

The Power of Youth in Non-Violent Action: The Egyptian Revolution of 2011
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It is often thought that a person must have age, wisdom, and experience to make a big difference in the world. The recent revolution in Egypt, however, has proved to the world that there are no prerequisites when it comes to making change. Rather than elder Egyptians igniting the flame, it was the youth of Egypt who inspired a nation to challenge its leaders.

When online social networks started to gain popularity, the youth of Egypt took to the internet to vent their frustrations and connect with others who shared their feelings about the Egyptian government's autocracy, police brutality, and the ever increasing poverty of the Egyptian people. Through these social networks, young Arabs were able to connect and find others who shared their passion to make a change in their country. For example, starting with blogging in 2008, Ahmed Maher formed a Facebook group, the April 6 Youth Movement, to call support for a nationwide strike on April 6 to support other individual labor strikes taking place around the same time which were set off by frustrations with the government¹.

Following in the footsteps of their Egyptian counterparts, young people in Tunisia created the Facebook group, the Progressive Youth of Tunisia, to discuss their frustrations and their ideas of how their country should change. Through this online forum, the Egyptians and the Tunisians were able to share their ideas and theories of nonviolence and nonviolent action across borders. They found common ground in the ideas of American political thinker, Gene Sharp. Mr. Sharp argues that nonviolent action can be utilized in many cases, varying from bringing down dictatorships to resisting genocide². The theories and actions described by Mr. Sharp were a verbalization of what many Egyptian youth were thinking at the time.

¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/14/world/middleeast/14egypt-tunisia-protests.html?scp=10&sq=egypt%20tunisia&st=cse>

² <http://www.aeinsteinst.org/organizations72b5.html>

³ <http://www.commonwealmagazine.org/gandhi-nile>

As more and more Egyptian youth began logging onto the Internet to find others who shared their opinions, another Facebook group, We Are All Khalid Said, started by Wael Ghonim, was created after a young Egyptian man was beaten to death by police. Mr. Ghonim used this Facebook group as a forum to teach other young Egyptians about democratic movements¹. Teaming up, the April 6 Youth Movement and Mr. Ghonim planned to turn an annual protest on Police Day, January 25th, into an event on a much larger scale. Spreading the word through blogs and their Facebook groups, the youth were able to create an event larger than even they had envisioned.

Tens of thousands of young Egyptians marched to Tahrir Square on January 25th, and were met with tear gas and other aggressive measures utilized by Egyptian police. The youth, however, refused to be driven away, and instead returned on January 28th, the Day of Rage, prepared to peacefully deal with whatever the police intended to use against them. These preparations included bringing lemons and vinegar to sniff to counteract the tear gas, and armor made of cardboard and plastic bottles to protect themselves from rubber bullets¹. However, the youth did not bring any violence or weapons. They continued to lead their protests in a nonviolent manner. With no intention of backing down despite the police violence directed towards them, the youth of Egypt were able to mobilize even more of their fellow countrymen and women to join them in their nonviolent actions.

In all, less than 1,000 people died in the revolution, most of which were killed by police¹. The revolutionaries were able to maintain their composure and their roots in nonviolent action, despite the violent opposition they faced. Based on their readings of Gene Sharp, some of the organizers' participation in workshops on nonviolence by the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, and their research into the Serbian youth group Otpor, who are credited with helping overthrow Serbian dictator, Slobodan Milosevic, the Egyptians were able to learn the integral aspects of a successful nonviolent protest³. The ability for the protestors to remain calm and collected in the face of violence was one of the most important

elements of their fight. By not giving the government the violent and uncontrolled reaction that they wanted, the protestors gave the government no need or right to be extremely violent. Rather, they knew that being riled up by the government would be counterintuitive to their desired results. And while the original organizers were obviously committed to the nonviolent basis of the protest, they needed to make sure this message was communicated to all who wanted to participate in the protests. Thanks to the ease of Facebook and Twitter, the message of nonviolence was easily spread to all protestors, leading to the success of maintaining nonviolence despite the large numbers of protestors involved. The organizers felt that not only was nonviolence the morally correct thing to do, it was also a requirement if they wanted their protests to be successful, and it was vital that all participating shared this feeling.

Another important aspect of successful nonviolent revolutions that the Egyptians were able to successfully implement is the idea of gaining power by increasing numbers of participants. Based on past revolutions that have achieved success through relative non-violence, the Egyptians knew that the size of the protest does matter. This is one of the reasons their protests began via Facebook and Twitter. Through online social networks, the organizers were able to get the word out much more quickly and to a much larger group than would have ever been possible through other forms of communication. On Facebook alone, more than 100,000 people signed up to participate in the initial protest¹. The youth of Egypt used what they knew best – the internet – to their advantage, and were able to pull off a protest more successful than they ever imagined. In addition to gaining the initial attention of a large group of supporters, a key to success is being able to maintain a large group of protestors for however long success takes, which due to the great number of participants in the Egyptian protests, was only eighteen days. An especially impressive aspect of the size of the Egyptian revolution was that the number of protestors only increased as the revolution went on.

In addition to gaining tens of thousands of protestors and remaining dedicated to their fight, the Egyptians also were able to ultimately gain the support of the military by avoiding violent confrontations with them. The demonstrators were urged to use goodwill towards the soldiers to show them that the protest was against their leaders (specifically Mubarak), and not against the military³. They kept in mind that the military consisted of their fellow countrymen, and were therefore most likely dealing with the same hardships as they were. By embracing the nation's people as a whole, the demonstrators were able to win the support and encouragement of Egyptians from all walks of life.

In just eighteen days, what started as Facebook conversations led to the autocracy of Egypt being torn down, the removal of an autocratic president who had ruled the country for decades, and the re-emergence of an Egyptian identity. This movement started in the hands of the youth, who desired to inspire change without the use of violence. The Egyptian revolution proved to the world that it can be done, as long as you stay true to your values and remain faithful in your motivations.