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Bullets Stall Youthful Push for Arab Spring

By MICHAEL SLACKMAN

MANAMA, Bahrain — These days, Muhammad al-Maskati is a prisoner in his apartment, his BlackBerry shut off by the government, the streets outside his apartment filled with tanks, the hospitals around town packed with the wounded.

Mr. Maskati is a 24-year-old human rights activist who not long ago felt so close to achieving Egypt's kind of peaceful revolution, through a dogged commitment to nonviolence. Then the Saudi tanks rolled into Bahrain, and protesters came under attack, the full might of the state hammering at unarmed civilians.

"We thought it would work," Mr. Maskati said, his voice soft with depression, yet edged with anger. "But now, the aggression is too much. Now it's not about the protest anymore, it's about self-defense."

The Arab Spring is not necessarily over, but it has run up against dictators willing to use lethal force to preserve their power. The youth-led momentum for change stalled first in Libya, where Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi unleashed troops on his people, and then in Bahrain, where King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa enlisted Saudi Arabia's help to crush demonstrations.

Bahrain's protests were part of a transformation sweeping the Middle East, propelled by young people free of the fear that held back their parents.

At first, they seemed an unstoppable force, driven by the power of demographics — about 60 percent of the population across the Arab world is under the age of 30. They started to reshape societies where the young defer to the old, toppling old hierarchies along with governments.

The movement is still forcing change in places like Morocco and Jordan, guiding transitions in Egypt and Tunisia, and playing out in countries like Algeria and Yemen. Young people remain out front, wielding the online tools they grew up with to mobilize protests, elude surveillance and cross class lines.

This generation's access to a life without borders through the Internet and pan-Arab television

networks like Al Jazeera exposed them to other societies, fueling anger at the repressive politics and economic stagnation that deprived the region's youth of opportunity and freedom.

It was long anticipated that young people would emerge as a powerful force because the median age across the Middle East is just 26. But what surprised many was the absence of religious discourse — and the embrace of pluralism — from a generation that is more observant than its parents and often seeks solace from despotic rulers and blighted lives in an embrace of Islam.

This generation rejected traditional opposition leaders, like the toothless political parties that served dictators by providing a veneer of democratic legitimacy, or the Muslim Brotherhood, which many came to see as having been co-opted by the status quo.

Young people interviewed across the region echoed the same ideas, tactics and motivations that set off revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia. In Morocco and Jordan, monarchs have already offered concessions, fueling excitement and hope. It is a force driven by young men like Tarek al-Naimat, 26, of Jordan, who joined Facebook a few weeks ago, saying that it was a more powerful tool than the Muslim Brotherhood.

And Oussama el-Khlifi, 23, who left the Socialist Union of Popular Forces in Morocco to found a nonideological movement — initially organized on Facebook — that has already rallied unmatched numbers in the streets of Morocco and pressed the king to announce plans to modify the constitution.

"We saw change would not happen through the parties, it would happen through the people," Mr. Khlifi said. "We created a Facebook group called Moroccans Discuss the King, and in four or five days we had 3,000 members."

The early victories in Tunisia and Egypt emboldened them. "I grew up in a world where we believed we could not do anything," said Mariam Abu Adas, 32, an online activist in Jordan who helped create a company called Hiber to train young people to use social media.

"Generations believed we could do nothing," she said, "and now, in a matter of weeks, we know that we can."

It is a new model for the Middle East, not only because the young people are taking the lead, but because their elders have started to listen and follow.

"The youth, we were afraid of, but we have come to see the youth are moving the region," said Mustafa Rawashdeh, a former headmaster at a school in Karak, Jordan, who was fired after trying to form a teachers' union. "Young people saw the winds of change and drove us."

And then Colonel Qaddafi's forces opened fire, followed by King Hamad's crackdown. The young activists' idealism has been challenged by the bitter reality of repression, leaving them dispirited but resolute.

It is a sobering pause, as Bahrainis tend their wounded and Libya's opposition flees from the advance of pro-Qaddafi forces. The future of the Arab Spring is at stake.

"I don't believe the peaceful protests will go on," Mr. Maskati said. "Now, it's about resisting the aggression."

Jordan

The women at Ammon News stood firm when the Jordanian authorities told them to take down a daring post critical of the monarchy and, in particular, Queen Rania — a taboo in a nation where criticizing the royal family is a crime punishable by three years in prison. The authorities promptly hijacked the Web site, and the staff's editor told them to give up and go home. Instead, the women took to the streets in protest, and the authorities backed down.

"It was the principle," said Ala Alyan, 22. "Liberty is very important."

The incident hardly registered beyond the borders of Jordan, a close American ally. But it illustrates the contagion of a movement determined not to allow its governments to treat its citizens as subjects.

Jordan's King Abdullah II is not facing the kind of popular revolt that forced out the presidents of Egypt and Tunisia. But there have been demonstrations that prompted the king to fire the cabinet, appoint a new government and promise constitutional change. The open question, as in Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco, is how far change will go, and whether young people will be satisfied.

"If you feel you have right on your side, you do not have fear," said Heba Alazari, 26, one of the Ammon News women who protested. "If an injustice happened before, no one knew about it. Now you can deliver your voice in a different way and everyone will know."

In the Jordanian countryside, the cyberworld and the real world intersect. The staff of Hiber, the social media training and blogging organization, recently visited the village of Tafilah, two hours south of the capital, Amman. It is a small, dry outpost of cinder-block and white-stone homes on rocky soil, with a traffic circle, a few shops and lot of young people. Every woman on the street was veiled, and fathers sternly police their daughters.

About 35 young people in the workshop run by Hiber, more than half of them women, were

eager to learn more. "The people in Egypt, who used these tools, woke up after 30 years," said Rasha Garabaa, 25, who wore a bright red head scarf and heavy makeup.

Ramsey Tesdell, 27, who was leading the discussion, said that social media allowed young women in the village to bypass the men — fathers, brothers, husbands — who circumscribed their worlds and their ability to communicate. They cannot go to the park unaccompanied and meet friends, but they can join a chat room or send instant messages.

"In a lot of ways, it has taken the power away from the traditional powerful leaders, especially older men," Mr. Tesdell said.

Ms. Garabaa understood, and marveled at the changes. "Remember how they closed Ammon the other day," she said, almost in a whisper, to one of the other members of the group. "Think how much the Internet can empower you. You have the world at the tip of your fingers."

Morocco

The secret password was tsk-tsk-tsk, and the door opened into the Feb. 20th movement.

Inside a run-down apartment at the top of narrow darkened staircase, Montasser Drissi, 19, was listening to traditional Moroccan music and working on subtitles for a protest video. He was one of the young men who helped organize nationwide protests on Feb. 20 that drew tens of thousands of demonstrators in a show of opposition that has already begun to change Morocco's political landscape.

"Our goal is a new constitution that serves the people, not the elite," said Mr. Drissi, a slight, understated young man with a dab of a beard.

The Feb. 20th movement is the loosely knit Moroccan manifestation of the youth fever sweeping the region. Its members met on Facebook and decided that like their peers in Egypt and Tunisia, they wanted to fight for change. Their goal was not to oust the monarchy, but to reduce its near absolute authority and strengthen elected institutions.

"We are young, we study, we have jobs — we're normal," said Yassine Falah, 23, who recently quit his job selling insurance and moved from Fez to Rabat to dedicate his time to the movement. "We tried hard to not politicize the thing, we used Facebook, we came together and that's how it started. Our spontaneity is our strength."

The government was concerned from the start. It tried to blunt the movement's impact, first by trying to demonize its young leaders as enemies of the state, and then, when that failed, taking the creative approach of announcing that the demonstration was canceled. But that did not

work either. Instead, traditional opposition parties that initially shunned the upstart movement jumped in, trying to ride the wave churned up by the young.

King Mohammed VI apparently got the message and in a rare nationally televised speech announced that he intended to meet some of the group's core demands — without ever actually acknowledging that the group existed.

The group helped break down barriers to join secular leftists with conservative Islamists in the fight for democracy. "In Morocco, there has always been a war between the left and the Islamists, and the state wants it that way," said Younes Belghazi, 20, as he flopped onto a mattress on the floor. "When the state saw we had agreed on basic things, like values, change, democracy, they just didn't know what to do."

Over in the corner, in what passes for the group's video studio — a white sheet taped to the tile wall and a camera on a tripod — Mr. Drissi's new friend and collaborator, Nizar Bennamate, 23, was discussing how the movement planned another national protest on March 20. The challenge was to maintain momentum, difficult for a leaderless organization whose members often could not agree on when to meet, or even exactly what it was they were fighting for.

"The demands we talk about are the lowest common denominator, the first stage," Mr. Bennamate said. "Once we get these demands, we will be at an early stage of democracy where different ideas can confront each other."

The group's secret headquarters was discovered recently by the police, who have also visited the homes of some of the organizers in an attempt at intimidation. But that also seems to be a sign of their power and success.

"I am an activist because I want change," said Mr. Khlifi, an unemployed high school graduate who has become one of the leading voices in the movement. "I want a political dialogue. I want to criticize. I want democracy. I want the people to have power."

Bahrain

Mr. Maskati struggled to force out each painful word: "They. Shot. The. People." Bahrain's army had just opened fire on demonstrators and he was trying to type out "Urgent from Bahrain" on his BlackBerry and post a video link of the attack to Twitter, Facebook and the extensive e-mail list of his human rights organization.

For years, Mr. Maskati was dismissed as naïve for trying to convince people that peaceful protests would be more effective than violence. And then, suddenly, the protesters so embraced his view that a group walked into an army roadblock, hands in the air, chanting

"peacefully, peacefully."

Nearly a month ago, the army opened fire, killing a young man after six were killed by the police. But the protesters clung to nonviolence, taking to the streets in remarkably large numbers, confident that international attention would force the government to stop shooting. The government did back down, offer concessions, release political prisoners, call for a national dialogue and shuffle the cabinet.

Mr. Maskati marveled at the radical change in approach after years of watching young people throw rocks and burn tires in the street, to no avail.

He founded the Bahrain Youth Society for Human Rights, a small monitoring and training organization that is one part of a youth-led movement that has posed the most serious challenge to the monarchy since the Khalifa family took power in the 18th century. Mr. Maskati's main weapons are his phone and his BlackBerry. He does not organize protests and he does not protest himself. He sees his role as informing the world through Facebook, Twitter and his extensive e-mail list.

From Feb. 14, the start of the demonstrations, Mr. Maskati was always on the scene, dodging the police, hovering at the periphery, posting updates to the Internet. He was one of the first to notify the world that the police had shot and killed a 21-year-old man. "Mr. Ali Abdulhadi Mushaima was killed by the riot police in Daih village.(8:00 PM, 14 FEB. 2011)," his message said. "Ali was not involved in the demonstration, but went out of his house to see what happens in his village."

The death galvanized the community of mainly Shiite protesters, and they turned out by the thousands for the funeral. At the cemetery, mourners did more than fume. They had a laptop computer and a wireless airstick, and as the young man's body was lowered into the ground, the image was immediately uploaded to the Internet.

"They did a big mistake," said Hussein Ramadan, 32, a manager in the local aluminum plant, as he stood at the edge of the grave. "They will pay for it, peacefully. We are not thinking about any violence. People are angry. But we can control our anger. We tried violence before, now we try the other way. We are ready to give our blood. It is our country."

Mr. Maskati is from a wealthy Shiite family, part of the Shiite majority in Bahrain that has smoldered under a repressive Sunni monarchy. He became interested in human rights work when he was 14, but he said he found his calling in 2006 after attending a training course in Jordan with Otpor, a Serbian youth movement that also inspired the Egyptian activists, and then in Washington with the Center for Nonviolence.

The next year, he founded his own group. He continues to monitor the events in Bahrain and post his observations each day. Last week, Mr. Maskati and two other human rights activists received death threats because of their work. But Mr. Maskati was undeterred and instead sent word of the death threats out on Twitter, Facebook and e-mail and to every blogger he knew.

Then the tanks rolled in, and on Thursday the police began rounding up opposition leaders. Mr. Maskati kept sending messages until Wednesday morning, when his phone number was shut off. He stayed home, using his computer, issuing updates always titled "Urgent from Bahrain."

Nadim Audi contributed reporting.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: March 24, 2011

Because of an editing error, an article on Friday about the youth-led movement for political change in Arab countries referred incorrectly to an online activist in Jordan who helped create a company that trains young people to use social media. The activist, Mariam Abu Adas, is a woman.