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Revolution, Facebook-Style

By SAMANTHA M. SHAPIRO

Only a few hours after [Israel](#)'s first air strike against [Hamas](#) positions in the [Gaza Strip](#) late last month, more than 2,000 protesters marched through the streets of downtown Cairo, carrying [Palestinian](#) flags. This began what would become weeks of protests, in which thousands of Egyptians of all different political leanings gathered in [Egypt](#)'s main cities, in public squares and at mosques and universities. Hundreds were arrested. In every city, the biggest presence at the protests was the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamist political organization, active in many countries throughout the Middle East, that seeks to govern according to Islamic law. Other, smaller demonstrations were put together, sometimes spontaneously, by leftist groups and student organizations.

Anti-Israel demonstrations in Arab capitals are nothing new. From Amman to Riyadh, governments have long viewed protests against Israel as a useful safety valve to allow citizens to let off steam without addressing grievances closer to home. But in Egypt, this time, the protests were different: some of the anger was aimed directly at the government of President [Hosni Mubarak](#). In defiance of threats from the police, and in contravention of a national taboo, some demonstrators chanted slogans against Mubarak, condemning his government for maintaining diplomatic relations with Israel, for exporting natural gas to the country and for restricting movement through Egypt's border with Gaza.

As the street protests went on, young Egyptians also were mobilizing and venting their anger over Gaza on what would, until recently, have seemed an unlikely venue: [Facebook](#), the social-networking site. In most countries in the Arab world, Facebook is now one of the 10 most-visited Web sites, and in Egypt it ranks third, after Google and Yahoo. About one in nine Egyptians has Internet access, and around 9 percent of that group are on Facebook — a total of almost 800,000 members. This month, hundreds of Egyptian Facebook members, in private homes and at Internet cafes, have set up Gaza-related "groups." Most expressed hatred for Israel and the United States, but each one had its own focus. Some sought to coordinate humanitarian aid to Gaza, some criticized the Egyptian government, some criticized other Arab countries for blaming Egypt for the conflict and still others railed against Hamas. When I sat down in the middle of January with an Arabic-language translator to look through Facebook, we found one new group with almost 2,000 members called "I'm sure I can find 1,000,000 members who hate Israel!!!" and another called "With all due respect, Gaza, I don't support you," which blamed Palestinian suffering on Hamas and lamented the recent shooting of two Egyptian border guards, which had been attributed to Hamas fire. Another group implored God to "destroy and burn the hearts of the Zionists." Some Egyptian Facebook users had joined all three groups.

Freedom of speech and the right to assemble are limited in Egypt, which since 1981 has been ruled by Mubarak's National Democratic Party under a permanent state-of-emergency law. An estimated 18,000

Egyptians are imprisoned under the law, which allows the police to arrest people without charges, allows the government to ban political organizations and makes it illegal for more than five people to gather without a license from the government. Newspapers are monitored by the Ministry of Information and generally refrain from directly criticizing Mubarak. And so for young people in Egypt, Facebook, which allows users to speak freely to one another and encourages them to form groups, is irresistible as a platform not only for social interaction but also for dissent.

Although there are countless political Facebook groups in Egypt, many of which flare up and fall into disuse in a matter of days, the one with the most dynamic debates is that of the April 6 Youth Movement, a group of 70,000 mostly young and educated Egyptians, most of whom had never been involved with politics before joining the group. The movement is less than a year old; it formed more or less spontaneously on Facebook last spring around an effort to stage a general nationwide strike. Members coalesce around a few issues — free speech, economic stagnation and government nepotism — and they share their ideas for improving Egypt. But they do more than just chat: they have tried to organize street protests to free jailed journalists, and this month, hundreds of young people from the April 6 group participated in demonstrations about Gaza, some of which were coordinated on Facebook, and at least eight members of the group were detained by police.

As with any group on Facebook, members can post comments or share news articles, videos or notes on the group's communal "wall." The wall of the April 6 group is constantly being updated with new posts, and the talk is often heated and intense. On a recent afternoon, members were discussing photographs that had just been posted on the Muslim Brotherhood Web site of a mass protest in Alexandria against Israel's actions in Gaza, in which thousands of members of the brotherhood took to the streets.

"They are real men!" posted a young woman using the alias Mona Liza.

"Something like this should happen in Cairo," another member typed. "People should go to the streets of Cairo until the Jewish crusaders' government falls."

Another member dissented: "We need strong actions, not protests like the brotherhood's where they sing religious songs and go home."

Ahmed Maher, a 28-year-old engineer who is one of the group's unofficial leaders, weighed in. "There are ideas about a big protest for Gaza right now," he wrote. The April 6 group should join that protest, he agreed, but "we should link it to our demands, which are of course different from other peoples' demands, like those of the brotherhood." It was a crucial point: unlike many protest groups in Egypt that were angry about Gaza, Maher saw Gaza as a way to stoke and focus discontent against Mubarak and his government. Maher saw Egypt's relationship with Israel as one symptom of a larger set of problems — censorship, corruption, joblessness and government incompetence — whose solution would lie not in resistance in Gaza but in democratization at home. "We should link politics with economic and social problems to show that our suffering is caused by a corrupt regime," Maher wrote.

The fact that tens of thousands of disaffected young Egyptians unhappy with their government meet online to debate and plan events is remarkable, given the context of political repression in which it is occurring. Organized groups opposed to Mubarak's National Democratic Party have long lived under constant surveillance by the government; their leaders are regularly jailed. As a result, most Egyptian opposition

groups remain small and are often plagued by infighting. And although about a third of Egypt's population is between 15 and 29, young Egyptians have for years been politically disengaged. A 2004 study by the Ahrum Center for Political and Strategic Studies found that 67 percent of young people weren't registered to vote, and 84 percent had never participated in a public demonstration.

In its official statement, the April 6 movement takes pains to emphasize that it isn't a political party. But the movement has provided a structure for a new generation of Egyptians, who aren't part of the nation's small coterie of activists and opinion-makers, to assemble virtually and communicate freely about their grievances. When I spoke earlier this month to Samer Shehata, an assistant professor of Arab politics at [Georgetown University](#), he said that it was no surprise that young Egyptians have chosen to put their political energy into a group that is not part of the Egyptian political process. "The state of the opposition in Egypt is so pathetic that existing parties have lost all credibility," he told me. "They've been around for a long time and produced nothing." The April 6 Facebook group, he said, "has credibility because it hasn't sold out to the regime or played the pathetic, limited game of politics the regime engages in."

ON A THURSDAY AFTERNOON last fall, I made my way to a Cinnabon cafe in Nasr City, a well-to-do district of Cairo, to meet with one of the founders of the April 6 Facebook group, a 30-year-old woman named Esraa Abdel Fattah Ahmed Rashid, who works as a training coordinator for a company that makes Islamic DVDs. The Cinnabon was subdued: a few pairs of young women and one or two married couples were scattered around the seating area with open laptops and frothy, sweet drinks. Sean Paul's "Temperature" played at a tasteful volume, low enough that the dance-hall lyrics about "the right tactics to turn you on" were nearly indecipherable. Rashid was wearing a meticulously coordinated outfit: brown pants, sandals, T-shirt, eyeliner and a baby blue tunic with overlapping light blue and brown head scarves.

Rashid has a round face, a high-pitched voice and a plucky sense of determination — [Reese Witherspoon](#) in a hijab. Her husband works in Dubai most of the year, and while he is away, she lives with her mother. She originally joined Facebook to keep up with friends; she joined groups for fans of the Egyptian singer Mohammed Mounir and the national soccer team, another for discussions of the Koran and others that offered updates on the latest styles in pajamas and modest wedding dresses. But her relationship with Facebook evolved in ways she could not have predicted. Last spring, the general strike that Rashid and her friends organized on Facebook landed her in jail, on talk shows and in newspapers around Egypt and abroad. She was now widely known around Egypt — even by people who didn't use the Internet — as the Facebook Girl, and she told me that she was logged into the site pretty much any time she wasn't working or sleeping. (Like most of the Internet activists I met in Egypt, Rashid spoke little English, and we communicated mostly through an interpreter.)

The April 6 movement has its roots in Egypt's brief burst of political freedom in 2005 and 2006, which came after the Bush administration put pressure on the Mubarak regime to hold its first multiparty election. Although the election was far from free, it created new opportunities for activists to organize and demonstrate, and out of the campaign a loose coalition of socialist, leftist and Islamist groups emerged called Kefaya ("enough" in Arabic). They focused on direct action and rarely discussed ideology, but they were united on one issue: that Hosni Mubarak should not be allowed to transfer power to his son Gamal. Kefaya organized street protests to pressure Mubarak to step down, hold free elections and allow the Egyptian judiciary to remain independent. Some demonstrations attracted as many as 10,000 people.

This flare-up of political activity coincided with the moment Egyptians were starting to gain access to the Internet in large numbers. Home computers and Internet cafes were becoming more popular, and the cost of getting online was dropping, thanks to a government initiative intended to encourage technological innovation in Egypt. The new technologies and political movements grew symbiotically. Shortly before Kefaya started, Wael Abbas, who is now one of Egypt's most influential bloggers, set up a Web site called Egyptian Awareness, and it quickly became the main source of information on Kefaya's activities, which were largely ignored by the state-run media.

Abbas and a few other early adopters of blog technology worked simultaneously as political advocates and crusading journalists. In 2006, Abbas posted cellphone-video footage of a police officer sodomizing a screaming minibus driver with an iron rod, which ultimately led to the officer's conviction. Another prominent blogger and friend of Abbas's, a woman in her early 30s named Nora Younis, posted stories about sexual harassment of women who participated in street demonstrations, which helped spur Egypt's mainstream media to cover the issue. (Younis worked briefly for The New York Times as a stringer.) Political blogs became essential reading for opposition parties; in 2005, Al Dustur, a weekly paper opposed to the regime, started a blog page, which reprinted important posts for readers without Internet access.

During the 2005 election campaign, Esraa Rashid started volunteering at the headquarters of El Ghad, a liberal democratic party that was founded in 2004 by Ayman Nour, a wealthy lawyer and member of Parliament. Nour came in second in the election, behind Mubarak, with 7 percent of the vote; he is currently in jail for forgery charges that his supporters insist are bogus. Rashid told me that she loved working at the Ghad office, but she and some of her friends in the youth wing grew impatient with the party bureaucracy. Like most political parties in Egypt, El Ghad has a strict hierarchy, and before deciding to stage an event, the leaders would carefully weigh a number of factors, including internal office politics and their current standing with the Mubarak regime. Members of the youth wing, Rashid told me, didn't have much say in that process, or much interest in the endless deliberations. So she and some friends turned to Facebook as a quicker, easier way to plan their own events and protests. Rashid's first foray into using Facebook for organizing was to coordinate a small demonstration around the opening of a movie about corruption and torture called "Heya Fawda" or "This Is Chaos." Rashid invited all her friends on Facebook to the event; they invited more friends; and in the end, about 100 people showed up. To Rashid, the event was a huge success; exhilarated, she and friends from El Ghad planned a few more events the same way.

THEN LAST MARCH, Rashid got a text message on her phone from Maher, the 28-year-old engineer and activist, suggesting that young Egyptians should do something to support the workers in Mahalla al-Kobra, an industrial town, who were planning to strike on April 6. For more than a year, workers around Egypt had been striking, periodically, to protest high rates of inflation and unemployment, but they never coordinated their protests. Rashid and Maher met when they were both part of the Ghad youth wing, but Maher had left the party to devote himself more fully to the youth movement of Kefaya. Unlike Rashid, he had been active in street protests and had been arrested. Rashid loved the idea of doing something to support the workers, and she called Maher immediately. She suggested they create an open group on Facebook to brainstorm ideas. On March 23, Rashid set up the April 6 Strike group on Facebook with herself and Maher as administrators.

Rashid expected this protest would develop more or less like her movie outing. But almost as soon as she set up the group, there were 16 members; when she refreshed the page a few minutes later, there were more than

60. The next day, more than 1,000. Rashid watched with fear and excitement as thousands of people, then tens of thousands, started joining and posting to the group. Eventually, the number reached 76,000. As the group's administrators, she and Maher could approve messages as they were posted, and it was their responsibility to delete spam or inappropriate posts; the two took turns monitoring the site day and night.

The group never developed a unified plan of action for April 6. Rashid initially proposed that people stay home and not buy anything in solidarity with the workers — unless they weren't afraid of protesting, in which case they should take to the streets. One girl suggested that everyone who protested on the street should give flowers to the security forces to disarm them, an idea Rashid supported. Maher started sending so many messages to the group that Facebook canceled his account; the site's automated filters presumed him to be a spammer. That left Rashid as the group's sole administrator. As the April 6 group grew, its call for a strike was endorsed by a variety of groups — political parties, labor groups, the Muslim Brotherhood, student organizations, the Kefaya movement. On the streets, supporters handed out leaflets and sprayed graffiti to make non-Internet users aware of the action.

Members who identified themselves as government security agents joined the April 6 group, too, posting comments under the insignia of the Egyptian police, and as April 6 approached, the government issued a strong warning against participation in the strike. Rashid told me that she was scared to go out on the street that day. She would have stayed home, she said, but she felt she owed it to all the people she'd been communicating with to come out. She posted her plans on Facebook; on the day of the strike, she said, she'd meet people at the Kentucky Fried Chicken in Tahrir Square downtown. She told people what she'd be wearing and gave out her cellphone number.

On April 6 in Mahalla, thousands of workers rioted, tearing down a Mubarak billboard. There were many arrests and at least three deaths. When Rashid headed out toward Tahrir Square, she was shocked to see police and military vehicles blocking off streets; soldiers and police officers, it seemed, were everywhere. As Rashid approached the Kentucky Fried Chicken, she found it was surrounded by police. She called some friends and told them to meet her at a nearby cafe to decide what to do next. Police swept in and arrested Rashid at the cafe; they took her to jail, where she stayed for more than two weeks.

Rashid was not prepared for a jail term. She had never been away from her mother for even a day without checking in, and although her mother knew she did clerical work for El Ghad, she had no idea that Rashid had been involved in organizing a general strike. Rashid's mother was beside herself, and she appeared on TV, begging the authorities to release her daughter.

While Rashid was in prison, members of the April 6 Strike Facebook group replaced their profile pictures with an image of Rashid with the words "Free Esraa!" printed below. And when Egypt's prime minister, Ahmed Nazif, came to speak at Cairo University about the government's technology initiatives, a 20-year-old member of the April 6 group named Blal Diab stood up and heckled him, urging him to free Rashid and other jailed activists from the April 6 movement. "They are the same young people who used the Internet to express their opinions!" he yelled, to thunderous applause. (One of Diab's friends captured the whole thing on his cellphone, and the video was shared widely over YouTube and on blogs.)

Rashid's release from prison was shown on live television, and it was quite a show. She ran out the door of the jail into her mother's arms, wailing. An unbelievable amount of screaming and crying ensued. Rashid's

mother tilted her face to the sky and issued a continuous stream of praise and thanks to Allah. Rashid said, tearfully, that she didn't expect that posting on the Internet would get her sent to jail, and that if she'd known what would happen, she wouldn't have done it. "They treated me well!" she sobbed. "They let me remain a girl. I missed you, Mom. I prayed to God every day."

When Rashid started playing the video on her laptop for me, she had to get up and walk away. Watching it still makes her cry.

ETHAN ZUCKERMAN, a research fellow at [Harvard](#)'s Berkman Center for Internet and Society, told me that the April 6 movement illustrates what he calls the "cute-cat theory of digital activism." Web sites or proxy servers created specifically for activists are easy for a government to shut down, Zuckerman says, but around the world, dissidents thrive on sites, like Facebook, that are used primarily for more mundane purposes (like exchanging pictures of cute cats). Authoritarian regimes can't block political Facebook groups without blocking all the "[American Idol](#)" fans and cat lovers as well. "The government can't simply shut down Facebook, because doing so would alert a large group of people who they can't afford to radicalize," Zuckerman explained.

When I spoke to Wael Nawara, a 47-year-old Ghad activist who is a co-founder of the party, he explained why, for him, getting on Facebook was such a big eye-opener. If you look at Egyptian politics on the surface, he said, you might think that the Muslim Brotherhood is the only alternative to the Mubarak regime. But "Facebook revealed a liberal undercurrent in Egyptian society," Nawara said. "In general, there's this kind of apathy, a sense that there is nothing we can do to change the situation. But with Facebook you realize there are others who think alike and share the same ideals. You can find Islamists there, but it is really dominated by liberal voices."

Interestingly, young Islamists in Egypt have also started blogging in ways that challenge their elders, often posting critical comments about the senior leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood. In the past, this kind of internal dialogue was suppressed by the brotherhood's leadership, or at least hidden from view, since the brotherhood's newspapers were outlawed. But the official leaders of the brotherhood and younger malcontents have both found a happy home on the Internet. Abdel Monem Mahmoud, one of the most prominent young Muslim Brotherhood bloggers, recently wrote a scathing critique of an article by a brotherhood leader arguing that all politicians must be devoted Muslims. And when the brotherhood circulated a draft of a political platform — the first step toward becoming an official political party — a 28-year-old brotherhood member named Mustafa Naggar used his blog to publish critiques of the platform's prohibition against electing women or Coptic Christians to the presidency.

A somewhat-grudging alliance has developed among some of the young Islamist bloggers and their secular-liberal compatriots over issues of free speech and the rights of opposition parties. I met Naggar one afternoon in a Cairo coffee shop just after he had recited the midday prayer. He told me Wael Abbas and Nora Younis's blogs are required reading for him; he visits them every day to stay current, although, he said, it really bothers him that Abbas often uses curse words in his posts. When I spoke to Asmaa Aly, a feminist blogger, she said that she was put off by the practice of many brotherhood members never to touch women other than their wives. "I could never be friends with someone who won't shake my hand!" she said emphatically. But she added that if a brotherhood blogger was jailed, she would definitely show up for a protest.

In Washington, there is increasing interest in the April 6 Youth Movement. James Glassman, the outgoing under secretary of state for public diplomacy, told me he followed the group closely. “It’s not easy in Egypt, and in other countries in the Middle East, to form robust civil-society organizations,” he said. “And in a way that’s what these groups are doing, although they’re certainly unconventional.”

Other State Department officials told me they believe that social-networking software like Facebook’s has the potential to become a powerful pro-democracy tool. They pointed to recent developments in Saudi Arabia, where in November a Facebook group helped organize a national hunger strike against the kingdom’s imprisonment of political opponents, and in Colombia, where activists last February used Facebook to organize one of the largest protests ever held in that country, a nationwide series of demonstrations against the [FARC](#) insurgency. Not long ago, the State Department created its own group on Facebook called “Alliance of Youth Movements,” a coalition of groups from a dozen countries who use Facebook for political organizing. Last month, they brought an international collection of young online political activists, including one from the April 6 group, as well as Facebook executives and representatives from Google and [MTV](#), to New York for a three-day conference.

IN RECENT MONTHS, Ahmed Maher has edged Rashid out of the leadership role they initially shared. When she was in jail, Rashid gave Maher the password to be the administrator of the April 6 Facebook group. He changed it, and ever since, he has declined to tell her the new password. Soon after Rashid was released from jail, she was married and left for her honeymoon. In May, Maher says, state-security officers picked him up and beat him intermittently for 12 hours to try to get him to give up the password for the Facebook group. Abbas posted pictures of Maher’s bruised back on his blog, and an opposition newspaper printed Maher’s account of the incident. Maher and other April 6 members set up a variety of steering groups for the movement, each of which is also on Facebook; using the wall, steering-group members discuss and vote on the direction the movement should go next. The new steering groups are not open to everyone, as the original group is, and Rashid has not been invited to join.

Some Egyptian bloggers and activists told me they resented Rashid’s emotional display when she was released from jail — particularly the fact that she said she wouldn’t have organized the protest if she’d known she would be arrested for it. (Rashid later recanted that apology at a meeting of the April 6 group; she quoted a lyric from a Mohammed Mounir song: “I didn’t need to repent; loving Egypt is not a sin.”) Abbas told me that other female activists, including the blogger Asmaa Aly, had been arrested before — Aly spent a month in jail in 2006 for participating in a Kefaya-organized sit-in for judicial independence — and when they were released, they didn’t cry or apologize.

“What the hell was she saying?” Abbas asked, referring to Rashid’s televised apology. “The girl is chicken. I am sorry to say stuff like that, but people are going to think that everyone who is active online is chicken like her. We are in the streets taking videos and photos. We aren’t only sitting in our bedroom in our pajamas.” (Once, looking at Rashid’s Facebook profile with her, I pointed out that Facebook’s software had included Wael Abbas on her page, under a tab labeled “People You May Know.” Rashid looked at his picture and shook her head. “We will not be friends,” she said firmly.)

Ahmed Maher and a number of his friends in the activist-blogger community spoke with respect about what Rashid had accomplished, but they agreed with Abbas that she didn’t have the right stuff to run the

movement. Some activists working with Maher questioned her lack of experience and said it wouldn't be appropriate for a woman to lead the group, given that the government had tortured Ahmed Maher and sent Rashid to prison once already.

Rashid says she is not happy about any of this. When she and I met in early October, she said that a month earlier, at the beginning of [Ramadan](#), she told Maher he had until the end of the holiday to give her back the password. Now Ramadan had just ended. "The longer he takes, the more forceful my response will be," she said fiercely.

It was in many ways the unideological, unedited voice that Rashid represented — someone who described herself as "a girl who loves Egypt" and who thought giving flowers to the police might be a good idea — that attracted people to the April 6 movement in such numbers. Young people were drawn to the fact that the movement wasn't part of Egypt's calcified party politics. ("I am involved in no parties, never," one teenage boy told me at a protest. "I just go to Facebook events, wherever they are. I'm in the Facebook Party.") But for April 6 to keep growing, some say, that may have to change. As Amr Hamzawy, an Egyptian political scientist who is currently a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, told me: "Just saying you are against Mubarak automatically gets a certain number of people behind you, but it's not enough. Kefaya wasn't capable and ready for the next step. They needed to put forth a positive platform as well as a critique of Mubarak in order to move beyond the base of elites in Cairo. April 6 will have to do this. It will have to become more organized in order to succeed where Kefaya failed."

THE APRIL 6 STRIKE was a success partly because it had its roots offline, among a cohesive, organized group of laborers; their protest was then vastly amplified by the Facebook activists. A number of the events created last summer and fall by the April 6 Youth Movement did not succeed in the same way. Protests were typically attended by only a few dozen of the group's supporters and often shut down by the police before they even began. Back in July, Maher tried to organize a "flash mob" on the beach in Alexandria that would sing patriotic songs and fly a kite with the Egyptian flag painted on it. But on the day of the protest, Maher and his crew of about 30 young people were stopped by the police before they were even able to finish unfurling their kite.

This month, as the university exam period began to cut into members' free time, the group's involvement in Gaza protests seemed to diminish. The decline in turnout led to a flurry of accusations, reflections and recriminations on Facebook. On Jan. 10, a young woman named Asmaa Mahfouz posted an angry screed on the April 6 site titled, "Are you all fed up, or what?" She accused members of opting out of protests because they thought things couldn't change, no matter how many strikes and demonstrations were organized. "Is this a reasonable way of thinking???!?" she wrote, punctuation marks flying. "Is it reasonable???? No, no, no, nooooo, absolutely not!"

A young man named Mahmoud Dahshan Ahmed replied that he thought the group needed to coordinate with the Muslim Brotherhood if they were to have an impact. "Frankly, I am fed up," he wrote. "What is the point of us demonstrating and marching from noon till 6 p.m., when nothing ever changes?"

By organizing online, the April 6 movement avoids some of the pitfalls of party politics in Egypt — censorship, bureaucracy, compromise with the regime. But whenever the movement's members try to migrate offline, they find they are still playing by Egypt's rules. They almost never meet in real life, certainly not in large

groups, and when they do, the police often show up.

Online, members of the movement are casting votes on the Web site's walls, publishing notes with their views on the political situation and creating groups to draft a constitution for their movement. But what does it mean to have a vibrant civil society on your computer screen and a police state in the street? When I spoke to Nora Younis, she described the April 6 strike as a practice session for the new generation. "It's a rehearsal for a bigger thing," she said. "Right now, we are just testing the power of each other."

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