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In the Gulf, Dissidence Goes Digital

Text Messaging Is New Tool Of Political Underground

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KUWAIT CITY -- Rola Dashti's cell phone buzzed on the heady evening of March 7, hours after she had helped lead the largest demonstration for women's voting rights in Kuwait's history, a clamorous protest that ended when hundreds of activists were expelled from parliament for shouting from the gallery.

She pressed her phone's text message button and read an anonymous insult circulating on hundreds of Kuwaiti phones, digital graffiti that attacked her family's Persian ancestry and disparaged her Lebanese-born mother. "Here's what voters will gain if they vote for Rola Dashti," the text message read, as she recalled it. "They will learn the Iranian accent. They will learn a Lebanese accent. And they will learn how to work with the American Embassy to get money."

In this roiling political spring of protest and debate about democracy in repressive Arab countries, cell phone text messaging has become a powerful underground channel of free and often impolite speech, especially in the oil-rich Persian Gulf monarchies, where mobile phones are common but candid public talk about politics is not.

Demonstrators use text messaging to mobilize followers, dodge authorities and swarm quickly to protest sites. Candidates organizing for the region's limited elections use text services to call supporters to the polls or slyly circulate candidate slates in countries that supposedly ban political groupings. And through it all, anonymous activists blast their adversaries with thousands of jokes, insults and political limericks.

"It means I'm making them nervous," Dashti said of the lambasting she received. "I'm on their list," she said, referring to Kuwait's conservative Islamic activists, "and I'd better get used to it so I'm not shocked when it happens during the election." Dashti hopes to run for office if the long campaign for women's suffrage in Kuwait succeeds, as many participants expect it will when the elected National Assembly formally considers the issue, perhaps as soon as April.

At about 40 cents per missive, text messaging can be an expensive way to mobilize the masses, but the Gulf

countries are lightly populated and afloat on record oil revenue. With political debate at a fever pitch this year, many of the region's well-heeled activists find it hard to resist the chance to compose their own uncensored statements and deliver their political wisdom to targeted audiences.

"My bill is going sky high," said Abduljalil Singace, foreign affairs director of Bahrain's Al-Wefaq National Islamic Society, the island emirate's largest opposition grouping, a Shiite Muslim movement that is noisily boycotting the country's three-year-old, limited parliament.

Singace was fired as an associate professor and department chair at Bahrain University in mid-March after he traveled twice to Washington to lobby against his country's royal government, a close U.S. ally. He said Bahrain's security services also told him to stop sending dissident text messages. The Bahrain government says Singace was discharged for neglecting his duties at the university.

"They warned me against text messaging on demonstrations," Singace said. Before the warning, he said, "I was not sure they were reading my text messages. Now I'm telling everyone."

Still, he remains proud of some of his compositions. When American management consultants issued a report recently about how Bahrain's government could accelerate reform of its free-trading economy, Singace whipped off a reply and paid a commercial service to distribute his message throughout the island.

"Economic reform without political reform is like a bird with only one wing," he wrote. "How can it fly?"

Text messaging is only the latest in a wave of border-hopping communication technologies to rewire patterns of Arab dissent during the past 15 years. Saudi exiles and Islamic activists waged an underground war of faxed pamphlets during the early and mid-1990s. Satellite television channels transformed the images and ideas available to Arab viewers during the same period. More recently, CDs, DVDs and the World Wide Web have dominated underground political publishing in the Gulf.

As each new technology has spread, the region's authoritarian governments have tried to fight back. They have sent censors to license fax machines and block dissident Web sites, and they have pushed government-friendly investors to buy and manage satellite channels. But the Gulf's monarchies have not yet figured out whether or how to control text message channels.

If they do, they will sorely disappoint the region's profit-engorged cell phone companies, whose stock prices have soared as phone and messaging use has exploded. About 55 percent of Kuwaitis and a third of Saudis now own cell phones, according to mobile service providers, and growth rates show no sign of slacking.

The Gulf's huge youth population stands at the center of the boom. As young people come of age in societies that discourage unsupervised contact with the opposite sex, text messaging offers a way to duck parents and defy gender segregation. In one of Riyadh's gleaming shopping malls on a recent Thursday night, veiled teenage girls in black-robed flocks giggled as they messaged boys across the food court. Teenagers send messages to flirt, plan social events and even set up clandestine dates, Saudi parents and teenagers said.

Less innocent slander and pornography also flow through text channels. When a Saudi mobile phone provider announced new photo and video messaging services this month, it issued an unusual press release to encourage socially responsible use of mobile phones and to argue that innovative technology should not be blamed because a few people abuse it.

In Gulf politics, too, text messaging "allows people to send messages that they would not say in public," said Fawzi A. Guleid, program officer with the National Democratic Institute in Bahrain. "It is alarming to me the messages that come."

Activists have learned how to blast thousands of attack messages while hiding their own identities. "People who use those messages are denouncing, insulting opposition figures, members of parliament and the government," Guleid said, suggesting that the new technology encourages unrestrained personal invective as new democratic cultures are formed.

Many of the insults and comments would sound tame to an American politician.

The technology also helps democratic organizers who are often badly overmatched by the Gulf's authoritarian governments. In a region where formal political parties are banned but loose political societies are often tolerated,

text messaging allows organizers to build unofficial membership lists, spread news about detained activists, encourage voter turnout, schedule meetings and rallies, and develop new issue campaigns -- all while avoiding government-censored newspapers, television stations and Web sites.

The Gulf's network of Muslim Brotherhood chapters has been especially aggressive in adopting such tactics, several of its leaders and campaign managers said in interviews. The Brotherhood is a global network of conservative Islamic political activists, often drawn from elite professions, who seek to establish religious governments and societies, usually by peaceful means. Its members control student and professional unions across the region and have won seats in several of the Gulf's limited parliaments.

Before text messaging went commercial, black marketers sold CDs containing lists of cell phone numbers smuggled out of government ministries or phone companies, said Mohammed Dallal, a lawyer and Brotherhood campaign manager in Kuwait City. Now "the mobile companies are giving the services," he said. "You give them the message, they'll send it to 40,000 people" for a fee.

Before this year's municipal elections in Saudi Arabia, the first in the kingdom in decades, Dallal spoke to prospective candidates and campaign managers in three Saudi cities. "I try to convince them to use the technology," he said.

In Bahrain, Shiite opposition organizers who frequently stage unauthorized or illegal demonstrations said they used services originally meant for commercial advertisements to keep protests on track even as the government tries to shut them down.

Kuwaiti women organizing protests for voting rights said they had been more effective during their 2005 campaign than during their last serious effort five years ago because text messaging had allowed them to call younger protesters out of schools and into the streets.

For all of these appealing practical benefits, text messaging also appears to be popular because it has captured Arab pop literary imaginations. In Gulf societies, where rhetorical speech is celebrated and poetry is prominent, the short, quipping format of a text message offers a new twist on tradition. Activists deliberate over their compositions and memorize their favorite zingers, passing them from phone to phone.

For Dashti, the women's suffrage activist insulted for being of less than pure Kuwaiti ancestry, the sting was salved by the message her own group blasted out that same night of the historic demonstration about the speaker of the Kuwaiti parliament, Jassem Kharafi, who had shut down their rally. The activists accused him of being more interested in making money from business contracts than in helping Kuwait advance democratic reforms.

"If you want Kharafi to vote for women's political rights," an anonymous member of the suffrage movement wrote, "just issue the right as a tender contract."

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