

# Youth Activism and Social Networks in Egypt

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## Abstract:

*The arrival of the Internet-based technologies has made the work of professional activists much more effective and has attracted the attention of society and observers, if only because their internal and external communications became much cheaper and harder to be monitored. The new social networking technologies have provided the youth with new channels for participation and empowerment. This became true in a part of the world where the older generations, in either government or opposition, controlled the traditional political and cultural arena and dominated the public sphere. However, the younger generations gradually launched creative initiatives using online media in recent years. The younger generations have engaged in public affairs by peaceful means to bring about a change and to influence the decision-making processes and policies. In this regard, the new social media played a facilitating role in the long wave of continuous politics in Egypt, although it is not a causal role. It basically helped in the mobilization and framing process aiming to delegitimize the regime and demoralize its policies. The ideas and ideologies spread in the public sphere, and, in addition to grievances, enabled the young activists to present new claims and to behave in ways that fundamentally challenged the authorities. Indeed the social media impact could not lead to real change without physical offline action in society. In this respect the most notable actions, such as the April 6 Strike in El Mahala 2008 and January 25 revolution, were triggered by the marriage between online and offline activism, particularly when activists moved smartly between online and offline activities to create real challenges to the regime and to escape from police repression.*

## Keywords:

*activism, Egypt, social media*

## Introduction

This article examines the development of youth activism in Egypt as key social actors during the latter years of Mubarak's presidency and leading

into the tumultuous events of the Revolution in January 2011 and beyond. In attempting to explain the contemporary re-emergence of youth activism during the January Revolution, the study proceeds to examine the developments that have led to a revolution particularly the new social media influence that created a new dilemma for the authorities that can effectively move against traditional media while finding it difficult to silence the increasing numbers of elusive protest voices playing out on new technologies which spread around the country. It is worth noting that the young generation became the main age group that uses Internet-based technologies. Egyptian youth activists in recent years found new independent sites for their activism in the emerging blogosphere and Facebook which became platforms of political and cultural expression for some, as well as a mode of social and political networking, campaigning and organization for others. It is important to explain the youth activism from the generational perspective and investigate the role played by social media in facilitating mobilization and creating a counter hegemonic discourse.

### Mapping youth activism from the generational perspective

The analysis of youth activism showed that the youth activism were part of the same political generation that could be called the “Digital Native” or “Millennium” generation. Mannheim (1974:7-8) identified a political generation as the same age group members who were involved in the two key elements; that all grow in the same historical and cultural context, and feel together in the same social and historical determination. In the Egyptian context, the Millennium generation is composed of the young people who grew up and experienced the historical developments in the period 2000-2011 when their age was between 18-35 years. They represent a political generation by Mannheim concepts, which emphasized that the biological generation has no sense of great political importance without having collective identity. The generation that becomes a political and social phenomenon worthy of study is the generation that consists of individuals in the same age groups who have lived through the same historical experience and share the same hopes and disappointments, and have experienced freedom and opposition to the older generation (Mannheim 1974:8, Willis

1977, Pilcher 1993). Feuer (1969:25) argued that the generational collective identity is formed due to the founder events that consolidate the similar generational awareness and way of life. It is worth noting that Bayat's thesis about youth activism and non-collective actors (Bayat 2009:5) is similar to Mannheim's theory about the political generation. Bayat's contribution tended to focus on culture, norms, uniforms and way of life. The claims of youthfulness remain at the core of youth movement. But the intensity of youth activism depends, first, on the degree of social control imposed on them by the moral and political authorities and, second, on the degree of social cohesion among the young (Bayat 2009:18).

The political generation features different groups of young people who may be conservative on the one hand or liberal on the other, for example. But both belong to the same generation, because both of them constitute different intellectual and social responses to the same exciting historical factors. Each of these two groups represents a specific "generation unit" within the same generation (Mannheim 1974:9-10). In the Egyptian context the generation features different groups such as Nationalists, Islamists, Marxists, Liberals and Independents.

### The generational gaps

Much of the new energy in the Egyptian society and politics came from the younger generation, which became the main social agent for change. The generations that controlled and led Egyptian politics for decades, both in government and opposition during Mubarak's reign, became very old and isolated from the social and cultural transformations in the society. There was a chance for a new generation to replace the old elite by being attached to Gamal Mubarak in the Policies Committee but its neoliberal agenda was a major stimulus for the 25th January revolution. On the other hand, the official opposition parties came under the full control of the regime security services. The activists from the Seventies generation, which emerged in the universities in 1970s, launched various political initiatives particularly political parties since the nineties such as Al-Wast, Al Ghad and Al Karamah after an internal generational and organizational split in the MB,

Al-Wafd and Al Tajamu respectively, as well as wide umbrella movements that consisted of independent and cross ideological activists such as the EPCSPI, and Kefaya (Tohami, Generational Mobility 2009).

The “Millennium” or “Digital Native” generation engaged in contentious politics joining these movements and networks in large numbers because of the historical events and political opportunities that occurred in Egypt and the region since 2000. They interacted with the large number of left-wing activists from the Seventies generation who returned to the political arena after nearly a decade of political apathy (Abdalla, 2003). However, a relative decline took place after the end of the wave of political mobility in 2005. The Millennium generation began to form their own organizations benefiting from the experience and tactics learned from the seventies generation.

Numbers of leading figures sought to establish their own initiatives and networks after developing critical positions toward the older generations, accusing them of apathy and inefficacy and compliance with the regime. They launched movements such as Youth for Change, April 6 and the Current (El-Tayyar) party, which could be considered a rupture with the older generation. Other movements featured better relationships between internal generations such as the MB and the ElBaradei campaign. However the April 6 movement is the most independent group among the younger generation initiatives. These young activists called for the 25 January revolution and were the basic backbone of the demonstrations, although the subsequent stages witnessed the participation of other generations.

The internal diversity in the movements and generational mobility provoked debates and discussion about the strategic choices and policies. While some wings in the movements tended to be more conservative, others have more open-minded views and good relations with other groups. This created intense debate and pressure for reform policies, strategies and frames. The airing of this internal debate in cyberspace foretold coming challenges to the movements. In this regard the social media helped to empower the voices of younger generations who tended to criticize many aspects and practices in some movements such as MB’s leaders.

Blogs and Facebook have enabled individuals in the MB to partake in opposition media activism (Exum 2007:1). This is evident in “how younger MB members attempt to adopt this technology to generate the kinds of solidarity, support and attention” they wish to see (Lynch 2007). The pages, profiles and groups of MB members gradually expanded on Facebook which became a public avenue to display internal disputes and controversial issues among MB activists as it appeared on the profiles and pages belonging to the younger and middle-age activists like Haythem Abou-Khaliel (Facebook n.d.). The movement leaders thought they were able to contain the different wings while activists argued that this “may further threaten the authority of more conservative leaders.” Different approaches emerged among MB leaders about how to tackle the issues; while some of them were concerned that the diversity may lead to fractions and splits, others did not agree saying, “youth should be encouraged to use this technology and not be criticized for doing so” (Ajemian 2008). The splits took place around many issues relating to policies, organization and culture. For example, the ex-Muslim Brother activist Abdel-Monem Mahmoud levelled a series of critiques of the conservative aspects of the published draft of the MB’s programme as a political party in 2007 before splitting (Ajemian 2008). At the same time, Facebook and Twitter became a public avenue to display internal disputes and controversial issues among the MB’s younger generation. Facebook pages also illustrated the escalation of the dispute among the young activists of the Muslim Brotherhood themselves. They debated about the decision to participate in the 2010 election and how it has been taken, as some former members raised charges on the incidence of counterfeiting in the decision of the Shura Council, whose members agreed to participate by 98 percent. The debate had shifted between the activists, from participating in the election decision itself, to a broader discussion about the process of decision-making in the Brotherhood and the role of youth. These disputes escalated and led to significant splits in 2011 when hundreds of activists formed the Egyptian Current (El-Tayyar) party whose leaders were prominent figures in the MB student wing in the universities.

It noteworthy that the new activism was characterized by a set of features that ranged from consuming products of globalization and adopting a kind

of hybrid culture and values balancing between particularity and universality, in addition to the lack of centrality and hierarchy that shaped their new networks and mobilizing structures. The young activists were driven by unlimited aspirations and ambitions so that they went to the extreme demands during the revolution while the older generations were hesitating and sought a compromise with the regime. They followed radical strategies and became less conciliatory in their approach to the regime, favouring comprehensive political change (Tohami 2011).

The cultural and collective identity of the Millennium generation is a hybrid culture; a combination of global and local components, modern and traditional values. Large segments of the young activists moved beyond the divided ideologies to adopt and construct an open political value system, which could be described as the “postmodernism generation”. Perhaps the model of the young man, Wael Ghoneim, the founder of the page “Kolna Khalid Saeed”, who works at Google, is an indication of this case. He graduated from Cairo University, and received his MBA from the American University in Cairo. Although he is not a partisan, he engaged in the protestation against the regime through social networking technologies.

The young generation of activists exerted pressure on the regime to undertake sustained social and political reforms. This has been done through non-violent direct action, such as sit-ins, marches, rallies, constructing barricades, blocking traffic, etcetera (Tarrow 2011:95). The disruption was the main strategy among the radical new activism who “adapted non-violence ideas to favour a type of indigenous political reform marked by a blend of democratic ideals and, possibly, religious sensibilities” (Bayat 2009:13). The nonviolent movements are considered the dictators’ worst nightmare. The social movements in the Egyptian context presented themselves as non-violent peaceful movements that did not resort to vandalism. They took the advantage of the global experience and avoided the risk of a bloody clash with security as happened with other Islamist groups. The anti-terrorist ideology became effective among the young generations of activists as a result of the militant Islamist’s failure in the 1990s who began seeking after nonviolence strategies. It should be taken into account that the violence

that occurred in specific events was in response to police violence like that which happened in the Al-Mahalla city on April 6 (Siam 2010:71).

### The impact of globalization and Internet-based communications

The global economic change, developments in media and communications technologies, and the growth of transnational networks contributed to reshaping the opportunities and constraints facing social and youth movements. Some forms of authoritarianism, such as totalitarianism and bureaucratic authoritarianism, have become more difficult to sustain. Although several new (or partially new) nondemocratic regime types took on greater importance in the 1990s, including competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky and Way 2002:63), globalization and new media contributed to the democratization in Middle East countries. In this regard the new transnational types of political, economic, social and cultural actors and processes resulting from globalization led to a global redistribution of power (Pratt 2004:314). Henry and Springborg argued that the way globalization impacts on political regimes in the Middle East depends on the regime type which range between three major types: praetorian republics, monarchies, and, lastly, democracies of varying degrees of institutionalized competitiveness. They classified<sup>1</sup> the Egyptian regime under Mubarak as a praetorian republic ruled by “bullies” as there were some elements of both civil society and rational-legal legitimacy, which in turn reduce, but do not altogether eliminate, the importance of violence and coercion in political life. The structural power of capital, although negligible in praetorian republics governed by bullies, is noticeably greater than in bunker states, where security of property is insufficient to permit capital accumulation. Consequently the “bully” responses to economic globalization are less brutal than those of the bunker states. The limited capacities of the “bully” states, however and the structural weakness of capital within them have severely constrained their efforts to globalize (Henry and Springborg 2010:63).

In addition to this, globalization strengthens “national/regional/political or other identities by bringing people together across time and space” (Yamani 2001). The process of globalization has facilitated intercultural exchanges

which enable new combinations of identities to be created, resulting in a hybrid culture (Nederveen Pieterse 1995). In some cases, these new identities can become a resource for the creation of transnational social movements or a movement for “globalization-from-below” (Keck and Sikkink 1998, Falk 1999, Al-Ali 2001, Pratt 2004:315-316). The blurring of hegemonic national cultures that represent the national community as homogeneous, may empower previously suppressed or ignored social groups, based on class, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexuality or other identities (Held and McGrew 2000, Al-Ali 2001, Pratt 2004:315-316).

In this regard, state autonomy is challenged from below by NGOs and other non-state actors. NGOs for example, “have been encouraged into this role by the increasing amount of aid channelled to them by Northern donors over the last decade.” (Fowler 1992, Pratt 2004). The interdependence relationship between the Egyptian NGO campaign for democratization and transnational NGOs emerged as the former not only mobilized local support, but it also had the backing of international human rights, NGOs and many foreign governments and donors (Pratt 2004:330).

The growing international civil society contributes to the creating of the opportunity for the emergence and extension of social movements. It is widely agreed that the role of transnational social movements and civil society organizations gradually expanded and surged with the globalization and the Iraqi war in 2003. Various groups from civil society and NGOs from different ideological trends have strong ties with the civil society in the western countries. Abdel Rahman (2009:40) argued that “the success of the worldwide anti-war movement has given support to the nascent Egyptian movement whose members are closely linked with this global umbrella”. In response to this challenge the regime advocated executive supervision of fund-raising abroad and attempted to delegitimize transnational linkages by representing ‘foreign funding’ as a threat to the nation (Pratt 2004:326-327).

In addition to this, globalization plays a role in democratization through the extension of new information and communication technologies (ICTs), which provide activists with new ways to challenge the authorities.



The Internet-based communications helped social movements to establish “counter-public spheres” (derived from Habermas’s “public spheres”), whereby this technology provides protesting and marginalized groups with a new and inexpensive means to establish a sphere of media discourse that accompanies their forms of organization and protest (Downey and Fenton 2003:185-202). These groups and individuals developed the use of such technology to become significant channels for voices, minority viewpoints, and political mobilization, and challenge the elite control of public sphere and mass communication. The online media, under a variety of regimes, has significantly contributed to expanding the scope of freedom of expression and to breaking official organizations’ monopoly of channels of communication (UNDP 2010:114). Increasingly, these developments comprise an emerging networked public sphere, in which the power of elites to control the public agenda and bracket the range of allowable opinions is seriously challenged (Etling et al. 2009:7).

The benefits of media convergence, bringing together print, video and broadcast in cyberspace, best explain how sub-state groups can circumvent their marginalization in mainstream media outlets. Ajemian argues that intersecting and complementing existing transnational media would allow for dissident groups and their sympathizers to tap into the mainstream. In addition to this, online media best demonstrate how media convergence empowers individuals to shape media counter-public spheres (Ajemian 2008). Morozov (2009) discussed the change of the meaning of activism; he argued that “anyone can be one of the activists joining a Facebook group, posting to a blog, or setting up a Twitter account would count as activism.”

Despite the historical control over the media, through many entities such as the Egyptian Supreme Press Council, which has been enhanced by the renewal of the state emergency law, the economic and political reform plans and the modernizing process since the mid-nineties, convinced the regime to consider the availability of information and knowledge one of its priorities, programmes that provide labour market information and employment services began emerging on the Internet especially on the

websites of the National Council for Youth and the Ministry of Manpower and Migration (Tohami 2009:23).

These developments led to a revolution in the use of the Internet and new social networking technologies and created a new dilemma for the authorities that were able to effectively move against the traditional media while finding it difficult to silence the increasing numbers of elusive protest voices playing out on new technologies which spread around the country. For example, the circulation for newspapers and magazines is just one million a day. But there are 60 million cell phones that can send a SMS. To the government this can be a dangerous issue that needs to be under control (Flieshman and Hassan 2010). The infrastructure of digital networks is beyond the reach of the state. The government can easily cut power off to television stations or restrict the supply of newsprint, but cannot easily control digital networks when the servers that host political conversations are located overseas, and the Internet service providers and mobile phone operators are privately held businesses (Howard 2010). These days, regimes cannot ban ideas and political debates; they just drive them on to the Internet (O'Donnell 2010).

It is worth noting that the youth are the main group who use Internet-based technologies. Indeed, the growing numbers of educated young people looking for new chances has become the age group benefiting the most from these transformations. They constitute the largest number of current Internet users and have developed channels for alternative means of engagement. According to population estimates prepared by the Central Agency for Public Mobilisation and Statistics (CAPMAS 2008) the youth population between 15-35 years old is about 23 million out of the total population of 76 million in 2006 (30 percent). And the youth represent the biggest category using the Internet as a source of information because it is one of the cheapest and fastest tools at hand.

The youth culture enjoys a visible presence and certain acknowledgement from society and media that was unseen in the 1980s or 1990s. Egyptian youth activists in recent years found new independent sites for their activism

in the emerging blogosphere and Facebook which became platforms of political and cultural expression for some, as well as a mode of social and political networking, campaigning and organization for others. Blogging remained a platform for cultural expression and networking (Tohami 2009:12-13).

The statistics about Internet-based technologies usage illustrate that that Egypt ranked 13th among countries using Facebook, with 28 million users and lead Arab countries in user count, representing almost 30 percent of Arab total users. In 2015, around 31 percent of the Egyptian population used Facebook. The number of users rose significantly in the past five years. In July 2010, there were 3.79 million and jumped to 8.18 million in same month in 2011. By July 2012, there were 11.38 million Facebook users and increased almost five million in July 2013 to reach a total of 16 million. The most notable year-on-year increase however was between July 2013 and July 2014 with the user figures jumping by 6.4 million to reach 22.4 million users.

A more recent report details Internet and social media use among Egyptians shows that Sixty five percent of the users are male while the remaining 35 percent are female. Around 17 percent of users were between 13 and 17 years of age. Users between 18 and 34 years of age dominated this age-group category with 65 percent. The age range of 35 and 44 years of age represented 11 percent of the users while the remaining 7 percent was for those ages 45 and above (Daily News 2016).

Online activists and bloggers, as well as participators in Facebook and YouTube were behind the political action in Egypt. The UN Human Development Report confirmed that “the extent of success of the so-called ‘electronic democracy’ rests largely on young people” (UNDP 2010:113). The importance of the Internet lies in the fact that it may be the only online means available for measuring youth’s political participation. And it has become a tool with huge weight in calling for any activity, as the events of 6th April 2008 demonstrated (UNDP 2010:114).

The number of daily Internet users in Egypt is much higher than that of newspaper readers. These figures are expected to rise to cover more than 50 percent

of Egypt's population in the next ten years (EHDR 2010:114). Consequently, the protesting youth found it to be the best arena to publish and mobilize through composing groups or through personal profiles (Shorouk 2010). We should take into account how young people deal with these new technologies as a new avenue to achieve their goals and dreams and how this reflects on the public sphere or otherwise. The World Development Report (World Bank 2006) shows a higher prevalence of computer use in Egypt. The young people have access to the Internet through cyber cafes that are in Cairo and other urban centres. But technology use among youth is limited to chatting, downloading songs, and access to religious sites (Assaad and Barsoum 2007:15, Tohami 2009:13).

For as much as these developments are significant and worth noting, the percentage of active youth is not representative of the majority. It is striking that the youth who are interested in political and cultural activities is considered a minority among the younger generation and the number who are practising as members of social movements is small, although they have a great influence on political and social issues (Elting et. al. 2009:10). In relating the political and cultural impacts, it is obvious that this minority of activists has an incredible effect on the public sphere and represent a big challenge to the hegemonic discourse of the regime.

The political generational approach used in this study focuses on the youth activism empowered by the social media to oppose the ruling elite. The Millennium generation is a hybrid culture with a range of views all responding to the same set of changes. It includes different ideological and political affiliation, which leads to disputes among them as what happened during the July 3 coup, but they learned to work together in specific events and issues to create change and challenge the regime discourse.

### **The different roles of social media**

The arrival of the Internet-based technologies has made the work of professional activists much more effective and has attracted the attention of society and observers, if only because their internal and external communications

became much cheaper and harder to be monitored. The new social networking technologies have provided the youth with new channels for participation and empowerment. This became true in a part of the world where the older generations, in either government or opposition, controlled the traditional political and cultural arena and dominated the public sphere. However, the younger generations gradually launched creative initiatives using online media in recent years until the 25 January revolution. The younger generations have engaged in public affairs by peaceful means to bring about a change and to influence the decision-making processes and policies.

In this regard, the new social media played a facilitating role in the long wave of continuous politics in Egypt since 2003, although it is not a causal role. It basically helped in the mobilization and framing process aiming to delegitimize the regime and demoralize its policies. The ideas and ideologies spread in the public sphere, and, in addition to grievances, enabled the young activists to present new claims and to behave in ways that fundamentally challenged the authorities. Indeed the social media impact could not lead to real change without physical offline action in society. In this respect the most notable actions, such as the April 6 Strike in El Mahala 2008 and January 25 revolution, were triggered by the marriage between online and offline activism, particularly when activists moved smartly between online and offline activities to create real challenges to the regime and to escape from police repression.

The social media empowered ordinary young people and impacted on the policy agenda as well. The activists launched social media campaigns to support or halt policies and actions both in internal and external issues and which resulted in increasing the role of the public space and public opinion in foreign policy. The Egyptian youth activists succeeded in attracting international attention and the building of a positive image, which shaped the international community's policies toward the Egyptian revolution.

The activists have made extensive use of information technology as a mobilizing instrument. Through their websites, blogs and social networking sites

such as Facebook and Twitter, youth has been able to coordinate various protest activities, even in the absence of organized political structures. The April 6 Strike and January 25 uprising were both wholly a product of the marriage of virtual and real activism. Taking into account that the regime had a high capacity to weaken and abort the forming of central hierarchical organizations, the new activism began using the social media to organize the demonstrations and launch digital campaigns calling for reform or change. The social media served as mobilizing vehicles and channels that connected and coordinated the activities of youth networks and groups, which were not hierarchical, but rather network-based. It could be argued that the activists used social media for a number of purposes: to plan mobilization, to create frames, and to share tips about protests, among other things. But social media's intersection with mobilization shifted in Egypt during the uprising. The social media main roles included providing an organizational infrastructure, as a form of alternative press, and as generating awareness both domestically and internationally of the ongoing revolution. The social media and the Internet were able to foster the necessary requirements for collective action. However, despite its success in organizing the uprisings, it would seem from the current situation in Egypt that social media has been less useful in translating the needs and demands of protesters into political reality (Storck 2011:41).

This shifting role went through at least three distinct stages. In the first stage, spanning roughly from mid-December 2010 to January 27, the "We Are All Khaled Said" Facebook page played an important role in the initial mobilization of the revolution. In the second stage, spanning from January 28 to February 1, 2011, the Social Media Blackout had the opposite effect on mobilization than the one intended by the government. One significant consequence of the blackout was that many people went into the streets to check things out, and ended up participating in the uprising. In the third stage, February 2 to February 11, 2011, after social media was restored in Egypt, there was what I describe as the iconization of Tahrir Square, which drew global attention to that space (Said 2017).

## **Expanding counter-hegemonic discourse**

The value of Internet-based communications and new media is not only because they can easily communicate and mobilize widely with one another, but also because it allows and facilitates the creation of a counter-public sphere of discourse that has the potential to penetrate the society (Ajeman 2008). They facilitated the creation of a counter-hegemonic narrative that challenged the regime. The human rights issues and the abuse of power were always a remarkable issue in the process of demoralizing the regime policies. This represented a major challenge to the regime, which was considered a classic hierarchy, attempting to maintain control of a large public sphere.

In this regard youth activism's influence was growing in its online presence. They were far more prominent and active than the National Democratic Party (NDP). Howard argued that, "If the election were held online, Egypt's ruling elites would be tossed out of power. The tide of opinion among Egyptians online has become a flood of support for opposition movements" (O'Donnell 2010).

## **Constructing alternative awareness and incubator of democratic**

The new social media presented the possibility of a much richer public sphere than existed before. The Internet has become the primary incubator of democratic political conversation. The social movements have moved online, using the information infrastructure of digital media as the place for difficult political conversations. The main opponent to the regime was a complex, fractured umbrella group. They composed of tech-savvy activists and wired civic groups which may not be enough to hold it together much longer (Howard 2010). The slogan "People Want the Fall of the Regime," which insurgents raised, was not only a rebel sign against the control of the older generation that had been in power for decades, but also it could be understood as a guide for this generation to build a new world - freedom, justice, dignity - fit perceptions for this generation formed in the light of the era of globalization.

It is important to consider the remarkable competition between activists and regimes, where each part pushed to come up with new tools: the authorities - with new tools to censor, and the activists - with new tools to unblock the censored materials. The regime realized the risks of leaving the arena of public sphere and developed new tactics to halt the strategy of new activism and then the social media turned out to be a battlefield. This also included the more the established organized groups, which have sought to take part in the Internet arena after recognizing the benefits and risks of ignoring such an arena but without having much influence.

At the same time, it is equally important to evaluate the discussion concerns the intersection of social media and mobilization in Egypt. Scholars and observers agree that social media was crucial in the events of the Egyptian revolution and the Arab spring at large. However, the impact of social media on youth activism became a controversial issue that led to debates about how networks both online and offline, contributed to the ousting of former president Mubarak. The role of youth activists and their strategy that for a long time was considered irrelevant or far from a strong influence on the political structure, proved to be effective in stirring the crowd and making a change through non-central virtual and practical frameworks and networks with a determination to pay the cost of change.

One could reject the false tension between describing the Egyptian uprising as either a “people’s revolution” or as “Facebook” Or “Twitter Revolution,” because ultimately “people” are the agents operating social media. Social media may be a site of contestation, but we should think of it as both a space and technology (Lim 2012:232-234). It is important to reject the techno-deterministic account that studies social media in a social vacuum. The real question is not whether or not social media was a (or the) decisive factor in the Arab spring, but in what ways online activism intersected with offline activism, as well as why the interaction between the two changed from time to time, within the same context. Rather than merely analyze the advantages and limitations of social media use, we should focus on the dynamics and processes of how social media intersects with mobilization, and the temporal shifts of this intersection (Said 2017).



Some reductionist views produced by the academic and media were spread about the role of social media. Rosenberg argued that ‘what worked so smoothly online proved much more difficult on the street’ (Rosenberg 2011). It was easy for the police to block the protests and prevent activists from interacting with ordinary people. It is extremely difficult to draw a clear line between online and offline mobilization, especially in an authoritarian context, where many developments that appear to happen online are in fact the outcome of organizations behind the scenes.

In this respect, some activists began to realize the limits of social networking as a tool of democratic revolution. Facebook could bring together tens of thousands of sympathizers online, but it couldn’t organize them once they logged off. It was a useful communication tool to call people to; well, to what?

Rosenberg’s argument assumed that Facebook was the main reason behind the success of the first 6 April strike, notwithstanding that there were many factors that worked together to bring such success, as has been discussed previously. However, the activists realized that they faced great challenges and dilemmas that needed a new more complicated approach. It was not a matter of calling for demonstrations or strikes on Facebook, but what was extremely important was how to implement on the ground through the cadres and activists who think and plan for it. It is important to distinguish between the social media used by well-educated middle and upper class activists to spread democratic values and the street activism from middle and lower classes who did not regularly log on to Facebook or Twitter.

## **A new phase of decline**

Youth activism expressed the overwhelming feelings and ambitions of young people to participate, keen to practice in the political and public arena during that romantic period when youth activists were considered to be the heroes of the revolution. It could be argue that a combination of youth, labour, students, political parties and Islamists acted together in order to overthrow Mubarak and his inner circle, which finally occurred on

25 January 2011. However, after the revolution, all was far from harmonious. The dilemma is that “nothing guarantees that a just social order will result from a revolutionary change” (Bayat 2009:2). After 25 January, youth activists sought to demolish SCAF rule, which they considered a continuation of the old regime. On the other hand, the election strategy, which was part of the façade corporatist arrangements during Mubarak’s era, began to work in favour of the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi parties. Moreover, the Muslim Brotherhood benefited from the confrontation between youth activists and the SCAF, as it weakened both of them and helped the Brotherhood to win the presidential election and overthrow SCAF in July 2012. Large group of the activists launched the Tamroud campaign, which strongly supported the military’s toppling of president Mohamed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood on 3 July 2013, but it began to decline after the coup (*Al-Masry Al-Youm* 2013).

Egypt’s political scene has changed radically from the vigorous pluralism that followed the 2011 uprising. In 2014-17, the Islamist and secular youth groups were excluded or marginalized. Many prominent youth or revolutionary leaders are in prison or exile. The political elite associated with the military or with the former regime of Hosni Mubarak has retaken centre stage (Dunne 2015).

There are many parallels between the current political scene and the one that prevailed in late 2010, when elections that excluded most opposition - and yet were still corrupt and violent - contributed to growing public disgust with the Mubarak regime. Islamist and secular opposition forces have mostly been silenced or marginalized due to the banning of several groups, a harsh law against street protests, an electoral law that disadvantages political parties, and other measures that have undercut media and civil society. It is worth noting that after the counter-revolutionary succeeded, social media became less effective in mobilization. This was due to many reasons, including the military regime’s targeting activists in social media and streets alike. The authority invested heavily in surveillance of social media, and hired an electronic army of paid informants and pro-regime actors to spread rumors and delegitimize activism and the revolutions communications (Said 2017,

Earl et al. 2016). In light of these complications, it is extremely difficult to cannot predict the ways social media would intersect with mobilization in the future in Egypt or other Arab Spring countries. It may well continue to play a role, but we cannot predict any specific type of configurations of this role (Said 2017, Earl et al. 2016).

Certainly the counter-revolution remains adamant in its determination to regain the state apparatus, monopolize the media, restrain civil society, and re-establish repressive rule, perhaps more stubborn than its pre-2011 version. But this new regime has to govern a citizenry that has been significantly transformed. Large segments of the urban and rural poor, industrial labour, an impoverished middle class, marginalized youth and women, have experienced, however briefly, rare moments of feeling free, engaged in unfettered spaces of self-realization, local self-rule and collective efferescence. As a consequence, some of the most entrenched hierarchies were challenged (Bayat 2015).

## Conclusion

In sum, the Egyptian youth activism could be seen as the cohering of a generation before and during the first waves of revolution. The youth activism transformed from activism in the old-style social movements to activism via a specifically Egyptian form of New Social Movements which were ultimately horizontal networks using social media as a tool for mobilization and challenging the regime hegemony. They adopted a nonviolent strategy to bring change but subsequently were unable to translate this revolution into post-revolutionary structural power.

The study demonstrates that these youth activism are better understood as New Social Movements (NSM) rather than conventional social movements. They have developed through horizontal networking rather than vertical and hierarchical organisations. They have drawn substantially on the political opportunities offered by transnational and external factors. In both these aspects, they have made good use of new informational and communications technologies, specifically the Internet, which create com-

municative linkages but do not offer a clear route to the next stage of formal political organisation (explaining in part the limitations of these movements). Finally, they demonstrate the importance of generational politics in Egypt, the grievances of which lie at the core of the rupture between state and society.

The study suggests that Egyptian youth activism could be considered as New Social Movements and not only an old style of Social Movements or Social Movements Organizations. The new activism could be identified as; firstly, adopting a kind of mobilizing structure that is horizontal and networked, secondly, being less ideologically partisan enabled them to form across ideological networks and movements, and, thirdly, value-oriented movements that focus on freedom, dignity and social justice. The youth activism was not hierarchical, but rather network-based which used social networking technology as a mobilizing tool. They are not vertically organized such as the MB that could be considered to be of the old style social movements. However, large segments of the youth activism are not typical NSM by Western criteria and terms because they are not post-material, nor post-industrial movements and still focus on power struggles, political issues and radical change of an authoritarian regime. Moreover, variables have started to occur that emphasize the importance of both the generational effect and social media roles. They need to be integrated in the analysis to offer a new synthesis about the youth activism and to fill the gaps in the literature and theory. Youth activism as part of contentious politics would not have prevailed without the new social media, which played a major role in the mobilization and framing processes. The most important thing about these movements was that they were part of a wider generation of young people. The generational peculiarity and gaps should be taken into account when exploring the common features and collective identity of these youth activism.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>They considered that Egypt, Tunisia, and prospective Palestine comprise the “bully” states of the MENA, while Algeria, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen are the bunker states.