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978-1-107-14076-9 - Information Politics, Protests, and Human Rights in the Digital Age

Mahmood Monshipouri

Excerpt

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Introduction

Protests and human rights in context

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As the public discourse of the global normative order unfolds in the context of modern communications technology, two contradictory tendencies are worth noting: While human rights are compromised in some circumstances, they are widely regarded as a common moral language in others.¹ The aggressive digital surveillance of governmental authorities has undermined and continues to eclipse the most basic rights and civil liberties, including the right to privacy. These and similar abuses have resulted largely from domestic and extraterritorial surveillance, the interception of digital communications, and the collection of personal data.² At the same time, the increasing demand for information and the ensuing need for anonymity, security, privacy, and the protection of other civil liberties have particularly contributed to the heightened public awareness by the news media of the potential abuse of digital communications, most notably the Internet.³

In the face of current deployment programs that principally use smart surveillance technology and cyberspace, legal safeguards to ensure individual privacy are not capable of creating ironclad systems free of error. Moreover, because technology has evolved so quickly, the risk to personal privacy protections has significantly increased. This and similar trends only serve to further undermine such basic rights, especially when the

¹ Charles R. Beitz, *The Idea of Human Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 1.

² Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, “The Right to Privacy in the Digital Age” (June 30, 2014), available at www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/hrc/regularsessions/session27/documents/a.hrc.27.37_en.pdf. Accessed on September 30, 2014.

³ Joseph Migga Kizza, *Ethical and Social Issues in the Information Age*, 5th edn. (London: Springer, 2013), p. 78.

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quest to minimize criminality and terrorism becomes the normative goal in domestic and international politics.⁴

At the same time, the emancipatory power of the Internet and other modes of digital communication has drawn attention for its unprecedented potential for social change. The expansion of global communication technologies has opened the possibility for collective mobilization and communication for change both within and across sovereign states.⁵ Arguably, a *smart* use of technology can help expand and guarantee human rights, especially freedom of expression or the right to culture and access to knowledge on the Internet in those places where they are repressed.⁶ Access to the Internet is generally understood to mean access not only to the medium (technology) but also to the content (the right to speak).⁷ Equally important is the extent to which citizens can participate in shaping the governance of new technologies from a human rights perspective.⁸ Emancipative values emerge, insists Christian Welzel, in response to the growing popular control of action resources – namely, their material means, intellectual skills, and connective opportunities.⁹ “It is safe to conclude,” Welzel observes, “that technological advancement is a formidable indicator of the combination of all three types of action resources.”¹⁰

More than just a communication medium, the Internet fosters the spread of liberty and the exchange of ideas, both of which go hand-in-hand with democracy.¹¹ The power of the Internet lies in its ability to “feed a process that prepares people for an open and civil society.”¹² Unlike more traditional media, however, the Internet does the job in real time with interactivity and concurrently in text, images, audio,

⁴ Mathias Klang, “Privacy, Surveillance and Identity,” in Mathias Klang and Andrew Murray, eds., *Human Rights in the Digital Age* (London: The Glasshouse Press, 2005), pp. 175–89; see esp. pp. 188–89.

⁵ Karin G. Wilkins, “Mobilizing Global Communication: For What and For Whom?,” in Karin G. Wilkins, Joseph D. Straubhaar, and Shanti Kumar, eds., *Global Communication: New Agendas in Communication* (New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 100–18; see p. 101.

⁶ Giovanni Ziccardi, *Resistance, Liberation Technology, and Human Rights in the Digital Age* (Dordrecht and New York: Springer, 2013), p. 126.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 129. ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

⁹ Christian Welzel, *Freedom Rising: Human Empowerment and the Quest for Emancipation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 113.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

¹¹ Gary W. Selnow, “The Information Age Is Fostering the Spread of Freedom and Democracy,” in James D. Torr, ed., *The Information Age* (Farmington Hills, MI: Greenhaven Press, 2003), pp. 31–34.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 32.

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and video.¹³ Not only has the digital revolution in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) provided an impetus for nonviolent modes of public action, but perhaps more fundamentally, new technologies have in fact changed the concepts of democracy and citizenship held by a younger generation keen on pursuing a more civil, inclusive, and liberating form of democracy.¹⁴

By making information more accessible than ever before, digital technologies have come to shape societies and cultures in many respects. These technologies also offer tools for resistance and change that can be effectively deployed to influence existing power relations. People around the world have increasingly used digital media to present political reactions against authoritarian rule or to speak out against failed policies. In contrast to the all-too-familiar centralized, vertically integrated social movements, theories of new social movements (NSMs) argue for a new way of doing politics – namely, through “network politics.” More importance is attached to social and cultural concerns in these movements, and the focus of politics shifts away from recruiting members toward establishing informal, loosely organized social networks of supporters.

Critics of NSMs have noted that change in the MENA region transpires through movements that typically lack an ideological framework, designated leadership, and the formal structure of protest organizations. Asef Bayat describes this phenomenon as social “nonmovement,” involving street protests and political activism directed at the state. Bayat argues that the discontented subaltern groups – the poor, the youth, women, and the politically marginalized – have not been passive or obeying the diktats of their repressive states, nor have they been fatalistic in their beliefs and attitudes. Far from it, they have always been engaged, albeit in mostly scattered and diffused struggles. By engaging such social “nonmovement,” they have been able to take advantage of movements to turn mishaps into the path of resistance and shift their mostly quiet and individual struggles into discernible and collective defiance.¹⁵ Such movements, Bayat goes on to argue, expose the inapplicability of Western mainstream social movement theories to the MENA region.

¹³ Ibid., p. 33.

¹⁴ Linda Herrera and Rehab Sakr, “Introduction: Wired and Revolutionary in the Middle East and North Africa,” in Linda Herrera with Rehab Sakr, eds., *Wired Citizenship: Youth Learning and Activism in the Middle East* (New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 16–26; see esp. p. 20.

¹⁵ Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, 2nd edn. (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013); see pp. x–xi.

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Today's social movements, such as feminism, the environment, and human rights, are organized around flexible, dispersed, and horizontal networks.¹⁶ By promoting horizontal links and providing a method for communication across space in real time, new technologies have bolstered decentralized network constellations, facilitating informal or underground transnational coordination and communication.¹⁷ This network politics involves the creation of inclusive spaces where diverse movements converge around common goals while still maintaining their autonomy.¹⁸

These technologies have allowed communities, groups, and individuals “to unite around shared grievances and nurture transportable strategies for mobilizing against dictators.”¹⁹ The information and communication technologies (ICTs) of our modern online age bring new perspectives on how to target structures of power at both national and transnational levels. The adoption of new methods and strategies to affect power relations has added fresh urgency to our need to understand how societies are responding to the more permeable forms of information flows. At the same time, Internet penetration of societies and the spread of social media offer a new platform for discussion of government policies and performance and spur intense debate about domestic revolts and related violence.

Experts of contemporary networked society, such as Manuel Castells, have demonstrated the speed at which more empowering opportunities emerge and grow exponentially. Castells argues that the development of autonomous networks of horizontal communications, free from the control of those holding institutional power, has led to new forms of social change and political democracy.²⁰ “The autonomy of communication,” Castells posits, “is the essence of social movements because it is what allows the movements to relate to society at large beyond the control of the power holders over communication power.”²¹

¹⁶ Jackie Smith et al., *Global Democracy and the World Social Forums* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2008), pp. 28–29.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 29. ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁹ Philip N. Howard and Muzammil M. Hussain, “The Role of Digital Media,” in Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner, eds., *Democratization and Authoritarianism in the Arab World* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), pp. 186–99.

²⁰ Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2012), p. 9.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

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Our conceptual framework is grounded in human empowerment theory. This theory is based on three interrelated propositions: (1) that technology has rendered the costs of an unmitigated state restriction on modern means of communication economically and politically exorbitant and, even more importantly, technically impractical; (2) that human empowerment relates to norms, values, and beliefs held by individual members of a society; and (3) that those individuals' access to modern communications technology is all too likely to affect the allocation of power in that society.

This volume's central argument is that the potential for civil disobedience and protest embedded in contentious politics has been facilitated by various modes of interactive technology, challenging the claims of many states to absolute sovereignty and making global nonintervention a less clear-cut stance for the international community. There is broad consensus among social scientists that the power of human rights more generally – and that of national human rights institutions in particular – is often better measured through the politics of contention than by the state's compliance with evolving standards.²²

A state's official adoption of international legal and human rights covenants and instruments may not necessarily change state practice. It is through protesting against state violations of human rights norms that social forces can fundamentally alter state actions. The activities of autonomous, mobilized, and digitally interconnected social actors – through individual or collective means – are likely to weaken the control of those holding institutional power. How and under what conditions such empowering tools can be successfully utilized remains open to debate. The critical matter is that the emancipatory theory of power and social change in the digital age is bound up with internal and external systems of support and incentives.

This book is thus motivated by the broader theme of exploring networked social movements and the ways in which the growing digital diffusion of images and ideas helps shape the political and social landscape at the local, national, regional, and global levels. This is also an inquiry into seeking ways to build democratic and just societies around the world by promoting dignified living conditions for all. The context is varied – from the Occupy Wall Street movement to the Arab uprisings to

²² This point is well illustrated by Sonia Cardenas, *Chains of Justice: The Global Rise of State Institutions for Human Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), pp. 356–58.

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other social movements across the world – as is the nature of such movements: sometimes spontaneous, sometimes premeditated. In general, however, we are interested not so much in the evolution of these movements as in their dynamics and the ways in which they may precipitate social change – technologically and from a normative standpoint.

Emancipatory potential of the digital age

The Internet has become a key enabler of human rights activities, allowing individuals, no matter where they reside, to receive information and redirect it to others. By confronting repressive regimes that persistently restrict such freedom of information, Internet users have a significant newfound tool at their disposal. Several studies have shown that the Internet has become a key to improving civic engagement and social connectedness. Studies have also illustrated that political blogs have upended the prevailing notions of participation and that blogging has revolutionized civic engagement in a networked society.²³ But as the information explosion becomes a defining paradigm of our time, it is important to acknowledge that the emergence of a digital world is no guarantee that its dark side will be minimized and that its benefits will trickle down to humanity at large.

The Internet has become a natural and dynamic platform and meeting point for mobilization and discussion.²⁴ Technology has empowered the demand for a more accountable governance, especially in the twenty-first century when we may see a real blossoming of more sophisticated and organized nonviolent social movements.²⁵ Digital technology has come to mean having a video camera anywhere – a tool of empowerment and agency that has fundamentally altered the game. Consider, for example, how a group of black social-media activists built the first twenty-first century American civil rights movement. A systematic effort to quickly mobilize protests in several US cities where a police shooting had

²³ Antoinette Pole, *Blogging the Political: Politics and Participation in a Networked Society* (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 4.

²⁴ Gary R. Bunt, “Mediterranean Islamic Expression: Web 2.0,” in Cesare Merlini and Olivier Roy, eds., *Arab Society in Revolt: The West’s Mediterranean Challenge* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2012), pp. 76–95; see p. 87.

²⁵ Kenneth E. Boulding, “Nonviolence and Power in the Twentieth Century,” in Stephen Zunes, Lester R. Kurtz, and Sarah Beth Asher, eds., *Nonviolent Social Movements: A Geographical Perspective* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 9–17; see p. 17.

occurred showed how online activism – supported by the broad networks that allowed for the easy distribution of documentary photos and video – became not just the site of uprising but the conduit for the spread of ideas.²⁶ From Ferguson to Staten Island to Baltimore, the so-called Black Lives Matter movement demonstrated how the speed with which such movements now act as well as the large number of people they can draw to every protest has “turned every police killing into a national referendum on the value of black lives in America.”²⁷

Throughout the world, the Internet and social media have enabled the youth movement to collectively voice their frustration with the state and its repressive apparatus. Without romanticizing or fusing the many-sided culture of youth in this wired revolutionary generation, as Linda Herrera and Rehab Sakr posit, it can be argued that “growing numbers of youth in the MENA [region] are pursuing a more civil, inclusive, and liberatory form of democracy.”²⁸ Similarly, the resurgence of the political Green Movement in Iran following the disputed 2009 presidential elections gave voice and membership to previously excluded students, women, and exiles.²⁹ The movement’s nonviolent orientation marked a clear historical break from the violent past and gained from the universal appeal of many great emancipatory events such as the anticolonial movement in India, the African American struggle for civil rights, and the antiapartheid struggle in South Africa.³⁰ Despite its delayed – and apparently ineffectual – impact in the face of the regime’s widespread physical repression, the ensuing internal power struggle between reformists and conservatives adversely affected the Iranian political landscape by undermining the government’s proclaimed exclusive legitimacy and religious mandate.³¹

Likewise, prodemocracy, student-led protests that have gripped Hong Kong, which since its return to Chinese rule in 1997 has been stable and

²⁶ Joy Caspian Kang, “The Witnesses,” *The New York Times Magazine* (May 10, 2015), pp. 34–39 and 52–53.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 52–53.

²⁸ Herrera and Sakr, “Introduction: Wired and Revolutionary,” pp. 1–16; see p. 4.

²⁹ Alison Brysk, *Speaking Rights to Power: Constructing Political Will* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 145.

³⁰ Nader Hashemi, “Strategies of Hope: Edward Said, the Green Movement and the Struggle for Democracy in Iran,” in Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel, eds., *The People Reloaded: The Green Movement and the Struggle for Iran’s Future* (New York: Melville House, 2010), pp. 397–407; see esp. p. 406.

³¹ Brysk, *Speaking Rights to Power*, p. 145.

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calm, have attracted an unknown number of mainland participants and pose one of the biggest challenges in years to Communist Party rule.³² These protests, which have been directed at Chinese-imposed limits on voting rights, have prompted a heightened resistance to mainland China and have essentially become a battle over the text (Basic Law) that focuses on Beijing's failure to fulfill its commitments. Thus, unlike struggles in Egypt and Ukraine, for example, these protests have not been a struggle to overthrow the regime. Instead, they have been a struggle demanding compliance.

Similarly, blogs have become key tools for dissident activity in states that control the mainstream media. While the Internet may not be widely accessible across socioeconomic classes, it has created a new ecology of participation in a world of collective action without traditional formal organization. The unfolding, open-ended uprisings in the MENA region have caused the collapse of regimes in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, and may do so in other countries of the region in the not-too-distant future. While traditional party politics and power relations within the region failed to produce any democratic change, a combination of youth and technology facilitated a revolutionary change unprecedented in the region's history.

To be sure, the old US bargain with local Arab autocrats has unraveled, making it more difficult for the United States and the broader West to work with authoritarian, yet pro-West, regimes. Instead of focusing on the "high politics," that is, the national and international security concerns, some analysts have noted that we should consistently observe "micropolitics" of social struggles and contentious politics, including prosaic strategies of resistance and "low key politics," as well as the invisible movements and "nonmovements" that influenced protesters' strategies as they poured into Tahrir Square.³³ To gain a better understanding of the ramifications of these democratic changes, it is also important to contextualize the mobilizing impacts of the information technology explosion.

Underlying the current political "clash of ideas" is a competition between different knowledge structures and worldviews (paradigms)

³² Neil Gough and Austin Ramzy, "Mainland Chinese in Hong Kong See Protests as Inconvenience and Inspiration," *The New York Times* (October 2, 2014), p. A12.

³³ Fawaz A. Gerges, "Introduction: A Rupture," in Fawaz A. Gerges, ed., *The New Middle East: Protest and Revolution in the Arab World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 1–38; see esp. p. 23.

among many actors on the global scene. This contest over worldviews has intensified with the drift to the post-Washington Consensus.³⁴ Rather than a single alternative to neoliberal views, there is a wide array of opposing views and philosophies. For the indigenous, or the “localized,” knowledge is a viable alternative. The struggle over worldviews and knowledge can no longer be separated from technological resources. Worldviews, knowledge, and technology have become interwoven. Yet the fact remains that political freedom has to be accompanied by a civil society that is literate and densely connected if it is to be protected and sustained in the long term.

Limits of modern technology

As previously shown, different communication technologies and software applications can help spark and accelerate protests, uprisings, and social movements by empowering citizens to stand up to despotism. Similarly, as many observers have pointed out, the Internet’s disruptive impact, as a source for both tremendous good and potentially worrisome problems, has only just begun, and citizens throughout the world will have more power than at any time in history.³⁵ As a result, authoritarian governments will find their digitally connected population more difficult to control, repress, and even influence, while democratic states will be compelled to include many more voices – including individuals, organizations, and companies – in their affairs.³⁶

Yet virtually all experts simultaneously point to the potential and limits of this so-called liberation technology, warning against troubling implications stemming from the exploitation of such technologies by authoritarian and repressive regimes.³⁷ The impact of the new technologies and social media platforms on abusive governments remains

³⁴ Robert O’Brien and Marc Williams, *Global Political Economy: Evolution and Dynamics*, 4th edn. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 276.

³⁵ Erich Schmidt and Jared Cohen, *The New Digital Age: Reshaping the Future of People, Nations, and Business* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), pp. 3–11; Klang and Murray, *Human Rights in the Digital Age*; and also see Giovanni Ziccardi, *Resistance, Liberation Technology, and Human Rights in the Digital Age* (Dordrecht and New York: Springer, 2013).

³⁶ Schmidt and Cohen, *The New Digital Age*, p. 7.

³⁷ For an illuminating account of the most dramatic recent instances of global mobilization and protests facilitated by the digital revolution, as well as coercive reactions to these protests, see Larry Diamond, “Liberation Technology,” *Journal of Democracy*, 21, 3 (July 2010), pp. 69–83; see esp. pp. 78–80.

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uncertain.³⁸ Under such circumstances, we should distinguish between social media-inspired empowerment as a current state of affairs and as an ideal. While the current state of affairs may be progressive and forward looking insofar as the power of new media is concerned, and while some changes have transpired as a result, we cannot avoid the reality of powerful institutions and organizations that have a longstanding history of survival and perseverance. Although Internet access is sharply increasing, governments and transnational corporations are becoming more and more capable at using the Web to undermine people resisting injustice and calling for change, as Symon Hill contends.³⁹

At a time when most societies encounter rapid technological change and persistent instability across social structures, the notion of promoting social media as an instrument of progressive sociopolitical change should be cautiously approached. Some scholars such as Robert D. Putnam have made the case that technology may lead people to stay at home rather than join established organizations. Modern technology, asserts Putnam, comes at the expense of social connectedness and civic engagement.⁴⁰ As a result, civic life, which represents collective and social space to protect the individual and community from the intrusive powers of the state and the market, has increasingly grown weaker. The decline in associational life on the one hand and the heavy reliance on technology-at-home on the other has proven to be mutually reinforcing.⁴¹

Technology may, in some ways, be undermining the influence of some organizations while making it easier to organize demonstrations. It is strikingly clear now that liberal-secular students and groups in Egypt, for instance, learned this lesson the hard way as they lost elections to the more organized Muslim Brotherhood in the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings. Ultimately, however, whether social media will prove to be influential will depend on the leaders' long-term commitments to political change. At this point, experts argue, it appears that social media will continue to play a mostly transitory role – that is, they will help to galvanize protesters to rise up against their governments while failing

³⁸ Eric B. Shiraev and Vladislave M. Zubok, *International Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 412.

³⁹ Symon Hill, *Digital Revolutions: Activism in the Internet Age* (Oxford, UK: New International Publications Ltd., 2013), pp. 118–19.

⁴⁰ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*