



EDITORIAL

Dear Readers,

Since the beginning of the “Arab Spring” nearly two years ago, some countries in the Middle East and in the Maghreb have undergone profound change. However, the initial euphoria over the progress made towards greater freedom has given way to disillusionment in many instances. This is currently apparent in reporting on events taking place in Syria. Online activists in this country plagued by civil war are complaining about the lack of support for their cause on the part of the international community. They maintain that their endeavours to bring about a revolution in Syria are greeted with far less enthusiasm than that shown in the case of Tunisia and Egypt in the spring of 2011. They also think that the rebel side is wrongly accused of disseminating propaganda.

The Western media have indeed become more cautious when assessing online protests, which are initiated predominantly by young people. They have vivid memories of the manipulation perpetrated by Tunisian Internet activists, who stated that the fruit and vegetable vendor Mohamed Bouazizi, who had committed self-immolation by way of protest and thereby triggered a storm of protest against Ben Ali’s regime, was a university graduate. Bouazizi was a person who was in despair about the political and social conditions, and the bleak outlook for unemployed, highly qualified young Tunisians did indeed fuel the protests. What was more obvious than combining the two aspects and painting Bouazizi as a graduate street vendor? The authors of the International Reports themselves fell victim to this PR coup by the online activists.

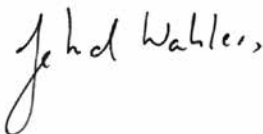
But these were not the reasons that actually dispelled the euphoria. Instead, the euphoria has given way to disillusionment because of the realisation that the young online activists in Tunisia and Egypt have not succeeded in networking in the real world as well and playing a significant

role in the process of reshaping the political landscape of the two countries. They do not have a presence in the newly elected parliaments. Because of this situation, revolts in Syria lack momentum. The hope that this movement would play a significant role after a possible regime change, which would not be caused by protests but by military action in Syria, has gone.

The concentration on online aspects in the reporting on the "Arab Spring" caused other relevant factors to be neglected. Such a narrow view means that social and political developments cannot be evaluated appropriately. The Muslim Brotherhood, which won in free and largely fair elections in Tunisia and Egypt, had no significant online presence. Instead, its members drove around the villages and talked to people.

Social media provide a platform. They are not themselves the message, nor are they necessarily an indication of social change, let alone of democratic development. On the contrary, the Internet also accommodates totally undemocratic tendencies, which actually go against a free and tolerant society. Forces within civil society use the Internet not only to demand democracy, but also to question the rights of minorities in some cases. In 2009, for instance, Muslims in Malaysia protested against a Hindu temple being relocated to their district by bringing along a cow's head and trampling on it to defile it in front of the shrine. These activists too used the Internet to spread their message.

When it comes to involvement in civil society activities, tools such as messaging services or social media are not of paramount importance. What truly counts is the capability of civil society players to interact strategically, organisationally and politically – not online but in real life.



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