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The Middle East's Generation Facebook

Mona Eltahawy

It's October 2033 and Shahinaz Abdel-Salam, 55, has just been appointed Egypt's first female interior minister.

She's about to address the nation by live holofeed to explain why she's accepted a post that as a young woman she'd always dreamed would be abolished because, in the Egypt where she grew up, interior minister was synonymous with "chief torturer."

Her office is in New Cairo, an area which was once desert but over the past few years has buzzed with university campuses and businesses freed from the suffocation of downtown Cairo. But her address to the public will be made from what used to be the downtown headquarters of the Interior Ministry called Lazoghli. For years, the building's underground dungeons had held hundreds of thousands of political prisoners—at its peak estimated to be around 20,000—mostly Islamists.

Her speech is short, but remarkable. In one of her first decisions as interior minister, she designates Lazoghli a national museum, including the dungeons, so that Egyptians would always remember the struggles of the past. Then, she appoints a poet as her deputy. Call me a romantic fool, she'd later say, but the interior minister should be a woman or a poet.

But not all the romance in the world could salvage the post of information minister—also known as the "censorship minister"—so she was relieved the post had been abolished and replaced by a social networking minister, responsible for boosting the online communities that had become vital to Egypt's civil society.

Shahi—as she's known to friends—wondered what her father would think if he were still alive. Like so many men of his generation, he'd signed up for the armed forces soon after a group of young officers staged a coup in 1952 that toppled the monarchy and ended British occupation of Egypt. He stopped speaking to Shahi for a few years after she started blogging in 2005. At the time, she would tell any journalists who would listen that she'd started to blog so that she could call the then-Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak a dictator. Shahi's father didn't think it was appropriate for the daughter of a proud army man to be so disrespectful to the head of state who was a fellow graduate of the army corps.

Mubarak was to be the last of Egypt's leaders from a military background. Shahi had tried to explain to her father that she belonged to a generation that would change Egypt, but to his death her father remained skeptical. He never told her that he'd read

her blog secretly and was especially proud of the role model she had become for other young people when she started blogging. He was especially proud of one blog entry she'd written about a conversation she'd had with a young man during a demonstration.

This blog item, like Shahi herself and the other individuals in this article, are real—the youths of 2008 who are the future and the great hope of the Middle East.

Down, Down with Hosni

In 2005, Shahi had taken the train from her hometown of Alexandria to Cairo to join street protests that took place almost every week that year and to chant "Down, down with Hosni Mubarak." After one such demonstration, a young man approached her and asked her if she was the writer of "An Egyptian Woman" blog. When Shahi replied in the affirmative, he told her she was the reason he was at the demonstration.

"I thought if a girl can take the train all the way from Alexandria to Cairo to demonstrate, the least I could do was to demonstrate too," he told her.

But Shahi's father couldn't imagine how a bunch of kids could change the country using their computers.

Forward to 2033: Shahi's boss, Prime Minister Ibrahim El-Houdaiby, 50, knew all about how computers could change not just a country but a movement, even the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamist organization founded in Egypt in 1928 and of which both his great grandfather and grandfather were iconic leaders.

Ibrahim had been a protégé of a Muslim Brotherhood editor who had impressed upon him and other young Brothers and Sisters the importance of the Internet to express themselves. In 2005, that editor, Khaled Hamza, had launched the Muslim Brotherhood's first English-language website, called IkhwanWeb, aimed at getting the movement's news and views out to the Western media. Muslim Brothers like Ibrahim learned to use the Internet not just to take on the Egyptian regime but the senior leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood too, which functioned like a microcosm of the state. It was led by a "supreme guide," effectively a dictator who brooked little dissent.

Ibrahim, developed a reputation for feminist sympathies when, as a board member of the Muslim Brotherhood's English-language website he wrote an op-ed in 2007 for a Jewish newspaper in New York in response to a secular Egyptian female writer's complaint that while she supported the Muslim Brotherhood's right to exist, she didn't believe they would return the courtesy. Ibrahim had gone on the record as criticizing the Muslim Brotherhood's supreme guide for calling the women writer "naked" because she wasn't wearing a headscarf when she'd gone to interview him. Ibrahim bolstered his feminist credentials when he went on to write a blog post criticizing the Brotherhood's manifesto, which said that Islam allowed women to vote but not to become a leader of a country.

Ibrahim and Shahinaz got to know each other through the social networking site Facebook, which, starting in 2008, began functioning as an online forum for young activists in Egypt. At a time when the Egyptian state was becoming increasingly out of touch with the needs and troubles of the average citizen and, more worrying, unable or unwilling to provide them with services they needed, the Facebook activists were becoming both the oxygen and blood of Egypt's civil society.

After he turned 80 in 2008, President Mubarak appeared in public less frequently, and soon it seemed as if every month brought a new disaster or crisis. The country teetered on the edge of a real revolution—and not a coup disguised as a revolution à la July 1952—fueled by the rage of the poor who were dying, fighting over

bread and whose houses simply collapsed because of shoddy building standards or because of neglect.

Facebook activists became the thin line between rage and sheer anarchy. They organized online fundraisers and encouraged their friends to go to poor neighborhoods and help clean up after disasters, such as the September 2008 rockslide that buried alive dozens as they slept in their homes in a shantytown on the outskirts of Cairo in. The activists also used Facebook to organize demonstrations and encourage each other to join nationwide strikes in support of workers protesting rising food prices and inflation.

2007: Egyptian blogger behind bars.

This Facebook Generation soon became central to Egypt's civil society, taking the reins from a Muslim Brotherhood, which having won in 2005 an unprecedented 88 seats in parliament becoming the largest opposition bloc, had lost touch with the ordinary Egyptians it had long claimed to champion. Instead, it had become obsessed with moral values and banning racy music videos. After Mubarak's death in 2012, when his son Gamal took over, this Facebook generation—no longer mere children—began in many ways to function as a shadow government, able to mobilize and provide services that the Muslim Brotherhood had once been famous for.

Gamal struggled as crisis after another challenged his already tenuous legitimacy. He could not trigger the trickle down of economic growth that he used to boast about as son of the president and head honcho of a select group of uber-wealthy businessmen. As the Egyptian population continued to grow, so did its skepticism that a Mubarak could ever improve their lives.

In 2015, when he was just 32, Ibrahim and two other disillusioned young Muslim Brothers broke away from the movement and formed a new political party modeled after Turkey's Justice and Development Party, otherwise known as the AKP. Ibrahim had long studied Reccip Erdogan, the Turkish prime minister who had worked so hard at taking Turkey into the European Union and who had himself broken away from an Islamist party to form what many called a post-Islamist AKP.

Soon after Gamal assumed the presidency, Ibrahim returned to Cairo from a job

in Abu Dhabi, drawn back by a burning sense that he must provide an alternative that neither Mubarak Jr.nor the Muslim Brotherhood, led by a new—but just as authoritarian and out-of-touch—supreme guide, could offer Egypt.

He started slow, hosting small meetings of like-minded fellow Muslim Brothers and Sisters whose blogs had identified them as frustrated with the Brotherhood's rigid hierarchy. He was especially eager to involve Brothers and Sisters from across the country to form a national network beyond the Cairo-centric, business-as-usual model of political leadership.

He started teaching political science at the American University in Cairo, his alma mater and a perfect setting for experimenting with his new style of post-Muslim Brotherhood policies. Visiting professors from India and the United States became close friends. When they later returned to their home countries, several assumed leading positions in their country's foreign ministries. They would prove to be Ibrahim's invaluable supporters, as he worked to establish his new party while assuring Egypt's powerful allies they could trust him.

Ibrahim was already acknowledged as a leader-in-waiting by the time President Gamal Mubarak took the historic step in early 2033 of handing over power to a prime minister. Gamal, then 70, was tired of trying to prove he could govern. His heart was always in business, so he had made the mistake of thinking that his businessmen best friends could fix Egypt. Instead, they'd alienated the people with their lavish and corrupt ways.

Gamal had inherited from his father an Egypt that was already teetering on the edge of social decay, its politics fueled by faded memories of glory. The 2008 global financial crisis hit the country particularly hard. With every year of hardship, more neighborhoods—especially in Cairo—turned into "no-go zones" ruled by local thugs. Affluent Egyptians increasingly retreated into gated communities and, for its own protection, the Mubarak regime sealed off huge parts of downtown.

The U.S. administration continued to prop up the Mubarak regime out of fear that Egypt could fall into the hands of the Muslim Brotherhood. Still, Gamal had to increasingly turn to the Brotherhood over the years to help him keep the country together. In fact, they didn't differ too much on the economy—the Brotherhood believed in free market capitalism as well—but they forced him into an increasingly belligerent position toward Israel and the West. Senior army officers with Islamist leanings applied additional pressure on Gamal, who implicitly knew he needed the army to stay alive.

Worried about Gamal's increasing dependence on Brotherhood support, India, then holding the chair of the G-10's revolving presidency, took the historic step in 2020 of pushing Egypt to open its political space. Almost overnight, a flurry of underground political parties gained licenses, allowing them to exist in the open. Ibrahim immediately began maneuvering to create his new party, Justice For All.

So it came as a relief to many when Gamal called a general election and announced that he would relinquish the reins of power, moving to the periphery as a figurehead and elder statesman. When Ibrahim's party won the general elections, he seized the opportunity to deliver on his promise to surprise Egyptians with his choice of a cabinet. He was especially eager to prove his administration would not be beholden to the Muslim Brotherhood, but instead lay out a new vision of Egyptian politics: one that respected Islamic principles of social justice but did not use religion as a political weapon (thus avoiding the long-fought wrestling match between Gamal and the Muslim Brotherhood). In-

stead, he was determined to focus on rebuilding Egyptians' crushed confidence by creating new jobs, stamping out corruption, and inviting deep-pocketed investors into the country. By giving ministerial portfolios to Shahinaz and seven other women, Ibrahim created Egypt's first ever woman-majority cabinet. It was a historic move that at once answered all the critics who continued to wonder if he meant it, all those years ago, when he criticized the Muslim Brotherhood's position on women leaders.

Egypt's first prime minister from an Islamist background had named a woman as his deputy and he put the entire Muslim world on notice. Egypt would revive its proud history of cultural and political leadership. What better way to shake the country awake than to place a woman as vice president? And what better way to show his break with the Brotherhood than to have a woman deputy who insisted that Egypt needed every man and woman working side by side to rebuild the country. Thankfully, his deputy had completed her graduate studies in Denmark and was well versed in Scandinavia's success in supporting women. Ibrahim's bold reforms looked toward Europe and the West, but his Islamist background made him still a man of the people, and in 2033 he would set out to emulate Erdogan's successes. On his second day in office, Ibrahim then put Europe on notice: Egypt would apply for European Union membership.

"Egypt's first prime minister from an Islamist background had named a woman as his deputy."

Saudi Congratulations

One of the first people to congratulate Ibrahim was Maha El-Faleh, who, in 2032, was appointed Saudi Arabia's first female mufti. Maha and Ibrahim had met at a conference in Dubai in 2010 after an online acquaintance. He had lived in Abu Dhabi at the time, while she had traveled from Jeddah. Their friendship, however, had long been brewing: in 2007, a mutual friend had invited Maha to join a Facebook group Ibrahim had created in support of political prisoners.

As co-mufti, she shared her post with two men—one a Sunni and the other a Shiite. Their appointments coincided with the thirtieth anniversary of what is now recognized as a tragic turning point in Saudi Arabia's relationship with its powerful clerics.

In March 2002, 15 girls were burned to death in Mecca when officers of the morality police refused to let them out of their flaming school building and barred firefighters from rescuing them because the girls weren't wearing headscarves. The ensuing outrage allowed then Crown Prince Abdullah to snatch girls' education away from the clerics and to further promote his reform ideology. Abdullah had become king when his brother Fahd died in 2005, but he became mired between liberals impatient for reform and conservatives who hoped it would never come, unable or unwilling to press decisive actions. Abdullah had often spoken of furthering women's rights and introducing much-needed reforms into Saudi Arabia. Many took him seriously because unlike some of his brothers who had ruled before him, he wasn't a playboy king but a serious and earnest man whose simple tastes appealed to Saudis proud of their Bedouin past.

Before his death in 2015, Abdullah had prepared legislation to allow women to

drive, but more important, to codify a criminal code which would end the free-for-all of Saudi Arabia's courts in which hard-line clerics who also served as judges passed verdicts based on their own interpretation of Islamic law.

The nephew who assumed the throne after Abdullah was laid to rest had not been expected to be much of a reformer. He'd had a little too much fun during graduate school in the United States and maintained the family tradition of summer vacations on the topless beaches of the French and Spanish Rivieras. But before his uncle's death, Faisal had dipped a few toes into the Generation Facebook pool.

He set up a Facebook profile (under an assumed name, of course) to read what his fellow Saudis were saying and was in awe of their inventiveness. Maha had come to his attention when, one slow evening, she'd posted as her Facebook status: "Maha wants to be liberated once and for all." (The social networking site encouraged its members to describe how they feel in what were known as "status updates.") Though Faisal didn't know it at the time, he was soon to find it serendipitous that his coronation coincided with an event in Saudi history that had empowered the hard-line clerics.

On November 20, 1979, some 500 armed Muslim militant gunmen seized Islam's holiest site, Mecca's Sacred Mosque, to proclaim the arrival of the messiah. The auspicious date marked the start of the Islamic calendar's fifteenth century. The militants were a motley crew: Saudi, Egyptian, Kuwaiti, Iraqi, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Yemeni. Presaging a mantra oft-repeated since (most notoriously by the Al Qaeda leader, the Saudi-born and educated Osama bin Laden), the militants railed against the sinful Saudi leaders, their modernization program, and their alliance with the West. It took Saudi forces, aided by French commandos, two weeks to rid Mecca of the rebels, whose leader, Juhayman bin Seif Al-Uteybi, was a product of the Saudi religious education system.

That event, five years before Maha was born, would draw a line in the Saudi sand creating a society more conservative than the one her mother and grandmother grew up in. In return for the clerics' support of the authorities during the siege of Mecca, the religious conservatives found themselves with even greater powers in the years that followed. An ultra-orthodox strain of Wahhabi Islam flourished, lending legitimacy to a Saudi royal family shaken by the audacity of the siege and the fault lines it uncovered throughout the kingdom. Before the uprising, the ruling family had ignored clerical criticism of a modernization drive funded by petrodollars. Indeed, before 1979, Saudi Arabia boasted cinemas and women worked as television announcers. But, in the wake of the siege, the Saudi kingdom changed dramatically.

The ruling family became increasingly isolated from the people. Revenues from oil funded infrastructure improvements and the acquisition of U.S. warplanes to defend against communism, while billions of dollars were quietly doled out to appease Wahhabi clerics and insulate the regime from those who might oppose it. As a result, fundamentalist Wahhabi Islam was exported to the rest of the Islamic world: Saudi-funded mosques and *madrassas* could be found from Indonesia to Nigeria. And as the Wahhabi clerics controlled the religious and educational domains, they became literally in charge of the people's hearts and minds.

A Vision in the Night

On the eve of his coronation, Abdullah's nephew, Faisal, had a dream where the Prophet Mohammed placed his hand on his forehead and told him that he had the chance to revive Islam's great message of

social justice and gender equality. When he asked the Prophet how he could do that, the future king of Saudi Arabia was told to recall the year 1979. Puzzled at first that the Prophet hadn't quoted verses from the Koran about the responsibility of leadership, Abdullah asked his friends to help him interpret the message. One of those friends, Ahmed al-Omran, a Shiite Muslim from the Eastern Province who had visited the United States in 2007 as part of a State Department visitor's program, told the future king of a book about the siege of Mecca he'd bought during his visit. The book's author maintained that the incident was the precursor to Al Qaeda's murderous ways. Ahmed, a fervent blogger both in English and Arabic, had reviewed the book online after he returned to Saudi Arabia. The book was the first he'd ever heard of the siege, as the event itself had been omitted from the Saudi history curriculum.

> "The Internet, blogs, and social networking sites now give voices to those most marginalized in the Middle East today—young people and women."

Relieved that someone had known what the prophet had tried to tell him, the new king of Saudi Arabia was determined to set the kingdom on a just course that would revive that message of social justice and gender equality which the prophet had emphasized. The growing power of the clerics after the siege had translated into an obsession with women—especially as Saudi Arabia modernized. The more highways the country built, the more control over its women the clerics demanded. It became a nation that played out its identity crisis over womens' bodies.

The obsession with women and public morality—*muttawah*, or religious police, back by clerics, would patrol shopping malls trolling for women with uncovered hair and ban shopkeepers who violated orders to shutter for prayer—meant little attention was paid to the plight of the poor (and they did exist in Saudi Arabia) or the foreign workers. Swarms of them had built 10-lane highways and sleek high-rises, yet lived much like modern-day slaves amidst the mountains of Saudi petrodollars.

It took him Faisal a few years—but we all know that things move slowly in Saudi Arabia. The oil had lasted longer than the naysayers had predicted, but by the time Faisal took over, the price of oil had plunged back to the low double-digits, which marked the beginning of the end of the Saudi welfare state. As the managerial posts dried up, Faisal encouraged young Saudis to train and apply for the junior jobs they had once eschewed as "beneath them." It was an uphill battle: whenever his predecessors had tried to implement such "Saudization" of the workforce, an influx of petrodollars would blunt the urgency.

Determined to create a more balanced role for Saudi Arabia in the region, Faisal reached out to China, India, and Iran. He wanted to be a global leader, though he was wise enough to assure his country's friends in the U.S. administration that his intentions were honest: he was merely fond of political multi-tasking.

In 2032, Faisal felt the country was ready and he asked Ahmed to become the first Shiite mufti and to recommend two others to share the post. Ahmed nominated Maha El-Faleh and Fouad al-Farhan, his contemporaries from Generation Facebook.

Maha, Fouad, and Ahmed had stayed in contact as their careers progressed and as Saudi Arabia and the Middle East changed around—and because of—them.

Fouad, for his part, became quite a celebrity after he was detained for several months in 2008 for the crime of calling for the release of dissidents in Saudi Arabia. Both Ahmed and Maha had campaigned for his release on their respective blogs. Unlike some other bloggers, Fouad had used his real name online, making it easier for authorities to corral him. But friends maintained his blog in his absence and like-minded bloggers across the Arab world called for his release via a massive online petition. Protest banners were posted across the Internet.

I Am a Dreamer

To misquote John Lennon, you may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one who imagines such a rosy future for Shahi, Ibrahim, and Maha—and the Middle East. Why? To quote one of my favorite George W. Bushisms, don't "misunderestimate" Generation Facebook and its ability to change not just Egypt and Saudi Arabia, but the entire region. I chose Egypt because—my own national biases aside and ancient Egyptian wonders notwithstanding—it's an oft-repeated mantra in the Arab Middle East that political changes in Egypt reverberate widely. To compare the Egypt into which Shahi and Ibrahim were born to the country today is to appreciate the topsy-turvy world of Middle East politics and to marvel at the endurance of a nation that simply shouldn't function anymore given its challenges.

What Egypt is to politics, Saudi Arabia is to religion—and not just for the Middle East but for the entire Islamic world. Islam was born in what is now Saudi Arabia, a magnet for millions of Muslim pilgrims to Mecca and Medina. If oil has been Saudi Arabia's trump card on the international stage, then Islam is its pair of aces for the Muslim world, both in symbol and practice—thanks to the billions of Saudi petrodollars that for years have promoted ultra-conservative Wahhabi Islam far and wide.

The Middle East today, in 2008, is full of young people—the majority of the region's population is below the age of 30. Paradoxically, their nations' rulers are all old, having for years fought off any potential alternative leaders, creating a political vacuum into which those young people of the region are increasingly stepping. The Internet, blogs, and social networking sites now give voices to those most marginalized in the Middle East today—young people and women.

It's impossible to look ahead in the Middle East without stopping for a moment to appreciate the myriad connections that keep the region in touch and aware in ways unimaginable in 1978 when Shahi was born. Satellite television means one can watch, over and over, the aftermath of the tragic September Cairo rock slide. On blogs like Shahi's "An Egyptian Woman," young people write about such tragedies, posting pictures and eye-witness accounts that rival the best media reports in Egypt. And, true to form, a group of young activists organized a group on Facebook calling on their friends and supporters to go to the grief-stricken shantytown to demonstrate in support of its bereaved inhabitants.

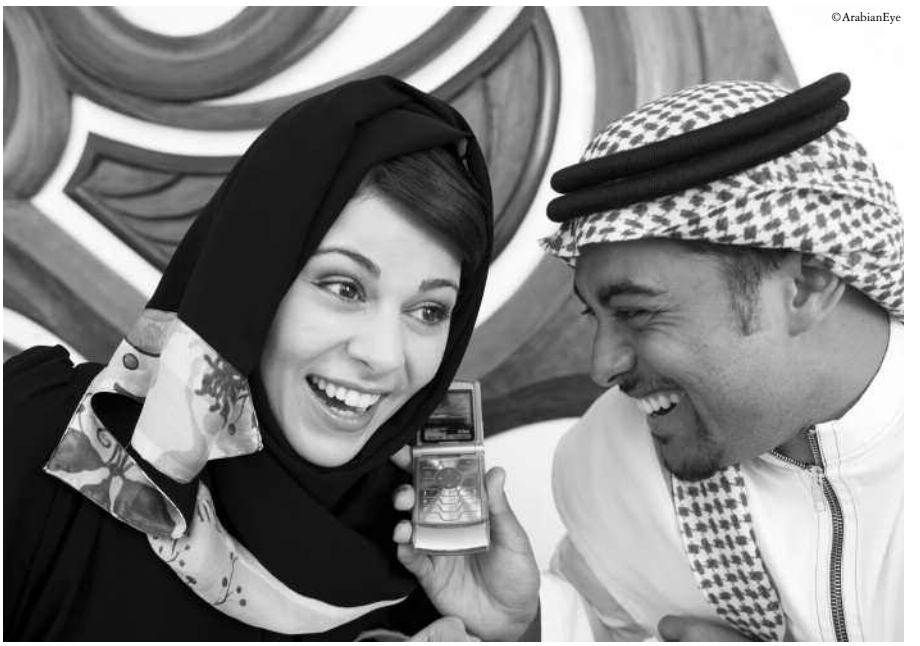
Generation Facebook is the godchild of two important developments that took off in tandem over the past three years in Egypt—an increasingly bold blogging movement and street activism. Both are among the few reasons for optimism in a country where most are pessimistic about the future.

In 2005, activists breached not just laws against public demonstrations, but

taboos of protesting against Mubarak himself, with street protests that focused on Egypt and its internal discontents. But that movement was perhaps too early to rally the masses and was criticized for being out of touch with the needs of ordinary Egyptians.

The recent Internet-inspired activism has flipped the script—the needs of the masses have sparked a wave of unprecedented activism among young Egyptians. Bloggers have been instrumental in the conviction of police officers for torture and in getting neglected stories into the headlines. The Internet has given young people like Shahi a space that does not exist in the "real world." They're using it to create grassroots groups and communities that will eventually translate into a real presence in society, and this bodes well for their ability to influence the futures of their respective countries. Generation Facebook might not be able to change their regimes today, but in building communities and support groups online, they are creating the much-needed middle ground that countries like Egypt desperately require. And, sadly, it is surely in recognition of that nascent power that regimes as aging, paranoid, and powerful as Egypt's Mubarak now arrest, imprison, and harangue bloggers and online activists.

And when the Egyptian regime moves against them—as when it imprisoned a blogger for insulting Islam and the president in 2007—they learn new ways to outmaneuver the state. As Generation Facebook grows older and more assured in its ability to organize and unite, it will be confronting a potentially inexperienced leader in the form of Gamal Mubarak with potentially tragic and unforeseen consequences.



2033: don't worry, be happy?

I call myself a foolish optimist. I'm a child of the "Naksa," as those of us born in 1967, the year of defeat by Israel, are called. So what, beyond a foolish dream, is left for us? I am confident that Generation Facebook is planting the seeds of an opposition movement that gives Egyptians, and by extension the whole region, an alternative to the state and the mosque. In 2033, I will be 66 years old. Nothing would make me happier than to see Shahi, Ibrahim, and Maha make my dream come true. ●