

# CIVIL SOCIETY IN WEST ASIA

## NEWSLETTER

This is the quarterly newsletter of the Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia, a joint initiative by Hivos and the University of Amsterdam with the purpose of generating and integrating knowledge on the roles and opportunities for civil society actors in democratization processes in politically challenging environments. The programme integrates academic and practitioner's knowledge from around the world to develop new insights and strategies on how civil society actors in Iran and Syria can contribute to various processes of democratization and, in turn, how international actors can support this.

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### Introduction

We are pleased to present to you the first quarterly newsletter from the Knowledge Programme on Civil Society in West Asia, which celebrated its first anniversary this month. The focus of the Knowledge Programme lies on developments in Iran and Syria, putting them into a broader regional perspective. Comparative studies on civil society in other MENA countries, as summarized in this newsletter, are a catalyst for additional questions. They help to unbundle the concept of "civil society" and take a closer look at the broad spectrum of civil society actors and their interaction with each other and the state. The schism between religious and secular actors has been a particular point of interest.

The borderline between civil society and the state turns out to be less clear-cut than assumed in theoretical discussions. Most actors have a rather ambivalent relationship to the state. Organizations can only survive if tolerated by the state, and risk becoming instrumentalized by state authorities who can use them as a kind of fig leaf to demonstrate a façade of pluralism. The alternative is not to organize into established groups, but to cooperate in loose networks. As a result, the research has shifted somewhat to the observation of the new forms of action, which have developed under these conditions.

The theme of this issue is the blogosphere in authoritarian states. Recent developments in West Asia let us to pay closer attention to the direct influence of the Internet on democratic processes within an authoritarian state. Questions arise regarding what role new types of media can play in the interaction between civil society and an authoritarian regime. Several articles in this newsletter examine aspects of the blogosphere in Iran and Syria.

The fast pace of recent events in Iran illustrates that any research on ongoing developments is on shifting sands. It is extremely difficult to say anything about the leeway for civil society which will still hold true a few months later. That is the risk of doing future oriented research rather than historical studies. Political developments have also made it harder to do research in direct cooperation with researchers and activists in the two countries, something which has been an aim of the knowledge programme from the outset. However, many local researchers are now abroad and their intimate knowledge of the situation in their home countries is a strong asset for our programme.

*Professor Gerd Junne, Chair in International Relations at the University of Amsterdam*

# ABOUT

## Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia

The main goal of the collaboration between Hivos and the University of Amsterdam is to facilitate stronger interaction between practitioners and researchers as a way to generate both academic output and lessons for practice. Research is a major component of the programme, as well the active exchange of practical experiences. Other activities include workshops, seminars and cooperation with local experts, with a view to translating research results into viable strategies for civil society actors (CSAs) and the development sector at large.

Hivos established its civil society support programme in West Asia in 2004, first in Iran and Iraq and later also in Syria. Where traditions of pluralism, equality and competitive politics are weak, civil society faces many obstacles, especially those organizations or actors that criticise their governments. In countries such as Iran and Syria, civic activists have few resources and are under constant threat of persecution and harassment. At the same time, there are a growing number of voices within academic circles that question the ability of CSAs to play a meaningful role in the transformation of state-society relations. Both the challenging environment in which CSAs operate, as well as the recent scepticism towards their instrumental role in social and political change, poses several dilemmas for CSAs in repressive settings, but also for the international organizations that support them. It is increasingly acknowledged that new approaches need to be developed to study, assess, and support civil societies functioning in restrictive environments. In this light the Knowledge Programme revolves around two overarching questions:

1. How can different types of CSAs contribute to various processes of democratization?
2. How can international actors contribute to CSAs' activities in these processes?

Through field research, regional expert meetings, and consultations with an international advisory board, our research team actively involves practitioners and policy makers in the formulation and articulation of knowledge needs, problem identification and analysis, and options for intervention regarding the two main questions. Current research topics include the role of business associations in liberalization in Syria, conducting social science research under conditions of authoritarianism, the role of diaspora opposition, the interaction between Islamist movements and the state, and regional comparative studies on Morocco, Jordan and Yemen.

The knowledge programme puts great emphasis on the shared creation and dissemination of knowledge, on the integration of local researchers in the South into international networks, and on the shared reflection upon possible applications of new and existing knowledge by Hivos and its partner organizations and by civil society actors and the development sector at large.

For more information visit the website of the Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia.  
[www.hivos.net](http://www.hivos.net)  
or contact the General Coordinator, Juliette Verhoeven, at [J.C.Verhoeven@uva.nl](mailto:J.C.Verhoeven@uva.nl)

# IRAN

## Public Dissent in the Age of the New Media

Coauthored by Erik van Zuylen and an Iranian research fellow for the Knowledge Programme

Some three months after the controversial presidential election in Iran on 12 June 2009, the country is still far from back to normal. After a period of relative silence, thousands of protestors used the symbolic Quds day, usually a day of rallies in support of the Islamic Republic, to protest the election fraud and the violence that followed it. This is especially remarkable given that the regime used its full force in an attempt to strangulate dissent. The developments of the previous months reflect a significant change which moved civil society years ahead. The unique experience of political solidarity gave civil society the courage to stand up to a repressive authoritarian regime. The public has, for the first time in thirty years, found the courage to express its discontent openly despite threats of retribution. New media, such as blogs and websites, have served as important outlets in this process. The main opposition leaders, Mohammad Khatami, Mir-Hossein Musavi and Mehdi Karrubi have publicized statements through the Internet, despite the ever-present threat of arrest. Open statements issued by these leaders are instrumental in keeping alive criticism of the atrocities of the regime and keeping the spirit of resistance high within the protest movement.

After the large protests on Quds day, an atmosphere of hope still lingers in the political statements of the dissidents, who refuse to be silenced, even though the regime is trying to muzzle free speech and destroy the evidence of its atrocities. Despite risks of serious retribution, activists still discuss these issues openly in the rapidly shrinking independent media. The regime is increasing its pressure on the few remaining newspapers, shutting down the offices of political and social organizations. Blogging and websites have developed into alternative media sources. The blogs are used as a means of information provision, bypassing the blockade of the independent media. Along with blogs, social networking sites such as Facebook are also serving as a forum for debating critical social, political and religious issues. The internet is also used for organizing protests. Attempts by the authorities to crack down on bloggers reflect the regime's fear of the Internet which it sees as a threat to national security.

The regime means to prevent general access to open sources of information through heavy censorship and by bombarding the public with propaganda broadcast by the state-run media. But, so far, the mobile and internet technology, and the websites and bloggers, have managed to maintain a narrow flow of information to those seeking it. The important role played by the Persian programs of the BBC and VOA should also be mentioned. They have become platforms for the expression of dissident voices from within Iran. The public are increasingly turning away from the state-run media. The Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting admitted a 40 per cent drop in viewership in the months following the 12 June election.

The persistence of opposition forces despite the regime's strategy to terrorize them, could be an indication that the strategy of inciting fear may not be working. Moreover, the repressive actions of the regime have added to the public distrust, as a new round of show trials accuse many respected revolutionaries and former state functionaries of

treason. The regime appears to be limiting its own possibilities for new alliances, while enhancing the possibility of the formation of new anti-regime alliances.

It is almost inevitable that the regime's repressive apparatuses will eventually manage to damage a large part of the organizational networks of the opposition. But there is a chance too that the regime's denial of the serious political, social, economic and security problems in the country will result in the re-emergence of the protests, perhaps with renewed decisiveness and with more radical demands.

Lurking in the background of this already extremely complex and critical situation are international tensions which threaten to resurface. Iran has many cards in its hand in the different crises around the Greater West Asia region, ranging from Iraq to Lebanon, from Palestine to Afghanistan. Furthermore, the International Community is still very worried about the Iranian nuclear program. Iranian civil society might be the victim of these tensions, when Western countries accept to stay silent on the growing human rights violations in the country, in exchange for a less hostile Iranian foreign policy. Added to this is the highly unpredictable behavior of Israel, which faces its own domestic and international legitimacy crisis and might even result in a destructive war.

Domestically, two main factors will determine the future course of the political crisis in Iran: on the one hand, the repressive powers of the regime and its continued willingness to use these powers; and on the other hand, the leadership of the protest movement and its capacity to reorganize. For the protest movement, cyberspace, and blogging in particular, are set to continue to play a vital role in information provision, facilitating public debate and organizing social and political networks. At the same time, both the regime and its critics will be highly dependent on decisions taken by leaders of other states in the international arena. All in all, Iran appears to be set for some of the most critical years of its modern history.

Erik van Zuylen wrote his thesis on Scenarios of Political Regime Change in Iran.

See also:

<http://iranscenarios.wordpress.com>

## SYRIA

# New Media in Syria

Roschanack Shaery-Eisenlohr, *Syria Researcher for the Knowledge Programme*

How do authoritarian regimes handle criticism within their societies? There is evidence that they make use of a variety of strategies to create consensus that reaches far beyond sheer force and violence. From the East European context there is ample material about the resilience of authoritarianisms and the mechanisms they employ to create obedient subjects. Relying on this scholarship, Lisa Wedeen and Miriam Cooke show how the Syrian regime engages citizens in what they refer to as bought criticism and commissioned criticism. For example, Miriam Cooke discusses, in detail, the practice of *tanfis/tanaffus* (2007, chapter 4). She describes how, in times of crisis, the regime makes a calculated decision to open the safety valves for a period of time, giving citizens the pretense of choice and freedom while the reality is that it is entirely in control of the situation. Hence the word *tanfis* which means breathing. The regime goes even further, according to Cooke, even finding ways to force intellectuals and artists to produce material that criticizes the regime mildly. This commissioned criticism or bought critique "is a moment for sharing unbelief and awareness of injustice; it provides pleasurable release of pent-up pressure." (Cooke 2007:72). The danger of *tanaffus*, she explains, is that "it allows for injustice to persist" (Cooke 2007:72).

Thara magazine is an example of the new internet activism hoping to shape public opinion on gender and social issues. By subverting the regime's discourse that women and social issues are distinct from political opposition, the magazine contributes in its own way to the development of political culture in Syria.

<http://www.thara-sy.com>

What is the role of the new media in this context of bought criticism? Hopes that increased globalization and advanced media technology bring about political liberalization have all but vanished. We now know that authoritarian regimes are more resilient and that economic liberalization and technological modernization are not necessarily coupled with democratic reform. The new media, especially the Internet, blogs and Twitter, have indeed created a counter public, a space where state hegemony is challenged. Opinions among Syrian dissidents differ greatly on the importance of this platform. Is this space part of the bought criticism or is it a *real* space for dissent? There is no doubt that the regime also exploits new media, using it to create the *façade* of pluralism by allowing some oppositional views to be expressed. While I am yet to be convinced of the authenticity of this virtual counter public or that it will lead to any substantial political opening, I do believe that the Internet has, to some extent, helped weaken the regimes' politics of fear. This politics of fear manifests itself, and is maintained, mostly through the atomization of society and the creation of distrust among citizens which, in turn, has the effect of pushing direct policing into background. The Internet, however, has facilitated the formation of networks of citizens, previously unknown to each other, and who would never have trusted each other had they met casually. Networking and trust works against the atomization of the society and can help break the culture of fear among those privileged with access to the new media. While Syrians know that this virtual counter public is not the type of resistance that would bring down a regime they also recognize that the resilience of authoritarianism is not simply due to citizens' fears but is deeply entwined with local, regional, and global politics and economic interest. They contribute to breaking the culture of fear with their limited possibilities and with the knowledge that the virtual counter public might just be another trick of the Orwellian regime.

#### References:

Miriam Cooke. *Dissident Syria*. Duke University Press 2007

This article is based on the forthcoming paper by Roschanack Shaery-Eisenlohr: From Subjects to Citizens? Media and Human Rights in Bashar's Syria.

*Shaery-Eisenlohr received her Ph.D from the University of Chicago. She is the author of Shiite Lebanon. Transnational Religion and the Making of National Identities. Columbia University Press 2008.*

## IN FOCUS

# The Internet and Democracy Project

Ashana Heera, *Researcher for the Knowledge Programme*

In the last couple of years, scholars have started to explore the field of blogging and democratization. Still, their conclusions remain ambiguous at best and leave many questions unanswered. Some may even leave us with more questions than we started with. The field remains relatively uncharted territory. The Internet and Democracy Project, initiated in 2007 by the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University, attempts to further uncover the role blogging may play in democratization processes. The project deals specifically with the question of how the Internet influences

The Internet and Democracy  
Project  
Berkman Center for Internet  
& Society  
Harvard University  
23 Everett Street, 2nd Floor,  
Cambridge, MA 02138  
United States  
T +1 (617) 495-7547  
F +1 (617) 495-7641  
[http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/  
research/internetdemocracy](http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/research/internetdemocracy)

The Internet and Democracy  
Blog: [http://blogs.law.harvard.  
edu/idblog/the-internet-and-  
democracy-project](http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/idblog/the-internet-and-democracy-project)

Global Voices Online: [http://  
globalvoicesonline.org](http://globalvoicesonline.org)

democratic norms and modes, with a special focus on the Middle East. Research results, as well as other knowledge products, can be found on the project websites and form a valuable source of information for anyone interested in the role of new media in democratization.

The Internet and Democracy Project received a \$1.5 million grant from the US Department of State's Middle East Partnership Initiative to undertake a series of case studies in which new technologies and online resources have influenced democracy and civic engagement. In a research period of almost two years, the project has already produced a wealth of information on the subject. Only a couple of months ago, in June 2009, the project released the results of a case study on the Arabic language blogosphere. Just to mention a few interesting findings: bloggers from the Arab world are likely to be young and male; the highest percentage of female bloggers can be found in Egypt; bloggers who focus on issues within their own country are more likely to be critical of domestic political leaders; and the most popular topics are Palestine, religion (in personal rather than political terms) and human rights. Another study on Iran (April 2008) goes against the conventional wisdom that Iranian bloggers are mainly young democrats critical of the regime. The results show that a wide range of opinions are represented in the blogosphere, including religious conservative points of view, on topics ranging from politics and human rights to poetry, religion, and pop culture. Another interesting finding is that religious/conservative bloggers have a greater tendency to blog anonymously compared to the secularists/reformists. Many more case studies have been conducted, on topics ranging from the role of digital networked technologies in the Ukrainian Orange Revolution to digitally networked technology in Kenya's 2007-2008 Post-Election Crisis. Details of these can be found on the project's website.

In addition to disseminating research results, the Internet and Democracy Blog (which can be found on a separate website) also offers links to blogs hosted by Global Voices Online. Founded by two fellows of the Berkman Center in 2005, the Global Voices Online website provides a great entry point for anyone who is new to the blogosphere and has difficulty in navigating the millions of blogs out there. Translations and summaries of blogs from all over the world, including Iran and Syria, are hosted on the website and can be a handy source for researchers and practitioners looking for inside stories from people in the two countries.

The combination of linking to actual blogs on the website and disseminating research results online sets the project apart from similar research endeavors. If you are curious about the latest developments in the field of blogging and democratization research and want to learn more about it, the Internet and Democracy Project is a useful compass for finding a path through the blogosphere.

# KNOWLEDGE PROGRAMME PUBLICATIONS

## **Moth or Flame? The Sunni sphere and Regime Durability in Syria.**

By Teije Hidde Donker, *Syria Fellow for the Knowledge Programme*

How should foreign NGO's engage with civil actors in Syria? And more importantly, how should they deal with the Islamic inspired part of Syrian civil society? Donker claims that they should, firstly, note that the general context in which (secular) civil society exists is better understood in relation to the Islamic Sphere. This is by far the largest field of civil activism in Syria and it is the only entity that has the potential to threaten the Syrian regime.

The Sunni sphere consists of various actors and both formal and informal institutions. Most activities undertaken in this sphere are, given the nature of the network and its contacts, informal. Therefore, the cohesiveness in the sphere is first and foremost a result of interpersonal trust. That is not to deny any differences among its members, goals and institutions. While various Islamic movements exist within the Sunni sphere, all activists emphasize that they are part of the same community. It has been argued that the Sunni sphere probably has a much greater cohesion than the secular civil society.

Around 70% of Syrians are Sunni, and a growing number of them are becoming socio-politically active via religion. One explanation for this could be that joining an organization in this realm of Syrian civil society is the only option left for civil activism, since other (socio-political) movements are either socially bankrupt, or heavily repressed.

The regime's reaction to Sunni activism is highly ambiguous. This is not a deliberate strategy but a result of, firstly, competing political considerations among the elite; and secondly, the highly fragmented bureaucratic system. A number of 'red lines' exist concerning civil activism in Syria, but these lines are blurred and (Islamic) activists test them by trial and error. Because of the ambiguous response of the regime to the Sunni sphere, it is crucial to understand that pragmatism has become a manner of survival. This pragmatism manifests itself in activists seeking relations with regime actors, like the mukhabaraat (secret service) or officials in certain ministries.

Paradoxically, Sunni actors can (unintentionally) support authoritarianism, by being drawn to the very regime that suppresses them. But, the fact that civil activists foster relations with regime actors should not be taken to mean that any contact with Syrian Islamic activists should be avoided.

Foreign civil society actors should gain knowledge about, and make contacts in the Syrian Sunni sphere. Building trust is essential. While sustaining contacts and continuing dialogue seems to be a good first step, foreigners should be cautious about developing cooperation projects in the Sunni sphere. Mutual initiatives are to be left to a later stage.

*Teije Hidde Donker is currently a PhD student at the European University Institute in Florence. During the first half of 2009 he conducted field research in Syria for the Knowledge Programme. This is a summary of his working paper, which is based on the forthcoming academic article "Enduring Ambiguity. The Civil Dynamics of Authoritarian Upgrading in Sunni Syria."*

The full working paper is available on the website of Hivos: [www.hivos.net](http://www.hivos.net)

## Civil Society and Democratization in Jordan

By Curtis R. Ryan, *Assistant Professor Political Science, Appalachian State University*

*The article summarized below is part of a set of case-studies commissioned by the Knowledge Programme that explores the relationship between civil society and the state in the Middle East.*

Traditionally, civil society has been viewed as a powerful democratic force, capable of making repressive governments bend to the increased pressures in society for democratic change. In his analysis of the state of civil society and democratization in Jordan, Ryan provides a more sobering view. While reforms have indeed been taking place, they have been limited at best.

The most important change to the machinery of government in Jordan began when the regime initiated its program of limited political liberalization in 1989. The reform process included one of the largest democratic and reformist Islamist movements in the region, legalized political parties and professional associations, competitive elections for the national parliament, and the gradual growth of civil society in the kingdom.

Yet that process is rooted mainly in national legislative and local municipal elections, and so has not really extended to the executive branch of government. The Prime Minister remains a royal appointee, and cabinet ministers are not necessarily drawn from among the elected members of parliament.

The key facets of Jordan's still-emerging civil society include the numerous political parties and professional associations, where political society and civil society meet, and the many non-governmental organizations within the kingdom. Yet while these civic organizations are themselves independent, they nonetheless retain legal links to the state, since all NGOs register with the General Union of Voluntary Societies. Islamic NGOs are permitted in Jordan, but only if they pursue civic and social, rather than political, activism. The largest and most active organizations in the kingdom are Royal NGOs. These RONGOs provide myriad services to the population, but also maintain a level of social and political control over civil society itself. Similarly, Jordanian workers are allowed to organize through trade unions, but these must then be approved and incorporated into the General Federation of Jordanian Trade Unions. In short, seemingly pluralist forms of social, economic, and civic activism are perhaps best seen as corporatist in organization, as the state both mobilizes and contains participation of citizens in public life. The restrictions that are being made on financing and assembly are clearly aimed at containing the more political aspects of civil society and more rarely pertain to more culturally or educationally oriented civil society.

Nowadays, many Jordanians are looking to tip the scales back towards liberalization and away from the conservative retrenchment that has undone much of that same process. What is perhaps just as compelling about this is the determination of many independent organizations to press on in their attempts to build civil society and more meaningful democratization. The efforts of these individuals and groups nonetheless run headlong into a core of the ruling elite that does indeed see democratization and all its trappings as a completed mission. For many regime conservatives the liberalization process already occurred, and it includes strict parameters intended to give a showy and pluralist façade to an established pattern of power and privilege.

Read the full article on  
[www.hivos.net](http://www.hivos.net)

# BOOK REVIEW

## Blogging Toward Utopia

Paul Aarts, *Lecturer International Relations at the University of Amsterdam*

The growth of Internet usage in the Middle East and North Africa is among the world's fastest: between 2000 and 2007 usage increased almost 500 percent, more than twice the rate of increase in the rest of the world. Just as elsewhere, this has led to Middle Eastern cyber-optimism - among the users of digital tools and Internet watchers alike. It is a widely-held hope that the coming of Web 2.0 can move closed societies toward democratic values and governance. The basic assumption is simple: The Web provides an infrastructure for expressing dissident points of view, breaking gate-keeper monopolies on the public voice, thereby lowering barriers to political mobilization. It makes group and individual action "cheaper, faster and leaner". As a result, the Internet has acquired a cult status, also among policy making institutions in the West that are preoccupied with promoting democracy and human rights. In Europe, it is the Dutch and Danish governments that are at the forefront of supporting digital activism. Conferences, seminars and workshops are organized where "digital heroes from the Middle East" play a prominent role.

Among the digital tools, blogging takes a prominent place. It is supposed to play an important role in building a more democratic public sphere in authoritarian states. In *iMuslims*, Gary R. Bunt, gives a comprehensive inventory of what he, somewhat clumsily, labels as the "cyber-Islamic environment" (CIE). The chapter on the "Islamic blogosphere" - a slight misnomer when discussing secular blogs in Iran or Syria - is a useful addition to what we already know about this particular form of digital activism in the Muslim world. Several countries are surveyed: Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine and the Occupied Territories, Turkey, Iran, and more briefly Egypt and several countries in the Maghreb.

Bunt is well-informed, also in his (short) treatise on blogging in Syria and more elaborate on Iran. The Syrians presented themselves at a relatively early stage while the Iranians are clearly front-runners with an estimated 700,000 Persian blogs in cyberspace in early 2007, of which about 40,000 to 110,000 are active. It is only at the very end of the book that the author grapples with the impact of the Internet, including the blogosphere. He rightly warns against overhyping the effect of online services under the banner of Web 2.0. Much remains in the eyes of the beholder.

With this conclusion, Bunt clearly keeps away from the grandiose promise of technological determinism - the idealistic belief in the Internet's transformative power - that has blinded so many analysts and policymakers. As, Evgeny Morozov, one of the most perceptive analysts in the field has remarked, "While the new digital public spheres may be getting more democratic (at least quantitatively), they are also heavily polluted by government operators, making them indistinguishable from the old, tightly controlled analogue public spheres (...). Digital natives are as likely to be digital captives as digital renegades." Until further research shows different, more rosy results, the conclusion must remain a sober one: people have access to lots of information but very little power to act on it. That is as true in Syria as it is in Iran. Logistics - "cheaper, faster and leaner" - are not the only determinant of civic engagement.

The article cited (*Texting Toward Utopia*) can be accessed through <http://bostonreview.net/R34.2/morozov.php>

Visit the website of Evgeny Morozov. [www.evgenymorozov.com](http://www.evgenymorozov.com)

# KNOWLEDGE PROGRAMME NEWS

## Call for proposals:

### **Authoritarianisms, Regime Resilience and State-Society Relations: Comparing Political Change in Syria and Iran**

**Deadline 30 October 2009**

Steven Heydemann (U.S. Institute for Peace and Georgetown University) and Reinoud Leenders (University of Amsterdam) are pleased to invite you to submit a proposal for writing a paper within the framework of a joint research effort on Authoritarianisms, Regime Resilience and State-Society Relations: Comparing Political Change in Syria and Iran. The paper is to be presented in a project workshop and will be considered for publication in an edited volume or a special edition of a major academic journal.

After nearly two decades hopes for and predictions of genuine and far-reaching democratic reform in the Middle East seem to have reached a dead-end. At the same time, conventional academic analysis on democratization and 'civil society', often grounded in Tocquevillian conceptual frameworks, have increasingly been criticized for their limited value in studying contemporary Middle Eastern politics. After all, authoritarianism in the region seems vibrant and, in many cases, more unyielding than ever before. As a result, many students of the region feel compelled to change their focus of investigation. Rather than exploring the reasons why the Middle East lacks democratic politics, the more appropriate research question pertains to the ways in which authoritarianism works and how it can be best understood. **To receive the complete call for proposals email [j.c.verhoeven@uva.nl](mailto:j.c.verhoeven@uva.nl)**

#### **Colophon**

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Editor: Ashana Heera  
Assistant Editor: Mira Levi

#### **Contact**

University of Amsterdam  
Political Science Department  
Oudezijds Achterburgwal 237  
1012 DL Amsterdam  
The Netherlands

T +31 (0)20 525 53 07  
E [west.asia.newsletter@uva.nl](mailto:west.asia.newsletter@uva.nl)

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