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The New Middle East: Emerging Political and Ideological Trends

POLICY BRIEF

Broken Walls: Challenges to Patriarchal Authority in the Eyes of Sudanese Social Media Actors

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From "Arab Spring" to "Arab Winter"—this narrative, focused on the political re-establishment of unbridled authoritarianism, misses the bigger picture. After a year of frustrated silence, social media actors re-emerged from disengagement "because there's much more to the story than what may seem evident. Progress within the *political* maybe *stunted*. But […] thanks to demographic trends and exponential technology, the *cultural and societal* is hastening."[i]

What role does technology play here? This brief summarizes views of Sudanese users on the impact of the internet in their country, after their own attempt at joining the "Arab Spring" was crushed in 2013.

The End of Patriarchy?

"Patriarchal authority has collapsed", was the first answer a Sudanese intellectual in his thirties gave to my question. And: "Virginity is no longer such a central issue." This may have been hyperbole, but my informant was adamant that he was highlighting a most important development. The unquestioned validity of the foundational pillars of the old social and political order, he claimed, was being shaken by the new technologies. Unlike people older than thirty, who had experienced their primary formation without the internet, those born after around 1985 grew up with the internet as a fact of life, giving them easier access to a wide range of information and facilitating the creation and flourishing of non-hierarchical networks.

In the Sudan, the first generation socialized with the internet in place was also one that grew up entirely under the "Salvation" regime. The impact of the net must therefore be seen in the context of this regime's ideological campaigns, aiming at the Islamization of all aspects of public and private life. The combination of youthful opposition and enhanced

possibilities to access information beyond the regime's ideological sway has led, said my informant, to another difference between the older and the younger generations: an increase in atheist attitudes. "Many who grew up under the current regime have lost their faith because this regime has dragged God through the mire."

Of course, he conceded, these observations applied only to a minority of active internet users. But since internet use was expanding, he was convinced that current trends were expanding into wider circles. And while similarly radical views about the end of patriarchal norms were not shared by everyone, it was striking to see that activists themselves often continued to be positive about the opportunities offered by the net, *despite* the political setbacks. Their personal experience of *social* change beneath the façade of a stagnant political regime was more fundamental.

Optimists vs. Sceptics

Still, not everyone agreed. Many I spoke to emphasized how important the family and social group still were; how conformist the Sudanese remained; and how moral conservatism was thriving, often strengthened by social media. Dissenting voices, they argued, remained a minority; Sudanese society at large had not changed: "The internet didn't actually allow to materialise [its potential]."

The difference in how 'optimists' and 'sceptics' among my informants assessed internet impact can partly be explained by a difference in perspective: while the 'sceptics' look at society at large, and express their frustration over how slow 'progress' is to materialise, 'optimists' extrapolate from their own experience, to envision a wider development affecting larger sections of society, as the net becomes a central part of socialization. They do agree with the 'sceptics' that old authorities and modes of thinking still wield considerable power. But they see this power being on the defensive. The very harshness of the old regimes' reaction, not least in the face of opposition in thoughts and words, can be taken to indicate that challenges to their power have grown. They cling to power more aggressively, because they feel threatened more fundamentally. Under these circumstances, every satire turns into an existential threat. Of course, satire and disrespect for the authorities are nothing new in the region. But strikingly, the actors themselves present such disrespect today as a significant change, compared to the norms they were raised under. We witness, they say, a generational shift, particularly among those for whom the net became part of early socialization. It made them, they claim, less dependent on the older generation for information and guidance, more networked with peers, and more open to influences from outside the circle controlled by the family. Whatever the objective sociological reality behind this image, it is displayed as a conscious attitude by many young, and recognized (often deploringly) by the older generation.

Social Change and Greater Privacy

While the answers my interviews elucidated were too disparate to point in a single direction, there was broad agreement on two points: that (1) the Sudan was undergoing significant social change; and that (2) privacy had become more important.

Regarding the first point, there was no agreement on the precise direction, but the experience of instability and lack of clarity creates a need to discuss taboo issues, and the semi-public space of social media has become a favourite venue for such discussions. Even those who avoid politics are eager to debate the other great traditional taboos: religion, sex and social norms. It may be argued that also in wider sections of society, old social norms are no longer accepted as a matter of course; the proof being that even those who defend conservative morality do so out of a conviction that their values are suffering an onslaught not only from outside but from within their own society. Therefore, the guardians of Order have to defend these norms all the more vigorously. On the other side, those who complain the loudest that Sudanese society remains backward, do so precisely because they dislike this, and aim to change it.

The second point that most of my interviewees, including Islamists, agreed upon, was that there was greater space for privacy now than a generation ago, that privacy had become more widespread and more respected. In certain social settings, privacy certainly was respected in earlier periods as well, but most Sudanese had not enjoyed it as a rule in daily life. With the spread of mobile communication, this is changing. Today's youth can withdraw into the private space of their mobile phones, and possibly into their own private room—unheard of thirty years ago. Parents regularly express concern about what happens in these private spaces where romance and sex are favourite topics. Cheap phone rates late at night encourage communication without parental control, and this virtual change has a direct effect on the 'real' world, with premarital sex and the number of extra-marital births growing as mobile telephony spreads.

Even more strikingly, my informants indicated that parents' attitudes were changing. Although parents dislike that their daughters are chatting the night away, the newly emerging norm is to respect this private space. Parents often expressed resignation over this, but felt they had lost the battle.

Me, Myself & I

Less direct parental control and greater individual privacy create an opening not only for greater freedom, but also for more uncertainties. The tech-savvy young may struggle with these, but they are clearly embracing the freedom they find through technology, asserting their right to develop their own ideas and express

their own feelings. Many of these revolve around "Me, Myself & I" and the demand, nay right to raise "my" voice and be heard—with attendant aspects such as the wish for companion marriage, or the assertion that "if the words of my shaykh contradict my reasoning, I follow my reasoning, because my shaykh is only one, while my reasoning is connected to many of my friends, and so is stronger."

While I must reiterate that the changes described here do not apply to Sudanese society at large, they are prominent among Sudan's 'digital natives', and some of my informants expected that individual self-assertion will expand its reach with the expansion of communication technologies—obviously, in soci0economic contexts that allow for their use in the first place. Typically, those who held that that the net has not (yet) changed their society, did affirm that it has changed *them*, opened up a world to them, led them to feel less alone, and enabled them to engage in public. Many young Sudanese growing up on the internet today feel they are partaking in significant social change, driven by their own individual change. Perceiving the persistent power of patriarchal authority, they prove ingenious in persisting to carve out spaces to raise their own voice in defiant self-assertion. And some are dismissive about the impact of the internet, since they are impatient with overall societal progress; they want to see more of the freedom they themselves have tasted.

So are we "back to the old ways? In a sense we are; partly because the old order is largely back in business. But something is fundamentally different: these are the old ways in new times, when the old order faces new political subjects and novel subjectivities."[ii] Outside actors must recognize that the "either me or chaos" card dictators play betrays the aspirations of coming generations and is so shortsighted that it risks backfiring.

[i]   A. Nasr, "Breaking the silence" <http://www.amirahmadnasr.com/blog/breaking-silence-writing/>, 14/4/2015.
[ii]   A. Bayat, "Revolution and despair", *Mada Masr*, 25/1/2015 <http://madamasr.com/opinion/revolution-and-despair>.