

Mohamed Zayani (2015).
Networked Publics and Digital Contention: The Politics of
Everyday Life in Tunisia.
Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.
ISBN: 978-0-19023977-0

Reviewed by
Philip J. Auter, Ph.D.
Professor of Communication
University of Louisiana at Lafayette
auter@louisiana.edu

What is commonly deemed “Arab Spring” – the public and social media protests by the people of many Middle East and North African (MENA) countries against what they considered oppressive governmental regimes – was preceded by the chilling effects of a “communication winter” in the region, and followed by what may be deemed “Arab Summer” and “Arab Autumn.” (The latter was actually used in some scholarly research titles.) Mohamed Zayani’s book, *Networked Publics and Digital Contention: The Politics of Everyday Life in Tunisia*, takes an in-depth look at the issues and events that gave rise to the spark that touched off Arab Spring in Tunisia, as well as challenges for the future.

Chapter 1 lays the foundation of the remainder of the text – introducing key issues such as “digital activism”, and the influence not only of technology but also youth on the Arab

Uprising movement against authoritarian governments. It provides a brief history of Tunisia and how events led up to an environment where tech-savvy “digital citizens” felt the need to take advantage of communication technologies that crept into everyday society in the most seemingly innocuous manner to utilize these channels to strike out at oppressive leaders. Zayani also describes the in-depth field research he performed on the ground in Tunisia in 2011 and 2013 – interviewing journalists, politicians, students, activists, and ordinary Internet users. It is this vast amount of directly gathered qualitative research that is the basis of the text which explores the “politics of everyday life” in an environment of authoritarian systems that have a harder and harder time maintaining control of people and communication in a world that is becoming more instantly interconnected.

In chapter 2, Zayani sets the scene for the unanticipated uprisings yet to come – introducing the reader to the economic and political environment of an authoritarian government in the 21st century as well as the many unfulfilled promises that the Tunisian people felt their government had broken. He outlines the historical context of the nation’s government, beginning with its political independence from France in 1956 all the way to the revolution that ultimately resulted in the 23-year reign of Tunisian President Ben Ali coming to an end when he stepped down in the midst of massive protests in 2011 – the first Arab leader to fall as a result of Arab Spring. Much of the history focuses on the governmental struggles between modernization and the control of authoritarianism. Perceived threats from an outlawed Islamist party; economic challenges; and the illusion of stability are outlined as ways the government maintained their solid hold on power. Zayani focuses on how the quality of education incrementally decreased even while media censorship continued to increase – ultimately resulting in a “culture of fear” throughout society.

Chapter 3 provides background on some of the key issues that were simmering just below the surface in Tunisian society. The author points out the growing weaknesses in the system that individuals found frustrating, but that citizen activists saw as chinks in the armor of the regime. It addresses more traditional activism and how those groups attempted to seek governmental recognition of issues and solutions to problems. The chapter also attempts to show how online and “offline” activism came together in part as a result of these events. Specific examples of traditional forms of government resistance from unions, lawyers, and opposition press are highlighted – as well as more militant opposition occurring in the early part of the 21st century. Along with protests of the nation’s “underprivileged,” these events seem to belie the government’s claim of total control.

However, Zayani proposes in this chapter that although there had been some form of dissent throughout the Ben Ali regime’s long existence, these events in themselves did not ultimately lead to toppling of the government – but rather were often diffused before they could coalesce into a larger, more unified movement. Instead, he supposes that these events, along with technological advancements and youth culture, ultimately led to the online activism that would take things to the next level.

Chapter 4 explains the historical context in which activists – both in and out of country (diaspora), became better educated in the process of communicating to their society and eventually mobilizing people to act. The chapter provides historical context into how the Tunisian government chose to address the communication revolution and attempted to regulate the public’s access to the Internet. It looks specifically at the five early attempts at digital activism via “ezines”, etc. during the early days preceding the Arab Uprising.

Zayani explains how the Tunisian government took an early interest in the Internet as a way to modernize and advance the country, and implemented a number of pro-technology policies. The result was that Internet access rose from 1% to over 30% in the early part of the 21st century – about the same time that Zayani proposes that people were becoming more and more frustrated with the lack of effect of limited traditional activism and the retribution that could follow. The result was a situation where while the government watched old-style avenues of protest closely and carefully censored the traditional media, activists were becoming knowledgeable about the new forms of communication and working them to their advantage. Although these forms of communication were dangerous as well, they proliferated. Zayani focuses on several examples of the changing landscape, including TUNeZINE and Nawaat.

Chapter 5 is a logical extension of chapter 4. In it, the author focuses on the politicization of blogs and the evolution of bloggers' writing from simple narratives of daily life to aggressive political activism. Zayani points out that blogging was but a small portion of Internet traffic; it was one of the most highly vocal and aggressive in its form of activism. Initial growth was slow, but over time more and more writing was done in support of free speech and other civil liberties. Most participants were readers, not writers, but interest grew and collaborative efforts were begun. He proposes that one key event in the evolution of blogging into cyber-activism was the arrest of the blogger Arabicca. After years of slow growth, suddenly the movement became quite large relatively quickly.

Chapter 6 chronicles the struggle between government and society to control the Internet. Given global changes in both society and technology, Tunisian leaders were faced with the dilemma of trying to encourage a modern communication society while still holding the reins on freedom of expression. Zayani looks at governmental attempts to increase modernization

while keeping communication restricted and how – particularly the youth culture – proceeded to evade these restrictions and keep the lid to Pandora’s Box open at least a crack. Online communities of resistance grew and not only claimed Internet access rights but ultimately political freedom and civil liberties. Zayani points out that, due in part to traditional censorship, the Internet became a refuge for dissident intellectuals and other activists. Given that it was much harder to police – especially by a regime that was trying to promote technological modernization – circumstances created a breeding ground where vocal unrest could flourish. Once a playground for the youth and technically inclined, the Internet, and all of its anti-government messages, were becoming increasingly popular with the general public. Attempts at Internet censorship and the resultant fight over Internet freedom erupted into a war of words over all societal freedom.

In chapter 7, Zayani focuses on the appeal of social networks, and how they allowed youth activism to grow almost unnoticed by the government until it was too late. Facebook and other social media are explored as avenues that – perhaps unintentionally – provided average citizens a platform to voice their complaints much like the activist bloggers ... but with reduced fear of reprisals. Authoritarian leaders would find it hard to isolate individuals in the cacophony of political and non-political communication often penned under pseudonyms (online personae). Yet all these myriad voices coalesced to increase the groundswell of resistance to the political regime.

The chapter then focuses on the translation of online activism to real world protests that swept the country – and even affected the traditional media both inside and outside of Tunisia. Al Jazeera, Zayani proposes, took particular advantage of the environment, taking advantage of the Facebook-led dissent and magnifying it. This resulted not only in increased exposure for the

issues at hand, but also the growing influence of the Qatari-based news channel that prided itself on advocacy journalism.

Chapter 8 sums up the earlier discussions and brings the book to a conclusion – looking forward to future challenges to societal and governmental change in the region post Arab Spring – in the “Arab Autumn” or the new “winter of discontent.” It looks not only at changes, and regressions in governments, but also how dialogues of once activists have evolved as a result of events that followed.

Ultimately, in *Networked Publics and Digital Contention: The Politics of Everyday Life in Tunisia*, Mohamed Zayani has provided the scholarly and broader communities with a detailed, interpretive analysis of the thoughts and experiences of a cross-section of Tunisian society during the height of Arab Spring. The in-depth field interviews are assessed within historical and theoretical communication contexts and offer an insightful look into the making of a modern, technologically-supported revolution. His work compliments and enhances our understanding of the more pedestrian quantitative content and survey analyses of messages and people in the MENA region. The book is a cornerstone to constructing an understanding of where the region has come from, what it has been through, and where it may head in the future – politically, technologically, and societally.