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The Arab Spring and the Struggle for Democracy in Egypt

Christopher Zambakari

Tarnjeet K. Kang

In 2011, a mass protest in Tunisia initiated what came to be called the Arab Spring. It also set in motion other political struggles throughout the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, before engulfing Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, and Yemen, and subsequently spreading to Syria. As the largest Arab country in the region, Egypt has experienced mixed results in its democratic journey. In this article we set to interrogate the so-called “democratic failure” in Egypt by placing the Egyptian democratic process, epitomized by the youth-led uprising at Tahrir Square, at the center of our analysis. This article is structured around the following question: has democracy failed in Egypt? In order to answer this question, this article examines some of the analytical and political failures of current literature on the changes that have swept through the MENA region, as well as the discourse on whether Arab conservatism, secularization, and democratization can co-exist. We argue that a culturalist approach obscures the internal politics behind the waves of change sweeping through the region. We find that, from Sadat to al-Sisi, each successor has inherited a liberalized autocracy that responds to the political climate, by tolerating political pluralism and granting limited media freedom, while also keeping both under constant threat of repression. Ultimately, we conclude that it is premature to talk about democratic failure after only five years when democratization is a long-term process.

Introduction

In 2011, a mass protest in Tunisia initiated what came to be known as the 'Arab Spring'.

It also set in motion other political struggles throughout the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, before engulfing Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, and Yemen, and subsequently spreading to Syria. As the largest Arab country in the region, Egypt in particular, has experienced mixed results in its democratic journey. In this article we examine the so-called “democratic failure”ⁱ in Egypt, touted by mainstream media, policy analysts and scholars, by placing the Egyptian democratic process, epitomized by the youth-led uprising at Tahrir Square, at the center of analysis.

This paper argues that, contrary to popular belief, what is unfolding in Egypt, set in motion by the Arab Spring, is not a descent into chaos. Instead, it is simply the out-workings of democratic transition, and a demonstration of how countries in the region are learning to function as democratic nations (Roy, 2012c). To probe this issue, we examine the broader challenges of democratic transition, some of the analytical and political failures of the changes sweeping through the MENA region, as well as the discourse on whether Arab conservatism, secularization, and democratization can co-exist. We also analyze the mixed record of U.S. foreign policy in Egypt, arguing that most of the aid is distributed in the form of military assistance and has not led to the consolidation of democratic institutions. Instead, it has strengthened military institutions while weakening social movements.

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One of the key issues with international development lies in stakeholders that assume that progress towards democracy is linear and follows a predictable path. Egypt is a key example of how political trajectories are often adapting in response to national, regional and international dynamics and forces. In Egypt, multiple stakeholders, inside and outside the country, with differing agendas, attempt to assert their power. Accordingly, this paper in no terms asserts that Egypt’s current path to democracy is complete, but it is premature to talk about democratic failure after only five years when democratization is a long-term process. This is particularly important to clarify, as recent events in the country indicate that many of the demands made by citizens during the Arab Spring have not yet been met. Rather, we begin a conversation on how the country’s political progress is measured and judged. While the events that

unfolded as a part of the Arab Spring could be considered a failure in achieving democratic outcomes according to Western standards, a closer look at the political significance of such moments contains many lessons and marks of achievement in the struggle for democracy, challenging external efforts by countries such as the U.S. to institute a Westernized liberal democracy.

First, understanding the challenges of the Arab Spring in Egypt requires that we situate Egypt's transitional process within its historical context and analyze the type of state that has arisen since 1973 under President Anwar Sadat. Each autocratic successor, from Sadat to the current Abdul Fattah al-Sisi, has inherited a state that tolerates political pluralism but limits freedom of the press and keeps both under constant threat of repression.

Next, we contextualize Egypt's liberalized autocratic regime, particularly some of the significant events that came out of the so called "Arab Spring" and the "Islamic Winter" including discussions about the place of religion in society, evolution of traditional Islamic views, social mobilization around questions of the identity of the state and citizenship, and an evolving form of democratization in the country, that combines technocratic modernism and conservative values. The effects have led to the re-interpretation of Islamic values and democracy within a modern context, highlighting the challenges facing both secular and conservative parties in Egypt. Finally, we conclude by discussing some prospects and challenges of democratization in Egypt.

Understanding the Arab World: Deconstructing the Culturalist Approach

The origin of the culturalist mindset lies in the writings of many scholars about political Islam's failure in the Arab World (Roy, 1994, Amin, 2007). According to Samir Amin, Egypt's pre-eminent Marxist thinker, "The exclusive emphasis on culture allows political Islam to eliminate from every sphere of life the real social confrontations between the popular classes and the globalized capitalist system that oppresses and exploits them" (Amin, 2007). Amin noted that during the mid- to late- 20th century, Arab countries were at the forefront of internal political struggles for democracy including in Algeria, Nasser's Egypt, the Ba'ath regimes in Iraq and Syria, and the South Yemen Republic.

Whereas many regimes during this time were not considered "democratic" according to liberal criteria, they were legitimate in the eyes of the governed. For example, there were many achievements made during the Non-Alignment period that aimed to meet

the needs of the citizens, including “mass education, health and other public services, industrialization and guarantees for employment and upward, social mobility” (Amin, 2012). These regimes showed a track record of building social welfare programs, adopting an anti-imperialist posture, and fighting for political and economic autonomy from the West.ⁱⁱ In fact, the development of higher education in many countries in Africa was a post-colonial project, driven by nationalist governments (Mamdani, 2011b).

Yet, the struggle for independence and the anti-imperialist policies that many countries in Africa and the Middle East pursued put them at odds with former colonial powers and current global leaders. The United States’ long-term support of many dictators like Hosni Mubarak, who suppressed freedoms and undermined various social movements, raised concerns about whether the U.S. genuinely pursued democracy in the region. The U.S. government saw leaders like Mubarak as the only bulwark against Islamism in the region. According to Rashid Khalidi, Edward Said Professor of Arab Studies at Columbia University, the West’s preoccupation with “stability” and its support for Middle Eastern despots is often “purchased at the price of the dignity of the individual and the collective” (Khalidi, 2011). In Europe, a leading political Islam scholar, Olivier Roy questioned, “what are they a bulwark against if the new generation is post-Islamist and pro-democratic?” (Roy, 2011).

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Given these divergent understandings, Mamdani offers a critique of how we understand and relate to Arab countries in the post-9/11 millennium through what he calls “Culture Talk”, which frames political problems, such as terrorism, as deriving from a society’s cultural repository (Mamdani, 2004). Mamdani traces this approach to two leading American scholars, Samuel Huntington and Bernard Lewis, who frame religion as driving, “both Islamic culture and politics and that the motivation for Islamist violence is religious fundamentalism” (Mamdani, 2005). In the same vein, the West has framed the Middle East as its “adversary”ⁱⁱⁱ while at the same time absolving itself of any responsibility for its actions in the region.

The problem with “Culture Talk” rests in how it makes sense of the Arab world. Advocates of the culturalist approach view Islam “as a discrete entity, a coherent and closed set of beliefs, values and anthropological patterns embodied in a common society, history, and territory” (Roy, 2004). The result is that culturalist intellectuals,

and those who try to make sense of the Arab world by digging through culture, turn Islam into "an explanatory concept for almost everything involving Muslims" (Roy, 2004).

With so many actors trying to shape the future of Arab countries, the culturalist approach obscures a deeper understanding of internal politics behind the waves of change sweeping through the region. Without understanding these historical forces and the context in which these events unfold, only a superficial conclusion can be drawn. Thus, including a political and historical context is vital to addressing some of the limitations observed in relying on a culturalist approach.

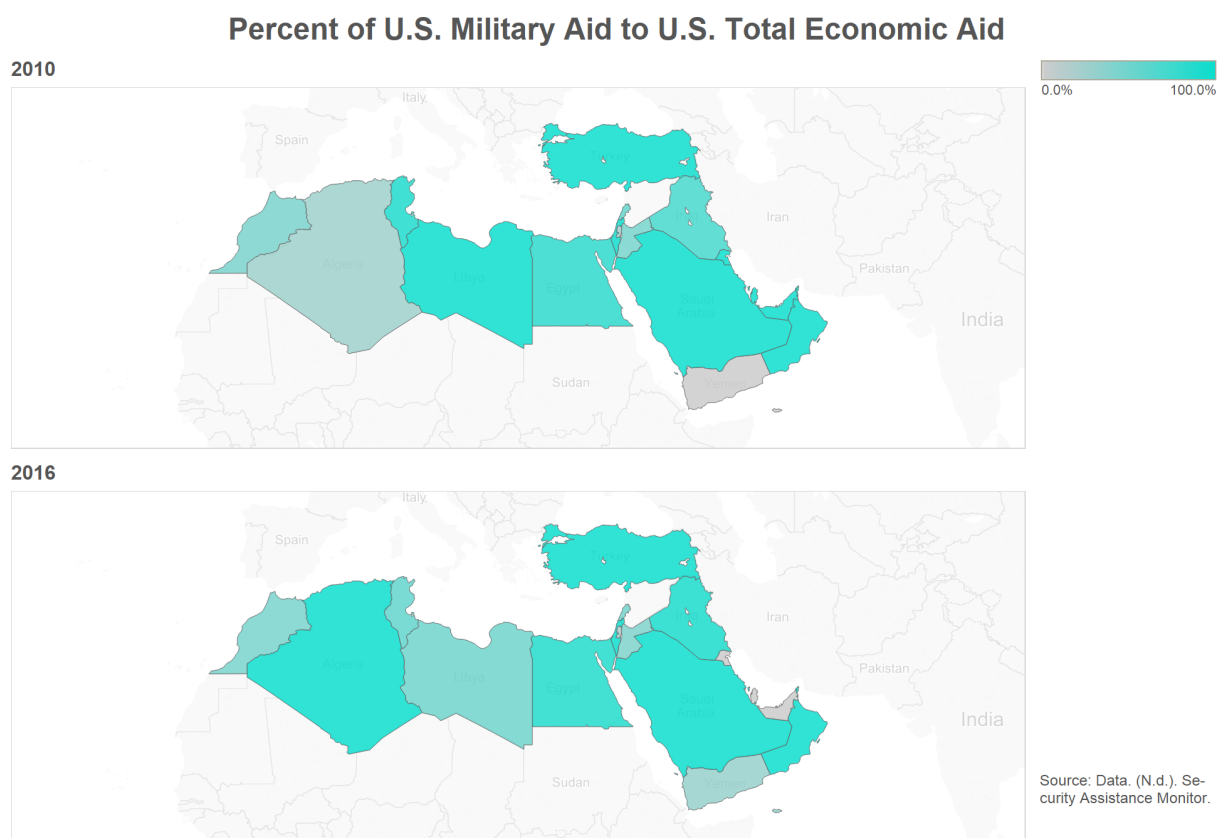
Understanding the Mass Uprising of 2011: A Political Context

Centered on the protests at Tahrir Square on January 25, 2011, the Arab Spring has since become a contentious topic of study. The Arab Spring illustrated that the out-workings of democratic struggle cannot be predicted, as the uprisings in the MENA region did not follow pre-scripted templates.

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The modern nation-state structure within non-Western contexts, which emerged in the post-colonial period, was based specifically on the constrictive ideology of liberal democracy. The type of liberal democracy that the West has imposed upon countries in Africa and the Middle East stems from a western socio-historical context that has theoretical underpinnings, different from the realities of Middle Eastern governance. Liberal democracy entails a representative form of government, primarily achieved through popular elections, and contrasts greatly with the varied indigenous and more localized approaches to leadership and governance that prevailed across the MENA region in the pre-colonial era. A representative government presented a difficult goal to achieve given that the majority of the region had never functioned as one governance unit, but rather in separate and localized structures. To further complicate post-colonial nation-building efforts, independence negotiations often left an elite in power that further marginalized citizens on the periphery and inhibited equitable economic development. When these ideologies, imposed on behalf of Western powers, fail to take root, the causes of failure are often attributed to local societies rather than the difficulty of implementing governance practices imported from abroad.

Based on the belief that liberal democracy is the best mechanism for ensuring the rights of individuals in developing nations, the U.S. government has historically implemented an approach to foreign policy that seeks to spread its structure of governance to other countries (Rieffer-Flanagan, 2014), including Egypt. Although Gulf countries have recently collaborated to provide international aid to Egypt, the incentive for this arguably lies in achieving general political stability in the region, as well as assisting Egypt in becoming eligible for IMF funds (Thomson Reuters, 2012). These donors, unlike the United States, do not specify democracy as one of the key goals of their assistance.



In addition to its diplomatic efforts, the U.S. has also sought to implement international development programs through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to both create and support liberal democratic efforts around the world. The developmental arm of the U.S. government supports programming for civil society organizations, women, and agriculture, with the hope that supporting such development will strengthen democratic institutions. While the U.S. State Department highlights the development aid that goes to Egypt, glaringly missing from public discourse is the significant amount of military aid also distributed to the country. The U.S. government has distributed approximately \$1.3 billion to Egypt annually in military aid since 1987 (Sharp, 2014), which risks counteracting the U.S.'s stated goals of promoting stability and democracy.

Percent of U.S. Military Aid Relative to Total U.S. Economic Aid in Egypt, by Year, 2010-2016



Source: Data. (N.d.). Security Assistance Monitor.

The reluctance of the Obama Administration to pledge more assistance to Egypt arose as the U.S. became concerned with the country's pace of reform. Central to this was the repressive nature of the Egyptian regime in cracking down on civilians, media, and non-governmental organizations (Parasie and Solomon, 2015), enacting repressive laws to stifle electoral campaigning, and organizing mass arrests of members of the opposition party (Human Rights Watch, 2013). In addition to disliking a crackdown on the political freedoms of Egyptian citizens, the United States expressed serious concerns with the un-democratic manner in which Abdel Fattah el-Sisi came to power in 2014^{iv} (Parasie and Solomon, 2015) through an engineered military coup, followed by violent military breaks up of protests. This confrontation resulted in the killing of hundreds of citizens in the aftermath of Morsi's removal from power (FRONTLINE, 2013). The violent crackdowns and coup diverged from U.S. foreign policy goals, causing tension between the U.S. and Egypt, leading to the U.S. suspending aid to Egypt in 2013^v (Gordon & Landler, 2013). As of 2016, the violent crackdown hasn't stopped the New York Time Editorial Board from issuing a statement requesting the United States rethink its relationship with Egypt (The New York Times Editorial Board, 2016).

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For both the Persian Gulf states, as well as for the U.S., Egypt has represented a linchpin for security in the Middle East, and as a viable way to create a bulwark against Islamist movements, such as the Islamic State and al Qaeda. For many of the Persian Gulf states (in particular Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E), the support for Egypt, and its crackdown against the opposition Muslim Brotherhood Islamist movement, is part of a larger policy to contain social and revolutionary movement. In the words of the Prime Minister of the U.A.E. and ruler of Dubai, Sheik Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, "We all have to stand by Egypt because its security and stability is the cornerstone in the security and stability of the region" (Parasie and Solomon, 2015).

Understanding the History: Egypt's Liberalized Autocracy Through Present-Day

According to scholars of Egypt and North Africa, one way to understand the discontent that fueled the uprising in Egypt is to examine the record of neoliberal policies adopted by Egyptian leaders since the era of Structural Adjustment^{vi}, which came in the wake of the debt crisis and the global oil price shock of the 1970s (Amin, 2012, Joffé, 2011). In 2011, Adam Hanieh from the Department of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, and Patrick Bond, Director of the Centre for Civil Society in South Africa argued that the neoliberal project, underway in Egypt, characterized by "Accelerating Structural Economic Reforms" by international financial institutions is designed to accelerate the programs that were pursued by the Mubarak regime (privatization, de-regulation and opening to foreign investment) (Bond, 2011; Hanieh, 2011). These economic reforms continue to represent threats to the economies and democratic processes in North Africa.

Neoliberal globalization and increased military influence in economic decisions ushered in a degradation of social conditions, mass unemployment, and increased poverty for citizens. In 2005, 3.8 percent of Egyptians were classified as 'extremely poor', 19.6 percent were 'poor', and 21 percent were 'near poor.' According to George Joffé, a specialist on North Africa, the GINI coefficient,^{vii} which measures a country's inequality, remained unchanged at 32 between 1992 and 2006 (Joffé, 2011, 509-10). In comparative terms, this made Egypt the 90th most unequal state in the world. Western economic models that were imposed on countries in North Africa, which combined massive reform and restructuring, had done little to improve the conditions in the region (Joffé, 2011, 509). Similarly, Egypt's embrace of neoliberal economic policy

since the late 1970s resulted in unchanging outcomes for the masses. These conditions later set in motion a revolt by the people.

During the transitional period, Amin notes, the “most vocal supporters of the ‘democratic revolutions’ calling the West to their rescue are some of the former leaders who enthusiastically supported the neoliberal alignment” (Amin, 2012). Joffé on the other hand notes that the causes of the uprisings are inextricably linked to the “global economic crisis and in the neo-patrimonial political natures of regional states” (Joffé, 2011). With the exception of Libya, where Qadhafi regimes “rejected any political or social domestic competitors to its hegemonic political discourse and practice” (Joffé, 2011), the rest of the North African states represented liberalizing autocracies.^{viii} In the latter, political concessions were possible. In the former, they were absent and the only option was radical political change that resulted in a civil war (Joffé, 2011).

According to Joffé, Egypt was originally able to contain the uprising and suppress social democratic forces due to its own historical trajectory. The institutional apparatus that undergirded Egypt as a liberalized autocracy required that the regime both tolerate political pluralism and grant limited media freedom, but keep both under constant threat of repression. Fortifying this liberalized autocracy was a, “state-enforced fragmentation of civil society against a background of a corrupted private sector” (Joffé, 2011, 513-14).

Joffé identifies Sadat, the former Egyptian President who opened the national economy to foreign investment in the *infitah* program, as a source of this liberalized autocracy (Joffé, 2011). To sustain this project, Sadat sought partners to ensure domestic peace and allow Egypt to renew ties with the West after 1973. By the end of the 1970s, an implicit alliance already existed between the military regime and the Muslim Brotherhood. This allowed the “latter to reassert itself within Egyptian society, although not given legal status, and the growth of a private sector allied to the regime by economic interest” (Joffé, 2011). The Mubarak regime inherited this state and then further engaged in the wholesale privatization of the economy^{ix} which, to this day, has left the Egyptian Army and its collaborators in economic control.

Whereas the Egyptian people have pushed for more democracy, U.S. involvement in the country has sometimes contradicted the demands and needs of the people. One of the U.S. failures in Egypt was its uncritical embrace of the military establishment,^x seen in the allocation of the majority of U.S. foreign assistance to Egypt toward military assistance. While the Obama administration has continued its support of the Egyptian army, in Tunisia, the U.S. refocused its aid away from the military and towards

transition-based assistance. In Tunisia, the people reaped the benefits of U.S. foreign aid given its allocation toward civil society organizations and social programs. In Egypt, the army was the larger beneficiary of U.S. aid, leading to less direct outcomes for the Egyptian people. This led to distrust among the Egyptian people of U.S. foreign policy, and its approach to promoting democracy.

The Obama administration also increased its economic aid towards Tunisia's youth. This lack of transitional support for younger people and civil society development in Egypt was a key driver in forms of internal resistance. When the Revolution Youth Coalition refused to meet with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in Egypt in 2011, they openly stated that their rejection derived from "her negative position from the beginning of the revolution and the position of the US administration in the Middle East" (cited in Radia and Marquardt, 2011). In another statement, the Youth Coalition noted that "the U.S. administration took Egypt's revolution lightly and supported the old regime while Egyptian blood was being spilled" (Radia & Marquardt, 2011).



Defining the Mass Uprisings: Arab Spring or Islamic Winter?

In many Arab countries, the role of religion and its place in the state remains a thorny issue. Shadi Hamid, a fellow at the Brookings Institute, argued that the challenge for Egypt, and the Middle East as a whole, rests in how secular state systems can accommodate and coexist with Islamist participation in the democratic process. According to Hamid, while secular liberalism promotes a separation between church and state, conservative Islamic states allow the "state to promote a basic set of religious and moral values through the soft power of the state machinery, the

educational system and the media” (Hamid, 2014). The challenge of reconciling values of liberal governance and Islamic religious principles remains a process that is evolving differently in each MENA country. This variation further challenges the notion that a standardized transition to liberal democracy in the region can exist.

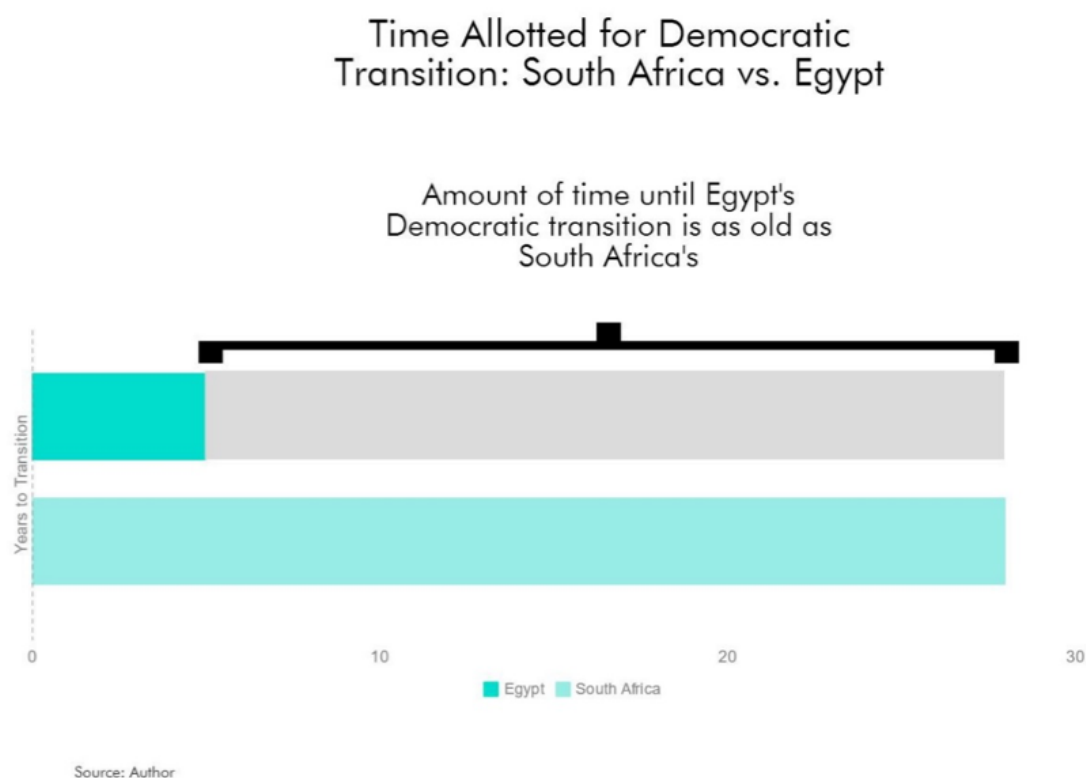
In assessing the gains from the Arab Spring, Boduszyński, Fabbe, and Lamont, concluded that most non-Islamist parties in Egypt have little to offer by way of a viable democratic alternative to the military regime or the Islamist parties. The authors claim that these non-Islamist parties are often autocratic, illiberal, and collaborate with both the old regime and current military regime (Boduszyński, Fabbe, and Lamont, 2015). They suggest that these parties do not seem to consider that support required for democratic norms should surpass their opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood. This, according to these scholars, “makes them poor stewards of liberalism and weak challengers to Sisi’s autocratic policies” (Boduszyński, Fabbe, and Lamont, 2015).

In surveying Egypt, Tunisia and Turkey, Kurzman and Türkoğlu note that these countries also have large secular parties with roots in authoritarian regimes and a close relationship with internal security institutions, such as the military (Boduszyński, Fabbe, and Lamont, 2015). Islamist parties, they argue, held progressively liberal positions on key issues, such as the role and place of religion in the state (Shari’a) or womens’ rights, until the millennium, but have since slowed in the post-millennial period. Yet, amongst both parties, support for the democratic process continued to rise (Kurzman and Türkoğlu, 2015). However, if the definition of democracy is expanded beyond the narrow liberal form “to include shura-style democracy, the upward trend is even more marked—more than 90 percent of Islamic-party platforms since 2000 have endorsed democracy of one form or another” (Kurzman and Türkoğlu, 2015). This points to the challenge of measuring and assessing democratic values, principles, and practices in a standardized way. Thus, the challenge for countries like the U.S. rests in how to make sense of, and support, a form of democracy that looks different from its own standard.

“One of the biggest challenges facing liberal democrats in the Arab world is how to accommodate Shari’a law and Arab conservatism with modern constitutions based on the values of liberal democracy.”

The aftermath of the Arab Spring has led to results that derive from a long-term process, driven by changes in society, demographics shifts, evolution in religion, globalization, and many other socio-political forces. Roy and others (Bayat, 2011) frame this transition for Egypt as one to “post-Islamism”^{xi}, a challenging evolution given the

“struggle to find expression in a political arena still dominated by actors from the old world” (Roy, 2012b). Islamist movements and political parties will remain a part of MENA politics for the foreseeable future as they represent an integral part of many local societies and constitute major opposition to other governments in the region (Bayat, 2011). With the exception of Tunisia and Morocco, where groups reached a compromise on the role of Shari’a in the state after the Islamic Revolution, Islamists in Egypt have not given up the fight to make religion an inclusive source of legislation. While the Muslim Brotherhood may have been defeated politically, the group has not left Egypt’s political community nor ceased its fight to maintain religion as a strong political influence. One of the biggest challenges facing liberal democrats in the Arab world is how to accommodate Shari’a law and Arab conservatism with modern constitutions based on the values of liberal democracy. Islamic parties also cannot impose a singular identity upon a society as diverse as the current Arab world, particularly Egypt, which promotes a range of “social, religious, political, and geostrategic” (Roy, 2012d) forces in the political environment.



While the revolution in Egypt did not completely overhaul the enduring political system or the country’s social order, the events of the Arab Spring in Egypt cannot be compared to Tunisia’s revolutionary success. In the former, the regime and its military counterparts survived, while in the latter, the regime was overpowered and the country underwent significant reform. The difference in these two situations rests in the involvement of existing institutions. In Tunisia, the power came from the people,

rather than existing powers or military elites, and was managed by organized political forces (e.g. strong trade-union movement). In Egypt, each attempt to democratize the country has been met and managed by the military, which has a history of intervening in political matters and has assumed a representative and negotiator role as in the current transition. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) also insisted on maintaining its autonomy of operations and resisted subordination to a civilian authority (Lesch, 2014). While the military agreed to some changes as demanded by the people, including to transition to civilian democracy, it has significantly limited reform of the security system, essentially enforcing the security system's continued influence in the constitutional process. While the inclusion of existing forces has challenged Egypt's transition to democracy, the events unfolding in many countries in the MENA region do not represent a failure of democracy; rather, they are part of the process of developing an individualized form of democracy (Roy, 2012c).

Understanding Future Challenges: Re-orienting Interpretations of Democracy and Success

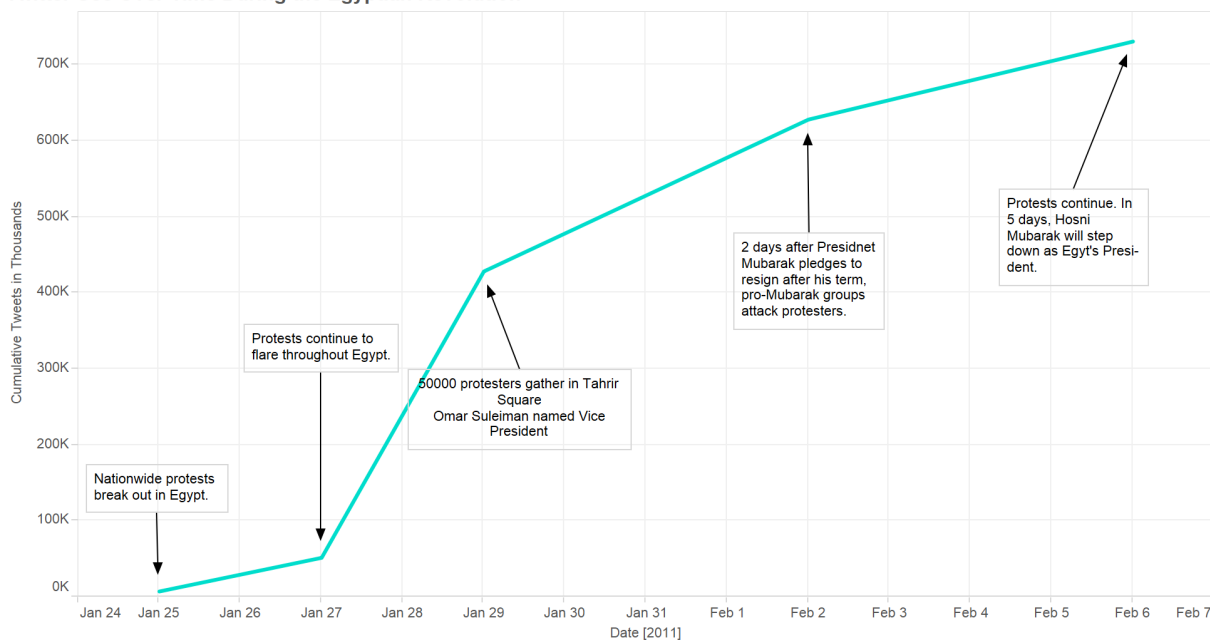
The mass protests and movements that occurred in Tahrir Square symbolized a collective act of agency on the part of the Egyptian people. Thus, arising from these events was a picture of the democracy that the Egyptian people envisioned for their country, but one that Westerners may not conceive of as traditional Democracy.

The movement in Egypt also reflected the complexities of transitioning from an autocratic society, with power vested only in the hands of a select few, to a democratic society, where influence could be ideally shared by many. What emerged in the end was not necessarily a total rejection of a secular state, but rather a desire to find a median in which the rights of citizens are respected, and religious and cultural values are reflected in their country's governance system. Moreover, the Egyptian youth broke ranks with the past, protesting the notion that religion is central to politics "without embracing militant secularism that would outlaw religion in the public sphere. Instead, it seemed to call for a broad tolerance of cultural identities in the public sphere, one that would include both secular and religious tendencies" (Mamdani, 2011a). This depiction of young people in Egypt, and their anti-militaristic call for secularism and democracy, challenges the assumptions and standardized measures of success embedded in Western forms of liberal democracy. The events in Egypt, and the young people that drove them, thus ushered in new possibilities for collective social action. The events in Egypt counter the notion that the people necessitate political empowerment from external allies; rather, they illustrate that the people

possess the organic capacity to assert their own needs and drive their own version of change, and external intervention can actually impede this process.

The events at Tahrir Square, and other acts of resistance in Egypt, also redefined traditional avenues of expression and criticism, particularly due to the involvement of Egypt's young people. The use of social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook, was seen as both a new modern organizing tool and a medium for sharing information about political issues. Popular music also became a means of expressing dissent, such as El-General's hip-hop anthem, "Rais Lebled," which critiqued the Egyptian government (Walt, 2011).

Twitter Use Over Time During the Egyptian Revolution



Cumulative Number of Tweets about the Egyptian Revolution

A look at the demographics of Egypt reveals that the majority of its population are young people. It is not a surprise that the early protest was also led by young people. According to the Panel Survey of Young People in Egypt, the Egyptian population is exceptionally young. About 61% of population is under the age of 30; and 40% of the population is between the ages of 10 and 29 (Roushdy & Sieverding, 2015). A previous UNDP report from 2010 placed the actual number of Egyptians belonging to the 18 to 29 age group to be 20 million, roughly a quarter of the population (UNDP & INP, 2010). Given that youth constitute a significant segment of the population in Egypt, their redefinition of citizenship and political participation has broad implications for the future of governance in Egypt, as well as the influence of the citizenry in the political system.

The media also played a powerful role in the revolutionary process, acting as society's watchdog, providing critical news and analysis to the people, creating a platform for discussion, and building ties between those spearheading the political movement and

ordinary citizens. Media also helped to link “local protests into a powerful master narrative of regional uprising” (Lynch, 2015). Yet, despite the constructive role that various media organizations played, some scholars believe that the media also played a dual role in stifling the movement and minimizing its gains during the political struggle. According to Marc Lynch, “Media organs that had proved crucial to the uprisings degenerated with dismaying rapidity into highly partisan platforms serving state authorities or political factions” (Lynch, 2015). The media, like any organization, is susceptible to capture by different institutions, such as political groups or existing elites, suggesting that the role of media can play both a positive and negative role in the face of democratic transition. In a post-millennium age where news can be shared across the globe instantaneously, media also facilitates and amplifies the fears and uncertainties that arise from revolutionary political transitions, risking intense polarization within a society and the dismantled potential of a revolution.

Five years after the uprisings, many still wonder what led to the failure to build strong democratic institutions (Lynch, 2015). However, the effect of the uprisings on the democratic process (Robbins, 2015) and the long-term performance of Islamic political parties in parliamentary elections (Kurzman and Türkoğlu, 2015) is yet to be seen. While a democratic result was largely expected in the short-term, five years fails to leave enough time to build a democratic institution and evaluate its success. Moreover, the Egyptian people’s appetite for democracy still remains strong suggesting the fight for democratic transition is far from over. (Robbins, 2015). Both the youth movement and the influential role of the media encourage the redefinition of democracy within different countries - rather than restricting representations of agency and participation to popular elections, what if these new forms of expression were also incorporated into measures of democratic success and progress?

Conclusion

The debate remains as to what type of democracy is suitable to countries like Egypt and who should shape the democratic process – external or local actors. This article does not answer all the questions or cover all the failures of the Arab Spring. If anything, it raises questions about the process of democratization in the region. Rather than postulating why democracy has not found its place in these countries, the debate must shift to what type of democracy is suitable to countries like Egypt. One answer is provided by Samir Amin. Amin writes that instead of copying models of democracy from outside of the national context and seeing westernization as a synonym to modernization, the Global South should promulgate its own variant of democracy more suited to its own context.

For Egypt to find a sustainable approach to democracy, it must be homegrown and internally driven. Due to the diversity of political actors involved, this inevitably means that secularist and conservative forces, religious groups, civil society organizations, and Islamist groups all require a say in the democratic process. Contrary to much Western commentary, democracy does not presuppose secularization (Roy, 2012d). The fear of takeover by Islamic political parties is overstated. In surveying parliamentary elections from 2011 to 2014 in 13 countries, with 53 parties contesting 16 parliamentary elections, only in Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, Turkey and Indonesia did Islamic parties win a quarter or more of seats (Turkoglu and Kurzman, 2015). These victories also came after periods of repressive secular regimes, suggesting the increased difficulty in these countries of constraining such historic influence in the political sphere.

Second, the new and evolving form of democratization in the country combines “technocratic modernism and conservative values,” (Roy, 2012a) with multiparty politics, necessitating coalition governments in order to win an electorate that is calling for more democracy. The future solutions to and compromises on key national issues, such as the place of religion in society, the identity of the state and citizenship, the evolution of traditional Islamic views, a national program for economic development, and the increased demands for greater freedom, justice, and equality, will progressively shape the type of democracy that develops in Egypt. One step toward ensuring compromise or solutions on these issues, and building a durable democracy in Egypt, is the re-orientation of support away from the military and toward social programs that benefit the people and address the economic grievances of the youth.

Third, labelling events around the MENA region as successes or failures in the aftermath of the Arab Spring is a poor way to understand societal and political processes around the region (Lynch, 2016). Egypt like many repressive regimes managed to survive the uprisings. The country’s leaders contained social movements and democratic consolidation through outright cooptation, coercion and modest reform to (Lynch, 2016). To contain the uprising in the region, Gulf States, like Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates invested heavily to prop up friendly regimes in Egypt, Morocco, and Jordan and keep them from collapsing. According to Lynch, “Size, population and historical position now seem to matter less for the exercise of regional power than do wealth, domestic stability, media empires, transnational networks and access to advanced weaponry” (Lynch, 2016). Those regimes that survived the protests were transformed, and today they remain unstable with the fear that another uprising might topple the remaining liberalized autocracies.

Fourth, an analysis of post-Arab Spring Egypt encompassing historical, political, and cultural factors suggests that a singular focus on culture as both the repository of political development and an explanatory concept in Arab countries is simultaneously misguided and misplaced. A culturalist approach to Egypt's political dilemmas, simplifying the country to one ridden purely by religious struggle, fails to encompass or explain the revolutionary political shifts in the MENA region. Moreover, this focus on culture and religion as the sole determinate factors risks minimizing the transitional challenges in Egypt and thus inhibiting the likelihood such challenges will be overcome.

It is the limited nature of this culturalist approach that leads to a final lesson: the current political state in Egypt fails to illustrate the potential of democracy in the country, as it is premature to talk about political failure only five years after a national revolution. Rather, we are witnessing the process of democratic transition and the inevitable challenges of democratic transition in the non-Western world.

Tarnjeet Kang is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Education Policy, Organization and Leadership at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Her research focuses on the role of community self-determination and the subaltern within educational, economic, governance and legal frameworks. Her dissertation research examined community self-determination within South Sudan's education and governance systems.

Dr. Christopher Zambakari is a Rotary Paul Harris Fellow, Founder and CEO of The Zambakari Advisory, LLC, and the Assistant Editor for The Bulletin of The Sudan Studies Association (SSA). His specialization is in international law and security, political reform and socio-economic development, governance and democracy, nation and state-building processes in Africa and in the Middle East. His work has been published in law, economic, and public policy journals.

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ⁱ The events that set off the Arab Spring have set in motion lively debates about the causes of the uprisings, prospects and challenges. The Boston Review organized a forum entitled “What Killed Egyptian Democracy?” with a lead article by Mohammad Fadel (Fadel, 2014), the Economist asked “The Arab spring: Has it failed?” (The Economist 2013), and other analysts focused on the failures of a transition to a democracy in Egypt and the region in the aftermath of the Arab Spring (Zakaria, 2014, Brown, 2013, Smith, 2013). In a recent edited volume by Emile Hoyakem and Hebatalla Taha nine rising analysts analyze the events that took place in Egypt between 2011 and 2015 and evaluate the outcomes of the uprisings and attempts at reform (2016).

ⁱⁱ The term “West” is borrowed from Samir Amin, the Egyptian political economist’s notion of countries of the Triad which include the US, Western and Central Europe, Japan.

ⁱⁱⁱ Leaders like Mubarak were seen as the only bulwark against the rise and spread of Islamism. Like communism in an earlier period, the U.S. has tended to collaborate with regimes that are not always practicing democracy at home when it serves U.S. foreign policies. Early during the uprising in Egypt, the Youth Coalition noted that “the US administration took Egypt’s revolution lightly and supported the old regime while Egyptian blood was being spilled” (Radia & Marquardt, 2011). According to Mamdani by “Ascribing the violence of one’s adversaries to their culture is self-serving: it goes a long way toward absolving oneself of any responsibility” (Mamdani, 2005).

^{iv} Immediately after removing President Morsi from power, SCAF led by Fattah el-Sisi, suspended the constitution, shut down at least three Islamist television stations and issued arrest warrants for hundreds of Muslim Brotherhood officials. The violent crackdown on opposition party members resulted in the killing at least 600 people and wounding thousands more in August 2013 (FRONTLINE, 2013).

^v The modest temporary freeze on military assistance to Egypt excluded certain types of aids that Egypt normally receives including those aid that are targeted for counterterrorism operations and the defense of Israel. The According to The Washington Post, the Obama Administration was set to resume suspended military aid to Egypt in March 2015 (Ryan, 2015).

^{vi} Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) are economic policies that have been promoted for developing countries by Bretton Woods Institutions (World Bank and International Monetary Fund-IMF) since the end of the 1970s. This includes loans that are conditional on the adoption of liberal economic policies and restructuring of national economies (World Health Organization, 2016).

^{vii} Income Gini coefficient measures deviation of the distribution of income among citizens/households inside a country. The range goes from 0 representing absolute equality to a value of 100 absolute inequality. The lower a country’s score, the more equal it is and the higher the score the more unequal the country.

^{viii} Liberalizing autocracies such as the Ben Ali and Mubarak regimes in Egypt and Tunisia, the Bouteflika regime in Algeria (except Qadhafi regime in Libya), “had increasingly allowed significant space in recent years for a degree of popular social and economic autonomy of expression and action. This was allied to processes of restricted political liberalisation, designed never to threaten regime control (Joffé, 2011, 508).

^{ix} According to Professor George Joffé, privatization under Mubarak involved “312 state enterprises, mainly in the Delta, which brought increased inflows of foreign investment as well as the growth of domestic investment but did not lead to rises in living standards (p. 520).

^x Egypt is one of the biggest recipients of U.S. foreign aid. The U.S. government has distributed approximately \$1.3 billion to Egypt annually since 1987 (see Sharp, 2014).

^{xi} The idea of “Post-Islamism” and the “failure of political Islam” do not mean the end of Islamist activism and discourse but instead according to Roy, the “utopian conception of an ‘Islamic state’ has lost credibility” (Roy, 2012d, 8-9) and Islamist ideologies are being challenged from various social, religious, and political forces in society.