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New Trends of Social Media Use in Iran: Candidates' Campaigns on Social Networks in the 2013 Presidential Election

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Abstract: On June 14th, 2013, Iranians headed to the polls to cast their votes for the country's next president. The unexpected turnout, that followed months of debates between those who wanted to go back to ballot boxes and those who did not, resulted in the election of Hasan Rouhani, the moderate cleric. About three months after the election, in his interview with NBC NEWS, Mr. Rouhani explained social networks' role in his victory as undeniable and appreciated his supporters for promoting his campaign on these platforms. This commentary reviews Rouhani's and the other state candidates'¹ use of formally blocked social networks during the recent presidential election in Iran, as a very recent shift toward planned and targeted use of social media by the government.

Keywords: Social media, social networks, social networking, Iran, 2013 presidential election

The recent presidential election in Iran was associated with a new development regarding the use of social media in the country. The flurry of the candidates' activities on banned social networks drew great attention and was reflected by many national and international journalists. Academically as well, this exceedingly important event in the political use of the Internet in Iran requires a critical reading of its own. Aims and methods of utilizing social networking sites by the presidential campaigns should be explored. The findings would consequently clarify the reasons for the inevitability of these media, even though they are heavily cracked down and formally blocked by the government.

Iran was one of the early adopters of the Internet in the Middle East as Sharif and Gilan Universities established the first connection to the global network in the early 1990's. It was supported and promoted by the government as a new means of

¹ The term state candidate is used because all candidates of the parliamentary and presidential elections in Iran have to be approved by the guardian council in order to run in the elections. The council is composed of six Islamic faqihs (experts in Islamic Law), to be selected by the Supreme Leader of Iran, and six jurists, to be elected by the Majlis (the Iranian Parliament).

scientific and technological advancement, which could assist the country's development in particular during the difficult economic period that followed the Iran-Iraq war. Originating from universities, the Internet was introduced to the Iranian public from 1994 and spread, as an increasing number of private ISPs (Internet service providers) gained the main responsibility for its provision (Rahimi 2007). With hundreds of active ISPs in the country, the number of Internet users has risen to 53.3% in 2012².

By the advent of web 2.0 technology, blogs, and social networking sites, the Internet in Iran started to gradually move beyond its initial aims and change to a platform for recreational and social activities as well as alternative media for raising the society's concerns. The increasing politicization of the Internet due to growing participation in user-generated content platforms like blogs, social bookmarking sites, online forums, and more significantly social networks like Facebook and Twitter; known as social media (Agichain et al. 2008); made the government to regulate the access to previously unrestricted online platforms. In particular Facebook and Twitter were officially banned following the unrests that greeted Ahmadinejad's re-election in 2009, when opposition activists tried to use those channels to organize demonstrations.

While these restrictions became one of the controversial issues between the Iranian government and its people, in particular the young generation, for whom social networks have changed to one of the defining features of their daily lives, the presidential candidates, not only the reformist and moderate ones, but also conservatives, decided not to miss the opportunity of communicating with the public via these blocked platforms. To access these platforms they have been using a variety of anti-filtering tools like Virtual Proxy Networks (VPNs), in the same way as people bypass Internet filtering in Iran. Although this was not the first time presidential candidates in Iran went online in their campaigns, in the previous elections there were mostly websites, and weblogs that have been employed for contacting supporters. This report seeks to track the trends of the 2013 presidential candidates' involvement in social networking activities, which can be perceived as a development in political use of the Internet in Iran.

The Candidates' campaigns on social networks

Some have founded their pages months before the election, some few days before their official enlistment as a candidate, and others after the final list of candidates was announced by the minister of interior on 21st of May. Beside the pages founded by their supporters, each candidate has at least one Facebook and/or twitter page run by their campaign office. In some of these pages the term official is explicitly mentioned, and in the others the content implicitly shows that the accounts are maintained by authorized campaign staff. The table below lists these pages.

² Iran Internet Usage, Broadband and Telecommunications Reports. (2012). Retrieved September 20, 2013, from <http://www.internetworldstats.com/me/ir.htm>

Accounts with non-significant numbers of followers³ are excluded.

Candidates	Twitter	Facebook
Jalili (drjalily.com) The Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council and former chief nuclear negotiator.	@DrSaeedJalili Page description: The Official Twitter of Dr. Saeed Jalili's Iranian Presidential campaign 2013, First Tweet on 11 May 2013	Facebook.com/Dr.Saeed.Jalili Page description: Dr. Saeed Jalili, page founded on 5 June 2012
Rouhani (rouhani.ir) Former chief negotiator in nuclear talks with the EU, head of the Expediency Council's Strategic Research Centre.	@HassanRouhani Page description: It has been changed to "Iranian president's English account" after the election, First Tweet on 5 May 2013 @drRouhani Page description: It has been changed to "President of Islamic Republic of Iran" Updates in English, French, Spanish and Arabic, First Tweet on 3 April 2013 @Rouhani_ir First Tweet on 22 April 2013	Facebook.com/Dr.Rouhani.Fanpage page founded on 22 Feb. 2013 Facebook.com/drrohaninews Page description: Dr Rouhani's news broadcasting center, Page founded on 1 June 2013
Ghalibaf (ghalibaf.ir , ghalibaf92.com) Current mayor of Tehran	@Qalibaf Page description: Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, The virtual presidential Campaign, first Tweet on 28 May 2013	facebook.com/Ghalibafofficial Page description: The official page of Dr. Ghalibaf's presidential campaign. page founded on 22 feb. 2013 facebook.com/havadar.mahbob Page description: Dr. Ghalibaf fanpage, founded on 17 Aug. 2012 Facebook.com/www.havadar.ir Page description: Dr. Ghalibaf fanpage, founded on 18 December 2012 Facebook.com/president.iran Page description: Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, founded on 20 April 2012
Aref (draref.ir) Member of the Expediency Council, pulled out of the race three days before the poll	@MohamadRezaAref Page description: Iranian politician, Electrical Engineer and University Professor, first Tweet on 31 May 2013	Facebook.com/DrMohammadRezaAref Page description: Mohammad Reza Aref, founded on 16 February 2013
Rezaei (rezaee.ir) Former military commander	@Drmohsenrezaei Page description: Dr. Rezaee News center official twitter, first Tweet on 29 May 2013	Facebook.com/drmohsenrezaei Page description: Mohsen Rezaee, founded on 16 July 2010

³ Twitter accounts with less than 100 followers and Facebook accounts with less than 1000 likes are not listed.

Velayati (velayati.ir) The Supreme Leader's long-standing advisor on international affairs, Iran's longest-serving minister since the 1979 revolution	Only two fan page with less than 50 followers	facebook.com/Dr.A.A.VELAYATI Page description: Dr Ali Akbar Velayati, Facebook.com/P.Velayatmadaran Page description: Supporters of the supreme leader-Dr. Ali Akbar Velayati, founded on 22 May 2013 Facebook.com/AliAkbarVelayatiIraniansAbroad Page description: Ali Akbar Velayati-Iranians Abroad, founded on 23 May 2013
Gharazi (gharazi.com) Former Petroleum and Telecommunications Minister	@gharazi Page description: Iranian Politician who served as Petroleum & Telecommunications Minister,	

Table 1: The presidential campaigns' on Facebook and Twitter

Despite the different political context of the country, the Iranian presidential campaigns have also utilized social media as a competitive advantage very much in the same way as electoral campaigns in the West. Reviewing the listed pages, the main implications of the social networking sites for the campaigns are recognized:

Information dissemination

Internet and Social networks served as the principal means of information dissemination for the presidential campaigns. There are several possible explanations for this phenomenon. First, IRIB (Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting) which owns all national TV and radio channels in Iran, gives the candidates equal airtime to broadcast their campaigns. The programs should start after the final list of candidates is revealed and stopped one day before the election' date. On social networks, however, the information could be broadcasted with no time and space limit. The page "Facebook.com/Dr.Saeed.Jalili" for instance, was founded about one year before the election and started by introducing Dr. Jalili's profile and his main achievements as the chief nuclear negotiator. And after his official enlistment the page served as his virtual presidential campaign.

Second, Information shared on these sites could reach to the audiences who do not usually rely on Iran's national broadcasting for gaining political information. Therefore to a great extent, social networks could serve as a broadcasting media's complement to cover a wider portion of voting-age population.

The competition over use of social networks by the candidates has been also intensified by the structural properties of social network sites. Social networks could provide the candidates with a much more cost-effective avenue for outreach. They also compress the time in which information distributes, an opportunity which has been of great value, in particular when a rally or meeting was needed to be broadcasted immediately. Moreover, the platforms could make them free from filters of editors and gatekeepers. And finally, social networks' design allowed

them to share all type of contents. Textual messages such as campaigns' rallies and meetings announcements, quotes of the candidates' speeches in their rallies and interview, and endorsement messages of known faces were disseminated beside visual contents including clips, videos and photos widely shared following the campaigns' events.

Direct interaction with people

The campaigns' strategists were also aware of the other unique opportunity social networks offered them, which was to be able to interact and talk to people. Rezaei's facebook⁴ page invited followers to comment on a number of controversial social issues like the morality police. He also has been talking directly with followers in his page, thanking them for their comments, apologizing for not writing regularly and even replying to comments. Jalili's⁵ and Ghalibaf's ⁶ facebook pages asked people to evaluate their presence on the first and second live presidential debates on national TV, in order to receive feedbacks for the next debates. A video⁷ shared on Aref's page in which he was asking people not to boycott the election, turned his page to a venue for the debate on vote or not to vote. All such cases show how contrary to traditional propaganda mediums, social networks provide the candidates with the opportunity of not only getting their own voice heard, but receiving public voice in return and gaining more detailed and timely understanding of the society's concerns.

Dr. Mohammad Soltanifar, a member of Rouhani's electoral campaign team, explained this opportunity in his interview with a daily newspaper one month after the election: "we defined our slogans, monitoring social networks...we observed accounts of different age, occupation, and social groups, which helped us understand what is going on in the context of the society...the results were in many cases far from our primary anticipations". In another part of his interview he also explained how they have gotten into the social networks' spaces a few months before the election, and reinforced users who were encouraging participation in the election, against accounts promoting the election boycott (Bani 2013). This shows that besides connecting users to the presidential campaign pages, the campaigns' media strategist have also supported users' connection with each other on issues affecting their votes.

4 See: https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=691485307547579&set=a.552272168135561.140268.551378801558231&type=1&relevant_count=1

5 See: https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=502823016455816&set=a.344034112334708.78152.344024295669023&type=1&relevant_count=1

6 See: <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=375637845879576&set=a.267252843384744.54895.267250533384975&type=1&theater>

7 See: <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?v=4995561015344>

Engaging with the world

Jalili and Rouhani, who have dealt most with the issues of foreign relations in general and nuclear talks in particular, have also made their twitter pages as the primary means to send information outside Iran's border. They tweeted extensively in English and sometimes in Arabic which can be considered as an attempt to reach out to the West and neighboring countries, as well as to the Iranian expat community. To gain more international attention, which could consequently influence on voters who value the country's public diplomacy, Hasan Rouhani's English Twitter account also tweeted directly at foreign journalists such as at CNN's Azadeh Ansari and the *New York Times* Tehran correspondent Thomas Erdbrink⁸.

Final Thoughts

The evidence from this report suggests that Iranian politicians have started to look at social media more as an opportunity rather than a threat. This change of view could be caused by two factors. First, the politicians have become mindful of the tremendous opportunities social media can provide them to reach out to a greater public support. Second, they have recognized the fact that technology finds its ways to people's lives, in spite of all restrictions and crack downs. So it is more wisely to use it in a managed and targeted way, rather than utterly deny it. As I was writing this report I was regularly being faced with news of several of Rouhani's cabinet members' openings on pages on banned Facebook and twitter, explained by them as a move toward greater government openness. Rouhani's English Twitter account (@HassanRouhani), which has become a sign of Tehran diplomatic outreach after the election, also constantly keeps followers updated with his speeches, media appearances, and presidential news. This increasing presence of officials on Facebook and Twitter has even raised the hope for the sites to be unblocked.

Forbidden or not, social media is part of Iran's changing political landscape. In the past it has been more in hands of people and NGOs, recently welcoming members of the government. The prominent political role Internet and social media is gaining in the country requires considerably more studies. Previous works in the field have concentrated mostly on political use of the mediums by public, groups and activists. Further research needs to be established on social media use by the country's government. Social media consequences for Iran's government-public relations, the government-media relations, and the country's public diplomacy are among strongly suggested lines of research.

⁸ See: <https://twitter.com/HassanRouhani/status/339751886326480897> (Hasan Rouhani(@Hasanrouhani) 24 September 2013)

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