

# **THE MIDDLE EAST ARC OF CRISIS** Political Spin-off and Developmental Outcome

Edited by

**MANSOUREH EBRAHIMI  
KAMARUZAMAN YUSOFF**

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MANSOUREH EBRAHIMI  
KAMARUZAMAN YUSOFF

*Sia Ebrahim*



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# CHAPTER 8

## From Tweet to Street: Social Media during the Arab Spring

*Mukhamad Shokkeh and Mansoureh Ebrahimi*

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### 8.1 INTRODUCTION

'Arab Spring' refers to a number of uprisings that signalled the eventual fall of regional dictatorships in Arabic speaking countries. These historical events began in Tunisia in December 2010 and swiftly sparked multiple rebellions; repeated in many, not all, Arab states. A general understanding accounts on these disturbances as being popularized by political slogans. Indeed, many Arab communities were informed via social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter; hence, the title of this chapter. These media platforms assisted in the dissemination of discontent, allowing displeased Arab masses to raise their voices and take to the streets where they publicly rebelled against dictators of the day.

Our purpose is to report and analyse the extent of social media influences as novel public platforms that kindled and prompted social changes in the Middle East and North Africa.

After more than six years, Arab Spring outcomes are still felt, particularly in Syria where attempts are still underway to overthrow and replace Asad's regime (a predominantly Baathist party), previously led by his father, Hafez Asad.

## **8.2 SOCIAL MEDIA AND SOCIAL CHANGE: THE MIDDLE EAST EXPERIENCE**

Arab Spring began in the streets of Tunisia's capital city, Tunis, and swiftly travelled to other parts of the country as well as to neighbouring states such as Egypt. As events unfolded, the first to fall was Tunisia's Zein al Abidin Ben Ali (Ben Ali), who had been in power for more than two decades. By the time he was forced out of office, Egypt's thirty-year autocrat, Hosni Mubarak was also ousted, and not long thereafter, Libya's erstwhile forty-year dictator, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, was savagely murdered. As these regimes were replaced with newly elected governments, the world saw similar developments in Yemen and Bahrain, even as Syria's Asad held onto power inherited from his father.

Political observers have since suggested that Arab Spring events not only triggered protests and rebellion but also set the stage for the growth of democracy throughout Arabic speaking nations (Burdah, 2016). Since each authoritarian leader of these nation states had silenced the press and restricted freedom of speech, in view of limited political freedom, Arab masses turned to social media throughout the Arab Spring period to critically question their governments. Thus, they employed social media platforms as a catalyst for political change. Throughout the respective tenures of fallen autocrats, most of their societies had experienced high levels of unemployment and rampant poverty. In Egypt, poverty levels were extremely high, approaching fifty per cent of eighty-one million Egyptians. *Kompas* (28/01/2011) reported that prices in Egypt soared while purchasing power rapidly declined. Hence, when the people justly vented their attitudes and resentment towards their dictators, they took to the



streets in large numbers to demonstrate their dissatisfaction and discontent. The eventual fall of these regimes can therefore and largely be attributed to social media; particularly Twitter, used to share messages that brought a clear domino effect throughout the Arab world.

Technologically savvy Arab youth spared no time in using the platform. From their perspective, social media was a welcomed vehicle employed to voice suppressed feelings and strengthen the opposition against autocratic regimes. Using various platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Skype, along with the strategic applications and contextual tones, Arab youth made their position publicly known. Their goal was to organize, communicate and raise awareness of internal social atrocities committed by their governments as well as the latter's censorship of the internet. They actively campaigned for civil disobedience, which involved, among others, attacks, demonstrations and marches. They also staged rallies to secure mailing lists of anti-government protesters. Many disgruntled demonstrators at these events shouted the slogan, "*ash-Sha'b yurid isqat an-nizam*", meaning, "*the people want to overthrow the regime*" (ABM, 2013: 13).

From the beginning, Arab Spring youth created a bottomless social network that not only influenced respective social milieus but also regional political lives. Their media networking actually swayed political elections in favour of the masses and impacted social outcomes. Worded differently, they affected previously unimaginable social change. Looking back at January 2011, one saw Facebook and Twitter playing critical roles in unrest and uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria, Algeria and Bahrain. In contrast to previous socio-political changes, the wave of revolutions that swept these nations was indeed different. Earlier rebellions were restricted to one country with little or no effect on neighbouring states. In the Arab Spring however, social media made an astounding difference that mobilised masses across the entire Arab region. This may be attributed to the manner in which information creatively spread over these new platforms.

Anyone studying Arab Spring events will know that scholars advanced theories of social movements that ignite social change. Some papers categorized these movements as spontaneous but unorganized collective actions that pushed for tangible changes. McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001) described these social movements as unincorporated groups of variously under-represented discontented members of the community who demanded immediate change; adding that they interacted to oppose and topple the elite. McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001: 7) and Smelser (1962: 2) held that these groups were organized in such a way that they mobilised to make social improvements as collectives to change norms and values.

It is generally thought that an emergent social movement, with all its variants, cannot be dislodged from the concept of social change. The reason being that such movements arise during a state of rapid social change accompanied by tension and crisis. These, in turn, lead to a disorganization of social values, morals, cultural norms, etc. (Sanderson, 1991). Nonetheless, social movements include organized groups that do not strictly operate within a framework of socially oriented goals that aim to change structure or social values. Regarding the theory of social change, two important concepts come to mind; one is 'social static' with respect to structure; the second is a 'social process' with respect to 'structural dynamics' (Sanderson, 1991; Burke, 2005).

### **8.3 MIDDLE EASTERNERS MARCHING TOWARDS DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION**

Taking into account social processes related to structural dynamics, one may argue that the Arab Spring demand for a democratic environment was foremost on the agenda as protesters tweeted and took to the streets. Hence, their request for change had an agenda of democratic transition. When considering transition, one must theoretically distinguish two phases: the first focuses on liberation of the oppressed from authoritarian rule; the second

involves the formation of a democratic constitution (Przeworski, 1993: 89). Considering these, one can argue that the first phase occurs when repressive powers are challenged and then thwarted. If repressive institutions are destroyed, the second process comes into play. However, if both phases occur simultaneously, three requirements demand attendance; (a) a large number of government reformers reach an agreement with opponents; (b) reformers are able to persuade the military to cooperate with institutional change; and (c) moderate groups assist in retraining allies who might reject any opportunity for former oppressors and dictators to escape.

Importantly, each stage of democratic transition holds different consequences that depend on forms and types of government. Michelin Ishay (2013) identified Arab governments and countries as three types: (1) homogeneous countries; (2) authoritarian states; and (3) rich monarchies. Countries such as Egypt and Tunisia have homogeneous ethnic and religious populations that are easily mobilised to undermine fragile regimes, reflecting a lack of human and economic capital and desire for a peaceful transition to democracy. Authoritarian countries like Libya, Syria and Yemen were slower to embrace democratic transitions because each has a fragmented civil society replete with sectarian and/or tribal rifts that overlap with economic divisions. By contrast, countries led by rich Arab monarchs, despite the absence of any vibrant civil society, prove more stable.

Contemporary Middle Eastern countries are states of diverse complexities and legacies. They generally reflect a modern political heritage bearing Arab traditions, colonial impositions and a mix of indigenous cultural mores added to globalist concepts of democracy. The post-colonial Middle East inherited the “*modern state*” structure built forcibly by colonial powers. This construction presents state relations with society as a blueprint for colonial rule, evident in Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Morocco, where parliamentary systems are, historically, the new rule of thumb.

Colonialism actually built modern European nations that withstood Arab encroachments and then developed what may be

described as economic institutional transplants and liberal democratic administrations reflecting European political and cultural savours. These institutions led to the emergence of civil societies, as in Europe, that are separate from state-structured political societies. This is to say, societies that contained constituent elements comprising economic entities (e.g., corporations and banks), associations and organizations, political institutions (political parties and electoral bodies), and cultural institutions (schools, mass media and publishing). Thus, building modern states in the ME challenged colonial powers that then imposed their own sundry systems and structures, especially in Iraq; a state that only transformed from autocracy to a kind of democracy post-allied invasion.

Other democratic movements had been around for quite a long time in the Arab world where most nation-states embraced various political models ranging from “*democratic to totalitarian to authoritarian to dictatorial*” (Sihbudi, 1993: 124). One can argue that Middle Eastern regimes ascended to power by two means: an inherited monarchy, as in Jordan, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia; or by military coups, as in Iraq and Libya. Since the end of the Cold War that announced the democratisation of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the Middle East was also affected. Consequently, the issue of political liberalization and democracy also gained momentum; though much later, compared to other regions of the world.

Interestingly, the Middle East practice of democracy became a state effort to supervise and manage society rather than the other way round, per western tradition. Thus, instead of paving the way for democratic models, it opened the path for martial regimes. Egypt is such a model, whose series of militaristic governments then replicated in Syria, Iraq, Sudan, Yemen, Libya and Algeria. Apart from this type of Middle East state, one also witnessed “conservative country” models or nations whose existence rested on “*investment qabilah and spoils of war*” or maintained absolute power politically, economically and culturally. In this type, the government controlled societal formations within a

framework of conservatism, in which natural structures, such as tribes, played a role in modern institutions. They supervised electoral institutions, influenced political parties, controlled sundry organizations and associations, as well as policed civil society in general. And then there remained semi-democratic countries such as Jordan, Sudan, Morocco and Lebanon (before its civil war).

Political scientists such as Fukuyama (1992) opined that Islam is a major obstacle to democracy in the Middle East, referencing the 1990 elections in Algeria and Iran's revolution. He was of the view that fundamentalists who desire forms of theocracy use popular democracy to come to power (Fukuyama, 1992). This accords with Huntington who argued that growing democratisation in the Middle East tends to provide opportunities for the revival of "Islamists." According to him (1991), apart from military dictators or absolute monarchs, Islamists consider themselves the optimal alternative political force in the Middle East.

Besides such questionable observations, a number of factors exist that encourage the process of democratisation in the Middle East. These are cultural and structural in nature: (a) the value of egalitarianism, as espoused by a ME majority and their struggle to form modern political parties. For example, the victory of the Justice and Development Party (JDP) in Turkey showed ordinary people do have an alternative political choice. Moreover, true traditional values provide a platform for change supported by leadership with integrity; so that (b) populist tradition developed among the lower middle class, especially traders and farmers. Manfred Halpern pointed out that bazaar merchants form a community that is very open and mutually respectful of each other's interests. Additionally, (c) migration to European countries such as France, Germany and the UK allowed for the learning and absorption of new values. Ideas and new experiences were then drawn from a constellation of Western democratic traditions of thought combined with ME wealth. The Tunisian opposition figure, Rashid Gannouchi, for example, learned from the UK scenario while developing his political wing. The same can be said

for the PLO, not only as a guerrilla movement against Zionist Israel but also a group that drew ideas from the UK, Germany and other countries. And (d) educational development, especially for younger generations with the expansion of information and communication (Patai, 2002: 345).

One can say the Arab Spring was not a spontaneous political event but more of a continuation of the long struggle to return dignity and rights to citizens of Arab countries (Laipson, Goldstone, and Ahmed, 2011: 6). In 2000, Egypt initiated talks, so-called *infitah* or openness, with the West. The idea was to seek peace with Israel while adopting a neo-liberal capitalist model as key to prosperity for its population (Kuncahyono, 2013: 89–90). In Syria, meanwhile, the “Damascus Spring” movement began early in Bashar al Assad’s reign. This attempt at renewal was, in fact, initially approved by al Assad but for some strange reason he made an about turn to proscribe it. Even though the movement was short-lived, its seeds gave rise to a potent middle class. Over 250 opposition leaders jointly declared the so-called “Damascus Declaration” of October 2005. Along with this, another group calling itself “Friends of Civil Society”, drafted a petition called the “Manifesto 1000”, demanding the creation of a political pluralist society in Syria. These intellectual communities carried and affected enormous influence against Asad’s regime. Ghadbian (2001: 636) noted these intellectual communities built-up a new found awareness that among them were people who opposed the Syrian regime.

#### **8.4 ARAB ‘MIDDLE CLASS’ SOCIAL MOVEMENT**

In countries like Egypt and Tunisia, intellectual middle classes formed a core leadership for the social movement. As intellectual communities, they exercised enormous influence and provoked mass resistance to respective regimes. The role of intellectuals as critical agents cannot be denied since they parented the movement

and have continued to evocatively create public awareness regarding oppressive regimes in Tunisia, Egypt and Syria.

Among politically oriented sections of ME societies, social media became a meaningful platform to create awareness of the reality of power exercised by respective regimes. Through social media, they activated symbolic messages that negotiated communal identities as oppositional to disliked rulers. These societies thus employed social media to counter the actual autocratic power in real time. Arab Spring was therefore an opportune event that demonstrated the extent of social media's application as a concomitant technological tool of revolution that spread transnationally.

Since middle class Arab youth had knowledge of various technologies, including satellite TV, mobile phones, computers and the internet, they used it to disseminate information to the masses, which triggered transnational activism. While technology has and is used for education, information sharing and communications across the world, it was specifically employed in the Arab Spring to trigger mass movements that justly demanded immediate political change. Table 8.1 demonstrates the spread of internet technology and access across the Middle East.

**Table 8.1** Internet Use in the Middle East and North Africa (2009)

Country	Fixed Broadband Subscribers	Internet Subscribers (Per 10 People)	Internet Users	Internet Users (Per 100 People)
Saudi Arabia	1,437,718	5.36	9,800,000	36.55
Tunisia	372,818	3.57	3,500,000	33.53
Morocco	475,767	1.50	10,300,000	32.56
Jordan	203,472	3.44	1,741,866	29.45
Qatar	129,907	8.13	399,000	24.97
Lebanon	222,000	5.29	1,000,000	23.83
Egypt	1,077,489	1.35	16,635,753	20.87
Syria	34,657	0.17	3,935,000	19.64
Algeria	818,000	2.34	4,700,000	13.45

**Table 8.1** (Cont...)

<b>West Bank and Gaza</b>	233,000	5.76	356,000	8.80
<b>Libya</b>	10,000	0.16	353,900	5.65
<b>Yemen</b>	-	-	420,000	1.80
<b>Bahrain</b>	165,000	14.11	649,300	55.52
<b>UAE</b>	690,424	9.95	3,777,900	54.45
<b>Iraq</b>	121	0.00	325,000	1.05

*Source:* The World Bank (2011), in Benmamoun, Kalliny, and Cropf, 2012.

In some Middle East countries where pockets of anti-Western sentiments exist, access to the internet was considered a critical and a pivotal technological tool. Since the middle class possessed purchasing power compared to lower economic classes, they bought technology at higher rates, which made them influential by default. Egypt's and Tunisia's middle classes grew and accordingly became important components that contributed to the formation and expansion of a new found Muslim social movement (Wickham, 2002; Zahid, 2010). In Egypt the 'April 6 Movement' transformed into a vitally significant mass social faction dominated by a middle-class called Kefaya (est. 2004), in response to their former lack of political access and an unfolding domestic economic crisis.

From thence onwards, the influence of social networking increased in political arena throughout the country. Following these developments, social networks influenced political elections and impacted political changes transnationally. As stated earlier, Facebook and Twitter were used to effectively promote unrest, uprisings and revolutions witnessed in Arab States like Tunisia and Egypt. As a result, Middle East governments imposed restrictions on their use and at present these platforms are heavily monitored and supervised.

With modern social media, the common masses need not be located in geographical proximity for information dispersal or



unified political mobilizations for a common cause. With respect to Arab Spring, there was no charismatic leader or vertically orchestrated organization, qualified ideological line, or formally organized political program with a rigid organizational structure. Through social media, organization was coordinated horizontally and carried diverse ideologies with loose structures without any authoritative political leadership. All manifest when Facebook and Twitter messages successfully entered Arab world airwaves. References are now made to specific examples.

### 8.4.1 Tunisia

The Tunisian revolt began in the province of Sidi Bouzid where demonstrators demanded the resignation of Zein al Abidin Ben Ali. Ben Ali's horrible management wrought an ailing economy, widespread corruption and widespread unemployment. Mohamed Bouazizi, an unemployed young man who worked as a street hawker, committed suicide which triggered unprecedented events. His public self-immolation occurred after police confiscated his produce, his only source of income. The moment Bouazizi died on 4 January 2011, sparked a revolution and immediately became a symbol of resistance against Ben Ali's regime.

Twitter played a prominent role in this event, which was recorded under the hashtag *#SidiBouzid*, used by Tunisian activists for more than 200,000 tweets within the first few weeks of protests. The initial dataset included 168,663 tweets posted between 12–19 January 2011, containing the following keywords: “#sidibouzid” and “tunisia” (Lotan *et al.*, 2011: 1381). Some writers refer to the revolution in Tunisia as the first ‘Twitter Revolution’, others note that, prior to the revolution, Tunisia only had 200 active tweeters and 2,000 registered accounts (Beaumont, 2011).

From what we gather, this demonstrated the extent of social media's role in informing and mobilising Tunisians, an important spin-off that cannot be denied. Although Bouazizi's suicide ignited the revolution, he was not the first Tunisian to self-immolate.

Three months earlier another man from Monastir did the same but was not filmed. As a result, there was no report on Facebook nor was that event widely reported in any media. Since the information was not disseminated, it did not inspire collective action (Beaumont, 2011).

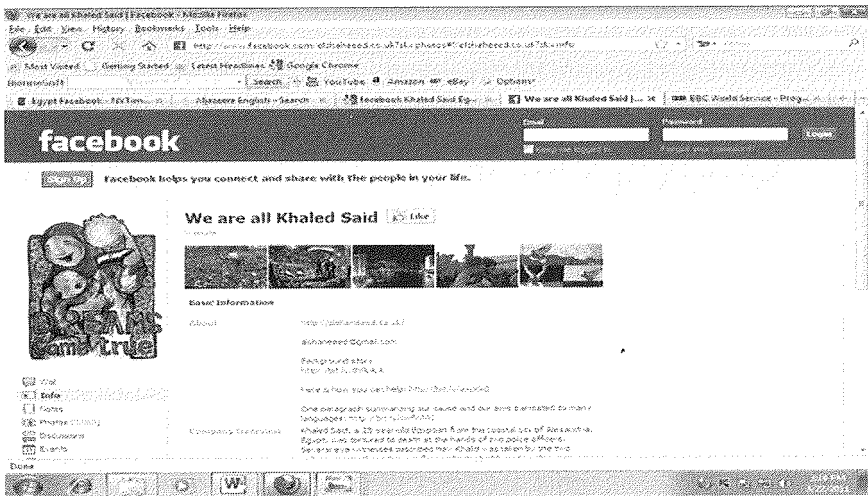
#### **8.4.2 Egypt**

In Egypt, protests against Hosni Mubarak's authoritarian machine – under construction from 1981 – and poor management of the state got off a slow start. Although demonstrations took place, none succeeded and the National Democratic Party (NDP) became the main political vehicle in power. Mubarak controlled the government to such a degree that he won every presidential election (1993, 1999 and 2005), gaining a majority on each occasion. At the same time, his regime restricted the activities of opposition parties and movements such as the Ghad party, Kefaya, the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafiyyah. During this time, all political activity was continuously and tightly controlled by the government, which also monitored social networks.

Egypt's authoritarian leadership made it difficult for any mass movement to use social networking platforms with robust results for the nation's citizenry. According to Julianne Schultz (2011), the ability of an adaptive technology to cultivate democracy is compatible only with countries that embrace democratic principles; and Egypt did not. Nonetheless, when Egyptians took to the streets, Mubarak tried to shut 'down all communication channels, including social networking sites. Protests continued from 25 January to 11 February 2011 during which Egyptians from all walks of life mingled and gathered in the streets to show dissatisfaction with Mubarak's government. The government responded viciously while Mubarak, who realized his circumstances, urged Egyptians not to imitate Tunisia. As far as he was concerned, the country's security was at stake; hence, the government pursued whatever means necessary despite losses.

Demonstrations continued while the government ignored demands. It was, however, under heavy pressure, not only from demonstrators but also from various political parties requesting the regime to fulfill the peoples' earnest requests. Mubarak stubbornly refused and arrogantly argued that he would revamp his cabinet. Mubarak then appointed Omar Suleiman, head of Intelligence, as vice president, hoping to satisfy the populace who was not convinced and demanded his resignation.

In the midst of these events, Facebook's "*We Are All Khaled Said*" message became an important meme that ignited the social network. Facebook awakened Egyptian society to the fact that they were disempowered by Mubarak's oppressive system. In fact, it became an important platform that contained information on (i) community imprisonment; (ii) the dominance of a dictatorial but legitimate identity; (iii) a peaceful ideal; and (iv) the existence of a system of reality management that recognizes people's rights.



**Figure 8.1** Facebook, We are all Khaled Said (<http://www.facebook.com/elshaheed.co.uk?sk=photos#/elshaheed.co.uk?sk=info>)

Anti-government protestors soon realized that offensive comments from pro-government groups were a government strategy used to destroy the revolution. Mubarak supporters had created false accounts and joined anti-government groups to influence the masses. However, anti-revolution units were unable to counter the opposition on internet media. On 28 January 2011, the government blocked Facebook and Twitter accounts and suffered a loss of Rp. 812 billion. Wael Ghonim, the Facebook account creator of *'We are all Khaled Said'* and also Marketing Manager for Google Inc. in the ME and North Africa, managed to sabotage the Internet network the government thought it had blocked. He created a communications network that allowed access to Twitter by telephone and also permitted voice messaging.

The integration of real and virtual movements finally toppled Mubarak who was forced to step down on the 11 February 2011. He handed the government over to military authorities and Omar Suleiman, then vice president, who announced that the Military Council was in control of Egypt.

### **8.4.3 Libya**

Libya was at the back end of the Arab Spring. As in Egypt and Tunisia, the Libyan regime had lasted for more than 42 years and encountered a variety of challenges from pro-change forces that demanded a change in leadership. Muammar Gaddafi was eventually forced to quit although he tried his utmost to hold onto power. His reign ended on 20 October 2011.

Libya was another example of limited internet connectivity where social media contributed towards the emergence of a social movement that demanded political reform and regime change. At that time, only 6% of Libyans were connected to the internet and less than 5% of the population used Facebook (Salem and Mourtada, 2011). Libyan protesters used the Twitter hashtag **#Feb17** to call for protests on a certain date. The tweet was popularized and re-tweeted to the extent it was even broadcast on mainstream television news, e.g., *"My name is freedom. Born in*

*Tunisia, raised in Egypt, studied in Yemen, fought in Libya, and I'll grow up in the Arab world. (@AliTweel, Twitter.*" Libyans not only drew inspiration and ideas from Egyptians but were also assisted by the use of the sims cards by ingeniously crossing borders so Libyan protesters could keep lines of communication open in spite of government disruptions and interference (Beaumont, 2011).

Libya's social movement for freedom and democracy maintained corresponding pages on Facebook, which, within a week of initial protests, had attracted 82,000 followers. Additionally, during the same period, Facebook's news page for the Libyan uprising, Rassd News Network (RNN) Libya, had over 22,000 followers and doubled within weeks. Libyan activists utilised dedicated websites such as [www.libyafeb17.com](http://www.libyafeb17.com) to upload images and news. These were in the English language so information could be readily accessed globally. Interviews conducted with Libyan activists suggested they were inspired by events in Tunisia and Egypt. Images and information were widely circulated among Libyans through social media (Charlton, 2011). Libyan activists also relied on networks within the Libyan diaspora, such as the UK-based Libyan Youth Movement.

## 8.5 CONCLUSION

We have demonstrated that social media was a major platform and instrument employed throughout the Arab Spring domino phenomenon. Initially, social media facilitated the proximal process of information distribution by a decentralised, non-hierarchical social media structure the facilitated the dynamic. Secondly, social media enabled actors in the Middle East to communicate directly and constantly across national boundaries. This allowed the diffusion of ideas across the region regarding calls for freedom and democracy and the use of nonviolence. Third, social media played a particularly important role in communication between those who transmitted and those who

adopted and adapted to the medium and then identified with each another. Social media's potential to connect groups sharing high degrees of identification was critical to the dissemination of ideas. Fourth, social media facilitated the common framing of tactics and slogans used between movements that were instrumental to success.

The Arab Spring phenomenon can be viewed as a call to establish freedom in the Middle East tied to the emergence of democracy and end of authoritarian regimes. The consequent rise of neo-Muslim political power is thus directly associated with democratisation and a new form of social revolution that most definitely changed the Middle East's social structure.

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