The Dynamics of Egypt’s “Semi-opposition,” 2004-11

ABSTRACT This paper maps the basic opposition groups that influenced the Egyptian political system in the last years of Hosni Mubarak’s rule. It approaches the nature of the relationship between the system and the opposition through use of the concept of “semi-opposition.” An examination and evaluation of the opposition groups shows the extent to which the regime—in order to appear that it was opening the public sphere to the opposition—had channels of communication with the Muslim Brotherhood. The paper also shows the system’s relations with other groups, such as “Kifaya” and “April 6”; it then explains the reasons behind the success of the Muslim Brotherhood at seizing power after the ousting of President Mubarak. KEYWORDS semi-opposition, Egypt under Mubarak, state-society relations, pre-2011 political actors

INTRODUCTION

Despite Hosni Mubarak’s weakened credibility in the latter years of his presidency, his regime claimed to be securing Egypt against the Islamists who succeeded in dominating Egypt after his ousting.1 The way in which the regime structured the political opposition, which it controlled, repressed, and excluded, shaped the structural form of opposition groups and the ideas raised within the system. These factors, in turn, influenced the dynamics of transition in the post-Mubarak era.

The structure of the political opposition formed during the Mubarak regime in Egypt, which included the Kifaya movement and the April 6 group, as well as the societal dynamics that ensued after Mohamed El-Baradei’s return and the death of “Khaled Said,” meant that the opposition groups all shared their membership base with other existing opposition and social movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). After Mubarak was

1. The concept of “Islamists” is used here to refer to supporters of political movements that favor a reordering of both government and society in accordance with the laws prescribed by Islam.
ousted, many of the members of these opposition movements were drawn to pre-existing political parties or opposition groups that represented different ideological orientations; they were suddenly expected to take over power or renegotiate with state power and provide a vision for the future.

The inability of protestors and various opposition groups to develop structures capable of presenting alternatives to post-Mubarak rule allowed the MB’s leadership and organization to fill the political vacuum. The overwhelming success of Islamist parties at the elections revealed the huge challenges facing the new political phase. Although initially many members of Kifaya or the revolution coalitions supported the MB’s negotiations with the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), a cohesive plan for political transition became vague shortly after the MB acceded to power and the Salafi groups became involved in politics.

This article investigates the question of how an opposition group benefited from its participation in a longstanding authoritarian regime. In other words, although various opposition groups formed in the 2000s were actively challenging the regime, why was the MB the group that succeeded in gaining power after Mubarak was toppled? What were the, and through what, processes did the MB emerge as a possible contender with a revolutionary claim against the Mubarak regime?

**REGIME TOLERANCE AND THE STATUS OF “SEMI-OPPOSITION”**

In Egypt, both the cultural context of the social role played some opposition groups and the ability to build internal ideological and organizational commitment played a pivotal role in defining the social and economic strength and presence of each opposition group in the country. In return, the regime’s behavior towards such groups or parties was determined by this strength and presence and evolved according to it. The social and economic strength and presence of each opposition group also determined the extent of conflicts or cooperation between Islamist and non-Islamist opposition groups, but the primary tendency to conflict or to cooperation was mainly derived by the evolution of the regime’s attitude toward each individual specified group or party. Under Mubarak, the MB, despite being the main opposition group and excluded at the political level, was very influential socially and culturally, and cohesively organized; this subsequently paved the way for its political predominance and hegemony.

The qualitative changes that took place in the nature of the Egyptian state and society reflected the various political outcomes and resulted from shifting
societal alliances, on the one hand, and shifting interests that occurred from 2004 to early 2011, on the other. The state–society approach endorses a very important vision related to the flexibility and heterogeneity of societal alliances, the interests of such alliances vis-à-vis the state which formulated the nature and privacy of state–society relations and interactions during that period.

Understanding state–society relations, legacies of authoritarian regimes, and theories of societal dynamics help to illustrate the patterns of state and opposition cooperation and confrontation. An authoritarian regime involves the narrowing of civil society, yet “revolutions” embody the cohesion and alliance among civil society actors. The fact that various “semi opposition” groups exist, co-opt with the regime, and challenge it largely reflects the interactions between the state and society in Egypt. However, the question arises how this relationship can persist if there is no “common ground” between the two sides. Mubarak’s Egypt through the mechanisms of police brutality, inequality, and repressive practices sought to strengthen itself while weakening society. As such, Migdal (1994, 11) argued that Mubarak’s control could be seen as an effort to overcompensate for its weaknesses and to try to combat an empowered society.

This section refers to the general characteristics of opposition under the Mubarak regime, and especially to some political developments in Mubarak’s last years, with particular attention to his rule from 2004 to 2011. Understanding the approaches of Mubarak’s rule helps to illustrate some of the problems of the post “revolution” or the transitional period that stem from the problems of the past as political polarization, opposition exclusion, and the political repercussions of a dominant ruling party.

The nature of Mubarak’s “hybrid” regime structured in a limited form of democracy (Herbst 2001, 370–73; also Hadenius and Teorell 2007) ended up with new types of authoritarianism. The state’s repression of opposition movements, including civil society and political parties, prevented these intermediary institutions between the state and society from bringing a significant change in the regime. Thus, the state shaped the society and provided certain channels of opposition and political freedom. However, these channels of political opposition were limited and monitored by the state (Fahmy 2010, 58).

The literature on state–society relations argues that various perspectives on how the state and society are to interact. Despite attempts to come up with a definition of state–society relations, scholars related that society
provides key requirements of support for a state to be effective, and that a state is critical to collective action in society (Fahmy 2010, 58). In the case of Egypt, by the change of time and context, the structure of interests has been changed, and thus the dimensions of societal alliances have changed accordingly, addressing new givens towards the state–society relations embodied in the events and the various societal dynamics throughout the six years preceding Mubarak’s ousting. Here a concept of “semi-opposition” can be introduced.

According to Juan Linz, in his study of undemocratic regimes, “semi-oppositions are a subset of regime critics best defined by their deep contradictions.” “They operate within “semi-free” authoritarian power-sharing arrangements, and exhibit self-limiting practices. Accordingly, this kind of opposition does not aim at achieving radical change or systemic overthrow. Instead, it welcomes cooperating with the regime based on mutual goals.” In return, the semi free regime environment imposes certain costs on its opponents, this explains their readiness to cooperate, which sometimes contributes to the persistence of such regimes as well as the endurance of such opposition (Linz 2000, 168–71).

A semi-opposition operates in a semi-free environment, and is frequently tolerated by the regime. Linz suggests that semi-opposition disables reform and thus contributes to regime durability, and (opposition) continuity. The expected benefits for opposition in such systems are low, while the costs of participation could be high. If the opposition openly challenges the ruling party, it could subject itself to further restrictions or political repression. On the other hand, if it approves the regime’s agenda, it may lose the support from the constituents who voted for it as a challenge to the existing regime (Loudolt and Mecham 2016).

A question here may be beneficial: Why do opposition groups participate in an authoritarian regime? With the ability to oppose government policies, participate in discussions and debates, and question government, and despite government’s repression tools, the opposition can use these obstacles to upgrade its public image. On the other hand, the regime appears as an open one that allows all voices to be heard, so it appears more democratic internationally (Waterbury 1999). Opposition participation can also provide information to the regime on opposition strength and support bases (Brownlee 2002). The opposition participation in non-democratic regime gives “credibility” to both sides and adds more questions to the nature of state–society relations and the societal interactions that result from such relations.
But why do some opposition groups succeed in mobilizing people under and after the overthrow of an authoritarian rule while other opposition groups do not? The characteristics of political life during the authoritarian era shape the way in which political participation is active during and after the political transition. The constraints imposed by the regime influence both the form and the nature of political mobilization (della Porta and Diani 2006, 79). The social movements or opposition groups that pursued a transformative agenda through both formal and informal networks to challenge the regime authority or legitimacy have more success in mobilizing and forming legal channels in the time of transition (Tarrow 2011). The patterns and practices of participation that existed for decades before the point of transition have a large effect on which groups can mobilize supporters, to influence society and the polity, and to seize power in some cases (Scott 1989, 4).

In a “semi-opposition” context, a group of opposition parties and groups are “permitted” to challenge the regime. Some pro-reform activist groups may also form and attract different segments of the political opposition, including members of opposition political parties, for the purpose of engaging in protests, and challenging the regime in ways that “legal” parties cannot. A large number of the members of the pro-reform activist groups have ties to other political parties’ ideologies or orientations, so once new parties with synchronized orientations are formed, those members leave such groups and join the new parties that most probably are experienced in recruiting and mobilizing functions (Van Antwerp 2013, 46–48).

Opposition groups gain popularity through the levels of repression and exclusion they face under the regime. With respect to their ability to mobilize politically, it depends on which opposition group has the resources necessary to influence the political process after the overthrow of the authoritarian regime (Lust-Okar 2004). Groups that challenge the regime through both within system and extra channels develop a grassroots presence and a network of informal ties that enable them to mobilize and recruit voters in transitional periods. This credibility persuades people to support them, and to believe in their abilities to change and reform later.

The way in which the regime structures the political opposition during the authoritarian era determines the organizational form of opposition groups, the ideas contested within the system, and the amount of experience the opposition may acquire. These factors shape the processes of party formation and political mobilization at the point of regime transition (Lipset and Rokkan 1967, 120–22). The MB was the sole group to challenge the regime
through within and extra system channels, serving as an advantage for mobilization in the transitional period.

The next section will give some detailed features for the main opposition groups that influenced the political scene in Egypt starting in 2004. In addition, a group of new givens that shaped the nature of the state–society relations and the dynamics of the “semi-opposition” in Egypt as defined above is introduced.

A REPRESSIVE STATE IN A CONTEXT OF “SEMI-Opposition,” 2004–11

The Muslim Brotherhood (MB)

The MB has played the lead role in Egyptian society since the 1970s. Although it only won twenty percent of the available seats in the 2005 parliamentary elections, the MB’s eighty-eight parliamentary seats presented the main opposition group. Keeping with Linz’s description, the MB does not promote anti-regime violence or seek to replace the regime. Instead, it adopted a gradualist reform strategy that avoided direct confrontation with the state, and a willingness to accommodate and work within the existing political system (Kotob 1995). In general, the MB was a functional supporter of the Mubarak regime in the way that its existence in the political opposition offers legitimacy for the regime (Abdel Nasser and Hergasy 2003, 278). Mubarak’s men thought the MB, as an organ of political opposition, was less dangerous by portraying it as a “scarecrow” and thought that this would suffice to avoid political change.

The MB, as a religious organization, had gained both short- and long-term benefits by political participation under Mubarak, insofar as it challenged the main basic facets of state and society dynamics. The organization played an observable legislative role especially by highlighting government violations of law and, in so doing, was introduced as a credible political actor. On the other hand, despite opposition, members were able to raise some political issues; they tended to do this by first thanking the regime and stating their approval of its political leaders (Loudolt and Mecham 2016).

During periods of toleration, the MB established an extensive grassroots presence through charities, private mosques, and individual religious outreach activities. It also used other civil society organizations, such as professional syndicates for political outreach (El-Miselhy 2008, 49–50). These activities, at the grassroots level, constituted the construction of a “parallel society” that challenged the regime’s power. On the other hand, the regime gave the MB
a large space for social activities through hundreds of social care organizations and tens of schools and the leadership of professional syndicates thanks to the extended bargaining that went on between both sides. That bargaining was based on the condition that the MB, as a political opposition organization, did not approach the president, while focusing instead on his men and government. Even MB leaders refused to participate in activities that involved any kind of criticism of Mubarak, or call for early presidential elections between 2005 and 2011 (Hoffmann 2011, 70–73).

According to the MB, the most effective form of outreach was through direct personal contact embodied in social welfare voluntary organizations that enabled the MB to become a reliable provider of services (El-Miselhy 2008, 49–50). These associations emerged because of the Egyptian state’s inability to provide sufficient welfare services to a large segment of the Egyptian population, and because many civil society groups and some political parties found difficulties in establishing social care organizations. This provided the MB with a source of symbolic credibility. The regime’s recklessness with regards to social services can be understood in the light of Mubarak’s self-assurance and belief that he would be safe enough as long as the bargaining with the MB worked, and the weakness of opposition parties continued. These activities at the grassroots level challenged the regime’s legitimacy (Hamid 2014, 74–75). The regime-opposition relationships of inclusion and exclusion, and the ways in which the MB benefited or suffered from its position, later determined its success in forming a political party able to mobilize supporters in the 2011 elections. The MB drew on its years of experience in politics and society to win a plurality of parliamentary seats and the presidency. The MB’s Freedom and Justice Party won forty-three percent of the seats in parliament in the first elections run in the transitional period.

Much of the literature has focused on the high degree of uncertainty that characterizes founding elections and political transitions more generally. O’Donnell, Schmitter, and Whitehead (1986, 62) characterize these elections as “moments of great drama.” The MB operated relatively openly during periods of toleration\(^2\) and expand its activities within society during periods of repression. Since the MB challenged the regime through both within and

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2. For an interview with Mohamed Morsi, head of the Elections Committee in the MB in 2010, and former Egyptian president, see *Al-Masry Al-Youm* (2010); for an interview with the last NDP Secretary General, Mohamed Ragab, see *Al-Masry Al-Youm* (2014).
extra channels and the majority of the latter did not appear to constitute a direct threat to the regime’s existence, its status gave it the push to act both as a main opposition group and also to develop grassroots ties with the population. By providing charitable services to the poor and middle classes, the organizations ran or funded by the MB succeeded in challenging state legitimacy and to construct an alternative form of legitimacy (Bianchi 1989).

The Salafi calling

“Salaf” means predecessor and refers to the Prophet Muhammad and his companions. According to the Salafi belief system, Salafism represents adherence to Islamic thought and practice (Wiktorowicz 2001). Salafism holds that learning and practicing the pure form of Islam will bring society to an ideal Islamic order. According to Salafi thought, a valid state system for Muslims must be based on Sharia law. Salafis do not approve the modern secular state and democratic institutions. As long as a ruler is Muslim, Muslims must obey his rule and must not rebel (Brown 2011).

Salafis in Egypt were not involved in politics directly before 2011; most Salafi scholars were politically apathetic and avoided controversial political issues during the Mubarak regime. Several days before the January 25 demonstrations, the spokesperson of Al-Dawa al Salafiyya in Alexandria stated that it would not support the protests against the regime (Bal 2014, 107–13).

The Salafi Calling stayed away from politics under Mubarak and was devoted to Dawa activities, charitable associations, and preaching in mosques. While the Salafi calling was less political than the MB and did not attempt to participate in parliamentary elections or use professional syndicates for political activity, its construction of a parallel network of Islamic charitable institutions formed grassroots which acted as extra system channels with the people (Brown 2013).

The charitable activities of the Salafi Calling were tolerated by the regime because these organizations were not political. By engaging in charitable community organizations, the Salafi Calling was able to challenge the state over service provision and gained legitimacy at the community level while avoiding regime repression. The Calling was supported by the regime because it offered services to the people, and it did not challenge the regime politically.

In addition to building a grassroots presence, the Salafi Calling established a network of private mosques from which its imams preached. The ability of the Salafi Calling to build and use private mosques for its religious outreach
was part of a broader phenomenon of private mosque-building that began in the 1970s (Wickham 2002).

As mentioned above, the regime responded to the activities of the Islamist groups with a mixture of toleration and repression. As the regime viewed the charitable activities as politically harmless, and adequately provided for Egypt’s poor, the regime tolerated the charitable activities of the Salafi Calling as long as the organization did not become overtly political (Van Antwerp 2013, 46–48).

After 2011, some Salafi groups reorganized themselves. In 2013, there were six main active Salafi groups and five political parties in Egypt (Brown 2013). Two of these groups are relatively more influential and have a larger base of public support. One is Ansar al-Sunna, which has a presence in all areas of Egypt. The second is Al-Dawa al-Salafiyya in Alexandria. Al-Nour Party—the largest Salafi political party—is associated with Al-Dawa al-Salafiyya (Lacroix 2016).

Al-Nour enjoyed a really strong base because of its members’ dawaa activities and its grassroots links, had no electoral experience before 2011, and it won nearly twenty-two percent of parliamentary seats, while parties with significant electoral experience were less successful. The victory of the MB’s Freedom and Justice Party winning forty-three percent of the seats in parliament and that of Al-Nour winning twenty-two percent reflected the reality that the use of Islam as a mobilizing ideology was responsible for the two groups’ success (El-Ashwal 2013).

Pro-reform activist groups

Since 2000, a variety of informal political groups and activist movements were formed and politicized wide sectors of the population. These groups were characterized by decentralization, loose organizational structures, the rejection of traditional leadership, and a reliance on members to initiate activities (El-Mahdi 2009). The pro-reform activist groups that contested the Mubarak regime through protests and conferences opposing the anticipated succession of Mubarak’s son, Gamal Mubarak, were mainly the Kifaya movement and the April 6 group.

The Kifaya movement emerged in late 2004 and demonstrates the frustrations of many Egyptians with regards to the abuses of the Mubarak regime. Also known as the “Egyptian Movement for Change,” it was a social movement whose members had various orientations, all united by their demand for a shift in the balance of power. They called for the president to cede power,
refused Gamal Mubarak as a successor, and for the promotion a new political
democratic environment (Kildani and Grant 2008). The movement was
unique in its composition of various political parties and its secular nature.
It included communists, nationalists, and Islamist members in a unique polit-
ical mixture (Nasser 2014, 14).

The constitutional amendments of 2007 triggered a response from Kifaya
members who marched in the streets in protest, many of them facing violence
and arrest. The Kifaya movement is significant in that it represents civil society
groups working together. This cooperation fostered trust and facilitated the
unity that came to represent the protesters in 2011 (Shorbagy 2007).

The movement began its opposition to the regime by organizing a petition
in protest against the regime’s proposal to make limited reforms and de-
manded direct presidential elections. The petition gathered 1934 signatures
(Arafat 2009, 158). The movement held its first demonstration in 2004 in
anticipation of the 2005 presidential elections, in which Mubarak was ex-
pected to use fraud to win (Oweidat, Benard, Stahl, Kildani, O’Connell, and
Grant 2008). The group’s slogan was “no to inheritance, no to extension,”
crystallizing the issue of Mubarak’s expected decision to shift power to his son.
Through the movement’s activities, Kifaya publicly challenged the regime’s
legitimacy; this was in stark contrast to what prevailed before the movement
when activists never dared to say “no” directly to the symbols of power.

Although the MB was an illegal organization representing an important
political force with broad grassroots support, it was not in a position to unite
the nation against the regime (Shorbagy 2007). Its religious ideology nour-
ished the reservations and concerns of many Egyptians about the organiza-
tion. In contrast, the Kifaya movement offered a new hope for Egyptian
politics because of its cross-ideological body of members and its ability to
reach out to the young generation of Egyptians; it also gave birth to new
movements such as “Youth for Change.”

Another pro-reform group called “April 6” was launched in 2008. It was
a youth activist group formed to support the workers in the “El-Mahalla
El-Kobra” strikes, during which two days of violent confrontations between
workers and the police took place, when three people were killed and many
arrested (Khalil 2011, 51). In solidarity, several associational groups and Face-
book activists called for a national strike, demanding a minimum wage, and an
end to corruption and police brutality. The security forces repressed the pro-
tests, but the event produced the “April 6 Youth Movement” (El-Ghobashy
2011).
April 6 was as diverse as Kifaya, although its membership was much younger than that of Kifaya. The group was inspired by the labor strikes in the industrial city of El-Mahalla al-Kubra in 2008 and began to coordinate its own strikes and protest actions that year. This was one of the groups that ultimately helped to organize the protests on January 25, 2011, the date when the Egyptian uprising against Mubarak broke out.

The regime used a mix of maneuvering and repression to frustrate the group’s efforts to engage Egyptian society more broadly. The maneuvering began almost immediately after the inauguration of “April 6” when the group’s activists planned a follow-up protest for May 4 on Mubarak’s eightieth birthday, during which they aimed to raise economic demands. During the next three years, the group’s leaders and activists were arrested numerous times by the regime (Trager 2008).

Both Kifaya and April 6 acted as groups that united different segments and orientations of the political opposition. The fact that both movements coexisted alongside other opposition political parties resulted in members coming from a wide range of ideological backgrounds. Many of Kifaya’s members were already members of other activist groups, as well as of pre-existing political parties with leftist orientations, as well as other social movements, such as the MB (Van Antwerp 2013).

NEW SOCIETAL FACTORS AND CHALLENGES TO THE STATE: STRONG SOCIETY–WEAK STATE

The Egyptian state under Mubarak was structurally weak, despite its repressive strength. As mentioned, the regime hindered any potential for true opposition. The 2007 constitutional amendments were introduced in favor of Mubarak and the ruling party (Nasser 2014, 14). The amendments aroused wide controversy because they were opening the way for the candidacy of Gamal Mubarak, which was used by many forces to intimidate the street and build passive legitimacy based on the idea of opposing his candidacy. The amendments included ending the idea of judicial supervision over each box and limiting it to public committees, which paved the way for the opposition to raise concerns about potential election fraud.

The nature of state–society dynamics made the regime more vulnerable. The more excluded from the government citizens feel, the more central civil society groups become. Mubarak’s tactics to bolster his rule offered opportunities for the opposition to challenge it. As Zubaida (2001, 235) explains:
The state has colonized, controlled, and penetrated society and crippled the forces of social autonomy. To reverse this process, it is not enough to hold elections and license political parties, democracy must be based on autonomous and voluntary institutions and associations.

In January 2011, Mubarak appeared to be laying the groundwork either for running for a sixth term that September or for ensuring his son Gamal’s succession. The November 2010 parliamentary elections resulted in the National Democratic Party winning over ninety percent of the seats. According to the constitution, presidential candidates required the support of at least sixty-five members of the People’s Assembly to be nominated, which is to ensure that the NDP would retain the presidency unchallenged.

Accordingly, there were plenty of signs of popular discontent within Egypt, including frequent labor strikes, scattered protests, and frequent criticism of the Mubarak regime in emerging social media outlets, in addition to numerous features that preceded the 2010 elections and contributed to the fact of a strengthened society vis-à-vis a weakened state.

The “El-Baradei” campaign

In late 2009, while leaving his post as head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Mohamed El-Baradei indicated that he might run for presidency “if the constitution were amended to allow all Egyptians to compete.” El-Baradei criticized Mubarak’s authoritarian rule and said that his new purpose would be to “nudge Egypt towards democracy,” since “democracy here is a farce” (Shenker 2010). Accordingly, the state-owned media attacked him immediately (Foreign Policy 2010).

On the opposition side, El-Baradei represented the possibility of unifying the anti-Mubarak movements around a single leader. Therefore, starting late 2009, a small group of activists who were connected and knew each other through Kifaya and April 6 started an online campaign to support El-Baradei’s presidential candidacy. They held their first major event on February 19, 2010, when they mobilized approximately 1000 people at Cairo International Airport, as El-Baradei returned home after decades of living as an international diplomat in Vienna (Saleh 2010).

Later, El Baradei released a manifesto calling for seven democratizing constitutional reforms. The manifesto was soon transformed into a petition. Meanwhile, a pro-El-Baradei Facebook page, which attracted over 70,000 members by April, became an important forum for disseminating information.
to activists nationwide (El-Din 2010a). By September 2010, with the regime’s campaign against him, combined with his tactical mistakes, including spending most of his time abroad, preferring to broadcast his message through media conferences and YouTube messages, and avoiding public meetings, meant the El-Baradei phenomenon had faded (Khalil 2011, 51). After the 2011 events, he appeared only once in Al-Tahrir Square during the eighteen days of protests. This rare appearance and weak attendance was employed by the MB leaders to maneuver that fact that El-Baradei would divert Egypt from following an Islamic direction (Shadid and Kirkpatrick 2011).

It is important here to mention an element of the MB’s opportunistic strategy and relation to El-Baradei’s image. Regarding the presidential succession, by late 2009, with Mubarak’s declining health and the approaching presidential elections in September 2011, and the emergence of El-Baradei as a possible presidential candidate, the MB moved against the regime and joined the “Against Succession” campaign in October 2009 (Jewish, Daragli, Semeika and Kader 2009). Two months later, the newly elected Supreme Guide Mohamed Badie, in his first interview with Al-Jazeera, declared that he had no problem with Gamal Mubarak becoming the next president of Egypt through fair and free elections (El-Din 2010b). These contradictory positions largely reflected the MB’s opportunism and the good use it made of it in times of both toleration and repression (Trager 2013, 188–91).

Approaching the 2010 parliamentary elections, and despite El-Baradei’s calls to boycott the elections (Al-Naggar 2010), the MB saw several benefits of participation, including the opportunity to resume its image as the main opposition group, as well as the belief that participation would enable the MB to expose the regime’s corruption. The regime responded by arresting MB leaders, tearing down the organization’s “Islam is the Solution” posters, and ran the elections. Though it was still Egypt’s best-organized political force, the MB believed that the regime was simply too strong to challenge (Trager 2013, 188–91).

The death of Khaled Said
On June 6, 2010, police officers dragged twenty-eight-year-old Khaled Said from inside an Alexandria internet cafe and beat him to death (El-Ghobashy 2011). In the immediate aftermath of his killing, activists produced a YouTube video and a Facebook page entitled “We Are All Khaled Said.” Within days, over 100,000 people had joined the page. “We Are All Khaled Said” quickly surpassed El-Baradei’s Facebook page as the most transparent source
for information on opposition activities. Furthermore, it became a forum for organizing protests that focused squarely on combating police brutality. The first of the protests took place approximately one week after the images of “Said” had been spread. Activists gathered along the Nile in Cairo and beside the Mediterranean in Alexandria, where they wore black, stood in a long line with each activist, and remained silent (Ghonim 2012, 59–61).

New developments were happening. On January 1, 2011, the Two Saints Church in Alexandria was bombed in an attack that killed twenty-three people and injured ninety-seven others (Fahim and Stack 2011). While the Mubarak regime blamed foreign Islamic terrorists for the attack, activists responded by blaming Egypt’s police for failing to protect the country, and organized human chains to guard churches on the day of Coptic Christmas, which fell the following week. Within this context, activists from April 6 and El-Baradei’s National Association for Change (NAC) began planning for larger Police Day demonstrations.

To sum up, from January 2011, a few events strengthened national frustration against the regime (Saouli 2015). First, the rigging of the 2010 parliamentary elections, giving most of the votes to Mubarak’s ruling NDP proved the measures the regime was ready to take to facilitate Gamal’s succession; second, the death of Said in Alexandria and the exposure of police brutality; and third, the attack on the Two saints Church (Al-Qiddisin) in Alexandria on January 1, 2011, revealing the state security’s incapacity to protect Egyptian Copts to the extent that many suspected the regime of being responsible for planning the attack in order to deepen sectarian divisions between Muslims and Christians. All such factors reflected the extent to which society was gaining power at the expense of that of the state.

**DYNAMICS OF THE “MIDAN”: A SHIFT IN POWER BALANCE FROM STATE TO SOCIETY**

The Mubarak regime, in portraying itself as the guardian of stability, came under external constraint for political change in Egypt. This evolved into an internal collective restraint in January 2011. All the actors that appeared throughout the last years of Mubarak rule came together to form the “Democratic Alliance,” which gained credibility because of the civil parties and the public persons that were affiliated to it. The MB’s role within this alliance had been also one of the factors that earned it a good image before it was subsequently exposed. The first four days of the demonstrations (January
involved violent confrontations between the security forces and the revolutionaries. The remaining fourteen days (January 20–February 11) revealed the emergence of collective action. Initially, the police succeeded in preventing the revolutionaries from controlling the “Midan,” but when the police withdrew from the streets on January 28, the regime’s coercive capacity began to weaken, reflecting a shift in the balance of power between state and society (Saouli 2015). The police withdrawal facilitated the empowerment of the revolutionaries.

The army’s intervention on January 28 and its decision not to repress the revolutionaries sounded the final death knell for Mubarak’s regime. At the time of the demonstrations, Marshall Hussein Tantawy was defense minister. His poor health and lack of support from within the military or the public made him an unlikely candidate for the presidency. In any case, many people, including Mubarak, considered him loyal to the regime (Alterman 2000). On the other hand, there was no popular figure in the high ranks of the military who could be considered as a potential candidate for the presidency. Mubarak sidelined the military in favor of the police. As a result, resentment grew among the military leadership against Gamal Mubarak’s rising influence at the expense of the economic and political interests of the armed forces.

Empowered by the increased participation of Egyptians, the withdrawal of the security forces, and the decision of the Egyptian military to support the protesters, the revolutionary forces insisted on Mubarak’s resignation. On February 11, Vice-President Omar Soliman declared that Mubarak had resigned and the powers of the presidency were transferred to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF). The reputation of the military largely remained undamaged. Thus, in comparison with the “cruel” police that most Egyptians disliked, the army remained a widely respected institution.

The two years that ensued revealed a shift in the balance of power from regime to society. Attacks on the police became a frequent occurrence on Egypt’s streets. Political divisions along Islamic/secular lines, with a fear of the emergence of an autocratic Islamic state, developed into bloody political and social confrontations, and proved the failure of the SCAF to manage the country politically.

**WHY DID THE MB SUCCEED IN HIJACKING THE REVOLUTION?**

The people who converged on Al-Tahrir Square in 2011 recognized the power of collective action. Since then, Egypt had struggled to determine what
type of government was to be established. This posed challenges to Egypt’s political state of affairs, combined with the neglected economic situation, instability, division, and a still fragmented civil society. The road thus far has been challenging.

The events leading up to and including 2011 reflected the failure of the youth to offer a credible voice, instead forming a loose opposition group. The lack of leadership made it impossible to speak with one voice; the frontier between the educated youth and traditional Egyptians holding traditional values made it difficult for both groups to unite or hold a dialogue with each other. Furthermore, with the passing of time, perception among Egyptians grew that the protestors were supported or manipulated by foreign forces undermined popular support (Abdel Rahman 2013). This gave an opportunity to the MB to introduce publicly their ideas for political Islam away from secular ideals.

By the time the 2011 events began, it had become an obvious concern that the revolution underway was a threat to the influence and authority of the MB. The latter had been considered as one of the lines of defense against the Mubarak regime and the only true alternative for change. In that capacity, the MB was successful in sustaining popular support for its cause. As a result, the success of any youth-led secular protest movement threatened the MB not only as a political movement but also as a social and religious organization whose foundational ideological narrative is that Islam is the only ultimate salvation for mankind. This illustrates why, by the beginning of the events in 2011, the MB called for reform, stability, and social harmony rather than transformation via revolution (Slackman 2011). The MB did not officially participate in planning the protests, while the MB youth became involved independently.

On January 27, the MB declared its intention to join the protests after Friday prayers. Egyptians who were encouraged by the unprecedented numbers of protesters during the first three days decided to join in larger numbers. Up to that day, neither the regime nor the protestors had recognized the true magnitude of the protest.

As a result, one of the controversies that prevailed about the revolution was about claiming its ownership. As mentioned above, the MB had a controversial relationship with the state under Mubarak. It was legally banned as a political party, yet the state allowed its non-political activities. Despite their criticism of the regime, Mubarak allowed the organization to continue its social activities, which challenged and eroded the state’s legitimacy. Thus, the
MB continued to exist as an opposition force, however limited and restricted, against Mubarak.

As it became clear that the demonstrations were gaining widespread support, the MB made an opportunistic calculation and served on the front lines and acted as a crucial element among the protestors. Their strong organizational presence, along with a skilled cadre of the “Brothers,” quickly exposed the weaknesses of the leaderless secular democratic youth protest movement (Tombaugh 2013, 35–38), allowing the organization to “pirate” the revolution over the heads of the leaderless and fragmented secular youth.

At the same time, the MB exploited every opportunity provided by the removal of Mubarak to secure for itself as much power as possible. This was reflected in its domination of the upper and lower houses of parliament and the taking of the presidency. In contrast, activists found themselves on the margins of this power struggle. The inability of revolutionaries to propose alternatives to post-Mubarak rule permitted the MB’s leadership to monopolize power. On the other hand, the pro-reform movements had no ready plan for the day after; they did not develop organizational skills that would equip them to match the popular base of the MB.

Both the Kifaya and April 6 groups failed in forming a political party in the transitional period because of the absence of leadership in such movements, and under the conditions of police brutality under Mubarak they did not have the luxury of exploring new forms of organization. Their failure at establishing possible alternatives (Abdel Rahman 2013) weakened the possibility for any potential to gain a place on the new political map. In any case, new political parties are generally only successful when they can use a strong organizational base. When the time came to form political parties, many of Kifaya’s members were drawn away into their “home” organization. For example, Kifaya members who were also members of the MB joined the MB’s party rather than form a party through Kifaya. Once the movement formed their political party after the uprising, the MB prohibited members from joining another political party (Trager 2013, 188–91).

With regards to the Salafists, although they succeeded in forming a political party that won about twenty-two percent of parliamentary seats, they failed to seize power, or at least to accomplish the success achieved by the MB. Many reasons for this can be highlighted. First, the apathetic history of the political background of the Salafi Calling did not assist it in forming a concrete organizational base as that enjoyed by the MB. Second, as mentioned above, the movements or opposition groups that pursued a transformative agenda
through both formal and informal networks to challenge the regime’s legitimacy have more success in mobilizing and forming legal channels in the time of transition. This was not the case for the Salafi Calling. It only performed informal grassroots practices and its political activities starting in 2011 are considered, though opportunistic, very recent and primitive compared with those of the MB.

A NEW STATE OR NEW STATE-SOCIETY RELATIONS?

An important point deserves to be highlighted here. It would be erroneous to assume that all Egyptians supported the demonstrations; there were those who rejected that the regime be overthrown. However, the failure of Mubarak’s regime to understand the increasing tension led to a boundary developing between the state and the needs and demands of society. This failure hindered the regime from reacting positively and in a timely fashion during the eighteen days of protests and from making any concessions in the first few days, enabling the protesters to gain revolutionary status and overthrow the regime. The latter did not collapse because of volume or strategies of the protesters, but because of the profound decay of its ruling elite.

The demonstrations succeeded in ousting Mubarak. A new stage under military supervision was initiated by the SCAF, which was supposed to leave the rule to civilians as soon as possible. However, the “new state” was very fragile and prone to further crises. The ensuing political situation had many ramifications. The removal of Mubarak was a new beginning, but it was only the first step. Over time, the features of the post-Mubarak period became apparent and the path to a “new regime” no longer seemed smooth.

At the beginning of the uprising, an unprecedented number of ordinary Egyptians swarmed into the streets to protest against the Mubarak dictatorship, which ended, a few months later, when the MB came to power. Only one year later, ordinary Egyptians from all over the country once again swarmed onto the streets, only this time it was not to congratulate but to remove the MB from power.
REFERENCES


