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Religion, Identity and Politics in the Age of Communication and Information Technologies with Emphasis on Iran

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Abstract: *This article examines the concepts of religion, identity, and politics, as well as the concept of digital democracy and its impact on political participation in the information technology age. With the rapid growth of digital technologies and the expansion of online platforms, traditional forms of political participation have undergone fundamental changes that raise fundamental questions about the opportunities and threats to the progress of modern democracy. Opportunities such as increased access, facilitating communication between citizens and the government, greater transparency, and the participation of marginalized groups are examined. The role of technologies such as electronic voting, social media, blockchain, and artificial intelligence in improving democratic processes was considered. However, along with these opportunities, challenges such as the digital divide, the spread of misinformation, security risks, and privacy violations were also analyzed. Successful and unsuccessful case studies of the implementation of digital democracy in different countries, such as electronic voting and constitution writing through online participation, shed light on the practical dimensions of this phenomenon. Finally, the article emphasizes the need for smart policymaking, the development of media literacy, the protection of personal data, and the design of inclusive digital platforms to ensure that religion, culture, and identity are not compromised in the digital age. Continuous innovation, institutional adaptability, and collaboration between government, civil society, and technology companies are among the requirements for a successful transition to an inclusive, transparent, and sustainable digital democracy, although there is still a long way to go.*

Keywords: Religion, Identity, Culture, Politics, Communication and Information Technologies

INTRODUCTION

The public sphere, especially as defined by Habermas (1989), is a realm of social life in which citizens exchange information and opinions on all issues of concern and, by using rational and critical reasoning, contribute to the formation of public opinion and the development of

individual and collective identities, and in this way, develop their ability to influence the structure and functioning of government. The operationalization of ICT capabilities, especially the Internet, or in other words, practical programs for digital democracy, covers a very wide range, including: providing information and

services of government agencies in the Internet environment, online voting and opinion polls, strengthening the relationship between legislative assemblies and the public and civil society through strengthening two-way communications, strengthening the relationship between elected representatives and their constituencies through e-mail and teleconferencing, electoral campaigns, facilitating and encouraging two-way and active communication between and within the public and civil society with politicians and government agencies, educating and training informed and participatory citizens, and achieving a higher level of transparency and accountability.

Facilitating government-society interaction, in turn, leads to a strong, open, and accountable government and informed and empowered citizens, while facilitating intra-government interaction reduces the number of steps required to complete tasks and reduces costs (current, personnel, etc.), thereby increasing the efficiency of the administrative system. It is important to note that the term “providing information and services” also contains many complexities and can include different levels, which is a reflection of the great capabilities of ICTs, especially the facilities available on the Internet. (Montazer Ghaem, 2002: 227)

The expansion of cyberspace has made the sources of knowledge and factors influencing national identity in different societies more diverse and extensive than in the past, and the individuals of these societies have come to a new understanding of who they are; this has led to changes in the field of national identity of societies. Recent research in the field of cyberspace has paid special attention to the role of this space and its capabilities in the process of identifying individuals and social groups, and states that cyberspace, despite the opportunities and positive effects it creates in the field of identity, also creates challenges that can weaken the national identity of societies. In general, the vastness and pervasiveness of cyberspace and its fundamental effects have led to the formation, strengthening, and prominence of identity patterns other than national identities, namely transnational (modern) identities and subnational (ethnic) identities, and as a result, it has created uncertainty in determining and choosing preferences and priorities among the aforementioned identity levels, as well as identity gaps and conflicts, and has weakened national identity in many societies. Of course, in addition to this issue, it is possible to mention the formation of identities of resistance to the effects of globalization and cyberspace in a number of societies,

which is not within the scope of this research. The main point here is that Iran's national identity is also facing fundamental challenges arising from the globalization process and cyberspace and has been exposed to their widespread effects. In recent years, as a result of Iranians' confrontation with the aforementioned phenomena, many of them have been exposed to fundamental questions about who they are and their national identity. Today, national identity in different societies is facing fundamental challenges that, from the perspective of this research, have arisen as a result of the expansion of the globalization process. Globalization is a phenomenon that emerged from the mid-twentieth century onwards and has expanded in recent years. This phenomenon has been able to affect national identity in different societies through various means, of which cyberspace is one of the most important. (Rafi and Abbaszadeh, 2019: 86)

(Poole 2000, Woodward; 2003) In defining national identity, a distinction must be made between the national identity of the country and the national identity of the members of society. The national identity of the country is a set of material, biological, cultural and ideological signs and effects that distinguish nations and societies from each other. The national identity of the members of society is their

awareness and sense of belonging, commitment and loyalty to the national community and its constituent elements. In relation to the national identity of countries, we are faced with two general categories: national identities that were created in the modern era and were influenced by the emergence of national states and nationalist ideas in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Like most current countries in the world, and national identities that were formed centuries before the emergence of national states in Europe and have been able to maintain their stability, dynamism and existence throughout history. Such as Iran, China, Egypt and Greece. Another point regarding national identity is that this identity is not a fixed and unchangeable phenomenon or thing and is always subject to change and evolution due to various factors.

Globalization is a process that has changed and transformed the world economically, politically, culturally and socially; as a result of its formation and expansion, different regions, countries and individuals have become more dependent on each other, and any change and development in one corner of the world affects other regions, countries and individuals. The present article considers globalization as a process that has gradually shown its effects in various

areas, including national identity. This phenomenon has economic, political and cultural dimensions, and the focus of the article is on its cultural dimension.

The cultural dimension of globalization can be considered to include processes and factors that have modified any cultural limitations and closures of social life. (Idrisi, 2002:111) and has led to the expansion of global cultural communications and the globalization of the horizon of the human mind and vision. (Golmohammadi, 2002:10; Mir Mohammadi, 2002:11). The important point is that the presence of values and foundations of Western culture in the globalization process is more serious than other cultures, and this is what is referred to as the expansion of the central characteristics of modernity on a global scale. (Shahram Nia, 2002:151-158); In other words, the challenges arising from the globalization process and the globalization space can be considered an extension of modernity and the globalization of its characteristics. (Giddens, 1999; Giddens 1998a, Waters, 1999)

Cyberspace is a title for a new world emerging in the era of the emergence and expansion of new communication media, which has been prevalent in the world for no more than two or three decades (Hashemi Zadeh and Ansari Nasab, 2012:

71). Cyberspace is an electronic environment that enables human communication in fast and trans-geographic ways with specific tools and directly. Since it arises from invisible information, it takes different forms (Mir Mohammadi, 2012). The Internet, satellites, and mobile phone social networks are the main manifestations of cyberspace. Cyberspace has unique features such as: being digital, high capacity for storing information and freedom to disseminate it, being interactive, being imperceptible to physical distances, being global in space, being anonymous and unknown to users, not being limited to the civil laws of national governments, etc.

Being broad and comprehensive, being stable and dynamic, the need for governments to perform better, increasing the efficiency of international institutions and organizations, the emergence of digital currencies and challenging national and transnational currencies, being intertwined with governmental and non-governmental administrative systems, etc. are among the most important factors that make it necessary to recognize the effects of governance in the digital age. In addition, the status and importance of the present topic are such that some even use the title of digital governance, which can cause

challenges for the national sovereignty of governments.

METHOD

Among the works related to the discussion of cyber governance, of course, with an emphasis on the Iranian political system, is the book "Iran's Strategy Pillars in Digital Governance and Cyber Governance" published by the Strategic Studies Center's Strategy Book Publishing House in 2020, which is the result of the efforts of Behzad Ahmadi and Sima Rafsanjani-Nejad. This book is compiled in six parts.

This book is an extract from six meetings focusing on the topic of "Cyber Governance and the Strategy of the Islamic Republic of Iran" that took place at the Presidential Strategic Studies Center. In the first part, titled "Cyber Governance and the Strategy of the Islamic Republic of Iran", the most important events of the next decade in Iran in the field of communication and information technologies, the challenges in the field of cyber governance, and the possible solutions for creating optimal structures related to cyber governance are discussed. In the second part, with an emphasis on the impact of non-state and transnational actors, an attempt has been made to present the Iranian government's active activism solutions. This section, titled "Global

Governance of Cyberspace: Recommendations for Active Activism," emphasizes that exercising will in cyberspace is different from the governance model and concept of the modern state, and that the strong presence of non-state actors must be taken seriously and a very active policy must be adopted in cyberspace.

The third section is dedicated to the level of governance of governments in cyberspace. In this section, titled "Cyberspace as an Area of Governance: Tools and Requirements," the question of how and to what extent should government governance and intervention be? The notion that governments do not or should not have a role in the governance of cyberspace is rejected, and it is claimed that cyber governance is currently an accepted fact in the world. In the fourth section, titled "Governance of Technology and Cyberspace," topics such as explaining governance and its dimensions in cyberspace, introducing and examining approaches to developing cyberspace governance, and presenting requirements for maintaining and strengthening cyberspace governance in Iran in interaction with technological development are examined. In the fifth section, defending the national sovereignty of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the digital and Internet arenas is examined under the title

"Requirements of Iran's Strategy in Cyber Governance," and it is emphasized that today, the debate is no longer about whether cyber independence is good or bad, but rather the main issue is the extent and extent of this independence and the mechanism for monitoring it. In the sixth section, "E-government requirements and requirements in Iran" are considered, and the stages of e-government development are divided into "presence", "interaction", "transaction", "participation" and "active participation". The authors believe that the presence and interaction stage has occurred in Iran, but from the transaction stage onwards, we face problems and need to change the administrative paradigm and institutional thinking and structural transformation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Politics and the Digital Age

Governments will be able to succeed in the era of digital governance when they have the necessary and sufficient knowledge of its tools. In this regard, the book "Tools of Government in the Digital Age" by Christopher Hood and Helen Margaret's, published and marketed by Palgrave in 2007, can be used. The book can be considered more by government officials and macro-planners, because it covers all government activities and provides a comprehensive overview of the

tasks and functions of the government and seeks to answer the question of how much the use of digital technologies in government has changed the main tools of governments. In this book, the technical issues of e-government and information technology are not discussed, but rather the policy-making perspective on the issue of information technology and its impact on government tools is considered.

The authors of this work believe that this book has a scientific and clinical perspective (looking at solving problems and issues) and is not politically biased. Digital technologies in the present era have fundamentally transformed and changed all human relationships and do not pay attention to the principles of law and government. The main approach used in this book to analyze the digital age is to use the main components of control theory in cybernetics. By reading this book, we can understand more precisely how the tools of government in the digital age have differed from the previous era. The government as a toolbox, typology of government tools, main sources of government, tools close to the node, tools based on authority, tools based on treasury, organization as a tool, comparison of government tools, tools of government in the information age are among the most important topics in this book.

Understanding the tools can be of great help in creating good governance. The fact that the government is a tool for creating welfare is emphasized by many scholars and theorists, and major discussions have been held about it. With the acceptance of digital governance, one of the most important discussions that has taken place is how it can be approached to good and ideal governance by using the capacities of the digital age and creating e-government. Considering the importance of the subject, the book "E-Government and Good Organizational Governance" by Behzad Parsa Jelodarlo, published by Giva Publishing in 2016, has tried to address the ways of creating good governance. The main question of the book is how much the performance of organizational employees will improve by achieving desirable governance based on e-government. In fact, the main goal of the book is to examine the relationship between digital government and increasing employee productivity. The main emphasis of this book is on the Iranian administrative system and he believes that given that e-government is expanding in various social, economic, scientific, political, etc. fields, this approach, by eliminating or reducing many of the necessities that are inevitable in a non-digital government, can also take a positive step towards realizing the reform of the

consumption pattern. The author places special emphasis on good governance and basically considers its realization possible using new methods.

The world today is facing challenges that arise from the transformation resulting from the advancement of science and industry and the emergence of new organizational and social needs. One of the most important of these is the challenges facing the issue of religion and how to communicate with society. This issue, especially in developing countries, has gained a special place in the establishment and institutionalization of civil society from the Independent Commission on Good Governance. Good governance in this regard has indicators of result orientation, effectiveness of roles and duties, promotion of values, etc. "Government services are transparency, capacity building, and accountability, and it will not be possible to move towards meeting these indicators with conventional organizational structures and methods. Therefore, it is inevitable to resort to using new methods." Digital governance has been an event that has led to the creation of good governance, and the creation of this type of governance has been achieved using new technologies. Therefore, understanding new technologies and their effects on improving performance and services is one of the important and

influential topics in creating digital governance. "Digital Governance: Leading and Advancing in a Changing World of Technologies" is one of the books that addresses this issue. This book was edited by Jeremy Swinfen Green and Stephen Daniels and published by Routledge Publishing.

This book attempts to examine the opportunities and threats of digital technologies and provide managers of companies and organizations with better and more fundamental methods of using digital technologies. The concept of digital governance, digital governance strategy, managing rapid changes in the digital world, human resources in the digital age, information and cybersecurity, digital privacy, emerging digital technologies, etc. formed the main headings of this book. Studying the aforementioned books and understanding digital governance, the tools for creating this type of governance, examining the role of new technologies as tools, etc. is the background for understanding, studying, researching, etc. for exemplary research.

Also, the book "Iranian Management, Electronic State Governance" is one of the books that has been discussed in an exemplary manner. This book is one of the volumes of the book "Iranian Management" that deals with the subject of electronic state

governance. This book was published by a group of authors and edited by Ali Asghar Pourezat in 2014 by Scientific and Cultural Publications and, with a historical perspective, considers Iran to be the founder of electronic government. The authors of this work believe that Iran, as the founder of the first empire and communication system, was a pioneer in accelerating communications and developing communication networks in ancient times; and now, in line with that ancient tradition, it is seeking to redevelop the national capacity to employ information technology in the administration of the country in order to introduce a powerful, fast, accurate and service-oriented administration to its future generations; therefore, it is striving to redevelop its religion, identity, law, economy, ethics and administrative technology in order to put the knowledge of organization and administration in the service of achieving a bright future.

The first and second chapters of the book are dedicated to introductory discussions related to the nature of e-government and how to establish it, in the form of the basics and introductions section. The third to sixth chapters are dedicated to the dimensions and features of software and hardware desirable for the development of e-government and the strategic infrastructure for the development

of virtual parks, e-government metaphors, and the analysis of important literature. The following chapters also deal with electronic human resource management, the future of the e-government concept, the history of e-government in Iran, and so on. The author considers e-government to be a product of human civilization, a social reality that develops dynamically and flexibly. From a phenomenological perspective, he considers e-government to be the product of all the criticisms and developments that have occurred in the field of bureaucracy. Developments that transformed simple organizations into bureaucracies and them into numerous and diverse types of machine-like, professional bureaucracy. (Abdel-Hossein Zadeh, 2010: 375)

Information technology has led to the formation of revolutions in all areas of human life. Especially with the implementation of smart and networked software on mobile phones, the fourth industrial revolution was formed. In the 21st century, actions such as buying, voting, participating in surveys, investing, obtaining various licenses, sending messages via Twitter, filming, etc. became possible with mobile phones. The new generation of information technology, which is equipped with 5G, artificial intelligence, and the Internet of Things, has set a very different future for humanity.

One of the vital areas of human life is the area of power, conflicts, and political organization, which was organized in the modern era based on the mechanical logic of the national government; a national government that was formed based on the balance of bureaucracy and democracy. Domestic and foreign policy in the modern era was formed based on national interests and interests based on the mechanical logic of balance and check. (Eslami, 2023: 6).

Digital Democracy

In this section, we will comprehensively examine the concept of digital democracy and its impact on political participation in the information technology era. With the rapid growth of digital technologies and the expansion of online platforms, traditional forms of political participation have undergone fundamental changes that raise fundamental questions about the opportunities and threats facing modern democracy. Opportunities such as increased access, facilitating communication between citizens and the government. Greater transparency and participation of marginalized groups are examined, and electronic voting, social media, blockchain and artificial intelligence are considered in improving democratic processes. Along with these opportunities, challenges such as the

digital divide. The spread of misinformation. Security risks and privacy violations are also examined. Successful and unsuccessful case examples of the implementation of digital democracy in different countries. Such as electronic voting and writing the constitution through online participation clarify the practical dimensions of this phenomenon. (Khaleghi pour, 2024: 61)

With the emergence of the information society and the contribution of emerging technologies in advancing the goals of societies and meeting individual and social needs in various fields, the model of democracy was not exempt from the developments of this era and took on a new nature. This democracy is called "digital democracy".

A wide range of new ideas believe that the capacities of information and communication technology in the modern era strengthen democracy. (Mehdizadeh and Shifteh, 2018). The author's arguments for the "digital democracy" model, considering the criteria of participatory decision-making in political society, including social cognition, public awareness, the power of free choice, and freedom of expression in platform societies and digital platforms, are: (1) The nature of the interaction and the convergence of relationships, as well as the capacity for multilateral communications in

cyberspace, increase the scope of citizens' exposure to content produced in cyberspace and strengthen public awareness. (2) The networked nature of relationships, facilitating the exchange of information, and the continuous flow of data in cyberspace promote public knowledge and social awareness. (3) Wide access to various sources and the high speed of providing information in cyberspace lead to an increase in citizens' decision-making power. (4) The distribution of power, the increase in the power of free choice, and the horizontalization of relationships in cyberspace lead to the reduction of class gaps, the formation of equality, the strengthening of freedom of expression, and the strengthening of the spirit of social activism. (5) Digital platforms are among the most powerful virtual ecosystems that mankind has ever created. Platforms provide the benefits of digitalization to the masses on a global scale. Therefore, the masses are involved in various political, social, and economic issues and topics in different fields and gain the ability to intervene publicly.

In the initial and apparent confrontation with the opinions of scholars in the field of "digital democracy", their arguments are indisputable. However, the analysis and study of virtual ecosystems and their impact on different dimensions of

the social field provide different results from the reality of digital democracy.

Criticism of the phenomenon of digital democracy

As the world entered the 21st century and the emergence of online platforms in information societies began, a new concept of people's ability to communicate with each other online and network relationships beyond the dimensions of space and time was developed, and a wide range of methods were invented to realize this idea. Although it seemed that the emergence of digital platforms in this era would strengthen public participation and, consequently, democracy, it also created obstacles to the realization of democracy, and this was a prelude to the emergence of a major threat to democracy.

Explaining how online platforms and platforms are a threat to democracy requires understanding the pillars and characteristics of platforms. To this end, we considered two aspects of understanding and the impact of platform algorithms and the characteristics of social networks on democracy as the main topics for criticizing this phenomenon.

The impact of platform algorithms on democracy

The structure of platforms includes three main elements: the platform owner, the supplier side, and the demand side. By

designing various algorithms, including search algorithms, content ranking algorithms, user behavior recognition algorithms (Walt, 2018), etc., the platform owner tries to direct “functional services” and “content” from the supplier to the demander in the best possible conditions. On the other hand, the platform owner, through his ability to design the platform ecosystem, is able to intervene in the process of content exchange and its direction. Just as algorithms can facilitate the transfer and circulation of content and information, they can also be used beyond their original function and towards predetermined goals through the will of the platform owner in designing that algorithm.

User Behavior Recognition Algorithm

One of the interventions of platforms that leads to damage to democracy and deviates from its free nature is the use of the “user behavior recognition algorithm” capability in the direction of the platform owner's will. This algorithm is able to analyze users' texts and, by examining users' behavior, discover their preference patterns and behavioral patterns. Therefore, this algorithm can shift society's preferences in a certain direction by changing the content efficiency, limit the information and data received by users, and draw awareness to users in a

predetermined direction, leading to user deception.

User Deception Algorithm

In another example of algorithm design, platform owners can use other algorithms, called “deception algorithms” of communication and information platforms, to increase the efficiency of the platforms. Deception algorithms can occur in two stages: “search” and “content suggestion” (Dong, 2021). When a user searches for content or when a platform suggests content, these algorithms direct users to the content the platform wants by placing content that does not match the user’s search request, and the flow of information and awareness is diverted from its main track. In this situation, by providing false content and information, the power of the criterion of “freedom of opinion and choice” of democracy weakens in society.

The Effect of Social Networks on Democracy

Promoting Fake and Extremist News

Given the widespread flow of information on social networks, another profound impact of platforms, especially social networks and digital media, on people's decision-making is the replacement of reliable information sources with fake and extremist news, and the influence of intrusive advertising. This

means that the need for interests can lead popular social networks to secretly spread fake news, misinformation, or targeted advertising in line with their established goals, which leads to a decrease in the quality of public discourse (Rakani, 1402).

Polarization of political discourse

Some of the characteristics of social networks and their impact on democracy are derived from the laws governing the network. One of the network laws, called the law of small worlds, deals with relationships and connections between users. This law claims that users of cyberspace on social networks are connected to each other through only six intermediaries. In this phenomenon, users are grouped into clusters with strong ties and have access to distant individuals in other clusters through long and often weak ties (Van Dijk, 1401, p. 98).

Due to the feature of user clustering and the creation of strong and extensive ties, users can live in different groups and clusters according to their desires, characteristics, and will. This feature of digital media and social networks can play a significant role in the polarization of political discourse. For example, the social network Twitter, which is designed to promote interaction and polyphony, but due to the feature of user clustering and grouping, users interact more with those

who share their views than listen to opposing views. In this situation, people on both sides of the political spectrum are more likely to see those who disagree with them as enemies, rather than citizens with different opinions (Hizb Elahi, 1400). In these circumstances, social networks become a platform for the polarization of political discourses.

Increasing social divide

Although the owners of social networks claim that in the information age, with the distribution of power among users and the networking of relationships, all users gain power equally, it must be acknowledged that social networks, due to their celebrity-making nature and the creation of a basis for the entry of influential actors, have deepened the social divide and have in fact designed a space for the boycott and non-recognition of different viewpoints and the reduction of diversity of viewpoints.

Plurality of identity

Given the plurality of different communities in cyberspace and the simultaneous membership of users in several communities, their identities become plural and the phenomenon of identity fragmentation emerges. Due to the plurality of identities in cyberspace, common values and principles in territories also become plural. Plurality in identity

causes users not to consider themselves to belong to geographical boundaries and to define their identity in global dimensions. In these circumstances, the division in self-definition (identity) weakens national unity and undermines democracy.

CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of the Internet and its development in the modern era have brought about profound changes in various fields. The emerging phenomenon of democracy could not be spared from the changes caused by the digital revolution and the emergence of digital societies. The transition from traditional societies to digital societies forced both enthusiasts and critics of the digital revolution to examine and evaluate the emerging phenomenon of digital democracy. Enthusiasts believe that with the development of social networks and digital media, the phenomenon of popular participation is becoming the main pillar of assumptions about how religion and culture function. They also believe that the power of the Internet is a force for democracy and globalization and an end to the monopoly of information and centralized control over communications.

On the other hand, critics of digital democracy believe that the Internet promotes ignorance as much as it produces knowledge. Eli Barisar, a scholar in this

field, also believes that Internet users are increasingly and often unconsciously entering a personal world that reinforces their known tendencies, while this feature separates each user from the common grounds needed for democratic society and politics and in a threatening and worrying way deprives us of the driving force to understand and acquire new ideas (Mohammad Nejad, 2016: 19)

Critics argue that entering social media, which are primarily presented as participatory platforms, has significantly increased loneliness and plunges people into illusions, the boundary between true and false information is destroyed, and reality is produced and disseminated in an atmosphere full of ambiguity. In this situation, information can be produced and distributed based on predetermined and personalized goals. Given the importance of correct information in decision-making, digital democracy produces its own opposite and weakens real democracy in societies. Iran, as a developing country, is no exception to these rules, and information and communication technology has had a significant impact on all aspects of Iran, including religion, culture, identity, and politics.

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