



# BeeHive

## Middle East Social Media

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### Human Rights and Environmental Protests: Facebook in the Service of Civil Struggles in Iran

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As the use of social networking services (SNS) increases in Iran, Facebook has become a central arena for conducting social and civil struggles. This article will focus on two central issues that have become the subjects of lively discussions on SNS in recent weeks: the state of human rights and environmental struggles.

#### Debate surrounding the Civil Rights Charter: The gap between vision and reality

On November 26, President of Iran Hassan Rouhani published a draft Civil Rights Charter. The draft was published 100 days after his government took office, in fulfillment of a promise given during the election campaign. The first section of this charter discusses general principles of civil rights and the obligation of the government to enforce them. It states that all citizens are equal before the law, regardless of gender, ethnic origin or social status. The second section, which is the main body of the charter, lists 141 civil rights relating to all areas of life, including: the right to life and health, freedom of thought, expression and the press, transparency in government, welfare, education and legal justice. Within this



framework, the charter enumerates the rights of distinct social groups, including: university lecturers and students, people with disabilities, the families of fallen soldiers, residents of villages, members of tribes, and ethnic and linguistic minorities. The third section relates procedures for implementing the provisions of the charter and assigns the responsibility to the Legal Affairs Division of the Office of the President.<sup>1</sup>

Publication of the charter stimulated intense discussion in Iranian media and SNS among legal experts, journalists and human rights activists. Some were impressed by the charter and claim that its very publication is evidence of the new government's commitment to safeguarding the rights of citizens. However, most responses were restrained. There are several reasons for the lack of trust expressed by most respondents. Many users noted correctly that there is actually nothing new in the charter. The rights it enumerates are already included in the Iranian Constitution. The problem is the failure to implement them. Others contend that many sections of the charter include conditions that se. For example, the charter subordinates the right to free speech to a number of laws and regulations established by the judicial authority, and the right of women to dress as they please is limited by the statement that they must comply with Islamic standards. Another key criticism focuses on the lack of clarity in sections dealing with the rights of religious minorities. The section that establishes equality between all citizens, without distinction by gender, ethnic origin or social status notably ignores the subject of discrimination on the basis of religion. Furthermore, the charter does not protect the rights of members of the Baha'i community, who are not recognized as an official religious minority and suffer from systematic institutionalized discrimination. In the final analysis, many users expressed doubts about the government's ability to enforce the charter, primarily because many of its provisions fall under the jurisdiction of unelected bodies, particularly the judiciary.<sup>2</sup>

The extensive discussion the publication of the draft charter aroused on SNS is additional evidence of the central role that issues related to human rights play in Iranian public discourse. Whether the subject is freedom of expression and the press, the situation of political prisoners, the regime's policy regarding capital punishment or questions relating to the rights of minorities, the discussion reflects a growing gap between the public's expectations from the new leadership headed by Rouhani and reality. Although there has been partial progress in some aspects of human rights, progress has been inadequate in many others. In some areas, there has even been regression. For example, although several political prisoners were released in recent months, many more remain imprisoned, Mir Hussein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, two leaders of the reformist opposition. Moreover, the authorities recently arrested several well-known journalists and artists; and there has been an increase in number of executions, including the execution of prisoners from the Baluchi and Kurdish minorities.

The ongoing violations of civil rights are evidence that the Rouhani government is having difficulty maneuvering between the demands of the public and those of the conservative

religious establishment. This failure is clearly echoed in the discourse on SNS. The crisis of expectations is likely to be exacerbated should Rouhani and his government also fail to find a solution for citizens' economic and social distress. Social media services continue to function as an effective means for expressing Iranians' frustrations with the regime.

### **The battle over water and the intensification of ecological discourse in Iran**

On November 29, thousands of people from Khuzestan province, on the shores of the Persian Gulf, demonstrated against the Behesht-e Abad project. Behesht-e Abad will divert water from the Karon river in Khorasan, to serve the Isfahan, Yazd and Kerman provinces in the center of the country. This project was launched as part of the authorities' efforts to alleviate the severe water shortage that Iran's central plateau has suffered for many years, and which threatens to dry up the Zayandehrud River outside of Isfahan.

The Karon River diversion project has aroused the ire of the residents of Khorasan. As part of their protest, they formed – for the fourth time in two months – a human chain while holding signs denouncing the project.<sup>3</sup> They warn that the project endangers the ecosystem of the river, and that the Karon is in danger of drying up. Moreover, they complain about the discriminatory policies that develop some cities and provinces in Iran at the expense of others. The protesters in Khorasan are now being joined by their



neighbors to the east, residents of the Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari province. These residents also oppose the Goulab canal project, which will divert water from the Zayandehrud River to factories and industries Yazd and Isfahan provinces. The protesters claim that the government's water policy is prejudiced in favor of central provinces at the expense of the periphery. In a broader context, the environmental struggles of people in these two provinces relates to the historical struggle between Iranian authorities and ethnic-linguistic minorities within the country's borders. Khuzestan province is the home to the country's Arab minority, which accounts for approximately 3% of Iran's population and suffers blatant discrimination, economic hardship, and neglect. Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari province is home to the Luri-Bakhtiari ethnic-linguistic minority, some of whose members also reside in Khuzestan.

A large proportion of the struggle conducted by residents of these provinces has played out on SNS. In the last two months, environmental activists have launched several Facebook pages that have received thousands of "likes" each. For the projects' opponents, Facebook serves as an important channel of communication for transmitting current information about protest activities, and a platform for conducting a lively discussion of projects that threaten water sources. In addition to criticism on issues related to water, online discourse also expresses the

frustration that residents of the peripheral provinces feel in face of the discrimination against them. A general call for the end of official discrimination in all areas of life emerges from the discourse.<sup>4</sup> Environmental activists also launched in English language website “Save Karon River” and a Twitter feed,<sup>5</sup> hoping to increase awareness of their struggle in both the Iranian public and the Western world.

These protests are the latest in a series of environmental struggles in Iran during recent years that have found widespread expression on SNS. In March 2013, there was a violent confrontation between security forces and farmers in Isfahan province following a government decision to redirect water to Yazd province. In the past two years, the drying of Lake Uromiyeh in Iranian Azerbaijan also led to several violent protests, calling for the preservation of the lake. Another wave of public protest focuses on the air pollution in principal Iranian cities, particularly Teheran, which has reached crisis levels that threaten the public health.

Against the backdrop of these struggles, SNS have become a main arena for environmental activists. If Iranians once used SNS primarily for political discourse between supporters and opponents of the regime, SNS are now used more broadly to promote diverse civil and environmental goals. The range of webpages, initiatives and online discussions reflects the increasing willingness of Iranian civilians to join struggles on civil and environmental issues. The protests held in several provinces during the last year are evidence that campaigns can move beyond the virtual realm and into the streets.

## Return of Religion to the Internet: Fethullah Gülen against Erdoğan

Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak

During the last month social networking sites (SNS) in Turkey have been the scene of tumultuous reactions to the public confrontation between Prime Minister Erdoğan and Fethullah Gülen, the spiritual leader of the *Hizmet* (Service) movement, in a clash over the future of academic preparatory programs in Turkey. Hizmet was founded by Gülen in the 1960s as a movement striving to introduce liberal Islamic values into the fabric of life in Turkey through an educational system. In the 1980s the movement began to grow in popularity; since the AKP came to power in 2002, Hizmet has been a major player in the country’s political life, due to the alliance it formed with AKP and its support of Erdoğan. Various observers estimate the movement currently has several million supporters.

Despite their public cooperation, there has been tension between Erdoğan and Gülen since the 1990s. Hizmet preferred not to take a clear stance against the



Education System - Preparatory Programs - University

“postmodern” coup of the Turkish military in 1997, in which the Islamic parties lost power and Erdoğan was jailed. Moreover, Gülen’s surprising support of Israel’s position in the crisis following the Marmara flotilla incident of June 2010 and declaration that the Turks must receive Israel’s permission to send humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip, exacerbated these tensions. Erdoğan’s recent declaration that all academic preparatory programs would be closed, including those belonging to Hizmet, precipitated a public split between the two leaders. The preparatory programs are one of Hizmet’s flagship initiatives, established under the personal leadership of Gülen as part of a network of private schools. Through this school network, Gülen hoped to open higher education to students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, in the framework of an Islamic religious education consistent with the movement’s values. Hizmet solicits donations for the school system from wealthy business people, including international donors.. The operation of these institutions is so important to Hizmet that it promises its graduates – who Gülen calls “the Golden generation” – employment security. Hizmet’s supporters consider the elimination of these preparatory schools as the first step in destroying the movement itself. Gülen himself called Erdoğan “Pharaoh” in his response to this move.<sup>6</sup>

The severe criticism of Erdoğan and AKP is widespread on SNS. Supporters of Hizmet emphasized that closing the preparatory programs will be detrimental to young people from lower socioeconomic classes for whom the Hizmet network essential.<sup>7</sup> Others agreed with the claim of senior Turkish journalist, Emre Uslu, that closing the Hizmet preparatory programs will mollify the Kurdish underground in Turkey (PKK), which considers them a significant component of the Turkish melting pot. Conversely, supporters of AKP claim that closing the preparatory programs is necessary because it will ease the situation for families whose children did not receive scholarships and have difficulty paying for higher education.<sup>8</sup> The discourse became even more emotional when Mehmet Baransu, writing in the liberal Turkish newspaper *Taraf*, revealed that Erdoğan has been trying for years to eliminate the Hizmet movement, even though it is one of the pillars on which AKP stands. Baransu claimed that decision was actually made by the National Security Council in 2004. Erdoğan countered that the decision had never been implemented, and declared that Baransu should be tried for treason and revealing a confidential document. Ironically, Baransu is considered one of the people who exposed the presence of the ultra-nationalist Ergenekon underground network within the military, allowing Erdoğan to prosecute many of its members. Erdoğan’s statements could not quell the stormy debate. Many users expressed their support for Baransu, claiming Erdoğan’s call for a treason trial violated the principle of freedom of the press,<sup>9</sup> while also intensifying their calls to keep the preparatory programs open.

The tension surrounding the government’s initiative increased when AKP MP Hakan Şükür resigned, accusing Erdoğan of turning on long-term allies. The resignation of Şükür could set off a domino effect within AKP, and Erdoğan may face the resignation of dozens of party members who are loyal to Gülen and Hizmet. Şükür was widely supported on SNS.<sup>10</sup> Respondents included

Hüseyin Gülerce, a senior journalist identified with Hizmet, who warned that there would be vigorous response. The response arrived on the morning of 17 December when the police began an investigation of institutional corruption within AKP. The police arrested the children of the ministers of interior, economics and environmental quality, as well as business people and top municipal officials. Over the course of the investigation, police discovered millions of dollars hidden in shoe boxes in the homes of the suspects. The police action largely substantiated the stubborn rumors that Hizmet has ‘buried’ members – commonly referred to as informal networks – in the police and state prosecutor’s offices. Naturally, SNS did not remain apathetic to these events. While supporters of Erdoğan loudly defended his honor,<sup>11</sup> followers of Hizmet stressed the corrupt behavior of AKP leaders.<sup>12</sup> Critics of the regime eventually carried out protest actions, organized via SNS, in which boxes of shoes were piled up at the entrance of the government-run bank Halkbank, one of the institutions at the center of the corruption scandal.<sup>13</sup> The atmosphere became tenser when the conflict and the deadlock in the judiciary were exposed to the public in the course of Prosecutor Muammer Akkaş's resignation. In his statement Akkaş blamed pro-AKP chief prosecutor Turan Çolakkadı - recently nominated to this post by Erdoğan – of blocking the probe.<sup>14</sup> As a result the protests had spread across Turkey, resulting in violent confrontations between anti-corruption protestors and the police forces.<sup>15</sup>

At the moment, it seems that the public pressure, on SNS and elsewhere, and the upcoming municipal elections scheduled for March 2014 (a bellwether for general elections), have prompted Erdoğan to delay his initiative, and allow the preparatory programs to continue operating until the end of 2015. This delay may be too little and too late. Hizmet is a long-standing pillar of the AKP regime. Engaging its supporters in battle is likely to exact a heavy political price from Erdoğan by dividing his core Islamic constituency. Moreover, the exposure of institutional corruption casts a negative light on AKP and stains the image of incorruptibility that party leaders have worked many years to develop. The entire incident has also revealed the strength of the unofficial networks within Turkish institutions, particularly within the police and judiciary. Surely Erdoğan, who warned Turks about such networks following the exposure of Ergenekon, should not have underestimated the ability of Hizmet to respond.

## **Crisis in the Gulf: Oman Refuses to Join the Gulf Union**

Michael Barak

On 7 December 2013, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) suffered a hard blow to its prestige when the Omani Foreign Minister strongly rejected the Saudi proposal presented at the Manama Conference.<sup>16</sup> The Saudis proposed establishing a “Gulf Union” among the GCC member states to coordinate strategies on mutual security and economic dilemmas and counter

Iran's hegemonic ambitions in the region. Oman threatened to resign from the GCC if such a union were established, leading to a serious crisis in relations with Saudi Arabia and sparking frantic discourse on social news services (SNS) involving Saudis and Omanis alike.

Saudi responses tended to interpret Oman's move as a betrayal of its partners and further evidence of its pro-Iranian policy, as reflected in Oman's recent efforts to mediate between Iran and the United States in the course of secret negotiations on the nuclear policy. Many users protested that Oman is selling the Gulf to Iran "for one *toman*" (Iranian coin) and allowing Iran to dominate the Gulf, and spread the Shi'a faith. Indeed, many claimed Oman's decisions were based on ethnic and religious considerations. Muhammad Al-Sheikh, a publicist for the Saudi daily Al-Jazeera, wrote that the ruler of Oman Sultan Qaboos belongs to the Ibadi school of thought (associated with the Khawarij sect of Islam that is neither Shi'ite nor Sunni), and is a member of the minority that controls the mostly Sunni country. He claims Qaboos fears the establishment of Gulf Union will lead to the strengthening of the Sunnis in his country, whom he seeks to exclude from centers of influence. Al-Sheikh explained the recent rapprochement between Iran and Oman on the basis of religious-political interest in weakening Sunnis in the Gulf region. He further warned of the damage that could result from Oman's withdrawal from union, mentioning the massive economic assistance it has given Gulf states in the past. Visitors' comments on this article and other forums dealing with the issue warned that withdrawing from the GCC would hurt the government of Oman since "Iran would swallow [both] Oman and the other countries [in the Gulf]."

However, responses of Omanis characteristically offered full support for the regime's move and rejected the charges of a pro-Iranian policy. A common argument was that Oman seeks union with other Gulf states, but not one based on the narrow interests of Saudi Arabia or its "blind follower" Bahrain. A former dean of Sultan Qaboos University tweeted that Oman is not against the idea of union itself, but rather opposes the prevailing uncertainty about the union, and warned of the danger to regional stability if a union were established for sole purpose of being a political counterweight to Iran. Commenters in news talkbacks frequently repeated the claim that the Saudis' initiative for a Gulf Union is a direct result of their concern over Iran's increased strength following the recent agreement with the United States.. At the same time, many Omanis claim that their country always seeks solidarity with its neighbors, and even claimed that Oman has proved to the world that diplomacy is preferable to belligerence, presenting as proof its success in persuading Iran to agree to negotiations on the question of the status of three disputed islands (Lesser Tunb, Greater Tunb and Abu Musa) that it conquered from the Emirates in 1971.<sup>17</sup> Many questioned the benefit of the union to Oman, and even dared to mock its Saudi partner. One writer noted with disdain, "a country that does not grant equal rights to women, cannot be a true partner in the union." Another sarcastically wondered whether Saudi Arabia would agree to accept pluralism in the Gulf, while yet another responded, "we cannot

join a union with people who apply the ‘infidel law’ to us.” Moreover, Omanis also noted that a union of Gulf States would not be reflected on all levels, for example, “the borders are freely open as in Europe.”<sup>18</sup>

Oman prefers to take a neutral position amidst the growing tension between Saudi Arabia and Iran, rather than side with fellow GCC member Saudi Arabia. Moreover, although the not reflected in official channels, SNS responses indicate a clear popular Omani aversion to Saudi Arabia’s policy, which many perceive as privileging narrow, Saudi-centered interests at the expense of the rest of the Arab Gulf states. On the other hand, the Saudi discourse on SNS expresses a sense of betrayal and frustration due both to the growing Iranian threat, and the fear of the gradual disintegration of the Gulf partnership, which could lead to loss of the Saudi hegemony in favor of Iran.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.president.ir/fa/72975>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/kambiz.nourozi/posts/1422262498005123>;

<https://www.facebook.com/marzie.rasouli/posts/381273655340922>;

<https://www.facebook.com/shahindokht.mowlaverdi/posts/375587695920247>;

<https://www.facebook.com/shadisadr2012/posts/498331583615142>;

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.mehrnews.com/detail/News/2167031>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/pages/%D8%AC%D9%84%D9%88%DA%AF%DB%8C%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D8%AE%D8%B4%DA%A9-%D8%B4%D8%AF%D9%86-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%AF-%DA%A9%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%86/206393149397393?ref=profile> ; ;

<https://www.facebook.com/zendeheroodforall?ref=profile> ; <https://www.facebook.com/ab.4mb?ref=profile>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.save-karoun.org/>.

<sup>6</sup> “Fethullah Gülen’den çok sert dersane açıklaması”, Radikal, November 15, 2013,

[http://www.radikal.com.tr/turkiye/fethullah\\_gulenden\\_cok\\_sert\\_dershane\\_aciklamasi-1160956](http://www.radikal.com.tr/turkiye/fethullah_gulenden_cok_sert_dershane_aciklamasi-1160956) [Accessed in: December 16, 2013]

<sup>7</sup> #DemokrasilerdeKapatmaYOK #DershaneHakkıGelecekHakkı #DershaneYeGelenADALET #MilletinEseriKAPATILAMAZ #EğitimdeHakArayışımKARALAMA #DayatmaKabulEdilemez

<sup>8</sup> #DershaneGerçeği #TürkiyeBuAyıbıHakEtmiyor

<sup>9</sup> #HaberAlmaHakkıEngellenirse #BasınÖzgürlüğüneDARBE #FişlemeSuçturSAVUNULAMAZ

#BlowToPressFreedomInTURKEY #HürBasınGerçekDemokrasi

<sup>10</sup> #MilletinVekiliHakanŞükür

<sup>11</sup> #ErdoğanıSizeYedirmeyiz #GüvenimizTamLiderimizErdoğan

<sup>12</sup> #TarihiYolsuzlukveRüşvetSkandalı #operasyonunadı

<sup>13</sup> Ayakkabı kutusu, #yolsuzluklobisi, Ayakkabı dünyası

<sup>14</sup> "İkinci dalga savcısı Muammer Akkaş'tan 'dosya' açıklaması", Hürriyet, December 26, 2013

<http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/25448223.asp> [Accessed in: December 28, 2013]

<sup>15</sup> "Police in Istanbul stage crackdown on protesters denouncing Turkish gov't over graft scandal", Hürriyet, December 28, 2013 <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/police-in-istanbul-stage-crackdown-on-protesters-denouncing-turkish-govt-over-graft-scandal.aspx?pageID=238&nID=60254&NewsCatID=341> [Accessed in: December 28, 2013]

<sup>16</sup> A regional security forum that meets annually in Bahrain, including representatives of countries in the region and around the world.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.irdiplomacy.ir/en/page/1925518/>

<sup>18</sup> #عمان\_ضد\_الاتحاد\_الخليجي



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#عمان\_تعارض\_توحد\_الخليج

#عمان\_تستعيد\_جزر\_الامارات

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