

Focus on: Virtual Gap

Social networking

Let's Take This Online

Is Syria's new online political debate turning nasty?



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Caricature Ala Rustom

In Syria, Facebook is getting political. Just a few months ago, logging on to the then-blocked social-networking site to write about your day at work, a film you saw or a romantic break-up meant using proxies to bypass the government's internet security.

Changing netscape

Now that Facebook is freely accessible, Syrians are regularly using it to express their political views. Discussing politics used to be a major taboo in Syria. But since political unrest began in mid-March, many young Syrians are openly discussing politics online as well as in the street for the first time.

But that has not been a wholly positive change. Syrian Facebook users living both in Syria and abroad told *Syria Today* that what began as a forum for political discussion quickly turned into a shouting match. Users

started blocking and in some cases even reporting their 'friends' accounts to Facebook because of their political views. Some are going as far as calling those who disagree with their views traitors and calling for their execution.

"The discussions I'm seeing on Facebook are depressing and dangerous," Hassan Abbas, a Syrian researcher in cultural issues, said. "People are no longer discussing their opponents' argument but their morals."

He believes that abandoning logical argument and attacking the moral veracity of people is the most dangerous element of what is happening on Facebook today.

"It is important that discourse remains interactive," Abbas added. "It's depressing as this moment requires a high level of awareness and selflessness and to focus our efforts on the future of Syria."

Syrians often post links or comments about sensitive topics online, which can cause heated exchanges and even lead to the break-up of otherwise solid friendships. This is what happened to Mohammed Ghazi, a 21-year-old mechanical engineering trainee.

"Sometimes my friends post things on Facebook or Twitter that are very different from what I know they think," Ghazi said. "I posted a video of a pro-government demonstration and several of my friends deleted me after we argued about it."

Syrian Facebook users first started changing their profile pictures to reflect their political stance during the revolution against Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia. Since March 15 many now reflect their views on domestic politics. Plain black images are used to signify mourning for those who were killed, while pictures of President Bashar

al-Assad and illustrations of inter-religious and ethnic solidarity are also popular.

Syrian users have also established hundreds of 'groups' to promote their political views. "I was constantly being added by friends — without my permission — to groups in support or against the demonstrations taking place now in Syria," a young Syrian Facebook user, who requested anonymity, said.

Virtual 'warlords'

As the unrest escalates, conflict between pro-government Facebook users and the opposition is growing more aggressive, forcing other users to take sides or be criticised by both.

"If you criticise the demonstrators then you are called a coward and if you criticise the regime you become a traitor — this is depressing," the young Syrian said. "In the past, I had to bypass internet security to access my

Facebook account to speak my mind because the website was blocked. Now that it is no longer banned and easy to access, I've deactivated my account because I couldn't take all the fighting and accusations anymore."

Bassam al-Kadi, founder of Syrian Women's Observatory, who has been attacked online by both pro-and anti-government figures, believes that instead of discussing the current unrest in Syria, Facebook is being

is the result of decades-old policies of exclusion and marginalisation.

Since the seventies, young Syrians could not actively participate in their country's internal politics. The one-party system in Syria and the lack of independent political institutions and liberties deprived them of the means to do so.

Young Syrians interviewed by *Syria Today* said that expressing their views on politics used to equal

politics changed.

"What I saw in Egypt gave me hope that young people can have a say. I saw it happening. It is possible!" a young engineer in his thirties, who asked to remain anonymous, said.

"It is no longer possible to be a viewer. Whether you are pro or against [the government], you have to take a stance," Mohammad Ghannam, a 32-year-old engineer living in Damascus, said.

competitive economic life if you do not have a more competitive political life," he added.

The new Prime Minister Adel Safar on May 1 promised political reform. He said it is part of a comprehensive package of reforms that the government is preparing in the coming weeks. A committee responsible for issuing new laws regulating parties and elections is also going to be formed "to ensure a more

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used to promote political propaganda and to mobilise people.

"Facebook today resembles a warfront rather than a political platform. Political participation means discussing solutions, the balance of forces, etcetera, and not throwing accusations at each other," Kadi said. "Facebook users are acting now like 'warlords' who, instead of addressing people's minds, speak to their emotions and polarise them."

"[Facebook users] don't represent the whole of Syrian society but they do reflect part of the Syrian reality today," Hassan Abbas said.

According to Marwan Kabalan, a politics professor at the University of Damascus's faculty of political science, the conflict

"trouble". They believed that leading an active political life was "dangerous" and "pointless" since they "couldn't change anything anyway".

"Our generation was raised to believe that politics, religion and sex are three major taboos that should never be broken," Zeina Qahwaji, a 25-year-old Syrian living in Damascus, said.

Abbas added that, though politically inactive, young Syrians have deep political awareness. "When you can't express your political awareness, you try to express it through art or religion or simply pack up and leave the country," he said.

Following the recent events in Tunisia and Egypt, however, some young Syrians' attitudes towards

According to Kabalan, the lack of the traditional means of political participation in Syria, such as political parties, cultural clubs and other organisations, has led young Syrians to find other ways to voice their political views, mainly through social media outlets like Facebook and Twitter as well as by marching in the street.

Reform needed

Establishing new parties that truly reflect the aspirations of the young generation along with an independent judicial system and a new media law that allows freedom of expression and transparency are also crucial to help the youth effectively participate in the country's politics and push economic reform, Kabalan said.

"You cannot have a more

effective role for parties in society", Information Minister Adnan Mahmoud later said.

Young Syrians reacted positively to that. "I never had the chance to choose before. I didn't choose my religion, my name and it's the same with politics. I had to repeat the Ba'ath slogans as a student at school. I would like to have other choices as well," Qahwaji said.

Since March 15, Syria has undergone political and social changes that cannot be easily reversed.

"When you know that you have more political rights and you are able to express them, it is difficult to reverse gear and go back," Kabalan said. "Let us not fear the side effects that might come with granting political rights to the young generation." ■



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