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NEW DIRECTIONS FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN EGYPT: TRANSFORMING STATE-SOCIETY RELATIONS

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Cover photo: A young protester carrying an Egyptian flag facing riot police in Cairo, Egypt. (c) Shutterstock/Ludovic Caritey

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Introduction

Any discussion of civic engagement is consciously or unconsciously anchored in a theory of social change. That is to say, it is anchored in a set of assumptions and propositions about the dynamics of power, the economy, and social relations. This paper is informed by a critical, liberal, historical sociology of change. It explains social change by the flow of outcomes resulting from struggles between rulers and social forces over control of the State, the economy, and social relations. These outcomes add layers to the structural impact of past struggles that have already shaped the configurations of state institutions, economic systems, and the composition of social forces. These present configurations, inherited from the past, limit the options available to social actors today while simultaneously creating opportunities that they may or may not seize. Social change, therefore, is a result not only of struggle among actors, but also between them and inherited political, economic, and social configurations – which in turn consolidate and reshape these configurations.¹

From this perspective, the weakness of Egyptian civil society – and the potential ways to strengthen it – cannot be understood simply by examining the choices of its activists, or by looking solely at military repression and international complicity in it. A deeper exploration of the historical struggle between Egyptian rulers and social forces over the State, the economy, and social relations is required. This paper suggests that understanding this struggle and its accumulated impact on the current relationship between civil society and the State offers a better understanding of the question at hand, and more sustainable avenues for civic engagement.

Egypt's State formation is clearly marked by the entrenchment of its authoritarianism. Like all modern State-builders, Egyptian rulers have employed a combination of violence and patronage to create State institutions, which they used to subjugate society and steer their modernization efforts. Unable to contest this power, the weakened social forces clung to the rulers to protect their interests, becoming

structurally reliant on them over time. This pattern has persisted from Mohammad Ali (rule: 1805-1848) to Abdul-Fattah Al-Sisi (rule: 2014 – present), with the notable exception of the period between 1850 and 1950, when a combination of private property protection, British occupation, and liberal policy allowed new social forces to emerge and compete for power, creating a vibrant civil society. However, their power progressively eroded until it collapsed between 1952 and 1955. One can therefore see the consolidation of authoritarianism and weakening of civil society as the flipside of the disempowerment of its social forces vis-à-vis the rulers. If this were the *full* story, civil society would thrive when rulers' power is again weakened. However, as the Arab Spring has painfully demonstrated, such a weakening did not translate into a strengthening of civil society. Instead, it led to messy transitions that ended in various forms of authoritarianism or outright State collapse.

In this paper, I argue that State fragility – a less known yet equally deadly aspect of Egypt's state formation – makes this collapse the most likely outcome of a revolutionary weakening of rulers' power. This argument is based on a reading of the history of Egyptian authoritarianism that views it also as a history of creating a *structurally fragile state*. The decimation of social forces meant that rulers gained almost absolute power. But it also meant that no significant social actor was able or wanted – to push for the rationalization of State institutions, develop a market economy, or mediate social conflicts. As a consequence, the patronage network that initially served the ruler as a “scaffolding” for state formation – often referred to as “neopatrimonialism” – never came down. Instead, it became the *modus operandi* of State institutions, the economy, and social conflicts. While that neopatrimonial scaffolding kept the state together, it constantly hollowed out State institutions, perpetuated economic stagnation, and fostered social atomization and polarization. In other words, it made State fragility permanent.

In such a structurally fragile State, the ruled and the rulers become prisoners of neopatrimonialism, without which the State risks collapse. While a revolutionary moment may weaken the power of rulers and open the door to a potential democratization process that encourages civic engagement, State fragility will likely make such

¹ For a brief discussion of historical sociology approach, see Philip Abrams, *Historical Sociology*. Cornell University Press, 1983. And of course Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, University of California Press, 1978.

a transition disorderly, with setbacks that would almost certainly derail democratization entirely. In the absence of such a revolutionary moment, civil society is condemned to operate within the existing rules of the neopatrimonial political system, leading to a dual loss: providing legitimacy to authoritarianism without the ability to change the rules or expand the space available for civic engagement. In this perspective, State fragility is as much an obstacle to the strengthening of civil society as the excessive power of the rulers. State fragility perpetuates authoritarianism, which in turn deepens fragility – creating a vicious downward spiral.

Therefore, a new approach to civic engagement should envision ways to address both challenges simultaneously: creating counterweights to rulers' power and reversing State fragility. This may be counterintuitive for many civil society activists, who often focus on the former and view State resilience as a byproduct of authoritarianism. This paper goes against this conventional wisdom and argues that building institutional and market resilience is a necessary complement to building social power if Egypt is ever to move towards democratic governance.

I. How Authoritarian Rulers Built a Structurally Fragile State

Like all State-builders, Egyptian rulers sought to extend their sovereignty and subjugate their rivals. Their victory was complete, but also *pyrrhic*. It condemned the authoritarian state they built to structural fragility that makes authoritarianism necessary to keep it afloat. Simultaneously, authoritarianism perpetuates State fragility. Together, they form a downward spiral that has so far resisted both reformist and revolutionary change.

1. The Subjugation of Egypt's

Social Forces

Walking in the footsteps of modern European State-builders, Mohamad Ali Pasha successfully

defeated his rivals and subjugated them to his will. Within a few years, he managed to eliminate the Mamluks, Egypt's military leaders, as well as the traditional administrative and commercial elites. He also subjugated the religious leaders who had led the popular revolt which, in 1805, had put him in power. Ali built new institutional bodies to assess and monitor various aspects of social, economic, and political life. He also built a coercive apparatus, including a powerful national army – the first in more than a thousand years – with compulsory, and in most cases coerced, recruitment. He steered this apparatus to transform Egypt's economy and society. Ali dissolved traditional professional bodies, such as artisanal guilds, as well as traditional tax farms and their associated peasant hierarchies, replacing them with organs of the new centralized institutions. He also replaced traditional forms of property and land use with State ownership, managed by an extensive network of bureaucratic institutions. Peasants became de facto employees of the State, whose officials decided which products were to be farmed and bought the harvest at prices they dictated. The State also became the main employer of the nascent industries, trade companies, infrastructural services, and administration. Ali extended state control to hitherto unchartered social arenas, such as health and education. Those who opposed Ali were either killed, like the Mamluk leaders in 1811, or exiled, like the religious leader Shaikh Omar Makram – as well as an unknown number of peasants, artisans, and tax farmers who left only faint traces of their opposition. The defeated tried to stay out of harm's way, either by submitting to Ali's will, or by withdrawing like the thousands of peasants and young people who deserted their villages to avoid the State's heavy hand.²

But there were also winners. Mohammad Ali had to rely on people to operate state institutions, the army, companies, schools, hospitals, and carry out his policies. These helpers gradually accumulated wealth and power. Unlike the decapitated Mamluks, merchants, tax farmers, religious and guild leaders, however, the new elite members were wholly dependent on the Pasha's favor. They were also an eclectic group, with different ethnic, cultural, and geographic origins, from Egyptian natives to Ottomans to Europeans. The largely incoherent

² Khaled Fahmy, *All the Pasha's Men: Mehmed Ali, His Army and the Making of Modern Egypt*, The American University in Cairo Press, 1997.

composition of this new elite kept it fragmented and further eroded its potential as a power contestant.

This changed to a degree after Ali's death. His successors introduced regulatory changes that gradually established property rights in the countryside and promoted commercial and intellectual leadership in urban centers. This consolidated the eclectic elite born out of Ali's modernization. A financial crisis inflicted on Egypt by its absolutist ruler, the Khedive Ismail, prompted a largely native part of this elite to contest his absolutist power in 1860s. They used the Consultative Council that Ismail had created in 1866, as well as influence within the military, to claim legislative powers, including budget and taxation oversight. After initial success, this elite ran out of luck. The structural power of the ruler proved stronger than the uncertain power assets at their disposition. As the new Khedive, Tawfiq, insisted on his absolutist powers, the internal divisions of the elite were resolved in favor of its native military wing, turning its constitutional movement into an armed rebellion. That, in turn, threatened the interests not only of the Khedive but also of important segments of the larger elite. A British intervention on the Khedive's side in 1882 brought the armed rebellion to a quick end, and with it the first attempt at power-sharing between Egypt's ruler and its social forces since the popular revolt of 1805 that had brought Mohamad Ali to power.³

The period between 1919 and 1952 witnessed the largest bid for power by emerging social forces. The British occupation of Egypt had introduced significant economic and legislative reforms. They included protection of land ownership, separating state resources from those of the rulers, standardizing and stabilizing fiscal and monetary policies, and adopting a general laissez-faire approach to the economy.⁴

3 (In Arabic): Abdel Azim Ramadan, *The Development of the National Movement in Egypt*, Egyptian General Book Authority, Cairo, 1998, Parts 1 and 2. Mohamed Sabri Al-Sarbouni, *The Emergence of Egyptian Nationalism (1863-1882)*, National Translation Centre, Cairo, 2002.

عبد العظيم رمضان، تطور الحركة الوطنية في مصر، الهيئة المصرية العامة للكتاب، القاهرة، 1998، الجزءين 1 و2. ومحمد صبري السربوني، نشأة الروح القومية المصرية (1863-1882)، المركز القومي للترجمة، القاهرة، 2002.

4 Aaron Jakes, *Egypt's Occupation: Colonial Economism and the Crises of Capitalism*, Stanford University Press, September

Coupled with a century of social modernization and the rise of nationalism, these reforms consolidated a social coalition led by an elite determined to contest absolutism. It manifested itself in a mass uprising in 1919 against British occupation and absolutism, leading to the establishment of Egypt's first constitutional government in 1923.

The new elite included native Egyptians, Turco-Circassians and other Ottomans who had settled in Egypt. Administrative appointments, education, the rise of commercial and industrial sectors gradually brought the upper strata of native Egyptian notables – who come primarily from rural areas – closer to the more established Turco-Circassian strata and eventually merged them.⁵ But Egypt's elite was larger than these two groups. It included European immigrants who settled in Egypt for decades but maintained a cosmopolitan lifestyle and stayed separate from the native Egyptians and their political struggles. This can be explained, in part, by a sense of cultural – and sometimes racial – superiority. But it also makes sense in political terms: this group had no need to assimilate in Egyptian life, let alone to contest the rulers' power. Their European citizenship protected their interests better, as European Consuls had shielded them from Egyptian legal jurisdiction (until the 1937 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty abolished these "Concessions"). And even after that, the British presence in the country was a better guarantee for their interests than integration in Egyptian life. The result was a bifurcation of the social elite, which took a significant part of its power out of the struggle against absolutist rule. While the Egyptian national elite (composed of native Egyptians and Ottoman groups) managed to extract considerable concessions from the rulers, their power was not enough to force his hand, push back British authorities, and overcome their rival elite of European origins. Out of three decades of "constitutional rule", the majority party – *al Wafd* – managed to rule for less than eight years.⁶

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5 (In Arabic) Raouf Abbas and Assem El-Desouky, *Big Landlords and Peasants in Egypt 1837-1952*, Cairo, 1998. رؤوف عباس وعاصم الدسوقي، كبار الملاك والفلاحين في مصر 1837-1952، القاهرة 1998.

6 During this period, Al-Wafd formed six governments that ruled for a total of seven years and 342 days. See (in Arabic), Abdel Azim Ramadan, *The Development of the National*

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The failure of these social forces was not only due to their structural weakness vis-à-vis their opponents, but also to their inability to maintain their leadership of the broader masses. During the 1930s and 1940s, the power of large landowners grew at the expense of other groups within this national elite. Conservative and rather short-sighted, they blocked social and economic reforms that other parts of the elite advocated. Legislative and policy proposals aimed at modest land reforms, expanding access to education, reducing poverty, and introducing social protection programs were systematically blocked in parliament. Even conservative British and American diplomats lamented this elite's short-sightedness.⁷ Falling into the grip of this group, *Al-Wafd* gradually ceased to represent the majority that once made it a formidable player. Other political organizations, such as the Muslim Brothers and a myriad of leftist and nationalist organizations, attracted the masses left behind by their traditional party. The erosion of the elite's power continued, mostly undetected, until the young "Free Officers" overthrew the king in July 1952 and proceeded, with considerable ease, to annihilate the power of that atrophied elite.

The Free Officers subjugated Egyptian social forces to State power in ways reminiscent of Mohamad Ali. In less than a decade, they redrew Egyptian political, economic and social relations around State institutions, which they expanded and tightly controlled. Less than two months after their coup, they introduced a land reform that targeted large owners.⁸ It redistributed a total of 15% of the cultivated land and, by 1965, had eliminated large ownership altogether, which had constituted a fifth of the total agricultural land in 1952.⁹ In 1957, a wave of nationalization hit the commercial and banking

interests of "foreigners", including the cosmopolitan elite that had lived in Egypt for decades. This wave was followed by a number of legislations that restricted private sector activities. In 1958, the regime developed a "five-year plan" covering the period 1960-1965- that still left a space for private enterprise, which was supposed to provide 55% of total investments for that period. However, by 1961 Gamal Abdel Nasser – now the unquestioned leader of the "revolution" – ordered a massive wave of nationalizations that covered everything from banking, insurance, transportation, construction, foreign trade, the remaining privately owned factories to a number of department stores, cafes, and restaurants.¹⁰ This wave decimated whatever was left of the political power of market forces, a primary goal of the nationalization process according to Nasser.¹¹

These transformations did not decimate the power of elite groups only, they also subjugated the peasantry, workers, and other middle and lower middle-class groups, with the military tied the peasants to tight state control. The peasants were certainly liberated from the large landowners' control, which sometimes mounted to near slavery;¹² small ownership rose considerably, and living standards improved as medical, educational, and social services extended in the countryside in new ways. This being said, the State, represented by its ministry of agriculture and irrigation, came to be in charge of all aspects of production, from determining crops to providing seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, finance, to purchasing the produce at prices it fixed. The State also took control of the "cooperatives", which had numbered more than 1700 in 1952, and "encouraged" peasants to join them. By 1970, three million peasants were enrolled in these State-run cooperatives.¹³ Egyptian peasantry was back to a Mohamad Ali-like control of

Movement in Egypt, Egyptian General Book Authority, Cairo, 1998, Part 2.

عبد العظيم رمضان، تطور الحركة الوطنية في مصر، الهيئة المصرية العامة للكتاب، القاهرة، 1998، الجزء 2.

7 Robert L. Tignor, *State, Private Enterprise and Economic Change in Egypt, 1918-1952*, Princeton University Press, 1984, pp. 215-217 and p. 231.

8 This first land reform limited ownership to a maximum of 200 acres, followed by further legislations that would, by 1969, cap ownership at 50 acres.

9 Robert Mabro, *The Egyptian Economy: 1952-1972*. Clarendon Press, 1974, pp. 71-73.

10 Mabro, p.115-130, and: Paul Rivlin, *Economic Policy and Performance in the Arab World*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001, pp. 3-30.

11 (In Arabic) Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi, *Memoirs of Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi*, Cairo, Egyptian Mod-ern Office, 1977.

عبد اللطيف البغدادي، مذكرات عبد اللطيف البغدادي، القاهرة، المكتب المصري الحديث، 1977.

12 Gilles Perrault, *A Man Apart: the Life of Henri Curiel* (Translated by Bob Cumming), Zed Books, 1987.

13 Mabro, pp. 68-70.

their productive activities.

Workers were led down the same road. As with the peasants, the new regime sought to mobilize workers' support but was keen on decimating their independence. One of the military's first coercive decisions, less than three weeks after they seized power, was to end a workers strike in *Kafr El-Dawar* industrial plant, executing two of its leaders. Two months later, they banned labor unions from convening their first national convention that was supposed to usher a workers' national federation. Instead, the military established a state-run workers federation, the membership of which became compulsory, and appointed a "labor leader" to head it. Similarly, the state extended its control over education, both secular and religious. Curriculum, personnel, finances, and other organizational matters of all educational institutions at all levels – from kindergarten to universities – fell in the hands of the ministry of education. Private schools were also put under State control or lost their license. The graduates were granted employment at State institutions or State-run companies. Same goes for the media, which was "nationalized" and put under the control of State administrative organs. By mid 1960s, there was no social force or group outside State control. In fact, there was no social, economic, or political activity that escaped state control.

The "State" came to mean the ruler and the security apparatus supporting him, namely the General Intelligence, the Military Intelligence (both controlled by the military), and the "State security" department of the ministry of interior. It was Nasser who constructed this apparatus in the 1950s in order to tighten his control over the military, then over the State as a whole. This process started from the first days of the coup, with Nasser building a new security apparatus within the military to cleanse the army from potential rivals. In 1954 a showdown with a segment of the Free Officers ended in Nasser's victory, which was cemented with the Suez War in 1956. The 1967 defeat in the 6-day war gave Nasser another opportunity to evict his rivals from the army and security apparatus. Since then, the military, and the security apparatus that sprang from it, have served as the backbone of the "State". When Nasser's successor Anwar El Sadat clashed with the chiefs of these security agencies in 1970, he won by arresting them while simultaneously maintaining and expanding the power of these agencies themselves. They continued to play the same role throughout his rule and that of

his successors.¹⁴ Those successors introduced limited liberalization measures, which led to the emergence of powerful and wealthy business elites. However, as subsequent sections will show, these groups remained wholly dependent on the State and never posed a significant challenge to its power.

2. Perpetuating State Fragility: The Scaffolding That Never Came Down

Historically, all modern rulers have used neopatrimonial networks as scaffolding to create and control State institutions. In places where rulers had to share power with social forces, those demanded more access to State institutions and, gradually, replaced the neopatrimonial scaffolding with standard rules and procedures which enhanced the ability of these institutions to discharge their functional missions. This has been the story of British institution-building since the Glorious Revolution of 1688, French institution-building since Louis XIV, and South Korean institution-transformation in late 20th century. Egyptian rulers used the same scaffolding to build modern State institutions that managed political, economic and social life. And because the rulers successfully crushed social forces, there was no one to bring the scaffolding down. Instead of contesting the rulers' patronage network, the weak and dependent social forces sought to populate it. What Max Weber dubbed 'sultanism'¹⁵ – later known as neopatrimonialism or neopatriarchy¹⁶ – is not a carry-over from pre-modern times or an anomaly; it is the *modus operandi* of Egypt's modern state. While it kept the state largely stable, it hollowed its institutions, weakened its political system and put a lid on its economy. In other words, the scaffolding that keeps the state together – neopatrimonialism – is also the primary culprit of its fragility.

14 For details, see Hazem Kandil, *Soldiers, Spies and Statesmen: Egypt's Road to Revolt*, Verso Press, 2012.

15 Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, pp.331-332 and 1006-1070.

16 Hisham Sharabi, *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in the Arab Society*, Oxford University Press, 1988.

Hollowing State Institutions

The neopatrimonial *modus operandi* follows a rather simple model. In it, the ruler entrusts loyal followers with main portfolios such as security, finance, justice, and education. While they become leaders - ministers and the equivalent - they derive their authority from the ruler's support. Rulers choose those supplicant leaders based on a combination of competence and loyalty, but the latter is far more important. When they fail in discharging their missions and cause embarrassing disasters, the ruler might dismiss them, but often temporarily. Like tenured academics, poor performing supplicant leaders are moved to places where they do less damage, but never fired. If they have served long enough, they can be appointed in honorary positions, usually in parliament. Signs of disloyalty, however, easily bring the career of supplicant leaders to an end, usually with no prospect of forgiveness.

To run "their institutions", ministers need their own loyal/competent agents who, in turn, recruit their own loyal/competent agents, and so on. The entire administrative pyramid, therefore, is structured around a network of agents and patrons interconnected by a flow of personal trust and rewards. Ministers control packages of resources – of different sizes depending on the importance of their ministry. They use these resources to "run" the ministry: obeying the instructions of the ruler and his security agencies, preventing unwanted behavior by employees, as well as carrying out the ministry's mission, at least minimally. Ministers often take a chance to find existing personnel, but quickly reshuffle them depending on who gains their trust and projects a minimum level of competency. They choose deputies and sometimes heads of departments, reshuffling them according to the same rule, and those in turn choose and shuffle heads of units and so on. This is a dynamic process; both trust and rewards could change. But it is the changes in personal trust, and its correlated reward, that govern institutional life. Official evaluations are generally irrelevant, *pro forma*, where everyone's performance is deemed "excellent" as long as they have not caused a disaster, functional or political. And at the same time receiving an "excellent" evaluation doesn't qualify anyone to a particular reward – the latter flows solely inside the trust-reward network. How to gain the trust of one's superior is the key question each civil servant needs to answer in order to advance their career.

When reform-minded ministers attempt to go beyond trust and promote people based on their expertise, they find that task almost impossible. In the absence of measurable benchmarks of performance, there is very little to rely on in order to measure expertise objectively. Those ministers end up relying on their *personal impressions* to determine who is "qualified". Personal impressions become a different form of "personal trust" that smart employees detect and leverage in order to advance their career. Ultimately, recruitment, promotion, and organization of work rely on the same network: trust and rewards (or mistrust and punishment/marginalization) flow from the top down while loyalty and obedience flow upward. And ultimately, all those who populate institutions find ways to make a living, a career, and a degree of fulfillment, within that same network.

Neopatrimonial management of Egyptian institutions has survived political upheavals, policy shifts, and deep constitutional changes. This survival isn't accidental. For one, the neopatrimonial *modus operandi* is easily compatible with the dominant mode of trust, which is more anchored in personal connections than it is in the "public trust" that sociologists associate with "high trust societies."¹⁷ It is also a low-cost management style that doesn't require complex evaluation processes with their detailed job descriptions, performance benchmarks, quantifiable objectives, recruitment and promotion mechanisms, arbitration, and so on. It is also adaptive: rulers can easily adjust the degree of their intervention in running State institutions as well as the relative weights of loyalty and competence in appointments and promotions. They can also allow the emergence of "islands of competence" in specific institutions or sectors, for a specific time that they determine.

However, neopatrimonial management hollows institutions and undermines their effectiveness, ultimately reducing the ability of the State to face collective challenges. Modern State institutions play a significant role in consolidating State power: they manage resource allocation nationally, with the aim of optimizing it. They monitor various aspects of the physical and social environment - from soil quality

¹⁷ See for discussion of these types of trust: Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Polity Press, 1991, and Francis Fukuyama, *Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy*, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2014.

to teen delinquency – and suggest ways to deal with the challenges they pose. They self-monitor as well, suggesting ways to improve their own performance and reduce their inefficiency. They create “public interest groups” within the State; civil servants who spend their lives advocating for the sectors they work on – from public health to finance to foreign policy. Institutions also operate as talent recruiters in the service of the state; the less social barriers they use the wider their net becomes. They create standard operational procedures that enable the less talented to complete complex tasks that they wouldn’t have been able to accomplish otherwise. All of these tasks are part of what we call “State capacity”, or its ability to intervene in social interactions and regulate them.

Neopatrimonial management undermines State capacity on all these accounts. It squanders public resources, which get allocated based on personal connections rather than cost-effective analysis and often with little coordination across institutions or sectors (because each institution is tied mainly – often only – to the top of the pyramid). It wastes most of the monitoring work these institutions perform of the physical and social environments, as decisions on regulating them are usually made elsewhere – in the informal network. It reduces institutions’ ability to monitor or regulate their sectors, as performance and competence gets ignored, unrewarded or even punished. Given the lack of objective performance benchmarks, self-monitoring becomes even less likely and, when carried out, formalistic. This in turn ossifies institutions further, reducing the potency of “public interest groups” within the State: civil servants become less capable of – and often less interested in – advocating for policy changes. It wastes talent, as it recruits primarily from the small percentage linked to the patronage network, and undermines the values and ethics of public service, as everyone quickly realizes how little relevance these have to their careers. And above all, patrimonial management hollows state institutions as it transfers decision-making to informal networks, rendering them incapable of making decisions when/if these networks go down. This became painfully clear during the Tahrir Uprising years between 2011 and 2014.

Freezing Social Conflicts

Neopatrimonialism is also the *modus operandi* of the political system that is supposed to manage and contain social conflicts, with debilitating impact on the ability of social forces to manage their conflicts

peaceful without the heavy hand of the authoritarian state.

Since Egypt became “independent” in 1922, it has witnessed multiple constitutional configurations, with different roles, rights, and limitations attached to legislatives, executives, the judiciary, political parties, elections, and so on. However, these constitutional arrangements were never the defining element of how its political system worked. Beneath the veneer of constitutions, laws, and regulations, lies an extensive patronage network binding the ruler and his security agencies to the social actors and groups, including those in the “opposition”.

For example, between 1922 and 1952, political parties were run by leaders who relied on patrons in either the Royal Palace or the British High Commission. The rise and eventual fall of these parties was tied to the decisions made by the patrons more than anything else. Party leaders also built patronage networks within their parties, and lost control over them only when these networks faltered.¹⁸ *Al-Wafd*, the majority party, was a revealing exception. During the 1920s and 1930s, it represented a social coalition led by landed and commercial elites and supported by the peasantry and urban middle classes. Relying on this coalition, it actively contested the power of both the King and the British High Commissioner. As that social coalition disintegrated, it increasingly became part of the patronage system, especially in the 1940s. In January 1953, the Free Officers banned all political parties by decree, with no popular pushback. They then proceeded to establish a visibly neopatrimonial political system based on a single political party. The new party – The Liberation Organization – was run like any executive institution, with the ruler choosing its leaders, deciding who can join and what tasks to “entrust” it with. In return for compliance, various types of rewards flew from the top to its multiple layers. On two occasions, Nasser decided that this party wasn’t serving its purpose, so he disbanded it and created a replacement.¹⁹

So did Sadat. In March 1976, he *decided* to “liberalize”

18 (In Arabic) Abdel Azim Ramadan, *The Development of the National Movement in Egypt*, Egyptian General Book Authority, Cairo, 1998..

19 The Liberation Organization was created in January 1953, then replaced in 1957 by the National Union, which in turn was replaced by the Arab Socialist Union in 1962.

the political system, and therefore *divided* the state-run, single party in three: center, left, and right. From that point until 2011, the rulers used patronage, rewards, and punishment to control the formation of parties and their activities. This doesn't mean that the leaders of political parties were operating as stooges for the regime, or that political life was fully orchestrated by the rulers. Far from that. Opposition leaders criticized the rulers and the government, called for political change, organized protests, and contested elections. But they did all this under the watchful eyes of the state, and within the bounds of its patronage. The patronage network enabled the State – the ruler and his security apparatus – to delineate the “margin of freedom”, communicate it to the opposition leaders, and manage compliance and violations. Crossing redlines, even inadvertently, often triggered unwanted consequences. Repression, which was always present in the background, varied in form and severity. But as a general rule, repeated or unrepentant violations of the “rules” were viewed as a challenge to the rulers, and their authors severely punished. Effective opposition leaders, therefore, stayed in communication with the authorities and consulted them when in doubt; this seemed the only way they could protect their organizations and its members from repression. While those members occasionally criticized their leaders for “complicity” and “clientelism”, they ultimately relied on their clientelist links when they ran into trouble with the State.

The same system governed relations with labor unions, professional syndicates, and civil society organizations. Here too, leaders served as a channel between the State and the members of their organizations: they represented the demands of “the base” to the State, and communicated the limits imposed by the State on the base. When there was a problem – usually as a consequence of a protest or a strike – they interceded on behalf of the base to “convince” the State to solve it amicably. As with political parties, the members of labor unions, professional syndicates and other organizations usually lament the complicity of their leaders, while using it to protect their interest and resolve conflicts with the state. When independent-minded people take positions of leadership, they have to make a quick choice: “act responsibly”, plugging into the patronage network so that they can manage the affairs of their organization successfully, or “taking a stand” against State oppression, making their term short-lived “stand”.

The neopatrimonial system extends to unorganized citizens. It grants them access to basic services, commodities, and employment as long as they abide by the rules. Entry points linking those citizens to the State's patronage network are multiple. A man from a remote area in Upper Egypt can communicate with the State through his family connection, neighbors, professional union, religious leader, “elected” representative, superiors at work and so on. If all else fails, that man can always launch a direct appeal to the generosity of the ruler who, occasionally, responds favorably in a show of exceptional care towards his subjects. Those who opt out of the network can live quietly on the margin of society, as long as they don't create trouble or need help. But when they do, they have to turn to the neopatrimonial network. Ultimately, decades of calibrated repression and patronage teach all social actors and groups to distinguish between “safe” and “dangerous” behavior. Everyone ends up internalizing the rules of the political game, turning these rules into the norms of wise behavior.

For over more than a century, the patronage network provided an effective mechanism to maintain political stability. Similar to the management of State institutions, it offered the rulers and the ruled an adaptable, low-cost, low-maintenance way to ensure representation of competing interests, albeit imperfectly. It also enabled them to maintain political cohesion, communication, socialization, and largely peaceful resolution of conflicts – all important tasks for any political system.

Yet, this neopatrimonial system destroyed politics as a mechanism to resolve or manage social conflicts. To start with, it promoted a symbolic understanding of politics, where maximalism became a mark of strength and compromise one of defeat. This is the consequence of moving political deal-making from the public sphere (institutions) to the informal network, thus bifurcating politics into two categories. The first is public rhetoric, with its maximalist principled positions that have no way of becoming part of policymaking. The other is deal-making, which is clandestine, limited to a small number of players, and is largely associated with submission to State power.

With maximalist rhetoric becoming a sign of integrity and compromise a sign of submission or betrayal, players rarely made deals amongst themselves: each of them needed the State more. All this gives compromise a bad name and disincentivizes

investment in developing skills of negotiation and deal-making. This also meant a lack of attention to integrating and reconciling conflicting interests among social groups, which contributed to freezing social conflicts and polarization. In this climate, political demands tend to drift into utopian dreams rather than focus on attainable goals.

This also meant little incentive among social players to formulate public policy alternatives, for there is no expectation that they would ever form governments. Instead, they ask the State to grant them their demands, without much attention to how policymaking works or its constraints. Instead of thinking in terms of available resources, alternative costs, competing pressures, and practical choices, social actors develop unrealistic expectations about the State's ability to distribute wealth, goods, and services. This shouldn't come as a surprise. Patriarchy feeds patriarchy: the ruled internalize the figure of the ruler as a "giver", a "head of the family" – the term Sadat used to describe himself. As children, they expect the ruler to meet their needs without much attention paid to how he can do that. And because politics has been divorced from compromise and from policymaking and restricted to utopias, each social actor paints their dream in a wholesome way. For Islamists, Egypt would be wholly Islamic, with all other players re-educated or reduced to marginality. For liberals, Egypt would become wholly liberal, with everyone else re-educated or reduced to the margin, and so on. Ultimately, it becomes the ruler – and his security agencies – who in practice protects these social actors from each other's utopian dreams. If the heavy hand of the authoritarian state flinches, these social actors find themselves face-to-face with each other, without the political skills or habits they need to manage their clashing dreams. In other words, they find themselves without a political system – unless or until a new ruler reestablishes his neopatrimonial control.

Protecting Economic Stagnation

Since the State took over production in the 1950s, its rulers ran it as an extension of State institutions. In fact, the management of the "public sector", as State-run economic units became known, is a textbook example of neopatrimonialism. As was the case with the civil service, rulers and their security agencies chose the managers of "public companies" based on personal trust in their loyalty and, to various degrees, abilities. Trusted managers strived to make their companies useful to the rulers, both

politically and economically – including, by diverting resources for personal use when necessary. They also kept the companies under control; preventing labor-related troubles or any crises that might embarrass the regime. At the same time, rulers used those companies as a pool for rewards. They filled them with fresh graduates, most of whom would otherwise have been unemployed – given the size of the economy. They distributed parts of its budgets – as "profits", "incentives" and alike – to workers and employees who otherwise would have been more severely underpaid. They used these companies as lucrative retirement plans for army and police officers. They also underpriced their products as a part of their strategy to buy off the poor majority. Ensuring the discharge of all these tasks constitute an integral part of the companies' managers' responsibilities, in line with the State "development" strategy.

Interestingly, when the State decided to "liberalize" the economy, the rulers built a similar relationship with the expanding "private sector". Starting 1974, a new social group coalesced around the State, using its contacts to appropriate public resources. This group, which formed Egypt's new "business community", was composed of segments of the old private sector that survived under Nasser, state managers, with strong ties to the state-run banking sector, and adventurous newcomers.²⁰ This emerging "private sector" focused on lucrative and often highly subsidized activities such as imports, financial services, and tourism, while the public sector continued to assume responsibility for the main part of employment and production. As such, the wealth accumulation strategy of this private sector could only work through its intertwinement with and dependence on the state. Losing the rulers' favor meant losing access to bank loans, licenses, land appropriation, and privatization deals, which in most cases also meant being evicted from the market. This dependence pattern deepened through the following decades.²¹ Around the year 2000, even when important segments of this business

20 (In Arabic) Samia Said, *Who Owns Egypt: The Social Origins of the Economic Openness Elite in Egyptian Society 1974-1980*, Cairo, Dar Al Mahrousa, 2002.

سامية سعيد، من يملك مصر: الأصول الاجتماعية لنخبة الانفتاح الاقتصادي في المجتمع المصري 1974-1980، القاهرة، دار المحروسة، 2002.

21 Melani Cammet, "Structural Adjustment and the Rise of Crony Capitalism", *A Political Economy of the Middle East*, Routledge, 2015.

community tried to take a more active political role and reshape economic and social policies, they did so by regrouping around the President's son, Gamal Mubarak. In a sense, he served as a bridge to the State rather than a leverage to limit its power. In either case, the initial success of this group came to a screeching halt in 2011 when the military stepped in, arrested most of their leaders in the context of the Tahrir Uprising, and then returned them to their traditional place of dependency on the state.

As with the dysfunctional institutions and the ineffective political system, neopatrimonial management of the economy did not generate a growth capable of meeting the increasing demands of the population and coping with global economic change. Neopatrimonial management does not allocate resources effectively or regulate economic activity in a dynamic and responsive way. Nor does it seize opportunities, produce talent, generate creativity, foster competition, or even mimic success achieved elsewhere. Private operators do this, when successful. There are certainly cases of neopatrimonial states that developed their economies, such as South Korea and other East Asian success stories. But their neopatrimonialism protected market forces and tied them to the ruler's overall strategy, rather than eviscerating the market and replacing its companies by State-run mammoths.

In a nutshell, the smashing success of authoritarianism, its subjugation of social forces, and its control of State institutions, the economy and social relations, perpetuated neopatrimonial management of the State. The decimation of social forces meant that there were no significant actors pushing for the rationalization of State institutions, developing a market economy, or the negotiation of social conflicts. Thus, the patronage network that formed an initial "scaffolding" for State formation never came down. Instead, it became the modus operandi of State institutions, the economy, and social conflicts. Neopatrimonialism hollowed out State institutions and perpetuated economic stagnation and social atomization. In other words, it kept the State together but eroded its resilience. Ultimately, State fragility perpetuated authoritarianism, which in turn deepened State fragility, together forming a vicious downward spiral that traps both the rulers and the ruled.

II. Civic Engagement and the Devil's Dilemma

Authoritarianism and State fragility create a trap for civic engagement. Political action, or civic engagement as a whole, under authoritarian conditions doesn't lead to cumulative change and often ends up cementing the regime it seeks to transform. On the other hand, revolutionary politics face severe and successful repression in ordinary times and, when they are momentarily successful, they run the risk of bringing down the State itself, creating the conditions for the return of authoritarianism. Neither strategy has worked, nor are they likely to in the foreseeable future. What this section suggests instead is to recenter civic engagement on transforming the State and its relationship to the economy and social forces.

1. Civic Engagement, Trapped

For six decades, Egyptian political and civic actors have struggled with this question. Many decided to seek official recognition and operate in the open. Successive rulers have adopted different strategies to deal with them, granting some a varying degree of recognition and freedom of action, and denying others. In terms of political actors, Nasser locked up most Islamists and some leftists but allowed other leftists and a few liberals to operate. While they were unable to form political parties, they were allowed to print magazines and newspapers and control some cultural institutions from which they tried to engage the public. Sadat created three political parties, with newspapers, branches across the country and some freedom to organize and recruit members. He then took over one party and turned it into the National Democratic Party. When the old *Wafd* party announced its return in 1978, Sadat banned it. But he allowed another party to emerge, and then allowed Islamists to operate openly, albeit without formal recognition. Mubarak allowed the *Wafd* to gain legal status, as well as a few other less significant parties. He also allowed Islamists to contest elections, both in trade and professional unions as well as in parliament. But he denied formal recognition to them and the communists who also operated openly. As was the case with Nasser and Sadat, some newspapers operated as de facto political parties, in all but name and legal recognition. Some formal political parties also focused their activities almost

exclusively around their newspapers.

A similar process took place in civil society, with the State granting recognition to some organizations and denying it to others while allowing varying degrees of freedom of movement to both recognized and unrecognized actors. Through civic engagement, many activists found a way out of the Devil's Dilemma of political action under authoritarianism. They were particularly frustrated by the failures of political parties to achieve their goals and saw an opportunity in a new sector that seemed to escape authoritarian controls and to offer a more effective path to popular mobilization. They also found there a way to supersede the ideological crisis on the Left, given the overlap between civic engagement and the causes they struggled for: social justice, democracy, and national emancipation. In addition to these elements, many Islamists and radical leftists found in civic engagement a way around state repression, and an opportunity to build networks and reach a broader audience. The trouble with these strategies is that the State security agency saw it for what it was: an attempt to dislodge authoritarian control, to which they were wholly committed. They therefore activated the neopatrimonial machine and worked to integrate civic spaces into its network, applying various doses of reward and punishment. In other words, the State viewed civic engagement as political activity and therefore extended its "political system" to include it.

Ultimately, both political action and civic engagement found themselves in the same authoritarian trap. By the end of term of all three presidents, authoritarianism was as robust as it was at its beginning, and opposition to authoritarianism, both political and civic, as weak and dispersed as it was at the start. Again, it is important to emphasize that the meager results cannot be attributed to lack of trying or complicity on the part of political parties or civil society organizations, far from it. They mobilized support, tried to recruit members, pushed for incremental change, organized protests and contested elections – as much as they were allowed. They also pushed the limits of what was allowed. But none of their limited successes had a cumulative effect in terms of enhancing power resources, political capital, or ability to act independently from the regime's favors, let alone contest its grip on power. Whenever the regime decided that the margin of freedom was growing too large or about to form a threat, it closed public space and curtailed those freedoms.

The only exception to this Sisyphean cycle was the decade *leading up to* the Tahrir Uprising (2000-2011). Here, the main driver of change was civil society organizations and networks. US adoption of an aggressive democratization policy following the 9/11 attacks prompted President Mubarak to expand the "margin of freedom" granted to political and social actors. This change didn't alter the nature of authoritarianism, but it did create a larger breathing space for social actors. Civic engagement mushroomed and consolidated their organizational power beyond the classic spaces of labor and trade unions. And around them appeared a large and loose network of associations, groupings, movements, and initiatives, mostly involved in seemingly apolitical activities. For a full decade, these networks interacted with each other, with various degrees of coalition, coordination, mobilization, etc., creating layers of social power that contributed to the 2011 Tahrir Uprising.

The initial success of the Uprising opened a window of opportunity for revolutionary politics to push Egypt down a path of democratization. The ensuing chaos, both spontaneous and deliberate, created ripe conditions for the return of authoritarianism. Islamists, Liberals, Nationalists and Leftists exchanged accusations of misconduct and betrayal. Regardless of the validity of their respective claims, it became clear by 2014 that the window of revolutionary politics had closed. The new regime quickly re-established authoritarian control, correctly identified civil society organizations as part of the threat, and therefore closed most civic spaces.

Other than the narrative of betrayal, the collapse of Egypt's brief experiment with democratization could be seen as a consequence of State fragility. First, the severe imbalance of power among Egyptian political and social actors reflects the former's subjugation of social forces and the latter's structural dependence on the State. This makes democratization unlikely, as those in control of structural power often defeat their rivals. Moreover, the severe imbalance of power in favor of the rulers makes the control of the State apparatus a matter of life and death for any political player. This means that those who lose control of this apparatus to a competitor as a result of elections run the risk of political annihilation. This zero-sum situation makes the democratic alternation of power a rather remote possibility and drives the players to fight each other to the death, sometimes literally.

The impact of this power imbalance is compounded

by a second aspect of state fragility: the weakness of the political system. As the previous section explains, decades of neopatrimonialism calcified politics, reducing it to grandstanding, symbolic acts, and holding on to maximalist positions, with little attention to developing alternative policies, integrating interests, or negotiating compromises. The ultimate result is the dominance of utopian dreams. Coupled with a political culture that prioritizes unity and upholds absolute truths while regarding dissent and skepticism as betrayal, this utopian radicalism often leads to exclusionary attitudes. After the ousting of Mubarak in 2011, every political player viewed the other not as a rival in a pluralistic society, but as a historic anomaly, a cancerous formation that would, if unchecked, destroy the very fabric of the country. Consequently, each player tried to find ways not only to cut its rivals to size but to eradicate them.

Finally, the fragility of state institutions and their reliance on a neopatrimonial *modus operandi* brought them to an almost stand-still when the rulers' grip on the reward-punishment network flinched. This had a devastating impact on democratic transition. On one hand, it rendered these institutions incapable of playing a role of mediation, containment, and mitigation in the sharp political conflict underway during the transition. Neither the police, courts, nor "independent" state bodies were in a position to uphold the law, arbitrate between political players, or draw boundaries for political behavior. Instead, these institutions themselves became subject to this political conflict, where each player tried to take them over and add their authority to its arsenal. On the other hand, the collapse of the neopatrimonial network freed marginalized civil servants from fear and prompted them to participate in protests calling for fairer and more objective models of running their institutions. It also frightened the civil servants who built their lives around the rewards granted to them through the neopatrimonial network. As those rewards became threatened, and sometimes suspended, those who carried out most of the work tasks – and were rewarded accordingly through the network – stopped working. And those who were not rewarded didn't (and in most cases couldn't) take up the tasks that were unfamiliar to them. Managers found themselves in impossible situations and often tried to satisfy everyone at the expense of performance. The result was a slowdown in outputs in all state institutions, some of which came to an almost complete halt. This added another layer to the chaos created by political infighting among the political

players and became part of it. It also exasperated the public, who saw a sharp deterioration in the functioning of the State. The inability of political players to present policy alternatives capable of improving the performance of State institutions, and therefore of the economy, public services, law, and order, further alienated and disillusioned the public.

From this perspective, State fragility was bound – in a revolutionary context – to create an atmosphere conducive to the return of authoritarian rule. Today, some reform-minded civil society activists have returned to the model of acting within the tight ring of the system. Others have withdrawn, waiting for a new revolutionary opportunity. The problem with both options is the same: the constraints created by State fragility have not changed, and it is therefore unlikely that either model will produce a different outcome in the future.

2. New Directions: Transforming State Institutions, the Economy, and Society

To avoid the trap of the authoritarian fragile State, this section suggests that civic engagement be recentered on transforming the State itself, as well as its relationship to the economy and social forces. This means prioritizing reforming State institutions and emancipating the economy from its grip, as well as adopting a new strategy to build social power. In other words, working to reverse the dynamics that feed State fragility. Reversing State fragility would, if successful, progressively dismantle authoritarianism and transform Egypt into a functioning State, with a pluralistic society, sustainable economy, and a democratic polity.

Re-forming Institutions

As previous sections indicate, what is keeping state institutions fragile is not a coincidental problem that can be fixed by technical expertise. It is decades of neopatrimonial management that hollow them and render them structurally fragile and dysfunctional. But this also means that reversing institutions' fragility cannot happen by merely ensuring their independence. As the years 2011-2014 have demonstrated, it is virtually impossible for these institutions to function without the rulers' hand.

The challenge then is to identify ways to *reverse this fragility under authoritarian rule without triggering a negative authoritarian response*.

Analyzing the experiences of former neopatrimonial countries could show different ways of achieving this difficult goal. Britain in the 19th century and South Korea in the late 20th century offer very different paths. The former went through a long, phased, and protracted struggle where rising social forces pushed for rationalizing and bureaucratizing public institutions. They were not, however, driven by altruistic aims or because they were convinced by Max Weber's ideal type of rational bureaucracy. They were simply driven by self-interest: creating standard rules for entry into institutions – from civil service to the military to universities – meant more access and therefore more social mobility for them and their children. In South Korea, the push for rationalization and standardization came from the authoritarian ruler himself. He was driven neither by Max Weber's arguments nor by social justice considerations, but by pure economic necessity. General Park Chung Hee embarked on a project aimed at "recreating the Japanese miracle in one generation". And to implement it, he concluded that he needed to reconfigure those State institutions dealing with the market. His goal was to reform these institutions on a meritocratic basis. And to achieve this in a messy political situation he chose to shield these "economic" institutions from the rampant neopatrimonialism that governed all state institutions. For the chosen institutions, he recruited staff based on standard qualifications, prioritized efficiency, expertise, and encouraged innovation. The rest of State institutions continued to serve as reservoirs for neopatrimonial perks. There, he parked army officers in need of lucrative post-military careers. Eventually, the recruited professional staff rose in the ranks and led impressive careers, some of them moving from their institutions of origin to other institutions where they tried to promote the same culture of professionalism. Civil servants in other institutions became jealous of the success and material benefits the meritocratic institutions had achieved and sought to mimic it. None of these institutions challenged the political control of General Park, but they rationalized the formulation and implementation of his policies. They also created a cast of State managers whose loyalty was to the proper management of public resources and the orderly discharge of their missions. Ultimately, what began as islands of effectiveness in a limited number of institutions had a contagious effect and pulled the rest upward. Authoritarianism

ultimately fell in South Korea, for reasons unrelated to these institutions, but the meritocratic institutions helped in managing the difficult transition to democratic governance.²²

It is conceivable to combine the British and South Korean approaches: pushing for standardization and rationalization in all public institutions, while avoiding any challenge to the political control of the rulers over these institutions. Few things could reduce the likelihood of authoritarian response to that effort. One is to avoid the question of institutional independence, simply because it is not a priority or a condition without which reform cannot take place. Another is to emphasize the technical aspects of institutional reform and downplay its political consequences, presenting it as a necessary means to increase effectiveness. A third is to frame it as an issue of social justice – as improving access to jobs and social mobility to all qualified individuals. It is harder for rulers to justify opposition to standard rules and procedure of recruitment and promotion, especially to their own supporters. It is hard for them to oppose calls to follow meritocratic rules, define clear benchmarks to measure and assess performance, and develop objective criteria for promotion and senior appointments. And although these reforms do seem technical, they are inherently political. Every gain in reforming State institutions strengthens their "muscles" and takes them one step closer to standing alone without the neopatrimonial scaffolding, with obvious consequences for governance and democratization. What starts as a technically driven process will inevitably have political consequences. But promoting these institutional reforms as part of political reform will bury them at the onset.

Emancipating the Economy

Building a market economy is rarely associated with civic engagement and is usually viewed with hostility by its activists. Part of this hostility stems from its connection with global economic institutions like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank,

22 For more details, see Byung-Kook Kim and Ezra Vogel, *The Park Chung Hee Era: the transformation of South Korea*, Harvard University Press, 2011, especially Byung-Kook Kim, "The Leviathan: Economic bureaucracy under Park", p. 227-228 and Huyng-A Kim, "State Building: The Military Junta's Path to Modernity Through Administrative Reform", pp. 85-114 and Eun Mee Kim and Gil-Sung Park, "The Chaebol", pp. 265-294.

both viewed as claws of an “imperial capitalist order” or, at best, as drivers of a “Washington Consensus” insensitive to social justice. Another reason for this hostility is the issue of privatization, which has been code for corruption and personal appropriation of public resources in Egypt. But a significant part of the hostility is ideological, coming from seven decades of State control of production that combined economic nationalism with features of the welfare state. The result is a national consensus, shared by most social actors, on an economic model that includes: a large public sector, State responsibility to provide affordable goods and services as well as remunerative employment to all citizens, protection of labor against capital, reduction of imports, exports promotion, protection of the national currency value, as well as developing and expanding the economy as a whole and improving its international competitiveness. Advocating for market reforms goes against this “Cairo Consensus”.

This section argues that breaking with this consensus is necessary to emancipate social forces and recalibrate their relationship with the State – both prerequisites for reversing State fragility and paving the way towards democratization. Economic development is a condition *sine qua non* for democratization, or any form of progressive reform. And it is hard to see why the Cairo Consensus model, which failed for seven decades in promoting economic development, would succeed today. More importantly, the Cairo Consensus model enshrines State supremacy over social forces, condemning the latter to structural subservience. Social forces don’t emerge out of rhetoric, and don’t build their power around constitutions. They emerge out of collective interests, customs, and their corresponding worldviews, and build their power around resources, especially wealth making. All of these are tightly linked to the control of production relations. State control of production means State control of *productive forces* – capital, labor, and cadres. It is simply impossible to limit state power without a degree of independence for both labor and capital. For these forces to build their independence, they need to emancipate themselves from State control.

The question is thus not as much about whether the economy is “free” or steered by a development vision as much as it is about the subjugation of productive forces to the State. The peasants who tilt the land by order of the State, planting the crops it decides, when it decides, the way it decides, using inputs it gives them, who then hand the harvest to the state at

prices it decides and keep the portion it allows them to keep, are not a free productive force. They have little autonomy and cannot be expected to challenge State power except in situations of temporary revolt. The same applies to labor, cadres, and capital – in different forms and degrees. Emancipating productive forces therefore means exactly that: emancipating those engaged in production from bondage to the State and allowing them to become autonomous, to become actors instead of subjects. This emancipation should not be conflated with antiregulatory or neoliberal policies. States can and do intervene in economic activities: they regulate markets, they can steer development and set goals for it, etc. But they do all that in conversation – and conflict – with productive forces. The models of State intervention vary, from Reagan’s United States to Scandinavia to South Korea. But in all these models, productive forces remain players that the State must bargain with rather than dominate. When the State eviscerates their independence and takes direct control of production, we get the post-1952 Egyptian model. What this section is calling for is not State withdrawal from the economy, but the emancipation of its productive forces from the current subjugation to the State.

Emancipating the economy should not be reduced to privatization either. Egypt’s private sector has historically been a disappointment to economists who argued in its favor. Since the mid-1930s, successive governments used their newly acquired legislative powers to offer investors fiscal, financial, and legislative incentives to foster growth. The private sector cashed the incentives, achieved some growth, and then stagnated. By 1950 that growth had slowed down and, in some sectors, declined. This rigid response to incentives was not always driven by greed or laziness; in most cases, it reflected the structural deficiencies of public policies. With little or no investment in the conditions of labor, in the professionalism of management, in marketing, or in regulatory frameworks, private operators could only grow as far as they benefited from their location in Egypt. Proximity to locally available resources, familiarity with local market needs, and cheap though unskilled labor. Once they had made use of these advantages, private operators had no space to grow in. Their competitiveness was low on foreign markets, and local markets couldn’t grow fast enough to create demand that can pull growth.²³

23 Patrick O’Brien, *The Revolution in Egypt’s Economic*

A worse process took place with Sadat's "liberalization" programs, and then subsequently with then Mubarak's. In addition to the continued deficiency of public policies, those operators often focused on direct plunder of public resources in the form of lucrative bank loans, tax exemptions, sale of privatized assets instead of restructuring them, appropriation of public lands, and sheer speculation. Ultimately, private operators used State support to accumulate wealth without necessarily creating the hoped-for growth. Although the share of the private sector in investments and in the GDP did sometimes increase, it remained dependent on the State and its public sector, failing to become the locomotive for growth that its advocates expected.

Emancipating the economy, therefore, should not be seen as transferring ownership of production assets to private hands but rather as *constructing a market economy*. This means restructuring the State's role in the economy so that it serves the productive forces and offers them the platforms needed for growth. This includes liberating productive forces – peasants, labor, cadres, and capital – from the grip of the State and helping them to organize, produce, and market. It also includes creating regulatory and institutional frameworks conducive to production. In addition, it includes promoting effective management, raising the quality of labor and improving work conditions. Finally, it includes the development of policies and institutions necessary to offer production units better access to markets, inside and outside Egypt, and facilitate their integration into the global economy.

Egyptian rulers are unlikely to go down this road voluntarily. In part, they too adhere to the Cairo Consensus that shapes their view of the economy and the State. Moreover, controlling the economy has clear political benefits, especially in a society where two thirds of the population are vulnerable. But advocates of civic engagement possess a dual advantage - if they choose to push for these transformations. On the one hand global economic forces are favorable to many of these changes. Although their focus is a lot narrower – mainly on reducing public spending – most of these changes would receive their support if pushed by local actors. On the other hand, the failure of the Cairo Consensus has become so apparent, and its consequences are so felt by the majority of Egyptians, that there might

be an opening for questioning it publicly. The main challenge remains the advocates of civic engagement themselves and their ideological commitment to the very Cairo Consensus that undermines their political power.

Building Social Forces

Social forces are not created by deliberate design; they are shaped by long-term, deep-seated changes. As the first section discussed, decades of concentration of economic, political, and social capital in the hands of rulers have decimated Egypt's social forces and made them structurally dependent on the State. This structural imbalance cannot be easily reversed, but social actors can adapt their strategies to navigate and mitigate its consequences.

Therefore, rebuilding Egyptian social forces and reducing social atomization should be the focus of civic engagement. Addressing social fragmentation necessitates a deliberate attention to organizing individuals into groups and networks, regardless of the activities around which these collectivities converge. The emphasis, therefore, should not necessarily be on the specific outcomes of these organizations; instead, it should be on the act of organizing itself. Even organizing people around simple activities like film screenings or sports can foster social cohesion, which is fundamental to any civic or political engagement. Additionally, depoliticizing these efforts can help avoid repression and build credibility.

Despite its apparent control, the Egyptian State has a limited level of "social penetration", here taken to mean the knowledge of and ability to shape social interactions at the regional and local levels. Apart from its largely uneducated networks of informants, the State lacks both information about and capacity to regulate these uncharted territories. For instance, when the State implemented a poverty alleviation program involving cash subsidies, it discovered that it had no data on income, employment, health, education, or residence information concerning the intended millions of beneficiaries. Among political actors, Islamists have been the exception in building networks connecting individuals at local, regional, and national levels. However, this network was exclusively Islamist and, despite its social mission, remained tied to a specific political group, preventing it from becoming a vehicle for broader social power and making it vulnerable to State surveillance and repression. Their approach was valid, and could

become a model for civic engagement, but without its political affiliation.

The proposed solution in this section is therefore to create *apolitical* organizations that connect individuals at the village and neighborhood levels. By apolitical, I mean networks formed by individuals unaffiliated with political groups, containing no political content, and advocating no political message. Using American terminology, these organizations should be deliberately bipartisan, avoiding political issues and focusing solely on social and economic matters. These village and neighborhood networks/organizations could address public health concerns such as waste management and sanitation or provide educational services. They could include women's groups, youth clubs, chess clubs, book clubs, and mutual aid financial arrangements. The more organized individuals become, the more coherently society can mobilize, and the more likely that social actors emerge as partners for the State, even if only as junior ones. By avoiding political topics and focusing on local, social and economic issues, these networks would invite broader participation and face less repression. Eventually, these networks/organizations could form connections at district or regional levels and potentially build partnerships with government agencies eager to engage in these uncharted territories, despite the resistance of security agencies wary of politically suspicious associations. Collaborating with State agencies would strengthen these organizations, provide them with legal legitimacy, and make them more valuable and desirable to the public. Such partnerships would also train members in governance, policy formulation, and demand articulation, all of which are essential skills for any future democratic society.

The same model could apply to labor and professional organizations, covering a wide range of activities from chambers of commerce to labor and professional syndicates, farmers' unions, and academic associations. These organizations have substantial memberships, sometimes numbering in the millions. It is difficult to find an individual who is not a member of at least one of them. Leftist and Islamist groups have attempted for decades to build political bases within these organizations, with varying degrees of success. As these organizations became political players, the State treated them as such, using the same approach it applies to political parties: allowing them some freedom, punishing them when they overstep boundaries, and using their leaders as intermediaries. This section

suggests an opposite approach: *depoliticizing* these organizations and focusing instead on *building their capacity as unions*, focusing solely on the professional concerns of their members and their expertise. As with local organizations, this would protect them from repression, allow them to strengthen their structures, and better connect with their members.

The same applies to traditional ties – such as extended families, tribes, and religious sects, all of which remain relevant in Egypt's social life. In rural areas, Upper Egypt, Sinai, and the northwest – essentially everywhere outside major urban centers – these ties play a significant role in social and economic life. Additionally, they occasionally gain political significance during mobilization times, such as elections or security crises. Understanding these ties, their dynamics, and limitations, and learning how to relate to and connect them, is an important source of political capital for any actor seeking to limit state power.

This suggested strategy is not purely theoretical; it builds on the experience of social organization growth between 2000 and 2011 while avoiding its pitfalls, particularly overt politicization. It is important to note that this strategy is not expected to yield immediate power but to lay the groundwork for future change. It would reduce atomization, teach individuals cooperation, provide real-life experience in collective bargaining, train them to aggregate and represent interests, formulate demands, negotiate compromises, and mobilize support. It would also offer opportunities for leadership development, improve communication across society, introduce realism in addressing public issues, and rationalize the public space. This framework would transcend identity and ideological differences, enabling practical solutions for real-world challenges among people with differing ideological perspectives. In essence, it lays the foundational building blocks for social power.

The proposed approach to civic engagement pivots away from revolutionary and reformist politics, while building upon both their legacies. It re-orders the priorities of civic engagement and provides it with a coherent and structured direction. Such a strategy is likely to encounter resistance, particularly from the ruling authorities and other entrenched interests. Nevertheless, compared to revolutionary or reformist approaches, it stands a better chance of effectively managing such resistance.

However, it should be noted that the proposed strategy aims to address deep-rooted patterns in State-society relations, which present some challenges. One of these is the timeframe. This proposed approach does not offer immediate solutions for the current suffering and repression, nor does it promise short-term results. Consequently, it is easy for activists to dismiss it in favor of immediate political action. However, experience shows that responding to urgent needs does not necessarily lead to effective outcomes. Resisting the impulse for immediate action is, therefore, the wiser political choice. The other challenge arises from the tendency to conflate the proposed areas of action with familiar models. For instance, there is a risk of conflating the concept of emancipating productive forces with neoliberalism, or reforming State institutions with the “institutional development” promoted by global organizations. Finally, this new direction represents a strategic path into uncharted territory; it requires focus, perseverance, and a willingness to learn through practice and experience.

Conclusion

Analyzing the historical relationships between the State, the economy, and social forces in Egypt provides critical insights into the origins of both authoritarianism and State fragility. Like many State-builders, Egyptian rulers relied on a combination of power and patronage to extend their sovereignty. They managed to establish themselves as absolutist rulers – subjugating social forces and taking direct control of the economy and social change. However, their victory was also pyrrhic: it decimated the social forces typically responsible for developing a market economy, pushing for the rationalization of State institutions, and negotiating social conflicts. This led to the perpetuation of state fragility: the neopatrimonial scaffolding of State institutions remained in place and, weakening and hollowing them over time. State control of the economy resulted in stagnation, while its management of social change exacerbated polarization, depriving society of a functional framework to address its conflicts. This fragile State became a trap for both rulers and the ruled. Unable to challenge this overwhelming power, the subjugated, fragmented, and polarized social forces became structurally dependent on the rulers to protect their interests. In turn, the rulers became dependent on sustaining neopatrimonial control

over the State, the economy, and social conflict. This created a downward spiral of State fragility and authoritarianism, each reinforcing and deepening the other.

This vicious cycle poses significant challenges for civic engagement. Thus far, advocates have focused on dismantling authoritarianism, either by working within its constraints or attempting to overthrow it. Neither approach has proven effective. This paper suggests that civic engagement should concentrate on reversing State fragility, particularly in three ways: reforming State institutions, emancipating the economy, and building social power. These actions target the dynamics that sustain State fragility and perpetuate authoritarianism. Successfully addressing State fragility in these ways could progressively dismantle authoritarianism and transform Egypt into a functioning state, characterized by a pluralistic society, a sustainable economy, and a democratic political system.

However, it is important to recognize that civic engagement is not a panacea for all the problems stemming from authoritarianism and State fragility. It should instead be viewed as part of a broader strategy that complements political, institutional, and economic reforms. And while this paper emphasizes the importance of depoliticizing civic engagement, it recognizes its links to the political engagement needed to push for these reforms. It also notes that the same problems that hindered civic engagement also trap political engagement. Specifically, the combination of authoritarianism and State fragility makes it unlikely for reformist or revolutionary politics to dislodge either. Therefore, some of the suggested paths for civic engagement could also be useful to consider for political action, especially the need to enhance political skills.

As this paper has discussed, neopatrimonialism impoverishes politics, reducing political actors to symbolic gestures with little incentive to develop the skills necessary for engaging in pluralistic political conflict. This dynamic prevents social actors from reconciling competing claims when the political space opens, leading instead to zero-sum conflicts. The intensity of disagreements among Islamists, liberals, and leftists, particularly between 2011 and 2014, underscores the urgency of addressing this issue. Therefore, a transformative political engagement agenda must focus on developing the skills that neopatrimonialism has hindered – specifically, negotiating compromises, integrating

interests, and formulating policy platforms. This involves two critical tasks.

The first is to rehabilitate the concept of compromise. In Egyptian political culture, compromise is often perceived negatively, associated with yielding to power, making secret deals, or betraying principles. Consequently, political activists need to redefine compromise as a positive political value, essential for the survival of democracy and the functionality of the political process. This effort requires an educational initiative that engages political leaders and advocates. It also necessitates ongoing discussions within each political group about the limits of compromise they are willing to accept. These discussions should address issues and demands that each group is prepared to suspend or postpone within the context of coalition-building or during prolonged pluralistic conflicts. These issues are not limited to theoretical matters, such as identity, but also include practical political questions about rights, the rule of law, the State's role, and public policies ranging from education to foreign policy.

This approach differs from previous efforts that focused on “building common ground” between, for example, Islamists and secularists. While engaging in in-depth discussions about identity, Islamic law, or individual rights is commendable, such discussions are unlikely to produce political convergence. They often result in superficial agreements that overlook deep-seated differences. The approach proposed here is fundamentally different: it starts by acknowledging that these differences are irreconcilable. Islamists will continue to seek the implementation of Islamic law, while liberals will persist in advocating for the full respect of universal human rights. The question then becomes what each side is willing to pause, bracket, modify, or postpone in order to create a foundation for a pluralistic political process, and for how long. It also involves planning how these groups will navigate situations where the political process does not generate sufficient support for their agenda. To address these and similar questions, each political group must engage directly with its own activists and supporters, rather than focusing on intergroup dialogues.

The second task is to shift the focus from principles to public policy. Developing public policies is not only a crucial skill for any pluralistic political process but also provides a more effective approach to resolving issues related to compromise and integrating

interests. Historically, Egyptian political actors have paid little attention to crafting public policies that could replace those they criticize. This neglect was understandable in an authoritarian context, where information was scarce, and there was little motivation to develop alternative policies. For over seven decades, political actors had no realistic chance of forming a government and implementing policy, and those in power showed no interest in adopting policies proposed by the opposition. Political actors continued to publish “policy platforms,” either to meet legal requirements for party recognition or to present themselves as credible alternatives during elections. However, these platforms were often more like wish lists than actionable policies. This symbolic approach became evident when the political space opened in 2011; the lack of policy alternatives or even a realistic understanding of policymaking severely undermined the credibility of those participating in transitional governments. Liberals, leftists, and Islamists who joined these governments found themselves constrained by bureaucratic inertia, unable to translate their ideals into practical policies, which significantly harmed their credibility as viable alternatives to the old regime.

Developing public policy alternatives may seem irrelevant given the resilience of authoritarianism. However, it remains a valuable exercise, regardless of the likelihood that political actors will form governments in the near future. Not only will this preparation be useful when opportunities arise, but it will also yield several other positive outcomes, all of which contribute to transformative politics. First, it will shift political debates toward governance and away from identity and ideological conflicts. This change would, in turn, move political actors away from symbolic politics – characterized by zero-sum, exclusionary, and utopian features – toward a more interest-based approach. As political actors begin to focus more on the competing interests within society, they are likely to recognize the need to integrate these interests and, at that point, prioritize the most significant ones. This process would reshape the political landscape according to divisions of interest, which are often easier to reconcile than identity-based issues. Such a shift would reduce identity and ideological divides, which tend to be more challenging to bridge. Engaging Islamists, liberals, and leftists in discussions on health, education, or economic policies is more likely to yield compromises than debates centered on national identity.

Focusing on public policy would also enhance political actors' understanding of the State apparatus, its resources, institutions, dysfunctions, and limitations. This knowledge is vital for rationalizing their expectations and aligning their aspirations with reality. It would also encourage activists to engage with issues that resonate with their target audiences, compelling them to think critically about governance challenges and to listen to their supporters' concerns. Such engagement would anchor activists more firmly in their local contexts, transforming their relationship with the public from a position of preaching to one of active engagement, thereby enhancing their credibility. It would also provide political organizations and campaigns with substantial activities to organize around, reducing infighting over symbolic matters such as statements and regulations. Furthermore, focusing on policy would give these organizations a means to evaluate effectiveness among their members, providing benchmarks essential for leadership development and managing internal conflicts and divisions.

Finally, focusing on formulating policy alternatives is less likely to provoke repression, especially when conducted in a depoliticized manner. Additionally, it requires minimal institutional capacity. Any group, whether formal or informal, can engage in this work. In fact, individuals can pursue it independently, whether within an institutional framework – such as working for a policy center or completing a graduate dissertation – or outside such structures, like writing a paper or book chapter. Some of these activities can even be conducted remotely, allowing the diaspora to participate and engage with Egypt's civic life.

In conclusion, while civic engagement serves as a crucial foundation for addressing State fragility and authoritarianism in Egypt, its effectiveness is inherently linked to political action. Civic efforts to build social power, reform institutions, and liberate the economy create the groundwork for a more engaged and organized society. While civic engagement should remain apolitical, it de facto connects with and supports broader political movements that advocate for systemic reforms. The same skills needed for successful civic engagement – negotiating, building coalitions, and developing policy alternatives – are also essential for political actors seeking to create lasting change. Thus, integrating civic engagement with political action not only enhances the impact of both but also ensures that the momentum generated at the grassroots level translates into effective governance

and sustainable democratization. By separating yet aligning these two spheres, Egyptian social actors can move towards breaking the cycle of State fragility and authoritarianism, opening up the possibility for a pluralistic and functional State.

Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is an independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change and social justice. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality, and gender equality.



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