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Egypt: Second Generation Internet Users and Political Change

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Although the general strikes on April 6 and May 4 have drawn limited public participation, they have revealed an important new political phenomenon in Egypt: political mobilization by young, second generation internet users via blogs, YouTube, and Facebook. After two years of intensive government efforts to outmaneuver the opposition, this mobilization caught the regime flat-footed. It highlighted the possible role of interactive non-traditional media in bringing about political change in Egypt, just as the government's heavy-handed response to the strikes revealed its failure to find new forms of political control aside from the usual repression by the security apparatus.

The growing role of non-traditional media has pushed the state to try to curb them through various mechanisms. Several bloggers have been arrested, including Moneim Mahmoud (editor of the [Ana ikhwan](#) or "I am Brotherhood" blog). Isra Abdel Fattah, who started a Facebook group calling for Egyptians to join the April 6 strike (over 74,000 joined the group), was also arrested and held for sixteen days. The blogger Wael Abbas (editor of the [al-Wa'i al-misri](#), or "Egyptian Awareness" blog) has been vilified in the government media due to his success in documenting Egyptian police brutality inside detention centers in video clips he posted on YouTube. And in February 2007, blogger Karim Amer was sentenced to four years in prison in 2007 for criticizing President Hosni Mubarak and religious institutions.

In the past few years, bloggers and other internet users have played several different roles in Egyptian politics. First, internet users have voiced direct criticism of President Mubarak's regime. For example, bloggers went beyond criticizing the amended Article 76 of the constitution, which regulates the process for presidential elections, and mobilized to record the flagrant abuses that tarnished the popular referendum on the amendment in May 2005, notably the sexual harassment of female journalists. The bloggers also stood in solidarity with the reformist judges who were subject to systematic attacks by circles close to the regime.

Bloggers have played a crucial role in uncovering abuses by institutions loyal to the regime. The spread of mobile phone video technology enabled bloggers to reveal incidents of torture in a number of detention centers, incidents that later became legal cases before the courts. Such efforts built bridges between bloggers and domestic human rights groups; some blogs now systematically map detention facilities in which officers commonly physically abuse detainees. The political opposition has used bloggers' documentation to attack the regime for its use of torture not only as a means of suppressing political opposition but also in controlling political and social mobility.

Another area of blogger activism is the state of religious minorities, an extremely sensitive issue in Egypt. During the last three years, some blogs have specialized in transmitting the views of religious minorities in Egypt, as well as forms of discrimination practiced against them. Perhaps the most prominent examples are the blogs founded by members of the Baha'i religion. Blogs such as [Baha'i misri](#) (Egyptian Baha'i) and [Min wijhat nazar ukhra](#) (From Another Perspective) have become not only a source of information on the Baha'i sect and their situation in Egypt, but also a way to mobilize support for their demands. There are also blogs that document religious discrimination against Christians, expressing criticism that differs radically from the conciliatory political discourse of the Egyptian Coptic Orthodox Church. Here, the blog [Aqbat bila hudud](#) (Copts without Borders), edited by Hala Butrus, has given voice to those who see discrimination against Christians as being rooted not only in society but in the state and question the regime's official discourse about "national unity."

Yet another area that bloggers are probing is the battle over strategies for various political players. Some recent examples include blogs by members of the Muslim Brotherhood and their debates over the draft party platform put forward by the Guidance Bureau in 2007. In the past, Brotherhood blogs served mainly to express the movement's political ideas and recruit new members, for example students. In discussing the platform, however, the blogs expressed and crystallized the struggle between the reformists (such as *Ana ikhwan*) and the conservatives. Most Brotherhood blogs joined the reformist side of the debate, rejecting ideas such as supervision of the executive and legislative branches by a board of religious scholars or exclusion of women and Copts from the presidency. Brotherhood bloggers are also credited with bringing disagreements over the platform out from behind closed doors—as they are now doing with many political topics that were once taboo in Egypt.

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