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Protest in the 21st Century - Harder

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> The Soviet Communist dictatorship, like any other system, seeks to preserve its own existence. To do this it is forced to stamp out any spark of dissidence which appears, either on its own territory or beyond its borders.
>
> — Viktor Suvorov, Inside the Soviet Army

I study Statistics and Machine Learning. Most of the time it's really exciting to be so close to the frontier, but sometimes it's terrifying because you understand how (relatively) easy it will be for totalitarian regimes to apply really powerful open-source software to do things like track their entire populations and automatically predict who might act out.

Facial recognition systems using technology like CNNs (convolutional neural networks) has proven itself to be extremely accurate on a small scale, and as the components involved in a large scale deployment (cameras, storage, and general computing power) become orders of magnitude less expensive, accessibility to even the poorest dictator improve. To this end, the general development of

AI will make the process of revolting against authoritarianism and protesting where that right is not strongly protected much more difficult (read costly).

I like to think that every person has a threshold of activation that once crossed drives them to rebel in some fashion. This threshold vastly differs because of expectations (I sure like to write about those!) about the society to which they belong and personally how non-confrontational they are as a human being. For citizens of liberal democracies, protest is often a matter of being irritated enough to act and protest is an important part of the political process, but consequences on a grand scale probably don't factor into their decision-making process that much.

Consequences are perhaps the most important factor in dissuading protest in the most repressive authoritarian states. North Korea's historical punishment of three generations of a defectors' family [a] being perhaps the most infamous contemporary example but I've heard of similar family-based punishment being used in Syria, the GDR and the USSR as well. Having the threat of the death of one's family hanging over you is pretty unimaginable but even then, decisions are probably influenced by an assessment of how likely you are to be caught. AI systems and their ability to identify people from security camera images or to track unknown people as they move through a country will raise that likelihood significantly and probably dissuade some people from revolting.

I'm hopeful this isn't that case. Truly terrible regimes cultivate such animosity in the lives of their people that some no longer care about their own lives (or even the lives of their families).

While some protest that may have occurred otherwise will be dissuaded by technology, some have such strong convictions that nothing matters. When Mohammad Bouazizi lit himself afire in front of the governor's office in his small Tunisian town, the world changed. Catalysts like this, captured and spread quickly by technology in all but the most repressive regimes will probably serve to accelerate the spread of protest once they begin.

When people rebel, governments have a choice to make and they aren't actually all that good. Precedents not soon forgotten are set fast and the dueling options of acquiescing or resisting are antipodes.

Acquiescence is to let go of power - something democracies and perhaps only the most self-aware authoritarians are capable of doing (the Saudis on women driving isn't a terrible example). The fabric of society is different and changemakers are often emboldened to continue their campaign — more confident in their own safety (notice how the Saudi government seems even quicker to push back recently to avoid this slippery slope).

This is why most authoritarian governments favor suppression. When done quickly, the status quo does not appear to have undergone change but this is perhaps naive in the long term. Brutalism

begets more resistance (perhaps only in the mind for the time being) from those aware of the suppression.

As such, it seems that authoritarian states have already lost the fight (against specifically change but perhaps against much more) when people actually rebel. I can only hope the drive of technology will equally benefit governments and those they oppress.

Related reading:

It is worth noting democracies are good at letting go of power and respond to protest because they exist by mandate of the governed — to ignore protest is to invite defeat in the next election.

If you couldn't tell, I'm a big proponent of liberal democracies but I'm respectful of the right of a people to collectively make a decision about how they want to be governed. Traveling to Singapore gave me weird technocratic vibes and a feeling of being generally surveilled but by most any standard, the people are free, happy and prosperous. That is better than so many others in our world.

All of the effects on protest I expect to see from AI have come about before (the development of technology has generally improved access to information and facilitated coordination). And while this benefits both sides of an engagement, (we saw protestors use technology to organize themselves during the Arab Spring) those in power with more organization to manage benefit more — these groups can (and do) use their power to restrict access [b] to the opposition.

I think it's really important to remember the name and story of specific individuals who made sacrifices and caused change for the better. When Mohammad Bouazizi went to the market the day he died, he just wanted to sell fruit (he made ~$140/month) and support his family. Endemic corruption and abuse by his government prevented this and drove him to self-immolation. Mohammad Bouazizi's death ignited a movement that ultimately fell short of its goals, but in the town of Sidi Bouzid today, the people elect their own leaders and enjoy what Freedom House [c] calls "unprecedented political rights and civil liberties" but which is also challenged by ghosts of the old regime. Here's more of his story. [d]

Links

a. nknews.org/2014/01/the-dilemma-of-leaving-my-family-behind-in-north-korea
b. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_censorship_in_the_Arab_Spring
c. freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2018/tunisia
d. aljazeera.com/news/2015/12/mohamed-bouazizi-arab-spring-worth-dying-151228093743375.html