



Internet: A weapon of mass revolution?

April 2009

Investigation : Clothilde Le Coz
Reporters sans frontières - Internet Freedom Desk
47, rue Vivienne - 75002 Paris
Tel : (33) 1 44 83 84 84 - Fax : (33) 1 45 23 11 51
E-mail : internet@rsf.org
Web : www.rsf.org

The Internet has been a background clamour in Egyptian political life since the 2005 legislative elections. It's a buzz that is attracting more and more Egyptians. The reputation of the local blogosphere is growing at the same speed as the numbers of its enthusiastic users. Today the country has the highest Internet penetration rate on the African continent (20% of the population regularly goes online).

In 2006, the blogger Kareem Amer was imprisoned over articles he posted on his blog. The vast majority of the country's prisoners of opinion are bloggers or activists imprisoned for posting political messages. All were arrested under the emergency law. According to the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI), the level of repression against Internet users has grown dangerously since 2007.



Photo of Kareem Amer, sent to his lawyers in December 2008

Most of Cairo's bloggers are angry about the case of Kareem Amer, jailed for posting articles deemed "insulting to Islam" and "insulting the president: "I have to say that I do not agree with him but I am disgusted by what has happened to him. Nobody should be imprisoned for their opinions", said one Internet user. And in Egypt, since 1955, a citizen accused of "publication of false information" is presumed guilty unless he can prove his innocence.

The fact that young Egyptians are turning to the Internet in ever greater numbers has led to the authorities' stepping up their surveillance of this group. Security agents now through the stock exchange district of the capital (El Borsa area) listening in to bloggers talking about "revolution", "change", "anger", and the date of 6 April 2009.

THE 6 APRIL: A CRISIS THAT STARTED ON FACEBOOK?

A strike broke out on 6 April 2008 in Mahalla (123 kilometers north of Cairo), site of the country's largest textile factory. The same day, members of a group on the social networking site Facebook were arrested for having passed on information about the strike.



Workers in Mahalla held for going on strike (May 2008)

Egypt experienced two different 6 Aprils 2008. One involved a strike called by workers at Egypt's biggest textile factory in Mahalla (north of Cairo). Workers stayed at home to protest against their working conditions. Later, Cairo bloggers spread the strikers' message and formed themselves into the "6 April group" on Facebook. As a result "6 April" came to stand for a movement gathering supporters of all political leanings.

Short history of a contested viral strike

Since that date, young Internet users with an average age of 23 have continued to communicate with one another about what they are calling a "revolution". A call went out in 2009 for 6 April to become a day of "anger". Every means of communication has since been pressed into service to spread the message far and wide, including slogans scrawled on bank notes and thousands of text messages sent to random phone numbers. The young Facebook users have no political experience and their real numbers are unknown. But that is their strength. Since any type of meeting is banned under the state of emergency law which the country has been under for nearly 28 years, the Internet allows meetings to be held through a computer.



Three "6 April" activists

Social networking sites can be used as a means of getting out protest messages and the Internet represents an invaluable space for the new Egyptian generation since it is gradually replacing the unions and political campaigning in the universities. "The government is like an octopus reaching out its tentacles to try to find a guilty party every time it is criticised. The Internet helps us to make our protest better known. It doesn't matter that there wasn't any demonstration in one city. Thanks to this means of communication, it can take place in another", one "6 April" blogger told Reporters Without Borders.

But "6 April" is also a media affair, a 'sexy story'. These young bloggers who come from nowhere, whose numbers are not known, are shaking things up in Egypt. Certainly, in a year, "nothing has really changed", say Cairo residents. But the Internet has allowed the message to get out.

However revolutionary it may be, this movement is nevertheless contested. Some criticise its supporters for exploiting the demands of the Mahalla workers to get themselves known. The media triumph of the best known may have damaged the credibility of online media protest. Others claim that the movement is going nowhere and that the early enthusiasm has disappeared.

Agence France-Presse correspondent in Cairo, Mona Salem described the 6 April movement as a "rare" moment in contemporary Egyptian history. Having covered the story for the agency, she believes the interest of the movement "does not lie in its results, because nothing has changed. It simply shows that young people without any particular political affiliation care about what is going on in their society". This nationalist upsurge has puzzled the government, which has been caught off its guard.

If you can't control the Internet, intimidate its users

"We have an independent press but it doesn't break any rules. We post photos and film on our blogs to break those rules. It is a bit like letting the genie out of the lamp, which can never go back into it", said Wael Abbas, one of Egypt's most emblematic bloggers. It was he who exposed one of the biggest scandals of the decade, by posting videos on his blog in January 2007, showing two police officers carrying out acts of torture in a Cairo police station, almost certainly leading to their conviction and being sent to prison, something which has not happened in the country for more than 20 years. Many young people started blogging because they were inspired by his example.

During the 6 April 2008 strike, a Mahalla blogger and worker, Kareem El-Beheiri, was arrested for covering this event on his blog. "It is now seven in the morning, on 6 April, and I am going to Mahalla to cover the factory strike. Pray for me and I hope that everyone will manage to show what is wrong with the Egyptian regime", he said, signing himself, "Kareem El-Beheiri, from a free country: that of the Egyptian revolutionaries", in a message posted on his blog before he got himself arrested. *Egyptian Workers* was one of the first blogs to relay information about the strike being organised in Mahalla. Kareem El-Beheiri spent 73 days in custody even though a prosecutor ordered his release ten days after his arrest. When he came out he was sacked by his employers for "absenteeism", even though they had been notified about his imprisonment. The authorities accused him of having incited the strike on his blog. The "6 April" phenomenon on Facebook shed light on the experience of Egyptians who are living in a police state.

Arbitrary arrests of bloggers are becoming commonplace. Gamal Eid, director of the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information said, "More bloggers are being arrested in this way than journalists under the state of emergency law. It allows citizens to be arrested without explanation and for them to be held in prison often for several years without any justification".

“We also note a tendency to silence challenging voices by kidnapping them to intimidate them”, he said. One of the country’s most read bloggers, Mohammed Adel, was abducted in this way by the authorities on 20 November 2008, in one of the neighbourhoods very popular with opposition acti-



Freedom Street: a security forces wagon taking away a prisoner

vists. “I was on my way to an interview with a French researcher when I was arrested”, he told Reporters Without Borders. “They questioned me about my blogging and the authorities also wanted to know what I did when I went to Gaza. They told me that I was the leader of a new training “cell” for the al-Aqsa forces and for Hamas, even though I only stayed there barely 48 hours.” Mohammed Adel spent four months in the hands of the police and was subjected to brutal interrogation (see his account on the Reporters Without Borders website). He still does not know where he was held. Four bloggers and Internet activists went through the same experience in 2009. However the bloggers who frequent the stock exchange district, where they now meet, have only one watchword: openness. “We know our mobile phones are tapped. But we have nothing to hide”, they say.

Since the development of the Internet trend, the screw has been tightening around telecommunications. Since 2008, Egyptians have been unable to get an unregistered telephone line but the control is not total. New rules are now in force under which users of WiFi now have to pay for a connection, for which they need to provide an email address to have the password and user name sent.

Moreover, a draft law is under debate in Parliament about Net regulation, providing for prison sentences for “abusive Internet

use” and for “publication of multi-media content without government permission”.

But the bloggers have continued their work. Blogger Mohammed Adel, who was held for four months for posting articles online and taking up a political position on the Israel-Palestinian question, has not given up. To date, he still does not know where he was held. It was his fourth arrest in two years, but he continues the fight.



Mohammed Adel on his release from prison (February 2009)

The most active bloggers are known. Iman Farag, researcher at the Centre for Social, Judicial and Economic Documentation and Study (CEDEJ) said, “While blogging in

France means hiding yourself among others, in Egypt it means forming groups and transforming the desire to express yourself online into a concrete phenomenon”.

A new charge levelled against journalists and bloggers as a result of major Internet use concerns “political accountability”. Gamal Eid described it as “Sword of Damocles” that hangs over those who are openly critical. Because of a weakpoint in the legal criminal procedure, a citizen can sue a relative hold responsible for “undermining the image” of the country or the ruling party. Journalists are accustomed to dealing with this, since they are the first in line as victims of such proceedings. The correctional court in El-Agouza sentenced four editors to a year of prison on 13 September 2007 for “publication of false news likely to disrupt the reputation of the country and the great public order” and “libel and defamation of the symbols of the ruling party” following a complaint made in 2006 by a member of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP). The verdict has been given on 31st January. An appeal Court dropped the jail sentence but confirmed a huge monetary fine for each of them.

Egypt Internet: A weapon of mass revolution?

***Al-Dustour*, an independent daily at loggerheads with a judge dependant on the government**

© RWB



Al Dustour

Independent daily *al-Dustour* has since 2005 had to defend itself 2050 times before the courts in connection with its articles. Most cases involve criminal accusations and call for the imprisonment of the writers. A total of 85% of them ended in victory for the newspaper and about 10% were kicked out for irregularities.

The weekly has faced cases over the publication of seven reports on police brutality. In these seven cases the interior ministry ordered the officers concerned to contest the accusations against them, under threat of being subjected to a direct internal investigation headed by the ministry for the same charges. In fact, charges are frequently brought against journalists because the officers are determined to protect themselves from their superiors.

Al-Dustour carried an editorial in its 476th edition headlined, “Egypt blocks access to Gaza. It is a partner in the Palestinian genocide”.

The editor, Ibrahim Issa, was charged with “damaging the image of the country” and “provocation of the Egyptian and Palestinian people”. His lawyer said “opposition newspapers do not come under pressure in the same way. Only the independent press is targeted in this way because they are the only ones to take up a stance against the government”.

PLEASE DO NOT ATTACK THE IMAGE OF THE COUNTRY



© RWB

Newsstand (Tahrir Square)

Judicial hounding of the press and internet users is indicative of a determination to protect the country’s image. Thirty-one legal cases were launched in January 2009, against bloggers and journalists at the average rate of one a day. In February 2009, the Arabic Network for Human Rights recorded 26 cases. Director Gamal Eid said 2008 had been the worst year for freedom of expression since 1952, the year of the declaration of the Egyptian Republic. “If you are a well known journalist you are likely to pay a fine. If you are not so well known, you are likely to go to prison”.

The press is subjected to 32 articles of the press law, pinioned between the criminal code, the press law, the law on publications, the law of documentary circulation (banning journalists from obtaining some official information), the civil employees system law, political parties and so on. Moreover, under the legislative system, the authorities can choose judges to try these cases.

Further, to start a newspaper in Egypt, permission must be sought from the government-controlled Supreme Press Council, from various security services and the council of ministers. Despite these constraints the opposition press is holding its own in Egypt. Since 1977, law n°40 (political parties law) allows each political party to found its own newspaper. However, if it turns out that the articles it carries come close to “threats to national security”, the party and the newspaper can be closed down. Most newspapers do not have their own printers. The government has managed to secure a monopoly in this field and owns 99% of news agents, allowing it to block distribution at any time. The authorities even go so far as to pay distributors to take back publications from newsstands before they can fall into the hands of their first reader.

Police officer punished for posting a handbook of the rights of Egyptian citizens

Following the 6 April 2008 demonstration, a former police officer, Omar Afifi, published a book considered as a guide to the rights of Egyptian citizens in relation to police brutality, entitled "To avoid humiliation". It was made available in the Madbouly Mini-Bookstore before copies were seized and withdrawn from sale.

For Omar Afifi, "The Internet is a powerful weapon. The regime has discovered its influence and is trying to control it by frightening the young people who have launched a movement for change in Egypt. But they will never succeed in controlling it completely."

Download "The handbook for avoiding humiliation" on the Reporters Without Borders' website.

A country for sale?

Egypt's international image is one of the government's major preoccupations. News must be made to serve its political interests and its external image. In a report "Israel/Gaza: control of information as military objective" released in February 2009, Reporters Without Borders has already drawn attention to the role played by Egypt in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, by closing the Rafah crossing between the two territories. President Hosni Mubarak, who declared that " Hamas must be defeated", limited use of the crossing to humanitarian aid and prevented journalists from entering the Gaza Strip, leaving the Palestinian media as the sole witness to events.

In another example of the Egyptian government's determination to control the media, an Egyptian journalist working for the Arabic service of *al Jazeera* was arrested as she went to cover the 6 April demonstration. The TV channel's English service was however able to broadcast footage. Since then, the authorities have prevented journalists from the Qatar-based television from working in the country by withdrawing their accreditation.

Another freelance journalist and activist, Philip Rizk, was arrested on 6 February 2009 and was quickly released from prison only because of an international outcry. "I wasn't given the same treatment as the others. I heard screams under torture but I was only threatened," he said. "While they were interrogating me, the police officers asked me questions about my 'international connec-

tions'. It is only now that I realise they were referring to the campaign within Egypt and elsewhere calling for my release. I was freed within four days. The authorities accused me of being an Israeli spy, which is not surprising given my profile", said Rizk. An intervention by the German embassy and messages sent online helped publicise my case. It was in their interest to release me quickly. They knew that I was going to talk after I was freed. That is perhaps also why I was so well treated".



Philip Rizk (March 2009)

The "6 April" movement is much more than a simple Facebook story. It is pushing at the limits of dissidence. "In Egypt, dissidence is being homosexual or undermining established moral order", says Iman Farag. "It has nothing to do with young people being concerned about the future of their country, who learn about politics from books. Perhaps that is their "revolution".

Compared to countries seen as repressive like China, Vietnam or, closer, Tunisia, Libya and Saudi Arabia, the Egyptian regime does not see these young people as dissidents. Activists who use this network do not hide themselves and their means of communication rely on completely open viral techniques. But this story is an example of a challenge thrown down to the authorities: "If you are there, show yourself. If you think that we live