

Saturday, 27 June 2009

## "Human rights" software allows Iranians to combat censorship Canadian software helps Iran dissidents connect



[Psiphon opens new pathways in order to access blocked content](#)

OTTAWA (Al Arabiya, AFP)

Western governments may not be interfering in Iranian internal affairs, but western technology companies certainly are.

The latest case of a private firm getting involved in Iran's post-election controversy comes from a Canadian lab that developed software to circumvent online censorship. It has been downloaded by more than 18,000 Iranians in the last 10 days, according to its developer.

A thirst for online freedom in Iran, as well as in China, Myanmar and other authoritarian hotspots, has led to a sudden proliferation of all technologies designed to overcome curbs on news and social networking Internet sites.

"This speaks to the hunger for access to information when it's being denied," Rafal Rohozinsk, developer of the new "human rights" software Psiphon, told AFP.

His is the latest in a string of efforts from companies like Google, Facebook and Twitter that launched Persian translation services, put maintenance delays on hold or otherwise made decisions based on what was happening in Iran.

Iranians angered by the results of the country's presidential election that returned hardline incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to power have been using social and media sites such as Facebook, Flickr and Twitter to communicate and organize.

They have also been posting videos of violent post-election protests and clashes to video-sharing sites such as YouTube.

But more and more, Tehran has fought back by blocking access to news and social networking Internet sites.

### "Human rights" software

Psiphon overcomes this by punching thousands of tiny holes in computer firewalls and opening new pathways in order to access blocked content.

If a user wishes to view a blocked BBC News website, for example, Psiphon enables them to link to a proxy to view the content. If censors shut down this access, a new access window opens up, and so on.

It is "human rights software," said Rohozinski, who also recently helped uncover a shadowy cyber-espionage network based mostly in China that had infiltrated government and private computers around the world.

The network, known as GhostNet, infected 1,295 computers in 103 countries and penetrated systems containing sensitive information in top political, economic and media offices, researchers at Toronto's Citizen Lab said in March.

### Worrisome trend

The idea for Psiphon emerged out of a project launched by Toronto, Cambridge, Harvard and Oxford universities to track Internet censorship.

"We found an exponentially rising curve of countries seeking to control content on the Internet," Rohozinski explained.

"Authoritarian states are increasingly taking note of the Internet as a communication medium and a mode of organizing opposition, and therefore they're going out of their way to try to control it," he said. "The trend was worrisome and so we started on a way to counter these efforts."

New Media services like Twitter, YouTube and Flickr have come into their own amid massive unrest in Iran as a young generation of advocates defied state censorship by tweeting news and posting rare footage and images on YouTube and Flickr as the government clamped down on foreign media and shut phone networks in an effort to gain control over coverage.

Iran's controls are not as pervasive as China's, he noted, but Tehran is clearly stepping up its online censorship.

Of late, world leaders have expressed growing concern over Iran's brutal crackdown on dissidents. Canada has been among the most vocal, outright rejecting Iran's call to "stay out" of its internal politics.

Last week, Canada's charge d'affaires was reportedly berated by Tehran over what Iranian authorities believed was Ottawa's support for Rohozinski's "efforts to spread insurrection in Iran" with his software.

Rohozinski denied any direct government ties, but his first clients include the BBC and the U.S. Broadcasting Board of Governors, which is responsible for Voice of America and the Arabic satellite channel al-Hurra.

On Thursday, U.S. senators vowed to help Iran's opposition defeat restrictions on news and the social networking Internet sites, as well as boost funding for U.S.-backed radio news broadcasts into Iran.

"We want the Iranian people to be able to stay one step ahead of the Iranian regime, getting access to information and safely exercising freedom of speech and freedom of assembly online," said independent senator Joe Lieberman.