

PRESS RELEASE, APRIL 8, 2011

NEW PAPER:

## **Digital Authoritarianism: Human Rights, Geopolitics and Commerce**

**Online censorship is about to take centre stage in the campaign to improve conditions for human rights, cyber security and commercial freedom of exchange on the Internet. Censorship and authoritarian control of the Internet has a cascading effect, impinging on national security, external relations with foreign powers, human rights and commerce. In this new study, Fredrik Erixon and Hosuk Lee-Makiyama survey online censorship and examine what governments can do to stop it from proliferating. They suggest rules of the World Trade Organisation to be used in order to discipline how some governments use online censorship.**

Governments in authoritarian regimes have been remarkably successful at adapting to the perceived dangers posed to their political authority by the Internet. China is a case in point. While it promotes its usage to benefit economic growth and industrial development, the Chinese Communist Party has also turned the Internet into a tool to control and maintain political stability. This is reflected in the increase in Internet-related arrests. An increased use of cyber espionage and military development has helped to further China's foreign policy goals and increased geopolitical leverage abroad.

In hindsight, the early hopes that the Internet would quickly usher in a wave of new pluralist political reforms in authoritarian countries like China now appear naïve. It has yet to happen. It may, however, happen in future, and it is incorrect to assert, as some do, that the Internet will never be a catalyst in reforming the Chinese political system. But for the moment digital authoritarianism has the upper hand over digital liberation.

The view this paper purports is that foreign actors can help to redress this imbalance by taking China to the WTO for flaunting its commitments. Principally, a WTO case against online censorship could not attack the entire system of censorship in China or any other country. China, and possibly also other countries, is in violation of its WTO commitments *when it uses censorship as a tool of discrimination and when its censorship actions are disproportionate to the stated aim of the actions*. Hence, the economic rights of other countries get violated by actions to censor the Internet and online communications.

Naturally, it is not all censorship actions that violate the rights of other countries; hence, a WTO case is not a strategy to address all problems caused by censorship. But important parts of censorship do violate economic rights. And as has been shown in past WTO cases of principal interest, it is possible to get a country like China to behave in better ways when countries defend their economic rights. Such an outcome would benefit freedom of expression and the efforts to combat cyber warfare.

#### Publication details

Digital Authoritarianism: Human Rights, Geopolitics and Commerce, by Fredrik Erixon & Hosuk Lee-Makiyama  
ECIPE Occasional Paper No. 05/2011

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