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## Vodafone Egypt and the Arab Spring: When Government and Business Collide

“[Vodafone] believe[s] that access to communications technology can support greater freedom of expression. However, the right to freedom of expression and privacy must be balanced with the protection of vulnerable groups, such as children, and public safety or security in certain exceptional circumstances.”<sup>1</sup>

*Vodafone’s Human Rights Policy*

### Introduction

As the desert sunset cast a gloom over the quiet office building at Vodafone Egypt headquarters, Hatem Dowidar gazed worriedly to the east, where a tense revolutionary fervor hung over Cairo. As CEO of Vodafone Egypt, Dowidar had helped the company achieve years of stable growth in his native country, but he now faced the hardest decision of his professional career. In early 2011, protests were peaking across the Middle East with major epicenters in Syria, Egypt, and Tunisia. Empowered by social media, protesters collaborated and tensions between ruling government entities and citizen groups escalated.

With an effort to stem the tide of anti-government protests, the authoritarian Egyptian regime issued an order to all its major telecommunications and Internet service providers (ISPs) to shutdown service to create a communication blackout. Dowidar had to decide between obeying government demands or protecting the rights of Vodafone customers. This communication blackout spanned to corporations like Vodafone Egypt, Link Egypt, and Telecom Egypt, affecting approximately 93% of Egyptian websites and networks.<sup>2</sup> The government-operated Telecom Egypt immediately complied, as did all of the other foreign telecom companies operating in Egypt.

As head of the country’s largest mobile operator, Dowidar considered the consequences of shutting off service. Terminating operations would prevent Egyptians from communicating among themselves and with the outside world. If Dowidar disobeyed the government, he risked losing access to one of Vodafone’s fastest-growing markets. Dowidar had to quickly decide Vodafone’s strategy in the growing conflict within the tremulous Egyptian revolution, as the pressure to do so was mounting.

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## The Telecommunications Industry

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The telecommunications industry was a powerful global force, worth more than USD \$1.5 trillion in 2014, that facilitated the exchange of information worldwide.<sup>3</sup> The telecommunications industry encompassed the electronic exchange of information through cabling, wireless, switching, transmission, optical communications, and media and IP networks. Every communication technology—from smartphones to applications like Twitter—relied on the telecommunications industry for functionality.

Due to its control over communication abilities, the industry had great influence over modern society. Historically, the telecommunications industry and its associated technologies were tightly linked to national security policies and regulations. Governments strove toward maintaining the capability of monitoring conversations involving foreign nationals and the occasional citizen in the interest of national security. Governmental units' interest in the industry led them to exert strong influence over telecommunications equipment producers and service providers to protect monitoring capabilities and interests.<sup>4</sup> This intersection of telecommunications and the government spawned conflicts, particularly during times of political instability or where business values misaligned with a governing regime's agenda. Google's relationship with China exemplified the delicate balance between the telecommunications industry and a governmental power.

### Google's Faceoff with China

Google began operating in China in 2005 despite strict Chinese regulations over Internet accessibility and the freedom of information. In January 2010, when Google and roughly 30 other American-based companies faced sophisticated attacks by Chinese hackers, Google decided to take a harder stance on the issue. Google announced its intent to stop complying with Chinese censorship rules, citing a shutdown of its Chinese operations, if necessary.<sup>5</sup>

The Chinese government responded harshly, affirming that Google was not exempt from Chinese law. Therefore, if Google desired to continue operations in China, then it must continue self-censoring on China's search engine.<sup>6</sup> A month after Google's announcement, its Chinese website began redirecting users to Hong Kong's equivalent search engine, which was not subject to most Chinese regulations regarding the restriction of free speech.<sup>7</sup> While this act of defiance was a bold political statement by Google, the Chinese government refused to cave to the pressure.

Consequently, Google stood by its decision to oppose censorship in China and eventually left the country, ceding nearly the entirety of its market share to competitors Baidu and Yahoo.<sup>8</sup> The power that telecommunications companies such as Google and Vodafone held to connect people came with the power to make bold political statements, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

### National Security Administration

The telecommunications industry had a complex relationship with the United States government. In the 2010s, the US public became aware that the National Security Agency (NSA) was collecting large amounts of phone and Internet data that allowed the NSA to monitor the private communications of millions of US citizens.<sup>9</sup> Despite major public backlash, the continuation of mass surveillance was defended as a necessary measure to ensure national security. Major ISPs and telecommunications corporations, such as Verizon and AT&T, had worked directly with the US government to allow access to customer data, driving a larger social discussion regarding privacy rights.<sup>10</sup> Ongoing issues such as these, both in the Western world and in developing nations, made the telecommunications industry a flashpoint of controversy in the world of business ethics.

## Vodafone Company History

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As the second-largest mobile telecommunications company in the world in 2014, Vodafone was an industry leader.<sup>11</sup> Launched under the Racal Telecom brand in the United Kingdom during the early 1980s, the company was able to secure a significant share in the fledgling mobile phone market after being awarded the second mobile phone network license ever issued in the UK.<sup>12</sup> Racal-Vodafone's success throughout the 1980s led to its establishment as an independent entity in 1991 under CEO Gerry Whent.<sup>13</sup> Now known as the Vodafone Group, the company continued to increase its share in the UK market through the 1990s, entering the international stage with an expansion to Germany in 1999.

The Vodafone Group has continued to expand its global service footprint through both consistent growth in existing markets and an ambitious series of mergers and acquisitions. Beginning in 2001, Vodafone acquired Eircell and J-Phone to gain a foothold in Ireland and Japan,<sup>14,15</sup> and formed a partnership with TDC Mobil to introduce Vodafone services to Denmark.<sup>16</sup> Following the success of its early expansion efforts, Vodafone pursued a rapid succession of further partnering and acquisition activities to reach markets in South Africa,<sup>17</sup> Singapore,<sup>18</sup> the United Arab Emirates,<sup>19</sup> and Turkey.<sup>20</sup>

After sales contracted in the beginning of 2008 from a global recession, Vodafone found itself rebounding with strong performances in 2009 and 2010. The company posted revenue of \$66.3 billion<sup>i,21</sup> in the fiscal year ending in March 2010, an 8.4% increase from the previous year.<sup>22</sup> Vodafone's mobile customer base increased apace, growing 12.7% to a total of 341.1 million customers by the beginning of 2010.<sup>23</sup>

Vodafone supported its globalization strategy with a new product line, a mobile phone introduced in February 2010 at a retail price of only USD \$15.<sup>24</sup> This low-cost mobile phone was intended to capture a rapidly expanding mobile customer base in the developing world. The inexpensive phone was slated for introduction into the markets of India, Turkey, and several African nations. By 2011, Vodafone had extended its global service reach, establishing a significant network presence in Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and the Asia-Pacific region.

Vodafone presented itself as an ethical and responsible company that provided services for enabling a more sustainable society for its customers, specifically by promoting economic development and improving communications and Internet accessibility. Vodafone's three primary goals in preserving its status as a leading telecommunications company were a commitment to responsible, ethical, and honest behavior; pursuing eco-efficiency by doing more for customers with less; and creating sustainable societies.<sup>25</sup>

## Egypt

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Egypt, formally known as the Arab Republic of Egypt, is located in the northeast corner of Africa, encompassing the fertile Nile River Valley and the Sinai Peninsula, which connects Africa to the Arabian Peninsula. The country has a total area of 1,001,450 square kilometers, and shares borders with Libya, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Israel. The capital of Egypt is Cairo; other major population centers include Alexandria and Giza.<sup>26</sup>

The Arab Republic of Egypt has nominally been a republic since 1953.<sup>27</sup> Its government was democratically elected with legislative, executive, and judicial branches. Its official religion was Islam, but the country also had a sizeable Coptic Christian minority.<sup>28</sup> Egypt was the most populous country in the Arab world, with a population over 79 million in 2011.<sup>29</sup> Egypt's economy was largely driven by agriculture, petroleum imports, natural gas, media, and tourism activities.<sup>30</sup> The further development of an export market for natural gas

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<sup>i</sup> For Vodafone's 2010 fiscal year, an average of 1 UK pound = USD \$1.50 was used to calculate revenue.

offers the prospect of future economic growth in Egypt. Per estimates made by the International Monetary Fund, Egypt's gross domestic product should total USD \$324.267 billion in 2015.<sup>31</sup>

Despite its supposedly democratic nature, the Egyptian political scene was dominated by three autocratic presidents who held power between 1953 and 2011: Gamal Abdel Nasser, Anwar El Sadat, and Hosni Mubarak.<sup>32</sup> Each of these presidents maintained power through the support of the military, which took advantage of its political clout to gain vast economic holdings within the country.<sup>33</sup> While these regimes spearheaded improvements such as land reform, education reform, and the modernization of the Egyptian military with help from the Soviet Union and the United States, the restriction of political freedom under Nasser, El Sadat, and Mubarak led to intermittent unrest.<sup>34,35,36</sup> By the late 2000s, President Mubarak faced increasing criticism as concerns about high unemployment, low wages, and rapidly rising food prices compounded the long-standing resentment against his political repression toward civilians.<sup>37</sup>

## Vodafone in Egypt

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Since entering the Egyptian market as a co-owner of the MisrFone Group in 1996, Vodafone has become Egypt's leading mobile operator. Once in the Egyptian market, Vodafone operated under the name Click GSM. The success of Click GSM led to its incorporation under the Vodafone brand in 2002.<sup>38</sup> Vodafone was then awarded a 15-year 3G license by the Egyptian National Telecom Regulatory Agency in 2007.<sup>39</sup>

Vodafone Egypt was the largest mobile phone company in Egypt, with more subscribers than any other company in the country as of 2012. It provided various voice and data exchange services, as well as 3G, ADSL (asymmetric digital subscriber line), and broadband Internet services. By 2011, Vodafone had become the Egyptian market's leader in terms of revenue share and customer base.<sup>40</sup> It provided services to individuals and enterprises in Egypt, focusing on Voice to Data and Internet services. Egypt was one of Vodafone's fastest-growing regions, with the company's 3G network providing coverage to 98% of Egypt's population.<sup>41</sup> Vodafone's rapid growth led it to become the largest foreign investor in the country. Vodafone sales accounted for nearly 1.5% of Egypt's gross domestic product.<sup>42</sup>

In 2011, Mobinil, Etisalat Egypt, and Vodafone were the three leading independent cell phone service providers in Egypt.<sup>43</sup> These cell phone leaders competed directly with the government-owned Telecom Egypt, which operated all Egyptian landlines and acted as a major Internet service provider.<sup>44</sup> The rapid expansion of the Egyptian population, which grew from 64 million in 1998 to over 78 million by 2010, made the telecommunications market an attractive option for organizations looking to achieve rapid growth.<sup>45</sup> An even stronger expansion occurred in the Egyptian economy, which grew from USD \$84.8B in 1998 to \$218.9B in 2010,<sup>46</sup> driving up average incomes and further catalyzing growth in the mobile phone market.

## The Arab Spring

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Beginning in December 2010, a wave of revolutionary demonstrations, protests, riots, and civil wars swept across several countries in North Africa and the Middle East. Dissatisfaction with government corruption, authoritarianism, human rights violations, and stagnant economic growth created conditions of widespread unrest in many Arab nations. After a succession of anti-government protests in Tunisia led to the rapid overthrow of the regime headed by President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in January 2011, citizens across the Arab world began to protest frequently.

Large-scale demonstrations occurred in Libya, Yemen, Egypt, Bahrain, and Syria. Morocco, Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, and Oman also began experiencing similarly scaled demonstrations.<sup>47</sup> This string of revolutionary

events became known as the Arab Spring, a term that referenced the 1989 strife in Eastern Europe where formerly impenetrable Communist regimes started collapsing due to protesters' pressure.<sup>48</sup>

A hallmark of the Arab Spring protests was the successful utilization of social media outlets that helped citizens organize and communicate. By taking advantage of the capabilities offered by telecommunications technology and websites such as Twitter, protesters were able to strengthen their ability to oppose the government. In several cases, ruling regimes attempted to limit Internet access or censor media content in order to repress communication and prevent wide-scale organization among protesters.<sup>49</sup>

The protest movement of 2011 was an expression of deep-seated resentment at the aging Arab dictatorships, anger at the brutality of the security apparatus, high unemployment, and the rising cost of goods. Corruption following the privatization of state assets in several countries added to protesters' complaints. These pro-democracy movements rose up against the authoritarian regimes and corrupt leaders. The relative success and outcomes of these movements remained hotly disputed in Arab countries, among foreign observers, and among world powers looking to gain leverage in the changing political landscape of the Arab world.

### **Vodafone's Position in the Egyptian Revolution**

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Inspired by the events in Tunisia, Egyptians gathered to protest in Cairo on January 25, 2011, during a national holiday known as "Police Day." Rebels in Egypt had grown more powerful and violent following the successful revolution in Tunisia. The Egyptian revolutionaries protested in Cairo's Tahrir Square, calling for an end to the corruption, injustice, poor economic conditions, and long-term regime of President Mubarak. Street demonstrations developed into a large-scale national revolutionary movement, prompting the government to issue shut-down orders to large telecommunications companies and Internet service providers in an effort to quell the demonstrations. The regime believed that diminishing communications would prevent the anti-government protests from growing by limiting protesters' ability to organize and gain support from the general populace. Following the communications shut-down, the government directed police efforts toward dispelling or arresting the assembled protesters in Tahrir Square.<sup>50</sup>

The political unrest in Egypt during 2011 raised questions about the role and responsibility of telecommunications providers in protecting the freedom of expression. The 2011 Vodafone Sustainability Report stated its belief that access to communications technology supported a greater freedom of expression.<sup>51</sup> In every country where Vodafone operated, governments used lawmaking powers to impact the rights to privacy and freedom of expression, including legal action that often required telecommunication operators to provide user data to governments and enabled government units to obtain information for law enforcement purposes.

In the Internet era, governments found new avenues to control the flow of information by interfering with or limiting digital communications. Governments retained powers to limit network access, block access to websites and resources, or even switch off networks or services, just as the Egyptian government attempted with Vodafone. Vodafone's dilemma questioned the relationship between governments and large telecommunications corporations. Ultimately, government regulatory approval processes played a significant role in determining whether a company was able to operate in a given country.

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## Human Rights and Vodafone Egypt

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The conflict between Vodafone Egypt and the Mubarak regime highlights several human rights challenges faced by telecommunication technology companies. The role of the telecom industry in modern civil society was paramount because of the ability to alert the world to human rights infringements quickly. Vodafone Egypt's conflict had ramifications for the global industry.

The telecommunications industry rested upon the importance of connecting people and ideas. Incumbent on a company's provision of mobile phone and Internet services was the recognition of the human right to freedom of speech and expression. When corporations failed to protect or recognize these basic rights, the consequences were often considerable, resulting in claims of censorship or forced service outages severely damaging to company reputations.

The value of free speech was enshrined in Vodafone's human rights policy,<sup>52</sup> but it was unclear if the company would defend this right against external pressure. A strong commitment to freedom of expression placed Vodafone in a difficult position when operating in markets where free speech was not politically protected or socially institutionalized, such as in developing countries. If Vodafone expanded its global footprint, it must decide between protecting its integrity and responding to on-the-ground conditions that may contradict company values.

Human rights policies were an important part of the sustainability strategy of a company. Vodafone believed that communications technology supported human rights by enabling the exchange of ideas and access to information, which in turn supported economic and social opportunity, fostered development, advanced knowledge, and increased transparency.<sup>53</sup> In modern society's interconnected and diverse world, many companies were placed in positions where accounting for critical decisions concerning human rights occurred without adequate awareness of the local political and cultural context. Too often companies were forced to address human rights concerns without a proper framework for evaluating the impacts of operational decisions.

The management of human rights issues, besides comprising a key aspect of a company's social responsibility role, had wider implications for a company's brand image and bottom line. Socially responsible activities provided a guide to consumers that demonstrated what a company stood for. Respect for human rights was both a responsibility and a sound business strategy for the telecommunications industry because many of its flagship products or services ultimately affected the human rights of its employees, consumers, and communities served.

By failing to protect free speech and expression by sharing customer data with governments or other agencies, telecommunications corporations like Vodafone risked damaging its brand image as a trustworthy, nonpartisan option for facilitating communication and information sharing. In a competitive marketplace, these failings played a detrimental role in determining which company earned a license to operate in new markets or a customer's willingness to repeat business.

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## Conclusion

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As darkness fell over Cairo, Dowidar knew the time to make a decision had come. The gravity of the situation weighed on his shoulders as he predicted both company and country unrest regardless of Vodafone's decision. Dowidar picked up his telephone, ready to make the call that would determine Vodafone's future in Egypt. Would it stand with the Egyptian protesters and be the iconic trend-setter for corporate responsibility or would it follow the orders of the controlling regime, leaving company values at the country borders?



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**Endnotes**

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- <sup>52</sup> "Human Rights -- Our Approach."
- <sup>53</sup> Ibid.



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