

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2011

INTERNET RIGHTS AND DEMOCRATISATION

Focus on freedom of expression and association online



This edition of Global Information Society Watch is dedicated to the people of the Arab revolutions whose courage in the face of violence and repression reminded the world that people working together for change have the power to claim the rights they are entitled to.

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TUNISIA

THE INTERNET: CATALYSING A LEADERLESS REVOLUTION



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Introduction

Since December 2010 Tunisia has experienced an unprecedented and spontaneous wave of protests, fuelled by a persistent lack of freedom of expression, anger over governance corruption issues, and mounting frustration over unemployment and social exclusion. These countrywide protests led to the toppling of the regime and the ousting of Tunisia's second president, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, on 14 January 2011 after 23 years in power. His departure into exile in Saudi Arabia has not calmed the violence as demonstrations and resistance continue on the streets, and on social networks. The political outlook has been positively impacted by the revolution. An interim president and government have been established, different high commissions responsible for protecting the revolution appointed and various reforms initiated.

This social resistance was buoyed by pictures posted on Facebook, flashed on Twitter and published on blogs and other online forums. This gave the revolution different names: the "Internet Revolution", "Twitter Revolution" or "Jasmine Revolution"; but regardless of the name, Tunisian youth demonstrated the important and critical role that the internet and social media play in struggles for freedom and for human rights today.

Policy and political background

Tunisia has an impressive political history: slavery was abolished in 1848, a Constitution established in 1861, polygamy abolished in 1956, abortion legalised in 1973, a Human Rights League established in 1977. Of the Arab countries, these qualified her as the one nearest to democracy.

The first president, Habib Bourguiba, went to great lengths to build the country by investing in education and health, but without being able to deepen democracy in the country. On 7 November 1987, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, just nominated prime minister, ousted Bourguiba in a bloodless coup, while promising that there would be "no presidency for life".

Ben Ali was the darling of the Western countries and considered the trusted leader who would maintain Tunisia's pro-Western policies and keep the country away from the extremism found in its larger neighbours: Libya and Algeria.

But the reality was different, and Ben Ali began consolidating his rule by restraining the opposition, and taking control of the media and armed forces. In 1999 he organised Tunisia's first multi-candidate presidential election and won it with 99.44% of the vote. A constitutional referendum in 2002 amended the upper age limit for a presidential candidate to 75 years of age, to give him the ability to run for a fifth term in 2009. He won with 89% of the vote.

Under his regime, Tunisia became known as one of the most restrictive countries with a poor human rights record, including the imprisonment of opinion leaders, the surveillance of websites, emails and other internet activities, the restriction of freedom of association, and the harassment and intimidation of cyber activists.

The internet as a catalyst to change...

One of the clearest signs of social resistance in Tunisia was the revolt in Redeyef in 2008, in the mining area of Gafsa in the centre of the country. This was brutally crushed by police, and no news went out other than a few videos published online – on the video platform YouTube, which had already been blocked by authorities. A small number of activists and journalists tried to unveil what happened but they were imprisoned and harassed by Ben Ali's regime.

Cyber activists had already been hard hit by the death in 2005 of Zouhair Yahyaoui, one of the first people to denounce human rights violations on his website TuneZine. Moreover, the release of WikiLeaks cables had made citizens more aware of the corruption of the regime, in particularly Ben Ali's family.

Other incidents also showed signs of brewing social unrest: the death of Abdesselem Trimeche in April 2010 in Monastir, and Chamseddine El Hani in November 2010 in Metlaoui – both immolated themselves. Neither case was covered by the media, other than some information and videos posted on social websites. Similarly, clashes between police

and protesters in the southern Tunisian region of Ben Guerdane in August 2010 were lightly reported by the media.

On the morning of 17 December, Mohamed Bouazizi, a 26-year-old vegetable trader, immolated himself after a municipal inspector tried to confiscate his merchandise. That afternoon, Ali Bouazizi – a cousin of Mohamed Bouazizi – uploaded a video on Facebook of the first protest, just in front of the Sidi Bouzid governorate, a few metres from the place where his cousin had immolated himself.

The same day Al Jazeera news downloaded the video of the protest from Facebook and broadcasted it on Al Jazeera Mubasher.

Unlike the Green Revolution in Iran in 2009, Tunisian activists used social media tools effectively by capturing and uploading videos on Facebook and sharing them on Twitter – but the heart of the protests lay in the organised and violent protests in different towns in the country.

Unlike Mubarak, who shut down the internet for five days in Egypt, Ben Ali was counting on his legendary oppressive structure and the self-censorship from his citizens that he was used to dealing with. This structure was – unfortunately for him – not able or prepared to respond to the rapid dissemination of information using new social media.

Cyber activists were the first on the scene, documenting and sharing news of the protests; but by the first week of January, millions of internet users became more and more active, reacting to what was happening each day and night in Kasserine, Thala, Menzel and Bouzaian; and to the very repressive police reaction that they witnessed.

Tunisian citizens were also able to follow information reported by international TV channels (Al Jazeera, France 24, Al Arabiya, etc.), which were broadcasting videos and information reported by normal citizens and activists on the ground. The state-owned TV7 – named after 7 November 1987 when Ben Ali secured power through his putsch – continued to ignore the growing social uprising.

Despite the censorship of almost all video and image-sharing platforms (e.g. YouTube, Dailymotion, Vimeo, Flickr), Tunisian protesters learned quickly how to use proxies, anonymisers and circumvention tools to share information on platforms like Facebook and Twitter – the hashtags #bouazizi and #sidibouzid reached a high-level trend worldwide.

The Tunisian authorities meanwhile tried every means possible to thwart the flow of information, which pushed the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists to send an open letter to Ben Ali stating: “Regional and international media have reported that numerous local and international news

websites covering the street protests were blocked in Tunisia. One report placed your country, along with Saudi Arabia, as the worst in the region regarding Internet censorship. A 2009 CPJ study found Tunisia to be one of the 10 worst countries worldwide to be a blogger, in part for the same reasons.”¹

The Ben Ali regime had also begun to attack activists’ Facebook and email accounts. A hidden script injected into popular site login pages had been discovered by cyber activists,² and the Electronic Frontier Foundation advised Tunisians to use HTTPS to log in to their accounts, allowing information to be encrypted.³

Unfortunately, many online journalists and activists reported that their accounts had been deleted or compromised. Ben Ali’s cyber militia used the stolen passwords to delete Facebook groups, pages, videos and accounts.⁴

For those reasons “Anonymous” – an international internet activism group – attacked different official Tunisian websites, including those of the presidency and the government, using distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks.⁵

El Général, a Tunisian rap singer originally from Sfax in southeastern Tunisia, had been arrested after publishing a rap song online criticising President Ben Ali. His video was to become very popular among young Tunisians and widely circulated online. Other activists were arrested by police in different towns and their computers seized.⁶

Ben Ali gave three speeches, calling the protests and riots “terrorist acts”. In his last speech he asked for pardon by declaring his intention not to run as a candidate for a new term in the 2014 elections, and promising to give freedom to the media and put an end to censorship of the internet.

On the night of 13 January, just after this last speech, the Ben Ali regime tried to play catch-up and organise pro-Ben Ali riots using paid militia from his political party RCD. At the same time, activists were intelligent enough to continue resistance on social media sites to spread the call for a big demonstration to be organised the next day.

The protests by then had gained vocal international support. United States Secretary of State

1 www.cpj.org/2011/01/tunisia-must-end-censorship-on-coverage-of-unrest.php

2 www.thetechherald.com/article.php/201101/6651/Tunisian-government-harvesting-username-and-passwords

3 www.eff.org/deeplinks/2011/01/eff-calls-immediate-action-defend-tunisian

4 www.wired.com/threatlevel/2011/01/tunisia/2

5 english.aljazeera.net/indepth/features/2011/01/20111614145839362.html

6 en.rsf.org/tunisia-wave-of-arrests-of-bloggers-and-07-01-2011,39238.html

Hillary Clinton declared in a speech during a meeting in Qatar on 13 January: “There’s no problem with people peacefully demonstrating and protesting. It’s going on in Tunisia right now. We support peaceful protest and the right of assembly.”⁷

The 14 January demonstrations came to a head as thousands of people gathered outside the Ministry of Interior, a symbol of the Ben Ali regime’s repression. Beginning in the afternoon, while Tunisian TV7 announced a state of emergency “to protect the Tunisian people and their properties,” bloggers and cyber activists reported that a special security force had arrested members of the Trabelsi family – the family of Ben Ali’s wife – at an airport. Later, TV7 declared that a major announcement to the Tunisian people was to be made soon. Bloggers began to report movements of the presidential airplane and spoke about a coup.

At the end of the day, Tunisian Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi declared in an official statement that Ben Ali had stepped down, and that he had taken over as interim president as allowed by Article 56 of the Tunisian Constitution.

Tunisia began writing a new wave of liberty and tweets stated: “Every Arab leader is watching Tunisia in fear. Every Arab citizen is watching Tunisia in hope and solidarity.”⁸

Despite the happiness of Tunisians after this announcement, the first reaction of cyber activists was to continue their hard work. Straight away they called for Ghannouchi to step down and appoint Foued Mebazaa, the president of the Chamber of Deputies, as interim president, drawing on Article 57 and not 56⁹ of the Constitution. They felt that Article 56 might give Ben Ali the opportunity to return to Tunisia as president if he wanted to. By 15 January Mebazaa took power as interim president and appointed Ghannouchi as interim prime minister.

Social mobilisation through social media tools to support civil resistance against attacks from the militia continued following Ben Ali’s departure. The hashtag #situation reported what happened in each city, warning of sniper locations, asking for blood donations, and even saving lives. A seventeen-year-old Tunisian cyber activist tweeted using his account @BulletSkan: “The army is not responding to calls! There are armed men in our yard! We

need help!” – which helped others to warn the army about his situation, a move which saved him.¹⁰

Protesters, from all parts of the country, remained in the Kasbah in Tunis in front of the prime minister’s offices, now to demand that the transitional government resign. The Kasbah sit-in (the first and second)¹¹ was encouraged and followed by social media. Different groups and pages on Facebook were dedicated to Kasbah. Even a dedicated committee to coordinate citizen media was created by activist participants in the sit-ins to report about their long days and difficult weather conditions.

After this sit-in, Mohamed Ghannouchi announced his resignation as prime minister of the interim government, and the interim president appointed Beji Caid el Sebsi in his place. The interim president then announced that an election would be held for a Constituent Assembly.

Conclusions

Evgeny Morozov, a visiting scholar at Stanford and a Schwartz Fellow at the New America Foundation, asked the following question in his article “First thoughts on Tunisia and the role of the Internet about the uprising”: “Would this revolution have happened if there were no Facebook and Twitter?” And his answer was “Yes.”¹²

On the other hand, in an official statement about the events in Tunisia, Twitter representative Sean Garrett stated: “We might be able to provide thoughtful analysis after all the events of Tunisia have unfolded. But, right now, along with the rest of the world, we sit back and watch in awe at how people are using Twitter and other platforms to provide on-the-ground perspective at what might become a truly historic moment.”¹³

The answer from Tunisian activists to Morozov’s question would be, for sure: “No.” This is mainly because, as explained above, without social media tools other traditional media such as Al Jazeera would not have been able to report on what happened. International organisations and other countries would not have been able to understand what happened and would not have put more pressure on the Ben Ali regime.

7 www.enduringamerica.com/home/2011/1/13/tunisia-liveblog-concession-or-confrontation.html

8 techcrunch.com/2011/01/16/tunisia-2

9 Article 56 delegates power to the prime minister in case of temporary disability of the president. In this case the president may return. Article 57 gives power to the president of the Chamber of Deputies after an absolute disability of the president and does not allow the president back to office.

10 videos.tf1.fr/infos/lci-est-a-vous/tunisie-twitter-a-sauve-ma-vie-6226394.html

11 There were two Kasbah sit-ins, both between mid-January and the end of February.

12 neteffect.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/01/14/first_thoughts_on_tunisia_and_the_role_of_the_internet

13 techcrunch.com/2011/01/14/tunisia

The internet and social media deserve full credit in helping citizens to design their future and make it happen. They catalysed and facilitated the revolution and anarchy that were organised but effectively leaderless.

Protests were in fact spontaneous and citizen-led – not supported by a central decision-making process. In this sense the internet helped to create a “user-generated” revolution, where everyone was participating in a different way in a countrywide revolutionary process. Even after 14 January and after the politicians took over the process of change, social media still supported the resistance with the aim of defining the “new” Tunisia.

Action steps

Today Tunisia has a clear chance to rebuild a new country. Using the internet, citizens are more likely to lead this process. Cyber activists should pay attention to the need for:

- A national broadband plan that ensures access for all in the country. This will help the Tunisian economy become more competitive by creating jobs and supporting entrepreneurship. Social solutions can be enabled by access to faster internet.
- A more open and solid internet governance system is needed, and a decentralised infrastructure that can guarantee freedom of expression. An open and more accountable government is needed. ■

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