

104

FEBRUARY
2011

THE TEXT-MESSAGING REVOLUTIONS

Oleguer Sarsanedas Analyst, media expert

The first time that social media helped force the ousting of a ruling despot was in the Philippines ten years ago, in January 2001, when mass mobilization and protests were arranged, in part, by forwarded text messages reading: “Go 2 EDSA Wear blk.”¹ Over a million people choked traffic in downtown Manila and, three days later, President Joseph Estrada was gone, blaming “the text-messaging generation” for his downfall.

In January 2011, crowds in Tunis accomplished the same and celebrated carrying banners saying “Thank you Facebook”. A few days later, in Cairo, protesters demanding the departure of Mubarak used not only current popular social networks but also, when the government tried to shut them down, new services created for the occasion, like *Speak2Tweet*, and even obsolete technologies such as faxes, ham radios and simple word of mouth to rally hundred of thousands in and around Tahrir Square.

These protesters belong to the same generation as the sons and daughters of the French *soixante-huitards* or the Spaniards born right after Franco’s death who, in the wake of the 2004 Madrid bombings, ousted the Aznar government. Thirty-something, university-educated, internet-natives, they have lived all their lives under Mubarak. They are the faceless ones who touched off and then guided a revolt that has kept most of its slogans and communications within the 140-character frame.

They are internet users who understand perfectly well the mobilizing power of social networks and who, having lived all their lives under a police state, are not in the least naïve about information flows and the production of stories about reality. The New York Times calls them “sophisticated and professional” for their ability to propagate false rumours to confuse the secret services, their dress rehearsals in poor quarters of Cairo and their planning of the revolt on a weekly basis.

But what has baffled many observers is their capacity to create and mobilize a catch-all coalition, in which many sensibilities are represented through people of

1. EDSA stands for Epifanio de los Santos Avenue, a major road in the capital of Manila

all ages and genders and from all walks of life. A coalition whose strength comes from a very simple but unlikely fact: they have freed themselves not only --in the end-- from Mubarak but before, more importantly, from fear --that priceless tool of tyranny. And this is when the Tunisian-Egyptian virus becomes so contagious.

How contagious is it? While it is always difficult to predict the reach of an epidemic from the outset, it is quite obvious that the example of the energy and determination of the Egyptian revolutionaries goes far beyond the Arab world, even if the very first protests encouraged by the dynamics of events in Tunisia and Egypt have taken place in Algeria, Yemen, Jordan, Libya, Syria, Bahrein. But China, for instance, was among the first to block key words --Tunisia, Egypt--, several *micro-blogging* sites and the main social networks in anticipation of the tsunami reaching the Far East.

In fact, this reaction of the powers-that-be has been pathetically similar everywhere. Instead of tackling the problems derived from the speculation on basic staples that has provoked an unprecedented rise of world food prices, instead of concentrating on devising new economic models that would allow not only for sustainable development but also job creation for the best-prepared ever world generation so far, the reaction has been to preserve as much of the old order and its network of interests as possible and... to cut off the Internet. As if, as the old Spanish saying goes, one could put doors to the fields.

For those interested in denying that things are no longer as they used to be, here are the bad news: in an *internetted* world, the nation-state may be as obsolete as black-and-white television sets. Increasingly, the resources and threats that matter, disregard governments and borders. States are sharing powers that used to define their sovereignty with corporations, international bodies and institutions, and a proliferating universe of citizens' groups. The bond markets, the international involvement in domestic crises and activists fighting battles in cyberspace for a wide variety of causes --all push the nation-state to give in. And the consequences of this power-shift are truly seismic.

The following tweet was posted on February 11, a few minutes before Mubarak's announcement that he was "resigning": A protester in Tahrir Square tells the BBC: "Neither the vice-president nor the president know how to send an SMS or how to use electronic mail. They speak a different language from ours."

Text-messaging, young, non-religious, peaceful... Such is the first revolution of the 21st century.