

Corrupt leaders on knife-edge, social media go on witch-hunt

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The revolution will not eat its children, but hunt for those who torture and starve its children. And this time around it will achieve its goals not with the thunder of automatic weapons and bombs, but with the tenacity of 'social networkers' - a techno-savvy congregation aspiring for social justice, democracy, human rights and equality.

This is the lesson learned in Egypt and Tunisia, where ordinary citizens used Twitter, Facebook, blogs and YouTube to foment change and chase 'witches'.

"Whenever there is a high-pressure situation, all that is needed is a spark to initiate change," Angus Robinson, Native executive creative director and former Brandsh CEO, told Bizcommunity.com from Barcelona, Spain, where he is attending the 2011 World Mobile Congress.

"Facebook and Twitter may have played a role in it recently, but other social media platforms such as blogs have been used for a while to spread opinion, initiate debate and to help identify thought-leaders.

"It is important to note that there had been years of anti-governmental groundswell that came to a head recently - social media just sped it up when the time was right."

Driving out corrupt rulers

Africa's biggest ever anti-governmental demonstrations, mostly planned through social media tools, eventually drove Tunisia's Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak out of power after 23 and 30 years of corrupt rule, respectively.

Ben Ali and Mubarak are just two of some 40 African dictators still ruling their countries with an iron-fist, and analysts believe the winds of change, boosted by easy use of modern technology, will likely spread to other nations in the near future.

Robinson, who is also Concept executive creative director, said: "The familiarity and ease of use of both Facebook and Twitter would also have played a role. Two years ago, they would have not have made any impact.

"Although Twitter's numbers in Egypt are small, it played a critical role in communicating to the rest of the world - almost garnering support from international media, bloggers, and non-governmental organisations. The attention and the sustained

flow of information makes an uprising like Egypt's difficult to ignore.

"In a population of 80 million people with an average age of 24, 60 million mobile subscribers, 20 million internet users and 5.1 million Facebook users, it is clear to see that all the ingredients are there for technology to be used in a situation such as the Egyptian uprising.

"However, we should not forget the potential role that ubiquitous technology such as SMS must have played. SMS might have been forgotten in the focus on Twitter and Facebook."

Rush to hamper hunt

But like in any witch-hunt process, those who are being hunted - in this case the dictators - rush to plead not guilty, and at the same time seek to diabolise the methodology of the process in order to hamper the hunt.

Some African and Arab leaders have described social networking sites as "divisive" and "evil" Western instruments aimed at corrupting and poisoning the masses.

Robinson said: "Of course some leaders would be angry. The leaders that would say this have typically controlled their countries and the media by suppressing communication and managing the message to suit their agendas. To them, democracy could also be described as a 'divisive instruments that are corrupting and poisoning the masses'."

Asked whether social media is an instrument of social justice, human rights and democracy, he replied: "Absolutely. Very little can now be kept completely private, anonymous or 'underground'."

"As long as there are a few people 'listening' (read 'following/friend/linked/etc), then any issue can be spread and therefore magnified across a variety of networks.

Social media, integrated into daily living

"We are almost at the stage that social media should not be split from normal communication and just needs to be treated as part of all communication channels, as they are so integrated into everything we do.

"It is clear that this way of communicating will only get more prevalent, reliable and pervasive in everything we do. Sharing, posting, emailing, updating statuses, smsing and all their cousins are expected and no longer anomalies in how people spread their messages.

"For the future, social media can play its most powerful role in Egypt in building the 'new Egypt'. It can be used to harness the spirit of change and emphasise the vision and bonds for a cohesive future - which starts immediately in getting back to work, encouraging tourism, building the new government and finding the right civil servants," Robinson concluded.

ABOUT ISSA SIKITI DA SILVA

Issa Sikiti da Silva is a winner of the 2010 SADC Media Awards (print category). He freelances for various media outlets, local and foreign, and has travelled extensively across Africa. His work has been published both in French and English. He used to contribute to Bizcommunity.com as a senior news writer.

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