

AMERICAN DEMOCRACY, TUNISIA, AND WIKILEAKS

Update: BBC and al-Jazeera report that Ben Ali has left the country and security forces have arrested family members at the airport.

The simultaneous (and related) unfolding of the uprising in Tunisia and the latest Wikileaks events reveals a great deal about our own country's support for democracy.

If you aren't already, I recommend you follow @abuaardvark (aka Mark Lynch) so long as this crisis in Tunisia lasts. Not only is Lynch following the up-to-the-minute events closely on Twitter—such as the news that dictator Zine el Abidine Ben Ali just sacked his government and will hold elections six months from now. But he also has chronicled the strange silence about this popular uprising in the US, particularly among the NeoCons who used democracy promotion as their excuse to launch an illegal war in Iraq.

Barely a month goes by without a *Washington Post* editorial bemoaning Egypt's authoritarian retrenchment and criticizing the Obama administration's alleged failure to promote Arab democracy. But now Tunisia has erupted as the story of the year for Arab reformers. The spiraling protests and the regime's heavy-handed, but thus far ineffective, repression have captured the imagination of Arab publics, governments, and political analysts. Despite Tunis's efforts to censor media coverage, images and video have made it out onto social media and up to Al Jazeera and other satellite TV. The "Tunisia scenario" is now the term of art for activist hopes and government fears of political instability and mass

protests from Jordan to Egypt to the Gulf.

[snip]

Perhaps they've had nothing to say simply because there has been little coverage of Tunisia in the Western media, and the United States has few interests or leverage in Tunis, making it a marginal issue for U.S. political debate. Tunisia is not generally on the front burner in American thinking about the Middle East. It's far away from Israel, Iraq, and the Gulf, and plays little role in the headline strategic issues facing the U.S. in the region. Despite being one of the most repressive and authoritarian regimes in the region, Tunisia has generally been seen as a model of economic development and secularism. Its promotion of women's rights and crushing of Islamist opposition has taken priority in the West over its near-complete censorship of the media and blanket domination of political society. Indeed, the United States has cared so little about Tunisia's absolute rejection of democracy and world-class censorship that it chose it for the regional office of MEPI, the Bush administration's signature democracy promotion initiative.

This is understandable, but hardly satisfying. I can understand the hesitation of U.S. *officials* to take a strong position on the side of either the protesters or the regime at this point, given the strategic complexities and the implications of taking any rhetorical stance. To my ears, at least, the U.S. message has been muddled, with some officials seeming to take the side of the protesters and warning against too-harsh repression and others seeming

to avoid taking a stance. For what it's worth, I told a State Department official in a public forum yesterday that the absence of major U.S. interests in Tunisia and the real prospect of change there make it a good place for the Obama administration to take a principled stand in favor of public freedoms and against repression.

Click through for his update—a response to a WaPo column regarding such populist uprising as a threat.

With Lynch's comments in mind, consider two different versions of the role of Wikileaks in this uprising.

Elizabeth Dickinson has a piece that—perhaps too strongly—calls Wikileaks “a trigger and a tool for political outcry” in Tunisia.

Tunisia's government doesn't exactly get a flattering portrayal in the leaked State Department cables. The country's ruling family is described as “The Family” – a mafia-esque elite who have their hands in every cookie jar in the entire economy. “President Ben Ali is aging, his regime is sclerotic and there is no clear successor,” a June 2009 cable reads. And to this kleptocracy there is no recourse; one June 2008 cable claims: “persistent rumors of corruption, coupled with rising inflation and continued unemployment, have helped to fuel frustration with the GOT [government of Tunisia] and have contributed to recent protests in southwestern Tunisia. With those at the top believed to be the worst offenders, and likely to remain in power, there are no checks in the system.”

Of course, Tunisians didn't need anyone to tell them this. But the details noted in the cables – for example, the fact

that the first lady may have made massive profits off a private school – stirred things up. Matters got worse, not better (as surely the government hoped), when WikiLeaks was blocked by the authorities and started seeking out dissidents and activists on social networking sites.

As PayPal and Amazon learned last year, WikiLeaks' supporters don't take kindly to being denied access to the Internet. And the hacking network Anonymous launched an operation, OpTunisia, against government sites "as long as the Tunisian government keep acting the way they do," an Anonymous member told the *Financial Times*.

Compare that the very weird logic State Department Spokesperson Philip Crowley uses in his speech to a class on media and politics the other day.

No one is a greater advocate for a vibrant independent and responsible press, committed to the promotion of freedom of expression and development of a true global civil society, than the United States. Every day, we express concern about the plight of journalists (or bloggers) around the world who are intimidated, jailed or even killed by governments that are afraid of their people, and afraid of the empowerment that comes with the free flow of information within a civil society.

Most recently, we did so in the context of Tunisia, which has hacked social media accounts while claiming to protect their citizens from the incitement of violence. But in doing so, we feel the government is unduly restricting the ability of its people to peacefully assemble and express their views in order to influence government policies.

These are universal principles that we continue to support. And we practice what we preach. Just look at our own country and cable television. We don't silence dissidents. We make them television news analysts.

Some in the human rights community in this country, and around the world, are questioning our commitment to freedom of expression, freedom of the press and Internet freedom in the aftermath of WikiLeaks. I am constrained in what I can say, both because individual cables remain classified, and the leak is under investigation by the Department of Justice. But let me briefly put this in context and then I will open things up for questions. WikiLeaks is about the unauthorized disclosure of classified information. It is not an exercise in Internet freedom. It is about the legitimate investigation of a crime. It is about the need to continue to protect sensitive information while enabling the free flow of public information. [my emphasis]

He sort of wanders back and forth between a discussion of press freedom and an insistence that persecution of Wikileaks is not a violation of that principle through the rest of his speech, at one point drawing a bizarre analogy between Coke's secret formula and Google's search algorithms and the US' diplomatic secrets, as if our diplomatic secrets are the essence of our identity.

Maybe that was his point.

I find Crowley's statement in the quoted passage interesting for several reasons. First, there's the odd non sequitur from Tunisia to Wikileaks, perhaps suggesting some unspoken agreement on Crowley's part with Dickinson's assertion that Wikileaks had an affirmative role in fostering this expression of civil society.

But note, too, how Crowley conflates what this speech is supposed to be about—journalism, the Fourth Estate, big-P press, and only the “responsible press” at that—and social media. He says, first, that our country expresses concern about the plight of journalists and bloggers (he doesn’t except journalists from Reuters or al-Jazeera, though he should, considering how many of them we’ve targeted or killed). Those would mostly qualify as “press.” But then he says the State Department has expressed concern about Tunisia, too. And even he admits that Tunisia attempted its suppression of any discussions about the uprising by hacking social media accounts.

Not only does it make the target something different from Crowley’s “responsible press,” but it seems our government has zero ground to stand on in condemning a government’s efforts to use hacking—including DDoS attacks—to prevent its citizens from reading content it finds dangerous (not to mention more old-fashioned efforts at repression, such as shutting down server and funding access).

And from there, conflating “responsible press” and the social media-assisted citizen activism in Tunisia, Crowley then attempts to redefine what Wikileaks is about, distinguishing between the “responsible press” and social media-assisted activism and “the legitimate investigation of a crime” and “the need to continue to protect sensitive information.”

Now, for most of the rest of Crowley’s discussion of Wikileaks, he focuses on the first of the two things he tries to redefine WL as: the investigation of the leak, not admitting the difference between investigating Manning’s alleged leak of the information and investigating Assange’s role in publishing it.

We are a nation of laws, and the laws of our country have been violated. Since we function under the rule of law, it is appropriate and necessary that we investigate and prosecute those who have

violated U.S law. Some have suggested that the ongoing investigation marks a retreat from our commitment to freedom of expression, freedom of the press and Internet freedom. Nonsense.

That's safer ground for Crowley. After all, the US' profoundly undemocratic response to Wikileaks extends not just to investigating and prosecuting Manning and Assange, but also to doing everything in its power to hinder Wikileaks' publication of the material it already has, including, just like the government of Tunisia, hacking Wikileaks' website.

Sure, the government has covered its tracks: We can't prove the US government is the entity that launched DDos attacks on WL. Lieberman has accepted the blame for persuading Amazon to shut down WL's US-based server. Paypal and various banks have explained they just shut down WL's use of their respective services out of a seemingly independent desire to interpret their own service agreements in ways that precluded working with WL.

But does anyone doubt that the government was behind all of this?

How odd, Mark Lynch rightly finds it, that our government and pundits have been so silent about the challenge to authoritarianism in Tunisia. But for those, like Crowley, focusing on Tunisia's technical repression of activists (as opposed to the physical repression of it), that question really could just as well be focused closer to home.