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Social Media in Egypt: Impacts on Civil Society, Violent Extremism & Government Control

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Abstract

Throughout this policy brief, we vet the use of social media in a major Middle Eastern country - Egypt - where the youth took to the streets to express frustrations that lasted almost a lifetime. While social media helped topple autocratic dictator, Hosni Mubarak, it played the role of Pandora's box, unwittingly showing the strengths and weaknesses of the society's fabric. The brief follows a string of events that changed the face of the Egyptian state and with it came conflict. We also discuss how extremism infiltrated potentially every home with access to internet and offer solutions that can aid this creeping disease that lures sympathisers. Finally we list a number of recommendations that could help civil society groups sustain a dialogue and have a strong impact on the general public.

1. The Context of Social Media During the Arab Spring

Towards the end of the 30-year rule of former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, in 2010, Facebook was a platform adopted and employed for different purposes by [4.2 million](#) users. Twitter received the same traction and provided a haven through which the youth could vent. Dissatisfaction with Mubarak's autocratic regime peaked in the wake of [Khaled Said's death](#) as a result of police brutality. The news broke in the forms of posts and accompanying pictures of the bloodied and beaten face of Khaled Said, a 28-year-old from the port city of Alexandria. Said had been at a cybercafe in Sidi Gaber when he was dragged by two detectives and beaten to death across from the cafe, according to the [cafe owner](#) who witnessed the incident. After Said's family visited his body at the morgue and saw quite clearly the signs of torture on his skull, his brother took pictures and uploaded them to the internet in a move to expose police brutality. The photos soon went viral, fomenting anger at a common strategy adopted by the Mubarak regime against civilians. The family later disclosed that the reason Said was beaten to death was because he had [video material](#) "implicating members of the police in a drug deal."

¹ For the safety of the author, this policy brief uses a pseudonym to protect the identity of the author.

A few days later, a video circulated of the cybercafe owner describing how Said was beaten: "... they banged his head against an iron door, the steps of the staircase and walls of the building... They continued to beat him even when he was dead." The video had appeared first on YouTube. Egyptians in the country and abroad were outraged including Google marketing executive at the time, Wael Ghoneim. Ghoneim was living in Dubai when Said's photo went viral so he started an Arabic Facebook page in Said's memory naming it "We are all Khaled Said", just five days after his death. The page quickly garnered [130,000 likes](#), with many Facebook members changing profile pictures to Said's.

The pressure built up, nationally and internationally, for Egypt to order the trial of his killers. Protests broke in Said's home city as well as Cairo's Tahrir Square and in front of the Egyptian embassy in London. By the end of 2010, more and more calls were put up on social media for Egyptians all around the world to protest on 25 January 2011 against police brutality, the state of emergency law, injustice and more under Mubarak's rule. The date was chosen as it is a national holiday to commemorate the police. January 25 was to symbolise the people's discontent with the Egyptian police force.

2. The Day the Revolution Erupted on Social Media

The leading organiser of one of the opposition parties, *April 6 Youth Movement*, Ahmed Maher wanted to learn more about [non-violent](#) protests in preparation for a potential revolution. Though Ghoneim knew little about politics, he managed to get [50,000 people](#) to commit to join mass protests in Tahrir Square and other major squares around Egypt.

Tens of thousands of people took to the streets and, once more, a revolution was documented on social media encouraging even more people, most of whom were youths, to join the mass protests. Social media was also vital to document the peaceful protests being met by police brutality in the form of rubber bullets, grenades, tear gas and water cannons. One of the most famous clips is a female protester being beaten and stripped by security forces. A different form of resistance to the protests by the government was [blocking social media](#) websites such as Twitter, YouTube, Hotmail, Google and more. The government even went as far as to block cell towers and phone calls.

Another reason protests turned into a massively covered and documented revolution was the calls by activists such as Wael Abbas, opposition parties, public figures and celebrities such as Amro Waked and Khaled Abo El-Naga to stand against the regime. Facebook and Twitter also served as platforms to make clear calls for social change, economic reform and a civil rule. Through these two websites as well as YouTube, people at home learned of the revolution slogans, one of which was the famous, "*Eish, horeya, adala egtema'eya*" which translates to, "Bread, freedom, social justice."

After 18 days of protests where hundreds of thousands turned to the country's major squares, Hosni Mubarak announced in a speech that he would step down after 30 years of autocratic rule. On February 11, then-vice-president Omar Suleiman, an army general and a renowned intelligence officer announced [Mubarak's resignation](#) saying that the power was to be shifted to the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF).

3. Post-Revolution Social Media Use for Democracy and Social Change

A year after the revolution, Egypt started to take back control over its parliament, constitution and domestic affairs in what most people hoped was a slow but sure move towards democracy. Social media continued to be the go-to method to criticise or praise the transitional government throughout the 2012 presidential election.

Facebook users also more than [doubled](#) from 4.2 million users at the end of 2010 to 10.7 million in May 2012. These numbers made Egypt 20th worldwide for Facebook usage. Twitter also witnessed a 65% rise in users in 2012 compared to 2011.

Racing towards the presidential elections, more people were emboldened by the seemingly successful revolution and were calling for everyone to participate. Social media by that time worked as a window to people's minds and sentiments; it was only fair to notice the Muslim Brotherhood's (MB) [changing tone](#). The winning candidate by a small margin (51.7%), Mohamed Morsi promised unity, a republic and reforms within security forces. But the Islamist president failed to deliver, prompting wide criticism from people. Naturally, these people again took to social media to express their dissatisfaction with Morsi's performance as well as the MB's interference in ruling the country.

With videos of Morsi himself and other MB members on social media where they blatantly adopted polarising speeches and preached fundamental Islamic values (even promising a [caliphate](#)), their staunch supporters were emboldened to the point where one woman cut a [Christian girl's hair](#) on the metro. The anger built up and calls were made to change the narrative; however MB members as well as Morsi were myopic and protests began to take place against Morsi's rule. This came in the form of a petition by activist Mahmoud Badr who formed a grassroots movement named [Tamarod](#), in defiance of Morsi. The movement gathered support through social media especially its own Facebook page; the goal was to get 15 million signatures by June 25 2013 urging Morsi to call for early presidential elections.

MB supporters opposed *Tamarod* through a movement called *Tagarrod*, collecting 11 million signatures by June 20. By June 30, people started gathering near the Ittihadiya Presidential Palace in response to social media calls, and by July 3, Morsi was deposed in one of the world's most recent coup d'etats. Then-defense minister Abdel Fattah al-Sissi asked Egyptians to go on the streets to give him a "[mandate](#)" to fight "terrorism."

This crackdown turned violent and [killed 817](#) pro-Morsi demonstrators at Raba'a al-Adawiya Square. Most of the massacre was documented via social media platforms and signaled the start of an oppressive regime consolidated by al-Sissi's rise to power after being elected president in May 2014.

4. Using Social Media to Monitor and Penalise Free Speech

This stifling of free speech on social media was seen through the emergence of bots and fake accounts. What activists and Egyptian social media users call al-Sissi's digital army of hired social media trolls and monitors had one main goal and that was attacking social media

users and subverting any remaining chance of freedom of speech. They essentially manipulated internet interactions to influence democracy. Additionally, this same army reported popular pro-democracy major satirical Facebook pages and in December 2016, Egypt's Ministry of Interior announced that it managed to remove [163 Facebook pages](#) and arrest 14 administrators for inciting vandalism. At the same time, Facebook and Twitter continued to deny any cooperation with the Egyptian government.

Digital censorship then turned to [penalisation](#). For example, 2017 was a year when a number of activists were falsely accused and imprisoned for spreading false news, insulting the president and inciting violence through their social media activity, despite the lack of substantiating evidence. This drowning out of activists and journalists was also accompanied by hacking activists' social media accounts in a bid to intimidate and silence them, such as in the case of Esraa Abdel Fattah when they posted photos of her without hijab to shame her.

5. Is Social Media Enabling Repression and Cyber-Bullying?

But it's not all political. Egyptian "netizens" (citizens using social media) concerned with social change and shifting attitudes often take to social media through the use of video streaming to share thoughts. But Egyptian authorities still clamped down on such practices as a weapon against any form of freedom of expression. For example, university professor [Mona Prince](#) was suspended and investigated after posting a video to Facebook of her dancing. Another is when former activist [Amal Fathy](#) was sentenced to two years in prison after streaming a video on Facebook detailing her frustration over being sexually harassed twice in one day as well as the government's reluctance to support human rights, and the country's deteriorating socio-economic conditions. Fathy was charged with "spreading fake news" and was later jailed for "joining a terrorist organization", two charges often used to silence critics.

These attacks on freedoms were consolidated in 2018 by a [social media law](#), the Anti-Cyber and Information Technology Crimes Law, stipulating that a personal social media account with over 5,000 followers would be considered a media platform and hence come under media law and censorship. This set of rules might have silenced and imprisoned scores of critics but a few were still vocal about injustices inflicted by the authoritarian regime.

In an attempt to thwart al-Sissi's unconstitutional bid to rule till 2030, activists and concerned citizens called on the public in Egypt and abroad to vote 'no' for the proposed constitutional amendments. Activists mobilised people through calls for democracy, and other pro-democracy voters and newspapers announced that there was a close call between 'no' votes and 'yes' votes. Observers and journalists who were present to ensure the referendum's transparency were soon banned which translated into an [88.8% approval rate](#). Social media was a major player in documenting all events surrounding the referendum, from state-sanctioned festivities to vote-buying and intimidation by the Egyptian armed forces.

But Egypt's small circle of thinkers and youth bent on achieving social change could still be seen arranging events and talking on social media to influence the general public and push for tangible change. But even these benign attempts could only survive the frightening atmosphere if done subtly and without raising suspicions of people in government.

6. Can Social Media be a Platform to Foster Extremism and Militarism?

Social media can also be a dangerous medium, and under a repressive regime, a hotbed for recruiting extremists. For the past few years, ISIS especially used social media to strengthen its presence on the web and reach out to ISIS supporters and sympathisers in Egypt. In the aftermath of the Raba'a massacre, ISIS aimed to retaliate by targeting Egyptian armed forces. At the same time, they were using active [Twitter accounts](#) with ISIS-related hashtags to deploy their message or even more cunningly, hijack unrelated hashtags to establish communication with their sympathisers and supporters.

Though Twitter managed to suspend over [170,000 accounts](#) supportive of the Islamic State, in 2015, 381,853 sympathizers and supporters' accounts that were not suspended generated 964,828,227 tweets. The subtlety of ISIS and their outreach was due to their lack of spamming activities, such as using irrelevant and unneeded messages, and use of URLs.

While Egyptian authorities claim to be on the hunt for ISIS supporters on social media, the new law focuses more on calls for change and social or political upheavals on social media platforms, which takes away from any efforts to suppress the growing extremism in Egypt.

7. What Civil Society Organisations Know So Far of Social Media Crackdowns

Digital activist and Tactical Technologist at Amnesty, Ramy Raoof², states that many forms of crackdown on social media accounts are possibly targeting users based on their public content, private communication and activities. And this is all made possible by how the telecommunications infrastructure works in the country. The infrastructure requires that all service providers rent ISPs that belong to the government, and it gives government full access to customers' private data, calls and messages.

Social media companies take down content (either users' accounts, posts or products like pages/groups) based on reports that can be made either through the social media companies themselves through self-designed policies and regulations that are implemented in an organised and automated manner or through a hired third party which can be insufficient and problematic.

Recommendations

In such a stifling atmosphere, finding solutions is riddled with threats to welfare and human rights. That, along with rising extremism, puts a strain on Egyptian authorities making it harder to maintain a healthy medium on social media platforms. This in turn calls for individual efforts to ensure personal safety and a sustained fight for all freedoms.

² Ramy Raoof, email interview, May 16, 2019

Recommendations to Strengthen Democratic Participation

1. **Securing a cyberspace for netizens to express valid issues pertaining to their overall welfare is pivotal to democracy and social equality.** Reaching a level of national dialogue can also direct their frustrations at government performance and human rights abuses given the sizeable population of Egypt.
2. **Increase civil society training to improve personal safety and cyber-security awareness.** This is not to say repressive procedures are warranted or self-inflicted. Civil society needs to refrain from using public WiFi, use a two-factor authentication access method, and ensure use of a virtual private network (VPN) and encrypted connection to circumvent censorship on important websites like Human Rights Watch, to protect user's credentials and private information, to keep social media accounts safe from hacking and cyber bullying, and to ensure one's privacy and safety under a police state.
3. **Draw on strength in numbers and coalitions.** One of the main reasons why Egypt is not witnessing a social upheaval is the fixation of the divided left in Egypt on minor issues that would be inconsequential to the general public. For example, actress [Rania Youssef](#) was both savagely criticised and defended for wearing a revealing dress. While part of the left saw it as a pressing issue to abide by and uphold Egypt's traditions, none looked at the bigger picture of taking autonomy from Egyptian women and granting them equality. Similar issues take away from major political and social causes that involve a majority of people. A solution would be to regroup and prioritise causes that would mobilise masses towards collective action. This can be done as easily as starting a unifying hashtag. With time an identity to which most can relate will start to grow.
4. **Establish a representative advisory group to present the challenges faced by the least privileged and more vulnerable.** Party politics in Egypt has grown weaker which leaves no channel to communicate between civil society groups and the government. New mechanisms for public input into decision making are necessary.
5. **Avoid demonising language:** There's a long-time clash between Egypt's governing bodies and citizens that was never mitigated after the revolution. In fact, it heightened. Using demonising language on both sides can easily harm either cause and erects an impenetrable and even hostile barrier. Having a mutually deferential language facilitates communication and understanding.

Recommendations to Reduce the Spread of Violent Extremism

1. **Develop open-web protocols to govern online space.** Social media outlets should change their privacy approach for their own platforms and services, invest in technology, and security by-design systems architectures, that does not create unconstrained freedoms on social media platforms or more gateways and centralised ecosystems.

2. **Provide a fact-based information ecosystem:** Since the public turns to social media platforms to consume news, a fact-based information centre on either platform can provide a consistent source of news. A collaboration between the state and civil society can help reach a common ground and eventually initiate a political dialogue.
3. **Hire Arabic-speaking consultants on identifying extremist views.** The Arab world is known for employing hundreds of dialects to communicate making it near-impossible to spot extremist views, especially now that artificial intelligence is being consistently used to determine such views. Social media companies like Facebook and Twitter can benefit from hiring Arabic-speaking consultants to help them to identify extremist views.

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