

# GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2011

INTERNET RIGHTS AND DEMOCRATISATION

*Focus on freedom of expression and association online*



*This edition of Global Information Society Watch is dedicated to the people of the Arab revolutions whose courage in the face of violence and repression reminded the world that people working together for change have the power to claim the rights they are entitled to.*

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## EGYPT

### EGYPT'S 25 JANUARY REVOLUTION: THE ROLE OF THE INTERNET AND MOBILE TECHNOLOGY IN SOCIAL RESISTANCE AND PUBLIC DEMONSTRATIONS



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#### Introduction

Were the internet and mobile technology the tipping point for Egypt's 25 January Revolution? Internet and mobile-based social networks like Facebook, Twitter, blogs and YouTube have been common tools for activism in Egypt for some time, as discussed in a previous GISWatch country report.<sup>1</sup> Though as much as they are tools for activists, they are also excellent tools for tracking and surveillance – an equally common practice by governments, the former Egyptian regime no exception.

So what was the difference between this revolution and previous attempts that used information and communications technologies (ICTs) to rally people to protest, especially attempts by youth groups such as the 6th of April Movement, independent activists and bloggers, and working professionals, be they journalists, lawyers or labour unionists? How did the revolution succeed despite nearly a week of internet, mobile, and in some areas, landline blackout?

This report maintains that as much as the internet and mobile technologies are important tools, without their broader amplification through more widespread traditional media like TV and newspapers and without a strong trigger changing the perception of the masses, these ICT tools are only minimally effective. Despite connectivity blackouts, social resistance and public demonstrations continued in Egypt; and as we are seeing, also in other countries of the region.

#### Policy and political context

The Mubarak regime had strongly promoted the spread of ICTs in Egypt. Connectivity and the development of IT skills were a cornerstone of Egyptian economic development – even though this approach proved to be a two-edged sword with the rapid development of Web 2.0 applications that spread the use of social networks, collaborative software, user-generated content, video sharing, and the like.

<sup>1</sup> www.giswatch.org/country-report/20/egypt

By 2005, the internet and mobile phones had become common tools for political activism. By 2008, the 6th of April Youth Movement Facebook page became a rallying point for activists. YouTube aired controversial footage. Twitter and mobile text messaging (SMS) were the chosen tools to organise demonstrations among core activists. The government responded by tightening control: the notorious emergency law, imposed for 30 years since President Anwar Sadat's murder in 1981, was extended to online content and mobile use. In a context of increasingly oppressive censorship targeting online activists, it was common for them to be harassed, arrested, and in cases, tortured.

Mobile ownership became traceable. The state established the National Agency for the Regulation of Audio and Visual Broadcasting (NARAVB), an enforcement body that engaged in the surveillance of radio, satellite and website content. As much as “venting” was allowed as part of a gesture towards freedom of political expression, laws and their enforcement were used to squash any content (or public demonstrations) that were remotely perceived as dangerous to the regime.<sup>2</sup> Resistance remained, but it never translated into widespread, lasting mass demonstrations.

#### A brave new change....

With the uprisings in Tunisia in mid-December 2009, culminating in President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali fleeing from the country on 14 January, the unthinkable became reality: masses can uproot entrenched, authoritarian regimes, even in the Arab states. Traditionally the wider public did not get involved in protests; it was the domain of journalists, lawyers, human rights activists, and, in recent years, new clusters like “Kifaya”<sup>3</sup> and an increasingly secular youth. Tunisia was the long-awaited trigger that unleashed the flood of anger that had been building up for decades in all strata of Egyptian society.

In Tunisia, Facebook and Twitter were used to organise revolts. The same had been happening in

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Kifaya is an opposition movement that began in 2004. In Arabic it means “Enough”. Kifaya operates in urban areas, especially Cairo and Alexandria, embraces a multitude of political views, from socialist to Islamist, and pushes for regime change. It has been built on grassroots protests.

Egypt. The Egyptian government had been anticipating protests – normally they did not last more than a couple of days, but this time it proved to be different. After several days of small demonstrations, mass rallies throughout Egypt were organised for Tuesday 25 January, the national holiday dedicated to the police force. The brutal police force was the most hated symbol of the regime. The government disrupted Twitter nationwide on the 25th in an attempt to dampen the protests. On the streets tear gas and rubber bullets were used. Facebook, intermittent SMS and emails continued to function, but some internet-based tools and sites needed proxies.

The national pride was ignited: with the success of the Tunisians' revolt, Egyptians could only blame themselves if they endured the Mubarak regime, especially as Ben Ali's and Mubarak's rule had many parallels. The Twitter hashtags #Egypt and #Jan25 were created and helped to consolidate tweets, updating the media worldwide as events unfolded. When protests continued into 27 January, the government shut down the internet completely shortly after midnight on the same day. The 28th was a Friday and mass riots were planned. The regime was reaching measures it had never used before to block communications: mobiles did not work anymore and landlines were dead in several of Cairo's districts.

To circumvent the silence, the hashtag #Jan25voices was created by Scott-Railton in Michigan to relay the messages he would get through phone conversations with people in Egypt.<sup>4</sup> For the more tech-savvy, Telecomix<sup>5</sup> provided a dial-up connection.

By shutting down the internet and mobile communication for the public,<sup>6</sup> the Egyptian government set a precedent that had been inconceivable. The blackout remained for five full days: from 12:30 a.m. early on 28 January to 2 February, when connectivity was partially restored. This blackout reflected the regime's belief that it was still dealing with a limited number of activists, and not a national uprising. Egyptians who were not on the streets – and they were many – remained glued to their TV screens, following news minute by minute.

Protests widened and got bloodier, especially in the Suez canal cities, Northern Sinai and Alexandria. Military troops were deployed on the streets

on 28 January. This was the same day Mubarak announced the sacking of his cabinet. The internet and mobile blocking had no obvious effect on calming the demonstrations. A deep feeling of dissatisfaction reigned.

Friday 28 January was a major rally day, the "Friday of Rage". Fridays after prayers at noon had become the spearhead of protests. More people joined the demonstrations, among them leading public figures. Police stations were set on fire. Mubarak "supporters" infiltrated Tahrir Square, stabbing people with knives, attacking them with sticks and rocks. The military let this happen, patrolling the peripheries of the rally without intervening on either side. On the evening of the same day prisoners were freed in an attempt to create havoc, increase crime and frighten people. General Mohammed El Batran, the head of prisons in Egypt, was fatally shot when he refused to obey the order to let the criminals out on the streets. Chaos was everywhere, protesters and the public were tense: there seemed to be no real protection from the military. The police forces had vanished from the streets.

From that Friday onwards neighbourhood groups had been formed by civilians. Each night men gathered under apartment buildings with weapons and sticks to protect their families and the streets. People barely slept and started stocking up on essentials.

On 1 February Mubarak declared that he was not going to run for re-election in September, a move many had anticipated anyway due to his age and health status. The message was taken as a stalling tactic, especially as Mubarak's son Gamal had been preparing to take over from his father. Mubarak's speech led to major protests around the country. Tahrir Square had its bloodiest day on 2 February, when thugs entered it on camels and horses attacking protesters with sticks, petrol bombs and stones. Protesters, who had generally been peaceful until then, grabbed whatever they could get their hands on to fight back. Three died and 1,500 were injured.

During the early morning hours of 3 February, grenades and Molotov cocktails were thrown from the 6th October bridge surrounding Tahrir Square. Shots were fired from different parts around Tahrir, killing and injuring protesters staying overnight in the square. The violence was intended to deter a mass protest planned for Friday 4 February. Since the internet was up again, video clips began appearing on YouTube, and tweets were constantly picked up by news agencies. Al Jazeera was one of the most active and influential news agencies in Egypt, making it the target of forceful government

4 Faris, S. (2011) Meet the Man Tweeting Egypt's Voice to the World, *Time*, 1 Feb. [www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2045489,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2045489,00.html)

5 [www.telecomix.org](http://www.telecomix.org)

6 Online accessibility was maintained for specific security units and the military.

intimidation – especially as it was seen as the main information channel for the public.

During all this time military tanks were circling Tahrir Square and were present in other major cities in Egypt. The demonstrators had made it clear that they considered the military neutral, if not on their side. To keep the military separate from the regime was crucial for the continuation of the demonstrations. Yet the military's position remained opaque. Protesters feared that they might be turning against them.

It was clear that many protesters were willing to face death. On 4 February, Tahrir Square was packed and people demanded that Mubarak step down unconditionally. The government responded by changing the National Democratic Party's leader.

In Egypt the weekend is Friday and Saturday; Sunday is the first working day of the week. On Sunday 6 February, businesses, banks and working life resumed in Cairo. An eerie chasm was felt between the anti-government protesters and other sectors of society who were willing to accept that the regime was not going to give up, and wanted life to return to normal. This trend abruptly changed when activist Wael Ghonim was interviewed live by the Egyptian channel Dream TV on 7 February. This was shortly after he was released from ten days of solitary detention, during which he had been blindfolded the whole time. His release and the sincerity of his interview infused the country with renewed vigour to fight.

On 5 February WikiLeaks posted that Mubarak's wealth was estimated at around USD 70 billion. This news was picked up by most media and aired on satellite TV, incensing the masses.<sup>7</sup> From 9 February work stopped at government and public institutions, and hundreds of thousands of union workers went on strike across Egypt. The rallies were intense and the army said that there would be changes coming soon that the protesters would like. It was said that Mubarak was going to give his resignation speech on 10 February. He appeared on TV very late at night on the 10th, but repeated that he was not going to run for president in September. He also stated that he would remain president until then, although delegating his responsibilities to Vice President Omar Suleiman. The crowds went wild. There was an incredible sense of frustration, disbelief and of having been mocked. The Mubarak speech was so disconnected from reality it hardly seemed true. What

worried the people were the conflicting messages that were emerging from the government. What was going on? Who was playing what game, and with whom? Was the military co-opting the regime?

The following day, Friday 11 February, masses of people took to the streets. For the first time demonstrations reached the presidential palace. Protests were all over Egypt, drawing numbers not seen before. That evening Suleiman declared on TV that the High Council of the Armed Forces was taking over the responsibility of temporarily governing the country, and that Mubarak was stepping down. The Egyptian revolution took eighteen days: events were organised and documented online, using mobile communication, and followed closely by the media.

## Conclusions

That the internet and mobile technology had a strong role in Egypt's political change is indisputable. But in a country where around 20% of the population is connected to the internet, and with a 67% adult literacy rate, there are limits to the outreach and influence of online content and activism. The use of Twitter is even more restricted as it needs a smartphone, a pricey piece of technology and service for a gross national income (GNI) per capita of USD 2,070.<sup>8</sup> The events show that the intertwining of online, mobile and traditional media, especially TV, were crucial in sustaining mass revolts. Without TV picking up the online and mobile messages, most Egyptians would not have known what content was being shared by a relative minority.

Al Jazeera<sup>9</sup> was pivotal in relaying information during the Egyptian internet and mobile blackout, as were other satellite channels – Egyptians from all strata of society use TV satellites widely. Citizen journalism was extensively used and picked up by the media, and often the visuals on YouTube were more powerful than words. The ability to relay events nearly instantaneously from all areas of the country through online and mobile technology gave the professional media incredibly rich, up-to-date material, from the perspective of people on the street.

Still, the capacity of governments to completely block internet and mobile access remains a problem that needs to be addressed. In Egypt the government had always maintained a close grip on ICTs, despite telecom liberalisation efforts. Liberalisation was geared towards the financial benefits of an open market, rather than the reality of centralised

<sup>7</sup> Though I found the strong reaction to the news a bit strange, as rumours about the Mubaraks' and their cronies' wealth were a staple in Egypt since the 1990s. It seems that seeing a clear figure of the alleged wealth at this junction in time was the last straw for the masses.

<sup>8</sup> [www.unicef.org/infobycountry/egypt\\_statistics.html](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/egypt_statistics.html)

<sup>9</sup> [english.aljazeera.net](http://english.aljazeera.net)

control.<sup>10</sup> This control was facilitated by a limited number of internet service providers (ISPs)<sup>11</sup> that offered the country online and mobile access. When the revolution came, the government simply declared martial rule, ordering the companies to cut off their services to the public. Vodafone has been a much cited example. Because it has a broad clientele and is headquartered in Paris, the assumption was that it should have maintained connectivity for longer and not succumbed so readily to regime orders.

It seems from recent events that even traditional media are not necessarily needed to keep social mobilisation going once it is in full swing, as is being seen in Libya, Syria and Yemen. The momentum is, instead, driven by the feeling in the bone marrow when the masses realise their power, when a retreat is impossible due to ingrained conviction, when the sense of right is fully awakened and when national pride is aroused.

### Action steps

- Technical alternatives and solutions are needed to enable people to circumvent communications services when they are blocked.
- The ability to share online content through more traditional media so that a wider audience is reached is necessary. In democracy mass ignorance could be fatal to the revolution's aspirations.

- Visuals are often better than a thousand words. What is needed is a platform that can *show* events in the way that YouTube does, but for millions without computers or mobiles, such as billboards.
- There is a need to educate children and youth on how to use the online and mobile platforms responsibly, and how to follow reporting ethics.
- There is a need to continue to make certain platforms more user friendly and intuitive to grow the user base. The average user is not up to the technical skills and tinkering needed today to use many of the crucial online applications.
- Internet and mobile use for emergency situations should be part of public training, in the way that first aid is.
- There is a need to continue to push for conditions that provide internet access to the poor. Social networking sites rely on the use of expensive technology such as the smartphone that is currently marketed to higher income and higher skills customers only. ■

<sup>10</sup> [www.giswatch.org/en/country-report/civil-society-participation/egypt](http://www.giswatch.org/en/country-report/civil-society-participation/egypt)

<sup>11</sup> The main ISPs are Telecom Egypt, Vodafone, Etisalat Misr, Link Egypt and Internet Egypt.

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