

# Social Networks and the Arab Spring

Fadi Halliso SJ

Syria faces prolonged unrest as the protests that have swept through the Arab world this year continue to provoke an aggressive response from the country's armed forces. In Egypt and Tunisia, similar protests culminated in the resignations of the presidents of each country, but how and why did these revolutions begin? Syrian Jesuit, Fadi Halliso examines the origins and development of the protest movements in Egypt and Tunisia, focusing particularly on the role played by social networking sites.

Six months ago, the international community was shocked by the news coverage of the beginning of what has come to be known as the Arab Spring. The Arab world has seen a chain of protests against national governments and their regimes, which have been organised largely by activists associated with youth movements. So far, two presidents (Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and Zine el Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia) have been forced to resign, whilst we are still waiting to see what effect they may have in many other countries like Yemen, Libya, Morocco and Syria.

How has this happened? How and why has a seemingly passive generation of young people now found the strength to rise up against repressive regimes? What role has been played by the internet in general and social networks in particular in these revolutions? By looking individually at the Tunisian and the Egyptian revolutions, exploring their similarities, differences and effects on one another, we can begin to answer such questions.

## Tunisia

The Tunisian revolution was in every respect a big surprise. It began in the poor and marginal southern city of Sidi Bouzid as a series of small protests over the now infamous 'Bouazizi' incident of December



2010, in which 26-year-old trader Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in a municipal building after complaining of mistreatment by the police. The Sidi Bouzid protests were inflamed by the violent response of the police and protests spread to other cities, where they gained strength and momentum over the following month. Such unprecedented reaction led eventually to President Ben Ali's resignation, after the army refused to intervene in

the social and political struggle or fire on protesters.

The revolution shocked the whole world. The western world was astonished to see a popular uprising in Tunisia, one of its allies in the Arab world, thought for a long time to be well governed. There was a great deal of confusion in European diplomatic circles over the real causes and consequences of what was happening in Tunisia. The French Minister for Foreign and European Affairs, Michèle Alliot-Marie resigned in February 2011 after facing criticism for her stance on and reaction to the unfolding events.

During the month of protests in nearly all of the major Tunisian cities, the activists used the internet, especially Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, to their advantage. These sites were used not just to rally people to the cause, but also to communicate directly and exchange ideas. Social networking turned out to be a very effective tool in dispensing information and

advice that some protesters learned the hard way, on the battlefield – like how to confront the security forces’ tactics as they attempted to disperse the demonstrations, or how to use vinegar and cola to avoid the effects of tear gas bombs.

Both protesters and the government discovered quickly how instrumental the internet is. It wasn’t only a medium used by some young ‘techies’, it was also the only way for the protesters to make their voices heard worldwide, as the national media were controlled and censored by the Tunisian government. So when the government decided to block access to Facebook, Twitter and other social networking websites, it turned out to have an escalating effect rather than a calming one. Demonstrators were outraged by this censorship, the protest movement became bigger and the Tunisian president had to apologise for the censorship decision and promise to reopen all censored websites again. But it was too late for him!

## Egypt

Was the Egyptian revolution as much of a surprise as the events in Tunisia? Well, the answer is yes and no at the same time. No, because Egypt has witnessed for many years protests of one form or another around the country. Yes, because no one in Egypt, not even the most enthusiastic revolutionist, would ever have thought that their movement would lead to the stepping down of President Mubarak.

The protests in Egypt began as early as 2005, before the fifth re-election of Mubarak, when a Christian Egyptian called George Ishak formed with some of his colleagues a movement called *Kefaya* (‘Enough’) to protest against the constitutional articles that placed no limit on the number of terms of office the president could serve. This movement organised some small rallies and drew some Egyptians’ attention to their political rights. Then, in spring 2008, came a strike and protest in the city of Al Mahalla, which provoked an aggressive response from the Egyptian government.

But at the time of this strike, a new, effective tool was being employed by the Egyptian activists: the internet. While the official media presented a one-sided story – the government’s – the world witnessed the emergence of new breed of reporters: the bloggers.

Many bloggers knew that the portrayal in the official media of what was happening at Al Mahalla was unfair so they travelled to the city where they stayed during the period of demonstrations and sit-ins and blogged live from the ‘battlefield’. Their work, whether written, photographed or videotaped, was vital in introducing the workers’ cause not only to the rest of the world, but even to the Egyptian public. With their blog posts, they helped the workers to negotiate some of the final terms of their agreement with the government. But this valuable contribution wasn’t in the end risk-free, as one or two of those bloggers were later imprisoned under false accusations.

The events at Al Mahalla did not end in the workers’ favour, but they did focus a spotlight on two young activists: a young man called Ahmed Maher, a 27-year-old then civil engineer and a former activist in the *Kefaya* movement, and a young woman called Israa Abdul Fattah. Motivated by what they considered to be the unfairness of their government toward the working class, they launched with some of their friends the ‘April 6<sup>th</sup> Youth Movement’.

The activists of that movement took note of the important role that bloggers played during the strikes and realised how powerful a tool the internet could be. They launched, through Facebook, an invitation for a country-wide general strike on 6 April. Again, a demonstration in Al Mahalla was violently dispersed by Egyptian authorities. Since then, 6 April has become the date of an annual strike, part of its aim being to increase the political involvement of the Egyptian youth. (Inspired by the Egyptian example, a similar movement and strike was organised in Tunisia. The organisers contacted their Egyptian counterparts in the April 6<sup>th</sup> Movement via Facebook and they shared their experiences.)

Maher and his colleagues soon came across a group called *Otpor*, a Serbian youth movement which drew on the ideas of an American political thinker, Gene Sharp and had helped to bring down Slobodan Milosevic. ‘The hallmark of Sharp’s work is well-tailored to Mubarak’s Egypt: He argues that nonviolence is a singularly effective way to undermine police states that might cite violent resistance to justify repression in the name of stability.’<sup>1</sup> Some of the April 6<sup>th</sup> Movement’s members even went to Serbia to meet and learn from members of *Otpor*.

In summer 2010, Egyptians were shocked by the death of an activist named Khaled Said, which was reported as being as a result of police brutality in response to Said's online activities: a few days before his death, he published on YouTube a video that shows a high-ranking police officer selling drugs inside a police station. A young Egyptian technician, Google's Middle East marketing manager, Wael Ghonim<sup>2</sup>, launched a Facebook page in response to Said's death called, 'We are all Khaled Said'; it garnered the support of thousands of young Egyptians who called for justice in Khaled's case and challenged what they considered to be the police manipulation of the investigation into his death. Ghonim, along with other activists, used this page to promote his ideas about democracy. He populated the Facebook page with reports of police violence all over the country, and used it to organise 'silent sit-ins' in Cairo, Alexandria and other cities. The demonstrators dressed in black clothes as a sign of mourning and promised to repeat such a gathering as many times as it took until justice was served in Khaled's case. Each sit-in was peaceful, even with the heavy police presence.

After the resignation of President Ben Ali in Tunisia on 14 January 2011, the April 6<sup>th</sup> Youth Movement in Egypt saw an opportunity to turn its little-noticed annual protest on National Police Day — the 25 January holiday that commemorates a police revolt that was suppressed by the British — into a much bigger event. Ghonim used the Facebook page to mobilise support. The page advertised that if at least 50,000 people committed themselves to turning out that day, the protest would go ahead. More than 100,000 signed up. Activists from many different groups and parties who were now working with the April 6<sup>th</sup> Movement also covered the streets of Cairo with posters to advertise the protests.<sup>3</sup>

The demonstrations of 25 January were enormous: thousands gathered at Tahrir Square in central Cairo. The organisers used their Facebook pages and groups to rally the people for daily demonstrations and declared the following Friday 28 January, to be the 'Friday of Rage' against the regime. The protestors relied on advice from their contacts in Tunisia, Serbia and the 'Academy of Change' in Qatar (another group, established by an Egyptian engineer, who follow the ideas of Gene Sharp). They received advice via Facebook and email on how to fight tear gas

bombs, how to disturb police armoured vehicles, etc., so they came well prepared for the big demonstrations of that Friday.

The events in both Tunisia and Egypt showed the internet to be a very effective weapon, one that posed a challenge to both governments. In these cases, free access to the internet allowed for the leaking of footage showing the violent and inexcusable acts of the authorities against demonstrators, exposing these authorities to global public opinion and to criticism from human rights organisations. However, censorship or a complete blackout of internet access provoked a turning point in the events; Ghonim claimed that the decision to block all internet and mobile phone access in Egypt on the night of Thursday 27 January was the Egyptian regime's biggest mistake. This forced thousands of pro-democracy activists who, until that point, had been following the events on their computer screens and mobile phones, to go to Tahrir Square to see what was happening. They had inadvertently escalated the protests.

In the words of Walid Rachid, of the April 6<sup>th</sup> Youth Movement that helped organise the 25 January protests, 'Tunis is the force that pushed Egypt, but what Egypt did will be the force that will push the world.'<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David D. Kirkpatrick and David E. Sanger, 'A Tunisian-Egyptian Link That Shook Arab History', *The New York Times*, 13 February 2011:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/14/world/middleeast/14egypt-tunisia-protests.html?pagewanted=1&r=2>.

<sup>2</sup> 'Wael Ghonim, like many others, was introduced to the informal network of young organisers by the movement that came together around Mohamed ElBaradei, the Nobel Prize-winning diplomat who returned to Egypt a year ago to try to jump-start its moribund political opposition. Mr. Ghonim had little experience in politics but an intense dislike for the abusive Egyptian police, the mainstay of the government's power. He offered his business savvy to the cause. "I worked in marketing, and I knew that if you build a brand you can get people to trust the brand," he said.' (Kirkpatrick and Sanger, 'A Tunisian-Egyptian Link That Shook Arab History')

<sup>3</sup> Kirkpatrick and Sanger, 'A Tunisian-Egyptian Link That Shook Arab History'

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.