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Revolutionizing the Revolution: An Examination of Social Media's Role in the Egyptian
Arab Spring Revolution

A Thesis

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“The barricades today do not bristle with bayonets and rifles, but with phones.”¹

Introduction

Revolutions are born out of human existence intertwining with synergetic movements. They are the products of deeply disgruntled and dissatisfied individuals seeking an alternative to the present status quo. Revolutions emerge from a number of situations and come in the form of wars, of movements, of social, cultural, and technological upheavals. They are complex moments in history that often cannot be fully understood until examined retrospectively. Each revolution is unique and particular, but with conceptual and phenomenal commonalities; they are multi-faceted, complicated moments in time.

The notion that revolutions do not occur singularly can be interpreted in two manners. The more commonly understood practical theory of revolution comes from Lenin, a successful revolution must have two parts, i.e. two moments of insurrection.² Taking Lenin’s theory and placing it in the context of present day Egypt, we can label the three week, mostly peaceful protests starting on Jan 25, 2011 and culminating with the ousting of then-president Hosni Mubarak as the first part of their revolution. Egypt enjoyed a brief moment of looking forward to the future, but after a mere 11 months in office, a popularly supported military coup overthrew democratically elected President Mohammad Morsi. The nation of Egypt was thrust into their second revolution. This time laced with a heavier dose of force, violence, and a greater degree of uncertainty. Lenin

¹ Peter Beaumont, "The Truth about Twitter, Facebook and the Uprisings in the Arab world," *The Guardian*, February 24, 2011.

² Vladimir Lenin (w/Slavoj Zizek), *Revolution at the Gates* (Verso: 2011), 106.

places special emphasis on the continued and sustained popular engagement of the people to assure ultimate success during this second phase of revolution.³ Egypt finds itself battling in the second phase of their revolution and to succeed the people must remain agents for change.

However, this paper seeks to go in the direction of a second interpretation. By asserting that no revolution occurs singularly, I propose that revolutions occur in a multiplicity. Within the framework of the Arab Spring Revolutions, another revolution has been occurring concurrently: a social media revolution. This revolution is taking place in the digital, social media age. It is a revolution that has been tweeted, facebooked, recorded, documented and shared instantaneously on platforms that obeys few lines of political sovereignty.⁴ Revolution and political action can now truly be shown from the perspective of the common citizen. Activists have discovered a greater platform for their voices to be distributed and causes promoted. The Arab Spring Revolutions were not a simply a series of revolutions that occurred and stayed within the boundaries of their respective countries. As these insurrections have progressed and developed, the world has observed and gone with them through social media. According to Mayfield, “Social media can be ‘best understood as a group of new kinds of online media, which share most or all of the following characteristics: participation, openness, conversation, community,

³ Ibid.

⁴ Facebooked is a colloquial term referring to posting on Facebook and tweeted can be regarded as posting on Twitter.

connectedness.”⁵ An important characteristic to note about social media is that it is all user-generated content.

Many will argue that perhaps awareness of situations has increased and global presence has been augmented, but the impact on the actual revolutions are being questioned. This paper seeks to prove that social media’s influence in the Arab Spring revolutions were significant in shaping the events of the Arab Spring.

This analysis was conducted under the framework of Arthur Bentley’s methodology. Bentley’s methodology was selected as the framework for this analysis because of Bentley’s views on social groups and pressures as explained in his most celebrated book, *The Process of Government*. By disregarding the individual as a primary factor, he theorizes that groups are at the center of all social movements.⁶ Bentley believes group interactions to be the driving force of governmental decisions and social processes.⁷ Because the Arab Spring Revolutions were not a result of any singular person and dependent on the revolutionaries as a whole, I believed Bentley’s framework to be fitting for understanding the revolutions. Social media proved to be the most unique tool of the revolution because it empowered an entire generation. Perhaps the largest reason that social media emerged as a substantial tool in the revolutions is because more people

⁵ Antony Mayfield, "What is Social Media?." In *What is Social Media?.* e-book: iCrossing, 2008.

*According to Mayfield, there are six basic kinds of social media: “social networks, such as Facebook, MySpace, and Bebo; blogs, such as Tumblr; wikis, such as Wikipedia; podcasts, as found on Apple iTunes; forums; content communities, such as YouTube and Flickr; and micro-blogging, such as Twitter.

⁶ Arthur Fisher Bentley, *The Process of Government: A Study of Social Pressures*. (Reprint. London: Forgotten Books, 1908).

⁷ Ibid.

than ever are connected to the internet and own mobile phones. According to a PEW research study conducted in 2013, 88% of people own cell phones in Egypt while 43% of people stated they use the internet at least occasionally or own a smart phone.⁸ Similar figures were reported in Tunisia. Because accessibility has increased—prices of owning a phone and having internet access have lowered significantly in most countries—as is the case when technology is no longer new, so has people's ownership. Moreover, social media has provided an effective, free way to stay connected to others. Primarily, it could not be controlled by the government which is why it has emerged as an incredibly effective tool in an area known for government dominance. It proved to be very useful in organizing demonstrations, and as its success was seen across the world, it stayed relevant and its usage grew.

Theoretical Framework

It takes more than a group of unhappy people for an uprising to occur. Analysts are attributing much of the Arab Spring revolutions to the fact that approximately 65% of the population constituting the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region is under the age of 30.⁹ German social scientist Gunnah Heinsohn, coined the term, Youth Bulge, signifying when “30 percent of men in the population are between 15 and 29.”¹⁰ Heinsohn suggested that this large percentage of youth often led to civil unrest and

⁸ Pew Research Center, “Emerging Nations Embrace Internet, Mobile Technology.” February 2014.

⁹ Lionel Beehner, “The Effects of ‘Youth Bulge’ on Civil Conflicts,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, April 27, 2007.

¹⁰ Ibid.

revolution.”¹¹ There has been a rise in the number of young men and women in the Middle East graduating with post-secondary degrees and emerging into a society with very low job prospects. Karim Kahlil, 20 year old Egyptian student and member of the youth bulge commented during an interview, “It’s not uncommon to find people here that have 10-year anniversaries of their engagements, because they still don’t have enough saved to get married.”¹² Young individuals have become disenchanted with their governments for its lack of activity concerning the economic standards of their country and for the corruption of the regimes. These feelings fueled the fire for revolution. The youth hold a different mindset from their older counterparts and are more apt to question authority, demand rights, and protest against perceived injustices.

The Arab Spring was partially powered by social pressures and aspirations of the youth who were dissatisfied and frustrated by the inequality and lack of opportunity. The increased communication provided by technology and social media empowered the dissidents and mobilized the movement. Modernization Theory is another prominent theory that also addresses concepts that have factored into the revolution.

*“Modernization theory holds that the experience of technological and economic change tends to “mobilize” new or previously apathetic groups by raising both their economic aspirations and their demands for political participation. Revolution is likely to occur when those holding state power are unable or unwilling to meet the demands of groups mobilized by modernization.”*¹³

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Karim Khalil, Interview with Philip Howard. ‘Youth Bulge and the Arab Spring.’ ABC Australia, October 29, 2011.

¹³ James De Fronzo, *Revolution and Revolutionary Movements* (4th Ed. Westview, 2011).

Social media has cultivated an environment for the younger generation to collaborate on their thoughts and ideas as well as discuss their viewpoints. Solidarity concerning beliefs is crucial in cultivating a community of dissidents and social media has aided in the development of relationships most extensively among the millennial generation, but not exclusively. Virtual communication allows individuals to stay in touch with a greater aggregation of people. In many cases, social media strengthens ties because it increases the amount of communication between parties, therefore expanding opportunities to build bonds. Social media played an important role in helping ex-pats and those living in a diaspora stay involved. Because portions of people's lives are open for display, individuals are capable of learning about common interests and factions of one's personality that might otherwise remain hidden.

The interconnectedness social media provides is perhaps its most revolutionary quality. Many people said that they had long been dissatisfied with the government, but believed themselves to be too much a minority to do anything about it. Daron Acemoglu was quoted saying, "what really stops people who are oppressed by a regime from protesting is the fear that they will be part of an unsuccessful protest."¹⁴ He went on to explain the fear associated with participating and then the regime not changing.¹⁵ Acemoglu maintains that satellite television and social networking have allowed information to become more widespread and let individuals know they are not alone in

¹⁴ Rebecca Rosen, "So, Was Facebook Responsible for the Arab Spring After All?" *The Atlantic*. September 3, 2011.

¹⁵ Ibid.

their views, whether or not protesting is worthwhile or safe (Freeland 2011).¹⁶ The emergence of social media created a platform for people to come together.

On social media, individuals are members of sites whose main objective is to connect them with a wide consortium of individuals at no cost to them. Members are able to utilize this platform to promote their ideas, garner support for their causes, share the news, or interact with others in a virtual social reality. As of May 1st 2013, Facebook announced their most recent user total had reached 1.11 billion.¹⁷ In 2011, 48 % of Facebook users cited that they receive their news from Facebook.¹⁸ The number one most cited hash tag utilized on Twitter in 2011 was “#egypt” with “#jan25th” rounding out the top ten.¹⁹ Hosni Mubarak’s resignation, Osama Bin Laden’s capture, and Moammer Gaddafi’s death all fell within the top five trending topics in the world news category. About 10% of all status updates in English on May 2nd, 2011 mentioned Bin Laden’s death while 5,106 tweets occurred per second on that day referencing his capture.²⁰ News is finding us quicker than we are finding it.

It is not that social media itself is creating more news, but it has proven to be very successful at sharing information that is already out there, so individuals are capitalizing on its enormous potential by using it as a means to make people more informed. The connections and relationships maintained through these sites allowed for the diaspora community to have a role in the revolutions. The international community was able to

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Brunella Rousseau, “Facebook Statistics.[Infographic],” 2012.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Aden Hepburn, "Facebook Statistics, Stats & Facts For 2011," *Digital Buzz Blog*.

contribute through humanitarian efforts as well as pressuring governments. The intervention in Libya was a result of international pressure caused by people living abroad. Much of the information the general public knew about Libya was circulated via social media. Increased exposure is one of the most beneficial aspects of social media as the site can be used to spread awareness about a campaign. If members are excited about an organization's work they may even share the information with their social network and thus the trend of information being passed along continues. Virtual social movements in this regard cannot operate independently; to be successful, they require the actions and assistance of offline individuals in the field.

Every revolution nowadays is a global revolution. The heavy usage of social media during the Arab Spring resulted in the restructuring of power dynamics among various social groups. A new study by a researcher at Rice University explains that social media allowed often traditionally marginalized women to gain a greater political voice and presence.²¹ Radsch, researcher from the project, says, that young women will “undoubtedly continue to use new media technologies to participate in and influence the future trajectory of their countries.”²² Because of the nature of this digital medium, women were able to hold more power and influence than they had in the past. Cultural appropriateness and patriarchal hegemony became less restrictive behind a computer screen.

²¹ Courtney Radsch, “Unveiling the Revolutionaries: Cyberactivism and the Role of Women in the Arab Uprisings,” *James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy*, May 17, 2012.

²² Ibid.

One of the more commonly recognized attributes of the Arab Spring revolutions is that it was largely youth led. A number of factors most likely contributed to this particularity, social media being one of them. Because youth are conventionally more technologically comfortable, and therefore capable, than older generations and social networking became such a prominent tool, it shifted the power from the hands of the older generation to the younger one. Power is influenced by whoever is in control of the tools. Rosen explains the significance of how we communicate during moments of “historic crisis and transformation.” She writes, “the medium that carries the message shapes and defines as well as the message itself.”²³

Globalization has led the world to greater awareness. People are aware of their rights as humans and the protesters, particularly the youth, have realized they have the capabilities to take measures to make an impactful movement. Revolutionaries are born when individuals face existential crises; they have nothing to lose because they cease to exist in their current state of being.²⁴ The praxis of Modernization Theory and Youth Bulge Theory is essential in weighing in on the Arab Spring because it accounts for two of the most critical components of the Arab Spring as an evolved revolution: the youth utilized social media to alter the status quo power structure in an effort to be included.

Per this paper, Bentley’s methodology is understood via Robert Oprisko’s discussion of Michael Weinstein’s analysis of Bentley’s theories. Bentley’s methodology can be broken up into a few key aspects in order to better investigate the state of affairs.

²³ Rebecca Rosen, "So, Was Facebook Responsible for the Arab Spring After All?"

²⁴ Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1991).

Bentley's method of analysis involves identifying key actors, a critical moment, strategies, tools, and power.²⁵ First, we must identify the actors related to the situation. The primary actors in the Egyptian Revolution include the citizens—some who were supporters of the government, but a vast majority who opposed the inequality embodied by the status quo regime. Another main actor includes former President Hosni Mubarak and his successor Muhammad Morsi. The military remains another primary player as they seized control of Egypt following the ousting of Morsi by the Egyptian citizens. Mohammad Sisi, rumored to be the front runner for Egypt's next round of elections has played a significant role in the removal and subsequent trial of Morsi. The international community can be considered as well; however it is difficult to explain their impact singularly. Finally, I argue, a significant actor in the Arab Spring was the social media community. This community is a conglomerate of many of the other actors, consisting of Egyptian citizens, supporters and opponents of the regime, and members of the international community. Just as multiple factors play into a revolution, multiple actors share a role in its development. The aforementioned actors are what I believe to be the chief players in the Egyptian revolution; however, there are numerous influential individuals and groups.

Revolutions are dynamic and in a constant state of flux. The status quo is constantly altering based on who holds the power, yet power is not singularly held by any

²⁵ Robert Oprisko, "Weinstein's Method of Political Analysis" in Michael A. Weinstein: Action, Contemplation, Vitalism by Robert L. Oprisko and Diane Rubenstein, eds. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014).

sole party.²⁶ Power is distributed and understood in multiple manners. For example, the regime in place exerts a degree of power by having control of the country. The military also exudes power through their use of force as they demonstrated in Egypt when they shut down two Cairo based pro-Morsi camps in August 2013.²⁷ Additionally, in January of 2014 the Egyptian people voted on a referendum amending their constitution.

However, external pressure from the military for a “yes” vote has led many to believe the procedures that occurred were not completely fair, with the Carnegie Endowment for Peace calling it “a very undemocratic process.”²⁸ A culture of fear and oppression emerged in Egypt as state leaders arrested those with differing political opinions. With the state controlling a number of media outlets as well as retaining clout within private media entities, they were able to wield their power to manipulate their constituents. The current powers in charge include individuals appointed by the military or of the military, continuing Egypt’s ruling trend of the last 62 years.²⁹ The adjusted constitution not only bolsters the power of the military but also expands that power.³⁰ Their budget would be beyond civilian oversight, civilians would be able to be tried in military courts, and the military would be in charge of the selection of the defense minister for the next 8 years.³¹ In the framework of Bentley’s analysis, military personnel hold the largest concentration

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ BBC News Middle East, “Q&A: Egypt in Turmoil,” *BBC News*, August 21, 2013.

²⁸ Orla Guerin, “Egypt Referendum Also Seen as Vote on Morsi’s Removal,” *BBC News*, January 14, 2014.

²⁹ BBC News Middle East, “Egyptians Fear Return to Authoritarianism” *BBC News*, December 19, 2013.

³⁰ Orla Guerin, “Egypt Referendum Also Seen as Vote on Morsi’s Removal.” *BBC News*, January 14, 2014.

³¹ Ibid.

of strength and authority. Even so, rebels willing to die for their cause retain a degree of power because they are ultimately sovereign over themselves; their weakness diminishes when they act popularly. Finally, by effectively utilizing social media to achieve their interests, which Bentley defines as strategy, protestors who effectively used social media garnered a measure of power.³²

Per Bentley's methodology, every situation has a critical moment. This moment consists of time and space and contains a conjunction of actors.³³ The critical moment in Egypt was the January 25 protest that kicked off their revolution. Although protests and unrest had been brewing long before, this was the decisive moment that fed into every other notable event regarding the revolution. The critical moment is a turning point, a period that is unable to be matched by others. Significant events occurred prior to this peak point, , and noteworthy events followed, but as far as what launched Egypt into their on-going transformation, the 3 week, and mostly peaceful protest was indispensable.

Methodology

In order to analyze the effects of social media accurately, I went straight to the source-- the people, the news, and the sites. I conducted a phenomenological exploration by reading blogs, twitter newsfeeds, and joined new social networking sites in order to include and engage multiple and varied perspectives. I examined news articles from various regions and countries and attempted to diversify my sources. I already had a

³² Robert Oprisko. "Weinstein's Method of Political Analysis."

³³ Ibid.

Facebook in which I was connected to over a thousand of assorted individuals from various backgrounds. My next step involved creating a twitter and following numerous groups and individuals. When analyzing my Facebook, I scrutinized my research from the point of view of my personal account. However, for the first year with twitter, I only followed political organizations, news companies, journalists, or political minded individuals who primarily utilized their twitter to promote news. This altered the following two years as my twitter followers expanded to include a range of personalities including friends and celebrities. I followed everything from Syrian citizens, to the UN, to hackers extraordinaire Anonymous. Since this is an analysis of present or very recent situations, there has not been a tremendous amount of exhaustive scholarly research. However, statistical data has been collected and analyzed via PEW research institute.

Now that Bentley's methodology has been utilized to explain the events and actors involved with the Egyptian revolution, we can connect the role of social media in all of this. It goes without saying that media influence is domineering over peoples understanding of culture and society. However, in the context of the Arab Spring, social media's most significant contributing factor was its enabling of popular organization at speeds never before seen and the diminishment of state controlled media. Social media served as a driving force for people to rally around. On June 6, 2010, Khaled Said, was dragged out of a cybercafé in Egypt and beat to death by police. It was rumored he had compromising videos of the police dealing drugs.³⁴ This very public event was captured on camera and photos of his deceased body circulated the social media world culminating

³⁴ Sahar Khamis and Katherine Vaughn, "Cyberactivism in the Egyptian Revolution: How Civic Engagement and Citizen Journalism Tilted the Balance," Arab Media & Society, 2011.

in a Facebook group titled “We are All Khaled Said.”³⁵ The Facebook group has almost 1.5 million members.³⁶ Many activists maintain that social media helped keep up the momentum of the protests.³⁷ In another article, the authors maintain that cyberactivism during the Egyptian revolution triggered public mobilization. Referencing York, Khamis and Vaughn explained that the “We are All Khaled Said” Facebook page grew into a social meeting place where information could be disseminated.³⁸ Advice such as “Egyptian flags only, no political emblems, no violence, don’t disrupt traffic, bring plenty of water, don’t bring your national. I.D. card, etc” (York 2011a).³⁹ Social media was the tool employed by the parties to achieve their interests.

The Arab Spring

Figure 1 below summarizes data collected by PEW Research Institute. Through a survey conducted in over 20 countries, PEW reported results that are consistent with the aforementioned assertion that the youth are more apt to engage with social media technologies than older generations. Moreover, if we look at the Arab countries, particularly Tunisia and Egypt, we see 64 percent of Tunisians between 18-29 years of age are social media users and 50% of Egyptians between the ages of 18-29 have also reported being connected to social media.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Rebecca Rosen, "So, Was Facebook Responsible for the Arab Spring After All?"

³⁸ Sahar Khamis and Katherine Vaughn. "Cyberactivism in the Egyptian Revolution: How Civic Engagement and Citizen Journalism Tilted the Balance."

³⁹ Ibid.

Figure 1.⁴⁰

Young Much More Likely to Use Social Networking				
<i>% That use social networking (based on total)</i>				
	18-29	30-49	50+	Oldest- youngest gap
	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>	
U.S.	80	59	28	-52
Italy	91	52	13	-78
Poland	82	53	8	-74
Britain	94	66	22	-72
Greece	74	35	4	-70
Spain	91	58	24	-67
France	81	47	17	-64
Czech Rep.	87	57	25	-62
Germany	69	42	16	-53
Russia	84	59	20	-64
Lebanon	66	28	4	-62
Turkey	69	31	7	-62
Tunisia	64	25	7	-57
Egypt	50	22	18	-32
Jordan	35	35	6	-29
Pakistan	4	2	0	-4
Japan	71	41	10	-61
China	61	26	8	-53
India	12	3	1	-11
Mexico	63	29	7	-56
Brazil	62	43	12	-50

PEW RESEARCH CENTER Q79.

Figure 2 provides a deeper analysis by breaking down users self-reported social media usage tendencies. In all of the MENA (Middle East Northern Africa) regions reported, approximately 30% of the populations in each country are connected to social networking. Notably, 60% of MENA social media users utilize their social networking sites as a platform to discuss politics and 70 % - 80% use them to discuss community

⁴⁰ Pew Research Center, "Social Networking Popular Across Globe," December 2012.

issues. This is especially interesting when compared to European countries where a much higher percent of the population utilizes social media, but users report only utilizing their personal networking sites for politics 20% - 30 % of time.

Figure 2.⁴¹

Social Networking Usage						
	% Saying they use social networking sites*	Do you ever use social networking sites to share your views about...**				
		Music and movies	Community issues	Sports	Politics	Religion
	%	%	%	%	%	%
U.S.	50	63	47	49	37	32
Britain	52	49	36	35	30	8
France	39	59	14	40	18	8
Germany	34	50	42	29	27	7
Spain	49	62	48	48	34	13
Italy	38	75	64	44	36	16
Greece	29	83	51	41	34	13
Poland	40	55	40	35	19	9
Czech Rep.	49	61	45	37	27	9
Russia	50	67	34	38	31	15
Turkey	35	78	63	61	57	53
Egypt	30	67	74	53	63	63
Jordan	29	68	80	68	60	62
Lebanon	34	48	81	22	68	8
Tunisia	34	77	82	64	67	63
Pakistan	3	--	--	--	--	--
China	31	86	50	50	35	10
India	6	85	41	82	45	40
Japan	30	59	32	33	22	1
Brazil	40	74	38	51	31	43
Mexico	33	84	40	42	21	15
MEDIAN	34	67	46	43	34	14

*Based on total sample.

**Based on those who use social networking sites. Pakistan not shown due to sample size.

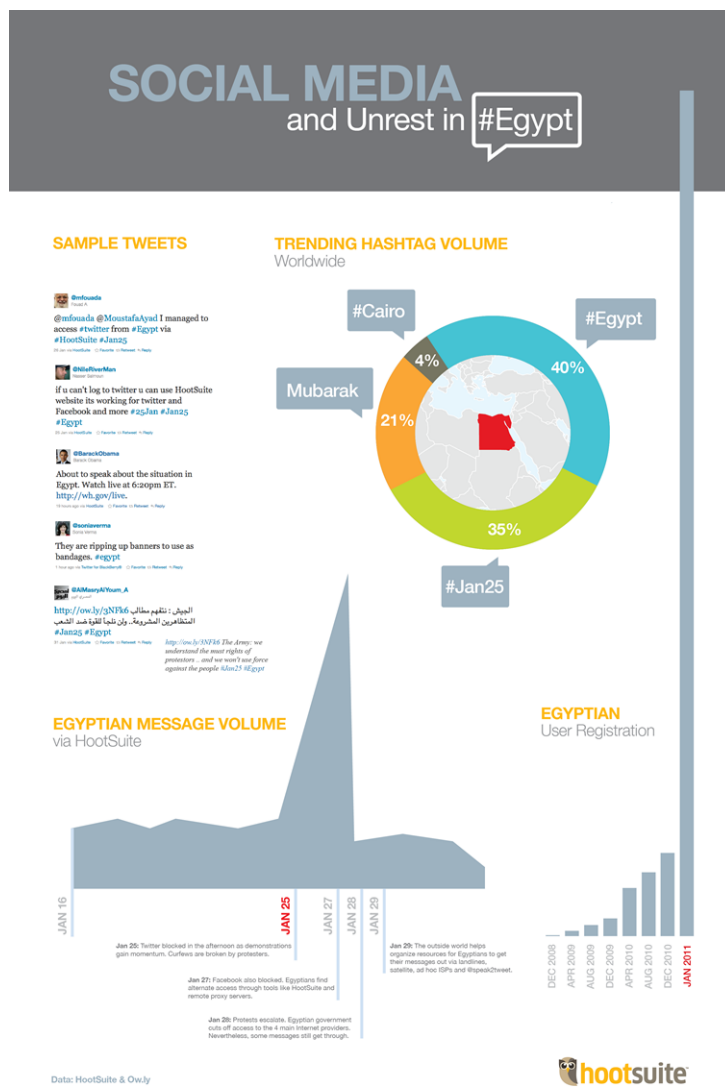
PEW RESEARCH CENTER Q79 & Q80a-e.

Figure 3 is a graphic image created by Hootsuite, a social networking management system. It displays the enormous increase in user registration in January 2011. As well as exhibiting the massive spike in the volume of messages from Egyptians during the critical moment of their revolution in the final days of January in 2011. These statistical

⁴¹ Pew Research Center, "Social Networking Popular Across Globe," December 2012.

data provide evidence that social media was heavily utilized during the revolution by citizens of the countries themselves.

Figure 3.⁴²



⁴² AndyAu. "Egypt Unrest and the Social Web – Infographic." *HootSuite Social Media Management* (blog). April, 2012.

Social Media: Promoting Active Engagement

One of the worst things we can do is to dehumanize the revolutionaries; indeed, nothing will turn one into a rebel quicker. Because of this, many people shy away from crediting social media with too much success because it detracts too much from the human aspect of the revolution. A more appropriate term to explain social media's role in the Arab Spring is cyberactivism or the use of electronic or internet activism such as social networking sites to enable faster communication.⁴³ The diction is important because it endows the revolutionaries instead of the technology. Cyberactivism has led to the emergence of a new wave of citizen journalists due to the proliferation of technology such as camera phones, wi-fi, and mobile internet access. During the Arab Spring, individuals documented happenings on the scene only to publicize them on their social networking sites.

Riyaad Minty, head of [social media](#) at Al-Jazeera, stated,

"Post [Egypt](#), in places like Libya, Yemen and Syria, citizens posting online have been the primary lens through which people have been able to see what is happening on the ground. Now our main stories are driven by images captured by citizens on the street, it's no longer just a supporting image. In most cases citizens capture the breaking news moments first. The Arab spring was really the tipping point when it all came together."⁴⁴

A fundamental characteristic of social media is that it has led to the empowerment of an entire generation. The pursuit of fame, recognition, awareness, or self-promotion has never been easier as having web access is the only requirement and it has never been

⁴³ Sahar Khamis and Katherine Vaughn, "Cyberactivism in the Egyptian Revolution."

⁴⁴ David Batty. "Arab Spring Leads Surge in Events Captured on Cameraphones," *The Guardian*, December 29, 2011.

easier to acquire as mobile phones offer internet access much easier than landlines. This concept is essential in understanding the framework by which social media was understood in the Arab Spring by young and old all over the world. Social media became an instrument that amplified their voices and strengthened their scope.

Watching YouTube videos and liking causes on Facebook did not bring down any of the regimes; the people on the street were responsible for that. Nevertheless, this new addition to the social stratosphere enriched the revolutions by establishing a setting where individuals and groups amassed to confer. Wael Baas, a prominent Egyptian blogger, stated it best,

“Social media is a tool. But revolution is the decision of many people. Once we decided to have a revolution, once people decided to stay in the square, social media was a helpful tool to call for support, ask lawyers for help. I will not give social media all the credit, nor will I take away all the credit from social media.”⁴⁵

Concerning protests, Twitter in coalition with sms-texting provided protesters with minute-by-minute updates on where to assemble in an effort to bypass police efforts. Perhaps, the greatest quality of social media is its capacity to spread information outwardly coupled with its ability to create a platform that allows individuals and groups to organize both socially and physically. Protestors created Facebook events and pages promoting protests. Arab activists blogged about the injustices they felt they were being subjected to by their own government. They publicized links to stories from media outlets they trusted or more often uploaded their own images and shared their personal accounts. As I mentioned earlier, the essence of social media is that the content is user generated.

⁴⁵“Twitter, Facebook and YouTube’s Role in Arab Spring (Middle East Uprisings),” *Social Capital Blog*, April 30, 2012.

The accessibility of the technology enabled users to change the story of the revolution. Thoughts that previously remained hidden under the surface now had a mechanism through which to be unleashed. Individuals found commonalities among groups. As Dr. Howard explains, "These dictators for a long time had many political enemies, but they were fragmented. So opponents used social media to identify goals, build solidarity and organize demonstrations."⁴⁶ Moreover, Dr. Howard asserts that the authoritarian regimes were unable to keep up with the new media technologies and the rapid pace at which they worked because they were only familiar with the old media.⁴⁷

Another factor that contributed to the success of social media and recognizes its innovatory relevance is the safety associated with an online identity. People can discuss, organize, plan, and disseminate that information, at speeds never before realized without ever truly displaying their real identity. As Tunisia's chief technology officer turned hacker, Foetus, explains, meeting "in real life meant 'spies and police and all these Stasi' he says, using the term for East Germany's secret police. Online we could be anonymous."⁴⁸ Activists used a variety of social media techniques to aid them during the revolution. Fake twitter accounts and pages were made to further tarnish the images of members of the regime.⁴⁹ Foursquare was used to broadcast the location of an activist trapped in the Ministry of the Interior while Skype and Mumble were utilized to speak

⁴⁶ Kate Taylor, "Arab Spring Really Was Social Media Revolution," *TG Daily*, September 13, 2011.

⁴⁷ Rob Lever. "Arab Spring: Did Social Media Really Spark Revolutions?" *Middle East Online*, March 13, 2013.

⁴⁸ Rebecca Rosen, "So, Was Facebook Responsible for the Arab Spring After All?"

⁴⁹ Ibid.

over the internet.⁵⁰ Foetus also stated, “We were online every day and on the streets pretty much every day, collecting information, collecting videos, organizing protests, getting into protests.”⁵¹ This is where social media usage proved to aid the Arab Spring revolutions in unique ways from past revolutions. A survey conducted by researchers out of University North Carolina with Egyptians who participated in the Tahrir Square protests reports that nearly half of the protesters disseminated information through their social networking sites, mainly Facebook.⁵²

Social media generated an opportunity for structure in a chaotic environment. Over 90,000 people signed up to a Facebook page for the January 25th protest in Egypt which the organizers described as “a stand against torture, poverty, corruption and unemployment.”⁵³ For the first wave of the revolution, Egyptians came together under the comprehensive understanding that the government was not serving their interests. A week before Mubarak’s resignation, tweets about political change in Egypt increased ten-fold, increasing from 2,300 a day to 230,000.⁵⁴ Howard explains that conversations regarding liberty, democracy, and revolutions on social media such as blogs and Twitter often

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Zeynep Tufekci and Christopher Wilson, "Social Media and the Decision to Participate in Political Protest: Observations From Tahrir Square," *Journal of Communication* (2012) 62.

⁵³ “Twitter, Facebook and YouTube’s Role in Arab Spring,” *Social Capital Blog*, updated July 7, 2013.

⁵⁴ Phillip Howard et al. "Opening Closed Regimes: What was the Role of Social Media in the Arab Spring." *A working paper: Project on Informational Technology and Political Islam* (2011).

heralded mass protests.⁵⁵ This initial protest marked the beginning of the Egyptian revolution that led to the eventual overthrowing of the regime. The next wave came under the disillusionment with Morsi's government. Morsi, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, continues to face much opposition across Egypt although a dedicated group of followers has remained true to the Brotherhood.

Social Media Effect

Most individuals would agree the kick start to the Arab Spring revolutions occurred with the self-immolation of Tunisian merchant, Mohammad Bouazizi, protesting policy brutalities and the poor economic conditions in Tunisia. However, something few people know is that a similar incident occurred a few months prior in Tunisia, but it had almost no internet coverage.⁵⁶ It was not heavily documented or Facebooked, Youtubed, or Tweeted.⁵⁷ On the contrary, Bouazizi's incident was recorded and virally spread across multiple social media sites.⁵⁸ Two very similar incidents produced drastically different results because of how the information was broadcast. The latter inspiring a series of revolutions that cut across geographical borders thus cementing the notion that digital media knows no bounds.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Rebecca Rosen, "So, Was Facebook Responsible for the Arab Spring After All?"

⁵⁷ Colloquial terms that refer to something posted on social media sites Facebook, Youtube, or Twitter, respectively.

⁵⁸ Rebecca Rosen, "So, Was Facebook Responsible for the Arab Spring After All?"

During the revolution, social media became vital because it was unable to be dominated and controlled by the state. “We still don’t believe the news and television,” [says Tunisian citizen Koubaa], not a surprising fact when many of the original journalists are still working. ‘I research what’s happening on Facebook and the internet.’⁵⁹ Egypt is still very much in the heart of their revolution and for many, communicating information via social media is the only way to circulate any information freely. There are some who argue that freedom of speech is even more limited now (under the interim government, post Morsi) than it was under Mubarak. They argue that conditions are worse nowadays because during Mubarak at least opposing voices were heard intermittently, but now they are completely suppressed. 23 year old Egyptian journalist reports, “We are witnessing the return of the police state.”⁶⁰ Egypt is listed among the top 10 jailers of journalists worldwide.⁶¹ In the words of 30 year old Egyptian activist, Wael Ghonim, “If you want to free a society, just give them internet access.”⁶²

On an individual’s personal social networking site, it is not just a newspaper or the television providing them with a headline or telling them to read an article. Often it is their friends, peers, or colleagues dictating to them what they feel is important. As social impact theory relates, the strength, immediacy, and number of the group will increase the social influence.⁶³ Moreover, the chances of the individual reading the article or viewing

⁵⁹ Peter Beaumont, “The Truth About Twitter, Facebook and the Uprisings in the Arab World.”

⁶⁰ BBC News Middle East. "Egypt's commitment to press freedom on trial." *BBC News*, February 19, 2014.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Rebecca Rosen. "So, Was Facebook Responsible for the Arab Spring After All?"

⁶³ B. Latané, and S. Wolf, The Social Impact of Majorities and Minorities. *Psychological Review*, 88, 438-453.

a video greatly increases when one or more persons in their network publishes it because it is coming from an associated source. Social networks are unique in that there is not a separation between personal posts and political or newscast posts; in this way, individuals are being subjected to bouts of news, whether in the form of pictures, headlines, or other postings. During times of trial and tribulation, common heritage or circumstances are often factors that bond people together. A sense of solidarity has formed among Arab nations which has been strengthened through social media because it has allowed citizens to share their struggles, successes, and other information. Scholarly research relating to the internet and recently social media as a place for people to come together for social support has been rising as the internet gains wider usage among all populations.

On January 24th, 2011 one day before the planned massive protest in Tahrir Square, the Egyptian government shut down the internet in an effort to control insurgents from being able to utilize the web to organize demonstrations.⁶⁴ A study conducted by researchers at the UN Development Program expressed that social media, particularly Facebook, was crucial because it shaped how “citizens made individual decisions about participating in protests, the logistics of protest, and the likelihood of success.”⁶⁵ A few days prior, the government had tried to block only social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, but citizens were able to find ways to get around the blocks via proxy servers.⁶⁶ Tunisians were communicating to Egyptians through Facebook and

⁶⁴ Ryan Holmes, "Why Social Media is (Really) Revolutionary: Looking Back at Egypt," *World's Largest Professional Network*, November 26, 2012.

⁶⁵ Rob Lever, "Middle East Online: Arab Spring: Did social media really spark revolutions?"

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Twitter how to get around these blockades as they had done in their country.⁶⁷ This allowed some Egyptians to remain in the loop in regards to protest information, however the majority of the population remained isolated for a few days. Social media usage was so pertinent to the revolution that the government was forced to blackout the entire internet system in an effort to prevent its use. In fact, shutting down the internet may have had the opposite effect that the government intended. Professor Phillip Howard notes, “Ironically, government efforts to crack down on social media may have incited more public activism, especially in Egypt. People who were isolated by efforts to shut down the internet, mostly middle-class Egyptians, may have gone to the streets when they could no longer follow the unrest through social media.”⁶⁸

The Future of Social Media

Many of these governments are quickly recognizing the importance of social media and have joined the campaign to serve their own interests. They have utilized social networking to track dissidents and arrest people who have voiced strong dissent or are known to be active contributors speaking out and protesting against the government.⁶⁹ In some countries, particularly the later parts of the “Spring” the regimes are catching up. Forming their own social media presences or realizing how to deter citizens who are active online. Security forces in Syria have taken measures to combat the social media

⁶⁷ Jillian York, "Unblocking Syria's social media" *Al Jazeera English*, February 12, 2011.

⁶⁸ Kate Taylor. "Arab Spring Really Was Social Media Revolution."

⁶⁹ Jennifer Preston, "Syria Cracks Down on Social Media," *The New York Times*, May 22, 2011.

effects by disabling the mobile 3G network to prevent citizen from uploading videos onto YouTube.⁷⁰ A group of President Bashar-Al Assad's supporters have called themselves the Syrian Electronic Army and are dedicated to utilizing social media to promote their pro-regime stances and to discredit the opposition.⁷¹ The Syrian government, learning from the regime of former Egyptian president, Hosni Mubarak, executed a different strategy. Mubarak's methods included shutting down the entire internet domain while Assad has employed more focused tactics.⁷² In addition to disabling the mobile networks, he has cutting off the electricity and telephone lines in particularly discontent neighborhoods⁷³ Because social media presents itself uniquely in each context, there is no telling how and if it will aid future revolutions.

Regarding social media's role in the future of revolutions, at its most basic level, as with any new technology or tool, people have the option of changing their strategy to include the contemporary method; rebels are able to alter or augment their approach. Social media is unparalleled in its ability to dispense information particularly in manners which make it easier for participants to organize. At the very least, information is disseminating further which is an extremely crucial aspect to the success of social media. Due to the numerous revolutions and uprisings in recent years in which social media has been utilized, there are a number of case studies to examine the effects that online networking has played in the past which will provide some insight into the near future.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Preston, "Syria Cracks Down on Social Media."

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Kate Taylor, "Arab Spring Really Was Social Media Revolution."

The impacts of this shared medium reach beyond the revolution. Social media is altering the political landscape. In some societies, a new kind of governance and democracy is forming with some countries witnessing the emergence of a type of E-democracy. Government officials examine the internet and social media sites to see how people are responding and reacting to situations, campaigns, laws, and rulings and base their response off this new information. The information sharing community that social media has created has forced us to reexamine our governance. Incidents such as WikiLeaks and people such as Edward Snowden have led us to reinterpret our rights, laws, and values. We are faced with the task of having to expand our definitions because new challenges are being presented. Issues of cybersecurity have emerged as well such as privacy laws and how to deal with sensitive information.

Social Media Dissent Explained

Critics of the social media effect attempt to diminish the theory by arguing that rebellions and social revolutions have occurred in places long before modern technology was available. While this is true, they fail to realize the innovatory characteristics of social media and how it has helped develop the causes. Online activism alone cannot support a revolution, it must be coupled with active, physical engagement. However, this new addition to the social stratosphere has enriched the revolutions by fostering an environment for insurgencies to grow. Perhaps social media has also allowed insurrection to incite in areas where it would have been unsuccessful previously. Social media could not function on its own; it needs the follow up and contribution of individuals who support the causes through real action. As stated before, it is simply a tool to organize, a

tool to discuss, and a tool to spread information far and fast. Social media is a means through which individuals and groups are promoting their ideals and fighting for their beliefs. The capability to inform an audience of endless capacity is invaluable which is where social media finds most of its success. This next section will present common arguments against social media's role in the Arab Spring and seeks to offer an explanation in an effort to open up the conversation into a wider discussion.

A) Argument: "Revolutions occurred long before internet and social media came about."

Explanation: Social media is a tool. It does not create dissent, but simply offers a platform for it to coalesce. Keeping that in mind, however, these revolutions would not have occurred in the same manner that they did, if social media was not a factor. Furthermore, had the media capabilities not been present, then the information would not have infiltrated as deeply as it did. People would still be subjected to the state controlled media which would have changed the nature of the revolution. In the case of Egypt, people would not have fled to the streets as vastly as they did, had they not grown accustomed to this method of getting their news and had the government not shut down the internet forcing them to flee into the streets to find out what was happening. Finally, people were more inclined to organize protests or demonstrations knowing that they had the massive support. As Kassim writes, social media not only helped overthrow a dictator "but also helped Arab civilians become aware of the underground communities that exist and are made up of their brothers, and others

willing to listen to their stories.”⁷⁴ Social media became a mechanism which strengthened communal bonds.

B) Argument: Social media was helpful in allowing the revolutions to get off the ground, but once the revolutions started, its usefulness was limited.

Explanation: The circumstances regarding each particular revolution is unique, so this assertion may not fall true for every revolution, but in a majority of the Arab Spring, social media's played its most crucial role in the beginning. Social media proved to be of most use in the beginning, by allowing people to band together, garner support and find places to organize. These qualities were vital. However, although social media may not have been as essential later to the success or continuation of the revolutions, it still has had a significant impact on shaping the outcome. For example, after the revolutions began, social networking in Egypt allowed people to use Google Maps to share locations where police or snipers were located so protesters could avoid them. This allowed citizen journalism to allow the truth to penetrate farther than the state-controlled media would have permitted as well as keeping the international community more involved. All of these factors were significant aspects, but the revolution could have plausibly carried on had they not existed.

C) Argument: “Many people in these regions of the world are not connected to the internet or social media.”

⁷⁴ Saleem Kassem, "Twitter Revolution: How the Arab Spring Was Helped By Social Media," *PolicyMic*, July 20, 2012.

Explanation: This is true, particularly in countries such as Yemen and Algeria. Egypt, on the other hand, is a populous country. Even if a small percentage of the population is connected it could have a resounding impact. Egypt has a population of 84 million people with about approximately 35% of the people connected to the internet (as was by June of 2012).⁷⁵ Close to 30 million people were connected to the internet which is a substantial figure. Especially considering that the individuals that are using the internet are more likely to be those in urban areas and because of this the cities are more heavily concentrated it could have skewed the impact of social networking in favor of having a deeper impact.

D) Argument: “Revolutions do not happen over the internet.”

Explanation: This argument has been somewhat addressed earlier. It is absolutely true that revolutions cannot stand alone; they must be coupled with street activism. However, social media can help create opportunities or strengthen aspects of a revolution such as the ability to organize people in mass quantities.

Findings

After a thorough examination of scholarly research, individual narratives, news articles, videos, and social media users themselves, this paper finds that social networking played an integral role in the Arab Spring Revolutions. It was utilized by both

⁷⁵ Maisoon O. Al-sebaei, "Egyptian Diasporas, Social Media, and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution: How Egyptians Living in Saudi Arabia used Social Media during the Revolution" (Masters Thesis., Grand Valley State University, 2013).

local citizens and people abroad to stay connected and learn information. To sum up its accomplishments, social media did not create dissent, but offered a mechanism for people, views, and ideas to come together. It's most pioneering characteristics lied in its ability to enable information dissemination including multimedia content sharing at brand-new speeds and distances unimaginable in the past. This in turn, altered the organization in the field for protestors and activists. Social media can never replace street activism; however, this new tool significantly shaped the format of the revolution. It is not to say that the revolution could not or would not have occurred without these capabilities, but the arrangement and progression of the revolutions would be significantly altered. Social media technologies empowered everyday individuals by allowing them to take greater ownership in their revolution through citizen journalism. Because of increased accessibility to mobile phone technologies and internet, people documented events and broadcast those images and information through their social networking sites. Through increased opportunities for connectivity, social media restructured power roles between the youth and the old, and provided women with a greater opportunity to join the cause. The role played by countless citizens in this revolution due to the emergence of social media connectivity has changed the meaning, "a revolution by the people, for the people." Finally, social media allowed individuals and groups to bypass state-run media entities because news and information was accessible from each other by way of their social media sites.

Conclusion

The days of Che Guevara, Ghandi, and MLK Jr. may be mostly behind us. As Wael writes in his book, "This was the Revolution 2.0 model, no one was the hero because *everyone* was the hero."⁷⁶ The social media revolution became significant to the revolutionaries because for so long they had been suffering in silence. Social media provided the opportunity for citizens to put their governments on blast, to make their injustices heard. The heart of social media's role in the Arab Spring revolutions lies in the fact that it increased the connectivity among people. As a result, individuals came together on the consensus that they were not alone in their grievances. Social media catalyzed the validation for need for the rebellion. Mass support surrounded the Facebook pages, the distribution of videos via Youtube, and tweets; people knew they were not alone. For the first time, activists had the opportunity to swiftly communicate and spread information while evading government restrictions.⁷⁷ Because social media became such a prominent tool of the revolution, it allowed citizen journalism to remain a major part of the information dissemination process. Although most commonly known as a youth-led movement, it is important to acknowledge the role of all the actors in these revolutions.

The success of many of the latter Arab Spring revolutions in ousting their initial government must be attributed to the successes of the former. Protestors gained courage and insight after witnessing the fall of the first regimes in Tunisia and Egypt. Countries

⁷⁶ Amitava Kumar, "'Revolution 2.0': How Social Media Toppled A Dictator," review of *Revolution 2.0: The Power of the People is Greater than the People in Power* by Wael Ghonim, *NPR*, February 8, 2012.

⁷⁷ Kassim, Saleem, "Twitter Revolution: How the Arab Spring Was Helped By Social Media."

such as Bahrain, Yemen, and Libya, were inspired by the success of their regional brothers. Activists observed effective tactics for victories and implemented them into their own strategies. Social media gained the most relevance and became empowered when individuals realized it was working. Revolutions require the support of the people. In this case, the support extends beyond national boundaries into the region and even across oceans as individuals everywhere utilize social media to display solidarity. The quickness in which this form of communication gained legitimacy and relevance is noteworthy. Social media is not just a fad; it is a fundamental shift in the way we communicate.

Appendix.

i.) Timeline of Egyptian Revolution taken from Foreign Policy Correspondant, Lubna Annani⁷⁸

The first wave: The ‘spark that lit the bonfire’

January 18, 2011 – Egyptian dissident Mohamed ElBaradei warns of a “Tunisia Style explosion” as disfranchised and largely unemployed Egyptian activists plan for “day of anger” demonstrations.

January 25, 2011 – Inspired by Tunisia, Egyptians take to the streets of Cairo in mass demonstrations unprecedented since the 1970s, calling for the dissolution of President Mubarak’s dictatorship. Mubarak’s government responds by blocking Twitter and shutting down internet and phone connections.

January 30, 2011 – With more than 100 dead according to *Reuters*, the Egyptian military makes a stand in favour of protesters against the regime.

February 11, 2011 – After 18 days of mass protests, President Mubarak finally steps down and hands power to the army council after three decades of autocratic rule.

The second wave: A slow transition under military rule

February 13, 2011 – The military refuses the protesters’ call for an immediate transition to a civilian-led interim government, stating that it will rule by martial law until the upcoming elections in at least six months’ time.

November 28, 2011 – Parliamentary elections take place after months of growing discontent with the progress of reforms and the eruption of anti-junta protests. The Muslim Brotherhood wins almost half the seats in parliament. The ultra-religious Salafis take a quarter. Overall, nearly 90 per cent of seats are won by Islamists.

June 2, 2012 – Ousted President Hosni Mubarak is sentenced to life in prison.

June 24–30, 2012 – Muslim Brotherhood Candidate Mohamed Morsi emerges as the democratically elected president of Egypt, winning 51.7 per cent of the vote in the first free ballot in more than 80 years.

The third wave: Disillusionment with Morsi’s government

⁷⁸ Lubna Anani, "From Revolution to Coup: A Timeline of Egypt (2011-2014)," *The Global Panorama*, February 3, 2014.

November 19, 2012 – Secular groups and Christian representatives withdraw from the constitutional constituent assembly, believing that Islamists will impose strict laws on the drawing of the new constitution.

November 22, 2012 – President Morsi issues a constitutional declaration immunising the constituent assembly from any potential dissolution by the court, as well as granting his decisions immunity from judicial review. This decision sparks public unrest.

December 22, 2012 – Sixty-three point eight per cent of Egyptians vote in favour of the new draft constitution. A large minority, mainly secularists, disapprove.

January 25, 2013 – On the two-year anniversary of the revolution, hundreds of thousands protest in Tahrir square and Port Said once again chanting for President Morsi to step down.

June 28–30, 2013 – Millions of Egyptians take to the streets protesting against Morsi. Protesters surround the Presidential Palace in the Heliopolis suburb, as well as in 18 other locations across Cairo.

July 3, 2013 – The military intervenes and ousts Morsi in a largely supported coup. Army chief Abdel-Fatah al-Sisi imposes a new interim government and appoints Adly Mansour as interim President, suspending the Islamist-based constitution. Battles between Muslim brotherhood supporters and security forces erupt.

The fourth wave: The military rules again

July 8 – September 22, 2013 – Violent clashes between Muslim brotherhood supporters and the military result in the mass killing of pro-Morsi supporters. Thousands are also detained, including Muslim brotherhood leader Mohamed Badie. Islamist extremists attack and kill 25 police conscripts in cold blood. At least 100 more die similarly in later months, including soldiers.

September 23, 2013 – The Muslim brotherhood reclaims its underground status after its activities are banned by the court.

November 4, 2013 – Morsi stands [trial](#) in his first public appearance since being ousted.

November 24, 2013 – Interim President Adly Mansour passes a new law banning the right to protest in an attempt to curb social dissent.

December 24, 2013 – The Muslim brotherhood party is officially deemed a terrorist organisation after a bomb attack on a police compound kills at least 12. The decision is made despite a separate jihadist group called Beit al-Maqqdis assuming responsibility for the attack.

January 15, 2014 – A new draft constitution — which cuts down on some of the religious clauses — is passed easily with 98 per cent approval amid efforts to stamp out dissent.

Jan 25, 2014 – On the third anniversary of the revolution, rival demonstrations of pro-military government supporters and opponents in Tahrir square result in the death of at least 49 people. The Muslim brotherhood contends that it will not leave the streets, reports the *Associated Press* news agency, “until it fully regains its rights and breaks the coup and puts the killers on trial.” Since the interim government’s crackdown began on the Muslim Brotherhood, over 1000 people have been killed in clashes.

February 1, 2014 — Morsi returns to court in Cairo accused of crimes against protestors. He and 12 others face charges of killing protestors outside the presidential palace in 2012. Morsi’s supporters say the trials are politically motivated, officials state they are being conducted fairly.

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