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Egypt – history's first "Facebook revolution"?

Are we witnessing Revolution 2.0 spreading throughout the globe, enabled by mobile technologies and social networking?

THE POPULATIONS of North Africa and the Middle East are writing a new, important chapter of their national histories. On 14 January the Tunisian President **Ben Ali**, in power since 1987, had to step down after weeks of street demonstrations and civil unrest. Nine days later, a massive crowd of Egyptian protesters started demanding the overthrow of their president, **Hosni Mubarak**, who had ruled the country since 1981. On 11 February, after 18 days of protests and hundreds of deaths, Mubarak resigned.

THIS POWERFUL wave of political change seems to have caused a far-reaching domino effect: similar demonstrations are currently ongoing in several countries including Libya, Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania, Yemen, Kuwait, Bahrain, Jordan and Djibouti. In particular, the situation in Libya is precipitating into a civil war: in a fiery speech to the nation on 22 February, **Muammar Gaddafi** vowed to fight on to the last drop of his blood against his opponents, who have gained control of parts of the country.

ALTHOUGH it is too early to assess the long-term consequences, we can be certain that these events will be remembered as revolutions. American sociologist **Jeff Goodwin** defines a revolution as a radical shift in power structures in which "a state or a political regime is overturned and thereby transformed by a popular movement in an irregular, extra-constitutional and/or violent fashion". A revolution does not end with the fall of a regime, which takes place

in a relatively short period of time, because it entails "a more or less rapid fundamental social, economic and/or cultural change, during or soon after the struggle for state power". Although the causes, decisive factors and starting/ending dates of each revolution cannot be unambiguously identified, its new ideas, values or unique features are often described by a motto. The essence of the French revolution is in the words "Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité", which for many represent the foundations of modern Western societies.

WHAT will the legacy of the North African revolutions be? Many journalists, researchers and bloggers are popularising the idea that

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what we witnessed in Egypt was history's first "Facebook revolution" – or, similarly, a "Twitter", "Google" or "Net" revolution. These characterisations suggest that the Web 2.0 seems to have an increasing impact on all types of societal processes, even redefining the concept of revolution. Can we really speak in terms of Revolution 2.0 or are we perhaps overestimating the role of social media compared with other important factors?

IN THE 2007 book "Mobile communication and society – a global perspective", sociologist **Manuel Castells** and his colleagues describe the relationships between social

movements, political power and communication networks. They identified three main aspects of added value that the internet and wireless communications enabled in the process of political mobilisations. First, mobility allows reacting instantly – in a variety of manners – to events that are of common concern. This creates the perception of "spontaneity" of an emerging movement. Second, mobile devices powered by internet connectivity make it easier to join forces by means of social networking with trusted peers and like-minded people. Third, the multimedia and multi-channel capabilities of digital devices enhance the collective awareness and experience of an event through

near real-time sharing of individual observations. In their analysis, Castells and colleagues warn that the role of digital technologies needs to be considered within the wider political, economic and socio-cultural context.

IN EGYPT, the time was ripe for revolution and social upheaval because of a widespread condition of poverty, repression and hopelessness: the Wikileaks cables revealed that in relation to the revolt of 6 April 2008 in El-Mahalla, US diplomats were warned of the possibility of a revolution in Egypt driven by young activists, who could have effectively used Facebook and other social me-

dia to achieve social change. Already in 2008, the Facebook group "April 6 Youth Movement" had 70,000 active members, most of whom were young, educated and had no previous involvement in politics before joining the group. In June 2010, the killing of 28-year-old **Khaled Said** by the Egyptian security police offered momentum for the revolution: the Facebook group "we are all Khaled Said", which was created in his memoriam, rapidly became an active forum for planning and coordinating protests. Today, it has almost 100,000 members and continues to be a key reference for political activists.

IT HAS been argued that a Facebook revolution is a leaderless revolution. Although the real power seems to lie in the network, a number of influential "micro-celebrities" emerged. For instance, **Mahmoud Salem**, known in the blogosphere as Sandmonkey, features hundreds of comments for each of his posts and has more than 25,000 followers on Twitter. His direct experience on the field allows understanding of the dynamics of the revolution: indeed, he explained in an interview that "social media was very useful at first in letting people know that there is a protest and what the demands are. Then, there was the shutdown and we were still able to organise and go to protests without the help of social media".

THE COMMUNICATION shutdown would perhaps have been more effective if it had been done just before the first gathering on Tahrir square. Instead, it took place two days later, when the demonstration had already gained critical mass. By then, the centre of gravity had moved from Facebook groups and blogs to Tahrir square it-

self. It was here where **Wael Ghonim**, internet activist and Google's head of marketing for the Middle East and North Africa, made a famous address to the crowd: "This is not the time for individuals, or parties, or movements. It's a time for all of us to say just one thing: Egypt above all." Ghonim's personal experience turned him into one of the icons of the Egyptian revolution: in fact, he was arrested by the authorities and spent 11 days in detention. During and after his release, Ghonim's followers on Twitter grew to more than 90,000.

ALTHOUGH the dynamics of the events in Egypt seem to be unique, they present some parallels with the People Power II revolution of 2001 in the Philippines. In that case, too, all of the conditions for a revolution were present, with 40 per cent of Filipinos living on a daily income of one dollar. Additionally, the Filipino President **Joseph Estrada** was on a trial for allegations of corruption, bribery and the illegal use of public funds. In January 2001, the Filipino population rebelled in anger when senators voted in favour of the president in a key passage of the trial. That same day, more than 1 million people converged on Epifanio delos Santos Avenue, known as EDSA, the site of the People Power revolt of 1986. The protest was organised, almost in real time, through the forwarding of a text message saying "go 2 EDSA, wear black 2 mourn d death f democracy". After four days of massive demonstrations, Estrada was forced to resign after several government officials abandoned him and, like in Egypt, with the military sided with the demonstrators. In 2001 there was no Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and the like, but the

"generation txt" managed to coordinate a smart mobilisation of people with the same objective through the simple forwarding of text messages.

SOCIAL media therefore played a key role in the Egyptian revolution, especially in its first phase, but the notion of history's first "Facebook revolution" seems far-fetched. Indeed, a true social-media revolution would not merely consist in the use of such tools in planning and coordinating political protests, but especially in the creation and development of a new democratic and participatory political model. Furthermore, it has been described how already 10 years ago networked citizens sketched and developed, through SMS and almost in real time, the script of the revolution. Therefore, I agree with Castells and his colleagues that the "access and use of wireless communication technology adds a fundamental tool to the arsenal of those who seek to influence politics and the political process without being constrained by the powers that be. Arguably, other media, such as wired phones, radio, and television, could perform the same rallying function as wireless communication does, but not in as timely a manner, not with the ability to reach people wherever they are, and not free of the production and communication constraints associated with the traditional media".

WILL we witness similar dynamics in Libya as well? Despite the reported internet outages, creative uses of social media are fuelling the uprisings and providing to the international community a complementary view to the regime-controlled media. Citizens' networked activism may not be sufficient to succeed without the support of other key factors like international pressure and the loyalty of Gaddafi's entourage.