Chapter 4
The Role of Web 2.0 in the Arab Spring

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Arab Spring seemed to give a renewed sense of promise to proponents of Web 2.0 as a force for democratization. However, a year on, throughout the Arab world the prospects for democracy are still far from certain. Our conclusion, based on an examination of the events in four countries—Egypt, Morocco, Bahrain, and Libya—is that Web 2.0 collaborative tools are without parallel in their ability to mobilize vast numbers of the public. Unknown, however, is whether Web 2.0 can also assist in institutionalizing democracy throughout the Arab world. In this study, the authors adapt the path dependency model of Douglass North and others to explain why, despite the huge popularity of Web 2.0 in the region, the growth of Arab e-democracy will be slow and uncertain. Path dependency suggests that in order for e-democracy to eventually take root and thrive in the region, certain preconditions must be met.

INTRODUCTION

What are some of the necessary preconditions for making the transition to e-democracy, which is generally recognized as one of the chief pillars of e-government along with e-administration and e-service (Heeks, 2001; Dawes, 2002; Jansen, 2005)? In the aftermath of the successful attempt to topple Egypt's regime and the other events of the "Arab Spring," spurred by protesters using social media, there is an air of optimism surrounding the power of social media and Web 2.0 to facilitate political change. In this study, we suggest a path dependency model to explain the transition some countries make to e-democracy and apply this model to countries in the Middle East where social media have played an important role in recent political developments. In the path dependency model, successful transition to e-democracy is dependent on the existence of formal rules (i.e., political and economic institutions) and informal constraints (i.e., political culture and norms governing use of technology) of a polity.

We assert that Information and Communication Technology (ICT) can create opportunities for the development of genuine democracy, but in order for there to be a meaningful impact on actual governance and policymaking, favorable preconditions of formal and informal constraints also have to be met.

There is little doubt that globalization enabled by technology has had a significant impact on cultural values worldwide. The impact of globalization was made possible mainly by advances in technological innovation particularly in the area of global communication (Hill, 2011). One of the regions that has been significantly impacted by technology (in the sense that technology and globalization has brought significant political, social and cultural changes to it) is the Arab world. This revolution has been spurred by expanding broadcast technologies and increasing mobile phone usage to access Web 2.0.

Thomas (1998) contended that growing new broadcast technologies and the worldwide deregulation of the broadcast industry in the 1980s and 1990s have opened the door for globalization. Lueg and Finney (2007) argue that mobile phones are key instruments that bring people together and stimulate interactive communication during the process of consumer socialization and interpersonal communication. In a 2011 report by the Arab Advisors Group, 14 Arab countries mobile have high-speed networks. For example, the report indicates that there were 1.37 million 3G mobile subscriptions in Morocco and nearly 3 million subscriptions in Saudi Arabia at the end of 2010. It is estimated the Middle East has surged to become the second-fastest growing mobile phone market in the world with a penetration rate of more than 50% (Trading Media, 2010). This surge in mobile phone usage has also helped spur the explosive growth in social media as an expected 100 million Arab users will be attracted to social media by 2015 (Ghannam, 2011).

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