

Understanding the Egyptian Revolution: People and De-Securitization

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Abstract. This paper focuses on some of the events leading up to the Egyptians revolution in the year 2011, and how it was important in the de-securitization process. The analysis is based on the researcher personal eyewitness experiences which she obtained by being an Egyptian, working as a journalist, following daily events, and viewing print and television news coverage during the revolution time. The paper will not cover everything related to the topic of securitization and de-securitization processes, but some of the related aspects.

Keywords: Egyptian revolution, Arab Spring, Human Security, Securitization, De-securitization.

1. Introduction

Egyptians suffered many decades of an undemocratic and corrupt regime. When we focus on the situation in Egypt from the 1950s until now, we can find many aspects of corruption with lack of transparency and rule of law. The main characteristics of this lengthy period are poverty, unemployment, and inadequate services specially when it comes to health, education and housing. One of the main results of such a situation is the widening gap between the minority rich and majority poor. In years past, specialists and political scientists wondered why Arab countries didn't revolt, and whether they ever would. For some scholars, culture and history are the major cause of the stable- undemocratic regimes in the region. While for other scholars, it is more about society and nature of the state building. However, when we focus on the politics of the pre revolution regime, we can find several aspects of securitization that the regime used to protect its existence and guarantee its position. The regime make use of the war and instability in the region to justify such policies and when the war period ends, at least officially for Egypt and some other Arab countries, the continuous talk about the potential threats work as a justification for authoritarian rule instead of democracy. There gime in Egypt used different tactics to guarantee control, but the core strategy was securitization. Therefore, it was difficult for people to revolt, known how "strong" and "violent" the regime was, they believe they could not make any positive change. This was the long held perception among Arab countries until the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions.

2. Securitization and De-Securitization

According to Copenhagen School theorists, Securitization is a complex process in which an actor takes a specific issue (e.g. migration, environment, resources) and creates a security situation that requires an extraordinary measures to maintain control. While de-securitization refers to the process whereby an issue shifts out of this emergency mode and back into the normal bargaining processes of the political sphere. When it comes to the relationship between the authority and the people securitization gives more power to the authority, taking issues from their normal sphere and transferring them into emergency status that required special measures to deals with. De-securitization on the other hand restores the power to the people. In principle anything can be securitized, which makes it easy for government to maintain control over the people. However, in order to create a threat it is necessary for the actor, state for examples, to construct the threat. This also implies that the actor can –in principle- de-securitize these securitized issue.

In the process, actors identify an existential threat that requires emergency executive powers, and if the audience accepts the securitizing move, the issue is considered a securitize issue, and issue outside the rules

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of normal politics. For example, when state (A) defines a place as securitized area, this means that people are not allowed to enter it, and when they define a certain political figure as a securitized person, this means that no one can criticize this person. The elements of this process are highly important in understanding how securitization and de-securitization work. In this context, the securitization process is an iterative, political process between actor and audience, and the key question for experts must be how are securitizing measures accepted or rejected? What are the politics behind successful processes of securitization and de-securitization?

3. Egyptians Road to De-Securitization

The securitization and de-securitization processes depend on the constructed image, the regime's efforts to construct such securitization make use of propaganda and media, especially traditional media that reaches every home in Egypt. For a long time the state owned media was and still an essential tool to influence people's opinions and shape their perception. Focusing on Egypt, the illiteracy rate, the role of the state in every aspect of life, and the lack of other alternatives can explain part of the situation. During the 1970s things started to change because of the Open-Door policy, and the oil boom in the Gulf countries. However, this change was limited because of the degree of openness, and type of activates people involved in at that time. Work opportunities in the Gulf oil-producing countries produce a new type of rich people in Egypt. People began purchasing new electronics mainly televisions, radios and cassettes. However, the source of the information received on these devices continued to be the regime. From the 1990s things started to change around the world and in the region. With the Gulf War in the year 1990 media agencies provide a new source of information. CNN and Aljazeera threatened the role of state owned media. Aljazeera become a topic of the Egyptians daily conversation. With the increasing role of satellite TV and new channels more options existed for the people to hear different points of views concerning lifestyle, government, politics, and oppositions in other countries. The increasing number of new media sources was an important part of the de-securitization process.

By the time social media arrived in the 2000s, the people were ready for more significant change. On the ground, different events started to shape the situation in Egypt. These events include, among others, the establishment of the Egyptian Movement for Change. They are referred to as, Kefaya which means "enough" in Arabic. Kefaya was an indigenous movement for political reform organized in late 2004, in opposition to the regime of ex-President Hosni Mubarak. Workers at a weaving company, "Misr Spinning and Weaving Company," demonstrations in the year 2006. The next step leading to the regime overthrown was the establishment of the April 6 Youth Movement in the year 2008, which helped to organize the people in the facebook. Death of Khaled Said on June 6, 2010, furthers the establishment of the facebook page named "We are all Khaled Said" on July 2010. The final straw was the highly corrupt parliamentary elections in November 2010. The Khaled Said Facebook page and the April 6 youth movement were among the facebook pages and groups that called for the January 25th demonstrations. Said, along with the Tunisian Mohamed Al-Bouazizi, were catalysts that threatened securitization. The Media focus on these events played an important role in the securitization and de- securitization processes as part of the revolution and counter-revolutions efforts.

3.1. Securitization VS. De-Securitization in the Revolution Context

De-securitization was an important factor in understanding the Arab Spring. One example of how the weakening securitization in Tunisia and Egypt helped to bring about the Arab Spring was the people's disregard of the imposed curfew. In Tunisia, there was a famous video during the revolution of a man standing alone in an empty street during the curfew while talking about Tunisian freedom. Tunisian media coverage focused on the people entering government buildings without being afraid of punishment. We can also find many stories in Egypt about people disobeying the old regime. Before the revolution, wearing a beard was considered from the police forces a symbol of being Islamist. With the new regime, men can now

walking in the street and in the front of the ministry of interior freely without problems. Such stories represent the de-securitization of the space and authority symbols. One of the jokes in Egypt at that time was that the government imposed the curfew, but the only one who couldn't go out was the president. Jokes like this one are an example of the weakening securitization. Following the revolution, Egypt faced many difficulties that become known as the counter-revolution. The people supporting the revolution believe the counter-revolution is a strategic policy from the old regime and recognize that the battle is far from over. Most people believe that the greatest benefit from the revolution was the end of fear. People's ability to criticize anything and anyone become critical aspect in the long battle for democratization. Egyptians during and after the revolution repeatedly emphasized that the old way of doing things had changed and would never go back to how it was. While people have given this change many names in reality it is an example of how the de-securitization process works.

The securitization process used domestically and internationally. Domestically, the regime built this wall around the position of the president and his family, as well as the ministry of interior and police officers. Internationally, the regime focused on the Islamist threat and an authoritarian style of government as a method for maintaining peace and stability. The regime securitized the idea that democracy and free elections would bring Islamist and terrorist into power. Additionally, it would lead to instability and chaos both in Egypt and in the region, and would jeopardize peace with Israel. Thus, sacrificing democracy was a good deal in order to protect stability and peace. Therefore, we can say that the Egyptian regime uses the carrot and stick method of rewards and punishments. The people have to avoid the regime's heavy hand especially with the existence of the Emergency Law, a law that included extremely strict roles for the citizens. On the other hand, those who were part of the system enjoyed special benefits. The same can be said when we look at the international system. Keeping the old regime in power would guarantee peace and stability, which was more important to the world than democracy. This was obvious after 9/11 and how the regime dealt with the American pressure for democratization in the region. At the end, cosmetic reform was enough to reduce the pressure and secure the relationship with America.

3.2. The Middle Class: Reconstruct the Personal Threat

While there are many reasons behind the Arab Spring, we cannot neglect the direct relationship that established between Mohamed Al-Bouazizi in Tunisia and Khaled Said in Egypt. In Tunisia, the relationship was directly related, but in Egypt there was a time gap between the action of tutoring Said and the revolution. In both countries, there was other events, actions and reasons that could lead to revolution, which in part was obvious in the Egyptian case when most of the social scientists raised the question why it happened in Tunisia, and why not in Egypt? For them, and for others, on one hand there are many reasons that trigger of the revolution in Egypt, and on the other hand the economic and social situation in Tunisia was better than Egypt. One of the main explanations given to this established link is the middle class factor. The fact that Al-Bouazizi and Said represent the average middle class made it easier to mobilize people. When Al-Bouazizi set fire to himself, there was many contradicting media coverage about him. The core of the story was the same, but the details about him weren't. While some media sources represent Al-Bouazizi as a university graduate, other media coverage failed to mention that or said something totally different. For the majority of the people he was a "normal", middle class, young university graduate who tried hard to find something to do without any help from the authority. At the end he die because of the authority behavior. This image made it easy for everyone to see himself or someone close to him in the same situation. The message of Al-Bouazizi's story was that no one is protected and anyone can be target of such behavior that led him to do what he did. The same can be said about Said. This is why what happened to Said was a trigger to mobilize more people through the Facebook page, which called for demonstrations on the January 25. Before Said, Egypt witnessed many other events of torture, but within the most famous cases we cannot find an average middle class young person who so many young people related to.

3.3. Economic Situation and Social Injustice

Justices and injustice is a matter of people's feelings and perceptions. Injustice will not accumulate and represent itself in people's behavior without being constructed in a certain way. In this context, social media among other channels helped in shaping people's perception toward their own standard of living and their status comparing with others in and outside their country. While the gap between the rich and poor in Egypt has increased throughout recent years, the number of very poor people has also increased over time. However, this situation wouldn't trigger resistance or anger unless it constructed within the whole context. The increasing number of new opposition newspapers, news websites and channels, in addition to the spreading of Internet access and internet cafe, participated in shaping the people's knowledge about the situation in the country. Therefore, people who didn't participate in the demonstrations in the early days joined in later. This in turn changed the event from demonstrations demanding reform into revolution demanding change.

The changes that happened in national media were another element in shaping the people's perception. Long ago, films and TV shows were modest in their production, representing the type of life that most people were familiar with. Leading up to the revolution, directions began focusing more on the wealth gap. This led social scientists to predict a violent revolution from the poorer classes. In the year 2010, the poverty rate increased to more than 21% of the population. While this was the official figure, some other NGOs said it was more than 40% of the population. The difference according to them has to do with the way the regime calculates the poverty rate itself. Corruption increased in Egypt so much that the regime could no longer deny it. The high level of corruption reduces the quality of services and the ability to compete with other countries in many fields. The situation becomes more like a circle, the existence of corruption reduces the opportunities, affect people's lives negatively and reduces the quality of services they have access to. At the same time, the bad quality of services for the majority of the people reduces their ability to improve their situation and revolt, at least from the regime point of view. However, the role of social and non-national media changed the situation.

3.4. Media and De-Securitization

Social media was one of the most crucial elements in the arrival of the Arab Spring in general and specifically the Egyptian Revolution. For some writers and commentators, this leaderless revolution was referred to as the "Facebook Revolution." Others thought the revolution was going to happen with or without the help of social media. When this debate started it provoked some anger among Egyptians. They felt that by calling it a social media revolution, it downplayed the role the people were playing in the streets. Social media, including Facebook, Twitter, and Youtu be played a very important role in helping people getting their message out, but without people themselves, nothing was going to happen. Social media was a tool in the hand of the people, but a tool alone without the people cannot make a difference. Within the Arab Spring countries, subsequent regimes learned something from the previous ones, while the people tried to learn and adapt as well. Therefore, it wasn't a surprise when the Syrian government decided to cut Internet access at a certain moment in the beginning of the Syrian revolution because this was one of the Egyptian regime's survival tactics in dealing with the revolution. On the other hand, most of the slogans and people activities in Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions were copied in other countries. However, there were a degree of differences among the Arab Spring countries concerning the targeted audience. While we can say that the main target of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions was the domestic public, the main target of the other countries was the international public. This doesn't mean that Tunisian and Egyptians didn't target the international community, or the other countries did less to target domestic audience. What this means is, the main focus of the less violent revolutions was mainly the people as a way to guarantee participation from a larger group. They targeted the international community to show the violence nature of the undemocratic regimes, and asking foreign countries to stop any kind of support to these regimes. On the other hand, the main focus of the more violent revolutions was the international community in a way to gain support and help. Therefore, the content of the media message was different.

While the Tunisians and Egyptians focused on the group behavior, different aspects of mobilization and entertainment methods. The other cases focused on the violence aspect of the regime, killing of civilian especially women and children, and call for help. Such differences raise many questions about the political regimes in the Arab Spring countries and the developments in the communications systems in these countries as well. While the regime was corrupted and undemocratic in Egypt, the need to open the Egyptian market for communication companies including cell phones, Internet and computer companies helped the people when time was available to use them for political purpose. If the regime knows that a revolution may come in which people will use these tools, it may select not to make them available in the first place. But in a globalized system, can a regime succeed at keeping these tools out? And if that is possible, to what extent can the regime do that? Another aspect of the media usage is the empowerment of the people. While empowerment requires, among other things, education and knowledge, we cannot rely on the traditional state- owned media in undemocratic regimes to inform people correctly. In an undemocratic regime, when empowerment is a challenge to their power, education and knowledge continue to be within the regime limits. One of the things challenging regime power is the increasing number of satellites and private television channels, plus the increasing number of news sites on the Internet. In addition, private and foreign education institutions and the opportunity to access education in different institutions inside and outside the country was an important element in the empowerment process. All these aspects helped in shaping the people's perception regarding the regime polices and the existence of inequality and corruption.

4. Conclusion

De-securitization is one of the important elements that we can discuss regarding the Arab Spring. This paper tried to cover some of the events that weakened the securitization and led the way to the Arab Spring with main focus on the Egyptian case. The importance of this topic is the relationship between the de-securitization and democratization. The main assumption is: the existence of several sources of information and knowledge is an essential factor in increasing people power vis-à-vis the authority.

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