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Arab Protesters and Social Media: Need for Engagement

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

Pro-democracy activists in the Middle East and North Africa have an edge in the battle for hearts and minds because of their understanding of the power of social media. Engaging them on social media requires a degree of sophistication and mind shift that Arab autocrats lack.

Commentary

IF THERE is one event or region that has highlighted the impact of technology and social media on policymaking, social movements and protest, it is the Arab revolt that has been sweeping the Middle East and North Africa since December last year. Many have dubbed the popular revolts in Egypt and Tunisia a “Facebook revolution” because of the use by middle-class activists of social media in the build-up to the mass anti-government protests that early this year toppled presidents Hosni Mubarak and Zine el Abedine Ben Ali. Activists in Libya employed social media to organise peaceful protests in February against the regime of Colonel Moammar Gaddafi before they mutated into a civil war.

Similarly, social media and mobile telephony have played a key role in Syria in circumventing news blackouts and censorship to get news of the brutal crackdown by the government of President Bashar al Assad to the outside world. They also figure in exacerbating sectarian tensions between the country’s Sunni Muslims and Alawites, the minority sect to which Assad belongs.

Technology does not spark revolts

Yet, despite the perception of many, it is not technology that sparks revolts. No doubt, social media facilitate and accelerate the speed and breadth of communication, and impact politics, social movements, communications and the flow of news. But the answer to the question whether the Arab revolt would have erupted without Facebook is a resounding yes. To dub the Arab revolt a Facebook revolution would require revising explanations of past revolts such as the Islamic revolution in Iran and popular uprisings in the Philippines and Indonesia.

To be sure, technology plays an important role in protests and revolts. In Iran in 1979, it was the cassette tape that helped Ayatollah Khomeini to inspire millions to overthrow the Shah, at the time the most powerful symbol of US influence in the region. In Tunisia, a mobile phone video of a young man setting himself on fire in desperation, tapped into widespread discontent and last December brought thousands into the streets of Tunis. Cassettes and mobile telephony are technologies that autocrats understand. Social media, however, is a game

changer. Pro-democracy activists understand social media and the opportunities they offer in ways that autocratic Arab regimes find difficult, if not impossible, to grasp.

Social media change the way communications and public affairs are managed, particularly in a crisis. That requires a degree of sophistication that many but particularly autocratic governments often find difficult, if not impossible, to marshal. In fact, employing that degree of sophistication would require a far-reaching revision of the way most Arab autocrats do business. Syria is a case in point. The government's approach to online information warfare involved its Syrian Electronic Army hacking hundreds of opposition and international websites, to assert that it was battling terrorists. According to NPR (National Public Radio) the websites targeted included those of Newsweek, the US Treasury, and screen and television personalities.

Engagement replaces control

Perhaps what is most frustrating to Arab autocrats is the fact that the combination of mobile telephony, the Internet and social media has rendered censorship futile and fundamentally rewritten the ground rules of communications policies. Social media have turned the shaping of the narrative into something much more complex, in which governments and institutions have to engage in ways they did not have to in the past.

For one, communication has become a two-way street. Shaping the narrative no longer means control, instead it means engagement. That is an approach that in the best of circumstances is a difficult one, but particularly for embattled autocrats, because it requires a mind shift that few autocrats can make.

Even the Western media had problems in adjusting to technological change. When newspapers shifted from broadsheet to tabloid formats, not only did size change, so did the content, the story. Similarly, moving the print edition of a newspaper on to the Internet proved to be an unworkable formula. It failed to recognise that technology had replaced one-way communication with interactivity and changed the way news is consumed and what an empowered public expects of news organisations.

As a result, governments and institutions, irrespective of the political environment they operate in, are being forced to rethink their approach to communications. They have to pay greater attention to the way they project themselves, their policies and the way they relate to the public in a new and increasingly complex communications landscape. Technological change means that governments and institutions have to be more attentive to public opinion because whether or not that opinion can be freely expressed social media enable it to become part of the public domain.

Discontent will find its Outlet

The international community looked to the Arab street in the wake of 9/11 for change that would eradicate the breeding ground of extremism. When the Arab street did not immediately revolt, government officials, analysts and journalists wrote off the Arab street. Nonetheless, the widespread discontent continued to simmer at the surface. It was palpable if one put one's ear to the ground.

If the current Middle Eastern revolt and its embrace of technology teach anything, it is that where discontent exists but cannot be expressed openly, it will be expressed elsewhere in what constitutes a truer reflection of reality.

It is a reality enhanced by technology that Middle Eastern and North African autocrats ignore at their peril.

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