

## Social Media in Egypt

*Adapted from the broadcast audio segment; use the audio player to listen to the story in its entirety.*

Here on the streets of a middle class Cairo neighborhood, Ahmed Nasser a young lawyer is doing something unusual in Egypt – grassroots political organizing. He has a stack of petitions and he is asking passers-by to sign them. The one-page list of demands includes an end to re-elections, term limits on the Presidency and a curb on government power. Ahmed Nasser has 100 petitions with him today. He is part of an online youth movement that set a goal of collecting a million signed petitions across Egypt.

“We won’t stop until we make change in this country and at least the election is not rigged anymore. We are working for our country and for the reform.”

Nasser began working for reform with a Facebook with a page he created called April 6th. On that date in 2008, the group called for a surprisingly successful national strike, organized online, to support a labor action. This year the April 6th movement became the first social media group to move towards traditional politics organizing on the street.

“I don’t want for my generation to be like the one before because the last generation was very bad. I think they are responsible for what we are in now. I am from this generation and I want it to be different. That’s why I am working on this. I think the most things that they did wrong is that they didn’t work. They were all civil servants getting money at the end of the month, getting their salary, not working and not caring about anything and that’s the result.”

Nasser stays on the street until after dark. He hands his last petition to a man out shopping, Mustafa Abbas Khalil. Mustafa agrees to sign with his full name and his Government ID number. He is taking a risk by publicly signing on to challenge government power.

In Egypt, at least 50 million people use the Internet, more than any other Arab country. There are thousands of blogs and Facebook groups mostly about entertainment or sports. A smaller number are political, secular and Islamist. Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood has a prominent presence on the web. These blogs challenge the government says Professor Said Sadek who monitors online activism and the generation behind it.

“They see the future bleak. They don’t know about jobs, marriage, and housing. They see torture. They see corruption. What can they do? The only tool in their hands is their fingertips and the keyboard. They use that as a tool for raising awareness.”

Rami Raouf works with the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, an independent human rights organization with an office in downtown Cairo. Raouf demonstrates what comes across his computer screen each day.

“Tweets, we have millions of tweets growing day by day. It’s always open in front of me, Flickr, Bambuser... The ministers are not stupid. They are very smart people so they know about Twitter and about Facebook. As we are improving ourselves online, they are also doing the same.”

Raouf gleefully explains the latest killer app for activists. Bambuser turns a cell phone into a video camera that can stream live pictures directly on to the web. Bloggers have posted pictures of brutal attacks on protesters including torture. Raouf helped create a website that tracks the police.

One torture case got international attention. Earlier this year a young Egyptian named Khaled Said was beaten to death at a cyber café in Alexandria, allegedly at the hands of the police. Bloggers interviewed witnesses and posted their findings. Pictures of Said’s shattered face appeared on social networking sites. Thousands showed up for his funeral. When Egypt satellite stations picked up the story, broadcasting it to a wider audience, the government charged the local police in Said’s death. It was a tangible victory for Egypt’s bloggers.

Dina Shehata is a senior researcher at The Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies. Shehata says that Egypt’s social media movement is a force for change but as the Khaled Said case demonstrates, it is the Egyptian public that’s been transformed.

“What’s new is that people are pushing back and saying we don’t accept this anymore and this is not the result of the incident that happened to Khaled Said but to the change that happened in the Egyptian

Society. It doesn't mean that we will have change in power anytime soon but it means that there is a new dynamic between the state and society. It's there and it will continue.

Shehata's analysis is challenged by those who say that Egypt's bloggers have not been able to deliver much in the way of lasting change.

Marc Lynch is the Director of the Institute of Middle East Studies at George Washington University. He's followed the movement since the first bloggers went online in 2005 and took the government by surprise.

"The first generation of bloggers and activists have been deeply frustrated. Many of these people thought that there was a chance for change and they found out that they were wrong. Once the police figured out that these guys were a challenge, they started cracking down on them, arresting them and torturing them. I think that had a real chilling effect especially for this younger generation who initially they believed that their international profile would protect them. It came as a very sobering experience to many of them to find out that they weren't protected. There was very little that their friends abroad could do for them."

Wael Abbas is one of Egypt's most famous bloggers. He has been online since 2005 and his site is still widely read. He is part of that first generation of bloggers. At 34, Abbas is one of the oldest bloggers. He says he tried to do good things too but now he is deeply pessimistic about the online movement.

"I know the limits of social media. I cannot tell people that we are capable of making something. Then they expect it from us and we disappoint them. Then they hit the wall and they lose the ability to act in the future."

Abbas has paid a price for his activism. He says it's harder than ever to get the international media to pick up his reports. He's been arrested, harassed by the police and detained at the airport.

"They are getting smarter. They are getting tougher and stronger. The international pressure on them is not as it used to be in the past. Nobody gives a damn about what's going on in Egypt. Mubarak is a friend and he is allowing McDonald's, Hardy's and Pizza Hut so why would we replace him? To hell with Egyptian people! If they want democracy, we don't care."

Egypt is in an era of great uncertainty. Egyptian youth face enormous economic pressure. Many are without jobs or prospects. Crucial elections are ahead. The vote for parliament is in November with Presidential elections next year. Egypt's 82-year-old President, Hosni Mubarak, may not survive another six-year term and there is an internal power struggle to name his successor. The uncertainty has sparked a new government crackdown on the media and Egypt's social media movement may find in the short term they have hit a brick wall.

– Reported by Deborah Amos for *America Abroad*