# THE NEW FORMS OF POLITICAL ACTIVISM AND THE EGYPTIAN REVOLUTION

**Ana-Maria GAJDO, Ph.D. Candidate,**
**Sapienza University of Rome**

*Abstract: During the Mubarak government any form of political activism was not tolerated. With the new forms of communication - internet and satellite TV, even if they were severely controlled by the dictatorial regime - Egyptians discovered new forms of political activism. The internet has become a „tool" and a political agora, as well an infinite source for the human rights literature. Egyptians used Facebook, Twitter to launch the calls to protest in Tahrir Square in early 2011, when the Arab Spring have brought the removal of Mubarak. Social media was a major factor in mobilizing protesters, exposing the atrocities of the regime, organizing the new political activism.*

*Keywords: Revolution, Social Media, Arab Spring, Political Activism, Human Rights*

The Arab Revolutions of 2010-2011 led to the fall of dictatorships in North Africa and the Middle East's country, regimes that managed to withstand decades. If online activism proved to be an important factor in the Egyptian Revolution of 2011, online political activism proved to be as important for the removal, in July 2013, of the first democratically elected president in Egypt, Mohamed Morsi, one of the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood - even though there are many controversies regarding the accuracy of the presidential elections held in Egypt in 2012, and the Islamic regime imposed by it.

## Facebook, Blogs, Twitter and the Revolution

Young people from North Africa and the Middle East, areas covered by the revolutionary wave in 2011, underwent an important process of socio-cultural training for at least the past ten years[57]. Thus, they had an important role in opposing to authoritarian regimes and found something to unite them: the "rights", whether we are talking about human rights, social, cultural, the liberty of expression, work, etc.. In this context, the Internet has not only worked as a tool and as a possible political agora, but it was also an infinite source for what is called human rights literature.

"Arab Spring" began on Facebook" so they said in early 2011. Social media, new media understanding by these satellite television, social networking websites, internet connections, blogs were not the ones who started the Egyptian Revolution, but certainly factors with an important role in mobilizing protesters, exposing atrocities regime Mubarak, organizing political activism. "For instance, many aspects of the Egyptian protests have been echoed across the region: the slogans, youthful element and use of social media reflected and inspired protest tactics in other countries from Morocco to Yemen. While Tunisia was the

[57] Paola Caridi, *Civil Society, Youth, and the Internet*, in the volume signed by Silvia Colombo, Paola Caridi, Jane Kinninmont, *New Socio-political Actors in North Africa - a Transatlantic Perspective*, Mediterranean Paper Series 2012, The German Marshall Fund of the Unites States, IAI-Istituto Affari Internazionali p. 1.



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spark to these uprisings, Egypt, because of historical, political, and demographic reasons, turned the spark into a full-fledge fire"[58].

An unexpected reaction and also "fatal" for the Mubarak government was in January 28 when he authorized the "cutting" of the mobile phone networks and the Internet. At that time "many parents had no choice but to go out into the streets to get the news about their sons and daughters. As a result, they saw at first hand vivid instances of police's brutality. Provoked and shocked by thid brutality, they spontaneously pulled together to defend themselves and their children. Food chains were improvised, tents and blankets were brought to Tahrir Square, and doctors established emergency clinics on the spot. In this way, the severing of communication channels was transformed from a constraint into an opportunity".[59]

Important to note is that Arab bloggers took to the streets: from e-dissidence to real opposition in the streets, in cafes, where they discuss politics. Those were places where young people "lifted their web-mask and revealed their proper identity, creating a community no longer simply virtual, and building profound personal links that still last"[60].

On the net arose a series of movements, political activism beeing in fact continuous, despite the claims made by the Western press in particular after the outbreak of the Arab Revolutions. The press talked about "The Arab awakening", "Islamic revival" and so on, but journalists who had real connections with the Arab world were saying that "the Egyptian Revolution did not come out of the blue on January 25, but is the result of chain reaction, of 2,000 protests in solidarity with the Palestinian Intifada" as Hossam El-Hamalawy wrote[61].

Also the Egyptian researchers Baghad Korányi, Rabab el-Mahdi[62] argue that political activism was "reactivated" with the second Palestinian Intifada, the reinvasion by Israel of the West Bank, but also in 2003 when the Egyptians protested in Tahrir Square against the invasion of Iraq by U.S. This last protest served as a model for the uprising of January 25, 2011. Some political movements which have also an identity in online world, were inspired by the riots: Movement for Change - Kefaya, 9 March Movement and April 6 Youth Movement[63].

April 6 Movement, which was formed in 2008 to support the textile strikes in the city of al-Mahalla al-Kubra was organized online: Using Blogs, Flickr, Twitter and Facebook, the movement has gathered 70,000 members in 2009 and stimulated hatred of the Mubarak regime, and also the debates on political issues. The editor of Democracy Digest Michael Allen wrote in 2008 that "to coincide to the NPD's (National Democratic Party) annual

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[58] Baghat Korany, Rabab El-Mahdi, Chapter *The Protesting Middle East* in *Arab Spring in Egypt – Revolution and Beyond*, Cairo, New York, volume coordinated by Baghat Korany, Rabab El-Mahdi, The American University in Cairo Press, (2012) p. 3.

[59] *Ibidem*, p. 11.

[60] Paola Caridi, Chapter *Civil Society, Youth, and the Internet"* in *"New Socio-political Actors…cit.",* p. 3.

[61] Hossam El-Hamalawy, *Egypt's revolution has been 10 years in the making*, The Guardian, 2nd March, 2011, available online at http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/mar/02/egypt-revolution-mubarak-wall-of-fear (last date of access: October 2013).

[62] Baghad Korany is professor of international relations and political economy at the American University in Cairo and professor at the University of Montreal; Rabab el-Mahdi is associate professor at the American University in Cairo and publicist.

[63] Ann M. Lesch, Subchapter *Mounting Opposition*, Chapter *Concentrated Power Breeds Corruption, Repression, and Resistance* in *Arab Spring...cit.* , p. 32.



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conference in November 2008, young activists launched a parallel cyber-conference to highlight and satirize the government's failures. As the regime has stifled freedom of criticism, harassing journalists and seeking to curb the satellite TV, the web has become a vital outlet for expressing grievances and criticism of the regime – and for confronting opposition's elites too."[64]

And political alternative to Mubarak regime focused on online activism. Egyptians rallied National Alliance for Change by Mohamed ElBaradei and signed the petition for the abolition of emergency laws and restrictions for presidential candidates. In August 2009, the petition had 88,000 handwritten signatures and 341,000 online signatures[65]. ElBaradei is a PhD in law from the University title in New York and is considered a model for the Egyptians. As President of the International Atomic Energy Agency warned the UN Security Council that there was not found evidence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and that U.S. attacks on this motivation, is not justified. It is considered a man of strong ideas, which did not yield to temptation Mubarak government in the sense of accepting a position in the government in return to support Mubarak family and, as such, has become undesirable. ElBaradei has set himself as an Egyptian leader in the battle for change. Also, in June and July 2013, he was a major actor in the intern politics and the most desirable candidate to replace president Morsi after „The Second Revolution" – the events that overthrowned president Morsi from the power, after 20 milion Egyptians were claiming his resignation in the streets. In the last decade, says Ann M. Lesch[66], cyberspace has made more and more Egyptians to be increasingly aware of state repression, but also of corruption among government officials. Moreover, police brutality is felt in all aspects of life and people increasingly strong desire to be heard has been crucial in preparing the Revolution of 25 January 2011.

An event, namely the absolutely violent and senseless death of a young Egyptian, Khaled Said, beaten by the police for having entered into an internet cafe, created an apart cause. The cause "We Are All Khaled Said " is active even today on Facebook. On 6 June 2010 Khaled Said, aged 28, was beaten by security forces in Alexandria. Officers hit him in the police station, and dragged him through the streets and finally called an ambulance. Khaled died in hospital. Later that night, outraged by what happened to Khaled, 17 young men and women, attacked the police station and in turn were beaten, arrested. Protests regarding these events continued throughout the summer of 2010 in several cities in Egypt, for the Egyptians realized that they may have the fate of Khaled. Several support groups were created on Facebook, but on the page "We Are All Khaled Said" began to be posted more and more stories about Egyptian police abuse.[67] In 2010, tens of thousands of Egyptians have joined the cause on Facebook. It soon became the largest Egyptian Facebook group with more than 300,000 members. This movement, "We Are All Khaled Said", organized a series of protests across the country that have attracted large numbers of young people. „The administrator of the group called on the members to wear black clothes and stand for an hour

[64] *Ibidem*, p. 34.
[65] *Ibidem*, p. 36.
[66] Ann Lesch is a professor of political science and associated provost for international programs at the American University in Cairo.
[67] Ann M. Lesch, Subchapter *We Are All Khaled Said*, Chapter *Concentrated Power Breeds Corruption, Repression, and Resistance* in *Arab Spring...cit.*, p. 37.



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in silence, facing the Nile or the sea - That because large gatherings were banned –A.N. For several Fridays in a row (Friday is a day off, a day to pray to the mosque – A.N.), hundreds of young people stood apart away from one another dressed in black and facing the Nile or the sea, to protest the murder of Khaled Said. In July 2010, „We Are All Khaled Said" and the April 6 (Movement-A.N.) organized a large protest to commemorate the death of Khaled Said in Alexandria"[68]. The protest was attended by opposition leaders including Mohammed ElBaradei and Ayman Nour (Ayman Abd El Aziz Nour's is the Al-Ghad Party founder-A.N.). In January 2011, the protesters were announced on the Facebook page "We Are All Khaled Said" about Police Day protests - the day when the Egyptian Revolution began. Sheila Carapico witness to the events of 25 January 2011, wrote that: "I personally became aware knew that something dramatic would happen on 25 January from the Youtube video distributed via Facebook. In the clip, the mother of Khaled Said (...) implored patriots to mark Police Day by showing pupular solidarity against police brutality".[69] Apart from Khaled's mother and her family, and the Coalition April 6 and Youth Movement for Change had spread the call to demonstrate on Police Day. „The momentum of 25 January exceded organizers' dreams"[70]. Ten of thousands Egyptians marched toward Tharir Square, thousands returned the next day, hundreds never left Tahrir.

In this way, "the new media - internet and blogs - have become democracy *off-shore* in the region"[71], ie in North Africa and in the Middle East. In 2008, only 13-15% of the population were users of the net, but in 2010 more than 57 million people in the area used net and, in 2011, 85% of the Arab media have site. Moreover, some blogs in areas were by tradition media was not present - such as Libya or Syria - had broadcasted the views of opposition leaders, via satellite, by New York Times, CNN or Al Jazeera. For example, the blog Egyptian Wael Abbas was selected in 2008 for the Knight International Journalism Award, award conferred by the International Center for Journalists. Wael Abbas was harassed by the Egyptian government and its YouTube and Yahoo accounts were closed, as the account of Facebook. „This was the first time a bolgger rather than a traditional journalist had won this prestigious journalism award".[72] Police followed bloggers, but with little success, and they were called "cyber-dissidents".

Dina Shehata[73] says that in 2008 there were 160,000 Egyptian blogs, 20 % of which were political in nature. Bloggers were on opposite sides from the mainstream media, controlled by the regime, by their criticism of public figures, including President Mubarak and his son, Gamal. Some blogs have become hostess sites for posting evidence of torture and spread the messages of public protests and events organized by the opposition.

Accordindg to Gamal Eid[74], executive director of the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, by July 2010 there were 750,000 bloggers in the Arab region and 300,000

[68] Dina Shehata, Subchapter *Phase Four: 2010-2011*, Chapter *Youth Movements and the 25 January Revolution* in *Arab Spring...cit.*, p. 117.
[69] Sheila Carapico, Chapter *Egypt's Civic Revolution Turns "Democracy Promotion" on Its Head* in *Arab Spring...cit.*, p. 212.
[70] *Ibidem*, p. 213.
[71] Bahgat Korany, Chapter *Egypt and Beyond: The Arab Spring* in *Arab Spring...cit.*, p. 286.
[72] *Ibidem*, p. 287.
[73] Dina Shehata, Subchapter *Phase Two: 2004-2006*, Chapter *Youth Movements and the 25 January Revolution* in *Arab Spring...cit.*, p. 112.
[74] Quote by Bahgat Korany, Chapter *Egypt and Beyond: The Arab Spring* in *Arab Spring...cit.*, p. 287.



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were active. Moreover, it is estimated that 57 % of Arab students in UAE and Jordan are reading news on websites. Also, Baghat Korany quotes Amr Badawy, executive chairman of Egypt's National Body of Communication, who argues that there were 4.4 milion Facebook users in autumn of 2010, 7.5 milion in the spring of 2011, 8 milion in June 2011 – when Egyptians were in the streets again, A.N. Also the number of Internet users has grown impressively: according to an article published by Al-Masry al-Youm on July 24, 2011, the net number of users increased from 27 million in January 2011 to 47 million in March – „Although the new media did not cause the overthrow of the regime, they certainly fueled the Arab Spring".[75]

Alaa Abdel Fattah is one of the leading figures of the Revolution in Egypt, specializing in software and one of the most prominent Egyptian bloggers. In 2004, Fattah began cyberactivismul his wife: they created the first Egyptian blog where virtual diaries kept continuously built a "digital political community"[76].

Bloggers in Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Bahrain, Syria, before 2011, had three goals, according to Paola Caridi[77]: to communicate, to build links with other bloggers, to provide information that differs from the information channel controlled by the state, to build a common culture and, above all, a political culture. The conclusion is that without the Arab blogosphere connection created between the net and the streets policy, social networks would not have had the impact that it had in 2011, aggregating support for the Revolution. "In short: Facebook was an aggregator and Twitter a tool. Blogs were the message bearers." [78].

As stated in April 2013 Saudi Prince Waleed bin Talal[79] in an interview for MEMRI - Middle East Media Research Institute, the governments who try to control or halt new media start losing battle: „This is a losing battle. Waging war on the open media and freedom of thought is a losing battle. I advise the broadcasting authorities in Saudi Arabia and in all Arab countries not to engage in these losing battles. In our age of high-speed Internet, the [media] will serve as a vehicle for the inevitable victory of freedom of speech and thought". It seems that these tips have reached the ears of the government of Mohamed Morsi until July 2013, or even if they did, the government has continued to be repressive with new political activists. According to an Al Arabiya news[80], a prominent Egyptian blogger and political activist, Ahmed Douma, was accused of insulting the former Egyptian president, Mohamed Morsi, and is not an isolated case.

According to the "Newsweek" magazine of 1 April 2013[81], Mohamed El-Gendy, a guide aged 30 years and organizer of actions of the "Popular Current" was murdered by

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[75] *Ibidem*.
[76] Paola Caridi, *Civil Society, Youth, and the Internet* in *New Socio-political Actors…cit.,* p. 2.
[77] *Ibidem*.
[78] *Ibidem*, p. 4.
[79] Rotana Khalijiyya, *Saudi Prince Al-Waleed Bin Talal: The Arab Spring Is 'Arab Destruction,' No Regime Is Immune to It; MB Smell Spreads in Saudi Arabia; Iran Cannot Be Trusted,* 2.04.2013, MEMRI - The Middle East Media Research Institute, available online at : http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/0/7150.htmThe, (last date of access: October 2013).
[80] ***, *Egypt Court Keeps Activist in Jail as Trial Starts,* „Al Arabiya", 5.05.2013, available online at: http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2013/05/05/Egypt-court-keeps-activist-in-jail-as-trial-starts.html, (last date of access: October 2013).
[81] Mike Giglio, *Egypt- Death of a Facebook Activist - Did Morsi's Government Cover up a Political Murder?*, „Newsweek", 1.04.2013, London, Great Britain, pp. 12-13.



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police. He was last seen alive on 28 January 2013, and his friends say they often receive threatening messages on the cell phone asking him to give up activism on Facebook. Although it was searched several hospitals, witnesses say that it would be seen first in prison. Then it was found beaten in a hospital in a coma. In a few weeks he was dead. His case became similar to that of Khaled Said. The article also points to the other two cases: first, the case of the student Gika Gaber, who was only 18 years old and was shot in November 2012 by police. Gika Facebook was administrator of the page "Together Against Brotherhood" (Muslim Brotherhood- A.N.), and two days before his death, another young man who was managing the page "Brotherhood Liars" was killed in similar circumstances.

In January 2013 another group of young activists more radical was created: "Black Block Cairo", group charged with "intent to destroy the country". Hundreds of supporters of various Egyptian Black Blocks occurred in January 2013 at the forefront of anti-government protests in Cairo, Alexandria and the Suez Canal cities. The first message of the group Black Block Cairo appeared on his Facebook page and quickly attracted more than 20,000 followers online, according to Reuters News Agency[82]. Its slogan is "chaos against injustice" and have only one enemy: the Muslim Brotherhood. Members of the "Black Block Cairo" were appointed by former Egyptian authorities as members of an "organized group involved in terrorist acts" and in February 2013, 22 members of the group were arrested for 15 days[83]. Around the 30th of June 2013, youth groups formed as the Black Block (Black Block, Black Bloc Cairo, Egypt Black Block) launched on Facebook calling the protests that ultimately led to the seizure of power by the military, removing and arrest of Mohamed Morsi and abolishing the Muslim Brotherhood.

**The Media had supplemented Social Media**

Egyptians used Facebook, Twitter to call other protesters in Tahrir Square on February 28, 2011 but this was not enough for the Revolution will not be repressed. Messages, but also advices on how to stay away from weapons in Tahrir Square on January 25, were provided by Al Jazeera, CNN and BBC cameras, which conveyed what is happening in Tahrir Square. So the role of social media was supplemented by satellite TV. According to the authors of the study *Arab Spring in Egypt - Revolution and Beyond*[84], Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya - old, classic media, backed by Facebook and Twitter - the new ones, showed images of fraternization between the army and people. Media "feed" people, but did not cause the Arab Spring. „Communication action is essential to collective action> it helps to create for people far from physical action (...) the picture of a common cause, a joint frame of action".[85] The powerful television station Al Jazeera is considered „the major weapon in Qatar's foreign policy": „The state-owned television channel Al Jazeera, where many important positions are

[82] Shaimaa Fayed, *Egypt prosecutor urges arrest of black-clad hardcore protesters*, Reuters, 29.01.2013, available online at: http://mobile.reuters.com/article/topNews/idUSBRE90S0NW20130129, (last date of access: October 2013).
[83] ***, *Egypt Detains Alleged Members of 'Black Bloc' Anti-Mursi Group* , „Al Arabiya", 21.04.2013 available on/line at: http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2013/04/21/Egypt-detains-alleged-members-of-Black-Bloc-anti-Mursi-group.html (last date of access: 9.07.2013).
[84] Baghat Korany, Rabab El-Mahdi, Chapter *The Protesting Middle East* in *Arab Spring ...cit.*, p. 12.
[85] *Ibidem*.



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held by the Muslim Brotherhood, is the major weapon in Qatari foreign policy, as shown by what happened in Libya: the channel called on people to rise up against Colonel Gaddafi whilst Qatar provided weapons to the Islamist rebels"[86]

An important role of satellite TV channels which mobilized Egypt was to promote "neoliberal Islam ", which appeared in 1990 with the "new preachers". Few neoliberals preachers had higher education, but with a modern appearance, a moderate speech and strong interpersonal skills, the new preachers had focused on "personal salvation." In accordance with the wishes of auditors, they adopted a non-political speech. The new generation of neoliberal preachers was a driving force in inspiring young Egyptians to develop a religious identity[87]. Importantly, for the first democratic elections after the Revolution, Egyptians had chosed the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamic political party.

„Thus while political pan-Arabism was failing, Arab feelings of togertherness or cultural pan-Arabism was surviving".[88] And the cultural pan-Arabism had experienced a revival in the late 90s when there were new ways of communication such as news channels via satellite 24 hours. In five years, from 2004 to 2009 Arab Transnational Broadcasting increased to 250%. In July 2011 there were 1,100 of which 600 TV channels free that reaches 90% of homes have electricity or 250 million people and the number is still increasing due to TV programs available on mobile phones[89].

If new forms of political activism proved decisive in removing dictatorial regime in Egypt, remains to be seen if they will be as strong in Syria. David W.Lesch[90] claims that Syrian opposition was mobilized from the first day of the protests using Facebook, Twitter and Youtube and that "indeed, the use of these social media sites has in itself been revolutionary transforming sporadic acts of civil disobedience into nationwide demonstrations"[91]. Moreover, social media provides protection to anonymous author who launches messages to revolt, even if the Assad regime continues to suppress and repress the media and control the flow of information. Precisely because the Assad government had chased reporters „every Syrian citizen became an activist and, at the same time, a journalist".[92]

In conclusion, in countries covered by the revolutionary wave of 2011, social media has brought down the barriers of fear, of fright of brutal repression by dictatorial regimes and facilitated access to information sources worldwide.

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[86] Patrick Schulze-Heil, *Qatar: An economic and religious offensive*, „ARTE TV" - Monde Arabe, 28.06.2012, available on/line at: http://monde-arabe.arte.tv/en/qatar-an-economic-and-religious-offensive/, (last date of access: October 2013).
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[88] Bahgat Korany, Chapter *Egypt and Beyond*: *The Arab Spring* in *Arab Spring*...cit., p. 285.
[89] *Ibidem.*
[90] David W.Lesch is professor of Middle East History, Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas and a consultant to US and European government departments as well as the United Nations.
[91] David W.Lesch, Subchapter *The Social Network*, Chapter *Opposition Mounts* in *Syria – The Fall of the House of Asaad*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2012, p. 117.
[92] Ibidem, p. 118.



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