Morocco: Internet Making Censorship Obsolete

Mohammad Ibahrine

While satellite television often attracts the lion's share of analysis about new media and their effect on prospects for democratization in the Middle East and North Africa, another technology may already have had at least as large an impact: the Internet. In Morocco, where the regime has severely constrained, controlled, or silenced independent print media through direct and indirect censorship, the Internet has become an important instrument for unrestricted flows of information, which in turn are leading to the emergence of a more vibrant public sphere.

The degree of Morocco's connectivity to the Internet is surprising. For a country that established its first Internet connection in 1995, Morocco has now about one million users among a population of about 32 million, one of the highest growth rates in the Arab world. The spread of cybercafés (now numbering over 1500), as well as of Voice Over Internet Protocols for inexpensive long-distance phone calls, are helping to spread Internet use.

Since the introduction of the Internet into the political field in Morocco in the late 1990s, government ministries, political parties, and the parliament are online. The same holds true for activists and civil society groups, who have a long tradition of developing and using independent media to promote their interests and facilitate communication.

Among the most important cases of political use of the Internet in Morocco is that of Abdul Salam Yassine, leader of Al Adl wa Al Ihsan (Justice and Charity), a leading Islam-oriented political organization. Internet use for political purposes gained momentum in 2000 when Al Adl wa Al Ihsan launched a website (http://www.yassine.net) to publish an open letter in many European languages after the regime banned independent newspapers for publishing it. Entitled “To whom it may concern,” the voluminous memorandum criticized King Hassan II's regime and urged King Mohammad to redistribute the late king's wealth. Yassine's website featured information resources, news, and audio and video clips, thus breaking the chains of censorship.

A separate but related recent case that shows how the Internet is facilitating political communication in the face of growing authoritarian tendencies is that of Nadia Yassine,
daughter and unofficial spokesperson of Abdul Salam Yassine. In an interview published on June 2, 2005 in *Al Usbu'iyya Al Jadida*, a Moroccan weekly, Nadia Yassine criticized authoritarian regimes and expressed support for a republic. Nadia Yassine was charged with damaging the monarchy and if found guilty, may face heavy fines and up to five years in prison. Following the charges, Nadia Yassine launched a website in Arabic, English and French ([http://www.nadiayassine.net](http://www.nadiayassine.net)) containing detailed information about her biography, ideas, and activities (including audio clips of her public lectures, for example one given at the University of California at Berkeley), as well as the full text of the interview that resulted in the case against her. The website has received numerous e-mail messages of support, mostly from highly educated Moroccans.

Nor have Islamists been the only ones to use the Internet to circumvent government constraints. Since January 1998 progressive intellectual and human rights activist Mahdi Elmandjra, denied access to regular Moroccan media, has used his website ([http://www.elmandjra.org](http://www.elmandjra.org)) and e-mail lists to disseminate information and alternative viewpoints. Elmandjra recently launched the “Baraka Movement,” similar to Egypt's Kifaya Movement, which opposes despotism and monopoly of authority. In using his electronic networks with international and national human rights organizations, he is able to publicize abuses, rights violations and repressive practices quickly. He perceives information sharing as an important feature of political participation, as it empowers marginalized individuals and civil society groups to overcome regime censorship. Since 1998 his website has had more than 400,000 hits, a large number of visitors for a personal website in the Arab world.

Internet-based political activism in Morocco is still nascent, but is growing at a fast pace and is likely to play an increasingly important role in accelerating political pluralism. The Moroccan regime is not ignorant of the power of the Internet and is attempting to stifle its effectiveness via legal constraints such as the 2003 anti-terrorism law as well as technical methods such as filtering and blocking websites. But such methods ultimately are ineffective; even when a website is shut down, there are still e-mail list serves and blogs to take up the cause.

_Mohammad Ibahrine is Lecturer in International and Comparative Communication Studies at the University of Erfurt, Germany._