

Cyber- activism and the Egyptian Revolution (2011)

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Abstract- In this new era of digital revolution, the Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are transforming many aspects of modern society. The power of ICTs as a means of passing information to heterogeneous audiences makes it a veritable tool in mass mobilization. Owing due to these ICTs a new form of activism has emerged known as cyber- activism. The Egyptian Revolution can be perhaps regarded as the best example of this new interaction between civil society movements and the new media. Through social media the Egyptian activists were able to carve out a virtual public sphere where they could create political awareness without the interference of the state security.

Index Terms- Social media, cyber- activism, Kefaya Movement, April 6 Movement, ElBaradei Facebook groups, We Are All Khaled Sa'id.

I. INTRODUCTION

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have revolutionized the way people interact with each other; it has also produced a new generation of connected and empowered citizens who are not afraid to speak their minds. These new brands of networked citizen strive for the creation of an ideal society with a responsive political system; they are motivated by the belief that they have the capacity to change the world through collective action. This belief has in turn produced a new phenomenon known as cyber- activism or online activism, internet activism or e- advocacy. Cyber- activism involves the process of using interactive communication technologies to operate and manage activism of any type; it allows any individual or organization to utilize social networks and other online technologies to reach and gather followers, broadcast messages and progress a cause or movement.¹ Cyber- activism manifests itself in the form of creating awareness, gathering and organizing followers and initiating reactions. It employs social media as a platform to share and broadcast information necessary for mobilizing the masses. The social networking tools like Facebook, Twitter, blogging etc. have come to assume an important role in the formation of collective identities, identification of common goals and organization of collective activities.

Broadly defined social media is “a variety of websites, services and applications that allow users to engage in social behaviours online or on a mobile phone.”² Some of the most

popular social media sites are Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, Pinterest, Flickr, Tumblr etc. Social media is characterized by three important factors namely, anonymity, many-to-many communication and cheap cost of communication. In comparison to the other modes of communication like television, radio or even print media, social media possesses an important advantage; it increases the flow of information. Sharing of information on social media is faster as information does not usually go through the filtering process like most of the other modes of communication. These factors have helped in creating an alternative platform for the citizens of the authoritarian regimes where freedom of speech and expression is greatly limited.

Egypt's political system prior the Egyptian Revolution of 2011 was a hybrid type, it consisted of democratic institutions and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) coupled with a repressive system quick in suppressing any form of opposition. The untapped human potential coupled with under-representation in the public sphere compelled the frustrated youths to look for alternative public spaces which they could claim as their own sphere of influence. The social networking sites consequently became the primary medium for expression for the frustrated youth, who had been silent for years as a consequent result of the regime and its oppressive laws. A few years before the 2011 revolution, a small but influential groups of urban, highly educated, middle class, primarily young Egyptian activists, coordinating and operating through multiple social media platforms, formed an array of loosely affiliated grassroots activists networks throughout the country.³ These civil society movements in the form of Kefaya and April 6 Movement and online groups namely We Are All Khaled Sa'id and the ElBaradei Facebook groups started a new online literary movement through which they stated their opinions freely as well as interacted with their like-minded peers. These civil society movements and online groups helped in creating a thriving virtual society where they openly criticized the regime and its actions thereby in the process breaking the fear barrier which the regime has successfully imposed and at the same time building a politically conscious environment. While the government closely monitored print and broadcast media, it more or less neglected the social media sites like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. The absence of strict government censorship and monitoring enabled the cyber activists to create a virtual world where they could openly exercise their right to freedom of speech and expression. These discussions in turn prompted the growth of collective

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<http://www.techopedia.com/definition/27973/cyberactivism>. Accessed on 15th October, 2014.

² Suw Charman Anderson, *Making the Connection: Civil Society and Social Media*, Carnegie UK Trust, 2010, p. 5.

³ Sahar Khamis, Paul B, Gold and Katherine Vaughn, *Beyond Egypt's "Facebook Revolution" and Syria's "YouTube Uprising." Comparing Political Contexts, Actors and Communication Strategies*, <http://www.arabmediasociety.com/?article=791>. Accessed on 8th March, 2015.

consciousness. The common frustrations against the system and its failure to address the existing political, economic and social problems had been an important factor in strengthening the common consciousness. In order to understand the history of Cyber-activism in Egypt it is pertinent that the contribution of the following groups namely Kefaya Movement, April 6 Movement, We Are All Khaled Sa'id and the ElBaradei facebook groups are analyzed.

As the number of Internet Service Providers (ISP) blossomed in Egypt so did the number of internet savvy Egyptian youths. With access to a vast sea of knowledge coupled with increased online interaction with various people across the world, the Egyptian youth was able to carve out a virtual world where it could freely express its opinions without the constant glare and monitoring of the Interior Ministry. Egypt got its first taste of online activism through the Kefaya (Enough) Movement comprising of a group of young leftists. The movement was built around one single goal- to prevent Gamal Mubarak from succeeding his father. Kefaya's mobilization and organization tactics mainly revolved around the efficient utilization of Information Technology. The group's website provided free membership to all its users and also at the same time it allowed the users to post their grievances anonymously. One of Kefaya's major organizing spaces was Misr Digital, the first digital independent newspaper in Egypt.⁴ The group used four primary means of communication:

Firstly, it used electronic mails (e-mails) to contact its members and the general public. A text message sent to thousands of mobile phones helped draw 2,000 persons to a June 2005 demonstration that one report described as "the most organized and impressive demonstration by the reform movement to date."⁵

Secondly, it published advertisements online. It was more safer for the group to advertise online as they were likely to be censored by the government if they published on print media. In 2007, an anti-Mubarak rally advertised by the group on an independent newspaper *Al-Karama (Dignity)* was confiscated by the state security.⁶

Thirdly, it published banners and caricatures (political cartoons) on its own website and on those supporting *bloggers*.⁷

Fourthly, it posted audiovisual and photographic documentation of sexual abuse and physical harassment by the state security forces on its website.⁸

Kefaya's internal structure consisted of an inner circle of activists, a coordinator and a spokesperson. The group's message was also circulated by the community of *bloggers* using the group's insignia which was a yellow circle with the word Kefaya

written in red through online blogging sites like 'wa7damasrya.blogspot.com' and 'misrdigital.blogspirit.com.' The *bloggers* wrote about human rights abuses by the police which received attention from international media like CNN, The New York Times, The Washington Post and Amnesty International. The popularity of these *bloggers* were attributed to the bold and honest way in which they discussed issues which were in a way forbidden by the suppressive regime. The initial *blogs* were published in English but later owing due to the development of Arabic software much of the *blogs* were published in Arabic which helped attract greater audience. The Kefaya Movement surfaced during this time as a prominent group which helped to mobilize the discontent youth by providing them with an alternative outlet to channel their frustrations against the regime.

Following close on the footsteps of the Kefaya Movement, the *April 6 Movement* burst upon the national scene in 2008. The April 6 Movement consisted of a small group of internet savvy Egyptians who launched a Facebook page on March 23, 2008 in support of the workers at Egypt's largest textile factory in the Nile Delta city of Mahalla al-Kubra who were going to protest against the prevailing low wages and the high food prices. To show support to the labor strike the leaders of the *April 6 Movement* which included Amal Sharaf, Israa Abdel Fattah, Ahmed Maher and Mohammed Adel invited 300 people to join its Facebook page and within a day it had 3,000 members and within a few weeks, 70,000 had joined the call for strikes across Egypt in support of the Mahalla workers.⁹ On 6th April, 2008, thousands of workers rioted but it was harshly suppressed by the police. Following the protest prominent young leaders of the *April 6 Movement* like Israa Abdel Fattah and Ahmed Maher were arrested by the police. This incident helped the political activists realize the power of social media in exposing an idea and generating support for it in terms of action.¹⁰ Post the strikes the regime also realized to some extent that the internet could be employed as a tool by the social activists to work against the system. The NDP established an 'Electronic Committee' rumored to have legions of well-paid young men and women whose mission was to influence online opinion in favor of the party through contributions to websites, blogs, news sites, and social networks.¹¹ Nonetheless in spite of these new developments the number of discussion forums, chat rooms and blogs continued to increase. The occasional arrest and subsequent harassment of bloggers and online activists also continued but the fact was that the control of social media was beyond the state security.

⁴http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/future_tense/2011/07/tahrir_square_was_a_foreseeable_surprise.html. Accessed on 14th July, 2015.

⁵ Nadia Oweidat, Cheryl Denard, Dale Stahl, Walid Kidani, Edward O'Connell and Audra K. Grant, *The Kefaya Movement: A Case Study of a Grassroots Reform Initiative*, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, CA, 2008, p. 21.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/revolution-in-cairo/inside-april6-movement/>. Accessed on 7th July, 2015.

¹⁰ Rasha Abdulla, *Egypt's Media in the Midst of Revolution*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Publications Department, Washington, DC, 2014, p. 10.

¹¹ Wael Ghonim, *Revolution 2.0: The Power of the People is greater than the People in Power*, Harper Collins Publishers, London, 2012, p. 36.

Another notable example on the use of social media as a mode of creating political awareness and mobilization prior the revolution was the ElBaradei's Facebook campaign. In 2009, Mohammed Mostafa ElBaradei, a diplomat and a lawyer by training and also the former chief of the United Nation's nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) decided to return to Egypt as his term was nearing an end. ElBaradei's return to Egypt was heralded by many Egyptians as the dawn of a new era in Egypt's politics. Corresponding with the increasing support for ElBaradei, a number of Facebook groups and pages began to crop up to support the nomination of Mohamed ElBaradei as President of Egypt. A young university student Mahmud al-Hetta started a Facebook group called *ElBaradei President of Egypt 2011* while a Facebook page for ElBaradei was also set up Wael Ghonim, a Google Executive. The tactics which were employed by the social activists were firstly to create political awareness by posting the interviews and visions of ElBaradei. Secondly, they tried to get the members of these online groups to participate in the Facebook campaign. For instance, the Facebook group *ElBaradei President of Egypt 2011* urged its members to replace their Facebook profile photos with that of ElBaradei. The possibility of a contender to Egypt's presidency throne gathered many support to these groups and pages especially from the young people. It was however with the historic reception of ElBaradei in 2010 that demonstrated the importance of social media as an alternative and effective medium for communication particularly under a dictatorial regime. The social activists were initially faced with certain problems the regime was already against ElBaradei. As per the reports published in some independent newspapers on the morning of ElBaradei's arrival, the security agencies through an unofficial statement had made it very clear that they would not allow the Egyptians to greet ElBaradei at the airport and that they had mobilized eighty thousand riot police to deal with any such gathering. Moreover, the Emergency Laws also prohibited any form of large gatherings. However inspite of these shortcomings the social activists were able to communicate with each other as well as with the masses through social media sites like Facebook and Twitter through constant updates and posts. On February 2010, ElBaradei returned to Egypt, more than one thousand cheering supporters flooded into the Cairo International Airport to greet the man who had suddenly been vaulted into the position of Egypt's savior.¹²

Amongst the online groups one notable online group We Are All Khaled Sa'id played an important role leading up to the revolution. On 8th June, 2010, 31 year old Google Executive Wael Ghonim came across the shocking image of the distorted and bloodied face of Khaled Sa'id and decided that something should be done against the police brutality in Egypt. Ghonim then went online and created a Facebook page entitled We Are All Khaled Said or Kullena Khaled Said under the pseudonym "el shaheed" which is Arabic for "the martyr." Some 36,000

joined the page on the first day.¹³ Within two minutes, three hundred members had joined the page. According to the official We Are All Khaled Said, Facebook page:

Khaled has become the symbol for many Egyptians who dream to see their country free of brutality, torture and ill treatment...Egyptians want to see an end to all violence committed by any Egyptian Policeman. Egyptians are aspiring to the day when the current 30 years long emergency martial law ends and when Egyptians can freely elect their true representatives.¹⁴

The Facebook page also contained other cases of police brutality in Egypt. Calls for silent protests were also launched by the group; the first Silent Stand was held on 18th June, 2010. A Twitter campaign aimed at raising awareness about torture and inhuman treatment in Egypt was also launched by the group on 20th July, 2010. Soon this group began to gain support from the other online groups such as the April 6 Movement as well as several other bloggers, social activists and associations. The growing support further widened the scope of the demands of the social activists; the demand for an end to police brutality eventually led to include putting an end to poverty, torture, unemployment, corruption and President Hosni Mubarak's 30 years rule. The mounting online support coupled with the success of the Tunisian Revolution further gave the social activists the necessary impetus they needed to advance their demands.

The 18 day revolution officially began on 25th January, 2011 and the event was termed as *yawm al-ghadab*, or *The Day of Rage*.¹⁵ The call for demonstration was announced by the We Are All Khaled Said page. Before long, the invitations had reached over a million people on Facebook, with over 100, 000 indicating that they were "attending."¹⁶ The online groups were joined by El Baradei's National Organization for Change and the Kefaya movement and several professional syndicates.

The above various movements and online groups played an important role leading up to the January 25 protest. Social media helped these movements and online groups to mobilize the different sections of the Egyptian society by creating a politically conscious environment and also at the same time it helped them to adopt new strategies and tactics involving Information Technology which could be used effectively against the regime. Many of the social activists were well experienced in social media tactics and this experience benefited them highly during the initial phase prior to the revolution as well as during the actual revolution. The social networking sites particularly Facebook, Twitter and YouTube were highly utilized by the

¹³ <http://www.wagingnonviolence.org/feature/egypt-revolution-began-long-before-2011/>. Accessed on 14th March, 2015.

¹⁴ <http://www.facebook.com/elshaheed.co.uk>. Accessed on 14th March, 2015.

¹⁵ Laurel E. Miller, Jeffrey Martini, Stephen F. Larrabee, Julie E. Taylor, Twewodaj Mengitsu, *Democratization in the Arab World: Lessons from around the Globe*, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, CA, 1st Edition, 2012, p. 94.

¹⁶ Rasha Abdulla, op.cit., p. 11.

¹² Ashraf Khalil, *Inside the Egyptian Revolution and the Rebirth of a Nation: Liberation Square*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1st Edition, 2012, p 105.

social activists in spreading political awareness during the initial phase of the revolution. Facebook pages like We Are All Khaled Said and the April 6 Movement were constantly engaged with its members through online discussions and online polls. Moreover, as is shown by the examples of the multiple protests staged by these groups prior the revolution social media also enabled the social activists and the protesters to remain in constant contact in the course of the protests and demonstrations through online updates and posts which were very quick and effective. The continued online interaction between the social activists and the protesters helped to create a vibrant interactive environment which was in a way isolated from the prying eyes of the suppressive regime and which helped to set the grounds for the emergence of a revolution which would bring down Mubarak's 30 years regime. with the development of ICTs a virtual world was opened up to the Egyptians, free from censorship and restrictions, where they could express their opinions and views freely which in turn helped in building a common identity as well as helped set certain common goals which attributed to the growth of a vibrant civil society in Egypt. As Putnam puts it, the cyber world created space for real freedom of speech and freedom of association in Egypt.¹⁷

¹⁷Bakry M. El Medni, *Civil Society and Democratic Transformation in Contemporary Egypt: Premise and Promises*, International Journal of Humanities and Social Science, Vol. 3, No. 12, (Special Issue – June 2013), p. 23, <http://www.ijhssnet.com>journal.2.pdf>. Accessed on 10th August, 2016.