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Turkey: In the Footsteps of Big Brother?

Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak

The prominent role of social networks services (SNS) in the turbulent events in Turkey during recent months, including events at Gezi Park and the conflict between Erdoğan's party, AKP, and the *Hizmet* (Service) movement, are evidence of a substantial decline in the state's ability to control how information is transmitted to its citizens. In the choice between a liberal policy towards freedom of information and a more intrusive policy of information management, it seems that the Turkish government chose the latter. It is currently toughening its stance regarding cyberspace by enabling governmental supervision and restrictions, with result that remain unclear.

As demonstrated in previous issues of *Beehive*,¹ SNS have become a central arena for power struggles between loyalists and opponents of Erdoğan. They are often used, moreover, to publish materials including recordings and classified documents that the government does not want posted. In recent years, SNS have become an especially crucial channel for preserving freedom of information because established media outlets have long been

subject to the dictates of the government and can no longer serve as “the watchdog of democracy.” A recent example was a recording of a telephone conversation in which Erdoğan was heard instructing the VP of the news channel *Haberturk* to interrupt the live broadcast of a speech by the chairman of nationalist MHP party. Apparently, the recording was leaked by supporters of the Gülen.² A more serious revelation followed, exposing the fact that top journalists distorted survey results in order to please the Prime Minister.³ Despite the criticism these allegations sparked, Erdoğan continued on his way and took even more drastic measures, including the deportation of Azeri journalist, Mahir Zeynalov, who was employed by a newspaper affiliated with Hizmet, and known for tweeting criticism of Erdoğan from his Twitter account.

Erdoğan is aware of the influence of SNS on the public sphere, and is now seeking to limit the possible damage they can cause. This is the background for understanding the new internet law formulated by the Turkish Parliament on February 6, and approved with minor cosmetic changes by Turkish President, Abdullah Gül, on February 18. This law gives the government unprecedented power in cyberspace, and states that within twenty-four hours of receiving a court order, the government can order the Communications Authority (TIB) to block browsing on any site it wants. In addition, the law states that Internet Service Providers in Turkey will be required to store the browsing data of all clients for two years, and supply them to government agencies, subject to court approval. In other words, through this new law, the Turkish government is seeking full control of public space on the web. Foreign editor of the newspaper *Hürriyet*, Emre Kızılkaya declared that recent steps mean that the state has become a Big Brother to its citizens.



Shh, prohibitions
have been loaded

In response to parliament’s passage of the law, many protesters organized via SNS took to the streets and clashed with police.⁴ During clashes protesters held placards with the slogan, “Hands off my Internet!” and protested both the violation of freedom of expression and other manifestations of corruption recently attributed to Erdoğan and his party. Cartoons being shared included one showing the Google search engine renamed, “Tayyip” (Erdoğan’s



first name; see picture). Once President Gül approved the law, many surfers expressed their opposition by unfollowing his Twitter account. In just one day, he lost 96,500 followers.

It should be noted that the new law is not unprecedented; the current government has already enacted measures to restrict the use of the internet. In 2011, under the banner promoting safer browsing, government passed a law that blocked pornography, prostitution, pedophilia and gambling, and defined a number of browsing packages for consumer use, including ones for children and families that restrict certain sites, including social networks Facebook and Twitter. Opposition elements who opposed the law and led demonstrations in Taksim Square argued at the time that it was the government's first step towards tagging and mapping the population. For instance, they suspected that internet subscribers who preferred to purchase packages without browsing restrictions (except the above mentioned websites that are blocked for everyone) would be subject to increased government monitoring. This is, incidentally, highlights a government's ability to gather intelligence from SNS, and not just to be "damaged" by their criticism.

In conclusion, the activity of Erdoğan in recent years shows that he aims to limit, as best he can, not only general media but also online media. He does not like the idea that he can still be criticized freely by certain internet channels, which are an important tool for mobilizing political opposition and leading protests against him and his government. Final approval of the law by the president may upset the prevailing balance between the government's opponents and its supporters on SNS, by giving the government the ability to restrict the former while strengthening the latter. Considering the inability of established media in Turkey to challenge the government, the law is a hard blow to the checks and balances of Turkish democracy. The upcoming municipal elections (late March), which are considered a representative sample for the presidential elections (scheduled for August) will show whether the Turkish people will punish the prime minister for this step, or coronate him once again.

Storming Movie Theaters and the “Carnival of Revolution”:

Social Critique on Iranian SNS

Dr. Raz Zimmt



Storming a movie theater

On Thursday, January 30, thousands upon thousands of people stormed dozens of movie theaters across Iran, in an effort to enter a free showing. The showings were part of a tribute to Iranian cinema organized by the Association of Movie Theaters, on the occasion of the 35th anniversary of the Islamic Revolution. Due to the mass thronging of theaters, some turned into scenes of physical confrontation between over-

excited spectators. In some cities, the crowds shattered the theaters' glass windows as they entered, while in Mashhad the police had to intervene to control the onslaught of the crowd (see picture). A few days later, the government began an operation distributing basic food products, including small amounts of rice, eggs, chicken, oil, butter and cheese, to citizens who earn the minimum wage (about USD 175) or less. The distribution areas become gathering sites, with enormously long lines, pushing, shoving and physical clashes between citizens struggling for the aid packages (see picture).

Both events, which occurred approximately on the anniversary of the Islamic revolution (11 February), aroused critical social discourse, primarily on social networks (SNS). Many Internet users directed their darts at the authorities, and censured them for the economic crisis for which they blamed the crowds' disruptive behavior. For example,



Fighting for food parcels

reformist journalist Saba Azarpeik wrote on her Facebook page that it is inappropriate to mock citizens who are seeking a little free entertainment, and explained that an Iranian

mother cannot afford to buy movie tickets for her four children because they cost as much as family's basic food basket of fruit and meat.⁵

Internet users incessantly criticized not only the authorities but also the public's behavior, which they attributed to the crisis of values and culture that, they argue, is afflicting Iranian society. They expressed dissatisfaction with the "uncultured, humiliating and immoral" behavior that was observed, and stressed that the responsibility for the failures lies with all of Iranian society. In response to the two events, which made headlines in the Iranian media, surfers wrote that it was unfortunate to see how citizens are willing to humiliate themselves for a movie ticket or a half loaf of bread, in a country that boasts a glorious historical and cultural heritage of 2,500 years. In this spirit, surfers responded to the critique of journalist and blogger Omid Memarian about the security forces' humiliating treatment of citizens during the distribution of food baskets. They argued that poverty cannot justify shameful behavior by assistance seekers, and stressed that many of them do not even need the food parcels but acted coarsely simply because they have become accustomed to it.⁶ Meanwhile, other surfers viewed the mass swarming of movie theaters as another expression of Western consumer culture taking over the lives of Iranian citizens. Among other things, they noted that it reminded them of phenomena known in the West, for example, the shopping frenzy of Black Friday that opens the season of Christmas sales in the US.

This is not the first time SNS in Iran were used to express harsh criticism of processes occurring in Iranian society. In April 2013, SNS were a platform for virulent criticism the highly publicized attempt of Choopan Dairy to register a Guinness World Record for producing the world's largest ice cream. The ice cream launch event, held at a ski resort in North Tehran, was attended by tens of thousands of spectators, and ended on a discordant note and riots after organizers refused to share ice cream from the giant tub to the spectators (on the grounds that it would be distributed among charitable institutions). An exiled Iranian blogger sarcastically noted that the thousands of citizens who attended did not call for release of political prisoners, nor did they fight for equal rights between women and men, or for freedom of speech and of the press. All they wanted was to eat ice cream. Upon seeing this behavior he noted, it is no wonder that the authorities continue to increase the prices of goods and the public continues to buy them.⁷

This public discourse on the crisis of values in Iranian society was also linked to the events marking the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution. Iranian web surfers saw a common thread joining the storming of theaters, clashes during the distribution of food baskets and parades on the anniversary of the revolution. The latter have, they contend, been transformed from events with a political, revolutionary character to a colorful carnival lacking any meaning. On his Facebook page, one surfer noted that only a few marchers used the occasion to express political views. Most citizens considered the day as an opportunity for a family outing on a national vacation day, and fairs were established for that purpose along the main streets.⁸

The events described above are part of a trend, which has been growing for several years, of criticizing perceived weaknesses in Iranian society. In the critics' opinions, these weaknesses are expressed in the adoption of Western patterns of behavior, a lack of social solidarity and a tendency towards individualism and escapism. Some critics attribute these weaknesses to the growing influence of Western culture, particularly among the young, urban middle class, while others see them as a direct result of the worsening economic crisis and social ills. It can be assumed that, despite the conservative religious establishment's efforts to curb the influence of Western culture, the cultural crises in Iranian society will continue to deepen, and that SNS will remain a central platform for critical discourse regarding these changes.

¹ See Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak, Return of Religion to the Internet: Fethullah Gülen against Erdoğan, Beehive, vol. 1, issue 4 (Dec. 2013). <http://www.dayan.org/sites/default/files/Beehive%20142013.pdf>

² "Alo Fatih 3 Tayyip Erdoğan Devlet Bahçeli'nin Basın Toplantısını Kestiriyor"
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dyvl8oR-sf4> [Accessed: February 18, 2014]

³ Fatih Altaylı Ses Kaydı – Habertürk – Seçim Anketi Manipülasyonu"
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hkMx_kcsKhl [Accessed: February 18, 2014]

⁴ #internetimedokunma
#internetkapanırsa
#tyypinternetiSansürlüyor
#TelekulakCumhuriyeti
#SansüreYolsuzluğaKarşı19daTAKSİME

⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/saba.azarpeik/posts/10201612547855775> .

⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10102834339018693&set=a.10100203820324243.2750939.1234515&type=1>

⁷ <http://saeidpersian.blogspot.dk/2013/04/blog-post.html/>

⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=782266125121655&set=a.223510104330596.73196.100000148248338&type=1>