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SOCIETIES UNDER SIEGE

Media, Government, Politics and
Citizens' Freedoms in an Age of
Terrorism

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Edited By: Banu Baybars Hawks & Lemi Baruh
Editorial Assistant and Cover Design: Kaya Tabanlı

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Banu Baybars Hawks
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INTERCULTURAL DEMONIZATION ON THE WEB: A QUALITATIVE APPROACH TO THE IRANIAN BLOG SPHERE

Ehsan Shaghasemi & Bijan Tafazoli

University of Tehran & University of Tehran

ehsanshaghasemi@yahoo.com

tafazzolibijan@yahoo.com

This study explores intercultural demonization among a group of Iranian bloggers and takes this as a barrier to democracy in Iran. Materials are gathered through blogs of so called "Pan Turkist" groups inside or outside Iran. Then these materials have been categorized into some main categories and they even are subcategorized within each category. Finally, it is shown that what major discourses of this bloggers are and what are the weights of these discourses in their general semantic sphere.

This study also suggests that this group of Iranian minorities should take new strategies to serve their cultural goals. We proffer them to join the mainstream movement of democracy for Iran to take a role in this process and therefore claim their own rights. The danger of intercultural demonization is that it prevents other cultural groups from helping Azaries to get their rights.

Keywords: Iran, Weblog, Intercultural Demonization, Azaries, pan-Turkism, blogosphere

In its quick flourishing, Internet and new communication facilities have changed our communicative sphere dramatically. In fact, the Internet gave an unprecedented opportunity to the so called "masses" to produce media contents and publish them to a global scaled audience. This raised a general embracement to the new cyber utopia. Besides, the Iranian dissidents found the Internet, a mighty instrument to promote democracy, publish their ideas, and frequently report human rights violations by government officials. From the early emergence of the Internet, Iranians learned to utilize it in favor of their ends. Today, more than 54 percent of the Internet users in the Middle East are living in Iran. (See for Example www.internetworldstats.com) This includes two million webloggers that 100 thousands of them update their pages on a regular basis (Namazi Khah, 2007). Although Shaghasemi (2008) shows that most part of Internet use in Iran is directed to find heterosexual partners and has nothing to do with politics, the rest of the users who have political concerns, still remain an important factor in the Iranian political arena. Beside the mainstream movement of democracy in Iran, there are some ethnic groups who challenge the

Iranian government periodically. Azarities are one of the strongest movements among these groups.

Azarities are mostly living in northwestern part of Iran. They are known as one of the first groups of Aryans who left Iran-Vij and came to this region more than 3000 years ago. About six centuries ago and after the invasion of Mongols, the Azari language gradually was replaced with Turkish language. About 150 years ago and after a series of Iran-Russia war, Azar, a part of this territory was separated and called the Russia's Azerbaijan. Azarities were the major pro-constitution force during the early 20th century and after a series of civil wars, they could force the Iranian monarchy to accept civil rights. In the 1940s, hardliners in the Azerbaijan shaped a movement and backed by Soviet Union, declared independence. But after one year the central government invaded the territory and this attack was accompanied by civil revolt inside Tabriz, the main Azerbaijan city. During the Islamic revolution of 1979, and shortly after that, hardliners again called for uprising. But, this time again their movement was shot down by central government. In this time also pro-Iranian groups inside Azerbaijan were the main barrier to declaration of independence. In all independence efforts, a powerful internal resistance could be identified and although the new communication facilities are likely to fragment the society, adherents of the national solidarity are still active in Azerbaijan.

In this study we try to investigate this discourse in the Azari blogosphere and describe what the sub-discourses of this discourse are and what will be the outcomes of this discourse. At the end point, we will issue some suggestions regarding intercultural demonization in the separatist discourse and the effect of this kind of view on the general political and cultural movements in Iran.

INTERCULTURAL DEMONIZATION

The concept of demonization has been used in many ways. Grenn (2007) discusses how Lilith's demonization was designed in divine books to keep women alienated from their own 'original sources' of power and spiritual authority. Chesney-Lind and Eliason (2006) examine the ways that popular culture and academic discourse have contributed to pathologizing two previously invisible groups: adolescent girls and adult lesbians, and explore how and why some feminists have ignored or contributed to the pathologizing of behaviors considered 'unfeminine'. They call this "demonization". Goldson (2001) draws attention to the youth and claims young offenders have been 'demonized', and the processes of demonization have not been limited to the realm of symbolic representation but have additionally exercised tangible influence over the domains of law and policy. Chesney-Lind (2006) claims that media in the recent years have tried to demonize young girls to push them back in the traditional roles. Kempadoo (2007) focuses on the issue of Caribbean women migrants in the US and criticizes demonization of those in undocumented, hyper-exploited labour forces. Ferber (2007) focuses on the demonization of black masculinity and the role of black athletes in this process. Keeble (1999) tries to set an important precedent for a series of quickie, risk-free, media-hyped attacks by the US on puny Third World countries to demonize their leaders. Coury (2005) explores the demonization of pan-Arab nationalism in the US publications. Sivanandan (2001) criticizes the current demonization of asylum-seekers and compares it with the demonization of blacks to justify their slavery in the past centuries. Ezekiel (2002) traces the French construction and demonization of American feminism (Le Women's Lib) by a segment of the women's movement and by public left-wing intellectuals. Smith (2004) investigates demonization of mothers in the Russian literature and

Sims (2005) takes a less negative stance toward demonization and explores it in narratives. Reay (2004) explicates the discourse of demonization in schools. Russell (2005) employs the notion of demonization to describe the Russian propaganda against China before and after September 11.

One dimension of demonization is sloppy thinking, which includes false linkages, such as President Bush's metaphor of an "axis of evil" (De Luca and Buell, 2005). This kind of view has of course political consequences. Demonization of the opponent causes exasperation and radicalization of the political struggle, but with the risk of distortion and manipulation (Mancini, 2007) and it highly damages democracy (Miller, 2007). Having summoned forth false demons, we find, in front of our eye, real demons arising (Young, 2003).

Demonization of the "Other" is not a sufficient basis for any kind of decent politics, certainly not now when the roots of terror in injustice can be addressed, and the terrorists isolated, deterred or put out of business. It takes patience and education, but is more worth the investment than still greater levels of large-scale violence and suffering (E. Said, 2001, quoted in Achugar, 2004). But, demonization is still a useful process for many of politicians. It is a good instrument for political ends and a suitable ladder to power.

We saw that rigid, sloppy, and highly categorizing thinking about others, if shaped negatively and wittingly, is demonization. So, intercultural demonization happens when members of one culture demonize members of another culture in a collective way. So, although the demonization may take individuated shape, when the individuals are perceived as members of their collective cultures, this is not a personal struggle anymore. Intercultural demonization in a discourse is dangerous in that it generalizes a uniform, demonized feature to all members of a culture and ban any possibility for a fair judgment. Now, it is time to examine intercultural demonization in the Iranian blog sphere.

METHODOLOGY

We explored the Persian language weblogs via Google search engines with keywords such as Azari, pan-Farsist, Persian chauvinism, Persians, Turks and so on. In this way, we searched about 1800 weblogs. Some of these blogs have nothing more than the keyword we had searched. Some other were identified as objection, claiming rights, criticism and strategy, which are not demonization. Finally, less than 100 were identified as interculturally demonizing. These comments were classified according to their languages. We identified two main discourses here: Anti-Persian discourse and anti-Azaris discourse. The latter includes those Azaris who are not accompanying their intercultural demonization or are critical of it.

Although we distinguished another discourses such as anti-Kurd, pro-Islam, anti-Islamic government, anti-Christianity, anti-West, pro-Mongol and anti-Achaemenid discourses. Therefore, we brought examples of their posts to help the readers identify other sub-discourses.

Also, the weights for each of these two categories were determined. The percentage was calculated according to the number of comments regardless of the volume of content. Therefore, each interculturally demonizing post on a weblog was taken as one unit.

RESULTS

About 78 percent of comments containing intercultural demonizing contents were categorized as demonizing Persians and the rest of 22percent were labeled as demonizing Azairies. The main sheet of findings contains 50000 words of data. We have selected excerpts of each category below.

DEMONIZING PERSIANS COMMENTS

South Azarbaijan (Date Unknown) wrote:

Persians are not the owners of the territory of Iran [. . .] are condemned to die and finally they will be buried in the deep of the trash of history.

In September 30, 2008, Araz Charanbdabi Wrote,

Activists of non-Persian nations should become bitchy and shout their rights loudly. They should not be shy about this because Persians want to diffuse Persian language as official and national language with bossiness.

In May 26, of 2008, Payam wrote,

Persian! We saw your reality in the movie 300. You are so sordid that even don't know anything about your own language.

Gunaskam (Date unknown) wrote,

The perceptions of Iranian Pan-Farsists are highly Euro-centric and have rooted in anti-enlightenment movements of 18th Europe.

In December 26, 2002, Leila Heydari wrote,

The glorious Islamic revolution [of Iran] shattered the Neanderthal nationalist organization down and was going to throw this rotten ideology to the trash of the history.

Aidin Tabrizi (date unknown) wrote,

Racist neandertalist pan-Farsists blame Azari Turks for violence of the Mongol Changiz Khan that although was not Azari but allegedly has racial kinship with them, for the rest of the history.

In April 23, 2007, Gray Wolf wrote,

When Azerbaijan republic gained its independence, many of fascists cached cardiac illness, but, when south Azarbaijan achieves its independence, all the hospitals of the world will be filled by cardiac sick people.

In August 22, 2008 Bati wrote,

For blurring unchangeable borders of Azarbaijan, Persian chauvinism and Kurdish terrorism concurred. Enjoying facilities and propaganda provided by Persian chauvinism temporarily, Kurds who for many years are looking for the territory of Azarbaijan, try to brag.

In October 16, 2007 Gamoh under the title of "Nasty bloodsucker of Persian chauvinism still welters in Azarbaijan" wrote,

Instead of learning science [the Azari] students are forced to learn abominable Persian language.

DEMONIZING AZARIES COMMENTS

In January 16 of 2006, Qarabaq wrote:

Historically aware nation of Azarbaijan has realized the identity of Kasravi and his followers and revealed the betrayal in their words and deeds. One can't delude Azaries in this way anymore. Kasravi and people like him were false sons of the Azarbaijan who are the shame of Azarbaijan because of their betrayal to the aspirations of their

nation. These panders have been wiped out from arena of the Azari history.

In July 1, 2005, Turkcu quoted a report on a gathering in Azarbijan by Tabriz news agency and calls it:

The solicitude of pan-Farsists in the website of their houseboy.

Baybak (date unknown) wrote,

Peyman Aref steps in the way in which Peyman Pakmehr is serving the Persian chauvinism and subserviencing monarchists. These traitors act exactly as fifth column of the enemy in Azarbaijan and they deny their historical identity and follow the instructions of Persian fascist regime for a scarce salary. It is worth to note that ridiculous organ that has been established by these hirelings is going to be eliminated in a prostrated way.

ANALYSIS

Reviewing the excerpts, we can de-construct the demonizing discourse in Azari blogosphere and find the following elements.

1. The demonizing discourse in Azarbaijan of Iran emphasizes on the authenticity of Turkish language.
2. The demonizing discourse in Azarbaijan of Iran suffers from lack of classic Turkish literature.
3. The demonizing discourse in Azarbaijan of Iran sees the Persian language as the main symbol for their humiliation. So, they raise Turkish language to resist against the perceived dominance of Persians.
4. Although most part of demonizing discourse focuses on culture, there are currents in this discourse that try to draw attentions to perceived discrimination in budget allocation.
5. The demonizing discourse in Azarbaijan of Iran sees the perceived traitors of Azarbaijan as a major barrier to achieve their goals. Among these so called "traitors", Ahmad Kasravi is the most important. Kasravi was assassinated in 1945 in Tehran.
6. The demonizing discourse in Azarbaijan of Iran suffers from the lack of evidences to prove that Turkish language has been always spoken in this place.
7. The demonizing discourse in Azarbaijan of Iran supposes no role for itself in the process of democracy in Iran.
8. The demonizing discourse in Azarbaijan of Iran gives no program for the future.

CONCLUSION

Given the materials and analysis provided above, the demonizing discourse in Azarbaijan, just like every demonizing discourse in every other part of the world, do not give any rational explanation about the issues it addresses. Blaming other people, insisting on issues that there is no scientific prove for them, and stimulating people to attack on other people just because they are speaking in another language, are what intercultural demonizers pursue. But, we are living in a shrinked world and unlike the past, what we say could be heard in any part of the world. So, the importance of what we say and also what we publish as personal concern has been ever

increasing by the recent years. In fact, since generating hate is much easier than nurturing peace, the emergence of small media such as weblog could serve in making big troubles.

In the world in which the borders are increasingly blurring, emphasizing the ethnic advantages and calling for revenge of the people for the sins they have never committed, is suspicious and concerning. Given the highly instable status of the region, Iranian scholars must be aware that although intercultural demonization in Iran is not in a dangerous level, it can outburst suddenly and culminate to a disaster. When Iran loses its stability, the Middle East will be sunk in a great chaos and nobody knows what will happen then.

Iran is gradually passing the process of democracy. The condition for realization of democracy in Iran is now better than many other countries of the region. We recommend every Iranian group, including Azaries, who are pursuing their rights, to join the main movement for democracy in Iran. No right could be achieved in social and political disorder. Demonizing other ethnicities in Iran also prevents them to approve or even join the same ethnic movement for calling rights. And finally, we Iranians are historically well aware that those who get the power unjustly, will maintain it via the power.

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