

Social Movements in the Middle East: A Sociological Analysis

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Abstract

The prevailing outlook among analysts before the advent of the recent social movements in North Africa and a number of Arab Middle Eastern countries indicated that the region will continue to resist the wave of democratization. The fall of several authoritarian regimes and continuity of social movements has generated serious doubts in this outlook, leading to the appearance of promising horizons for democratization. This paper argues that these social movements originate from the exacerbating legitimacy crisis of authoritarian governments and rising political, social and economic dissatisfaction of the general public, including the youth and the modern middle class. This work seeks to answer the question: what are the major sociological origins and precipitating factors influencing the advent of social movements in the Middle East and North Africa? In response, it can be argued that the advent of social movements in a number of Middle East and North African countries is rooted in the legitimacy crisis, as well as rising political, social and economic dissatisfaction of the general public, the youth and the modern middle class in recent decades. The web-based social networks and cell phones acted as precipitating factors in the massive mobilization and integration of mass protests and those of the modern middle class and the fall of a number of authoritarian regimes. These movements are notably characterized by being comprehensive, Islamic, democratic, anti-despotic, independence-seeking, and highly reliant on new information and communications technologies. The web-based social networks served as a precipitating factor in massive mobilization of the aforementioned strata within the context of an exacerbated legitimacy crisis and the gap between the state and the society rather than as a structural deep-rooted factor.

Keywords: Middle East, North Africa, Social Movements, Legitimacy Crisis, Islamic Democracy

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Introduction

The prevailing outlook, within the past decades, among analysts of the Middle East and North Africa indicated that the region will continue to resist the wave of democratization exceptionally due to such reasons as deep-rooted Islamic and traditional attitudes, Islamist opposition to democracy, hereditary corrupt autocracies, rentier and corporatist economic system, weakness of social forces and absence of coherence and horizontal links among them. Hence no transition to democracy was expected in the region in the foreseeable future. The fall of several authoritarian governments in North Africa and continuity of social movements in a number Arab Middle Eastern countries have generated serious doubts about these outlooks and beliefs.

Nonetheless, it cannot be claimed with certainty that the fall of authoritarian governments in a number of countries would lead to democratic consolidation there. The main reasons include ideological conflict between the Islamist and nationalist secular political forces and currents, relative persistence of ethnic-tribal fabric and relationships, failure of the new governments to realize good governance in desirable fashion, differences among the revolutionaries concerning the alternative to the authoritarian governments and how to distribute power, which all need careful examination in another research paper. In this article, the author seeks to offer analytical answers to the following question: What are the sociological origins and precipitating factors influencing the advent of social movements in the Middle East and North Africa? In response



to the question above, the research hypothesis is that the advent of social movements in a number of Middle East and North African countries is rooted in the legitimacy crisis and rising political, social and economic dissatisfaction of the general public, the youth and the modern middle class in recent decades. The web-based social networks and cell phones acted as precipitating factors in the massive mobilization and integration of mass protests and those of the modern middle class and in the fall of a number of authoritarian regimes.

I- Origins of Recent Social Movements

No social movement takes shape in a vacuum, but it is a product of political, social, cultural and economic pressures, tensions and crises in the society in the long, mid- and short run. The social movements in North Africa and certain Arab Middle Eastern countries occurred in response to the increasing legitimacy crisis of the authoritarian, hereditary and autocratic regimes rooted in the growing dissatisfaction of the masses, the youth and modern middle class in recent decades. It was within such a framework that the fall of the Tunisian authoritarian government occurred with an almost spontaneous public uprising. In this event, the self-immolation of a street vendor and posting of images of him on web-based social networks ignited the flames. Tunisian developments and Internet technologies as well as cell phones acted as factors precipitating social movements in Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen and some other countries. It is worth noting that the impact of the new communication technologies should be examined simply in the category of precipitating factors rather as important structural deep-rooted factors. Below, the most important roots of the legitimacy crisis influencing the advent and expansion of these movements in the region will be studied and analyzed briefly.

The Middle East and North Africa represent one of the considerable hubs of authoritarianism and suppression. Since the



second half of the 1970s, and particularly since the 1980s onwards, the populist repressive authoritarian governments in a number of Arab countries including Tunisia, Algeria and Egypt were replaced with the personal authoritarian governments opposed to populism. In the beginning, these governments formalized a pluralist party system accompanied with certain sociopolitical freedoms, but after a while, the cover was removed from the face of authoritarian rulers as they moved overtly to rising authoritarianism and suppression. Since then, the legitimacy crisis took shape and grew. The authoritarianism of these regimes in North Africa and a number of Arab Middle Eastern countries was leading to the loss of popular legitimacy due to the reason which will be discussed.

In the former Pan-Arabist and socialist governments, authoritarianism did not arise from the ruler himself, but was derived from and related to the nationalist ideology and state socialism governing society. With the rise of new authoritarian governments, the prevalence of those ideologies was replaced with the dominance of the person of ruler and the hereditary nature of political power in the ruling family. The interconnectedness of the person and the ruling family with the government was so intense that it was impossible to separate the two. Such a characteristic resulted in the centrality of the ruler in decision-making and excessive concentration of power in his hands. This made politics informal and led to the monopolization of decision-making by the head of government and the ruling party, ceremonial position of parliament in decision-making, prevalence of self-centrism over institutionalization, corruption and suppression of civil institutions in these regimes in the region. This is all described as Sultanism or Neo-patrimonialism in political literature. In recent decades, personal and hereditary authoritarianism and suppression of dissidents and critics grew gradually which subsequently gave rise to a rising gap between government and society in the region. In these countries, the societies became more isolated from the government day by day and its legitimacy was undermined among them. The



personal nature of government led the people and social forces to blame the ruling person and party for all inadequacy, corruption, bad governance and political, economic and social crises. The recent movements reflected a serious gap between the society and personal government and suppressive ruling party; a result of a political legitimacy crisis which culminated from this gap.

One of the characteristics of the authoritarian systems in the region (republican and non-monarchical systems) has been the dominance of the ruling party on the sociopolitical sphere and a democracy with superficial, directed party pluralism. In this region, the link between the ruling party and the ruler was so close that it was impossible to distinguish the party and the ruling person. The ruling party represented the main channel through which the ruler and his family controlled the society and social forces. In the authoritarian republics, superficial and directed party pluralism acted as a cover for concealing the true face of the systems and for legitimizing them. In these countries, superficial multiparty elections were held intermittently, but the interference, threats, influence and excessive control by the party and ruler over the elections prevented the critical and opposition parties from coming to power, enjoying significant seats in the parliament and gaining political weight in the parliament.

The ruling parties in Egypt (the National Democratic Party), Tunisia (Al-Dastour), Algeria (National Liberation Front), and in Iraq exerted serious constraints on civil institutions and opposition in addition to rigging election results, suppressed them, and reduced freedom of the press and free circulation of information, distancing them from critical content (King, 2009: 90). Islamists and Islamic parties like the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamic Salvation Front and Al-Nahda were very strong and deep-rooted, seriously threatening these regimes due to their extensive influence among the lower and middle classes. Governments did not allow these parties to take part in elections, but instead they allowed less critical parties in the secular, nationalist and socialist spectrum to take part in the elections and the



press at a limited level. It was intended, on the one hand, to give a democratic appearance to their own rule and to prevent any coalition with the Islamists and rise of an inclusive movement, on the other (King, 2009: 91).

Clientelism means favoritism defined as a type of mutual relationship between the patron (the ruling person or party) and clients (socially important groups and personalities). In exchange for political-social support by the clients, the patron grants them significant economic perks and rents.

One of the marked characteristics of the authoritarian governments in the region, whether monarchical or superficially republican, is clientelism and growing corruption. This is certainly related to the personalization of government and its hereditary nature in the region. In principle, personal, hereditary governments are unaccountable and irresponsible as manifested by corruption in such types of governments. Since these governments lacked a vast class and supportive base, they needed to establish corrupt supportive networks with influential individuals and groups and to gain their sociopolitical support for preserving political power of the ruling family.

Transparency International is an organization that releases a list of the cleanest and the most corrupt governments of the world annually. In its reports, countries are rated with a point between 1 and 10 in which 10 shows full health and lack of corruption and 1 reflects the most corrupt one in abusing power and public positions for personal, group or class interests. According to Transparency International, the bulk of the regional Arab countries suffer from high economic and administrative corruption including Libya 2, Yemen 2.1, Egypt 2.9, Saudi Arabia 4.7, Jordan 4.5, Tunisia 3.8, and Bahrain 5.2 points out of 10 (Transparency International 2012).

The Persian Gulf Sheikdoms have continued to use petrodollars for gaining wealth for the ruling families as well as for the tribal chieftains and influential persons in order to gain their political



support. Among the monarchies, Bahrain is among the countries that have failed to provide the masses with significant welfare services due to lower oil revenues in comparison to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Moreover, Shi'a Muslims - who constitute the majority of the country's population - suffer from religious discrimination and the corruption of the Sunni ruling family. Welfare and recruitment policies are largely adopted and implemented to the benefit of the Sunnis, which in turn provided one of the substantial grounds for the extensive popular uprising particularly among the Shi'a during the past couple of years. In Yemen, the vast corruption of Ali Abdullah Saleh's government also gave rise to a popular protest movement in a society with a rapidly growing population of 25 million with low oil revenues and inadequate welfare policies.

The authoritarian republics implemented economic adjustment and liberation policies since the second half of the 1970s and particularly since the 1980s in a controlled and directed fashion. They distanced themselves from the legal mechanisms of a true market economy, as its intervention created corruption, generated corrupt support mechanisms as well as networks between the government and the ruling party and socially and politically important personalities and groups. In such a space, a kind of political rent-seeking morale became dominant through which the governments led their authoritarian rule for a while, repressing their political opponents.

The authoritarian governments in such countries as Egypt, Tunisia, Syria and Algeria forged and institutionalized a kind of corporatist economic mechanisms. Such mechanisms were declared as the trilateral meeting among the government, representatives of owners of the industrial and commercial capital, landowners, guilds and workers for economic decision-making. However, in practice they represented an unwritten mutual political coalition between the government, landowners, tradesmen and the wealthy dependent on the government for plundering public resources. Through political and electoral support for the government, the members of the



coalition acquired significant privileges and wealth. Such illegal mechanisms barred regulated competition in the economic realm, and in contrast, they institutionalized the corrupt disposition of rent-seeking and profiteering (King, 2009: 88-89).

The U.S. ambassador to Tunisia had reported in 2006 that more than half of the commercial elite were connected to Ben Ali through his children, brothers and other relatives, benefiting from the rents arising from such a relationship. In another report, the U.S. embassy indicated that the corrupt institutions and networks in the country have been geographically divided between Ben Ali and his wife in such a way that Ben Ali's family had established access to the middle region of Tunisia's beaches and his wife, the Trabelsi family, to the suburbs of the greater Tunisia, both engaging in exclusive economic activities (Niakouei, 2011: 246). It is claimed that Mubarak's family has possessed assets worth between \$40 and \$70 billion in Egypt and 39 high-ranking officials or tradesmen close to the deposed president's son Jamal Mubarak each had saved more than one billion dollar through corrupt client-patron relationships with the government (Niakouei, 2011: 252).

In Egypt, through the corrupt client-patron networks, the ruling party purchased political and electoral support of the candidates representing the landowners, tradesmen, high-ranking employees and owners of capital. Or their candidates ran for elections superficially as independents, but became members of the ruling party, i.e. the National Democratic Party, after they won the elections; hence the ruling party continued to maintain the absolute majority of the seats in the Egyptian parliament (Unay, 2011: 190). The local aristocracy used the ruling party's revenues and budgets, spent part of it in the remote villages and areas, and channeled the votes towards the ruling party. Therefore, one of the backgrounds for the social movements both in the past and present within the past two years has been the presence of widespread corruption leading to the exacerbated political legitimacy crises in those governments.



As mentioned above, until the 1970s and 1980s, the socialist Arab republics in North Africa and some of the Arab Middle Eastern countries managed to reduce class cleavages to some extent and gained the satisfaction of the masses by applying welfare policies and distributing subsidies among the lower classes.

Utilizing the increasing oil revenues, the Persian Gulf monarchies have managed so far to prevent the rise of serious economic crises even in the years experiencing lower oil prices, taking into account subsistence and welfare issues of the masses. In addition, the scant population of these countries along with the hefty oil revenues has not made economic-social management of these countries difficult. Overall, a multitude of factors has led to a situation where constant social movements are not found in the oil-rich countries including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates as opposed to such poor countries as Bahrain, Yemen and Syria. These factors include the governments' welfare policies, granting subsidies and financial aid to low-income families, provision of considerable welfare and construction programs using hefty oil revenues, relative weakness of civil institutions, predominance of subjective culture and tribal fabric over the civil culture and fabric, lack of cohesion between civil institutions and agents, the government's superficial attention to Islamic commandments and so on.

Nonetheless, it should be kept in mind that in these oil-rich countries, the masses and particularly the more educated strata have been dissatisfied due to such reasons as unjust distribution of wealth and its huge accumulation in the hands of the ruling family, class cleavage, corruption and suppression and have occasionally resorted to uprisings, but they have not been continuous like in Bahrain and Yemen. In the foreseeable future, social movements will occur in these countries, which will be beyond the purview of this article.

After the second half of the 1980s, declining oil prices led many Arab workers from countries without oil wealth like Egypt, Tunisia



and Jordan to leave the oil-rich countries, most notably Saudi Arabia. As a result, these countries lost a significant part of their hard currency income and the workers remained unemployed. Moreover, economic adjustment policies led to the reduction of subsidies and in some cases to the cutting off of subsidies, rise in living costs for the masses and middle class, inflation and finally to significant decline in living standards for the masses (Bayat, 2002: 4). This gave rise to social movements and mass uprisings from the late 1980s until the early 1990s, striking a serious blow to the legitimacy of these inefficient regimes. Except for Turkey, no country was able to implement the economic liberalization policies successfully. Egypt, Algeria and Tunisia resorted to harsh repression in response to the unrest and the Jordanian monarchical government moved toward democracy and minimal liberalization (Unay, 2011: 188).

In 1987, almost 30% of the population in North Africa and the Middle East lived under the poverty line; this number was at 22/2% in 1996, i.e. those who lived on less than two dollars per day (Page, 2007: 834). After the second half of the 1980s, unemployment and inflation in the non-oil-rich countries was a very serious economic and political challenge, resulting in occasional riots. Significant shortages in providing services, foodstuffs, housing, health and alike have exacerbated the situation (Sardarnia, 2010: 27).

People and the youth find the root cause of the economic and social problems in the authoritarian, unaccountable and corrupt governments, weak governance and these governments' absolute pursuit of the policies imposed by the international banks and credit institutions (El-Said & Harrigan, 2006: 484). Reforms envisaged by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) especially in Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan and Morocco worsened the conditions, because they resorted to economic liberalization without caution and rapidly albeit in a distorted form. Government inefficiency in Egypt led to the Muslim Brotherhood assuming part of the responsibility for the subsistence needs of the masses, providing



them with a variety of services and gaining influence among the masses (Unay, 2011: 179).

Therefore, in recent years and particularly between 2010 and 2011, enhanced repression and authoritarianism, apparent fraud in elections along with the rising social and economic dissatisfaction of the masses, the youth and the modern middle class led to the exacerbation of legitimacy crises. With the advent of a social movement in Tunisia, similar radical social movements emerged in a number of other countries, which resulted in the overthrow of authoritarian regimes in some cases.

II- Web-Based Social Networks

The inclusiveness of the movements means that they included a coalition of various classes, strata and age groups in the society. It can be argued, with a brief historical study, that within the recent decades except for the social movements in 2011, we have not witnessed general, inclusive and constant movements in the Middle East. Although in 1988 and 1989 we saw protest movements of the masses, workers and the youth against the authoritarian regimes in a number of North African and Middle Eastern countries, most notably in Jordan, these movements were not entirely inclusive.

Nevertheless, since 2000 onwards, the original grounds for inclusive social movements were unfolded in the Egyptian society, though they were not as inclusive as the recent movement that overthrew Mubarak in 2011. In the first years of the third millennium, 'The Egyptian Movement for Change' known as al-Kefaya took shape with an entirely nationalist and democratic discourse. The movement was relatively inclusive, but not entirely, because it included mostly the nationalist secular spectra and excluded the Islamist spectra including the Muslim Brotherhood.

The al-Kefaya movement declared its existence on September 9, 2000 and stated in its first declaration: "We believe that two deadly dangers threaten our nation; they are the two sides of a coin each



reinforcing the other; first, disgusting invasion of the Arab nation's soil by the Western powers; second, suppressive despotism that overwhelms all aspects of the Egyptian political system" (Sardarnia, 2011: 124). The movement also pointed to the widespread corruption, growing unemployment, crisis-ridden economy and exacerbation of poor living conditions of the Egyptian people, blaming Mubarak's regime for all the disorders" (Shorbagy, 2009: 532).

The al-Kefaya movement sought to bridge all the democratic and nationalist forces by propagating shared slogans, symbols and demands, making the movement more general and paving the ground for all-out democratic changes. The movement consisted of a coalition including the popular movement for change with the motto "freedom now," women's movement for democracy entitled "the street belongs to us," youth movement for change, journalist movement for change and labor movement for change; the coalition became known as the 'al-Kefaya movement and its sisters'. On December 2, 2004, al-Kefaya held its first silent demonstration with the slogan "Enough of dictatorship and hereditary government", attracting the attention of local and global media (Sardarnia, 2011: 125).

In Egypt, after the very disgraceful and forged parliamentary elections were held in 2010, once again a very serious ground was provided for a radical and entirely inclusive social movement. This time all Islamist, nationalist and leftist spectra brought their advocates to the streets and protested against dictatorship and the election results vigorously. Mohammed ElBaradei's entry as an internationally known figure to the political struggles and the formation of the 'National Association for Change' was another turning point in the political struggles in Egypt, contributing to the inclusiveness of the movement. With ElBaradei's invitation, all spectra gathered in front of the Supreme Court, calling for the annulment of the elections. It was within such a framework that the overthrow of Ben Ali's government in Tunisia rang the bell seriously for Mubarak's fall in



Egypt, leading to the completely inclusive uprising. Overall, in all countries that have seen the rise of protest movements, it can be claimed that a vast majority of political strata, spectra and currents were present, demanding the overthrow of the authoritarian governments.

One of the other most important characteristics of the recent social movements within the past two years in North Africa and the Arab Middle East was that the masses and the youngsters became significantly mobilized spontaneously, continuing until the overthrow of the authoritarian governments and even after it. Therefore, political-civil leaders and activists were not the only active agents in the area of the struggle. In the past protest movements, unlike the past two years, the presence of the masses were not spontaneous, occurring in response to the calls made by the political currents, and particularly the Islamists.

The serious presence of the masses and the youth along with the political leaders and activists affiliated with the major political currents indicated the coincidence of social-economic demands of the masses and youth with the political and social demands of the leaders, activists and intellectuals and overall showing the dramatic decline of political legitimacy of the authoritarian systems and serious gap between society and state. Of course, this is not to ignore the role played by the political leaders and currents in the revolutionary mobilization within the past two years. It has to be noted that for the aforementioned reasons, most notably the influence of the Internet and social networks in social mobilization of the people, the leaders did not face difficulty in mobilizing the people unlike the past, attaining people's revolutionary mobilization with scant political and financial costs.

Protests in Tunisia began in the rural and peripheral areas, spreading to the capital in which the people and youth from the small and large cities and a powerful labor union were very active. It is suggested that the protests in the country in comparison to other



regional countries were more spontaneous and less organized. The political leaders and charismatic leaders roughly did not play any role in directing the protests as the movement, in practice, lacked leadership. Even the al-Nahda movement entered the political scene after Ben Ali's fall. The youngsters objecting to corruption, despotism and economic crisis began the protests and the political parties joining the uprisings were in practice a function of the youth movement, making efforts to ride the wave of protests and confiscating it in their own interests. In Tunisia, the entry of the labor forces and unions played a decisive role in the balance of power in favor of the revolutionaries (Niakouei, 2011: 248-249). The military also sided with the demonstrators after the protest waves spread.

Regarding Egypt, however, it can be argued that the Tunisian social movement had a significant precipitating effect, as the first protest wave began in the country with a call for a gathering on Facebook on January 25 2011. These demonstrations took place with a call made by the April 6 Youth Movement. Generally speaking, neither the role played by the masses, the youth, their relative spontaneity and continued presence can be ignored, nor should the part played by the Muslim Brotherhood, the April 6 Youth Movement, Mohammed ElBaradei and other groups be underestimated. The continuous presence of the youth and workers in large cities such as Cairo and Alexandria were very influential whether in the spontaneous or in directed forms during the protests leading to Mubarak's fall. Although the role played by the political groups and the leaders in directing the movement cannot be ignored, the spontaneity of the movement in Tunisia and its developments impacted and inspired the Egyptian working classes and youngsters in such a way that the leaders of the political groups were surprised by this dramatic spontaneity. Thus the political parties and currents including the Muslim Brotherhood which did not play a significant role in the early stages of the uprisings joined the spontaneous youth and labor protests later on, which led to the enlargement of the



protest movement.

The same is true with Bahrain where various Shi'a strata and to some extent the Sunnis, workers and youngsters joined the protest movement first spontaneously and then under the leadership of such party currents as al-Wefaq, Waad and the Haqq movement which has continued to date. The most important demands of the revolutionaries include serious democratic reforms and an end to religious discrimination at various political, social and economic levels.

In Yemen, influenced by the revolutionary developments in North Africa, the youngsters, Houthi Shi'a, people and tribes from the poor south and college students joined the social movement spontaneously. It can be claimed that in the country, political-ideological currents were not influential and the movement was largely spontaneous; the same applies to the Libyan case.

In the past couple of decades, social movements as the most important social and civil actors have played a significant role in mobilizing public opinion and protests at the global level, overtaking political parties. People join the movements increasingly and show a type of apathy towards political parties. Overall, the new social movements since the early 1980s onwards, and particularly since the 1990s, have had several distinct characteristics: 1) Their heavy reliance on the media especially new information and communications technologies; 2) Their serious attention to mobilizing global public opinion; 3) Their autonomy from a specific class and their inclusiveness; 4) Their excessive tendency to form identities and politicizing types of identities; 5) Serious attention to common human problems and dilemmas such as the environment, terrorism, security, etc. Among these characteristics, the most important ones include the movements' reliance on the media and Internet, satellite and cell phones for disseminating political and social awareness, changing the outlooks and beliefs and mobilizing protesters and public opinion at the global level.



Social media networks imply a website or a set of websites in which the users can communicate their demands, concerns, thoughts and works with others. Social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, Youtube, Google Reader and alike create new grounds for virtual communication which has expanded in a short period of time. It is suggested that Facebook has more than 300 million users all around the world. Social networks represent a forum for gathering and communicating for hundreds of millions of Internet users who interact and communicate regardless of borders, language, gender and culture (Kia & Mahmoodi, 2011: 2011: 17).

Among the Arab nations, Egypt has been the pioneer in producing media content and use of the Internet. After Egypt, Saudi Arabia has the second largest number of Internet users in the Arab World. It should be noted, of course, that the weblogs originating in this country are mainly non-political. The number of Internet users in Egypt in 1994 was 2,000, which increased to 100,000 in 1998, 220 thousand in 2000, 560 thousand in 2001 and 13 million in 2009. Currently more than 20% of the Egyptian people have access to the Internet (Sayed Mohammed, 2010: 133). Due to the closed media and press space in Egypt, use of the Internet gained attention as the major alternative channel. It is indicated that for the first time, the al-Kefaya movement used the Internet and weblogs for articulating its objectives, outlooks and protests, compensating for the constraints on the press in the first stages, at least in a limited form (Faris, 2010: 7).

Between 2005 and 2007, group emails, weblogs and cell phones played a larger role in information sharing, critique of the formal governmental discourses, highlighting criticisms, challenges and government suppression rather than Facebook and other social networks. After the forged parliamentary elections in 2005, the Muslim Brotherhood Organization, al-Kefaya movement and the society of judges protested and the bloggers and group emails acted well in sending pictures and protest contents, revealing the



authoritarian and anti-democratic nature of the government. Since 2007 onwards, Mubarak's regime arrested a number of bloggers and blocked their weblogs (Faris, 2010: 111-114). Accordingly, bloggers acted adequately in reflecting the pictures and news related to the 2007 protests. Afterwards, weblogs, group emails, cell phones and social media networks like Facebook entered the struggles in the online environment in Egypt. It is said that the creation of social networks in Egypt refers to the April 6 Youth Movement in 2008 and labor strikes in Delta city in protest against reduced wages and rising prices. The April 6 Youth Movement in 2008 declared its objectives through Facebook as follows: 1- It is not dependent upon any party; 2- Getting past Mubarak's authoritarian regime; 3- National sovereignty; 4- Democratic governance; and 5- Realization of public freedoms (Daudy, 2011: 14). The number of Facebook users in Egypt rose to 800,000 by 2009 (Attia, 2011: 370). Due to several constraints on the freedom of speech, Facebook was an important instrument for political struggles in Egypt and the more educated youngsters were more inclined to using the Internet. In Egypt, there have been considerable links between the print and electronic media. Some critical newspapers reflected critical news, information and reports posted by the online newspapers, weblogs and social networks, thus influencing the expansion of political and social awareness in the country (Faris, 2010: 65). The first weblog in Cairo was called 'Cairo Live' and was created by Tarek Atia.

The general call for labor strikes on May 4, 2008 was issued by the bloggers and administrators of pages on web-based social networks. They also became able to elevate the labor protests from the local level into the national and global level with the general call for 2009. By creating a Facebook group in March 2008, Israa Abdel Fattah proceeded to disseminate extensively the news and information related to the strikes by the textile industries workers in the al-Kobra neighborhood. In the meantime, she published critical comments on the adverse effects of the neo-liberal economic policies



and their inflationary and anti-employment implications. This Facebook group attracted 70,000 members in the first week, which rose to 800,000 after a while. After such an event, Abdel Fattah was detained, making her an international figure (Faris, 2010: 111-118). The Muslim Brotherhood Organization designed and created two websites in 2007 entitled 'Ikhwanweb' and 'Ikhwanonline'. Enjoying deep influence in the society among many Egyptian social strata, the Organization managed to use the social networks more adequately, attracting a global audience by launching two websites in English and Arabic. It sought to make global public opinion aware of the severe political stagnation in Egypt, particularly in relation to this organization and cases of human rights violations, gaining the attention of international human rights reporters (Faris, 2010: 180-187).

In her PhD dissertation titled 'Cyber Dissent in the Middle East', Asiya Daudy views this type of dissent as heavily affected by the domestic characteristics of the authoritarian government, suppression and media strangling. Drawing upon panel data in the Middle East and North Africa, she concludes that the higher degree of press and media censorship and governments' authoritarianism is the main factor in the extensive use of cyberspace in recent years. In cyberspace, protest against governments' authoritarianism, violence, suppression, corruption and abuse of power have been considered extensively (Daudy, 2011). In his PhD dissertation entitled 'Weblog, Bloggers and Public Sphere in Egypt,' Ali Sayed Mohammed has reached considerable conclusions, using the method of interview with active bloggers and human rights activists. From his point of view, blogging in Egypt in recent years has played a crucial part in breaking social and political taboos. According to him, blogging and online journalism have provided a major alternative public sphere and forum for stating the viewpoints beyond the formal discourse. With the formation of this type of public sphere, a multitude of criticisms and discontent were released concerning authoritarianism, suppression



and government inefficiency in cyber space, adding to the protest mobilization (Sayed Mohammed, 2010).

In the Middle East and North Africa, cyber dissent has evolved largely as a result of the absence of free media space and the authoritarianism governing the political and civil spheres. It is worth noting that the Egyptian government has tried, according to the Extraordinary Act, 1033 persons, sentencing 92 to death between 1992 and 2000 (Kassem, 2004: 40). The trial of blogger Ahmad Mustafa before court martial clearly exemplifies this matter. Another example is the severe brutal physical punishment of Khaal Said, a young blogger critical of Mubarak's government, by the police which led to his death due to multiple injuries. This was caused by the fact that he wanted to release information on the Internet related to the illegal police use of confiscated unauthorized drugs. The spread of pictures of his bloody face on Facebook and YouTube provided a serious motive for youth protest in 2010 (Daudy, 2011: 25). Thousands took to the streets to protest his murder and a Facebook page was set up in his memory.

These points show how the Internet and cyber space had already been influential in mobilizing protests, expanding political and social awareness, and breaking political taboos since 2004; that is, several years before the recent developments started. Nonetheless, it has to be reiterated that cyber space and web-based social networks played a vital role in mobilizing the protests in 2011 and accelerating the overthrow of authoritarian regimes in North Africa much more than what they used to do. The precipitating effect of social networks in North Africa was so significant that some have called them 'Facebook Revolutions' (Daudy, 2011: 132). Similarity in structures, language and sociopolitical conditions has been effective in expansion of protests through cyber space. In an interview with CNN, Mubarak related the Egyptian uprising to Facebook (Daudy, 2011: 136).

The executive director of the Arab Networks for Non-Governmental Organizations Amani Kandil is of the belief that



generally, civil society is weak in the Arab World and the Internet has been effective in increasing the impact of certain civil institutions, particularly in relation to human rights organizations and communicating their outlooks to the international community. Currently the civil organizations present in cyber space have acted more effectively than the non-cyber civil organizations in mobilizing protests, raising awareness and objection to the authoritarian regimes. Prominent Egyptian blogger Wael Abbas sees cyber space as an important alternative to the weak civil society in the Middle East, observing that people's presence in the streets was largely affected by cyber space (Sayed Mohammed, 2010: 122-123).

One of the prominent writers at the Egyptian newspaper Al-Ahram, Khalil El-Anani, maintains that a new generation of youngsters has emerged in Egypt that is different in terms of culture, instruments and demands. They are engaged in electronic and Internet communications as Egypt moves toward an unlimited gulf in the virtual democratic sphere with particularly weblogs and Facebook, which in turn has left its impact on the protest movements since 2005 onwards. He points to the 200,000 active weblogs in Egypt which have mushroomed, influencing Egyptian political life, and particularly in expanding the social movement.

In the social protest movements since 2005 onwards, and particularly since 2010 and 2011, the Internet has provided an important channel for communication and political struggles for the youngsters regardless of party affiliations. The previously suppressed voices had found a serious chance for articulation, participation and objection in cyber space. For this reason, the government and more specifically the ministry of information and communication in Saudi Arabia and particularly in Egypt have blocked a number of websites and weblogs and arrested their administrators since 2006 onwards. During the judges' sit-in in 2006, ten bloggers were detained (Sayed Mohammed, 2010: 199).

Arab governments have imposed harsh laws and restrictions on



Internet users within the past years; for instance, in Saudi Arabia a huge number of weblogs related to political, religious and social issues have been blocked. Moreover, administrators of websites threatening national security or containing pornography face a punishment of 10 years in jail accompanied by hefty fines (Daudy, 2011: 113). The Jordanian government has also obliged Internet cafes to install cameras and register their IPs. In the Tunisian social movement, the Internet played a crucial role in speeding up the movement, displaying its mobilizing power in the social and political milieu replete with dissent and a deep-rooted legitimacy crisis. Releasing pictures of the self-immolation of the young street vendor in objection to his grave economic conditions rapidly led to a protest mobilization which overthrew Ben Ali's regime within two weeks on January 14, 2011. In the Egyptian developments, inspired by the developments in Tunisia, youngsters and activists used cyber space, using their previous experiences with protest in cyber space. Caroline Youssef believes that in the recent social movement of the Egyptian youth, university graduates and urban middle class took part as influenced by the Tunisian developments following the social movements since 2004 onwards. The Internet played a determining part in accelerating the spontaneous youth protests and involvement (Yousseff, 2011: 226).

All evidence demonstrates that in the first months after the social movements started in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Algeria and Bahrain, Web-based social networks served to accelerate the protests dramatically as the experiences of these countries led other governments like China to block the websites related to such developments (Attia, 2001: 370). In these countries, general calls for gathering in the streets and main city squares and announcing Friday as a 'day of wrath' via the Internet acted to speed up the people's and youth's spontaneous mobilization and their continued struggle until those regimes fell.



Conclusion

The social movements in North Africa and a number of Middle Eastern countries are rooted in the accumulated political, social and economic dissent as well as crisis of legitimacy of personalized, hereditary and suppressive authoritarian regimes within the past three decades. The authoritarian disposition of these governments on the one hand and the directive economic adjustment and privatization policies on the other caused growing political and economic dissatisfaction, which finally deprived these governments of legitimacy among the people.

In this paper, the author maintained that the impact of cyber space on the expansion of the recent movements and acceleration of the fall of these regimes can be examined only under the category of precipitating factors rather than the structural and deep-rooted factors, because in the absence of deep-rooted dissent and accumulating legitimacy crisis, no revolution occurs with the mere presence of cyber space. Moreover, it was shown in the paper that the movements in the past couple of years were identified by such characteristics as inclusiveness with the presence of the vast majority of various strata and age groups, revolutionary nature and the relative spontaneity of the masses, though without ignoring the role played by leaders and activists.

With regard to the nature or content of these social movements, however, it should be noted that it can be better referred to as a mix of Islamic Awakening and democracy-seeking. In the past three decades, the failure of the secular regimes to realize good governance and providing a variety of services to the masses as well as their increasing corruption deprived them of popular legitimacy. On the other side, the religious-Islamic fabric of these societies and the brilliance of Islamic forces - and particularly the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and its offshoots in some other countries - as an alternative and rival government in providing services to the masses have added to the



political weight of Islamists, which has continued to unfold so far.

The Islamist forces and especially the Muslim Brotherhood have gained tremendous influence among various social strata in the past three decades. In this respect, the following reasons can be mentioned: provision of a variety of services to the masses, propagating Islam as a social religion capable of answering all human needs and avoiding violence, propaganda cover for attracting most social strata including the masses, villagers, city-dwellers, the youth, the elders and modern middle class and recently the higher social classes, their increasing use of traditional social networks such as the mosques for mobilizing the people, their high organizational power and continued political struggle in spite of strict restrictions imposed by the secular authoritarian governments so far. Serious Islamist presence in most social movements at the grass-roots level as well as the intellectual level within the past three decades. Serious Islamist opposition to the presence of alien powers in the region and to their governments' dependence on them as well as significant support for the oppressed Palestinian people.

Adaptability of moderate Islamists notably the Muslim Brotherhood and its offshoots in the Middle East with the new issues and developments and vast flexibility with the new changes for attracting the educated and modern middle and urban classes. Transnational and intra-regional links and cohesion in the moderate Islamist spectrum in the Middle East and North Africa along with the aforementioned factors have added to their political weight. Considerable victories gained by Hamas and Algerian Islamists in the parliamentary elections and acquiring of numerous seats by the Muslim Brotherhood in some parliamentary elections despite boycott and legal ban on this organization are other examples proving the political weight of the moderate Islamist spectrum. The noteworthy point is that in the wording of the Muslim Brotherhood and moderate Islamists, Islam has been propagated as a religion willing to guide societies and capable of answering human needs in every age. If we



look at religion as a social fact, then the Muslim Brotherhood has put forward, more than other currents, the economic, sociopolitical and cultural dissent of the people in a comprehensive fashion, adding to the current's influence.

Propagation of racist and Islamophobic ideas by theorists who believe in the clash of civilizations as Huntington, Elie Kedouri, Bernard Lewis and Fukuyama in theory and media onslaught and expanded presence and interference of foreign powers on the other led to the harsh reaction of Islamists much more than the secular nationalists did, contributing again to the political weight of this political-intellectual current. Although the Islamists were more seriously involved in protest during the past three decades, within the past couple of years or at least since 2005 onwards, and particularly in case of Egypt, nationalist and democracy-seeking spectra were also highly and visibly present. That is the reason why these movements have to be referred to as both democracy-seeking apart from being part of an Islamic Awakening. The discourse of recent social movements has emphasized democracy, objection to authoritarianism and corruption, ending hereditary governments and violation of human rights. Although democracy-seeking has been seriously put forth in recent movements, it has to be acknowledged that democracy-seeking in its native, regulated form consistent with Islam rather than the secular form has been widely accepted by the Muslim populations of these countries during the recent movements. The quantitative surveys conducted in recent years also attest to the fact that although the majority of Muslim people have regarded democracy as the best choice, they have accepted a democracy consistent with Islam and Islamic identity rather than its secular form. Lastly, the victory gained by Islamists in parliamentary elections in Tunisia and Egypt and the use of Islamic symbols and slogans by the protesters and revolutionaries in the pre- and post-revolutionary stages also support the mixed nature of these movements; that is, religious democracy as the presence of Islamists cannot be ignored in these societies.

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