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## **The internet in authoritarian regimes: a technology of liberation or repression?**

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The use of social media by protestors during the Arab Spring was a breakthrough. Cyber-optimists predicted that the internet in general, and social media in particular, would allow the people living under authoritarian regimes to organize themselves to overthrow dictators. However, a decade later, there has not been a wave of democratization.

By Babak RezaeeDaryakenari

## The internet in authoritarian regimes

# A technology of liberation or repression?

In 2020, the American NGO Freedom House reported the fourteenth consecutive year of global decline in democracy and pluralism. This is concerning. Social science research finds that democracy, besides its normative values, is associated with positive political and economic outcomes, such as peace and economic growth. While there is an ongoing debate on the causality of these associations, there is a universal desire for democracy. This desire is even more vital in authoritarian states, where discontented citizens perceive that democracy is part of the solution to their problems. However, whenever these grieved citizens protest against authoritarian regimes, the regimes violently repress them.

The use of social media by protestors during the 2009 Iranian election protests and the 2011 Arab Spring was a breakthrough. Some pundits and scholars even called social media a 'liberation technology'. Cyber-optimists argued that the freedom and capacity of the internet to spread news across

Cyber-empowered protest and repression



the world within seconds could empower opposition movements in authoritarian states. Therefore, we should expect a new wave of democratization. However, after about a decade since protestors first used the internet, there has not been a wave of democratization. Instead, some scholars and practitioners have raised concerns that authoritarian regimes use the internet to repress the opposition and secure their own survival.

### A cyber-empowered wave of democratization?

Within the scholarship on democratization, there is a rich discussion on the causes of authoritarian persistence. While some may cite cultural explanations, others will cite a lack of agency as the root cause of democratization failure. Although such factors may be crucial, we should not downplay the role of efficient repression in the survival of authoritarian regimes. Authoritarian regimes rely on their competent security forces to prevent any plans for organizing protests. And if dissatisfied citizens overcome these barriers and take to the streets, they are often suppressed violently.

Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter changed the battleground in the first decade of the 21st century. While authoritarian regimes were confident that the combination of media censorship and the fear of severe repression would discourage any collective movement, the millennials in some of these countries used social media platforms to raise awareness about the corruption, inequality, and kakistocracy<sup>1</sup> in their countries by discussing these issues in weblogs and online forums. Then, when the opportunities arose, they used the social media

**Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter changed the battleground in the first decade of the 21st century**

<sup>1</sup> | A kakistocracy is a government run by the worst, least qualified, or most unscrupulous citizens.

platforms to organize anti-government protests. They also used the internet to spread the photos and videos of state violence recorded on their mobile cell phones.

The widespread circulation of the undeniable evidence of state repression recorded and posted by the masses adversely challenged the legitimacy of authoritarian regimes in the eyes of bystanders. It also attracted the attention of democratic countries to these violations of human rights. These cyber-empowered revolutions led to the overthrow of several dictators, including Mubarak and Ben Ali, in the Middle East.

As a result of these new developments, cyber-optimists predicted that the internet in general, and social media in particular, would allow the people living under authoritarian regimes to pass the censorship walls so as to organize themselves to overthrow the dictators. They also predicted that citizen-journalists would use their cell phone cameras to record all the blatant violence committed by security forces. Therefore, it was expected that authoritarian regimes would become more conscious of using violence against the opposition. Consequently, as a result of the internet revolution, there was high hope for a new wave of democratization in the second decade of 21st century.

#### Upgraded authoritarianism?

When dissidents used the Internet against authoritarian regimes, censorship was the first reaction of the regimes to survive the threats that this new technology posed to them. However, the development of virtual private networks (VPNs) and other bypass proxy technologies showed that censorship could only slow down the exchange of information on the internet in the short term. Censorship is hence ineffective in giving state authorities complete control of the online space in the long term. Moreover, the economic benefits of the internet have made shut-downs and censorship a costly decision for authoritarians.

Instead, authoritarian states have upgraded their tools and have formed cyber forces to exploit the freedom of social media platforms to surveil their citizens, spread disinformation, and manipulate the flow of information on online platforms – both within and beyond their borders. Indeed, reports of the Information Operation of Twitter show that a group of mostly non-democratic countries has used Twitter to manipulate the discourse on the online platform.

Some authoritarian states have already developed their cyber forces to actively monitor and manipulate the online platforms commonly used by citizens.<sup>2</sup> The active presence of these government-backed online users has allowed the regimes to collect information on potential dissidents and protests; distract online users from conversations leading to a collective movement against the state; and disseminate disinformation on online platforms during political conflicts, in particular by spreading doubts about distributed evidence on corruption and human rights violations in these regimes.

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<sup>2</sup> | For instance, 50 Cents Army in China, Cyber Army in Iran, and Web Brigades in Russia.

After about ten years since the Arab Spring, we have not seen any considerable wave of democratization in the world. Instead, the evidence and reports indicate that authoritarian regimes have used the internet to contain democratic movements within their borders and to attack democracies beyond their borders.<sup>3</sup>

#### Ready for the challenges of digital authoritarianism?

Both dissidents and state authorities use the internet, and research on how the internet explicitly influences the dynamics and outcomes of their interactions is ongoing. Yet the initial evaluation is that the internet is neither inherently democratic nor non-democratic. The internet, and in particular the online social media platforms, are new tools in the hands of different political actors. On the one hand, online platforms decentralized entertainment and news broadcasting, and offer marginalised citizens a low-cost and low-controlled space to challenge the status quo. On the other hand, the very freedom and anonymity of the platforms have also made them into an attractive tool in the hands of authoritarian states to monitor, control, manipulate, and repress citizens more effectively than before.

As the influence of the internet on protest-repression dynamics unfolds, democrats should ask themselves several important questions. What are the legal implications of the increasing use of the internet by authoritarian regimes? Does monitoring online spaces to repress dissidents violate the rights of these dissidents? And if so, under which domestic and international laws? What about using social media platforms to manipulate the behaviour and decisions of citizens? If the use of the internet by authoritarian regimes to repress citizens violates any laws, what is the way to launch legal procedures? How feasible is the legal attribution process? Are international institutions prepared to adapt to these new developments? Can authoritarians be held accountable for cyber-repression and cyber-enabled repression? And what about think tanks supporting democratic movements? Are they ready to assist the democratic movements worldwide against the cyber tactics that authoritarian regimes use to suppress them?

There is evidence showing that authoritarian regimes use their cyber technology and armies not just against their domestic oppositions, but also against their foreign rivals, in particular to target the democratic institutions in democracies. How well-prepared are democratic countries for the cyber-attacks and online campaigns launched against them by authoritarian regimes? And last but not least, are the educational and research centers training a new generation of students to be ready and capable to face the challenges and threats that digital authoritarianism poses? ●

<sup>3</sup> | <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/rise-digital-authoritarianism>

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