

## **A SOCIALLY NETWORKED ELECTION**

*Nicholas Karides*

*Ampersand Communications*

The 2011 parliamentary elections in Cyprus were never going to be a 'critical' contest despite the rhetoric employed by some of the political parties during the campaign that they were crucial for the future of the country. The campaign itself was a dry affair marked by drab bickering, poor TV ratings for poor political debates and a subsequent disinterest by voters. Inevitably this was reflected in an unprecedented 21.3% abstention, double that of 2006, a record for national elections in Cyprus.

One feature in this election that did capture some attention, putting aside the final and very predictable results, was how several candidates embraced social networking to promote themselves and their messages. Aspiring parliamentarians jumped on the Facebook bandwagon, created profiles, uploaded photographs, strategically selected their "likes" and finalized quotes for their "walls", always keeping an obsessive eye on the counter registering their "friends".

After the short-lived boom of blogs and political websites during the 2006 parliamentary election, but especially after the successful use of social networks by Barack Obama in 2008, it came as no surprise that politicians in Cyprus would seek to ride the new wave. While it was not so foreign to see young candidates loosen up the campaign by marching to polling day via Youtube, it was at best curious to see grey suit monotone politicians come alive on Facebook in the vocabulary of the new medium projecting an altogether different image from what voters had become accustomed to.

In 2007, Chris Hughes, head of the US President's online group and member of the team of Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook, created two websites: the central BarackObama.com and MyBO (My Barack Obama) through which "friends" of the candidate contacted him, received his comments on the campaign, but most importantly communicated with each other and organised meetings and events to support him. Websites filled with "communities of supporters" of the presidential candidate, a fact which stunned pollsters and conventional media.

By the end of the campaign, Obama's "friends" had created two million profiles, had organised 200,000 events, uploaded 400,000 blogs and managed to raise \$30 million for his campaign through the creation of 70,000 personal websites.

Such figures are unthinkable for the scope and scale of Cyprus where it is profoundly difficult to change deep-rooted mentalities or to deviate from traditional methods of political communication, let alone affect voting patterns. But Facebook and other means of social networking had the potential to make a difference particularly in the battle against the growing 'abstention party',

the younger generation. With municipal elections coming up at the end of 2011 and presidential elections due in early 2013 it is certain that more clicking will be sought.

Clever exploitation of Facebook can succeed in engaging the curiosity of a generation that lives and breathes through tablets and smart phones. It would be unfair to say that younger voters would not be interested in the opinions of a politician on constitutional arrangements of federal structures. But it would be fair to claim that they would be more inclined to examine the views of someone whose profile matches their 'likes' whether in terms of favourite songs, films or sports.

Whether we like it or not, changes in the ways we communicate have brought about changes in the content of our communication. Facebook has changed the way in which citizens interact with each other but also the way in which they view politicians and their campaigns. It has absorbed the time that people devoted to other media, also enabling them to express and propagate their own ideas and opinions.

The effectiveness of social networks has created an expectation for a revolution that would regulate the relationship between political power and popular will in favour of the citizen. The spring uprisings in the Middle East and the Facebook-aided mobilisation of disenchanting citizens in Spain and Greece are proof that citizens no longer require access to television stations or to newspaper pages to transmit their opinion. They now surf, intervene and influence, write blogs and multiply their friends, launch campaigns, and, it seems, terrify those who may still believe they have a hold on political power.