

Book Review

Twitter Activism in Iran: Social Media and Democracy in Authoritarian Regimes

Hossein Kermani (2025). *Twitter Activism in Iran: Social Media and Democracy in Authoritarian Regimes*. Palgrave Macmillan.

181 pages.

ISBN: 978-3-031-81537-9 (Hardcover)

ISBN: 978-3-031-81540-9 (Softcover)

ISBN: 978-3-031-81538-6 (eBook)

Mitra Shamsi

Author information:

Mitra Shamsi is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Centre for Advanced Internet Studies (CAIS), Bochum, Germany. Her research focuses on digital feminist activism in the Iranian context, examining the construction of digital feminist discourses in their traversing both inside the country and in the diaspora. In her current research trajectory, she is interested in ways in which online women's rights campaigners navigate and respond to nationalist narratives, with a specific focus on the recent Women, Life, Freedom uprising. She holds a PhD in Media and Communication Studies from the University of Tehran.

For more information: <https://www.cais-research.de/en/fellows/mitra-shamsi/>

E-Mail: mitra.shamsi@cais-research.de

To cite this article: Shamsi, Mitra (2025). Book review of Hossein Kermani (2025): Twitter Activism in Iran: Social Media and Democracy in Authoritarian Regimes. *Global Media Journal – German Edition*, 15(1), DOI: 10.60678/gmj-de.v15i1.338

In the days following the death of Jina/Mahsa Amini in Iran's morality police custody for allegedly wearing her hijab improperly in September 2022, Persian Twitter became a contested space for the "Woman, Life, Freedom" (WLF) Movement. Competing narratives from various political forces, both inside Iran and in the diaspora, sought to frame the protests around contested ideas of women's rights, justice, equality, the legitimacy of the uprising, and Iran's political future.

Exploring such competing narratives across three pivotal political moments in Iran, situated within the "political field" of Persian Twitter (p. 74), lies at the heart of *Twitter Activism in Iran: Social Media and Democracy in Authoritarian Regimes*. In this book, Hossein Kermani presents a thoughtful inquiry into how Twitter has become a contested discursive battlefield in an authoritarian context. Focusing on Iran, where state-imposed platform restrictions coexist with constant digital activism, he explores how users navigate repression to express dissent and construct counter-narratives, while also examining the regime's strategies to suppress this form of activism.

Structured in seven chapters, the book combines theoretical reflections with empirical case studies to map the political field of Persian Twitter. It acknowledges Twitter's global role in enabling new forms of political engagement, even in the "post-Twitter era" (p. 7). Yet it distances itself from techno-determinist optimism by emphasising that these platforms also serve as tools of algorithmic control, misinformation, and state repression. Positioned at the intersection of digital resistance and digital authoritarianism, the book draws on the Iranian case to explore how online activism unfolds within politically restricted and closely surveilled contexts.

Building on this conceptual ground, the book develops a framework mapping three domains through which social media engage with politics: their instrumental use by political elites, grassroots digital activism, and computational propaganda. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of habitus and concept of networked publics, Kermani frames digital activism as a discursive process. Based on this framing, marked by the author's careful conceptual definitions, Persian Twitter is considered a contested discursive field, underlining that social media platforms are not neutral tools but products and producers of discourse. The author notes that the algorithmic architecture of digital platforms and their commercial interests also constrain digital political expression, alongside users or regimes. Though conceptually central, this aspect receives limited analytical attention in the book's case studies.

The empirical core of the book is organised around three case studies, in Chapters 4-6, each corresponding to a key political moment in contemporary Iranian history and illustrating how discursive dynamics evolve across different political contexts. Kermani conceptualises Persian Twitter during the 2017 Iranian presidential election as a political field in the Bourdieusian sense, a structured space where networked publics struggle over symbolic power through discursive practices. He analyses how users compete to advance preferred meanings and secure visibility and legitimacy. While digital platforms are often seen as enabling opposition voices, this case shows that users largely stayed within existing political boundaries,

reproducing regime frames rather than challenging them. This supports the argument that even seemingly open digital spaces are shaped by pre-existing political logics and constraints.

Based on a nuanced analysis of bot-driven discursive activism during the COVID-19 crisis, the book investigates how bots and human users framed the pandemic as a political issue. The analysis shows that anti-regime human users predominantly framed the crisis through narratives of state mismanagement, often employing irony and sarcasm. Pro-regime bots, by contrast, adopted revolutionary metaphors that emphasised national strength and the Western failure in pandemic management. These bots amplified regime-aligned frames, functioning as a coordinated campaign to simulate public support. The discursive struggles on Persian Twitter during this public health emergency mirrored deeper political cleavages, reflecting not only domestic tensions about pandemic management but also the regime's efforts to justify controversial foreign policies, for instance, through war metaphors that compared medical workers (referred to as “health defenders”: مدافعان سلامت) to Islamic Revolutionary Guards deployed in Syria (framed as “holy shrine defenders”: مدافعان حرم).

The case of Persian Twitter during the *#MahsaAmini* uprising illustrated how the platform becomes a digital battlefield, where false information and incivility function as discursive tactics by competing political groups. The book argues that false information and incivility were not only propagated by bots in coordinated propaganda but also appropriated by ordinary users as part of a broader discursive struggle. These communicative forms served different functions for opposing sides: for anti-regime users, they were vehicles for expressing anger, grief, and solidarity; for pro-regime actors, they worked to delegitimise protesters and justify repressive measures. This case reveals how Persian Twitter became a mirror of Iran's fragmented political structure, particularly in the strategic separation between state and regime narratives during the upheaval. While the analysis offers valuable insights, it could be further strengthened by an exploration of the discursive tensions at play, particularly emotional expressions such as outrage, solidarity, and fear, alongside the platform's algorithmic constraints that shape the visibility and legitimacy of protest narratives.

Across these three cases, which span distinct political moments, the book traces a broader transformation in the discursive dynamics of Persian Twitter over time. While the 2017 election reflected a relatively pluralistic field where users largely operated within the boundaries of official discourse, subsequent political crises, contributed to the erosion of reformist legitimacy, paving the way for more polarised discourse. Two particularly significant events were the bloody crackdown on nationwide protests in 2019, sparked by a fuel price hike, which left hundreds dead, and the downing of the PS752 flight by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps amid heightened tensions with the United States, killing all 176 people on board. This shift enabled more oppositional and radical narratives to gain visibility, gradually pushing moderate voices to the margins. By the time of the WLF uprising, Persian Twitter

had become a deeply polarised space, structured around a binary opposition between pro- and anti-regime actors.

One of the book's strengths lies in its well-designed and clearly articulated mixed-methods approach, combining social media critical discourse studies with ethnographic content analysis, qualitative coding, and computational tools. This combination enables the author to trace discursive struggles across tweets, user networks, and platform-mediated interactions, providing a layered understanding of both human- and bot-driven practices.

The book also succeeds in grounding digital discursive struggles within Iran's broader political and media context. It situates digital activism within a contested space of complex political and discursive dynamics shaped by citizen resistance alongside authoritarian control, and infrastructural constraints. This contextualisation outlines the evolution of digital media in Iran under a complex and multi-layered authoritarian system. It shows how both repression and circumvention have shaped user behaviours and platform dynamics over time.

The book offers a thoughtful and well-structured analysis of Persian Twitter's political field, though two dimensions could have received more sustained attention. While it appropriately highlights the distinct dynamics of digital politics in authoritarian contexts, certain observed patterns—such as political polarisation—appear to align with broader global trends in digital political communication. Deeper comparative engagement with studies from other authoritarian contexts and research from beyond the Global North could have clarified how these dynamics are context-specific and how they reflect broader global political developments.

Additionally, digital feminist activism represents a significant dimension of political engagement in Iranian digital spaces, manifested through creative forms such as Twitter feminist hashtag campaigns and tweetstorms, which have been documented in a substantial body of scholarship. However, this important dimension receives limited attention in the book. A more deliberate engagement with these existing studies could have acknowledged the relevance of gendered discourses in shaping digital political contention in the Iranian context.

Twitter Activism in Iran offers insights that extend well beyond the Iranian context. Its nuanced examination of discursive practices, user strategies, and state-aligned responses makes a valuable contribution to our broader understanding of digital activism under constraint. The book will be of particular interest to scholars of digital contention, platform politics, and mediated political participation, both within and beyond authoritarian contexts. By tracing the evolving dynamics across key political moments, it not only documents significant transformations on Persian Twitter but also lays the groundwork for comparative research across different geographies and digital platforms, as well as transnational studies examining global-local dynamics and external influences in digital politics.