

WikiLeaks in MENA:

Small Connections and Big Changes

International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR)

July 13-17, 2011 Istanbul, Turkey

Research Thesis:

Has WikiLeaks influenced the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa?

MENA and the Big Changes

The situation MENA has been reshuffled from Ben Ali exiled, Mubarak fallen, Gaddafi genocidal, Bahrain recruiting the Saudi military, Yemen using nerve gas, Syria arresting bloggers at random; many other regimes all over the region either attempting to bridge the gap with reform, or steadfastly refusing to see their people rise.

To understand the broader phenomenon of protests that have swept through North Africa and parts of the Middle East, one must consider the causality between the two key variables of the revolution: media texts and political change.

WikiLeaks: small connections

Wikileaks though is not just a whistle-blower platform and tool, but rather a weapon of information, an edifice of what the internet has evolved to offer its users. Wikileaks is a new window for unveiling the hidden ills of society to be showcased, for individuals to be named and shamed and for established mobilization to occur around central issues.

A niche for the elite in MENA

- ▶ Wikileaks exposed government corruption, political oppression and diplomacy hypocrisy, which quickly made wikileaks, a platform for widespread discontent among official circles.
- ▶ Undoubtedly, arguments such as the end of corruption, the fall of a hated regime, and secrets behind closed iron walls are broad enough to spin and gain popular support, especially in countries with high youth populations and high unemployment rates, poverty and societal disruption and dysfunctional media.

Why WikiLeaks & MENA?

The most dramatic revelations are in relation to reported calls by Arab world capitals for the United States to do what it must to rid the world of the fear of the Iranian regime headed by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

For example, "the Saudi King Abdullah bin Abd al-Aziz is reported to have repeatedly urged the United States to attack Iran's nuclear program. He wanted the U.S. to "cut off the head of the snake" in Iran, as the Saudi Ambassador to Washington Adel al-Jubeir quoted the king as saying in a meeting with Gen. David Petraeus in April 2008 (Sennott, 2010).

WikiLeaks and the Usual Conspiracy

The big conspiracy theory of the big brother that just dictates what happens. But the problem remains in the failure of explaining the international context and the system of protocols in which fateful decisions are made. Aijaz Zaka Syed, writing in Arab News (July 27, 2010) states that, "...the shock and awe of the Wikileaks disclosures takes. As it was a new window for unveiling the hidden ills of society to be showcased, for individuals to be named and shamed and for established mobilization to occur around central issues. The release of such sensitive information harmed the already tenuous relationship between the the media and the patron states in MENA (Drezner, 2010, 3), though it is a common practice for political institutions to increasingly restrict access to information in response to forced leaks.

Professional journalists have shown frustration towards the freedom Wikileaks had in running free with publishing stories many journalists have wanted to, but been barred to get involved with (Berger and McDougall, 2011).

Wikileaks have assumed the roles that professional journalism has either been neglected or even dead. If they are not going to pursue the truth (as it is not in line with corporate agenda or profiteering), then the truth will have to find another way of being set free.

Julian Assange stated in his article titled: "Assange hails WikiLeaks role in Middle East revolt" on the the Deomcratic Underground. Com on Feburary 13:

"It does seem to be the case that material we published through a Lebanese newspaper, Al Akhbar, was significantly influential to what happened in Tunisia," Assange told the SBS programme Dateline. But there "And then there's no doubt that Tunisia was the example for Egypt and Yemen and Jordan, and all the protests that have happened there," he added.

(http://www.democraticunderground.com/discuss/duboard.php?az=view_all&address=102x4731595)

There are several factors that have brought the MENA region to this point of crisis, including rising food prices and the effectiveness of social media (Facebook, etc.), high rates of unemployment, poverty and political oppression. But the timing is intriguing to instigate anger and unveiling the grapes of wrath.

"Given that Arab governments enjoy little popular support, its leaders largely express these views in private. WikiLeaks, therefore, exposed some of these leaders in an unfavourable light to their populaces. In fact, given the recent events in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen, many in the region have begun asking whether the WikiLeaks revelations may have contributed to the sudden explosion of angry protests and demands for regime change in these countries."

(<http://bigpeace.com/elcid/2011/02/22/did-wikileaks-cause-the-explosion-in-the-middle-east/>)

The Tunisian Case

"President Ben Ali's extended family is often cited as the nexus of Tunisian corruption. Often referred to as a quasi-mafia... Tunisia's financial sector remains plagued by serious allegations of corruption and financial mismanagement... Nepotism is also believed to play a significant role in awarding scholarships and offering jobs.... The lack of transparency and accountability that characterize Tunisia's political system similarly plague the economy, damaging the investment climate and fuelling a culture of corruption."

(<http://wikileaks.ch/cable/2008/06/08TUNIS679.html>).

Cables released by Wikileaks, gave a detailed account of corruption taking place in top levels of government in Tunisia. Several cables describe the lavish lifestyles led by President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali and his extended family and link them with cases of corruption. "President Ben Ali's extended family is often cited as the nexus of Tunisian corruption." (Wikileaks cable release, 2008).

"They tolerate no advice or criticism, whether domestic or international. Increasingly, they rely on the police for control and focus on preserving power. And, corruption in the inner circle is growing. Even average Tunisians are now keenly aware of it, and the chorus of complaints is rising." (Wikileaks cable, 2009).

The Egyptian Case

A number of dispatches made public on January 2011 that showed in detail how diplomats repeatedly raised concerns with Egyptian officials about jailed dissidents and bloggers, and kept tabs on reports of torture by the police. (LANDLER and LEHREN, 2011)

In March 2009, a cable offered a pessimistic analysis of the prospects for the "April 6 Movement," a Facebook-based group of mostly young Egyptians that has received wide attention for its lively political debate and helped mobilize the protests that have swept Egypt. Leaders of the group had been jailed and tortured by the police. There were also signs of internal divisions between secular and Islamist factions.

During Hillary Rodham Clinton's first meeting as secretary of state with Hosni Mubarak, in March 2009, a confidential diplomatic cable signed by the American ambassador to Egypt, Margaret Scobey, advised Clinton to avoid even mentioning the name of the man, Ayman Nour, and never to thank Mubarak for releasing an opposition leader from prison because he was ill.

On December 3, 2010 US embassy leaked cable that revealed Egypt's fears about the possibility of its neighbour Sudan breaking into two. In the cable, written the year before, a foreign ministry official urged the US to help postpone a referendum on independence for Southern Sudan. As mentioned in the cable that the official said the creation of "a non-viable state" could threaten Egypt's access to the River Nile (Ross, 2010). The Egyptian government took "series of selective actions" against journalists, bloggers and an amateur poet, who ended up being imprisoned for three months for allegedly 'defaming' Mubarak, including public and private legal action, in an attempt to suppress critical opinion. One blogger was held at an airport (name withheld) for 13 hours and had his laptop confiscated by authorities. (09CAIRO1447, RECENT GOE ACTIONS TO SUPPRESS CRITICAL OPINION)

Answering the question?

The Wikileaks cables could be seen as a catalyst, but they were not the cause of the revolutions.

Wikileaks and these other forms of new media reflect the capacity to "collectively transform the Arab information environment and shatter the ability of authoritarian regimes to control the flow of information, images, ideas and opinions" (Marshall, 2011).

The Wikileaks cables highlighted corruption in MENA and cast a negative light on the governments, the United States' image was bolstered by the image where the Ambassador so openly disapproves of Ben Ali's corrupt and indulgent behaviour for example. The US condemnation of Ben Ali's regime could be seen as the encouragement that was needed to spark mass protest in Tunisia. This attitude reflects the widespread feeling

of the Tunisian public, though they only began to express their discontent publicly following the release of the cables and, one could say, the US stamp of approval (Leigh et al., 2011).

Dissatisfaction with Mubarak and Ben Ali and frustration had been brewing for many years; the publishing of the cables and their publication on public forums seemed to induce sudden action by civilians.

The cables did not receive much attention by local media, but rather international media. Suddenly the world's 'spotlight' was on Tunisia and civilians took action, with the volume and power of the protests made possible through social network sites and new media resources.

Conclusive Remarks

The leaks brought knowledge about corruption and espionage, though this knowledge was acquired from unverified allegations and may lead to further restrictions on press freedom and access to information.

The cables regarding Tunisia were allowed little coverage by local African media but the attention that they received by global media forums and the nature of the globalized online media that they were still accessible by Tunisians.

Western media described the Freedom Movement as "unrest" as usual in the Western corporate owned news media's portrayal "unrest ". Then it upgraded its status to "Egyptian Uprising." After persistent sit-ins at the Tahrir Square, it was defined as "People Revolution."

The credit of the political transformation in MENA goes to the movement for workers' rights in the newly revived factory towns and micro-sweatshops of Egypt and the movement against police brutality and torture. At a time when mainstream media all too often loses the vital elements of balance and context, and primarily portrays the negative side of the story, Arab civil society activists for constructive change, has a different approach through their use of social networking.