Impact of Social Networks on Functions of Political Parties in Iran Following the 10th Presidential Election

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Abstract: The 10th presidential election in Iran was not the sole election to be influenced by the cyberspace, but it was among prominent political developments in the country whose new frameworks and functions were defined by the public opinion formed in the cyberspace. The presence research studies impact of social networks (as one of the most important components of cyberspace) on functions of political parties in Iran following the tenth presidential polls. This article, which is the result of a namesake study, focuses on the impact of social networks on authorized political parties in Iran following the tenth presidential elections in 2009 and tries to answer this answer: Have social networks been influencing functions of authorized political parties in Iran after the tenth presidential election? It also tries to answer the following questions: Are social networks able to start or guide special social movements? Can such networks take advantage of ongoing movements? Are social networks able to impress the elite and cause big social movements?

Preface:

The 10th presidential election in Iran was not the sole election to be influenced by the cyberspace, but it was among prominent political developments in the country whose new frameworks and functions were defined by the public opinion formed in the cyberspace.

This is more than anything else attributable to rapid penetration of the internet and cellphone in the Iranian society over the past four years. Almost 23 million internet users (a penetration index of 34.9 percent) and 48 million cellphone users (a penetration index of 58 percent) have access to a form of technology and medium which can leave its mark on political events in the country. (ITU,2008) Despite low speed of the internet and GPRS services, synergistic effect of the internet and cellphone helped by another medium; that is, satellite televisions, has been able to create a new and, at times, challenging power.

Photos taken by cellphone during post-election unrests were rapidly transferred out of the country through the internet and were displayed by various satellite and social networks. Organizing street protests was done, to a large extent, through the same social networks. Weblogs were turned into news agencies capable of immediate uploading of news items and websites sharing films and photos rapidly turned into major sources for official media.

The main content of those networks was provided by ordinary citizens who functioned as freelance journalists.

Thesis Statement

The main assumption of the present study is that social networks are among the most influential communication technologies which affect all aspects of human life and all dimensions of our social and personal lives. Therefore, while explaining importance of social networks, the present research will discuss their impacts on the functions of authorized political parties in Iran following the tenth presidential election. It will also try to answer the following questions: Have social networks been influencing functions of authorized political parties in Iran after the tenth presidential election? Are social networks able to start or guide special social movements? Can such networks take advantage of ongoing movements? Are social networks able to impress the elite and cause big social movements? Are social networks a good alternative for banned newspapers? Can such networks replace certain other media like SMS when sending short message has been barred by state officials?

It seems that discussing theoretical and practical issues related to the social networks and explaining requirements of such networks is quite necessary to help political parties do their part in the best possible manner. Such networks should be also studied by domestic specialists to clarify impact of social networks on the performance of authorized political parties in Iran following the tenth presidential election.

literature

The literature of the present research starts with definition of basic concepts like social network and political parties as the main variables. Then, social networks, including their information functions, their role in cellphone communication, internet-based social networks, main users of social networks, share of social networks and weblogs from total volume of the internet…, is introduced. A discussion of the concept of party and political party in Iran follows where such issues are a center of attention: quality and performance of political parties; history of political parties in Iran, and configuration of political currents in the country.

Social networks

Social networks are venues for hundreds of millions of internet users who embark on free exchange of information regardless of political borders, language, gender, and culture. Such a network is a website which allows people and even organizations to create their own pages and then allows for those pages to be connected in accordance with various commonalities. When talking about social networks, a mention should be also made of user community. In fact, a social network is a website or a group of websites which allows its users to share interests, ideas, and activities. This is why a weblog is not a social network because a blogger is not usually interested in users' information (but Weblogistan is a social network).
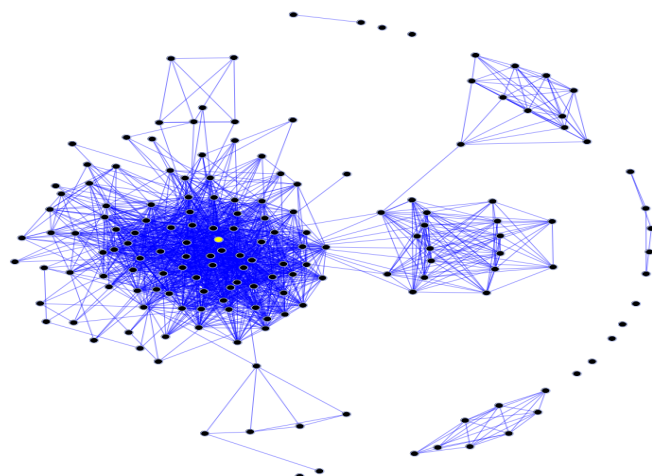

Figure 1 – Schema of simulated model of social networks in the cyberspaces (Wikipedia)

Function of networks

A network is a group of people or organizations, societies, and institutes with shared values and viewpoints which come together to find solutions to common problems. The most important functions of a network are as follows (Media News, 2010):

- **Facilitation**: This means that a network should provide suitable grounds for cooperation among various people or organizations to achieve predetermined goals. Therefore, a network and membership of people or societies in those networks should not prevent collective action, but should facilitate such action as lubricant facilitates movements of an engine.

- **Answering common needs and problems**: Membership in a network will make such resources as collective ideas, social capital and other resources available to its members. Therefore, members will be in a better position to meet their common needs and address common problems.

- **Fighting common threats**: When faced with political and social threats alone, people are very vulnerable and have no choice but to surrender. A network of relationships will protect them from loneliness and helps them to fight common threats in cooperation with their friends.

- **Exchange of information and experiences**: Exchange of news and information is among the most important functions of a network. Information brings power and provides maneuvering room while making it easier to correctly foresee the future. Due to its many links, a network makes it possible for members to share information (Norouzian, 2010).

- **Learning**: Although members of a network have certain features in common, like all other groups, they have also different abilities. A network will make it possible for members to learn from one another. This is very important in view of rapid expansion of the cyberspace because more abilities and experiences are created by the cyberspace everyday which should be learned by more knowledgeable members of this network to others (Ibid).

- **Improved performance**: People sharing a network will be able after any group action or activity to review what the group has done, discuss its strengths and weaknesses and try to improve future performance of the network.

- **Building identity**: Group relations among members of a network will rapidly reveal common culture, language and values of network members. Therefore, a network provides grounds for strengthening identity of its members. In social movements, networks play a great role in determining identity of the movement by making it possible to share various identities (Ibid).

Capabilities of social networks

Social networks have been welcomed through the world because they allow internet users to meet their online needs over these websites. The users can build their own personal profiles which may include personal information, photos, interests and other similar issues. These websites, however, turn into a network after every user prepares a list of their friends and those personal profiles are then connected. Every user can add his/her friends who are members of the same social network to their friends list. The users can also search in profiles of other users and se their personal specifications, thus, making new friends and expanding their friends list. These are the most primary possibilities provided by social networks. Such websites have endeavored a lot in recent years to provide their users with more and more options. Providing weblog-like spaces to allow users write down short memos or daily notes and other spaces where you can put your personal photos, considering chat rooms and instant messaging facilities as well as the possibility to create personal chat rooms and fans pages, like internet forums, are among the simplest possibilities provided by such networks. Social networks also provide other possibilities in proportion to their areas of interest which may include internet news, online games, video and other file uploads, and communication with other personal media. Therefore, many possibilities which were already made available to internet users by various websites are now available on a single website. This is why many users spend the lion's share of their online time in social networks (Tavakkoli, 2010).

A list of the most favorite social networks with more than 10 million users
by December 2007 (Wikipedia-Farsi)

Name	Focus	Registered users (million)
MySpace	General – north America	290
Facebook	General – north America	74
Orkut	General	67
Hi5	General	50
Windows Live Spaces	General – blogging	40
Classmates	Old classmates	40
Bebo	General – Commonwealth of Nations	40
Xanga	General and blogging	40
Flixster	Movies	36
Tagged	General	30
Netlog	General	28
Reunion	Old friends and family	28
Broadcaster	Clip sharing	26
Friendster	General	26
Cyworld	General – for Koreans	21
Friends Reunited	Old friends	19
Linkedin	Business and professional networking	16
BlackPlanet	General – African Americans	16
Imeem	Music, photo, video	16
Plaxo	Business	15
Last.fm	Music and clip	15
Fotolog	Photography	13
LiveJournal	Weblog	13
Badoo	General – Europe	12

Weblog: Iran's political cyberspace before 2010 presidential election

Bruce Etling, a researcher at the University of Harvard, has noted that most research and policymaking institutes in Washington maintain that the majority of the Iranian bloggers are young people looking for democracy and opposing the government. However, he and John Kelly have found that this can only describe a small portion of the Iranian bloggers and other groups are usually ignored. In other words, the schema presented by John Kelly and Bruce Etling was like a starry night sky in which every cluster of stars represented a certain group. They have also found out that most secular and reformist bloggers write under their real names, but most conservative and religious ones prefer to hide their true names (Harvard University, 2008) .

The research has also reached the conclusion that the outcome of the ongoing tug of war between reformists and fundamentalists over freedom of speech, will determine not only Iran's cultural

structure, but also future course of the internet as a political instrument; an instrument which will make new forms of protests quite possible. Being multipurpose as well as non-centralized and somehow unofficial is among the most important features which differentiate them from information system used by newspapers. A blogger may be arrested, but as long as his/her views are present on the internet, they can be viewed by other people. If Iranian weblogs continued to grow, other networks promoting free thoughts may follow suit with the Iranian model.

The same research has clearly noted that the Iranian Weblogistan is an expanded discourse-based network whose bloggers represent all kinds of subjects and political tendencies. The discourse opposing the Iranian government is powerfully present and the weblog covers various political viewpoints which span between two extreme polls; that is, secular-reformist and conservative-religious. The research carried out by the University of Harvard has also noted that it is not clear whether availability of 80-90 percent of the Iranian weblogs is due to government's unwillingness to block the opposite ones, or its inability to do that (Macintyre, 2009).

Iranian weblogs usually convey accumulated, untold and restricted messages.

Research findings related to the Iranian weblogs have led to the following conclusions:

- ✓ Political viewpoints reflected on the Iranian weblogs are increasingly becoming more radical;

- ✓ To evade political and social pressures, Iranian bloggers are more willing to use pseudonyms;

- ✓ Iranian weblogs offer more possibility of dialogue than the print media;

- ✓ Mobilizing and networking capacities of the Iranian weblogs are increasing;

- ✓ Weblogs have turned into information tools at the hands of civil institutions;

- ✓ Iranian weblogs are generally willing to take advantage of multiple columns which is mostly a result of domination of oral culture over the written culture;

- ✓ Memos on the Iranian weblogs are more like the press texts. At the same time, using the official language and recording memos' time has turned them into a timed and meaningful social medium;

- ✓ "Big revolution, small media" is a known theory which seeks to explain role of media in cultural, social and political developments of Iran and the role played by weblogs compared to other forms of media, clearly proved that theory in Iran;

- ✓ As print media lose their audiences to weblogs, one may claim that virtual networks, in general, and weblogs, in particular, are carriers of great social developments in Iran (Ziaeiparvar, 2010: 267-282).

Therefore, internet should be taken seriously as a medium for social developments.

Iran's recent developments and social networks
There is no doubt that a large part of social communications among Tehran youth during social unrests which followed the tenth presidential election was organized through the internet and social networks. Perhaps, due to political and social restrictions, limited coverage of protest by the official media such as the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting and print media as well as limitations considered for cellphones and SMS, most those active in social developments chose the internet and social networks as a good substitute for the aforesaid media. The role of such networks in the aforesaid riots was highlighted even in the indictment of attorney general against the arrested demonstrators (Fars News Agency, 2010).

The solicitor general charged the social network, *Twitter*, with having postponed its daily update, which as he claimed "required a few days of interruption in the website" just to support the protestors. *Facebook* was also incriminated with having launched "its test version in order to facilitate communications between Iranian and foreign members, so that, protestors could take better advantage of it" at time of turmoil. In another part of the indictment, the solicitor general noted that software for translations from English to Persian had been considered among services provided in order to help the rioters. Following unrests in Tehran, the *Google* announced that it will speed up development of its Persian translation website and mentioned "intense interest of the world in Iran's developments" as the main reason behind its decision (Google, 2010) As enthusiasm to use *Facebook* was soaring among the Iranian youth as the website represented a new generation of social networks, the website was immediately filtered in the country and the situation continued up to February 2010 when, in a surprising development, both Facebook and YouTube became

accessible in Iran. During the first month months after filtering Facebook was suspended, hundreds of thousands of users registered in the site. This sudden and unprecedented enthusiasm drew attention of *Facebook* officials to Iran. according to some reports, during about four and half months that *Facebook* was not filtered in Iran, the number of people signing up to this website in Iran increased by more than 7,000 percent and some estimates show that about six hundred thousand Iranians are now members of the *Facebook*. Although *Facebook* never gives the number of its members in a specific country, there is proof to show that it has been the most favorite website in Iran through spring of 2009. The first proof was a report on global interactions on *Facebook*, which showed surprising growth in Iran as compared to a year before. Therefore, *Facebook* decided to add Persian as one of its languages due to rapid increase in the Iranian membership. *Facebook* was finally available in Persian in late June 2009 (Parsi, 2010: 38).

Te second proof was provided by figures offered on such websites as *Alexa* which proved unprecedented growth of *Facebook* use in Iran, so that, a few days before the presidential election, *Facebook* was the third most visited website in Iran after *Yahoo* and *Google* (Habibinia, 2009).

The following list enumerates some of the most important uses of this social network in Iran:

- Personal and social information;

- Self-strengthening and creating social currents;

- Affecting daily life and lifestyle;

- Serving as a model for social learning;

- Encouraging interaction among various people and groups;

- Reflecting part of the virtual life schema;

- Reflecting and creating identity for the public opinion;

- Psychological discharge and finding new relations (Afrough, 2010).

Therefore, even if social media did not qualify as a medium, their role in keeping the social and political struggles going could not be ignored. Such websites have great audiences which visit them every day. No other medium is able to have 100 million people as its audience and many people working on the internet in Iran do not dream of hitting that record. Such a huge audience has very high capacity to launch a

movement. At present, most possible candidates for the next election have opened web pages and their fans use them to share their views or promote their favorite candidate. They also invite their friends to become members of such websites (Minavand, 2009).

Obviously, social networks are an advanced tool; so advanced that they change their users' preferences. *Facebook*, unlike other social network, considers itself a platform which members can use to develop their own programs.

Configuration of political currents in Iran
A cursory glance at the history of the Islamic Republic of Iran will prove that Iran has been an arena for two powerful political parties during the past three decades. Both of them have retained their general identity despite changes in names, goals and mottos. Sometimes, they are called Imam's Line as opposed to conservative rightist politicians, while at other times they are defied into rightist and leftist fronts. They are sometimes called conservatives vs. moderns at other times they are fundamentalists as opposed to reformists.

Many political observers in Iran maintain that a consequence of the tenth presidential election was radical changes in the arrangement of political forces and the political ambience. They argue that subsequent to presidential polls on June 12, 2009, there have been changes in the main political players and political struggles can no longer be divided along the traditional lines. Therefore, it seems new configuration should be considered for political forces before analyzing recent and predicting future changes. To understand the status quo we better have a look at the past political records of the country. In the middle of the Iranian year 1373 (1994-95), *Asr-e Ma*, which was an organ for the Islamic Revolution Mojahedeen Organization, a leftist political party, provided a detailed analysis on the configuration of political currents in Iran. Although that analysis was met with serious criticism from rival parties, it was confirmed by many political analysts and players in the country as it conformed to the realities on the ground. In that article, *Asr-e Ma* divided the main political currents of that time in four groups (Madani, 2008: 35).

Traditional right
The first group included followers of traditional rightist tendencies which covered Qom Seminary Teachers' Society, Society of the Combatant Clergy, Islamic Coalition Party and other entities in line with the above institutions. Their followed believed in traditional reading of religion and the Islamic government. As for economic views, although they

believed in private ownership, they were also attached to traditional relations in Tehran bazaar. When it came to culture, they called for maximum state control over cultural products. They also supported minimum tension in foreign relations. The social body of this political current was made up by traditional urban classes (Ibid, 59).

The left

Parties with leftist tendencies made the second group which included Association of Combatant Clerics, Islamic Revolution Mojahedeen Organization, Office to Foster Unity, Islamic Association of University Teachers and related bodies who held most managerial posts in the first post-revolution decade and were marginalized in early years of 1990s. They believed in extensive state control over economic affairs and their newspapers and other periodicals like *Salaam*, *Asr-e Ma*, and *Mobin* clearly criticized economic policies of Hashemi Rafsanjani considering those policies as a cause for further deepening of income gap. Although they generally accepted Hashemi's détente policies, but argued that undue lenience in diplomatic interactions would cause the ruling system to distance from the pristine values of the Islamic Revolution. They were more lenient toward cultural affairs and since one of their members was in charge of cultural affairs then, intellectuals and artists were more positive toward this political current. In the society, their supporters somehow overlapped with those of conservative figures, but they outdid their conservative rivals in universities and cultural areas (Qorbani, 2006: 357).

Modern right

This was the third group mentioned in Asr-e Ma analysis which included technocrats who were close to Hashemi Rafsanjani and adopted a development-based approach. They maintained that development took precedence over other things. It was, in fact, a new growth from traditional right with some former members of the leftist front. Helped by the president and its own periodicals such as Hamshahri and Aftabgardan, they could introduce the Iranians to a new approach to managing country's affairs. This current turned into a new political entity two years later after establishment of Kargozaran party. Due to its support for political ownership and economic liberalization, many traditional rightist figures were averse to the modern right. In politics, this new current believed in marginalization of ideology and took steps in that direction while in culture they shared many views of the traditional left. The modern right clearly announced alignment of the urban middle class as its main goal (Haqshenas, 1996: 11)

Modern left

This was the last group mentioned in that article which is of more importance now than it was then. According to *Asr-e Ma*, the modern left comprised political forces that were largely ignored by the statesmen in the first and second decades after the Islamic Revolution and they were present on the margins of managerial posts, both in time of war, and in reconstruction period. They believed in returning to basic ideas of the revolution and were considered a subsidiary to the traditional right. However, their aggressive treatment of intelligentsia and dissidents revealed their extreme fear of modernity.

The modern left charged most mangers of the first two post-revolution decades with weakness and, sometimes, corruption. They also advocated government's powerful control over the economy as prelude to social justice. At that time, this tendency was represented by the Society Defending Values and Ansar Hezbollah. They made their voice heard in such periodicals as Sobh, Ye Letharat, Kayhan, and Values. They insisted that the government should have powerful control over cultural products. It was under their pressure that the then minister of culture and Islamic guidance, Seyed Mohammad Khatami, was forced to resign. As for the foreign policy, this current went for adventurism. Part of their forces was organized as Ansar Hezbollah. Others established such organizations as Society of War Veterans in later years. They were trying to represent lower social classes both in the cities and villages. *Asr-e Ma* argued that traditional right, modern right and modern left were working in invisible unison to eradicate the traditional left. As time went by, the modern right gradually sided with the traditional left two years later. During the reforms period, although various currents changed their mottos and even goals, the harmony among traditional right and the modern left continued in the fundamentalist camp while the modern right, part of Imam's Line followers and the Society Defending Values continued under the new reformist designation (Tabriznia, 2000: 246).

Parties in modern Iran

There are currently 39 parties, 32 societies, 34 Islamic associations, 21 Islamic societies, 18 Islamic groups and 23 Islamic assemblies totaling up to 158 organizations and parties in Iran. Of course, total number of their members and fans does not add up to tenfold their number. To analyze this, it should be noted that some parties in Iran as opportunist parties which mushroom before each election, try to gather some vote, and disappear soon after the election is over (Hajjarian, 2006: 12).

Political parties are necessary if democratization process is to be complete. They have been described

as the spine of democracy. The most function of political parties is to create unity and facilitate political life. Introducing election candidates, formulating general policies, criticizing the government, political training, and connecting people to the government are major functions of political parties (Alem, 2009: 41).

A short review of history, activities, and dissolution or survival of parties in Iran will show that due to special social grounds, parties in Iran have been totally different from other countries and other periods of time (Zibakalam, 2006: 195).

A review of the history of the Islamic Republic of Iran will prove that despite all developments, the country has been an arena for political struggles between two dominant currents. Although they have changed goals and even mottos in the past 30 years, their original identity has remained the same. Their rivalries were sometimes between Imam's Line and traditional right and, in another time, between right and left political currents. They have been called conservatives, fundamentalists and reformists (Tajzadeh, 1999: 14-15).

However, many analysts maintain that a result of the tenth presidential polls was a radical change in the arrangement of political forces and political ambience under the powerful influence of social networks.

Main hypothesis

This research assumes that "social networks influence functions of political parties in Iran."

Research areas

Time, place and subject of this research are as follows:

1. Place: Location of this research and its population was teachers and students of communications at Sciences and Research Branch of the Islamic Azad University in Tehran. Due to importance of social networks, on the one hand, and the issue of political parties, on the other hand, this research can be also carried out at a national level sometime in the future.

2. Time: This research focuses on the role of social networks and their influence on functions of political parties in Iran following the tenth presidential elections.

3. Subject: the main subject of this research is influence of social networks on functions of political parties in Iran following the tenth presidential elections.

Methodology

From the viewpoint of goal, this research is categorized with "applied" studies using "explorative survey" method. The most important tools used to gather information were questionnaire and interviews with the elite as well as available documents, libraries, articles, periodicals, and the internet.

The population included teachers and doctoral students of communication and political sciences at Sciences and Research University and sampling has been random.

Given the research method (survey), special characteristics of the subject and diversity of research variables, various tools and techniques have been used to obtain necessary information. Almanacs, classified and secondary information as well as available information and questionnaires were the main sources and tools used to collect information. However, a questionnaire designed by researcher, which has been filling in writing and in person has been the most important tool used to get information. Each question was designed on the basis of the research hypothesis to assess and measure concepts and variables of each hypothesis.

The SPSS software has been used to organize information and data and present them in diagrams, bars, and histograms. Distribution of frequency and quantity of important variables have been presented in one-dimensional tables using quantitative statistical indexes like mean, median, standard deviation and so on.

Cross tables with two variables have been presented in the section on testing hypotheses. To test the hypothesis of this research, non-parametric tests such as Spearman's correlation test, have been used. Analytical factor test has been used to test questions and categorize research indices and also to assess and test the effect of variables. Since systematic thinking method has been used in this research, differential equations and integral have been used to analyze data in addition to simulation and model testing software.

Analysis

Descriptive and inferential methods have been used in this research. Raw data have been gathered and classified using statistical methods and questionnaires. Then they have been presented in tables and charts using descriptive statistics. Inferential statistics have been also used to test research hypotheses.

Frequency distribution and percentage of answers as well as centripetal and deviation indices (for distance-based variables) have been used for descriptive analysis of statistical information. Such

indices include mean, median, standard deviation, variance, and standard error.

Research questions have been assessed and findings have been generalized using inferential methods as well as statistical tests.

Descriptive statistics: personal specifications of cohort

Out of 75 questionnaires sent to university teachers teaching communications or political sciences, 48 questionnaires were returned and studied.

Study of 48 questionnaires led to the following results:

✓ More than 60 percent of 48 respondents were men;

✓ More than 35 percent of them were younger than 40 years old;

✓ Most respondents held doctorates. Those holding master's degrees and students accounted for more than 33 percent of the cohort;

✓ Most people studied (58 percent) were graduates of communications and about 42 percent of them had studied political sciences;

✓ Number of doctoral graduates was higher among graduates of political sciences as compared to those graduating from communications courses.

Table 7 – Frequency and percentage of answers to membership in general social networks

Membership	Frequency	Percentage	Correct percentage	Cumulative percentage
Member	28	58.3	58.3	58.3
Non-member	20	41.7	41.7	100
Total	**48**	**100**	**100**	

According to the above table, more than 58 percent of respondents are members of social networks. Among those who are not members of general social networks (some of them have been former members but are not members anymore) about 42 percent or 33

percent (15 percent of total) are members of other specialized social networks.

In fact, about 73 percent of them are members of some kind of virtual social network and about 27 percent are not member of any social network.

Chart - Membership of respondents in general social networks

Table – The time spent on social networks during presidential elections in June 2009

Time	Frequency	Percentage	Correct percentage	Cumulative percentage
Zero	5	10.4	10.4	10.4
Less than an hour	9	18.8	18.8	29.2
One to two hours	18	37.5	37.5	66.7
More than two hours	16	33.3	33.3	100
Not answered	0	0	0	
Total	**48**	**100**	**100**	

According to respondents and as shown in the above table, about 10 percent of the cohort has spent no time on social networks during presidential election in June 2009 while more than 33 percent of them spent two hours or more on such social networks. Most people studied here spent one to two hours surfing the social networks. On the whole, about 90 percent of the cohort was using a social network during the last presidential election. Statistical studies using Chi-square have shown that there is no meaningful differences in the amount of time spent surfing social networks which could be attributed to class, educational course, gender or age. As a result, the difference between the amount that such networks were used during election has not been a result of sampling error. Therefore, this test cannot tell us anything about the difference in the amount of time spent surfing social networks on the basis of the above variables.

Research Results

The following conclusion can be derived from the present research:

About 63 percent of people studied here somehow agree to the proposition that "social networks do not usually give birth to political currents." In fact, they do not agree that social networks alone would be able to generate political currents. About 31 percent of

people studied are against that proposition. They maintain that social networks are quite capable of generating political currents on their own.

Chi-square test shows no meaningful difference between those viewpoints which can be attributed to gender, age, class or educational course.

When faced with the proposition that "political interactions are facilitated through virtual social networks," about 92 percent were positive or very positive to it. Only 4 percent opposed that proposition.

About 63 percent of the cohort agreed to the proposition that "virtual social networks reflect prevalent political convictions in the society."

About 21 percent were opposed to the above proposition while about 17 percent refrained from giving any opinion.

Chi-square test showed no meaningful difference between differences in opinions about this proposition and such variables as age, gender, class, and educational course. Meanwhile, when applied to the difference between the amount of time spent on social networks and the above viewpoints, Chi-square did not reveal a meaningful difference.

When asked whether social networks can replace political parties and faced with the proposition that "virtual social networks cannot replace political parties," 42 percent believed that such networks could not function as parties, but 46 percent believed that virtual social networks can behave as political parties.

Although opposing and agreeing views are close on this proposition, which can be attributed to people's understanding of how a party functions, Chi-square did not show meaningful difference between those answers which could be attributed to such variables as age, gender, class, educational course and the amount of times spent on social networks during presidential election in June 2009.

Perhaps, experience in party work could have influenced the answer to this question, but since firstly, there are no real political parties in Iran and the existing ones, therefore, do not function as real parties and, secondly, answering such questions may have political and social consequences for respondents, they usually refrain from answering this questions and it was not included in the questionnaire.

The answer to the next proposition, "in times of political pressure, virtual social networks can function as parties," was again much dependent on people's various opinions and experiences with political parties. More than 52 percent of respondents agreed to this proposition while 40 percent were opposed to it.

Chi-square did not show meaningful difference between opponents and proponent in terms of age, gender, class and educational course and the time spent on virtual social networks during June 2009 presidential election.

Just in the same way that most respondents believed virtual social networks being a good substitute for political parties, when faced with the next proposition that "virtual social networks can replace political parties in view of modern technologies," the situation of opponents and proponents was almost the same. About 45 percent of respondents agreed to that proposition and about 40 percent opposed it. Meanwhile, 15 percent abstained from giving their opinion. Since such independent variables like age, gender, class and educational course do not seem to have an influence on respondents' answers to the above propositions, it is perhaps better to pay more attention to other experimental aspects of respondents. It should be also born in mind that when social experiences with certain social concepts in Iran are different from their objective meaning in other countries, people's opinions about them may widely differ. People's mentality about political parties which fall and rise rapidly may influence people's judgment about them.

People's social experience and their viewpoints about future outlook of political parties will certainly influence their understanding of such issues.

Less than 40 percent of respondents maintained that political parties could only be influential under objective political conditions and about 34 percent opposed this proposition while 17 percent abstained. The number of opponents was not much different from proponents. Those opposing the proposition that "political parties can only work under objective political conditions and are no use in the cyberspace" were about 44 percent of the total. In fact, they maintained that apart from objective social conditions, virtual environment like virtual social networks can be influenced by the political parties. Chi-square showed no meaningful difference between the two groups in terms of age, gender, class, educational course, and the time spent surfing virtual social networks during presidential elections in June 2009.

Unlike past propositions about performance and functions of parties in relation to virtual social networks, respondents' viewpoints were more converging when it came to this proposition: "virtual social networks greatly help to promote viewpoints of political parties."

While about 83 percent of respondents believed that virtual social networks do really help to promote the viewpoints of political parties, only slightly more than 6 percent of respondents opposed that view.

As political parties attach special significance to information as one of their most important pillars, and the next proposition was "virtual social networks are powerful media for dissemination of information and news." Faced with this proposition, nobody was "very opposed" to it and more than 85 percent of respondents agreed to it to various degrees. Meanwhile, slightly more than 6 percent of respondents opposed this proposition.

Similarity of functions of virtual social networks and the print media was another proposition posed to interviewees as such: "real parties in the world used various kinds of media, especially the press, for information and communication." About 75 percent agreed that "virtual social networks functioned like the press" and about 15 percent rejected it. Meanwhile, 10 percent were neutral.

Although here more people voted in favor of information aspect of virtual social networks compared to the previous proposition, there was more doubt about the proposition that virtual social networks functioned like the press and the number of proponents was 10 percent lower.

Answers to "virtual social networks can be a suitable substitute for banned periodicals" were similar to previous proposition.

About 75 percent of respondents agreed to this proposition, about 13 percent opposed it and about the same percent of respondents remained neutral.

Chi-square did not show any meaningful difference among various responses to the said proposition which could be attributed to age, gender, class, educational course and the amount of time spend surfing virtual social networks (like Facebook) during June 2009 election.

Although a high proportion of respondents to previous propositions supported similarity between functions of virtual social networks and the print media, most of them also believed in basic differences between these media.

Faced with the proposition that "virtual social networks are different in nature from the press," 50 percent agreed, 33 percent opposed and about 17 percent were neutral.

Chi-square did not show meaningful difference in terms of age, gender, class, education, as well as the amount of time spend surfing virtual social networks during last year's presidential elections among these groups.

Obviously, virtual social networks convey both personal and public messages, especially *Facebook* which has considered many possibilities for this purpose. Therefore, the next proposition was "virtual social networks play an important role in conveyance of personal and public messages." Only 3 percent were opposed to that proposition while 92 percent

agreed to it. This is proof to people's attention to technical possibilities provided by virtual social networks.

Only slightly more than 6 percent of respondents opposed the proposition that "virtual social networks provide a good place for the expression of various viewpoints on social and political matters." About 10 percent were neutral and the majority (about 84 percent) agreed to it.

An important issue regarding political parties is their relationship to social movements. Social movements need media in order to grow and survive. The results of presidential election in 2009 led to a social movement which was born on the streets, but survived on virtual social networks. Although this somehow changed the quality of that movement, the change took place one way or another. Therefore, the next proposition was whether "virtual social networks get connected to social movements." A minority of about 4 percent opposed while 79 percent of respondents agreed to it.

The next proposition was, in fact, more accurate version of the previous proposition which further limited the relationship between virtual social networks and social movements: "social movements use virtual social networks for their qualitative and quantitative growth."

While the number of opponents was almost the same, the number of proponents grew to more than 87 percent of respondents.

While viewpoints converge on the relationship between social movements and virtual social networks, there were different viewpoints on the proposition that "virtual social networks cannot give birth to a social movement."

About 56 percent of respondents believed that virtual social networks cannot give birth to a social movement while 29 percent opposed it and about 15 percent did not answer.

Chi-square did not show a meaningful difference among the answers which could be ascribed to age, gender, class, education, or the time spent surfing virtual social networks during June 2009 presidential election.

Although most respondents maintained that virtual social networks cannot give rise to social movements, about 70 percent of respondents were positive to the next proposition that "virtual social networks can be good objective spaces for social movements." About 17 percent remained neutral while 13 percent opposed this proposition.

Reproduction of objective conditions is an important issue related to virtual social networks. In other words, some maintain that although virtual social networks cannot take place of objective circumstances, they can reproduce an objective space

in the virtual space to help people achieve some of their social and political goals.

About 45 percent of respondents agreed to the proposition that "social movements can be reproduced in virtual social networks, but such a reproduction cannot be a substitute for objective conditions." About 26 percent opposed this proposition and the number of respondents remaining neutral was more than the previous proposition, which seems logical given complexity of this issue. About 28 percent of respondents remained neutral toward this proposition.

The efficiency of using SMS in mobilizing political forces, which is a function of political parties in field operations, was also proven in Iran during 2009 election. Of course, here, SMS did not serve parties and was mostly used to promote a popular movement. Therefore, SMS is considered to play an important role in exchange of information and mobilization of the masses. The next proposition was "virtual social networks can replace SMS." The number of opponents (about 35 percent) and proponents (about 33 percent) was close. Since this was a difficult comparison (between SMS and virtual social networks) and people had different experiences with SMS, more than 31 percent of respondents remained neutral. It seems such comparison has failed to help respondents get a clear picture of similar functions of these two media.

Chi-square did not show a meaningful difference among the answers which could be ascribed to age, gender, class, education, or the time spent surfing virtual social networks during June 2009 presidential election.

An important and powerful possibility on virtual social networks is the opportunity they provide for two-way communications. Faced with the proposition that "virtual social networks are more effective than mass media in deepening social movements," about 45 percent agreed, 19 percent opposed and about 38 percent were neutral. This difference does not seem meaningful in the light of Chi-square and in relation to such factors as age, gender, class, education and the time spent surfing virtual social networks during presidential election in 2009.

Only about 17 percent agreed that "growth of social movements has nothing to do with virtual social networks." More than 54 percent believed in a sort of relationship between virtual social networks and growth of social movements while 29 percent remained neutral. Chi-square does not show a meaningful difference with regard to such variables as age, gender, class, education and the time spent surfing virtual social networks during presidential election in 2009.

Conclusion

1. Most people believe that virtual social networks promote and deepen social movements and political currents by various reasons without being the main cause of political currents or social movements;

2. Most people are of the opinion that despite basic differences between virtual and objective conditions as regards social movements and political demands, some forms of political demands and social movements can be reproduced in the virtual space without being a good substitute for objective conditions;

3. Most people maintain that despite basic differences between the press and virtual social networks, virtual social networks sometimes function like the press and fulfill their duties;

4. Age, gender, class, educational course, and the daily times spent on surfing virtual social networks did not cause any meaningful difference among answers given to various propositions;

Generally speaking, it seems that although Iranian political parties are not able to create political currents through virtual social networks alone, they can use them to promote their political and social demands. Virtual social networks are an important component of social movements and political parties should not pass over this possibility when developing their political agendas.

Findings also prove the research hypothesis that virtual social networks have been able to influence functions of authorized political parties in Iran following the tenth presidential election and there is a relationship between virtual social networks and party behaviors in Iran.

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