

Cyber-Activism and Human Rights

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Many thanks to the Foreign Secretary William Hague for giving ARTICLE 19 the opportunity to join in the launch of the FCO annual report on human rights and democracy, which is a valuable resource on the UK's perspective and record on human rights. This report is a vital tool as the UK public and civil society broadly assesses a government's performance and seeks its accountability for this.

My contribution today will be on a standout human rights issue, one that is taking on even more strategic significance given its contemporary reach, relevance and impact: and that is freedom of expression and particularly on-line expression.

ARTICLE 19 is a freedom of expression organisation, established 23 years ago, headquartered in London and with 5 regional offices and some 50 close partners around the world. We take our mandate from article 19 of the UDHR which states that "everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; ... to hold opinions without interference ... to seek, receive and impart information and ideas regardless of frontiers and any media - electronic, organised, social or otherwise.

Today, more than ever before, it is access to the means of distribution of expression that is playing a critical role in struggles for freedom and for human rights. Access to electronic media, to the Internet, and the cyber activism that this enables, have emerged as essential to movements for greater freedom and, perhaps more surprisingly, as essential even to revolution. And, this is the human rights revelation of the extraordinary cascade revolutions springing up across the Middle East.

On December 17, 2010, an unemployed Tunisian 26 year old, Mohamed Bouazizi from Sidi Bouzid, set himself on fire, protesting against joblessness. His death sparked a popular uprising against the government. Less than a month later, President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali has fled the country, an interim government had been established, various commissions and actors responsible for protecting the revolution appointed and political and economic reforms initiated.

But this story of freedom's thirst didn't stop at the Tunisian border. Carried by the pictures and reporting of Al Jazeera, spread through videos and blogs posted on Facebook, flashed on Twitter and issued by all forms of social media, the spirit, process, claim and ultimate reality of the Tunis spring has spread around the region. With the 2011 spring revolutions of the Arab world has been born both the reality and perhaps myth of the Internet revolutions.

Two weeks ago I was in Tunisia where I too was bitten by this bug of the revolution. I revelled in the activists' sense of pride and honour, grateful to be associated, even in such a small way, with these first revolutionaries of the region. But throughout my time in Tunisia, I wondered: how did you do it? And why now?

Of course, historians will return to the January 11 Tunisian revolution and debate its causes. But my small contribution this morning is to share with you the responses I got from Tunisians I met during this mission. I hope it will help further locating the UK FCO report within the reality of the struggles for human rights.

I was told that the revolution is of *les petites gens* - the little people. It was neither a revolt nor a coup of the political elite. It was the product of ordinary people's deep alienation of dignity such that continuing to live this life was simply no longer worth it. The Tunisian revolution was the victory of the truly desperate, of those who believed they had nothing left to lose. Because of poverty and a near complete lack of opportunities .

I learned that the Tunisian revolution is the revolution of the local Trade Unions, of the organised movements who survived somehow despite brutal oppression. It is the story of the workers' unions, lawyers and the teachers who marched their protest to a momentum that spread to the capital and to their respective HQs. They forced their leaders at regional and national level to act leading to the general strike of 13 and 14th of January.

"We left in the morning. We did not know whether we will return in the evening"

But I was also told that the Tunisian revolution is a victory over decadence. Even by dictatorship standards, the last years of the Ben Ali regime were ones of utmost decadence. Everything was despoiled by this extravagance. Not one centime of the public purse, not one inch of the public space was unaffected. Someone compared Ben Ali's last year to Louis the 14th. Although maybe Louis the 16th is more appropriate. This decadence was to strip the regime of the last vestiges of credibility.

And, I was told, the Tunisian revolution is a victory for Wikileaks. Tunisian revolutionaries could well remind our friends, in the midst of their Wikileaks induced angst and anger, and concerted efforts to muzzle the site and imprison sources, that those US cables did wonders for the sprit of the Tunisian people. The November leaks were showing that Ben Ali and his family were not supported by *the* superpower. They were then spread throughout the country via Facebook and other social media tool, reaching many Tunisians. *"The leaks"* I was told *"took our fears away."*

And the Tunisian revolution is also the revolution of Al Jazeera. So I have been told and not only in Tunisia. Indeed, the revolutions of 2011 are also a victory for AJ. What national and international print media and TV did not do, when they though these movements would not come to anything, AJ was there, throughout the region, relaying information, debates and messages, the voices of the revolutionaries from the street and the protests, conveying the

Arab people' demands, manifesting the courage of the uprising and no doubt spreading their hope.

And then the Tunisian revolution is the revolution of the netizens, of the on-line community which the regime had sought to repress and had repressed somewhat successfully. But not entirely so.

While the protests that eventually led to the toppling of Ben Ali took root in the rural and marginalised areas of Tunisia - far from the national and international spotlight - coverage of the subsequent police brutality, sniper shootings, bodies in hospital morgues and wide spread street protests came not through national news channels which did their best to ignore and thus silence them, but via posts on Facebook and Twitter, and in footage on Flickr and YouTube.

It was the uprising from these poor rural heartlands coupled with coverage from social networking sites which helped fan the fires of the revolution, well before the protests took root in the capital.

In the meantime, the consequences were severe. According to government counts, 23 Tunisians were killed by police and security forces, while numerous more were injured. At least six bloggers and activists had either been arrested or had disappeared across Tunisia during the revolution. These included Tunisian Pirate Party activists Slah Eddine Kchouk, Slim Amamou (later released and eventually appointed Secretary of State for Sport and Youth by the incoming government) and Azyz Amamy. Hamada Ben Aoun, a rapper who released two songs on his Facebook account criticising the Tunisian regime and its social policies, was arrested (but later released).

Perhaps ironically, the underpinnings of this remarkable story are the unintended by-product of government policy. As a result of heavy investment in the telecom sector since the mid-1990s, Tunisia has one of the most developed telecommunications infrastructures in Northern Africa. As of June 2010, there were 3,600,000 Internet users or 34.0% of the population, the highest in Africa after Seychelles. There was a 1% penetration in 2000. (21% in Egypt; 5% in Libya). Mobile coverage is close to 100%. As of August last year there were 1,671,840 Facebook users, a 15.8% penetration rate.

What these netizens of Tunisia achieved was incredible, considering the level and degree of censorship that the Ben Ali regime had imposed.

Tunisia's former government actively suppressed critical speech and oppositional activity, both in real space and in cyberspace. The country had a focused, effective system of Internet control that blends content filtering with harsh laws to censor objectionable and politically threatening information. (Source: OpenNet)

According to Global Voices Online, there were 274 cases of threatened or arrested bloggers. Top 10 countries are: China 41(22%); Iran 37(20%); Egypt 31(16%) (*Not up-to-date*);

Tunisia 23(12%) (*Not up-to-date*); Syria 18(10%); Vietnam 11(6%); Russia 8(4%); Cuba 7(4%); Morocco 6(3%); Saudi Arabia 6

OpenNet Initiative (ONI) began documenting Tunisian Internet filtering in 2005. The ONI's 2010 report found that Tunisia filtered several content categories pervasively, placing it en par with China and Iran. The organisation's research revealed a steady increase over time in the number of sites blocked, and continued crackdowns on social media, dissident blogs and on political opposition websites.

The government used American-made filtering software SmartFilter (owned by McAfee, which was recently bought by Intel) to accomplish their filtering goals. Unlike other states that employ filtering software, Tunisia concealed instances of filtering by supplying a fake error page when a blocked site is requested (404). This made filtering more opaque and clouds users' understanding of the boundaries of permissible content. The Tunisian Internet Agency (Agence tunisienne d'Internet or ATI) also injected JavaScript (code) to capture individual users' usernames and passwords.

There was (still is) in place a very elaborated censorship system devised by the Tunisian Minister of interior with a number of secret or non transparent departments financed through special funds.

In response, Tunisian bloggers have been using circumventing filtering software, getting news on Facebook and sharing censored posts, videos, photos or news updates (like the beating of a journalist) on the main Tunisian blogging platforms and information gateways hosted overseas or via twitter and key words like #sidibouid. When it was discovered that the Tunisian Internet Agency (ATI) was injecting JavaScript into web forms, using it to harvest usernames and passwords, *Anonymous* reacted by releasing a browser add-on that strips the added JavaScript code. The Greasemonkey script allowed Tunisian surfers to access Blogger, Facebook, Gmail, Yahoo, and Twitter without exposing their login details. These tools, coupled with their courage and determination helped explain how the stories of the demonstration in December and January were spread throughout the country.

IN CONCLUSION,

None of us saw this remarkable revolution coming. The predecessor to this human rights report we launch here today and others like it, did not predict it nor foresee that Tunisia would be the catalyst for a region wide cry for freedom. Why did none of us see it? What else are we not seeing?

A main lesson that Tunisia teach us all and experts in particular is humility. For all our expertise, our data and our reporting, it seems that we still assuming a tolerance for, and resilience in the face of, oppression that simply was not there. It seems we underestimated the thirst for freedom that resides within ordinary people across the country and across the region.

We have come to think of liberty as a product bartered between large and formal powers; of military intervention as the singular solution to oppressive regimes.

As the current situation in Libya underlines, such intervention is sometimes necessary. When rooted in appropriate Security Council resolutions, supported by regional instruments, with clear demands from the people from within; when the reality of probability of massive violations and deaths is evidenced: military interventions have their role to play.

What Tunisia showed is that ultimately, the seeds for sustainable and just societies reside first and foremost in people's hunger for freedom, with the simplest of tools and in the common public will: in marches, public protests, words of denunciation, on line and on the walls, with people speaking out from all corners of society, men and women, and in demonstrations of international solidarity. Words of support for those who stand up in the face of oppression go such a long way. And, words of condemnation for repression and oppression are essential; words regarding the treatments of their peoples by the governments of Bahrain, Syria or Yemen, for instance. Speaking out and speaking up.

Finally, I would like to share with you the Top 2 tweets on and from Tunisia:

@Voiceoftunisia - Tunisians too early for congratulations, we did not succeed yet. power is still in the corrupt RCD party. #sidibouziid #tunisia #jasminrevolt

@monaeltahawy - Every #Arab leader is watching #Tunisia in fear. Every Arab citizen is watching Tunisia in hope and solidarity. #Sidibouziid