were advocated for by bridgebloggers in light of Iran's past experiences with modernization. While these experiences have long been at the center of discussions about Iranian national identity, bridgeblogs have shown that the current impetus for change has been more organic, and that the justifications for it are based more directly on Iran's history.

Dislike for the Iranian regime and distrust for the mixing of religion and culture with politics was apparent in many bridgeblog posts on a range of topics. However, these criticisms were even more observable in discussions concerning the presidential elections. Anti-establishment sentiment was voiced during this period several ways. First, bridgebloggers noted their opposition to the government through their disdain for candidates who represented or symbolized the status quo. For example, during the months leading up to the elections many bridgebloggers discussed the possible candidacy of former president Ayatollah Heshami Rafsanjani. Highly entrenched within the regime's hierarchy, Rafsanjani has been considered one of the richest and most influential men in Iran. Although winning presidential elections in both 1989 and 1993, his reputation for corruption and greed led to an embarrassing defeat in the 2001 parliamentary elections. During the campaign process bridgebloggers registered their distrust and contempt for one of Iran's leading clerics. Mr. Behi, a twenty-something blogger from Tehran, wrote,

What would you do if you had become a candidate for representing people of your nation's capital in parliament and people choose not to vote for

you and you loose the ballot? Would there be any slight possibility for you to even think of winning a presidential election some years later without any change in your attitude, interests, priorities and way of life?[...] if you were in Iran and your name was “Rafsanjani”, you would even think of yourself as the only possible savior of the whole nation even after such a crash in popularity [*sic*].¹⁴²

Yasser, another bridgeblogger from Iran, had this to say about the ex-President: “In Iran if you asked people their opinions about Hashemi Rafsanjani, Most of them said: he is... he and his relations stole Iran property, and he is godfather of a real mafia [*sic*].”¹⁴³

According to many bridgebloggers, a cleric so embedded in the regime’s hierarchy represented the failures of the Islamic Republic, not its strength. For bridgebloggers, the unbridled corruption of Rafsanjani’s official past highlighted a pervasive problem:

“Corruption among Iranian officials has not a limited scope; rather it is omnipresent: it is everywhere, from top to bottom of the system.”¹⁴⁴

While criticism of Rafsanjani dealt with the issue of public corruption, bridgebloggers did not ignore the connections between other candidates and the regime. Many found links between the top conservative candidates and their previous official duties and loyalty to Ayotollah Seyyed Ali Khameneh’i, the “Supreme Leader” of Iran, unpalatable. Windsteed, whose English language blog “Iran Votes 2005” was devoted to covering the elections, prophesied troubling consequences resulting from the election of the top conservative candidate Ali Larijani:

¹⁴² Mr. Behi, “The Godfather runs, I hope he falls,” *Adventures of Mr. Behi* [Weblog], May 12, 2005, http://mrbehi.blogs.com/i/2005/05/the_godfather_r.html (accessed March 2, 2006).

¹⁴³ Yasser, “Why Hashemi become popular among some people in Iran again?” *Under Underground* [Weblog], June 4, 2005, <http://yaserb.blogspot.com/2005/06/why-hashemi-become-popular-among-some.html> (accessed March 3, 2006).

¹⁴⁴ Windsteed, “Fighting corruption misses out of candidate’s agenda,” *Iran Hopes* [Weblog], April 21, 2005, <http://iran-votes-2005.blogspot.com/2005/04/fighting-corruption-misses-out-of.html> (accessed March 3, 2006).

Larijani still has “a job to do.” He is running for the office, because he has an order to do so. If anyone from among Rezaee, Ghalibaf, and even Ahmadi Nejad, wins the election, given their military background, an era of absolute militarism will dominate Iran. However, if Larijani is elected[...] Iran will face a revival of Islamic fundamentalism.”¹⁴⁵

Within the bridgeblogging community, talk of candidates clearly belied a negative feeling towards anything connected with the regime.

As bridgebloggers reported, a common strategy in campaigns was to disassociate oneself from the government. This fact, corroborated by outside observers, demonstrated a common perception by candidates of both bloggers and the electorate. Farid Pouya, a political researcher, noted at the time the lack of affiliation with the regime or the political Islam:

No one, however, has used Quranic verses, Khomeini’s sayings or any reference to Islamic revolution. Political images and slogans are void of any mention of twenty-six years of Islamic Republic. This omission demonstrates that the candidates recognize that the voting Iranian population are not at all attracted with Islamic revolution’s symbols or values. Beyond their propaganda, the candidates know there are not many buyers for Islamic values.¹⁴⁶

Aside from the reformist candidates Mufasta Moin, Mehdi Karroubi and Mehr Alizadeh, whose affiliation put them in the corner of the opposition, Rafsanjani was perhaps the most aggressive and obvious in creating a new image and distancing himself from the regime’s past. KE, an American blogger living in Iran, wrote about Rafsanjani’s campaign during the run-off elections: “Hashemi is portraying himself as the future of Iran. A poster portrays him looking down, without the turban that identifies him as a

¹⁴⁵ Windsteed, “Larijani: one step closer to the job,” *Iran Hopes* [Weblog], April 23, 2006, <http://iran-votes-2005.blogspot.com/2005/04/larijani-one-step-closer-to-job.html> (accessed March 3, 2006).

¹⁴⁶ Farid Pouya, “Iran: To Vote or Not to Vote,” *Gooya News*, June 16, 2005, <http://1384.g00ya.com/english/archives/031122.php> (accessed February 19, 2006).

cleric.”¹⁴⁷ The absence of a turban indicated that even one of the leading clerics of the regime wished to be viewed in a more professional light, avoiding the association between the ruling religious officials and a corrupt and repressive government. Bloggers also observed presidential candidate Mohommad-Baqer Qalibaf’s similar attempts to put distance between himself and the regime. Windsteed, analyzing a televised interview, writes about Qalibaf’s “constant laying of stress on that he does not belong to the hardliners camp and more importantly the repeating instances in which he referred to rights of people and justice.”¹⁴⁸ Qalibaf maintained this approach despite the fact that he stepped down as the chief of Iran’s paramilitary police force in order to run in the elections. Even Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the former Tehran mayor and hardliner conservative who squeezed himself into a runoff election with Rafsanjani and then went on to beat him, used a strategy of disassociation, to the dismay of bloggers like Tehran’s Yasser.

Many [people] believe Ahmadinejad as opposition leader! Especially [those] who have fewer facilities for an easy life and suffer from poverty. so its predictable when they believe lucky mayor when he objected to some injustices relation in governmental system.... they never think that he is belong to some parts of POWER in Iran which many of these kind of injustice is because of them [*sic*].¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ ET, “Cowboy campaigning in Iran,” *View From Iran* [Weblog], June 23, 2005, <http://viewfromiran.blogspot.com/2005/06/cowboy-campaigning-in-iran.html> (accessed March 3, 2006).

¹⁴⁸ Windsteed, “Larijani: one step closer to the job,” *Iran Hopes* [Weblog], April 23, 2005, <http://iran-votes-2005.blogspot.com/2005/04/larijani-one-step-closer-to-job.html> (accessed March 3, 2006).

¹⁴⁹ Yaser, “The Knowledge,” *Under Underground* [Weblog], June 23, 2005, <http://yaserb.blogspot.com/2005/06/knowledge.html> (accessed March 3, 2006).

As the post above and others illustrate, throughout the election process bridgeblogs went to great lengths to expose connections between candidates and the government.¹⁵⁰ Such posts demonstrate as well the perception of Iran's ruling religious hierarchy as unjust, hinting at the widespread corruption thought to be prevalent within the government. The preponderance of anti-establishmentarian symbolism and discourse during the campaign period, reflected in these blogs, signaled the realization by candidates of the government's loss of legitimacy in the eyes of the public.

Discussions of participation in the elections similarly revealed the distrust of the regime and signaled a loss of faith in the government and its ideology of political Islam. This sentiment was expressed in blogger arguments both for and against voting. Here both sides of the argument revealed the complexity and contradictions of the new generation's struggle against the ideologies of the past. During this election the crux of the issue concerning voting was the tradeoff between choosing a candidate who could potentially change the system from within versus contributing to the government's credibility by participating in its processes. Advocates of boycotting the elections felt that no more change from within the system could be achieved through voting for reformist candidates.¹⁵¹ On the other hand, many bridgebloggers decided to vote out of

¹⁵⁰ Hossein Derakhshan, "Qalibaf: The emerging conservative candiadte [*sic*]," *Editor: Myself* [Weblog], April 15, 2005, <http://hoder.com/weblog/archives/013958.shtml> (accessed March 3, 2006); Persia, "Analyzing Five Minor Figures in Iran's Presidential Elections on 17th of June," *Tehran Post* [Weblog], June 10, 2005, <http://ord-per.blogspot.com/2005/06/analyzing-five-minor-figures-in-irans.html> (accessed March 3, 2006). In some cases the cynicism of bridgebloggers reached manic proportions, as exemplified occasionally by posts from Windsteed and Hoder.

¹⁵¹ Mr. Behi, "To waive or to waste; what shall I do with my vote?" *Adventures of Mr. Behi* [Weblog], May 16, 2005, http://mrbehi.blogs.com/i/2005/05/to_waive_or_to_.html (accessed March 3, 2006); Mr. Behi, "You snooze (or not) you loose (anyway)," *Adventures of Mr. Behi* [Weblog], June 14, 2005,

fear of a conservative victory. Hossein Derakhshan was among those who felt that reform had to be sought through elections: “There are still many issues that even progressive reformists are in fact quite fundamentalist about... But this should not stop us from embracing what they are today. There is no way they can reach there by not going through these preliminary stage [*sic*].”¹⁵² Despite this rationale, many voting bridgebloggers made the agony of their choice clear:

I Never think that someday I force to vote for Hashemi because I terrify another one (Ahmadinejad). These days in Iran people are frightening many scared about what may happen in next days and many wrote letters: “we support Hashemi in second round election only because we want to say NO to fascism.” A big contradiction in Iranian society [*sic*].¹⁵³

In either case, participation in the presidential elections focused on attempts to change the system itself.

The pragmatic response to the question of participation also revealed bridgebloggers’ departure from previous ideologies of revolution. The desire to avoid subversive tactics and the tendency towards pragmatism mirrors Ramin Jahanbegloo’s description of the “Fourth Generation” intellectuals, the leaders of the new wave of ideological change. The observation by Farid Pouya that many of the calls for boycotting the elections came from Iranian ex-patriots suggests that those who actually had to deal

http://mrbehi.blogs.com/i/2005/06/you_snooze_or_n.html (accessed March 3, 2006); Yaser, “Presidential election-1,” *Under Underground* [Weblog], April 17, 2005, <http://yaserb.blogspot.com/2005/04/presidential-election-1.html> (accessed March 3, 2006).

¹⁵² Hossein Derakhshan, “Growing out of the establishment,” *Editor:Myself* [Weblog], May 31, 2005, <http://hoder.com/weblog/archives/014119.shtml> (accessed March 3, 2006).

¹⁵³ Yaser, “Bitter votes,” *Under Underground* [Weblog], June 21, 2005, <http://yaserb.blogspot.com/2005/06/bitter-votes.html> (accessed March 18, 2006).

with the effects of a conservative victory were much more open to pragmatic decisions.¹⁵⁴

Through issues such as candidate campaigning and voter participation it becomes clear that from the perspective of the bridgebloggers the entire ideological framework of the Islamic Republic was no longer viable. The very nature of religious authority in politics was thus questioned. Brooding Persian, a blogger from Iran, compared the laws of the regime to the syntactic rules of split infinitives:

Can you imagine a world in which mistakes were officially forbidden? Or a world in which a vast infrastructure existed to excise all traces of split infinitives because someone in his infinite wisdom had decided to shield the rest of us mere mortals from the troubles and perplexities of life?

The result, as you might suspect, is a depressing, bizarre landscape where nothing is as it initially appears. The land of the cynics who believe in nothing, care for nothing and respect nothing. Perhaps that ever-present deity, Mammon, should be excepted of course [*sic*].¹⁵⁵

Another blogger, Windsteed, considered the implications of using religion for political means: “And what is so dangerous about this tendency? The danger is that religion, i.e. Islam, is used as a resource, as the only remedy, to deify the persons (like Khomeini, Khameneh’i and now Ahmadinejad) and to make sacred their ‘victories’ in a way that will always agree with the regime’s oppressive agenda.”¹⁵⁶ These bloggers’ observations relate to the ideas of Katerina Dalacoura, who argues that the phenomena of fundamentalism and political Islam are specific modern reactions to the crises of identity and authority experienced by many post-colonial Muslim countries. The “traditionalism” and “nativism” that the ideology of the 1979 revolution attempted to invoke are

¹⁵⁴ Pouya, “Iran: To Vote or Not to Vote.”

¹⁵⁵ h, “To vote or not to vote,” *Brooding Persian* [Weblog], June 14, 2005, http://broodingpersian.blogspot.com/2005_06_01_broodingpersian_archive.html#111877012219719032 (accessed March 18, 2006).

¹⁵⁶ Windsteed, “Monday, August 22, 2005,” *Iran Hopes* [Weblog], August 22, 2005, <http://iran-votes-2005.blogspot.com/2005/08/ahmadinejads-cabinet-is-dubbed-by-his.html> (accessed March 3, 2006).

themselves paradoxically modern inventions. As Dalacoura notes, Iran provides a perfect example of the dangers of politicizing culture and religion: “The mismanagement and incompetence of the Iranian regime are becoming associated in the popular mind with Islam.”¹⁵⁷ Perceptions of this association littered English-Iranian bridgeblogs during the presidential elections. As Dalacoura predicts, bridgebloggers represented a de-legitimization of the regime and of culture as politics.

While the contempt for the status quo is hardly unique to Iran’s new generation, the complementary uncertainty registered by bridgebloggers and the electorate towards westernization serves as an unusual corollary. A common feature of Iranian discussions of modernity has been the presence of the West, either as a positive or negative model. The discourse of bridgebloggers shows that this dynamic is changing. This is not to say that the West does not continue to factor heavily today in how Iranians perceive modern society. It is clear that Western consumer products, pop-culture and mass media have become especially popular in Iran during the last decade. However, bridgeblog coverage of the elections as well as the election results themselves indicate that for many Iranians the imitation of Euro-American social and cultural norms does not present a convincing argument for addressing major problems in the cultural and political fabric of their society. Indeed, during the election process bridgebloggers noted the ultimately unsuccessful attempts by candidates to wield westernizing rhetoric for their own political gain. The results of the election forced these same bloggers to reflect on the reform movement’s own relationship with westernization. Through both these developments bloggers addressed Iran’s relationship to the West, indicating a consensus that Iranians no

¹⁵⁷ Dalacoura, 87-8.

longer look to Europe or the United States for solutions to their problems. Instead, Iran's own interaction with the ideology of modernity now serves as the main guide by which many judge contemporary society.

As with the issue of association with the regime, the "westernization" of campaigns both revealed what candidates thought was popular with the public and also served as a basis upon which bridgebloggers could advance their perspective on the candidates' assumptions. Pictures taken by Hossein Derakhshan and others and put up on the Internet exhibited the advertising mania that preceded the June 17th elections.¹⁵⁸ Again, Hashemi Rafsanjani represented the most ostentatious example of this aspect of the process with a highly "westernized" campaign, although he was by no means the only one. In the weeks leading up to the first elections, and then again during the week between the initial and runoff votes, young, trendy supporters of Rafsanjani littered the streets, passing out his propaganda and paraphernalia. These campaigners were often young attractive women who openly flaunted *hejab*, the dress-code required of women when they are in public. These women (and men) were armed with stacks of campaign stickers that read "Hashemi" in English rather than Persian script. Bloggers posted and linked to photographs of young supporters adorned with "Hashemi" stickers rollerblading in the city streets.¹⁵⁹ Rafsanjani also made appearances with young, Western-dressed supporters. On Iran Scan, a multi-authored blog dedicated to covering the elections, Derakhshan explains the significance of appearances:

¹⁵⁸ Flickr, "Photos tagged with election84,"

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/tags/election84/> (accessed March 3, 2006).

¹⁵⁹ "hashemi," Flickr, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/e1384/18170013/> (accessed March 3, 2006); "hashemi," Flickr, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/e1384/18170012/> (accessed March 3, 2006). See Appendix B.

Iranian officials usually avoid appearing with young boys and girls who favor a more Westernized look over the semi-official look that is for instance preferred by TV anchors. (Men should not wear jeans and short sleeves and women should completely cover their hair and wear a “chador”...).¹⁶⁰

While other candidates were more restrained in their campaigns, Western fashion was a key component in the campaigns of both conservative and reformist candidates.

Derakhshan, for instance, described the trendy new makeovers of Qalibaf and Moin spokeswoman Elaheh Loulaie, noting “Looks are playing a big role in this years election.”¹⁶¹

The strategy of Rafsanjani and others illustrates the realization by candidates of the need to appeal to reformist segments of the population, and specifically to the Western oriented youth, students, women and intellectuals who were instrumental in the success of president Mohammad Khatami’s election in 1997 and reelection in 2001. Ironically, Rafsanjani and other conservative candidates attempted to mimic the very Western fads that the youth used to symbolize their opposition to the establishment.

For the most part however bridgebloggers disregarded these westernized gimmicks as empty of any substantial meaning. KE, in her blog “View From Iran,” spoke of what she called the “Rafsanjani disco:” nightly campaign rallies/parties held for young Iranians in the weeks leading up to the elections. About Rafsanjani’s supporter/surveyors she added,

¹⁶⁰ Hossein Derakhshan, “The Youth Vote,” *Iran Scan* [Weblog], May 18, 2005, http://www.iranscan.net/blog/iran/Hossein+Derakhshan/?permalink=youth_vote.html&mm=y (accessed March 3, 2006).

¹⁶¹ Hossein Derakhshan, “Apealing or adapting to the young voters,” *Editor:Myself* [Weblog], May 30, 2005, <http://hoder.com/weblog/archives/014112.shtml> (accessed March 3, 2006). See Appendix C.

I don't get the whole Rafsanjani fashion craze and, neither, it seems, do other bloggers. (Farideh Nicknazar on Open Democracy's Iran Blog writes, "What I find interesting, and I have never seen this done before, is to see young trendy women (with makeup and minimum head cover) showing off headbands with "Hashemi" written on them in English... Why in English?").¹⁶²

Generally bloggers searched each candidate's past to reveal his intentions, rather than relying on his campaign statements. The conservative candidates, as Yasser noted, "are who lost in 1998 election, but today they are changed their old clothes to came with a new suit."¹⁶³ The victory of Ahmadinejad, arguably the most low profile candidate running, indicates that much of the population also rejected the attempt to co-opt Western trends for political gains.

Another aspect of the election that reveals a distrust of Western influence by bridgebloggers were their attacks on foreign interpretations of election debates and results. As touched upon earlier, the issue of boycotting the elections was somewhat divided along lines of geography. Evaluating the costs of the boycott during the week between the initial and runoff elections, Windsteed wrote this excited post:

Let's not underestimate the help of Iranian commentators abroad. Ahmadi Nejad will be with us until next week to remind those 'commentators' in exile, who made the boycott recipe for Iranians, that they must either consider a hobby other than mingling Western ideologies with Iranian affairs or update their 'Iranology' software.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² ET, "Hashemi," *View From Iran* [Weblog], June 7, 2006, (<http://viewfromiran.blogspot.com/2005/06/hashemi-i-dont-get-whole-rafsanjani.html>) (accessed March 18, 2006).

¹⁶³ Yaser, "The Knowledge," *Under Underground* [Weblog], June 23, 2005, (<http://yaserb.blogspot.com/2005/06/knowledge.html>) (accessed March 3, 2006).

¹⁶⁴ Windsteed, "Election, selection, etc.!", *Iran Hopes* [Weblog], June 18, 2005, (<http://iran-votes-2005.blogspot.com/2005/06/election-selection-etc.html>) (accessed March 18, 2006).

The long legacy of interference and imperialism by Western powers continues to feed the fears of even liberal and reformist thinkers in Iran. Windsteed's suspicion evokes the rhetoric that first developed with the nativist and anti-Western ideology of the 1960s and 70s. Windsteed resents the attempt to apply Western solutions to Iranian problems.

Although these bridgebloggers are clearly opposed to the Islamic regime, they continue to harbor great resentment against the Pahlavi period of rule, in which an authoritarian regime implemented its domination under the guise of westernization. Even now exiled monarchist groups are disdained due to their unflattering past both while in power and in opposition to the regime. The United States' association with this group, which it backed both before and after the 1979 revolution, has remained important in reinforcing the mistrust of both. A little over a month before the presidential elections Mr. Behi explained that most Iranians disliked the monarchists as much as they did the regime:

What if we do not like to endorse any of these two?[...] I feel it is a very ugly view that "The enemy of my enemy is my friend"[...] MKO [Mojahedin Khalq Organization] calls itself "Government in Exile" but no one knows who else apart from its supporters voted for it! They praise their leaders JUST like the way supporters of Iranian leadership do for theirs and "Obey without questions" is a conspicuous fact and is carefully applied to the unfortunate members [*sic*].¹⁶⁵

Although unassuming, Mr. Behi's words signal a departure from the dualistic, antagonistic vision that has dominated Iranian society's ideological framework for generations. Ideologies touting westernization, such as those dominant during the Pahlavi dynasty, no longer win out in these groups because of a favorable comparison

¹⁶⁵ Mr. Behi, "Exchange monarchy for monsters? Hell NO!" *Adventures of Mr. Behi* [Weblog], May 20, 2005, http://mrbehi.blogspot.com/i/2005/05/exchanging_mona.html (accessed March 3, 2006).

with “traditional” non-Western rule, just as regimes that define themselves against Western modernity, like the Islamic Regime, are beginning to lose the benefit of fears of “Westoxication.” Again, Mr. Behi’s sentiments bear a resemblance to the views of Jahanbegloo’s Fourth Generation intellectuals.¹⁶⁶

As Mr. Behi’s comments imply, neither the anti-Western approach of political Islam, nor the westernization attempted during the Pahlavi period have been successful in creating a satisfactory or stable modern Iranian identity. Thus, Iranians have begun a process of reevaluating dominant social and political ideologies with respect to Iran’s own lengthy history of interpreting modernity. For many bloggers the 2005 election period became a key time to reflect on the progress and goals of the new movement for social and political change. The dramatic defeat of the reformists, whose leading candidate, Mustafa Moin, placed a lowly fifth overall in the initial elections and failed to qualify for the runoff election, reflected the shortcomings of the movement that began nearly ten years ago. However, as bridgebloggers noted, the reformist defeat, which signaled the indefinite end of reform within the political system, was the result not of the changing status or perceptions of the populace, but of a change in the strategies in reaching the goal of reform. For many Iranians who elected Muhammad Khatami in the previous two elections, the reformist leaders proved themselves unable to implement meaningful change.

What has been billed as the death of the reform movement by observers of Iran’s political climate¹⁶⁷ has been in actuality the rejection of a political leadership that has

¹⁶⁶ Jahanbegloo, “The Role of Intellectuals.”

¹⁶⁷ Laura Secor, “Young Iranians confront the collapse of the reform movement,” *The New Yorker*, November 14, 2005,

proved themselves incapable of pursuing reform. In the aftermath of the elections, bridgebloggers, many of whom foresaw and participated in the collapse of the official movement, regrouped to analyze what had led to the dead-end result. Although a wide range of explanations was given for the election results, including fraud, apathy and ignorance, many bloggers also acknowledged the lack of a solid reformist platform and ideology. Two months after the elections, Windsteed pointed out Khatami's inability to provide these things.

Did Khatami listen to the millions of people who voted for him? His second cabinet was one of the weakest and least efficient cabinets in Islamic regime's history. Besides, he had no discernible agenda. Ahmadinejad, however, has a well-defined agenda... All of his moves can easily be read in line with that agenda. But Khatami only gave promises without knowing if they were realizable or he would have the capacity to deliver them [*sic*].¹⁶⁸

A lack of a coherent agenda, continually an issue in attempting to diverge from the dualistic vision of modernity in Iran, continues to plague the new ideological movement in Iran. While many Iranians who made up the core of the reform movement had a consistent idea of what they perceive of as a modern society, politicians have been unable to successfully convert this view into a social and political platform.

As a result of the failures of Khatami's reform party, the coalition that had brought together different segments of the population split during the 2005 elections. Some, mostly upper and middle-class urbanites and ex-patriots, either boycotted or ignored the election. Some continued to vote for reformist candidates and for Rafsanjani,

http://www.newyorker.com/printables/fact/051121fa_fact4 (accessed November 22, 2005).

¹⁶⁸ Windsteed, "Monday, August 15, 2005," *Iran Hopes* [Weblog], August 15, 2005, <http://iran-votes-2005.blogspot.com/2005/08/so-called-reformists-have-denounced.html> (accessed March 3, 2006).

primarily because they feared the alternative. Some among the middle class and a large percentage of the poor voted for Ahmadinejad over Rafsanjani because they perceived him as a fresh face who still had the people's interests in mind. Bridgebloggers picked up on this idea after the surprise results:

Iranian tv is saying that Iranians have shamed America and Western news is saying that Iranians have taken a hard turn to the right. I am going to go out on a limb here and say that neither are correct. This election was not about America... This election was not about Islam... The election may have been about the revolution... This past week AN [Ahmadinejad] presented these simple messages: Rich against poor and honesty against corruption, People voted for AN. Raf[sanjani] voters voted *against* AN [*sic*].¹⁶⁹

As this observer points out, the election did not reveal more oscillation between the westernization/modernization- Islamic/traditional dichotomy. It was rather about who could capitalize the most effectively on the failures of the elected reformist government to improve the socio-economic and political situation in Iran.

The failures of the reformist officials cannot overshadow the increasing demands for change of a large percentage of the population. Katerina Dalacoura describes these demands as arising from Iran's historical process of modernization. As she puts it, the vision encompassed by Khatami "does not fall victim to stereotyping and generalizing about Islamic or Western identity or authenticity. His ideas on Islamic civil society and the rule of law, on freedom of speech and toleration... are not imitations of the West. They arise from the real experiences and needs of the people of Iran."¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁹ ET, "Today Iranians Woke Up to a New President..." *View From Iran* [Weblog], June 25, 2005, <http://viewfromiran.blogspot.com/2005/06/today-iranians-woke-up-to-new.html> (accessed March 3, 2006).

¹⁷⁰ Dalacoura, 91.

In their coverage of the presidential elections, bridgebloggers, the vanguard of the reform movement in Iran, demonstrated the simultaneous defeat and ideological evolution of the movement. The posts of these bloggers reflected a solid opposition to Iran's leadership, the system of governance and the idea of political Islam. However, they also registered their contempt for the Western façade covering the campaigns as well as their frustration with the floundering reform movement. With the election victory of Ahmadinejad these bloggers revisited many of their own reform movement's shortcomings. In doing so they may have moved closer to forming a coherent ideology that no longer hangs upon the problematic historical ideological divisions between "modernity" and "tradition."

Conclusion

This paper attempts to outline the characteristics and significance of the most recent developments in the conceptualization of Iran's modern identity. Iranian weblogs and the history of the blogging movement in Iran provide a means of interpreting a new and developing vision of Iranian modernity. This new development has been situated in the longer process of modernization in Iran. The dynamics of the Iranian blogosphere are also discussed in order to contextualize the role of blogging both with respect to its relationship with groups championing reform and to its place in a larger social sphere.

The conclusion drawn from these comparisons is that, indeed, an interpretation of modernity based on thoroughly "modern" notions of political representation, citizenship, individualism, and justice and equality under law has been put forth by a generation of young Iranians drawing upon their own experiences and those of past generations. While this interpretation continues to share a close relationship with Western-oriented technologies, institutions and ideologies, it is not dependent on Western values and norms to supply the means of justifying or accepting modernization. This conclusion is primarily derived from Iran's own historical process of modernization and the various responses Iranians have formulated around it. Iran's continual interaction with European modernity has supplied its people with their own rich experience of modern ideologies. Thus, today's generation of young Iranians are armed with a thorough knowledge of the processes and consequences of various strategies of modernization. As Katernina Dalacoura writes, the new ideas espoused by this group "are not imitations of the West.

They arise from the real experiences and needs of the people of Iran.”¹⁷¹ Dalacoura, Jahanbegloo and others have begun to identify a shift from former interpretations of modernization, which sought to dichotomize the relationship between “modernity” and “tradition.” Based on their analysis and on the posts of many bloggers, young Iranians seem to be discrediting this ideological paradigm.

The perspective of Iran’s blogging community provides a window into how the historical processes of the past two hundred years are facilitating a fresh look at society’s ideological framework. In fact, the Iranian blogosphere itself embodies the confusing process of modernization that has led Iran to the current movement for reform. As a mode of communication based on technologies created in Europe and the United States, it symbolizes in many ways the continued weight of Western modernity on Iran.

The influence of Western technology, which stretches back to initial attempts of reform during the late Qajar period, has continued to play a major role in Iran’s modernization process. From the westernization projects to modernize Iran’s economy under the Pahlavi dynasty, to the appropriation of Western media in the name of Islam during the 1979 revolution, Iran has both consciously and unconsciously appropriated new tools of modernization. However, as with earlier movements such as the 1906-1911 Constitutional Revolution and the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iranians have also drawn on non-Western and non-specific influences to shape their social, political and cultural perspectives. Iranian weblogs and other Internet communities are one more example of the indigenization of Western-derived modern technology. Associated with this mixture is the outline of a new vision that holds the potential of framing modernization within an

¹⁷¹ Dalacoura, 91.

Iranian ideological perspective. This perspective is embodied in the decade-old reform movement that from its inception has had important links to the development of new technologies in Iran.

The Iranian reform movement is a reaction against the previous stage of conceptualizing modernity, which was born out of the nativist discourse of thinkers like Jalal Al-e Ahmad and Ali Shariati, and which eventually spilled forth in the form of the politicized Islam of the 1979 revolution. However, the reform movement reflects an attempt to avoid the process of ideological oscillation between two imagined extremes, Western modernity and Iranian tradition, that has gone on for at least a century. Many reform-minded Iranians have begun deconstructing Monica Ringer's modernization dilemma, which has developed over Iran's successive phases of conceptualizing modernity. This change in the perspective of Iranians represents the most important step towards a healthy socio-political climate in Iran.

The blogging movement of the last several years has shown the latest developments with respect to a new modernist paradigm. A response to the interaction between the regime and the reform movement, the blogging phenomenon has also opened up a new space that allows users to participate in virtual civil society. A look at blogs also shows the conflicting nature of modern identity in Iran. The tensions between different socio-economic classes, political spheres, and between Iran and its diaspora show that consensus, and at times even dialogue, is absent within the online community. Additionally, tensions between bloggers and segments of society that either do not want or do not have access to the Internet also show a highly divided society. Both of these observations support Mark Graham and Shahram Khosravi's description of the Internet in

Iran as a “heterotopia,” a space where alternatives to the dominant ideological perspective can flourish.¹⁷² This refutes both utopian and dystopian descriptions of cyberspace, which are commonly used either to promote or deflate the impact of the reform movement in Iran.

The 2005 presidential elections provide an interesting and informative alternative perspective of Iranian society against which the Iranian blogosphere can be explored. The elections themselves signaled the effective demise of the reform movement as a contending ideology within the framework of official politics. However, from the opinions and analysis provided by bloggers, the implications of the election were far more mixed. As various weblog authors pointed out, even the election of ultra-conservative candidate Ahmadinejad has not signaled the abandonment of the desire for reform, but instead reflects ongoing divisions within Iranian society that the reform movement must confront. The statement made by the overwhelming victories of Muhammad Khatami in the 1997 and 2001 elections have not disappeared. Instead, their implications have been diluted by the failures of the reform movement’s political leaders. Alternatively, reformers must seriously rethink their strategies for implementing change, both in terms of the issues targeted and in terms of gaining support and acceptance by the population. Bloggers have begun to do exactly this in the aftermath of the elections.

Ultimately, blogs both clarify and complicate the picture of Iranian modern identity. In one sense they help clarify the often conflicting and contradictory directions Iranian society seems to be headed by better explaining the relationships between different parts of society. They also provide a firsthand, unfiltered glimpse into what

¹⁷² Graham and Khosravi.

reformists really experience and how they react to these experiences. A central component of their perspective reveals the promise of transcending ideas, such as the modernist-traditionalist dichotomy, which have hindered Iranians' abilities to cope with the hegemonic modern Western ideology. However, blogs also provide yet another perspective on the fragmented sense of self many Iranians carry, demonstrating the problems still obstructing the formation of a cohesive, healthy society. This is illustrated in the conflicting views represented in the blogosphere and even within a small group such as the bridgeblogger-reformers. The fragmentation of perspective and identity has a long history in Iran, and it is doubtful that it will be resolved any time soon. The direction of change can be better informed by observation of the dynamics of the blogosphere, and from this perspective the future holds the potential for positive change.

Appendix A

Loading "تروریست"

http://terrorest.persianblog.com/ Google

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Advertisement

تروریست

چرا « تروریست »؟

عده ای روزگاری به ما گفتند : عجم ! ننگمان آمد . پس دستار بستیم تا چون عربها کردیم
 روزگاری دیگر گفتند : رافضی ! پس سالیان دراز تقیه کردیم و عشق به مولایمان را پنهان ساختیم
 پس برای سالیان سال آنها « تک » کردند و ما فقط انکار کردیم . ایا در آن سالها کسی پیدا شد تا داد زند : که ای چهاران عالم ! " من رافضی ام "
 دیروز نیز قوم موپور چشم زاغ که بر پایه جاهلیت مدرن تمدنی پوشالی بنا کرده اند کلاه شاپو بر سرمان گذاشتند تا از فرق سر تا نوک پا فرنگی شویم . به آنها که مطیع نشدند گفتند : مرتجع ! . سالها سعی کردیم تا این « تک » را دفع کنیم
 امروز به مسلمانی که جانش را بگف گرفته پیکار می کند تا پوزه مستکبر و قلدر را بخاک را بخاک بمالد می گویند : تروریست !
 آنها « تک » می کنند و من نه « پانک » که بر « تک » شان « پانک » می زنم .
 پس فریاد میزنم : من عجم ام . من رافضی ام . من مرتجع ام .

من تروریست

سایت انصاف

مطالب تروریست در وبلاگ « حق علی (ع) - فدک فاطمه (س) »

(نقد دین ستیزی و اشنایی بآدین ستیزان)

توضیح : ضمن تشکر از جناب دوستدار بابت متن انگلیسی ، عکسهای حادثه ۱۱ سپتامبر تزئینی است .

: (اراشیوهای تروریست) لحظه ای ماوس را روی شماره ها نگه دارید تا از فهرست مطالب مطلع شوید

اول	دوم	سوم	چهارم	پنجم	ششم	هفتم	هشتم	نهم	دهم	یازدهم	دوازدهم
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خانه حس: صبا

HADID Hacking Team

We demolish security of dirty data to unravel evils programs

گروه هکری حدید

أَيْنَ الْمَشْطَرِّ لِأَقَمَهُ الْإِمَامُ وَالْعَوَجَ وَأَيْنَ مُبْدَاهِلُ الْفُسُوقِ وَالْعَصِيَانِ وَالطُّغْيَانِ

Appendix B



*Note: Flickr does not allow photographs on their website to be downloaded. These photographs were found using the Google search engine.

Appendix C

E:M | Apealing or adapting to the young voters

http://hoder.com/weblog/archives/014112.shtml

Blackboard IT Help Outlook Web Access

EDITOR: MYSELF

A weblog on Iran, technology and pop culture, by Hossein Derakhshan


« Khamenei prefers the young and the restless | Main | Growing out of the establishment »

May 30, 2005

Apealing or adapting to the young voters

Looks are playing a big role in this years election and it's something easily missed by the foreign journalists who are not familiar with the culture.

For example, a foreign journalist can hardly understand why the new appearance of Baqer Qalibaf, the former police chief of Tehran and high-ranking commander of the Revolutionary Guards, is significant. Semi-shaven beard, with brown or [white and over-sized jacket](#), while sporting trendy glasses, Qalibaf is completely different from how [he used to appear](#) in public.



Baqer Qalibaf tries to appeal to the youth

MENU

- My blog in Persian
- vagrantly (My Photoblog)
- Iranian blogs in the Press
- Blogs by Iranians

ABOUT

My name is Hossein Derakhshan (aka Hoder). I was born in [Tehran](#), the capital of Iran, and I'm now living in [Toronto](#), Canada since December 2000. This is my weblog in English which does not necessarily cover the same topics as my [Persian weblog](#). The titles of these weblogs, "Editor: Myself", clearly displays my motives to start blogging. First post of this weblog was written on [June 11, 2002](#).

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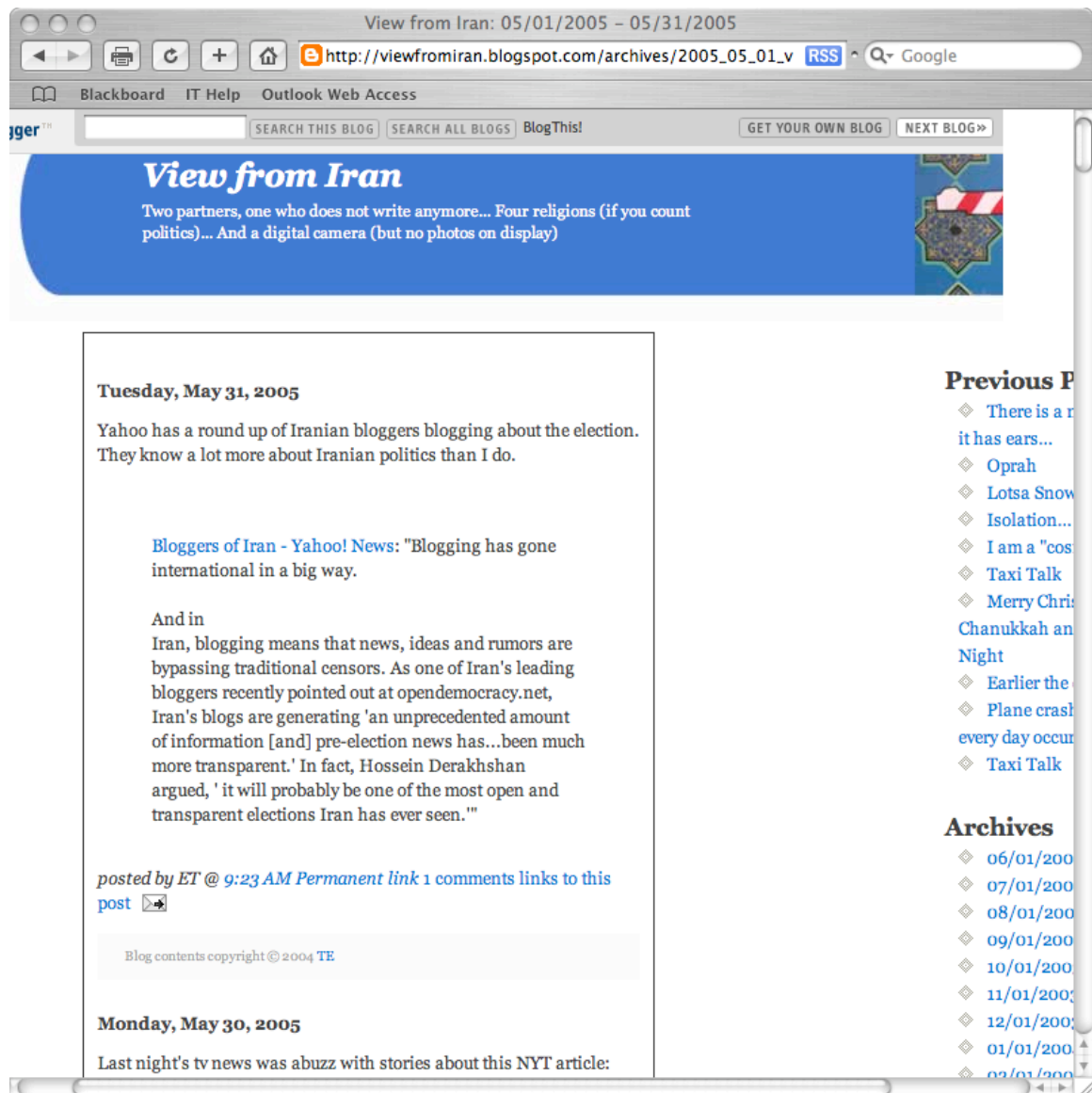
(Please choose a descriptive subject for your email, since there is a brutal Spam killer installed on my mail server.)

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Appendix D



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