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*Knowledge as a Public Good Project*

## **DEMAND-BASED MOVEMENTS UNDER AUTHORITARIANISM:**

THE CASE OF EGYPT'S UNLIMITED  
INTERNET CAMPAIGN

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## About the Author

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Cover photo: Women pass an internet cafe in downtown Cairo - © EPA/MIKE NELSON

March 2023

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# 1 Demand-based Movements Under Authoritarianism:

*The Case of Egypt's Unlimited Internet Campaign*

## Introduction

The Unlimited Internet campaign in Egypt represents an innovative form of social mobilization that strives to impact public policies, as well as a movement aiming to change how internet service is provided in the country. The campaign was initially launched as a lobbying endeavor by a group of stakeholders, to direct public policies toward specific solutions that align with their interests. In democratic countries, lobbying and advocacy efforts aimed at promoting specific policies within the government are commonplace. However, in authoritarian regimes, the risks associated with participating in public affairs and the limited opportunities for assembly and organization mean such activities are rare. Since its inception, the campaign has deliberately refrained from adopting any political or human rights discourse, with its members even practicing self-censorship to eliminate any appearance of political partiality in their demands. This self-censorship can be explained by the authoritarian nature of the Egyptian regime. Indeed, although one of its members was subjected to enforced disappearance, the campaign stayed away from making any appeals based on human rights or engaging in anti-regime rhetoric.

Instead of inflammatory language, the campaign chose to maintain a calm and steady approach, thereby reinforcing its apolitical nature. As a result, it gained visibility and access to media outlets close to the regime and was the subject of frequent discussions on TV channels. Furthermore, the campaign's apolitical stance enabled government officials to engage with it, releasing cautious but supportive statements during its initial phases.

This paper aims to examine and analyze the monitoring, framing and organization work carried out by the campaign, which has presented an effective model for influencing public policies in authoritarian contexts. The Unlimited Internet campaign provides evidence that even in tightly controlled authoritarian regimes, mission-led movements can open spaces for engagement and sometimes influence government officials.

To collect data for this research, the author tracked the online activities and interactions of campaign pages on Facebook and Twitter during July and August 2022. The author also viewed YouTube videos released by the campaign during the same period. Official media statements and TV interviews featuring current or former Egyptian officials discussing the campaign were also consulted. These three sources formed the basis of the author's analysis of the campaign and the model it represents. The analysis employed the theoretical framework proposed by Érik Neveu, which considers the context of public problems through stages such as identification,

framing and narrative construction, justification, popularization, and policy solutions.<sup>1</sup>

## How the campaign started

A million-user-strong hashtag, #Unlimited\_internet\_in\_Egypt,<sup>2</sup> trended on Egyptian social media over an extended period, sparking a widespread public and media discourse on the possibility of realizing such a goal. The hashtag was a tool used by campaigners to challenge internet service providers (ISPs) and call for policies that enable unlimited downloads for broadband users. Although not the first of its kind, this campaign was the most significant and influential among similar initiatives in recent years. Egyptian ISPs require that users subscribe to monthly plans that provide a predetermined data allowance for internet usage. In instances where users exceed their monthly download quota, they must either purchase additional data or upgrade their plan. Supporters of the campaign complained about insufficient data packages and unaffordable costs of higher-tiered plans for most Egyptian households. The campaign's shrewd engagement of public opinion and its broad popularity ensured that these issues continue to be extensively discussed.

The campaign emerged in the wake of several announcements made by the Egyptian government about a national program promoting "digital transformation" and encouraging citizens to use online services. The government introduced new applications aimed at facilitating paperless bureaucracy, with the goal of "forg[ing] an Egyptian digital society that adopts and integrates technologies in almost every aspect of life."<sup>3</sup> The Ministry of Communications and Information Technology initiated the "Digital Egypt" project, with a focus on three primary pillars: digital transformation, digital skills and jobs, and digital innovation. While these policies did focus on improving internet infrastructure and speed, they

1 Érik Neveu, "L'analyse des problèmes publics : Un champ d'étude interdisciplinaire au cœur des enjeux sociaux présents", *Idées Économiques et Sociales*, no. 190 (2017): 6–19.

2 #إنترنت\_بلاحدود\_في\_مصر

3 See the Egyptian Ministry of Communications and Information Technology for about the digital transformation strategy: [https://mcit.gov.eg/en/Digital\\_Government](https://mcit.gov.eg/en/Digital_Government)

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paid little attention to the cost of service and data packages available to users.

At the start of 2022, the number of internet users in Egypt was estimated at over 75 million, indicating an increase of almost 1.5 million from the previous year.<sup>4</sup> Despite the government's ambitious goals in the field of information technology, there has been a surge in complaints, particularly among the youth, regarding the subpar quality of the internet services, and the inadequacy of monthly download quotas compared to the cost of subscriptions.

The Unlimited Internet campaign effectively organized public grievances and aimed to pressure the Egyptian government into reforming the ISP sector and prioritizing relevant policies. Despite facing challenges such as the enforced disappearance of one of its members, Muhammad Anis, the hacking of his online accounts, and the closure of his YouTube channel, the campaign continued its activities – albeit with reduced media coverage. The members of the campaign were primarily young individuals who shared similar social and professional backgrounds, with many working in information technology, online communications, and content creation. Most are in their twenties and worked in the private sector. The campaign also attracted followers and supporters from various social backgrounds.

## How the problem was identified

Upon close analysis of the campaign's output during its peak over two months, it becomes evident that the issue of internet service provision in Egypt is multifaceted and can be examined from various angles.

The most obvious aspect relates to technology, which involves the internet and communication infrastructure in Egypt. This angle leads to a conversation about the requirements for improving the quality of internet services.

The second aspect, the political one, highlights the adverse effects of authoritarian policies on freedom of expression and opinion. This extends beyond politics and includes the expression of economic and social demands.

Relatedly, the public policies aspect focuses on the decision-making structures and mechanisms. The Unlimited Internet campaign highlights the Egyptian regime's lack of responsiveness to public and social demands, as well

as its intentional disregard for the campaign's proposed alternatives, at least as of the writing of this paper.

Lastly, the intersectional perspective combines social and policy approaches and contextualizes the campaign and its demand within the local and national environment in which it operates.

These different angles and perspectives provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue at hand. This paper begins by examining the behavior and discourse of the campaign's members, their ways of identifying the problem, and their approaches to addressing it. The campaigners positioned themselves as part of a larger social group that suffers from poor internet services in Egypt. As such, they avoided framing their campaign as a response to a political or social "public grievance," and refrained from using the human rights discourse commonly employed by other social movements in Egypt. What sets the campaign apart is its emphasis on solutions rather than grievances: it did not demand the release of detained individuals or sought to confront the regime. Given its distinct form of social mobilization, the Unlimited Internet campaign can be characterized as a "mission-led movement." Its goal was to gain support for specific demands and policies and urge the government and its executive agencies to adopt them.

As such, the extensive interaction generated by the Unlimited Internet campaign can be viewed as a reflection of general discontent with inadequate public services. The campaign brought together the grievances of citizens and proactive efforts to find solutions, advocate for appropriate policies, and formally place the issue on the government's agenda.

## Framing and reformulating the narrative: From "rights" to "necessity"

Having identified the problem, the campaign framed its demands in a unique way. The government had framed the problem as an issue of poverty, leaving little room for improvement or development. In response, the campaign publicized a simple yet powerful hashtag: #Unlimited\_internet\_in\_Egypt. This hashtag encapsulated all of the campaign's activities and discourses into a clear and specific demand, with a focus on the means of achieving it.

<sup>4</sup> For more information on Egypt, see the Digital 2022 report: <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-egypt>

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This straightforward and concise phrasing of the campaign's main demand played a significant role in its wide reach across Egyptian society. Additionally, it led to public figures endorsing and promoting the campaign's cause by utilizing the hashtag.

The campaign's success cannot be solely attributed to its ability to clearly identify the problem and frame the issue. The campaigners also aimed to challenge commonly held ideas about priorities, presenting multiple arguments and evidence for the need to improve the quality of internet service and the data packages offered to users. The common thread linking all their justifications – even those related to national goals – was the concept of “necessity”. By emphasizing that good internet service in Egypt is necessary, the Unlimited Internet campaign made their cause a fundamental requirement for citizens in contemporary society. This was the foundation of the campaign's argument, complemented by additional sub-arguments that helped mobilize further audiences. These sub-arguments included:

- The currently available data packages are insufficient for managing a large number of online businesses. Many jobs in the technology, communications, data, or content creation fields require larger bandwidths to function effectively.
- The data packages provided by Egyptian ISPs are comparatively lower than those provided by ISPs in other countries. The campaigners used statistics to reveal that the average Egyptian family is provided with lower download quotas than most families in other countries.
- The campaigners noted some positive aspects of the Internet service in Egypt, such as its reasonable speed. However, the limited data packages remained a major issue. By contrasting the pros and cons of the internet service, the campaign was able to define its demands more clearly.

By strategically framing its demands as necessities instead of rights, the campaign avoided open opposition to the regime. The potent discourse of rights can often be confrontational, while the language of necessity is generally more moderate in tone. Furthermore, the campaign may have adopted this approach to align with the regime's narrative and use it to justify its mission. By emphasizing the necessity of improving internet service and increasing the amount of data available to average users, the campaign reinforced the regime's own goal of achieving digital transformation and building a digital Egypt.

## A movement with a marketing strategy

The Unlimited Internet campaign was able to attract broader public support for its demands by employing several marketing and expansion tactics. Before examining these tactics, it is important to highlight some of the campaign's features that contributed to its widespread support.

The first feature was its decentralization and participatory nature. The campaign had no clear leadership, and it managed to persist despite the enforced disappearance of one of its prominent members. This underlines its flexibility, voluntary participation, and coordination among groups and individuals from various backgrounds. The campaign's structure made it invulnerable to the regime's attempts to suppress or weaken it.

The second feature of the campaign was its extensive utilization of the Internet as a tool for disseminating information and rallying support. While previous campaigns with similar demands relied on Facebook, the current campaign used a variety of online platforms, including Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook, as well as other new tools and tactics. Additionally, the campaign did not include any offline activities and remained solely online.

The third notable feature was the campaign's ability to avoid confrontation with the security apparatus, which minimized the risk of potential prosecution. This was achieved through the use of innovative methods to reach and interact with a large number of supporters without drawing unwanted attention from the authorities.

The campaign also used several unique tactics. The most popular was the Twitter hashtag #Unlimited\_internet\_in\_Egypt. This hashtag was shared over a million times and became the most popular hashtag in the country for several days. Its popularity and strength led to considerable coverage by various media outlets, as well as the endorsement of several celebrities like Egyptian actor Mohamed Henedi. Due to coordination among the campaigners and the clarity and simplicity of this primary demand, the hashtag spread widely, including among people who were not politically or ideologically motivated. Although the campaign used other hashtags periodically to revive its activities, #Unlimited\_internet\_in\_Egypt remained its primary slogan.

The second tactic was the use of short videos on Facebook and YouTube. These videos featured campaigners engaging with a wider audience to discuss the issues affecting internet services in Egypt and provided updates on the latest

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developments and activities of the campaign. Some videos offered solutions and policies for the government, while others focused on ways to support the campaign. It is worth noting that these videos were uploaded on major YouTube channels specialized in tech news and content creation, making them relevant and understandable to their viewer base. This resulted in wide engagement with the campaign's demands and proposals. The internet served not only as a platform for the campaign's expansion but also as an arena for organic and unforced discussions and interactions between campaigners and supporters.

As a third tactic, the campaign used social media "reactions," to direct audiences to visit the pages of Telecom Egypt and give "angry" emoji reactions to all their posts and comments. This tactic effectively conveyed a message of popular discontent with the company's services and policies, while keeping the campaign's supporters safe from any confrontations or harassment by the Egyptian security.

Similarly, the fourth tactic was the use of low ratings on Google Play for Telecom Egypt's My WE app. This tactic was aimed at demonstrating widespread dissatisfaction with the app's developer, which could lead to its removal from the platform.

Finally, the campaign's fifth tactic urged the audience to cancel their subscription plans as a form of protest against the current service. At times, the campaign also set specific dates for users to cancel their subscriptions in a coordinated effort to amplify the impact of the protest.

These innovative tactics were developed through Facebook and WhatsApp groups involving young people from diverse backgrounds. The campaigners were focused on coordinating their efforts, strategically activating the hashtag at specific times, and creating visually compelling graphics and designs to effectively communicate the campaign's demands to the widest possible audience.

The deployment stage can be seen as part of a larger successful online marketing plan, without the need for any on-site activation or field advertisement. From the outset, it was clear that the Unlimited Internet campaign was a meticulously planned marketing campaign. This was evident from its efforts to reach a broad audience across various platforms, its consistent messaging and calls to action, and its ability to convert followers into customers. In other words, the campaign's extensive reach allowed it to engage followers from diverse social backgrounds in implementing its directives and actively participating in discussions about proposed solutions and policies.

## Proposing alternatives as a movement

The Unlimited Internet campaign was not limited to simply raising complaints; its members also proposed solutions. For instance, many campaign members shared videos with proposals and solutions to address the issue of poor internet service in Egypt.

The comment section of these videos provided a platform for the development, critique, and modification of several proposed ideas. Through this interactive process, the campaign's discourse was further developed, and the proposed solutions and policies were refined. This dynamic allowed the campaign to create an online community for itself and its supporters, facilitating the exchange of ideas and feedback, which ultimately contributed to the maturity and refinement of the proposed policies.

Three possible solutions were highlighted in the videos produced by the campaign:

The first solution was to double the current data packages while maintaining the same price. This meant that users would not have to pay extra for additional packages if they exceeded the download quota. Instead, their internet speed would be reduced until their subscription renews. This solution aims to increase the download quotas of existing packages and eliminate additional charges for exceeding them.

The second solution was to provide unlimited internet at a reasonable price, albeit with low speeds. The focus here was on providing unlimited packages without the added benefit of high-speed download.

The third solution aimed to reduce the price of current internet packages by 50% while maintaining their current features. The goal was to alleviate the financial burden on citizens, while still providing the option to upgrade to better packages by paying the same current fees.

Two observations can be made on these proposals:

First, these solutions managed to disrupt the government's exclusive control over technical discourse. The open discussions held in videos made by campaigners and the comments they received moved the conversation about internet service provision from behind closed doors to a public space accessible to all stakeholders. By involving the

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public in discussions of minute technical considerations, these proposals broke the monopoly of official institutions over policies and solutions.

Second, these solutions enabled direct stakeholders, such as those in the technology, communications, content, and data industries, to participate in formulating and discussing proposed policies and alternatives.

The campaign set an example for advocacy and support campaigns typically found in democratic regimes but was uniquely implemented in an authoritarian context. By creating a digital space for its supporters to engage with policymaking, the campaign garnered widespread public support and engagement.

## Are mission-led movements replicable?

The emergence of the Unlimited Internet campaign raises several questions about the potential for replicating this model in future mission-led movements. By studying the campaign, one can conclude that replication of this model is possible under specific external conditions.

The first condition is the ability of stakeholders to communicate and debate free from restrictions imposed by the authoritarian regime. What sets the Unlimited Internet campaign apart is that a significant portion of the discussions, communications, and ideas development took place online. Campaigners were able to use online platforms to share and utilize knowledge, allowing them to establish networks for sustained and effective dialogues. This contributed to the development and organization of campaign ideas, done at a safe distance from the regime. The availability of such spaces for interaction and free discussion is key for the emergence of mission-led movements in the future.

The second condition is the necessary knowledge and expertise to propose viable solutions and alternatives. Breaking the government's monopoly on public policymaking knowledge is essential for developing effective and implementable policies that can be adopted by stakeholders.

The third condition is the ability to mobilize and attract support from a diverse audience. This ability ultimately gives campaigns the power to influence state actions and decisions. Authoritarian regimes are often more immune to the demands of citizens, but popular support and mobilization can force

them to either respond or allow space for campaigners to further act and influence change.

## Conclusion

The Unlimited Internet campaign exemplifies a mission-led movement that successfully garnered popular support to push for its demands and policies to be incorporated into the government agenda. The campaign used diverse methods of support and advocacy to draw attention to the issue of internet service provision in Egypt, provided sound justifications and narratives for its actions, and deployed wide-ranging marketing tools for its proposed policies.

As an “apolitical” campaign, it operated and had a considerable impact without being constrained by political affiliations. It operated within a limited space and skillfully avoided political entanglements while promoting public engagement in policymaking and seeking to influence the government. By not engaging in formal politics, the Unlimited Internet campaign made a political statement by defining a widespread issue, framing it in as a necessary change, garnering support through a creative strategy, and proposing alternative policies to address it.

In recent years, the Egyptian regime has clamped down on political participation, curtailed public freedoms, and employed stringent security measures to counter protests and public demands. Faced with the Unlimited Internet campaign, however, the regime shifted its strategy by emphasizing technical aspects and engaging specialists as the primary stakeholders and experts. To the regime's surprise, the campaign was able to present itself as a formidable stakeholder in the conversation, offering technical policies instead of demanding rights and freedoms. Subsequently, the regime choosing not to attack the campaign directly and not to respond to it through political means, such as accepting some of its demands, adopting the movement symbolically, or making promises to address its complaints. This disregard is an indication of the return of politics, even in the face of attempts to close off avenues for public participation.

The maintenance of a robust marketing approach that includes technical and policy discussions signifies the resurgence of political participation through the “backdoor” of public policies. While this approach may appear technical and uninviting, the campaign was able to infuse it with popularity and clarity and attract significant follow-up and support.

By connecting the Unlimited Internet campaign to theoretical discussions in the public policy literature, we can see that the policymaking process is always influenced by its

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surrounding environment, which is shaped by national, political, and social factors. Therefore, a broader analysis of the environment surrounding public policies is essential to understanding their development and implementation. Authoritarian environments impose limitations and restrict the activities of mission-led movements to specific areas, hindering the creation of public policies in terms of content and stakeholder interactions. The differences in policymaking between authoritarian and democratic environments are largely attributed to such environmental factors.

Lastly, the Unlimited Internet highlights the significance of societal factors in policymaking, an aspect often overlooked in public policy literature that tends to focus solely on political systems. By shifting the focus to Egyptian society and its response to poor internet services, rather than fixating on the decisions of the regime and governmental institutions, the campaign reveals areas of work and influence within authoritarian contexts that have received insufficient research attention.

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## About the Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is an independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change and social justice. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality, and gender equality.



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## About the project

The project “Knowledge as a Public Good” examines the relationship between knowledge production, academia, scholarship, and public policy with a local focus and addresses the tension between international and local knowledge. The project includes workshops that aim to promote evidence-based research by providing technical skills and a translation platform for up-and-coming scholars who write in Arabic.