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The New Media Revolution in Egypt: Understanding the Failures of the Past and Looking Towards the Possibilities of the Future

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Over the last decade, activists and scholars have grown increasingly excited at the prospect that new forms of communication might revolutionize the way in which people interact with their governments. Many of these observers, the vast majority of which come from the relatively democratic West, have predicted that these forms of new media will be used to force authoritarian governments to be more responsive to the wishes of their populations. As first cell phones, then blogs, and now social networking sites have become common tools in the limited arsenal of opposition activists in dictatorial countries, Western commentators have grown even more confident in their conviction that new media will lead to a wave of democratization. These observers have viewed the potential of new media without considering how these tools could be hindered or stopped by uncooperative forces, and they have failed to understand the limitations of new media in the context of specific struggles between dissidents and their dictators.

This failure is particularly stark in the Middle East, where over the last decade many observers have seen their lofty dreams of democracy crushed, as the hold of dictators has grown stronger in many countries. The wave of democracy that was supposed to flood the region after the fall of Saddam Hussein never manifested itself. Hopes that many of the populist movements that sprouted following invasion Iraq, the most promising being the Kefaya and Khalas movements in Egypt and Lebanon respectively, would yield at least some small changes for the better seem to have been merely wishful thinking. While new media isn't going to be the end of dictatorships in the Middle East, it could prove to be helpful in forcing some democratic changes.

In Egypt, the successes, failures, and potential of the new media revolution are more apparent than anywhere else in the region. Perhaps the most fundamental success story is simply the incredible access to these new forms of technology Egyptians have gained over the last decade. The substantial forays into electronic dissent occurred in early 2004, and in the half decade following such efforts gained in both number and intensity, largely unhindered by Egypt's dictatorial regime. However, the past year has seen new efforts on behalf of the regime to repress these new modes of activism, which have in many ways been successful. If Egyptian activists are to learn to use the mediums effectively (and if observers wish to more accurately predict the consequences of electronic dissent), then it is important to take stock of the spread of new media in Egypt, how far electronic activism has come, and what paths might be available for it in the future.

The Spread of New Media in Egypt

The pace with which technologies of the 21st century have gone from non-existent to pervasive is nothing short of astounding. At the turn of the century, there were fewer than 1 million mobile phone subscribers in Egypt; less than a decade later there are almost 55 million,¹ a penetration rate of almost 66%.² Considering that over 25 million Egyptians are under the age of 14, over 95% of Egyptian adults have access to a mobile phone.³ With SMS rates at less than .1 Egyptian pound a message, communication via text message is available to almost all adult Egyptians. Mobile phones have become ubiquitous in Egypt.

Data indicate that Internet access is not far behind. The cost of Internet access in Egypt means that it is more restricted than mobile phones, but still available to the majority of Egyptians. Most Internet use in Egypt occurs at public terminals, schools, and Internet cafes, and not inside the home. The flourishing of Internet cafes in Egypt has helped expand Internet access. By interviewing hundreds of Internet café owners in 2004 Deborah Wheeler found that Internet cafés are patronized by all classes of societies, including college students, tea boys, and secretaries.⁴ Because many blogs and other online communication tools are written in `ammiyya (colloquial Arabic), the educational barrier to use the Internet is not as high as it is with more formal Arabic media.⁵ The penetration rate among Egypt's youth is mostly likely significantly higher than other age groups since they have grown up socialized into Internet usage in ways their elders have not. Given the low cost and literacy barriers, a sizable portion of the 40 million Egyptians between the ages of 10 and 25 have at least basic familiarity with the Internet.

Egyptians use the Internet primarily for email and chatting, and more recently for social networking. Facebook estimated over one million users in Egypt by the beginning of May of this year.⁶ Yet the most

1 "Egypt: Mobile phone subscribers hit 53.4 million," *Middle East North Africa Financial Network*. 11 August 2009. Accessed 2 October 2009 at http://www.menafn.com/qn_news_story_s.asp?StoryId=1093281519.

2 Figure based on population statistics provided by the CIA World Factbook, accessed on 11 September 2009 at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/eg.html>.

3 Ibid.

4 Wheeler, Deborah. "Empowerment Zones? Women, the Internet and Life Transformations in Egypt" Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Marriott, Loews Philadelphia, and the Pennsylvania Convention Center, Philadelphia, PA, Aug 31, 2006 . Accessed 24 May 2009 at http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p152543_index.html.

5 "The Arab Blogistan" *Rantings of a Sandmonkey*. Accessed 12 May 2009 at <http://www.sandmonkey.org/2006/04/06/the-arab-blogistan/>.

6 "Facebook Crosses 2 Million Users in Belgium, Sweden, Denmark; 1 Million Users in Egypt, Malaysia,"

prominent method of peer-to-peer communication in Egypt is still blogging. Determining the number of bloggers (and their readership) has been so difficult that most scholars have had to resort to generalizations. Marc Lynch and Andrew Exum estimated in 2007 that the number of political blogs in Egypt is anywhere from “perhaps a few thousand⁷ to just around 1,000.⁸ Top blog hosts Blogger.com and Maktoob.com list 24,409 blogs and 10,000 blogs respectively for registered to users who report their country of residence to be Egypt.⁹ While many of these blogs are possibly inactive,¹⁰ the fact that just two hosts collectively report almost 35,000 blogs suggests that the number of active blogs in Egypt could be over one thousand. Even more difficult is determining who reads blogs. Readership varies immensely between different blogs and at different times. For instance, Wa`el Abbas claims about 30,000 regular visits to his blog each month, but in May of 2005, a protest that was violently suppressed by government forces, his site received over 500,000 hits in just two days.¹¹

The Early Successes

Blogging began in earnest in Egypt in 2003-2004, at the time of the advent of the Kefaya movement.¹² It would not be possible to understand the origins of the political blog in Egypt without mentioning Kefaya, nor would it be possible to understand the successes of Kefaya without discussing blogs. Indeed, this relationship has been described as “a close, organic relations between blogging and a contentious political movement.”¹³ When Kefaya held its first major demonstration in December of 2004, it was organized entirely online, coordinated by the group’s highly trafficked site harakamasria.com.¹⁴ From the very beginning, Kefaya was an online movement as well as an offline one.

InsideFacebook.com. 2 May 2009. Accessed 10 August 2009 at <http://www.insidefacebook.com/2009/03/02/facebook-crosses-2-million-users-in-belgium-sweden-denmark-1-million-in-egypt-malaysia/>.

7 Lynch, Marc, *Voices of the New Arab Republic*. Columbia University Press; New York. 2007. Pages 7-9, 11-23

8 Ibid 43

9 Maktoob.com

10 A study to approximate the ratio of regularly maintained to inactive blogs would be immensely helpful in determining the number of blogs in any given community. Unfortunately, I am unaware of the existence of any such study.

11 Author interview with Abbas 27 June 2007

12 *Kefaya* is the Arabic word for “enough,” and is the name given to a loose coalition of political organizations that are united by their opposition to the presidency/autocracy of Hosni Mubarak and the presumed succession of his son Gamal. Kefaya was very active from the summer of 2004 to early 2006, but aggressive repression on the part of the regime and its failure to see the successful completion of many of its stated goals contributed to a general decline in the group’s activity.

13 Lynch 2007, p 57

14 Loosely translated, the website address is “The Advancement of Egypt.”

As the movement gained momentum and political activists joined the group, they brought their personal blogs with them, or, were encouraged to start them. What emerged was an online forum that reflected the diverse nature of Kefaya itself. The almost total lack of barriers to the entry of the blogosphere, as well as the drastic decrease in the costs and dangers associated with free speech, led to a profusion of diverse blogs which were united by their criticism of the government. As the movement held more demonstrations, blogs helped generate increased attention and participation when traditional media outlets refused to provide coverage. Activists used SMS messaging to coordinate demonstrations. Mass texting allowed for demonstrators to warn each other about the location of State Security Forces, make last minute changes regarding the location of the protest, and in many cases help track to movement and status of demonstrators who had been apprehended by authorities. These messages were then relayed to a broader audience via the blogosphere, all of which led to an extremely well informed activist community. However, Kefaya failed to reach a broader audience because the general public was not aware of its existence.

Gradually, as Internet penetration in Egypt increased, the public became more familiar with the blogosphere. While the number and types of Egyptian blogs has increased greatly, they have not had more impact. The result has been a large influx of digital participants in existing opposition movements, but not offline activists. This in turn led to competition and various disagreements amongst the original Kefaya activists as well as the newcomers, and ultimately contributed to the disintegration of the movement. The arrival of a second and third generation of bloggers since the decline of the Kefaya movement has contributed to the cacophony that, while helping increase the legitimacy and popularity of blogs, has also served to drown out some of the more experienced and motivated leaders. Blogger Amr Ezzat, who authors *What it seems to me*,¹⁵ worries that this sort of predicament may be endemic to political culture online: “It’s ironic that we keep promoting democracy and condemning centralization of power, but we can’t even run a yahoo[sic] group.”¹⁶

April 6th: Enter the State

Until the spring of 2008, the Egyptian government had largely ignored the electronic activities of dissidents, preferring to respond only to the physical manifestations of any opposition. Unlike other

¹⁵ <http://mabadali.blogspot.com>

¹⁶ While Ezzat’s concern might appear hyperbolic, it is in fact quite literal; disputes over who would run the “Youth for Change” Yahoo group affiliated with Kefaya actually forced the group to shut down. Author interview with Ahmed al-Saleh, April 14th, 2008.

countries in the region, Egypt blocks very few pages and it is relatively simple to use proxy-servers to skirt the restrictions. With a few exceptions, there had been almost no blockage of websites in Egypt prior to the spring of last year.¹⁷ Instead of shutting down websites, the regime has utilized other methods of repression, such as arresting journalists, harassing their family members and friends, and enlisting the government press to defame the character of dissidents.

The turning point in the nexus of electronic repression and dissent came with the April 6th General Strike in 2008. The April 6th Youth Movement is a loose, diverse coalition comprised of remnants of the Kefaya movements, the al-Wast party, the al-Karama, the 9th March Movement for University Autonomy, and other groups.¹⁸ Facebook and the blogosphere enabled the group to coordinate efforts quickly (the strike was organized in less than two months), which led to Western observers touting the success of the movement and the future of “Facebook activism.”

Yet when April 6th finally arrived, the general strike called for in the blogosphere failed to materialize, and the only tangible manifestation of the planned protests occurred at textile factories, where workers largely mobilized by themselves through more traditional means. But the regime took notice, and would no longer turn a blind eye towards electronic activism. It rolled out a strategy for countering this movement on May 4, 2008 when the April 6th Movement attempted to stage another general strike on Mubarak’s birthday. Between May 4, 2008, and April 6, 2009, the Mubarak regime employed a distinct strategy to derail the April 6th Movement. The regime hounded the leadership of the movement practically into submission, and many bloggers and activists affiliated with the group were arrested. At the same time, the regime conducted an even more brutal and wide-ranging campaign against the labor movement in Mahalla, putting 49 workers on trial in the High State Security Court. Many more young people have been dissuaded from joining such movements in the first place, preferring instead to pursue the creature comforts of post-Infatih Egypt.¹⁹ Why risk getting yourself beaten or arrested in demonstration when you could be enjoying the comforts of modern Egyptian life, especially when protesting has shown that would only be in vain?

Strategies for the Future: Keeping Electronic Dissent Effective

¹⁷ Eid 2006 141-144

¹⁸ “We Want a Living Wage” *Beheyya: Egyptian Analysis and Whimsey*. Access 29 April 2009 at <http://baheyya.blogspot.com/2008/04/we-want-living-wage.html>

¹⁹ Ibid.

It would be unfortunate if the failure of the April 6th Youth Movement in this one instance led to the end of electronic activism in Egypt generally, or even the departure of the newly-mobilized urban youth elite from the field of activism. Yet the state these activists are entangled with is a hardened authoritarian regime with decades of experience dividing and conquering its opposition. It will take a much savvier opposition, with clearer goals and a stronger presence on the ground, to seriously threaten the state. If a viable opposition is to take shape with the assistance of electronic media, the opposition will have to pay much more careful attention to the kinds of small-scale struggles over freedom taking place every day in the courts, the press, the labor sector, and the professional associations. It will also have to draw the right conclusions from the April 6, 2008 experience. The 2008 strike was probably more of a test run for information dissemination more than a large-scale mobilization. As Ferris notes, “It was a day where information technology played a crucial role, the updates coming out of Mahalla, people were exchanging info on Facebook about the strike, they were mobilizing, how can we help, this and that.”²⁰

Future actions via new media should probably be tied to on-the-ground efforts, especially concerning those areas in which activists and professionals have had the most success contesting the regime’s hegemony: human rights and issues of constitutional and economic justice. These issues are the subject of widespread political agreement among Egypt’s divergent opposition forces and population as a whole, and if they can successfully pool their resources, social media are likely to play a critical role in building political consensus, coordinating and executing concrete actions, and in putting together international human rights coalitions that can put pressure on the regime. The most promising route might be for the April 6th movement, with its ties to international media organizations and NGOs, to somehow link up with the labor movement in advance of the 2011 presidential elections – even if not all sectors of the opposition agree with the labor movement’s economic principles. As other revolutions have demonstrated, unity around issues of democracy must precede struggles over the post-revolutionary landscape. However, it is up to individual activists to turn the possibilities of social media into reality, and even the most tech-and-politically savvy individuals will continue to face determined resistance from a regime that has proved to be adept at repressing all threats to its existence.

20 Ferris 2009