THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA UPON THE LEBANESE REVOLUTION OF
OCTOBER 17, 2019

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ABSTRACT

"Better to be free regardless of costs than to remain enslaved forever"

It is no secret or a matter to ignore that Social Networking Sites and Applications (SNSAs) influence has been one of the most active agents in mobilizing people of different ages, cultures, and beliefs. They could play a positive role in building civilized societies or drive humans back to a primitive age. Following a mixed quantitative and qualitative research, taking Lebanon as a case, the authors reached some conclusive remarks. (SNSAs) have played a major role in initiating and sustaining the Lebanese October Revolution by spreading information to educate the common citizen. The consequences spread like a snowball all over the country. What is remarkable stand in what differentiates such a Revolution from others? The demonstrators were able to maintain peaceful demonstrations. They united all citizens regardless of gender, age, and political affiliation. Social media was able to produce a unique type of revolution in spite of the fact that traditional leaders ignored their scandalous behavior, and instead opted to destroy the country rather than reform the system. The end result would not guarantee that (SNSAs) could intensify into violence should the national security forces resort to unlimited force? Social media has acted as a peaceful tool of communication.

KEYWORDS: Revolution, Social Media, Social Networking Sites and Applications, Peaceful Demonstrations, Culture

INTRODUCTION

On October 17, 2019, the Lebanese Ministry of Communication announced a new fee to be levied monthly, upon those who use WhatsApp online calling phone system for socializing, and communicating with their diverse human environment. This illegal increase of taxation along almost 50% of the Lebanese population who were already subjected to financial misery initiated a small snowball of popular discontent, anger, and rebellion. That little ball would have been abolished by minimal usage of force since the citizens have since the existence of the country been tamed, and enslaved to ignorance, violence, fake promises, corruption, and unlimited forms of fear. Protesters from all over Lebanon rallied around the chant “All of them mean all of them”. Indeed the successive rulers never stopped betraying their compatriots and using them as tools to assert their power, often transferred from father to son, wife or even grandchildren. The demographic composition of Lebanon was diverse based on 18 separate religious denominations coupled in modern times by over 50 political parties. Each political party and each religious denomination sought to take full control of the country, meaning natural resources, human resources, and political power.
As a result, one may question how Lebanon has become a special zoo hosting all types of vicious, weak and astute actors. A lawless society where justice, human equality and rights are trampled over by the "super leaders".

In brief, Lebanon is suffering from three majors killer diseases:

- Feudal governing by the same permanent leaders or tribal families.
- Over 50 political parties for a population of 6.849 million; 33% of them are Palestinian or Syrian refugees.

Furthermore, because of government deficiencies in providing the basic socio-economic needs of electricity and other necessities, Lebanese citizens pay twice the electrical and water bills. The educational fees are extremely high, with no social or medical security. They drown daily in the swamp in the garbage and bacterial diseases. Those who voice objections to the authorities are immediately labelled as national traitors. Consequently silenced, these are the major foundations that contributed to the birth of the popular revolution of 17 October. The citizens were waiting for an evasive miracle to happen whereby certain leadership would lead them out of bondage to freedom. They were hampered in taking any action because they lacked the usage of technological communication tools and leadership. Social media quickly filled up the vacuum they were suffering from. Valuable, sensitive, scandalous and cruel information destroying the country and its citizens were quickly disseminated. The citizens with blurred vision began to clearly and angrily see different sides of the truth.

This research intends to highlight the major role of social media in the success or failure of the revolution. Could the revolution exist and be sustained without social media, or does it form an integral part of the revolution unity and drive?

**DEFINITION OF SOCIAL MEDIA**

Five decades past, the people living in mountains and rural areas of Lebanon did not have the luxury to benefit from electrical and technological tools. They were mainly farmers, small traders and tourism agents. Worse, education was only afforded by the wealthy landlords or warlords. The citizens who lived in the country were almost isolated from those residing in the city. Poverty and social misery were accepted by the individuals as the essential basis of their destiny. In certain areas, there was no electrical power, no transportation nor medical services or other essential living conditions as applied in the developing countries. The per capita income varied between $50 to 400 per month. Politically, the citizens belonged to a specific "Zaim", a secular warlord or a religious dive authority. No modern constitution with the separation of powers' rule or democratic voting laws has been implemented or enforced. In governance, the golden rule was incarnated into corruption, unethical practice and way to increase one's wealth. Communication lines and tools were primitive.

It is only in the late eighties of the last century that the cellular phones were introduced in Lebanon at the highest cost compared in the region. The majorities of the citizens began asking questions, going to school and secure diplomas. Intelligent and talented ones often immigrated and did not return. This fight for survival constituted a key factor in keeping those who remained, to indulge in more corruption, resort to crimes, and seek security by stacking all kinds of weapons in their homes.

Following the civil war of 1975 many Lebanese acquired experience and became dissatisfied with their political system. In the meantime, technology has leaped tremendously in the future, globalization bridged the geographic distance between people on earth. A new culture was developed especially among the youth. Humans began tasting the value of
being free, respected and recognized. This cultural birth necessitated that many of the old imposed traditions and laws be removed.

The presence of these two cultures: the old and the new, generated conflicts, revolutions, and even bloody wars. Social Media played a determining factor in the success and failure of the popular uprising.

Since the introduction of Social Networking Sites and Applications (SNSAs) by hundreds, humans almost at all levels, applying these tools to serve a variety of interests and objectives. The (SNSAs) usage and application formed new of cultures, all revolving around them. In the developing countries where people have been for a long time abused and exploited by the ruling –noble class, the new culture of freedom and emancipation became integrated into their existence. Ignorance does no more control their aspirations and actions, rather the power to share or even dictate. This plurality of (SNSAs) applications cater to multiple, and diverse clientele, and in different manners. They become the first line of communication and moving agent especially when people are placing focus on looking at issues.

The social network offers individuals opportunities to learn, communicate with other cultures, and understand social rights and duties. They freely connect with others and share information

Research Methodology

The authors focused their research on previous research and upon their observance and interviews of the demonstrators. This includes reports by various media channels such as LBC, MTV, Mayadeen, and others. Writings and discourses by famous historians and political leaders, public Newspapers and Google Scholar. The main topics dealt with Social media and popular revolutions in the last decade. We paid deeper attention to the following three definitions about (SNSAs).

LITERATURE REVIEW

What is Social Media? Although scholars assume an inherent understanding of social media based on extant technology, there is no commonly accepted definition of what social media are, both functionally and theoretically, within communication studies (Carr & Hayes, 2015). The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines it as “forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (such as videos)” (“Social Media | Definition of Social Media by Merriam-Webster,” 2020). In addition, “…Developing and evaluating informatics tools and frameworks to measure the activities within social media networks from around the web. Data on conversations, engagement, sentiment, influence, and other specific attributes can then be collected, monitored, analyzed, summarized, and visualized.” (Yang, Kiang, Ku, Chiu, & Li, 2011)

Moreover we have seen other definitions using the interplay of people, tools and content: “social media consists of (a) the information infrastructure and tools used to produce and distribute content that has individual value but reflects shared values; (b) the content that takes the digital form of personal messages, news, ideas, that becomes cultural products; and (c) the people, organizations, and industries that produce and consume both the tools and the content” (Howard & Parks, 2012).

Social media platforms are playing an enormous role in today’s changing societies (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). It is getting individuals closer to information, increasing knowledge, reducing bad perceptions and altering old beliefs. Social technologies and applications have enabled and eased connection between individuals and information; they granted them
the ability to connect easily between each other’s and through the shared contents, helped them monitor other people, organizations and societies (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). However, the use of these platforms had raised the different concerns in terms of controlling, managing, and operating these relationships. In their work, Kietzmann & al, 2011 defined the honeycomb of seven functional blocks of social media: identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and groups.

Digital and social media have played a central role in the upsurge of protests and revolutions during the last decade. We have seen it in the Middle East and North African - MENA region with the Arab Spring especially in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria (Baker, 2011; Cottle, 2011; Khondker, 2011; Skinner, 2011), then with “Occupy Walls Street movement” in the United States of America (Gleason, 2013); after that we have seen protestors in the Ukrainian Revolution using social media platforms in order to communicate and spread the news and organize thousands of individuals (Bohdanova, 2014). Most of participators and witnesses believe that social media is still one of the leading forces behind the popular revolution MENA region in the region (Webster, 2011).

Lately, in October 17th 2019 Lebanon witnessed an enormous wave of unprecedented nationwide protests, and people took the street as a revolt against planned taxes on online calling such as WhatsApp and Viber. With the increased use of mobile devices many social media platforms among them WhatsApp application, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter played a crucial role in the spreading the news immediately after it happens. Social media took a powerful role in changing the society.

People nowadays tend to portray the revolutionary effects of social media (Croteau & Hoynes, 2013). Social media has created a whole new level of awareness among teenagers (Bruhn, Schoenmueller, & Schäfer, 2012). It stirred an entire depressed generation with their living conditions and economic inequality (Indaco & Manovich, 2016).Academicians had considered the effects of social media on protests and political revolutions as innovatory and may encourage dramatic social change (Gainous &Wagner, 2013; Qualman, 2009). Meanwhile, researchers are still divided between two opinions towards the Internet’s expansion and openness to fast and easy access to information and exchanges of ideas. Some believe that it has been powerful tool in enhancing the participation of the youth in politics, granting them more involvement in the civil society, and democracy (Hague & Loader, 1999), while others believe that governments through their abuse of power may manipulate users and suppress any future engagement in political activities (Dahlberg, 2001; Morozov, 2011).

These days, individuals are attached to social media (de Zúñiga, Barnidge, & Scherman, 2017). Social media is playing the role of a new interplay between new system of social political communication (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). Some referred to the some uprisings and revolutions by the Facebook, Twitter Revolutions, and recently the WhatsApp Revolution in Lebanon. This was due to the fast internet transmission and connection attached to the use of mobile multimedia usage and applications (sum’s, voice and video messages) that really altered the infrastructure of social connectivity and broadcasted on different social platforms (Bailard, 2009; Khamis & Vaughn, 2011).

THE LEBANESE REVOLUTION OF OCTOBER 17, 2019

Like a dormant but ready to erupt volcanoes, the people of Lebanon specifically the mothers, the young educated students and those struck by hunger and poverty and unemployment were waiting for the secret word to call. They were fed from being humiliated and having to hand over natural resources worth billions of US dollars while their own families are
abused by a corrupt and unqualified public management. Since almost every citizen had access to (SNSAs) a popular uprising crept amongst those who were in suffering and misery.

Causes of the Lebanese Revolution

The Political System

Most local historians and political scientists claim that Lebanon was at its birth, moribund and unnatural. It was imposed in 1860 by the superpowers then (the UK, Russia, France, Turkey, Austria, and Germany). These powers either ignored or disregarded the demographic cultural, religious and social forces controlling the Middle East area. They failed to think about possible future conflicts and gave in to an easy solution out. Their motives were driven by each super's interests and victory. The local population was either enslaved to the powerful ones or kept in darkness and ignorance. After all, they were tamed and had to follow, suffer or best immigrate to havens to secure their freedom and sustain their development. Families were split forever. The superpowers established a sort of fiefs upon which they extended limited financial and political control. Hence the local (ZUAMA), war lordship was intensified. Worse they scraped some rules and ineffective laws and rules to establish the state of corruption. With the Reglement Organique, imposed upon Lebanon mixing in an indigestible formula, they were able to simultaneously invent a theocratic and secular system. This system was founded on mistrust between religious factions, insecurity; thrive for power and control and almost disintegration of Lebanon. Consequently, Lebanon became the arena where gladiators whether regional or international display their art of war and applause their candidates. The picture may be summarized as follows:

- Deficiency in Lebanese laws, with no real separation of powers, rather a strict monopoly by the parliament in a state of no accountability.
- Introduction of two basic cults. One relates to leaders; the other to the "I" or no one.
- The educational system is based mainly on memorization and fraud.
- No modern housing policy. Instead the country’s drift in chaos and bribes. Furthermore, the people have been stripped from their seashore properties
- Unemployment reached 35% among the youth causing social crimes drug intake, and immigration.
- The basic services of infrastructure remain in prehistoric ages: Potable water, electrical power, roads, planning, transportation…
- Socially inadequate medical services for the poor and retired. No social security for those who spent over 30 years of their lives paying taxed and humiliated. No educational services for the poor and deprived.
- Garbage is scattered all over.
- Too much ignorance or no desire to improve and sustain any reform.
- The presence of tribal leaders and their followers, and the other 50 political parties. Absence of loyalty to a defined homeland takes control.

Worse, if you raise your criticism or objection to any policy or behaviour, you are immediately considered as a person coming from outside the “magical system”. In spite of it, all individuals feel compelled to submit to a leader and
accept their destiny. Here in this matter, we, the authors, like Anatole France regarding the Dreyfus affair, repeat: We "accuse those superpowers who abused human life, and environment in Lebanon."

We, the authors, wish to attract the readers to the following climax of the crime. To help Lebanese solve their problem the super leaders invented and demanded that it be applied, namely (consociational democracy) translated as consensus. This led to the present socio-political disease of national cake portioning. To please 18 official religious sects and over 50 political parties all decisions must be unanimous. The cake is on the table released to diverse human ogres to partition and enjoy.

The Socio-Economic System

Lebanon is divided into 18 religious sects, and each has its subdivisions. It is a religious state whereby Muslims and Christians, follow their multiple religious denominations dividing God into so many groups. The state watches and approves. Marriages, for example, between individuals belonging to these 18 religious sects cannot be effectuated in Lebanon based on the secular Lebanese laws, rather they are subject to punishment and humiliation should they violate the teachings of the grand masters. Furthermore, a viable government ought to have hundreds of plans for the development of cities and the countryside. Yet you might encounter some resorts that are only available for the wealthy, and the corrupted lords. The municipalities, instead of serving the citizens search for ways to serve themselves. Most of these municipalities acquire wealth through bribes, illegal transactions, and theft of public treasury. In spite of this deficiency, the Lebanese people continue to live in an intense virtual world founded on political promises preached by their masters. On the economic level, Lebanon had no economic plans; a budget with an uncontrolled deficit between spending and collecting. Import has been the driving economic factor; it has virtually no exports with 4 to 1 import export imbalance, along with over-inflated, unrealistic real estate practices leading Lebanese Youth to immigrate. The finances including people's money are at the mercy of banking and financial institutions and theories. Currently, during these times, the whole life of the citizens revolves around being tamed and obedient.

OBJECTIVES OF THE REVOLUTION

Political Ones

In such an extreme state of corruption, poverty, lawlessness, an archaic system whereby politicians ravaged the natural, human, and financial resources of the country. The revolution of suffering and discontent was fermented to explode in October 2019. Through social media, the appeal was launched for freedom, democratic practices, and qualified public management. Every cause listed in this research urgently needs reform or even total replacement of the system. The economic system is falling apart since Lebanon runs a high sovereign debt estimated at 144 percent of its GDP; lacking any formal economic policy. Banks are working less, and even refusing to fully satisfy their depositors of funds. Unemployment is skyrocketing, poverty, hunger, and sickness invaded the social demography. Crimes are increasing with limited protection. New scandals and crises creep daily out in the open.

The revolutionaries' participators, thanks to the application of social media developed great awareness of what their role ought to be. They reject being bought by another Marie Antoinette's biscuits. They long to be the power, not the servants. They decide who should rule them through democratic and civilized principles, laws, and applications such as total separation of powers, drafting a new constitution that protects individual rights and freedom. Enact a new and viable
electoral Law is a must. Once for all banking secrecy and any type of immunity to professionals, politicians and union members are to be revoked.

Social and Cultural

Demonstrators refuse to live in a country torn by religious bigotry, hate, and violence. They ask religious Muslim and Christian leaders to stop playing by their fate and morals. They want to be free and dignified human citizens. They oppose any form of religious discrimination and wars. The revolutionaries opted to grab all opportunities to unite as one people in one country, equals and supportive of each other. The October revolution differs in human behavior and demands for change compare to the violent French, Iraqi, Iranian and so forth. They are concerned with their employment, education, and health retirement survival. They opt for civilized conduct in transmitting their demands. In brief, they are looking for a clean country ruled by conscientious and highly qualified management experts.

Economic

It is no secret that Lebanese culture revolves around the parents' concern to see their children succeed with wealthy and prestigious responsibilities. This is the golden oriental theory. They spend every penny they earn to promote the welfare of their children. Consequently, as an example, 75 percent of these young men and women do graduate from universities. The total cost per individual's education fees could vary between $150 to 800. They graduated but there is no work except at the minimum level of $650 per month. An earning that could not equal the interest rate on their investment. Often, they face two choices: either live under the poverty level, or immigrate for an unlimited time. As a result, the poor population increases at an alarming level. Individual citizen pays two electrical bills per month, if they get electrical power. He/she buys water to wash and water to drink. He/she is exposed to merciless germs from the unresolved garbage problem. Imagine 1000 villages lacking sewage treatment system; consequently, the polluted water is used to irrigate vegetables and trees. Factories close down due to the high cost of energy and raw materials. They are less competitive in outside differentiated market. The entire infra-structure is so primitive that it may be qualified as a remnant of WWI. If you drive on most roads you can be sure that your car will break down. Bumps are filling roads to please someone who inhabits the area while the citizen has to junk his/her car due to broken pieces.

The Interviews Results

The authors have also opted to conduct limited but highly important interviews as per the following questions. The interviewees have been selected from all over Lebanon based on their expertise and professionalism:

Question 1: What is the effect of Social Media on the revolution and protests?

• It helped the spread of the revolution news and increased the effect on people participation.

• Its effect is very efficient and it gives spirit to the people when they know that they are been covered by social media.

• Social media has played in conveying what is happening since day one. The live broadcast was essential to connect people everywhere

• Social Media was the main drive for people to freely interact without any fear by filming, recording and broadcasting live what has been actually happening.
• Social Media encouraged responsible citizens to act as real reporters and send full coverage, minute by minute about the demonstrations throughout the country.

Question 2: How do you perceive Social Media as a tool connecting revolutionists inside and outside Lebanon?
• Not only in Lebanon ... we saw it as a basic tool in all revolutions of the world and Middle east ... it is documenting and disclosing many scandals and crimes.
• I have no one answer for such question. It is, it was and will always have this special linkage between people from different backgrounds, ages, and places.
• Social media has been the main tool to make the voices of all categories of people heard, whether inside Lebanon or abroad. It helped to connect the sense of nationalism all over the world, in addition to the field movements and updates.
• As a tool, protestors used it to the Maximum in order to communicate inside and outside Lebanon. One can see demonstrations of Lebanese across the Globe trying to support the October Revolution
• From my point of view, I think that people had realized earlier that Social Media is the new way to send messages freely and without any fear. We saw and heard things about different political parties that we would never believe they would happen.

Question 3: What is the role of Social Media in boosting communication within target groups nationally and internationally?
• It was the main real instrument to keep people updated
• It’s very important to connect people with each other in order to know what’s happening and in order to know how we must respond. When people outside Lebanon see people inside Lebanon still protesting they will get encouraged to continue.
• Social media was able to reach target groups and affect those who were not totally involved. It pumped the pulse of the revolutionists.
• Using the different applications (like WhatsApp) and Social Networking, Facebook, People started creating Revolution groups in order to expedite messages in different areas and times
• I would say that without these social media applications, we would not arrive to what we have achieved in taking control of the streets, and taking actions.

Question 4: What will be the future use of Social Media in future movements?
• Social media offers a diversity of tools that help the protestors or the followers to be an efficient vehicle in spreading the information and documentation of daily events.
• It’s enough for social media to cover any movement; there is no need to do more than covering.
• Thawra (revolution) revolutionists will continue to broadcast via the various means of social media, whether the private ones have been restricted to a certain level or not. Social media will accompany all future movements in parallel.

• Any future revolutions will learn from its previous ones, especially the social media coverage and effect

• New applications can be created and downloaded in order to spread the word and news on the spot

Question 5: Could the revolution happen without the use of Social Media?

• It will be very meek and limited. It will remove the butterfly effect on social movements.

• I think no revolution can succeed nowadays without social media.

• The revolution exists regardless of any circumstance. The revolutionists had to go live with videos, shouts, and pictures to the whole world in the presence of social media.

• Social media had given the Lebanese revolution a special effect and the Lebanese revolution gave the social media a new blend for future revolutions.

• Without social media we may have a revolution, but not as powerful, interactive and up-to-date.

Question 6: If we consider the Revolution as a Three Phases operation: Phase 1: Silmiyye, (peaceful); partially violent and violent.... What are the Pros & Cons of Social Media usage in the revolution phases?

• I think for all phases it has the same pros and cons based on instant communication with the protesters and a worldwide audience. People also can congregate within minutes or hours.

• It reflects the unity of the Lebanese, regardless of their religious, economic, or social status.

• In the Silmiyye process, we found the people from different places united to walk and protest.

• At the beginning people were energized but the political parties did not react according to the people voices and wishes

Question 7: If we think about the Revolution as a Three Phases: Phase 3: Now after a New Government has been established.... What are the Pros & Cons of Social Media usage in the revolution phases?

• Same as before

• The social media can stop from being used when the people see an actual result and that the revolution succeeded.

• Its role continues to convey how each party behaves, how the path of freedom shall proceed till the free Lebanese attain their righteous objectives.

• Better to used social media coverage to re-strengthen and remobilize the crowd.

ROLE AND IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA: CONCLUSIONS

With today's technological creativity and application to all facets of human life, people 50 years ago were still using certain primitive tools for communication. Consider the 6 billion humans who were strangers to each other, are in our days capable of communicating with any company or individuals regardless of their nationality or location. International
business developed leading to the concept of globalization. Social media has been turned into energy that can be destructive if badly implemented or positively constructive. It is more evident than any time that we, humans are able to develop and sustain (1) a world of peace, and prosperity, or (2) drift into a world of violence and destruction. Our research focused on finding out what role did social media played in instigating, and nurturing the Lebanese revolution of October 17?

Based on actual governmental documents, on the media's findings, and limited interviews with highly selected citizens and leaders, with respect to the great diversity in the country, as well as archives of certain journals, the research led us to the following findings:

The social media in Lebanon acted in the first stage the instigator and promoter of the October 17, peaceful revolution. Indeed the revolutionists abjured from using violent means to express their opposition.

In the second stage, violence was introduced by some injected foreign elements amongst the demonstrators. The result was limited violent actions and sometimes conflict with the Lebanese security forces.

Now in stage three, after more 100 days of its declaration, a government has changed the games that have changed. The new government is essentially political and failed to understand and fulfill most of the objectives of the revolution. Reforms are still a long shot; judicial and administrative appointments are waiting at the political doors.

Already the revolutionaries rejected the political government. Although it is difficult to predict the future, what is somehow evident is that the social media role may turn, at a desperate stage by the revolutionist into tools for bloodshed and destruction.

Social Networking Sites and Applications (SNSAs) influence in Lebanon has been one of the most active agents in mobilizing people of different ages, cultures, and beliefs. Women played a positive role in building and mobilizing civilized demonstrations. They led by example, bringing the demonstrations to a new level and new way. Moreover, (SNSAs) took one of the key roles in igniting and sustaining the Lebanese October Revolution by spreading the key information about the corrupt politicians and regime to educate the common citizen. The consequences of these were like butterfly effect, peaceful demonstrations spread like a snowball all over the country. In fact, the Lebanese people and social media were able to act as a peaceful tool of communication in order produce a unique type of revolution.

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