

Reform Pirouettes: Foreign Democracy Promotion and the Politics of Adjustment in Egypt

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At least since 9/11, democracy promotion has become a central feature of US foreign policy in the Arab World. While *democratization through regime overthrow* – as conducted in Iraq and Afghanistan – remains highly controversial, *democratization through regime transformation* is a widely accepted goal within the US administration and the member states of the European Union, when it comes to pushing for reform in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

The Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), initiated in December 2002 by former US Secretary of State Colin Powell, and the Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative (BMENA), received approval from the US's Western allies. At their summit at Sea Island in June 2004, the Group of Eight (G8) adopted a plan of action to support economic, social, and political reform initiatives in the Arab states. In addition to the enhancement of regional and international cooperation and economic development, the promotion of democracy figures prominently in the document.¹

The rhetoric of democratization determines not only the premises of Western foreign policy but also the domestic political debate in many Arab countries. Certainly in response to international reform pressure but also with regard to growing domestic unrest, Arab governments have affirmed their willingness to reform on many occasions. The G8 declaration refers explicitly to the commitment to democratic values, for example at the 2004 summit of the Arab League in Tunis and in the Alexandria Library Statement. The latter was issued at a conference organized in May 2004 in the Bibliotheca Alexandrina. Arab politicians and intellectuals generally rejected external interference in domestic affairs and put peace in the region at the top of the agenda, but they also

1. For details of the action plan, see: G8, *Plan of Support for Reform*, Sea Island, 9/7/2004, available at: <http://www.g7.utoronto.ca/summit/2004seaisland/reform.html>, last access on 20/5/2006.

insisted on the necessity of reform in compliance with democratic principles.²

Is this proclaimed readiness for reform the fruit of the US »forward strategy of freedom,« launched after the Iraq war? Are Arab autocrats finally preparing for democracy? The answer is no. Arab regimes have not witnessed any kind of democratic transition (Albrecht and Schlumberger 2004). In the past, they have successfully adapted to external pressures and even consolidated authoritarian rule (Camau and Geisser 2004). Consequently, the question of whether democracy promotion makes a difference in the region seems tautological. In addition to the authoritarian regimes' ability to adjust, scholars have noted the inconsistency of international democracy promotion. Democratization – which implies regime change – is not in harmony with the desire for stability in the region. Countries like Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia are pampered by the US administration. Geopolitical and economic interests prevail over the proclaimed ambition of bringing more liberty to the people of the region (for an overview, see Carothers and Ottaway 2005). As far as the last decade is concerned, Carapico (2002) noted that democracy promotion strengthened liberal institutions and civil society organizations but failed to weaken governments and their control over the distribution of aid. Still, the question of why the democratization vocabulary is spreading among authoritarian leaders remains puzzling.

This article concentrates on two reform initiatives in Egypt in order to understand the current dynamics of adjustment to external democratization pressures. Instead of focusing on specific instruments, I analyze the promotion of central elements of the »international democracy agenda.«³ First, I will analyze Egypt's constitutional reform. The government organized presidential and parliamentary elections in 2005 with the promise of »free elections.« The international community in general and the United States in particular closely followed this process, considering it an

2. Bibliotheca Alexandrina: *The Alexandria Statement: Issues of Reform in the Arab World*, 12–14 March 2004, available at: www.arabreformforum.com, last access: 15/5/2006.

3. I use this term to grasp the fact that a wide range of actors conduct the promotion of democracy. Besides the United States, the EU, multilateral donor organizations, and transnational and domestic NGOs make use of the democratization rhetoric and employ different instruments to advance it: diplomatic pressure, the support of civil society organizations, and the political conditionality of development aid are among the most prominent.

important step towards democratization. Second, I will look at social reform initiatives in order to demonstrate the promotion of »good governance« by the World Bank. The organization of »free elections« and the implementation of »good governance« figure prominently in both the »international democratization agenda« and the Egyptian reform debate.

The Egyptian regime is currently adjusting to international reform pressures, without releasing its grip on society. The rhetoric of democratization is omnipresent in the regime's reform vocabulary, without generating tangible results. In order to understand this paradox, it is important to address the dynamics between foreign democracy promoters and national policy-makers. In a »friendly state« like Egypt, democracy is far from being imposed. The promotion of democratic principles is rather similar to a negotiation process between donor and client. Within the framework of close cooperation, democratic principles are watered down to promote the interests of both parties. This way of promoting democracy has unintended and even counterproductive consequences. It contributes to a cycle of reform and a permanent adjustment of the rules of the game, resulting in uncertainty for the challengers of regime incumbents.

The Amendment of Article 76 and the Promise of »Free and Fair Elections«

Egypt's presidential and parliamentary elections in 2005 attracted considerable international attention. On February 26, 2005, President Mubarak announced the amendment of Article 76 of the Egyptian Constitution in his home province of Menoufia. Article 76 regulates the election of the president. Until then, the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) had appointed the president every five years. The people then voted on the appointment in a referendum. On September 6, 2005, the people elected their head of state from ten candidates. President Mubarak won 88 percent of the vote, his most prominent challenger Ayman Nour from the El Ghad party (Tomorrow) reached 7.6 percent and Noman Gomma, leader of the historic Neo-Wafd Party, 3 percent. The seven other candidates did not receive more than one percent of the votes. Official figures registered a 22.95 percent voter turnout. In the subsequent parliamentary elections, 26 percent of registered voters went to the polls. The illegal but tolerated Muslim Brotherhood won 88 out of 454 seats, becoming the

strongest opposition bloc. President Mubarak's party ensured its two-thirds majority in Parliament when »independent« candidates joined the NDP after the election.

The constitutional amendment is an outstanding example of the way the Egyptian regime is carrying out reforms under increasing pressures to democratize. By announcing multi-candidate elections, the President created high expectations among the Egyptian opposition and the international community. The regime signaled its willingness to engage in political reform and pointed to such democratic principles as pluralism, competition, and the possibility of a secret and free vote. But the result did not meet expectations. The overwhelming victory of Hosni Mubarak is proof of successful authoritarian adjustment.⁴ While promising democracy, the regime went as far as putting further restrictions on pluralism. The NDP introduced various hurdles to limit competition in the presidential election race and to stay in control of the president's nomination process in the long run. During the transition period of 2005, the candidacy was limited to senior members of political parties, ensuring at least an appearance of political pluralism. For the next presidential elections, the conditions for candidacy will be tighter. The possibility of nominating a candidate depends entirely on the party's performance in the parliamentary elections: they have to have a minimum share of 5 percent in Parliament or be supported by 250 members of different local and national assemblies.⁵ As no legal opposition parties are able to achieve this, only the ruling NDP will be able to meet these conditions in the near future. The Muslim Brotherhood, as the strongest opposition force, is not allowed to operate as a political party. It seems likely that the NDP prepared Article 76 to serve its own purposes: Gamal Mubarak, the president's son, could now be elected in a multi-candidate race, ensuring a dynastic succession with democratic legitimacy (Hassabo 2006).

How did the international community react to the reform of the electoral process? The United States – Egypt's closest ally in terms of development aid – considered the presidential elections as a »historic depar-

4. One remembers Tunisia, where President Ben Ali got re-elected in 2004 with 94.48 percent for a fourth term after he changed the constitution. Two candidates »competed« with him to provide some credibility in the eyes of the international community.

5. For the details of the new Article 76 see: NDP, *The Amendment to Article 76 of the Constitution*, available at: http://www.ndp.org.eg/modifications/THE_AMENDMENT_TO_ARTICLE_76%20.htm, last access: 15/05/2006.

ture« and a »step towards democratization.«⁶ While they got directly involved in the preparation of the elections, they did not pay much attention to the authoritarian adjustment that took place. The US State Department's follow-up regarding the reform process demonstrates the importance of the Egyptian regime's democratization rhetoric when it comes to tackling external pressures. Interaction between the US and Egyptian governments during the reform process can be described on three levels: pushing for political reform, supporting civil society, and recognizing progress in terms of democratization.

Egypt's relationship with the US was tense before the announcement of the amendment, but President Mubarak's reform initiative helped to revitalize it. In early 2005, the US administration paid particular attention to Egypt's domestic development. President Bush mentioned indirectly Mubarak's hesitation to start up political reform when he said, »Egypt, which showed the way towards peace in the Middle East, can now show the way to democracy in the Middle East.«⁷ The relationship has experienced a number of setbacks, including slow progress during negotiations on a free trade zone. On February 26, 2005, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice cancelled a visit to Cairo in protest against the arrest of Ayman Nour. Nour had been accused of forgery of membership cards to get his new party, El Ghad, legalized. The US press took a particular interest in the case, considering the affair as being politically motivated. The arrest weakened Nour as a potential challenger to the President's son, Gamal Mubarak.⁸ Given its commitment to democracy promotion, the US government could hardly neglect growing resistance in Egypt to the possibility of hereditary succession. Since December 2004, a few hundred people from the newly created Kifaya (Enough!) movement have protested against the president's authoritarian rule and the possibility of the transfer of power from father to son. Three prominent figures from Egypt's civil society announced their candidacy for president in a symbolic act in October 2004.

6. The White House, George W. Bush, *The State of the Union*, Washington DC, 2/2/2005, available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/02/20050202-11.html>, last access: 20/05/2005.

7. US State Department, *Daily Press Briefing by Sean McCormack*, Washington DC, 8/9/2005, available at: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2005/52801.htm>, last access: 19/05/06.

8. For the »Pro- Ayman Nour -Campaign« see *Washington Post*, 16/2/2005, 13/3/2005, and 22/12/2005.

President Mubarak's step proved effective in countering external and internal pressures, in the sense that he presented himself as a serious reformer. Following the announcement of the constitutional amendment, the US took a two-pronged approach. On the one hand, it attenuated its criticism, largely recognizing the regime's reform efforts. On the other hand, it insisted on the organization of transparent elections. Only a few days after Mubarak's speech, the US ambassador in Egypt announced a one million dollar grant to support Egyptian NGOs engaged in the monitoring of presidential and parliamentary elections. Direct intervention by President Bush resolved the question of media access for all candidates and the people's right to vote without intimidation.⁹ The support for Egyptian NGOs involved the US in an important polemic surrounding the organization of the 2005 elections. It caused major uproar in the Egyptian independent and pro-government press, as it was considered to constitute interference in domestic affairs. The Egyptian government categorically refused to allow international observers into the country, but was fully informed of US support for Egyptian NGOs.¹⁰

Monitoring by judges had been institutionalized during the 2000 parliamentary elections. Nevertheless, its application is subject to temporary adjustment. In the run-up to the presidential elections, the judges' association asked the government to organize voting over two successive days in order to ensure its independent control. Although the judges' association threatened to boycott the elections, the government declined. With regard to supervision by Egyptian NGOs, the organizers of the elections reacted in a similar way, allowing them access only on the day before the vote. Only during the politically less important parliamentary elections two months later was monitoring by the judges and NGO supervision permitted. Unlike the sensitive presidential election, the government took various steps to present the parliamentary elections as »founding elections« by providing transparent ballot boxes and granting monitors and journalists free access to voting offices.

Despite its direct engagement in preparing transparent elections, the US put more emphasis on reform efforts than on violations and irregularities. In the eyes of the US State Department, the presidential elections would »enrich the Egyptian political dialogue, certainly for years to come.« State Department spokesman McCormack pointed out that the

9. *Al Abram Weekly*, No. 746, June 9–15, 2005.

10. *Al Abram Weekly*, No. 733, March 10–16, 2005.

»Egyptian Government and the Egyptian people can build upon this positive first step in holding this multi-candidate presidential election and build on the positive experiences, the positive actions in this election, as they look towards parliamentary elections«¹¹ Regarding irregularities, the US focused on technical aspects like the absence of international monitoring, media access, and incidents of voter manipulation. It did not pay much attention to the boycott of the elections,¹² the limited voter turnout, and the restrictions on candidacy in future elections. The holding of multi-candidate elections was considered a positive step in itself.

With regard to the parliamentary elections, the US mainly followed the Egyptian government's argumentation, regarding them as a further test of its sincerity concerning political reforms. Only when the elections turned violent in the second and third stages¹³ did the State Department respond with fierce criticism, pointing out security interference, violence against election monitors, and the detention of Ayman Nour. It was worried about the future of political reform and Egypt's commitment to democracy, but still insisted that progress had been made: »We have urged the Egyptian Government and civil society as well to act in ways that meet international standards ... and help advance the development of democracy in Egypt ... Is it perfect, no. Have there been problems? Yes. ... Has progress been made? Certainly. If you look at where Egypt is now in terms of reforms and openness and democratic development versus where it was a year or two years ago, I think it's important to note that there has been important progress made.«¹⁴

11. US State Department, *Daily Press Briefing by Sean McCormack*, Washington DC, 8/9/2005, available at: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2005/52801.htm>, last access: 19/05/06.

12. Among others »Kifaya,« the leftist Tagammu party, and the Nasserist party called for a boycott of the presidential elections.

13. Parliamentary elections took place in three different stages. The first stage in the electoral districts of the capital Cairo was relatively calm. During the second and third stages, a wave of violence overshadowed the elections in some districts, leaving 13 people dead and hundreds wounded. Supporters of pro-government candidates attacked supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood. The security forces remained at first passive, but then prevented voters from entering polling stations. With regard to the promise of »free elections«, organization in three stages permitted full monitoring but also room for »adjustment.«

14. US State Department, *Daily Press Briefing by Adam Ereli*, Washington D.C., 6/12/2005, available at: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2005/57831.htm>, last access: 19/05/2006.

The statement illustrates the US State Department's focus on progress rather than results. Egypt's commitment to political reform, as expressed in the President's February speech, is considered an important step, clearly relegating the achievement of democracy and the possibility of a change in government clearly to second place. Regardless of the many violations during the voting process and the recent crackdown on reform-oriented judges, who investigated these violations, the US State Department has not reconsidered its position. It still prefers dialogue with the Egyptian government to sanctions. It refuses to cut aid flows, although Congress has demanded them.¹⁵

The US State Department's follow-up on Mubarak's reform process not only exemplifies its gradualist, top-down approach to participation (Neep 2004), but also shows that democracy is promoted within a framework of cooperation. This dialogue certainly fosters the promotion of democratic principles such as pluralism and transparency. At the same time, an authoritarian regime may convert external pressures for reform into a resource. Sharing the same vocabulary is an important basis for understanding. The Egyptian government accepted US involvement and took up the rhetoric of democratization. Mubarak's announcement – because it invoked democratic principles like free elections and pluralism – opened the door to a new phase of cooperation.

The framework of cooperation leaves room for adjustment. The Egyptian government is carefully adapting to some of the principles promoted by the US without giving up control over the electoral process. It has carefully crafted reform measures for the domestic institutional setting. By erecting high obstacles against political candidacy, the NDP still controls pluralism and competition in presidential elections. The liberalization of parliamentary elections does not constitute an immediate threat, given that the power of the legislature is very limited in a system where the president controls politics and policies. Prominent features of the international democratization agenda like the monitoring of elections or the establishment of independent commissions are being introduced selectively. These measures are in principle up for negotiation, but the regime has set clear limits to their implementation by curtailing civil society autonomy and institutions. The differences between the parliamentary and

15. US State Department, *Daily Press Briefing by Sean McCormack*, Washington D.C., 11/05/2006, available at: <http://www.state.gov/t/pa/prs/dpb/2006/66163.htm>, latest access: 20/05/2006.

presidential elections illustrate how the Egyptian government has manipulated the principle of »free elections«.

One result of these more or less democratic maneuvers is the reelection of President Mubarak. Another result is the weak performance of the legal opposition parties,¹⁶ which have no chance to nominate a candidate for the presidency. A third result is the strong performance of »independent« Muslim Brotherhood candidates, which some view as a warning signal against the introduction of »too much democracy.« From the point of view of the results, the regime has turned the constraints of democratization into a resource to strengthen relations with its allies.

The US State Department's current focus on cooperation with Egypt may be due to the fact that other regional issues, like Iran's nuclear program, currently draw the bulk of its attention. Still, it is important to repeat that relations with Egypt are determined by the continuous search for stability. Stability is in the interest of both parties, watering down the implementation of democratic principles. In this regard, a strategic ally like Egypt will not share the same fate as Georgia or the Ukraine, where US foundations are proud of having built vibrant civil societies that swept away unfriendly dictators in the aftermath of elections.

Social Reform and »Good Governance«

How external pressure for democracy may be turned to one's advantage can be further illustrated by social reform projects. Egypt's higher education reform, started in 1998, is an example of Egypt's adjustment to »good governance,« another component of the international democratization agenda. While promoters of good governance draw a direct link from »participatory governance« to »democratization« (Santioso 2001) the introduction of the principle was subject to negotiations in the Egyptian case. Working closely together with the World Bank Group, the government adapted to the principle without implementing real change.

Egypt is a major recipient country of development aid and cooperates with USAID¹⁷, the European Union, and the World Bank in fields like in-

16. Despite a common platform the Nasserists, the Neo-Wafd party, the Tagammu' party, the Karama party, and the El Ghad party won only 12 seats.

17. US Agency for International Development. USAID is the government agency providing US economic and humanitarian assistance worldwide for more than 40 years.

frastructure, health, education, and micro-finance. While Egypt is still rated low in terms of democratic governance by international comparison (Bertelsmann 2004), the World Bank has recognized slow progress in the field of »participatory governance.« The way the government designed its current higher education reform has been designated »best practice« (World Bank Group 2002). Former minister for higher education Moufid Shehab set up a committee in 1998 in order to build consensus for the reform. The committee included stakeholders from civil society and the private sector. A large national conference in 2000, comprising university professors and students, adopted the Higher Education Enhancement Project. In support of this process, the World Bank approved a credit line to implement parts of the reform program.

The higher education reform is an example of the very pragmatic way in which an international organization may act in a particular country, despite its – at least proclaimed – underlying development ideology. The way the reform has been prepared hardly meets expectations linked to »good governance.« If the creation of the National Committee constitutes an important change in Egyptian politics, it has had none of the consequences described in the World Bank's governance agenda, neither empowering segments of civil society nor fostering a transparent and accountable decision-making process. Participation in the committee was restricted to high-ranking officials from the government, administration, and universities. Managers of industrial conglomerates represented the private sector. Those ranking lower in the hierarchy – such as assistant professors and students – had no influence in the decision-making process and were merely informed of the results. In terms of political representation, the committee lacked legitimacy, given that members of opposition parties and professional associations were absent from the process. After all, the committee did not control implementation of the reform. The government called for participation without empowering the stakeholders with any prerogatives.

These shortcomings are at least partially due to the nature of the cooperation between the World Bank and Egypt. Bank experts cooperated directly with the government in the preparation phase of the reform, making recommendations regarding the composition of the committee. Government control therefore put clear limits on the scope of participation. The Committee's creation promised a »bottom-up« approach to public policy formulation, but it operated as a forum to channel conflicting interests within the administration. With regard to the limited results

in terms of governance, it is important to note that the cooperation with the World Bank in the case of higher education involved many policy issues, some more, some less sensitive for the client country. Compliance on one issue made it possible to water down expectations considerably in other fields. While the Egyptian government only partially adopted the principle of »participatory governance,« it adjusted the higher education reform program to the World Bank's recommendations (Kohstall 2007).

Regardless of its many constraints, the cooperation with the World Bank seems very much a positive benefit for the Egyptian regime. Egypt's government is in need of support to push through reform projects. Despite the widely held view of an omnipotent state, sensitive policy issues quickly meet the resistance of the affected population. When the Minister for Higher Education announced a draft amending the existing university law, protests from professors holding senior positions in the university forced him to withdraw the draft. Because of the state's weakness, the World Bank is able to push through unpopular reform measures. Certainly, cooperation with an international organization like the World Bank is often criticized in public debates as interference in domestic affairs, but this cooperation also provides the government with expertise, financial support, and international recognition, crucial in the domestic policy battle. Policy suggestions formulated with the support of the World Bank are internationally recognized and difficult to oppose.

World Bank-monitored reforms probably best illustrate that the precise meaning of democratization depends on a negotiation process. The World Bank is so closely involved in many reform processes that any project potentially subject to financial support is first of all negotiated between the Egyptian administration and the Bank's experts. The Bank provides the government with expertise and invests in the training of national decision-makers. On the other hand, talking about and partially complying with »good governance« constitutes an important benefit for authoritarian rulers as long as it strengthens links with the World Bank. In this negotiation process, civil society organizations and stakeholders are the weakest part of the governance triangle. They are no more than observers in the negotiation process engaging mainly the World Bank and government officials.

Some Unintended Consequences of Democracy Promotion

Does democracy promotion make a difference? The wide acceptance of democratic vocabulary in the rhetoric of authoritarian rulers is worrisome. When it comes to political reform, »democratization« and »good governance« are not only invoked by the international community and the domestic opposition, but also by the regime. Egypt's authoritarian regime is carefully adapting to the international democratization agenda without losing control over the political realm. It introduces pluralistic elections and widens participation without modifying the center of power. These adjustments constitute a delicate puzzle for the international community.

Political reform in a friendly country like Egypt takes place within the framework of close cooperation, be it with the United States or a multilateral donor like the World Bank. While the democracy promoters are interested in the creation of democratic structures and stability, the Egyptian government seeks international recognition and maintenance of the *status quo*. The politics of adjustment are taking place within these limits. In practice, the introduction of pluralistic elections and participatory governance goes only as far as is required to gain international recognition in exchange for compromises regarding the democratization agenda. The level of adjustment is low, focusing mainly on principles, not real political change.

With respect to this logic of negotiation, it might be asked whether the continuing rhetoric of democratization is not an obstacle to real change. Can gradual democracy promotion within the framework of close cooperation meet its goals? In the last decade Egypt has started various reform projects without bringing them to fruition. Paying lip service to catchwords such as democratization and liberalization, many reforms have never seen the light of day, while others have been implemented only to be revised the next day. Some of the measures implemented after Mubarak's announcement of the recent constitutional amendment could easily serve to illustrate the famous phrase: »If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change.« Following up on the constitutional amendment, the NDP made the party's law more restrictive. After the Muslim Brotherhood's gains in the parliamentary elections, municipal elections were cancelled by the government on the pretext that the voting system had to be adapted to the provisions of the new Article 76. Despite Mubarak's electoral promises to finally revoke the state of emergency and

to pass an anti-terrorist law, martial law was extended for further two years on April 30, 2006. This new phase of deliberalization after last year's apparent liberalization is more a characteristic of authoritarian rule than a step towards democracy (Kienle 2003).

So far, reforms have been partial, selective, and unilaterally decided by the ruling party without consultation with the opposition. The latter has had to accept the permanent changes to the rules of the game. In the context of political reform, opposition forces have to confront a climate of structural uncertainty. Depending on the rules set by the regime, they must choose between participation and abstention. In 2005, all opposition parties called for the boycott of the constitutional referendum, and of the more important opposition parties only the El Ghad and the Neo-Wafd parties nominated a candidate for the presidential elections.

This permanent change in the rules of the game is not at the request of the international community. The latest deliberalization measures have been widely criticized. However, we may ask whether the rhetoric of reform is helping to stabilize the rules of the game or whether it favors ceaseless reform pirouettes.

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