

# Chapter 105

## The Potential of Political Changes in the Information Age: The Political Challenges Sphere of Saudi Arabia through Citizen Activism

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### ABSTRACT

*In non-democratic societies new media social networks have played a significant role in changing political and social positions, not necessarily through real life but, instead, through cyber life. This chapter examines how Saudi activists challenge the political authority and how Saudi citizens took advantage of publicity by demanding political change. All of this happened due to social networks and new media, which allowed citizens to mobilize information for the sake of transparency. This was a new phenomenon in Saudi Arabia. The current young generation of Saudis, who use the Internet and social networking sites, played a significant role in the public sphere by making use of the space available to them within cyberspace. This chapter discusses the potential of political information to flourish in Saudi Arabia. It examines how and why citizen activism in Saudi Arabia can be effective. The chapter also shows that social networking activities have the power to change political decisions and society.*

### INTRODUCTION

The notion that citizens hold power in a society such as this one and sometimes become counter-powers to the government is critical, and it must be taken into consideration in order to understand how such activity has challenged the government, changed society, and shaped the public sphere.

The example of Saudi Arabia with regard to these new social movements becomes more vital and vigorous for political and social change in the country. The case studies provide significant evidence regarding how citizens initially challenged the government and demanded political and governmental reform. These advantages have changed many political decisions based on what society has stipulated. In fact, the case studies in

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this chapter illustrate the first citizen mobilization in the cyberspace environment and how citizens pressured the government and became a counter-power to authority.

This chapter uses the example of Saudi Arabia as a case study, examining how Saudi Arabia has been affected by the work of new social movements through new media social networks and how the information age has affected politics there. While the success of these movements as they relate to society and political boundaries may be exaggerated, the example of Saudi Arabia here is to consider the challenges of these movements toward society and the potential of political and social changes. Thus, the two case studies regarding Saudi Arabia will be considered here as empirical examples of how social movements emerge through cyberspace, especially in a region that has no experience in civil society. Even though these movements have not taken advantage of transnational frames of movements, it is interesting to see how amateur societies practice democracy and establish a form of political participation. The first case study was done in 2009 when the first citizens took action via *Citizens Against Corruption* and held the government responsible by demanding accountability of the offenders. The second case study is the *Saudi Women Spring*, the movement that demanded that women have more rights and the ability to drive; this also addressed reforming the notion of guardianship. This movement demanded that the King of Saudi Arabia announce more political rights for women, allow them the right to vote in municipal elections, and select them to be a part of the *Shura* council. Two additional case studies are provided here, as well. These case studies have to do with the new youth movement that took place via cyberspace, and how the younger generations became more daring in their open critique of the government. The chapter ends by examining the *Day of Rage*, a result of the Arab Spring, and the government's response to it.

Hence, the new political activity that was formed through social movements activities

transformed society and affected politics in the information age, which led the King to confess to corruption and immediately call for reform based on what he had observed through new media social networking. This, in turn, caused the government to be embarrassed in the public sphere because citizens saw them as scandalous. Because Saudi Arabia has never before had institutions of civil society or social or political movements, I have chosen it as an example and case study to discuss online social and political movements. The nation still does not have any political parties other than the monarchy's regime. Therefore, allowing citizens to share political and social decisions in Saudi Arabia represents a radical shift. Citizens decentralized both government power and the monopoly on information that the government held.

## **NEW MEDIA AND NEW POLITICS**

Today's Saudi Arabian society, with the emergence of the cyberspace environment, has experienced a new form of social practice and political activities. It has applied a new phase of movement and civil society that did not previously exist. The new space through new media social networks allows citizens to aggregate, to elaborate, and discuss social, economic and even political situations in what amounts to a public space. Citizens have more confidence to talk about their demands and their problems. Citizens do not need the mainstream media in order to gain information, and they do not need to follow the news to express themselves; they have established their own forum of dialogue. They share news and even create it. Citizens find new spaces where they may share information, and these spaces are not under government control. But before discussing the actual reform events by examining the two case studies, it is important to look at the situation in Saudi Arabia and how civil society and social movements work through cyberspace.

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