

## Advice for China

Written by Thomas L. Friedman  
Monday, 06 June 2011 23:06

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FROM: Ministry of State Security

TO: President [Hu Jintao](#)

SUBJECT: The Arab Spring

Dear President Hu: You asked for our assessment of the Arab Spring. Our conclusion is that the revolutions in the Arab world contain some important lessons for the rule of the Chinese Communist Party, because what this contagion reveals is something very new about how revolutions unfold in the 21st century and something very old about why they explode.

Let's start with the new. Sometime around the year 2000, the world achieved a very high level of connectivity, virtually flattening the global economic playing field. This web of connectivity was built on the diffusion of personal computers, fiber-optic cable, the Internet and Web servers. What this platform did was to make Boston and Beijing or Detroit and Damascus next-door neighbors. It brought some two billion people into a global conversation.

Well, sir, while we were focused on the U.S. recession, we went from a connected world to a "hyperconnected world." It has connected Boston, Beijing and now Baotou in inner Mongolia. This deeper penetration of connectivity is built on smarter cellphones, wireless bandwidth and social networks. This new platform for connectivity, being so cheap and mobile, is bringing another two billion people into the conversation from more and more remote areas.

To put it in Middle Eastern terms, sir, this new platform has connected Detroit and Damascus and Dara'a. Where is Dara'a, you ask? Dara'a is the small Syrian border town where the uprising in Syria began and whose residents have been pumping out video, Twitter feeds and Facebook postings of regime atrocities ever since.

The point, sir, is the world is now hyperconnected, and there is no such thing as "local" anymore. Everything now flows instantly from the most remote corners of any country onto this

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global platform where it gets shared. What the laptop plus the Internet plus the search engine did for Web pages was enable anyone with connectivity to find *anything* that interests them and what the cellphone plus the Internet plus Facebook are doing is enabling anyone to find *anyone* who interests them — and then coordinate with them and share grievances and aspirations.

The days when Arab dictators could take over the state-run TV and radio and shut off all information to their people are over. The Syrians can't shut off their cellphone networks now any more than they can shut off their electricity grids.

Sir, think about this: Syria has banned all foreign networks, like CNN and the BBC, but if you go to YouTube and type in "Dara'a" you will see the most vivid up-to-date video of the Syrian regime's crackdown — all shot with cellphones or flip-cams by Syrians and then uploaded to YouTube or to newly created Web sites like Sham News Network. Nothing stays hidden anymore.

The second trend we see in the Arab Spring is a manifestation of "Carlson's Law," posited by Curtis Carlson, the C.E.O. of SRI International, in Silicon Valley, which states that: "In a world where so many people now have access to education and cheap tools of innovation, innovation that happens from the bottom up tends to be chaotic but smart. Innovation that happens from the top down tends to be orderly but dumb." As a result, says Carlson, the sweet spot for innovation today is "moving down," closer to the people, not up, because all the people together are smarter than anyone alone and all the people now have the tools to invent and collaborate.

The regime of Hosni Mubarak of Egypt was just too dumb and slow to manage the unrest. The Tahrir revolutionaries were smart but chaotic, and without leadership. Therefore, the role of leaders today — of companies and countries — is to inspire, empower, enable and then edit and meld all that innovation coming from the bottom up. But that requires more freedom for the bottom. Do you see what I mean, sir?

But this is not about technology alone. As the Russian historian Leon Aron has noted, the Arab uprisings closely resemble the Russian democratic revolution of 1991 in one key respect: They were both not so much about freedom or food as about "dignity." They each grew out of a deep desire by people to run their own lives and to be treated as "citizens" — with both obligations and rights that the state cannot just give and take by whim.

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If you want to know what brings about revolutions, it is not G.D.P. rising or falling, says Aron, “it is the quest for dignity.” We always exaggerate people’s quest for G.D.P. and undervalue their quest for ideals. “Dignity before bread” was the slogan of the Tunisian revolution. “The spark that lights the fuse is always the quest for dignity,” said Aron. “Today’s technology just makes the fire much more difficult to put out.”

We need to keep that in mind in [China](#), sir. We should be proud of the rising standard of living that we have delivered for our people. Many of them appreciate that. But it is not the only thing in their lives — and at some point it won’t be the most important thing. Do you see what I mean, sir?

Source: [The New York Times](#)