

Mississippi Model Security Council Issue Papers

Freedom of Speech in Global Politics

“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 19

The freedom of expression is seen as a staple of democracy and civilization in America, but that is not the case in many other nations in the world. Although it is generally advanced by the agenda of the UN, very few countries actually allow truly free expression. Even supposedly democratic states' governments are typically fond of jailing those whose ideas and actions are inconvenient or offensive. It is not uncommon in nations such as the United States of America and the United Kingdom, nations whose constitutions specifically protect the freedom of speech, to find a law that provides for the “emergency” withdrawal of basic rights from citizens in the name of the “preservation of national security.” In practice, exercising the freedom of speech is never as clear-cut, rewarding, or welcome as the UN and other proponents of global standard human rights would have us believe.

Freedom of speech as a concept has been touted and glorified so much through Western propaganda that it is viewed by many people in stable developing undemocratic countries throughout the world as the magic Band-Aid that can right all the wrongs done to them. Unfortunately, that same concept of self-determination is exactly what the established autocratic regimes in those countries fear the most. Therefore, when the people decide to exercise their ability to speak freely, the government must stop them. Because of the near-instantaneous communication and coordination allowed by modern technology and the Internet, what 100 years ago would have ended in a brutal government massacre of right-to-work protesters in a city called Benghazi instead led to an uprising that has radically changed the political landscape of North Africa and still influences that region today.

The Arab Spring is by far the greatest example of what happens when a nation or many nations accustomed to oppression suddenly discover the ability to speak candidly. As a result of the violence engulfing the Middle East, many developed nations such as France and Russia have brainstormed ways to prevent the violence and revolutionary spirit from spreading to other parts of the globe. One controversial tactic is to censor the Internet in high-tension regions, using electronic censorship to block social networks entirely. While this would greatly reduce the number of spontaneous coordinated revolts, it is also an egregious infringement upon the freedom of expression referenced in the Declaration of Human Rights. Indeed, in July 2012 the

UN Human Rights Council passed a resolution calling all nations to support individual rights online and withhold Internet censorship to a minimum. Despite this, the UN Commission for Science and Technology Development is still considering a proposal by India and China to require all member states of the UN to vote to hand over governance of the Internet within their borders to the UN, the intent of which is clearly to give the UN an unlimited power to censor websites and content available to specific countries.

In the Information Age, freedom of speech has taken on a greatly enhanced meaning. Words and actions of lone agitators were never perceived as a real threat to government sovereignty until those actions could be seen by millions of people at the same time across a nation, and the advent of Internet communication has literally torn states in two. Well established nations are doing what they can to prevent this from happening to them, and without the resources to mount a decisive electronic campaign, these attempts may yield little result.