

What Role Did Youth Play in the 2011 Egyptian Revolution?

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### Introduction:

When Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser rose to power in Egypt during the 1952 overthrow of King Farouk, an informal social contract between the Egyptian people and the new military ruler was born. The citizens of Egypt would cede the political arena to Nasser, the ruling party, and his successors so long as the regime provided material prosperity and security.<sup>1</sup> Under Hosni Mubarak, that social contract was shattered. By 2010 inflation had been steadily increasing more than 10% each year for nearly a decade. Meanwhile, food prices had risen 37% in just two years - all while public sector workers, civil servants, and pensioners saw their incomes remain largely stagnant. At the time of the January 2011 Egyptian Revolution, more than 40% of the population fell below the poverty line.<sup>2</sup> In fact, "At least 90% of the unemployed [were] aged less than 30 years and many more [were] affected by underemployment."<sup>3</sup> In 2008, unemployment among university graduates reached 25%.<sup>4</sup> Along with his failure to provide satisfactory prosperity, Mubarak also failed to maintain a sense of security within Egypt. Emergency Law had been enacted since 1967 (during the Arab-Israeli War, then it was reinstated following Egyptian President Anwar Al-Sadat's assassination in 1981) however, following the deadly terrorist

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<sup>1</sup> Haas, M. L., & Lesch, D. W. (2013). *The Arab Spring: Change and resistance in the Middle East*. (pp. 35-59). Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Handoussa, H. United Nations Development Programme and the Institute of National Planning, Egypt, Human Development Project. (2010). *Egypt Human Development Report 2010*. Retrieved from website: [http://www.undp.org/Portals/0/NHDR\\_2010\\_english.pdf](http://www.undp.org/Portals/0/NHDR_2010_english.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Haas, M. L., & Lesch, D. W. (2013). *The Arab Spring: Change and Resistance in the Middle East*. (pp. 35-59). Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.

attacks of the 1990s, Mubarak gave his internal security forces even greater authority and power. Mubarak's regime responded to these attacks by granting the security services extensive authority, with few legal constraints, to arrest and detain citizens. Once police officers began using these new powers, it did not take long for abuse to set in.<sup>5</sup> Citizens suspected of a crime were routinely beaten at local police stations and those suspected of incitement against the regime were subjected to long imprisonment without trial. Egyptian youth, many educated at the university level, facing unemployment, poverty, and routine beatings by a distant, brutal ruler, began addressing their grievances publicly as early as 2004. However, it was not until the tragic death of Khaled Said, a young man beaten to death for possession of evidence proving the corruption of Mubarak's police forces, that participation in protests increased exponentially. In response to Khaled's brutal murder, young men and women used social media and word of mouth to call for a "Day of Revolt" on January 25th, 2011, Police Appreciation Day, to protest police brutality. Tens of thousands marched towards Tahrir Square to answer the call, and they did not leave. On Thursday, the 27th, cell phone satellites were shut down and access to the Internet was blocked. On Friday, the 28th of January, the "Friday of Anger," protesters officially demanded Mubarak's resignation. In response, Mubarak opened the prisons, dismissed his police forces and deployed the military to break up the protests. For the next 18 days protesters remained in Tahrir Square as well as in various demonstration locations across the country, and endured all sorts of danger and violence; namely, rubber bullets, tear gas, arrest, beatings, and on occasion, the use of live ammunition on part of the armed forces. The chaos continued until the 11th of February, the "Friday of Departure" when Mubarak announced his resignation. Mubarak left control of the country in the hands of the Supreme Council of Egyptian Armed Forces

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<sup>5</sup> Haas, M. L., & Lesch, D. W. (2013). *The Arab Spring: Change and Resistance in the Middle East*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press. pp. 35-59.

(SCAF) headed by Field Marshal Mohammed Hussein Tantawi. A year and a half later, Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mohamed Morsi was elected President on June 24th 2012. Morsi would be sworn into the Office six days later.

For my research I will explore the role of youth in the Egyptian Revolution of 2011. I hope to provide a better understanding of the various actors within the revolution and why the youth in particular were so important in determining not only how the revolution was conducted but also in shaping the outcome of the revolution itself. It is vital to have an understanding of the various participants to truly recognize the importance of the revolution and its effects on women's rights in Egypt, the use of social media, as well as the future of Egypt. I will discuss the role of early protest movements (such as the Labor Party, Kefaya, and the 6th April Movement) in the lead up to the 2011 Egyptian Revolution. I will explore the failures and strengths of these movements and how they influenced the youth movement during the revolution. I will highlight the failure of these movements due to lack of proper organization and leadership and whether the youth movement during the 2011 Egyptian Revolution suffered a similar fate. I will go into detail on the pivotal role of women in particular and their contribution to the revolution. I will also explore the role of social media and technology in the hands of the youth. I aim to discover and analyze the actions of youth during the 2011 Egyptian Revolution and the rise of the youth movement which eventually led to the rise of Mohamed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood. To accomplish this goal most successfully I will be analyzing forty-four mixed method surveys of Egyptians conducted in Alexandria in the Spring of 2013 (see methods). Through the collected quantitative data and qualitative responses I contend that the role of youth during the Egyptian Revolution of 2011 was a movement in and of itself and that it shaped the direction of the revolution.

Review of the Literature:

It is important to discuss the cultural distinction between "youth" as considered by American scholars and as considered by everyday Egyptians. In traditional literature, "youth" is considered a demographic, a set age. However, in Egypt, and in the literature I will be referencing, this is not the case. "Youth," as I will be discussing throughout my research, will not be defined by a number, but rather by any person that considers themselves as active, energetic and enthusiastic members of society. Also, to be a member of the youth, an Egyptian generally has to have lived solely under Mubarak's rule, which lasted for 30 years, or have no recollection of a time when Mubarak was not in power. It is these two criteria which will be used to determine what defines a "youth." This notion contradicts the norm of many current scholars writing on social movement theory such as Giuseppe Caruso, who fails to mention youth as a separate movement (thus diminishing their role to that of a demographic) in his book "Cosmopolitan Futures: Global Activism for a Just World"<sup>6</sup>. Social movement theory is an interdisciplinary study within the social sciences that generally seeks to explain why social mobilization occurs, the forms under which it manifests, as well as potential social, cultural, and political consequences. Throughout my research, the numbers of sources writing on the 2011 Egyptian Revolution have been contradictory in their referencing of youth and youth movements. Some writers such as Joel Beinin, make no mention of the role of the youth at all, merely considering them as a demographic as part of a separate movement, such as workers or laborers<sup>7</sup>. In others, such as in Merlyna Lim's article "Clicks, Cabs, and Coffee Houses: Social Media and Oppositional Movements in Egypt, 2004-2011" the youth's role in various movements is emphasized, however, as in traditional literature, Lim places parameters on the ages

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<sup>6</sup> Caruso, G. *Cosmopolitan futures: Global activism for a just world*

<sup>7</sup> Beinin, J. (2012). Egyptian workers and January 25th: A Social Movement in Historical Context. *Social Research*, 79(2), 323-343.

considered (15-29)<sup>8</sup>. Youth must be recognized for their vital role in the Egyptian Revolution. Their commitment and participation is certainly worthy of mention. I also argue that it is unfair to place a set age group such as 15-29 on the youth. Youth are their own social movement, they are not merely *part* of other broader movements such as labor or women's movements. Who qualifies as a member of the youth movement is also not black and white. By placing parameters on the age of persons, we neglect a great deal of active participants and their role in the revolution. Traditional literature confines youth to a demographic. It analyzes set movements such as the Labor Party and Kefaya, however, I urge that youth, rather than making up some portion of each of these movements, deserve to be a part of their own movement. Those that are active are not necessarily attached to one movement or another. The Labor Party, Kefaya and the 6th April Movement provided many active young people with knowledge of *how* to demonstrate and organize but they were not the only representation of youth. Youth should not be labeled by the particular movement to which they belong(ed) because through the use of social media they were able to organize, form, and take part in their own movement.

Another term worth clarifying is the word, “revolution.” In her article, "France, Russia, China: A Structural Analysis of Social Revolutions," Theda Skocpol defines revolutions as those with a thoroughgoing structural transformation and a massive class upheaval.<sup>9</sup> Skocpol makes the argument that only three successful revolutions have truly taken place throughout history: France (1789), Russia (1917), and China (1911-49). Professor Joshua Stacher of Kent State University also argues that the events of early 2011 in Egypt do not qualify as a revolution. Stacher explains that “...the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) had, in fact, used the

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<sup>8</sup> Lim, M. (2012). Clicks, Cabs, and Coffee Houses: Social Media and Oppositional Movements in Egypt, 2004-2011. *Journal of Communication*, 231-244. doi: 10.1111/j.1460-2466.2012.01628.x

<sup>9</sup> Skocpol, T. (1976). France, Russia, China: A Structural Analysis of Social Revolutions. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 18(2), 175-210.

presidential elections to strengthen their rule of Egypt" and that "What had effectively emerged from the supposed process of 'democratic transition' that had begun back in February 2011 with the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak was a coup rather than a revolution."<sup>10</sup> Despite these arguments, I will be using the term "revolution" to describe the events that have taken place in Egypt since early 2011. The Egyptian people use the word “ثورة” *thow-rah*, or “revolution” to describe these events and they use the term for a reason. They believe they have brought change to their government, that they were successful in at least some sense, and it means something to them to call it a "revolution" instead of a "coup" or a "rebellion" or an "uprising." Even though the system remains largely intact following Mubarak's resignation and the army did gain certain powers in the President's absence, it was the actions of the people that forced the end of Mubarak's 30 year rule and demanded free elections from his corrupted political party. As Paul Sedra writes:

I insist on the language of revolution in large part because Egyptians still use this language of revolution themselves. And frankly, I think it is vital that they continue to use this language—not from an analytical standpoint, but from a political one. I fear that to abandon the language of revolution would be tantamount to abandoning the hopes, the ideals, and the expectations that accompanied the ouster of Mubarak.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, to eliminate confusion, to reflect the views of survey participants, and to be in alignment with the emotion behind the term, I will be using “revolution” to describe the events of 2011 and on, as well.

I aim to present a new way of considering Egyptian youth during the Egyptian Revolution of 2011. They are neither merely a demographic nor limited to membership in only one movement. Youth during the revolution were a part of their own movement. Their role was not confined to action within one group but rather over-lapped across all sorts of group identities

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<sup>10</sup> Sedra, P., Springborg, R., Stacher, J., Sabra, A. & Colla, E. (2012, August 12). Roundtable on the Language of Revolution in Egypt. Jadaliyya, Retrieved from <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/6552/roundtable-on-the-...1>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

(age, gender, class, religion, and movement) in order to best inform and promote their various ideas of change throughout the country. I will also be exploring the theory on how the youth movement's organization and its relationship with other segments of the population shaped the outcome of the revolution. As there is little theory to present regarding this topic, knowledge of the Egyptian Revolution will be expanded for both casual readers and fellow researchers alike.

Data/ Methodology:

In order to explore the role of youth in the Egyptian Revolution I conducted forty-four mixed method surveys. The survey questionnaires, both the English and Arabic versions, can be found in the Appendix. Section A of my surveys consisted of quantitative data concerning the participants, namely their age, gender and education level. Section B included numerous qualitative, open-ended questions regarding the participants' feelings about the Mubarak regime and their self-described role in the revolution. Section C is mixed methods with multiple choice questions as well as open-ended questions about the participants' use of technology.

The surveys were conducted in April-May of 2013 in Alexandria, Egypt. Identical surveys were offered to participants in both Arabic and English. Participants were allowed to choose whichever survey they felt more comfortable with. Nineteen surveys were filled out in English, while the other twenty-five were completed in Arabic. The surveys were printed at the University of Alexandria and a large portion were handed out to teachers to disseminate to students, friends, and family while a smaller portion of surveys were brought to a local fitness center. Although the surveys were intended to accurately reflect the different facets of the Egyptian population, there are biases to be addressed. Firstly, the participants were all from the urban center of Alexandria and therefore can not accurately reflect on the whole of Egypt or, in particular, the sentiments of rural Egyptians. Also, the surveys reflect the views of a highly



educated portion of the population. Greater than 93% of participants reported an education level of tertiary schooling (undergraduate) or higher. A great majority of survey takers were under the age of 35 as well (59%) with no participants over the age of 60. The survey data will thus represent a very particular portion of highly educated, urban, youth. However, this data remains important and highly relevant for my research. These statistics accurately reflect the average participants in the revolution - young, educated, and urban residents. As Campante and Chor argue, it was the increase in education combined with poor labor markets which poised Egypt for revolution.<sup>12</sup> Unemployed, highly educated youth were very active in the Egyptian Revolution 2011. Thus, the bias of the data will enable me to provide a more authentic representation of the youth and of their involvement in the Egyptian Revolution.

#### Preliminary Findings:

Preliminary findings show that a great majority of participants disapproved of Mubarak's regime; however, many were reluctant to take part in protests due to its violence or fear of what might happen if they participated. For those that chose not to participate there are a substantial number of survey-takers that regret their decision and if they could choose to take part in the revolution again they would. The participants' usage of social media is staggering. Nearly every participant thus far has used Facebook to either organize demonstrations, communicate word of upcoming demonstrations, or to stay up-to-date on the events of the revolution. Many participants relied on technology heavily during the revolution and in their daily lives.

I hope to have the rest of the surveys translated shortly in order to better analyze the data.

#### Research Timetable:

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<sup>12</sup> Campante, F. R., & Chor, D. (2012). Why Was the Arab World Poised for Revolution? Schooling, Economic Opportunities, and the Arab Spring. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 26(2), 167-188. doi: 10.1257/jep.26.2.167

Completing the translation of the Arabic surveys is the number one priority for my research project and will be concluded by next Friday, the 21st of September. With the finalizing of the translations I will be done with data collection and can begin my analysis and writing of the final paper. The second step is the development of the literature review. I will have all of my secondary sources read and analyzed by the 1st of October. On the 7th of October I will complete a Literature Report. I will be prepared to present my thesis on the 21st of October and again on the 12th of November, and the 3rd of December. I will submit my preliminary research product on December 6th, 2013.

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## References

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## Appendix

## Example of Survey

**What Was Your Role in The 2011 Egyptian Revolution?**

A Survey by Undergraduate Student Elise Luers  
(All Answers are Anonymous)

**Section A**Age:

< 14       15 - 19       20 - 25       26 - 30       31 - 35       36- 40

41- 45       46 - 50       51 - 55       56 - 60       61 - 65       > 66

Gender: (circle one)      Female      Male

Education: (Please indicate level furthest completed or currently being pursued)

Primary Education     Secondary Education     Tertiary Education (University)     Post-Graduate

**Section B**

Regarding the 2011 Egyptian Revolution (Please write legibly):

Question #1: How did you feel about the government of Hosni Mubarak before the uprising? Why?

Question #2: How did you find out about the events of the Revolution?

Question #3: Do you consider yourself an active participant in the Revolution?    Yes     No

Question #4: If Active, why did you decide to get involved?

Question #5: If Active, please describe how you were involved in the Revolution.

Question #6: If Non-Active, why did you decide to not get involved?

Question #7: If Non-Active, given the chance, would you have changed your role in the uprising? Why or Why not?

## Section C

### Technology and Social Media:

Question #8: Do you use technology (mobile phone, internet, social media, etc) in your daily life?

Yes  No  N/A (no access)

-If yes, which type(s)? Circle all that apply:

Mobile Phone    Email    Facebook    Twitter    Blogs    Other:\_\_\_\_\_

-If yes, for what purpose? Circle all that apply:

Work    School    Keep in contact with friends/ family    Inform others of current events

Organize events    Share feelings on current issues/ topics    Networking    Other:\_\_\_\_\_

-If yes, how often do you use technology? (please be as specific as possible):

Question #9: Did you use a method of technology (mobile phone, internet, social media, etc) to get involved in the uprisings? Yes  No

-If yes, which type(s)? Circle all that apply:

Mobile Phone      Email      Facebook      Twitter      Blogs      Other: \_\_\_\_\_

-If yes, how did you use them to get involved?

Thank you for your help!  
This survey will be used to collect data for a Senior Thesis at the University of Mississippi  
All participants will remain anonymous  
Alexandria, Egypt    April/ May 2013

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## Appendix

## Example of Survey (Cont)

## ما كان دورك في الثورة المصرية ٢٠١١؟

مسح للطلاب الجامعية "إليس لورس"  
(لا أسماء مذكورة)

عمر:

< ١٤ □ ١٥-١٩ □ ٢٠-٢٥ □ ٢٦-٣٠ □ ٣١-٣٥ □ ٣٦-٤٠ □  
٤١-٤٥ □ ٤٦-٥٠ □ ٥١-٥٥ □ ٥٦-٦٠ □ >٦١ □

جنس: (دائرة واحدة) □ أنثى □ ذكر □

تعليم: (يرجى الإشارة إلى أعلى مستوى من التعليم حتى لو يجري متابعته حالياً)

□ التعليم الابتدائي □ التعليم الثانوي □ التعليم العالي □ دراسات عليا

الثورة المصرية (يرجى كتابة مقروء): لعام ٢٠١١ فيما

سؤال ١: كيف تشعر حيال حكومة حسني مبارك قبل الانتفاضة؟ لماذا؟

سؤال ٢: كيف عرفت بأحداث الثورة؟

سؤال ٣: هل تعتبر نفسك مشاركا نشطا في الثورة؟ □ نعم □ لا □

سؤال ٤: إذا بالموقع، لماذا قررت المشاركة؟

سؤال ٥: إذا كنت كذلك، يرجى وصف كيف اشتركت في هذه الثورة؟

سؤال ٦: إذا لم تكن كذلك، لماذا قررت أن لا تتورط؟

سؤال ٧: إذا لم تكن كذلك، إذا أُتيحت لك الفرصة، هل من الممكن أن تغير دورك في الانتفاضة؟ لم أو لم لا؟

### التكنولوجيا وسائل الاعلام الاجتماعية:

سؤال ٨: هل تستخدم التكنولوجيا (موبايل فون البريد، والإنترنت، ووسائل الإعلام الاجتماعية، الخ) في حياتك اليومية؟  نعم  لا  لا توجد إمكانية

- إذا كانت الإجابة بنعم، أي نوع (أنواع)؟ دائرة على كل ما ينطبق:

الهاتف المحمول البريد الإلكتروني الفيسبوك تويتر مدونة أخرى: \_\_\_\_\_

- إذا كانت الإجابة بنعم، ما الغرض؟ الدائرة على كل ما ينطبق:

عمل مدرسة التواصل مع الأصدقاء / الأسرة تنظيم الأحداث الشبكات  
إعلام الآخرين عن الأحداث الجارية المشاعر حول القضايا الراهنة / موضوعات أخرى: \_\_\_\_\_

- إذا كانت الإجابة بنعم، كيف وغالبا ما كنت تستخدم التقنية؟ (يرجى أن تكون محددة قدر الإمكان)

سؤال ٩: هل استخدام أسلوب التكنولوجيا (الهاتف المحمول، والإنترنت، ووسائل الإعلام الاجتماعية، الخ) لتشارك في الانتفاضات؟  نعم  لا



- إذا كانت الإجابة بنعم، أي نوع (أنواع)؟ دائرة على كل ما ينطبق:  
مدونة تويتر الفيسبوك البريد الإلكتروني الهاتف المحمول أخرى: \_\_\_\_\_

- إذا كانت الإجابة بنعم، لم كيف كنت استخدامها على المشاركة؟