

# Can Dictators Survive New Media?

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Articles & Testimony

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## "Protest technology" has changed the relationship between authoritarian regimes and their citizens, and there is no going back.

**T**he Arab uprisings suggest that recently developed "protest technology," from cell phone cameras to social media, are changing the way people behave under dictatorships and authoritarian regimes.

Prior to the rise of "protest technology," individuals had to endure under the tyranny of authoritarian regimes because there were few tools available to organize the masses without evading detection. Quite simply: the average citizen lacked the necessary instruments to outsmart their rulers. Autocratic regimes possessed the capabilities to swiftly crack down on dissidents before their ideas could evolve into a network of mass movement.

This allowed despots free rein to exercise their unchecked powers. Elections were frequently rigged and stolen, any opposition was suppressed, and massacres were committed against groups of people deemed enemies of the state. Whistleblowers who bore witness to these crimes lacked the technology to broadcast their stories to the rest of the world in hopes of humanitarian intervention.

Take Bosnia for instance. In 1995, the nationalist Serb militia and the Yugoslav National Army (JNA) started indiscriminately killing thousands of Bosniacs in Srebrenica, Bosnia on July 11. The outside world, however, only heard reports of a massacre being committed much later in the week, as the JNA and Serb militia were nearly done with their crimes, killing over 8,000 people.

The technologies of today, which we take for granted, such as camera phones, wireless connections, and social networks, allow crimes committed by governments to be reported as they take place, literally. This is akin to a social revolution: citizens of authoritarian regimes and their oppressors are now on more level footing, for the first time ever.

The Syrian uprising is a case in point. In 1982, when Bashar al-Assad's father killed tens of thousands of his own citizens in Hama, Syrians in other towns were clueless that such a massacre was taking place.

Today, all Syrians are witnessing al-Assad's brutality daily and are taking to the streets to protest. This is due to the Internet and new communication technologies, which provide a social and political space of mobilization -- a space that even al-Assad cannot control. New "protest technology," such as a simple cell phone, allows each demonstrator to become an empowered reporter, broadcasting videos, images, and narratives of al-Assad's crackdowns to people across the globe.

Al-Assad will fall because his oppression, broadcasted in real time on virtually every news media outlet, will draw the ire of the outside world, leading to intervention. More importantly, similar to the fate of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, Syrians will topple their dictator thanks to the use of new technologies.

It will become increasingly difficult for dictators to carry out massacres and other crimes against humanity as well. Historically speaking, the stark power asymmetry between the oppressor and the victim has paved the way for massacres. Previously, victims found themselves entirely powerless to challenge their dehumanization and ensuing persecution by their oppressors or call for outside help. "Protest technologies" could alleviate part of this problem by empowering the persecuted. People targeted for massacre can now spread their call for outside help faster, making a stronger plea for humanitarian intervention.

In other words, there is no more "to-be-judged-in-posterity" immunity for al-Assad or other dictators, save perhaps North Korea, which forces its citizens to live in a pre-"protest technology" age (Pyongyang bans internet and cell phones except for use by the privileged few).

"Protest technology" will not only shed light on very public crimes such as massacres but also affect leaders who are accused of rigging elections. The Russian leader Vladimir Putin faced surprisingly large-scale unrest following the 2011 legislative elections. Common citizens made use of Internet, social media, and cell phones to document electoral fraud in real time -- a first in Russia.

Putin's next test is surviving the March presidential elections. Other leaders who rig elections -- not just Putin -- from the presidents of the Central Asian republics to Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus, need to take notice: in the "protest technology" age, when each citizen plays the role of an elections monitor, massive electoral fraud is going to become increasingly difficult.

In 1517, when Martin Luther took advantage of the then newly available printing press to have his theses disseminated all over Europe, his use of this new technology forever changed the way Europeans view the world.

"Protest technology" could be a similar, revolutionary step, shaping social behavior in authoritarian regimes.

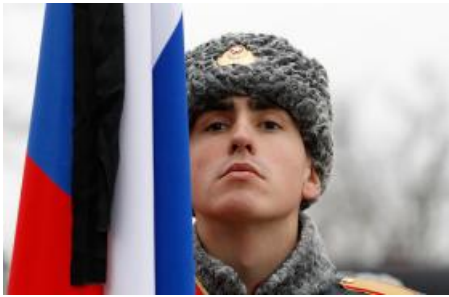
Of course, the autocrats could quickly learn how to manipulate these new technologies, turning them at times into instruments of social control. Even then, however, the relationship between citizens of authoritarian regimes and their oppressors appears to have changed, and there is no going back.

*Soner Cagaptay is a regularly featured commentator on CNN's Global Public Square and director of The Washington Institute's Turkish Research Program. ❖*

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