

Facebook, YouTube used as weapons in Kashmir fight

August 27 2010, By AIJAZ HUSSAIN , Associated Press Writer



In this Friday, Aug. 13, 2010 file photo, a Kashmiri protester throws stones at Indian paramilitary soldiers during a protest in Srinagar, India. Ahmed, who calls himself "an anonymous soldier of Kashmir's resistance movement," is part of a wave of Web savvy protesters in Kashmir who have begun using social networking sites to publicize their fight against Indian rule to a global audience and to keep other demonstrators energized and focused. (AP Photo/Dar Yasin, File)

(AP) -- Before hitting the streets, Ahmed reaches for his two essential protest tools: a scarf to mask his face and a cell phone camera to show the world what is happening.

The 23-year-old, who posts videos to YouTube under names such as "oppressedkashmir1," is part of a wave of Web-savvy protesters in Indian-controlled Kashmir who have begun using social networking to

publicize their fight and keep fellow demonstrators energized and focused.

"(I am) an anonymous soldier of Kashmir's resistance movement, using [Facebook](#) and [YouTube](#) to fight India," Ahmed said, showing off his most recent work, a montage of protest videos and photos set to London-based Sami Yousuf's popular song, "Try Not to Cry Little One." Like other protesters, he declined to give his full name for fear of arrest.

The last three months have seen an upsurge in violent protests against Indian rule in Kashmir, a region divided between India and Pakistan and claimed by both.

The protesters, mostly youths wearing jeans and hooded shirts, call themselves "sangbazan," or the stone pelters. They have covered Srinagar and other major Kashmiri towns with pro-independence graffiti and mounted fierce stone barrages against security forces, sometimes surrounding armored vehicles and throwing stones inside through the firing slats.

At least 64 people, mostly teenage boys and young men in their 20s, have been killed. Prabhakar Tripathi, a spokesman for the paramilitary Central Reserve Police Force, said it's difficult to respond to such attacks. "We use bullets in self-defense as a last resort," he said.

With student discussion groups banned and thousands of security operatives believed to be snooping on protesters, the youth of Kashmir are using the Internet as a virtual meeting place.

[Social networking sites](#), though presumably under Indian surveillance, have proven to be more effective than any previous form of political communication in Kashmir, said Shuddabrata Sengupta, a New Delhi-based writer who follows new media issues in India.

"The struggle on the streets and in the corners of cyberspace have a mutually complementary nature," he said.

The stone pelters use Facebook to debate the weekly calendar of protests, discuss ways to hold Kashmiri leaders accountable and trade daily news updates, some of questionable reliability.

One user sparked a debate about the role of Kashmiri intellectuals in the fight by posting a picture of the Palestinian-American literary theorist Edward Said symbolically throwing a stone near the Israel-Lebanon border. In Kashmir, many intellectuals do not openly identify with the struggle, though privately they may embrace it.

Another user, whose Facebook name is "Kale Kharab," a Kashmiri term for a hothead, recently posted methods to counter the effects of tear gas and administer first aid to a shooting victim.

"They're shaping the political discourse and raising the bar for pro-independence political groups in Kashmir and authorities in New Delhi," said Sheikh Showkat Hussain, a law professor at the University of Kashmir.

Marketing and information technology experts estimate at least 40,000 Kashmir residents are on Facebook. The page for "Bekaar Jamaath," or the Idle Group, amassed about 12,000 members in four months before being hacked, removed and re-established recently.

The posting of well-produced Kashmiri protest videos began more than two years ago with the expansion of Internet service in the remote Himalayan region and access to better cell phone technology.

One of the first videos combined images of women and children wailing at graveyards and the bodies of slain Kashmiris with a moving song

written by Abdul Ahad Azad, an early 20th-century Kashmiri revolutionary poet. Two other videos were set to singer Chris de Burgh's "Revolution" and "Oh My Brave Hearts."

Now young Kashmiris are uploading video shot furtively from windows showing government forces damaging vehicles and property during curfews, when there are no journalists around.

"Because of this video evidence that cannot be denied, some people outside Kashmir have started believing the horrors we have been living under," said Rayees, a young protester who uploaded a clip to Facebook showing paramilitary forces hurling stones and smashing the windows of homes in a Srinagar neighborhood.

"There are aberrations," said Tripathi, the paramilitary spokesman. "The commanders in their areas of responsibility have been directed to listen to the public grievances and see if people are facing any problems."

Another video of intense stone throwing by protesters, set to the Everlast song "Stone in My Hand," has become a hit with the demonstrators and made its shadowy creator - known only as a computer engineer - a revered figure among them.

"He made it appear as if the song was composed for Kashmir," said Shabir, a college student and stone thrower. "He showed us how one can be more meaningful and imaginative and yet continue to be a stone pelter."

More information: <http://tinyurl.com/23ovhpw>
<http://tinyurl.com/2353d48>
<http://tinyurl.com/28ofyz2>
<http://tinyurl.com/2bsmjios>

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