

Even more than Mideast, China keeps firm grip on Internet

February 21 2011, By Tom Lasseter

As Arab governments from Bahrain to Yemen and the clerical rulers in Iran alike wrestle with how to get a grip on the Internet's role in spreading unrest, the Communist Party in Beijing has steadily applied one of the world's most sophisticated censorship programs.

Instead of shutting down the Internet completely, as Egypt briefly did in an unsuccessful bid to save former President Hosni Mubarak's regime, [China](#) carefully picks and chooses what material is allowed to filter through. And while troops in Bahrain opened fire on crowds of demonstrators, China so far has been successful in keeping dissidents from gathering momentum, in part by crushing their ability to post manifestos or form groups online.

While the Internet hasn't carried the momentum of those uprisings nor has it addressed the myriad of complex underlying factors, it's thought to have galvanized groups of key protest organizers.

But Beijing so far hasn't had to roll back or reconsider Internet access issues, because in China, they didn't exist to begin with.

Widely known as the Great Firewall, the restrictive measures emanating from Beijing keep a majority of China's estimated 457 million Web users from accessing anything online that the government considers politically sensitive, including sites - such as [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) - that have been used to organize or report on recent standoffs between troops and protesters in Bahrain and Egypt.

The result is a parallel system in which the bare news of events such as those now roiling the Arab world can be reported while any analysis that might draw parallels to domestic issues in China is omitted. Or, as has been the case recently, it can be accompanied with dire warnings about the dangers of turmoil.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton challenged that authoritarian approach in a speech on Internet freedoms this week, contending that it ultimately leads governments to a "dictator's dilemma" in which they have to continue doubling down on oppressive tactics or finally relent and let the "walls fall."

China, however, has given no indication that it intends to change course.

In fact, a chief architect of China's Internet monitoring program said in an interview published Friday by state media that the country should bolster its efforts.

Despite the efficiency of China's censors, Fang Binxing, nicknamed the "Father of the Great Firewall," told the Global Times state newspaper that he was concerned about software platforms that could circumvent those measures with virtual private networks, which allow groups of people to use the Internet to communicate privately. While exact figures aren't available, it's widely assumed that only a small portion of China's Internet users have access to VPN subscriptions, which often require credit card transactions in foreign currency.

Still, Fang said he'd concluded that "so far, the GFW (Great Firewall) is lagging behind and still needs improvement."

Fang, the 50-year-old president of the Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications, said that he kept six different VPN connections at home "to test which side wins: the GFW or the VPN."

The article paraphrased him saying there was a "war" between the technologies and that calls to open up the Internet represented a "soft power threat to China from foreign forces."

Fang used the totalitarian regime of North Korea, which counts China as its key backer, as an example.

"Some countries hope North Korea will open up its Internet," he said. "But if it really did so, other countries would get the upper hand."

On Tuesday, Clinton announced \$25 million in additional funding this year to "fight against Internet repression," which presumably would include Chinese efforts along those lines.

When the U.S. Embassy in Beijing attempted to post Clinton's address, which specifically mentioned China five times, it was blocked on several Chinese sites.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Ma Zhaoxu slammed the White House initiative Thursday, saying, "We are against any other countries using Internet freedom as a pretext for interfering in others' internal affairs."

Across some of China's own Web pages, though, there have been calls for more access and less oversight.

Fang's role in developing the Great Firewall program has made him a target of derision for some "netizens." When Fang created a page on a popular Chinese blogging site in December, users posted a torrent of insulting, and at times profane, remarks attacking him.

Amid the bluster in the Global Times piece, Fang acknowledged that the [Great Firewall](#) could use a bit more nuance in, as the article put it,

"distinguishing between good and evil information."

When a website contains sections with "sensitive" language, everything else is blocked as well, an issue Fang said he hoped would be addressed with smarter software in the future.

"It's like when passengers aren't allowed to take water aboard an airplane because our security gates aren't good enough to differentiate between water and nitroglycerin," he said.

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