

Social Media

The New Tool of Revolution

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The role of social media in protests and revolutions has garnered considerable public interest. The events in the Arab world over the last two months are a pointer to the fact that social networks can play an important role in affecting change in despotic regimes. There is a belief that authoritarian rulers would find it difficult to sustain their regimes when confronted with the power of the people brought together by the social media and that this could usher in an era of democratisation around the globe. In a Jan 27 YouTube interview, U.S. President Barack Obama went as far as to compare social networking to universal liberties such as freedom of speech.

The Jasmine revolution in Tunisia is now reverberating across the Arab world with unpredictable consequences. The domino effect of the revolution has already led to the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and has sparked violent protests in Yemen, Lebanon, Libya, Syria, Jordan, Algeria and Bahrain where regime changes in some of these states seems likely. Even Saudi Arabia is not immune from the winds of change and the present dispensation would have to move deftly to preserve its hold on power. The demands of the people for dignity, rights and the end of oppressive regimes is similar to revolutions of the past; but the role of social media is something that has defined contemporary events as witnessed in the protests in Myanmar (2007), Moldova (2009) and in the Iranian election protests (2009-2010). Protests in the Iranian elections were done through social network sites such as *Twitter*. During this period, *Twitter* was considering a temporary shutdown in June 2009 to upgrade their network but was requested by the US State Department to delay doing so to ensure that the Iranian public could continue to use the service to protest against the elections.¹ While the results in Iran were ambivalent, the role of the social media in the recent revolts in the Arab World has been of consequence.

Social media alone, however, do not instigate revolutions. They are no more responsible for the recent unrest in The Arab World than cassette-tape recordings of Ayatollah Khomeini speeches were responsible for the 1979 revolution in Iran. Social media are tools that allow revolutionary groups to lower the costs of participation, organisation, recruitment and training. But like any tool, social media have inherent weaknesses and strengths, and their effectiveness depends on how leaders use them and how accessible they are to people who know how to use them.

The Jasmine Revolution

In Tunisia, the main reasons for the uprising were unemployment, food inflation, corruption, lack of freedom of speech and bad living conditions. While the events angered the masses, the grassroots demonstrations that finally led to a revolution were facilitated by the almost 3.6 million Internet users, mostly below the age of 25, through their blogs, tweets and messages and *Facebook* pages.² The use of social media was pivotal in breaking the media blackout imposed in Tunisia. Mohamed Bouazizi's self immolation which sparked the revolution was not the first case of self immolation in Tunisia, but it was picked up by Al Jazeera from the social media and broadcast to the world. It was further picked up by the news channel, *France 24* and *Al-Arabiya*.³ *Facebook* remained pivotal to the Jasmine Revolution. Videos on *Facebook* were tweeted by users from Tunisia and abroad. The incidences eventually dominated the hashtags of *Twitter* that started with the local tag of #bouazizi and expanded to #sidibouazid and finally engulfed the whole country, making the hashtag #tunisia. Millions of *Twitter* and *Facebook* users followed the story in real time.

The Tunisian authorities were unable to stop the flow of information on the web. They hijacked and deleted accounts, blocked websites and arrested online activists, bloggers and organisers. But other online activists ensured that their tweets, videos and pictures made it to the social media sites through proxy sites, for the world to see. Mobile phones, texts and calls also became a channel of communicating and disseminating information and updating other protesters about their whereabouts, police raids etc. These facilities helped maintain the determination of the anti-regime people to continue their protests.

Rim Nour, a young Tunisian techie and participant of the Jasmine Revolution in a speech at the January meeting of DC Media Makers⁴ at Washington DC, asserted the importance of social media in the initial stage. She averred that social media was particularly helpful for the following reasons:

- Grassroots mobilisation and organisation of protests.
- To identify the positions of snipers, police and looters, and to alert one another to other violence.
- Sharing verified information on *Facebook* to counter unsubstantiated rumours.
- To analyse government statements and to form a consensus on whether the positions met their requirements.⁵

The Egyptian Protests

The Jasmine Revolution was a source of inspiration to the people of Egypt, who started their protest by marching to Tahrir Square on 25 January 2011, demanding President Mubarak step down. For years, the secret police and state-controlled media in Egypt helped suppress most anti-government activities. The social media helped activists build a strong and creative force against the regime. As an example, the 28 January 2011 ‘Day of Rage’ was organized by a group of activists online.

The *Facebook* page, ‘We Are All Khaled Said’ dedicated to a 28-year-old Egyptian businessman who was beaten by death by Alexandria policemen, was a platform where dissidents condemned the brutal killing and called for a regime change. The administrator of the page, Wael Ghonim, was arrested by the Egyptian security forces on 25 January and released after 12 days on 7 February. Also, Asmaa Mahfouz, a 26 year old Egyptian lady recorded a video calling all the Egyptians for the protests and uploaded it on *YouTube* and *Facebook*. The video proved to be a catalyst for the Egyptian protests. At a particular time before the commencement of the protests, there were over 90,000 followers on a *Facebook* page devoted to the protests. The April 6 Youth Movement⁶, comprising of socialists and pro-labor people, was another important group that helped in the organisation of the movement.

On 25 January, protesters poured into Tahrir Square and the demonstrations gained momentum forcing Hosni Mubarak to resign as President on 11 February 2011. Blocking access to social networking and dissident websites was the first move undertaken by the Egyptian authorities, starting from 24 January. However, the users bypassed the blocks by using proxy sites like *HootSuite* to get access. Threatened by the scale of the demonstrations and the continuing role of the Internet in the same, on 27 January, the Egyptian government shut down the Internet for five days, an unprecedented move in the history of the Internet. The government even clamped down on texts and the *BlackBerry* messages. Following

the shutdown, *Twitter* teamed up with *Google* and *SayNow* and established @Speak2Tweet which allowed people without an Internet connection to use *Twitter*. Anyone could now call a number with a landline and post a tweet online. This made it easier for the protesters in Egypt to communicate with the world. Other similar projects were *Stop404.org*, *Global Voices* and the *Twitter* account @jan25voices. The events in Egypt could be tracked on the hashtags of #Egypt, #Tahrir, #25Jan on *Twitter*. The role of mobile phones deserves special mention as they helped in overall communication outside the world of Internet.

The social media was also used extensively by news outlets like *Al Jazeera*, *CNN* etc. Journalists tweeted events in real time and uploaded pictures, videos and interviews. Due to limited access to *Al Jazeera* in different parts of the world, *Al Jazeera* uploaded the option on online streaming of the news channel. Even when the website became inaccessible due to heavy traffic and technical issues, the option of live stream was available on their *Facebook* page. News channels also tracked the mood of the country through online portals where Egyptians and others posted their views on latest developments. Users hailing from different countries posted pictures and videos of their solidarity march and messages of motivation and support online.

Fearing that the events in Egypt may spark a similar revolution, the Chinese authorities blocked the word “Egypt” on the country’s most popular microblogging services, *Sina*, *Tencent* and *Sohu*.⁷ Such developments clearly reflect the importance of social media as perceived by governments. Akin to the role of social media in the Jasmine Revolution, its role in the Egyptian protests ranged from facilitating mobilisation to countering rumours and analyzing ongoing developments.

Even after the ouster of Mubarak, the events in Egypt continue to dominate the hashtags of *Twitter*, pages on *Facebook*, videos on *YouTube* and pictures on *Flickr*, *Picasa*, so much so that some analysts started terming it as the ‘*Twitter* Revolution’ or ‘*Facebook* Revolution’. This is merely rhetoric. During Rim Nour’s session at DC Media Makers, she was asked if the revolution could have happened *without* social media. “Yes”, she asserted, “but it wouldn’t have happened as fast.”⁸ The social media can hence be viewed as a catalyst to revolution rather than as a causative factor. It is important to note that even during the shutdown of Internet services in Egypt and the crackdown on dissident online portals in Tunisia, the protests continued and gained momentum. *Twitter* and *Facebook* were forums which acted as facilitators or as a new tool for revolution. While the social media jumpstarted the protests, especially among the youth, the numbers

increased as groups walked towards the Tahrir Square. Each group marching towards Tahrir motivated people passing by to stand against the regime. With additional people pouring in, the groups became larger. Finally, the power of numbers resulted in the culmination of the protests and *Twitter* was mainly used tactically as it helped users inform others about check-posts, safety issues, new marching points etc. Designating the uprisings as Social media Revolutions would be an insult to the protesters on ground that actually fought for the cause and sacrificed their lives for the sake of democracy and freedom.

The social media was also a powerful tool in shaping world opinion as circulation of information online helped in sensitising the international community to these events. As stated by Evgeny Morozov in *Foreign Policy*, “their real promise seemed to lie in using social media as some kind of a Trojan horse to get their countries onto the front pages of American newspapers - and then, hopefully, on the top of Washington’s agenda.”⁹

Impact on the World Scene

As more and more people are gaining access to the Internet, the social media is likely to play an increasingly important role in future protests. The events in North Africa and the Gulf Region do not point to an Islamic hold over the revolution though protests were largely calibrated on Fridays to coincide with the Muslim day of prayer. Fridays have thus become the ‘Days of Rage’, to mobilise the masses against despotic regimes. But these are movements for civil rights and even religious extremist groups would be wary of what the masses can do.

The Shia-Sunni population densities in North Africa and the Persian Gulf also has its ramifications. In North Africa, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Algeria are Sunni majority countries ruled by Sunni autocrats. In the Gulf, Iran and Iraq have Shia majorities with a Shia leadership while Saudi Arabia and Yemen have a Sunni majority which is responsible for the marginalization of a minority Shia population (that remain high in number). The Gulf coast of Saudi Arabia is Shia dominated – and this region produces and exports most of its oil. Bahrain has a Shia majority but is rule by Sunni leadership. Kuwait and the Emirates have large Shia populations, which are once again ruled by Sunnis. The Shia-Sunni divide is thus likely to magnify in this very sensitive region. Even Saudi Arabia is becoming paranoid as the bulk of its oil lies in the Shia majority areas. In a democratic set up, the Shias will certainly trump the Sunnis in the Gulf – and this will cause consternation to the US. Despite their moral pretensions to democracy, the US is more comfortable with a Sunni autocracy than with a Shia leadership which may

not be that sensitive to US concerns. The coming years will see an increasing Iranian influence in the region along with the process of democratisation. But the Iranian leadership would be wary too as their own theocratic regime is vulnerable to democratic forces.

In Pakistan, the country is already on the verge of implosion and its weak economic situation further compounds the problem. It lacks the base in its restive populations in Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa for the social media to be an effective tool in mass mobilisation. Despite comments by political leaders like Imran Khan advocating change through social media on the lines of the Jasmine revolution, the possibility is remote. China however has much to fear from the social media as it has consistently suppressed its people through a much centralised dictatorship. The high level of economic development in China is a positive factor but the yearning for freedom cannot be suppressed forever. An eruption of violence in China has consequences for India as an internally besieged China may act externally to unite its population. A border war with India could be the natural consequence of such an occurrence and India would need to be prepared accordingly.

The Indian context

While conditions for social unrest prevail in many parts of India, a Jasmine like revolution is unlikely due to its democratic set up and the availability of a plethora of means for dissent. Corruption, rising inflation and widespread unemployment may spark protests but these are likely to be localised. The very diversity of the country in terms of culture, customs, and lifestyles and also in terms of the grievances and problems faced by them negates a unified approach which could lead to revolution. In any case, dissatisfied people in India have periodically thrown out governments through the ballot box thereby negating the very need for revolution. As per John Elliott, a British journalist based in New Delhi, 'Since independence, no event has united the country in protest. There have been local uprisings for years in the far North-East states such as Assam and Nagaland, but this has no resonance or impact elsewhere. Even, 21 years of unrest in Kashmir has been largely contained to that state.'¹⁰

India's base of 81 million Internet users is the world's fourth largest¹¹. This figure is however a function of sheer population, not deep adoption: just 20 percent of India's urban citizens are connected to the Internet, compared with 60 percent in China. And while China has 233 million mobile-Internet users, or 18 percent of its total population, India has just 17 million, or less than 1 percent. While the

Internet is an inevitable part of many people in metropolitan cities, it has not yet managed to touch the lives of people in rural India most of whom are unaware of the Internet. The major reason for non- access to the Internet is the unavailability of access points or infrastructure like electricity that has impeded the reach of the Internet.¹² Any nation-wide revolution with the help of social media does not seem to be realistic under such circumstances. The low rural base internet usage also dictates against any impact in the Naxal infested areas or the violence prone areas in India's northeast. But the lessons of the Jasmine Revolution cannot be lost on New Delhi. Increasingly, the social media will come to be used to mass public opinion on issues such as corruption in government, unemployment etc which will force the government to be more sensitive to the demands of the people as also lead to greater levels of transparency and accountability.

The impact or otherwise of the Jasmine Revolution on Kashmir will be seen in the coming summer months. Violence levels in the valley have over the past two decades been inspired by inimical elements in Pakistan, both state and non-state actors and this will continue. As a means of mobilising the public, the impact of the social media will be marginal as Kashmir has seen no lack of ability in public mobilisation using other means. However, the spread of false propaganda through such media, sponsored by Pakistan's notorious ISI is a possibility which must be guarded against and countered. As a long-term solution, transparency and accountability in government, economic reforms and a more responsive and effective criminal justice system are the means to lead to stability in J&K.

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Notes

1. Lev Grossman, "Iran Protests: Twitter, the Medium of the Movement", 17 June 2009, *Time*, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1905125,00.html#ixzz19mDm6751>, accessed on 27 February 2011.
2. Tunisia country profile, *BBC News*, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/country_profiles/791969.stm, accessed on 27 February 2011.
3. Yasmine Ryan, "How Tunisia's revolution began", 26 January 2011, *Al Jazeera*, <http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/features/2011/01/2011126121815985483.html>, accessed on 28 February 2011.
4. DC Media Makers is an association of journalists, entertainers, advocates, documentarians and tech enthusiasts dedicated to video blogging and learning media literacy in general in Washington, DC.

5. Alex Howard, "A Tunisian on the role of social media in the revolution in Tunisia", 20 January 2011, *Gov 2.0*, <http://gov20.govfresh.com/a-tunisian-on-the-role-of-social-media-in-the-revolution-in-tunisia/>, accessed on 26 February 2011.
6. The April 6 Youth Movement is an Egyptian Facebook group started by Ahmed Maher and Israa Abdel Fatah in Spring 2008 to support the workers in El-Mahalla El-Kubra, an industrial town, who were planning to strike on April 6.
7. Michael Kan, "China Microblogs Block Chinese Word for 'Egypt'", 29 January 2011, *PC World*, http://www.pcworld.com/businesscenter/article/218185/china_microblogs_block_chinese_word_for_egypt.html accessed on 28 February 2011.
8. Alex Howard, "A Tunisian on the role of social media in the revolution in Tunisia", 20 January 2011, *Gov 2.0*, <http://gov20.govfresh.com/a-tunisian-on-the-role-of-social-media-in-the-revolution-in-tunisia/>, accessed on 26 February 2011.
9. Evgeny Morozov, "Tunisia, social media and the politics of attention", *Foreign Policy*, 14 January 2011, http://neteffect.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/01/14/tunisia_social_media_and_the_politics_of_attention
10. John Elliott, "India's protection against Tahrir Square style rebellions", 11 February 2011, *Global Post*, <http://www.globalpost.com/webblog/india/india%E2%80%99s-protection-against-tahrir-square-style-rebellions>, accessed on 25 March 2011.
11. China ranks first, with 420 million users, followed by the United States, with 240 million, and Japan, with 99 million. Source: Internet World Stats, 2010.
12. "84 percent of Indian rural populace oblivious of internet", 14 September 2010, *Silicon India*, http://www.siliconindia.com/shownews/84_percent_of_Indian_rural_populace_oblivious_of_Internet-nid-71448.html, accessed on 25 March 2011.