

Iran's Internet Throttling: Unacceptable Now, Unacceptable Then

by Jadzia Butler
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Last week, Iran's minister for communications and information technology, Mohammad Hassan Namini, [admitted the government purposely slowed Iran's Internet](#) [1] during the days leading up to their June 2013 election in order to "preserve calm in the country" and to prevent interference from "foreigners trying to disrupt the election process." During that time, users reported both slower Internet speeds as well as the censorship of popular communications services such as Gmail, Skype, and Viber. As CDT has [said many times before](#) [2], politically motivated "throttling" and full-blown network shutdowns are an unacceptable restraint on the right to free expression.

Unfortunately, the government's "precautionary measures" were nothing new to the Iranian people. In the June 2009 election, when then-President Ahmadinejad won despite several reports of voting irregularities, the voices of thousands of protestors rang out not only in the streets, but also throughout the Internet. Thanks to activists' access to blogs and platforms like Twitter and Facebook, the Green Revolution's message carried all over the world in real time, allowing the Iranian people to bring international attention to their governments' actions. The government responded by disrupting the Internet and completely shutting down the SMS system.

Government rationale for shutting down the Internet (or dramatically diminishing its utility) often hinges on public safety concerns, but this, like any rationale, can be abused, resulting in governments restricting their citizens' rights to free and open political discourse. Further, such shutdowns tend to augment, not alleviate, the chaos of emergency situations. Cutting off people's ability to communicate with each other cuts off their access to emergency services, limits their ability to get status updates about their loved ones, and hinders dissemination of updates about imminent or enduring threats. Combined with the inevitably significant economic consequences that come with shutting down the Internet in an age when most economies depend on it, it's clear that even in the most extreme cases, governments would have to demonstrate an overwhelming need in order to outweigh the near-insurmountable costs of network shutdowns. Thinly veiled efforts to stifle political discourse clearly do not meet this burden.

So what do the results of the election mean for the future of an open Internet in Iran? Many activists hope that the selection of moderate President-elect Hassan Rohani signals an era of change. Days after Iranians took to the ballot box, several Internet activists and bloggers [drafted a letter to the President-elect](#) [3], calling on him to improve Internet speed and ensure it is managed by elected bodies. "We ask you to provide such conditions for us to have a motive in 2017 to again call on Iranians to cast your name in the ballot boxes," the letter said, emphasizing the large role that activists' use of social media played in solidifying Rohani's victory.

We urge President-elect Rohani and other governments around the world heed the advice of this letter and begin augmenting Internet access for its considerable social and economic advantages, rather than hindering it for its perceived threats.

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