

Environment and Urbanization

<http://eau.sagepub.com>

Bloggers' street movement and the right to the city. (Re)claiming Cairo's real and virtual "spaces of freedom"

Wael Salah Fahmi

Environment and Urbanization 2009; 21; 89

DOI: 10.1177/0956247809103006

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://eau.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/21/1/89>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



[International Institute for Environment and Development](http://www.iied.org)

Additional services and information for *Environment and Urbanization* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://eau.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://eau.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations <http://eau.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/21/1/89>



Bloggers' street movement and the right to the city. (Re)claiming Cairo's real and virtual "spaces of freedom"

WAEEL SALAH FAHMI

Dr Wael Salah Fahmi is Associate Professor of Architecture and Urban Design in the Department of Architecture at Helwan University, Cairo, and a visiting academic at the University of Manchester, UK.

He is an architect-planner with research interests in the development of inner-city urban poverty areas, population eviction and resettlement. He has been working on Greater Cairo's urban growth problems, focusing on the rehabilitation of historical Cairo, the adjacent cemetery informal settlements and the garbage collectors community. Some recent research has examined Greater Cairo's housing dynamics and gated suburban communities as well as street movements.

Address: 34 Abdel Hamid Lotfi Street, Mohandessein, Giza/Cairo, Egypt 12311; tel: 00 202 33370485; fax: 00 202 33351630; e-mail: uders2004@yahoo.co.uk and uders2003@yahoo.co.uk

Acknowledgment: This article was presented under the title, "Contested spatiality from the street to the square: (re)claiming Cairo's spaces of freedom" at the Royal Geographical Society and Institute of British Geographers

ABSTRACT Faced with formidable challenges to expression in Cairo's public spaces, urban blogger activists have developed new ways of articulating dissent, namely spatial tactics ranging from boycott campaigns, cyber-activism and protest art, to innovations in mobilization, means of communication and organizational flexibility. This is particularly evident in the way these activists have (re)claimed Cairo's contested public spaces in downtown Unions Street and Midan al Tahrir (Liberation Square) and transformed them into zones for public protest, employing urban installations and street graffiti and constructing significant sites of urban resistance and spatial contestation. The emergence of this grassroots street activism opens up a new public sphere through which the role of urban governance might be contested to accommodate cultural identities within various forms of spatiality and popular democracy.

KEYWORDS blogging / Cairo / protest / social movements / urban youth

I. NETWORKED SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND HYBRID SPACES OF FREEDOM

The age of communications and its associated transnational public spheres has witnessed the emergence of new social movements⁽¹⁾ represented through loosely organized and open networks.⁽²⁾ These "resistant networks" are regarded as a defence "...against the placeless logic of the space of flows characterizing social domination in the Information Age."⁽³⁾ Flows of people, information, images, easily cross borders with a greater degree of flexibility than ever before.

With the emergence of "Notopia",⁽⁴⁾ the Internet became inhabited by global cyber "hacktivists" (hackers and activists) who are also mobile *flâneur* activists.⁽⁵⁾ These hacktivists mobilize and organize massive anti-globalization rallies via the Internet, constantly travelling and reassembling for street demonstrations in various cities around the globe⁽⁶⁾ – a shift from the immobility of old urban movements of the working class. New social movements, with their do-it-yourself approach to information and communication technologies, have nevertheless mixed old and new technologies, merging virtual and physical spaces into "networks of alternative communication".⁽⁷⁾

These networks are linked to "social centres" that shelter transnational networks in unoccupied buildings and abandoned urban spaces, where

innumerable media groups work with WiFi, video streaming, satellite wireless connections, websites and the non-commercial open-source operating system, Linux.⁽⁸⁾ From the national “print publics” that informed movements, to the “electronic sit-in” by activists blocking the World Trade Organization’s (WTO) website in 1999, information tends to outrun institutional networks, flowing along more invisible spaces and “submerged networks”.⁽⁹⁾ The spaces of resistance constituted within these hybrid physical and virtual worlds have created new geographies of protest. On the one hand, global networks’ geographic mobility, loose organizational models and access to communications have shifted their campaigns and resources to alternative virtual venues.⁽¹⁰⁾ On the other hand, as events are reported through websites, blogs and streams in a collaborative social process, a means of navigation is provided for street protestors.⁽¹¹⁾ Media activism no longer means just making and editing images/texts, or viewing video or audio clips, but also uses the Internet as a work space, social centre and project workshop so that virtual and physical spaces are experienced almost as a single space of communication. The expansion of the communication space and the creation of public spheres for political organization and network formation have contributed towards holding together the diversity of the anti-globalization movement,⁽¹²⁾ mainly through public access points regarded as a hub for exchanging information.⁽¹³⁾

Since the 1999 protests in Seattle against the WTO talks, the process of reclaiming the streets and producing emancipatory globalized public spheres has taken different forms of expression and practice, with the launching of IndyMedia (the Internet-based network of independent media centres (IMCs)), which emerged as the backbone of communication for the broad coalition of anti-capitalism movement activists.

“Those on the streets could get messages from friends via SMS about what was happening where. The permanent presence of portable, mobile, transportable media equipment on the street, whether in the form of buses or public access terminals, satellite dishes or camera and mini-disc recording devices, affects more than reporting – it changes the form of political articulation, can become part of interventions, contribute to the permanent production of the public sphere; a public sphere no longer has to distinguish between ‘real’ and ‘virtual’. It is thus only logical when parts of the global protest movement increasingly demand not only ‘free movement’ but also ‘free communication’, while skillfully connecting virtual and physical space.”⁽¹⁴⁾

“Reports were coming in from video makers, radio journalists, reports with mobiles around the city. We knew the precise scale of the clamp-down against the anti-WTO protestors, who was injured, who was arrested. The tension was rising and the IMC was stuck right in the middle of the ‘no-protest zone’, where all constitutional rights were suspended.”⁽¹⁵⁾

“Imperfect, insurgent, sleepless and beautiful, we directly experienced the success of the first IMC in Seattle and saw the common dream of ‘a world in which many worlds fit’ is possible – step by step, piece by piece, space by space, pdf by pdf, word by word, over the net on pirate broadcast, in the streets, streaming live and most importantly, face to face.”⁽¹⁶⁾

(RGS-IBG) Annual International Conference 2007, London, 28–31 August 2007.

1. Leontidou, L (2006), “Urban social movements: from the ‘right to the city’ to transnational spatialities and *flâneur* activists”, *City* Vol 10, No 3, pages 259–268.

2. Melucci, A (1996), *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 441 pages; also McKay, G (1996), *Senseless Acts of Beauty*, Verso, London and New York, 228 pages; and Castells, M (1997), *The Power of Identity*, Blackwell, Oxford and New York, 461 pages.

3. See reference 2, Castells (1997), page 358, cited in J Urry (2000), *Sociology Beyond Societies: Mobilities for the Twenty-first Century*, Routledge, London and New York, page 142.

4. “Notopia” is an expression coined by Papadimitriou, and is derived from the Greek term *no-topos*, meaning no place, no location, no map. See, Papadimitriou, F (2006), “A geography of ‘Notopia’. Hackers et al., hacktivism, urban cyber-groups/cyber-cultures and digital social movements”, *City* Vol 10, No 3, pages 317–326.

5. A “*flâneur*” is a person who walks the city in order to experience it. The meaning was largely developed by Charles Baudelaire, a nineteenth century French poet, critic and translator. See reference 1, based on the concept of *flâneur* in Benjamin, W (1983), *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet Era of High Capitalism*, Verso, London. “*Flâneur* activists” are people who travel from town to town in order to attend militant rallies, constantly reassembling in cities around the globe. The term was coined by Leontidou. See reference 1.

6. In relation to those *flâneur* activists, one politician declared that “...there is no place in democracy for an anarchist travelling circus that goes from summit to summit with the sole purpose of causing as much mayhem as possible.”

7. Hamm, Marion (2003), "A r/c tivism in physical and virtual spaces", republicart.net 09/2003, <http://republicart.net/disc/realpublicspaces/hamm02_en.htm>, accessed 10 June 2007.
8. Notes from Nowhere (2003), "Indymedia 'precursors and birth'", in Notes from Nowhere (editors), *We Are Everywhere. The Irresistible Rise of Global Anticapitalism*, Verso, London, New York, pages 230–244.
9. Anderson, B (1988), *Imagined Communities*, Verso, London and New York.
10. Tarrow, S (1998), *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 288 pages; also Della Porta, D, H Kriesi and D Rucht (editors) (1999), *Social Movements in a Globalizing World*, St Martin's Press, New York, 272 pages.
11. Hamm, Marion (2006), "Reclaiming virtual and physical spaces. Indymedia London at the Halloween critical mass", in *Hybrid Space – How Wireless Media Mobilize Public Space – Open 2006/ No 11*, NAI Publishers, SKOR, pages 96–111.
12. See reference 7.
13. See reference 8, page 241.
14. See reference 7.
15. See reference 8, page 241.
16. Ruggiero, Greg (1999), *Microradio and Democracy: (Low) Power to the People*, Seven Stories Press, New York; also see reference 8, page 238.
17. See reference 8, page 241.
18. See reference 8, page 234.
19. Pickerill, J and P Chatterton (2006), "Notes towards autonomous geographies: creation, resistance and self-management as survival tactic", *Progress in Human Geography* Vol 30, No 6, pages 730–746.
20. Mertes, T (2004), *The Movement of Movements. A Reader*, Verso, London, 288 pages.
21. See reference 19.

IndyMedia has linked decentralized actions and networks with familiar forms of struggle such as mass marches, rallies and reclaiming of spaces, challenging the boundaries between reporter and activist, documentation and spectacle, expert and amateur, techie and content producer, cyberspace and real space.⁽¹⁷⁾

In an interview, Jeff Perlstein of Media Alliance stated:

"Although we are all linked now by this website Indymedia.org, there's a real emphasis on the physical spaces because one of the whole points is to reclaim space for ourselves for people to interact and to come together and dialogue and exchange, and that can happen in the virtual realm but most powerfully happens when we're face to face. So these physical locations are linked by this virtual connection."⁽¹⁸⁾

It has become common to think not of a single movement⁽¹⁹⁾ but, rather, of a "movement of movements",⁽²⁰⁾ lacking a centre, difficult to control, monitor and police and not conducive to the formation of hierarchies, leaders and the centralization of power. The use of affinity groups sharing common goals and areas at a human scale⁽²¹⁾ has been common with alternative and independent media such as IndyMedia, which have developed non-hierarchical communication techniques.⁽²²⁾ Techniques such as collaborative webpages used by social forums allow wide participation and discussion on visions and practical alternatives. In 1996, the Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) called for a strategic move away from the streets, declaring that the new geography is a virtual geography, and the core of political and cultural resistance must assert itself in electronic space, thus bringing a new model of resistant practice into action.⁽²³⁾

Weblogs (blogs)⁽²⁴⁾ have been heralded as a new space for such collaborative creativity,⁽²⁵⁾ allowing writers greater access to flexible publishing methods.⁽²⁶⁾ Blogs offer online interactions between bloggers and readers, through bloggers' updates, audience comments and the number of "hits" or visits to their blog sites.⁽²⁷⁾ The synchronous and playful environments of IRC (Internet relay chat) and MUDs (multi-user domains), and the role-playing and use of pseudonyms, lead to online or virtual identities as performative, fragmented, multiple and often subversive. With the active role of the "blogosphere" within global computer-mediated communication (CMC)-based virtual space, bloggers became part of a virtual transnational community, encouraging civil participation and online political activism, while continuing to produce unimaginable quantities of indexed, archived and hyperlinked material created by the mass ceremony of instant publishing.

With the rapid development of mobile technology, blogging from a portable device (mobile blogging (or moblogging), photo blogging, video blogging) has affected many users' personal communications,⁽²⁸⁾ as images became an increasingly common element within the blogosphere.⁽²⁹⁾ Such visual blogs reveal how images operate online and how they interact with text, representing the unadorned evidence of everyday events.⁽³⁰⁾

II. THE BLOGGERS' MOVEMENT AND THE EGYPTIAN BLOGOSPHERE

The qualitative study reported here explored the Egyptian bloggers' movement, looking at their experiences with cyber political activism and

street actions for democratic reforms. In addition to drawing on alternative media online publications posted on the Egyptian blogosphere, the author conducted informal discussions and unstructured interviews with various bloggers, and was an observer at sit-ins and street demonstrations over a period of six months (March–August 2006), including the Spring 2006 demonstrations within downtown Cairo's European Quarter. The study indicates the importance of participant observation (as opposed to purely quantitative research methods) in examining the social dimension of blogosphere, given the complexity of the literal and metaphorical construction of blogosphere and its interconnectedness in terms of social space.

Confronted by an emergency law since 1981, which restricts the organization of public rallies and the distribution of posters in the streets, the Egyptian blogosphere has developed into a virtual platform for socio-political expression, as bloggers navigate between online activism and social spaces for protest.⁽³¹⁾ Blogger activists have created an Internet hub, encouraging "citizen journalism" by sending accounts of demonstrations and pictures of police abuses and posting these on the web as a contemporary archive of Egypt's battle for democracy, and becoming increasingly employed in directing political campaigns and mobilizing people for rallies and demonstrations.

Since 2005, Egyptian bloggers have created spaces of protest within hybrid physical and virtual worlds. Their extensive use of information and communication technologies was appropriated through collaborative content management systems (Wikis) and media streams, in convergence with various forms of street protest. Despite demonstrating similar tactics, Egyptian bloggers' street actions were not initially connected to anti-globalization movements. These bloggers started to experiment with the Internet as an additional space to articulate political dissent, organizing their repertoire of contention through web-based campaigns, and were only later influenced by practices of transnational movements against neoliberal globalization.

a. The Egyptian blogosphere⁽³²⁾ and online activism

Recent figures (July 2007) listed a total of 1,481 blogs on the Egyptian blog ring (Table 1). All new posts on any of these blogs are aggregated at the Egyptian blog aggregator (<http://www.omraneya.net/>), with an index that enables readers to follow new posts minutes after the bloggers have published them. This multi-faceted web hub provided open-source web development.

"We offer Drupal-based free hosting space and free aid developing a website for any cause we find worthy or interesting and for any speech that is censored or prosecuted in Egypt. The blog has posts in both Arabic and English and the site includes an Egyptian blog aggregator, also in both languages, photo galleries, database and video documentaries." (Informal discussion with a blogger)

Bloggers are part of a loose network not affiliated with a particular political group, although some are active members of the Egyptian Movement for Change, Kefaya ("Enough").⁽³³⁾ When, on 25 May 2005, government supporters assaulted protesters during a demonstration against the presidential referendum,⁽³⁴⁾ despite facing hostility when filming during actions and

22. Kidd, D (2003), "Indymedia.org: a new communications commons", in M McCaughey and M Ayers (editors), *Cyberactivism: Online Activism in Theory and Practice*, Routledge, London.

23. See reference 11; also Critical Ensemble (1996), *Electronic Civil Disobedience and Other Unpopular Ideas*, Automedia, New York, 144 pages.

24. A blog is an interactive webpage, regarded as an online journal, which is published on the World Wide Web. Blog articles or blog entries are called "posts", which appear in reverse chronological order, with the most recent appearing first. Old posts that are categorized by topic or by date are accessed through sidebar links. A blogosphere is a collection of related blogs that can cover a particular topic, current events or personal thoughts, with each post having a comment section for readers' interaction with the blog author (blogger) and with other readers. To read blogs and news via RSS (Really Simple Syndication), an account needs to be created to use any of the freely available online blogs and news feed syndicators. Blogs have links to various websites and homepages and to lists of other blogs (blogrolls). Some of the popular hosting services are <https://www.blogger.com/> and <http://www.blogsome.com/>.

25. Blood, Rebecca (2000), "Weblogs: a history and perspective, Rebecca's pocket", <http://www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog_history.html>, accessed 11 November 2006.

26. Lampa, G (2005), "Imagining the blogosphere: an introduction to the imagined community of instant publishing", <http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/imagining_the_blogosphere.html>, accessed 11 November 2006.

27. Blanchard, A (2005), "Blogs as virtual communities: identifying a sense of community in the Julie/Julia Project", <http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/blogs_as_virtual.html>, accessed 11 November 2006.

28. Wang, Hsiu-Chuan, Yi-Shin Deng and Sean Chiu (2005), "Beyond photo blogging: new directions of mobile communication", Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on Human Computer Interaction with Mobile Devices and Services, Salzburg, pages 341–342.

29. Badger, M (2005), "Visual blogs", <http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogsphere/visual_blogs.html>, accessed 11 November 2006.

30. See reference 29.

31. Bayat, A (2003), "The street and the politics of dissent in the Arab world", *Middle East Report (MERIP)* No 226, http://www.merip.org/mer/mer226/226_bayat.html, accessed 11 October 2006.

32. The term "Egyptian blogosphere" usually refers to blogs written by Egyptians or by non-Egyptians living in Egypt. See <http://www.egyptsites.com/dir/egypt-blogs>.

33. The Egyptian Movement for Change, Kefaya ("Enough"), was formed in 2004 when intellectuals and public figures signed a founding statement demanding real political changes and an end to economic inequality and corruption. Between 2004 and 2005, Kefaya transformed from an umbrella organization binding various groups, ideologies and visions into a protest street movement. The movement's concept of the "good society" proposed a transitional phase of one to two years during which emergency law would be lifted and a national coalition caretaker government formed to devise the rules of the post-transition political period. Kefaya's "strategic vision for change" aimed at the transformation from a one-man state to a multi-party democracy, the adjustment of legal and judicial situations and a respect for public liberties and basic human rights.

34. The 2005 referendum was focused mainly on amending constitutional Article 76, which allows the nomination of more than one candidate for presidential elections.

TABLE 1
The Egyptian blog ring

		Number	Percentage
Languages	English	590	39.8
	Arabic	874	59.0
	French	8	0.5
Categories	Personal	703	47.5
	Politics	320	21.6
	Art and culture	207	14.0
	Photologs	35	2.4
	Entertainment	24	1.6
	Society	109	7.4
	Technology	77	5.2

SOURCE: Mansour, Mohamed (2007), "Is blogging a bursting bubble?" *Daily News Egypt* (3 November 2007), accessed 30 November 2008 at <http://www.thedailynewsegypt.com/article.aspx?ArticleID=10091>.

demonstrations, bloggers posted reports, with several photo and video blogs of police attacks and arrests spreading throughout the Egyptian press, on Arabic satellite television stations and on the Internet.

As a blogger posted in May 2007:

"Bloggers' voices are clearly heard worldwide. They are independent and free. They act individually, campaign collectively. To have uncontrollable bloggers in Egypt who shape public opinion and raise topics about torture, corruption and election falsification on mainstream media is not something a police state would accept. As bloggers are summoned to state security headquarters, some stop blogging, fearing the consequences of speaking out, while others lose their jobs. The regime is labelling bloggers a 'bunch of kids' who go to jail. Now when parents find out that their sons or daughters are blogging, they feel concerned about their safety and try to convince them otherwise."

The Egyptian government subsidizes Internet access, and Internet cafes are widespread and have 4.2 million users. However, the recent establishment of the General Administration for Information and Documentation and the Department for Confronting Computer and Internet Crime, two security units within the Ministry of Interior that are in charge of online surveillance and monitoring, has led to the detention of some bloggers and the blocking of their blogs by authorities.⁽³⁵⁾ Bloggers were among the 300 protesters jailed during the April–May 2006 suppression of projudiciary reform demonstrations. "Blogging is a new but growing phenomenon. The government is monitoring and it does not like what it sees" said the director of the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information.⁽³⁶⁾

Under Egypt's emergency laws, which have been in place for nearly 25 years, bloggers could be jailed indefinitely. A special court reviews such detentions every 15 days, applying Article 80(d) of the penal code, which criminalizes "harming Egypt's image". Officials declared: "They could be punished for what they are writing according to the law, because it is libel... If they think that what they are doing is an expression of their freedom, they should remember who gave them this chance and who is insisting on its continuity."⁽³⁷⁾

Such official reactions have nevertheless strengthened the networks of alternative communication, resulting in technical improvements and new connections between bloggers and advocacy groups and civil liberty organizations.

During 2007, 50 blogs and websites were threatened as a result of a lawyer's case against the government for allowing these websites to exist. Eventually he lost his case, as the State Commissioner Committee refused to block the websites, regarding blogging as a form of journalism, although they conceded the government's right to remove pages that contained insults against the aggrieved party in the case.⁽³⁸⁾

In March 2007, amid little or no coverage in the mainstream media, police security attacked a street demonstration against the regime's constitutional reforms, detaining more than 35 young activists and bloggers. The constitutional amendments, which will allegedly give the ruling National Democratic Party more political power, aimed to "...ensure the continuation of the dictatorial rule over the country, the inheritance of succession and the abolishment of judiciary monitoring of the elections."⁽³⁹⁾

b. Extracts from bloggers' narratives

Narratives were recorded during informal discussions and unstructured interviews with various bloggers about their experiences, focusing on their attitudes towards online activism as alternative spaces of freedom and towards the Egyptian blogosphere. The bloggers were selected based on their political involvement in street demonstrations and history of blogging. Most Egyptian bloggers use pseudonyms, as they feel this gives them more freedom to write about politics without being detained. Given the recent detainment of some bloggers and the blocking of their web logs by security authorities, the author agreed not to reveal the names of the bloggers or blogs referred to in this paper (Table 2).

"The Internet, and the rise of blogs in particular, have afforded Egyptians an unprecedented opportunity to make their voices heard, to exchange ideas and to communicate across borders. Where the press is tightly controlled, pro-democracy human rights activists and journalists, who are shut out from the mainstream media, have taken to the web to disseminate information as they set up their own blogs free of charge." (Blogger A)

"Most bloggers have been infused by politics rather than having driven the political movement. Maybe in few years, when we see thousands of blogs, we can claim that blogs affected politics. Right now, I think it's the other way around: the political climate has affected bloggers." (Blogger B)

"I think there is disagreement about political activism through blogging. Most bloggers simply express their political views, but only some of them are also activists. Some have been politicized by the blogs and have become part of the Egyptian Movement for Change, Kefaya. They interact with the movement on both fronts: the intellectual (through analysis and criticism); and the practical (by physically joining demonstrations). This is why they are attracted to Kefaya, which is more of a flexible coordinating framework than an actual organization. It certainly does not adopt a single ideology." (Blogger C)

35. Reporters without Borders have released a handbook on blogging with detailed information on how to set up a blog, the ethics of blogging, blogging anonymously, censorship and personal accounts of bloggers from different countries. See http://www.rsf.org/rubrique.php?id_rubrique=542.

36. See the Arabic Network for Human Rights information website, <http://www.hrinfor.net/en/>.

37. See reference 36.

38. See reference 36.

39. See reference 36.

TABLE 2
Selected bloggers' profiles

	Language	Name	Gender	Industry/profession	Location	Started blogging
Blogger A	English	Real name	Male	Graphic designer, video director and photographer	Cairo	November 2001
Blogger B	English	Real name	Male	Editor, journalist, human rights researcher	Cairo	November 2005
Blogger C	Arabic	Real name	Male	Civil engineer, part-time journalist	Cairo	September 2005
Blogger D	Arabic/ English	Real name	Female	Journalist and media correspondent	Cairo	July 2005
Blogger E	Arabic	Pseudonym	Female	Journalist	Cairo	May 2005
Blogger F	Arabic	Pseudonym	Male	Mechanical engineering student	Alexandria	September 2005
Blogger G	English	Pseudonym	Female	Media and communications	Cairo	January 2005
Blogger H	Arabic	Real name	Female	Communications engineer, journalist	Alexandria	February 2005
Blogger I	Arabic	Real name	Male	ICT professional	Cairo	November 2003
Blogger J	Arabic	Real name	Male	Assistant lecturer in rural sociology	Cairo	November 2003
Blogger K	English	Real Name	Male	School teacher	Cairo	June 2005
Blogger L	Arabic	Real name	Male	Engineering student	Cairo	December 2005

SOURCE: Field survey (March–August 2006).

“Those who read blogs have access to computers and high-speed Internet and have the luxury of time to sit around and talk about politics read blogs. Although I am convinced that blogging will eventually influence pro-democracy reform initiatives, this doesn't necessarily mean taking to the streets. Despite being fuelled by bloggers, political activism remains a personal choice.” (Blogger D)

“The good thing about blogs is that they're an independent source of information. I think activist bloggers are forming an interactive popular electronic journalism that is more truthful, reliable and revealing than the coverage of any other form of mainstream media of recent political events in Egypt. This kind of effective activism is informative, while creating a new kind of awareness among Internet users.” (Blogger E)

“Internet activism contributes substantially to initiatives of reform. Before the recent arrests of some bloggers, I would have said that cyber activism has little effect. But now I believe that detaining activist bloggers exposed security measures used against Egyptians in general if they tried to express themselves. The detentions drew the attention of most human rights organizations in Egypt and abroad and raised so many questions about the seriousness of the reform process.” (Blogger F)

“I think that the blogosphere is a reflection of the current sociopolitical reality. There are some open-minded and truthful people but much more dogmatism. However I don't see bloggers as a force to contend with or as having any effect on reform initiatives.” (Blogger G)

"Blogging is the best way to make your voice heard. The best thing a blogger can do is record demonstrations and events by taking pictures and publishing them. I believe in the power of blogging and Internet activism in general. Look at how much media attention was given to the arrest of bloggers to see how effective this new tool is becoming. Who organized the sit-in of Midan al Tahrir? The bloggers. Many magazines and papers are now publishing pictures taken by these bloggers." (Blogger H)

"While mainstream media would report a protest through a short clip on TV or a photo in a newspaper, bloggers give a very detailed description of street protests, with many photos and anecdotal observations compared to the official media." (Blogger I)

"Blogs have been a good means of providing accounts of recent street protests, since they are not regulated by censorship or by any political affiliations. Each blogger just captures his or her experience. Mailing lists, online forums, e-mails and SMS messages could provide forms of citizen journalism and are effective ways of delivering information and mobilizing people. We managed to recruit more than 100 youth activists through blogs and other forms of citizen journalism." (Blogger J)

"As a freelance journalist I coordinated the production of a short documentary tracing democracy in Egypt. After the official filming was over, blogger street activists who were absolutely unknown to me became very familiar contacts and friends later on. At this point, a blogger helped me design my webpage and later encouraged me to turn it into a blog where I posted my archived photos." (Blogger K)

c. Bloggers and Youth for Change reclaiming the streets

In February 2005, many bloggers who were active members of the Egyptian Movement for Change (Kefaya) decided to organize themselves into a proper collective, Al Shebab min Agl Al Tagheer, or Youth for Change. They had mainly been involved in the Spring 2003 anti-Iraq war movement (known as the "20th March") and Palestine solidarity campaigns. While the government's massive roundup and imprisonment of hundreds of protesters in the weeks following the 2003 anti-war demonstrations did impede the movement, the immediate war period constituted an important step in opening doors to critics of domestic policy.

Initially regarded as the semi-official youth section of the Kefaya movement, Youth for Change's five rotating committees (media, communications, culture, art and outreach) were run by a five-person steering committee. Active members of the group formed temporary social centres as they moved with their laptops and mobile phones from coffee shops to university halls to unions and syndicates throughout the city. The group was technologically savvy, spreading their message through e-mails, SMS messages and blogs. Youth for Change's strategy is almost guerrilla-style in relation to some of the more conservative tactics of Kefaya.

After a demonstration at the Press Syndicate on 30 July 2005, where baton-wielding security personnel and plain-clothes security men had beaten up a number of protesters and arrested at least 23, a young activist confided: "*This is a fight for young people like me who want to have jobs, a house*

and get married. I cannot do that when I get paid 300 pounds (approximately US\$ 50) per month."

Bloggers' alternative news websites are probably the most important sites through which networks of critical and informed constituencies are formed; yet the extent and efficacy of these new virtual spaces of contention remain limited. The street remains the most vital locus for the audible expression of collective identities, as urban youth activists and bloggers meet in coffee shops, unions and syndicates throughout the city on a daily basis. By June 2005, they had taken their message directly to the street, targeting working-class Cairo communities such as Shoubra and Al-Sayeda Zeinab (Box 1). Groups of two to four activists visited public squares and distributed flyers as they engaged people on the street in impromptu discussions.

"In seeking to link daily concerns with failures of the political process, activists broach issues that touch all sectors of life – from transport costs to health care access to unemployment. They ride public minibuses, engaging potential supporters, hopping off as soon as they feel impending arrest (and they do get arrested). Soon, they will be adding street theatre to their repertoire of tactics." (Blogger K)

"There was actually no strategy at all. We just talked to people. Nobody thought of even putting together a piece of paper that said what we were about to discuss, or even contacting the media to cover our activities. We were lucky because people really responded to our message. I guess we learn something new with every demonstration." (Blogger L)

On 15 June 2005, bloggers thought of invoking a popular ritual at Al-Sayeda Zeinab mausoleum, calling for political reform and exposure of security violations, thus bringing the reform caravan to ordinary people within Cairo's district. "Kans Al-Sayeda", or sweeping the Prophet's granddaughter's tomb–mosque, comes from the Egyptians' tradition of popular religion.⁴⁰ When central security forces blocked them from speaking to people, they moved inside the mosque. There they spoke of the elections and the daily arbitrary police security interrogations. Later, young activists were detained for 15 days by the state security prosecution and charged for distributing leaflets with statements such as:

"We're a group of youth protesting the current conditions of no health, no education, no work, no housing, no freedom. That's why we decided that it's necessary to change all that. We're sure you too feel as we do, let's think together and act together so we can have better living conditions."

This demonstration resulted in the introduction of a regular Wednesday protest, with a specific theme and in a highly populated new area each time (rather than the Press Syndicate stairways), with innovative 3-D banners and bloggers' URL addresses among the political leaflets.

There are marked ideological differences between the youth and older members of Kefaya, both about the nature of outreach tactics and about Kefaya's failure to reach beyond an exclusive Cairo-based intellectual crowd. Youth for Change's central strategy states: "*Our job is to link young people's daily problems to the government, to explain to people that they have certain rights and someone has a responsibility to listen to their demands.*" This is a reaction to Kefaya's general discourse of human rights and democracy, which fails to address the more fundamental, daily concerns of Egyptians,

40. Sweeping the mosque entrance with straw brooms is considered both a literal act of paying respect to the mosque and a symbolic call for aid and blessings from the beloved Zeinab's spirit. Seeking spiritual assistance against all manner of injustice is a Sufi-inflected mode of popular resistance that Egyptians have invoked historically against tyrants and police brutality.

BOX 1

Chronology of Cairo's street movements as posted on the Egyptian blogosphere

March–December 2005

- May 25th – Demonstrations against the referendum on constitutional Article 76
- June 1st – Women in black protest against security harassment, organized by the association for Egyptian mothers at the Press Syndicate
- June 8th – A candle vigil at Dareeh Saad (shrine of 1919 revolution leader)
- June 9th – The Street is Ours movement was launched to defend women's political rights
- June 15th – Youth for Change and bloggers' demonstration at Al-Sayeda Zeinab mausoleum
- June 22nd – Demonstration in Shubra organized by the Popular Campaign for Change under the slogan "Freedom Now"
- June 26th – Demonstration in front of the Ministry of Interior, celebrating International Day against Torture
- June 29th – Protest at the Virgin Mary church in Zeiton
- July 14th – Kefaya's unemployment protest in Abdeen Square
- July 20th – National Coalition for Change and Reform rally of 5,000 protestors in support of the judges
- July 31st – Protest against the presidential elections
- August 1st – Sit-ins for the release of detainees from the July 31st protest at the General Prosecutor's office, at the High Court and at the Press Syndicate
- August 2nd – Artists and Writers for Change protest in Talaat Harb Street, chanting "*Big brother is watching you*"
- August 3rd – Demonstration against corruption in Opera Square
- August 8th – Demonstration at Dar el Hikma (Doctors' Syndicate) for the release of detained doctors
- August 14th – National Coalition for Change and Reform street demonstration with 7,000 protestors calling "*No to the regime, Yes to judiciary independence*"
- August 16th – The Movement for Popular Monitoring of the Elections, Shayfeenkom ("*We are watching you*"), was officially launched
- August 21st – Youth for Change flash demonstrations (for 30 minutes) with thousands of flyers distributed in the low-income and densely populated Giza village of Nahia
- August 23rd – Artists and Writers for Change pro-reform demonstration in Talaat Harb Square
- August 26th – Youth for Change protest in Rod el Farag district, with thousands of leaflets containing blog URL addresses
- September 1st – National Coalition for Change and Reform rally to support judges' independence and the end of corruption
- September 8th – Friends and families of victims of the Beni Suef theatre fire (5th September Group) protest at the state-sponsored funeral, demanding inquiries into the death of more than 30 artists
- September 27th – Demonstration organized by Kefaya, bloggers, 5th September Group and detainees' families
- December 12th – Kefaya marking its first anniversary with a protest against the newly elected members of parliament

SOURCE: Extracts from various blogs (with modifications by author), accessed March 2008.

with its focus on regime change impeding the elaboration of a practical agenda. As Youth for Change distanced their activities from the Egyptian Movement for Change, the bloggers discussed everyday problems of the excluded: the poor, the homeless and the unemployed. In this way, the bloggers' movement, demanding elementary rights to the city for everyone, underlined and clarified the content of contemporary urban struggles.

d. The right to Cairo's contested public spaces

At the 2006 World Social Forum meeting, the anti-global movement prepared a charter for the "right to the city",⁽⁴¹⁾ challenging the neo-liberal attack on public spaces.⁽⁴²⁾ According to its preamble, the charter

41. Portaliou, E (2007), "Anti-global movements reclaim the city", *City* Vol 11, No 2, pages 165–175.

42. Castells, M (1983), *The City and the Grassroots*, Edward Arnold, London, 450 pages.

43. World Social Forum (2006), "World charter on the right to the city", Discussion Paper. Article 1 defines the right to the city for all its citizens, that is, all persons living in the city either permanently or in transit. The basic principles of the right to the city are: democratic management of the city; the social function of the city; the social function of property; full exercise of citizenship; equality and non-discrimination; special protection for vulnerable persons and groups; the private sector's social undertaking; and enhancing economic solidarity and imposing progressive policies.

44. Lefebvre, H (1996), *Writings on Cities, Part II: Right to the City*, Blackwell, Oxford, 264 pages.

45. Melucci, A (1985), "The symbolic challenge of contemporary movements", *Social Research* Vol 52, No 4, pages 789–816.

46. Sheller, M (2003), "The mechanisms of mobility and liquidity: re-thinking the movement in social movements", Working Paper published by the Department of Sociology, Lancaster University, UK.

47. Jordan, J (1998), "The art of necessity: the subversive imagination of anti-road protest and reclaim the streets", in G McKay (editor), *DIY Culture: Party and Protest in Nineties Britain*, Verso, London and New York, pages 129–251.

48. Gould, R (1995), *Insurgent Identities: Class, Community and Protest in Paris from 1848 to the Commune*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 253 pages.

49. Leontidou (see reference 1) noted that the city barricades of the Paris Commune in 1871 and the students' uprising in May 1968 took place within Boulevard St Germain in the Quartier Latin. Both the "NO" demonstrations against the EU Constitutional Treaty in May 2005 and the victory of the protest movement against employment legislation in April 2006 were celebrated around the Bastille and the Arc de Triomphe.

"... is an instrument intended as a contribution to the urban struggle and as an aid in the process of recognition of the right to the city in the international human rights system."⁽⁴³⁾ Social movements' street actions are related to the concept of the "right to the city", which implies the right "... to freedom, to individualization in socialization ... to participation and appropriation", which also includes "... the right to the use of the (city) centre."⁽⁴⁴⁾ This has highlighted people's right to participate in the public sphere, spatializing this right and associating it with everyday urban life. In this case, the urban experience, the social encounter in the street, becomes a political event.

A classic repertoire of contention used by social movement actors is to flood into public spaces, fill them with a special kind of active presence⁽⁴⁵⁾ and stop other kinds of flows.⁽⁴⁶⁾ Literal flows of people (and blockages) are crucial to social movements,⁽⁴⁷⁾ from the barricades of the Paris Commune in 1871⁽⁴⁸⁾ to the "reclaim the streets" events organized by anti-road protesters in the 1990s. These actions of appropriating space have made visible the latent power of state authority to exercise coercion at the most personal level by stopping freedom of movement and by incarcerating people.

In Paris, Haussmann's wide boulevards and grand squares provided a perfect urban venue for massive demonstrations.⁽⁴⁹⁾ A similar relationship between space and politics was evident during Spring 2006 pro-democracy street rallies and sit-ins organized by urban youth and blogger activists within Cairo's European Quarter. This part of the city was regarded as a contested site for collective action and a symbolic space for urban youth's political participation and spatial appropriation.⁽⁵⁰⁾

Cairo's downtown European Quarter was created between 1863 and 1879 by Khedive Ismail, who decided to build an entirely new city similar to Haussmann's Paris, hiring more European technicians to oversee the construction of a new quarter called Ismailiya. In his obsession to create a Paris-sur-Nil, with long broad boulevards and public squares (*midan*) and gardens, he continued an ambitious scheme to reclaim a large swamp on Cairo's western flank to make room for the famous palace (*kasr*) series,⁽⁵¹⁾ featuring a magnificent square, called at the time Midan Ismailia, with the new surrounding area known as Cairo's European Quarter, Al Kahira al Ismailia, or Ismailia for short.⁽⁵²⁾ In 1954, in its effort to remove all traces of the old regime, Egypt's new leadership renamed 15 Cairo streets and squares and decreed that all Ismailian names should be erased, so Midan Ismailia became Midan al Tahrir (Liberation Square)⁽⁵³⁾ (Figure 1).

e. The *flâneur* activists and bloggers' street movement

Last time central Cairo's strategic Midan al Tahrir was occupied by demonstrators was during the height of the 1972 student movement, when a left-wing-led student movement called for democracy and a more equitable economic and social system.

During the Spring of 2006, a group of young activists and bloggers (calling themselves the 30th February Group) organized a two-day sit-in in Midan al Tahrir. The square was flooded with protestors calling for democracy, political changes and judiciary reforms, and hundreds of candles were lit once the sun had set (Photo 1). Dozens of protestors chanted songs by the late Sheikh Imam, who was famous in the 1960s and 1970s, representing the revolutionary commitment of Arab students and workers during strikes, sit-ins and demonstrations. A month later, in April,

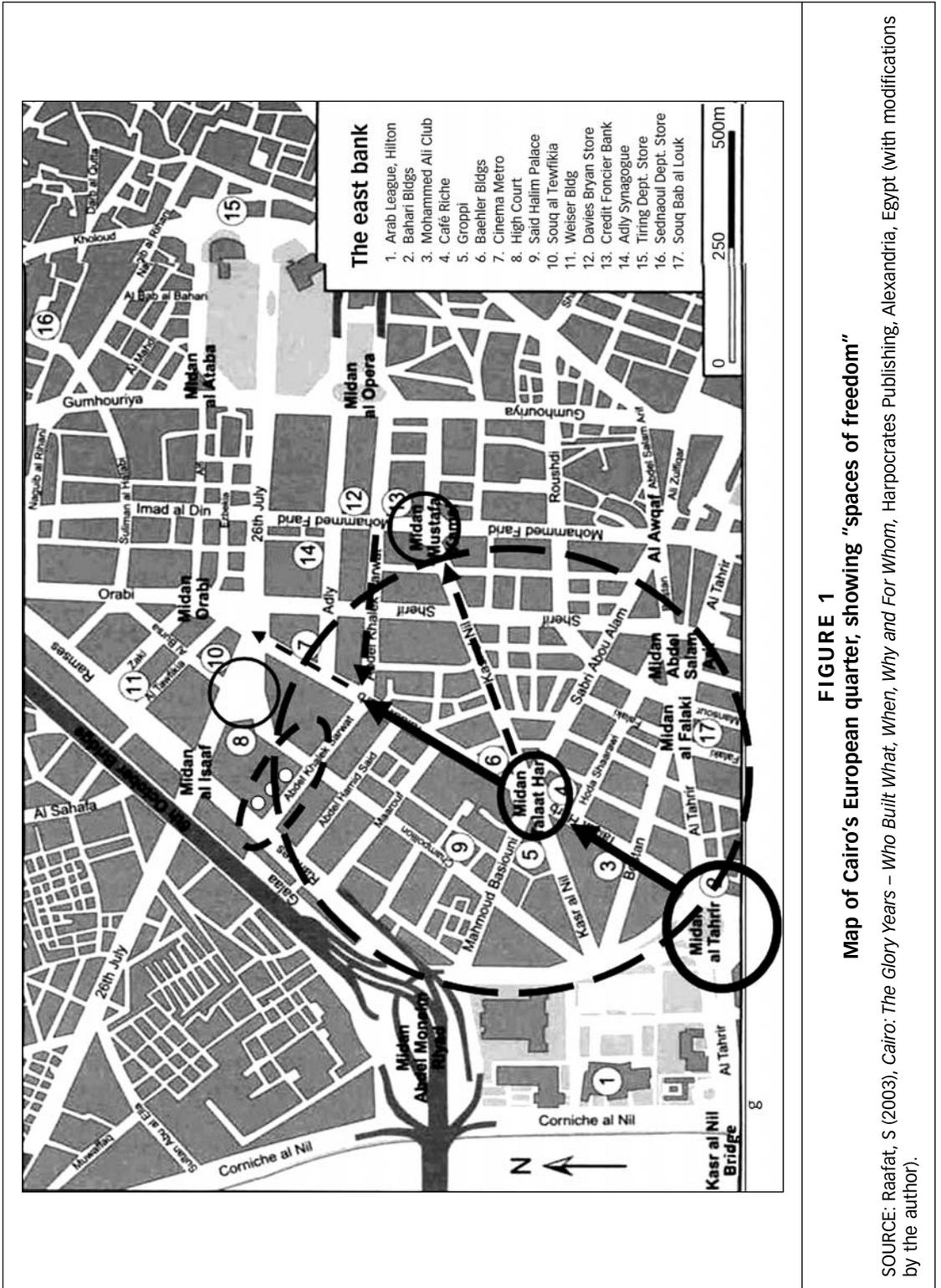


FIGURE 1
 Map of Cairo's European quarter, showing "spaces of freedom"

SOURCE: Raafat, S (2003), *Cairo: The Glory Years – Who Built What, When, Why and For Whom*, Harpocrates Publishing, Alexandria, Egypt (with modifications by the author).



PHOTO 1
Photo blogs of street demonstrations – Midan al Tahrir (Liberation Square)
 © Wael Salah Fahmi 2006

50. Malone, K (2002), "Street life: youth, culture and competing uses of public space", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 14, No 2, October, pages 157–168; also Batuman, B (2003), "Imagination as appropriation. Student riots and the (re)claiming of public space", *Space and Culture* Vol 6, No 3, pages 261–275.

51. Raafat, S (2003), *Cairo: The Glory Years – Who Built What, When, Why and for Whom*, Harpocrates Publishing, Alexandria, Egypt, 331 pages.

52. See reference 51.

53. Stewart, D J (1999), "Changing Cairo: the political economy of urban form", *International Journal of Urban*

there was another sit-in in Unions Street (Abdel-Khaleq Tharwat Street) in front of the Press Syndicate and the Judges' Club⁽⁵⁴⁾ (Photo 2). For five days, urban youth activists transformed the street into zones for public protest, employing urban installations and street graffiti, and creating a significant site of urban resistance⁽⁵⁵⁾ (Box 2). Just as the virtual spaces of the Egyptian blogosphere can be considered "spaces of freedom", so too can these downtown public spaces in Cairo, where protesters regularly expressed political dissent and a repertoire of contention in the form of street rallies, demonstrations and sit-ins. The circled areas in Figure 1 show the main public spaces that were venues for street rallies, while the arrows indicate the route of major demonstrations as protestors moved from Midan al Tahrir (Liberation Square), through Talaat Harb Square, Mostafa Kamel Square to Unions Street, where they usually gathered on the stairs of the Press Syndicate and sometimes opposite the Judges' Club.

Both of the April sit-ins were in solidarity with judges demanding judiciary reforms and independence from the state-appointed Ministry of Justice, which directly influences any elections.⁽⁵⁶⁾ The first sit-in was



PHOTO 2
Photo blogs of sit-in, Judges' Club, Unions Street
 © Wael Salah Fahmi 2006

also to support judges who faced charges for reporting September 2005 presidential election violations. This event stunned the government and major precautions were taken to prevent the urban youth and bloggers' demonstrations. During the second sit-in, the government planned to overpower the demonstrators by arranging a counter-demonstration by their own supporters. Although anti-riot police forces cordoned off the protest and were able to divide the masses, this did not stop demonstrators from trying to break through cordons, resulting in more confrontations. Thousands of demonstrators made it to central Cairo, where police chased them down and reportedly arrested hundreds. After five days, Unions Street was completely empty as anti-riot security forces and police vehicles occupied the city centre.

Since the Spring 2006 demonstrations, the government has imposed security measures to control street rallies, by occupying public squares with baton-wielding security forces and plainclothes agents and introducing CCTV surveillance. But street cafes became venues for political public dissent, social centres where urban youth gather and exchange

and Regional Research Vol 23, No 1, pages 103–127.

54. Since 2005, as judges called for the independence of the judiciary system, the Egyptian Judges' Club (in Unions Street) has symbolized a site for pro-democracy street movement.

55. Hetherington, K (1998), *Expressions of Identity: Space, Performance, Politics*, Sage, London, 192 pages.

56. Since 1991, judges have called for a detailed bill guaranteeing their budgetary autonomy from the state-controlled Ministry of Justice. They also demanded the lifting of emergency laws. In 2005, the Judges' Club formed

BOX 2

**Bloggers report on the pro-judiciary reform demonstrations – Spring 2006
(as posted on the Egyptian blogosphere)**

Week One

- Despite nearly 200 activists being detained during the past few weeks, a solidarity demonstration was planned today with judges who face charges for reporting 5th September 2005 presidential elections violations.
- Pro-democracy demonstrators marched in support of the judges, stopping in front of the Judges' Club, where judges organized a silent vigil. Protestors carried huge posters of prominent pro-reform judges. The posters were designed by the bloggers and young activists (30th February Group, who organized the Midan al Tahrir sit-in in March 2006).
- At 10 a.m., around 700 activists started chanting "*Judges put your strength together – rescue us from the tyrants*"..."*Freedom, freedom where are you – emergency status between us and you*"..."*One by one.. tomorrow the hundred becomes a thousand*"..."*Revolution, revolution till victory – revolution in all Egypt's streets and alleys*".
- The demonstration failed to take place at the High Court as streets were occupied by thousands of uniformed and plain-clothes police agents. The protest was forced to divert to a side street before being violently dispersed. The protest did not last more than 15 minutes. While thousands of state security agents with batons, sticks and shields sealed most downtown streets, plain-clothes police agents attacked protestors before arresting them. I started taking photos from the other side of the street. People were running in different directions. Wherever I looked there were people I thought to be secret police.
- As hundreds of disguised police occupied the streets, one protestor told me to go home immediately as violence was extending to all side streets. Despite all this, in Adly Street, I saw 50 people chanting and raising posters with "*Egypt's pharmacists support Egypt's judges*".
- As protestors entered the Metro movie theatre to escape the security forces, I went to the Excelsior Café and whenever I tried to get out, plain-clothes police agents would follow me so I decided to stay inside the café for an hour. There was news of a protest in Ramsis Street and of more arrests.
- Judges' hearing was postponed to next week.

Week Two

- While the Ministry of Interior issued a statement two days ago warning that any gathering in Cairo would be illegal, more demonstrations were planned today.
- At 7.30 a.m., as young activists were wandering in downtown Cairo in groups of five, they were attacked by plain-clothes police from the side, with state security forces attacking them from the front.
- At 8:30 a.m., the Press Syndicate and the Lawyers Syndicate were sealed. The High Court was also surrounded by security forces.
- A protest, with 500 people, started at Souk el Tawfikia Street (next to Hisham Mubarak Law Centre), proceeding from al Gomhoreya Street in front of the Sydnawi shopping store, to Ataba Square, to El Gabarooni Alley, then to Assem Alley and finally to Kamel Sedky Street in Faggala. After each police attack, protestors were dispersed and would withdraw, then would re-gather again in a new location, standing hand in hand as they faced the security forces who used the "squeezing protestors technique". Few injuries were reported among protestors.
- By the end of the day there was news from the High Court that one judge had been found innocent, with the other judge getting a severe reprimand. The Judges' Club refused the verdict and vowed to appeal.
- Opposition sources announced that between 240 and 400 demonstrators were arrested today. I have seen at least 15 arrests with beatings of reporters and photographers. My photos feature 11 arrests.

SOURCE: Extracts from various blogs (with modifications by author), accessed March 2008.

information, even in the face of an emergency law forbidding more than five people to meet in open spaces without government permission.⁽⁵⁷⁾

“Since the pedestrianization of the Stock Exchange sector, the street has been privatized. Despite the environmental improvements within the area, recent security surveillance and CCTV have been introduced to provide policing powers to physically remove young people from public cafes.” (Interviews with an urban youth)

Despite the collective action involved in Cairo’s Spring 2006 street demonstrations, this was not a typical social movement, which requires both continuity and structure.⁽⁵⁸⁾

“I see this situation reflected in the contradictions of the urban youth and bloggers’ demonstrations. The traditions, which existed in the 1970s student movement, where committees were formed and some did sit-ins while others negotiated with the government, have faded in the 1980s and 1990s. The government succeeded in turning the opposition into a mere façade. So today’s students were unable to acquire this expertise from their predecessors. That was one weakness. How long do street tactics remain sustainable; will their current momentum carry on?” (A journalist observer).

In an interview with *Al-Ahram Weekly*, Bayat’s analysis of the Palestine solidarity demonstrations during Spring 2002 asked similar questions:⁽⁵⁹⁾

“But did the ‘movement’ have an identifiable leadership? That was not clear to me. Usually, social movements have organizations behind them: it is clear who are the ideologues, who are the leaders, who are the activists and so on. But in this case, it was not very clear. I would say it was some kind of semi-movement. For the moment, the structure is very weak and fragmented. The demonstrations’ dynamics – a spontaneous yet strong popular mood, lacking adequate leadership – may partially explain this weakness.”

III. THE NEW CIVIL SOCIETY MOBILIZATION

In contrast to the period between 2004 and 2006, the Egyptian Movement for Change (Kefaya), with its structured, incremental, protest-centred strategies and orientation toward the vast, excluded indifferent Egyptian public, has faded from the political scene, devolving into contending factions and ceasing to capture the public’s imagination. Since 2006, demonstrations have become less frequent, attracting a limited number of youth activists. As a consequence of political and ideological conflicts within Kefaya, various factions split off, such as Youth for Change, mainly composed of bloggers, who accused Kefaya’s leaders of being authoritarian and too willing to compromise.

As they gained experience in street tactics and popular online journalism, both bloggers and Youth for Change brought a globalized dimension to their local protest movement, linking with international media through video and photo blogs. Since 2006, blogging has represented more of an information hub, as bloggers continued posting news and exposing various human rights violations. Also during this period, a new civil society mobilization emerged, making specific demands of the authorities.

a fact-finding committee to investigate the quality of judicial supervision of the referendum of 25 May 2005. The nine-page report included information about polling in 13 governorates and difficulties judges encountered while supervising the referendum as a result of security violations and police intimidation. Consequently, there was growing tension between the government’s Supreme Judicial Council, court general assemblies and chief justices, and between factions within Judges’ Clubs in the provinces.

57. Fahmi, W and K Sutton (forthcoming), “Reclaiming Cairo’s European Quarter: contesting nineteenth century and early twentieth century architectural heritage”, submitted to the International Development Planning Review (IDPR), University of Liverpool, UK.

58. See reference 31; also Abdalla, A (1985), *The Student Movement and National Politics in Egypt*, Al-Saqi Books, London, 300 pages.

59. Howeidy, Amira (2002), “All our destinies”, *Al-Ahram Weekly* No 593, 4–10 July, <<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2002/593/feat1.htm>>, accessed 7 March 2008.

Inspired by Kefaya's earlier actions and encouraged by urban youth's repertoire of contention, ordinary people, who do not belong to political parties, trade unions or pro-democracy groups, broke the psychological barrier of fear as they exercised their right to public protest, demanding basic rights such as housing, salaries, water and services. Regarded as a new template for political action in Egypt, street demonstrations by groups of ordinary people, who rarely distribute pamphlets or carry posters, are less political than "real" protest, less documented and less celebrated than similar actions by organized social agents.

This was notable in the revival of the labour movement between December 2006 and September 2007, as workers organized rallies and sit-ins inside Al-Mehalla al Kobra Textile Company (Ghazl al-Mehalla) in northern Egypt, protesting against layoffs and demanding, among other things, better compensation, better working conditions and democratically elected unions, as recorded on a young worker's blog. The government declared these actions illegal, threatening to sack striking workers who did not return to work immediately, while launching a campaign of criminalization.

The real estate tax collectors' (civil servants) strike in December 2007 lasted nearly 10 days, attracting media attention and public solidarity. Thousands of tax collectors converged on Cairo from all over Egypt to stage a massive sit-in in front of the prime ministerial cabinet office. They demanded wage parity with their better-paid colleagues in the general tax and sales tax authorities and the transfer of their affiliation from the corruption-ridden municipal governments to the Ministry of Finance.

Other examples have included water protests in the northern delta region of Kafr al-Shaykh, El-Gharbiyya, El-Daqahliyya and Giza, known as the "Revolt of the Thirsty"; and demonstrations in front of Parliament by residents of Qal'at al-Kabsh, an informal housing settlement in Cairo, after a forced eviction. Despite official promises, no alternative shelter or compensation were provided, and homeless residents had to sleep on the streets – only 70 families out of 1,000 received assistance.

By 2008, the government proposed a decree prohibiting demonstrations without prior permission from the Ministry of Interior. The law, which would oblige protestors to define the location and time of demonstrations, effectively prohibits any criticism of the regime and any calls for democratic and political reforms. Despite such measures, a broad coalition of civil society representatives and Facebook⁽⁶⁰⁾ online activists called for a general strike on 6 April 2008 to demand decent living conditions and to protest against corruption, nepotism, inflation, torture, poverty and police brutality. The plan was to stay at home and not report to work or school, or alternatively to join protestors in street processions converging on main city squares.

As the 6 April general strike gained local popularity and international exposure through SMS messages, e-mails, blogs, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter,⁽⁶¹⁾ riots erupted in Al-Mehalla al Kobra city, resulting in confrontation between workers and police security. Simultaneously, a number of bloggers and Internet activists were detained, particularly those "Facebookers" involved in initiating the online mobilization for the general strike. Although the call for the general strike coincided with Al-Mehalla al Kobra textile workers' strike, no direct coordination was noted between the "Facebookers" virtual actions and the workers' physical mobilization.⁽⁶²⁾

60. Facebook is a social networking website that provides various ways for people to interact through chat rooms, messages, e-mails, video streaming, file sharing, blogging, discussion groups; see <http://www.facebook.com/>.

61. Twitter is a free social networking and micro-blogging service that allows users to send updates ("tweets" – text-based posts up to 140 characters long) to the Twitter website via short message service (on a cell phone), RSS or a third-party application such as Twittrific or Facebook. Updates are displayed on the user's profile page and instantly delivered to other users who have signed up to receive them; see <http://twitter.com/>.

62. An Egyptian blogger wrote, in a blog post criticizing what he described as a call "...coming from the cyberspace by bloggers, Facebook activists...", that: "We, the Egyptian bloggers, have always prided ourselves on the fact that we have one foot on the ground and the other in the cyberspace... But this time, it seems some have thrown both their feet as well as brains in the cyberspace and are living some virtual reality, mistakenly believing (helped by the media sensationalist coverage of the 'Facebook activism') that they are the ones behind the events in Mehalla."

Nowadays, the Egyptian blogosphere provides more than a news resource, representing an alternative urban hub and acting as an interface between events in the streets and the Internet. The commitment to openness and participatory consensus-based style of collaboration resonates both with the free software movement and the 1990s grassroots movements,⁽⁶³⁾ as reflected in the Zapatista's 1996 call for "networks of alternative communication":⁽⁶⁴⁾

"Let's make a network of communication among all our struggles and resistances. An intercontinental network of alternative communication against neoliberalism ... (and) for humanity. This intercontinental network of alternative communication will search to weave the channels so that words may travel all the roads that resist ... [it] will be the medium by which distinct resistances communicate with one another. This intercontinental network of alternative communication is not an organizing structure, nor has a central head or decision maker, nor does it have a central command or hierarchies. We are the network, all of us who speak and listen."

63. See reference 19.

64. See reference 11, page 108.

REFERENCES

- Abdalla, A (1985), *The Student Movement and National Politics in Egypt*, Al-Saqi Books, London, 300 pages.
- Anderson, B (1988), *Imagined Communities*, Verso, London and New York.
- Arabic Network for Human Rights information website, <http://www.hrinfor.net/en/>.
- Badger, M (2005), "Visual blogs", <http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/visual_blogs.html>.
- Batuman, B (2003), "Imagination as appropriation. Student riots and the (re)claiming of public space", *Space and Culture* Vol 6, No 3, pages 261–275.
- Bayat, A (2003), "The street and the politics of dissent in the Arab world", *Middle East Report* (MERIP) No 226, http://www.merip.org/mer/mer226/226_bayat.html, accessed 11 October 2006.
- Benjamin, W (1983), *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet Era of High Capitalism*, Verso, London.
- Blanchard, A (2005), "Blogs as virtual communities: identifying a sense of community in the Julie/JuliaProject", <http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/blogs_as_virtual.html>.
- Blood, Rebecca (2000), "Weblogs: a history and perspective, Rebecca's pocket", <http://www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog_history.html>.
- Castells, M (1983), *The City and the Grassroots*, Edward Arnold, London.
- Castells, M (1997), *The Power of Identity*, Blackwell, Oxford and New York, 461 pages.
- Critical Ensemble (1996), *Electronic Civil Disobedience and Other Unpopular Ideas*, Automeia, New York, 144 pages.
- Della Porta, D, H Kriesi and D Rucht (editors) (1999), *Social Movements in a Globalizing World*, St Martin's Press, New York, 272 pages.
- Fahmi, W and K Sutton (forthcoming), "Reclaiming Cairo's European Quarter: contesting nineteenth century and early twentieth century architectural heritage", submitted to the International Development Planning Review (IDPR), University of Liverpool, UK.
- Gould, R (1995), *Insurgent Identities: Class, Community and Protest in Paris from 1848 to the Commune*, Chicago University Press, Chicago.
- Hamm, Marion (2003), "A r/c tivism in physical and virtual spaces", republicart.net 09/2003, <http://republicart.net/disc/realpublicspaces/hamm02_en.htm>.
- Hamm, Marion (2006), "Reclaiming virtual and physical spaces. Indymedia London at the Halloween critical mass", in *Hybrid Space – How Wireless Media Mobilize Public Space – Open 2006/ No 11*, NAi Publishers, SKOR, pages 96–111.
- Hetherington, K (1998), *Expressions of Identity: Space, Performance, Politics*, Sage, London.
- Howeidy, Amira (2002), "All our destinies", *Al Ahram Weekly* No 593, 4–10 July, <<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2002/593/feat1.htm>>.
- <http://twitter.com/>
- <http://www.egyptsites.com/dir/egypt-blogs>.
- <http://www.facebook.com/>
- http://www.rsf.org/rubrique.php3?id_rubrique=542.
- Jordan, J (1998), "The art of necessity: the subversive imagination of anti-road protest and reclaim the streets", in G McKay (editor), *DIY Culture: Party and Protest in Nineties Britain*, Verso, London and New York, pages 129–251.
- Kidd, D (2003), "Indymedia.org: a new communications commons", in M McCaughey and M Ayers

- (editors), *Cyberactivism: Online Activism in Theory and Practice*, Routledge, London.
- Lampa, G (2005), "Imagining the blogosphere: an introduction to the imagined community of instant publishing", <http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/imagining_the_blogosphere.html>.
- Lefebvre, H (1996), *Writings on Cities, Part II: Right to the City*, Blackwell, Oxford.
- Leontidou, L (2006), "Urban social movements: from the 'right to the city' to transnational spatialities and flâneur activists", *City* Vol 10, No 3, pages 259–268.
- Malone, K (2002), "Street life: youth, culture and competing uses of public space", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 14, No 2, October, pages 157–168.
- Mansour, Mohamed (2007), "Is blogging a bursting bubble?", *Daily News Egypt* (3 November 2007), <<http://www.thedailynewsegypt.com/article.aspx?ArticleID=10091>>.
- Mckay, G (1996), *Senseless Acts of Beauty*, Verso, London and New York, 228 pages.
- Melucci, A (1985), "The symbolic challenge of contemporary movements", *Social Research* Vol 52, No 4, pages 789–816.
- Melucci, A (1996), *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 441 pages.
- Mertes, T (2004), *The Movement of Movements. A Reader*, Verso, London, 288 pages.
- Notes from Nowhere (2003), "Indymedia 'precursors and birth'", in Notes from Nowhere (editors), *We Are Everywhere. The Irresistible Rise of Global Anticapitalism*, Verso, London, New York, pages 230–244.
- Papadimitriou, F (2006), "A geography of 'Notopia'. Hackers et al., hacktivism, urban cyber-groups/cyber-cultures and digital social movements", *City* Vol 10, No 3 pages 317–326.
- Pickerill, J and P Chatterton (2006), "Notes towards autonomous geographies: creation, resistance and self-management as survival tactic", *Progress in Human Geography* Vol 30, No 6, pages 730–746.
- Portaliou, E (2007), "Anti-global movements reclaim the city", *City* Vol 11, No 2, pages 165–175.
- Raafat, S (2003), *Cairo: The Glory Years – Who Built What, When, Why and for Whom*, Harpocrates Publishing, Alexandria, Egypt.
- Ruggiero, Greg (1999), *Microradio and Democracy: (Low) Power to the People*, Seven Stories Press, New York.
- Sheller, M (2003), "The mechanisms of mobility and liquidity: re-thinking the movement in social movements", Working Paper published by the Department of Sociology, Lancaster University, UK.
- Stewart, D J (1999), "Changing Cairo: the political economy of urban form", *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* Vol 23, No 1, pages 103–127.
- Tarrow, S (1998), *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 288 pages.
- Urry, J (2000), *Sociology Beyond Societies: Mobilities for the Twenty-first Century*, Routledge, London and New York.
- Wang, Hsiu-Chuan, Yi-Shin Deng and Sean Chiu (2005), "Beyond photo blogging: new directions of mobile communication", Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on Human Computer Interaction with Mobile Devices and Services, Salzburg.
- World Social Forum (2006), "World charter on the right to the city", Discussion Paper.