

Interview with Carl Gershman

Carl Gershman is the President of the National Endowment for Democracy.

Deborah Amos (DA): We have heard this hour that some young Arabs are more vocal about their social and political frustrations but the vast majority use the web as a form of self-expression – more music than politics. The political online groups haven't been able to produce any lasting reform. Why can't they?

Carl Gershman (CG): Well first of all it's only beginning and it's very, very difficult to reform these systems in the Arab world. What has happened especially in a country like Egypt is that the web offers an arena where young people can express themselves. The governments in the region are very concerned about this new arena of expression and they are cracking down fairly severely. They do not want it to be used as a means of opposition or mobilization. This is not unique to the Middle East. I think it's fair to say that in autocratic countries around the world, they have sort of seen that a lot of the newer groups, especially the younger groups, are using the web as a means of expression – as a means of networking – and they are trying to prohibit that.

DA: What is unique to the Arab world that makes it so difficult to foster those changes?

CG: The one thing we seem to know is that it really is not Islam. You have Indonesia being the largest Muslim country in the world and the third largest democracy. The Arab world is a region which has trailed in this area. The third wave of democratization which swept the world in the 1980s and the early 1990s bypassed the Middle East. I don't have a simple answer to that but I also don't believe that the Middle East is impervious to democratic ideas and democratic change. I think it will happen. It's lagging a little bit but the very fact that we are talking about these young people who are now connected to themselves, to the web, to larger communities internationally through these new technologies is very encouraging. I think it's just going to be a matter of time.

DA: We heard earlier in the program an observation from Rami Khouri. He is at the American University in Beirut and has done a study on uses of the web. What he says is being able to express yourself on the web, may make young people actually more complacent. He points to what happened with Al-Jazeera, the Pan-Arab satellite station that opened a space for people to say what they wanted. But over the last 10 years, there has been no particular revolution. Arabs did get to say whatever they wanted on television but it became a way to blow off steam. I wondered if you thought that it was possible that if you can express yourself, you will sit back down on your couch and say okay I did it.

CG: Certainly the governments in the region don't agree with him. The Iranian government sees the possibility of people exchanging information and expressing themselves on the web as a great threat to the system. So does the Syrian government. So does the Egyptian government. I think that's probably a mistake. I mean these are not just ways of letting off steam. I mean there are ways in which young people can communicate with each other. They can share information. They can learn and they can also organize a network. I would love it if they agreed with Rami Khouri and just said "Well, this is a way of pacifying the youth." But I don't think they believe that. In other words, if we look at the history of social movements, I think if people have an opportunity to connect, to express themselves, to organize, that does represent a form of opposition.

DA: There have been student movements in the Arab world in the past. There was great foment in the 1960s. Nationalism came out of that. But as those people got older and they got jobs, they were not so active. What's different or is there anything different about this young generation of activists online that tells you that they won't do the same?

CG: Well you know some of the older movements that you referred to: Pan-Arabism, nationalism, socialism and so forth, they adopted ideologies that just proved to be ineffective. I don't think this new generation is driven by ideology. I think they are really trying to connect in a very meaningful and practical way with the modern world. That's not something that stops with being young. In other words, if they become successful entrepreneurs or successful professionals, if they are going to remain competitive, they are going to have to stay at the cutting edge of change in their respective professions. They have the potential to be leaders in their countries. It's really trying to avoid ideology and to focus on the practical skills – the practical values that are necessary to be successful in the modern world. I think that's their great strength.