



POLITICAL ACTIVISM, SOCIAL MEDIA AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT: A NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF ARAB SPRING MOVEMENT

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Abstract

The role of social media during the Arab spring and particularly at the outset of the revolution was indeed instrumental and pivotal. In this study, we see the use of the internet or social media for Arab uprising. Social media proved as a catalyst in the unity of the Arabs against the tyrannical rulers and economic downturns in the Arab world. The story of the Arab Spring began with the suicide of Muhammad Bouazizi, a Tunisian street vendor, who incinerated himself after being subjected to police brutality. The protests had significantly raised many notions for civil rights as their voices and actions had played a triggering role in the revolution. The Arab Spring is the outcome of decades of civil and political unrest of rights as the Arab Spring might herald as the first social revolution in the 21st century



as the people now have an individual and collective social voice against the various forms of fear, manipulations, disinformation and control that was from the authoritarian regimes. The research is a narrative and critical analysis of the Arab Spring literature, which discusses its cause, the role of social media, and the regional developments in this regard.

Keywords

Arab Spring, Media activism, Digital dictatorship, Internet, Facebook, Twitter, Social movements, Fake news, Citizen journalism.

Introduction

The Arab Spring was not merely a springtime event. It was a watershed moment for many Middle Eastern countries, such as Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and many other countries, who fought to reclaim power from undemocratic government regimes. In January 2011, the world was wiped up by the storm, and after this, many Middle Eastern countries became a war scene. A Tunisian street vendor burnt himself after being subjected to police brutality (Gire, Sabiha. 2017). His hospital photos went viral on the internet, causing a massive public outcry. The viral images energized not only the Arabs but also the international community. By getting motivation from Egypt's transformation, people started making it difficult for Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali to stay in power. **Mohamed Bouazizi**—Tunisian citizen—torched himself in December 2010. Egyptian protesters started to make a group of 3 or 4 persons. They went door to door having fliers saying people attend the rallies, upload Facebook posts, and make strategic use of Twitter (Frangonikolopoulos, 2012).

Technology played a vital part in the case of Arab Spring. Some people—especially the journalists—said that social media's role in the Arab Spring is overstated and exaggerated. The substantiation behind this rhetoric is that when the government shut down the internet facility on January 28, 2011, the people continued to protest on the streets. The following months after the onset of the spring, social media remained mainly inactive as there were no internet signals in the Arab air. The governments imposed strict measures to control online media, and the government arrested many activists for the anti-state content they posted on the internet (Alhindi, 2012). Internet censorship on social media and websites has increased, and various laws have emboldened the persecutions of individuals over online posts (Shishkina, A., & Issaev, L., 2018).

Social media enhances the challengers' ability to assemble aggregate activity. Understanding and assessing the power of media is a massive challenge for those who study political protest and violence. This fact confirms that the use of social media in social movements has increased a lot in recent years. Hundreds and thousands of people have



connected in one platform known as social media like Facebook and Twitter and support collective action to prepare. However, skeptics claim that media and social media's role in movements' success has been overstated (Browning, J. G., 2013). In the debate "Arab springs," these types of dramatic events particularly warmed (Wolfsfeld, G., Segev, E., & Sheaffer, T., 2013).

Literature Review

Role of Social Media

Storck (2011) emphasized the role of media in it, as the Arab Spring was not conducted in a specific country, so social media's role varied from country to country. The Egyptian demonstration was the hallmark in this regard. While in countries like Yemen and Libya, where the internet was not that much in vogue, social media was not used to galvanize people. More importantly, in Tunisia and Egypt, Facebook was used as a toolkit to set up awareness campaigns, and it worked well. The best example in this regard was 'We are all Khalid Saeed' campaign that was even operational before the commencement of the Arab Spring. The Khalid Saeed Campaign was controlled by strict regulations and internet policies in Egypt to outrun the protestors growing influences. But the spark of Tunisian revolt after Bouazizi's case added fuel to the fire. Now Arabs were of the opinion that the economic oppression and barbarity that resulted in massive unemployment, economic downturn, and social stagnation must die a natural death.

As a matter of fact, while comparing the Arab spring with the ancient revolutionary ventures, we come to know that the social media did play its part in the process. The French revolution that was concluded in 1789, took almost ten years to complete. The truth can never be kept vague because the Arab spring spread like a forest fire in the whole Arab world. So what was behind this rapid success? Perhaps the internet platforms may answer this question. The French Revolution and the Iranian revolution that created an upheaval in the country are also debatable propositions (Hussain, 2013). While in the case of Arab Spring, thanks to the great innovation human beings have achieved in recent times—The internet and social media websites. Indeed, the political spearheads didn't strive for too long to achieve success, unlike in the past political upheavals.

"Little War Magazine" has a more optimistic assessment of social media's role in the Arab Spring, as it writes that "Social media removes the two primary obstacles of distance and delay." It results in new forms of communication. People may communicate in near real-time. However, social media alone will not bring people out into the streets. In reality, a huge number of activists participating in the Arab Awakening movement are utilizing social media as a crucial instrument to aid in the spread of the wave of



demonstrations. "Social networks may exist as a result of the international and public revolution, and have a store that did not exist before to the events of 2011 (Guesmi, 2021).

Indeed, it was not only the role of the internet that made a difference during the Arab spring. The Arab world has a long and fluctuating history of turmoil and disparity. Take, for example, Egypt again; its history stretches over long years of activism and union activity. When Morsi was ousted by Sisi, the Egyptians went on to show massive protests and discontent against the Military dictator while successfully executing the role of social media. Needless to say, the Arab spring was an amalgam of lingering activism and social media (Poell, 2015).

According to (Brown, 2012), the internet is considered the fastest source of getting information or spreading information in today's world. The use of the internet is increasing unexpectedly. In this study, we see the use of the internet or social media for Arab uprising. When the Arab spring began and started exerting influence, the primary source was the influence of social media. Before the power of social media, the Arab world was generally undiscovered by the world of what had been happening with them but after the influence of social media, the educated college student and people with the availability of the internet formed groups of activists to exercise the freedom of speech. Facebook and Twitter were the two most important social platforms and public spheres used by the protestors.

Haythem Guesmi (2021) said that social media networks did not trigger the Arab uprising, but they played some role. The writer used the term big tech for social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc. In the Arab world, social media is a dangerous political medium because of little content moderation and abusive and disinformative data. In the early days of Arab spring, the big tech companies took advantage of the opportunity to brand themselves as a platform for political activism and resistance. The author reject the term "Facebook revolution" for Arab spring. In 2011, Lisa Anderson the president of American University, noted that the Arab spring is not the result of social media technology, but how revolutionary aspirations resonated across the Arab world for a long time.

The revolution of the Arab uprising started online. Online media played its role in uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa from Libya to Egypt. Arab people followed trends on social media. For example, people who ran small businesses decided to create a Facebook page when they saw a post of a businessman. Khalid was beaten to death by police for exposing their corruption, dishonesty, inequality, and autocracy. Even though the government has shut down the internet, the government machinery failed to stop people



from protesting. People with the power of social media forced the government to give up; as a result of this; the Egyptian President stepped down within 18 days.

After the success of Egypt, the Libyan people also tried to take help from social media tools. They made a Twitter page with the name "Shahab media," but there were challenges from the beginning (Abdelhay, 2012). These social sites soon became hate and disinformation platforms, and they did not seek out the issue even after lots of complaints. At that time, the use of social media eventually rose high, and gradually, people started connecting beyond social media. The bad and good both came in social media and there was no way to stop it or to figure out what is good or what is bad?

It has been seen how social media played an essential role during the Arab Spring. Social media raised awareness among men and women, who began protesting against dictatorships, searching for democracy. During the Arab Spring, social media was the only powerful platform for raising the people's voice to higher authorities. Some people started misusing social media, and the United States government stepped in. They banned such posts that were spreading violence and declared that any person found involved in such type of posting, from a local public to a political figure, would be hanged (Brouwer, 2014). Arab Spring was one of those revolutions that opened people's eyes and their minds and spread awareness about one's own and other people's rights. Thanks to social media, critical to the Arab Spring's success.

From place to place, social media's power varies. The Arab springs are Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya revolutions started against the corrupt regimes. John Pollock, interviewed two Tunisians, the one named "foetus" told how protests began. He said there were just 30000 Tunisian's on Facebook by the end of 2009, but after the demonstrations started, Tunisians had 800000 Facebook accounts. People spent most of their time on the internet sharing photos and videos of government violence and brutality (Rosen, R. 2011).

The story began with the suicide of Muhammad Bouazizi—a street vendor—of Tunisia when he burnt himself after the brutality of the Tunisian police department. His pictures were viral, and the images revitalized not only the Arabs but also the international community. The sense of global community has morphed the protest into a full-fledged revolution. Now, the Arabs were embarked on an opportunistic journey to address their voicing issues for years. The people were galvanized into groups and mobs chanting anti-state slogans, and the situation was exacerbated further (Huang, 2011). Although of low quality yet empathetic and profound content was shared on the internet. Unedited, uncensored, and uninterrupted, and it caught everyone off-guard. Prior to 2011, the widespread discontent and anti-state rhetoric was nothing new, but the constraints imposed



by the Arab rulers subdued the voices to a greater extent. People have very little room to raise their discontent. However, the introduction of social media changed things. The people documented the government's brutality and sent it to the world.

Causes of Arab Spring

Rosenberg (2011) highlighted the causes of Arab Spring that rising food costs have also impacted Egypt. Due to meteorological circumstances, grain prices surged substantially worldwide in 2010. Wheat is an essential part of every household because bread is made from wheat, and bread is a vital source of nutrition for families who have low-income budget. If the prices of wheat rise, it delicately attacks the prices of bread that cause hunger and hunger cause death, and it also causes resistance and anger against those responsible for the suffering of people.

The Arab world protests began in Tunisia and spread to Egypt and Libya. On Arab transformation, social media assumed a productive part that is essential to consider so the reader can see the relationship between social media and Arab Spring. Several researchers have studied how the people used Facebook and Twitter to transform and overthrow the ruling regimes (see, e.g., Alharbi, 2018). At the time of the uprising, the government cut off the internet connections, but the people did not back off the use of media; however, the users found a different platform to perform their tasks and convey their voice to the World. With the help of social media, the protestors come on one forum to stand in front of a corrupt government. Social media platforms, later blockage of the social media sites, brought the protestors out of their comfort zones, and they started meeting outside to mount pressure on the government.

The digital dictatorship was deeply discouraged by the international community. It has, undoubtedly, snatched the freedom of speech right from humanity. Indeed, the regimes now look for the social media activists who have many followers and can influence people through this platform and ultimately arrest them for anti-state narrative on terrorism charges which is gruesome and irrational. However, things are evolving, and we can hope for a better free world. The role of social media in the Arab spring was of great importance. It helped people express their narratives and reservations—even anti-state, to unfree themselves from the oppressive regimes (Wolfsfeld, 2013). Social media sites like Facebook and Twitter were phenomenal in this regard. The international community was alarmed, which indeed augmented pressure on the political mechanism of these countries. However, it is needless to say that the long epoch of activism in the region cannot be overlooked. Indeed, it was the amalgam of political activity and technology. When the censorship policies have increased, and states use it as a toolkit to subdue voices, we can



hope for a better world where all voices will be given an equal chance to be heard under fundamental human rights.

Qadir (2017) said that the civil revolution in the Arab world was phenomenal through social media, and it also affected the surrounding states. It explains how this revolution succeeded in letting the long-term authoritarian rulers resign in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt and provided rights to the natives of Oman, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, and Bahrain. Moreover, it emphasizes that Tunisia was the actual victim of Arab spring as it got the desired outcome while other states could not succeed. Ansani (2012) studies the economic motivation of the Arab Spring. After inspecting the association among the Arab world and the general global economic issues that began in 2007, the research emphasizes some underlying perspectives, i.e., the significant social imbalances, the disparity among the schooling levels of young ones in particular, etc., let the background for people's revolt against the oppressive system. The blend of young generation, socioeconomics, high joblessness ratio, and increasing informative and educational level, combined with an aberrant political structure, improves the probability of societal agitation.

Regional developments and Arab Spring

In the aftermath of the Arab Spring revolutions in early 2011, teachers and political pundits have tried to determine the reasons and elements that brought about those movements' achievements or failures. While everyone has confronted its very own particular set of political, social, and monetary problems, a not unusual place thread that instructional observers have detected is the more and more not unusual place use of social media for functions of revolution (Al-Jenaibi, 2014).

The Arab spring is an Anti-government and pro-democratic series of events, including protests and even armed rebellions against the authoritarian style of government, which has been the type of government in the Arab world. As a consequence of the Arab spring, the rulers of some countries resigned, but at the same time, it was not influential for others despite political and economic pressure; along with providing information about Arab Spring, this paper analyzed the tangible results of political discrimination in the Arab world.

The uprisings and the events of Middle Eastern Spring shudder the foundation of a variety of center systems of the East. This policy provides an overview of the changing situations that took place with a perspective to the approaching center east meeting. The Middle Eastern rebellion and its failure provided another ground for effective military control through the issues such as zero progress in Palestinian - Israeli struggle and the Iranian atomic program are yet the disputes. It seems though that the present problems



could be settled adequately in some near or distant future, but undeniably, the Middle Eastern spring gave it a powerful drive (Gause, 2014; Berger, 2012).

Salamey (2015) notes that the politics after the Arab spring is the consequence of globalization's economic and social liberalization. The phenomenon of privatization along with the global market has negatively affected the dictatorial standard over state and society but provides a ground for corruption at the same time. This ultimately results in public disgust. The political situation of the Middle East and North Africa post Arab spring gave rise to the reasoning polarity of globalization. Resulting, economic unification came up with the expiration of national authoritarianism while producing communalism and political fracture.

Subsequently, after the 2011 Arab Spring, the only question that bothered was why some dictator rule was still in power apart from all the others who fell when they encountered by similar problems. Going before the portrayal of the achievement of tyranny in the Middle East and North Africa emerged similar illusions regarding politically fruitful behavior in a specific place or region. Portrayed by neighborhood autocrats and worldwide entertainers, this view takes them to put forward adhoc policies reorientation concerning an infection of admired uprisings. These policies failed authoritarianism, and democracy dominated in some countries (Volpi, F. 2013). These uprising alternatives are uncertain events as they pivot on significant misjudgments of the situation to be effective (as in Tunisia, Libya) despite being structured by the lack of opportunities for contestation present in each policy. Corresponding to when reform pathways are made available by an authoritarian regime, contestation can be conveyed into non-revolutionary political action (like in Morocco, Algeria).

Kitchen, N. (2012) notes that as a consequence of Arab spring, Obama's policy is not to let the developments flourish in the US. The critics, though, condemned the unclear approach and not talking to democratic personals while protecting national interests. The supporters, on the contrary, appreciated the amalgamation of practical principles and considered it a more innovative approach towards international affairs. The conflicting approach of the US, which sometimes adds up to the approval of certainties, gives back extensive planned stress in the US' approach to the Middle east and the fact that US is the most important superpower in the region. Its capability to prescribe results is limited. Obamas' administration ensured that the new authorities will have to work with the US and that the US is not distracted from its veto strategic reorientation towards the Asian pacific region yet coping and working to keep the US on the right side of the history meanwhile Arab spring.



Findings and Conclusion

The journey of the Arab Spring that started in 2010, when Mohammad Bouazizi died from his injuries after setting himself on fire and passing away from his injuries had sparked a revolution that resonated in the hearts of the people of Tunisia and later on to the rest of the neighboring Arab countries hearts as protestors rallied against corruption, economic inequality, joblessness unemployment and to demand the downfall of the authoritarian regime that was ruling.

The MENA countries being rich in oil and resources had a downfall in economic development in Pre-Spring Arab world due to corruption, inequality and inflation of prices in their economy making it harder for the average individual to survive and work for a living and had experienced a further major downfall in economic development amongst the regions during Post- Arab Spring that brought people to their knees and enraged onto the streets.

Due to the political instability and meddling corruption as an example, Tunisia was hit with the worst of it all, like the situation in terms of institutional social, economics levels does not seem to be recovering as many of the young people who held degrees and graduates were part of the high unemployment rate amongst the population as well as political instability and unrest such was the same case for the other neighboring regions like Egypt, Syria, Yemen, etc.

Syria that led an uprising from the spark of the Arab Spring, an uprising that had led to a civil war with many losses and casualties and eventually the rebels losing against Al-Assads's regime and followed by Yemen becoming the poorest Arab country as it too had also descended into violence and chaos. The uprising showed that previously the women were presented with limited opportunities for them in the society, be it economic, financial, or political, and their rights were also being limited as well, but the protests had further sparked an influx of women leading to more protests and fighting for their right for equality and voice against the authoritarian regimes in the Arab Spring countries.

The rise in food prices and the shortage of food items was the main factor that pushed the people to start the movement, protest. It clearly showed that the people were disturbed for their needs, essentials to be fulfilled by the government. The reason people were upset by the government and the politics was because they did not think about how a middle-class person could survive such higher prices. The people wanted to learn Islam because it would guide them in all their life problems. They understood that Islam always



encourages keeping equality freedom among the people. Islam always motivates us not to treat others low based on their cast, color, culture, and race.

Poverty was also the primary effect, and the only solution for it was creating more job opportunities by the government for the people. Women should also have the same opportunities as men to work and have jobs. If a male and female of the same house could have a decent job, the poverty rate will start getting down. The people demanded opportunities from the political bodies. The Arab Spring also increases the number of women to demand equality in political, social, and economic work. This led to creating equality among men and women in society. The women wanted to prove that they are also important as males are important for company or family growth.

Social media played a significant role in creating awareness that a better life is essential for them. Protestors were using social media platforms to run their programs. The moto was to help people understand how vital the protest is for them. It also allowed those unaware of the movement to join them as the motive was creating equality freedom. Many followers joined the revolution in the Middle East just because of social media.

The analysis of the previous studies state how the Arab Spring affects Middle Eastern countries. The people raised their voices for their economic growth and better job opportunities to stand among the other people worldwide. Egyptians protest was on the three demands, and they are:

- Justice.
- Freedom.
- Human dignity.

The research clearly showed that the political change happened rapidly and violently with the help of social media. Some American leaders also saw the movement of Arab Spring as a good sign because the people were demanding a good life, in a good place, free of corruption and social discrimination. Women empowerment was a good point then and now. Arab Spring ultimately ended in December 2012, but it left a message that social media provide a potent public sphere to register protest and raise voice for rights at the individual and collective level.



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