Social media platforms: A Trojan Horse for Political Islam?

By Rashida Lmlahi

Reviewed and Prepared by Ahmed Al-Romh

For many years, political Islam has imposed itself on researchers and those interested in the political field in the Arab and Islamic world. However, the new challenge facing them all is that the Islamic movements have developed their discourse and adapted it with the help of technical and digital developments, liberated this discourse and opened the doors for it to reach the local and global public opinion.

And if the social and political transformations that took place in the Greater Middle East during the 21st century had brought Islamic currents back to the fore, then this coincided with the technological boom that the world experienced due to the dense and intense spread of the Internet in general and social media networks in particular. The internet gave the political Islam discourse an unprecedented momentum and flow that made its owners reach societies and segments that they have long been prevented from accessing and addressing, facilitating the processes of promoting the discourse of the Islamic movements and coordinating field operations to achieve their ultimate goal: the seizure of power.

In this study, we start from this ground to shed light on the interaction of Islamic currents of all stripes and references with the digital revolution and their use of social media platforms to promote their political discourse and direct public opinion in the virtual and real world.

The digital revolution coincided with the widespread use of the term "soft power", before the term "Cyber Power" branched out from it, which, according to Joseph Nye, means "the ability to obtain desired results through the use of information sources related to cyberspace, that is, the ability to use the cyberspace tools to create advantages and influence events related to other real-world environments".(1)

Since politics is a space for practicing social action and a strive to achieve what's possible and to be developed, the Islamic political actor, when trying to download its societal and political vision, did not hesitate to exploit the opportunities and capabilities that the technological revolution provided to it in the field of communication, the globalization of information, and the speed of its flow. Therefore, and sometimes per-

fectly, it took the initiative to employ social media networks and use them optimally in order to achieve better positioning and win many points in its struggle for power.

Thus began a kind of change in the rules of the game, and the balance of power began to tend relatively to the Islamic movements after they managed to neutralize the means of control, subjugation, and punishment, pulling the rug out from under the security services, and transferring the battle to virtual worlds, in which victory does not depend on possessing weapons, tanks, and impregnable prisons, but on mastering information management and the art of communication. And for the first time in human history, power in the era of social networks has become in the hands of those who master information management and improve marketing of images, audio, and video recordings.

The transition from a society that consumes information to a society that produces it, has created profound changes in the terms and rules of the struggle for power, which is now dependent on what is going on in the virtual world more than it is related to what is happening in the real world. Power has come to be measured by the extent of efficiency in obtaining information, exploiting it, and redistributing it according to the interests, and trends of the political conflict.

The transformation of information into a force with a great influence in shaping public opinion and determining the destinies of countries became evident during the Arab Spring revolutions, which would not have reached their level without the social networks, playing a pivotal role in confronting the existing authorities. In the same way that bloggers and activists have found means of action, participation and influence in drawing public policies and distributing power in the context of political conflict, blogs, websites, and social networks have formed a new communication environment, a vast space for political action, a space free from censorship and conditions for adherence to the political approach of the regimes.

Addressing the role of the virtual world in changing the conditions of political action and practice, enhancing the dynamism of change requires awareness of the importance of shifting from the concept of the information to the concept of the virtual society. A shift that coincides with the rapid transition during the last decade of the

20th century from the concept of civil society to the concept of information society, which was the focus of social and cultural theorizing for a while. This leads to the necessity of reconsidering the concept of society from a sociological perspective, "based on the change that has occurred in the communication media, foremost among which is the Internet, digital satellite television, and smart and advanced mobile phones".(2)

Social networks and the acceleration of the revolution

Contrary to the idea that the fear of authoritarian regimes leads to a decline in participation rates in political activities, the fear factor has led, unintentionally, to accelerate the wheel of revolution and change. Fear of arrest and torture may be the reason behind the demonstrators' insistence on escalation and continuing to demonstrate in order to attain their demands, especially after the faces and names of many of them became known to the authorities, and they are no longer virtual persons as they used to be in the beginnings of the spread of the Internet in the Arab world.

Thus, these demonstrators reached the point of no return: Either to achieve the desired change or to die trying.

Here, it can be said that the new media have provided the demonstrators with new channels of communication not available before, and thus enabled them to practice patterns of political activity more appropriate to the political composition of the milieu in which they interact.

This transformation has made virtualization a groundwork for political action, around which political practices array and evolve according to its means and techniques. "The political scene in the whole world is closely related to the environment (medium) and multimedia communication", so that "the digital space has become a networked communication space, and it is, like all networks, a fabric within which the contemporary human experience is woven in its various social, economic and political dimensions. A fabric through which identities with different patterns reflect the struggle over the technologies that characterized the information age as the basis of every new political practice that goes beyond the mechanisms and means of traditional political action. (3)

Political Islam and the "Bet on the kids of Facebook"!

Despite the victimhood discourse raised by political Islam movements when discussing their relationship with the media, these movements certainly occupied large areas in the media, in terms of covering their news and following their steps, and even granting them certain media outlets that allowed them, over the years of their inception and spread, to promote their intellectual discourse and political approach of various and multiple ramifications. However, the above-mentioned victimhood discourse soon collapsed and lost its justification for its existence with the flurry of social networks that enabled political Islam movements to emerge in a new stereotype. (4)

What is striking here is that the movements of political Islam dealt with great skill and professionalism on social media networks compared to the rest of the actors and political parties, who missed the train of change in the field of communication that social networks introduced. Political Islam outclassed the others by adopting a method that succeeded smoothly in blending the content it carried with the new technical and artistic capabilities that the new communication media made available to it. The result was that political Islam took the lead in political discourse and preceded other parties by many steps. The regime and the opposition alike did not pay attention, until late, to the danger and importance of social media, and perhaps the phrase "kids of Facebook" the former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak used to describe the revolutionaries on Tahrir Square is the best evidence of the Arab regimes' disdain for social networks compared to political Islam, which saw in it a golden opportunity to contest the discourse of its opponents, regardless of their preferences and expectations.

In parallel to the above, the performance of political Islam movements has developed, it did not hesitate to exploit these communication windows to attract new segments of supporters and followers and work to attract the new generation of users and pioneers of social networks in order to convince them of their intellectual and political proposals.

Political Islam apprehended the situation early and realized that modern communication networks have a greater impact on the current generation that suffers from mar-

ginalization and exclusion from the official discourse. They were betting on this to create a generation that was controllable and docile.

This opportunism, which the political Islam movements dealt with the "Kids of Facebook" was manifested in their exploitation of the weak cognitive and cultural level of users and activists of social networks, in order to create a state of tension among them in the hope of provoking and mobilizing them against the regime and the rest of the opponents alike. In that, it adopted a magic mixture based on the combination of the speed of the information flow, emotion, and enthusiasm of those communicating with the political Islam movements, as well as the presence of a pre-readiness for them to receive and accept the religious discourse.

The leaders and theorists of political Islam have also benefited from the emergence of a new generation of Islamists and sympathizers of Islamic movements, who are distinguished by being more revolting and more nervous, and at the same time possessing less knowledgeable, culturally and religiously. This segment was the most protesting against traditional religious institutions and universities for their association with the state and not separating themselves from the official discourse.

Since the first day of the spread, it was no secret that the modern communication networks are dangerous to the social and political fabric at the global level as a result of the polarization cases that caused their creation, and their transformation into platforms for marketing values that contradict societal values such as tolerance, love, acceptance of others, and pluralism, replacing them with a speech that incites hatred and violence. As well as their contribution to the spread of deviant cultures, not to mention their facilitation of the abetment of sectarian and tribal strife and incitement to insulting religions.

Amid all this chaos caused by the uncontrolled flow of information and news through social networks, it was not surprising that the extremist groups embarked on this tidal wave to spread their ideas and beliefs, which intentionally or unintentionally contributed to the production and reproduction of narrow and deadly identities. (5)

On the Arab level, it was evident from the beginning that political Islam had mastered the game well, and entered the world of social networks vigorously and in an orga-

nized manner. Over time, it gained experience and expertise to turn into an elaborate organization that moves collectively and according to carefully studied and tight steps.

Thus, it was the birth of what became known later in the literature of politics and communication as "Cyber Brigades".

Nobody knows precisely the number and strength of this digital army. Nonetheless, and from the first day of its founding, its theorists set an indispensable goal for it, which is to achieve the ideological project of Islamic movements by penetrating the digital space and imposing control over it, and taking advantage of the opportunity to "fill the vacant place" provided by the laxity of the opponents of these movements and their lack of adequate attention and care to the digital space in general and social networks in particular.

Whether it is the propagandist, political or jihadist actor, most Islamic movements have interacted well with the opportunities and capabilities that the digital revolution has opened up to them, to the point where the term "Cyber army" or "Cyber Brigades" has become closely associated with the Islamic organizations and movements, which is a natural and logical result given the large and intense presence of the Islamic actor on social media, even though the matter "is still a media discussion, and has not yet entered the field of academic research."

On the practical and field level, the importance of the cyber brigades is evident in the moments of the general buzz that the Sheikh or the Emir of the movement announces among his followers and invites them to promote a loyalist discourse or to confront a discourse or opposition movement, whether in the virtual or real world.

Perhaps the electoral context remains the most prominent example of the full employment of cyber brigades, to achieve goals and objectives for which they were created, to the point where differences dissolve and conflicts between competing Islamic movements and references are postponed until after the achievement of the supreme goal: The Egyptian experience provides a clear example when the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists forgot their differences and left them aside to support the Islamic project, which at the time saw the ballot boxes as a Trojan horse that would fulfill their dream of reaching power that had long haunted them.

This was demonstrated by the great role played by cyber brigades to control minds and persuade the "couch party", the counterbalance, to participate in the aforementioned elections and vote for the Islamic current candidate.

Another example that can be invoked here is that of the cyber brigades of the Moroccan Islamists, represented by the Justice and Development Party. This party has demonstrated a high level of skill in controlling social media and was among the first to employ it to promote its political and electoral rhetoric. For this purpose, it employed the experiences that its members accumulated in its propagandistic tributary represented by the Movement of Unity and Reform, whose members were directly or indirectly involved in the cyber brigades of the party along with the rest of the members and sympathizers from other tributaries such as civil society associations, unions, and others. They demonstrated terrific communication capabilities before and during the digital campaigns, in which the Justice and Development participated. A role unanimously agreed by many observers on its decisive importance in the party's achievement of major victories in the legislative and collective affairs during the last decade.

When these cyber brigades are subjected to a cross-sectional autopsy, it appears that they do not include only the members known to be overtly affiliated with the movement or its union, student, and other arms. Rather, it consists of a homogeneous mixture sometimes of members distributed in public or private spaces, present in several fields such as media, associations, research, educational, and those involved consciously or unconsciously, intentionally or unintentionally in these brigades that appear from the outside as a gelatinous body. A body whose population is known only to a small group of leaders of the movement who carry a "remote control" device that controls the rhythm and movements of the brigades.

Political Islam connects classic media to social networks

On the tenth anniversary of the Arab Spring revolutions, the relationship of classic media with social networks, during the outbreak of events and the subsequent developments, is still clouded by a lot of ambiguity and confusion. And if political Islam was the biggest beneficiary of the situation, its weapon in that was the social media net-

works that played the decisive role in promoting the discourse of political Islam, which at its moment seemed more attractive and polarizing to activists in the virtual world due to the anger and hope embedded in its message for change.

Political Islam would not have succeeded in its plans and endeavors had it not been for the hidden support it received from the support and support it received from the classic media represented by Al-Jazeera, which, from the beginning, did not bother to conceal its support for the conservative movement in general, and political Islam in particular. This helped this current to become a wild card compared to the rest of the progressive and civil currents, whose members, in turn, raised their smartphones in the face of police rifles and tear gas grenades.

Al-Jazeera has played a pivotal role in fanning the fires that broke out in several Arab countries during the Arab Spring revolutions that have become "autumn", and it was not hidden from experts, and even to the general public and followers, how did the Qatari channel's newscasts and programs feed on the videos that were published by the movement's activists on communication networks Social, and how it transformed itself into a "revolutionary" platform that contributed effectively and decisively to toppling the regimes of Ben Ali, Mubarak, and Gaddafi, and set fires in Yemen and Syria.

Someone might say that Al-Jazeera, and classic media in general, has the right to deal with social media networks as sources of news imposed by the modern technological revolution, but the editorial line of the Qatari channel soon deprived it of this privilege and brought it into the dock, and the reason is its Suspicious relations with political Islam in general, and the Brotherhood movement Muslims in particular. And that is since the moment when the channel bared its fangs at the outbreak of the Spring Movement and became a major platform for the Islamic revolutionaries, imprinting a religious character on the events in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria, which is mainly evident through its coverage of what was called "Fridays of anger."

The series of demonstrations that were shaking Egypt at the time every Friday had a strong impact on public opinion and the masses who were fascinated by weekly demonstrations bearing the names of Friday of Anger, Friday of Departure, Friday of

Cleanliness. These are the events/demonstrations that heralded the Islamists 'control of the rhythm and ceiling of the Egyptian revolution.

This will appear in particular after the Egyptian authorities cut off internet service with the protests reaching their climax, and the entry of the Al-Jazeera channel as a media platform for the revolution and the revolutionaries and its means in this regard are dozens of video and audio recordings, that were exclusively accessed by their "proxies" in the squares and streets of the revolution. But what happened is that the Qatari channel, in coordination with the political Islam movements, succeeded in transforming social media networks into an unprecedented weapon in the hands of political Islam movements that exploited it to the greatest extent, in order to achieve progress on its political opponents for the first time in the history of its bitter struggle with them.

In general, whether it is related to Islamic movements or others, what can be said here is that the new media of communication have provided the demonstrators with new channels of communication that were not available before, and thus enabled them to practice patterns of political activity more appropriate to the political composition of the milieu in which they interact.

Conclusion

In sum, the relationship of political Islam movements with the media has shifted from just covering its news and following it up to becoming windows for promoting ideological and political discourse for all types of movements thanks to social networks that have given them vast spaces and capabilities to appear in a new stereotype.

This strong and striking presence in virtual worlds and social networks could enable political Islam movements to occupy leadership positions during the revolutions that swept some Arab countries since the first months of 2010. The activities of the aforementioned movements on social networks during the events of the Arab Spring were more professional and dexterous, which enabled them to present their messages to their audience and the general public in a manner that indicated a good control at dealing with the opportunities presented by networks.

As a result, it can be said that political Islam movements have succeeded, thanks to social networks, in attracting a new segment of supporters, and a new generation that believes in their intellectual and political theses, and spreads their ideas on their behalf among social media followers, which is then known as Cyber Brigades.

Brigades essentially, to confront the attacks of opponents and critics of the Islamic movements' theses, undertook sometimes by persuasion and by defamation at other times, as they did not hesitate to oppose them and call them the most terrible accusations and distort their images among the public.

On the other hand, the ruling regimes in the Arab countries did not realize until late the danger and importance of controlling the religious discourse and political Islam over social media networks. For instance, the Egyptian government tried to rectify the situation through the official religious establishment, represented by Dar Al Ifta, which tried to issue fatwas to show the danger of media tampering in Social media sites, and to provide a sober discourse. However, the inability of these institutions to possess the elements of attractiveness that match the current Islamist pages made their impact dim when confronting the dangers of the religious discourse of political Islam movements on social media.

This dramatic development in the conflict between Arab regimes and Islamic movements of all sects finds justification in the fact that the effectiveness of political practice has become linked, today and more than ever before, to the power of electronic media, which has tightened its grip on the political field and has become its preferred space, and the rules of conflict are now controlled by images, sounds, or symbolic manipulation, without which there is no chance of winning or exercising judgment.

As social networks tightened their grip on the political scene, a relative distinction was noticed for the new generation in the Islamic movements in contrast to the apparent default of their opponents, including old political actors and traditional institutions that failed to adapt to the "information revolution", which gave these movements virtual progress in the race for the power. Soon, a level of reality was gained, as it was the case when the Muslim Brotherhood came to power in Egypt and the Moroccan Justice and Development Party won in two consecutive government terms.

References

(1) Montaser Hamadeh, an article on the interaction of Islamic movements with social networking sites. Researchers of the Moroccan Journal of Social and Human Sciences. Issue: 1.

(2) An article by sociologist Abd al-Razzaq Abalal. The Virtual and transformations of political action. Researchers of the Moroccan Journal of Social and Human Sciences.

(3) The same previous source. Issue: 1.

(4) The Dangers of Political Islam on Social Media, an article by Mahmoud Shaban Bayoumi, published on the website of Al-Mesbar Center for Studies and Research.

(5) The same previous source.