SAHAR KHAMIS AND NADA ALWADI

3. CYBERACTIVISM AND ONGOING POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION

The Case of Bahrain

INTRODUCTION

The ongoing political resistance and civic engagement movements that have been sweeping the Arab world since 2011, and came to be widely referred to as the "Arab Spring" or "Arab Awakening," have empowered large segments of the region's populations across different countries. We argue that the assumption that the Gulf region, unlike other Arab spring countries, is going to remain politically stagnant and largely immune from this sweeping tide of socio-political change, due to factors such as economic affluence, oil revenues, small and homogeneous populations, robust security forces, and support from foreign superpowers, is inaccurate and faulty. In fact, Jane Kinninmont, a Senior Research Fellow at Chatham House, notes that "The economic process of telecoms liberalization has facilitated a surge in social media technologies that are having a profound impact on the distribution of information and of power over communications, with a dramatic impact on political, religious and cultural debate. This is a prime example of the ways in which economic and demographic change can lead to social and political changes in the dynamic and rapidly evolving societies of the Gulf" (2013).

The most obvious example for this trend is Bahrain, a small gulf island that has been witnessing a popular movement that has advocated on behalf of political and democratic transformation since February 2011. Taking into account the significant impact that the media, in general, and social media, in particular, have played in titling the balance in favor of democratic transition and popular revolt in the Arab region (Khamis and Vaughn 2011), it becomes especially important to analyze the media landscape in the country, with a special focus on the growing role of social media, and its many implications for influencing the country's political landscape. Therefore, in a country like Bahrain, where transformation is yet to be visible in the political arena but has been prevalent through the content of many social media platforms, it becomes especially important to examine the role that social media may have played in paving the way for political change and determining whether they can be considered instruments for inspiring actual change on the ground, or have simply mirrored this change.

In this chapter, we will provide a deep examination of the political content of social media in Bahrain, with the aim of explaining ongoing political trends while

predicting future ones. We thus provide a transparent picture of the country's political and media landscapes, describing the media landscape in Bahrain before and after the political events of February 2011, while examining how far change in the media mirrors or reflects change in the political landscape. This chapter will also discuss whether political discussions and debates are actually encouraged by social media in Bahrain, and how much of a synergy exists between social and traditional media with regard to political discussion. The final part of this paper will examine the role played by social media in helping Bahraini women to shape and reflect their political leadership.

"CYBERACTIVISM" AND THE "ARAB SPRING"

New media and social media, in particular, played a critical role in triggering the wave of revolt and upheaval that has been sweeping the Arab world since 2011. In their article "Cyberactivism in the Egyptian Revolution," Khamis and Vaughn (2011) argue that the role of new media before, during, and after the Egyptian revolution was especially important in three intertwined ways, namely: enabling cyberactivism, which was a major trigger for street activism; encouraging civic engagement, through aiding the mobilization and organization of protests and other forms of political expression; and promoting a new form of citizen journalism, which provides a platform for ordinary citizens to express themselves and document their own versions of reality.

This is true in many Arab countries, including Bahrain, a small country with a large Internet population. While Bahrain has witnessed a great surge in social media usage that both inspired and paralleled political activism, it has also witnessed governmental efforts to resist and halt this activism, both on the ground and online. There are many cases where the government has shut down Internet websites, blogs and Twitter accounts, and has arrested political opponents who were also social media activists. As a result, Bahrain was added to the Reporters Without Borders list of "Enemies of the Internet in 2012" (Reporters Without Borders 2012b) after a number of journalists, bloggers and social media users were arrested and tortured by the authorities in power. According to this report, the online activists' community in Bahrain is very well organized, but closely watched by the government. The report indicates that,

> Because of Internet filtering, a lot of online content is in theory inaccessible to the general public. The filtering obviously targets 'pornographic' content, but also, and above all, political and religious opinions that are at variance with the regime. Content about the ruling family, the government, and the opposition is strictly regulated, although there are ways to circumvent the filtering. (Reporters Without Borders 2012b)

The effective role that new media played in both the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions, has broad implications for repressive states in the Arab region and, indeed, throughout the world. Given the demographic, economic, and political conditions in the broader Middle East region, uprisings and political movements

are likely to continue to ferment. Howard presciently, given the Egyptian example, noted that nations with significant Muslim populations show "modular political phenomena", i.e., "political action based in significant part on the emulation of successful examples from others," that "successful democratization strategies in particular countries are transported into the collective action strategies of movements in other countries," and that "democratization movements appear to be learning to use information technologies from each other, linking up to share experiences and transporting successful organizational strategies" (2011, pp. 20-21). The true implications of the current wave of political upheaval in the Arab world, and the extent to which it will be influenced by social media, remain to be seen over the course of the coming years. As Jeffrey Ghannam (2011) states in a report to the Center for International Media Assistance, "Social networking has changed expectations of freedom of expression and association to the degree that individual and collective capacities to communicate, mobilize, and gain technical knowledge are expected to lead to even greater voice, political influence, and participation over the next 10 to 20 years."

THE MEDIA LANDSCAPE IN BAHRAIN BEFORE AND AFTER 2011

It is evident that the year 2011 was a major turning point for the media and freedom of expression in Bahrain. In this year Bahrain dropped 29 places in the *Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index* rankings, to be in the 173rd position among 179 countries. The organization blamed the drop on "its relentless crackdown on pro-democracy movements, its trials of human rights defenders and its suppression of all space for freedom" (Reporters Without Borders 2012a). The international advocacy group Freedom House started classifying its press status as "Not Free" as of 2011 and this status has not improved since then. Previously Bahrain used to be classified in the same index as "partly free" before the political crisis in 2011, a status that whose existence was shared in the Gulf region only with Kuwait (Freedom House 2011). Thus, it was not a surprise to witness a large shift in the Bahraini media landscape in recent years, where new and social media have been playing a bigger role than ever, serving as channels that facilitate the exchange information, news and ideas about the political future and the nature of democratic transition within the Gulf Island. New and social media are providing individuals in Bahrain with the space to freely express their views at a time where the traditional media is more controlled than ever.

Given the regulatory environment, most of the media outlets in Bahrain have always been either government-owned or have presented government viewpoints. Local radio and television outlets are government owned and controlled. Radio broadcasting in the country dates back to 1940, while television broadcasting started in 1973. Bahrain television was set up in 1975, as the number of official television channels eventually increased to six, all controlled and funded by the Ministry of Information. In addition, the Bahrain News Agency was inaugurated in 1976 under the name "Al-Khaleej News Agency," also to be administrated by the Ministry of Information (now titled the Information Affairs Authority).

Due to legal constraints, private television and radio stations were generally not allowed in Bahrain. The media in Bahrain is organized only according to regulations within the 2002 Law No. 47 that address the organization of the press, printing and publishing. While this law recognizes the instruments, devices and programs used to transfer words, figures, photos or films, it lacks sufficient articles that clearly enunciate the roles and responsibilities of the radio and television media. For example, the Information Affairs Authority has never allowed any private television channel to transmit programming except for channel Al-Arab, which began broadcasting from Bahrain in 2012. This channel, owned by Saudi businessman, Prince Al-Walid bin Talal Al Saud, technically has been operating under an illegal license, because of a lack of legislation that regulates audio-visual media in the country. The channel was forced to close in early 2015 after one day of broadcasting, upon airing an interview with a Bahraini opposition figure.

While newspapers are generally semi-privately owned in Bahrain, four out of the five main Arabic newspapers in the country are owned or affiliated directly or indirectly with members of the ruling family. Those newspapers, Akhbar al-Khaleej, Al-Ayam, Al-Watan, and Al-Bilad, do not offer oppositional views. The only exception is the daily newspaper Al-Wasat, known to be the only critical voice in the Bahraini press. Print journalism in Bahrain was relatively independent before the severe political crisis in 2011. The economic prosperity and political openness that accompanied the political reform initiative leading up to the Bahrain National Charter in 2001 gave license to starting new newspapers and press freedom enjoyed its golden era. Newspapers started to compete over investigative stories and attract competent journalists. By 2005, the golden age began to fade away, and the Bahraini press started to suffer from local and regional political tension with more restrictions enacted by the government. Bahrain was swept up in the global financial crisis in 2008, and the press also suffered economically. Government advertising became the only source of income for most newspapers after the decline of private advertising, and this shift was reflected in the coverage of these newspapers, which started to become less critical and more biased in favor of the government. This was the case for most newspapers in Bahrain, except for two independent publications: Al-Waqt, which was forced to shut down in 2009, and Al-Wasat, which faced a difficult political situation after being accused by the Information Affairs Authority of fabricating news in its coverage of the 2011 uprising (Bahrain Press Association 2014).

While traditional media in Bahrain were suffering from a lack of independence as well as the economic challenges threatening their survival, new media were on the rise, assisted by the fact that Bahrain has one of the best levels of Internet coverage in the Middle East. With an Internet penetration rate of 77%, most Bahrainis are connected to the Internet, connection speeds are fairly good (ranging from 512k to more than 20M, according to the region) and the number of Internet Service Providers is very high for the size of the population (23 ISPs for 1.25 million inhabitants). Batelco, owned and operated by a member in the ruling family, is the most important of the ISPs.

However, legal constraints were also an obstacle for new media, as news websites needed to obtain licenses from the Information Affairs Authority in order to operate and online censorship has always been commonly practiced by the Authority with online public forums and websites having often been blocked several times after posting any critical political discussions. In an interview for this chapter on May 5, 2014, prominent online activist Ali Abdulemam said that the rise of online media usage as a source of information in Bahrain started fifteen years ago. He argued that freedom that was available online attracted growing numbers of Bahrainis to join online public discussion forums and debates. According to him,

> Since the year 2007, the online space started to have an impact on the ground;
> I personally noticed how people started discussing issues, organizing events,
> and then covering these events online, all while traditional media was absent;
> it was amazing to watch how people learned to write their own stories from
> their point of view, and create their own online media platform to publicize it.

Inspired by the so-called "Arab Spring," Bahrain witnessed major popular protests on Feb 14, 2011 when tens of thousands of Bahrainis joined protests in their capital, Manama, demanding political reform and a democratic transition. The use of social media was essential in organizing this movement and mobilizing people to join it. The discussion about the movement first started on an online popular public forum called "Bahrain Online," where the idea of organizing protests on February 14 was first introduced. As political events escalated during February and March, social media, particularly Twitter and Facebook, became the main source of information for those who wanted to follow the news. The majority of those who were in the lead of this movement in Bahrain were independent youth activists, many of them organized themselves later into different groups and coalitions, such as the February 14 Youth Coalition. Considering the fact that around 25 % of the population in Bahrain is under the age of 25, it was not surprising to see the youth taking a big part in this movement. Meanwhile, state-controlled media, including television and radio, were largely one-sided in their coverage, and most newspapers, except for Alwasat, were also reflecting the state's agenda by portraying the protesters as violent and sectarian.

This uprising was crushed a month later by the Bahraini authorities, and emergency law was declared in the country for three months. Major human rights violations were committed during these months including imprisonment and torture leading to death in some cases, as well as the dismissal of thousands of employees for participating in protests. Members of the media were targeted, imprisoned, tortured and dismissed from their jobs at the Information Affairs Authority or at pro- government newspapers. Al-Wasat founder Abdul –Karim Fakhrawi and blogger Zakariya Al- Ashiri were both arrested and severely tortured, their treatment leading to their eventual deaths. France 24 correspondent Nazeeha Saeed was also arrested and tortured in 2011. After three years in court, the trial against the police officer accused of torturing her was adjourned without resolution, which has raised serious concerns about the spreading of a culture of impunity in Bahrain.

After the worst of the violence in Bahrain, the government appointed an independent body to investigate the factors that led to the protests and ensuing chaos. The Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, which included a reputable team of international human rights experts, released a 513-page report in November 2011 detailing their investigation. The report documented 46 deaths, 559 allegations of torture, and more than 4,000 cases of employees dismissed for participating in protests. The commission summarized the lack of freedom of the press in Bahrain by noting, "… that the media in Bahrain is heavily censored by the government and does not represent the views or outlook of the vast majority of Bahrainis" (Bassiouni 2011, p. 396). Most of the BICI recommendations have not yet been implemented in Bahrain despite the fact that the government has accepted the results of the report and has pledged to implement its recommendations. In fact, the latest government moves in Bahrain appear to increase more restrictions on freedom of speech rather than reduce them. According to the BICI report, Bahrain television broadcasting during the period of the imposition of the Emergency Law, used insulting language and engaged in provocative and defamatory coverage of events. This situation hasn't improve much since then as the government media policy continues to be biased and excludes opinions of the opposition. State-controlled television and radio channels still present political programs that are supportive of the government and its policies.

Furthermore, the influence of the Bahraini press declined dramatically in the years following the 2011 crackdown on the pro-democracy movement, which was followed by an aggressive attack on journalists and the press. The Bahrain Press Association was one of the bodies launched after the crackdown specifically to document and report the situation of journalists in Bahrain, as well as the degree of freedom of expression and media in the country. In its latest report delivered in May 2014, the BPA stated that

> objective news coverage became rare in the local press due to the lack of transparency as well as the one-sided coverage of the political crisis in Bahrain since 2011. Many important issues received insignificant and unbalanced coverage in newspapers, including stories of violations of human rights, corruption, reports of the national audit court and illegal land acquisition by members in the ruling family. Newspapers practiced self-censorship rather than chance appearing to be supportive of the opposition leading the protests. (Bahrain Press Association 2014)

Today, most of the newspaper headlines in Bahrain are the same, due to the fact that newspapers usually depend upon press releases issued by the government as the main source for their stories. This reflects a lack of professional reporting and the absence of critical journalism, as well as the dominant influence of the government over the local press.

THE RISE OF "CYBERACTVISM" AND CITIZEN JOURNALISM IN BAHRAIN

It is evident that the Bahraini government adopted vigorously tried to curb the press and force it to endorse its views. However, it became very difficult to contain the flow of information after the political crackdown and the growth of the February 14 movement, since these events took place in the digital age. The previous role of the press as a supporter of authority was weakened, and new dynamic and popular tools became available to individuals to use for free. New and digital media started to fill the information gap created by the ineffective and biased traditional media in Bahrain, and these new media channels were equipped with the capacity to transmit photos, videos and documented recordings. Thus, the officially declared the era of "citizen journalism" in Bahrain began and has since thrived. Four years after the crackdown in 2011, the number of citizen and photojournalists is on the rise in the country. There have been many cases of imprisonment, torture and the targeting of these individuals, sometimes resulting in their death, as was true of the case of citizen videographer Ahmad Ismael, who died after being shot while he was filming a protest in 2012. However, the harsh treatment of some citizen journalists doesn't seem to be effective in stopping others from spreading news, photos and videos through the social media, Twitter in particular being an effective vehicle for disseminating information.

The July 2012 Arab Social Media Report (Dubai School of Government 2012) found that #bahrain was the most-tweeted hashtag in the Arab world in February and March 2012, mentioned 2.8 million times in English and 1.5 million times in Arabic. In fact the usage of Twitter has been thriving in Bahrain in recent years by both anti and pro-government individuals, not only among the youth demographics but also among political leaders and public figures. This also was the case for the rest of the Gulf countries, which have relatively high-income levels that allow widespread use of smart phones. According to the same report, the penetration of social media usage in Bahrain is among the highest in the Gulf area, with 25.93% of the internet users in Bahrain on Facebook, and 5.33% of the internet users in Bahrain on Twitter. These percentages even exceed the penetration of social media usage in Saudi Arabia, a country which is well-known for the widespread usage of social media, with 19.18% of the internet users on Facebook and 2.89% of the internet users on Twitter (Dubai School of Government 2012). Jane Kinninmont (2013) argues that Twitter has played a major role in allowing like-minded people to network across national borders and may be contributing to the continued formation of a 'Khaleeji' (Gulf) identity. However, she also mentions the "darker side" of Twitter in the region, which is the fact that it started to be used as a source of misinformation, propaganda and hate speech. This resulted in polarizing the society in Bahrain even more, as well as giving space for sectarian language and the incitement to violence. Twitter has also become a new battleground for censorship over political and religious sensitivities. Censorship over Twitter and other social media in Bahrain increased to its maximum level in recent years, and harsh punishments have been directed against those who have been critical in the social media. Indeed, more than thirty-eight Bahraini citizen journalists were

arrested in 2014 for their activism on Twitter, with many of them having been convicted of "slandering the king", receiving prison sentences ranging from one and seven years.

Therefore, using social media for political activism in Bahrain is becoming harder and riskier than ever even though those who consider themselves online activists are still strong believers in its power and effectiveness. As Abdulemam stated in his May 5 interview,

> There was a time when the regime didn't really pay attention to what's written in social media. This time has passed and now they monitor every single word, they even started to believe in the power of social media and are using it. No matter how risky it is, social media helped us in so many ways; it gives voice to the young and empowers them. We struggled a lot dealing with the old dominant powers in our society, in this era we have the space to mobilized people and think outside the box.

Thus Abdulemam believes that the use of social media was essential to the success of the February 14, 2011 movement, and that people will continue to use it to bring change in Bahrain even with the high risks that such usage entails.

THE RISE OF INDEPENDENT AND ALTERNATIVE MEDIA IN BAHRAIN

Attempts to create independent and alternative media in Bahrain arose almost immediately after the crackdown on the pro-democracy movement in 2011. Activists, opposition parties, as well as journalists felt the need to create their own media in order to reach out to the public in Bahrain, in addition to the international community, in order to convey their messages and their news. This was especially important to them since there was a media blackout on the Bahraini story since the crackdown, as well as a complete state control over mainstream media. Several media projects started broadcasting, including a television station, news websites and several online blogs. These media outlets have attempted to provide alternative voices to analyze the situation in Bahrain, beyond the mainstream media's agenda. The following are a few good examples.

Lulu TV is a privately-owned channel that was established in London in 2011. It is widely known that this channel has strong ties with the opposition parties in Bahrain. The channel focuses on the Bahraini political events and news, and it is critical of the Bahraini government. Therefore, the channel doesn't have an official office in Bahrain as the Bahraini authorities have refused to authorize one. Since Lulu television launch, its signal was jammed on the Egyptian Satellite Company, Nilesat, so it chose another satellite to broadcast is programming. However, as it is still difficult to watch the channel inside Bahrain, it created a YouTube channel (https//www.youtube.com/user/loulouatv) to upload its news and programs as videos to reach out to the audience inside, and outside, Bahrain.

The Bahrain Mirror (http://bmirror14feb.2011.no-ip.org/index.html) is another source of alternative media in Bahrain. The Mirror is an online news website that started also in 2011 to create a space for critical voices to be heard. Several

Bahraini journalists manage and write for this website, and it has become one of the main online resources for news on Bahrain. As the website is also very critical to the Bahraini government, it's blocked inside Bahrain. However, activists have been creating ways to make its content available through other technologies. Manama voice (http://manamavoice.com/) is another of the most famous news websites in Bahrain. This website was one of the very few websites that got a license from the Information Authority in 2009. It is run by a prominent Bahraini journalist, and focuses upon reporting local news. The website has had to illuminate its audio and video online coverage due to the restrictions imposed by the Information Affairs Authority, but it has continued publishing news from inside Bahrain.

Many other blogs and Facebook pages have appeared as an alternative media and are being used by activists on the ground to spread news and information about the situation in Bahrain. Both anti- government and pro-government online groups are gaining a lot of attention and followers inside Bahrain. However, as most of these pages and blogs are run by young and inexperienced activists, the quality and credibility of the news varies from one website to another. Examples of these websites are the Feb14 Media Network and the Bahrain Forums, where activists from many villages around Bahrain have created Facebook pages or Twitter accounts to write news and updates from each village, some of which appear to be very well organized efforts.

THE TRANSFORMATIVE POLITICAL AND MEDIA LANDSCAPES IN BAHRAIN

Since the year 2011, there has been a general media blackout on the Bahraini political story, either inside Bahrain or in the Arab media. In its report on the enemies of the Internet for 2012, the Paris based organization Reporters without Borders stated that "Bahrain offers an example of an effective news blackout based on a remarkable array of repressive measures: keeping the international media away, harassing human rights activists, arresting bloggers and netizens (one of whom died in detention), smearing and prosecuting free speech activists, and disrupting communications, especially during the major demonstrations" (Reporters Without Borders 2012c). Thus, the uprising in Bahrain, which at its height engaged more than half the Bahraini population and brought them out to the streets, largely disappeared from the television screens in many Arab countries, as Qatar and Saudi Arabia intervened to help the monarchy crush its opponents. However, the Qatari based channel Al-Jazeera English, unlike Al-Jazeera Arabic, has been trying to include the story of the uprising in Bahrain in its coverage, and its production of the famous documentary "Bahrain: Shouting in the Dark" was the highlight of its coverage of the Bahraini protest movement, describing its root causes and ramifications. Later on, however, Al-Jazeera's correspondent was not able to resume his work in Bahrain, due to restrictions from the Bahraini government. The coverage of other Arab media outlets was predominantly in line with the coverage of the Bahrain state-controlled media, thus confirming an "official" narrative, without providing enough space for the "alternative" narrative

developed by the opposition movement and its supporters. In a report titled "Political Science and the New Arab Public Spheres", Mark Lynch argued that "Bahrain did not only rely on force, or even on the shocking wave of sectarian repression which followed. It also fully invaded the public sphere. Saudi and Qatari television stations (including Al-Jazeera) largely ignored Bahrain in order to remove that struggle from the popular regional narrative, while the Bahraini regime launched a massive public relations campaign designed to tarnish peaceful human rights protestors as radical Iranian proxies. Bahraini regime supporters flooded social media sites to promote the regime narrative and relentlessly hound anyone expressing support for the opposition" (2012).

Based on the above analysis, it's highly unlikely that traditional media in Bahrain actually mirror or reflect the changes and transformation in the political landscape inside this country. As a matter of fact, it's hard to say that any media outlet can truly present a clear picture on the changing dynamics of politics in Bahrain today, even the social media, which is now highly polarized. If there is any sign of synergy between traditional and social media in Bahrain, it is the fact that they are both polarized. The Bahraini state media started using the sectarian card in early 2011 as a technique to defame pro-democracy protesters. And the situation escalated when the peaceful movement in Syria turned into a violent civil war that helped to fuel sectarianism throughout the whole region. The sectarian Sunni-Shi'a dynamic is currently represented on a big scale in social media with inflammatory hate speech and divisive sectarian language being exchanged by users on both sides in unprecedented ways. The question that is raised in this context, is whether this is a representation and a reflection of the current polarization in Bahraini society or whether social media is in fact provoking polarization and contributing to its escalation.

Online Bahraini activist Asma Darwish, in an interview with one of the authors on May 13, 2014, attributes polarization in the social media to two factors. First, the length of the political crisis in Bahrain has been exceptional, as it has gone on for a long time with no prospect for a successful resolution in the near future. Second, there have been organized "official" efforts through use of the social media to fuel and feed this polarization. Darwish's claims are based on her observation of the political discussions on twitter, as she argues that "most hate and polarized speech looks engendered and doesn't reflect what people really think in Bahrain."

The Constraints on Social Media in Bahrain

The issue of the censorship of cyberactivists in Bahrain, whether they are journalists, bloggers or photographers, has become a pressing one addressed by many organizations focusing on human rights and freedom of opinion and expression around the world. The many arrests of journalists, human rights activists and politicians resulting from Internet censorship have added to the urgency of the issue, and created an unhealthy environment for political debate on social media in Bahrain. Reporters Without Borders classified Bahrain as one the

five most important enemy countries of the Internet for 2012 for its imposition of restrictions on the Internet, its monitoring of published contents and its imprisonment of bloggers (Reporters Without Borders 2012b). The organization added Bahrain to its list after the death of the Bahraini blogger Zakariya al-Ashiri while in government custody in 2011. It also suggested that the Bahraini authorities have arrested many Internet users and opened a campaign to defame those who protest for freedom of expression and communications.

Bahrain Watch, a volunteer initiative led by group of cyber-activists and specialists, is the first group to document the use of British spyware by the Bahraini government to spy on activists in a report published in 2012. According to their report, there were several methods used by the Bahraini government to censor activists. These included sending online messages containing spyware that automatically uploaded to the recipient's device and hacking Facebook and Twitter IP addresses in order to determine the identities of users and arrest them. In addition, the government demanded the passwords to the online accounts of arrested cyberactivists to access their personal contacts and investigate their associates. The report documented the cases of five people who were arrested on the charge of insulting the king on Twitter. Some of them confirmed having been targeted and pursued through IP spy links. The report documented more than 120 pro- and anti-regime accounts that were targeted in the years 2011 and 2012 with IP spy links using public mentions through vehicles such as Tweets that are visible to the public to target accounts (Bahrain Watch 2012).

SOCIAL MEDIA AS A GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY FOR BAHRAINI WOMEN ACTIVISTS

The wave of uprisings which swept the Arab world in 2011 did not just instigate a "political awakening" that has shaken the power structures in a number of Arab countries and resulted in dictators fleeing their countries, resigning from office, or facing brutal death. Rather, it also instigated a "social awakening" that has shaken Arab societies' commonly held assumptions about gender roles and women's ability to challenge them. This was evident in the many heroic examples and iconic images of Arab women's activism and resistance, in both the political and social spheres. This stunned the world, earning respect and recognition for these activists, as evident in the selection of Tawakul Karman, as the first Arab Nobel Prize winner ever, in what has been seen by many as a node to the "Arab Spring" movements, in general, and to Arab women's roles in them, in particular (Khamis 2011, p. 693; Radsch and Khamis 2013, pp. 881-890).

Since the uprising in February 2011, Bahraini women activists emerged as new leaders in their society, thanks to the increasing role of social media and their effective utilization of this platform to spread their opinions and exercise their social and political activism. Their ideas, voices and activities have been receiving stronger support from within their often conservative communities. It is now more accepted by the public that democratic transition cannot be achieved without the participation of women. However, women's activism in Bahrain is not new. The

women's movement in Bahrain dates back to the 1950s when young educated Bahraini women started their activist work that revolved not only around empowering women in the society, but also in engaging in political struggle. New generations of women activists rose in Bahrain during the political unrest era in the 1990s (Khalaf 2013).

However, through their use of social media, women activists gained a new opportunity to be presented as "leaders" in their own community after the political unrest started in 2011. Women activists were very active in using social media as well as being involved on the ground, and their role continues to be essential to the political struggle in Bahrain (Alwadi, 2014). Indeed, the participation of women in both the opposition and in the pro-government movements has been an important feature of the political conflict in the country, indicative of a growing sectarian split within the society. Female supporters of the government have gained a voice to express their concerns as part of the national dialogue but it is still a matter of time before one can assess whether their voice will be heard and their recommendations will be implemented. Female opposition members, on the other hand, are active in on-going protests and concentrate on pushing for political reforms while keeping gender related demands absent from their agenda. Despite some improvements though, Bahraini women still face challenges in their efforts to facilitate female empowerment. So far, it is clear that the way forward lies in the hands of the Bahraini authorities who play the paramount role in encouraging female empowerment. As a result, they are able to promote a pro-female image abroad, which sets them apart from their opposition.

Women who have supported the opposition movement come predominantly from the Shi'a sect or are secular. From the start, they participated widely alongside men and as the government crackdown became a reality, they bore the consequences of their actions as did their fellow men activists. Although the facts are in dispute, the opposition claims that so far fourteen female protesters died in the crackdown, mostly from tear gas suffocation. Furthermore, women were detained and incarcerated. Among the imprisoned female protesters, the case of Ayat al Qurmezi, the young female poet who dared to publicly read a poem which harshly criticized the ruling family in Bahrain, made headlines throughout the world. She was incarcerated and released after a forced apology aired on Bahraini television. Another iconic female figure is the daughter of the activist Abdulhadi Al Khawaja, Zainab Al Khawaja, who has been campaigning for the release of her father and other activists from jail and has faced prosecution in the Bahraini courts. According to Magdalena Karolak (2013), women activists who supported the pro-government movement participated in numerous sit-ins and rallies as well as displaying demonstrations of loyalty organized throughout the country. They had no specific demands with regard to the targeting of at female empowerment, but strongly feared an "Iran/Shi'a takeover" of Bahrain. They thus saw their interests as similar to the aims of the pro-government movement, which were centered on the preservation of the monarchy and the Sunni identity of the country.

Since 2011, the portrayal of women in Bahrain has dramatically shifted. Women are now being portrayed as proactive leaders, vocal, and brave, a portrayal which is

somehow new to the small island. When Jalila Alsalman, a Bahraini teacher and mother, was released after spending months in prison for her activism, people treated her like a heroine. Thousands of Bahrainis gathered in front of the prison to receive her and cheer her and her family. Huge banners showing her picture were hung on the houses in her conservative village for months to express the pride in her role in the prodemocracy movement. Ironically, many people in such traditional Bahraini villages who were hesitant to vote for women in the election are now treating one of their own women as a heroine and a leader.

The impact of women's activism in support of the uprising in Bahrain was very alarming to the authorities, which is why they were punished in equal measure to their fellow men activists. Bahrain is still the only country in the Gulf region that allowed women to be jailed and tortured for their political activities, and witnessed several cases of women having been killed by police forces. But the crackdown on women activists created a lot of admiration on the part of the general public. People from very conservative villages started chanting on behalf of women activists and they started viewing them differently, following them on Twitter and listening to them speak in the media, or on the stage when they organized public protests. Suddenly the image of the Bahraini woman as a political leader became popular and acceptable, as Bahraini women became active both online and on the ground.

Online activist Asma Darwish, in her May 13, 2014 interview, recalls her experience in the year 2011 as an example of how social media could be used to glorify the role of women activists. She says, "I still remember when I participated with few other women in a strike campaign at the UN building in Bahrain during the status of Emergency law 2011. Social media, Twitter in particular, picked up the story and it went viral in few hours. International media were calling us and reporting our story. I will never forget this moment as I felt the whole world was watching what those Bahraini women are doing, it was very empowering."

If there is something that the "Arab Spring" has achieved in Bahrain so far, it involves giving women an outlet to prove themselves as real and equal political players for the general public to see. Previously, this outlet was only available to those who were privileged by the state but not to average women. However, one result of the uprising was to give ordinary Bahraini women a golden opportunity to emerge in the public sphere as iconic role models and public opinion leaders, capturing the public's attention and earning its admiration and respect. By doing so, they have proven their political importance to their own communities as leaders, while, most importantly, demonstrating the fact that political transition can be achieved without the full participation of women.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The rise in the use of social media in Bahrain was related to the popularity of these new technologies, but was also largely triggered by the political crisis in Bahrain and a lack of freedom of expression in the public sphere that was controlled by traditional, state-controlled, mainstream media. Bahrainis used to deploy social

media only for the purposes of improving social communication and networking. However, social media in Bahrain now offers an open space for Bahrainis to express their oppositional views and alternative political opinions while sharing information and exchanging knowledge related to the ongoing political struggle in their country.

As the use of social media in Bahrain increased dramatically over the past few years due to the political situation in the country, the government itself began to realize the significance of the role played by social media, and began to catch up, participating in a new wave of online activism. For example, there have been an increasing number of Twitter and Facebook accounts affiliated with the Bahraini government in recent years. In fact, it is safe to say that social media became one of the major sources of information for Bahrainis today, to a level whereby it successfully competes with, if not exceeds, a reliance on traditional media, including television and newspapers. The political crisis in Bahrain resulted in the emergence of many new online media outlets, as well as new initiatives, including the growth of citizen journalism. These efforts are seen within a context where there is a need to fill the knowledge gap created by the total government control over traditional media outlets.

However, the online sphere is not always a safe place for Bahraini bloggers, citizen journalists and activists. It is reported that the Bahraini government is currently using advanced technologies for surveillance, including new spyware, which in many cases results in the tracking and jailing of online activists. Furthermore, using social media as a main source of information represents another major challenge, as stated by prominent Bahraini journalist Hana Buhiji. She noted in a May 23, 2014 with one of the authors of this chapter that "social media needs to be accompanied with public awareness to make sure that people are able to filter out the fabricated and wrong information, especially those news and information which directly affect the local political situation."

Buhiji's observation arises from the fact that the discussions and debates in social media in the Gulf region have become extremely polarized, as interest based groups have also been using social media to disseminate false news and information to influence the political situation in their favor, contributing to the sectarian nature of the political narrative. However, there are some doubts that the polarization and hate speech prevalent in social media actually represents the reality on the ground. To be sure, the polarized and highly risky political environment within the country make social media a very challenging tool for Bahraini activists to use. Nonetheless, pro-democracy activists, as well as bloggers, journalists, women and youth, continue to rely heavily upon the social media to voice their opinions and vent their grievances. Therefore, it is safe to conclude that as the struggle for democracy, freedom and justice in Bahrain is likely to continue for years, the multiple roles that are being played by the social media in this struggle will continue to have an impact upon the social and political transformation the country is experiencing.

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