

Internet cutoff fails to silence Egypt protests

The Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) -- In its effort to silence protesters, Egypt took a step that's rare even among authoritarian governments: It cut off the Internet across the entire country.

The nation's four main Internet providers all went dark, and cell phone service was suspended in some areas. But the drastic move did not stop demonstrators Friday, and it could backfire by fueling anger and chaos in the streets of Cairo and beyond.

Until now, Egyptians have had nearly open access to the Web.

"This is night and day," said Robert Faris, research director at Harvard University's Berkman Center for Internet and Society. "They have gone from open Internet to no Internet, and that has got to be a big shock."

Protesters are angry about the government of President Hosni Mubarak, so severing Internet and cell phone access only adds fuel to the fire, Faris said.

"This just calls into further question the government's legitimacy," he said. The political cost of acting so aggressively will make it "difficult for them to recover. But those are the tradeoffs."

Many Egyptians, especially young people, have grown accustomed to using the Internet to discuss local issues, economic conditions and politics. The government has been able to censor traditional media, such as major newspapers, but small local publications and independent groups have enjoyed a vibrant presence online.

The shutoff is an "enormous regression for a country that has always had a very strong and very engaged civil society," said Cynthia Wong, director of the Center for Democracy and Technology's Project on Global Internet Freedom. The Egyptian government "just can't cut off the entire nation forever, even if it does serve short-term goals."

Egypt is not the first country to shut off Internet service to quell dissidence and prevent the spread of embarrassing images.

Myanmar did it in 2007. Iran disrupted Internet service in 2009 to try to quell protests over disputed elections. That same year, China, which already censors the Web, suspended international phone service and cut off the Internet in the far western Xinjiang region after deadly riots.

Iran blocked access to social sites such as Twitter, YouTube and Facebook and slowed the Internet to a crawl, but did not cut it off completely.

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Published on Electronic Component News (<http://www.ecnmag.com>)

"What's notable is that Egypt has gone farther than even Iran," Faris said. "We always thought of Egypt being a more moderate regime. In this particular instance, apparently they are not."

Although the protests in Iran did not topple the government, they drew an outpouring of international support, much of it expressed on social networks. A video of a young woman's death from a gunshot wound - captured on cell phones - become a symbol of that uprising and the government's brutal crackdown.

In Egypt, authorities have gone after individual bloggers. But until Thursday, the government has typically permitted access to Twitter, Facebook and other sites, Faris said.

The information revolution has helped people in the Middle East organize in ways that were impossible just a few years ago. No longer do they need a formal political or social organization to protest.

"The Egyptian government understood that very quickly in moving yesterday to put limits on social media," Shibley Telhami, professor of international relations at the University of Maryland, said Friday. "Some of it worked. Some of it didn't."

Although relatively few Egyptian homes have Internet access, cybercafes and cell phones are prevalent. Mobile phones outnumber fixed phone lines, as is the case in many developing countries.

At the end of 2010, an estimated 80 percent of Egyptians had a cell phone, according to research firm Ovum. About a quarter had access to the Internet as of 2009, according to the International Telecommunications Union, an arm of the United Nations.

So it was notable that the government shut down not just Internet connections but also mobile service. Unable to use their cell phones, some people muttered angrily about what the cutoff would mean for reaching emergency services. As of Friday, at least eight people had died in the protests.

Going from open Internet to no Internet is more shocking to people than losing it piece by piece, or not having access to it in the first place, as is the case in Cuba and North Korea.

"One of the things China is particularly good at is offering alternatives to media they are blocking," Faris said. "For most Chinese Internet users, that's enough. They are probably fine with that."

That said, shutting down Internet connections in a country with limited infrastructure, like Egypt, is not technically complicated. If an Internet service provider turns off its "routers" - powerful computers that relay Internet data - then traffic is halted. Egypt has just five major providers, according to Renesys Corp.

When Iran's protests erupted in 2009, the state started filtering the country's

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Internet connections, blocking some types of communications and slowing the overall network.

By shutting down nearly all Internet connections, the Egyptian government is wielding a much blunter instrument, possibly because it was caught by surprise and did not have time to put an elaborate filtering system in place. And they might have acted too late.

"People protested before there was Internet, and people protest when there is no Internet," Faris said. "A lot of the organization that went on online has already occurred."

Associated Press writers Michael Weissenstein in Cairo, Peter Svensson in New York, Jessica Mintz in Seattle and Joelle Tessler in Washington contributed to this story.

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