Social Revolutions in the Arab World: Success of 2011 and Failure of 2018

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Abstract

The Middle East witnessed two social revolutions in less than a decade. The Arab Spring created tremendous social and political changes in 2011 while the Yellow Vest movement failed to make an impact in 2018. Both revolutions started, developed and spread on social media and bypassed the traditional domination of the media and governments. The impact social media had on the civil uprisings changed the face of the Middle East. It determined dramatic changes in the balance of political power, allowing ordinary citizens to influence public agenda, participate in the political process and determine social developments. Social media allowed social movements to flourish, changing the global political landscape. But despite the tremendous role of social media, the Arab Spring created major social and political changes in Arab countries in the Middle East and North Africa, while the Yellow Vest Movement, which started in France, continued with unsuccessful attempts to resume social uprisings in the Arab World. Despite attempts to duplicate the French experience in other regions of the world, with the Middle East in particular, the global spread of this revolution was limited. It was not a global uprising but one that had common global social goals, with the reason being is that technology and social networks are much more developed and spread globally today. The paper investigates the impact of social media on populist social revolutions, while concentrating on the differences between the successful civil demonstrations of start of the decade in the Arab World and the failed uprisings of the end of the decade in the same countries.

Key words*: social media, social revolutions, uprising, the Arab World*

Introduction

Social revolutions in the 21st Century have become powerful communication tools that created fundamental changes in society, involving a shift in power from governments to the people and massive political changes influenced by the power of the people. The most significant political changes occurred in the Arab World, led by social media: the transformation of power from undemocratic and aristocratic regimes to new political leadership which cannot ignore any more the force of the people.

We have first seen the power of social media and its effect on Arab societies in the social revolution that dominated the Arab World in 2011. The Arab Spring refers to the protests and revolutions that spread across Middle Eastern and North African Muslim countries: Tunisia, Egypt, Algeria, Yemen, Libya, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria and Bahrain. The term "Arab Spring" was based on the term "the Spring of Nations," that refers to a wave of national revolutions in Europe in the mid-19th century. The uprising demonstrated that the game changer in a modern civil revolution is the spread of social media, which swiftly delivered the message throughout the Arab World, creating historical social and political changes with tremendous global impact.

The latter part of the second decade of the 21st Century brought a second social revolution that called for social reforms in the Arab World. Nevertheless, although this revolution was spread and influenced by global media, its impact on the Arab World was limited. The Yellow Vest demonstrations started in 2018 in France, ceased off and continued in 2019. This revolution started with social media and had social goals – but had not succeeded to breakthrough into the Arab World.

That bring up the following question: why did the 2011 revolution had such a huge impact despite limited Internet services, while the 2018 protests failed to make any social changes, despite rising use of the Internet with new technology and global impact?

Online Revolutions

In order to answer this question, the research examines the social and political implications of the two upheavals. It raises important research questions about the global changes in 2011 and 2018, while examining the differences between the social movements and the political developments at the start and at the end of the century. The research concentrates on the role of social media in the success and failure of the events. This examination concentrates on the relationship between revolution movements and governments – and the looks if indeed the success of the 2011 revolution was because revolution movements controlled social media whereas in 2018 government learned how to control social media and social revolutions.

The research shows that control of social media was a key element to the success and failure of the social revolutions. In 2011, revolutionary movements controlled social media and took Arab government by surprise. In 2018, governments learned how to control and dominate social media, changing the social surrounding which initiated and encouraged social revolutions.

Social media played a critical part in the Arab uprisings in 2011 (Brown, Gaskon and Mitchell, 2012) and had an instrumental role in the success of the anti-government protests that led to the resignation of dictatorial leaders (Wiest and Eltantawy, 2011). The revolution was organized by activists which used the Internet as a dynamic vehicle to maintain broad based support in the streets. The protests across the Arab World appeared from nowhere, organized by Internet activists with a powerful social agenda (Hemple, 2016). Shirky (2011) explains that Facebook became the new effective public sphere. The demonstrations in 2011, as well as the protests in 2018 and 2019, were inspired by global movements, who used social media to bypass local governments and reach people all over the world on top of old policies and traditional media.

The protest was a series of pro-democracy uprisings that caught the Arab World by surprise. They were organized by activists which used the Internet as a dynamic vehicle to maintain broad based support in the streets. The protests were dominated by a powerful social and political agenda (Hemple, 2016). The nature of each uprising varied wildly from country to country, and yet they had one defining characteristic in common: social media. The term Arab Spring became interchangeable with "Twitter uprising" or "Facebook revolution", as global media tried to make sense of what was going on (Shearlaw, 2016). The impact of the uprising was huge: the world was thrown into the chaos of social movements through online activity, as millions of tweets on Twitter, hundreds of hours of YouTube and countless posts on Facebook told stories of the revolution from citizens who needed to get their voices heard. Social media was critical in the spreading of revolutionary messages and posed a serious challenge traditional to policies (Lynch, 2011).

Things were different in 2018. Whereas the uprisings in the Arab World were connected to social media and had global impact and despite unprecedented technical advancement compared to 2011, the 2018 uprising did not start in the Arab World. It started in France, and despite the leading role and accessibility of global media (much more influential than seven years ago) – remained local (in France) and could not breakthrough into other parts of the world, especially not the Arab World.

The 2018 wave of revolution started with social media. After an online petition posted attracted nearly a million signatures, mass demonstrations began in France. The movement was motivated by rising prices, a high cost of living and claims that tax reforms did not benefit the working and middle classes. The French Yellow Vest movement began as a protest an increased fuel tax and evolved into a broader stance against President Emmanuel Macron's economic policies. Although it was spread by social media, it was not until demonstrators went out to the streets that the movement started to influence. And yet, different from 2011 in the Arab World, its impact was insignificant and did not shake the political leadership. For about 6 months, tens of thousands of people wearing yellow vests demonstrated across France, blocking highways and clashing with security forces. The high-visibility security jackets that became emblematic of the movement stem from the ones French motorists must always carry in their vehicles. It was sparked by the French government's decision to increase fuel taxes, and the drive snowballed into wide scale protests the rising cost of living. The protest was fueled by often-violent protests and did not vanish until President Macron announced a package of measures to lower taxes. Despite attempts to rerun the 2011 revolution in 2019 too, and even though the Internet is much more developed and influential today in the Arab World than almost a decade ago – this social revolution failed to make significant impact in the Arab World.

Citizen Journalism

In order to understand the role of social media in the success and failure of the events in these two major social movements, with particular reference to political developments in the Arab World, we need to examine the way that social media changed the attitude of citizens around the world to their governments. In 2011 we witnessed the power of social media and its effect on society in the Arab Spring, as people used social technology to help shape the world's events and culture (Benioff, 2012). We have also seen the impact of technology in 2018, as the Yellow Vest movement gained its initial strength from social media. But the impact of social media in 2011 and 2018 was totally different. In 2011, social media played an instrumental role in the success of the anti-government protests that led to the resignation of dictatorial leaders (Wiest and Eltantawy, 2011), creating profound significance for the politics of the region for years to come (Dalacoura, 2012). The impact of social media was however limited in 2018, despite advancement in technology and global reach of social networks, with much lesser success of the protests in the Arab World. The success of the 2011 revolution and the failure of the 2018 protests in the Arab World showed the different role that social media has had in social and political changes at the end of the decade verses the events that occurred less than a decade earlier.

Common to both major social revolutions is that the tremendous influence of social media and the new style of public debate that has developed with social media. This new movement was the main engine to what we define today as Citizen Journalism. In the new era of politics that is dominated by social media, ordinary people spread news and information, opposing the traditional mainstream media outlets (Lynch, 2015). The emergence of a new generation of websites and social networks has helped to found new areas of communication, information and journalism, and with Citizen Journalism every citizen can potentially become a reporter by proposing information, sometimes at high added value (Iribarren, 2019).

Citizen Journalism made its impact by bypassing the traditional media, allowing public dialogue which enables people to share, comment on, and discuss a wide variety of topics, grounded on an interactive community (Theohary, 2015). The result is that in the new environment of digital society, ordinary citizens are more empowered than ever before to topple political establishments by communicating their messages through social networks. A common impact of the two social revolutions is the realization that social media is crucial in shaping political discourse and allowing people to interact with each other by sharing and consuming information (Nations, 2016).

Citizen Journalism is defined as the reporting of news events by members of the public using the Internet to spread the information (Mason, 2018). The importance of Citizen Journalism is to a great extent

because of the limitations the traditional media. Although independence and autonomy from political power are core values among professional journalists in most western societies, research has shown that news media organizations rely heavily on official actors for the construction of news (Shehata, 2010). Wolfsfeld (2017) claims that even though free speech has become essential and a fundamental right worldwide, the media have a long history of being closely associated with government interests. The ability of Citizen Journalism and social media to provide easy and accessible platform to ordinary citizens allows them to make an impact on public agenda – forcing traditional media to relate to issues that governments used to have a monopoly on. Mason (2018) argues that Citizen Journalism and social media might look threatening to professional journalism, but actually, they complement each other because with the power of social media on citizen journalists' side, news produced by them is likely to spread faster, so if a professional journalist sits on their story for too long, it may no longer be new news.

Citizen Journalism swiftly spread globally, making unprecedented impact on global politics. The social movements in the Arab World reached a global effect, achieved through social media (Howard and Hussain, 2011). The civil movements proved that technology plays a large role in the globalization of social and political movements, enabling the global domination of Western political and economic values, while breaking down social and cultural borders (Kumar, 2016). As demonstrated in those social revolutions, social media reached policymaking circles at the regional and global levels and demonstrated the socio-political context of movements in a globalized world. As been demonstrated in previous social movements around the world, they are mobilized by citizens who have often had previous experience in voluntary and/or political associations (Della Porta, 2002).

The impact of social media on social and political changes throughout the decade demonstrates the tremendous changes the world has experienced. Shirky (2011) and Castells (2015) argue that social media in the form of Citizen Journalism has been influential in spreading ideas of freedom and democracy to the people, motivating them to take their protests onto the streets, assisting in the planning and organization of demonstrations, communicating with world and contributing to global social and political changes. Aday, Farrell, Lynch, Sides and Freelon, (2012) suggest that Facebook and Twitter were especially supportive of Citizen Journalism, taking the form of ordinary people spreading news and information regarding the uprisings, as opposed to the traditional reporting via mainstream media outlets.

Social and Political Changes

In order to understand the social and political impact on the events that occurred in the Middle East during the second decade of the 21st Century, we need to examine the roots of the social revolutions at the start of the decade and the uprisings at the latter part of the decade. The 2011 uprising – the Arab Spring - dominated all Middle Eastern and North African countries but did not spread globally. It was a political revolution that brought tremendous political changes in those countries. In contrast, the 2018 Yellow Vest uprising was an international social movement that saw activists in France and Middle Eastern countries taking to the streets to demand economic reforms.

The Arab Spring was based on the desire for democracy and resulted from protests and revolutions that spread across Muslim countries with limited freedom of speech and lack of representative government institutions. In order to understand the magnitude of the social and political changes, we need to explain that Arab societies had limited channels for interactions and Facebook and Twitter provided the ability to communicate between people and countries (Mourtada and Salem, 2012). Although the nature of each pro-democracy uprising varied from country to country, they were all dominated by social media, which played a central role in shaping political debates in the Arab Spring (Howard, Duffy, Freelon, Hussain, Mari and Maziad, 2019). Usage of the Internet grew substantially throughout 2011 in the Arab World,

contributing to the development of civic engagement in Tunisia and Egypt and providing the people the means to participate in the uprising and join the street protests in other Arab countries too (Ghannam, 2011). According to Howard & Hussain (2011), there can be no surprise that social revolutions transpired in Tunisia and Egypt. Tunisia had a very large population of Facebook users and Egypt had more Internet users than any other country in the Middle East. They argue that popular uprising was not translated into action until cell phones and the Internet became available, helping to unite disparate grievances in a common agenda.

The social and political changes throughout the second decade of the 21st Century show that in contrast to 2011, the demonstrations in 2018 and 2019 were based on social and economic issues in countries with free media and stable governments – developed and developing countries alike. Unlike the Arab Spring, which developed within the Arab World and did not spread globally, the Yellow Vest uprising was global as it started in France and then spread to other countries, mainly Arab states.

Social media and networking tools have been most effective to direct political and social changes, forcing changes in the policy of Arab governments (Yigit and Tarman, 2013) and creating a new reality of media dominance of global issues. The uprisings raised profound questions about how such an ostensibly weak society could generate the kind of mobilization necessary to overwhelm the Egyptian regime's feared security apparatus (Howard and Hussain, 2011). But the success of the revolutions in neighboring Tunisia catalyzed a rapid shift in the perceptions and considerations of a set of strategically positioned actors, who began serving as brokers between social sectors and the people (Freedom House, 2018).

The Arab Spring resulted in long-term global political changes. It led to new forms of open and democratic governance in the region (Kurtzer-Ellenbogen, 2011). What started in 2011 - was tremendously proven again only seven years later, in 2018. The revolutions demonstrated that the impact of the Internet is turning from developed to developing countries, and global political changes have been the catalyst for progress in countries that have traditionally been underdeveloped, mainly in North Africa and the Arab World. The process started from the people against the will of governments and ended up in political changes encouraged by governments, which as a result seek to advance their competitive position in the global environment.

The most transcendent difference is that countries changed dramatically in less than 10 years, and so has global politics. However, a major difference between the two civil protests is in the impact of social media on global issues. The 2011 social media revolution was determined by profound changes in most Arab countries. The Arab Spring was the first-time social media was used to get a political message out (Brown, Guskin and Mitchell, 2016), after young educated Muslims did not trust their political institutions. With the Internet, the world could see what was truly going on under military or dictatorship regimes. Politics changed as non-democracies have witnessed the rapid growth of new social media that have become vehicles for civic activism (Beissinger, 2017).

In contrast, the 2018 protests were organized by social goals in a modern democracy. Demonstrators in the Arab World were inspired by events in France and demanded economic reforms, but the protests could not maintain the momentum necessary to have a long-term impact in the region. Both Arab Spring and Yellow Vest movements were spontaneous and motivated by the mass without a pre-organized leadership. They gained momentum without any government consent - in fact by bypassing the rule of governments, but the nature of the protests differed in all that relates to the Arab World. The Arab Spring was a political protest against old regime that ruled for over a century, while the Yellow Vests movement was based on social demands which did not match the goals of Arab revolutionaries.

Conclusion

The paper examines what caused the different outcome of the social revolutions that occurred in the Middle East in the second decade of the 21st Century. The civil uprising started through social media, and

then developed and accelerated into massive civil demonstrations throughout the Arab World. The upheaval started in just one country, Tunisia, but rapidly spread via social media and inspired citizens of Egypt and other Arab countries to protest, changing the political surrounding in the Middle East. The uprising tremendously changed the Arab world, as the social media revolution came to prominence by driving the social protest in these countries.

The significant political changes that occurred the Arab Spring of 2011 in the Arab World, led by social media, determined the collapse of undemocratic regimes which ruled Arab countries for centuries. The social media revolution proved that in the new political environment, the voice of the people is heard through the Internet and the traditional ruling forces - governments and the media - cannot ignore the impact of the new political powers – the people and social media - on the Arab World.

The failure of the Yellow Vest movement that developed in 2018 and 2019 in France to restart a social revolution in the Middle East shows that the relationship between governments and social movements has changed since 2011. As the research demonstrates, the success of the protests in 2011 was since social media surprised Arab governments and caused swift social political pressure coming from the people. The research further shows that the failure of the 2018 uprising is related to the response of governments to the new wave of social movements. It looks at the way that governments succeeded to control the 2018 protest – in contrast to 2011, when social movements were the influential forces.

To understand the way that the two protests had opposite power players, we need to examine the way that the changed role of governments made an impact on social and political changes. An important difference between the two waves of civil demonstrations is that governments nowadays don't try anymore to block the Internet, as they did in the demonstrations at the start of the century. The uprisings proved that social media provide enormous opportunities and challenges for social and political forces around the world, although the balance of power has also changed. Today all parties – governments, publics and the media and international organizations – acknowledge the power and influence of social media to establish civil demonstrations and accelerate them into massive national or global movements, thereby determining public agenda and national or global policies. The main difference between the social revolutions of the start and end of the decade is however, that governments have also adapted their policies to social media and are now able to influence, direct and even control the face of social revolutions.

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