

## Transformation without Democratization? Egypt's Political Future

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**F**rom a distance, the Egyptian parliamentary elections in autumn 2000 appeared to bring to an end the period of political deliberalization and therefore the erosion of political and civil liberties that had marked much of the 1990s. This time no more than 87 percent of the seats went to members of President Mubarak's National Democratic Party (NDP), compared to more than 94 percent in the assembly (s)elected in 1995. Accordingly, 56 seats in the 454-seat assembly went to representatives of opposition parties and unaffiliated candidates, compared to only 27 seats previously. More strikingly, 17 seats went to declared Islamists, most of them closely linked to the otherwise still outlawed Muslim Brotherhood. In contrast, only one oppositional Islamist had managed to enter the outgoing assembly before being stripped of his parliamentary immunity. Roughly at the same time President Mubarak's son Gamal, widely seen and publicized as a young, dynamic modernizer, became active in the NDP, presented himself as an economic and political reformer, and left many observers with the impression that the sclerotic regime was perhaps open to change after all. These expectations seemed further confirmed when he became chair of the NDP's Policy Secretariat and began to advocate the abolition of some of the country's special tribunals, the removal of sentences of hard labor from the penal code, and the creation of a national human rights council.

Leaving aside the troubling but currently receding possibility of semi-monarchical succession, Egypt could appear to be back on the track towards political liberalization and democratization that it seemed to have abandoned in the early 1990s. The standard argument – or rather belief – developed or held by the enthusiasts of globalization seems to have been rehabilitated: the spread of models of good practice and governance, the

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support of civil society, democracy promotion, and in particular economic reform in the sense of economic liberalization ultimately prove to be irresistible and, despite temporary blockages, lead to the transition from authoritarian rule in the »Third World«.

At the same time, the increase in the number of Islamist deputies after the 2000 elections could indicate the renewed rise of what is commonly – but often inappropriately – called »political Islam«. In other words, the other main preoccupation – alongside democracy – that has kept Egypt-watchers busy in the past seems to have reappeared as the largely alternative vanishing point of political change in the country. Having little sympathy for Islamists, European and American promoters of democracy have reason to rejoice, but also to worry (recent claims by representatives of the current US administration that Islam is compatible with democracy are hardly meant to apply to Islamists). Enhanced opportunities for political participation could even benefit Islamist forces that are often considered enemies of democracy. Consequently, the widely assumed positive nexus of economic reform, improving standards of living, democracy, and its consolidation through the concomitant demise of Islamist forces allegedly thriving on poverty could be thrown into question.

We shall argue that developments in Egypt represent neither a transition to democracy nor a transition to an Islamist regime – or, to be more precise, to a regime more Islamist than the present one; we shall also argue that the (relative) rise of Islamist forces is not necessarily incompatible with democracy. At the same time, we question the simplistic links that are frequently postulated between economic reform, political reform, and Islamism.<sup>1</sup>

## **The Transition to Democracy that Never Was**

### **Three Decades of Half-Hearted Reforms**

Those who detect signs of democratization endorse, though perhaps unwillingly, the official narrative of the country's recent history according

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I. Democracy will be defined as the possibility for the ruled to replace the rulers peacefully and at regular intervals in accordance with clearly established procedures. Islamists will be defined as actors who, whether in government or in opposition, seek to (re)organize public and private life in accordance with values and norms that they themselves consider as Islamic.

to which Egypt has been in transition to democracy since 1977 when President Anwar al-Sadat dissolved the old single party, the Arab National Union, and in 1979 held the first pluri-party elections after the fall of the monarchy. For them the 2000 elections and other elements, including Gamal Mubarak's reform program, confirm that the dark years of the 1990s were nothing but a temporary setback due to particularly unfavorable circumstances. Depending on whether they emphasize the role of actors or of structures, they are convinced that either the democratic convictions of the rulers or the march of history, which may even open up new opportunities for grassroots actors, will inevitably and ultimately transform the country into a true democracy. Reinforced by regime changes in the successive »waves« of democratization that hit first Southern Europe and Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s, and then Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union in the 1980s and 1990s, mainstream evolutionist and teleological visions of history indeed leave little choice when it comes to making sense of political change in Egypt.

However, a closer look at Egypt's history should lead to different conclusions. What under Sadat appeared to be a process of political liberalization and democratization was indeed a far more complex attempt to moderately enhance liberties in ways that could not harm the regime. The changes were not simply rhetorical, but real in the sense that some new people could enter parliament and new fora for discussion and debate were opened up. Also, the creation of the Supreme Constitutional Court (SCC) in 1979 ultimately strengthened the rule of law. Simultaneously, however, mechanisms were put in place that restricted the new liberties. Regime control of most of the media, the active creation of inherently weak and mutually suspicious opposition parties, new but discreet repressive legislation, and more heavy-handed methods of vote rigging guaranteed the NDP the two-thirds majority necessary to fix presidential elections and to amend the constitution. Consequently, the regime's survival in power was never at stake.

To the contrary, one could argue that, as in numerous other countries, limited political openness and controlled opposition gave additional support to the authoritarian regime. Controlled openness gave a certain amount of leeway to a population that, as a result of the simultaneous selective economic liberalization known as »infitah,« was increasingly questioning the old partly socialist, partly statist Nasserist consensus and articulating conflicting interests. Controlled openness also provided an opportunity for new constituencies, in particular the crony capitalists

produced by the infitah, to ingratiate themselves with the regime, that was eager to find new allies in the attempt to redefine its social base.

Sadat's successor, Husni Mubarak, soon after assuming the presidency attempted to develop a more coherent policy of regime-supporting political decompression. The showcase event was the 1984 parliamentary election, although the regime party garnered 87 percent of the seats, just one percent less than in 1979. Given significant advance publicity at home and abroad, closely followed by the international press who could cover the elections without restriction, they were generally considered and reported as free and fair. However, while flagrant fraud and vote rigging were limited or relegated to less visible parts of the electoral process, a set of factors that may be called the structural supremacy of the regime continued to force competitors of the NDP to fight an impossible uphill struggle on a less than level playing field. Such structural supremacy – in some ways even hegemony – derived from the support of the armed forces, control of the media, and control over an economy in which partial economic liberalization had created regime-dependent capitalists. A legislature packed with regime-dependent deputies enabled Mubarak to tolerate an opposition which, precisely because of its own structural inferiority, remained unable to challenge the regime seriously or to cross the red line that had been drawn around its activities.

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However, the regime was not uncontested. In 1987 and in 1990 (and again in 2000), the SCC declared unconstitutional legislation that had governed the preceding parliamentary elections. Consequently, on each occasion parliament had to be dissolved and new elections had to be called under amended legislation that gradually reduced regime control over the election process and, ultimately, over the results.

The regime was threatened not only by the courts, that whittled away its structural superiority, but also – and far more directly – by oppositional Islamists who, depending on the narrative, either challenged the existing order or resisted attempts by the regime to reconquer the geographical and metaphorical territory that it had previously lost or left to

them. Contrary to widespread belief, the oppositional Islamists posed a threat to the regime not because they were Islamists but because they were oppositional. The conflict was less about ideology than about power and the spoils associated with it. Indeed, Islamists could easily be found in the regime and in the ranks of its supporters, if by Islamists one designates political actors who seek to reorganize public and private life in accordance with norms they consider as Islamic.

In addition, the 1990s were marked by economic reforms that at least in the short run threatened the living standard of numerous Egyptians and indeed entailed material losses for many of them. In 1991, agreements with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank put in place programs of macroeconomic stabilization and structural adjustment inspired by what was then known as the Washington Consensus. In the longer run growth was to be fostered through increasing productivity and competitiveness based on deregulation, including the gradual liberalization of foreign trade, the privatization of public sector companies, and an increase of the role of the market in resource allocation. Socially, the reduction of employment and wage levels or even the closure of companies were the likely – and indeed actual – consequences.

The conflict between the regime and oppositional Islamists, the distributional effects of the economic reforms, and regime attempts to neutralize the more liberal and participatory amendments to the electoral law imposed by the SCC resulted in a process of political deliberalization that began in 1991 and marked most of the decade. Political opponents were prosecuted,<sup>2</sup> parliamentary elections were rigged as never before, professional organizations were put under regime tutelage, trade union rights were curtailed, and strikes put down by the police.

By the end of the decade the regime had defeated the oppositional Islamists involved in armed resistance and terrorism; in the process it had also managed to contain the Muslim Brothers, who sought to bring about change without resorting to violence. Also, the worst initial effects of macroeconomic stabilization had been overcome and the economy

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2. The penal code was substantially modified and included far harsher sentences than in the past for political crimes. Increasingly, sensitive cases were referred to special tribunals, civilians were tried by military courts, countless death sentences were handed down and executed, the practice of administrative detention without trial under emergency legislation was generalized, and torture and extra-judicial killings became a standard feature of repression.

had recovered, with growth rates rising from around zero in 1991/92 to some five percent in 1996/97, entailing some degree of statistical growth in per capita income as well. Under these circumstances the regime felt partly able – partly compelled by its allies abroad – to proceed to a degree of political decompression. In the 2000 elections oppositional forces did slightly better, avoiding an embarrassingly large majority for the regime. Simultaneously, administrative detainees were released (though others were arrested after September 2001) and repression was slightly eased. The first woman judge was appointed and women can now obtain divorce more easily. In early summer 2003 the reforms advocated by Gamal Mubarak were translated into law.

However, in the same period the Ibn Khaldun Center was closed by the regime and its staff, including its director, Saad Eddin Ibrahim, were arrested on fabricated charges. Newly elected members of parliament quickly lost their seats to more regime-friendly ones in heavily rigged by-elections. Representatives of opposition forces, in particular the Muslim Brothers, continue to be arrested and tried for dubious reasons.

In the economic sphere, structural adjustment has been less successful than macroeconomic stabilization and the pauperization of large parts of the population, starting with the reforms, has continued in a period of decreasing economic activity and growth. More recently, the regime was forced to devalue the Egyptian pound, a decision that heavily increased the cost of living in a country in which imports account for a large part of food consumption and basic commodities. Trade liberalization under WTO rules and the new association agreement with the EU will further test an economy whose international competitiveness is far from being established. Policing the losers (and the winners, who might get too strong and become challengers from inside) therefore remains a key concern of the regime.

Thus, on balance, political decompression has not gone very far. Sometimes change has been proposed or announced but not implemented, and what has been implemented remains easily reversible. None of the changes affect the structural superiority or hegemony of the regime.

## The Absence of Alternative Power Centers

Most critically, the changes are far too limited to allow the emergence of power centers independent of the regime that could become strong

enough to effectively challenge the latter and force it to enter into power-sharing arrangements. Processes of that sort were crucial to the kind of transformation that produced the political systems that today we consider established democracies.

In Egypt, the oppositional political parties are far too weak and restricted in their activities to play such a role. Civil society defined as it is today as non-profit associations and organizations independent of the state, is no stronger. The most effective mediators between the state and the individual are still the more communally-based ones. Certainly, the latest Egyptian law on non-profit associations (commonly referred to, to some extent inaccurately, as non-governmental organizations or NGOs) makes them independent of the regime in the sense that the latter no longer appoints up to half their board members. However, their creation and activities remain severely restricted and policed. Transgressions entail stiff penalties, including dissolution of the association. Moreover, they are too diffuse to confront the regime effectively, and even if they formed a united front they would have little material clout. Financially, the more political ones largely depend on foreign funding which often delegitimizes them in the eyes of Egyptians who remain staunch nationalists, especially when it comes to relations with »the West«. It is indeed one of the more serious misconceptions of our times that the growth of civil society necessarily brings democracy. Historically, it has certainly been associated with processes of democratization but largely as a by-product of the wider socio-economic transformations that led to the emergence of competing power centers representing corporate, class, regional, or ethnic (including religious) interests.

The private sector has not emancipated itself from the regime or turned into one or more competing power centers either. It no doubt grew significantly as a result of the economic reforms that started timidly in the late 1980s and gained momentum after the 1991 agreements with the IMF and the World Bank. The changes were far more substantial than those prompted by the *infitah* of the 1970s that merely added a dependent private sector to what was still a public-sector-dominated economy. Since the late 1990s the private sector has accounted for some 60 percent of gross domestic fixed investment, compared to some 25 to 33 percent in the early 1980s. Every year since the early 1990s new private investment has outpaced new public investment. Private consumption now amounts to some 80 percent of GDP, compared to less than 70 percent in the 1980s. However, the vast majority of private sector companies remain small and

medium-size enterprises with a workforce of no more than a dozen or two, with similarly small market shares. With a few exceptions business organizations are either non-existent, state-dependent, or of a local nature. Very few entrepreneurs have managed to create large companies, which by and large remain family enterprises. So far, none of them has openly challenged the regime in any way. Material advantages granted especially to large businesses, particularly in terms of taxation, may indeed have been sovereignly granted from above without concerted and sustained demand from below. On the contrary, President Mubarak has repeatedly reminded business people of their duties, both individually or collectively, to the country and the regime. Those who failed to listen discovered that social mobility could work not only upwards but also downwards.

To date, the judiciary – with the obvious exception of special and military tribunals – remains the most active and effective countervailing power in relation to the regime. Though ultimately part of the state, the courts have, to varying degrees, escaped regime control. This is not to say that they cannot be influenced, that their rulings are technically flawless, or that they are based on values one might like to sign up to. Saad Eddin Ibrahim and his colleagues at the Ibn Khaldun Center had to wait three years for the Court of Cassation to quash earlier rulings confirming their initial condemnation. Nonetheless, judges cannot be removed from the bench and their selection, promotion, and transfer to other courts are entirely in the hands of a committee made up of their most senior representatives. The Supreme Constitutional Court is the only court other than special and military courts in which the regime – in fact, the president himself – is formally in a position to influence the appointment of the judges; however, his influence is limited to a choice between candidates proposed by the other judges of the court.

### Authoritarian Rule Reconfigured

Rather than force political change in Egypt – and in numerous other countries – into the conceptual straightjacket of an inevitable transition to democracy we should interpret it as the reconfiguration of authoritarian rule. There is no reason why authoritarian rule today should present the same features as authoritarian rule in the past or in the days when the concept was forged by authors such as Juan Linz. For instance, why not assume that authoritarianism may be combined with limited participa-



tory elements, in particular in a period in which political legitimacy is almost entirely defined in terms of electoral democracy? In Egypt, positive and negative liberties have sometimes shrunk or been reduced, while in other periods they have grown or been expanded. Never, however, have they been allowed to grow sufficiently to enable us to call the political system a democracy. Obviously, things may change in the future, but without the emergence of independent power centers – whether formal or informal – such a future seems remote.<sup>3</sup>

## The Sources of Regime Resilience

The claim that Egypt is not in transition to democracy obviously raises the question of why its political system is resistant to such change. We have noted the absence of power centers independent of the regime and able to compete with it, as well as with each other. Explaining the continuity of authoritarian rule indeed means explaining the absence of such power centers and why they have not emerged or been consolidated. It also means explaining why the regime largely (but not exclusively) through the state that it inherited, rebuilt, and reproduced has been able to acquire such a dominant position vis-à-vis other actors and to maintain its control not only over the physical means of coercion but also – in spite of satellite television – over the media, minds, civil society, and the economy.

Part of the answer certainly lies in the dominant role played by the state and therefore the regime in the Egyptian economy ever since the agrarian reforms and nationalizations decreed by Nasser in the 1950s and 1960s. Private sector growth in the 1970s failed to weaken the position of the state, partly because of the lack of concentration of private ownership, partly because of crony capitalist arrangements in which the private sector remained the junior partner of an unaccountable regime monopolizing

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3. The description of Egypt as a country in transition to democracy is further thrown into question by the possibility of a semi-monarchical succession, should Mubarak's son, Gamal, be elected president. No doubt he would be elected in accordance with the constitution, but the election procedure lends itself well to paternal filiation. Gamal Mubarak is considered by many an agent of modernization, but reforms proposed by a candidate whose rise was due entirely to the existing authoritarian system are at least questionable.

the means of physical coercion. At the same time, economic liberalization carried out by an authoritarian regime obviously entailed not deregulation but regime-friendly reregulation and thus failed to affect state control over the economy. Under these conditions civil society cannot rely on autonomous domestic sources of support, nor can independent media easily mobilize the resources necessary to confront state-controlled radio and television.

Another part of the answer lies in the military foundations of the regime, permanently consolidated by external threats, alleged or real, readily accepted by a deeply nationalist population as policy constraints. Imperialism is still lurking; Israel remains suspect in spite of the peace treaty; Sudan and countries further up the Nile threaten the country's water supplies; and Islamist terrorists are ready to strike throughout the Middle East. These threats have been partly sublimated into the claim that Egypt needs to play the role of a regional power and maintain order in a disorderly part of the world. Thus successive Egyptian regimes have managed to justify a national security state with all the restrictions on liberty that go with that. Indeed, even the role of the state in the economy and limits on economic liberalization are officially justified with reference to security concerns.

A third part of the answer lies in external material and diplomatic support, to which we shall return in greater detail below. Under Sadat and Mubarak, Egypt has been generously rewarded by the United States and Europe for recognizing Israel and fighting Islamists. More generally, such support was supposed to ensure the country's stability and the longevity of its friendly rulers. It encouraged the regime's regional ambitions and thus the repression of domestic challengers. It also repeatedly allowed the regime to ignore demands for economic reform formulated by the Bretton Woods institutions that might have weakened crony capitalism.

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The mechanisms of control and repression that these factors made possible to put in place and to maintain could have been affected by the notorious internal divisions of the state apparatus. Similar to other large organizations, the Egyptian state consists of numerous elements, including ministries, government agencies, corporatist solidarity groups, clien-

teles, and networks that have carved out for themselves a degree of autonomy and try to ingratiate themselves with the president and vie for budgetary favors and administrative responsibilities.

The state apparatus remains divided. Censorship is a case in point as various agencies, including the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the Ministry of Information and relevant departments at al-Azhar University seek to ban or promote different opinions. Another example is the NDP whose leadership is notoriously unable to impose its candidates against challengers from within the party. Nonetheless, the regime has managed to contain both divisions and ambitions. High-ranking army officers are regularly moved from post to post to prevent them from building up their own support base, while the police have been strengthened to keep the armed forces in check. Within their respective forces, the defense and the interior minister are encumbered by their deputies or chiefs of staff, and the secret services watch each other. The fragmentation of the state apparatus is in fact actively used to maintain the balance of power among its various segments.

As the regime has successfully managed the internal divisions of the state apparatus non-regime actors were unable to ally themselves with challengers to the status quo from within. This is not to say that the various components of the state apparatus were insulated from »society« in ways we (sometimes naively) assume characterize »modern« Weberian states. Many state agencies and officials in Egypt connive with non-state actors or are colonized by them. However, in its effects such porosity remains limited to the pursuit of material interest, circumvention of the law, and promotion of norms considered as Islamic; even in these areas repression tends to strike when matters get out of hand and the »wrong« people make unacceptably large gains. Thus the regime has acted against corruption when privileged interests were at stake or pretenders had to be put in their place. Similarly, the armed forces – except for the assassins of President Sadat – have remained largely immune to subversion by oppositional Islamists.

Obviously, the regime's ability to control its various agencies is to a considerable extent a question of resources. Human and material resources are needed to feed the steady flow of legitimating propaganda via print and electronic media, to operate the technical means of surveillance, and to maintain the generous entitlement programs which enable officials to buy, at cheap rates, holiday flats overlooking the Mediterranean or the Red Sea. As a matter of course, opponents must not be in a posi-

tion to mobilize similar resources, an objective not too difficult to attain as long as the regime enjoys structural superiority.

## **The Role of Outside Actors: Complicity or Interference?**

As in other third-world countries, outside actors are key providers of the material resources which enable the regime to maintain its structural superiority at home. Consequently, these actors are – at least in principle and within the limits of their own calculations – in a position to put pressure on the regime. Controlling access to a large market for Egyptian products and disbursing various sorts of aid as they do, the European Union and its member states could activate human rights and democracy clauses in the new association agreement based on the principles of the Barcelona Declaration and the Euro-Mediterranean partnership. Alternatively, the European Union could replace or combine these rather vague forms of political conditionality with new instruments that actively encourage political change: for instance, (additional) aid and access to markets could be granted, subject to increasing political participation, easing repression, and strengthening the rule of law.

As the major international backer of the Egyptian regime the USA could have even greater leverage. The US administration and Congress could reduce or cut military and civilian aid (currently 1.3 billion and 0.6 billion US dollars per annum, respectively), although civilian aid is in fact to be phased out over time anyway. Furthermore, US influence over the IMF and the World Bank could block or delay stand-by loans and funding for structural adjustment measures. Until recently President Mubarak had managed to defeat such initiatives or temptations in their early stages, largely by stressing his commitment to peace with Israel and his track record in fighting Islamism.

Matters changed after September 11, 2001, when the advocates of speedy global democratization in and around the Bush administration established an explicit link between terrorism and authoritarianism. The argument was most forcefully developed with regard to Saudi Arabia, the home country of most of the suicide hijackers. However, the involvement, alleged or real, of Egyptian nationals such as Ayman al-Zawahiri in al-Qa'ida and other international terrorist networks brought the Egyptian regime into US sights. More or less vocal depending on the shifting balance of power within the administration the anti-terrorist democratiz-

ers seemed to gain ground again when President Bush himself in early November 2003 asked the Egyptian regime to show its neighbors the road to democracy. Nonetheless, others in the administration, some of them pointing to the demise of neoconservative projects for Iraq, continue to argue that authoritarian regimes keep in check Islamists who otherwise could come to power through the ballot box and pose a yet more powerful threat to American, Israeli, and other »Western« interests. They point out that the Mubarak regime has managed to defeat terrorism at home, although its victory came at a very high price in terms of lives and liberties.

Support from other Arab states ceased in 1979 when Egypt signed the peace treaty with Israel. Even when relations improved again and the Arab League moved back to Egypt, official aid never reached its former peaks. From the mid-1980s the oil price declined and so did the revenues of the major oil producing states. As a result there was less to give away to poorer neighbors such as Egypt. Though also declining, remittances sent home by the millions of Egyptian migrant workers in the Gulf and in Libya remained one of the major balance of payment items; this income of course largely escaped the state, even though it did try to tax it. There was also a degree of Arab investment and allegedly large amounts of money were paid by various private and public sources in the Gulf to oppositional Islamists in the country. Given their own vested interests the majority of Arab donors would hardly link finance to political reform. And when Egyptian remittances were put into the then growing Islamic banks the regime stepped in and closed down institutions which it feared would strengthen oppositional Islamists.

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A more complex question is whether open external pressure for political reform or even regime change would be helpful or counter-productive. In the eyes of key constituencies and the wider public in Egypt any such pressure would be a sign of interference by basically hostile imperialist powers who dominated their country in the past and now seek to dominate it in new, more up to date ways. Democracy and human rights

frequently appear suspicious because they are advocated by the actors and forces that dominate the global scene and, from an Arab point of view, fail to defend the human rights of Palestinians living under Israeli occupation. Past experience and the acute awareness of present vulnerability combine to reinforce communitarian reflexes and identity politics that manifest themselves in the defense of the indigenous against the alien and thus of existing political arrangements. Indeed, the old semi-parliamentarian regimes that governed Syria, Iraq, and Egypt before the revolutions of the 1950s and 1960s were created by the imperialist powers and largely remained under their influence, sometimes formalized by special treaties of an entirely unequal nature. It therefore comes as no surprise that European funding for the Ibn Khaldun Center in Cairo and its political reform initiatives – such as the strengthening of civil society, the protection of minority and women's rights, or the monitoring of parliamentary elections – seem highly suspicious in the eyes not only of the Egyptian rulers but also of the ruled, including even intellectuals critical of authoritarian rule.

In Egypt and elsewhere the promotion of democracy from outside can be successful only if it is based on an understanding of how the transition from authoritarian rule unfolded in those states that we consider consolidated democracies today. Of course, the historic experience of Europe and North America cannot just be repeated in other countries, such as Egypt. Politics at the periphery differ from politics at the center and so do political conditions in different centuries. Nor should it necessarily be repeated if one takes into consideration the countless victims of revolutions, counter-revolutions, coups and counter-coups that marked the conflicts between power centers and the frequently arrested and reversed process of democratization in the UK, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and elsewhere. One may even claim that the democratization of Britain took several centuries before universal suffrage was finally established in 1928. In France, one could argue that the process came to a conclusion only with the end of the Vichy regime, possibly only when President De Gaulle succeeded in thwarting the coup attempt by officers opposed to Algerian independence. In Germany, only the liberation from Nazi rule – after more than a century of struggle and with the exception of the brief Weimar interlude – marked the beginning of democratic rule, at least in its Western parts.

The promotion of democracy from outside depends on whether or not external actors are able to favor the emergence of competing power cen-

ters, so to speak »in vitro«, more speedily than in the classic cases of democratization and with less human cost. Even leaving aside the disturbing questions of the moral right to interfere from outside and the potentially perverse consequences of such interference, the matter is by no means simple. As a matter of course, any such attempt should strengthen existing centers, even if they exist in nuce rather than in actual fact. The past failure of civil society and of the private sector to develop into such power centers does not preclude them from playing a role in the future, provided the former is seen as no more than a contributory factor, and the latter – or parts of it – manage to emancipate themselves from the regime. The complete emancipation of the private sector depends on guarantees of property rights and therefore on legislation implemented by a non-partisan bureaucracy, backed by a judiciary yet more independent than the current Egyptian courts. Such independence is in turn conditional on the complete separation of powers, both *de iure* and *de facto*, itself unfortunately dependent on the emergence of competing power centers.

In the meantime, more modest objectives would have to be identified, such as mechanisms to monitor privatization and prevent it from strengthening crony capitalism, without, however, dispersing assets among too many owners who would be unable to coordinate their action. Any such move would have to be accompanied by measures to make the trade unions fully independent of the regime and to strengthen them in terms of membership and organizational capacity. The established democracies also owe much to conflicts between labor and capital. A third possibility would be cuts in foreign aid and other income from external rent that would weaken the state economically *vis-à-vis* other domestic actors and forces, reduce its distributional capacities, and force it to increase taxation. Hopefully, taxation would result in more sustained demands for representation and participation. Every one of these options may still be seen as open interference, but at least they would have an impact on the internal balance of power. Obviously, they would be more complex than simply dishing out financial aid or organizing democracy training programs for the police; they depend on a detailed understanding of the ways in which the regime's structural superiority works.

## An Islamist Democracy?

Once the playing field has been leveled and a more egalitarian distribution of politically relevant resources has been achieved, the resulting possibilities for oppositional Islamists to freely organize and compete for influence would certainly strengthen them in various ways. So far, the regime has prevented oppositional Islamists from establishing effective political organizations or winning too many seats in parliament and other assemblies. What today is latent and repressed would become manifest. Many Egyptians and foreign observers fear that Islamists who today are in opposition would not play by the rules, and ultimately would try to establish a new authoritarian regime. Such an outcome cannot be altogether excluded.

However, more or less informed guesses as to their popularity put their prospective electoral scores at no more than 30 or 40 percent of the votes. Probably their overall score would be divided between competing Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood itself and its dissidents who, in their attempt to form the »Wasat party«, came close to creating the Muslim version of a European Christian Democratic party. Many voters, convinced of the need to respect values and norms that they consider Islamic, could well continue to throw in their lot with the regime and its party who, since the days of Sadat, have contributed to the growing »Islamization« of Egypt, without calling themselves Islamists. The split of the Islamist vote would ipso facto favor a degree of pluralism: the competition between the various Islamist forces would allow or even necessitate alliances with non-Islamist forces.

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As the unfortunately aborted experience of the Wasat shows, the rise of hitherto marginalized Islamists may be compatible with democratization and democracy.

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The overall proportion of the Islamist vote is unlikely to rise or fall with poverty or per capita income alone. Neither in Egypt nor in other Muslim countries is there a contradiction between private business success and Islamist attitudes. The Muslim Brothers draw much of their support from smaller owners of capital and professionals. The leaders of violent groups such as the Islamic Jihad and the Jama'a Islamiyya were also – largely young – professionals. Poverty and income play a role pri-



marily because they are determinants of exclusion. However, social or societal exclusion is a consequence not only of local income differentials within a given country but also of perceived inequalities, material and symbolical, on a global scale and therefore intimately linked to globalization and its avatars. As long as Egyptian business people need to queue for hours in the sun in front of European consular services, and as long as legitimate Palestinian concerns remain ignored, the world will remain unequal, characterized by the sort of exclusion that fuels identity politics. The question of whether the legalization and rise of Islamist parties would simultaneously result in the Islamization of social practices and regime policies and legislation remains open. On the one hand, this trend is already under way under the present regime; on the other, many oppositional Islamists and Islamists outside the regime seem to be rather pragmatic, in particular those who sought to establish the Wasat Party. The case of Turkey, where the Islamist Refah Party was first refounded as the Fazilet Party and then as the AKP (Adelet ve Kalkinma Partisi), illustrates a scenario also possible in Egypt.

## **Transformation without Democratization**

Ultimately, the democratization of Egypt's political system could result in no more than limited gains for presently outlawed Islamist organizations; nor would it necessarily reinforce what is rather loosely called the Islamization of public or private life. More importantly, as the unfortunately aborted experience of the Wasat shows, the rise of hitherto marginalized Islamists may be compatible with democratization and democracy. The real question remains that of democratization itself, a process that remains hypothetical as long as no competing counter powers to the regime emerge and of course survive even after a possible change of regime. In the foreseeable future the Egyptian political system will certainly continue to adapt and to change, as most political systems continuously, though perhaps slowly and reluctantly, do. However, such transformations are unlikely to entail a transition to democracy in the definition adopted above or to liberal democracy in the sense of a regime that reconciles majority rule with guarantees for those who are not part of that majority.