

Blogging from the edge of the world

For us, blogging is just an interesting diversion; in other countries it is the last word in free speech. Threatened bloggers talk to Politics

Blogging has become one of the buzzwords of the past two years. From the downfall of American news presenters, to a cheap and easy way for newspapers to bulk out their online content, everyone has been at it.

But there is an overwhelming sense with even the best blogs, they are at best a niche addition to the mainstream media.

This week, *Politics* writers have talked to bloggers from around the world, where what they do really does make a difference. In some countries, blogging marks the last stand

of freedom of speech, letting the outside world know what is really going on in a country under autocratic rule. Not that the role of the blogger is an easy one to assume.

The people contacted in the making of these pages have been subject to threats, one by his own government. Indeed, one Chinese blogger we tried to contact has since gone missing.

It's a difficult job to do, but they can only hope to make a change for the better if governments and people from outside the affected countries learn from them and try to make a change for the better.

Read more about bloggers under threat at: committeetoprotectbloggers.civiblog.org

ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT

By Andrew Rennison
Political Correspondent

Afghanistan, centre of the world's attention four years ago, remains an impoverished and volatile nation with an uncertain future. Though internet access is scarce, young Afghans are beginning to raise their voices through blogging.

Sohrab Kabuli, a young man from Kabul, is one such pioneer, writing in the English version of his blog, 'Afghan Lord'. In it he writes about life in Kabul and events abroad, with the intention of illuminating both himself and others. With Afghanistan having been overlooked for years following the invasion of Iraq, *Politics* contacted Sohrab to learn more about his nation and his views.

I began by asking Sohrab about his views on 'fundamentalists', an issue touched upon in his blog.



KARZAI: Still holding close ties with America, four years on

"I don't know what you understand by fundamentalism. Who are fundamentalists? We can't say an opposition party that opposes the Karzai government is fundamentalist, or the Democrats in US who oppose the Republicans. The same goes for Conservatives and Liberals in Britain.

"Let me clarify that fundamentalists are not Al Zarqawi or Osama Bin Laden, fundamentalists are not Taliban - those people are terrorists, they are against humanity. We should have a better definition for terrorists. We should not believe that fundamentalism is only an Islamic issue; it involves others too.

"I agree that fundamentalists have some reason for being violent. The reason I think is that fundamentalists believe that America should accept them

as an equal part of a country, not as small, scattered groups."

I asked whether he thought Iraq had been intended to divert attention away from Afghanistan, as that had certainly been the result in recent years.

"I don't think the Iraq war was started to divert attention from Afghanistan. After the war in Iraq, Afghanistan lost its priority in the world community. This was like losing a chance for Afghanistan. For example, aid for Afghanistan was wasted and stolen by a group of NGOs. I don't see a significant change compared to three years ago."

That Sohrab had recently visited Tehran was particularly interesting. He commented on his impression of Iran:



"The new generation in Iran have a modern view of the world. In Tehran, most of the people were expressing their disgust and tiredness with the regime, and were ashamed of recent expressions by the President about removing Israel from the map."

Returning to domestic issues, I asked Sohrab about living standards in Kabul.

"Living Standards' has no meaning for people in Kabul. In the capital city of Afghanistan, citizens can use electricity for only five of every 48 hours, and water for only four.

electricity.' I had noticed recent frustration in Sohrab's blog over political

progress. Did he think the situation was getting better or worse?

"I believe it's getting worse. I sense a great danger for Afghanistan if Americans and the Afghan government don't change their attitude towards the people."

I was curious to know of Sohrab's opinion of major news networks, as we in the West hear so little now from Afghanistan.

"I think the media coverage of Afghanistan is very weak and insufficient. It seems they are only reporting about Karzai and Taliban. Taliban are not the only residents of my country; lots of hard working and open minded young people are working for progress.

"The media pictures are clichés: Afghan women aren't simply burkas; they participate in business and politics. People in the world need to know about Afghanistan's real face. I am saddened that foreign news networks are only reporting a bad face of Afghanistan."

Finally, what had he learnt and achieved through his blogging, and what did he hope for Afghanistan's future?

"I learnt what is going on in the region and my country. I encouraged my friends to blog. I learnt how to voice the problems of those people who dream of a piece of bread.

"I just hope that life gets better. I hope the voice of educated Afghan youth counts in the government. I hope freedom of expression will be taken more seriously. I hope Americans have learned more about Afghanistan and will change their strategy for better development. I am happy that the US helped my country.

"Like other young Afghans I pray for peace and security in my country."

Read The Afghan Lord at: afghanlord.blogspot.com

THE LONG, SLOW SLIDE FROM DEMOCRACY

By Andrew Mickel
Political Editor

Latin American politics is currently undergoing a remarkable shift to the left. Thumbing a nose at the Bush administration, Bolivia's new indigenous President has threatened US involvement in the area, whilst Haiti and Ecuador are both likely to shift left in this year's elections.

But it is President Chavez of Venezuela who leads the anti-American pack. Having won power in 1998, he has quickly set about turning his country into a Castro-style society. In his short time as leader he's already been subject to a failed coup, protests, strikes and a referendum on his leadership. His rule has been accompanied by opposition muzzling, election-rigging and destroying anyone who doesn't agree with his plans for the country. Following Venezuelan news is to follow a country's long, slow slide into autocracy.

Blogging allows us to see how the changes are really happening to people on the ground. The media has not just been systematically removed, but replaced instead by Chavez's own

pet channel, TeleSUR. So in the absence of real media, blogs like Miguel Octavio's have become even more valuable. "Remarkably, we have at times covered issues that the local media has failed to cover out of fear for their future", Miguel tells *gair rhydd* in a question and answer session, "since under the new media law, their licenses can be withdrawn for creating 'panic' in the population."

"I'm a little skeptical that 'actions' from abroad would prove useful"

Chavez recently attracted widespread international condemnation when he chose to imprison Carlos Ortega, the leader of the unions and the man that managed to beat Chavez's candidate for the position. It was not an achievement that has gone unnoticed by the President. "In what other country can a union leader be jailed and charged with a crime like civil rebellion that is nowhere in the legal code of the country?"



ANTI-US: Chavez with Fidel Castro INSET: Chavez's pet channel TeleSUR

But the crimes against Ortega are not the exception. The Electoral Commission (CNE) has become well known for acting as Chavez's henchmen in eroding the country's democracy. "Polls say that over 70% of all Venezuelans do not trust [head of the CNE] Jorge Rodriguez and the CNE and his partisan role played a very important role in the high level of abstention in the recent Parliamentary elections.

"His role is very well known and he is seen as being too pro-Chavez by even those that support Chavez."

Ultimately, Chavez has proven himself to be a devastatingly self-interested leader who, despite many populist social policies, is recognized as being a risk, even by people on the ground. Television broadcasts have often been interrupted in evenings for the President to launch lengthy tirades against the US.

Chavez's attempt to set up a news channel for South America was somewhat undermined as a serious project when TeleSUR launched with a picture of the American flag with a swastika imposed over it. It was always intended to be an anti-hegemonic project, but the US has since started trying to broadcast its own radio into the country to balance out the channel.



Still, Miguel tells us that the channel is regarded as a joke on the ground as much as it is outside the country. "I don't think Telesur is being watched by many Venezuelans. Even the Government's TV channel VTV has less than 3% audience nationally. It is too political and radical in its posture."

So it is clear that Chavez cannot hoodwink the Venezuelan people out of their freedom. But that doesn't mean that he won't try to gain control by other means. And because of that, Miguel's blogging is under threat.

Because it has become established (and is even now hosted on American site Salon.com), he can't remove his identity from the project like others can. "I have received private threats and there was once a public call to investigate our funding (which we do not have), but that has been the extent of it."

But that doesn't mean that Miguel is giving up on his work. "I see it as a tool for wider awareness than action. The

type of human rights violations of the law and the Constitution and the like, that have taken place have not generated much action. I am a little skeptical that we may get 'actions' from abroad that would be useful."

So for now, Chavez is going to have to put up with the Devil's Excrement letting people know what he is doing. "We just need more awareness of these abuses so that Chavez does not get away with the world thinking he is a democrat."

Read The Devil's Excrement: blogs.salon.com/0001330/



By Claire King
Political Correspondent

In February 2005, the Nepalese King Gyanendra sacked the government and took direct power. He appointed a new government, which mainly consisted of pro-monarchist politicians.

The king saw fit to suspend media freedom; publications which were previously outspoken are now forced to operate under strict guidelines. Currently these publications only cover bland topics or even choose to leave editorial pages blank.

Supposedly, Nepal became a democratic country in 1991, as the result of popular protests. This has been compromised by frequent changes of government. It is not the first time that the King has assumed executive power. He did the same thing in 2002. He has justified his actions as he claims that the former government had failed to hold elections and restore peace in Nepal. King Gyanendra came to the throne

in June 2001, after the then Crown Prince drunkenly gunned down his parents and several other royals before killing himself.

He claims that he remains committed to democracy and a multi-party government. Internet blogger Umesh Shrestha disputes this. In a media blackout, there are few ways that the general public can access true facts about actual events in Nepal. Umesh remains committed to relaying the truth to the Nepali people on his Nepalese website.

In a mission to do this, Umesh has been subject to violence from the Nepalese authorities. The Committee to Protect Bloggers, an organisation which supports people like Umesh, encourages him in his work. On their website, Umesh relays some of the atrocities he has been witness to. He talks of the events of December

MAJESTIC BLOODSHED AND MEDIA BLACKOUT

14 2005, when the Nepalese army fired indiscriminately and recklessly killed 12 civilians. Two days later, at a protest against this, 'Mandales', supporters of the King, attacked protesters and severely beat them.

Umesh was at the scene trying to capture these horrific events. When the Mandales realised what he was doing, he was beaten and his camera was badly damaged. Not only this, but Umesh has received several threats through the post. In his quest to relate the truth to the Nepalese people he is constantly under threat.

Comments posted on the Committee to Protect Bloggers website reveal that



King Gyanendra

his work is not appreciated. The Nepalese diaspora worldwide, who tend to reside in Europe, Asia and America, are reliant on the work of bloggers such as Umesh to stay up-to-date with political events in their home country.

Umesh is concerned that the international media are not doing enough to support his cause. This means that unless the diaspora check websites like his, they have no access to the harsh reality of the situation.

Although Nepal's national media are powerless to print anything which is anti-King Gyanendra, bloggers still have the freedom to do this. In a *gair rhydd* question and answer session, he confessed that "we the bloggers can do that, and [we] even launched a Google bombing project against this autocratic king."

When asked what he would like to see the wider world doing to help the Nepalese situation, he said he wants to see increased pressure exerted on the king to return sovereignty to the people.

The Nepalese people have been active in their struggle, organising protest rallies which have drawn the support of tens of thousands of people. Now, they are not even allowed the right to peaceful protest.

"Today, the police arrested poets



PROTEST: Marching against the King on the streets of Kathmandu

who are simply reciting poems against autocratic rule. They manhandled journalists and human right activists also. The international media should create awareness so that their governments can pressurise our king."

Although blogs have become popular in Nepal since King Gyanendra took direct control, Umesh thinks that many people are still unaware of the work that he does. He comments that their readership is growing slowly, as more people become aware that blogs are the only way to access uncensored journalism in Nepal.

Despite the severity of the situation facing Umesh he remains optimistic. He is concerned that, in the future, the internet may become censored to a greater extent, but he maintains a positive outlook, stating: "The future is always bright." His people have little opportunity to protest against their situation, but he is encouraging: "We have to go on for peaceful agitation."

Umesh's message is clear. If international awareness of the situation in Nepal increases then there is hope. Without this, it is possible that Nepal's future may not be quite so bright.

Read Umesh's blog at: www.umeshshrestha.co.np