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Arab Spring Case Study

The Arab Spring refers to the wave of revolutions against hostile regimes in the Arab world. While each revolution was different, they were all sparked by similar demonstrations and used social media as a complementary asset.

The Tunisian and Egyptian regimes violated their countries’ social contracts and a social media fueled revolution caused their downfall. Tunisia’s first independent regime created this contract, limiting political participation and ensuring employment. This contract was violated by Ben Ali. After a non-violent *coup d’etat*, Ben Ali implemented the Washington Consensus, an economic development plan that, eventually, reduced employment. Egypt’s succession of militaristic leaders, specifically Hosni Mubarak, adopted similar economic strategies, with similar results. These policies violated Egypt’s social contract. Both countries experienced events that sparked political protests; the viral immolation of a Tunisian citizen and the murder of Khaled Said in Egypt. These events alone had small effects, but citizens used social media as a logistical tool to organize their revolutions. Despite both countries’ efforts to shut down social media platforms, the message spread and both Ben Ali and Mubarak were forced out of power.

The volatile Syrian government constantly experiences civil unrest, but their active response to social media fueled protests allowed the dictatorial Assad family to stay in power. When the Assad’s came into power, Hafez and later Bashar, the liberalization of the Syrian economy violated the social contract of the nation, as it did in Tunisia and Egypt. The detainment of youths speaking out against leaders transformed civil unrest into political protests. The message of the anti-regime coalition spread through YouTube and other social media. But, seeing the combative use of social media in other Arab countries, Syria was ready for its effects and used social media itself to fight back. The regime targeted protestors speaking against the government’s ideals online. This active response proved effective, as Bashar Al-Assad remains in power.

Social media, certainly, did not cause the Arab Spring. But, after inciting demonstrations of political unrest in each country, social media platforms acted as logistical tools of spreading information. Each country’s response to social media protests dictated their success.