

Globalization and the Arab Spring Revolution in Egypt

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The Arab Spring, a series of revolutions in the early 2010s promoting democracy across the Middle East and North Africa, was a defining moment in the history of the Arab world. A collective dissatisfaction with the authoritarian regimes in power, corruption, high unemployment, and political repression fueled these revolutions (Bunghardt, 2014). The Arab Spring revolution began in Tunisia at the end of 2010 after Mohamed Bouazizi, an average Tunisian fruit vendor, committed an act of self-immolation to challenge police brutality and corruption. Protests and mass movements erupted in the neighbouring countries in the following weeks and the revolutions culminated in the overthrow of several long-standing rulers across Arab countries, most notably in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen (Bunghardt, 2014).

Egypt's unique historical and political landscape, marked by decades of authoritarian rule and escalating public injustices, set the stage for an unprecedented uprising bringing significant changes to its political system. The beginning of 2011 marked the height of the Arab Spring in Egypt. Disapproval of the former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's three-decade-long repressive rule and long-standing grievances over political repression, extreme economic hardship, social injustices, and deep-rooted institutional corruption fueled mass protests. Protesters flooded in mass to Cairo's Tahrir Square to demand

social, political, and economic change. The protests gained significant popularity and momentum, ultimately leading to Mubarak's resignation in February 2011 (Bunghardt, 2014).

Following Mubarak's resignation, the military took over the state and promised an election in the following months. In June 2012, Egypt held its first democratic elections and voted in Mohamed Morsi, a member of the controversial Muslim Brotherhood Party, to the presidency. Morsi's presidency was also characterized by disapproval and controversy, as he failed to address the same issues which caused the 2011 protests, leading the military to oust his government in 2013. Subsequently, there was a return to military-backed governance in Egypt and Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the head of the Egyptian Armed Forces, has since assumed control of the country. His presidency has been characterized as authoritarian and repressive, with estimates that his administration holding thousands of political prisoners (El-Sharif, 2017).

A shared struggle for dignity, justice, and democratic governance in the Arab world resonated with the great dissatisfaction with existing circumstances unique to Egypt (El-Sharif, 2017). While the causes of the Arab Spring revolution in Egypt are multifaceted, the significant influence of globalization on the dynamics of the revolution must be further analyzed. The rapid spread of information, technology, economic independence and communication characterize "globalization", "a matrix of social processes that [are] transforming our present social condition and conventional nationality into one of globality," (Steger, 2020, p.44). Here, we attempt to determine if

and how globalization influenced the Arab Spring revolution in Egypt and the nature of its politics. This piece argues that globalization exacerbated economic inequalities, spread ideologies, and promoted the use of social media changing the nature of international politics in Egypt through the Arab Spring.

Economic Hardship

First, globalization exacerbated economic inequalities changing the nature of Egyptian politics through the Arab Spring revolution. Poverty was one of the main factors that drove the revolution as “[...] the Egyptian people were naturally becoming increasingly dissatisfied with financial life in Mubarak’s Egypt. By 2011, it has been estimated that almost 40 percent of Egypt’s population was living below the poverty line,” (Bunghardt, 2014, p.4).

Globalization exacerbated these inequalities in many ways, for example as Egypt adopted neoliberal economic policies. Globalization led many countries to shift towards a neoliberal economic framework, characterized by its “[devotion] to the free market and [opposition] to state intervention in that market,” (Ritzer, 2021, p.112). Neoliberal economies can often lead to the exacerbation of wealth inequalities as “there are very many losers as the world becomes more ‘globalized,’” (Owens et al., 2023, p.78).

Leading up to the Arab Spring, Egypt underwent significant changes as it implemented a neoliberal economic framework. These changes included “the privatization of public sector

enterprises, the liberalization of trade and prices, the introduction of flexible labour legislation and the removal of progressive social policies,” (Joya, 2011, p.370). International financial institutions (IFIs) readily encouraged these reforms to further integrate Egypt into the global economy (Armbrust, 2011). While this led to rapid economic growth in certain sectors, it led to poverty in others, and wealth and power became concentrated in the hands of a minority of elites, including Mubarak and his entourage (Armbrust, 2011).

The consequences of implementing this economic method have been disastrous for many Egyptians including the rise of unemployment and poverty. Neoliberal economies can often lead to higher unemployment rates and salaries as financial liberalization drives competition (Ritzer, 2021). High-paying jobs became scarce in Egypt and by the beginning of 2011, 40% of Egypt’s population lived below the international poverty line of less than \$2 USD per day and unofficial unemployment rates were close to 25%. The African Development Bank found that in recent years, many economies in North Africa, including Egypt’s, “failed to grow fast enough to create sufficient good jobs,” (Ogbonnaya, 2013, p.17). The report also found that “per capita income in the region averaged only 0.5 percent per year,” (Ogbonnaya, 2013, p.17).

Another consequence of implementing a neoliberal economic method can be seen in rising food costs in Egypt. Globalization has contributed to food scarcities in Egypt, due to rising fuel costs and lack of regional produce (Ritzer, 2021). Between January 2010 and February 2011, food prices increased

by 40% generating a food crisis in Egypt. Several reports found that the rapid increase in food prices within the region was one of the major causes of the Arab Spring revolutions across the region (Ogbonnaya, 2013). Food scarcity, coupled with the economic austerity, demonstrates that globalization, through neoliberal policies, impacted the Arab Spring revolution in Egypt.

Globalization's exacerbation of financial inequalities has not been limited to the implementation of a neoliberal economic method. Global economic crises also contributed to the harsh economic conditions in Egypt. Globalization is marked by how fluid various phenomena have become, becoming less vulnerable to physical or political barriers (Ritzer, 2021). The global financial crisis of 2008 exemplifies this fluidity, as although the crisis itself was not related to Egypt's economy, the impacts of the crisis were felt significantly in Egypt. The Egyptian tourism sector was one of the worst impacted sectors of the economy as it forms a significant 15% of the country's economy (Moussa et al., 2017). The global decline of wealth after the 2008 financial crisis led to a decline in tourism. Studies revealed that the tourism and hotel industries in Egypt witnessed a decline of 3.11% in international arrivals in 2009. The decline in tourism led to job losses and shrunk the economy exacerbating economic hardships (Moussa et al., 2017).

In addition, the economic disparities between Egyptians endured under Mubarak's regime comprised a hegemonic component. Neo-Gramscian theory argues that "consent [...] is created and recreated by the hegemony of the ruling class in society. It is this hegemony that allows the moral, political, and

cultural values of the dominant group to become widely dispersed throughout society and to be accepted by subordinate groups as their own,” (Owens et al., 2023, p.210). From this perspective, the austere economic policies were not solely financially exploitive; they also served as tools of cultural and ideological hegemony that allowed the elite to rule at the expense of the broader Egyptian population. Therefore, the revolution can be viewed as a contestation of the existing hegemony, with Egyptians aiming to reshape the norms, values, and economic conditions that created said hegemony.

Spread of Ideology

Second, globalization contributed to a spread of ideology which changed the nature of Egyptian politics through the Arab Spring. Different groups, each with a distinct vision for the country’s future, who are often in conflict, united with the common objective of challenging the Mubarak regime and implementing democratic principles. Ideology played a significant role in shaping participation during the protests, as various factions, despite their differences, found themselves aligned in opposition to the government, and it is crucial to study how this consensus came about. Globalization allows ideologies to spread across the globe through several interconnected mechanisms that have accelerated and intensified the exchange of values, ideas, and more (Ritzer, 2021). This process has allowed the dissemination of various political ideologies, which influenced the Arab Spring revolution in Egypt.

The spread of ideology was first observed with the growing desire for democracy. Globalization exposed Egyptians to global events, freedoms, and ideologies through various processes, such as the internet and social media. An example that demonstrates this exposure to Egyptians is an important speech that former American President Barack Obama gave in Cairo in 2009. In this speech, he propagated the concept of democracy and liberalism as he emphasized freedom, law, self-determination, transparency, and responsibility from governments. He crucially suggested that Egyptians should have the “freedom to live as [they] choose,” (cited in Bunghardt, 2014, p.6). This resonated deeply with Egyptians as his speech highlighted the failure of Mubarak’s regime to provide the same basic levels of freedom, prosperity, and justice. Hillel Schenker, president of the Palestinian Journal, argued that Obama’s speech planted a “seed” for democracy (Bunghardt, 2014). This influential message, which was broadcast globally through the media and internet laid the groundwork for the events of the Arab Spring in Egypt. As this motivated Egyptians to aspire for better governance, it demonstrates how globalization has reshaped the nature of Egyptian politics through the Arab Spring revolutions.

Another example of globalization’s ability to facilitate the spread of ideology in this region is the broader efforts to encourage democratization. Under the leadership of former American President George W. Bush, the United States aimed to aggressively spread democracy across the world, most notably through military interventions in the Middle East (Kay, 2004). The 2003 invasion of Iraq was partially justified as an attempt to

liberate Iraqis through the implementation of a democratic government by the Bush administration. The visible push for democracy in Iraq and the Middle East contributed to a growing discourse on democratic ideals and human rights in the region (Kay, 2004). The Arab Spring movement in Egypt, therefore, can be seen as a larger part of global ideological exchange and influence, hence demonstrating how globalization changed the nature of Egyptian politics.

Social Media

Third, globalization changed the nature of Egyptian politics through the Arab Spring due to the use of social media. Globalization, through technological advancements and the exchange of ideas, has greatly contributed to “the spread and wider availability of communication technology which intensifies connectivity,” (Khondker, 2011, p.678). The advent of social media and other mobile technologies greatly impacted the landscape and conditions of political activism and awareness in Egypt in various ways. During the revolution, an Egyptian activist explained that “[they used] Facebook to schedule the protests, Twitter to coordinate, and YouTube to tell the world,” highlighting how social media facilitated the revolutions across the Arab world (Khondker, 2011, p. 680).

According to research conducted by the Arab Social Media Report, the total number of Facebook users in the Arab world grew 78% in 2010 to 22 million users, with Egypt having the largest share of users representing 22% (Chapsos, 2012).

Notably, in 2010, youth aged 15-29 comprised 75% of these users, underscoring the platform's centrality in youth activism (Chapsos, 2012). Egypt is one of the world's most youthful populations, where a third of the population is under 25 years old. The majority are part of the lower-middle class, with higher rates of poverty and unemployment; lower rates of education and tend "to subsist on the margins as casual, low-paid, low-status, and low-skilled workers (as street vendors, sales persons, buss boys, or taxi drivers), and to reside in the overcrowded slums and squatter settlements of the Arab cities," (Chapsos, 2012, p.6).

For politically and economically marginalized youth lacking institutional methods to voice their concerns, social media provided an outlet to express their discontent and mobilize advocacy. Studying how social media operated as a tool is imperative to understanding the popular uprisings in Egypt.

Social media was impactful in that it raised awareness of conditions and actions of the regime in power. Social media allowed Egyptians to connect with one another and the wider world, empowering them to share their experiences and grievances globally. Mohamed Bouazizi's act of defiance in Tunisia quickly "became national and eventually international news thanks to the combined effects of conventional media and the new media," (Khonder, 2011). In Egypt, it was a parallel incident, the murder of Khaled Saeed at the hands of the police which sparked outrage. Pictures of the incident were spread online and the Facebook page named "We Are All Khaled Saeed" was created to help spread information on the regime's

wrongdoings. Within two weeks of its creation over 350,000 people joined the page (Khonder, 2011). Khaled Saeed and Mohamed Bouazizi's cases highlights how social media allowed citizens to easily access information regarding the conditions and wrongdoings of the regimes in power sparking the Arab Spring movement.

The impact of the use of social media in the Arab Spring movement can also be seen in how it attracted international attention to its cause. Social media platforms permeated geographical boundaries, allowing Egyptian activists to broadcast their struggle for democracy to a global audience (Khonder, 2011). The global coverage of the revolution inspired widespread support that provided moral support and validation to the protesters and put additional pressure on the Egyptian government and other authoritarian regimes in the region. The international pressure was so effective that former President Mubarak stepped down after only 18 days of protests (Khonder, 2011). Globalization, through social media, thus fuelled the Arab Spring revolutions.

Furthermore, social media broke the monopoly of state-controlled media. Social media offered a space for free expression "where [it] was used effectively to mobilize people against a regime in power for three decades," (Khonder, 2011, p.680). Before the advent of social media, the Egyptian media scene was tightly regulated by the government, and censorship and suppression of opposition were common. Conventional media outlets were often simply mouthpieces of the Mubarak regime, spreading content that fit the regime's narratives and

minimizing public exposure to diverging perspectives or the state's wrongdoings. In contrast, social media platforms allowed freedom of expression and gave Egyptians the tools to share uncensored news. The revolution was often called "Facebook Revolution" as it bypassed traditional media barriers and used social media platforms such as Facebook "to tell stories of police brutality, violence, and blatant injustice," (Wolfsed, 2013, p.6). In the end, social media platforms helped protestors mobilize specific political outcomes such as the removal of President Hosni Mubarak, hence highlighting its importance in the Arab Spring revolution in Egypt.

Globalization's impact on the Arab Spring is also demonstrated through social media's organizing power. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, which surged in popularity concurrently with the Arab Spring, became vital tools for coordinating demonstrations. "The Egyptian revolution was well organized, coordinated, and civil and at every step the new media played its part," (Wolfsfeld, 2013, p.116). Through social media, the protests in Egypt grew exponentially and were extremely well-organized as the Arabic and English broadcaster Al Jazeera has "estimated that as many as one million people took part in the protests in and around Tahrir Square," (Bunghardt, 2014, p.7). To achieve this level of success, Egyptian activists used specific tactics such as Facebook pages and hashtags to gather support and disseminate logistical information (Khonder, 2011). Without using social media, protesters would have not been able to respond dynamically in an organized fashion, highlighting its importance for the

movement.

Conclusion

To conclude, the transformative Arab Spring revolutions demonstrated the deep effects of the forces of globalization on Egypt and the broader Arab world. These forces of globalization included economic pressures caused by neoliberal policies, the rapid spread of political ideologies, and the use of modern communication tools, such as social media that went beyond state-controlled messaging. In this context, social media emerged as a revolutionary tool, providing a platform for marginalized youth and allowing for greater solidarity. The Arab Spring, despite not bringing about the long-term democratic objectives many had hoped for, marked the beginning of a new phase in Egypt's political history – one in which the global flow of information and ideas continues to reshape the nature of politics and activism.

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