Recently, the politics in Muslim countries has been overshadowed by dictatorships, dictatorships in disguise, military coups, extensive role of military in politics, exile, self exile, corruption, and leaders who cling on to power at all costs. This has harbored a long history of economic, social, political and leadership disconnect with citizens. From Northern Africa to Middle East and beyond, the Muslim world has suffered from leaders who only understand how to run a country with an iron fist. Take for example the case of Pakistan. In its 64 years since independence, it has been mostly ruled by military dictators who staged coups on the pretext of deteriorating law and order situation and left the country in even worst condition. In other countries the political system has been turned into practical monarchies under the disguise of presidential, parliamentarian or other distorted forms of so called “democracies”. The internal politics of Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Oman may be a little less volatile until recently but the hallmarks of classic dictatorships are clearly visible.

In the recent years, political discourse in Muslim countries has seen unprecedented unrest of sorts. In Tunisia, president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was removed in January 2011. The political implications were not limited to one country. When Tunisian people forced president Zine El Abidine out, no one thought that this was reflective of the “Arab World”. However, the unrest in Egypt showed that no one was far from the reach of ICT’s power to give citizens voice at national and international stage. The widespread broadcast of citizen sentiments and police brutalities kept the Egyptian armed forces to refuse shooting at the unarmed protestors. The successful campaign against Hosni Mubarak’s strong grip on Egypt was almost unthinkable a few weeks ago. It is Mubarak’s defeat that has shown the oppressed citizens in other Muslims countries specially the Middle East and North Africa that crushing power of the government can be taken down. While the 2009 green movement in Iran during the presidential elections was not as successful as the civil society movements in Pakistan, Tunisia and Egypt, it demonstrated the influence of ICT on politics in a vivid manner.

There are a number of questions that come to mind when we consider some of the recent political changes in Muslim countries. What is so special about the recent political changes in Muslim countries? Are recent political protests in Muslim countries fundamentally different from the past protests? Why do some movements bring in a revolution and others cannot? What factors are inspiring political discourse? If there are the fundamental differences between past protests and recent protests? How are these protests related to the increased use
of information communication technologies (ICT)? What is the role of electronic media in the overall scheme of things? What role does religion play in the use of or the lack thereof in using ICT? How do we deal with the extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda’s use of ICT for its propaganda purposes?

This special issue on “ICT and Politics in the Muslim World” is an attempt to answer some of these questions. This issue features four extraordinary research papers that explore and shed light on some of these issues. The first paper presents political analysis of the complex global and historical socio-cultural impact of new media. It explores two specific cases dealing with the green movement during 2009 Iranian presidential elections and Al-Qaeda’s attempt for online radicalism. This paper has been written by researchers in the political science and international relations department at the University of Delaware. This type of in-depth political analysis is usually missing in the mainstream information systems literature. It presents a perspective that is different from how information systems research understand political discourses. The second paper uses the extended design-actuality framework to explain the role of inherent ambiguity, complexity and diversity of ICT that result in unintended consequences of governmental policies. The case of 2009 presidential elections in Iran provides an excellent backdrop for understanding some of these unintended consequences. The third paper provides a critical discourse analysis of the political implications of ICT growth in Pakistan. It discusses the history of ICT growth and how this history has been shaped by recent proliferation of ICT. The paper draws insights from the controversial actions of President General Pervez Musharraf for holding on to the office of army chief and the president of Pakistan simultaneously. The last paper in this issue deals with another important challenge facing Muslim countries, i.e., gender issues. More specifically the paper deals with the current situation of women in Public Relations role in the Arab world, and outlines the main causes of the low number of women managers in P.R. in some of Arab countries.

The interview with Dr. Mohammed el-Nawawy is one of the most important contributions of this special issue. He is the author and co-author of several books, including “Islam dot Com: Contemporary Islamic Discourses in Cyberspace”, “Al-Jazeera: The Story of the Network that is Rattling Governments and Redefining Modern Journalism”, “Al-Jazeera: How the Free Arab News Network Scooped the World and Changed the Middle East” and “Israeli-Egyptian Peace Process in the Reporting of Western Journalists”. His experience, views and understanding of the role of information technology has yielded a remarkable interview which presents the analysis of the issues in a different situation of sorts. His analysis of the role of ICT in Muslim countries runs deep and presents profound understanding of the situation.

We chose a brilliant book to wrap up this issue. This book is an excellent read and synthesizes views on the topic based upon data collected from 75 Muslim countries. The book is written by Philip N. Howard and is titled, “The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Information Technology and Political Islam” published by Oxford University Press in 2010. It is an amazing account of important events in the Muslim countries where information technology has played a key role in toppling regimes. For example, the historic review and discussion of the end of Suharto’s rule in Indonesia, Tulip revolution in Kyrgyzstan, Kuwait’s women’s suffrage movement, Turkish military leaders’ statements to curb elected Islamists, online “reappearance” of cracked down Labour Party and Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, server relocations for Tunisian newspapers, and green revolution in 2009 Iranian presidential elections are all present in this book.

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