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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Discourse Analysis of Iran International Website's News Coverage of the Assembly of Experts and Islamic Consultative Assembly (Majlis) Elections

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction:

Elections, as a cornerstone of democratic systems, serve not only to facilitate the rotation of power among political elites but also to legitimize governing structures through public participation. The Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) has long emphasized its dual identity as both Islamic and republican, positioning elections as a key mechanism of legitimacy. However, these events also constitute a strategic battleground for discursive contestation, particularly by foreign media seeking to influence political trajectories within Iran. Among such actors, Iran International -a Saudi-funded, Persian-language satellite network-has emerged as a key promoter of anti-establishment narratives, particularly during electoral cycles. Against the backdrop of Iran's twelfth Islamic Consultative Assembly and sixth Assembly of Experts elections held in March 2024, this study examines how Iran International sought to delegitimize the electoral process, promote voter disengagement, and construct alternative ideological narratives. Anchored in theories of discourse, the research investigates the mechanisms through which this media actor

frames political participation as complicity with systemic corruption, inefficacy, and authoritarianism. This article situates the network's interventions within broader regional dynamics and ideological conflicts, arguing that Iran International operates not merely as a media outlet but as an ideological instrument orchestrating symbolic warfare aimed at undermining the discursive and institutional foundations of the IRI.

Method:

This study employs critical discourse analysis (CDA) through a hybrid methodological framework combining Van Dijk's three-dimensional model with Laclau and Mouffe's theory of discourse. A corpus of 229 news texts, published by Iran International between January 21 and March 1, 2024, was examined. The analysis integrated linguistic, cognitive, and social dimensions of discourse while identifying key signifiers, nodal points, and chains of equivalence. MAXQDA software was utilized for qualitative coding, allowing for the extraction of dominant themes and the reconstruction of meaning-making strategies. Triangulation was achieved through multiple data sources, theoretical frameworks, and inter-coder validation to enhance reliability and validity.

Findings:

The findings reveal that Iran International consistently positioned the discourse of election boycott as its central nodal point, around which a constellation of mutually reinforcing signifiers was constructed. The network framed participation in the 2024 elections as an act of legitimizing a dysfunctional, oppressive system, thereby urging citizens to disengage from the political process. Strategies included emphasizing Iran's deteriorating economic conditions, exposing financial corruption among state officials, and delegitimizing the efficacy of electoral institutions through the portrayal of the Guardian Council's vetting as exclusionary. Furthermore, Iran International sought to present reformist actors as ineffective or complicit, thereby erasing intermediary alternatives and deepening political polarization. The network's interactive model—incorporating citizen-generated content and horizontal communicative structures—was instrumental in building symbolic capital. This participatory approach created a perception of grassroots authenticity and inclusivity, enhancing the credibility of boycott narratives and positioning the network as a surrogate for public grievances. Iran International also leveraged the discursive momentum of the 2022 protests to frame the elections within a broader cycle of systemic repression and civic disillusionment. Social media and digital platforms were employed to amplify this message, portraying electoral engagement as futile and oppositional voices as the only moral stance. Simultaneously, the network exacerbated ethnic and sectarian cleavages by extensively covering Friday sermons of Molavi Abdolhamid, highlighting Sunni marginalization, and framing security policies in ethnic regions as acts of state violence. Additionally, selective framing of reformist candidates—especially those disqualified or connected to the establishment—was utilized to paint a narrative of systemic closure and irredeemability. Through such mechanisms, Iran International reframed the electoral field not as a contest of ideas but as a façade masking authoritarian continuity. The network thus neutralized centrist voices while elevating radical or separatist alternatives, contributing to discursive fragmentation and delegitimation of the entire political order.

Conclusion:

This study concludes that Iran International's election coverage constituted a deliberate and ideologically informed campaign aimed at discursively dismantling the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. By centering its discourse around election boycott and symbolic delegitimation, the network effectively neutralized reformist and intermediary political forces, portraying participation as acquiescence to a corrupt and irreformable system. These strategies not only served to suppress voter turnout but also promoted a depoliticized public sphere increasingly characterized by apoliticism and disenchantment. Moreover, by positioning Molavi Abdolhamid and figures like Reza Pahlavi as viable alternatives while systematically excluding or discrediting reformist leaders, Iran International contributed to a reconfiguration of

oppositional politics in the Persian media ecosystem. The findings underscore a shift away from earlier approaches that encouraged conditional participation or strategic reformism toward a more confrontational model of regime change discourse. This shift aligns with regional geopolitical interests, particularly those of Saudi Arabia, the network's primary financial sponsor. Importantly, the study warns of the broader consequences of media-driven delegitimation, including the erosion of political pluralism and the potential for symbolic and actual destabilization. The proliferation of boycott discourse may foster a political culture in which elections no longer serve as vehicles of representation but are instead viewed as mechanisms of state manipulation. This dynamic contributes to political alienation, weakens civic agency, and opens space for populist and extremist alternatives. In sum, Iran International's electoral discourse reflects an orchestrated effort to reshape the Iranian political imaginary, not through direct confrontation alone but by gradually undermining the discursive infrastructure upon which political legitimacy rests. Future research may benefit from comparative analyses of Persian-language media actors and the long-term impact of their narratives on voter behavior, political socialization, and regime stability in Iran.

Data Availability Statement.

Data available on request from the authors.

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Ethical considerations

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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