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THE ROLE OF PROTEST IN EGYPTIAN POLITICS

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The Role of Protest in Egyptian Politics

I. Introduction

Protest¹ is certainly not new to Egyptian politics. Up until 1954, with the consolidation of the Free Officer's regime, labor and political protests, strikes, and demonstrations formed an important repertoire of contention. Egyptian national identity was developed, in part, through acts of protest and resistance against the British presence in Egypt and foreign control over the Egyptian economy. However, protest as a channel to express grievances was severely curtailed under the Nasser regime's efforts to quell political competitors and domestic instability. From 1954 forward, protest in Egypt still occurred, but it was sporadic, often spontaneous, and nearly always crushed by security forces. Today, the Egyptian street has re-emerged as a site of contention, and protests expressing grievances and demanding redress have become an everyday occurrence.

In the past decade this normalization of protest has become apparent. Cairo witnesses it in various forms: ongoing labor protests in the face of neoliberal economic reform; anti-foreign protests aimed at specific international events; demonstrations organized utilizing new media; a cross-cutting Kifaya/Enough Movement demanding wholesale regime change; and numerous

¹ Karl Deiter Opp, after reviewing the literature for definitions of protest (and finding twelve significantly different interpretations) has offered the following as a baseline definition of protest: "*Protest* is defined as a joint (i.e. collective) action of individuals aimed at achieving their goal or goals by influencing decisions of a target." A protest group is "defined as a collectivity of actors who want to achieve their shared goal or goals by influencing the decisions of a target." This paper is not concerned with intentionally violent protest or with the question of why some protest groups adopt violence. It is concerned with contemporary protest action in Egypt, which is usually nonviolent in character. See: Karl Deiter Opp, *Theories of Political Protest and Social Movements* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 38.

actions protesting specific laws, human rights abuses, or the ruling Egyptian regime at large. However, given the ostensible propensity of the Egyptian regime towards violent repression and the apparent lack of change to the political status quo, why do Egyptians protest? To what extent might this increased political activity be undermining or augmenting the political stability of the Egyptian regime?

This paper argues that, beginning in the early 2000s, street protest became part of daily life in Egypt. Street protests or marches without government permission, once strictly illegal, were used often during a protest campaign organized by Kifaya, a cross-cutting group demanding change in governance. In addition, the reform policies under Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif starting in 2004 generated increased labor activity and protest. Street protest is now regularly used to express grievances to the government. Although Kifaya's supporters were limited to a relatively small number of elites and politically active Egyptians, the impact of breaking the taboo on street protests has opened up a political space used to be by many. Protest events have even grown to include members of groups typically excluded from power in Egypt – women protesting against sexual harassment, orphans seeking better treatment, and disabled individuals protesting for enforcement of entitlement laws.² Egyptian political scientist Mustapha Kamal al-Sayyid attributes this increase in protests since the early to mid-2000s as a “demonstration effect” from the Kifaya movement.³

Despite these changes, the expanded space for protest should not be viewed as a step in gradual liberalization. Although protest has been normalized and some protests are permissible, neither the legal structures forbidding protest have disappeared, nor have the red lines that

² Amro Hassan, “Egypt: The disabled protest for more rights, better jobs,” *Los Angeles Times Blog*, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/babylonbeyond/2010/04/egypt-disabled-rights-protest.html>; Norhan Elhakeem, “Orphans receive housing after month long battle,” *Al-Masry al-Youm*, April 19, 2010 <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/en/news/orphans-receive-housing-after-month-long-battle>

³ Mustapha Kemal Al-Sayyid, interviewed by Jessica Glover, March 22, 2010.

provoke aggressive regime response dissolved. While protest is not repressed for merely existing, in many cases it is still a costly exercise. This is apparent in the violent coercive power that the state wields over any protest event: making hundreds of arrests, torturing activists, and exercising the power to decide which protests are tolerated and which are treated as illegal.

Although this new space for protest allows some actors to express grievances and demand redress, it still preserves the state power to punish unwanted political behavior. Political protests provide the government with expedient opportunities to quell any doubt regarding regime's coercive capacities. Activists in Egypt believe that publicizing regime abuses will prompt others to enter a moment of reconsideration and side with the protestors. Yet, politically active Egyptians who refrain from street protest pointed out that the regime uses violence against politically weak movements for the purposes of intimidation.⁴ While regime violence against protesters may alter public opinion, it also highlights the high cost of protest that openly challenges the government.

As Charles Kurzman notes regarding the Iranian revolution, the perceived *viability* a social or revolution movement is central to its success. Viability, as Kurzman outlines it, focuses on "potential protesters' estimations of the future actions of other potential protesters." Revolution, he asserts, succeeds by "gaining a reputation for viability." He further questions whether "non-revolutionary social and political structures reproduce themselves in the same way."⁵ Rather than creating a belief that others will mobilize, and thus that protest is a viable way to challenge the regime, political protests calling for sweeping political changes, and the consequent governmental response of repression toward these protests, serve to remind audiences of the viability of the status quo in Egypt.

⁴ Ali Dessouki, Interviewed by Jessica Glover, March 18, 2010.

⁵ Charles Kurzman, *The Unthinkable Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004) 171.

Groups seeking to obtain concessions from the government, on the other hand, have at times made deliberate efforts to appeal to the government as the legitimate actor to resolve grievances. A clear example is the recent series of protests in Damietta which sought to halt the construction of a chemical plant appealing to the President directly to intervene. Although labor protests are angrily critical of the government, they remain organized around grievances specific to workers, avoid associating with political entities such as the Muslim Brothers or civil society groups, and normally, are not even politicized.⁶

This paper offers an alternative reading of Egyptian protest that begins to explore the ability of the regime to adapt to increasing levels of popular discontent. It proposes that the regime is capable of incorporating protest, as it incorporated elections, into a structure that can be used to manage popular dissatisfaction. By modulating actions to fit within a regime sanctioned window, groups considering protest as a tactic perceive that they can avoid costs and maximize potential benefits. These protests, which I term *limited protests*, may or may not reflect actors' internal opinions on the legitimacy of the regime. However, by masking personal preferences and appearing "as if" the regime is the legitimate broker of social and political public goods, limited protests may work to reinforce the perception that the status quo political order is not only viable, but also will potentially respond with concessions to grievances and demands. In the case of *labor protests*, the ability of labor groups to mobilize by the tens of thousands makes the prospect of regime repression of protest costly, especially given the need to maintain a positive investment climate. Labor protests, however, are careful not to associate with political parties and actors so that this environment of accommodation remains intact.

⁶ Joel Beinin, "Labor Protest Politics and Worker Rights in Egypt," (presentation, The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, D.C., February 17, 2010)
http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/0218_transcript_egypt_labor_protests.pdf

The result of the contrast between overtly political and limited protest influences how Egyptians approach political action broadly. Given that actors look to past successes to formulate their own strategies, the government ultimately influences which tactics of protest will proliferate and which will remain a spectacle of punishment. A style of protest that does not overtly question the legitimacy of the government, but highlights the social or economic problems within the current order, has emerged and is the most likely to be tolerated. The government, then, is able to elect to “solve” or ignore the problems presented, managing popular dissent through distribution of resources and attention. While anger is clearly a driving factor in the decision to protest, successful protest (protests that gain concessions or that do not suffer high costs) has become linked to appearing “as if” the regime is legitimate.

Despite the strength of the regime, new structural changes in political opportunity, costs of repression, economic conditions, and resources (such as new technology and media outlets) have facilitated mobilization and have altered the regime’s propensity to repress. An examination of protests in Egypt reveals that many Egyptians protest with diverse motivations and goals. Undergirding these goals are different understandings of protest’s role in politics as well as different conceptions of how public opinion, both domestic and international, matter in authoritarian contexts. Protests in Egypt can roughly be fit into three categories that describe these different conceptions of protest.

The first, and most prominent, is a strong series of *labor protests* that are pressuring the government on issues including wages, worker layoffs, and the process of privatization that see protest as a way of creating pressure in a traditional bargaining interaction. Labor protests are the only protests currently capable of mobilizing in large numbers, which makes pressuring the regime possible. The second, which I term *revisionary protest*, views protest as a tactic to build

support for a broader social movement to challenge the regime. Costs are sometimes high for revisionary protest, but activists are able to reframe costs as strategic benefits, and thus are willing to bear them. The third, *limited protest*, views protest as a tactic to gain concessions within an ongoing relationship with the regime.

Thus, although government responsiveness to popular opinion is not a hallmark of authoritarian regimes, incorporating structures of governance that enable the government manage instability, adapt to changing norms, and preserve overall regime stability are tactics authoritarian regimes employ. Scholars have long observed “democratic facades” that enable authoritarian systems to adapt to changing social pressures. As Steven Cook notes, the “presence of pseudodemocratic institutions and representative structures permits authoritarian regimes like Egypt’s to diffuse, co-opt, and/or deflect political opposition.”⁷ Accommodating protest allows for a greater monitoring of dissent, an opportunity for clientele responses to localized issues, and a way for the government to handle worker complaints without endangering stable investment climate. Egyptians are protesting because, with limited goals, protest has become successful in gaining concessions, a seat at the bargaining table, and a place to express grievances. Activist groups with broader goals see protest as an opportunity to prove the brutality of the regime, mobilize new supporters, and begin a process of broader social change. Both types of protest provide chances for the government to respond in ways that can help it manage protest and dissent.

II. Methods, Theoretical Baselines, and Competing Notions on Activism

A. Rational Choice Theory

Rational Choice Theory (RCT) is a theoretical framework used to understand and sometimes formally model collective and social behavior that assumes that collective social or

⁷ Steven Cook, *Ruling But Not Governing* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007) 78.

economic phenomena are the result of individual actions. *Rationality* in the framework of RCT is not used to evaluate whether a goal is “reasonable” or “sane” – but to describe a process in which an actor balances costs and benefits to take an action that maximizes utility and gives the greatest net benefit in reaching a goal. There are two versions of RCT. The first is the *narrow version* of RCT stemming from neoclassical economics.⁸ This model assumes several things: actors’ possess perfect information, actors correctly perceive an objective reality, only material incentives matter, and that “individuals explicitly calculate the costs and benefits of their action” to “maximize their utility from the viewpoint of an observer.”⁹

This narrow version stands in contrast to a *wide version* of RCT that assumes humans act within a bounded rationality. Different assumptions are added to the wide version of RCT: that beliefs and perceptions are important; that people may “satisfice” and do what they perceive as best – rather than what is an objective a maximization of utility; and, finally, that immaterial (non-economic) incentives and beliefs (even those which contradict “objective reality”) can be determinants of behavior.¹⁰ The wide version shifts the emphasis of RCT away from the evaluation of economic incentives which surround a decision, although these remain important. What also becomes critical is a close examination of ideas, beliefs, and expectations that actors hold. Importantly, this wide version of RCT does not deny the rationality of actors in maximizing utility when acting on preferences.¹¹ It does assert that human rationality is bounded within the limits of knowledge, beliefs, and expectations, which all work to determine preferences and decisions.

⁸ Deiter Opp, 3

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹

Categories such as *incentives*, *costs*, *individual efficacy*, and *group efficacy* also influence individual decision-making. The difference between the narrow and wide version of RCT is that an actor's perception of cost can be substantially different from the objective cost one will bear. Likewise, perceived outcomes may be very different from expected outcomes. Thus, wide versions of RCT imply that critically examining beliefs, interpretations, perceptions, and projections of future circumstances can greatly inform an analysis of collective behavior. Listening to how actors explain their participation, and non-participation, in protest can inform a larger analysis of the significance of this protest action to larger trends in Egyptian politics.

This paper does not seek to use RCT in a formulaic method or in a formal model to predict or explain protest behavior. Importantly, I am not arguing that "rational-self interest" explains protest. Instead, the modest goal of this paper is to examine how actors in Egypt view protest action and participation, using RCT as an analytical framework that provides a common (and intuitive) vocabulary. Despite the criticisms of the theory, of which there are many, it is a basic theoretical structure that allows for an analytical discussion of the paper's central question: why Egyptians protest in spite of such high costs and low expectations for outright success.

Furthermore, as James Buchanan noted in hopes of expanding narrow RCT in 1986, there exists an "interdependence between the predicted patterns of political outcomes and the rules or institutions that constrain the political actors."¹² In other words, self-interest and actors' conceptions of success are mediated by a specific political context in which institutions – formal and informal – encourage certain outcomes and behaviors while discouraging others. The basic theoretical notions of RCT offer a point of departure to analyze protest, but they certainly do not answer the question in themselves. Wide rational choice theory emphasizes that the ideas and expected outcomes of protest, which are heavily influenced by formal and informal institutions

¹² Jane J. Mansbridge, *Beyond Self Interest*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1990) 20.

that form a larger political context, are of greatest analytical importance in addressing the role of protest in Egyptian case. In this vein, I analyze protest with an eye towards how actors perceive costs, successes, and the role of protest in achieving stated goals.

B. The Choice of Egypt as a Case

The puzzle in the Egyptian case of protest lies in the apparent irrationality of protesters in pursuing goals that are unlikely to be achieved alongside protest's high cost and lack of usefulness in an authoritarian system of governance. While the benefits of future success could be great, the likelihood of success seems slim. In an authoritarian regime, popular sentiment or grievance expressed through a petition, marches, or a strike is sometimes presented as irrelevant to the regime unless it occurs en masse and spontaneously and triggers the "threshold" of what the regime can absorb.¹³ Further, the primary demands of some protest groups, such as the end of the Emergency Law, have reverberated for decades without action from the government. The *group size* of Egyptians involved in politics or protest action is typically recognized by activists to be, problematically, a very small percentage of the total population.

The persistence, and even increase, of protest action in light of these conditions merits a closer look. Although individuals lack information on future group success, they do look at past group success in similar circumstances to predict future outcomes. Individuals also turn to group size as an indicator of group success and as a way to understand the distribution of cost. Generally speaking, a larger group is perceived as more successful and also action is perceived less costly in a larger group.¹⁴ Many Egyptians, while praising movements or political parties to which they belonged, openly admitted they were achieving little in terms of stated goals. In

¹³ Marc Lynch, *Voice of the New Arab Public* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006) 68-69

¹⁴ Opp, 63: "*Effects of the number of contributors: The larger the expected number of participants in collective action, the higher is perceived personal influence, the higher is expected group success, the more likely a norm of participation is activated, and the lower are the costs of repression and other costs of participation.*"

short, the impact and potential success of protest and political action to the outside observer seems negligent.

Secondly, the potential *cost* of protest in Egypt is ostensibly quite high. Protest and any gathering of more than five people remain illegal in Egypt. Security forces are well known for their brutality and Egyptian jails for their torturous conditions. Arrests of activists are common, even at events that do not directly target the state. As an example, Bassem Samir, a blogger and Egyptian activist, along with several other prominent activists were arrested on their way to the town of Nag Hammadi in Southern Egypt to express condolences and show solidarity with victims of attacks that occurred in the town on the eve of Orthodox Coptic Christmas. They were later charged with illegal assembly and disorderly conduct. Another activist described a protest in which he and a group of youths involved in the “April 6 Youth” constructed a large kite to fly along the beach in Alexandria – in an effort to make political involvement by youth seem lighter or fun – only to be chased and arrested by Egyptian security services.¹⁵ According to Egyptian activists, formal arrest is only one mechanism through which the state can inflict costs, as businesses, reputation, family, livelihood, and other aspects of life are also at risk.

The cost of protest is well known by Egyptians. One self-described activist, who doesn’t attend protests due to the risks involved, was quick to assert that politics has pros and cons, just like anything in life. Police surveillance, losing a job, economic costs, arrest and torture, violence or threats of violence against self or family, and travel restrictions were at the top of the list of costs cited by Egyptians. Modifying actions to fit within the permitted “window” or “red lines” of expression is a common way that Egyptians approach protest and political participation.

C. Perceptions of Protest: Activism Inside and Outside the Regime’s Lines

¹⁵ Basem Fathy, Interviewed by Jessica Glover, March 20, 2010; Asef Bayat uses the same incident Basem described to illustrate the overwhelming presence of and repression by regime security in Egypt. See: Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press: 2010), 10.

Within the activist community, one interviewee reported that general consensus agrees that a moderate approach to activism is preferable because it allows a margin of sustained movement and continued existence within the space that exists to educate others and change people's opinions.¹⁶ Having witnessed the coercive capacity of the state and its ability to derail politics within the formal political sphere, members of civil society organizations are wary of provoking a similar response. Achieving limited gains in a moderated relationship with the state was sometimes presented as preferable to opposing it and bearing the cost.

Working within red lines also affords a number of benefits to activists. The opportunity to travel to conferences outside of Egypt, meet other interested individuals, potentially find job prospects, and positive feelings of prestige or satisfaction are clear benefits. In Egypt, as in much of the developing world, non-government organizations have become a sector of the economy, and scholarships for trainings, English lessons, job prospects, and opportunities to develop new projects all made more available to individuals involved in civil society efforts or activism within the state's framework.

Mass political protests, given the strength of the regime, were not seen as possible by several Egyptians. Others were more optimistic and believed that people might respond to a call to stay home from work and school as a signal, as strikes in which people remain inside are easier to carry out (and perceived as less costly) than marches or demonstrations. The regime's intimidation tactics are generally seen as successful in keeping people from participating in protest actions. Politically active individuals also sometimes formulate their actions to fall within a regime sanctioned window to avoid arrest or being considered problematic by the regime.¹⁷ One Egyptian businessman, although visibly incensed over the regime's abuses, recounted that

¹⁶ Fatma Emam, Interviewed by Jessica Glover, Cairo, March 13, 2010

¹⁷ Hassan el-Sawwaf, Interviewed by Jessica Gover, Cairo, March 17, 2010

after being threatened with imprisonment by the regime he reconsidered the scope of his public arguments. Since then, while still publishing work online critical of the regime (in English) he is careful to avoid provoking a response from internal security.¹⁸ Other activists view street protest as a means to act outside the regime's framework. In doing so, they knowingly subject themselves to costs. However, costs can be reframed as an opportunity to embarrass the regime, highlight its abuses, and provoke others to reconsider their role in a larger struggle against the regime. Activists viewed it as a strategic game competing for popular support – one they were certain they were winning.¹⁹

In other words, Egyptian protesters who intentionally cross red lines are not measuring success in progress on their stated goals, which they admit are unlikely to be realized soon. Instead, they are concerned with the effect of their actions on Egyptian and foreign audiences. For example, Bassem Samir's arrest for visiting Nag Hammadi came to the attention of an advocacy group in Washington, DC. During Samir's visit to DC in January 2010, as part of a conference organized by the group, Secretary of State Clinton mentioned him by name in a speech she delivered on internet freedom.²⁰ The arrest is considered a strategic success, since it put pressure on the Egyptian regime. This narrative of protest believes that enough of these instances will result in pushing the regime to take steps toward liberalization and influence change.

However, Egyptians interviewed who were not involved in street protest or protests challenging the regime, while sympathizing with those arrested and tortured, saw these incidents as evidence of the regime's strength and proof of the inability of protest to affect change. Rather

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Samir; Fathy

²⁰ Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, Remarks on Internet Freedom, The Newseum, Washington, DC, January 21, 2010. <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/01/135519.htm>

than becoming involved in protest, these individuals elected to pursue alternative avenues of participation within red lines – whether it be blogging on issues of human rights broadly, joining a political party and running for local office, or working with private charitable organizations to address social issues at a community level.

These two competing perceptions of political protest's costs that emerged throughout interviews are important to highlight because they parallel theoretical models regarding the effectiveness of nonviolent protest. While not deliberately seeking out costs, Egyptian activists seeking to directly confront the regime reported consciously using costs in attempts to sway public opinion and weaken the regime. This strategy is based on a model of protest which claims that “intense media coverage generated by violent confrontations between armed state forces and unarmed protestors will tend to ‘activate’ (i.e. mobilize) uninvolved parties, who will then demand that the offending government yield to the protestors’ demands.”²¹ Egyptian activists’ effort to appeal directly to English-speaking audiences in their cyber-activism is evidence that their intended audience to mobilize is not only the Egyptian but also the American government and public. Yet, the impact of repression on mobilization has long been puzzling for political scientists seeking to explain the “true relationship” between repression and dissent. While in some cases repression leads to mobilization (both violent and nonviolent) in other cases it achieves its goal of diminishing dissent.²² Yet, the Egyptian government appears to be punishing some protests while accommodating others. This dynamic is important to consider as it represents a change in the pattern to protests and government response, historically.

III. Protest in Egypt Historically

²¹ Molissa Farber, “Totalitarian Responses to Nonviolent Protest Movements: The Rationality of Strategic State Violence,” *Journal of Politics and Society* 19, (2006): 47-71.

²² Mark Irving Lichbach, “Deterrence or Escalation? The Puzzle of Aggregate Studies of Repression and Dissent,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 31:2, (1987); Karl Dieter Opp and Wolfgang Roehl, “Repression, Micromobilization, and Political Protest,” *Social Forces* 69: 1990.

To claim that a protest serves a new role in Egyptian politics since 2003, it is necessary to establish a historical baseline of protest. This is especially true given that organized protest has a long history in Egyptian politics: protest and collective action are evident from the beginnings of modern Egyptian nationalism during the years of the ‘Urabi Revolt.²³ Several accounts of the history of labor in Egypt provide ample evidence that protest and striking has been the norm, rather than the exception, at least since the development of Egyptian nationalism in the 1880s. Protests accelerated during the struggle for independence, and were fueled by issues foreign financial control and foreign owned war industries during World War I and World War II. From 1919 onward, workers and political forces united in opposition to the British with mass demonstrations erupting and often escalating into violence.²⁴ By 1945, student and worker committees had begun organizing for political action, and activists played a major role in labor strikes and student demonstrations between 1946-1952.²⁵

The Free Officers Coup of 1952 and the subsequent new order that followed, however, quickly outlawed all political organizations and muted political action. By 1954, the Muslim Brotherhood was also an illegal organization. After a series of threats to the new order, the regime worked to silence competing views and consolidate power by both repressing challenges

²³ For a complete overview of the ‘Urabi Revolt see: Juan Cole, *Colonialism and Revolution in the Middle East*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.) Incidents of protest during this period were widespread, including student protests in Zaqaziq, which spread to Mansura, and later to Damietta. (206) As Cole points out, “What we begin to see happening in 1877-78, against the backdrop of a major military confrontation between the Ottomans and a European power, is the congruity of riots with urban anti-European demonstrations, and the participation, not only of workers and tradesmen, but of students from the middle strata. ...That school boys mounted anti-European protests in several cities in 1878, developing a new repertoire of contention that complemented the urban conflicts between Egyptian and European workers, served as a harbinger for the future.” (210) Crowd action and protest served as an important repertoire of contention throughout the development of Egyptian nationalism, this repertoire, perhaps, may be considered linked to Egyptian nationalism itself.

²⁴ P.J. Vatikiotis, *The History of Modern Egypt* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 266-267.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 360

and co-opting the interests of different factions into the regime.²⁶ Alongside the use of violent coercion, the regime undertook an intensive effort of “re-socialization” of Egyptians to build support for the regime. Sites and avenues of traditional political activity were either shut down or incorporated by the regime. New sites, such as the Islamic Congress and Liberation Rally, were created for official regime channels to tame (and monitor) citizens as a source of support to strengthen regime legitimacy.

As Carrie Rosefsky Wickham observes between 1954 and 1967 many Egyptians were acquiescent and Egypt’s educated elites moved from being the country’s leading source of opposition activism to, at times, being enlisted by the regime to help build popular support.²⁷ These socialization efforts undertaken to bolster regime legitimacy also created an acute political awareness of regime promises and raised expectations of regime performance that only ended in disappointment. The official socialization processes initiated by the regime even provided leaders of the student movement in the 1970s training on how to organize and mobilize – which they later used in opposition to the government.²⁸

The onset of an economic “retrenchment” in 1965/66 and defeat in the 1967 war to Israel sparked a new wave of student protest that culminated in the student uprising of 1972-1973.²⁹ In February 1968, students joined with workers in Helwan to protest the light sentences given to officers responsible for the 1967 defeat. However, the demonstration came at a time of critical weakness for the regime. Wickham suggests the defeat created a “perceptual” break in the regime’s legitimacy, and the power of the Free Officer’s order was suddenly in question.³⁰ After

²⁶ Carrie Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 24-30.; Vatikiotis, 380-384; Also: Denoux, Guilan, *Urban Unrest in the Middle East* (New York, SUNY Press, 1993).

²⁷ Wickham, 31

²⁸ “Interview with Egyptian Student Leaders,” *MERIP Reports* 17 (May 1973): 8

²⁹ Wickham, 31

³⁰ *Ibid.* 33

this first uprising Nasser responded with a ‘Mandate for Change’ (March 30 program) promising to deal with corruption, liberalize politically, and work to rebuild the political order.³¹ Nasser also made concessions that permitted more student activities on campuses, a move that permitted further mobilization.³²

In 1972, during Sadat’s presidency students undertook massive demonstrations, demanding a full scale assault on Israel, improvements in the standard of living, and freedom for Egyptians to organize independent of the state. Government response in 1973 to the student demonstrations included arrests, torture, and expulsion from the Arab Socialist Union (which usually meant losing one’s job), and house arrest.³³ The government media ignored these protests or selectively published reports about the student demands designed to limit their ability to mobilize other sympathetic groups.³⁴ The often cited “bread riots” of 1977 pushed the regime to backpedal on its cancelation of food subsidies by igniting protest that led to mass social disruption.

Social instability marked Sadat’s tenure as president. Egypt witnessed numerous sectarian attacks between Coptic Christians and Islamists, and social instability only heightened after the 1979 peace treaty with Israel. In 1981, protests against Sadat were met with harsh repression and a “purge” that resulted in around 1500 politicians, journalists, religious figures, being arrested for “causing sectarian strife” and “threatening internal security.”³⁵ Although many

³¹ Vatikiotis, 410

³² Wickham, 33

³³ “Egyptian Student Revolt Moves from Streets to Chambers,” *MERIP Reports* 15, (March 1973); “Interview with Egyptian Student Leaders,”

³⁴ “Egyptian Student Revolt Moves from Streets to Chambers,”

³⁵ William E. Farrell, “Egypt’s Police Quell 2 Islamic Protests,” *New York Times*, September 12, 1981; Maurice Guindi, “Police whip and beat demonstrators,” *United Press International*, September 18, 1981; William E. Farrell, “Moslem Protesters Clash with Cairo Police Again,” *New York Times*, September 19, 1981; “The Sphinx that Pounced,” *The Economist*, September 12, 1981.

of the figures were later released by Hosni Mubarak, governmental responses to protest did not change and the Emergency Law banned all demonstrations.

Israeli actions were often (and continue to be) drivers of protest in Egypt given the strong links between Egyptian national identity and Palestine, with Egyptian national identity consolidated through decades of war against Israel. In some cases, police reported allowing expressions of anger to “let off steam,” particularly at universities, but beat back crowds to disperse them back if they attempted to march in the streets.³⁶ However, during the first Palestinian Intifada, demonstrations, particularly those at Al-Azhar, were often dispersed before they spread and street demonstrations were officially banned in January 1988.³⁷

Other protests that erupted spontaneously, such as riots over an increase in the price of basic foods and a three percent increase in deductions toward pensions from workers’ payroll³⁸ in Kafr al-Dawar (an Egyptian town home to four large textile factories and a hub of labor activity), were violently quelled by security forces that remained in the town for days. The regime blamed “radical leftists” (later arresting seven leaders of the Progressive Unionist Rally)³⁹ for the incidents. Despite the violent response of the government, days after the protest President Mubarak also rolled back the contentious price increases, likely fearing that the disturbances could spread as they did in the well known 1977 “bread riots.”⁴⁰

³⁶ “Egyptians Protest Israeli Invasion,” *United Press International*, June 18, 1982; “Cairo Police Break up an Anti-Israel Rally,” *New York Times*, August 14, 1982; Alan Cowell, “Anti-Israel Protests in Cairo Broken up by Egypt’s Police,” *New York Times*, January 2, 1988.

³⁷ “Egypt Minister bans street demonstrations,” *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, January 7, 1988. Although, given the emergency law, this ban served more as a reminder than a new development.

³⁸ David B. Ottaway, “Mubarak Orders Price Rollbacks to Quell Violence Near Alexandria,” *Washington Post*, October 2, 1984.

³⁹ Kathryn Davies, “Egyptian leftwingers held on propagandist charges,” *The Guardian*, October 17, 1984

⁴⁰ “Mubarak Rolls Back Prices After Riot,” *The Associated Press*, October 1, 1984; Also significant were Egyptian protests – sealed on university campuses – after an Egyptian soldier, Suleiman Khater, who shot seven Israelis and committed suicide, an event that sparked student protests demanding an investigation in his death. See: Paola Crociani, “Students Protest Death of Policeman who Killed Israelis,” *Associated Press*, January 8, 1986; Students also protested Israel’s bombing of the PLO

These accounts are merely snapshots in a much richer history that is beyond the scope of this paper. However, even from these limited examples it is clear that protest was not a daily event, was not integrated into a larger discourse regarding the nature of the regime, and that the regime's toleration was limited to allow individuals to "let off steam." In contrast to the media environment today in which satellite television (with independent channels, news, and commentary) reaches nearly all Egyptians, protest through the 1950s-1990s did not garner such coverage. The typical threshold model of the "Arab street" that is spontaneous and angrily reactive – although perhaps accurate to describe the Nasser and Sadat eras – stands in contrast to how Egyptians use protest to affect changes today.

IV. Categories of Contemporary Protest in Egypt

Moving from this historical baseline, protests in Egypt today are sites where new patterns of contention can be witnessed. In this section, I highlight the different dynamics characterizing *labor protest*, *revisionary protest*, and *limited protest*. In order to answer my initial question of why Egyptians protest in an authoritarian government, it is vital to recognize that Egyptians are using protest in different ways, with different goals, and that the government is not pursuing a "one-size-fits-all" response to protest. While *revisionary* protests seek to confront the regime, *limited protests* and *labor protests* seek to engage the regime to win concessions. These different motivations result in different styles of protest and different government responses.

A. Labor Protest

headquarters in Tunisia as well as the US interception of an Egyptian airliner carrying the hijackers of the Italian cruise ship – the Achille Lauro – and forcing it to land in Sicily. See: Scott MacLeod, "Egypt riots raise doubts about Mubarak's authority," *Christian Science Monitor*, February 27, 1986. Central Security Force riots also occurred in 1986 – and, although certainly significant, are less acts of civilian protest than violent mutiny within the armed forces. See: Robert H. Reid, "Curfew Imposed in Cairo After Rioting Spreads throughout the City, Airport Shut," *Associated Press*, February 26, 1986; Margaret L. Rogg, "Egyptian Policemen Fight Troops in Revolt Set off Near Pyramids," *New York Times*, February 27, 1986. Although some civilians did join the forces in protest, the regime response crushed the mutiny

The history of organized collective action by the Egyptian working class dates back to 1882 when several thousand Egyptian coal-heavers went on strike and demanded higher wages in Port Said.⁴¹ Different factories followed suit throughout the 1880s into the early 1900s, at which point the first organized labor groups emerged. Among their goals were job security, higher wages, and reasonable working hours – and also the eradication of verbal abuse from factory owners or floor supervisors and conditions that ensured the basic dignity of the worker.⁴² The development of class consciousness in the working class closely paralleled the development of Egyptian nationalism, and the workers struggle became an integral part of the broader nationalist struggle. While nationalist parties, particularly the Wafd, harnessed the support of the workers struggle as a means to secure an independent Egypt ruled by indigenous elite, workers themselves saw that “class divisions coincided with ethnic or nationalist divisions in the workplace.” Abusive treatment by foreign factory owners was linked to the nationalist issues of foreign economic domination and British rule in Egypt.⁴³

Joel Beinin and Zachary Lockman provide a detailed account of the beginnings of the labor movement in Egypt until the Free Officer’s coup in 1952. This baseline of labor-state relations prior to the rule of the Revolutionary Command Council demonstrates the significance of the new bargain struck in 1954.⁴⁴ This bargain provided workers with their most important demand in the post-WWII era – job security – in exchange for the right to strike.⁴⁵ This relational pattern is based on a mutual set of obligations in which the state provided a basic standard of welfare in exchange for the workers’ reliable labor.

⁴¹ Joel Beinin and Zachary Lockman, *Workers on the Nile* (Cairo: The American University of Cairo Press: 1998), 23- 27.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 65

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 76-77

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 444; Also, Kirk Beattie, *Egypt During the Nasser Years* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 89-91.

⁴⁵ Beinin and Lockman, 432.

The importance of labor is not relegated only to the past, and the relationship between the state and labor is undergoing significant changes today. The future of this relationship is proving to be an important question as Egypt aggressively pursues policies of structural adjustment and economic liberalization that often leave workers without the standards to which they've grown accustomed. On its part, the government passed Law 12 of 2003, which completely replaced all prior legislation governing state-labor relations, eased the restrictions on firing employees, and formally gave workers the right to strike if approved by the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF), an arm of the Egyptian government.⁴⁶ These laws often remain unenforced and ignored by employers.

In response, workers are striking.⁴⁷ It is noteworthy that, although Law 12 provides the right to strike with the approval of the ETUF, these strikes are technically proceeding illegally, without the approval of the union.⁴⁸ Between 1998 and 2008, approximately “2 million Egyptian workers participated in 2,623 factory occupations, strikes, demonstrations, or other collective actions.” According to Beinin, organized labor “constitutes the largest and most sustained social movement in Egypt since the campaign to oust the British...”⁴⁹ However, he also notes that these actions are primarily local in nature and do not correspond to a coordinated, national program. Instead, the success of one company's workers in obtaining a raise or bonus, through protest action, raises expectations of success and provokes workers in other companies to also undertake

⁴⁶ Article 192, Book Four, Part IV, Law 13 of 2003. <http://www.egypt.gov.eg/english/laws/pdf/Book4.pdf>

⁴⁷ Joel Beinin and Hossam Hamalawy, “Strikes in Egypt Spread from Center of Gravity,” May 9, 2007, MERIP <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero050907.html>; For data on the estimated number of protestors and protest actions see: Solidarity Center, *Justice for All: The Struggle for Worker Rights in Egypt* (Washington, D.C.: Solidarity Center, 2010), 16-17.

http://www.solidaritycenter.org/files/pubs_egypt_wr.pdf

⁴⁸ Beinin, “Labor Protest and Worker Rights in Egypt”; In addition, the “right to strike” gained in 2003 is further limited in Article 194 that prohibits strikes at sites or in ways that “disturb national security” which are determined by “a decree of the prime minister.”

⁴⁹ Joel Beinin, “Workers’ Protest in Egypt: Neoliberalism and Class Struggle in the 21st Century,” *Social Movement Studies* 8:4, November 2009, 449-454.

such action.⁵⁰ During 2007, the actions spread from factories to other sectors including “building materials workers, transport workers, the Cairo underground Metro workers, food processing workers, bakers, sanitation workers, oil workers in Suez...and in the summer the movement broadened to encompass white collar employees and civil servants.”⁵¹

The size of the protests ranges widely. Some of the largest events – such as those in al-Mahalla al-Kubra at the Misr Spinning and Weaving Company – witnessed ten to twenty thousand workers striking in December 2006. Security forces responded and surrounded the mills, however did not step in with force. The strikes were successful in obtaining a guarantee that the company would not be privatized and that workers would receive a 45 days bonus.⁵² According to MERIP reports, “in the three months following the December 2006 strike, about 30,000 workers in more than ten textile mills...participated in protests...if they did not get what the Mahalla strikers won. In virtually all cases, the government succumbed.”⁵³

The protests enjoy broad support from Egyptians and have been successful in wresting concessions from the regime in many cases, although not all of the negotiated agreements have been implemented.⁵⁴ Labor campaigns have also been capable of sustained mobilization, a feat which other protest movements have been unable to duplicate. Despite this success, Beinín concludes that the worker networks are organized around specific local grievances, are unable to challenge the existing power structure of the Egyptian regime – and, normally, are not even politicized.⁵⁵ This lack of politicization Beinín observes in the protest movements is likely

⁵⁰ Beinín and Lockman, 452

⁵¹ Solidarity Center

⁵² Joel Beinín and Hossam el-Hamalawy, “Egyptian Textile Workers Confront the New Economic Order,” March 25, 2007, MERIP <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero032507.html>

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Solidarity Center

⁵⁵ Beinín, 454

related to the limited economic goals and concessions driving the protest movements. These goals are located, and can presumably be achieved, within an ongoing relationship with the state rather than necessitating a wholesale revision of the political structure itself. The economic demands of workers, in other words, are not typically a direct challenge to the regime, although there have been notable exceptions such as the strikes of April 6, 2008 in Mahalla.

As Beinun notes, workers in one company have adopted protest after witnessing the successes at another company – suggesting that they look to similar situations to gauge the likelihood of their own success and act accordingly. Doctors, a group not historically part of the labor movement (which has tended to be industrial in nature) threatened to strike in 2008 for higher wages. Hamdy El Sayyid, the chairman of the doctors' syndicate explained to the *New York Times*, “what made us take more confrontational measures is that we saw other groups doing so and making their demands.”⁵⁶ Media coverage on the protests has rapidly expanded as well, and international solidarity organizations working for labor rights are also working in Egypt.

Martha Pripstein Posusney asserts that Egyptian labor's rationale for protest is best understood through a “moral economy” framework. In contrast to the “dispassionate calculation of costs and benefits” of narrow rational choice theory, Posusney argues anger – as “an emotional response to policy changes” – drives labor protest action in Egypt.⁵⁷ Protest, in the moral economy approach, is a response to violations of norms and expectations. Workers view themselves in a patron/client relationship with the state, based on the bargain struck and developed in the Nasser period, with concomitant entitlements and responsibilities. As Posusney points out,

⁵⁶ Michael Slackman, “Day of Angry Protests,” *New York Times*, April 6, 2008
[http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/06/world/africa/06iht-egypt.4.11708118.html?
_r=3&pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/06/world/africa/06iht-egypt.4.11708118.html?_r=3&pagewanted=all)

⁵⁷ Martha Pripstein Posusney, *Labor and the State in Egypt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997). 249.

the protests are not motivated to achieve new goals or benefits – but to “restore the status-quo ante” of a basic standard of fairness in the relationship between the workers and state.⁵⁸

In the current situation, the state is revising Nasser’s bargain with the workers through its economic policies and new laws. In response, workers are using protest to influence the degree to which they are enforced. Importantly, workers have begun striking for greater benefits that are perceived as necessary within this new relationship. One example is worker protests for a national minimum wage of 1200 LE per month, after a court in Egypt ruled that a minimum wage taking into account current prices for necessities must be set.⁵⁹ Thus, the revision of this state-labor relationship shows signs of moving beyond a “moral economy” approach based on anger and into a period of negotiation and bargaining – in which protest is an effective tool to create pressure and influence the government.

While some protests are beginning to move from strictly economic demands to a restructuring of the union system (a move that comes with serious political implications), most have “deliberately stayed aloof” from politics and, unlike movements like Kifaya which criticize President Mubarak, “Egyptian workers tend to appeal to Mubarak to step in personally to resolve their grievances.”⁶⁰ This apolitical stance increases the likelihood that the protests will move forward without repression, and that concessions will be considered. Also likely decreasing the government’s willingness to violently repress is the impact violent confrontation could have on foreign investors. The state may have an interest in bargaining with workers on strike, given their

⁵⁸ Martha Pripstein Posusney, “Irrational Workers: The Moral Economy of Labor Protest in Egypt,” *World Politics* 46, no. 1, (1993): 83-120. 84.

⁵⁹ Hossam el-Hamalawy, “Hundreds of Egyptian Workers Demonstrate for Minimum Wage,” April 3, 2010, Al Masry al Youm, <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/en/news/hundreds-egyptian-workers-demonstrate-minimum-wage> ; The current minimum wage in Egypt, according to the article, is 35LE per month; Mohammed Azouz, “Government Obligated to Set Minimum Wage,” Al-Masry Al-Youm March 30, 2010 <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/en/news/court-govt-obliged-set-minimum-wage>

⁶⁰ Saif Nasrawi, “The Political Edge of Labor Protests,” *Arab Reform Bulletin* November 10, 2009 <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/arb/?fa=show&article=24119>

proven capacity to mobilize, rather than risk an all-out confrontation and its potential consequences for foreign investment.⁶¹ This space afforded for strikes serves to incorporate peaceful and apolitical labor protest into the process of liberalization.

B. Revisionary Protest

Unlike their labor counterparts, revisionary protest groups seek to revise and change the basic relationship between state and society. These types of groups have broad political goals such as an end to the emergency law, free and fair democratic elections, revisions of anti-terrorism legislation, or a clear plan for democratic leadership succession. They also may have other goals or ideals which they use to mobilize, however what distinguishes their collective (or in some cases individual) action is overt and politicized confrontation with the regime. Unlike limited protest, these groups seek to revise political structures rather than gain concessions within them.⁶² Given the low turnout of revisionary protests, the Egyptian regime is able to repress these groups without much cost and doing so provides the state an opportunity to intimidate other potential political challengers.

Rabab El-Mahdi asserts that the rise of groups calling for political revision – specifically for open presidential elections – constituted a fundamental change in Egyptian politics. These groups were aided by new mobilizing structures such as the Popular Committee to Support the Intifada, the Anti-Globalization Egyptian Group, and Defense Committee for Labor Rights that provided new forums for activists to organize outside the established, and largely ineffective, political parties.⁶³ The *Kifaya* or “Enough” movement is the most prominent example of a group

⁶¹ Mustapha Kamel al-Sayyid, interviewed by Jessica Glover, March 21, 2010

⁶² See: Nadia Oweidat, et al. *The Kefaya Movement: A Case Study of a Grassroots Reform Initiative*, (Santa Monica: RAND, 2008); Rabab El-Mahdi, “Enough!: Egypt’s Quest for Democracy,” *Comparative Political Studies* 42, no. 8 (2009):1011-1039; Mustapha Kamel al-Sayyid, “Kefaya at a Turning Point,” in *Political and Social Protest in Egypt* edited by Nicholas S. Hopkins (New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2006)

⁶³ El-Mahdi

that emerged from these mobilizing structures during the time frame of the 2005 elections. Kifaya called specifically for the end of President Hosni Mubarak's time in office and a transition to democracy.

Mobilization was facilitated by an appeal to Egyptian national identity in which two frames were bridged in an effort to mobilize supporters by linking events in the Arab world to the character of Egyptian democracy.⁶⁴ Kifaya began connecting Egyptian policies toward the American invasion in Iraq and toward Israel during the second Palestinian Intifada to the government's illegitimacy and inability to represent Egyptians. Kifaya leaders argued Egypt could best support Iraqis and Palestinians by first tackling internal reform, suggesting that "Egypt ruled by tyranny and backwardness—in which corruption is prevalent—cannot offer anything worth mentioning, especially for the Palestinians."⁶⁵ These two frames, one which drew upon strong national, religious, and Arab identity and another based on domestic political grievances, formed a resonant framework for mobilization that opened the door to larger debates and direct challenges to the Mubarak presidency.

The Kifaya movement developed alongside a new media environment. Al-Masry al-Youm's first year of publication in 2004 coincided with the Kifaya movement's rise. Al-Masry al-Youm was the first Egyptian daily newspaper "of record" unassociated with the government or political parties. This outlet provided independent perspectives on the movement, while other mediums – blogs, websites, satellite television, and other new technologies – also increased the amount of coverage protests garnered. The access to both traditional print newspapers and non-

⁶⁴ For information on "frame bridging" see: Robert Benford and David Snow, "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment," *Annual Review of Sociology* 26, (2000)

⁶⁵ Ahmed Baha' al-Din Sha'ban, *The Butterfly Effect: Kefaya—Past and Present*, (Cairo: Kefaya Printings, 2006,) 45

traditional online media allowed protest movements to take part in setting the agenda. Online activism both made mobilization easier and also allowed activists to report firsthand accounts, share videos and pictures, and relay information quickly.⁶⁶ Cell phones and text messages services allowed protest events to be circulated widely, according to a RAND report on the group one text message sent to thousands of mobile phones helped draw over 2,000 supporters to a well organized protest.⁶⁷

While the movement was unable to achieve its stated goals, its key role in expanding political space has had lasting effects on how groups approach protest as a tactic. Kifaya itself spoke of an unpredictable “butterfly effect” that “generates a series of consecutive results and successive developments that gradually increase in size to far exceed the initial event.”⁶⁸ One political analyst even suggested that the current actions of Mohammed el-Baradei would be difficult to imagine if this expansion hadn’t taken place.⁶⁹ Joel Beinin and other observers acknowledge the influence of Kifaya’s actions on labor protests working to “inculcate a culture of protest in Egypt.”⁷⁰ The impact of Kifaya on normalizing protest as an avenue to express grievances is clear and has impacted the actions of varying groups across Egypt. By taking action without government permission Kifaya “expanded what is admissible and opened up more public spaces.”⁷¹ Social movement research has long emphasized that actions affect other actions and

⁶⁶ Azer, Sherif, interviewed by Jessica Glover, March 20, 2010

⁶⁷ Oweidat, 21

⁶⁸ Sha’ban, 13

⁶⁹ alAmrani, Issandr, interviewed by Jessica Glover, March 15, 2010

⁷⁰ Beinin, 454

⁷¹ Manar Shorbagy, “Understanding Kefaya: The New Politics in Egypt,” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 29 no. 1 (2007): 54-55.

the process of *diffusion* of tactics from one social group to another typifies waves of protest and dissent.⁷²

Thus, despite its limited appeal, several new developments that aided Kifaya remain significant to protest actions today. SMS technology, cell phones, and a “multifaceted Internet strategy” were integral in permitting Kifaya to spread its message because, unlike newspapers or banners, online efforts could not be confiscated. Documentation of Egyptian authorities’ human rights abuses online also helped draw foreign media attention to the group.⁷³ These strategies and lessons from the Kifaya campaign are now being applied and refined by other activist groups who recognize the importance of technology and media attention in their own goals.⁷⁴ Enabling technologies help groups mobilize, and they also allow groups considering protest to evaluate which types of behaviors bring success and which result in repression. The movement’s use of technology is a tactic that other groups have adopted.

One such example is the April 6 Movement, which incorporates many techniques from Kifaya, particularly regarding the use of using technology to mobilize. While the first protests organized by this group focused primarily on supporting workers and demanding relief from high prices, an “April 6 Youth” group has emerged since 2008 demanding a change to the regime. In 2008, the protests garnered significant media attention from the West, partially because of the use of Facebook in mobilizing, but also because it was the first “general strike” in Egyptian memory. Thousands of workers in al-Mahalla al-Kubra planned on striking in the morning of April 6, 2008 to protest low wages. The call to protest was taken up by a group of

⁷² Pamela E. Oliver and Daniel J. Myers, “Diffusion Models of Cycles of Protest as a Theory of Social Movements,” National Defense University <http://www.nd.edu/~dmyers/cbsm/vol3/olmy.pdf>

⁷³ Oweidat, 21

⁷⁴ Samir; Fathy

online activists who called for a general strike in solidarity with the workers and in opposition to recent price increases.

On the same day, hundreds of students protested at three universities.⁷⁵ In Mahalla, the protests numbered in the thousands and turned violent, with at least three deaths being reported.⁷⁶ In Tahrir Square, the center of Cairo, security forces turned up in large numbers and arrested those who showed up. In 2009 and 2010, similar events to on April 6 were planned – though not in solidarity with the Mahalla strikes. Turnout was low and in 2010 the security forces responded in full force, arresting scores of protesters in Tahrir Square and sealing the doors of Cairo University to prevent students from protesting in the streets.⁷⁷

While Facebook has been identified as a major mobilizing tool, activists recognize its limits. It is clearly monitored by the government and although a group may have many members – most of those members are not very active. The “low cost” signal of joining an online group is not an indicator of willingness to take high cost actions, such as attending demonstrations. Further, the use of online mobilizing tools are acknowledged as limited as over a quarter of the population remains illiterate and, according to the World Bank’s development indicators, that only around 15% of the total population have access to the internet. At the same time, activists report they are not only using Facebook to recruit and mobilize people to attend street protests – although that is one goal. Those using new media often reported that their primary goal was to distribute pictures, videos, and first-hand accounts of the regime abuses in an effort to sway public opinion.

⁷⁵ Slackman

⁷⁶ Samantha M. Shapiro, “Revolution, Facebook Style,” *New York Times Magazine*, January 22, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/25/magazine/25bloggers-t.html?pagewanted=4&_r=2&ref=magazine

⁷⁷“Security Abort Demonstration in Cairo,” April 6, 2010, Al Jazeera (Arabic) <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/28C460B4-C1C0-40DC-99A2-8B251A7865AF.htm>

In other words, Egyptian protest movements are not measuring success in progress on their stated goals, which they admit are unlikely to be realized soon. Instead, they are measuring progress in the effect their actions – costly actions, such as arrest – on an Egyptian audience and a foreign audience. For example, Bassem Samir’s arrest for visiting Nag Hammadi came to the attention of an advocacy group in Washington, DC. During Samir’s visit to DC in January as part of a conference organized by the group, Secretary of State Clinton mentioned him by name in a speech she delivered on internet freedom. The arrest, therefore, is perceived as having a direct payoff in putting pressure on the regime.

Among activists, success is sometimes measured by turnout or governmental response but media coverage exposing the harsh responses of state security and generating popular sympathy are also seen as crucial. The type of citizen journalism activists want to promote: video recordings of protests, blogger accounts, email and online networks with domestic and foreign reporters, and twitter feeds to relay information quickly are perceived by some activists as powerful tools that can be used against the regime. Revisionary protest has been unsuccessful in weakening the regime, but it has been successful in gaining media coverage domestically and internationally, which aids in the diffusion of protest as a tactic. While it has had a ripple effect, it is still clear that many groups using protest are not doing so to support Kifaya or reform, but rather to gain concessions through a regime structure.

C. Limited Protest: Damietta & E Agrium

In 2007, a Canadian fertilizer plant received the government of Egypt’s approval to build a factory in Damietta, at Ra’s al Barr, a popular tourist destination and vacation spot for Egyptians, where part of the Nile meets the Mediterranean Sea. The site was planned to house

two ammonia plants and two urea plants.⁷⁸ When plans for the 2.5 billion USD plant progressed, residents feared pollution from the factory would damage the environment, consequently damaging their three main sources of income: tourism, real estate, and fishing.⁷⁹ Beginning in April 2008, construction on the plants halted when a series of protests against the company escalated, culminating in the eventual cancellation of the factory by the Egyptian government in August 2008.

According to Jeannie Sowers and Sharif el Musa, the Damietta coalition that formed in opposition of the plant “crossed class and occupational lines, and included representatives of voluntary associations, members of Parliament, businessmen, university professors, landowners, and members of unions and professional syndicates.”⁸⁰ Types of protest actions used also varied widely, including “coordinated statements, petitions, marches, vigils, litigation and strikes,”⁸¹ with protesters at one point draping their homes in massive black banners reading, “No to the factory of death.” Every Friday afternoon demonstrations were held in the province that appealed to the government for a final decision to move the plant.

These actions were accompanied by a formal recommendation, introduced by 59 members of Parliament from both the NDP and opposition, to move the factory from Damietta. The recommendation was adopted by vote in June following a report by a Parliamentary fact-finding committee that formed after protests began.⁸² It concluded “that E Agrium had failed to

⁷⁸ Andrew Schurgott, “The Agrium Agendas,” *Business Today Egypt* July 2008
<http://www.businesstodayegypt.com/article.aspx?ArticleID=8067>

⁷⁹ Adam Morrow and Khaled Moussa Al-Omrani, “Egypt: Residents of Coastal Province Fight Fertilizer Factory,” *InterPressService*, July 21, 2008

⁸⁰ Sharif Elmusa and Jeannie Sowers, “Damietta Mobilizes for Its Environment,” *MERIP*, October 21, 2009, <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero102109.html>

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Mohamed El-Sayed, “People Power,” *Al Ahrām*, June 26, 2008
<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2008/903/eg2.htm>

observe environmental standards or secure the consent of the local population before starting construction.”⁸³ By the end of the summer the plans for the plant in Damietta were cancelled.

Although the company was compensated, the incident raised concerns among the international business community regarding foreign investment in Egypt. Particularly concerning was that the corporation had gone through all the necessary steps with the Egyptian government, and that the protest still was capable of bringing about the end to the agreement. Also noted was the impact of the Damietta success – which was “diffused through Egypt’s increasingly lively public and media sphere”⁸⁴ – that inspired other protests and refusals.⁸⁵ Government efforts to renegotiate a site were hampered partially because when other communities, such as Suez or Port Said, were mentioned as possible alternatives in the press – residents of those cities began organizing popular committees to fight the move and protest, too.⁸⁶

Elmusa and Sowers attribute the success of Damietta to several factors. The first is the role of NDP governor, Muhammad Fathi al-Barad’i, as a mediator between protest organizers and the regime. Not insignificantly, his prior actions in office included initiatives to promote tourism in the city. Success in handling the overriding popular sentiment against the factory and using it to promote his plans for the city could clearly help him politically. Nasir al-‘Umari, the coordinator of the “Campaign Against the E Agrium Plant,” though not extensively detailed in the MERIP article, is described by other reports as the former Mayor of Damietta and ex-

⁸³ Morrow and al-Omrani

⁸⁴ Elmusa and Sowers

⁸⁵ “Monthly Report: Egypt,” *The Economist Intelligence Unit Limited*, September 2008

⁸⁶ Mohammed El-Sayed, “No Solution in Sight” *Al-Ahram*, May 22, 2008, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2008/898/eg2.htm>; Elmusa and Sowers

president of the NDP Youth Committee – a position which significantly affected how protesters framed demands to the regime.⁸⁷

Another factor contributing to success was the effort of community leaders to educate residents on the issue of pollution. Arguments against the factory were framed carefully – pointing at negative health consequences, government corruption, and lack of legal enforcement of environmental regulations.⁸⁸ The foreign nature of the company was highlighted as well, with MERIP reporting that “campaigners evoked the historical memory of Damietta as a bulwark against the Crusaders, equating new petrochemical firms and their associated pollution loads with invading armies.” Some reported these efforts were primarily to score political points by playing on Egyptian nationalist sentiments.⁸⁹ As, despite consistent media references to the company as Canadian, technically 40% of Agrium’s shares are distributed between four Egyptian corporations, three of which are state-owned.⁹⁰

Most importantly, perhaps, was the way in which the protests framed the issue in relation to the state. Instead of opposing the position of the government or linking this protest to political issues – Damietta appealed to Mubarak. Elmusa and Sowers describe an event on Earth Day where children carried banners asking “President Mubarak and Mama Suzanne to save us from Agrium and grant us the right to a clean life.” As the authors keenly note, these tactics were an attempt to “distinguish the ‘legitimate protests’ in Damietta from others that had an anti-regime flavor.”⁹¹ Mubarak, in response, “announced that the plant would not be built without the

⁸⁷ Schurgott

⁸⁸ Elmusa and Sowers

⁸⁹ Schurgott

⁹⁰ “EAgrium is majority owned by the Canadian company Agrium Inc. (60%), with the remaining shares distributed between the Egyptian Petrochemicals Holding Company (ECHEM) and the Egyptian Natural Gas Holding Company (EGAS) — which hold a combined 24% — the Egyptian Natural Gas Company (GASCO, 9%) and the Arab Petroleum Investment Corporation (APICORP, 7%).” See: Shurgott

⁹¹ Ibid.

approval of the people of Damietta.”⁹² This pledge was repeated and used throughout the summer of 2008, calling upon Mubarak to fulfill his promise.

Finally, Sowers and Elmusa are cognizant that the interests of certain elites in preserving the area as a vacation spot or tourist hub aligned with the substantial environmental concerns. Other articles have highlighted the competition over land that is zoned for industrial use by the government, but whose local elites believe it should be used for tourism. The extraordinary circumstances of the Damietta case where cross-cutting public opinion and varied social forces are all clearly opposed to a company – with organizers working to strategically appeal to the government and an effective governor mediating the dispute – point to it being an exceptional case and very atypical for Egypt.⁹³

Yet, its success in halting the company has increased the perception of the Damietta protest as a successful one, evidenced by citizens organizing in Suez to ward off the potential move of the plant there, and a new campaign, *Itkhannaqna* (“We’ve Been Suffocated”) in Cairo’s Shubra al-Khayma district. The Shubra campaign has modeled itself after Damietta to protest a petrochemical factory close to residential areas. Without economic elites with close ties to the NDP acting as organizers and intermediaries – it remains to be seen how successful popular protest can be. Yet, the success of Damietta also underscores how popular protest is selectively tolerated and rewarded.

V. Conclusion:

The emergence of a new public space in Egypt, along with the diffusion of protest tactics, has altered the place of protest in Egyptian politics. To be clear, these developments have not altered the structure of the regime, its repressive capacity, or its propensity to repress. The

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ al-Sayyid, interview

regime still acts to create an environment of intimidation, quell protests before they become mass actions, and punish leaders for criticizing the regime. The human rights situation in Egypt and the state of political opposition remain unchanged. However, when examining protest it becomes apparent that some protests are tolerated and others, like Damietta, are even rewarded with concessions. This paints a more complicated picture of regime responses to protest.

In categorizing Egyptian protest, a divide over underlying goals becomes clear. Revisionary protest, seeking regime change, aligns with traditional models of civil society that assume greater activity and networks of civil society will eventually lead to the flowering of a more democratic state. Yet, as Partha Chatterjee writes in his examination of popular politics, *civil society* appears as “the closed association of modern elite groups, sequestered from the wider popular life of the communities, walled up within enclaves of civic freedom and rational law.”⁹⁴ The arguments and goals of revisionary protestors in Egypt, seeking to expose the regime’s illegitimacy and lack of accountability, stem from an understanding of the state as a constitutional model that must uphold democratic norms and use protest as a way of expressing this claim to the full rights of modern citizenship while exposing the regime’s brutality.

The reemergence of labor protest and growing incidences of limited protest in Egypt align more closely with Chatterjee’s notion of *political society*, collective actors that have distinctively emerged in post-colonial states within the past 30 years. This new phenomenon of collective action has been facilitated by both the conception of the state’s legitimacy based on welfare provision and a wider arena of political mobilization.⁹⁵ Members of political society, rather than making claims to democratic governance and citizen rights like civil society, make claims to “a habitation and a livelihood as a matter of right.”⁹⁶ These claims, rather than being

⁹⁴ Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004,) 4.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 47

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 40

acknowledged as rights by the state, are negotiated within a new terrain of political expediency. Populations often seek to receive attention from political parties or government leaders by making use of the fact that they can vote (and, that their vote can be purchased) and, in Egypt, by taking collective action to bring grievances to officials' attention.⁹⁷ On the government's part, those who "seek to renew their legitimacy as providers of well-being" are able to "confront whatever is the current configuration of politically mobilized demands."⁹⁸ This form of popular politics, captured by Chatterjee's notion of political society, has important implications for conceptualizing protest in authoritarian regime contexts.

In Egypt, protests appealing to the government as the legitimate entity to solve problems are perceived as less likely to be met with repression. They are also perceived as more successful in gaining concessions. When this occurs, other groups perceive that their demands are likely to be met too, and limited protest is diffused as a tactic. This is apparent in the spread of labor protests from the industrial sector to white collar workers, as well as in the campaigns which imitated the success of Damietta province. These processes, where states select "successful" protest point to, at least a capability for, the incorporation of limited and labor protest into a structure of clientele politics that serves the regime and political society. In this way, certain tactics of successful protest as determined by gaining concessions – appealing to the regime directly and acknowledging limits to protest – might proliferate.

These actions have implications for how scholars consider both how authoritarian governments can utilize opposition to create governmental power. Lisa Wedeen provides examples of a strong authoritarian state, Syria, which can force citizens to routinely act "as if" the government is legitimate. Yemen, a weaker authoritarian state unable to compel such

⁹⁷ On vote buying see: Lisa Blaydes, "Who Votes in Authoritarian Elections and Why? Determinants of Voter Turnout in Contemporary Egypt," <http://www.stanford.edu/~blaydes/Turnout.pdf>

⁹⁸ Chatterjee, 41

widespread behavior, is able to use temporary spectacles of power and charades to contain political dissent. In the case of Egypt, the regime is able to use incidents of dissent to its advantage by making real violence against weak revisionary protesters demonstrations of coercive potential. These incidents inform perceptions of *viability* of political change and stifle mobilization. Activists seeking to embarrass the regime by exposing its cruel methods of coercion may in fact be vehicles of its power, which rests in the government's capabilities as well as how actors perceive these capabilities and project this perception of power into future scenarios. Stronger social groups that would be more challenging to repress outright, such as labor protests, are encouraged to keep their economic demands within the regime structure and certain limits in order to gain the most benefits.

At the same time, official political activity opens up channels for dissent other than street protest to be incorporated into a larger regime structure. Egyptians who choose to become politically active under regime purview have "legal channels" to focus efforts that offer benefits and minimize costs. Limited protests also function within the current political regime. They become opportunities for politicians to intervene on their constituents' behalf and distribute resources, a way to expediently attempt to accumulate legitimacy based on performance. Labor protest and regime response may be a way to manage the changing relationship and privatization efforts in ways that allow for the expression of anger, without risking full-fledged confrontation. In short, protest that does not challenge the regime structure works as a mechanism for resource distribution in ways that can bolster the regime.

However, these practices of mobilization on the part of Egyptians also invite questions about democratic practices, rather than procedures, in authoritarian settings. As Lisa Wedeen puts it, "democrats can exist without procedural democracy."⁹⁹ In her discussion examining qat

⁹⁹ Lisa Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions*, (Chicago:University of Chicago Press, 2008), 146

chews in Yemen as sites of public sphere activity, she emphasizes that aspects of “performative democracy” may work to facilitate a “kind of political participation” that promotes “citizen awareness and produce[s] subjects who critically debate political issues.” Protests, even limited protests, in other words, may be sites of democratic practice in their own right – as they seek to press government to respond to demands.¹⁰⁰

Open questions remain regarding the future of protest in Egypt that call for close observation of these ongoing campaigns. The first and foremost is whether the regime giving reformers an inch will allow them to create a mile. Theories of gradual liberalization rest on the theory that small amounts of progress, if taken advantage of by activists, can result in demonstrable change. However, if Egyptian labor, as the strongest social group, stays politically aloof it remains to be seen if localized concerns over privatization will expand. Comparisons to Latin America or Eastern Europe and the role of worker movements may be instructive in understanding how the labor movement might contribute to a democratic transition. Another question is whether limited protests will grow or diminish during times of leadership transition, and what this spells for Egyptian democracy. Finally, how do protests affect public opinion, notions of citizenship, and the ongoing development of Egyptian national identity? Broader social processes and debates which begin during moments of contention, particularly those which are entering a lively Egyptian public sphere, are just as important to examine as the quality of the events themselves.

¹⁰⁰ As Joel Beinin commented on the issue of labor activity: “This is the most democratic thing that is happening in Egypt because here you have people who are getting together, choosing in one form or another their leaders, deciding what it is that they want, deciding on the tactics that they will pursue to go about achieving their aims, and for the first time to a very considerable extent, actually winning a good part of their demands.” Beinin, “Labor Protests and Worker Rights in Egypt”

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