

A Report on the Status of the Internet in Iran



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Abstract

Attending to the status of the Internet in Iran, the present report primarily focuses on filtration. Firstly, it will touch on the current situation of the Internet in Iran. Secondly, it will look into the statutes restricting the freedom of expression including both the public media laws and the laws specific to the Internet. Thirdly, it will elaborate on censorship and the methods thereof as well as the classification of the websites subject to censorship. Censored websites mentioned in this report do not include all the censored sites and are only the examples of such sites. Finally, the report will discuss briefly the rapid growth of blogging in Iran and the large-scale censorship affecting the weblogs.

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1- Introduction

The Internet in Iran has a 10-year history. People welcomed it because it was a place for them to escape from the constraints of a closed society. During these 10 years, people used the Internet for garnering information and also expressing their ideas and thoughts (lifestyles) which were considered unacceptable by the government.

The government has had a dual policy respecting the Internet. On the one hand it has tried to promote the use of the Internet by the development of required infrastructure embodied in TEKFA Initiative, but on the other hand has sought to control it through continuous censorship of websites on news, human rights, religion, women, and as well as weblogs. This policy has been opposed by both the civil society and the Internet users. The enthusiastic Internet users, however, have never stopped trying to outmaneuver the government in its filtration techniques.

The present report will discuss the advent and development of the Internet in Iran, censorship and its methods, weblogs and their role in the civil society, and the problems regarding the development of the Internet in the country.

2- The Internet Boom

Iran has witnessed a rapid growth in the communication networks during the recent years. The use of fiber optics in the country was increased in length by 8, 700 km in 2003. By August 2005, the total length of optical fiber used in the country added up to more than 56, 000 km¹. Also, the Internet bandwidth has increased from 28Mbps in 1999 to 1.5Gbps to date.

7, 000 banks have been interconnected since 2003. Also, 2000 offices for providing ICT-related services have been established in the rural areas by the Telecommunication Company of Iran so that the villagers can use the services offered by e-government. The number of these offices will add up to 4, 000 by 2006 and 1, 000 in 5 years².

The government of Iran has taken special measures to expand the Internet technology (embodied in TEKFA and E-Government initiatives). Funding public and private entities for their software projects, the "IT Use Development" initiative (TEKFA) is aimed at encouraging the said entities to have an active presence in the Internet and participate in the computer software market. This resulted in increase in the number of software companies and participation thereof in tenders and projects supported by TEKFA; but the initiative has been a failure in terms of overcoming the lack of transparency in the

¹ see Telecommunication company of Iran, at <http://www.irantelecom.ir/default.asp?sm=&page=40&code=6>

² see The Data Communication Company of Iran (DCI), at www.dci.ir

government structure. Despite of big tenders concerning “E-Government” initiative and approvals respecting transparency in the government structure, Iran (scoring 2.9 out of 10) is ranking 88 in terms of transparency in the world³.

The function of the e-government in Iran is currently limited to the reduction of visits by citizens to governmental offices (for example to get a passport) and replace them by visiting “e-government” offices and as the Secretary of the E-Government Seminar put it, “in spite of implementing different e-government projects, we have not yet reached a point of hopefulness”⁴. According to the UN reports on the access of citizens to public services via electronic networks, Iran is ranking 115 among 178 countries⁵.

The number of the Internet users across the country is now 6.2 million⁶ which, according to Iran’s Telecommunication Company, will increase to about 20 million in 4 years. The Internet Service Providers (ISPs) currently provide services needed for access to the Internet. All ISPs must be licensed by the government and obtain the required bandwidth from ASPs which are strictly supervised by the government. All ICPs (Internet Connection Providers) are by law subject to government licensing and restriction of access to the Internet. According to the Telecommunication Ministry, 32 ICPs⁷ and 572 ISPs⁸ licensed by the government are currently active across the country.

There are about 6 million computers in Iran. Iranians also use more than 5000 hosts⁹. Persianblog which is a Persian weblog service provider in the country alone has classified 91, 780 blogs in its website¹⁰. In most of the cities throughout Iran, CoffeeNets offer easy access to the Internet at 3.5 PPP\$¹¹ per hour. The majority of the rural areas on the other hand lack any facilities for access to the Net. The following map shows the geographical distribution of ICPs across the country.

³ http://www.transparency.org/cpi/2005/cpi2005_infocus.html

⁴ see Islamic Republic News Agency at <http://www.irna.ir/fa/news/view/menu-279/8408153134144254.htm>

⁵ See Information Technology News Agency at <http://www.itna.ir/archives/news/001892.php>

⁶ see Telecommunications Company of Iran, August Report 2005, at <http://www.irantelecom.ir/default.asp?sm=&page=40&code=6>

⁷ see The Information Technology Company of Iran, at <http://www.ict.ir/isp/icp.htm>

⁸ See Ministry Of Information & Communications Technology at <http://www.ict.gov.ir/IndexStudy.aspx>

⁹ International Telecommunication Union, Internet Indicators: Hosts, Users and Number of PCs, at

¹⁰ Persian Weblog provider: <http://www.persianblog.com/userslist.asp>

¹¹ PPP (purchasing power parity) A rate of exchange that accounts for price differences across countries, allowing international comparisons of real output and incomes. At the PPP US\$ rate (as used in this Report), PPP US\$1 has the same purchasing power in the domestic economy as \$1 has in the United States.

**Distribution of ICPs
in Iran's Provinces.
October 2005**



11 companies are authorized to provide ADSL-related services (high speed Internet connection) in Iran¹². The Telecommunication Company of Iran has installed 52, 138 data ports of which 14, 606 data ports are already in use. 716 cities have access to the Internet via these ports.¹³ Also, Wireless Internet has been offered by some private companies since early 2005¹⁴. Although services can not be offered throughout the country, they can be accessed in most parts of Tehran with a population of more than 10 million¹⁵.

Despite the quantitative growth of the use of the Internet, access to the Internet has been largely limited by certain laws and regulations (which will be discussed in Section 3). The number of users has increased, but their access is exclusively controlled and monitored by the government. ISPs do not have free access to the Internet anymore. They

¹² see Ministry Of Information & communications Technology website: at <http://www.tra.ir/static/pap/PAPStats.asp>

¹³ See Telecommunications Company of Iran, August Report 2005, at <http://www.irantelecom.ir/default.asp?sm=&page=40&code=6>

¹⁴ see Datak Group Of Company, at <http://www.iranhotlinks.com/VisitLink.php?key=759&PHPSESSID=4444874bfef3b3eadf3491c87b7f62ca>

¹⁵ see Datak Group Of Company, at <http://www.datak-telecom.net/images/map.jpg>

were either forced to capitulate to censorship laws passed in 2001 or were stopped from operation by the government.

2-1 Costs

Access to the Internet from a CoffeeNet costs 3.5 PPP\$ per hour while the price of a computer is about 2250 PPP\$. Most of the Internet users use Dial-up connection which costs 1 PPP\$ per hour.

ADSL services featuring 8Mbps downstream/768 kbps upstream are at best trimmed to 1Mbps downstream/256 kbps upstream. The price of ADSL featuring 128-512 kbps is about 1200 PPP\$ per month¹⁶.

3- Legislation

3-1 Media Public Laws

According to the Constitution, radio and television are exclusively owned and run by the government. Also, as stipulated by the Press Law, all newspapers and other publications may operate only under the supervision of the government. Violators under the Press Law will be tried in special courts established for such purpose. Violations include *calumny*, *releasing false information*, *propagating against the ruling body of the country*, *jeopardizing national security* and *insulting the leader*. This has led to even independent newspapers adopting a policy of self-censorship so as not to face accusations as “accomplice of aliens”, hence closing down by the government.

Since the growing suppression of press beginning from April 2000 after an era of relative press freedom under former President Khatami tenure, more than 110 newspapers and other publications have been stopped from operation and more than 40 journalists jailed.

According to the Constitution, “publications and news media shall enjoy freedom of expression provided that what they publish does not violate Islamic principles or the Civil Code” and according to the Press Law enacted on March 19, 1986, “the mission of the press is to enlighten public opinion, advance the objectives of Iran, counteract internal division among citizens, propagate Islamic culture and principles, and reject manifestations of imperialistic culture as well as foreign politics and policies. Publications must not conflict with any of these enumerated goals”. As stipulated by these statutes, all publications need to be licensed by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and no one may without a license or anonymously publish any material.

¹⁶ see one of the biggest internet provider Pars online and the other one, at <http://www.parsonline.com/poltpackage.htm>

Based on the Press Law 1986, newspapers and other publications may release domestic and international news but must “consider the best interests of the community” and abide by the applicable laws. Publication of any material questioning the basics of Islam is forbidden and criticisms “in conflict with the public interest” are prohibited. When criticizing the statements produced by anti-Islamic groups or parties, the narration adopted should not in any way propagate those statements, groups or parties.

3-2 Internet Laws

As mentioned earlier, the Internet infrastructure expanded very rapidly in Iran. The first public use of the Internet in the country dates back to 1995 when students could use Internet console through Dial-up. The demand for using the Internet rapidly increased afterwards making the Internet very popular in a few years leaving the government behind ignorant of the capabilities of this powerful medium. By 2000, CoffeeNets of different size and shape which were connected to the Internet through a satellite dish were abundant around many cities.

Public access to the Internet and the rapid growth of Persian sites which provided the public with the news censored in the country’s publications made the government to move to impose the censorship laws on the Internet too. In May 2001, an order titled “Overall policies on computer-based information-providing networks” issued by Ali Khamenei, the leader of the country, urged the authorities to “make access to the global Information-providing network only possible through authorized entities”.

Following this order, the Cultural Revolution High Council through a set of laws passed in 6 successive meetings put the control of the Internet in the hands of the government. These laws (Letter no. 3091/sh, December 3, 2001) conflicted with the approvals made by the Council in the previous year (July 2, 2000) stating that the access to information must not be exclusive and “multiplicity of Access Service Providers is strongly approved”.

The new legislation states that the government is exclusively in charge of supervising all Access Service Providers across the country. It also states that all ASPs must give up their direct connection and all ISPs and CoffeeNets must obtain license from the government.

The new legislation also states that all ISPs must install and use filtering systems to “block access to forbidden immoral and political websites and other undesirable sites” and record the activities of the users to provide to the Ministry of ICT. The recorded information must be endorsed by the Ministry of Information, Justice Administration and the Police. The records may at the request of the High Council of National Security or a judge be provided to the Ministry of Information.

Any individual applying for an ISP license must be an Iranian citizen, practically committed to the Constitution, a believer of one of the country's officially accepted religions and must not be a member of an anti-revolutionary or illegal group. Internet service providers may not without a license use any codes for the exchange of information or offer any extra services (such as Voice over IP). Individuals applying for running a CoffeeNet must be married.

The new legislation also restricts the contents of the websites. It prohibits and considers a crime to publish on the internet any material in conflict with or insulting the Islamic doctrine, revolution's values, the thoughts of Imam Khomeini, the Constitution, jeopardizing national solidarity, instilling cynicism in the public regarding the legitimacy or efficiency of the ruling body, propagating a good image of illegal groups, revealing state classified information, promoting vice, advertising smoking, accusing or insulting state officials.

Finally on December 31, 2002, the government issued the "Decree on the Constitution of the Committee in charge of Determination of Unauthorized Websites" (Official Gazette no. 16877) stating that, "In order to safeguard the Islamic and national culture, a committee comprising the representatives of the Ministry of Information, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, the Islamic Republic of Iran's Broadcasting, the Cultural Revolution High Council, and Islamic Propagation Organization shall be set up by the Ministry of Information to determine and notify to the Ministry of ICT the criteria respecting unauthorized websites". Websites notified to the Ministry of ICT by the committee are added to the list of the websites subject to censorship.

4- Censorship

Like other media in Iran, the Internet is subject to a monopoly by the government. It is true that the Internet is less restricted in the country compared to other media. However, the new approach of the government towards the Internet is based on a policy of suppression. At the outset, Internet was free of censorship in Iran and soon became a place for the manifestation of suppressed demands of the youth. This resulted in the government giving more heed to the Internet and led to the people losing more and more of the freedom the Internet offered them. The Internet is still the freest medium in Iran which people use to fill the media vacuum felt in the country; but it is retreating in the face of the increasing pressure by the government.

4-1 Layers and Methods of Censorship

Censorship of the Internet in Iran includes 2 layers and 3 methods. The first layer applies to the ASP level on which the Telecommunication Company has a monopoly. Unofficial

reports indicate that the software used for this purpose is SmartFilter produced by Secure Computing Company which denies the sale of the product to Iran. As mentioned under Section 3-2, the government has a monopoly on all Access Service Points used in the country.

As for the second layer of censorship, the government obliges all providers including ICPs and ISPs (which obtain bandwidth from the government) to use censoring and filtering software. They are also required to add new websites notified to them by the government to their censor list on a continuous basis. Every now and then, CDs containing the list of new websites and suspicious ports to be filtered and blocked are sent to all ISPs and ICPs.

There are two reasons for this 2-layer filtering system; first, the technical inability of the Telecommunication Company to implement a all-inclusive filtration program. In fact, the Telecommunication Company carried out a centralized filtering program for the Internet throughout the country at first. This caused a sharp reduction in the Internet speed and also put a very heavy pressure on the servers of the Telecommunication Company. Second, the government wanted to share the guilt of censorship with ISPs and ICPs. For example, state officials have repeatedly stated that there is no censorship based on words, but at the same time have assigned that duty to Internet Service Providers.

3 methods of censorship are currently used in Iran: censoring by blocking ports, censoring based on key words used in the URL, and censoring websites through blocking access to URLs or their IPs.

4-1-1 Ports

Ports are the main place for bypassing filtration. At the beginning of filtration policy (before 2004), almost all users knew how to use free proxy servers to bypass filtration and censorship was a failure in practice.

In 2004, the Judiciary required all ISPs and ICPs to close the ports used by proxy servers. Presently, almost all of the above-said ports are closed and it is not possible to bypass filtration using free proxy servers or anonymizers. The following ports are now closed in all Internet service providers:

1027, 1029, 1033, 1075, 1180, 1212, 1478, 1813, 2280, 2282, 2301, 2425, 3124, 3127, 3128, 3129, 3228, 3330, 3331, 3380, 3382, 3800, 8000, 8003, 8080, 8081, 10000

In addition to these ports, the aforesaid committee periodically provides the Internet service providers with a list containing new proxies and requires them to close the IPs related to them.

4-1-2 Key words

Another censorship method is using the key words in a URL, a task required of ISPs and ICPs. The software used in this method searches for certain words in the URL and will censor the webpage if it finds any. The main words subject to censorship in Iran are currently English words related to *sex*, *sexuality*, and *birth* - even if used in literature, mythology, medicine, etc. As the result, some words that are frequently used in ordinary websites can not be searched anymore. For example, if your search includes the word “women”, you will get nothing!

Censorship based on words is an old and irrational method since for example by censoring the word phallus or breast users will be prevented from access to many websites related to mythology and breast cancer!

4-1-3 Speed

Although after continuous pressure by the private sector the pro-reform 6th parliament could persuade the ICT Ministry to authorize the establishment of ADSL technology (high speed Internet) by PAPs (Private Access Providers), most of the citizens are still not able to use high speed Internet due to very limited scale of the offer. The majority of the Internet users are now using dial-up connection which (low speed) which is also expensive.

It should also be noted that the current speed of ADSL connection in Iran is less than 144kbps. The government does not approve the use of high speed Internet by the public, because according to the Constitution, the Islamic Republic of Iran’s Broadcasting has monopoly on radio and television broadcasting; a monopoly which will be jeopardized if people could have access to radio and TV programs online using high speed Internet connection.

Although never publicly stated, it seems that limiting the connection speed is a method used by the government to restrict access of the citizens to the Internet.

4-1-4 Websites

In Iran, filtration is mainly conducted through domain names. It occurs mainly at ASPs which are exclusively controlled by the government. ISPs, too, should carry out a separate filtration. Websites blocked in this way are divided into two groups. First, the websites known by the censoring software as unauthorized and second, the websites designated as unauthorized by the “Committee in charge of Determination of

unauthorized websites” which are notified to the Telecommunication Company and ISPs to be included in the list of websites to be censored.

According to “Reporters without Borders”, about 10, 000 websites are presently censored in Iran (http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=10733). A domestic estimate, however, shows that the number adds up to 25, 000 to which a large number of new websites determined by the Committee in charge of Determination of Unauthorized Websites is added each month.

It is worth noting that many Persian websites address the Iranians living in Iran. Therefore, censoring the websites with limited visitors (such as anti-religion websites or websites for defending the rights of minorities) can eventually lead to their closure.

In the December 2003 Meeting of WSIS in Geneva, Mr. Khatami, the former president of Iran, said that only immoral websites are subject to censorship in the country.

Here is the categorization of the censored websites subject to censorship in Iran.

4-2 Categorization of censored sites

Pornography

Almost 100% of the porn sites are censored in Iran. This has been achieved by using SmartFilter filtering software. The government has repeatedly attributed the censorship to “immorality of some websites”.

Sexuality and sexual education

Along with the porn sites, many sites related to sexuality and sexual education are also censored. This is due to the contents of such sites which includes material or pictures related to sexuality and also the key words referred to in Section 4-3. As a result, many websites attending to sexual health, health of women and other medical issues are out of reach. These include;

www.scarleteen.com, www.siecus.org, <http://www.sxetc.org>,
<http://www.likeitis.org/sexuality.html>, www.sexuality.org,
<http://www.oralcaress.com>, <http://www.unc.edu/sexuality>,
<http://womens.richmond.edu>

Human rights

Foreign websites dealing with the human rights are not systematically censored in Iran. Websites such as Amnesty International (www.Amnesty.org) or Reporters Without Borders (www.RSF.org) are censored only when they publish news about Iran. Some parts of these sites may be censored during certain periods without the whole site being censored. Filtration is more restrict when it comes to websites addressing the status of the human rights within the country. Many of the Persian sites related to the human rights are censored. These include;

<http://www.bashariyat.de> (Verteidigung der Menschenrechte im Iran),
<http://www.iran-e-azad.org/english/hr.html>(List of More Than 20000 Members of the Opposition Executed by the Regime),
<http://www.polpiran.com> (community for defence of Human Rights),
<http://www.iranestimony.com/>, <http://www.adpi.net> (International Committee Against Executions), <http://www.StopStoningNow.com>

Religion

Systematic censorship in Iran also includes subjects related to religion including atheism. Almost all Persian sites criticizing religion and several international sites are censored. Also, websites which present less common versions of Islam are subject to censorship. These include;

<http://www.kaafar.com> (Atheist), <http://kaafaraaneh.blogspot.com> (Paganism),
<http://kaafar.netfimrs.com> (Pagans), <http://geocities.com/no-islam2000>,
<http://islamic-army.blogspot.com/>, <http://www.IAmPagan.com>,
<http://eslam.blogspot.com>, <http://montazeri.com> (A Reformist Islamic Leaders site), <http://members.aol.com/egyptart/mytho.html> (Egyptian Mythology),
<http://www.rael.org>, <http://bikhoda.blogspot.com> (An Atheist)

Politics

Since activities of different parties are not free in Iran, many political parties and groups have turned to the Internet as a means for communicating their ideas and beliefs. Opposition groups based abroad, too, try to use the Internet to propagate their ideas and recruit new members thus making their websites a primary target of censorship. According to OpenNet (www.OpenNetInitiative.net/iran), about 98% of political websites are censored in Iran. These include;

<http://www.ashti.org/>, <http://www.jebhe.org>, <http://www.iran-e-sabz.org/> (Green Party of Iran), <http://www.jomhour.com/> (Republicans), (Tudeh Party of Iran), <http://www.60000000.com> (Requesting a Referendum), www.Arabo.com, www.crwflags.com (Very large noncommercial source on vexillology which identified as "separatist"), <http://www.nehzatetashyealavi.com> (ProIslamic Group), <http://www.marzeporgohar.org> (Glorious Frontiers Party / Nationalist)

Women issues, feminism

It seems that currently the most vibrant movement regarding civil rights in the country is that of women. From the point of view of the government, feminism is against Islam thus subject to certain restrictions. On the other hand, the sites dealing with issues related to women are increasingly growing. Also, using services such as BlogRolling they are getting more and more inter-connected. Some sites are specialized in providing news concerning women's activities while many others (mostly in the form weblogs) contain personal experience of women written by them. Also sites related to violence against women are censored. Other sites subject to censorship include;

<http://www.unifem.undp.org>, <http://www.womeniniran.org>, <http://www.womeniniran.com>, <http://www.Hastia.org> (A Feminist NGO), <http://www.azadizan.com/> (Freedom Of Women), <http://www.avayezan.com> (Sound of woman), <http://www.zanoone.web1000.com>, <http://www.zanana.com>, <http://iranianfeminists.com/>, <http://www.kargar.org/zanan.htm> (Workers/Women), <http://www.8mars.com>, <http://www.pwoiran.com> (Progressive Women Organization), <http://www.irandwr.org> (International campaign for the defense of Women's Right in Iran), <http://www.zananeha.com> (Feminist Weblog)

<http://www.IFTribune.com> (Iranian Feminists Tribune) which is one of the most important websites about women in Iran was censored at the time of preparation of this report.

News

In Iran, the government has a monopoly on Radio and Television which broadcast programs favorable to the ruling body. Newspapers are also under the supervision of the government and are not free in publishing the news. The Internet for the Iranians is a place they can look for unbiased news and have the choice in finding their favorite news

sources. According to an Iranian Students News Agency¹⁷ poll, Iranians trust the Internet more than other media. Many political groups and organizations have already launched their own news websites. Independent sites are one of the few news sources attending to event like street rallies (e.g. rally of March 8) held despite the disapproval of the government which journalists are not allowed to report. News sites which are based abroad are also subject to censorship. The oldest example of these sites is www.Gooya.com which was launched when the Internet first came to Iran. Despite being censored, this site has so far acted as a major news source for Iranian Internet users. News websites subject to censorship include;

<http://voanews.com/persian> (Voice Of America), <http://news.Gooya.com> (First Iranian News site), <http://www.akunews.org> (AKUniversity news), <http://www.news-sniffer.com>, <http://www.newsdone.com>, www.asre-nou.net (A newspapers site), <http://www.newsdump.com>, <http://www.news-archive.net>, <http://www.jonge-khabar.com> (collection of news), <http://www.iran-khabar.de> (Iran news), <http://www.rooydad.com> (Happenings), <http://emrooz.ws>, <http://www.sedaye-ma.org/> (Our Voice), <http://www.iran-chabar.de/>, <http://www.emrooz.org>, <http://ir.MondeDiplo.com>, <http://KeyhanLondon.com/>, <http://www.rouydad.org>, www.chekhabar.com

Satire

Sites attending to satire have been rapidly grown in number in the recent years probably due to the increasing number of the Internet users in Iran and the lack of enough Persian sites on the Net. These sites are very popular with people, the youth in particular. But the government has two problems with them; first, the use of dirty language and pictures of women which is in conflict with the so-called “Islamic ethics”, a term coined by the government. As mentioned earlier, protecting ethical values is the argument made by the government to justify the Internet censorship. Second, many concepts are considered holy by the religious government of Iran and making jokes about them will make them earthly. The government simply can not tolerate these jokes to be presented in written form. These sites include;

<http://www.hadisara.com> (An Iranian humorist), www.KosSher.com (persian database of jokes), www.akhoond.tk (Mullah), www.farsijoke.com, <http://sootikadeh.blogspot.com>, www.taktaz.com (collection of fun links), <http://jokeiran.netfirms.com>, <http://khandeh.ifrance.com> (Laugh),

¹⁷ ISNA News Agency, at <http://www.isna.co.ir/news/NewsCont.asp?id=427457&lang=P>.

<http://www.akhoond.net> (Mullah)

Anti-filtration

It is quite logical that if a government has a policy of Internet censorship, it will also censor websites containing anti-filtration techniques, proxies, anonymizers (tools for making a user anonymous while working online), etc. According to OpenNet, about 95% of anti-filter sites are censored in Iran. Also, many anti-filtration websites and proxy servers which operate on ordinary ports (such as 8080 or 8000) can not be used in Iran due to censoring of many standard ports.

Miscellaneous

As mentioned earlier, censorship is not a transparent phenomenon in Iran. Many sites are censored without a clear reason or an authority accountable for censoring them. These include sites providing e-books which are completely censored because some of their books are “inappropriate” (e.g. <http://books.myownflag.org/> and <http://www.khabgard.com/adab>). Also, online magazines may be added to the list of censored sites as the result of publishing a single article criticizing the government or the cultural values supported by the government (e.g. <http://www.cappuccinomag.com> and www.fanusian.com). Sites that are censored without any reason include www.Orkut.com, www.BlogRolling.com, www.Technorati.com, <http://www.nedstatbasic.net> and www.GeoCities.com). Also, many technical or artistic sites are censored only because of cultural differences such as dressing code (e.g. www.PhotoSig.com).

5- Weblogs

As mentioned earlier, the government of Iran does not welcome variety when it comes to lifestyle. Expression of certain ideas and lifestyles (e.g. versions of Islam other than those officially accepted, opposition to government, etc.) are forbidden. Like anywhere else on the planet, these ideas and lifestyles have their own supporters in Iran. Such supporters have been subject to severe suppression and censorship after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. After the introduction of blogging, these suppressed groups used it as a means for expressing themselves on the Internet.

Later on, as companies such as www.BlogSpot.com offered means for simple blogging, the number of Persian weblogs started growing. But by the introduction of Persian weblog service providers (www.PersianBlog.com and www.BlogFa.com), the number of weblogs increased dramatically and according to some reports Iran ranked 9th

in the world in terms of the number of weblogs in use. With 6.5 million Internet users across the country, there is a weblog for each 10 user which shows the thirst of Iranians for expressing themselves, sharing their experiences, and presence in the world community.

Using their real name or behind anonymous IDs, now users had the opportunity to talk about their “forbidden lives”. People wrote about their sex life, religious beliefs or even their day to day life. These subjects inevitably included criticism of the government and discussion of lifestyles which previously were only discussed among close friends and relatives. As a joke, it was said that during that era bloggers outnumbered the Internet users because everybody had a personal and a political weblog (It is still common for people to have more than one weblog).

Expanded interpersonal relations resulted by blogging resulted in people realizing how much they had in common. It was the main reason the government reacted to blogging. In particular, weblogs had become the means for pressure on the government by the civil society. It was for the first time after years that people could freely express their views. For instance, when 11 pro-reform newspapers were closed down, or when a woman was sentenced to death because she had killed somebody when she was acting in self-defense, weblogs could organize collective protests and give the civil society a voice which it had lacked before.

At the beginning, the government tried to censor the sites providing free weblog services (for example, www.BlogSpot.com was repeatedly censored by large ISPs such as Pars Online), but was then forced to retreat in the face of extensive protests by bloggers and sufficed to individual censoring of weblogs or the providers of the weblog services.

As censorship intensified in the country, censorship of weblogs heightened as well. The biggest Iranian weblog service provider (www.PersianBlog.com) included in its terms of agreement that bloggers must “observe ethical principles, country’s laws, and avoid publishing material jeopardizing the national independence and security” and weblogs violating the said terms will be closed. The problem was that there was no authority for determining “ethical principles” and “issues jeopardizing national independence and security”. If a weblog was censored, nobody was accountable.

The number of censored weblogs in Iran is so large that providing a list including all of them is practically impossible. Sometimes even the tools (www.BlogRolling.com and www.MovableType.org) for facilitating the creation or using weblogs are censored.

Blogging is a hot issue in Iran at the moment. Reporters Without Borders Organization in its Annual Press Freedom Festival for Weblogs, in addition to sections for Asia, Africa, Middle East, Europe, America and International, allocated a special section to Iranian weblogs. This year’s prize was awarded to Mojtaba Saminejad’s censored weblog

(8mdr8.blogspot.com). The blogger is serving his 2-year sentence in prison as punishment for blogging. The decision to award the prize to this blogger was not made by voting but through consensus among the 10 other contestants¹⁸.

It is worth noting that Iran is among the few countries where one can be sentenced to jail for blogging. Arrest of Sina Motalebi in April 2003 was the beginning of a period of arrest and imprisonment of bloggers. Many site owners, writers or bloggers are threatened, arrested, interrogated and jailed every year.¹⁹

6- Conclusion

During the tenure of the former president Khatami and the social and political reforms introduced by him, the Internet enjoyed a period of rapid growth. People use the Internet to overcome the social and political constraints affecting their lives and the government endeavors to control the Internet use while at the same time backing its expansion. TEKFA (IT Use Development), for example, is an initiative presented by the government aimed at infrastructural development through the introduction and implementation of the Internet-related IT projects. At the same time, it is largely funding for censorship measures in order to control the Internet use across the country.

People of Iran consider the Internet as a powerful means for getting unbiased news about their country and the world, being in touch with other people, forming groups including people with same interests, and expressing their thoughts. Political and social groups, too, have been able to freely publish their views using the Internet.

The government is currently facing a dilemma. On the one hand, it wants to decentralize the government using the Internet; but on the other, is unwilling to let people express their differences on the Net, because like any other ideological government, it seeks to build a society made up of uniform individuals. Therefore, it has adopted a policy of censorship with regard to the Internet. Today, all ISPs are operating with observance of censorship laws and under the tight control of the government.

In its next step, the government is aiming at an integrated censorship system so that it can first, have an all-encompassing control over the Internet and second, monitor the activities of the Internet users in a centralized fashion. The recent tender organized by the Ministry of Telecommunication titled “Internet Comprehensive Filtration System” and the interviews given by the winner of the tender (Delta Global) is indicative of this point of view.

¹⁸<http://www.rsf.org/blog-awards-en.php3>

¹⁹ They include Gholam Tamayomi, Omid Memarian, Shahram Rafihzadeh, Hanif Mazroi, Rozbeh Mir Ebrahimi

The growing use of the Internet in Iran is now facing some problems. Existing infrastructures are still lagging behind the countries using the modern technology. Companies licensed to offer ADSL services have so far failed to do so due to the lack of cooperation by the government. Another existing problem is that most of the ICTs and ISPs are located in Tehran (see Section 2), thus creating a digital gap within the country. This growing gap should be added to the gap already existing between the country and other parts of the world.

Another problem which has also resulted in the failure of the use of the Internet by governmental bodies is to consider information as an issue related to security hence facing difficulty regarding the circulation of information. And you won't wonder when you know that Iran ranks 88 in the world regarding government transparency.

Last but not least, there is a problem of cultural nature. Like any new technology, the Internet has first been used by the youth thus emphasizing its use for entertainment in contrast to the scientific purposes. Although the situation was improved when the news and scientific websites joined in, but it seems that still the majority of the Internet users spend most of their time online in Chat Rooms and dating websites²⁰. The situation, for sure, will not be rectified as long as the social freedoms are constrained.

There is no doubt that the Iranian civil society, public opinion, and the Internet users will not easily yield to the restrictive policies of the government. The future moves will presumably be focused on; 1) filtration bypassing methods, and 2) civil protest against filtration and censorship.

²⁰ The overwhelming number of Iranians visiting Yahoo Asia Chat Rooms and the fact that Iranians rank 3rd in using www.Orkut.com is an evidence of this point.