

# Chapter 4

## Social Media for Political Change: The Activists, Governments, and Firms Triangle of Powers during the Arab Movement

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter discusses the role of social media in the uprisings of the Arab world. It argues that the seemingly democratizing impact of online activism is not due to the inherent nature of social media as a tool for democracy but rather an outcome of the equilibrium of forces that shaped the use of social media platforms by all three main players. Activists, governments, and social media firms formed a triangle of powers that influenced the use of social media during the Arab movements. In a different context, the outcome of such power balance can arguably inhibit citizens' rights and empower governments. To this end, the chapter first explores the use of social media platforms from the perspective of activists, governments, and social media firms, then presents a framework to understand the impact of all three in shaping the use of social media during the uprisings. The chapter then concludes that the projections of the role of social media on other movements in the world must not be made without understanding the underlying complexities and dynamics of these movements.*

### INTRODUCTION

Social Media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube were extensively employed during the Arab Movements by activists as an instrument in the battle against the authoritarian regimes and to bring democracy to the region. Online activ-

ism's conspicuous role during the revolutions in the Arab world and its impact on democratization has been a topic of debate. By some, Social Media was a supportive underpinning to activism during what was dubbed as the "Facebook Revolution." This rhetoric is supported by researchers who argue that Social Media contributes to collective

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action, and consequently, to the fall of regimes (Iskander, 2011). It curbs the regimes' leverage to silence and criminalize opposition (Masoud, 2011). Lynch (2011) highlights the Social Media contribution to activism and collective action. He articulates that Social Media bolsters activists coordinating actions by honing protesters' hopes of success, hindering the states repression by increasing its costs, and publicizing the movements through diffusion of information. Another rhetoric, on the other hand, argues about the possible adverse outcomes of embracing online activism by stressing how it encourages shallow support of causes and minimal activism (Gladwell, 2010). This line of thought finds that Social Media can be exploited by regimes through surveillance and infiltration (Morozov, 2011) and that policies of Social Media firms can hamper activists' efforts (Youmans & York, 2012).

To better understand the role of Social Media platform is it worthwhile to explore its uses by activists, governments and Social Media firms and to look into the driving forces and needs that motivated their strategies, tactics, actions and reactions.

### **ACTIVISTS AND SOCIAL MEDIA: A PROACTIVE INNOVATIVE APPROACH**

Undermined as the children of the Internet (Serageldin, 2011, p.28), the youth in the Arab world embraced online activism as their doctrine for change during the Arab Movements. In Egypt, the explosion in Internet use was evident. Facebook's one million users increase in one month is a clear indicator of users attraction to the Internet (Peterson, 2011). Citizens' congruence with online activism during the Arab Movements roots to their needs and motivations in the first place. In their quest to topple the regimes and bring reforms to their region, activists generally relied on three main

strategic objectives; Maintaining a certain level of security, influencing public opinion, and mobilizing protesters and the public. Activists' tactics and maneuvers originated from the evolvement of those motives. The Arab Movements provide an interesting set of cases in which the innovative and proactive use of Social Media by activists and dissidents is in accordance with these strategies.

First, personal security and the need for survival from retaliation or repression of authoritarian regimes pushed activists to embrace online anonymity in Social Media as a vital practice in most of their activism. An example is the famous "We Are All Khaled Said" Facebook page that was created in June 2010. The creator of the page, Wael Ghonim, used a pseudonymous user instead of his real name. In answering Newsweek why he chose to do so, Wael explained that he is seeking anonymity because he is scared of the government (Giglio, 2011). Activists relied as well on Facebook's feature of creating closed and secret groups that are unsearchable. This provided them with a safe and reliable environment to organize actions on ground. However, online anonymity has its adverse impact on activism. Youmans and York (2012) explain how it "has been used by some as a cover for harassment, fraud, and illegal activity. For example, a blogger known as 'the Gay Girl in Damascus' became a media source on protests in Syria and was later found to be a middle-aged American man living in Scotland" (Addley, 2011). Such incidents arguably harm the public image of the opposition by raising questions on its credibility.

Second, dissidents need to mobilize protesters and push more people to streets in order to challenge the state's authority and alter the status quo. To this goal, Social Media served as a strategic effectual tool for activists. According to Vila, Facebook's largest impact was in the mobilization of protesters (2011). It helped connecting otherwise geographically separated groups (Peterson, 2011). Amidst coerced despotic autocracy, activ-

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