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## PROTESTING IS NOT EVERYTHING: ANALYZING TWITTER USE DURING ELECTORAL EVENTS IN NON-DEMOCRATIC CONTEXTS

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### ABSTRACT

Despite the fact that during political protests, Twitter usage has been substantially studied in various contexts, there are still some significant gaps in our understanding of the ways that this microblogging network is employed in regular political happenings, e.g., elections, particularly in authoritarian countries. As a result, it remains unclear if citizens in non-democratic countries use Twitter to protest at the time of regular political events as the time of uprisings or not. This investigation tries to address this gap by providing some empirical evidence from the Iranian Twittersphere during the 2017 presidential election. Having employed networked framing theory, we combined textual and network analytic approaches to investigate a sample of 10,416 tweets of the most influential users in the retweet (RT) network. Findings demonstrate that Iranian users did not significantly challenge the regime and power relations in Iran. They framed the election in a non-critical way dealing with routine political and election frays and debates. They also preferred to attack politicians rather than discuss contentious and deliberate politics. Thus, this research reveals that Twitter is not always a tool for protesting against non-democratic regimes. At the time of electoral events, it could be used as an ordinary communication platform.

Keywords: Twitter activism, Iran, Networked framing, Election campaigns.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Since Twitter has become an inseparable part of contemporary politics, it has been substantially studied in recent years both in democratic and non-democratic countries. The first wave of research into Twitter activism revolved around a series of political unrests aiming to change and overthrow some of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) dictatorships. Iran's 2009 Green Movement and Arab Spring protest arguably motivated this line of studies. Discovering the promising potential of Twitter for political causes, dissident citizens employed this microblogging platform to mobilize protests, coordinate their actions, broadcast the movement, seek solidarity, and forge linkage between local and international protesters in these early cases (Howard & Hussain, 2013; Zizi Papacharissi & De Fatima Oliveira, 2012; Ruijgrok, 2017; Tufekci, 2017; Wojcieszak & Smith, 2013; Wolfsfeld et al., 2013).

Twitter use in western democracies to challenge the governments' injustice and unfair social policies also received notable scholarly attention to date. As early examples of employing Twitter to protest in democratic contexts, the #occupy movement in United States (Zizi Papacharissi, 2014; Penney & Dadas, 2014), and 15-M Movement (#15M) in Spain (González-Bailón et al., 2011; Peña-López et al., 2014; Reinecke & Ansari, 2021) have been at the center of attention for years. In recent years, scholars also investigated how people use hashtags like #blacklivesmatters and #metoo to shape movements against different types of sociopolitical injustice (Jackson et al., 2020; Li et al., 2020; Linabary et al., 2020).

Besides its significant impact on political unrest, Twitter also plays a key role in more regular events such as elections (Jungherr, 2017). The ways that candidates, parties, and political strategists in western countries employ Twitter during election periods have been studied to a great extent. Twitter provides politicians with new and more efficient ways to rethink their campaigning strategies (Vergeer & Hermans, 2013), communicate with their voters in a fast, direct, horizontal, and interactive way (Rauchfleisch & Metag, 2015), enhance their publicity and measure their popularity (Jackson and Lilleker, 2011), engage in public discussions of ongoing sociopolitical events (Guerrero-solé, 2018), and to connect to and have discussions with their local and foreign fellows (Hwang, 2013; Plotkowiak & Stanoevska-Slabeva, 2013).

On the contrary, there are not many studies on how Twitter is used in electoral events in non-democratic societies. As we discussed above, the main body of research focused on Twitter in political upheavals and protests in authoritarian regimes. The existing literature emphasizes that people in authoritarian countries use Twitter mainly to show their

disagreement with the regimes and shape counter-narratives and discourses (Ems, 2014; Howard & Hussain, 2013; Kidd & McIntosh, 2016; Zizi Papacharissi, 2014).

But what about Twitter at the time of regular political happenings? Do people still utilize it to protest against the regimes? Or does it work as a normal communication venue at the time of elections designated for electoral debates and discussions? What are the similarities and differences with Twitter at the time of electoral events in established democracies? These questions have remained unanswered due to the existing gap in our understanding of how social media is used and worked in authoritarian regimes at times when there is no unrest.

This paper seeks to address this gap by focusing on the Iranian Twittersphere (Persian twitter) during the period surrounding Iran's 2017 presidential election. Iran is a non-democratic country where Twitter is seemingly of high popularity. In line with the existing literature on Twitter in authoritarian regimes, Iran-oriented Twitter research is also mainly focused on its usage during political protests (Ansari, 2012; Carafano, 2009; Moghanizadeh, 2013; Morozov, 2009). Nonetheless, the 2017 presidential election provides a convenient case to conduct this study. It was indeed, a time when there was no protest occurring in the country. Eight years after the contested 2009 election, all candidates were competing to win the election in an electoral atmosphere that resembled a normal democracy, at least on its surface. Therefore, investigating Twitter activism in the 2017 Iranian presidential election has enabled us to enhance our knowledge of the ways that this social medium is used at the time of regular events in authoritarian regimes.

This paper is organized as follows. First, we discuss Twitter activism in the political landscape of Iran in recent years. Then, networked framing is introduced as the theoretical basis of this inquiry. This will be followed by explaining how a network analytic approach was combined with some textual and qualitative methods to reach a close and distant reading (Moretti, 2005) of a tweet corpus of 2,596,284 tweets, having already been gathered during the 2017 election. Having identified the most influential users in the network, we will qualitatively analyze their tweets to explore what frames they dominated during 2017 election. Investigating these frames will help us understand the Twitter role in a non-protest event in Iran as a non-democratic society. This will be discussed in the discussion section.

## 1.1 Twitter and politics in Iran

While Twitter has become an important communication channel almost everywhere, its role in non-democratic contexts like Iran is even more significant. Twitter works as another vehicle for Western citizens to share their ideas and engage in public discussions (Zeng, 2020). But in authoritarian contexts, it is something more than that. In a restrictive context<sup>1</sup> like Iran, people lack free media and encounter many limitations in sharing their ideas freely and with no fear (Koo, 2017). Twitter, in this limited space, provides citizens with a free medium to circumvent the state's barriers and so-called 'red-lines' (Christensen, 2011; Elson, Yeung, Roshan, Bohandy, & Nader, 2012). Of course, people need to employ VPNs to use Twitter as it is blocked in Iran, but once they log in, the state cannot control or monitor them in direct and violent ways anymore<sup>2</sup>.

The proliferation of Twitter in Iran goes back to the contested 2009 presidential election and the nationwide protests following it, known as the Green Movement. Twitter facilitated those uprisings by enabling dissident citizens to build networks, coordinate protests, spread information, and seek external support (Wojcieszak & Smith, 2013). It is worthwhile to say that Twitter was blocked by the Iranian regime, at the very beginning of these upheavals. However, its blockage was not enough to discourage people to use it or to lessen its political effectiveness. Iranian users have continued utilizing Twitter through circumvention tools since.

Moreover, despite the fact that we have no exact data about the number of Twitter users in Iran and their demographic information, mostly because of its blockage and lack of official statistics, this microblogging network has become part of Iranians' everyday practices. Additionally, it can be arguably said that Twitter has a portion of loyal and permanent users if the size of its users is less than other social platforms like Telegram and Instagram in Iran. In addition, Marchant et al., (2018) argue that the content of other social media is implanted by Twitter. As such, Twitter notably leads the flow of information and discussions in other social media in Iran.

Moreover, the popularity of Twitter has been increasing in recent years in different social and political groups (Kermani and Tafreshi, 2022; Azadi and Mesgaran, 2021). Iran is a non-democratic regime that is ruled

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<sup>1</sup> In this study, the term "restrictive contexts" is used to describe societies ruled by authoritarian regimes. Scholars have used various terms in referring to non-democratic societies, such as "illiberal," "authoritarian," "restrictive," "coercive," and "closed". Here, we use "authoritarian" and "restrictive" interchangeably to describe non-democratic social contexts.

<sup>2</sup> In recent years, authoritarian regimes develop more complicated ways to monitor social media and lead the flow of discussions like operating cyber armies or disseminating fake news. Nonetheless, they are still far from controlling users in direct and suppressive ways as they do it with official media.

by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader. The domestic political system is comprised of two major competing forces: reformists and conservatives. In addition to these main camps, there is a body of Iranians who have migrated from Iran mainly in the years following the 1979 revolution to date, a diaspora community. Of course, these labels like any other label are general and do not represent the real contradictory and messy political landscape in Iran. Nevertheless, they are useful for the purpose of this study since they give us a general understanding of the major forces competing over power in Iran. We do not aim to investigate the multi-layered and complex political sphere in Iran.

While they declare their loyalty to the revolution and the supreme leader, reformists advocate some changes in the state's policies and norms. For instance, they demand more freedom for women and the press. On the contrary, conservatives are strict in executing Islamic rules as well as maintaining the revolution's principles like anti-Western viewpoints. Supported by the leader, conservatives are the more powerful political force in Iran. Unlike these domestic camps, the diaspora community has almost no direct and official role in Iran's politics, but they have a clear and notable presence in the public sphere particularly with powerful media operated outside Iran. Having defined itself outside formal and official boundaries, the Iranian diaspora is mainly against the regime policies and tries to subvert the political system. Whilst reformists in political activism and sharing their ideas are not as free as conservatives, they have had the majority on social media from Facebook to Twitter in Iran. Several pieces of research reveal that reformist users were the main force in Persian Twitter in the 2013 presidential and 2016 parliamentary elections (Khazraee, 2019; Marchant et al., 2016, 2018).

Twitter also provides a channel through which Iranian people living abroad can engage in political discussions in more direct and effective ways (Khazraee, 2019; Marchant et al., 2018). Since they do not reside in Iran and are deprived of managing news media inside the country, Twitter plays a significant role for them to remain in the circle. Before that, the role of the diaspora community was restricted to some satellite TV networks. As such, ordinary diaspora people did not have any communicative channel to involve within the domestic political sphere.

Unlike Western democracies where all political parties are free in political participation, Twitter is mainly the sole chance for many dissident Iranians and groups to raise their voice and shape counter-discourses and narratives. In what is known as Tweetstorms, users promote some hashtags supporting political prisoners, for example, #saveArash and #FreeOmid. (Arash Sadeghi and Omid Kokabi were two such prisoners.), showing their outrage against the regime's brutality such as #Don'tExecute, or advocating

social demands like #buyVaccine during the Covid-19 pandemic (Kermani, 2020).

While these two groups had been using Twitter more effectively for political orientations traditionally, conservatives were also joining this microblogging network on a big scale during the years leading to the 2017 election (Kermani & Adham, 2021, Azadi & Mesgaran, 2021; Marchant et al., 2018). After several years of denial and denouncement, conservatives decided to play a more significant role on Twitter not to allow anti-regime users, whether reformist or diaspora, to dominate the network anymore (Bowen, 2017). This emphasizes the importance of Twitter in Iran. It was not possible for hardliners to neglect the impact of Twitter on political events. In addition, the presence of conservative groups makes Twitter a more realistic portrayal of the political landscape in Iran. In previous incidents, a big part of the political context in Iran was missing as conservatives were absent in the network to a notable level. Kermani and Adham (2021) show that all main forces were active on this network in the 2017 election. Thus, analyzing Twitter is a convenient way to understand the vibrancies and dynamics of political transformation in Iran. In democratic countries, all political parties are participating in political events with no restrictions. Thus, researchers can also focus on traditional news media to analyze political competitions. Such an approach is not efficient in Iran since diaspora users are completely absent from the political landscape, and reformists encounter many restrictions in using news media.

Furthermore, Iranian politicians and authorities, in particular conservative figures, have been joining Twitter in recent years. For instance, the office of Ali Khamenei operates three accounts in Farsi, English, and Arabic languages. Also, Iranian presidents and ministers manage their own accounts. Mohammad Javad Zarif, the ex-minister of foreign affairs, using Twitter during nuclear negotiations in 2015 and after that is a famous example of employing this network to advocate Iran's policies and connect with non-Iranian people. Also, he has the most followed account on Persian Twitter with more than 1.6 M followers. Other hardliners such as Ali Larijani, the ex-president of parliament, have their account in this blocked social medium in Iran. All these facts highlight the effectiveness of Twitter in Iran.

In the 2017 presidential election, Iranian users galvanized around their candidates with different political affiliations on Twitter for the first time in Iran's modern history (Marchant et al., 2018). The real battle during the 2017 presidential election happened between reformists and conservatives. In the beginning, six candidates competed in that election: Hasan Rouhani (the president), Eshagh Jahangiri (the vice president), Ebrahim Raisi, Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf (the mayor of Tehran), Mostafa Hashemi-

Taba, and Mostafa Mir-Salim. In terms of political affiliation, Rouhani and Jahangiri represented the Reform party, Raisi and Ghalibaf were supported by conservatives, and Hashemi-Taba and Mir-Salim were independent candidates. However, before Election Day, Jahangiri and Ghalibaf withdrew in favor of Rouhani and Raisi, respectively, and the actual competition was between Rouhani and Raisi<sup>3</sup>. All of the candidates employed Twitter in their campaigns to spread their plans and slogans.

The 2017 election is of interest from another perspective. It was a time when no protest was happening in the country. After the 2009 Green Movement, there was not any notable nationwide protest, mostly because of the harsh violence and high level of suppression. Thus, the 2017 presidential election in Iran is a convenient case to explore how regular political events are framed in non-democratic countries by elites and ordinary users. Accordingly, we exploit the theory of networked framing to study this phenomenon

## 1.2 Networked framing in the Twitter era

Bennett & Segerberg (2012) discussed how the old forms of collective action has been transformed into new forms of connective action, as a result of the emergence and prevalence of personalized digitally frames, called Personal Action Frames (PAFs), on Twitter. PAFs arise from internalized or personalized ideas, plans, images, and resources, and are generally easy to share (p. 36). This concept implies that users frame events based on their own beliefs and desires regardless of organizational and group interests. PAF is created and shaped in a process in which users collaboratively and perpetually select, comment, share and even change the events. Meraz & Papacharissi (2013) conceptualized this process as networked framing.

Framing is a well-established theory in media studies to investigate how covered events are represented in news stories (Entman, 1993). In a most referred definition, Entman (1993) stated: 'to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described' (p. 52). Framing theory claims that the way news reports characterize an issue will influence how the audience understands that issue (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). This theory focuses only on how news reports' portrayals of an issue influence audience, without accounting for the role of audiences in framing construction (Galarza Molina, 2019; Jiang et al., 2016).

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<sup>3</sup> For more information on Iran's 2017 presidential election, see Marchant et al. (2018).

However, the emergence of social media that has generated a context of “socially mediated publicness” (Baym & boyd, 2012) weakened and curbed the news media’s power to determine how major events are publicly interpreted (Pöyhtäri et al., 2021). As produsers (Bruns, 2008), users can have a decisive role in gatekeeping, framing, and storytelling on social media. Thus, a new type of framing which is not as mass media frames, cascading, vertical, restrictive, and organization centered shaped. Networked framing is more horizontal, interactive, and based on users’ activities and interactions. Meraz and Papacharissi (2013) understand networked framing as a process whereby actors take the information circulating and add their own layers of information, knowledge, beliefs, and experiences to it. Here, the concept of PAF emerges. In fact, Twitter frames are personal ‘interpretive packages’ (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989) having been formed by ordinary users, not necessarily elites, regardless of their group identity or organizational bonds. Users can give more prominence to given news stories, views, or interpretations through activities such as linking, liking, sharing, and retweeting (Pöyhtäri et al., 2021). Unlike the static and permanent nature of mass media frames, Twitter frames are persistently revised, rearticulated, and redispersed by both crowd and elite (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013). It is the result of interaction between elites and crowds in networked publics (boyd, 2010) to generate dominant frames that shape the form of news narratives.

Networked framing provides a convenient theoretical basis to study how users tune into social and political incidents on Twitter. We exploit this theory to understand Twitter usage in the 2017 Iranian presidential election. Through the lens of dominant frames during this election, we can understand how citizens in non-democratic societies use Twitter during regular political events.

## 2 METHOD

We followed a mixed-method approach in this study, combining social network analysis (SNA) with two textual analytic methods (Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (SM-CDS) and Ethnographic Content Analysis (ECA)). Researchers offered using qualitative and manual content analyses in line with computational methods to overcome the fallacies and weaknesses of automated approaches (Lecheler et al., 2020; Wonneberger et al., 2020). Therefore, we employed SNA to identify the main communities and the most influential users while we relied on human coders to investigate more complicated rhythms and dynamics of networked framing.



## 2.1 Data collection, social network, and textual analyses

Between 1 May 2017 and 25 May 2017, we collected 2,596,284 tweets employing Twitter REST-API directly. Since the election was held on 19 May 2017, it was a convenient timeframe to capture the most important and ongoing debates and conversations. We started collecting data by some initial hashtags and keywords including candidates' names and their campaign slogans as well as some general terms like #Election96, #Election<sup>4</sup>, etc. Then, we monitored Persian Twitter every day for emerging keywords and hashtags and added them to our list. At the end of this process, we had a total of 94 keywords and hashtags. Since we aimed to analyze Persian tweets, we just used hashtags and keywords in Farsi<sup>5</sup>.

Having removed non-Farsi tweets and duplications, we extracted the retweet (RT) network as the main network of content sharing (Bruns & Stieglitz, 2013). RT network consisted of 1,208,723 tweets, with 62,633 nodes and 713,696 edges. Then, we conducted a cluster analysis on the RT network to identify the main communities. The Louvain method has been employed in many studies as one of the most efficient methods in the community detection (Blondel et al., 2008). Our community detection resulted in three main clusters: reformists, conservatives, and the Iranian diaspora. We will discuss them in more detail in the next section. Also, we should mention that we removed botnets and automated accounts from this analysis. Since we aimed to understand how Iranian citizens framed the election, it was reasonable to remove bots.

Next, we used the PageRank centrality (Easley & Kleinberg, 2010) to identify the top 50 influential users in each cluster. We draw on the theory of networked framing focusing on the most influential users. Networked framing implies that it is social media users, regardless of their organizational and group interests in the real world, who are co-working in shaping frames on Twitter. In line with Papacharissi & De Fatima Oliveira (2012) and Cherepnalkoski & Mozetič (2016), we argue that the top users in the RT network are probably leading the flow of content and are responsible for making some frames salient and marginalizing others. As Meraz & Papacharissi (2013) emphasize the top users in RT network could be ordinary citizens or elites in the real world, we will also discuss it in the next section. Networked framing is the process of collaboration between these users in framing political events. Henceforth, the most influential users in the RT network of Persian Twitter had probably a critical role in the networked framing of the 2017 presidential election.

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<sup>4</sup> In Farsi: #انتخابات\_96، #انتخابات

<sup>5</sup> A sample of hashtags and keywords is provided in App. 1.

Having extracted all of the top users' tweets (n= 31,098 tweets), we analyzed and coded the top users and a random sample of their tweets. Based on Cochran's formula for calculating the sample size of a finite population, we choose a representative sample of 10,416 tweets randomly<sup>6</sup>. We employed two coders to iteratively code the sample in two consecutive rounds based on Saldaña's provisional and pattern coding methods (Saldaña, 2015). The coding process aimed to identify the emerging themes in data based on our model of textual interpretations. We used Krippendorff's alpha to measure the intercoders' reliability (Lombard et al., 2002) after the final close step. All scores were significantly satisfying with a minimum of .91. Since levels above .8 are generally considered sufficient, the codes are reliable.<sup>7</sup>

A combination of SM-CDS (KhosraviNik, 2017) and ECA (Altheide & Schneider, 2013) inspired the coding process. This combination enabled us to analyze the networked frames on Twitter qualitatively and quantitatively. An SM-CDS model includes horizontal context substantiation (p. 585), which deals with the intertextuality among textual practices, and vertical context substantiation, which links both the micro-features of textual analysis and horizontal context to the socio-political context of users in society (i.e., the societal discourses-in-place: the 'thick' context). SM-CDS provides us with a convenient approach to investigating the fluid, changeable, and non-static nature, location, and dynamic of the discursive power in social media. In order to enrich our model, we connected SM-CDS horizontal axis with ECA.

ECA, according to Altheide & Schneider (2013), is a mixed-methods approach used for documenting and explaining the communication of meaning, as well as for verifying theoretical relationships. All its steps are reflexive and circular, and it considers the data not only as numbers but also as narratives. This method combines quantitative content analysis with participant observation to offer a qualitative approach to document analysis (Barnard, 2016). Our model has a significant capability to investigate in-text features and examine its connections with sociopolitical narratives and discourses. As such, it enables an analysis of networked framing and power structure relations in Iran.

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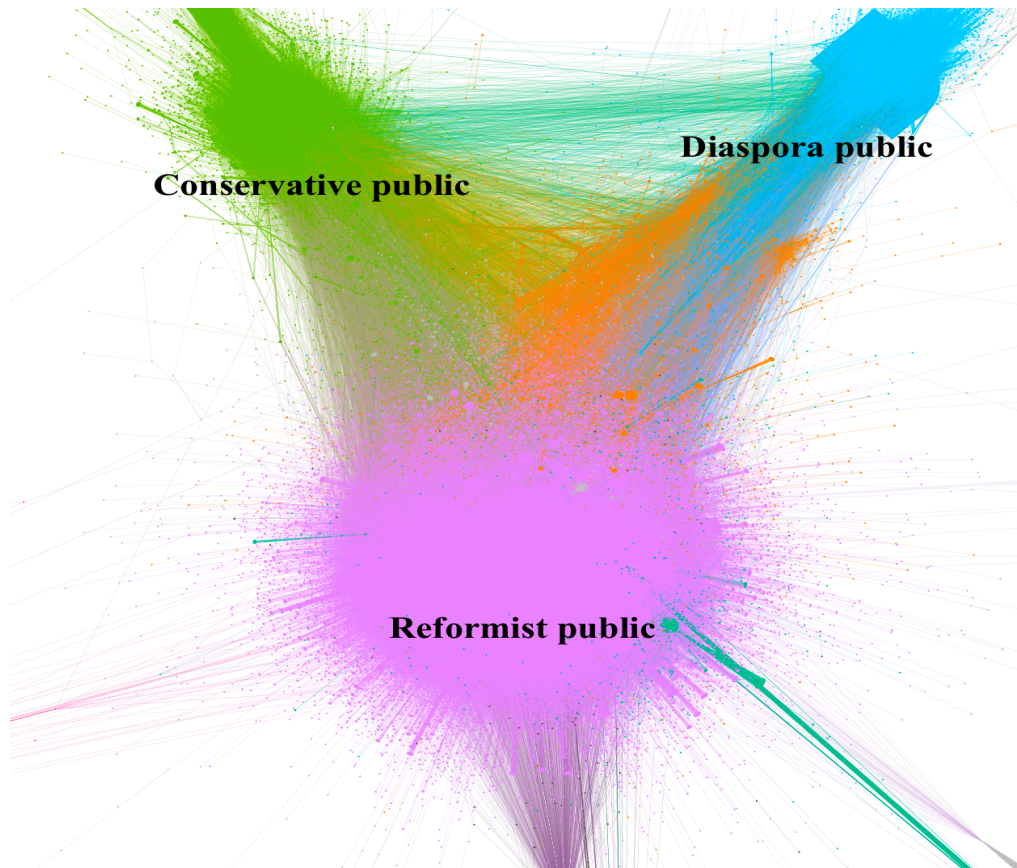
<sup>6</sup> App. 2.a presents more information about the sampling method.

<sup>7</sup> More explanations into the coding procedure are provided in app. 2.b.

### 3 RESULTS

#### 3.1 Network analysis

Three main networked publics emerged on Persian Twitter during the period surrounding the 2017 election: reformist, conservative, and the Iranian diaspora. The reformist community was the biggest cluster in the network (52.93%) followed by conservative (12.5%) and Iranian diaspora (7.4%) communities. Fig. 1 shows how these clusters formed the RT



network.

*Figure 1. The Structure of Persian Twitter*

Then, the most influential users in each community were identified. Figures 2-4 illustrate how they were located within the networked publics. These illustrations are limited to the top 10 users for better visibility.

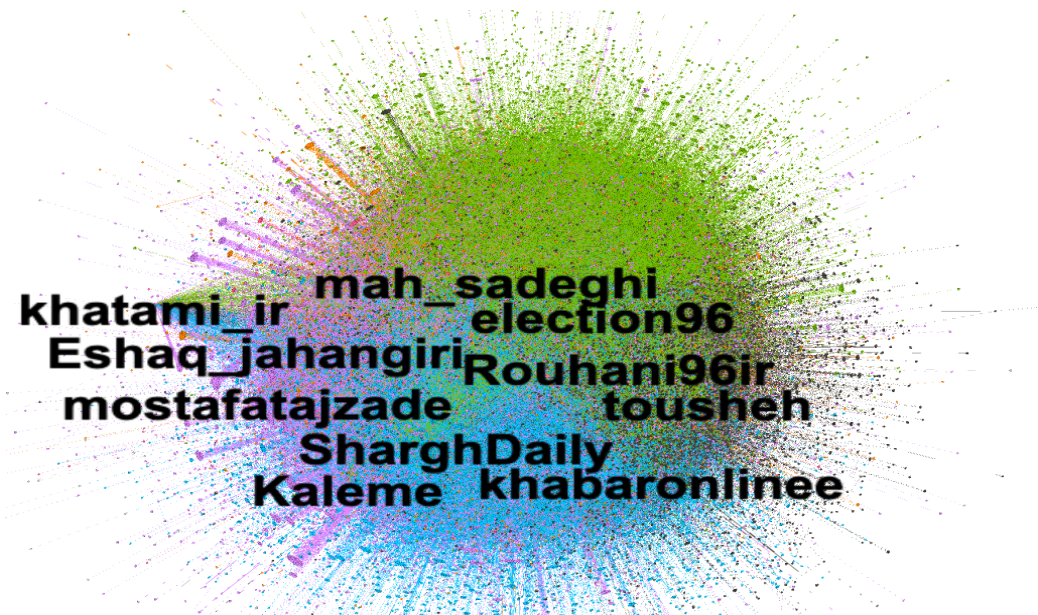


Figure 2. Reformist Cluster

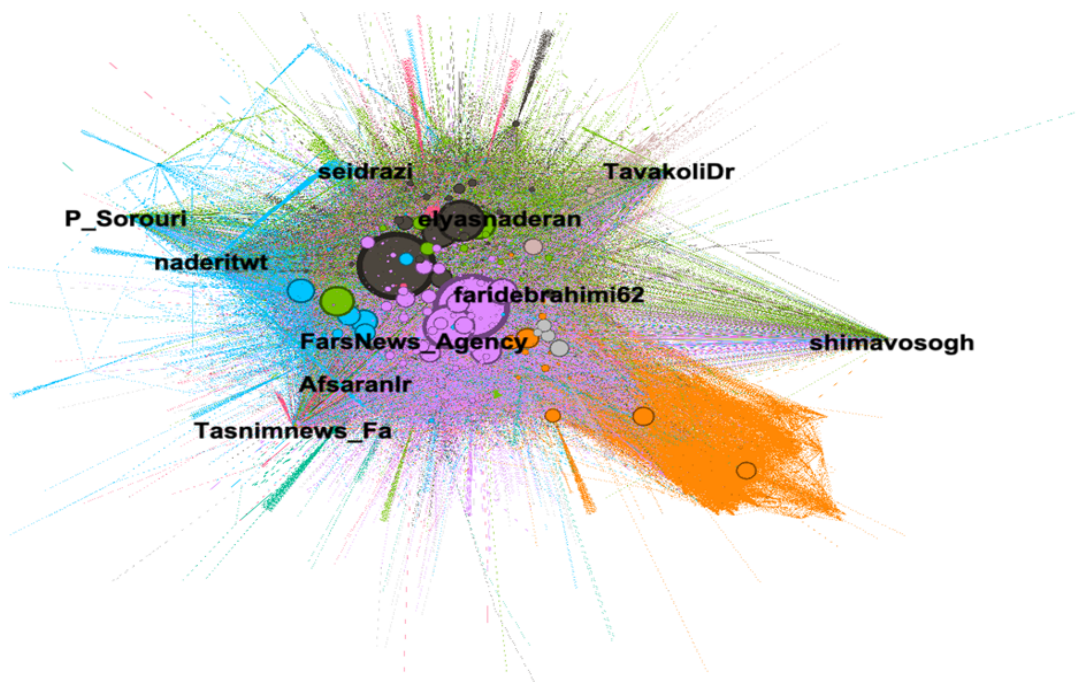


Figure 3. Conservative Cluster



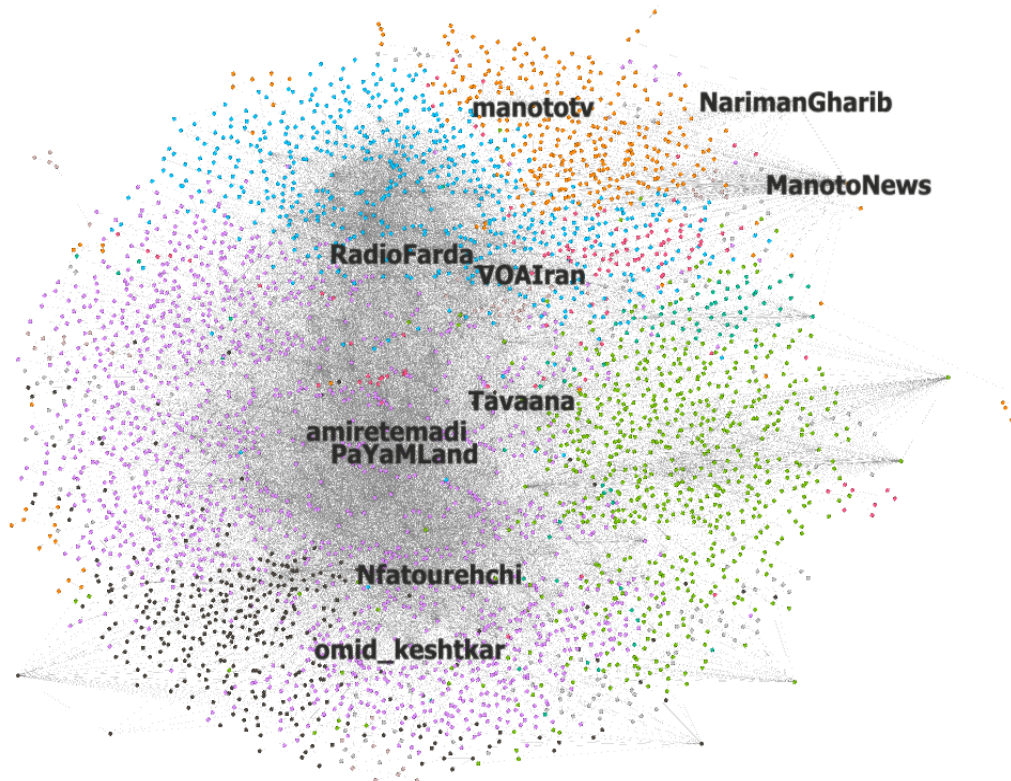


Figure 4. Iranian Diaspora Cluster

Reformist cluster included 33,157 nodes and 451,499 edges (see figure 2), while conservative cluster had 7,827 nodes with 111,248 edges (see figure 3). The number of nodes and edges of the diaspora cluster were 3,665 and 17,582, respectively (see figure 4). In the next section, we will discuss how these influential users framed the election in a collaborative and co-working practice<sup>8</sup>.

### 3.2 Networked framing

We identified 31 frames in the whole network. Since the frequency of most of these frames was low and our analyses focused on dominant frames, we restricted our investigation to top frames in the emerged networked frames. Table 1 shows the frequency of the top networked frames in each community. The values show the percentage of each frame in each networked public.

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<sup>8</sup> The typology and operationalized definitions of the influential users are provided in Appendix 2c.

**Table 1. Top networked frames**

	Reformist		Conservative		Iranian diaspora	
NF 1	Condemning political deception (CPD)	12	Condemning political deception (CPD)	22	Condemning political deception (CPD)	26
NF 2	Participating in/boycotting the election (P/BE)	6	Condemning corruption of politicians and their alliances (CCP)	11	The importance of ethical values (EV)	7
NF 3	Condemning corruption of politicians and their alliances (CCP)	5	The importance of ethical values (EV)	4	Condemning corruption of politicians and their alliances (CCP)	5
NF 4	The importance of citizen rights (CR)	5	Candidates and their alliances' unsuccessful past (UP)	4	Participating in/boycotting the election (P/BE)	5
NF 5	Candidates and their alliances' unsuccessful past (UP)	3	The importance of the trustworthiness of the election (TE)	4	The importance of citizen rights (CR)	5

The above table shows that there are a total of 7 frames that have the majority in the whole network. Some of them are common in various clusters, while others are unique. We analyzed these frames to give a better understanding of dominant networked frames on Persian Twitter.

### 3.2.1 *Condemning political deception (CPD)*

CPD is the most prevalent frame in the whole network. While it has the highest frequency in all networked publics, its top position in the conservative cluster is more significant. Since the conservative community's size is meaningfully smaller than the reformist cluster, this finding shows that political deception is more central to conservatives.

CPD is generally about blaming and condemning political actors' statements and actions considered by users as actions to deceive voters and citizens. Its scope is also not limited to candidates or election periods. However, condemning political deception is the nodal point that all users agreed upon, though it has been discursively articulated in different ways in each community. Investigating minor themes gives us a clearer picture of how this frame was articulated in these networked publics.

CPD has three minor themes: blaming candidates' lying, blaming deceiving citizens, and blaming unreal promises. Investigating the internal structure of CPD in all communities shows that this frame is more about challenging rival candidates and politicians. In this way, Twitter users did not challenge the regime as a political identity. Their criticisms about political deception remained at the individual level. For instance, a

conservative user<sup>9</sup> sarcastically tweeted: *Guys! if Raisi will be elected, the TV series will be censured in this way! Oh! The ministry of Rouhani censured them?* This critical tweet aimed to show Rouhani and his supporters lied about Raisi's cultural policy. Conservatives argued that Rouhani's ministry of culture and guidance is an apparatus of censorship itself. On the other hand, a reformist user wrote: *Disinformation and lying have no end in Ghalibaf's campaign. Hadi Nourouzi and Mehrdad Ouladi<sup>10</sup> announced their support of Ghalibaf from the other world.* This user emphasized that Ghalibaf and his campaign used fake statements to show he is supported by famous figures. In this case, this tactic was revealed as these two footballers were dead. These tweets both of which criticized candidates do not aim to attack the discursive foundations of the Islamic regime. Such debates are normal in electoral times everywhere. Thus, questioning candidates is not a meaningful threat to the political system.

Moreover, Iranian users did not put the political figures who could be considered the regime representatives at the center of their Criticism. For instance, they did not criticize the Iranian leader, who is a symbolic figure and a nodal point in Iran's hegemonic discourse, on a big scale.

Condemning political deception has also been asserted by many Iranian authorities since the establishment of the revolution as part of the populist discourse which they have developed (Jahanbakhsh, 2003). Therefore, this frame did not challenge the political system. It even supports the epistemological roots of the hegemonic discourse to some extent. In fact, if users would have criticized the identity of the regime or high-ranked and powerful figures as the leader, the frame could have been understood as a destabilizing one. However, each community tried to employ this frame as a tool to attack its opponent.

Interestingly, expatriates stayed with conservatives in this battle. Since expatriates have been traditionally considered as people who strongly disagree with the Iranian regime, this finding is interesting. While they also accused Rouhani as a liar and deceiver, the subjects of their attacks were different. They believed that Rouhani lied intentionally and consciously to save the regime. For example, they argued that Rouhani gave an unreal promise to free Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karrobi (the leaders of the 2009 Green Movement). Sharing the below illustration, a diaspora user accused Rouhani of misusing the Green Movement leaders' situation for his own political benefits by tweeting: *When I heard that Rouhani would misuse the confinement of Khatami and other leaders of the Green Movement to gain votes again.*

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<sup>9</sup> The name of users were removed regarding the ethical guidelines in using Twitter data in social research.

<sup>10</sup> Two Iranian famous football players who died in years before the election.

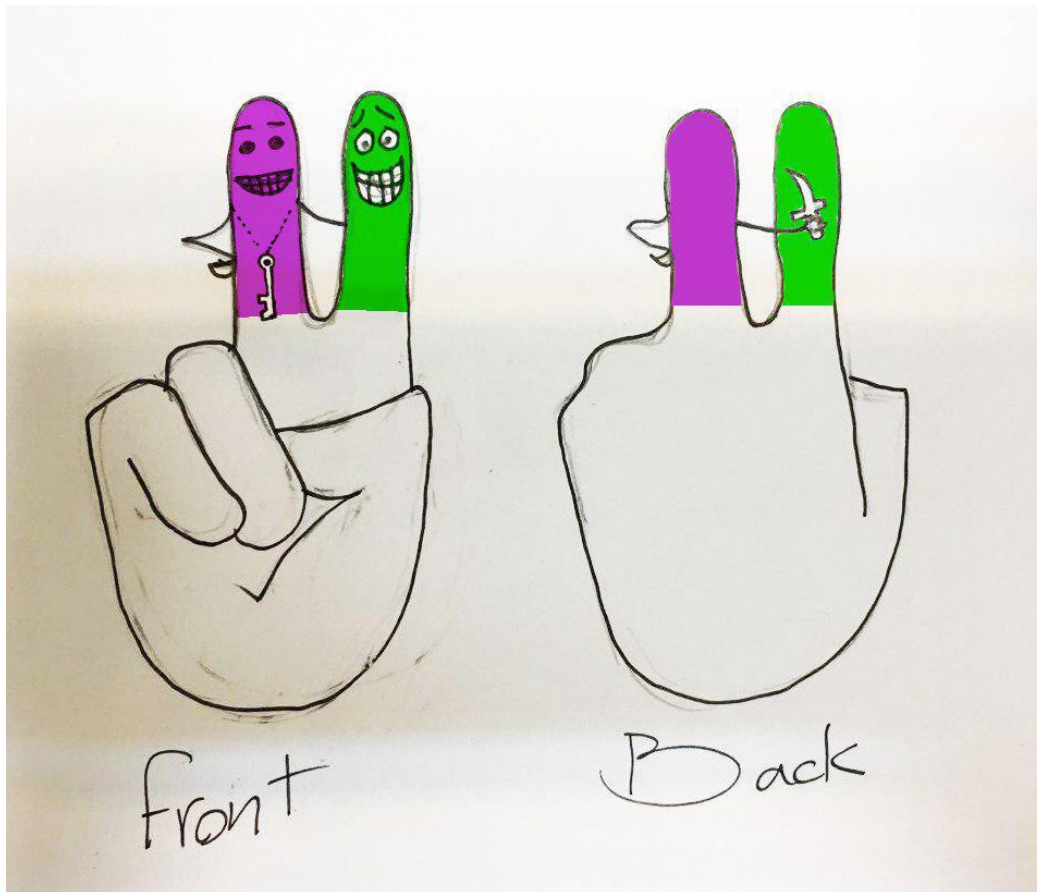


Figure 5. An illustration by a diaspora user

Pink was the color, the key was the symbol of Rouhani's campaign, and green was also referred to the Green Movement. In this tweet, the user implied that Rouhani was not honest in his alleged friendship with the leaders of the Green Movement. Instead, Rouhani forced his rivals to support him by giving them no other alternative.

To a lesser extent, diaspora users argued that all Iranian authorities are deceivers and there is no difference among them in this regard. Besides their similar critical strategies, the way they used this frame could put more challenges to the political system. However, they were smaller in numbers and they could not make their forming of this frame dominant in the network. As a result, this frame is more of a non-challenging one regarding the Iranian political system.

### 3.2.2 *Condemning corruption of politicians and their alliances (CCP)*

CCP is also a shared frame in all the communities, implying its importance to Iranian society. To a great extent, CCP resembles CPD in rationality and logic. By condemning corruption and framing it as a major networked frame, Iranian users did not actually involve in criticizing the regime. Their criticisms mainly focused on the election frays and debates. As CPD, CCP



revolved around users' attacks on their political opponents. Again, reformists criticized conservatives' corruption and vice versa. Expatriates also performed a similar practice as what they have done in framing CPD.

While corruption was a nodal point in social media protests against dictatorships in MENA and led to the overthrow of the regime of Mobarak in Egypt (Kavada & Poell, 2020; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012), due to at least two reasons, we can argue that CCP is not a threat to the Iranian regime in 2017 election. Firstly, as we explained above, it aimed to challenge the individual politicians not the entity of the regime like what happened in the Egypt uprising or even in the Green Movement. Whilst expatriates challenged the regime to some extent, most of their criticisms also concentrated on challenging Rouhani and other reformist figures. For example, a diaspora citizen equaled both reformist and conservative candidates, tweeted: *Jahangiry revealed the corruption of Ghalibaf, and Ghalibaf revealed the corruption of Jahangiry. Ok, it comes out that both of them are corrupted, so, why we should choose between them?* This tweet also implies boycotting the election as a result of seeing all candidates corrupted and we will refer to it in the next section. Nonetheless, the size of the diaspora cluster was also notably smaller than other communities. Hence, they were not successful in challenging the regime by framing CCP, and also CPD.

Secondly, the corruption of individual politicians has also been criticized by Iranian authorities frequently, while they severely rejected the idea of the Islamic republic's corruption. Thus, this frame did not actually challenge the power relations, even if CCP did not support it. Condemning corruption could have been a threat to hegemonic discourse when it was about the regime or at least its powerful figures, e.g., the supreme leader. However, this was not the case in the 2017 election.

Our findings show that the importance of CPD and CCP for conservatives was higher than for reformists, another reason shows that these frames were non-challenging. Regarding conservatives' smaller community, it has a particular meaning. In fact, they accused Rouhani's administration of 'the luxury government' with multi-millionaire ministers. Conservatives, as people who saw government in their enemy's hands, found deception and corruption as reformists' Achilles' heel. That is why they made these points the centers of their attacks. There is also another reason confirming CCP did not negotiate on the political power in Iran. Conservatives, as the regime's supporters, tried to criticize Rouhani and other reformist politicians. By no means, they wanted to challenge the regime or accuse it of being corrupted. In their point of view, corruption is not a systematic problem. It is just a problem pertaining to their political opponents. In doing so, they paid particular attention to Hossein

Fereydoun, the brother of Hassan Rouhani<sup>11</sup>. An ordinary conservative user mentioned an excerpt of Raisi in the electoral debates: Raisi: *Mr. Rouhani, the authorities from the judiciary came to your office and showed you the documents of corruption of the closest person to you. You said it is not a good time!*. Economic corruption was not the only point that conservatives attacked. They also questioned the reliability of Rouhani's Ph.D. license, condemning him to scientific corruption. A conservative citizen explained: *The thing about Rouhani's dissertation is not if he wrote it or not. The dissertation is not fabricated. The problem is stealing content on large scale.*

### 3.2.3 Participating in/boycotting the election (P/BE)

P/BE is a common frame between reformists and expatriates. It was not an interesting frame for conservatives since they have probably been participating in the election for granted. In fact, participating in the election is a significant value in the Iranian political sphere. This was asserted many times by Khamenei and other Iranian officials. They implied participating in the election is considered a sign of legitimacy and acceptance of the regime. However, there was not a consensus between reformist and expatriate users about it.

Diaspora people mainly argued that participating in the election is a useless action. They stated that the regime just used it to legitimize its existence. An anti-regime user tweeted: *My dear friend if you want to vote, do it. But do not think that you are saving Iran. You are extending the life of the Islamic republic.* On the contrary, reformists argued that participating in election and rationally voting for reformist politicians paved the way for democracy. Trying to encourage others to vote for Rouhani, an influential reformist user wrote: *Vote to preserve the weak body of reform which they have been trying to dismantle it in the last 20 years. The results and consequences are not a few if you want to accept.*

Reformists also referred to the election of Ahmadinejad in the 2005 election as the result of boycotting the election on a large scale. They stated that Raisi and hardliners would win the election if people do not vote for Rouhani. In fact, they did not aim to support the hegemonic discourse or the regime intentionally. However, defending election participation is logically an action that underpins hegemonic values.

P/BE has two minor themes: participating in and boycotting the election. Regarding the bigger size of the reformist community, it can be

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<sup>11</sup> On 15 July 2017, Fereydoun was arrested for questioning in connection with a corruption probe. He was released 2 days later. In 2019, he was sentenced to five years in prison.

concluded that this frame supports the hegemonic discourse rather than challenging it. In fact, the frequency of minor themes participating in the election is significantly higher than the rival frame. Reformists devised some hashtags to defend their argument, e.g., #Won't\_go\_Back<sup>12</sup>. They frequently referred to 'the dark time of Ahmadi Nejjhad's (the former president) administration' to encourage people to vote for Rouhani in order to avoid it re-happening. Nevertheless, expatriates disagreed with them insisting that previous experiences show that nothing would change by participating in the election.

### 3.2.4 *The importance of citizen rights (CR)*

While reformists and expatriates are on the two opposite sides of P/BE, they had the same ideas about the importance of citizen rights. In this regard, they collaborated in framing this as an important value and trying to make it dominant. CR has three minor themes: free speech, civil rights, and transparency. Utilizing the first two minor themes, users chiefly condemned the brutality of the regime in imprisoning, executing, kidnapping, and violating dissidents' rights. They insisted that dissident people should have the right to freely criticize the state with no fear. To a lesser extent, the latter minor theme was employed in that way. This minor theme was more about blaming campaigns for not being transparent in their actions, particularly in their financial transactions.

CR was more significant to reformists. While its higher frequency in the reformist community could pertain to its bigger size, it ranked fifth in the diaspora cluster. This means that attacking reformists and other political figures of the Islamic Republic was more important for diaspora users. Whether used by reformists or expatriates, this frame challenged the regime to a great extent. Unlike the previous frames, CR totally tried to weaken the hegemonic discourse by pointing to the state's brutal activities in suppressing dissident citizens.

### 3.2.5 *Candidates and their alliances' unsuccessful past (UP)*

Reformists and conservatives also had a common frame, but they articulated it in different ways regarding their political preferences and beliefs. UP has the same nature as CPD and CCP. Similar to those frames, UP was articulated by each camp to attack their rivals. In this frame, the nodal point is candidates and their party mates' unsuccessful past activities. Moreover, they referred to opponent figures' statements in previous years which their inaccuracy and incorrectness had been approved. Naturally, reformist users attacked Raisi and Ghalibaf. On the other hand,

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<sup>12</sup> In Farsi: #بِه\_عقب\_برنمیگردیم

conservatives criticized Rouhani and Jahangiri. A conservative user criticized Rouhani performance by tweeting: *[another user] explained in simple language what Rouhani did with the economy of country with inflation, recession, and liquidity in recent years. The future will be darker with him.* While conservatives concentrated on Rouhani performance in his first administration (2013-2017), reformists paid lots of attention to Raisi's role in what known as 'the massacre of 67' (The 1988 executions of Iranian political prisoners)<sup>13</sup>. An Iranian journalist tweeted: *As a friend said, a merit of debates was recognizing Mr. Raisi's voice. Hearing the voice file of Mr. Montazeri<sup>14</sup>, we had some doubt that which one is Raisi's.*

Again, the criticisms in both communities relatively remained at an individual level and did not aim at the regime. To this extent, UP did not put a serious danger to the hegemonic discourse and established power relations either. It was more of an occasional frame devoted to the campaign debates and arguments. Its scope did not contain other powerful politicians too. Even when reformists criticized Raisi's role in the murders of 67, they treated him as an individual, not as a symbol of the regime. Furthermore, conservatives' attacks were more unipolar in attacking Rouhani since he was the president at the time. Reformists however targeted several conservative figures in this regard.

### 3.2.6 *The importance of ethical values (EV)*

Conservative users not only focused on reformists' unsuccessful past to criticize them, they also argued that reformist politicians had not upheld ethical values. While this frame was not of interest to the reformist community, expatriates joined conservatives in dominating this frame to attack the reformists. In fact, conservatives have a frame in common with reformists (UP) which were articulated differently. But conservatives framed EV in the same way as diaspora users. Here, they attacked their mutual enemy. In other words, reformists preferred to focus on conservatives' unsuccessful past to challenge them. They did not show much interest in accusing conservatives of being unethical. On the other side, expatriates concentrated on ethical values to criticize reformists while they did not pay much attention to reformists' unsuccessful past. Conservatives, however, employed both frames to attack reformists.

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<sup>13</sup> The 1988 executions of Iranian political prisoners was a series of state-sponsored execution of political prisoners across Iran, starting on 19 July 1988 and lasting for approximately five months.

<sup>14</sup> In August 2016, a voice file of Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri was released in which he condemned the death decisions were made by other clerics leading to the massacre of 67. Montazeri was the Deputy Supreme Leader at that time. Ebrahim Raisi was reportedly a member of a committee that made those decisions.

Dominating this frame, conservatives mainly criticized Rouhani as a selfish person who denounces and sneers at his critics. During an electoral debate, a conservative user tweeted: *Rouhani became mad at being criticized by other candidates, and began to humiliate and denounce others as always. It is the banality of ethics that Rouhani talked about ethics.* Diaspora users mainly attack reformists as a political identity, not individual politicians to accuse them of being opportunists. While their aim was different from that of conservatives, they more or less helped conservatives to challenge Rouhani and his government. A diaspora citizen first sent a tweet to criticize Rouhani's supporters in attacking critics: *Four years ago, I criticized Rouhani a few times. Half of the reformist friends wanted to execute me, and the other said that I disrespect the vote of the people.* Later, she developed her criticisms of all reformists after being attacked by them on Twitter: *How impudent the community of reformists is. Swear to GOD, the fans of Raisi are one hundred times better than them.*

Nevertheless, EV is not a challenging frame for the hegemonic discourse either. It also does not support the hegemonic discourse significantly. This frame like other frames like CCP and CPD dealt with routine and normal discussions during the election period to a great extent.

### 3.2.7 *The importance of the trustworthiness of the election (TE)*

TE is the last frame which was dominated the network. While the aforementioned frames were common in at least two communities, TE was exclusive to the conservative cluster. In fact, conservatives raised many concerns about cheating in the election. It could have been considered as a challenging frame if conservatives had targeted the regime. However, they argued that Rouhani's administration is not reliable and trustworthy to run the election. A conservative journalist tweeted: *It is not good at all that the secretary of domestic affairs said the 2017 election would not go to the 2nd round. Besides violating the principle of neutrality, it reveals their political bias.* Like other conservative users, he believed that the whole government worked and misused public resources in favor of Rouhani.

As the above tweet illustrates, conservatives wanted to attack Rouhani, not the regime. While it is inherently a paradoxical argumentation, conservatives argued that they aimed to defend the Islamic republic by challenging the government for its unreliability in conducting the election. In their point of view, Rouhani did not truly obey the leader. Therefore, conservatives did not assume that attacking Rouhani and accusing him of cheating would be a challenge for the regime.

Reformists and expatriates did not pay much attention to this frame. They were practically busy discussing participating/boycotting the election. However, conservatives did not take part in their discussion. They probably

had no doubt about participating in the election. Thus, conservatives put their attention to the trustworthiness of the election. Nonetheless, reformists hijacked this frame to a lesser extent to criticize conservatives. A reformist user tweeted: *I subscribed to a Telegram channel belonging to conservatives, named: the documents of cheating. There were more than enough documents that forced them to change the name of the group to: the documents of cheating only in the 2017 election.* In fact, dominating TE was conservative users' tactic to turn the table. Since reformists and other opposition groups accused the regime of cheating in the 2009 election, they wanted to fight back and show that they are reformists who are cheaters. In this tweet, the reformist users sarcastically sneered at their effort by claiming that many documents about cheating in other elections were sent to that group despite the initial aim of the group.

Unlike reformists' claims about cheating in the 2009 election, this frame was not threatening the hegemonic discourse. Since conservatives as the regime's loyal people raised such concerns, similar arguments were defined within the hegemonic discourse's boundaries. Literally, if reformists or diaspora users did so, their accusation would have been considered a threat to the regime, as they did in the 2009 election. In terms of discursive theory, conservatives are the hegemonic discourse "us" while reformists and expatriates are considered as "they". Therefore, conservatives' complaints about cheating in the election were not regarded as a hostile and attacking practice, but as a friendly concern.

#### 4 CONCLUSION

This paper provides more insights into Twitter use during regular political events such as elections in restrictive contexts. The existing literature on Twitter activism has mainly been devoted to sociopolitical protests in non-democratic and democratic countries. Despite the growing body of literature on Twitter use during regular political incidents in western democracies, there is not much investigation into restrictive societies. Therefore, the ways in which users frame official political events like elections in non-western societies remain unknown, to a significant extent. Providing some empirical evidence, we focused on the 2017 Iranian presidential election to fill these gaps.

We combined two textual methods with a network analytic approach in order to give a better understanding of how Iranian Twitter users were engaged in politics during the 2017 election. We investigated the tweets of influential users in all communities. In fact, we showed that three networked publics emerged on the RT network at the time of this research: reformist, conservative, and the Iranian diaspora. This finding confirms previous studies on Persian Twitter (Khazraee, 2019; Marchant, Sabeti,

Bowen, & Kelly, 2016). Despite this result which is echoing Azadi and Mesgaran (2021) work, we argue that the structure of Persian Twitter has probably changed in recent years after December 2017, and November 2019 nationwide protests. This categorization might not be useful to understand the political landscape of Iran anymore, but it was at least during the 2017 election. We also extended the past scholarship by going beyond providing a mere descriptive analysis of Persian Twitter. We identified and investigated the dominant networked frames on Persian Twitter by mixing SM-CDS and ECA within a rich interpretative model.

Our findings showed that Iranians chiefly framed the election by discussing domestic issues and other routine topics related to the election time. The result confirms previous research which argues that Twitter creates a socially mediated publicness (Baym & boyd, 2012) where ordinary citizens can raise their voices and make themselves visible. This line of study mainly insists on social media's potential in producing and sharing counter-narratives and discourses to challenge non-democratic regimes, and social and political inequalities (Poell & van Dijck, 2018; Tufekci, 2014). While this argumentation seems plausible in political upheavals, our findings do not support it during regular political events. It is true that Twitter provides all Iranians, in particular dissident citizens, with an unprecedented opportunity to share their ideas. But they do not inevitably use this space to challenge the regime all the time and during all events. Even citizens who were deprived of access to free media in Iran, diaspora people, and reformists, did not use Twitter to challenge the regime. This finding contradicts the existing research asserting that unhappy citizens use Twitter and other social platforms to destabilize authoritarian regimes (Ems, 2014; Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013; Newman, 2009). Our findings indicate that Twitter is not only a tool for protest in restrictive contexts, it can work as a normal communicative channel devoted to ordinary electoral debates during elections as it does in democratic societies (Bode & Dalrymple, 2016; D'heer & Verdegem, 2014; Jungherr, 2017).

On the other hand, this study reveals that Twitter does not only provide an opportunity for grassroots groups and muted people to involve in politics, conservative citizens and figures also employ it to serve their political wills. It is against the existing body of study which argues that it is dissident and anti-regime users who use social media to a great extent in authoritarian countries (Howard & Hussain, 2013; Weller, Bruns, Burgess, Mahrt, & Puschmann, 2014). This argument might be viable in the early years of social media, but not anymore. In line with Azadi & Mesgaran (2021), Marchant et al., (2018), and Khazraee (2019), we argue that conservative users have been joining on large scale the Twitter network to destabilize the hegemony of anti-regime users in this space.

It is of importance if we consider that conservatives are in favor of filtering and blocking social media in Iran. This result shows while conservatives insist on shutting social platforms down, they accept the reality of the presence of many dissident Iranians on Twitter. As we show, the presence of conservatives could make Twitter more and more unchallenging and non-threatening to the regime. At least, the case of the 2017 election reveals that the pro-regime users were successful in turning Twitter into a battleground between them and reformists on non-sensitive issues. While the fact that Twitter was not a threat to Iran's regime in the 2017 election could be pertinent to the time of research, the presence and activity of conservatives could assure the regime that Twitter would lose its effectiveness in challenging the regime even in political unrests. Moreover, this can be seen as a deliberative strategy by the regime to depoliticize Twitter. Such hypotheses could set a direction for further research.

This study also contradicts the previous research by showing that even anti-regime users worked with conservatives during regular political events (González-Bailón, 2015; Tufekci & Freelon, 2013; Zeng, 2020). It is an unimaginable alliance during political uprisings in previous years. This result could also be contingent on the fact that reformists were steadily losing their social acceptance and position in Iranian society. A trend that has intensified in recent years after the November 2019 nationwide bloodshed upheavals. It could be said that this started with the 2017 election when reformists tried to save their position for the last time in a competition with conservative and diaspora citizens. In recent years, unhappy citizens move from the reformist community to join other communities or shape new ones as they were disappointed by the reformists' performance (Kermani and Tafreshi, 2022; Azadi and Mesgaran, 2021). This finding also reveals how the political conditions in restrictive contexts cause unpredictable results.

CPD and CCP were the two most dominant networked frames in all communities. As we explained in the previous section, these frames were devoted to challenging rival candidates, not the regime or its powerful figures. These frames were of interest in social media protests in other countries like Egypt and China (Kavada & Poell, 2020; Nip & Fu, 2016). Nevertheless, in those cases, users criticized the corruption of regimes, but in the Iranian 2017 presidential election case, users produced these frames to challenge the rival politicians. They did not attack the regime as a corrupted or deceiving system. This finding is also true for other dominant frames such as UP, EV, and TE. In the top networked frames, CR and the minor theme of boycotting the election challenged the regime to some extent. However, these frames could not attract much attention. Furthermore, this study shows that Iranian users did not concentrate on structural problems and inequalities in the 2017 election. It confirms the



previous studies during political unrests (Poell, 2020), but with a significant difference. In political protests, people did not deal with fundamental issues as they focus on disagreeing with political systems with emotional messages. In the 2017 election case, Iranian dissident users avoid challenging more profound political and social injustices at a cost of dealing with normal and routine electoral debates and frays.

Moreover, our arguments could be confirmed by investigating the less frequent frames. There are some frames that can more notably destabilize the hegemonic discourse, e.g., regime change, women's issues, minor groups' problems, condemning militia intervention in the election, and releasing the Green Movement's leaders. Furthermore, Iranian users did not even criticize the leader or other powerful figures when they aimed to attack individuals. These findings, overall, show that Persian Twitter framed the 2017 election mainly in a non-challenging and routine way rather than in a hostile and destabilizing form.

The current study enhances our knowledge of Twitter activism and networked framing in restrictive contexts by investigating an official political happening in Iran. It discusses that our niche understanding of Twitter's role in Iran needs to be revised. In fact, Twitter is not necessarily a means for showing disagreement with the regime and challenging it. Users in closed countries could also deploy it as a free and easy space to discuss non-controversial issues. In this sense, this platform is more of a communicative one rather than an inevitable tool for protesting. Moreover, we argued that not only did Twitter challenge the hegemonic discourse in Iran, but it also supported it to some extent at the time of regular events. These findings could be examined in further studies. Also, this research offers an opportunity for scholars to look deeper into Twitter activism in authoritarian regimes. Besides, the states' propaganda and coordinated actions, ordinary users can even reinforce the regime and its preferred discourse in a probably generic and independent way. Finally, we did not involve bot accounts in this study. Comparing bot and real users' activism in protests as well as official happenings in non-democratic regimes could set a direction for further research.

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