

DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT DEBATES

Victory by Facebook? Egypt's Digital Youth Comes of Age

Bijan Kafi

Egypt's bloggers, who have been shaping activism on and off the streets of Egypt for years, have now seen their finest hour. Many observers believe the events in January were a "Facebook Revolution". Still, most of Egypt's youth feel uncomfortable with the newly won fame and reject the idea of being called the true heroes of change.

I met Basem Fathy on the 4th floor of the Journalist Syndicate, a huge building that combines an indistinguishable mix of architectural styles into a graceless concrete block of gargantuan proportions. With a fake marble portico framed by towering pillars, the building is one of the most intimidating sights in downtown Cairo.

These days, however, it seems nothing is capable of intimidating Basem, one of the key figures of the Egyptian digital activist movement. Sweaty but elated, he sits down to talk for a few minutes amidst a group of visitors to an event he describes animatedly: "I'm here for a workshop on the upcoming elections", he explains with excitement in his eyes. "We need to tell people why elections are important for them and the country."

Basem is one of the former leaders of the "April 6 Youth Movement", a leading group behind a large number of the much-reported activities of young activists that achieved international recognition whenever Egypt's youth and state authorities clashed in recent years. He later left the group and joined the Egyptian Democratic Academy, a group formed by young Egyptians and aimed at promoting democracy and human rights.

There could not be a more fitting place to meet than the Journalist Syndicate. In this crumbling architectural relic of a former government's fondness for megalomaniac self-display, this young Egyptian is poised to teach fellow citizens, many much older than himself, about the basics of participation in an egalitarian society.

It took Basem and his friends a long time to get here.

From "Kifaya" to the "April 6"

2003 brought the independence of the newspaper market and subsequently satellite TV and the internet into Egyptian homes. State-owned publications like "Al Ahram" suddenly had to deal with an increasingly diverse journalistic opposition - and with more citizens who dared to speak out and made use of new technologies.

Today Egypt boasts a remarkably varied landscape of offline media catering to the interests of countless ethnic and opposition groups. But independent newspaper journalism never developed into a truly respectable opposition to established opinion. "No newspaper in Egypt is truly independent. There are always business considerations, monetary constraints, or concerns of political correctness", notes Noha Atef, 26, another young activist who runs the country's most prominent anti-torture site.

Since 2003 independent newspapers such as "Al-Masry Al-Youm", "El Dostor" or "Al Shorouk" have enthusiastically embraced new internet-based technologies. Many believe that they, together with young Egyptian bloggers, were the driving force behind the development of a public atmosphere that gave more people the courage to speak out.

Gamal Eid, Director of the Arab Network for Human Rights Information, remembers how it began: "Bloggers first expressed support for a public initiative in 2005 and 2006, the "Kifaya" ("enough")

movement." "Kifaya" subsequently developed into an umbrella organisation, uniting normally deeply divided groups who now joined forces with the bloggers to fight their common adversaries.

In May 2006, digital activists came to the assistance of Egypt's judges who had attracted the scorn of President Hosni Mubarak when they challenged him with an ultimatum demanding the reform of the judiciary's ability to monitor the upcoming elections. 25 bloggers "annexed" a patch of land in front of the Judges Club and declared it a "liberated part of Egypt". They also supported the movement through articles on their blogs.

When Kifaya's impetus quickly waned under the repressive government, the blogger movement looked for other causes to support. Facebook soon became the favourite online space for the world's networked youth to gather, bringing change for Egypt's young activists as well. In contrast to blogs, Facebook is not primarily about voicing one's opinion, but about creating a community. Interest now turned to gaining traction by bringing likeminded individuals together.

Facebook became the seminal cell for many offline activities that drew on the discontent that already existed on the streets of Cairo, Mahalla and other industrial towns. In the aftermath of another labour strike on April 6, 2008, in Cairo student Israa Abd-El, who works at the Egyptian Democratic Agency with Basem Fathy today, created a Facebook group named for the date of the strike. Within hours the group gathered thousands of members. Spurred on by the impact of her own voice, Israa dared to call for a second strike on President Hosni Mubarak's birthday. The government did not take the provocation lightly and Israa and her partner Ahmed Maher were briefly arrested.

During the run-up to the parliamentary and presidential elections of 2010 and 2011, Egypt's digital activists had pledged their early support to some renowned opposition figures. A Facebook group in support of Mohamed El Baradei, one of Egypt's most prominent candidates, soon registered membership in the hundreds of thousands. Other domestic turmoil, such as the case of Khaled Said, a blogger who may have died from injuries sustained during police torture, also fanned the smouldering fires of discontent again and encouraged the bloggers to regroup.

Reporting the news unfit to print

Over the years, many of Egypt's vocal young activists have gained exceptionally widespread readership, some even notoriety. They continue to play a significant role in providing independent and to some extent even investigative insight where traditional media fail. Bloggers are often perceived as the "bravest journalists". And while "April 6" was the first to make active use of social media tools such as Facebook, YouTube, or Flickr, blogs have remained the single most important channel for raising an individual's voice in relative safety.

Their impact on traditional news reporting may be startling for observers from the West. In Egypt, however, newspaper journalism is widely perceived as not very investigative or citizen-centred in its style of reporting. Bloggers and activists fill this gap. In their search for independent data -- and increased circulation -- many newspapers regularly reprint blog articles. For a long time, bloggers provided raw video footage from the streets depicting both the victims and the perpetrators of human rights abuses. They gave a voice to individuals who dared not speak out for fear of repression or social shame. They took photos of police officers, making it easier for victims to identify offenders and demand their rights. Bloggers "have helped the seeds of freedom of speech take root" according to Ahmed Samir, founder and co-director of the "Horytna" (Our Freedom) independent internet radio station, which draws largely on material provided by digital activists.

After April 6, January 25 has now become the new date Egypt's networked youth identify with. Again, the "April 6 Youth Movement" together with the "We are all Khaled Said" group led the way while courageous individuals joined in. Yet Wael Ghonim, founder of the "Khaled Said" group, later minimised his own role and that of his fellow activists in a television interview: "Do not believe those who tell you this is a Facebook revolution". He felt it would show a lack of appreciation for the people's will and perseverance in the face of the regime's tanks to declare "victory by Facebook". Wael Abbas, the hu-

man rights blogger who received numerous awards for his work, also rejects the idea: "Facebook played a role in the beginning, but then it became a revolution of the people. Without the people there would not have been a revolution."

Still, Egyptian bloggers understand the current fondness of many for the new opportunities technology provides. It allowed them to mobilise a large number of activists quickly, flexibly, and effectively. But had Egyptians across all social strata not risked their lives on the streets of Cairo in the crucial days after January 25, the transformative events that followed could never have happened. Young people's commitment to support the strikes and demonstrations of other disadvantaged groups "online and off-line" gave much of the population one common voice - even after the government shut down the internet.

The future is open

Not even Basem seems to know what will become of the youth movements of today. For him and many of his peers, the revolution came as a surprise victory and brought sudden relief for anger that had remained unexpressed for many years. The question of what is to come next has many wondering where their place might be in the new Egypt.

By the end of February 14, youth groups had formed the "Revolution Youth Coalition". Some individual activists had decided to join parties. Basem suspects that more of his friends may do the same. Many others may prefer to stay independent and make their influence felt through pressure or in advisory groups serving politicians. I asked Basem if he thought "April 6" and the other youth movements would survive in their present form. "No", he responded gloomily. "I fear they might lose their vitality, now that their main goals seem within reach."

It will remain unclear for some time to come whether the goals of Egypt's youth have truly been achieved. In any case, the transformative period is certainly not over for them yet. Only time will tell if they will succeed in becoming capable partners in social and even political dialogue, or if others will move up to take their place.

It would not be the first time a revolution has devoured its own children.