



Social Media Lead the Charge

Advancing Reform in the Middle East
via Facebook, YouTube and Twitter

By per Concordiam Staff
Photos by Agence France-Presse

In early January 2011, Slim Amamou, part of a new generation of tech-savvy Tunisians, found himself sleep deprived in a government holding cell, accused of supporting the overthrow of President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali. A week later, the Tunisian blogger and online activist found himself taking the oath of office as the country's interim Minister for Youth and Sport. The world media was quick to highlight the role played by social networking websites in ousting Ben Ali, going as far as to dub the uprising a "Twitter Revolution," named for the popular social networking website.

Amamou resigned the post several months later, but his temporary elevation from online irritant to government insider lent credence to the theory that social media, delivered via computers and cellphones, have been a force for liberalization in the Arab world. Across North Africa and the Middle East, websites such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube have allowed protestors to bypass traditional “gate keepers” such as government-run media and build alliances with like-minded reformers. In Egypt, leading up to President Hosni Mubarak’s resignation in February 2011, protestors congregated by the hundreds of thousands on Facebook pages lionizing victims of Mubarak’s secret police. Iranians used Twitter to update foreign journalists about developments during the so-called “green revolution” of 2009, circumventing a news blackout imposed by the government.

“The arrival of social media doesn’t suddenly remove all previous forms of coordination. It’s an addition to the landscape, not a replacement for it,” said Clay Shirkey, a “new media” scholar and author based at New York University. “What social media does is it allows groups of people to know what other people are thinking in the country at a much wider scale, at much lower cost.”

But experts caution that Internet activism, a tool favored in the Middle East mostly by educated urban elites, is no panacea. The tendency for protestors to “socialize” at a few big-name websites like Facebook or YouTube has also made it easier for authoritarian regimes to jam, manipulate or otherwise disrupt those sites. When loose networks of semi-anonymous government critics assemble on a relatively easy-to-track website, it can actually expedite government repression. What’s more, Internet connectivity remains small in many of these reform-minded societies. For example, Facebook users represent only 4.5 percent of the admittedly large Egyptian population.

“Triumphalism about recent events in the Middle East is premature. The contest is still in its early stages, and the new age of Internet-driven democratization will endure only if we learn to counter the sophisticated measures now being developed to quash it,” Belarusian-born media expert Evgeny Morozov said in a February 2011 article in *The Wall Street Journal*. Morozov added: “It wasn’t the

Internet that destroyed Mr. Mubarak – it was Mr. Mubarak’s ignorance of the Internet that destroyed Mr. Mubarak.”

Others are more optimistic about the prospects for using social media to hasten political reform. They cite the well-known example of the Philippines, where millions of protestors summoned mostly by cellphone text messaging rallied to oust President Joseph Estrada



in 2001. It has since been dubbed the world’s first “e-Revolution.” More recently, Colombia’s No Mas FARC movement mobilized 13 million protestors on Facebook in 2009 against the Marxist, narcotics-financed insurgency that had destabilized the country for years. “What we see is a rising role of citizen journalists” who are sometimes usurping the role of the official media, said Dr. Dona Stewart, professor at the U.S. Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies.

Tunisia’s Internet-backed uprising started when Mohammed Bouazizi, who sold fruit and vegetables without a permit in the town of Sidi Bouzid, set himself ablaze to protest the government’s confiscation of his business. News of the suicide spread, and protestors jammed the streets, many complaining about high unemployment during President Ben Ali’s 23-year reign. “It seems that here the internet did play a significant role in spreading news of the

Tunisian blogger Slim Amamou takes the oath of office as the country’s interim Minister for Youth and Sport in January 2011. Amamou is a social media star whose protests helped topple the regime of President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali.

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– *Eugeny Morozov, media expert*



A protestor carries a banner showing police Maj. Alexei Dymovsky during a 2010 demonstration in Moscow. Dymovsky caused an Internet sensation when he released a YouTube video asking Prime Minister Vladimir Putin to crack down on police corruption.

suicide which sparked the protests, and then in multiplying those protests. An estimated 18% of the Tunisian population is on Facebook, and the dictator neglected to block it in time,” columnist Timothy Garton Ashe said in a January 2011 edition of the *Guardian*.

Social media carved out a similar role during the Egyptian protests. After the police were accused of murdering an innocent man named Khaled Said, a Facebook page titled “We are all Khaled Said” attracted hundreds of thousands of followers, some of whom spilled into the streets in early 2011. Computers and cellphones also played a part in subsequent protests in Bahrain, Yemen and Syria. Even when protests are more modest, they can sometimes motivate governments to act. In Russia, Alexei Dymovsky, a police major in Novorossiysk, presented a YouTube message to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in 2009 asking for help in tackling police corruption. Within days, the video had drawn more than 400,000 viewers. Dymovsky was initially arrested, but his online plea reportedly led to the firing of several Russian Interior Ministry officials. “What is being witnessed, especially in Egypt, is the perfect storm of social media revolution,” Alexander Klimburg of the Austrian Institute for International Affairs said in an early 2011 edition of *Defense News*. “Facebook, YouTube and Twitter have combined together with standard media, such as TV network Al Jazeera, and cross-border crowd dynamics to create a perfect feedback loop.”

But media analysts like Morozov fear authoritarian regimes will absorb the lessons from Tunisia and the Philippines and fine tune their repressive machinery to prevent similar online outbreaks. When a Buddhist-led protest broke out in Burma in 2007, the country’s leaders not only severed Internet service but hired roving thugs to beat up people carrying cellphones near the scene of the demonstrations. In its failed effort to contain the uprising in early 2011, Egyptian authorities pressured the country’s five Internet service providers, or ISPs, to shut down voluntarily, causing a huge traffic drop-off in a single day. To overcome the government’s attempted security crack-down, Google offered Egyptians a “speak to tweet” platform that converted voicemail to Twitter text.

In the spring of 2011, Libya’s government, facing a civil war it would ultimately lose, throttled down the nation’s only ISP, effectively



blocking usage for the rebellious masses but preserving online capacity for government officials. Syria at one point loosened controls on Facebook, acting as if it were a concession to government protestors, though many suspect the Assad government's motive was to spy on the opposition more effectively, Morozov said. Iran has the reputation of having the most intensive apparatus to squash social media. "They have learned their lesson from the 2009 uprising and have developed the most comprehensive Internet control strategy in the Middle East, setting up dedicated units of "cyber-police" and experimenting with advanced Internet surveillance techniques that may even allow them to detect dissidents who are using anti-censorship tools," Morozov said.

Even in the most successful cases, social media played more of a publicizing rather than an organizing role, experts concede. In Tunisia, for example, the Internet often served as an electronic

bulletin board for decisions made "off-line." Others caution against drawing too many conclusions from a technology that is a means to an end, not an end in itself. They recall hype from the late 1980s that dubbed the fall of the Soviet Empire a "fax machine revolution." Who today credits fax machines with dismantling the Eastern Bloc? In the end, experts insist the social media is only as good as the people who use it. That was the message of the December 2010 report "Political Change in the Digital Age" published by the School for Advanced International Studies in the U.S. In the case of Amamou and his colleagues in Tunisia, Internet activism led to a burst of freedom. In places like Burma, repression gained the upper hand.

"Conditions that contribute to success are likely determined not by the given technological tool," the report concluded, "but by human skill and facility in using the networks that are being mobilized." □

An Egyptian woman previews a Facebook page devoted to Khaled Said, whose death at the hand of police officers in 2010 provoked protests, some inspired by online social media sites.