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The Role of New Media and Communication Technologies in Arab Transitions

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>> The pace of events in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya in early 2011 led analysts to identify Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) as an important catalyst of the Arab spring. ICTs include mobile phones and Internet-based applications such as email, blogs, forums, social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook and Twitter, and Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) programmes such as Skype. Looking at the role of these tools in processes of political change, we distinguish two phases: firstly, their role in bringing down old regimes, and secondly, their significance in consolidating transitions to democracy once the revolutionary dust has settled. Whilst it is clear that ICTs made an essential contribution to the overthrow of Mubarak and Ben Ali, experiences from other parts of the world show that their role in sustaining the democratic transition process in the longer run is less certain.

This policy brief will explore the role of new technologies in Egypt and Tunisia. It will examine how ICTs helped the revolution by mobilising important parts of the population and creating alternative discourses to authoritarian regimes, which found international backing. Looking at both the achievements and the most important challenges within the MENA transitions, it will then assess how ICTs can support democratic consolidation by contributing to the development of an open public sphere and helping pro-democracy actors to remain engaged during the transition phase. Examples and lessons from democratic breakthroughs and transitions in other parts of the world will further enrich the analysis.

HIGHLIGHTS

• ICTs helped the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia by facilitating the organisation of protests and the global broadcast of these in real time.

• They can also play a positive role during the transition by fostering an open public sphere and linking new and traditional pro-democracy activism.

• ICTs cannot by themselves guarantee regime change or the success of democratisation, but they will constitute an important focal point of the political struggle.

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ICTS' ROLE IN ENDING AUTHORITARIAN RULE

While avoiding deterministic explanations regarding their 'liberatory' character, there is a broad consensus that new communication tools, which enable individuals broadly to share information played an important role as accelerators of the social protests that ended the Mubarak and Ben Ali regimes. Mobile phones (especially smart-phones which can connect to the Internet), online forums, blogging platforms, video-sharing platforms like You Tube, and social network sites (SNS) like Twitter and Facebook, have all been used increasingly by Arab activists to gather and spread information and weaken the regimes' control over the political narrative. These tools helped political change thanks to their dual ability to facilitate the organisation of protests and broadcast these, locally and globally, in real-time.

International reporting on the Arab spring gave this development credit by coining catchy labels like 'Facebook-' and 'Twitter-revolutions'. The actual impact of SNS was more nuanced. On the one hand, the reach of SNS is limited to Internet users, which amount to 33.9 and 24.5 per cent of the population in Tunisia and Egypt, respectively. Although these are among the highest penetration rates in Africa, total outreach remains limited. The spread of mobile phones is considerably higher, with 83.3 per cent among Tunisians and 50 per cent among Egyptians. Furthermore, different SNS had varying uses and impacts. Tunisia has over two million Facebook users, but estimates of active Twitter subscribers at the time of the revolution were as low as 200. An Egyptian activist stated that 'Facebook was used to schedule protests, Twitter to coordinate, and YouTube to tell the world'.

Activists used ICTs to mobilise locally against authoritarian regimes. At the same time, their international real-time broadcasting had a global impact.

Fostering international backing for political change: While Twitter conversations around the #jan25 and #Tahrir hash-tags did not have a mass audience in Egypt, their impact at the global level was considerable. For numerous younger Egyptian citizens, the Internet became a way to vent their frustration with the economic and political situation, and contact others who were equally unhappy. References to previous protests added to their frustration, such as those in 2004 led by the 'Kefaya' movement. News of the Tunisian revolution also spread on the Internet, and became a further motivator, together with other less direct influences like hip-hop videos ridiculing authoritarian rule. All of this helped to create a feeling of community both among cyber-activists in Egypt, across the Arab world and with the Diaspora in the West.

While the Arab spring became the most important and successful example of the use of ICTs for political mobilisation, it was not the first. Barack Obama's successful election campaign in 2008 highlighted the power of the Internet in political mobilisation. Shortly thereafter political uprisings in Moldova (April 2009) and Iran (June 2009) – both following rigged elections – became the first 'Twitter revolutions'. The latter two provide a valuable lesson however, in that they proved to be less a reflection of the growing power of SNS than of the growing international attention paid to ICTs. In the context of the Arab spring, although to external observers online discussions were some of the most visible elements of the upheavals, they were certainly not their main cause.

Popular mobilisation against autocratic regimes: Locally, ICTs were not decisive in triggering the Arab spring, but they helped activists simultaneously to organise protests and construct a bottom-up narrative against the regime. They enabled people on the streets to record the protests and the police's response, remain connected to other protesters, react flexibly to new developments, and broadcast live what happened on the ground to a global audience. This constituted a sufficient threat for Mubarak to shut down Internet connections for five days. This measure proved counterproductive for the regime as more people were forced onto the streets, which also helped them to evade the

state's online monitoring. This may have inspired the Syrian regime to end its initial Facebook blockage, as it realised that a total blackout was nearly impossible (images and videos of state violence still reached the world via Lebanese networks), and allowing access to Facebook proved more efficient to control dissent. Although the radically new character of these technologies limits comparisons to developments in other countries, some parallels are pertinent.

In the Philippines, during the 2001 impeachment trial of President Joseph Estrada, loyalists in the Congress voted to set aside key evidence against him. Angry crowds reacted by calling for a mobilisation via text messages. Over seven million messages mobilised around one million people to protest in Manila. As a result, Estrada stepped aside. This event marked the first known example of social media as a tool for putting an end to tyranny.

Activists must go beyond mobilisation and institutionalise the use of ICTs to channel civil society demands

During the 2004 'Orange Revolution' in Ukraine, ICTs – although not SNS –played an important role. In particular, alternative online media such as the Ukrainskaya Prevda website, email lists and online forums, alongside mobile phones, were used by activists to stay in touch with each other and keep informed about latest developments, and by those in Kiev to mobilise friends and family in other towns. Following the successful street mobilisations leading up to the Orange Revolution, however, the political space soon closed down. ICTs have been instrumental in mobilising against autocratic regimes or around concrete events, like a rigged election. Nonetheless, as Ukraine shows, in order to become a meaningful tool for democratisation ICTs must transcend the revolutionary stage and be used to engage protesters in the political debates of the transition.

Two main lessons can be drawn from the events in Eastern Europe, for the impact of ICTs on Tunisia and Egypt. First, ICTs help to raise international awareness and support for democratic upheavals, but this global character can also distort perceptions, and make international observers over-emphasise elements that may have little importance on the ground. Second, if ICTs are to become important factors during the transition, activists must go beyond specific instances of mobilisation and seek to institutionalise the use of these tools as a way of channelling and carrying over civil society's demands to the ensuing transitional phase. In contrast to their role in instances of regime change, ICTs' importance in longer-term transition processes remains largely untested.

ICTS' ROLE IN CONSOLIDATING DEMOCRATIC RULE

ITCs can play a positive role throughout political transitions. Firstly, they can contribute to fostering an open public sphere, provided that freedom of expression and information are sufficiently guaranteed. Secondly, ICTs can help consolidate the gains of a democratic breakthrough by facilitating linkages between new and traditional activism, and between punctual mobilisation and longer-term political debates.

Preserving an open public sphere. Autocratic governments have long sought to remain in power by controlling public opinion through the monopoly of traditional print and broadcasting media; however, they have begun to lose this comparative advantage in the Internet. Similarly, the spread of satellite networks has reduced government control over information. Arabic language satellite channels have mushroomed in the region and beyond: the US (Al-Hurra), the United Kingdom (BBC Arabic), Iran (Al-Alam), Russia (Russia Today) and China (CNTV-Arabic). These channels also have their own websites and forums to complement them. Rising Internet penetration rates have reinforced the battle between users and states seeking to control them.

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Controlled liberalisation of the media can prove to be a powerful way for regimes to relieve some of the pressure generated by social and political discontent. In several Arab states, the regimes' fears of uprisings has led to the announcement of a series of reforms, including the adoption of a bill on media and freedom of the press in Algeria, which carefully allows some liberties by withholding others. That media liberalisation does not necessarily lead to greater democratic pluralism is shown by examples such as Pakistan, where the creation of several private, politically tame TV channels did little for diverging opinions.

The popularisation of blogs and SNS has extended the group of potential targets from activists and journalists to any citizen politically active online. At the same time, the Internet has been used to circumvent government controls, access information and share it with a significant part of the population. Although heavily monitored, online tools and spaces reproduce and amplify rumours, news and pieces of information that weaken regimes' control over information. Regimes fear the effects of contagion and 'waves' that feature prominently in democratisation theories. As a result, authoritarian regimes like China, Zimbabwe or Equatorial Guinea have blocked reporting on the Arab spring and have since increased web monitoring.

Unfortunately, harassment and control of the media is still intact even in post-revolutionary countries, to varying degrees, as remnants of the old regimes stay put and continue old practices. In Egypt, the arrest of blogger/journalist Alaa Abdel Fattah as a result of his critical reporting on the military council's rule has generated widespread protests and monitoring and harassment of SNS users continues. In Tunisia, despite the praised elections and the establishment of the National Instance for the Reform of Information and Communication (INRIC), pre-revolutionary media laws remain in place and TV and radio licences are waiting to be granted. Strong links between media and politics have also been brought to the centre stage through the businessman Hachemi Hamdi, leader of the Popular List party and owner of a TV station featuring him during his campaign. Hence, in both countries, faster progress on securing freedom of expression for both traditional and new media will be crucial to circumvent an undermining of revolutionary gains.

Linking up to political actors and debates: In addition to keeping the space for debate open, ICTs can help transitions if pro-democratic activists are able effectively to use these tools to reach out to the general population, and link to broader political debates, carrying over the demands and momentum of revolutionary mobilisation into the calmer waters of the transitional phase. Here, the examples of pro-democracy grassroots movements Maidan and Pora in Ukraine are illuminating. During the revolution, activists were able to use ICTs – email and online forums, and SMS – to help establish linkages with citizens. However, after the Orange Revolution, these groups lost all momentum and failed to remain engaged during the transition phase. A more optimistic example comes from Kenya, where following the 2008 post-electoral violence, a new wave of activists joined established civil society organisations (CSOs) in the fight for effective democratisation. During the 2010 constitutional referendum campaigning, voting and implementation, progress was monitored by a wide variety of CSOs working from different angles, online and offline, and which remain active for the 2012 presidential elections.

These important connections between online activism and CSOs signal the need to explore further how ICTs relate to the broader political process and their ability to influence the agenda. Both in Egypt and Tunisia, some influential bloggers and online activists have had a public presence in the post authoritarian scenario. At the same time, however, in Egypt, ICTs are being used very effectively by the SCAF to maintain its position. As previous revolutions, like the Iranian one in 1979, have shown, the social groups that led the protests against authoritarian rule and those that were eventually able to dictate the nature of the successor regime are not necessarily the same. The current North African scenario stresses the important work still ahead for those that led the overthrow of Mubarak and Ben Ali to defend their demands in an institutionalised political arena. The lesson from previous similar situations also emphasises that for these actors to be successful, new and old generation of activists within the MENA must form a broad pro-democracy constituency which effectively employs ICTs to share information, debate and articulate its demands for reforms.

CONCLUSION

The Arab spring has impressively demonstrated how ICTs are becoming increasingly important tools in the democratic political process, often serving to promote a more accountable political system. ICTs contributed to regime change in the Arab countries by helping the organisation of popular protests and giving these an international dimension. However, experiences from other regions suggest that ICTs' 'democratising potential' in post-revolutionary transitional periods has been more limited. The difficulties in carrying over the momentum and demands onto the transitional phase remains a considerable challenge for activists in North Africa.

In the longer run, ICTs offer a vast potential of new forms of political and civic participation of democracy that the MENA and elsewhere can benefit from. In the short term however, the realisation of ICTs' potential in the region depends on the existence of a minimum open public sphere and the defence of the freedom of information and expression. Protecting these and other liberties will depend on the ability of CSOs and activists to take advantage of these new tools to bring reform demands to the fore and resist a renewed closing of the political space, as happened most visibly in Ukraine.

ICTs should be considered a facilitating rather than a decisive factor, and hence not a new panacea for democracy. Through mobilisation, ICTs can effectively accelerate regime change, yet their impact is dependent on factors such as an organised civil society, opposition movement or international backing. This is particularly relevant for countries facing a possible transition such as Syria and Yemen, where access to ICTs is not sufficient to provoke changes given the absence of all other factors. ICTs' role as a tool and channel for political participation and mobilisation will grow as mobile and Internet user rates increase. In the Arab world, this will intensify the battle over information and communication spaces, as both pro-democracy forces and spoilers will seek to employ them to their benefit.

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