Comment:

Egyptian uprising: Redefining Egyptian political community and reclaiming the public space

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to understand and explain the emergence of a public sphere and the articulation of a new Egyptian identity. We argue that the Egyptian revolution, catalyzed by the social media, was possible because the young men and women succeeded in reclaiming the public space from the apparatuses of the post-colonial state. There was a contest between the protesters and the regime over the meaning of Egyptian identity and what it means to be an Egyptian. The protesters were able to redefine the Egyptian public sphere and redraw its contour. Through a semiotic and discourse analysis of the repertoires of protest, the symbols, the slogans and the images at Tahrir Square and on social media sites, we hope to show how the youth-led massive social mobilization redefined and reconstructed the civil society and the Egyptian national political community (identity).

Keywords

activism, public sphere, social networks, Egypt, social media, Arab Spring

> "We will not be silenced; whether you are a Christian, a Muslim or an atheist, you will get back your god' dam rights. And we will have our rights. One way or the other, we will never be silent."
>
> A protestor shouting into the TV cameras at Tahrir Square, Jan 25, 2011 (Sha'aban 2011).

In 2011, largely non-violent popular protests in Tunisia and Egypt toppled two oppressive rulers. Protest in both countries served as a precipitating factor and inspiration for the people in other countries in the MENA region. The protest in Tunisia, and more so in Egypt, had a "spill-over effect"

(Meyer & Whittier 1994) inspiring peoples in Yemen, Bahrain and Syria to rise up. In a way, the sequenced spread of uprisings reminded of the 1989 events of the fall of the Eastern Bloc. Moreover, strategic use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter in Tunisia and Egypt reminds us of how democracy movements in the Eastern Bloc utilized the *samizdat* and Radio Liberty to mobilize. Not surprisingly, the news media coined the upheavals in the Arab world using the overarching frame of "Arab Spring."

Because of the widespread use of social media websites there was a tendency to coin these protests as Facebook Revolution or Revolution Web 2.0 (Ghonim 2011). Such an overarching frame suggests a sort of technological determinism, which obfuscates the roots of the uprising that lie in the socio-political contexts and the contingencies of place and time. The communication media technologies are not only instrumental factors, but to some extent they produce their own social context (Castells 2007, Meyrowitz 1985). However, the larger socio-political context out of which the uprising burst on to the scene should not be only seen through the prism of technological determinism, and as Morozov (2005) has compellingly argued, we should be cautious of falling into "internet-centrism" or "cyber-utopianism."

Although the use of social media appears to be a common thread in the so-called Arab Spring, the social logics that propelled the various popular uprisings in the MENA are different and rooted in the multilayered and complex nature of the social in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Syria and Bahrain.

The case of Egypt

It appears that we are witnessing the makings of a long revolution in Egypt. More than one year after the 18 days that quivered Cairo, Alexandria and Suez mainly, the off-and-on popular uprising has been only a relative success, and is still unraveling. Not surprisingly, some observers of Egyptian politics reject defining the popular movement that toppled Mubarak as

a "revolution," and are wondering if the SCAF (Supreme Council of the Armed Forces) has actually succeeded in co-opting the uprising and turning "the revolution" into a mere "uprising" (Abd al-Fattah 2011). Unlike Tunisia, the impediments for the uprising in Egypt were many. The Egyptian society is much more diverse and complex. Egypt has a larger middle class, but it also has had a well-entrenched state security apparatus. The quasi-military regime has been the lynchpin of geopolitical status quo in the region. Following the "victory" in the 1973 war in Sinai, the Egyptian military has enjoyed a sacrosanct place in the national imagination. However, the discontent against the civilian face of the regime was simmering and building up throughout the last decade, and reached a tipping point in 2010-11.

Thus, it is most important to take note of the impediments for the uprising in Egypt, and in other places, and the socio-political context of the protests that were in the making for a long time. To reach the tipping point, the activists required building the civil society and an alliance between the working class and the middle class. We argue that the uprising in Egypt was in the making as "submerged social networks" of activists evolved from series of smaller protests since the Iraq War. We are calling them "submerged social networks" as they functioned under the radar of government surveillance and the perpetual "gaze" of the state that had virtually penetrated all segments of society (Kumar 2011a). These submerged networks masked themselves in innocuous sounding social ties built in mosque groups, soccer fan clubs, women's groups, coffee houses, musical concert circuits and the more recent miscellaneous Facebook groups. Additionally, the submerged network of the Muslim Brotherhood thrived in the Islamic underground and in social welfare organizations that operated relatively free from the state.

The submerged networks were building the civil society, recovering and re-imagining the Egyptian identity and constituting political communities from grounds-up in a society that was effectively depoliticized since the 1954 coup. The networks of activists, who were baptized in the repertoire of civil street action in the series of social protest since 2001, became the

nucleus of the 2011 uprising. Additionally, since the late 1990s, in Egypt and the wider Arab world, the public sphere was expanding with the proliferation in private satellite news channels, the Internet and recently social media. The expansion of the public sphere created more avenues to communicate within the country and with the world outside. Later, we will see that the social media was used as an extension of a face-to-face submerged social network of activists. We hope to show that, for the uprising, mobilization had to move beyond "liking and writing on the wall" and the activists had to actually show up on the street to claim the public space and pass the "town square test" (Kumar 2001b, Sharansky 2005).

Claiming the public space

As Nathan Sharansky (2005) argues, all popular movements have to pass what he calls the "town square test." A successful mass uprising starts with ordinary people mustering the courage to converge in the city center to claim the public space in order to be seen and heard in their country and world over (Mitchell 1995, Kumar 2011b, Sharansky 2005). Don Mitchell (1995:115) articulated public space as "... a place within which a political movement can stake out the space that allows it to be *seen*." He argued that "[b]y claiming space in public by creating spaces, social groups themselves become public." Claiming the public space, at the physical and cognitive levels, leads to the social production of a new consciousness. Eyerman and Jamison (1991:4) argued, "Social movements are best conceived of as temporary public spaces, a movements of collective creation that provide societies with ideas, identities and even ideals." As the public space claimed by social protests is often temporary, it is important to understand that the state apparatuses can co-opt and re-colonize the public space.

To be seen and heard beyond the locality of the protests, the activists require support from the communication media. The asymmetrical nature of news media, Facebook and Twitter, gave the protesters a megaphone to overcome the constraints of space and time, but to successfully claim the public space, the protesters need to be seen and heard in the corridors of power, and that

requires witnessing and legitimation from the news media. This makes the media -including social media and traditional news media-in any large-scale mediated and networked society, the terrain for political contestation for the voice of the protesters to acquire transformative power (Atton & Hamilton 2008, Castells 2007, Dahlgren 2005, Kumar 2009, Langman 2005).

This was evident in Tiananmen Square in 1989 and more recently in Pearl Square in Bahrain. In Tiananmen Square protests, the Chinese state quickly re-colonized the fledgling public space that the protesters had claimed. The Chinese state was able to re-colonize the space because there were: internal conflicts in the fragile civil society that had emerged in Beijing, there was a blackout in the national media, and the protesters could not communicate with the outside world as the international media had restricted access (Calhoun 1994). Arguably, the lukewarm coverage of the democracy protests in Bahrain received from the media (*Al-Jazeera*, *Al-Arabiya*, *CNN*, *BBC* and others) enabled the government to crush the protests assisted by neighboring Saudi Arabia. In the case of Egypt, we propose that without the support from the news media it would have not been possible for the protesters to succeed in claiming the public space in Egypt. However, the uprising was successful in recalling a collective identity around which the mobilizing happened-an element lacking in Bahrain.

We suggest here that the protesters succeeded in claiming the public space, although temporarily, because of articulation of social alignment across differential communities that led to constructing a unified political community. Yet, this alignment was a temporary phenomenon and gave rise to competing political communities within a national public space. Dina Shihatah (2010) has described this as the "return of politics," which has been progressively moving forward since 2004, and the uprising has given it a quantum jump. To understand this "return to politics" we need to look at the period of de-politicization following the 1954 coup and transformations in the Egyptian public sphere since the late 1990s.

The Egyptian state and depoliticized "public"

The Egyptian public was depoliticized for decades. Meaningful participation in political life had been declining since Nasser overthrew Naguib in 1954. The percentage of people, especially the young, participating in politics was very low. According to a study in 2004, 67 percent of young men and women of voting age were not registered to vote. More than 80 percent had never engaged in any kind of political activity (Zohny 2010). In the 30 years of the quasi-military dictatorship, Mubarak's regime had given the people a Faustian choice- stability of the regime or the strict Islamic code of the Muslim Brotherhood (Osman 2010).

While Nasser kept a sense of cohesion in the society through his nationalist narrative, he debilitated political life and installed a one-party rule of the Socialist Union and persecuted his political opponents (Marfleet 2009, Osman 2010). Nasser purged the Communists and Islamists and forced them to go underground. Even when his successor Sadat reinstated political parties, they remained marginalized. After the Islamists opposed the treaty with Israel and assassinated Sadat in 1981, Mubarak took away whatever minimalist liberties remained. Mubarak's regime promulgated a strong Emergency Law, which gave the state immense powers to spy on the people, indefinitely detain them without trial, and proscribe anything that it perceived as a threat to national security. Resentment to Emergency Law did not run very high among the people after the assassination of a president. Furthermore, facing the Islamist violence, Egyptians seemed to willingly choose familial safety over liberty. Even when the Islamists renounced violence in the 1990s, Mubarak's regime still managed to renew the Emergency Law regardless (Osman 2010, Naguib 2009). The grip of the state on both the public and private spheres was so tight that it was not possible for the people to conceive of a social life without the government having some sort of presence in it. The government was like the benevolent parent who knew best what was good for the people. This relationship was perpetuated by the image Sadat[1] adopted as the family patriarch-an image Mubarak inherited and continued to foster (Osman 2010).

Thus, the Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak regimes further and further depoliticized the Egyptian society by keeping it divided along religious, class and rural/urban lines. During the Mubarak regime, the neoliberal economic policies led to concentration of wealth and created social policies that deepened the gap between classes and encouraged the creation of gated communities isolated from the misery of ordinary Egyptians (El-Naggar 2009, Marfleet 2009). The fragmentation of the society ensured that the civil society remained weak and dependent on the state. At the same time, the regime managed to maintain a strong grip of the society through the state security apparatuses and co-opting the opposition. Those who could not be co-opted were either imprisoned or forced to go underground like the Muslim Brotherhood. State Security and thugs (*baltajiyyah*) were state instruments on the streets and had shuttered the public sphere. In *Al-Masri al-yawm* (*now*, *Egypt Independent*) Nur al-Din (2011) reported that the Interior Ministry employed 165,250 "collaborators" who are mainly convicted felons and registered thugs to intimidate and terrorize citizens when needed. Their services are in particular demand during elections. Thugs were used to terrorize the protesters during the famous standoff between the protesters in Tahrir Square[2] and *baltajiyyah* following the run-in by the camels (also known as the Battle of the Camel). After Mubarak was removed thugs were still employed and attacked demonstrators along side with security forces in Mohammed Mahmoud Street in November 2011.

The state had ensured that the vast majority of the people of Egypt did not see themselves as one national political community or even diverse political communities in one polity. It assumed the role of the patriarch and the citizens were assigned the role of infants who needed the state's parenting to survive (Osman 2010). The Emergency Law also maintained the public space divided and fragmented and suppressed public participation in political life. The law ensured that all civil and religious associations (syndicates/unions) were under the control of the government. Under that law, print media was closely controlled and no rally without the approval and supervision of the Interior Ministry could take place.

The transformation of the Egyptian public sphere

Until recently, the news media was mostly government owned and aligned with the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP). Editors of national newspapers functioned under the patronage of the state, and in effect were controlled by the NDP. They were handpicked and appointed for their loyalty to the regime rather than their professionalism or competence. Broadcast journalists were not members of the journalist syndicate, neither were they protected under journalism laws that gave relative freedom to print journalists. The Commission for Investment controls licensing independent radio and TV stations and revoked licenses when editorial lines did not appeal to the state.

The diversity in voices was restricted to the limited range within the ruling party-NDP. Furthermore, the press operated under an unwritten agreement that proscribed criticism of Mubarak or his family. The press was co-opted to support the regime. The infamous case of the head of Al-Wafd Party – Elsayyed Elbadawy – acquiring the independent *Al-Dostour* and firing its award-winning editor Ibrahim Eissa, is a case in point (Kenner 2010). Eissa was a vocal critic of Mubarak and released information about his ailing health, an action that angered Mubarak. Eissa was jailed (El Deeb 2008). Elbadawy's buying *Al-Dostour* and firing Eissa, was seen as a token of goodwill towards Mubarak and his regime. Launching *Al-Jazeera* in 1996 stirred up change. But, Al-Jazeera mostly focused on international news and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. It did not interfere much in the internal politics of other Arab states, although, it did critically cover specific events and boldly criticized the Egyptian government's impotent-almost serving Israel stance on Gaza.

Al-Jazeera's policy changed after September 11, 2001. It slowly started advocating democratization in the Arab states and reported ferment on the Arab street. Interestingly, perhaps realizing the imperatives of globalization and advancement in communication, the Mubarak regime chose to paint its reign as the "golden age for freedoms" [*sic*]. This translated into accessi-

bility to the Internet and an explosion in accessibility to satellite television. Privately owned Egyptian satellite television *Dream TV* launched in 2001 followed by *al-mihwar* in 2002 (although the latter is closely connected to the NDP).

Still, the state had control over the news content. The government patronized businessmen and the Egyptian Radio and Television Union owned significant equity in these private media organizations. Later, a few more Arab satellite channels were started: *Al-Arabiya* in 2003 (Saudi owned) and a host of Lebanese news and entertainment channels. Despite the presence of privately owned and international news channels, news remained circumscribed by many restrictive laws in the Arab world, including Egypt. Even in the case of a few privately owned media (i.e. *ONTV*, *Dream TV*) the reporting and the commentary operated under self-censorship and were filtered through the gate keeping norms established under the Emergency Law. In this environment of tightly controlled public sphere, religious speakers emerged as television stars. Egypt got its own televangelists.

In the last decade, there was a rise in religious media in Egypt and other countries in the Middle East. Traditional Islamic televangelists have always been present, especially on Egyptian and Gulf states TV and radio (Moll 2011). To fulfill part of the media "social responsibility" goal, these broadcasting entities carried religious pronouncements programming on day-to-day material consumption and social conduct, and modernity. Interestingly, these televangelists did not shy away from criticizing some practices as not complying with Islam. This indirectly implicated that the governments were not Islamic enough. After years of absolute censorship in the public sphere, this was perhaps a first. However, initially, the religious rhetoric was an illusion of freedom. The mosques and the Coptic churches functioned under the state supervision. Nasser had already controlled al-Azhar (Bayoumi 2010, Qissat al-Azhar 2012), and the Coptic Church had chosen to align with the state during the Mubarak years after its experience under Sadat. The head of al-Azhar and the Coptic Patriarch were co-opted by the state through special privileges granted to them to maintain social control over

their respective flocks (Tadros 2009).

A major shift in Egyptian televangelist scene happened in 2002. Young modern looking *du'aah*, callers to Islam, were becoming more popular among the middle and upper middle class (Mahmood 2005). They showed that there was no conflict between modernity and Islam and paved their way to TV shows, mainly on channels funded by Saudi Arabia (Majid 2011).

The first major sensation among the young in Egypt was Amr Khalid, a rich accountant-turned-preacher. He attracted tens of thousands of followers who listened to his sermons in public auditoriums and large mosques. A few years later, the Mubarak regime forced him into exile. However, this only increased his popularity on satellite television. Sales of his shows on CDs and DVDs also increased. In the virtual world, Khalid was able to sustain a presence on his website. Like Khalid, there were other young *du'aah*. The large assemblies of people that gathered to listen to preachers such as Khalid were punching a dent in the tightly controlled public sphere and public space in Egypt.

In this media mix, there were also websites, blogs and instant chat technologies along with a few publications targeted to young teenagers. *Teen Stuff* magazine targeted the young generation. In its effort to engage them as citizens, the magazine even organized a "youth parliament" to give the youth opportunity to speak out about their issues. The opening up of the public sphere was enabling the young to dream about a different sort of Egypt, but the expectations were also leading to frustrations among the young.[3] News media avenues opened up new communication channels for the young, that were free from the gaze of the parents and the government, the super parent of all. Yet, these spaces were still defined along class lines. A commentator writing about the changes said that the new media had "put youth on the cultural and political map, though divided."[4]

The changes in the media in the last decade not only laid the groundwork for the transformation of the public sphere in Egypt, but also set the stage for Egyptians to utilize social media for political deliberation. Interestingly,

Prime Minister Ahmad Nazif, the champion of the E-government, seemed to have encouraged connectivity only for it to become a contributing means for his downfall. The sheer number of people who are either on Facebook or connected to the Internet is far ahead of many developing nations. In 2011, there were over 9 million users of Facebook, which constitutes about 52 percent of the total Internet users (over 20 percent of Egyptian population use the Internet [Internet users 2012]). This is more than 10 percent in a country of over 80 million. If one excludes the Egyptian population living in rural areas (56.5 percent according to the CIA World Factbook), the number of Facebookers becomes more significant.

The social media not only served as an alternative public sphere for exchanging information and views, but also produced new social, religious and political consciousness. It emerged as a place where the youth constructed their own public space free from the controls of their parents and state surveillance. Very soon, the young formed many social and cultural groups on Facebook. Most politically oriented Facebook groups and blogs were initially about the Palestinian-Israeli issue. But soon fledgling political parties such Kefaya and workers' unions saw an opening and used social media to carry their struggle, despite the Emergency Law, to better the living conditions of Egyptian people and reform the political system dominated by one party.

Recovering the political community and Kefaya

The Mubarak regime had relaxed control over the media in hopes to construct an image that would be appealing to foreign investors (El-Mahdi 2010). Concurrently, the fledgling civil society in Egypt was becoming more confident that if they exposed corruption and failures of the government, their voices would be heard in some quarters before the state would make attempts to muzzle the protests. *Dream TV* had already started venturing into relatively free coverage of local politics in early years of the 2000s. In 2005, *Dream TV*'s, Wael Al-Ibrashi and journalists of *Sawat al-Ummah*, were put on trial by the state for their coverage of the electoral fraud and

exposing how the government was purging judges who would not toe the government line. However, some commentators on the private TV channel were not deterred and continued to air their views on corruption in the government, with relative freedom. The independent avenue for citizen journalism on websites and blogs also bolstered the confidence of civil society groups and smaller political parties such as al-Ghad, led by Ayman Nour, and al-Wafd party, led by Munir Fakhri Abd al-Nur. Between 2004 and 2011, more than 1.7 million workers in Egyptian industries engaged in some sort of social protest and strikes under leadership of various labor organizations (Lee & Weinthal 2011).

The protesters have time and again staged sit-ins in front of the Egyptian parliament, claiming sidewalks as public space for registering their protests and airing their views. In all those years, the Egyptian government was very successful in not allowing these smaller protests from coalescing and transforming into a massive tidal wave like it did January 2011. The first active political group in which many young people joined was Kefaya (Enough!).

Established in 2004, it posed itself as a trans-ideological movement-members of different political convictions came together in hopes of creating an Egyptian mainstream (al-Shurbaji 2010). It provided a middle ground for activists and intellectuals along the political spectrum to work together.

Kefaya was modeled after the Popular Committee to Support the Intifada (PCSI). The latter was formed gathering members from rival political factions around a common goal: supporting the second Palestinian Intifada. The Iraq war provided another polarizing and galvanizing moment, and instigated mass protest against the Egyptian government's silence (El-Mahdi 2009). Kefaya maintained its integrity by refusing to receive any foreign funding. It required that members interested in joining the movement do so in their capacity as individuals, not representing any of their political affiliations. What unified the group were plans inside the ruling NDP to anoint Gamal Mubarak to succeed his father Hosni Mubarak. The group was successful in generating consciousness about the constitutional referen-

dum, political reforms, and the corruption in the electoral process. Kefaya set up a website, Egyptian Awareness, in 2005 to publicize and inform its members about its activities. Yet, Kefaya was criticized for being "elitists" and not suggesting solutions (al-Shurbaji 2010:115, Osman 2010).

The activities of Kefaya, in a way contributed to the formation of al-Ghad, in 2004, a liberal political party that mustered the will and courage to contest the 2005 election. Al-Ghad presidential candidate, Amyan Nour, challenged Mubarak in the elections. Despite massive electoral fraud Nour got 7 percent vote.[5] The government panicked. Nour was arrested and jailed on what was seen as trumped-up and politically motivated charges (after the fall of Mubarak he was granted amnesty) ("Egypt restores" 2012). The experience of working for al-Ghad during the elections built a submerged social network of young activists. These activists started experimenting with social media in 2005 to communicate and organize small meetings. These submerged social networks brought together differential social groups such as democracy activists, labor, and urban middle class youths.

Social media and submerged social networks

Earlier political functions and activism were conducted within the boundaries of political parties' headquarters and did not really reach the populace. The impotence and internal divisions in parties and in parliamentary life, disenchanted the younger generations in political parties (Shihatah 2010). The Internet was an important means and outlet for the disenchanted. They utilized it to communicate and mobilize away from the boundaries of traditional political life. Videos of citizens being tortured in police stations were means for mobilizing support for rejecting brutal police practices. Protesters were able to plan and communicate via social media and get the news out. The youth who were computer savvy understood the power of social media, but also its limitations (Frais 2008).

Face-to-face social network is essential to eventually come out on the street and claim the public space. Revolutions in the end do not happen in the media, they take place in the public square. The communicative processes of

recovering and reimagining a collective identity, and constructing a political community that helped claim the public space did not start with Facebook or the Jan 25 protests, yet they were amplified in social media. Changes in Egyptian society and a counter-wind were mitigating the effects of concerted efforts for depoliticization that had taken place over the years.

A submerged social network of political activists was getting organized and eventually was able to muster the mobilization required to claim the public space, and garner enough mobilization to pass the "town square test" during the uprising. But for ordinary Egyptian people to pass the "town square test," they had to mitigate the impact of de-politicization of the Egyptian society and state. To understand, we briefly recap the lessons of the 6th of April Youth Movement.

The lessons of 6th of April Youth Movement

In Dec 2006, labor movements crested and created a new set of social ties between the labor activists in the Egyptian textile industry and middle class urban youth. The textile workers in al-Mahallah al-Kubrah went on strike demanding their promised bonus. The strike was a success; their demands were met. On April 6, 2008, the workers had planned for another strike. In 2008, 323 significant protests and strikes swept across the country[6] and university professors demonstrated in Cairo against the presence of the so-called campus security. It was basically State Security agents controlling academic and student life on university campuses. The April strike was also called for at the time to tap into the discontent among the people over "bread riots" because of shortage of subsidized bread. *Al-Ahram Weekly* described the year of 2008 as the "season of protest."

A group of young activists picked up the call for the 2008 textile workers' strike and wanted to support it. They called for a general strike and a protest in support of industrial workers near Tahrir Square and set up an April 6 Strike Facebook page. The activists tried to suggest a common link in the series of issues behind the discontent. On the Facebook page, they explai-

ned what they wanted: decent wages, education, a humane transportation system, a functional and independent judiciary, safety and security. They wanted freedom and dignity, and housing for newly weds. They were against price increases, torture in police stations, corruption, bribery, [arbitrary] detentions and manipulation of the judiciary. Many of these same issues came to the fore and were the main rallying cries in Tahrir Square. These issues constituted the glue that linked the grievances in a series of discontents and claims, which is a characteristic feature of massive populist social mobilization (Laclau 2005, Kumar 2011a).

The state came to know about the general strike and managed to abort it. The textile workers' strike failed too. Labor leaders even blamed the failure of their strike on the 6th of April Movement's call for general strike (El-Mahdi 2010). The casualties were not limited to the failure of the strikes. Isra Abd al-Fattah, one of the callers for the protest, was arrested and shortly after, another was arrested (Shihatah 2010). A "Free Isra" campaign on Facebook was launched. She was released, but after being forced to recant her views and opposition to the government. Isra's arrest had a chilling effect frizzling out a Mubarak birthday protest the following month (Faris 2008). However, this propelled the 6th of April Youth Movement as one of the leading voices of political change and a submerged social network of activists. The 6th of April Youth Movement came to realize that in the end, social media provides "complimentary and logistical support to whatever we do ON THE GROUND" (Faris 2008:9, emphasis in original).

In June the 6th of April Youth Movement (6th of April hereafter) was turned from a mere Facebook group into a political movement. It was composed of a group of young men and women who previously worked under the umbrella of different political entities such as: Kefaya, al-Ghad party, the PCSI and some independents. It appealed to many as it capitalized on the fact that 60 percent of the population is young and thus have a stake in the future of Egypt (Osman 2010, Shihatah 2010). The movement was structured around work groups that members could join as they see fit to their skills, interests, background, etc. and utilized different means of com-

munication including grass root street campaigns. At the event of getting arrested, 6th of April supported the detained member providing both legal aid and provisions. They also organized media campaigns to support and call for freeing the detained.

Groups such as Kefaya and the 6th of April emerged as the most well organized opposition groups in Egypt in 2010. Members of these groups later became leading actors in the mobilization. They met regularly and planned to occupy the pubic space in Cairo and other major cities in Egypt. A member of the group travelled to Serbia to learn tactics to organize large protests and deal with the police using non-violent means. They had come to realize, like in other similar movements, they would have to claim the public space and ensure that they are witnessed across the world. Their plans for the uprising were overtaken by a number of important events.

On June 6, 2010, a young man was brutally beaten and killed in Alexandria. Pictures of his brutalized body were published and many were moved by his violent death. A new Facebook group – "We are all Khaled Said" emerged – that by then, had more than 400 thousand members (at the time of this writing, members exceeded 2 milion). As if that was not enough, the 2010 parliamentary elections were scandalously rigged. On New Year's Eve, the Saints Church was bombed. The explosion rocked Alexandria and killed innocent Egyptians and angered and mobilized them. Rather than taking on each other (Christians vs. Muslims), citizens demonstrated in solidarity. Shortly after, another Alexandrian was brutally killed by the police who beat him to death while trying to extract a confession that he was behind the church explosion. Finally, in neighboring Tunisia, following the self-immolation of a young street vendor, Ben Ali was toppled.

It was time to construct and claim the public space and take the "town square test" after the margins of the controlled public space had been breached through the work of submerged social networks (Kefaya, PCSI, April 6th, labor workers). To rally differential social identities, protesters used symbols, images and slogans to achieve the goal of constructing and temporarily clai-

ming a public space that became a prelude to the hoped-for new Egyptian Republic. The following section discusses how the social media enabled a submerged network of social activists to temporarily claim the public space, recover Egyptian identity, and construct a political community in the winter and spring of 2010-2011.

"Kullina Khaled Said": Reclaiming a narrative

For the purposes of the argument here, the "who" and "how" behind the Kullina Khaled Said Facebook page[7] is not as important as the "what." Shortly after it was started, the page went viral and the numbers of its members increased rapidly. To protest what had happened to Khaled, which is nothing but another episode of an ongoing systemic culture of torture and police brutality, the page called for silent "stands." Members were invited to wear black-in mourning, to express sadness, and to symbolize the darkness of injustice that has been wrought unto all Egyptians for so long and was exemplified in the brutal killing and torture of Khaled Said; something that could happen to any of them under the current regime.

The page called for the stands and gave out a number of instructions. Cognizant of the constraints imposed on citizens by the Emergency Law, the page called participants to stand five meters apart to avoid being persecuted. Participants were also invited to stand along waterfronts carrying the pictures of Khaled Said, banners renouncing the Emergency Law, or an Egyptian flag (in no particular order). Khaled became an icon for what happens as a result of police brutality. Months later, demonstrators will cry out in Tahrir and other squares in Egypt, "Khaled Said ya walad dammak beyharrar balad" (praised are you Khaled Said; your blood is freeing an entire country). The idea of a silent stand appealed to many Egyptians-- silence was a means of protest. In a personal communication with one of the protesters, he passionately talked about how these silent stands were the beginning of his participation in protest and ultimately in the 2011 Tahrir Square sit-in.

After each stand, the page posted news of the protest: stories of protesters

who were able to defy the police or were subjected to police intimidation. The page provided an alternative space for people-a virtual one (call for stands) until it could became a public one (the stands themselves) then they went back to the virtual to discuss their real space and plan some more. We call this the virtual-real-virtual cycle that preceded the extended occupation of public space.

The first call for a stand was limited to Alexandria and Cairo; later calls were extended to different cities in Egypt. By the middle of October, membership hit 300 thousand. Commemorating this milestone, the page posted a poster explaining the significance of the number: "our number exceeds the capacity of Cairo Stadium 5 folds." But most powerful was the spatial visualization that the text on the poster provided: "if all the members formed a human chain by holding hands, they could connect the cities of Cairo and Alexandria (two of the biggest cities in Egypt) with their own bodies." Using the significance of the number, the page was moving to assign "real" life meaning to the "virtual" community and affirm the importance of unity and its potential for re-claiming ownership of the Egyptian terrain.

The very title of the Khaled Said page inherently calls for unity by highlighting the power it could bring: Khaled Said's case is not isolated. The sole citizen under such a regime is fragile and the perils of fragmentation are increasing; each could end up like Khaled. If his death is left unaccounted for, we would be all susceptible to the same fate. The same poster further went to challenge the state control over the media space. At 300 thousand, "we could communicate with 3 million people and that could trump the voice of *al-Akhbar*, *al-Jumhuriyyah* and *Al-Masri al-yawm*."[8] The page was consistently redefining the source and balance of power; it is within the ability of the people to unite and move between the virtual and the real. Later, the page, along with the 6th of April page, will join forces in exposing the "national" newspapers and TV complacency with the regime, claiming the media space virtually. The campaign continues after the removal of Mubarak.

The Khaled Said page also revived a sense of national belonging. To combat feelings of alienation and disenfranchisement, it and the 6th of April page

called on Egyptians to restore their sense of belonging mainly through action. A picture of Khaled Said had the caption: *al-balad baladna* – the country is ours. The "real" space was reassigned to Egyptians on the page before demonstrators participated in the silent stands. It was a call to "reclaim" the country and affirm belonging by participating in silent demonstrations and later in the Jan 25 demonstration. This feeling that "the country is ours" will prove to be most important to revive, especially when it was used to call on demonstrators to refrain from vandalism, engaging in fights and never to use any religious, party or sectarian slogans.

During the stands, all the slogans had to be "Egyptian." Interestingly, participants were invited to take something to read if they wanted (the Bible or the Quran or any book) or something to listen to. The "rules" of conduct in the "real" public space were being set and agreed upon in the virtual public space. This is seen in both the 6th of April and Khaled Said pages. They clearly state that their goal is to "awaken" the Egyptian people by creating a space for Egyptians to engage in discussions and end injustice and tyranny. Both pages list the guidelines for conversations and participation. The two pages engaged members in discussions but constantly reminded them that the virtual space is a starting point and actual participation in the public space is the goal. Moving between the virtual and the real also was evident in the use of symbols. While the virtual space is a-religious, the real space is drafted along lines of religion.

When the Khaled Said page suggested reading a book and listed the "holy books" among the options, it was bridging realities between the virtual and the actual. Perhaps it was co-opting the largely accepted religious "norms" of Christianity and Islam. However, it was a unifying moment where both religious texts were equally Egyptian, diffusing any sectarianism and simultaneously, it was iconizing Khaled Said as an all-Egyptian, a-religious symbol. The Egyptianization of Islam and Christianity will become evident and reinforced by images. We do not claim that it was Internet pages that instructed people to behave in a specific way. Yet, cues in the virtual space were later "realized" in the square. Pictures of Christians and Muslims providing safe prayer spaces for each other in Tahrir during the sit-in were shared

on Facebook. Similarly, images of Muslims with beards (sign of religiosity) holding crosses as they cried for freedom along side Christian clergy were equally shared and celebrated. These images recalled a collective memory held dear in the Egyptian national memory. During the 1919 revolution Egyptians chanted, "Long live the crescent and the cross." Crowds cried out loud the same chants while demonstrations passed by churches on January 25 (not a single church was attacked from Jan 25 – Feb 11 despite the complete absence of police).

From the virtual space to Tahrir Square, and back

We examined pictures posted on the photo albums of the Khaled Said and the 6th of April Facebook pages in their entirety. We chose the two pages because they were pivotal in mobilizing for the Jan 25 demonstrations and engaged page members in discussions and solicited suggestions, feedback and opinions. One of the two authors is a participant observer in these two pages, the demonstrations, and did interview protest and sit-in participants and/or activists. It is important to note that many demonstrators and participants did not know about the demonstrations through technology (online, text messages, emails, tweets). An activist narrated how a female street vegetable vendor literally ordered her son to take her merchandize home as she spontaneously decided to join the demonstration when the crowds passed by her.

We all matter: A main challenge that mobilization faced is a sense of helplessness and valueless that individuals and the society as a whole had developed under Mubarak. To combat these feelings, the pages at hand invoked the commonly cherished national/patriotic symbols; i.e. the flag and torture victims. Interestingly, the significance of the flag has been kind of fresh since it has been used in the All Africa soccer games.[9] At times, the flag was used simply as is. Other times, the flag was creatively combined with other symbols to mobilize people participation and revive their sense of belonging. Using the flag as the basic component/background of banners, the pages called for everyone to participate in planned demonstrations.

While the Khaled Said page reminded of the power of all, the 6th of April page was blunt in reminding individuals of their responsibility: "you think nothing will change, not enough people will participate, this will only happen if you do not participate. I will." Using the flag in the virtual will later move to the real when even women with scarves will wear flag-colored scarves. Notably, Tunisia became one of the symbols appropriated for mobilization. It became a symbol of what a community is capable of doing once it has moved from the virtual to the real and from the one to the collective.

Somehow, Tunisia symbolized the desire and aspiration for freedom that the participants in the virtual space are seeking. The Tunisian flag was also appropriated. It is all red with a crescent embracing a star in the middle. The Egyptian flag is red, white and black. Banners calling for the demonstrations on Jan 25 carried an Egyptian flag where the red stripe was stained with the crescent and the star (miniature Tunisian flag). The Tunisian flag was appropriated for mobilizing and as inspiration for reviving the dream of Arab solidarity and unity (planted in the collective memory during the zenith of Nasser's Arab nationalism). Ironically, the very flags that were divisive tools between the two nations during soccer games became symbols of shared aspiration for freedom. Flags occupied the backgrounds for banners where "Egypt" itself called on the Egyptians to participate in the demonstrations. The banners reminded people that Tunisia was able to "do it" on Jan 14 and "we," real Egyptians, will participate and follow the steps of Tunisia. Along with the flag, the "martyr" was another symbol appropriated in the pages, and later in the square.

The Martyr: Khaled Said's picture was iconized as the "martyr." This was affirmed in using the word shahid (martyr) to refer to him and was the user name for the page email address. Khaled's mother was referred to as the mother of the martyr. Other victims of police brutalities were assigned the "shahid" title as well. The martyr addressed page members, inviting them to participate in demonstrations. A poster was composed of a collection of pictures showing the following: Khaled Said, a pack of hyenas preying on an animal, then a pack of policemen beating a citizen, and another of a

shot from the video because of which Khaled Said was allegedly killed. The captions on the poster read:

> This is a jungle (pack of hyenas praying on a dead animal). And this is a jungle too (pack of policemen beating a person). And this is a prey (Khaled Said) and those are wolves (policemen in the video shot). On my own, I am not sufficient, but together we are stronger and it is the stronger that survives. After all... we live in a jungle.

Khaled Said was the icon but other victims were not dismissed. Pictures of others who were killed, disappeared or tortured were posted, enforcing the idea that "we all matter": victims and citizens who will not remain silent in the face of injustice.

The Saints Church bombing was also a moment that symbolized national unity. And two more icons were added: Sayyid Bilal and Mariam Fikri. Bilal was brutally killed by the police. Fikri was killed in the explosion. On Jan 7 (Coptic Orthodox Christmas), another demonstration was planned to express solidarity and unity against terrorism that fueled the blowing up of the church.[10] The magnitude of the event called for using a different slogan: we are all Egyptians. The national crisis united Egyptians; the state could not oppress the physical occupation of public space. Egyptians, Muslims and Christians, were appalled from the gravity of the event and they wanted to unite in solidarity. Images were used to affirm that unity. A picture of a secular, a bearded man (to connote Islamists) and a woman were imposed on an Egyptian flag.

"Egypt" was used in slogans inviting citizens to participate in demonstration using captions as: "I will be a real Egyptian. I will participate." Or "Egypt is waiting for you; come participate." Later, when the demonstrations move from the virtual to the real space, demonstrators will call on people to join them: "our folks/people, come join us." This sense of belonging and fraternity was fostered as the pages pressed the idea that every citizen matters.

The word Egypt (misr) was also used as a unifying word. A banner used the word misr with the first letter composed of a crescent and a cross-another

symbol recalled from the 1919 revolution- and called for Egyptians, Muslims and Christians, to reclaim their own country and not let anger (for the blowing up of the church) "drown" the country. Citizens were called on to focus on those who subjected them to injustice. It was an attempt at turning a moment of potential division (especially that the state wanted to frame Islamists for the church bombing) into a moment of unity.

This unity was evident in images that showed the suffering of Egyptians. In addition to pictures of Khaled Said's brutalized face contrasted to pictures taken before his death, both the 6th of April and Khalid Said pages showed images of ordinary citizens contrasted to the images that the police circulated of them claiming they are thugs. The pages posted images of everyday citizens suffering: women carrying propane cylinders while the government exports Egyptian natural gas to Israel below market price. Citizens in line for bread were shown with the slogan: "bread, freedom, social justice." This slogan would prove most effective in mobilizing the "real/physical" space, as the demonstrations took off from different mosques and churches. The Khaled Said page posted images of silent demonstrations and invited discussions from page members. An album for photos of police brutality was also posted.

Images depicting Egypt as a matriarch calling her children (Egyptians) to help her were posted. As the protesters moved from the virtual to the real space, they used martyr pictures. Other powerful images included an older woman motherly kissing a central security policeman on the cheek. Reviving matriarchy combated the family patriarch narrative that Mubarak had used as an organizing myth to support his regime. This counter narrative resonated in the Egyptian collective memory and activated an identity of independence that seemed to be dormant during the Mubarak years. The state had bet on the "silent majority"-citizens who had been indoctrinated in the idea that the president is the "father" and that removing him constitutes a violation of cultural norms and mores.

Conclusion: Holding on to the ideals of reclaimed public space

When the Egyptians took to the streets on Jan 25, they were united around the slogan: bread, freedom, social justice/human dignity. Members of submerged social networks had been working on overcoming divisions in the society. The Khaled Said page's call for those who live in buildings overseeing silent stands' locations not to participate in "stands" and take as many pictures/videos as possible to document what is happening in the events, was an invitation for citizens to put the state under *their* gaze. The citizen protesters *reversed* the gaze on the state. Neutralizing the role of state surveillance by countering that surveillance was not an innovation of the Khaled Said page. The civil society and human rights activists had already used YouTube as an outlet for exposing police brutality and the Imad al-Kabir[11] torture is a case in point. Reversing the gaze on the state is evident in posting a video of the kidnapping of one the administrators of Khaled Said page (Wael Ghonim). In a way, reversing the gaze also restored the Egyptian sense of their capability to be active social actors who expose corruption. It was a moment of restoring citizen agency and sense of empowerment.

With the move to the virtual space again, the Khaled Said and 6th of April pages collaborated to expose regime propagandists. They published the history of journalists/publications that paid lip service to the regime. The pages reclaimed political consciousness by creating archives: publishing newspaper clipping and documents to show parallels between present and past in an effort to prevent history from repeating itself.[12] They revived the temporal mode of interpretation for people to restore a collective national identity that is not as fragmented or divided. Invoking collective memory was a means to maintain a common spatial and temporal locale: they functioned as a place where time and space for participants collapsed some would share this collapsed time to invite more people to the reclaimed public space.

Unlike the Tiananmen Square in China in 1989, or the Pearl Square in Bahrain in 2011, the Egyptian protesters and democracy activists succeeded in holding on to the public space because the uprising was rooted in submerged social networks that were built over many years. Movements

such as industrial workers' protests, Kefaya and the 6th of April were able to recall a common identity that can cut across divisions and fragmentation (unlike in Bahrain). And the national public sphere in Egypt had opened up significantly in the last decade. Activists in the Egyptian case operated on two levels of space: virtual and real. In either case, activists used techniques with which the weak became stronger than the oppressor by moving fast across the physical and virtual (Garcia as cited in Renzi 2008:71). However, the public space claimed in the uprising remains temporary. The remnant of Mubarak's regime, the SCAF, is making new moves to re-colonize the public space by sowing internal conflicts in a fragile civil society.

The October Maspiro Massacre marked a new turn in the struggle for freedom in Egypt. The SCAF adopted a new tactic to defeat the spirit of the revolution. Civilians have been summoned before military courts since the beginning of the uprising. However, after Maspiro, when the SCAF started summoning activists to military investigations, activists, in turn, pushed back and refused to answer the investigators' questions, stating that they are civilians and do not fall under the jurisdictions of military investigators ("Egypt: new" 2011). Activists and citizens are challenging the SCAF authority and making a point to emphasize citizenship in a civil state; a concept the SCAF has been undermining.[13] On the other hand, the uprising has constructed a new political community and revived the political consciousness of Egyptians-citizens. This is evident, in the citizens' awareness of the importance of occupying not only the physical space but also the "media space." The SCAF has managed to polarize the society along the ideological lines of liberal vs. Islamist with the media machine of state radio and television under total SCAF control. In a way, SCAF managed to occupy the media space with its own narratives and propaganda. In an effort to combat the SCAF occupation of the media space, activists and ordinary citizens organized a campaign called *Kazeboon* (liars). Acknowledging that as long as the SCAF controls the media, it also controls the dissemination of information and the defining of issues, activists decided to go to the people in streets and squares (again to the public space to temporarily occupy it). Armed with projectors and monitors, they show videos that combat propaganda by playing the contradicting SCAF statements and use of violence.

In the short term, it may seem that the uprising has failed to bring about a real transformation and democracy in Egypt, and even unleashed reactionary forces that won the parliamentary and presidential elections. However, like most social movements and popular protests, the impact of the uprising will be felt in the decades to come. In addition to the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafi groups, the new social networks and civic society groups that emerged from the uprising will shape the making of a new Egypt. Egyptians left the square, but the social networks persist and they are not submerged anymore. Although, the military has failed to make clear its intentions regarding the future of democracy in Egypt, the future still looks hopeful because even though occupying the physical public space can only be temporary, from a cognitive perspective the space created for relatively free deliberation among social networks of Egyptians will prevent the return to Mubarak years.

The citizen agents who showed up in Tahrir Square and forced Mubarak have tasted the power of showing up in the public space. This will shape and influence the rebuilding of the nation and the emergence of new political communities that will compete in the democratic space. The number times since January-February 2011 the people have converged on the Tahrir Square suggests that the ordinary person in Egypt has overcome fear of the state. The ideas, identity and the ideals of the uprising are now part of the Egyptian new national consciousness and form the basis for a long revolution in Egypt. In the last year, the reclaimed Egyptian identity and unified political community turned to be a temporary phenomenon with multiple communities (Muslim Brotherhood, Salafis, progressives and Copts) competing for political power. Yet, we contend that democratic political competition among different groups is better than a depoliticized society living under the perpetual gaze of the state.

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Notes

[1] Sadat was notorious of coining himself the head of the family and addressing his critics or referring to them by walad (boy). This rhetorical ploy is still used by SCAF.

[2] Arrested thugs on the Battle of the Camel testified they were hired to attack the demonstrators. The case is still before the courts at the time of writing this. See Shalabi and Abu-Shanab (2011) and Al-Qaranshawi (2011).

[3] See "Frustrated dreams of Young Egyptians," by Christian Fraser, BBC News.

[4] See 'A divide way of life' by Hadil Ghoneim, in Al Ahram Weekly, April 17–23, 2008, Issue No. 893.

[5] See "Ghad Al-Thawra Party" in ahramonline, Dec 3, 2011 online: http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/33/104/26694/Elections-/Political-Parties/Ghad-AlThawra-Party-.aspx

[6] See "Seasons of Protest: 2008, when demonstrators and strikes became a norm," in Al-Ahram Weekly, January 1-6, 2009, Issue No. 928.

[7] For more details please visit http://www.facebook.com/elshaheeed.co.uk (English) and http://www.facebook.com/ElShaheeed (Arabic).

[8] Some leading newspapers of Egypt.

[9] It is widely believed that soccer was a means by the Mubarak regime to distract people from political participation; see al-Jiddawi (2010) and Abu-Arab (2009)

[10] To date, no serious investigation was conducted in the Saints Church bombing.

[11] Citizen sodomized in a police station. The officer convicted of his torture was sentenced to jail time only to return to the service after finishing his sentence.

[12] After the 1952 revolution, Egypt spiraled in an authoritarian form of governance because the military refused to deliver its promise to transition to a democratic state.

[13] SCAF has repeatedly resorted to "solving" religious tensions and conflict under common law-a practice that undermines the rule of law and citizenship and is antithetical to the principles of a modern state and the uprising.