

## **Youth, Service and Political Mobilization in Egypt**

An Arab Families Working Group Policy Brief

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By Barbara Ibrahim<sup>1</sup>



The massive youth-led movement for political change that emerged in early 2011 in Egypt was remarkable for many reasons, not least of which was the failure of observers to predict its timing or numeric strength. In recent years, most research on Arab youth has focused on the absence of political participation and the supposed passivity of this generation, coupled with what was seen as a retreat from public life into growing religiosity.

Recent research on youth engaged in community-based service in Cairo suggests a very different dynamic. The field study was conducted between 2007 and 2010 among volunteers at Egypt's largest youth-run social service organization, Resala. Our initial thesis was that in a repressive and authoritarian context such as that which existed in Egypt, most contemporary youth would avoid confrontational street politics and some would favor safer spaces in which to practice civic engagement in non-political arenas. Beginning around 2000, a new phenomenon

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emerged of youth-founded and youth-run organizations providing community services. Despite large numbers – Resala had 90,000 registered volunteers in 2009 – these organizations were dismissed as insignificant by political analysts. They equated youthful volunteerism with charity, seen as an outgrowth of the revival of religion and a space antithetical to democratic change. AFWG researchers, however, argue that youth volunteerism created an arena which prepared young participants for active participation in the uprising that toppled a regime in the early weeks of 2011.

How did community service projects – providing meals, clothing, and medicine or tutoring in underprivileged urban neighborhoods – prepare young Egyptians to take part in prolonged street demonstrations? These youth were not part of the highly-politicized and secretive core who planned and initiated the January 25<sup>th</sup> revolution. However they were prominent in the second wave of young participants who joined the street protests in the ensuing days. They brought organizational skills useful in providing ad hoc services to the protest sites such as medical care, food, and security at the perimeter. Their commitment to service and experiences reaching out to the urban underclass contributed to attitudes and dispositions that were in fact similar to those of the youth who engaged in overt street politics. These orientations -- toward social agency, civic consciousness, and democratic practice – contributed to the rapid mass mobilization in Cairo’s Tahrir square and helped to give the revolution its unique character.

These associations were masked in previous studies which assumed that the revival of religious discourse and practice in contemporary Egypt and elsewhere was antithetical to the creation of a democratic citizenry. Debates over the conditions required for democratic transformation often rely on the assumption that a democratic society is necessarily a secular

one. Equal opportunity for public participation and a regular circulation of power, it is argued, can only exist in a society where no one religion plays a dominant role in organizing public life. The truth claims of most faiths are presumed to dissuade citizens from embracing diversity and choice. Respect for religious freedom is indeed foundational to democracy, but this does not require religion to be relegated only to the private sphere. Collective religious identities quite often motivate public participation and active citizenship. The nearly universal religious encouragement of social cohesion, where people feel bound to one another by mutual responsibility, shared values, and a sense of a good that is greater than the self can and does foster participation in democratic societies around the world. Values of social solidarity and giving are central to Islam, and the authors found a strong religious discourse among young volunteers who expressed the conviction that their actions could build a more just society.

The notion that religion may be counter-productive for flourishing democratic systems is of quite recent origin. Historically, religious communities and faith-based activity have been pivotal forces in shaping cultures open to democratic practice. Alexis de Tocqueville, as he toured America in the early 1800s, was struck by the strength of the new civic culture; he noted that individuals were bound into communities where each person had a responsibility for the good of the whole. Toqueville posited that it was the role of churches and religious groups to forge disparate immigrant groups into a polity with common purpose and that these religious institutions trained their members into the behaviors and habits that underlie effective citizenship. Far from requiring the exclusion of religion from the public sphere, communities built around faith were integral to the creation of an emergent democratic culture.

Toqueville's analysis is helpful insofar as it illustrates that as societies evolve, the role of

religion in public life is likely to shift. Scholars and others who may hold secular notions of what constitutes effective democracy should not dismiss or preclude pathways to democratic transitions that are enhanced by religious institutions and ideas. It is useful to note that while religion is often seen as being in tension with democratic pluralism in western societies, it was historically a crucial element in forming habits and practices that contributed to effective citizenship.

In the Arab world, youth are seen as closely linked to the revival of Islamic religious practice. Since the 1970's, youth have been at the forefront of a trend toward more religious piety. Arab youth have introduced novel forms of dress, discourse, and social interaction based on adaptive expressions of what it means to be young and Muslim in the contemporary world. Concurrently, there is a new interest to engage in social justice issues that will build a more equitable Umma or community of believers. Part of that trend has been expressed through an increase in youth participation in social service organizations.

Volunteers in the largest of these organizations in Egypt, Resela ('mission' or 'message' in Arabic), provided remarkable insight into the desire among urban youth to engage and forge a sense of social purpose. Religious tenets are an important component of Resela's recruitment and in sustaining the commitment of volunteers. Some observers of Resela's phenomenal growth have assumed that it might have a covert political mission; the organization earned the wary attention of security forces during the Mubarak regime, which monitored its activities closely. The research reported here and that of others, however, concludes that the remarkable growth of Resala was built on providing for youthful desires to be part of a common effort to serve Social justice formed an important basis for the connections volunteers made between individual action

and civic change. They reason that people who engage in Resela's activities would become increasingly charitable toward one another; this would lead to a fairer economic redistribution: "We benefit the poor – and if there is enough charity, then the class differences will go away." They are adamant that change must begin in people's hearts and actions at a local level, which will cumulate into profound societal change.

Resela's dominant discourse over the past decade had stayed distant from political themes, while inadvertently paving the way for its volunteers to embrace them. This seems to have been accomplished via the creation of a culture of participation, love of country, solidarity, personal virtue, and responsibility. Ultimately, those ideals were consistent with a desire for and readiness to demand political change; volunteers were not initial organizers of the revolutionary street protests, but they shared the organizers' readiness to resist authoritarianism and corruption and the belief that Egypt had lost its way. Once the call went out for Egyptians to come to Tahrir square and other urban protest sites, the Resela volunteers responded and began providing needed services. Skills acquired through community participation – assessing needs, planning collective action and remaining committed to a goal under duress – all became important tools for youth-driven political action for change. Thousands of Resela volunteers joined the 18 day mass protests that eventually toppled the old regime. Their orientation toward service gave the demonstrations a unique character based on social solidarity and services – from cell phone recharging stations to medical treatment centers. The experiences of volunteering afforded by prior membership in Resela and similar youth-led organizations provided a powerful path to activism. Together with hundreds of thousands of others, these young Egyptians helped to achieve a remarkable feat of political transformation in Egypt.

