

Technology Fund: Investing in the Green Movement for Democracy

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The Islamic Republic of Iran remains among the world's most repressive regimes. Yet, despite techniques of repression ranging from the medieval to the technologically sophisticated, Iranians have engineered means to resist the regime's grip on power since the 1979 revolution that established totalitarian, theocratic rule. In recent years, and especially since the fraudulent June 2009 presidential election, that resistance has proliferated through the Internet. **Iranians, more than a third of whom are online regularly, have made the Web their virtual public square,**

heralding cyber-freedoms of expression and association largely lacking in Iranian civil society and state-dominated media.

Iranian Civil Society and the Birth of the Green Movement

The discourse in Iranian cyberspace, not to mention the demographic vastness of that space, is a reflection and function of Iran's social history: its modernization and urbanization; high literacy; capacity for technological discovery; legacy of newspapers and book publishing; defiant women; love of the arts and humanities; an early constitutional revolution and century-long aspiration for freedom; a large and empowered diaspora; and long-held cosmopolitan yearnings. Particularly when compared with the Arab Middle East, Iran remains, despite its fiercely retrograde regime, a politically curious and intellectually vibrant society. Though its intellectual elite in the late 1970s led the country and the region into an unforgiving love affair with radical Islam, Iran has re-emerged today mature, more knowing and more liberal for the bitter experience.

Having witnessed egregious state violence and corruption in the name of Islam, the most religiously devout Iranians are leading parts of a broad-based, largely headless social movement that seeks to reclaim religion and the state so that

Executive Summary

The US and Europe should immediately bolster Iranians' capacity to receive and impart information freely. Specific recommendations include:

- a robust trans-Atlantic political commitment in support of Iranians' free access to information
- countering efforts by the Iranian regime to scramble VOA and BBC satellite-television broadcasts
- funding to broaden the use of successful circumvention tools to combat Internet censorship
- a voluntary code of conduct to reign in European companies providing communications technology to the Iranian regime
- increasing satellite Internet access

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both enjoy, with appropriately demarcated spheres, renewed autonomy and integrity. Large parts of Iranian civil society, in its post-Islamist incarnation, are determined to win the most basic of human rights, safeguard them through limits on state power, and strip religion of its place in politics, freeing it from the control and manipulation of tyrants.

The experience of religious despotism has left many Iranians deeply suspicious of the religious community and its rhetoric. Iranians who do remain devout tend to look to dissident clerics such as Ayatollahs Hossein-Ali Montazeri, Hossein Kazemeyni Boroujerdi, Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari, Mohsen Kadivar and Yousef Sanaie. Religious intellectuals and ordinary religious Iranians are seeking at once a reform of their political and religious lives. An Islamic reformation of sorts, to make faith compliant with a desire for modernity, women's rights and civil liberties, is unfolding in parallel with a quest for democratic life. Religious women and men seeking to protect their freedom and their faith have joined ranks with classically liberal, secular thinkers and activists in the Iranian political spectrum, closing painful gaps and forging new allegiances around hope for democratic life, not ideology.

The Green Movement, a civic struggle for civil and political liberties born out of the stolen 2009 presidential elections, is the largest and most unified expression of the Iranian people's will for democratic life since the 1979 revolution. Though propelled through sustained, mass demonstrations of millions of Iranians throughout the country and through smaller acts of non-violent political action, the Green Movement's character and perhaps even its mere existence have become difficult to imagine without the

instrumental force of the Internet, satellite TV and mobile technologies.

Neda and the Power of Information

The image of one protestor, Neda Agha Soltan, galvanized the world. Shot to death by a sniper while marching amidst a crowd of protestors, Neda's dying eyes and bloody face were captured on video and sent abroad instantaneously via mobile technology. Overnight Neda became the symbol of Iran's Green Movement, building global solidarity with a courageous people's peaceful, determined struggle for freedom. More than one year after the election, that video and images of Neda persist on Iranian social networks, human-rights campaigns and protests worldwide. HBO even produced a documentary on Iran's Green Movement entitled, "For Neda".

If it were not for Iranians' connectivity and the viral exchange made possible by their social networks, Neda's image and its representation of hope versus the killing of innocents (36 confirmed dead by Iranian authorities during peaceful protests) would be unknown to the world. The global outrage over Neda's murder provides a stunning example of the impact of the Internet and Iran's porous communication boundaries in exposing Tehran's human-rights violations. A 1988 prison massacre, which led to the regime's systematic killing of more than 4,000 political prisoners in little over a month, came a full decade before the start of Internet use in Iran and went largely unnoticed, domestically and internationally. To this day, many Iranians remain unaware of the massacre, its scope, its victims, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's religious fatwa mandating the mass killing, and Ayatollah Montazeri's public denunciation of Khomeini's

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call to kill, which cost Montazeri his designation as future supreme leader. The regime's still largely unreported assassinations in the 1980s and 1990s of several dozen Iranian liberal dissidents living in exile are also indicative of the significantly elevated power that improved communications have given Iranians to expose the regime's abuses.

Iranians' exchange of information while protests continued last year was arguably the most potent and sustained use of technology by any people living in a repressive regime. Photos and videos taken by protestors of fellow protestors being beaten by government forces and plain-clothes Basiji militants became a staple of world media coverage during the summer of 2009. Students at Tehran University alerted the world via Twitter about the militants' violent raids on their dorms. Accounts of beatings and the deaths of friends came from brief messages sent every few seconds, just days after an election that had felt promising to so many. Photographs of bruised bodies haunted Facebook pages while Iranians' profile photos changed en masse to green and included other symbols of defiance.

When the regime took peaceful protestors to makeshift prisons and began systematically raping and torturing them, student activists, bloggers, human-rights defenders and hordes of people previously disengaged from political action sent alerts via the Internet, ultimately forcing the regime to close two of the prisons, a muted acknowledgment of the deaths and other atrocities that had occurred there. Names of the thousands of protestors arrested or missing were efficiently processed by international human-rights organizations. They collaboratively used Internet technology to gather, compile, verify and

disseminate the names of the imprisoned protestors and advocate for their release.

CNN and other mainstream media increasingly relied on daily doses of mobile text messages, eyewitness video accounts, Twitter feeds, photos, e-mails, Facebook updates, and blogs sent and posted daily by ordinary Iranians. The media outlets gained a new appreciation for Iran's citizen journalism and technological reach, especially after the regime expelled foreign journalists. Voice of America (VOA) and the BBC's Persian-language satellite channels, together reaching a critical mass of well over a third of the Iranian population, beamed images and accounts received via the Internet back into Iran on satellite television.

Mir-Hossein Mousavi, the ostensible leader of the opposition, still sends regular statements via his website and Facebook page to encourage the Green Movement's resistance. Mehdi Karroubi does the same and has written letters condemning the supreme leader and the regime's violence, particularly its systematic rape of peaceful protestors. Dissidents abroad broadcast their views and messages of solidarity via satellite TV, radio and the Internet, and one, Mohsen Sazegara, sends a daily YouTube video message to the Green Movement, sharing political analysis, logistical information about protests, and strategic lessons from other non-violent struggles for freedom.

Crackdown and the International Response

Given all the connectivity, global reach and visibility that Iranian Greens achieved for themselves as they took on their oppressors, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and President

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Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's continued grip on power and their ongoing violent crackdown – the execution of peaceful protestors, the systemic rape and torture of political prisoners, the sham trials of prominent reformist types, the surveillance and harassment of ordinary Iranians, and the ensuing exodus of civic activists, journalists and intellectuals – are all the more devastating. Safety in numbers, protection through visibility, global solidarity and other maxims of waging effective non-violent resistance have indeed been tested in the Iranian case and have proved to be deficient, at least in the short term.

A ruthless, well funded, highly corrupt regime is more intent and more capable of maintaining its power than some may have supposed. The world's dependence on Iranian oil and the regime's manipulation of a global preoccupation with its nuclear program have only helped Khamenei and Ahmadinejad deflect scrutiny of their stolen election and mounting human-rights violations. In late April 2010, the election of Iran, which has some of the world's most discriminatory laws and practices against women's rights, to the UN Commission on the Status of Women was a further blow to Iranians who hoped the UN and the international community might side with them rather than their oppressors.

For many, hopes for official solidarity and support from democratic governments had already been deflated by what has been widely characterized on Iranian cyberspace as too late and tepid a response from US President Barack Obama to last year's official election results. Political cartoonists, bloggers, and human-rights defenders including Nobel Laureate Shirin Ebadi

have expressed frustration and resentment with America for what they characterize as a bartering away of Iranians' democratic aspirations for dubious, piecemeal progress on a nuclear deal. Marching through the streets of Tehran in one of the largest demonstrations that city has ever seen, Iranians sought to force the US to make a moral choice, chanting en masse, "Barack Hussein Obama! Ya Ba Oona Ya Ba Ma!": "Barack Hussein Obama: You are either on our side or theirs [our oppressors]."

Resilience and Germinal Unity

Last June, quite remarkably, Iranians of various political stripes and social backgrounds in Iran and across the globe came together under one banner for the first time since the 1979 revolution. Their collective consciousness was one of hope for an imminent, progressive breakthrough. Millions of Iranians participated in marches through cities and small towns throughout their own country and in many major world cities. They hoped to trigger a gradual turn towards greater civil and political liberties, government accountability and the start of a peaceful democratic transition.

Regime fissures and a Green Movement leadership that included political "insiders", namely presidential candidates Mousavi and Karroubi and former President Mohammad Khatami, played heavily into those hopes.

At pivotal moments during the period of mass protests and global attention, even Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, considered the second-most powerful man in Iran before the intra-regime takeover by Ahmadinejad and his backers in the Revolutionary Guard, gave powerful statements about the need to respond to the rightful

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demands of the people and to release political prisoners.

Stereotypes about Iranian political factions being hopelessly disparate and fractious unraveled as leaders representing different constituencies and political/religious/social outlooks – including the late Shah’s son, Reza Pahlavi; former radical revolutionary and now prominent filmmaker Mohsen Makhmalbaf; internationally best-selling author Azar Nafisi; Grand Ayatollah Montazeri; Nobel Laureate Ebadi; former Revolutionary Guard founder turned dissident Mohsen Sazegara; national poet and feminist Simin Behbehani; and religious scholar Abdul Karim Soroush – came out boldly in support of the Green Movement. Highly publicized, cathartic defections of prominent government officials and/or their children became commonplace.

What remains today of the regime is a tight, increasingly paranoid collection of the most radical and corrupt, scheming to use oil money to buy off the poor and to use fear to force a mobilized, resistant majority back to silence.

While Iranians’ hope for democratic breakthrough has not yet borne fruit, the Internet has been instrumental in reflecting, creating and promoting a desire for a democratic transition. The cyber-discourse is so radically different from and resistant to official state propaganda that Iranians’ dictated lives and their largely unrestrained cyber-identities, demands and aspirations are diametrically opposed. **For many Iranians – for their political, social, sexual, spiritual and artistic selves – the Internet is their “real” existence, reflecting their truer, liberated nature and hopes for a fundamentally different future.** In Iranians’ political consciousness, the

realm of artifice and representation on the Internet is more real than the real world.

The immediate reporting and viral information-sharing related to protests and human-rights violations is but a small part of Iranian cyberspace’s democratic expressions and associations. Iranians’ more “traditional” use of the Internet to express their desire for human rights and democracy has been manifest for more than a decade. The prohibition in the late 1990s of more than 100 reformist dailies and magazines, liberal books, book fairs, university and NGO activities, coincided with the proliferation of the Internet in Iranian society. As demands and organizing for the rights of women, students, journalists, labor, ethnic and religious minorities, teachers, children, the poor, homosexuals, the handicapped, migrant workers and victims of trafficking were crushed, writers, dissidents and civic organizers took their struggles online. A parallel world of online civic associations, newspapers, petitions and referenda, letters from prison, documentaries, watchdog efforts, political manifestos, training, human-rights documentation databases, Wiki pages on civic subjects, translation services for and by activists, memorials for victims of state violence and awareness-raising campaigns rapidly emerged. Iranians latched early on to first-generation Internet-conferencing programs such as PalTalk and social networks such as Google’s Orkut, now largely obsolete.

The Politics of Democracy Promotion

As Iranian cyberspace continued to develop and as the regime’s crackdown on civil society intensified under Ahmadinejad, international democracy-promotion efforts for Iran also began

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to take root. The Dutch Foreign Ministry in 2005 solicited proposals for up to €15 million in support of free-media projects. Outlets such as Gozaar and Radio Zamaneh were outgrowths of the funding. In 2006, in a move that caused much controversy, the George W. Bush administration pushed through Congress a bill to distribute up to US\$75 million in funding for democracy and human-rights programs for Iran, including increased support for Radio Free Europe's Radio Farda and VOA's Persian service (making it the broadcaster's largest service).

Such democracy-promotion efforts, however, have been met with resistance from the Iranian regime and critics of Western policy towards Iran. But there is no reason to cower from such criticism. The Islamic Republic has, since its inception, labeled student activists, feminists, professors, liberal politicians and journalists, NGO workers, ethnic and religious minority leaders and anyone else perceived as a threat against its power to be "agents" of the Great Satan and, more generally, of the West. There is nothing new about this charge; the regime has never needed an excuse, as some claim, to deny Iranians their most basic human rights.

Some dissidents have shared the view that foreign democracy-promotion efforts could taint civic actors, making them liable to accusations of acting as foreign agents. Akbar Ganji, for example, resisted the Bush administration's overt embrace of Iranian civil-society development. But even he and others like him do not hesitate to appear on US-government broadcasts and participate in US-funded conferences and democracy programs for Iran. In the face of such contradictory statements and deeds, and given the sustained call for help from a broad range of other civic actors, including

those in Iran, the US, Europe and independent donors should remain confident that a wide range of democracy and human-rights programming can continue to be delivered safely, effectively and sustainably to Iranians, especially via the Internet.

US and Dutch government-funded programming for Iranian media and civil society has not only taken root and proved useful, but has also come to be more easily understood and appreciated by Iranian opinion makers. Though a few intellectuals, particularly leftists coming from a legacy of anti-Americanism, continue to question and condemn publicly American motives and "interference" in Iranians' struggle for freedom, the same individuals, less publicly, often acknowledge, if not laud, the pivotal role of the VOA and other foreign-funded broadcasts such as Radio Farda and the BBC. They also praise websites, awareness-raising campaigns, training curricula, advocacy initiatives and cyber-security tools funded by the US and European governments, and activities sponsored by Western foundations, think tanks and universities. In some cases, these contradictions arise because dissidents in Iran fear for their safety. In other cases, particularly those involving dissidents abroad, the contradictions stem from knee-jerk anti-Americanism. But in all cases, such criticism should not stymie trans-Atlantic efforts to aid Iran's democracy movement.

Indeed, the perception of democracy and human-rights assistance by the US and Europe is already shifting. In a bold move that cannot be underestimated in the insular, violent context of Iranian politics, Nobel Laureate Ebadi vehemently stated just after last year's fraudulent election that the Iranian people need the free world's help to fight injustice. She also said that the primary

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means to overcome the impasse between the state and the people is to hold new, free and fair elections with oversight from international election monitors, and she pressed the UN to send human-rights envoys and special rapporteurs to Iran to investigate post-election atrocities. Since the crackdown has grown deeper, Iranian civic leaders are also openly calling for support from Western governments, primarily the US, for unrestricted Internet communications technology and measures to counter the Iranian regime's jamming of VOA and BBC television broadcasts. In stark contrast to Akbar Ganji's 2006 *New York Times* op-ed entitled "Money Can't Buy Democracy", Iranians are frantically asking in this post-election period why the West is not putting its money where its mouth is and providing Iranians with a technological lifeline to the free world.

Policy Recommendations

While Iranians' call for help has not gone unanswered, the level of real technology assistance thus far from the US and Europe is still less than that needed to create a critical mass for circumventing the regime's censorship. In addition, awareness of the role of Western technologies in repressing the Iranian people has yet to translate into effective policies to prevent a trade deal such as Nokia Siemens' 2009 sale of cell-phone-surveillance capacity to the Iranian regime.

The political commitment, informed vision and coordination among donors and implementers for an effective Internet/satellite technology policy for Iran are lacking. The US has authorized US\$20 million for Iran Internet-freedom programs as part of the VOICE Act (Victims of Iranian

Censorship Act), and the Netherlands has dedicated €1 million for promoting free media. But the EU and other European nations have yet to commit funds or meaningful political attention to the issue, though pressure is mounting, from the Netherlands in particular, for the EU to act within the framework of the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights to fund Internet-freedom efforts.

Recommendations for trans-Atlantic support for Iranian democratic development through Internet/technology freedom programming include:

- a robust political commitment from Washington and European capitals to support Iranians' free access to information. Bold backing of Iranian Greens' need to communicate with each other and the free world should be consistently provided. This support should come from legislatures, as has already been the case, and from official statements from executive branches as a key part of trans-Atlantic foreign policy towards Iran. Open support of the Iranian people's struggle for freedom builds hope and provides invaluable moral solidarity. Historic precedents providing such solidarity and assistance to people fighting for their freedom in other totalitarian regimes, particularly through Radio Free Europe, demonstrate how support for democracy in Iran is a moral calling and an essential exercise of the national interest of all free nations.
- **disbursing immediately the \$20 million authorized by the US Congress for Iran**

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Internet-freedom initiatives. The funds can provide for an urgent increase in the use of circumvention tools and expanded Internet-based educational opportunities for Iranian civil society.

- Europe's provision of technology funds in support of Iranians' free access to technology. The EU should match the US commitment, and each European country should at least match the funds dedicated by the Netherlands.
- donors' prioritized support for access to technology over the development of Web-based content. Iranians are already capable of producing informative and engaging online content about human rights, democracy, the rule of law and non-violent resistance. What is needed is greater attention to free access.
- using varied and diverse technological solutions to combat repression. Multiple technologies should be explored to provide free and secure satellite, Internet and mobile-phone access to overcome Tehran's sophisticated use of technology against its people. Donors should convene conferences to discuss all technological options. Transparency, trust building and collaborative action among donors and implementers should be a priority. Technological assistance has thus far been provided too opaquely and competitively.
- increasing support to proven circumvention technologies that combat Internet censorship and to promote long-term sustainability of such technologies, their continuous improvement and user-friendly distribution.

Server capacity for the most effective circumvention tools, such as Freegate, is now severely limited for Iranians. With more funds, well established, tested circumvention tools can rapidly provide free access to the Internet for tens of thousands more Iranians. Donors should refrain from funding multiple circumvention tools that essentially perform the same service.

- ensuring circumvention tools undergo usability studies to ensure good aesthetics, ease of use, and adequate support for users. Many Iranians know about circumvention but not know how to do it safely and effectively. Circumvention tools supported by donor agencies should demonstrate their effectiveness through transparent displays of usage data per country.
- donor testing of Internet via satellite. Initially costing US\$2,000 per user per year, satellite Internet access may quickly catch on among Iranians, opening up an (albeit black) market that already exists for satellite television.
- promoting cooperation between the US, the EU and satellite-television providers to counter the regime. Satellite television is a ubiquitous communications channel much prized by Iranians. But the Iranian regime has recently improved its ability to jam VOA and BBC satellite airwaves. Eutelsat has threatened to cut off the regime's own satellite infrastructure, provided by the company, if Tehran does not cease jamming EuroTel's foreign broadcasts.
- making inverse reforms to US and European economic policy towards Iran. As it toughens

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international sanctions against Iran, the US should amend its own sanctions regime to allow for the maximum provision of freedom-enhancing technology. Europe needs to take immediate steps to reign in the selling of equipment and expertise used to repress the Iranian people.

- preventing further sales of technology that aid the regime's repression. The EU should facilitate development of a voluntary code of conduct among European companies seeking business in countries with repressive regimes. Such an initiative is already being proposed by telecommunications companies themselves as a way to even the playing field toward more ethical behavior by the industry. As part of the voluntary code of conduct:
 - *Businesses should agree not to sell equipment, services or expertise that can facilitate repression in any country ranked "Not Free" by Freedom House. Adherence to such a code will remove pressure on firms to compete in such markets.*
 - *All sales of technology and related services and expertise to Iran should be centrally tracked by the EU using existing mechanisms such as arms-control databases.*
 - *A human-rights impact assessment (similar to domestic privacy impact assessments) of any technology that may be sold to Iran should be performed by an independent group.*
- publicizing the limitations of technologies. Donors funding and encouraging the use of

technology for civil-society development should also educate users in repressive regimes about potential dangers. Such regimes can exploit cell phones, for example, to identify instantly activists' locations, making targeted surveillance and arrest easy.

- supporting new, innovative uses of the Internet such as virtual classrooms and e-learning initiatives, socially networked advocacy initiatives, awareness campaigns, virtual press conferences, events and global political actions. This could be coordinated with established universities in the US and Europe, as well as with NGOs, media outlets and civic associations.
- developing fun, animated, Web-based awareness-raising campaigns about cybersecurity to help inform unaware activists of the possibilities and the dangers of technology.
- sharing ideas and talent with Iran's leading cyber-activists as they develop appropriate tools, practices and training. Iranians can engineer home-grown solutions to their technology needs. Understanding these needs, collaborating virtually with and advising activists can be as important as providing the technology itself.
- funding and facilitating security audits for established cyber-activism projects, blogs and news sites, particularly those managed in Iran.
- expanding knowledge of time-tested, basic protection skills such as decentralized storage of communications, routine destruction of

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communications, call trees in case of trouble, media advocacy, pseudonymous publishing, closing e-mail accounts of those arrested, and tip sheets describing safe travel options, hospitals, and ground rules before coordinated non-violent actions. Often the best protection mechanisms for activists using technology are non-technological.

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