Social Movements in the Digital Age: Change and Stasis in the Middle East

Mohamed Zayani
Georgetown University

The Arab uprisings were a unique event not only because they toppled a number of dictators and brought hope for ending decades of authoritarian rule in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, but also because they constituted socio-political movements that were associated with digital technologies. Although the Arab uprisings cannot be reduced to a digital phenomenon – as they were rooted in social discontent, economic grievances, marginalization, unemployment, and unfulfilled youth aspirations, among other factors – digital technologies were important in the uprisings.

At least during the initial uprisings of 2011, technological adoption enabled activism and provided the structure for collective action. Whether it was capturing evidence of police brutality, recording defiant protesters, diffusing information, coordinating protests, rallying support on Facebook, trilling tweets, or posting scrawled anti-establishment graffiti on social media, new forms of digital communication emerged as central to the contestatory dynamics that animated the Arab uprisings. Digitally-enabled activism and networked forms of organization proved to be so important for contesting power that the typically vertical state power structures found themselves at odds with the horizontal forms of communication embraced by networked publics.

Significantly, state efforts to reclaim the public sphere have often proved to be a challenge in the face of the popular social media platforms adopted by many actors and players to effect social change. From the Iranian Green Movement of 2009 and Arab uprisings of 2011, to the Gezi Park protests in 2013 and beyond, digital media have been tightly connected to protest movements that have shaken a region long known for its authoritarian resilience. During the uprisings that swept through many Arab countries, social media platforms extended activism, facilitated collective action and mobilized social networks. Online networking sites became powerful tools for citizen activism, playing a significant role in stoking protests, mobilizing protesters, coordinating street action and precipitating turmoil.

On Change and Stasis

Before exploring evolving dynamics that lie at the intersection of emerging social movements and wide-ranging digital transformations in the Middle East, it is worth dwelling on the concept of change itself. This is all the more important as information and communication technologies were inherent to the narrative about the region's changeability. Such conceptualization is tied to a number of dominant frames, including Middle East exceptionalism and the region's incompatibility with democracy, teleological assumptions about modernization that often see the region for what it ought to be rather than what it is, and technological determinism, which views the adoption of information technologies as a way of overcoming the Arab predicament.

It is a truism to say that change entails a movement from one particular state or condition to another. In the case of the Middle East, what is particularly noteworthy is the peculiarity of the prevalent discourse of change. As often conceived, the fault line between change and stasis is conspicuously thin. While conditions, systems and practices may change, the region has been engulfed in a state that approximates "static change." Prior to the Arab uprisings, the dominant understanding of what is often called the democratic exception is

not that the Middle East does not change or that the political systems in the Arab world are static, but that change – whether it takes the form of partial political openings, managed political reforms or liberalizing initiatives – works to strengthen the authoritarian grip of Arab states. The basic theoretical premise that underpins the resilience of Arab authoritarianism, as theorized by many political scientists, privileges "stasis" over "change." Whatever changes the region's authoritarian systems have undertaken, it is to ensure regime survival and perpetuate the status quo.

Beyond Technologies of Change

The unexpected events that unleashed the Arab uprisings did more than alter the reality of a number of countries in the MENA region; they unsettled many of the givens about the region, from the nature of Arab authoritarianism to the resilience of autocratic political systems, from assumptions about the region's democratic exception to the irrelevance of Arab public opinion.

Curiously, though, the narratives about the winds of change that gained currency during the uprisings were largely construed in relation to the region's perceived aversion to change. The dominant narrative that emerged with the outbreak of the revolutions was as much about the transformative nature of technology as it was about the prospects for change in the region. A key force and instigator for change that was widely invoked during the waves of protest the Arab world witnessed in 2011 were information technologies. The changeability of the region has been portrayed as being contingent on the transformative power of technology. What this narrative extols is not the disposition of the region to change, but the extraordinary ability of digital technologies to induce change, even against the disposition of the region.

To eschew such technological determinism, it is important to place the Arab uprisings in context, as social movements have been an integral part of the region's history. The genealogies of the Arab uprisings of 2011 are important to note with respect to earlier waves of anti-colonial nationalism in the first half of the twentieth century, and, more relevantly still, other forms of popular protests and anti-regime movements in the second half of the twentieth century. Previous cases of contentious politics in the region

abound, whether it is the bread riots and crowd actions of the 1970s and 1980s or the Iranian Revolution of 1979 (Chalcraft, 2017).

Political Communication in a Hybrid Media Environment

Just as social movements in the MENA region existed long before the Arab uprisings, the use of communication technologies to mobilize people and challenge regimes predates the digital era. The internet is only the latest phase of communication developments that have been intertwined with social movements. In the 1970s, mid-tech communication technologies acquired importance by virtue of their integration into society. The use of cassette tapes in the 1980s by exiled Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini to mobilize the public against the pro-Western regime of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and galvanize support for the Islamic revolution was not without effect. The appropriation of accessible and affordable small media inspired many opposition figures and movements in the Arab world to incite political change. Likewise, the ubiquity of video cassette recorders in subsequent years facilitated the circulation of sensitive, controversial or censored programmes. The use of the fax machine in the late 1980s and early 1990s further facilitated the flow of information, giving exiled Arab political dissidents in European countries the ability to disseminate critical information and anti-establishment messages to audiences in their native countries.

The advent of the digital era did not make these older forms of media obsolete. Legacy media remain important and, in the case of television, even more universally accessible than the internet and digital media. Digital forms of communication are not supplanting traditional forms of communication; instead, they are favouring the rise of an even more complex communication sphere, marked by an overlap between the two. The process of convergence that ensues from on-going digital transformation does not amount to legacy media simply being absorbed by emerging technologies; rather the two intersect in complex ways, giving old concepts and practices new meanings. Increasingly, we operate in a hybrid media environment where the digital and pre-digital co-exist.

Prior to the Arab uprisings, emphasis had always been on whether information and communication technol-

ogies – be it satellite television, new media or digital technologies – could be politically consequential, particularly when it comes to the outlook of democratization in the region. The received wisdom has been that the phenomenal transformation of the Arab media scene created a new and unprecedented momentum, but seemed to have little impact on the region's political systems. At best, the new Arab media scene opened the debate, enabling people to talk more freely and publicly. In doing so, it favoured the rise of a vibrant Arab public sphere, which was tolerated by Middle East regimes, as long as it did not alter power relations.

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The eagerness to draw out the political implications of evolving communication technologies and digital tools has often obscured significant trends associated with the complex ways in which these technologies are being adopted and appropriated within the Arab world. In particular, how digital technologies have affected agency, subjectivity, identity negotiation and political engagement over the years remains largely understudied. Understanding how social movements evolved in the Middle East requires a brief overview of how digital transformations have changed the communication sphere in the region.

Information Technologies and the Paradoxes of Modernization

The growth of communication – which predates the widespread adoption of the internet, with the phenomenal development of satellite broadcasting and the ubiquity of mobile phones throughout the region – became more explosive with increased internet pen-

etration. Although the internet was introduced in the 1990s, its presence was segmented and took the entire decade to materialize. At the beginning, the technological information revolution was largely elitist, as it favoured the well-educated and well-to-do. Public access was in large part through the numerous internet cafés that sprung up throughout the region. The affordable cost of these internet service centres and increased competition lowered the barrier for internet adoption, expanded home access to the internet and increased user numbers. With more users and new forms of usage, the internet took on another dimension.

Not only users, but also states throughout the Middle East region took a keen interest in the internet. They attempted to improve and further develop their telecommunication systems to avail themselves of better internet connectivity and increase internet penetration. Many countries invested in internet infrastructure and promoted internet development as a symbol of modernization. Developing an information and communication infrastructure would serve as a driver of economic growth and a trigger for social change. Notwithstanding notable overall disparities in connectivity in the region, extensive IT infrastructure, the introduction of competition between private companies, declining prices of new technologies and widespread mobile broadband coverage paved the way for the region's predominantly large youth population to become heavy mobile users and to be active on social media with the coming of web 2.0.

Paradoxically enough, while realizing the inevitability of joining the digital era, governments throughout the region developed a deep apprehension that wider internet access would entail the flow of undesired information and undermine state control over the information sphere. And so, for states that feared that new communication technologies could erode their control over their subjects, internet control and government censorship became the hallmark of the digital era. From the outset, the internet was a guarded space. Regimes in the region supported internet development only to the extent that they could control it. They enthusiastically embraced ICTs while at the same time despised the inconveniences that came with them. As internet use became more widespread, the prospects for online activism became a source of concern. Freer access to information could conceivably open people's eyes to new realities, alter dispo-

sitions and engender aspirations for greater civil liberties and political freedoms – all of which could induce online political activism.

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For the region's political establishments, the dilemma had always been how to join the information revolution and promote internet use without eroding regime legitimacy. In essence, states were attempting to marry two irreconcilable pursuits: democratizing the means of communication while constraining the free flow of information. Thus, while continuing to expand access to the internet and advocate the benefits of the information society, Middle Eastern states introduced regulations on internet service providers, subjected internet use to tight controls and intensified the electronic and human surveillance of users. They applied various methods to control the internet. The security instinct of these regimes impelled them to monitor online correspondence, close down undesired blogs and interfere with email accounts.

Digital Spaces and Online Communities

However, internet control did not go unchallenged. Over the years, tensions developed between regimes that sought to restrict access to the internet and aspiring users enchanted with what the internet had to offer. In the early days, many users were attracted to Usenet groups and email listservs, which offered information but also enabled discussion. This dynamically-shifting communication sphere took on another dimension with blogging, which became a space for the emergence of a new consciousness of citizenship. Although the internet undermined Middle Eastern governments' hegemonic control over information, it remained politically inconsequential in the face of the region's entrenched authoritarianism. Initially, these online spaces constituted lively discursive arenas, which lay at the intersection of the personal and the public,

and straddled the cultural and the political. Blogs stood out as a form of expression in a suffocating environment, enabling users to put forth arguments, engage others and share views. They helped voice views, overcome the culture of conformity and draw attention to controversial issues. In some ways, they helped create a new culture of citizen journalism. But in an environment that was inimical to free speech under regimes that brooked no dissent, blogging was a risky activity, and many outspoken bloggers faced grave consequences, from monitoring of blogs, to censorship, intimidation and crackdown. As a consequence, ordinary bloggers generally steered clear of politics.

Although the blogosphere was marginal to political life and a great many bloggers remained politically unengaged or avoided political commentary, blogging did have a political flavour, which became more pronounced among successive waves of bloggers and during subsequent phases of blogging. Though organized activism was not prevalent on the blogosphere, bloggers used blogging to advocate change and mount various online campaigns. Blogs helped inspire and facilitate new forms of activism and new ways of mounting campaigns and organizing. Though blogging was not manifestly a political activity, it evolved into a form of digital contention, which was a precursor to the social movements that animated the Arab uprisings. While, generally, blogs were a vibrant space of engagement, the blogosphere had, from its early days, an anti-establishment character. In Tunisia, disenchanted youth used blogging to contest censorship; in Kuwait, bloggers spoke out on nepotism or to fight political corruption and voting irregularities during the 2005 succession crisis; and in Bahrain, it was used to mount human rights campaigns. The Lebanese blogosphere initially developed around crises like the anti-Syrian movement, but then grew as a result of other issues, including sectarianism, business corruption, foreign workers and gender discrimination. In Egypt, the internet enabled activists and anti-regime critics to mobilize and develop online strategies that drew attention to their causes.

Online Activism and Political Contestation

The Egyptian blogosphere is particularly interesting because it was initially connected to the contentious

politics of Kefaya (literally "Enough"), an unconventional popular political movement that came into being in 2004. Energized by the mass protests that accompanied the 2003 Iraq War and the relative openings in terms of freedom of expression reluctantly ceded by the regime as a result of post 9/11 pressure to promote democratization efforts in the Middle East, this unconventional opposition movement was initially constituted by a loose coalition of political players and groups from various ideological backgrounds, united by their deep resentment of Mubarak's long rule and their adamant opposition to his son's presumed ambition for succession. Lacking physical headquarters but also denuded of the rigidity of established political parties, Kefaya relied heavily on mobile phone and internet-based communication in its activism, using its website to communicate news, air grievances, host forums, publicize protests, mobilize support and coordinate activities (Lim, 2012).

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This strategic use of communication, which enabled the movement to circumvent government controls and provide counter narratives to what state-sponsored media promulgated, nurtured blogging and energized the then nascent blogosphere. The nonconventional oppositional nature of Kefaya and its drive to connect to ordinary people attracted many Egyptians desperate for change and young activists, some of whom used their blogs to support the movement, while others began blogging during this period. More than an outlet for activism, the blogosphere grew to be "a site of protest" in itself (Radsch, 2008). As more users migrated from the hitherto popular online forums to the blogosphere, blogs multiplied to form a vibrant online space.

Increased state repression and crackdown on street protests largely confined political activism to cyberspace but also brought in another wave of bloggers. By the time Kefaya started to lose momentum, the blogosphere had taken on a life of its own, away from the

anti-regime discourses, adopting issues that touched individuals more directly. The blogosphere, henceforth, emerged as a close-knit community of bloggers, with the most committed blogger activists posting stories about police torture, power abuse, corruption, citizen grievances and sexual harassment.

One prominent blogger, Wael Abbas, who runs the blog Misr Digital, epitomizes this trend. As a citizen journalist, he based his stories on videos, photos and leaked documents, which helped publicize sexual assaults against women and denounce police abuse. By exposing injustices, documenting abuses and circulating pictures taken on cell phones, defiant bloggers often act as de facto investigative journalists. Their blogs get often noticed and picked up by the independent press, whose reports make their way to the international press. This compels the state media to cover these abuses of power and has even led the State itself to acknowledge them.

Such online activism took on another dimension when it intersected with offline labour mobilization, as epitomized in the April 6 Movement. Not only did independent political action associated with decentralized online networks start to co-exist with offline, ideologically-based movements tied with political parties or labour unions, but the ensuing dynamics also started to push the limits of dissent. Facilitating this kind of activism is the convergence of mobile phone and internet technology and the emergence of social media platforms. When in 2008 the textile workers at Al Mahalla Al Kubra, an industrial town in the Nile Delta, planned a strike, a group of bloggers created a Facebook group in support of their cause. The group, which called for a general strike, then transformed into a pro-democracy movement. Though the protest was met with a firm police response, the group continued its activism and managed to attract a large number of followers on its Facebook page. The arrest of one of the figures of the movement would popularize the movement even further, though with little effect on the ground.

As more activists started to use blogs as political tools, governments pushed back by implementing various measures aimed at stifling the blogosphere. These included closing down blogs, mounting defamation campaigns in the pro-government press against bloggers, devising strategies to divide them and altering data packages to limit uploading capability (Isherwood, 2009).

Social Media Networks and the Arab Uprisings

The rise of social media induced greater public engagement with issues. The strategic use of social media for social mobilization was particularly evident in the case of Iran. In 2009, social media networks were an important tool in energizing a massive protest movement. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's declared victory in the presidential election led the supporters of the opposition candidate, Mir Hussein Mousavi, to mobilize and contest the election results and call for real change in what came to be known as the Green Movement. Mousavi's supporters used digital communication tools to reach out to the general public, disseminate information about what was taking place, maintain contact both inside and outside Iran, rally support for their cause and organize protests. Social media platforms, like the micro-blogging site Twitter, enabled the protesters to circumvent government censors and bypass restrictions on text messaging. Digital technologies were instrumental in mobilizing protesters and sustaining the momentum of the protests, transforming a political battle into an information one. While these protests failed to alter the outcome of the disputed elections, such activism highlighted the unsettling political potential of the social web. The widely publicized death of Neda Agha-Soltan, which was captured on the mobile phones of witnesses and circulated extensively on the internet, became a powerful symbol rallying international support for the Green Movement.

It is in this context that the events of the Arab uprisings broke out. With the rise of social media, online communities and social networks started to form around social networking sites like Facebook. Increased internet penetration, ubiquitous mobile phone use, the popularity of blogging, and the massive use of Facebook would play a prominent role during the Arab uprising – even though that role remains a matter of contention between the technology enthusiasts who champion social media and the technology sceptics who question such celebratory accounts.

In Tunisia, where it all started, digital media was an important factor in social mobilization. The circulation of news about Bouazizi's self-immolation led to a spontaneous outburst of popular rage, which was captured on mobile phones. Soon images of protests found their way to the internet, quickly making it a matter of interest to the broader public. As the town of Sidi Bouzid came under siege, activists turned to social media to tell their stories. Local activists recorded scenes of the confrontations with their mobile phones and uploaded them on social media networks, capturing the attention of sympathetic audiences. Much of the momentum that animated the internet was fuelled by mobile footage from disenchanted youth and cyberactivists. The mediatization of the unrest helped connect the local setting to the broader national context. As more material became available, people started to relate more closely with the protesters and identify with their cause (Zayani, 2015).

Widely circulated images of state violence and police brutality were a stark reminder of the ruthlessness of the regime. As the protests spread, digital activism intensified. A number of activists aggregated, curated and promoted protest videos that were posted on Facebook, helping to amplify the information. Several Tunisians in the diaspora and foreign activists used Twitter to provide updates about the situation on the ground. Writing in multiple languages, they shared news they gained from activists and information they extracted from Facebook, thus increasing their reach and prompting an information cascade. The prominent use of social media should not obfuscate the role of traditional broadcast media. The fact that amateurish footage published on Facebook was picked up by the media and broadcasted on popular transnational satellite television channels fuelled further interest in social media and increased its relevance (Alterman, 2011).

The events in Tunisia had a spill-over effect. In a matter of weeks, Egyptians rose up against the Mubarak regime, where social media was also an important component of social mobilization. The launch of the Arabic version of Facebook had increased the number of users on this social media platform, which some exploited to speak up on issues and mobilize support for various causes. One of the popular groups that emerged in 2010 was "We are All Khalid Said." The aim of the group was to protest police corruption and to expose the brutal death of a young Alexandrian, who was apprehended at a cyber café and savagely beaten to death by security forces for exposing police corruption and disseminating images of police officers involved in drug dealing. Pictures of his bruised

face circulated on social networking sites causing a public outrage. What started as a collective form of digital commiseration with a young blogger who was the victim of police corruption and state repression, developed into a protest movement calling for change and demanding the departure of Mubarak. The campaign to memorialize the murder of Khaled Said would energize a leaderless anti-Mubarak movement. An awareness of shared grievances energized the masses, while the strategic use of digital tools to share information and organize support helped keep the momentum as the world watched the massive protests in Tahrir Square and elsewhere (Faris, 2012).

Post-Arab Uprisings Dynamics

Images of jubilant protesters celebrating the undignified escape of Ben Ali and the fall of Mubarak inspired various Arab states across the region to protest, including Bahrain, Algeria, Yemen and Syria. Digital activism empowered various actors and groups and bolstered their ability to resist and contest government control and demand change. But this wave of protests did not last long. As states managed to repress, co-opt or pre-empt change, an Arab winter set in. In the aftermath of the uprisings, many social movements withered and lost their momentum. Counter revolutionary forces, setbacks and disillusionment, prolonged armed conflicts, and reversion to authoritarianism undermined the ability of peaceful social movements to effect change in the Middle East region. Yet, this prognosis needs to be qualified, as the viability of these social movements differs from country to country.

In countries that are mired in prolonged armed conflict like Syria and Libya, civil war and factionalism replaced social movements. In countries like Egypt, where a popular revolution toppled one of the iconic figures of Arab authoritarianism, before the country once again fell into the hands of military rule, the ability of social movements has been throttled through both legislation and repression. Conversely, in countries associated with the second wave of the Arab

uprisings like Sudan and Algeria, social movements are taking the form of street demonstrations against entrenched ruling elites facing defiant popular pressure for real change.

In countries that are transitioning from authoritarianism to democratic rule like Tunisia, social movements have evolved into civil society organizations that are becoming more visibly active. What the strengthening of civil society and the participation of various groups did is create a tighter link between the civil and political sphere. How these social movements are likely to evolve and what they are likely to achieve is hard to tell; what is certain though is that the Middle East region is in the throes of tumultuous change.

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