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China Likely to Ignore Clinton's Internet Freedom Speech

Peter Simpson / Beijing



Photo: State Dept

Secretary Clinton delivers remarks at George Washington University on Internet freedom, February 15, 2011. Chinese authorities have brushed off U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's speech urging governments to end Internet censorship. She warned that countries such as China that censor the Internet risk going the same way as Egypt and Tunisia, where pro-democracy protests organized via social media sites and brought down governments.

A Foreign Ministry spokeswoman had no comment on Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's speech.

In the United States on Tuesday, Clinton pointed out the role that Twitter, Facebook and other social networks played in uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt.

Both sites are banned in China.

China's ruling Communist Party is determined to prevent social unrest, and contains efforts by its citizens to complain about the government or seek reforms.

Beijing routinely blocks the Web sites of foreign news organizations, including VOA. It also blocks topics it considers sensitive - such as the massive protests in Egypt that forced President Hosni Mubarak out of office.

Raising the question of Internet censorship with the Chinese government brought a response much like the one Foreign Ministry spokesman Ma Zhouxu gave last week.

Ma said the Internet in China is free and Chinese enjoy an open Internet.

David Bandurski, who heads the China Media Project in Hong Kong says Clinton's speech is likely to fall on deaf ears in China, which has what he describes as "rigorous controls" on the Internet.

He also says it there are limits to the Internet's role in pushing for greater democratic freedom in China and elsewhere.

"I think the caveat we have to remember is that the Internet is not a panacea in itself," Bandurski noted. "It is an important tool but we cannot over play the role of the Internet in isolation. How things will play in China is difficult to say. It is true it is an important tool for mobilizing around all sorts of issues in China."

He says while there is online discussion on many topics in China, it tends to be superficial.

For instance, recent online discussions of the Internet's role in finding missing children did not include any calls for the government to do more about child abductions.

Yu Guoming, a professor from Renmin University's journalism and communication department in Beijing, agrees with most of Clinton's speech.

But he says Internet freedom in China is complicated and a work in progress.

Yu says China's Internet is much freer than five years ago, and continues to open up.

But he says opening it up should not be rushed by pressure from other countries, especially the U.S., which he accuses of double standards.

Yu pointed to the Wikileaks controversy, which has seen the U.S. government seek to stop the leaks of sensitive material on the Internet.

An, a 40-year-old information technology worker in Beijing, says he thinks the Internet in China is free. But, he says, every country needs laws to control the Web, including the U.S. He also cited the Wikileaks controversy.

An adds that China is a special case because of its huge population. Without some form of control of the Internet, he says, social security could be jeopardized.

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