



**S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL  
OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**  
A Graduate School of Nanyang Technological University

# RSIS COMMENTARIES

RSIS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS. Due recognition must be given to the author or authors and RSIS. Please email: [RSISPublication@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:RSISPublication@ntu.edu.sg) or call (+65) 6790 6982 to speak to the Editor RSIS Commentaries, Yang Razali Kassim.

No. 36/2011 dated 7 March 2011

## **Could Syria be Next?: Protests by Arab Internet Bloggers**

By Zulkifli Bin Mohamed Sultan

### **Synopsis**

*Recent political unrest in the Middle East showed numerous dissatisfactions with the style of governance which seek to dictate and control its people. The detention of a young Syrian blogger has aroused the Arab blogosphere to protest against such suppression.*

### **Commentary**

GOVERNMENTS THROUGHOUT the Arab world are consistently censoring Internet platforms such as blogs, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Arab Internet users, particularly the youths, use the Internet to express their opinions, expose corruption and oppose authoritarianism. In most Middle Eastern countries, where authoritarianism and dictatorship are the typical styles of governance, freedom of expression via the Internet is especially repressed.

The arrest and detention of Google employee, Wael Ghanim, earlier this year encouraged the demonstrations in Cairo and Alexandria that led to the Tahrir Square revolution which ousted President Mubarak on 11 February 2011. He was arrested for his initiative on his Facebook page for organising protests. A different but similar case is developing in Syria involving a teenaged blogger, Tal Al Malouhi.

### **Case of Tal Al Malouhi**

Al Malouhi was 17 when she was summoned to the State Security Department in Damascus in December 2009. She has not returned home since. According to reports by human rights organisations the high school girl was called for interrogation regarding some articles and poems about local and Arab affairs she had posted on her blog. Some days later security officials went to her house and seized her computer and books and personal items.

After 14 months of continuous pressure from local citizens and international human rights groups demanding her release, Al Malouhi was put on trial behind closed doors in Syria's Higher State Security Court. She was convicted of contacting a foreign country and leaking information that should be kept secret and sentenced her to five years jail. Citing articles on her blog saying she yearned to play a role in shaping the future of Syria, which had been ruled by the Baath Party for the last five decades, the court found that she had revealed "information that should remain hushed to a foreign country".

The court did not give details or identify the country she was accused of spying for. However the United States has sharply criticised Syria's handling of the case, condemned the regime for the secret trial and appealed for Al-Malouhi's immediate release. The US rejected what it called "groundless allegations of American connections that have resulted in a spurious accusation of espionage".

### **Tip of the Iceberg?**

Al-Malouhi's detention stirred a storm in the Arab blogosphere, with numerous postings criticising what was called indiscriminate repression in Syria. An extensive protest made online by local Arabs as well as those across the Middle East reflects ordinary people's desire for freedom. Despite this threat Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad remained confident that there would be no protest in Syria, unlike what happened in Tunisia, Egypt and other parts of the region.

While the Facebook group promoting the "Day of Rage" attracted many supporters, there were several key dissimilarities separating Syria from Egypt or Tunisia. As Facebook is banned in Syria, the page was reportedly set up by expatriates and although it gained 15,000 followers, most are believed to be Syrians living abroad. Hence the day of rage in Syria, predictably did not have the same outcome as others in the region. The failure to draw crowds at planned rallies in Syria and Kuwait underscores that the revolution of Tunisia and Egypt seemingly can be stamped out by a hardline state security, which is also a hallmark of Gulf states.

Countries in the Middle East, concerned by current protests, have been cutting or controlling Internet access in an effort to stop the flow of information both in and outside of their countries. And there are fears in nations where Internet access has not been controlled, including Morocco and Saudi Arabia, that the same could happen there. Arbor Networks Chief Scientist Craig Labovitz said some cuts to connections go even further than the Internet. In several countries, phone lines are also being disrupted.

### **Restrictions on Internet Freedom**

The Internet is a rare outlet for the expression of independent views in Syria, as a result of government surveillance and bans on numerous sites. Censorship is prevalent and extends to popular website such as Blogger. Many other social networking and political websites are also banned including Facebook, YouTube, Wikipedia and hundreds of websites of domestic opposition. Several Syrian bloggers and writers have been arrested and sentenced to jail.

Indeed, government agencies in Syria exercise sweeping powers that undercut human rights assurances, allowing arbitrary detention and arrest of suspects deemed a threat to public security -- all without any warrant or specific legal basis. These types of oppression undermine the Syrians' way of life and in many cases their very lives. There is ample evidence to show that government repression creates fertile soil for the growth of extremism and terrorism.

There have been other reasons cited by analysts as to what hindered the progress of anti-government protest by the people of Syria. However, if one were to study the emerging trends of the Syrian discontent towards authoritarian repression on them, one could wonder if it would only be a matter of time for this protest to progress to another level. Despite the lack of success, one cannot entirely dismiss the people's potential. The case of Tal Al-Malouhi is not unique. It is estimated that approximately 10,000 political prisoners are being held, most being detained for a long period of time without any trial.

*Zulkifli Bin Mohamed Sultan is a researcher with the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University. He spent five years in Damascus, Syria for his undergraduate studies.*