

GRAFFITI AND POLITICAL SARCASM AS TOOLS FOR POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN EGYPT

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Introduction

Social media has provided space for citizens to comment on and criticise policies during times of troubles. Considering the growing importance of social media,¹ many scholars have argued that the 2010-2011 revolutions that took place in southern neighbourhood countries, including Egypt, were mainly a result of online campaigns organised to mobilise people. According to Abdul-Wahed (2012), political activity on Facebook led to increasing civic political participation. Abdul-Razzak (2013) asserted that social media has transformed politics in Egypt, while Far and Salimi (2012) have proved that social media like Facebook had guided the Egyptian revolution in 2011 through calling and managing the movements of protesters.

Others, however, warned about overestimating the capacities of online media. In 2011, Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Facebook, while speaking at the meeting for internet governance at the G8 summit in Paris, stated that: "It would be extremely arrogant for any specific tech company to claim any meaningful role in the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. Facebook was neither necessary nor sufficient for any of those things to happen."

The key question is therefore if and to what extent social media has contributed to mobilising citizens of Tunisia and Egypt. Social movement literature on the effects of online activism considers it as a key driver for creating a sense of shared identity and for mobilising to action by making activism more appealing, in particular to youths, through the use of diverse tactics, such as political sarcasm.

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¹ The Egyptian Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (MCIT) indicated that the number of internet users increased exponentially to reach 40.9 million in 2018, compared to 12.3 million in 2009. The Alexa internet website considered Facebook, Google and YouTube in the top 10 websites visited by Egyptians in 2013.

In the Egyptian context, indeed, one of the forms frequently used on social media to refer to political developments and realities has been sarcasm and satire. Following the 2011 revolution, another visually attractive form of activism appeared – graffiti –, produced by young street artists, which aimed to keep the spirit of the revolution alive.

This article aims to examine the features of the development of political activism, with a focus on political sarcasm and graffiti. The first part of this policy brief analyses the political activism in Egypt since 2004 and its increased resort to social media. The second part examines the transformation of activism and a gradual development of its tools, from a more “traditional” use of online tools (i.e. posting and moderating a debate on social media) to adoption of more captivating tactics – political sarcasm and graffiti. Subsequently, the article discusses the legal developments in Egypt related to control of political activism in the country. Lastly, the article provides some recommendations on how to ensure safer space for online users and promote and safeguard street art.

Political Activism and an Increased Use of Online Tools

2004 was marked by the emergence of a new wave of political movements in Egypt. That year the Egyptian Movement for Change, also called “Kifaya” (enough), was created. A loose coalition of activists, its main aim was to prevent the then Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak from making his son succeed him in the presidency. Many Kefaya members were bloggers and documented the protests by uploading the videos on YouTube (Onodera, 2009). Kefaya improved their communicative tools with the public by sending text messages and advertising the ongoing events on the Wehda Masrya “Egyptian Unity” blog.² The blog was used to document all events that took place in Egypt starting with the establishment of Kefaya in 2005, a rally in support of freedom of the press in 2007 and the calls for the 6 April strike in 2008 (Wehda Masrya, 2007). The movement, however, quickly lost ground due to internal disputes over its future.

Another major movement, which used social media, was the 6 April Movement, created in 2008 to support the strike of the workers in textile factories of Al Mahala Al Kubra city. In order to mobilise Egyptian citizens, a Facebook page was created, calling for a general strike on the 6 April. Other social media tools, such as Twitter and blogs, were used extensively. Although the 6 April protests were shut down by police, the movement continued, with the Facebook page as its main tool for contact and information sharing. Following a thorough analysis of content published on 6 April Movement Facebook page, Bowe, Alkazemi and Blom (2012) note that the movement used Facebook to encourage Egyptian citizens to protest during the 2011 revolution.

² See the Wahda Masrya official blog at http://wa7damasrya.blogspot.com/2005/04/blog-post_14.html

At the beginning of 2010, a new page to support Mohamed Al Baradei in his race for the Egyptian presidency was created by two young activists, Waeel Ghoneim and Abdel Rahman Mansour. The popularity of the page grew quickly and exceeded 100,000 followers. A few months later, this online group was transformed into a popular movement, called the National Association for Change, a broad coalition of almost all opposition groups and movements calling for democratic reforms. According to Abdelrahman Yousef, the head of Al Baradei's campaign, "the association was not a political party with a clear structure. The coalition was a general popular movement and its members are the signatories of the petition." In June 2010, Waeel Ghoneim created a webpage on Facebook called "We Are All Khaled Saeed", in memory of a young Egyptian from Alexandria who was tortured to death by the police, with the aim of protesting against police violence. Within a few days, the page reached over 36,000 followers, achieving a quarter of million by the end of 2010 (Ghoneim, 2012). According to many scholars, the heated protests and debates on the Facebook page produced a spark for street protests in January 2011 (Samy, 2014). On 14 January 2011, Ghoneim posted on the page "Today is the 14th [...]. January 25 is Police Day and it's a national holiday [...]. If 100,000 take to the streets, no one can stop us." Although, the 6 April Youth Movement was the first to call for protests on 25 January 2011, Ghoneim was the one who created the 25 January online event (Lim, 2012).

In order to prevent youths from mobilising on social media for offline protests, the Egyptian government decided first to cut off the internet and, subsequently, mobile connections. Despite those actions, the number of subscribers of "We Are All Khaled Saeed" page jumped to more than half a million. At that time, according to a 2013 report by the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology, the number of internet users in Egypt increased to 29 million, Facebook users increased from 4.2 million users in 2010 to reach 9.4 million users in 2011, "where Facebook was the hub of virtual meetings to coordinate youth's political acts," and the number of Twitter users amounted to 129,000 (Ministry of Communication and Information Technology, 2013). Apparently, Egyptians were increasingly resorting to social media to receive accurate information on the ongoing developments.

All the above described movements were very critical of the ruling regime. Moreover, these movements did not have any ideological backgrounds. Their main motivations, instead, were to bring about political reforms and defend human rights, as well as advocate social equality and justice (El-Sharnouby, 2012). Lack of political or ideological links has enabled those movements to mobilise youths across different socioeconomic classes and political backgrounds. More importantly, use of social media to mobilise citizens around their claims was one of the key strategies of those groups. The movements limited their actions to online reality, and did not engage in the offline political sphere either by working with political parties or by taking part in parliamentary or presidential elections (Sika, 2012).

As a reply to those developments, and in the light of an increased use of social media, government and state officials also started resorting to those tools as a channel of communication with citizens. For instance, the Supreme Council of Armed Forces created its own Facebook page and used it extensively to communicate with young people (Abdalla, 2016).

Graffiti and Political Sarcasm Gaining Space

In addition to increased resort to online tools, other forms and tools were used by youth activists to boost the involvement of young people in the protests, and to maintain the popularity of political demands during and after the revolution of January 2011. The most popular ones were political sarcasm and graffiti.

Before 2011, graffiti was a very rare sight in Egypt, due to a tight control of public space by the regime. Following the outbreak of the revolution, graffiti appeared all over Cairo to illustrate the Egyptian demands. Creative drawings attracted many journalists and analysts interested in documenting the revolution and analysing the emergence of graffiti as a political art. Graffiti was considered by many as an emerging form of cultural expression.

The main objective behind this type of activism was to commemorate the events through the creation of a “memorial space”. For instance, artists painted the walls surrounding Tahir Square with portraits of those who had died during the Port Said football stadium massacre in 2012 (see Figure 1), in which 74 fans lost their lives at a football game between Al-Ahly and Al-Masry clubs. Although initially considered as a fight between supporters of opposing football clubs, according to analysts, the major driver behind the massacre was a reprisal against Al-Ahly supporters for having actively participated in the Egyptian revolution protests in 2011.

Figure 1



Another aim behind the art of graffiti was to pronounce on the developments in Egypt. A case in point is the Med Graffiti Week campaigns. The first Med Graffiti Week campaign was launched in May 2011 to protest against censorship imposed by the regime and trying of civilians by military tribunals. The second campaign, launched in January 2012, and supported by street artists from all over the world, aimed to recall the 2011 revolutionary demands and encourage citizens to protest against political violence and the harsh economic situation in Egypt. The two campaigns were initiated online by an Egyptian artist, Ganzeer. The graffiti also called for access to urban spaces. Following the closure of Mohamed Mahmoud Street leading to Tahrir Square in order to prevent further protests, a group of street artists launched the “Mafish Gudran” (No Walls) initiative. The artists painted concrete blocks with colourful images, calling for pulling down the walls and sending a peaceful message that no walls would stop the revolution (see Figure 2).

Figure 2



Source: al-monitor.com

Regarding political sarcasm, the creation of Egypt's Sarcasm Society Page on Facebook in 2009 was the first major attempt to create sarcastic and humorous comics online. The page, dedicated to publishing political sarcastic comics, quickly gained numerous followers and managed to reach nearly 80,000 fans by late 2011. Currently, the page has over 3.5 million followers. In 2012, another sarcastic page was created on Facebook called “Asa7be”, meaning “My friend”. The page quickly went viral among Egyptian online users and ranked among the top 10 pages on Facebook in 2019. On the page, numerous sarcastic pictures with indirect political messages are published. For example, related to

Figure 3

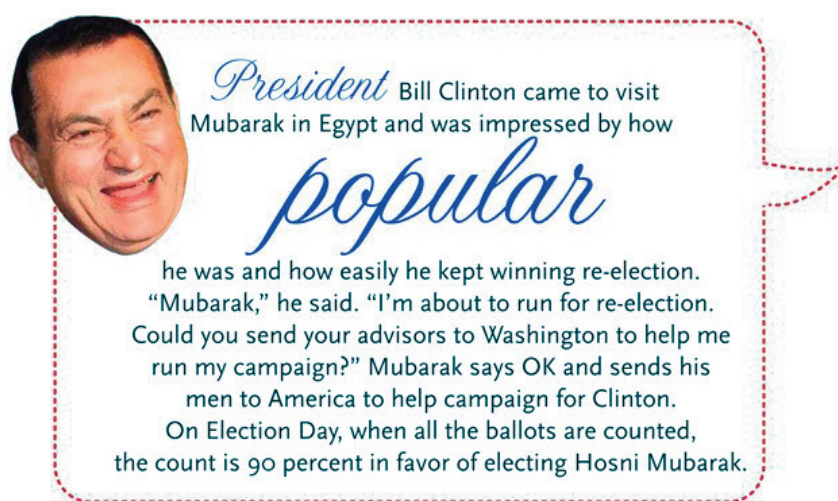


the recent increase gas prices, the page posted a sarcastic picture: the first part includes a picture of Fayrouz, a famous Lebanese singer, singing “My darling, where we can go...” the other part includes a picture of Yao Ming, Asa7be meme, replying with “let’s stay here, because of the increased prices of gas” (see Figure 3).

A notable example of political sarcasm was the use of the hashtag “Reasons WhyMubarakIsLate” on Twitter. Some of the jokes related to the late resignation of Mubarak, announced on 11 February 2011, produced by Twitter users are: “He’s trying to Google Map Saudi Arabia but forgot he shut down the internet. #ReasonsWhyMubarakIsLate” or “Every time he is ready to leave, there’s a damn curfew in place. #ReasonsWhyMubarakIsLate”. In 2011, *Foreign Policy* magazine published a translation of the most common Egyptian jokes that were shared during the demonstrations in Cairo. Hosni Mubarak was yet again their main protagonist (see Figure 4).

Use of graffiti and political sarcasm has been considered by many Egyptians as a safer way to express political opinions, and, often, in the case of graffiti, due to the shutdown of the internet by the regime, the only way to continue defending revolutionary demands. Nevertheless, even these types of expression have been severely persecuted. Indeed, the previous and current regimes have developed a series of laws to control and limit this type of political activism.

Figure 4



Countering Activism with the Legal Framework

The Egyptian constitution of 2014 guaranteed citizens the right to organize public meetings, marches, demonstrations and all forms of peaceful protests (Article 73). Article 71 of the constitution stipulates that "it is prohibited to censor, confiscate, suspend or shut down Egyptian newspapers and media outlets in any way" and that "exceptions may be made for limited censorship in time of war or general mobilization".

At the same time, the Egyptian government has passed several laws, aiming to regulate and control the use of social media. In June 2018 the Egyptian parliament approved three draft laws regulating the media, including social media, and establishing three new bodies: the Higher Council for Media Regulation, the National Press Authority, and the National Media Authority. In August 2018, the Egyptian president, Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, ratified law No. 175/2018 on combating IT crimes, known as Cybercrime Law. Article 25 of the law provides that any content violating the familial values and principles of Egyptian society or invading personal privacy shall be penalized. Article 171 of the Egyptian penal code of law No. 58/1937 states that any person who commit a felony or misdemeanor by "writing, drawing, pictures/photographs, marks and symbols, or any other method of representation made in public [...], shall be punished with the penalty prescribed therefore" (Law No.58 01).

Although, the head of the Supreme Council for Media Regulations (SCMR), Makram Mohamed Ahmed confirmed that the BBC websites were blocked due to "inaccurate coverage of the small-scaled protests" that took place in September 2019, several websites were blocked for allegedly promoting terrorism, including Al-Jazeera and Mada Masr websites. According to the Freedom House "Freedom on the Net" report, internet freedom in Egypt has significantly decreased since 2011. While in 2011, Egypt scored

54/100, in 2017 the country scored 68/100 (0=Most Free, 100=Less Free). The report resorted to three main criteria: obstacles to access, limits on content and violations of user rights. First point is related to restriction on connectivity, due to military operations related to the fight against terrorism in Sinai Peninsula. On the second element, according to the report, in 2018 there were 500 websites blocked. The third point reports a number of cases of arrests of bloggers, online activists and journalists for political, social, or religious posts on social media. Several activists were detained or sentenced for allegedly administering Facebook pages that poked fun at government policies or expressed legitimate opposition to their policies. For example, in 2017, Islam Al-Refaei, a social media figure known for his sarcastic comments on political and social topics, was arrested and charged with “membership of a terrorist group, inciting against the state, and calling for demonstrations without a permit”. Similarly, several graffiti artists were arrested, and a number of graffiti paintings were erased. As a result, loose interpretation of the legal framework put some restrictions on political activists who have waned or have been reluctant to express freely their thoughts due to fears of imprisonment or harassment.

Conclusion and Recommendations

To conclude, during the turbulent times, many Egyptians resorted to social media to obtain accurate information on political developments. This is demonstrated by an increase of Facebook users in Egypt and the popularity of the Facebook pages discussed above. With a population of 98 million, the younger generation is the main user of social media in Egypt. According to the MCIT (2015) report about the Internet Users Demographic Profile in 2013, more than 72% of internet users are people between 15 and 44.

Social media was considered one of the main tools that helped mobilise and organise the protests at the beginning of the 2011 revolution. The tools have been used increasingly by opposition movements and activists to express their opinions on political developments in Egypt. Social media was also considered for a certain time a safe space to express political opinions. Nevertheless, the authorities started to control online space, closing pages and arresting online activists. Hence, the new tools – political sarcasm and graffiti – helped push the boundaries to continue commenting on political developments. As shown by the above analysis, these forms of expression have also been increasingly suffering from suppression.

Against this background, and in order to protect social media users and street artists, this brief puts forward the following recommendations:

- 1- Firstly, social media stakeholders, including individuals and companies, in Egypt should launch a safeguard initiative to guarantee basic online safety and privacy

of their users against security breaches, including protecting personal information and reducing online government censorship.

- 2- The EU could support the region's communication and information technology infrastructure by employing technological safeguards. The information technology companies, for their part, could invest in technologies such as anonymising the owners of online pages and groups, thus protecting them from government scrutiny.
- 3- In order to promote street art and graffiti, the European Union (EU) in cooperation with the Egyptian government could help empower cultural development by funding projects, organising cultural events and workshops, and/or inviting artists to participate in street art events as part of exchange programmes. In 2012 the EU Delegation to Egypt granted financial support for the project entitled "The Art of Inclusion: A Place for Arts and Culture" in Cairo's City of the Dead to bring together the old heritage with creative contemporary art. Those types of projects should be further promoted and expanded.

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