THE EMERGENCE OF PEACEFUL PROTEST IN EGYPT UNDER MUBARAK

"It's no longer any use begging for our rights by appealing to the regime, because it will not listen. But if a million Egyptians went out to the streets in protest or announced a general strike, if that happened, even once, the regime would immediately heed the people's demands. Change, as far as it goes, is possible and imminent, but there is a price we have to pay for it."[1]

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The wave of protest in December 2010 which eventually led to the ousting of the Tunisian President Ben Ali caught most analysts, scholars, politicians and journalists off guard and even after Ben Ali had been forced out of office in January 2011 most experts considered the Tunisian Revolution an isolated event. Such a strong call for democracy and change was regarded as most unlikely if not impossible in Arab countries and especially change by means of popular and peaceful protest was seen as the least achievable. In this paper I shall argue that, firstly, the idea that Islam and democracy are incompatible and secondly, the focus on elite politics and the simultaneous disregard for social movements distorted the analysis of the state of affairs in Egypt. To substantiate the argument this paper shall proceed through three main chapters. Firstly, I shall demonstrate how the notion that Islam has

a negative effect on the emergence of democracy and democratic movements prevented many analysts from drawing the correct assumptions about the Egyptian society. Secondly, I shall argue that the emphasis on elite politics and their role in both the emergence of democracy and democratic transitions distracted the centre of attention from those spheres of society where changes actually took place. To stress this point I shall, thirdly, give a short account of the development of peaceful and popular protest movements in Egypt. Finally, I shall sum up my points.

My first point focuses on the argument that democracy can only flourish in a cultural environment that embraces democratic values such as individualism, equality or compromise. The argument claims that religions leave an important stamp on the predominant culture of any region and that certain religions like Protestantism are

1) Anonymous in Alaa Al-Aswany on February 28, 2010.

© Matthew Cassel |Protesters on top of an Egyptian army tank at Tahrir Square on 29 January call for the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak.

more conducive to democracy than others such as Confucianism, Catholicism or in our case Islam.

After the terrorist attacks of September 2001, the absence of democracy and political instability in the Middle East was seen as a threat to international security and this perception spurred the search for what caused the lack of democracy and freedom. Some analysts started a debate about the compatibility of democracy and Islam (Ehteshami 2004). At the time analysts looked for a common feature in the Middle Eastern region that stifled democratic change and some of them came to the conclusion that it was Islam that hindered democratic change. But other scholars such as Larry Diamond (2010) or Stepan and Robertson (2003) argued against the idea that one religious belief could prevent democratization and supported the notion that there were many other reasons behind the lack of democracy in the Middle East such as economic inequality, the rentier economy and the influence of oil, internal and external support for authoritarian statecraft – to name a few.

But also before 9/11 and the War on Terror scholars developed a line of argument which claimed that because there were no democratic traditions in the Islamic tradition, democracy could never take root there and was ultimately confined to regions where democratic traditions – at least basically – were already existent. Among them is Elie Kedourie (1992: 5-6) who claims that there is "nothing in the political traditions of the Arab world — which are the political traditions of Islam — which might make familiar, or indeed intelligible, the organizing ideas of constitutional and representative government."

Very prominent are also the ideas of Samuel Huntington (2001) who stressed the point that there was only one Muslim country which could count as democratic and this country would be Turkey. According to Huntington the only Arab

© Matthew Cassel | A protester holds a sign with Mubarak's face pasted on a donkey.

country with (signs of) democracy was Lebanon. But in the case of Lebanon he contributed the emergence of democracy to the Christian majority which was predominant in the country and he claimed that once there was a Muslim majority, democracy ceased to exist (Huntington 1991: 18).

Contrary to this line of argument Ray Hinnebusch (2000) claims that former theories of democratization valued linear and simple theories and explanations over accuracy which led to one superficial explanation of Middle Eastern or Muslim exceptionalism instead of thorough analysis of the reality in those countries.

But it seems that those arguments obstructed the view for certain developments in Arab countries. According to the 2010 Egypt Human Development Report which was undertaken by the United Nations Development Report (UNDP) religion is very important to 96 percent of interviewed Egyptians (Egypt Human Development Report 2010: 72). But the important position of religion in peoples' lives does not appear to have any influence on their attitude towards democracy. In a study in 2008 Jamal and Tessler found that "support for democracy in the Arab world is as high as or higher than in any other world region" (2008: 97) maybe exactly because there is such a striking lack of democracy.

Also according to the findings of the UNDP 84 percent of the correspondents stated that is was important to live under a democratic regime and while 90 percent of the respondents support the fact that leaders should be elected in free elections, 73 percent state that civil rights are important to protect individual rights and freedoms (Egypt Human Development Report 2010: 77).

Thus it seems that the discourse on the incompatibility of these two concepts is rather based in Western intelligentsia and used to explain the persistence of authoritarianism in Arab countries which is also mirrored by Jamal and Tessler's finding that "large numbers of Arabs and other Muslims contend that the tenets of Islam are inherently democratic" (Jamal and Tessler 2008: 101).

My second line of argument relates to the focus on elite politics which perfectly explains the phenomenon of "durable authoritarianism" (Masoud 2011: 21) but fails to give account of the breakdown of this form of authoritarianism. An example for this could be Karen Kramer's work on 'Arab Political Pacts' (2006).

Among scholars was a strong emphasis on the phenomenon of durable authoritarianism and, thus, they also analysed the region trough this lens.

Egypt was a very prominent example of what was also termed "electoral authoritarianism" (Schedler 2002). In the

Western discourse elections are intrinsically linked with democracy, but in the Egyptian context elections were nothing but a means for the regime to maintain their hold on power. While elections were held, they were so tightly controlled that the ruling party was guaranteed to win but at the same time the regime was able to claim at least a semblance of democratic legitimacy. Like other regimes Egypt "fail[ed] to institutionalize other vital dimensions of democratic constitutionalism, such as the rule of law, political accountability, bureaucratic integrity, and public deliberation" (Schedler 2002: 37). The literature assumed that such hybrid regimes had a long lifespan because they provided for the appearance of democracy and allowed for some participation as well as very limited opposition in order to prevent a full blown revolution. But in Egypt the balancing act between the appearance of democracy and the underlying control of the regime had been alienating more and more people.

Yet it was exactly this development which was overlooked by the focus on political elites which includes the regime and the opposition movements on the other side. This led to a failure to explain or presume the breakdown of this durable authoritarianism – also due to a focus on elite politics and to neglect for political mass participation. Thus, one lesson drawn from the events in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria is that authoritarianism is in fact an instable type of regime because at some point the population

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will demand their rights. Moreover, neglect for the ideas and aspirations of the population led to wrong assumptions and focussing on the developments among the political elites in Egypt cannot explain why Mubarak fell because not only does this leave out 'the street' as factor in politics

but it also does not mirror the realities of the events in February 2011 as Mubarak was forced down by a leaderless movement of demonstrators

© Matthew Cassel |Protests calling for the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak continued at Tahrir Square on 8 February.

– an aspect which hardly corresponds with elite politics.

The focus on elite politics was also the reason why the emerging protest movements in Egypt were not deemed as crucial as they actually were. This leads to my third point which covers the development of the protest movements in Egypt in recent years. One can put the start of the recent developments in mobilization and political protest in Egypt at the year 2000. Before there was hardly any open public space for political dissent with the government breaking down on any formation of dissent and with no real opposition existent.

So, in 2000 the "second intifada triggered perhaps the largest and most spontaneous demonstrations in the Arab world since the first Gulf war" (Pratt 2007: 170). This change spurred the hopes of many Arabs that they could achieve more equality, justice and emancipation with people-power (Sadiki 2000: 83). In March 2003 the US invasion in Iraq served as new rallying point and over 40,000 people attended a rally on Tahrir square on 20th March 2003. Protesters were dispersed after occupying the square overnight – an event which became known as 'Tahrir intifada' (El-Mahdi 2009: 95). But only in 2004 did the aim of the protest change from international to national issues when the Egyptian Movement for Change – or better known under the movement's slogan 'Kifaya' which means 'Enough!' – was founded. The movement and other groups such as the Popular Campaign for Change publicly urged Mubarak not to seek re-election and they also strongly opposed to the idea that Hosni

Mubarak's son Gamal Mubarak could inherit the office from his father (El-Mahdi 2009: 88). Despite remaining limited to urban centres, the movement became quite popular across Egypt and inspired many others to become active (Hamzawy 2005: 3). Kifaya symbolizes significant change in how protest movement in Egypt worked because for the first time activists were calling for political changes and reform whereas in the past they had not dared to question the system itself but only protested out of economic or social grievances (El-Mahdi 2009: 92). In the following years Egypt saw several waves of protest in the country – to name just a few in 2006 the Egyptian judges protesting against corruption and election manipulation (El-Mahdi 2009: 99-100) as well as in 2007 and 2008 the protests against the soaring food prices were organized across the country (El-Mahdi and Marfleet 2009). Thus, those protest movements laid the groundwork for what was going to happen in February 2011 when millions of protesting Egyptians forced President Mubarak to step down.

So, as I have tried to show it was the focus on elite politics and the idea that Islam is not conducive to democracy which led to wrong assumptions about the state of affairs in Egypt. There were other factors which contributed to those false assumptions but in terms of theory these two points call for a reassessment of several assumptions that have been predominant in political theory and the literature on Arab countries. ∎

Hossam el-Hamalawy | A burnt down Central Security Forces truck, on the Nile Corniche facing the National Democratic Party headquarters. Protesters sprayed anti-Mubarak graffiti on its side, accusing Mubarak of being an „agent" for the US, demanding that he leaves.

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