Network Politics and the Arab Spring

Ashu M. G. Solo, Maverick Technologies America Inc., Wilmington, DE, USA

Jonathan Bishop, Centre for Research into Online Communities and E-Learning Systems, Swansea, UK

ABSTRACT

Network politics is examined in the context of the Arab Spring. Network politics refers to politics and networks. These networks include the Internet, private networks, cellular networks, telephone networks, radio networks, television networks, etc. Network politics includes the applications of networks to enable one or more individuals or organizations to engage in political communication. Furthermore, network politics includes government regulation of networks. Finally, network politics includes the accompanying issues that arise when networks are used for political communication or when there is government regulation of networks. The domain of network politics includes, but is not limited to, e-politics (social networking for driving revolutions and organizing protests, online petitions, political blogs and vlogs, whistleblower websites, online campaigning, e-participation, virtual town halls, e-voting, Internet freedom, access to information, net neutrality, etc.) and applications of other networks in politics (robocalling, text messaging, TV broadcasting, etc.). Network politics has played a crucial role in the Arab Spring.

KEYWORDS:

Arab Spring, E-Government, E-Politics, E-Voting, Internet, Networks, Politics, Social Networks

1. INTRODUCTION

Technology has brought about many changes in the realm of politics. This is no truer than in the Middle East and North Africa where citizen lead and technology enabled revolts have led to the overthrow of brutally repressive dictators. The revolts in the Middle East and North Africa that started after the beginning of 2011 were largely driven by social networks and are often referred to as the "Arab Spring" (Shavitt & Zilberman, 2012). The Arab Spring became the latest manifestation of the liberating impact of information and communication technology (Tsuma & Mbarika, 2013).

The Arab Spring has brought down governments in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen and is threatening a fifth government in Syria. These revolutions have started in large part due to social networking websites like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Much of the world was able to see the Arab Spring through photographs and videos made by anonymous local citizens with mobile devices such as cellular phones (Cox, 2011). In Arab countries, there were many activists who played a crucial role in the Arab Spring using social networking as a key tool in expressing their thoughts about the wrongful acts committed by the government (Madu & Moguluwa, 2013; Tufekci & Freelon, 2013). The debate about the Arab Spring is embedded within a complex of wider theoretical debates about how new media might affect political outcomes (Aday et al., 2013).

The whistleblower website Wikileaks has had a tremendous impact in exposing government corruption (Corneil, 2010). Politicians and candidates use their own websites and social networking profiles to get their message out. The mainstream media no longer has a monopoly on political commentary as anybody can set up a blog or vlog and post opinions online. Political activists can

network together online. Voting is often done using electronic voting machines, which has created many problems. In the future, voting will likely be done over the Internet, but there are many issues that need to be worked out. Internet freedom and equal access are important issues that have many facets.

The Arab Spring wasn't the first technology transformed political struggle. The printing press challenged government ideologies too. In the past, the only political engagement for many people involved voting and following news. Now because of the Internet, there is much more direct participation in politics (McBeth & Robison, 2012). Therefore, it is necessary to develop new paradigms to understand the changing world. Hence in this research paper, the authors describe network politics within the Arab Spring. This field was first originated and defined by the authors of this research paper in (Solo & Bishop, 2011).

2. NETWORK POLITICS

The authors have coined the term *network politics,* which refers to politics and networks (Solo & Bishop, 2011). These networks include the Internet, private networks, cellular networks, telephone networks, radio networks, television networks, etc. Network politics includes applications of networks to enable one or more individuals or organizations to engage in political communication including expression, organization, or voting. Furthermore, network politics includes government regulation of networks. Finally, network politics includes the accompanying issues that arise when networks are used for political communication or when there is government regulation of networks.

The term *e-politics* (Romm-Livermore, 2011) just refers to politics and the Internet. Therefore, e-politics is a subset of network politics. The term *e-government* refers to the use of information and communication technologies in government operations, access to government data, interactions between government agencies, interactions between government and citizens, and interactions between government and external organizations (Reddick, 2010). Only those e-government applications in the realm of politics, such as e-voting, are in the domain of network politics.

The domain of network politics includes e-politics (social networking for driving revolutions, social networking for organizing protests, online petitions, online political videos, political blogs, political vlogs, whistleblower websites, online campaigning, e-participation, virtual town halls, e-voting, Internet freedom, access to information, net neutrality, etc.) and the applications of other networks in politics (robocalling, text messaging, TV broadcasting, etc.), among others (Solo & Bishop, 2011; Solo & Bishop, 2014) .

A network politics layman activity could be posting a political blog entry, starting an online petition, posting online messages about a protest, posting online videos of government crackdowns on protesters, or holding a virtual town hall, all of which can use existing software tools. A network politics research and development activity could be studying the characteristics of political bloggers, developing new software tools for organizing political activists, developing a tool to alert protesters of protest locations, or developing a tool for candidates to alert voters by text message when a candidate will be giving a speech in their particular geographical area.

3. SCOPE OF NETWORK POLITICS RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

The scope of research and development in the field of network politics includes applications of networks to enable one or more individuals or organizations to engage in political communication, government regulation of networks, as well as the accompanying issues that occur as a result of the preceding. More specifically, the scope of research and development in the field of network politics includes, but is not limited to, those in Table 1.

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