The Arab Spring, Social Media, and Human Rights

By Tina Xu

WHEN MOHAMMED BOUAZIZI doused himself with gasoline and lit his fatal match, he ignited not only his flesh but the spirit of a revolution that would transform the face of North Africa and the Middle East. His last words—"How do you expect me to make a living?"—resounded with the Arab world in which 40% of people live in poverty and young people make up over half of the unemployed (United Nations Development Programme). Even with a college education, economic desperation and political oppression seemed to be an inescapable reality for the frustrated, demoralized youth. A different Tunisia was, as Bouazizi's mother described it, "a dream we dared not dream" (Abouzeid).

Yet the world watched one government topple after another as crowds gathered to demand a voice in politics. Connected in new ways by social media, broad-based anger metamorphosed into an organized movement that dramatically redefined the relationship between citizen and government.

There is an adage that goes, “The mind is like a parachute. It doesn’t work if it’s not open.” Before taking to the streets to liberate society from dictatorship, revolutionaries found intellectual liberation in the free flow of information online. While state-run media sources gushed government propaganda, social media functioned as a forum for honest political discourse. Growing expression of dissent online enabled people to think critically about politics, a prerequisite to revolution. The strictly censored press only told “one version of history", explains Muhammad Faour, a senior associate at Carnegie Middle East Centre. "When you have different versions of history, you are creating an atmosphere of freedom" (Howard). With the diverse opinions of the online community reflecting every “version of history”, people also began to consider multiple versions of the future—perhaps even one without dictatorship.

Social media also gave common people the means to bring government abuse to light. In the absence of reporters, a new breed of "citizen journalists" armed with cell phone cameras self-published to websites such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and WordPress. Khaled Said, a young Egyptian blogger, revealed police corruption in a video of officers distributing confiscated drugs among themselves. When he was beaten to death by two policemen as a result, the media claimed Khaled choked to death on a packet of drugs (Parker). However, a digital image of Khaled’s bruised and bloody face was shared between thousands of mobile phones and on a 1.8 million member Facebook page made in his honor titled “We are all Khaled Said”. "Suddenly, it's personal," said Egyptian activist Sally El-Bayoumi (Piachaud). Despite the government's efforts to cover up its injustices, the truth found an audience of millions through social media.

By the time large-scale protests had kicked into motion, social media was a key tool for communication. As an activist in Cairo said, "We use Facebook to schedule the protests, Twitter to coordinate and YouTube to tell the world" (Howard). The Tunisian rapper El Général recorded

songs calling for reform and posted them on YouTube, where they were quickly downloaded by thousands. The song "Rais Lebled" came to be known the "anthem of the Jasmine Revolution", sung loudly in squares by protesters: "Mr. President, your people are dying! / People are eating rubbish / Look what is happening!" (Walt). The phrase "tweeting the revolution" became commonplace as demonstrators detailed the minute to minute progress of protests to those elsewhere and abroad. According to a study by University of Washington professor Philip N. Howard, tweets about political change in Egypt rocketed from 2,300 a day to 230,000 on the day Mubarak resigned. Through the internet, revolutionary zeal spread like wildfire from city to city, country to country, continent to continent.

With the aid of social media, young Arabs are finally demanding their rights and fighting to reclaim their countries. However, building a democracy isn't easy—in the chaos of sweeping regime changes, Amnesty International is needed more than ever to document human rights abuses and rally activists around the world to take action to end them. Threatened dictators have attempted to mute the infectious calls for democracy with brutal crackdowns. Police mercilessly shoot protesters, indefinitely detain activists and journalists, torture prisoners, hold unfair military court trials and perpetrate crimes against humanity (Year, Protest). Even many countries that have successfully overturned their rulers face similar situations with interim governments that teeter on the edge of relapsing into tyranny.

As Christine Lagarde, Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund said in a speech, "We are in the middle of a delicate transition between rejecting the past and defining the future, a key inflection point. 'Yesterday is but today's memory, and tomorrow is today's dream,'" (Carrol). In the emerging dream of democracy whose hopeful flame still smolders in the heart of North Africa and the Middle East, social media is the kindling that has turned an angry spark into a conflagration of human dignity.

Works Cited

Abouzeid, Rania. “The Martyr’s Mother: An Interview with Mannoubia Bouazizi.” *TIME Magazine*. 14 Dec. 2011. Web. <http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2101745_2102138_2102239,00.html>

"Amnesty Says Arab Leaders Fail to See Scale of Uprisings." *BBC News*. 9 Jan. 2012. Web. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-16464174>.

Carroll, Dean. "Hope Shines on for the Arab Spring - IMF." *Public Service Europe*. 07 Dec. 2011. Web. <http://www.publicserviceeurope.com/article/1218/hope-shines-on-for-the-arab-spring-imf>.

Howard, Philip N. *Opening Closed Regimes*. Publication. Print.

Howard, Philip N. "The Arab Spring's Cascading Effects." *Miller-McCune - Smart Journalism. Real Solutions.* 23 Feb. 2011. Web. <http://www.miller-mccune.com/politics/the-cascading-effects-of-the-arab-spring-28575/>.

Kirkpatrick, David D. "Tunisia Leader Flees and Prime Minister Claims Power." *Africa, New York Times*. 14 Jan. 2011. Web.

Parker, Ned. "Revolution in the Age of Internet." *The Los Angeles Times*. 11 Feb. 2011. Web. <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/feb/11/world/la-fg-egypt-google-20110212>.

Piachaud, Nicholas. "A Year Since Khaled Said’s Death, Egypt Still Waits for Justice." *Human Rights Now*. Amnesty International USA Blog, 6 June 2011. Web. <http://blog.amnestyusa.org/waronterror/a-year-since-khaled-saids-death-egypt-still-waits-for-justice/>.

"Protest and Repression Set to Continue in 2012 | Amnesty International." *Amnesty International*. 9 Jan. 2012. Web. <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/middle-east-and-north-africa-protest-and-repression-set-continue-2012-2012-01-09>.

Shane, Scott. "Spotlight Again Falls on Web Tools and Change." *New York Times*. 29 Jan. 2011. Web. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/30/weekinreview/30shane.html?_r=2&hp>.

United Nations Development Programme. *Development Challenges for the Arab Region*. UNDP, 20 Dec. 2009. Web. <http://content.undp.org/go/newsroom/2009/december/development-challenges-outlined-in-new-arab-states-report.en>.

Walt, Vivienne. "El Général and the Rap Anthem of the Mideast Revolution." *TIME Magazine*. 15 Feb. 2011. Web. <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2049456,00.html>.

“Year of Rebellion: The State of Human Rights in the Middle East and North Africa”. Amnesty International, 9 Jan 2012.