Chapter 1

The Road to Egypt’s Tahrir Square: Social Movements in Convergence, Coalitions and Networks

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ABSTRACT

On January 25th 2011, Egyptians revolted, thereby making history. Before the date, roads to political activism were being incrementally built towards their eventual converging on Tahrir Square. This chapter argues that “nodes of convergence,” defined as shared political and economic grievances, as well as shared virtual and physical spaces, had to be created first before mass mobilization for a collective action of millions on the street could ensue. Providing in-depth examination of events leading to January 25th, this chapter offers a case study for mobilization, from which generalized theory is extrapolated about online communities’ convergence, networking, and coalition building. Two main Facebook pages were studied: April 6th Youth Movement and We Are All Khaled Said-- both in Arabic. The conceptualization is built on anthropological fieldwork trips in Egypt since March 2011. This covered ethnographic participant-observations and interviewing. For evidence triangulation purposes of the “convergence effect”, the authors conducted qualitative content analysis of significant posts.

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INTRODUCTION

Six years ago, on January 25th 2011, Egyptians came out on the streets. Youth had called for protests, albeit not knowing for certain what would ensue. In an unprecedented scene, mass demonstrations against poverty, corruption, and political repression broke out and people chanted for “Livelihoo, Freedom, Human Dignity, and Social Justice.” In Tahrir Square, located right in the heart of Cairo, as well as in other squares nationwide, Egyptian men and women from different walks of life, religious convictions and political ideologies came together. They filled the public space under the fixated gaze of international audiences, thereby rendering “Tahrir” a global household name and an icon that stood for what it actually means in Arabic: “Liberation.” As a result, on February 11, 2011, former President Hosni Mubarak was forced to relinquish power. He stepped down due to public pressure that continued for 18 days. Hastily-appointed Vice President Omar Suleiman announced that Mubarak would resign as president, turning power over to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF). This chapter, investigates core questions about what became known as the “January 25 Revolution”— How and why did millions converge on Tahrir Square?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: NODES OF CONVERGENCE

In this chapter, we argue that what we call “Nodes of Convergence”— defined as shared political and economic grievances on the one hand, as well as shared virtual and physical spaces on the other— had to be created first before mass mobilization for a collective action of millions on the street could ensue.

In this conceptualization, the Egyptian Uprising is not seen as a historical event, but rather as a historical process, rooted in a long record of Egyptian activism, and projected into a political and economic future that Egyptians are still currently painting, one brushstroke at a time. However, the reasons why the Uprising has been depicted as an event will also be delineated, given the way social media helped mobilize core segments of the young population, who in turn mobilized others towards the convergence on the specific date of January 25, 2011.

In news reports that came out during the process of the uprising, as well as in subsequent myriad academic studies conducted, the interplay between digital media and acts of mobilization has been recognized as essential. However, the extent of digital media’s impact has also been debated. In this chapter, while we do acknowledge the nature of social media that helped construct the “Nodes of Convergence” we conceptualize, we move beyond reductionist techno-determinist enchantment with a so-called “Facebook” and “Twitter” Revolutions to ascertain the complex and
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