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THE INFLUENCE AND LIMITS OF REVOLUTIONARY MEDIA

Vielen Dank sehr geehrter Herr Ministerpraesident Platzeck. Guten Morgen meine Damen und Herren.

Zunaechst einmal moechte ich mich vielmals bei den Veranstaltern dieser wichtigen Konferenz fuer die freundliche Einladung bedanken. Es ist mir eine grosse Ehre, wieder hier sein zu duerfen. Und fuer die naechsten Stunden freue ich mich auf eine anregende und fruchtbare Diskussion.

The Challenge of Political Authoritarianism

The title of this year's colloquium -- "Global Democracy – A Triumph for Social Networks?" -- is posed as a question, and I think rightly so.

We've witnessed extraordinary change in the past months and social media have been a part of it, although their exact role and influence are not entirely clear.

One year ago, if someone had suggested that within a matter of weeks the entire Middle East and North African region would be turned upside down, he would have been scoffed at.

The duration and depth of the political authoritarianism that gripped the region has had a number of effects, including inuring outsiders to its depredations -- and limiting imagination about the possibility for change there.

I would like to take just a moment to put the recent changes into some perspective, using the example of Tunisia.

As a reminder of where the country was as of December 31, 2010 -- effectively the last days of the Ben Ali regime -- I will draw from Freedom House analysis:

Tunisia was at the time ranked Not Free by Freedom House both in *Freedom of the Press*, our report which chiefly analyzes print and broadcast media, and in *Freedom on the Net*, Freedom House's assessment of the Internet and other new communications technologies.

This Not Free designation means that under Ben Ali the system provided no meaningful safeguards or guarantees for the freedoms that were assessed.

So, for example, in *Freedom of the Press*, Tunisia was at the level of notoriously repressive regimes in Equatorial Guinea and Laos. Out of 196 countries examined, Tunisia was ranked 184th.

In *Freedom on the Net*, Tunisia ranked among some of the world's most repressive systems, including that of China, a country I'll return to later in my remarks.

Likewise, in *Freedom in the World*, Freedom House's annual analysis of political rights and civil liberties, Tunisia was Not Free.

The recently removed despots in Tunisia and Egypt -- and now Libya -- among them had nearly 100 years in power.

Muamar Gaddafi came to power on September 1st, 1969.

Kurt Georg Kiesinger was West Germany's Bundeskanzler at the time.

The authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and North Africa ruthlessly suppressed dissent.

Over the course of their decades in power these dictators built dead end governance systems resistant to reform and therefore highly vulnerable to unpredictable crises.

The argument that authoritarian governance is a guarantor of stability proves to be a myth.

In reality, authoritarian systems steadily erode the independent institutions and safeguards that guarantee basic justice; that ensure government integrity and responsiveness; and that provide for regular, peaceful transfers of power.

Regimes like those of Mubarak, Ben Ali, Gaddafi and Assad come to focus on enriching themselves and suppressing complaints rather than addressing underlying problems.

Many of these just-mentioned issues are high on the list of protesters' grievances in the region.

Furthermore, these regimes' intrinsic lack of transparency on the issue of presidential succession makes crises almost inevitable.

And these regimes of course make controlling the news media a priority.

State news media, especially television, have helped authoritarian leaders stay in power by creating a parallel reality for their populations and depriving dissenters of a wider audience.

The Internet and other new communications technologies are challenging this media hegemony.

From Revolution to Democracy

So given the clear and enormous obstacles to change, by just about any measure the achievements in the region this year have been remarkable. There's no question about this.

Despite the swift and historic nature of these changes, however, I would emphasize a critically important point: today neither Tunisia nor Egypt, the countries in the region first to experience revolutions, is a democracy.

Hopefully, they will achieve this status as soon as they are able. Right now, though, they should be understood as inhabiting a post-authoritarian limbo.

This idea of properly defining the status of these countries' political development is helpful in thinking about the contribution of social media to the changes underway in the region in the following sense.

As of now, one can rightly argue that social media have played a significant role in dislodging entrenched dictators in North Africa; going forward, however, precisely what influence these media will exert in the difficult, long-term work of building democratic institutions remains an open question.

In this respect it is premature to speak of triumphs.

So what has been the influence of social media in North Africa and the Middle East? Sami ben Gharbia, among others, has explained their valuable role in the uprising in Tunisia.

He has compellingly described the elaborate interactions between Web 2.0 applications and influential satellite media, Al Jazeera in particular, in raising awareness and mobilizing citizens.

There's little doubt that 2.0 applications afford important tools to organize citizen activism.

In Tunisia and elsewhere in the region, they've been used to spread news of the protests and the violent crackdowns that followed, and to disseminate videos to document the scale of the protests and the viciousness of the authorities' response.

The influence of digital media has been particularly evident in Syria, which banned foreign journalists, including regional Arab media, during the unrest and has killed and detained thousands of activists and protesters.

Anti-regime activists have used Twitter to inform international media about the situation in Syria, posted videos on YouTube of security forces firing on demonstrators, and created Facebook groups to coordinate messages and plans among separate groups of activists in different cities.

So, to date, social media have indisputably created space for expression where such space has been limited -- and helped mobilization to remove dictators.

But in the aftermath of an authoritarian leader's removal, in what ways will social media drive durable institutional reforms -- with regard to political parties and judicial reform, just to take two examples -- in these settings? This is a crucial question.

China: A Singular Threat to Internet Freedom

A word on China, whose government's strategy to create the gold standard of internet censorship represents a singular threat to online freedom.

It is ironic that at a time when China's authoritarian model has been increasingly cited as the principal alternative to democratic governance, the critical mass of authoritarian states in the Middle East has begun to fracture.

The popular uprisings in the Middle East have been particularly unnerving for the Chinese authorities.

Fearing that the Chinese people might be inspired by the scenes from Cairo, censors in China at one point earlier this year blocked web searches of the word "Egypt."

On February 12, the day after Hosni Mubarak's resignation as president of Egypt, several Chinese Communist Party Politburo members held a special meeting to discuss events in the Middle East.

According to information obtained by China scholar Perry Link, a key emphasis of the discussion was propaganda, particularly online.

The resulting directives included orders to halt all independent reports on events in Egypt and elsewhere, tighten censorship and criticism of microblogs, and strengthen the guidance of public opinion.

Freedom House's *China Media Bulletin* has detailed the deepening censorship in China that has emerged since the onset of the Arab Spring.

In May of this year, for instance, the word "jasmine" -- whether it referred to the flower, the subject of a Chinese folk song, or the Jasmine Revolution that unseated President Ben Ali -- was targeted by Chinese authorities in virtually all contexts, and not just on the Internet.

Online, since anonymous messages calling for a protest-driven, Tunisia-style "Jasmine Revolution" in China circulated among netizens in mid-February, searches for the word "jasmine" were censored on China's Sina Weibo microblogging service as well as on the search engines Baidu and Panguo.

Video clips of President Hu Jintao singing a folk song titled Jasmine ("Molihua") at public events have been removed from the web.

While these measures are undoubtedly a signal of insecurity from the Chinese authorities, the enormity of the government's commitment -- and even imagination, one could say -- in sanitizing and manipulating information is remarkable.

It is important to acknowledge that the Chinese authorities -- and other sophisticated authoritarian regimes today -- do not seek to achieve a monopoly on public speech.

Instead, they work to manage and influence what is politically consequential.

Using methods that disrupt, deny and disinform, authoritarian regimes have also become more adept at using social media toward their own ends.

A 2009 report produced by Freedom House, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* and *Radio Free Asia* titled *Undermining Democracy: 21st Century Authoritarians* pointed out the ways in which the authorities in Iran, Russia and China, especially, are using advanced and well-funded techniques to subvert legitimate online discourse.

Scholars such as Evgeny Morozov and Rebecca MacKinnon have done extensive work on the ways in which such regimes use the resources and power of the state to bend the Internet in the direction of less freedom.

The vigor with which authoritarian regimes are seeking to deny open expression makes clear that the community of democracies will need to renew their own commitment to the defense of these values.

I feel compelled to add that far too often Western firms are working against the grain of online freedom by helping to sell surveillance and censorship technology to these very authoritarian states.

Within the last two weeks, as the Gaddafi regime crumbled, the *Wall Street Journal* reported on the assistance provided by Amesys, a French firm, to monitor digital communications in Libya.

Bloomberg News produced extensive reporting on the surveillance software provided by Nokia Siemens that has been integral to tracking the communications of dissidents in Bahrain, in some instances apparently leading to their torture.

The Arab Spring: Only the Beginning of the End of Authoritarian Systems

I started my remarks by noting that one year ago it would have stretched credulity to suggest that three of the most deeply entrenched dictators in the Arab Middle East would soon be jettisoned. In the same way, predicting what will be a year from now is beyond our abilities.

We do know that the time and effort required to make a successful transition from deep authoritarian systems to durable democracy will be exceptional.

Precisely because it is now only the beginning of the end of these systems, we should be prepared to take a closer look at the role of social media to identify where it adds the most value and whether there is there something intrinsic to new media that propels democratic development?

Recognizing the extensive time, effort and resources that will be needed to build democratic societies, we should also carefully guard against an over-reliance on new technologies to the exclusion of other critical aspects of democratic development.

Thank you for your attention.