

## Social media and political revolution in the Middle East: Lessons for the seat-tight political leaders in sub-Saharan Africa

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### Abstract

This article examines the role of social media in political revolutions in the Middle East with a view to caution seat-tight leaders in sub-Saharan Africa and subverts such occurrence in the region. Data for this study was collected from secondary document on social media in the Middle East. The paper relied on content and discourse analyses. The paper argues that cyberactivism and satellite communication has transformed human lives and institutions reinventing the relationship between people and power. Hence, the new media, ranging from *wikileaks* and *facebook* to *twitter* and *youtube* has persistently challenged the traditional flow of information and exposed powerful, seat-tight and corrupt governments in the Middle East. This paper recommends that political leaders across sub-Saharan Africa should favour overall economic reform, shun corruption, embrace the global best practices in conducting democratic elections, create jobs and reduce poverty especially among the youth to avoid similar uprising in the region.

**Keyword:** Social Media; Political Revolution; Information; Middle East; State; and Leaders

### Introduction

In 2010, a wave of political revolution engulfed virtually all the countries in the Middle East, challenging the existing political order which has merely recycled poverty among the people. Tunisians were the first to stand up to a dictator and demanded democracy. From Tunisia, the revolution spread to Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, Syria and almost all the Middle East and North African countries. At the heart of the complaints among protesters are poverty, unemployment, low wages and the prevalence of political corruption. Simply put, the people demanded for good governance and accountability. The most striking and the unexpected part of the protests is that although each Arab nation had its own permutations of a balance of power among tribes, sects, mosques, militaries and none of these entities has been at the forefront. Discussions on social justice, equity, good governance and democracy took precedence to religious and tribal allegiance (<http://www.newyorker.com/talk/comment>).

Remarkably, the role of the development in the information and communication technology especially the social media in the uprisings in the Middle East has dominated academic literature. This development of the information and communication technology was possible due to the improvement in the productive forces of the society around the microelectronic in the 1950s and 1960s (Freeman, 1982 and Perez 1983). Notably, this microelectronic revolution laid the foundation for the information revolution which started in the United States in 1970s (Castells, 2004c and Mitchell, 2003). By 2010, the information revolution had completely engulfed the Middle East countries. Interestingly, the population of social media users in the region surged from less than 5 million to over 30 million during the uprising. This surge was mostly among the youth. Arguably social media networks like Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and YouTube were mostly used in the region during the uprising.

Words on twitter, Face book, Linked-in and YouTube are more powerful in mobilizing the masses, building worldwide support and forcing seat-tight leaders to step down. The importance of the social media as an effective instrument of mass mobilization was recognized by the United States Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, when she announced plans for the United States to spend \$25 million annually to support on-line dissidents. According to her, those who clamp down on internet freedom may be able to hold back the full impact of their people's yearnings for a while but not forever (<http://www.tednguyenusa.com/social-media-ignites-revolutions-in-middle-east-north-africa>). Clinton called free access to the social web a 'fundamental human right'. Despite the insurmountable cases of electoral malpractice that characterize the emergence of leaders in most SSA countries, they are regarded as democratically elected leaders. However, the long years of military leaderships in the SSA has militarized the government of the region such that even democratic leaders exhibit enormous autocratic tendencies. Nwankwo (1989: v) noted that "the despotic manner of African leadership and the tendency of these leaders to use state power to cause death to opposition has re-launched Africa as the most barbaric and backward continent in the 21<sup>st</sup> century". This article examines the role of social media in political revolution in the Middle East with a view to caution seat-tight leaders in sub-Saharan Africa and subverts such occurrence in the region, where poverty and political corruption also hold sway.

### **On the Phenomenon of Social Media**

Kaplan and Haenlein (2011:59) defined social media as "a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, which allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content." Kaplan and Haenlein (2011) furthered that there are six different types of social media. They include: collaborative projects, blogs and microblogs, content communities, social networking sites, virtual game worlds, and virtual communities. Technologies include: blogs, picture-sharing, vlogs, wall-postings, email, instant messaging, music-sharing, crowd sourcing, and voice over IP, to name a few. Many of these social media services can be integrated via social network aggregation platforms. In this paper, social media refers to media for social interaction, using highly accessible and scalable communication techniques. It can take many different forms, including internet forums, weblogs, social blogs, micro- blogging, wikis, podcasts, photographs or pictures, video, rating and social bookmarking.

One characteristic shared by both social media and industrial media is the capability to reach small or large audiences; for example, either a blog post or a television show may reach zero people or millions of people. Some of the properties that help describe the differences between social media and industrial media are:

1. Reach - both industrial and social media technologies provide scale and are capable of reaching a global audience. Industrial media, however, typically use a centralized framework for organization, production, and dissemination, whereas social media are by their very nature more decentralized, less hierarchical, and distinguished by multiple points of production and utility.
2. Accessibility - the means of production for industrial media are typically government and/or privately owned; social media tools are generally available to the public at little or no cost.
3. Usability - industrial media production typically requires specialized skills and training. Conversely, most social media production does not require specialized skills and training, or requires only modest reinterpretation of existing skills; in theory, anyone with access can operate the means of social media production.
4. Immediacy - the time lag between communications produced by industrial media can be long (days, weeks, or even months) compared to social media (which can be capable of virtually instantaneous responses; only the participants determine any delay in response). However, as industrial media begin adopting aspects of production normally associated with social media tools, this feature may not prove distinctive over time.
5. Permanence - industrial media, once created, cannot be altered (once a magazine article is printed and distributed changes cannot be made to that same article) whereas social media can be altered almost instantaneously by comments or editing.

Again, community media constitute an interesting hybrid of industrial and social media. Though community-owned, some community radios, TV and newspapers are run by professionals and some by amateurs. They use both social and industrial media frameworks. Keen (2006) like many academics, uses the neologism network economy or "network information economy" to describe the underlying economic, social, and technological characteristics of what has come to be known as "social media". Keen (2006:15) criticizing social media in his book *The Cult of the Amateur*, noted that "out of this anarchy, it suddenly became clear that what was governing the infinite monkeys now inputting away on the Internet was the law of digital Darwinism, the survival of the loudest and most opinionated". Under these rules, the only way to intellectually prevail is by infinite filibustering (<http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=long-live-the-web>). Drawing from this assertion, most governments especially in the Middle East caution against the use of social networks among youth that grow too big and tends to limit innovation, dilute Islamic values and challenge incumbent government (Golder and Huberman, 2006).

The Middle East is not the only region where the social media has dominated. Today, social networking accounts for 22% of all time spent online in the U.S (<http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/global/social-media-accounts-for-22-percent-of-time-online/>). A total of 234 million people age 13 and older in the U.S. used mobile devices in December 2009 (<http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/global/social-media-accounts-for-22-percent-of-time->). Twitter processed more than one billion tweets in December 2009 and averages almost 40 million tweets per day (<http://digital.venturebeat.com/2010/02/10/54-of-us-internet-users-on-facebook-27-on-myspace/trackback/>). Over 25% of U.S. internet page views occurred at one of the top social networking sites in December 2009, up from 13.8% a year before (<http://digital.venturebeat.com/2010/02/10/54-of-us-internet-users-on-facebook-27-on-myspace/trackback/>). Australia has some of the highest social media usage statistics in the world. In terms of

Facebook use, Australia ranks highest with almost 9 hours per month from over 9 million users (<http://digital.venturebeat.com/2010/02/10/54-of-us-internet-users-on-facebook-27-on-myspace/trackback/> and <http://www.socialmedianews.com.au/social-media-stats-in-australia-facebook-blogger-myspace/>). The number of social media users age 65 and older grew 100 percent throughout 2010, so that one in four people in that age group are now part of a social networking site (<http://www.socialmedianews.com.au/>).

### **Where is the Middle East?**

Middle East is located in South Western Asia and North Eastern Africa. The geopolitical term *Middle East*, first coined in 1902 by United States naval officer Alfred Thayer Mahan, originally referred to the Asian region, south of the Black Sea between the Mediterranean Sea to the west and India to the east (Sluglett, 2009). In modern scholarship, and for the purposes of this article, the term refers collectively to the Asian countries of Bahrain, Cyprus, Iran, Iraq, Israel (and the Israeli-occupied West Bank), Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen, and the North African country. A broader, more cultural definition might include the Muslim countries of Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Sudan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. The area is mostly arid with hot, dry summers and cool winters. It contains about 65 percent of the world's oil reserves, primarily in the states bordering the Persian Gulf. Oil is the region's main export. Some Middle Eastern countries are extremely rich because of their oil reserves. Others with high populations and no significant oil resources (notably Egypt and Yemen) are considerably poorer (Sluglett, 2009). More than 90 percent of the area's populations are Muslims. Christians form the next largest group, with about 4 percent of the population, and Jews make up about 2 percent of the population. (Sluglett, 2009). Due to the growth of the petroleum industry and accompanying modernization, traditional ways of life largely disappeared from most parts of the Middle East in the 20th century (Sluglett, 2009). With the first wave of modernization came a general trend toward secularism. Islam exerted less influence on social conduct, and religious practice was gradually relegated from the public to the private sphere. However, some Middle Eastern countries have manufacturing sectors that contribute significantly to their economies. Examples are Egypt and Turkey, whose manufactures include textiles, processed foods, and chemicals. Although agriculture dominated the regional economy until the 1950s, the Middle East was importing more than half of its food requirements by the early 1990s. Agriculture remains significant in the economies of Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Iran, Egypt, and Turkey, supplying between 15 and 25 percent of their Gross Domestic Product (Sluglett, 2009).

### **Evidence of popular uprising in the Middle East**

Despite the promise by President Ali Abdullah on 2<sup>nd</sup> February, 2011 that he would not seek another term in office, after three decades in power; that he would not hand over power to his son (No extension, no inheritance, and no resetting the clock), protests continue in the streets Sanaa, Aden and Taiz (Sudam, 2011 and Daragahi, 2011). In Bahrain, protesters have continued to clash with police in which many people have died. Like in many other Middle East States, Bahrain is vulnerable to unrest because of discontent among its majority Shia population against the ruling Sunni dynasty. After the government in Tehran called for a rally on Friday, February 18<sup>th</sup>, 2011 to express hatred for the opposition movement (Slackman and Audi, 2011), the regime's two main opposition leaders mobilized the protesters and the protest quickly turned into anti-government unrest which left many people dead and others injured (Kevin, 2011).

The rulers of Saudi Arabia also face the delicate task of responding to pressure for reform while combating a growing problem of extremist violence. It has always been in the ruling al Saud family's interests to preserve stability in the region and to clamp down on extremist elements. Hence, opposition movements are banned within the country. Thousands of Jordanians have taken to the streets over the past five weeks, demanding better employment prospects and cuts in foods and fuel costs (Al-Khalidi, 2011).. In response, King Abdullah II sacked Prime Minister Samir Rifai over the slow pace of reform and appointed Marouf al-Bakhit, a former army general and ambassador to Israel (Massoud, 2011). The death of King Hussein, who ruled for 46 years, left Jordan still struggling for economic and social survival, as well as regional peace.

In Libya, the latest unrest was triggered after it was posted on face book that a lawyer who is an outspoken critic of the government had been arrested. Colonel Gaddafi who is the longest serving ruler in Africa and the Middle East, and also one of the most autocratic has refused to step down hence the country has remained the most tensed in the region (Adams, 2011 and Arnold, 2011). While Colonel Gaddafi refused to step down, he in fact continued to resist protesters with the armed forces until his death.

In Egypt, President Hosni Mubarak was forced to step down on February 11<sup>th</sup> 2011 after 18 days of protests (Jack, 2011; Parvaz, 2011 and Sly, 2011). Aged 82, he had been in power since 1981. Egypt had long been known as a centre of stability in a volatile region, but that masked problems which erupted in popular demonstrations against the 30-year rule of President Mubarak (Andoni, 2011 and Shadid, 2011)). The main drivers of the unrest were poverty, rising prices, social exclusion, anger over corruption and personal enrichment among the political elite, and a demographic bulge of young people unable to find work (Nguyen, 2011).

According to (Karam, 2011), Morocco's main opposition group has warned the "autocracy" will be swept away unless there are deep economic reforms. Morocco has been facing severe economic problems. It has announced an increase in state subsidies to try to counter commodity price rises. Morocco, like Egypt and Algeria, does allow limited freedom of expression and has so far been able to contain protests. Like Jordan it is a monarchy with strong support among sections of the public (McDevitt, 2011). Algerian protests have been sporadic since early January, with demonstrators demanding the resignation of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika. Protest groups united in their opposition to the government include small trade unions and minor political parties. According to Nguyen, (2011) the unrest triggered mainly as a result of sharp increases in the price of food. Nguyen, (2011:1) remarked that "after the Tunisia's Twitter revolution and the social media-fueled protests in Egypt that toppled both their presidents, the social media revolution is spreading to other areas of North Africa and the Middle East including Syria". Surprisingly, the new media has ignited popular anti-government uprisings in the oil rich region. Table 1 below show the list of Middle East countries that experience(ed) ing the social media propelled revolution.

**Table 1: Middle East Protests and Outcomes, 2010-2011**

S/N	Country	Date started	Type(s) of protests	Outcome	Death toll
1	Tunisia	18 December 2010	Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation; Nationwide protest; occupation of public spaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Resignation of Prime Minister Ghannouchi</li> <li>Release of political prisoners</li> <li>Dissolution of the political police and the former ruling party</li> </ul>	223+
2	Algeria	28 December 2010	Self-immolations; major protests; riots; road-blockings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lifting of 19-year-old state of emergency</li> </ul>	8
3	Libya	13 January 2011	Nationwide protests; armed revolt; occupation of cities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Opposition forces seize control of numerous Libyan cities</li> <li>Formation of a Benghazi-based National Transitional Council, death of the Dictator</li> </ul>	10,000+
4	Jordan	14 January 2011	Minor protests and demonstrations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>King Abdullah II dismisses Prime Minister Rifai and his Cabinet.</li> </ul>	0
5	Mauritania	17 January 2011	Self-immolation, protests		1
6	Sudan	17 January 2011	Minor protests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>President Bashir will not seek another term in 2015</li> </ul>	0
7	Oman	17 January 2011	Major protests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Economic concessions by Sultan Qaboos</li> <li>Dismissal of ministers</li> </ul>	2
8	Yemen	18 January 2011	Major protests; riots	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>President Saleh will not seek another term in 2013</li> <li>Resignation of MPs from the ruling party.</li> </ul>	35
9	Saudi Arabia	21 January 2011	Self-immolation; minor demonstrations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Economic concessions by King Abdullah</li> </ul>	1
10	Egypt	25 January 2011	Self-immolations; nationwide protests; occupation of public spaces; attacks to official buildings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ousting of President Mubarak</li> <li>Assumption of power by the Army</li> <li>Suspension of the Constitution, dissolution of the Parliament</li> <li>Resignation of Prime Minister Ahmed Shafik</li> </ul>	384+
11	Syria	26 January 2011	Self-immolation, minor protests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Statement by President Assad about "reform"</li> </ul>	1
12	Djibouti	28 January 2011	Major protests; occupation of main public spaces		2
13	Morocco	30 January 2011	Self-immolation; minor protests; attacks to properties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Political concessions by King Mohammed VI</li> <li>referendum on constitutional reforms</li> </ul>	6
14	Iraq	10 February 2011	Self-immolation; major protests; riots; attacks to official buildings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prime Minister Maliki will not run for a 3rd term</li> <li>Resignation of provincial governors and local authorities</li> </ul>	21
15	Bahrain	14 February 2011	Major demonstrations; occupation public spaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Economic concessions by King Hamad</li> <li>Release of political prisoners</li> <li>Dismissal of ministers</li> </ul>	7
16	Iran	14 February 2011	Major protests	None	3
17	Kuwait	18 February 2011	Protests; clashes between riot police and "bidoons (bedouins)"	None	0
18	Western Sahara	5 March 2011	Minor protests	None	0

	Total				6,700– 10,700
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**Sources:** Washingtontimes.com 15 February, 2011; wsj.com 15 February, 2011; Lisa , 2011 ; The Wall Street Journal 20 February, 2011; Middle East Online 22 February, 2011; Reuters 19 February, 2011; The Gulf Today 27 February, 2011; Reuters 11 February, 2011; Monsters and Critics 22 February, 2011; Press TV 26 February, 2011 and Afrol News 5 March , 2011.

In light of the dramatic development of events, on a considerable scale, it has become evident that new media have been playing a key role this time around in keeping the momentum going, and bringing the voices of the disengaged Middle East youths to the attention of world media, and hence to international public opinion. Mobile phones, blogs, YouTube, Facebook pages and Twitter feeds have become instrumental in mediating the live coverage of protests and speeches, as well as police brutality in dispersing demonstrations (Miladi, 2011). Such developments have proven very significant in changing the rules of the game, of journalism production and dissemination of information in the region where the government historically keeps tight control on the media and where almost no platform is available for opinions critical of the political elite.

### **Rationale for the Revolution in the Middle East, 2010-2011**

Notably, the revolution which engulfed the whole of the Middle East between 2010 and 2011 are attributed to the following numerous factors: dictatorship, unfavourable immigration policies imposed on them by the regimes, demonstrated government corruption, unemployment, and extreme poverty, coupled with a large percentage of youth within the population (Cockburn, 2011). Increasing food prices and rates of famine globally have also been a major reason, involving threats to food security worldwide and prices approaching levels seen during the 2007–2008 world food price crisis. In recent decades, rising living standards and literacy rates and an expansion in higher education have resulted in an improved human development index in the affected countries (Ansari, 2011). The tension between rising aspirations and a lack of government reform may have been a contributing factor to the protests, as well as anti-Zionism (Alain, 2011 and Ammar, 2011).

Observably, human rights violation/abuse by dictatorial regimes drives the foregoing rationale for the revolution in the Middle East. In fact, the premium on power is exceptionally high and the institutional mechanism for moderating political competition is lacking thus political competition assumes the character of warfare. The unique nature of the Middle East states lies primarily on the fact that the states serve as a major instrument of capital accumulation and that those that control the government endemically increase the use of force to build strong defense for their continual domination and capital accumulation. Many years after most leaders in this region have seized power, education, health, information communication, industry and other sectors of the Middle East economy remain marginalized as government seeks survival and continuity. While Middle East governments vote the largest poll of their treasury for national security, the masses especially the youths remain unemployed, food shortage rises, inflation worsening and the general standard of living declining. After about five decades of dictatorial regime in the Middle East at the detriment of democracy, major development indicators are lacking in the region, the regional security threats heightens, border conflicts and intra religious conflicts have more than increased and economic welfare/growth stagnate and at worst regress. Like the late popular reggae musician Lucky Dube the states in the region continue to build prisons since 1980s to further repress the people.

Remarkably, the maximum leaders in the region tenaciously hold on to power because of the abundance of the mineral resources. The various crises situations in the region is related to the struggle for national question which usually aims at protection of natural resources ranging from gold to diamond and tin to crude oil. These natural resources are crucial for the survival of the people on whose land it is located while the states see these resources as the sole source of foreign exchange for the entire state hence, the leaders would not spare the last military personnel to uproot any group standing in between the state (interest of the dominant class) and the resources. Specifically, the exploration of these resources for personal gains explains the seat tight syndrome in the region and across Africa.

### **Information dissemination before the arrival of the social Media in the Middle East**

Prior to the advent of the various social media, information dissemination has been a sole prerogative of the state press controlled by the government in the post colonial states mainly in the Middle-East and Africa. Conventionally, each of the constitutions of these states assert that the liberties of opinion, expression, the press, publication, assembly, and association are guaranteed and exercised within the conditions defined by the law. Specifically, Article 1 of the Press Code in Tunisia provides for "freedom of the press, publishing, printing, distributing and sale of books and publications yet as early as 1956, with the birth of the first republic under the leadership of President Habib Bourguiba, the ruling government gained control over the press - and later over broadcasting. As a result, almost all the media outlets remained propaganda tools in the hands of Bourguiba's



government and ruling party. Under Ben Ali (who came to power through a coup in 1987) the media and government relationship got even worse. Miladi (2011) rightly observed that television and radio from Morocco to Egypt and from Syria to Saudi Arabia have remained state controlled and primarily serving the ruling governments.

According to Miladi (2011), the fundamental role the state televisions and radios play in the region is to promote the image of the dictatorial leaders as a competent, successful and progressive leader. He argued that almost half of the main evening news programme on TV7 or Channel 21 in Tunisia report on the everyday meetings, initiatives and engagements of the president and this tendency cuts across the media houses in the region.

The implication of monopolizing these media houses by the political leaders is that the civil society organizations, lawyers, academics, and trade unions do not have a platform to express their critical views on national affairs. These states in the Middle East are able to control the press through the tight censorship measures placed on them during the last few decades. Other international newspapers (Le Monde, Liberation, Le Figaro, and Al-Quds Alarabi) that attempted to expose government corruption, human rights abuses and the country's democratic deficit got censored (Miladi, 2011). This is because government has direct control on the servers, and most leaders in the region have become almost obsessive about control of news and information.

Meanwhile, the development of satellite technology and the mushrooming of TV channels available free-to-air have marked a turning point in the dissemination of information and the relationship between Arab state broadcasting and Arab audiences. It is estimated that more than half of the TV audiences in the Middle East migrate every night via satellite TV to the rest of the world with the global TV broadcasting, headed by Al Jazeera.

The recent unrests have given more prominence to satellite TV in the viewing habits of youths in the Middle East. Al Jazeera, which was ahead of other international broadcasters in breaking the news, has become the most influential broadcaster in which critical information about news coverage in various parts of the country can be accessed. Al Jazeera heavily relied on referencing Facebook pages and Youtube in reporting the raw events, which marked a key turning point in unveiling the bloodiness and horror of the manner with which the police had been dealing with the riots. No wonder that Tunisians flocked to the social media networks, which fed and fuelled news stations like Al Jazeera, BBC Arabic, France 24, Al-Hiwar and other channels (Nguyen, 2011).

The social networks on Facebook and Twitter was by far the most instrumental factor in the escalation of the recent events in the Middle East. Tens of thousands joined Facebook groups and got to know about the news developments and mobilized for further action. On a positive note, this has partly kept these social networks independent from any external pressures and from the politics of media corporations, and has partly kept the protests independent in their nature, that is, free from being 'hijacked' by political groups. Students and professionals have led the way, and the trade union movement and the political parties followed. Bloggers have proven that they can challenge not only the state media and other independent (self-censored) newspapers and radio stations, but also the government discourse on what is really happening.

Remarkably, news disseminated via social media was one of the driving forces that kept the protests alive, giving the Mideast youths in specific countries to an effective way to coordinate. Contrary to civil unrests in the region during the last few years, the recent revolutions in the region have attracted international media attention thanks to social media networks. Nguyen, (2011:1) however noted that "protest of old, featured rock- and stone-throwing youths, but in today's world, words on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are more powerful in mobilizing the masses, building worldwide support and forcing old men to step down". According to him, Tunisia's and Egypt's uprisings are spreading to at least 10 countries in which Facebook posts and tweets are organizing protestors across North Africa and the Middle East. According to Nguyen, (2011), Middle East protestors received a big boost in political support from U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton as she announced plans for the U.S. to spend \$25 million annually to support online dissidents, she added, those who clamp down on Internet freedom may be able to hold back the full impact of their people's yearnings for a while, but not forever. Clinton forcefully called free access to the social web a fundamental human right. Hence the growth in social network patent between 2008 and 2010 is astronomical. There has been rapid growth in the number of US patent applications that cover new technologies related to social media in use across the globe. The number of published applications has been growing rapidly over the past five years. There are now over 250 published applications (<http://www.answers.com/topic/social-media-technology#ixzz1GCGB9dKG>).

On state media there has been systematic and organized silence, placing a blackout about the riots. During the first two weeks of the unrest, the Tunisian main broadcaster Tunis 7 and Channel 21 completely steered away from mentioning news about the death of the two university graduates and the subsequent deaths of targeted civilians. They subsequently started a campaign of demonizing the protester as thugs and outlaws. In contrast with the state media, public defiance and the display of popular anger were sustained by new media outlets. Bloggers and Facebook pages have become sites of networking and spaces for exchanging and disseminating news about the protests.

### **The role of social media in Middle East revolution**

The social media network provided the youths of the Middle East with the opportunities to share information as they challenge seat tight leaders in the region who have engendered poverty amongst the people despite their rich natural resources. During the Arab Spring, young tech savvy activists led uprisings which caught dictators in a dozen countries across North Africa and the Middle East off-guard. Historically, dictators in the Middle East were accustomed to control traditional media but were unable to keep up with the rapid pace of cyberactivism. According to Howard (2011), cyberactivism means the act of using the internet to advance a political cause that is difficult to advance offline. This activism created compelling intellectual and emotional digital stories of injustice in order to remove unwanted governments. After analyzing more than 3 million tweets, gigabytes of YouTube content and thousands of blog posts, O'Donnell (2011) finds that social media played a central role in shaping political debates in the Arab Spring. The social media was limited to organizing protests. Hence, facebook was used to schedule the protests, twitter was used to coordinate, and YouTube was used to tell the world about every development in the Middle East protests (<http://www.miller-mccune.com/politics/the-cascading-effects-of-the-arab-spring-28575/>). In Tunisia and Egypt, conversations about liberty, democracy and revolution on blogs and on twitter often immediately preceded mass protests and major events. Despite that about 88.10 percent and 94.29 percent of the people in Tunisia and Egypt respectively got their information and news through the social media, Storck (2011) (facebook, twitter and blogs), Gladwell and Shirky (2011:1) contend that, "there is a limit to which social media could facilitate political change". Thus, the social media did not initiate but drives political revolution in the region. Although social media did not cause the upheaval in North Africa, they altered the capacity of citizens to affect domestic politics. The new media created a virtual ecology of civil society, debating contentious issues that could not be discussed in public.

Digital media helped to turn individualized, localized, and community-specific dissent into structured movements with a collective consciousness about both shared grievances and opportunities for action (Howard & Hussain, 2011). Although the social media is one of the most sufficient and necessary conditions for the Arab Spring movements, data do not provide strong support for claims that the new media caused the Arab Spring. A study conducted by Juergen Pfeffer and Kathleen Carley at Carnegie Mellon University in 2013 found that, the pattern of spread of the revolutions was not related to the pattern of social media usage. In other words, the social media did not cause the revolutions (<http://www.rawstory.com/rs/2013/03/10/debate-flares-over-impact-of-social-media-on-arab-spring-and-other-revolutions/>).

Arguably, the role of social media in fomenting revolution in the Middle East was overhyped. Despite the fact that social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter, played a critical role in the political upheavals that have been taking place in the Middle East, we cannot assume a relationship of causality between social media and political revolutions. Social media cannot automatically or single-handedly launch a revolution. This is not to say that social networks do not matter, rather this is to say social media do not incarnate freedom or heaven-like stage of human history (Rieff 2011; Morozov, 2011). The social media was effective in galvanizing the youth and empowering them in their fights against repressive regimes and their plight for more freedom and independence. Goldman (2013) observes that social media has contributed significantly in shaping the way in which ordinary people carry on political conversations and action around the Middle East. Thus, the social media complemented the active civil society and organized political groups and networks to effectively initiate the kind of change experienced in the Middle East especially in Egypt. There was a longstanding democratic movement in Egypt and Tunisia and these movements have tried many tactics but none of them worked. The new media merely changed the way people think about their options (Howard, 2011).

A poll by the Arab Social Media Report in 2011 indicated that in Egypt, the majority of Facebook agreed that Facebook was used most effectively to raise awareness of the causes of the movements within the country. Indeed, Egyptian activists reject the notion that social media drove their revolution. They argued that dictators in the Middle East had accumulated many fragmented political enemies who used social media to identify goals, build solidarity and organize demonstrations. This explains why government efforts to crack down on social media incited more public activism in Egypt. Perhaps the achievement of social media during the revolution was informing the world about the struggle for liberal democracy in the Middle East. The success of demands for political change in Egypt and Tunisia led individuals in other countries to pick up the conversation. It helped create discussion across the region. Social media carried a cascade of messages about freedom and democracy across North Africa and the Middle East, and helped raise expectations for the success of political uprising (Howard & Hussain, 2013). This suggests that social media only helped to keep up the momentum of the protests that began in Tunisia, toppled two more dictators in Egypt and Libya and continue to shake the region. The tweets and Facebook posts did more to spread information outside the affected countries and led to a boomerang effect that brought international pressure to bear on autocratic regimes. Collaborating the foregoing, El-Nawawy & Khamis (2012) conclude that social media can potentially contribute to political revolution, but only under certain circumstances. Hence, a complex network of events, forces, and people are needed in order for social media to be effective in political change.

### Lessons from the Middle East for Seat tight leaders in Sub Saharan

Notably, the use of social media among youth is not peculiar to the Middle East. The youth in sub Saharan Africa have also been noted as one of the highest users of facebook and twitter. Arguably, deteriorating economic condition in the Middle East accounts for the explosion of the revolutions. Meanwhile the economic condition in the Middle East is better than the condition in sub Saharan Africa. Sub Saharan Africa is obviously one of the poorest regions in the world as it contains most of the Least Developed States (See Table 2 below).

**Table 2: WORLD'S POOREST COUNTRIES**

Rank	Country	GDP Per Capita
1.	Sierra Leone	\$500
2.	Tanzania	\$550
3.	Ethiopia	\$560
4.	Somalia	\$600
5.	Cambodia	\$710
6.	Democratic Rep of Congo	\$710
7.	Rwanda	\$720
8.	Comoros	\$725
9.	Burundi	\$730
10.	Eritrea	\$750
11.	Yemen	\$750
12.	Madagascar	\$780
13.	Afghanistan	\$800
14.	Tuvalu	\$800
15.	Mali	\$820
16.	Kiribati	\$760
17.	Zambia	\$880
18.	Guinea-Bissau	\$900
19.	Malawi	\$940
20.	Sudan	\$940
21.	Nigeria	\$970

Compiled by CIA world fact book  
 Curled from (World Bank, 2005)

The above table shows that the first 10 poorest countries in the world are in the sub-Saharan African region. This explains why World Bank has classified sub-Saharan Africa as a debt distressed region as nation in the region find it extremely difficult or impossible to service debt (Killick and Martins, 1989a). They rightly noted that the basic amenities for the people living in sub-Saharan region are embarrassing. Political leadership in this region has therefore been unable to organize or direct economic programmes and projects that would steer their people away from poverty and launch their economies in the global fact book of development (<http://www.subsaharanafriicapolitical.com>). Figures for life expectancy, malnourishment, and infant mortality and HIV/AIDS infections are also dramatic with the exception of South Africa (<http://www.development.com>). Retrieved 2<sup>nd</sup> January, 2010). Table 3 below shows the global economic indicators by regions

**Table 3: Selected Development Indicators for Major Developing Regions**

Region	GNI per capita, 2001 (dollars)"	Average annual growth in GDP per capita, 1980-2000 (percent)	Life expectancy at birth, 2001 (deaths per 1,000 live births)	Under-five mortality rate, 2001 (deaths per 1,000 live birth)	Average annual growth in population, 2001 (percent )
sub-Saharan African	271	-1.1	46.0	172.5	2.3
South Asia	449	3.3	62.6	95.3	1.7
Latin America	3,669	0.5	70.6	32.7	1.4



East Asia and the Pacific	3,710	6.4	70.2	38.3	0.8
Middle East and North Africa	2,207	0.9	68.4	49.8	2.0

Source: World Bank (2003a).

Table 3 above shows that sub-Saharan Africa had annual growth rate of -1.1%, South Asia has 3.3%, Latin America 0.5%, East Asia 6.4%, Middle East and North Africa 0.9% (World Bank, 2005). Life expectancy in sub-Saharan Africa is lower than Middle East. Meanwhile, African autocrats do not hesitate to manipulate their national constitutions to prolong their stay in power (Ezeibe, 2015). Among the recent cases of succession-driven crises in Africa are those of Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Togo, Kenya and Zimbabwe. Thousands of lives have been lost due to the destructive nature of these conflicts. Another aspect of the leadership succession crises in Africa is that of African heads of state stepping down from the presidential office but maneuvering to desperately cling onto a certain measure of power by remaining leaders of their political parties. The recent examples are that of Namibia and Malawi. In the case of Namibia, the constitution had to be amended to accommodate a third term for the former president Sam Nujoma only. In Malawi, Nigeria and Zambia, similar attempts were made to amend the constitutions, but these were thwarted by a coalition of forces made up of opposition political parties, civil society organizations, and even sections within the ruling parties.

Omar Bongo of Gabon died after 42 years in power; Teodoro Obiang Mbasong of Equatorial Guinea has held on for 30 years; Hot on his heels is Mugabe at 29 in Zimbabwe tolerating no rivalry to his power. His political desire to stay in the presidential office remains insatiable and unconstrained by conscience hence, the repeated flaring up of crisis. Paul Biya of Cameroon for 27 years; Yoweri Museveni of Uganda for 24 years; king Mswati 111 of Burkina Faso for 22 years and host of other (Anim, 2009:50). As African leaders devote their attentions and efforts to clinging to power, the continent continues to endure the burden of underdevelopment, widespread poverty, high levels of illiteracy, widening income gap between the haves and have-nots. The ambitions of Bakili Muluzi, Olusegun Obasanjo and Frederick Chiluba, in their attempts masquerading as born again democrats best captures the point being made above about sit tight syndrome in Sub-Saharan Africa.

### Conclusion

The revolution in the Middle East was motivated by citizens' upset over the wealth, inequality, political corruption and most of all immigration policies imposed on them by the regimes. The authoritarian regimes in the region have imported foreigners into their countries to alter the demographics in their favor. Naturally, the native populations became upset over this, hence, the revolutions. Notably, these Middle East regimes had been under intense for a very long time and no doubt exacerbated in recent decades by ever younger trending demographics. No wonder the social media successfully played the role of mobilization and organization rather than cause like most Western scholars argue.

The revolution in the Middle East presents enormous risks, not only for the West but also for the rest of the seat tight political leaders in sub-Saharan Africa. After a few decades of relative stability in the world, we are entering interesting/dangerous times. Today, governments are scrambling to salvage their influence and take advantage of the new cyber and satellite media. From China to the Sudan, Egypt to Iran, despots and armies are tracking web activity and setting up Facebook accounts to spy on their citizens. Although autocratic governments in the Middle East attempted to squelch new organizing technologies by largely shutting down the internet and cell phones, the genie was already out of the bottle, the revolution was successful- it changed the dictators in the region.

This study recommends that, as autocratic leaders of sub-Saharan Africa watch the scene of the Middle East revolution, they should be proactive to avert similar occurrence not by tracking web activities like the Egyptian autocrat attempted rather by increasing the political space. This paper recommends that political leaders across sub-Saharan Africa should favour overall economic reform, shun corruption, embrace the global best practices in conducting democratic elections, respect human rights, create jobs and reduce poverty especially among the youth to avoid similar uprising in the region.

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