

DESTROYING THE IMAGE + CREATING SOCIAL GROUPS

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RJ *Why did social media suddenly become so important and so influential? Why did they play such an important role in Tunisia?*

I think the first important fact is how social media has been adopted by professionals during the last few years. And it's not a phenomenon that has just started this year. Everyone knows by now that there has been huge censorship of the mass media in general in Tunisia. So therefore, many people have found social networks to be very valuable sources of information to find out about the world, to exchange information, and also to voice their opinion. They're mushrooming in popularity and **an increase in the number of Tunisian Facebook pages has been especially dramatic during the last couple of years.**

The second important fact is also the great difference between these social networks and other traditional groups. They are mostly groups of people who

are apolitical. Such groups have never been involved in politics and are usually twenty to twenty five years old. But many of these people have now obviously become very involved because of the levels of corruption, because they couldn't find any other way to express themselves, and obviously because they came to a kind of deadlock with regard to finding jobs and new opportunities, despite an especially high percentage of them being well-educated.

RJ *What was the precise method in which social networks were used in this political and civil struggle?*

There have been many examples. The first **are the people who posted the videos on 'Revealing corruption amongst the family of Ben Ali' or the family of his wife Leila Ben Ali.**

Other examples were **those who created hiphop videos over the last few months.** They have all become a very influential phenomenon, authors of the most popular one were all arrested during the first weeks of the uprising and released later by Ben Ali. But these people were not necessarily looking to spark political change, they were just looking to say, 'Hey Mr. President, we are here, we do exist, we need attention, help us find basic jobs and education!' Of course, these videos have now become much more to many people, and you can see them on YouTube with tens of thousands of views.

All this proved a crushing blow to Ben Ali. Just to give a bit of a background to what I want to say, Ben Ali and his regime had tried to paint a picture for the last twenty years that they were nice, moderate, democratic, and clean. In this context, what led to the crumbling of this regime was the circulation of information that began to defame Ben Ali and his family. **The increasing number of cartoons, for example, about Ben Ali and insulting him in different ways, was something unprecedented.** No one would ever have expected, for example, a cartoon to appear about Ben Ali in a Tunisian newspaper, or in any media for the matter. It was just never done. If any-

one had attempted something like that in the past he would have been sent straight to jail. So **the regime survived as long as it was able to keep a positive picture of the president intact.**

And what social media in this case started to do was capitalize on defaming the image of the president, saying 'No, it's not what we've been hearing for the last twenty or twenty five years, he is corrupt and surrounded by gangsters.' And so images of caricatures and videos of corruption became very important. They made it clear that the Tunisian people wanted this regime and the family surrounding Ben Ali to leave, to just simply go away.

RJ *How different would the situation be in Tunisia without Facebook, Youtube, or Twitter?*

It would have been very different, in my opinion – the revolution wouldn't have happened. I think that the third part, the third section of people who had been using social media are **obviously political groups. They can be from the left, they can be democrats or from Islamic groups. They were not necessarily looking to depose the regime** but they were also spreading information about democracy and of crime and corruption in the country.

So I think all of these three groups were very active from their different platforms. Twitter is perhaps slightly different and was very useful in terms of exchanging news and information and also connecting with people who are continually active in the same way that Facebook was in terms of first creating these groups. I mean you can see the existence of several groups especially in the second or third week of the protests. **People have started to join these groups in large numbers reflecting the increasing momentum of the revolution.**

When the protest grew in momentum, more and more people, both men and women, subscribed to such Facebook groups and Twitter feeds. ■

Noureddine Miladi was speaking with Yulia Netesova