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Dissonant Politics in Mubarak's Egypt

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Abstract

For years now political scientists have been asking questions about why the Middle East remains one of the world's least democratic regions. Given the recent Middle East war and the United States' current project to build a democracy in Iraq, the question seems more significant than ever.Yet the topic continues to puzzle researchers around the globe as they contribute to a growing body of possible explanations for the phenomenon.While these explanations vary widely in form, they also reflect a constant and underlying question regarding what factors inhibit the formation of sustainable Middle Eastern democracies. This paper examines one such model in the context of contemporary Egypt to test its relevance to events actually occurring in the Arab world.

Keywords

Egypt

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For years now political scientists have been asking questions about why the Middle East remains one of the world's least democratic regions. Given the recent Middle East war and the United States' current project to build a democracy in Iraq, the question seems more significant than ever. Yet the topic continues to puzzle researchers around the globe as they contribute to a growing body of possible explanations for the phenomenon. While these explanations vary widely in form, they also reflect a constant and underlying question regarding what factors inhibit the formation of sustainable Middle Eastern democracies. This paper examines one such model in the context of contemporary Egypt to test its relevance to events actually occurring in the Arab world.

Democratization theories that seem to work in other areas of the world break down in the Middle Eastern context. For example, some theorists studying Eastern European countries draw a positive correlation between economic development and democracy (Bunce). According to such models, oil-rich Arab Gulf states possess distinct advantages in forming democratic systems. Nevertheless, the governments of these countries repeatedly turn to hegemonic measures to reinforce their autocratic leadership—demonstrating the irrelevance of such theories to Middle Eastern politics in the process.

Other political scientists studying Latin American democracies have cited economic performance as a positive influence on the formation of democratic governance (Remmer). Such scholars argue that poor economic performance creates popular dissent and alienates the ruling elite from the working classes. In many countries this popular dissent translates into calls for political liberalization and economic reform, thereby creating conditions that encourage democratic advancement. Though this phenomenon is not linked to any particular political system, its effects are more acute for authoritarian regimes that create chasms between the political elite and general population. Still, the theory weakens when applied to many Middle Eastern regimes where despite frequent destabilizing fluctuations in vital economic markets, many governments have resisted reform and maintained social control.

The limitations of these two variables in the Middle Eastern context spurred some political scientists to explore other, more unique characteristics of Arab economies to explain the democracy gap. One theorist proposed that natural resource endowment in many of the oil-rich Arab Gulf states gives the illusion of wealth in terms of GDP without translating into economic empowerment for most citizens (Ross). Thus, the wealth distribution, democratic achievement, and power structures of many Middle Eastern countries are comparable to states with much lower GDP figures. This model may offer a partial explanation of the political environment in Muslim countries, but it is by no means exhaustive. Many Islamic countries with relatively few natural resources located across Asia Minor and North Africa possess authoritarian systems similar to their oil-rich neighbors, and this realization has prompted researchers to search for other explanatory options.

As illustrated by these disappointments, economic-based theories of democracy often fail to explain the political environment of many Arab states. Consequently, many theorists have turned to non-economic explanatory variables to understand the question. Political heritage represents one variable used to comprehend democratic change in other parts of the world. Many models assume that former British colonies democratize more readily because the legacy of colonial government institutions predisposes future democratic development (Weiner). Alternately, some argue that a communist political heritage impedes future democratic advancement because its presence produces an antidemocratic political culture (Fish). The inadequacies of this model once again become apparent in the Middle Eastern context, however, where brutal forms of hegemonic and political control are exhibited by countries possessing both forms of political heritage.

Ethnic diversity represents a final non-economic variable adapted from the study of other world regions to explain the Middle Eastern political situation. According to research on new democracies in Eastern Europe and Latin America, societal fragmentation along ethnic or racial lines problemizes political consensus-building and predisposes populations to violent interactions that quickly inhibit normal democratic processes (Horowitz). Homogeneous societies, on the other hand, avoid this conflict by narrowing the field of possible political alternatives to a set of commonly acceptable boundaries. Once again, however, Arab states hold exception to the model by exhibiting below average levels of democratic performance compared with ethnic fragmentation.

The insufficient explanation provided by these commonly cited variables led many in the political science field to search for alternate modes of understanding Middle Eastern politics. One current hypothesis linking Arab nations to autocracy argues that Islam as a religio-social institution precludes liberal democratic foundations such as individual human rights and majoritarian rule (Fish). Studies promoting this idea contend that Islam instead favors either strong authoritarian systems that provide cohesion to a single religiously guided worldview or consensual-based systems that rely heavily on pre-existent patterns of patriarchal and tribal authority. Although most scholars concede that Muslim cultures are no more religiously-convicted than other societies, it is nevertheless assumed that a prevailing Islamic worldview can seriously inhibit democracy.

Subsequent research points to certain errors in this analysis. An examination of the electoral gap in Muslim countries found that autocratic governance is not as much an attribute of Islamic states as it is of Arab ones (Stepan and Robertson). Further empirical observation comparing Freedom House and Polity Project ratings for Muslim majority countries with and without majority Arab populations while controlling for factors of economic strength and significant democratic experience reveals that "16 Arab countries form the largest…group among…states that 'underachieve' [democratically]…[but] the world's 31 Muslim-majority but non-Arab countries…form the…largest bloc…that 'greatly overachieve'" (30). Since little or no evidence connecting Islam to autocratic governance exists, researchers are left to speculate on the reasons for the Arab deficiencies.

In an attempt to make sense of these empirical observations, Brumberg introduces a model that separates Islamic states into two distinct interpretive categories (Brumberg, "Islamists and the Politics of Consensus"). This treatment asserts that "to say that someone is Muslim tells us little regarding that person's views on politics [because] the supposition that there is one Muslim identity that trumps all others is erroneous" (109). Alternately, it advocates looking at unique differences in the political and institutional tools used by various Muslim countries to explain the democracy gap. The study identifies the terms *harmonic* and *dissonant* as two distinct categories of governance and observes that "the challenge is not to figure out whether Islamism is 'essentially' democratic versus autocratic…it is to see whether this or that Islamist group is acting within a hegemonic [harmonic] political arena…to shut out alternative approaches, or else within a competitive [dissonant]…arena where [they must] accommodate the logic of power-sharing" (112). According to this definition, "dissonant states create a multipolar arena that abets competition and negotiation [while] harmonic states…create a unipolar field that can easily become a place for deadly games of 'winner takes all' between rulers and their opponents" (113).

Evidence from outside the Arab world supports this claim as studies exploring Muslim views of democracy in former Soviet Union reveal that factors such as education and the national economy explain attitudes towards democracy more than religious identification (Rose). The idea of the common Islamic identity breaks down due to variations in religious observance and because Muslims represent diverse social and economic classes that cannot be simplified for political analysis. Dissonant political strategies take advantage of such diversity by incorporating Islamists, liberal democrats, secularists and other groups into

legitimate political dialogue-thereby bolstering state legitimacy while diffusing specific political successes and failures.

Other recent political studies agree with these preliminary findings by positing that the search for legitimacy in times of economic instability yields increased pluralism and political incorporation (Hudson). While this development may not necessarily yield increased democracy as earlier theorists expected, it is a step towards what Brumberg calls "liberalized autocracy" (Brumberg, "The Trap of Liberalized Autocracy"). The advantages of such a dissonant system over absolute harmonic hegemony include increased human rights, official opposition activity, and greater government transparency. However, autocratic rulers are seldom enthusiastic supporters of political liberalization and often offer serious resistance to broad-based reform.

Contemporary studies are less optimistic about the prospects of democratic reform in the Arab world. Although a shift in the Middle Eastern political climate is apparent, no single explanation can account for past democratic deficiencies or predict future political developments in the region. Observable advances toward political pluralism were made in the past fifteen years as shown in the rise of new dissonant liberalized autocracies. The future of these systems, however, is a subject of ongoing debate. Some fear the redoubled oppression witnessed in Algeria as autocratic regimes attempt to regain solitary control over political, social, and economic spheres of influence. Others predict that a new generation of oppressive theocratic Islamist rulers will replace the fading autocratic regimes. Yet, the hope for democracy is not lost as in some cases, "Inclusion [may breed] moderation…and Islamists who reject undemocratic behavior in exchange for inclusion will be transformed…from destabilizing antisystem parties into acceptable representatives of a legitimate ideological trend" (Langohr 117).

The Egyptian Case

An interesting example of the way these democratic issues and political transformations react with one another to produce new and novel forms of authority can be found in contemporary Egypt. Modulating between liberal and hegemonic policies, the country is a prime example of dissonant politics in the modern liberalized autocracy. As home to many well-organized dissonant political groups including the Muslim Brotherhood, secularist liberals, a large women's liberation movement, and one of the Middle East's only regional human rights organizations, the political elite face considerable opposition. Still, repressive tactics are regularly mixed with gestures of liberalization as the Egyptian government continually attempts to maintain its monopoly on legitimate social and political interpretation (Brownlee).

This general pattern seen across the Arab world led one theorist to observe, "The trademark mixture of guided pluralism, controlled elections, and selective repression…is not just a survival strategy adopted by authoritarian regimes, but rather a *type* of political system whose institutions, rules, and logic defy any linear model of democratization" (Brumberg, "The Trap of Liberalized Autocracy" 56). Brumberg's model of dissonant and harmonic regimes may hold the key to understanding a new form of political system exhibited by regimes like Egypt where necessary accommodations lead to pluralistic political participation but do not inevitably translate into greater democratic governance. In other words, increased inclusion of opposition parties in Egyptian politics should not necessarily be interpreted as a process leading towards democratization but instead signifies a new type of Middle Eastern political system.

This study assesses developments within Mubarak's Egypt to examine the usefulness of Brumberg's dissonant/harmonic paradigm in understanding political events across the Arab world. The traditional autocratic ruling elite of the country commonly uses hegemonic measures to maintain political, social, and religious control and may therefore be compared

to other repressive regimes across the Middle East region. Additionally, the substantial and organized nature of opposition movements within the country make it a crucial case for interpreting gestures of power-sharing and dissonant politics in other portions of the Arab world.

Past studies attempting to explain the Egyptian political environment examined the government's reaction to issues of economic reform, elections, Islamist incorporation, constitutional abuses, human rights, and gender equality as indicators of democratization (Brownlee; Goodson and Radwan; Beattie; Aly). However, despite this careful inclusion of variables and thorough study design, many of these studies failed to account for Egyptian developments precisely because they assumed a linkage between these factors and democratic growth-an assumption proven ineffectual by the stubborn persistence of autocratic governance in the country.

Nevertheless, the variables considered in past studies remain present in Egyptian society and relevant to politics on the national level. By examining changes in each of the above-listed country-level indicators throughout Mubarak's rule, this study shows how the ruling political elite periodically incorporates or cooperates with opposition groups in an ongoing quest for legitimacy and stability. This is the logic of dissonant politics-to integrate political opposition into a competitive field of ideological rivalry for the mutual benefit of the various players involved (Brumberg, "Dissonant Politics in Iran and Indonesia").

Measuring each of these indicators will involve extensive use of past political studies as well as statistical reports compiled by various domestic and international watch groups. Analysis of economic liberalization and market reform can be found in past studies (Fisher; Lögren; Sadowski) and in reports tracking current economic developments in Egypt and other member countries compiled by the International Monetary Fund and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (International Monetary Fund, *International Financial Statistics Yearbook*; The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, "Survey of Economic and Social Developments in the ESCWA Region"). Information on election fairness relies primarily upon the contributions of two important country surveys (Fisher; Brownlee), while data regarding Islamist political incorporation originates from both former studies and a human rights watchdog group (Fisher; Ismail; Human Rights Watch, "Egypt: Human Rights Developments"). Supplemental information regarding constitutional abuses is provided by two past studies and more recent publications released by Human Rights Watch and Freedom House. (Brownlee; Fisher Human Rights Watch Backgrounder, "Elections in Egypt"; Freedom House, "Freedom in the World"). Finally, accounts of human rights activity and women's liberation in Egypt can be found in reports compiled by one political scientist and various non-governmental agencies[1]. All variables will be measured and operationalized at the country-level over the period of Mubarak's leadership in order to make explicit the large-scale developmental changes contributing to Egypt's current political situation.

Contextualizing the data within the dissonant/harmonic model of political authority rather than assuming its linkage to democratic change will result in a more accurate explanation of why and how the Egyptian political climate took its current form. Such an approach contributes valuable methodological insight to the analysis of other Arab regimes vacillating between liberal and hegemonic political behavior by suggesting a paradigm that can explain the seemingly erratic nature of government actions. Furthermore, political

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[1] Refer to Crystall; Amnesty International, "Database of Human Rights Reports and Articles for Egypt"; Human Rights Watch, "Divorced for Justice: Women's Unequal Access to Divorce in Egypt"; Human Rights Watch, "Egypt: Human Rights Developments"; The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Central Asia, "Where do Arab Women Stand in the Development Process? A Gender Based Statistical Analysis"; The World Bank Group, "Gender Stats."

developments must be viewed in light of Middle Eastern conceptions of democracy and the limitations brought upon them by contemporary political situations-a combination that necessitates the formation of new non-linear theories of democratic development. The model of dissonant incorporation is one such non-linear paradigm with broad applicability across the Arab world that seriously explores issues arising in liberalized autocracies without submitting to the urge to predict imminent democratization.

Economic Reform

The effects of economic reform on internal and external government legitimacy make Egyptian economic policy decisions an important resource for observing dissonant politics in action. Large amounts of foreign debt accumulated over the last twenty years have created a dilemma for Mubarak's government. External agencies like the IMF and USAID as well as individual creditor countries favor drastic reform measures such as the devaluation of the Egyptian pound to reduce annual trade deficits, increasing interest rates to limit spending, and loosening government price controls to help manage debt. However, the short-term political cost of applying such policies discourages the government from implementing liberal reform except under severe pressure. The story of how Mubarak has negotiated these pressures and alternated between Western demands and internal political expediency reveals much about the current government's attitude towards reform and illustrates one way in which liberal concessions can be used to maintain long-term political legitimacy.

When Mubarak succeeded President Anwar Sadat in 1981, he inherited a host of economic problems that plagued Egypt since the mid-1970s. An extensive consumer-subsidies program, large foreign trade deficits, and mounting government debt contributed to increased pressure for economic reform. However, past failures at market liberalization such as the deadly riots sparked by a 1977 bread price increase pointed to the political consequences of such action and discouraged the government from moving quickly. Declining oil revenues throughout the 1980s and relative inflation of national debt payments—to 71% of all national commodity exports in 1986-forced some government compromise between the demands of foreign debtors and the Egyptian population (Sadowski 29).

Several internal structural changes were implemented throughout the 1980s in response to these ongoing pressures. Throughout the decade, the government attempted to streamline Sadat-era fiscal policies and bring the national economy more in line with market forces by attracting foreign banks, creating new international banking institutions, and curtailing the growth of unregulated Islamic investment companies. The most drastic of these reforms were implemented between 1987 and 1989 when Mubarak consolidated the four formerly separate state banks into a single Central Bank that adjusted official exchange rates daily to reflect real market values. The immediate effect of this reform was the devaluation of the Egyptian pound by over more than 60% from $1 = 1.36 to $1 = 2.17 (Sadowski 38; Fisher 334). The consequences of such a change for ordinary Egyptians may be observed in a time series graph of the consumer price index (Fig 1).

Fig. 1 Comparative Consumer Price Indices

Egypt — United States
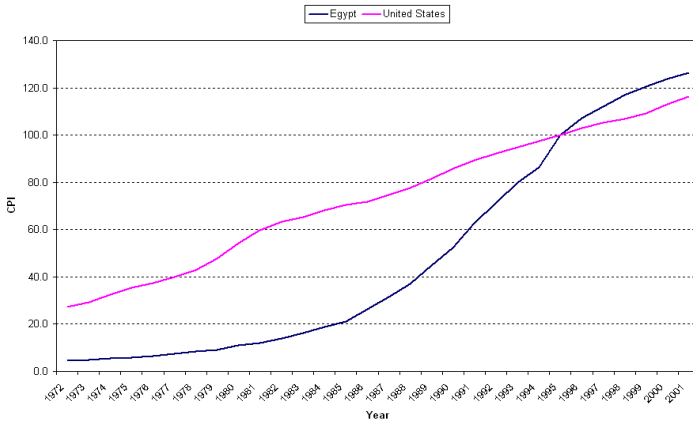
The years following the 1987 reforms reveal sharp price increases alongside a relative drop consumer purchasing power—a trend that only recently began to level off.

Liberal reform continued through much of the 1990s until it finally began to stagnate in 1999 in response to ongoing government overspending and widespread dollar shortages. Preliminary legislation in the new millennium suggests a retreat from floating exchange rate policies and further economic reform as the Central Bank begins to interfere with foreign exchange markets in response to short-term currency shortages stemming from lackluster tourism and the war in Iraq.

In conjunction with the institutional restructuring of the late-1980s, Mubarak conceded to foreign and IMF pressures to raise interest rates to levels reflecting inflation. Central Bank lending interest rates were subsequently raised two points from 15 to 17% between 1986 and 1988 (Sadowski 38). While this adjustment may appear drastic following a six year period with no rate adjustment, the reform remains short of the country's 20% inflation rate (Fig. 2 below).

Comparative Lending Interest Rates

Egypt — United States
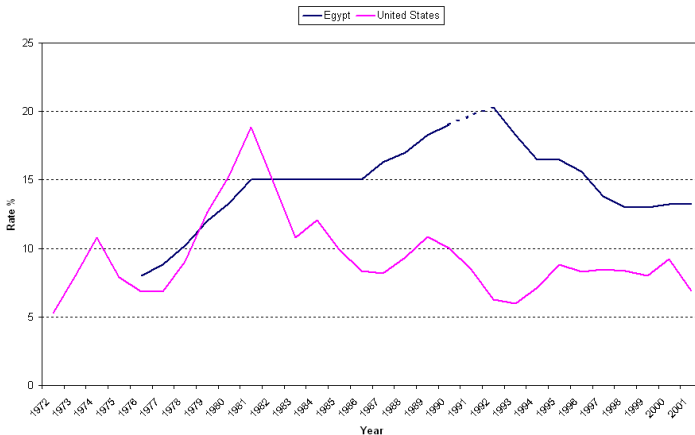
The peak of interest rate reform came in 1991 when banks were allowed to set deposit and lending rates virtually unencumbered by government regulation. However, this seemingly liberal policy remained untested through the 1990s because the Egyptian economic boom occasioned few opportunities to test Mubarak's commitment to reform. Current interventions in foreign exchange policy may foreshadow a return to past interest rate policies, and despite continued pressure for liberalization, Mubarak remains a cautious reformer—exhibiting the political expediency of compromise and limited concessions in the dissonant political arena.

As perhaps the most inflammatory issue in Egyptian economic policy, price control adjustment receives much attention from foreign and domestic reformers alike. Costs from government subsidies and controls for agricultural products and foods stuffs gradually rose throughout the 1980s as the national population and food import dependency grew and oil revenues shrank. Sudden price increases in these state-distributed necessities have historically triggered food riots from the government's poorest constituents. Revealing a lack of cooperation among the upper-classes, merchants with state-sponsored monopolies failed to respond to a system of "'friendly pricing' in which the 'lords' were supposed to raise their own prices gradually and pass along a share of the profits to the farmers" (Sadowski 36). In the early 1990s the government finally responded to its budget crisis by reducing subsidies on certain foods, agricultural resources, and energy products. The most drastic of these reforms focused on the energy market and resulted in a 50 to 170% price increase between 1990 and 1991 (Löfgren 409). Also during this time, the government began loosening restrictions on foreign trade and private investment, and in an attempt to stimulate further price adjustment, export bans were lifted on over one hundred important agricultural and industrial products. The combined effect of these measures has brought prices on many goods closer to international levels, but resistance to further reform from both inside the government and the general population precludes complete liberalization.

The inefficient and bureaucratic government structure and an overriding desire to maintain political stability form two major impediments to price adjustment from within the regime. Lack of cooperation between government ministers with differing constituencies produces a situation where "agreements negotiated with one minister [are] often vetoed by others, and meetings with the full cabinet…[reveal] diverse and contradictory positions" (Sadowski 34). Additionally, an overwhelming concern for political stability overshadows any reform discussion as the threat of mass demonstration and popular revolution weighs into all regime decisions. Pressures from vested economic interests in both the public and private sectors also factor into government liberalization policies as powerful business owners stand to lose much from loosened price controls. Finally, continual assurance of renewed aid from Western countries helps to alleviate debt concerns and allow for complacency on reform measures (Löfgren 410). Keeping in line with the rules of dissonant politics, Mubarak has responded to these pressures with partial concessions and snail-paced reform in order to maintain a maximum amount of government stability while appeasing his foreign creditors.
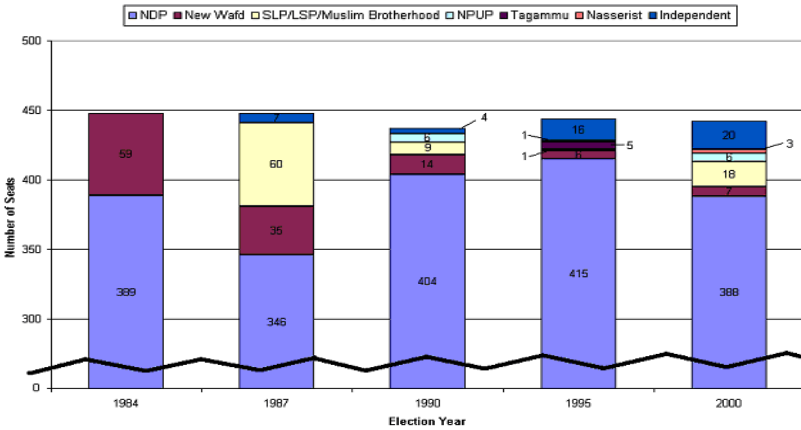
Elections

The skillful use of elections as a tool to reinforce government legitimacy plays an important role Egyptian dissonant politics. By co-opting and pacifying important dissent parties in times of regime weakness, Mubarak's National Democratic Party (NDP) protects its own political dominance and institutional place. Periods of political strength allow for use of hegemonic political powers to ban rival parties, silence dissent groups, and fix elections to ensure continued NDP dominance in the Egyptian parliament. By examining the shifting positions of Mubarak's government toward political opposition, one can better understand how dissonant politics contribute to the overall stability of the current autocratic regime.

Muhammad Hosni Mubarak ascended to power as head of the NDP and president of Egypt after the assassination of President Sadat in October of 1981. His response to this national emergency foreshadowed the type of president he would become, and in the months following the failed coup, hundreds of Islamist group members were arrested, tried, and sentenced for crimes in connection with the assassination (Fisher 301). The state of emergency gave Mubarak the chance to consolidate his newfound power in the NDP and national politics. Despite these hegemonic exercises of control, however, Mubarak still lacked popular legitimacy. The 1984 elections would be crucial in re-establishing both the NDP and Mubarak in national leadership.

Unwilling to risk too much in their quest for a popular mandate, the NDP-controlled parliament passed a law before the election that "required parties to gain a minimum 8% of the total vote in order to be represented in the People's Assembly" (Fisher 301). Because of this restriction, only one opposition party—the New Wafd Party—was able to gain seats in the new legislature. Representation proportions created by this requirement are visible in figure 3 and reveal a clear victory for incumbent NDP candidates. Although Mubarak secured the popular mandate he was seeking, the questionable constitutionality of the eight percent law and charges of coercion and election fraud tainted his victory and led to further political instability.

Fig. 3   Party Proportions in the National Assembly

Responding to Supreme Constitutional Court rulings that the 1984 election had indeed been unconstitutional, parliament passed electoral reform laws that restructured independent representation in the People's Assembly. Parliament was dissolved by public referendum in 1987 so these laws could take effect and elections were set up for later in the year. Alliances between opposition parties created greater competition for the NDP in this election and the number of majority-controlled seats in the legislature indeed reduced, but with 346 seats, the NDP maintained a resounding majority. Once again, the government certified the results amid minority party allegations that intimidation and electoral fraud were decisive in the NDP victory.

In 1990, the Supreme Constitutional Court ruled that "elections to the People's Assembly in 1987 had been unconstitutional because the electoral law promulgated in 1986 unfairly discriminated against independent candidates" (Fisher 304). Mubarak responded quickly by dissolving parliament and setting up national elections in November and December of that year. Furthermore, in an outward display of concern for democratic

reform, the eight percent electoral threshold laws were repealed to allow for real competition between the NDP and its fragmented opposition. Amid this relatively liberal environment, independent election to the People's Assembly grew to its highest proportions in recent Egyptian history. Yet, Mubarak resisted the implementation of impartial election monitoring, and fraud still marred the election results. Additionally, many of the independent candidates joined the NDP following the election—giving the party 404 of the 444 parliamentary seats or slightly more than a 90% majority.

This semi-liberalized electoral system continues today as Mubarak repeatedly feigns movement towards greater democratization only to violently suppress developing political opposition. For example, the 1995 elections promised to be the most direct confrontation between the NDP and its Islamist opposition yet, but in the months leading up to the polling date, Mubarak's government launched some of the largest anti-Islamist raids since Sadat's assassination. These raids not only resulted in one thousand arrests of Muslim Brotherhood and Islamic Jihad members but also severely crippled Islamist aspirations to political power (Fisher 310). The 2000 elections followed a similar pattern as Mubarak promised independent judiciary supervision of polling places but strictly limited the judges' ability to prevent intimidation and fraud (Brownlee 8-10). Both of these elections ultimately served to reinforce and solidify NDP control over government activities despite an outward show of reform.

Fig. 4   Percentage of Seats in National Assembly
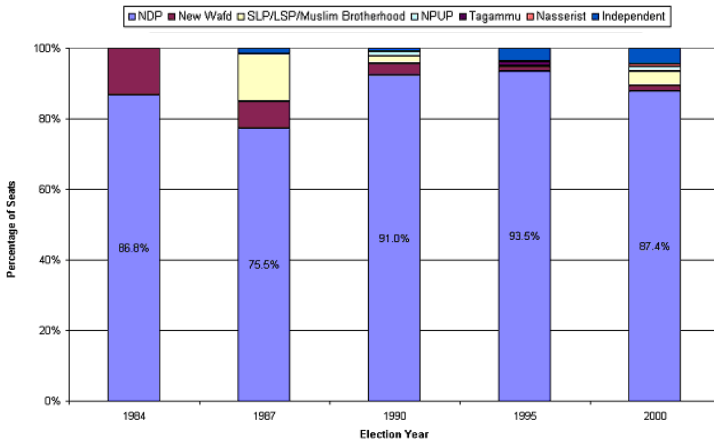
As illustrated by the five People's Assembly elections examined above, the Egyptian government occasionally responds to crises of legitimacy by proposing measures towards electoral reform. The sincerity of such reforms, however, remains highly suspicious, and the NDP repeatedly resorts to hegemonic measures of intimidation, arrests, and fraud to ensure its continued political dominance. As highlighted by figure four, the NDP has never slipped below a three quarters majority in the legislature during Mubarak's presidency. This unchecked rule precludes all but the most superficial forms of election reform as the NDP uses its electoral dominance to perpetuate its own majority status.

The riddle of Egyptian dissonant politics lies in this insincerity. Mubarak and the NDP continually propose commissions and inquiries to investigate and combat electoral abuse, only to later obstruct the basic recommendations of such committees. The logic of dissonant politics argues that governments seek to optimize both power and stability. By continually proposing election reform and institutionalizing criticism in the form of limited opposition, Mubarak hopes to placate serious opposition movements and increase govern-

ment legitimacy and stability. Too many liberal concessions may trigger a loss of legislative dominance, while too few could lead to uncontrolled dissent and popular revolution. Dissonant theory provides a context for understanding the Egyptian government's seemingly erratic actions as a coherent attempt to balance authoritarian leadership and popular legitimacy in the form of a liberalized autocracy.

Islamist Incorporation

Because Islamic parties represent the most sustained challenge to NDP dominance in Egyptian national politics, government policies toward Islamist incorporation are highly related to the issue of electoral liberalization. The legalization of limited political opposition in the second half of the 1970s triggered a slight increase Islamist activity, but the 1981 assassination of President Sadat by militant Islamists led to widespread repression of Islamic organizations and increased authoritarianism. Mubarak assumed office amidst this climate of national emergency and continues to struggle with the dilemma of how to reincorporate Islamic opposition into national politics while ultimately limiting its influence and maintaining regime stability.

Islamist involvement in Sadat's assassination and a failed popular uprising led to widespread government repression of a variety of Islamic groups. Mubarak initially responded to the crisis by arresting over three hundred members of *Jama'ah al-Islamiyah* (Islamic Jihad) in connection with the coup attempt, but subsequent bannings and dissolutions also affected other more moderate groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) (Fisher 301). This pattern of Islamist suppression continued for two more years until political opposition was once again legalized, and the reformation of the New Wafd Party in alliance with the MB reasserted Islamist influence on the national political scene.

Islamist presence fell short of translating into real political power, however, as minimum threshold laws passed before the 1984 election ensured continued NDP dominance. Mubarak sustained his policies of political self-preservation through discriminatory electoral laws, hegemonic coercion, and widespread fraud over the remainder of the decade until Islamist violence escalated in the early 1990s. By this time, the failure of MB accommodation to bring about Islamic reform led to widespread disillusion in more radical Islamist circles (Ismail 201-22). Members of Islamic Jihad and other radical Islamist organizations reacted to MB disappointments with a campaign of political assassinations and tourist attacks that killed seventy people by the early months of 1992, and violent attempts to overthrow the government resulted in the loss of 1.5 billion dollars in tourism revenues by the end of the year (Fisher 306).

Mubarak countered the aggression with a military campaign against radical Islamist organizations that was widely criticized by human rights organizations for its heavy-handed approach. These conflicts represented the first large-scale and overt violence since Sadat's assassination and marked a distinct change in government-Islamist relations. Especially in the opposition stronghold of northern Egypt, "the upsurge in violence…[prompted] a huge deployment of security forces…massive search and arrest operations, controversial new 'anti-terrorism' legislation…and a wave of human rights abuses affecting not only suspected Islamists but also ordinary citizens" (Human Rights Watch, "Egypt: Human Rights Developments"). These actions were followed by increased press censorship and the dissolution or co-option of several professional trade organizations with MB leadership.

Despite Mubarak's new policy of restraining Islamists at gun-point, anti-government violence increased, and by 1994, government forces had gathered over 29,000 radical dissidents through military action and mass arrests (Fisher 308). In response to growing political violence and a perceived loss of local control, the NDP moved to consolidate its power by abolishing local elections and replacing Islamist sympathizing local mayors with Ministry of Interior appointments. This action was officially framed as an effort to elimi-

nate Islamist strongholds and curb the violence that plagued many northern regions of the country, but opposition groups and international watch organizations criticized the measure as an instance of hegemonic authoritarianism.

Continued attacks from radical Muslim groups through the rest of the decade failed to overthrow Mubarak and the NDP dominated government. Instead, the violence served to justify further government repression, and moderate Islamic parties such as the MB suffered under increased NDP political opportunism. Repeated arrests of MB leaders and bannings of MB candidates in national elections served to marginalize the group, and by 1997, the Brotherhood simply began boycotting elections in a display of peripheral dissent (Fisher 311). These developments in the late 1990s marked the most severe period of state repression through legislation and military intervention, but events at the turn of the century created hope for political normalization in opposition parties.

Political violence calmed following Mubarak's third reelection and calls by several imprisoned leaders of radical Islamist groups for a unilateral ceasefire on political attacks. In return, the Egyptian government accelerated the release of Islamist political prisoners and by September of 1999 claimed the release of "over 5,000 Islamist detainees…[although] human rights groups claimed this still left 15,000 in detention" (Fisher 312). The Islamist turn toward peaceful modes of government resistance continues with few exceptions into the present day, and the government has reacted positively with the cessation of large-scale military activities. However, state interest in Islamist politics remains high, and Mubarak consistently uses the state-controlled Political Parties Committee to limit Islamist participation in national elections.

Responses to Islamist challenges to NDP political dominance varied tremendously over the last twenty years from military intervention and sweeping arrests to partial institutional incorporation. Beneath these changes lies a basic need to limit competition from moderate Islamic groups like the MB without inciting violence from radical organizations or more generalized public discontent. By pursuing a dissonant political agenda, Mubarak allowed limited competition from conservative Islamic parties in times of NDP strength but used brutal measures of hegemonic control to eliminate opposition in times of NDP weakness. The Egyptian government thus follows no set policy for dealing with Islamist competition. Rather, it reacts to opposition actions and the prevailing political environment to maximize both its control and legitimacy in the national political sphere.

Constitutional Abuses

Constitutionality and the problem of constitutional abuse in Mubarak's Egypt are perhaps difficult to gauge given that the country is now in its twenty-third year of a nearly constant state of emergency. The astounding flexibility given to the ruling party under such conditions gives little incentive for change. Still, the Supreme Constitutional Court does occasionally exercise its powers of constitutional review to hold the NDP accountable for extreme legal transgressions. Because a large number of high-profile constitutional violations involve NDP election activities, it is instructive to examine closely the recent controversy surrounding the 2000 national election to understand the dynamic relationship between Egyptian courts and the elected government.

In late 1999, Mubarak made his customary gesture towards political inclusion by announcing that "the coming elections to the People's Assembly would be 'subject at all stages to supervision by the judiciary'" (Brownlee 8). Of course, legislation limiting judicial abilities to supervise the upcoming elections was subsequently passed. The NDP thereby hoped to force the judiciary into validating election results that would undoubtedly be mired by intimidation and fraud. However, in a rare exercise of its constitutional powers, the Supreme Constitutional Court ruled that "legislation governing parliamentary elections was unconstitutional due to the absence of full judicial supervision" (Human Rights Watch,

"Egypt: Human Rights Developments"). The implementation of such a ruling required the deployment of judicial officials at every national polling place for all three rounds of the People's Assembly elections. Despite logistical difficulties involved with such an effort, the judiciary succeeded in ensuring orderly proceedings in each round of the election.

Meanwhile, the NDP used its broad legislative and bureaucratic powers in an attempt to secure its own continued political dominance. In the months leading up the election, the government-run political parties committee refused legal recognition to the SLP and Labor parties and dissolved several Islamist organizations in an overt attempt to limit electoral competition. The MB also came under increased attack as twenty senior members were arrested and tried for belonging to and recruiting for an illegal organization (Human Rights Watch, "Egypt: Human Rights Developments"). These strategic arrests severely limited MB members or supporters running as independents in the upcoming election and served as a warning to other Islamist opposition parties executing similar plans. Even during the election, the government restricted the presence of judges to the counting stations—leaving voters outside polling places open to extensive intimidation (Fisher 316).

The combined effect of these measures produced an election that did receive official judicial supervision but remained highly flawed and undemocratic. The NDP once again secured a ruling majority in the People's Assembly and Islamist parties were relegated to the political sidelines. Most importantly, however, Mubarak wrestled in a political struggle with the Supreme Constitutional Court and came out victorious—a result which increased his leverage against the institution and sent a clear signal warning against further constitutional challenges. Yet the political cost of such an overt use of electoral intimidation and fraud in overcoming the judiciary is evident in the 15 to 40% participation rate through all three rounds of elections.

Despite the 23 year state of emergency that allows Mubarak considerable constitutional flexibility, the Supreme Constitutional Court still periodically offers constitutional challenges to NDP rule. The controversy surrounding the 2000 People's Assembly elections serves as a good example of how the elected government benefits from independent judiciary in terms of legitimacy and yet consistently evades court decisions to ensure NDP dominance and maintain the status quo. Dissonant politics within the liberalized autocracy mandate such actions to protect authoritarian rule while outwardly displaying political reform—a trademark of the Mubarak government throughout its tenure in office.

Human Rights and Gender Equality

The first human rights organization in the Arab world was formed in Cairo in 1983 as a response to political and civil abuses perpetrated by various regimes in the Middle East region. The Arab Organization for Human Rights (AOHR), as the movement became known, received mixed reactions from many of the authoritarian regional leaders. AOHR staunchly opposed Islamist programs of political reform that autocratic leaders feared would soon gain popular support, but the organization also threatened to restrict many of the governments' hegemonic measures of political and social control. The logic of Egyptian dissonant politics dictated a careful compromise between government endorsement and overt suppression of the group.

The debate was especially strong in Egypt where the new organization chose to center its activities and began pressuring Mubarak to release political detainees. The question was officially answered later that year, however, when AOHR "members presented their declaration to the United Nations, [and] their home countries, in an unusual display of unity, joined forces to deny them the consultative status they sought" (Crystall 14). Acknowledging partial defeat, the group moved underground and began meeting "unofficially," like so many other organizations in Egypt, maintaining a vicarious existence under the watchful eye of the Egyptian state security service. Since that time, activists founded the

Egyptian Organization for Human Rights (EOHR) and international human rights group activities increasingly focus on Middle Eastern developments. Yet, these groups have little to show for all their efforts, and Mubarak remains highly ambivalent towards policy reform.

Ironically, the agendas of Islamist and human rights groups in Egypt during the 1980s were remarkably similar. AOHR formed partially in response to the mass arrests and political detentions of Islamists following Sadat's assassination, and organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have widely criticized the Egyptian government for its treatment of political opposition. The greatest challenge to human rights in recent Egyptian history occurred during the struggle between Islamic militants and the Egyptian government in the early 1990s, when government oppression reached its highest levels since Sadat's assassination. In one 1992 account of government security abuses, Human Rights Watch wrote,

> There were widespread arbitrary arrests. Persons were detained on mere suspicion or because they had beards; periods of detention typically ranged from fifteen to thirty days. Relatives of wanted suspects-including mothers, sisters and wives, and children as young as eight years old-were arrested "to force [suspects] to give themselves up or to obtain information from victims as to their whereabouts." (Human Rights Watch, "Egypt: Human Rights Developments")

The cessation of widespread Islamist attacks in the late-1990s marked a shift of focus for human rights groups operating in Egypt. Many organizations continued working for the release of political prisoners but also began calling for political reform and increased electoral competition in government elections. Increased pressure for intellectual freedoms, women's rights, and ending the twenty year old state-of-emergency imposed after Sadat's assassination were also primary goals for human rights groups. Still, government response to such calls is slow and insincere as evidenced by previous sections of this paper addressing Mubarak's failures to abstain from constitutional abuse and implement election reform.

The controversial struggle for women's rights in Egypt reveals much about the general struggle for human rights the country. Since efforts at women's liberation began shortly after the 1952 Nasserist Revolution, the movement has experienced great advances and severe disappointments as the role of women in public continually advances and retreats following changes in the Egyptian political climate. Institutional setbacks characterize much of Mubarak's presidency and include a 1985 Supreme Constitutional Court decision that invalidated many of the rights gained during Sadat's presidency. In spite of these difficulties, however, growth in the women's workforce throughout the 1980s changed popular attitudes towards women in public, and women's literacy rates and school enrollments are now at all time highs (fig. 5)[2] .

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[2] Refer to The World Bank Group, "Gender Stats"; The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, "Where do Arab Women Stand in the Development Process? A Gender Based Statistical Analysis"

Fig. 5   Female vs. Male Educational Attainment
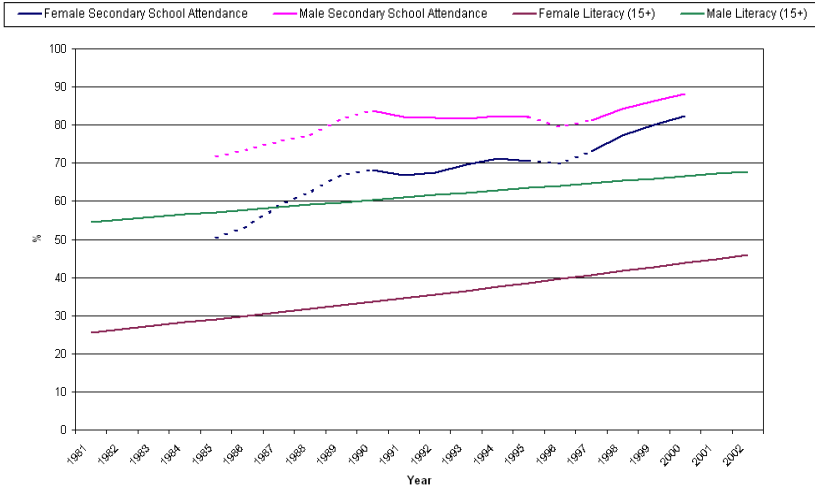
Unfortunately for these activists, the application of the Sharia system to family law precludes similar progress in private life, and women remain the subject to widespread genital mutilation in rural areas and unequal divorce rights (Human Rights Watch, "Divorced From Justice: Women's Unequal Access to Divorce in Egypt"). Because Islamist radicals jealously guard against encroachments on traditional law, institutional reform in the near future seems unlikely, and Mubarak has remained indecisive about these issues despite great pressure from the international community. Limitations on both women's and human rights are thus dictated by overriding concerns of regime survival in contemporary Egypt, and current conditions present little incentive for NDP-sponsored reform.

Conclusions

Egyptian government policies toward economic reform, electoral fairness, Islamist incorporation, constitutional abuses and human and women's rights seem inconsistent and erratic over the last twenty-five years. Fluctuations in Mubarak's enthusiasm for political reform defy the logic of linear theories of democratic development and make predicting the futures of authoritarian regimes in Egypt and the Middle East a dubious process for political scientists working in the region. However, by abandoning the confines of linear political thought, one may begin to observe a pattern of common underlying motives dictating regime policy.

The non-linear theory of dissonant politics addresses these problems by explaining how authoritarian regimes selectively mix hegemonic measures of political control with more benign strategies of co-option, incorporation, and limited reform to balance regime stability and political power in the modern nation-state (Brumberg, "Dissonant Politics in Iran and Indonesia"). According to this theory, authoritarian regimes may be divided into dissonant and harmonic conceptual categories to facilitate better understandings of individual policy decisions. Harmonic regimes such as pre-occupation Iraq and Saudi Arabia represent traditional totalitarian dictatorships by jealously guarding social and political power from would-be rivals with overt and often violent measures of political oppression. Alternatively, dissonant regimes like Iran and Lebanon allow limited social and political criticism to maximize both regime legitimacy and stability. This strategy of liberalized autocracy is ideal for leaders of countries with large amounts of foreign debt and heavy internal and external pressure for reform.

Mubarak's presidential actions seem to support this theory. For nearly twenty-five years, he has paced between democratic reform and hegemonic totalitarianism in an attempt to silence his many critics on subjects of economic reform, electoral fairness, Islamist incorporation, constitutional abuses, and human and women's rights. Ultimately, this balanced approach towards autocratic liberalization translated into political longevity for the president while other leaders straying to far toward either reform or control fell subject to democratic transformations or violent revolutions. Understanding this basic desire for political longevity is the key to understanding NDP political policy—too much compromise brings freedom and the possibility of real political competition but too little jeopardizes legitimacy and state security.

Brumberg argues for the wider applicability of this theory throughout Arab world and possibly even in much of the authoritarian third world, and indeed, dissonant political thought may prove relevant in diverse situations. However, the paradigm's resistance to complex empirical analysis limits its usefulness. Real countries exhibit varying degrees of dissonant political action, and this often complicates the placing countries into such a dualistic theory. Distinguishing between political measures that fit the model and actions that do not requires extensive background knowledge and the collection of information that is frequently unavailable for third world and Arab states. The combination of these factors causes the theory to be cumbersome and nearly impossible to test with any accuracy—making precision and external reliability major challenges to its wider application.

Despite these limitations, the dissonant/harmonic political paradigm still works better at explaining contemporary Middle Eastern politics than older linear models, and this makes the theory attractive to many political scientists working in the region. Understanding political developments in Egypt provides a model to help facilitate more perceptive treatments of politics in other Arab countries-an advance that may ultimately influence international perceptions of the region and improve foreign policy decisions regarding the Middle East as a whole.

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