

Islam Today

Youth & New Media

University of California at Berkeley

South Asia Research Notes

Politics And New Media In The Muslim World

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The ability to use new media has been significant for many young Muslims, as many who feel isolated have come to find solace in these virtual communities. The creation of community through media and the subversion of stereotypes through popular culture, have all allowed for this new generation of Muslim youth to develop their own identity. Through a series of three programs, UC Berkeley's "Islam Today: New Media & Youth Culture in the Middle East, South Asia and Southeast Asia," will address these issues, as well as the clash between traditional and modern forms of religious practice and ideals that is continually being played out in these different mediums.

"**Politics and New Media in the Muslim World**," the first program in this series, brought together five young practitioners, researchers and scholars to discuss the transformations that have occurred following the

SUMMARY

- The forum's discussion mostly focused on new media and how it is used to 'resist' governments.
- Governments use new media for their own ends as well, but people still tend to turn to the Internet for new and exciting information – since the status quo is less interesting to read about, it seems likely that new media will tend to remain more a tool for those who are less aligned with government interests than otherwise.
- As Internet connectivity mushrooms in the region, the popularity of online news sources, including blogs and more formal sites, will rival traditional news and print media.
- Use of the new media outlets is especially relevant with sensitive topics such as sexual harassment, torture, HIV/AIDS, religion and politics.
- Governments may also try to crack down, and they do crack down, but the mobility of the web seems to mean that new ways of getting information out continually emerge.

rapid expansion in the use of technology and new media to talk about political issues and political change in the Muslim world. Speakers included: **Mohamed Abdel Dayem** from the Committee to Protect Journalists; **Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad**, a member of Malaysia's opposition party KeAdilan Rakyat and a recently elected member of Selangor's State Assembly; **Muhamad Ali**, Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at UC Riverside whose research looks at contemporary Islam in Indonesia; **Huma Yusuf**, a freelance journalist in Pakistan with a special interest in new media and political activism; and **Haroon Mughal**, a popular U.S.-based blogger who writes about issues concerning South Asia and Muslim Americans (avari.typepad.com). The forum was moderated by **Wajahat Ali**, Associate Editor of altmuslim.com.

The forum highlighted the similarities and differences between the three world regions in intriguing ways – bringing forward many points where more discussion would be fruitful, and also exposing the audience to look more broadly at contemporary politics in the Muslim world. It also turned out to be a great opportunity for networking among the speakers and the audience. Before and after the forum, three of the five forum speakers participated in other events in the Bay Area: Haroon Moghul led the Friday prayer for the Muslim Students Association on the UC Berkeley campus; Huma Yusuf gave a talk on Pakistan's relations with the U.S. at UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism; and Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad gave a talk at the Asia Pacific Research Center at Stanford University and met for three separate off-the-record dinners with Malaysian students and professionals in Berkeley, Santa Clara and San Jose.

The forum co-sponsors were the Asia Society Northern California, Islamic Networks Group, the Arab Cultural and Community Center and Meedan.net.

"Islam Today: New Media & Youth Culture in the Middle East, South Asia and Southeast Asia" is being organized by UC Berkeley's Centers for Middle Eastern Studies, South Asia Studies, and Southeast Asia Studies, with funding support from the Social Science Research Council, for 2009-2010. This new collaborative program explores how Muslim youth around the world are using new media, politics and popular culture to explore their identities, find "virtual" communities, promote new agendas and confront stereotypes. Three events have been planned: a forum on new media, Islam and politics; a forum on Muslim youth and social networking; and a festival on youth, Islam and the arts.

This is a report of the first event. Further information and webcast at: <http://islamtoday.berkeley.edu>

Highlights of the 1st forum on Politics and New Media in the Muslim World



Huma Yusuf

Huma Yusuf discussed the rise in the use of new media in Pakistan. She argued that new media emerged in Pakistan between 2007-2008 when then President Pervez Musharraf declared an emergency situation in Pakistan. With the shutting down of television stations and independent print news and channels, blogging and web media became an outlet to report the turmoil in the country. Furthermore, Pakistan experienced an explosion of cell phone usage with texts and SMS reporting becoming increasingly popular. For example, Yusuf described how Pakistani citizens were able to capture Benazir Bhutto's assassination through the use of cell phones. One blogger was able to connect cell phone images and make the case that Bhutto was in fact shot before the blasts occurred. Yusuf described this as an example of the convergence of citizen journalism and political activism.

Most recently, Yusuf reported on the Internationally Displaced Persons (IDPs) that fled Swat Province due to the military's campaign to combat the Taliban. Twitter updates, blogs, and cell phone videos were used to capture the life in the camps with the IDPs and also the public torturing that the Taliban inflicted on local peoples. As new media has become an increasingly popular mode of both formal and informal journalism, the government of Pakistan enacted the prevention of Electronic Crimes ordinance in July of 2009 to monitor the increasing usage of new media outlets. The ordinance loosely defines cyber terrorism and states that pictures published without permission are considered a cyber crime. While new media increases in Pakistan, the government's regulation of it will likely increase.

Huma Yusuf is the Features Editor of Dawn.com, the website of Pakistan's leading English-language daily. She reports on media trends, terrorism, and human rights for Dawn, The Christian Science Monitor as well as other news organizations. She is a graduate of MIT's Comparative Media Studies program, where she worked as a researcher for the Center for Future Civic Media. Her recent writings examine the interplay of new media and democracy in Pakistan as well as the importance of community radio stations in combating terrorism.



Haroon Moghul

Haroon Moghul discussed his work with the Islamic Center and how the use of Internet has allowed their message to spread. Their use of new media involves recording their religious sermons and making them available on outlets such as iTunes, YouTube, or through their website. These sermons are often about "taboo" topics, such as sex, that Muslim youth and others find difficult or awkward to discuss in public forums or with their families. These sermons reach 30,000 listeners per month in about 125 countries and have received feedback from places as far as

Iran, and as close as students from New York University. Indeed the recorded sermons have helped establish communication and conversation between Muslims and across geographical and "virtual" boundaries. Moghul argued that just because someone is using new media, this does not mean that they are liberal or secular. As the phenomenon of new media continues to advance, so will the ability to connect people of all faiths and creeds.

Moghul also discussed that the sermons and his blog allow for a neutral space for Muslims, particularly the youth, to voice their opinions and discuss their religion. He stated that new media can be a space that is non-judgmental and open and can help negative stereotypes and misunderstandings of religion to reconcile. The positive in new media is that it serves as a portal to disseminate this knowledge and to exchange and engage those discussions.

Haroon Moghul is the author of an influential and popular blog focused on issues concerning South Asia, the Middle East, Islam and Muslim Americans. He is the author of *The Order of Light*. He is the Director of Public Relations for the Islamic Center of New York University, and is currently also pursuing a Ph.D. in Middle East Studies at Columbia University. His field of study includes the intellectual history of Islam in colonial India, the Indian Ocean economy and the modern Muslim world. In 2009, he was nominated for the Presidential Award for Best Teaching by a Graduate Student at Columbia.



Mohamed Abdel Dayem

Mohamed Abdel Dayem explained that in the Middle East and North Africa blogging has become a serious medium for social and political commentary as well as a target of government suppression. Blogging has flourished in the Middle East, propelled by the region's unusually high growth rate in Internet use, and the exceedingly restrictive

landscape for traditional media. This nexus of demography and repression has led activists, journalists, lawyers, and others online, where they express dissent and report information in previously unimaginable ways. During his talk, Dayem also discussed his work with the CPJ. CPJ defends bloggers who meet fundamental journalistic precepts; that is their work be reportorial in nature or offer news-based commentary. Though a large majority of blogs do not meet this journalistic standard, CPJ and other analysts estimate that hundreds, if not thousands, of blogs in the region critically examine issues of public interest. These are issues that traditional media, shackled by government ownership or strict, longstanding prohibitions, often cannot cover. Dayem gave the example of the Egyptian blogger, Wael Abbas, who began blogging in 2005. With a focus on domestic issues, Abbas attracted a loyal but modest readership in his first year of blogging. But when he posted a video of police torture in 2006, he set off an astonishing outcry and altered the nature of blogging in the region. Egyptians had long heard anecdotes of torture in custody, but the video provided evidence. This and other equally damning videos posted by Abbas and others ultimately led to the conviction of several police officers.

Abdel Dayem also discussed the press laws and overlapping regulations that blogging is policed by in the Middle East. He explained that virtually all regional countries rely on three basic types of laws to restrict online expression: longstanding press and penal code provisions, emergency laws, and emerging Web-specific laws and decrees. In Iran, which employs the most elaborate scheme of layered legal restrictions, the press law prohibits the publication of anything that "promotes subjects that might damage the foundation of the Islamic Republic" or "propagates luxury and extravagance." Amendments in 2000 extended the law to all forms of electronic media. Syria extends its press law to prohibit electronic publications from publishing political content unless the site is specifically licensed to do so. The publication of "falsehoods" or "fabricated reports" is punishable by fines and prison terms. Other regional governments are tailoring laws to online journalism. The United Arab Emirates enacted the Cyber Crime Law of 2006, which sets fines of 20,000 dirhams (US\$5,400) and prison sentences of up to a year for a number of vaguely defined online acts, such as "abolishing, destroying or revealing secrets or republishing personal or official information," or insulting religion or family values. Tunisia, Oman, and Jordan have verbal orders or written decrees in place extending civil and criminal liability to Internet service providers, Internet café proprietors, and owners of web servers, obliging them to monitor and report infractions. Saudi Arabia relies on a 2001 Council of Ministers Resolution, which carries the weight of an executive decree, to regulate Internet use. The resolution prohibits all Internet users from publishing or accessing "anything contrary to the state or its system."

Mohamed Abdel Dayem is the Program Coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa for the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) in New York. Before joining CPJ in 2008, Mohamed Abdel Dayem worked for the Save Darfur Coalition; for the National Endowment for Democracy, where he managed the Endowment's Iraq portfolio; and for Human Rights Watch, where he conducted research and media outreach on countries throughout the Middle East and North Africa. Abdel Dayem has an M.A. from the School of Advanced International Studies at the Johns Hopkins University.



Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad

Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad discussed how new media was playing a crucial role in Malaysian politics. This role had emerged because of the tight control placed by the government over old media, such as print, radio and TV. The new media role was particularly important in the March 2008 elections, which brought significant gains to the opposition for the first time in many years – and which Nik Nazmi said was in no small part due to the ability of Malaysians to now turn to online sources for their information. New media outlets help counteract Malaysia's dominant Barisan National political alliance from being too easily able to place stories in print or elsewhere that discredit the opposition or that stir up ethnic divisions. The government under then PM Mahathir had initially pressed to develop a multi-media corridor and Internet-savvy society, with a Bill of Guarantees provided to international companies such as Microsoft to promote market penetration, it is now limited in how it can crack down or go against the growing reliance of many Malaysians on alternative or independent online news sources, including news sites and personal blogs. Nik Nazmi noted that 65% of Malaysians have Internet access, and more than one million have broadband access (out of a population of 25+ million). Mobile devices also, he notes, are very important – with use of SMS/text messages during campaigns and forwarding of photos etc. from cellphone to cellphone being a useful tool for information sharing. Nik Nazmi's own campaign used Facebook and blogs to generate support. He also created a campaign video, distributed via a Video CD. In his case, and in other constituencies, young and urban voters voted against the government coalition in a big way. As he put it: "New media played a big role in trumping old politics".

He also noted that in the Malaysian case, the Salafi-based groups tended to be more tech-savvy than the traditionalists, but added that there were also many young religious figures who were turning to the Internet to reach people. Some sites he mentioned were iluvislam.com which has thousands of registered members and saifulislam.com. Nik Nazmi ended with a note of caution against seeing new media as the end in itself. He said that it should instead be the means to an end, meaning that it should be a way to "unshackle" mainstream media in the country. However, with the knowledge the web as well as its use still evolving, it was not yet clear how it may develop.

Nik Nazmi bin Nik Ahmad is a Malaysian politician who has been actively involved with the Malaysian opposition party led by Anwar Ibrahim. He was elected to the legislature in Selangor state in 2008, as a member of the Pakatan Rakyat coalition, and as the youngest candidate to contest a seat in those elections. He currently serves also as Political Adviser to the Chief Minister of Selangor, and is a member of the Executive Committee of his party's youth wing. He studied law at King's College, University of London.



Muhamad Ali

Muhamad Ali spoke about contemporary Islam in Indonesia and the use of the Internet, with a specific focus on issues that have emerged in the online world following the July 2009 terrorist bombings in Jakarta. Ali explained that in Indonesia, the Internet is often used to discuss issues of nationalism, religion, and domestic politics but added that media and technology have no determining impact on ideology. Human agency and socio-cultural contexts are what matter most.

In the public sphere, progressive and fundamentalist Muslims groups do not see terrorism as justified, but their language of condemnation varies: the fundamentalists are more ambiguous than the progressives. All groups use the Internet in a politics of difference. Islamist groups use the Internet to relay their message to a broader audience, which then become the basis of debate for the local public intellectuals. Most commonly, the government and the police are the targets of criticism amongst the Islamist groups.

Muhamad Ali is the Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at the University of California-Riverside. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Hawaii where he wrote about the dissemination of Islamic knowledge in Aceh and the Malay state of Kelantan during the colonial period. His recent research has looked at varying manifestations of contemporary Islam in Indonesia, focusing particularly on religious pluralism, as well as the meanings of state reactions to radical or heretical movements.

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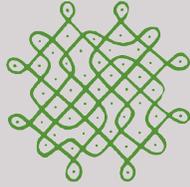
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Mohamed Abdel Dayem

"Online repression in the Middle East combines old-school tactics such as detention and harassment with newer techniques such as online blocking and monitoring. It has also moved assertively to extend—and even expand—longstanding legal restrictions on print and broadcast journalism to online media."



Huma Yusuf

"Heightening political instability has wracked Pakistan since November 2007. In an effort to boost public accountability, organise protests, and disseminate accurate information, young Pakistanis are employing new media tools – blogs, YouTube videos, social networking sites, SMS2Blog – thereby spurring a new culture of political activism and civic engagement."



Haroon Moghul

"Through its on-line lectures and sermons, the Islamic Center at NYU has become part of a web of global discourse. My presentation discusses the implications of that development for authority in Islam."