

# The Study of Democratization and the Arab Spring\*

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## Abstract

This paper proposes and illustrates a framework for analysis of the recent events in Middle Eastern and North African countries (the so-called Arab Spring) by bringing into dialogue recent theoretical advances in democratization theory with the comparative-historical literature on the political development of the MENA region. We advocate two analytical shifts from conventional approaches in the analysis of the Arab Spring: first, reconsider the temporalities of democratization processes; second, focus on struggles over specific institutional arenas rather than over the regime as a whole. The former recommendation draws attention both to the strategies used by key actors in the political, economic, and civil society spheres, and to the historical legacies that built the influence and resources of these actors over time. The latter allows us to consider the institutional safeguards for old elites that are likely to be included in the post-authoritarian regimes emerging in the region. Even though some of these safeguards are clearly anti-democratic, historical examples show that they do not necessarily preclude democratization. Indeed, in some cases, their introduction might be necessary to achieve democratic openings in other arenas. We illustrate these theoretical points with reference to the case of Egypt.

## Keywords

democratization – institutions – Arab Spring – Middle East – North Africa – Egypt

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\* The authors would like to thank Philippe Schmitter and Jillian Schwedler for their valuable comments on earlier drafts of this paper, as well as three anonymous reviewers whose comments greatly contributed to improving the final version.

## Introduction

From Tunisia to Syria, Yemen, Egypt, and Libya, Middle Eastern authoritarian regimes that ruled for decades have been swept away by the winds of radical political change. The outcome of these quickly unfolding processes is still largely unpredictable. All newly emerging political actors declare allegiance to “democracy”. However, it is far from clear at this stage whether democracy will take root, and if so, which kind of democracy will prevail in the area. Recent decades have shown that the enthusiasm for democratic opening can quickly be followed by backsliding into various forms of “competitive authoritarianism”,<sup>1</sup> where formally pluralist elections mask *de facto* authoritarian regimes. Even though pluralistic competition is established, unelected actors such as the military or the clergy may continue to yield tutelary power over elected officials, and authoritarian incumbents can entrench their positions of power by limiting or distorting competition. Some are already questioning the durability of the Arab Spring as protracted conflict engulfs even the most promising of transitions.

The purpose of this paper is to advance our understanding of these events by bringing two important literatures into conversation with each other: one on political change in the MENA countries and an emerging literature on the dynamics of historical democratization, what goes under the heading of the “historical turn” in democratization studies.<sup>2</sup> If, on the one hand, the insights of the “historical turn” approach are useful for understanding recent developments in the MENA region, on the other hand, taking the history of the region seriously has important consequences for the theoretical approach of the historical turn as well. From the “historical turn” approach we draw two theoretical insights that we consider important to make sense of the unfolding processes of regime change in the MENA region: first, the need to recast the *temporalities* of democratization processes so as to take into account the role of structural features of societies and cultures as well as that of key actors at critical junctures, analyzed over the long run; second, the utility of shifting the analytical focus to developments in institutional arenas *within* the regime rather than the regime as a whole. At the same time, paying the due attention to developments in the MENA region as expounded in the rich literature on the region leads us to broaden our attention from the formal-constitutional institutions of democracy

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1 Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

2 Giovanni Capoccia and Daniel Ziblatt, “The Historical Turn in Democratization Studies: A New Research Agenda and for Europe and Beyond,” *Comparative Political Studies* 43, no. 8-9 (Aug, 2010): 931-968.

which have been the focus of the historical turn. In addition to looking at institutions aimed at constraining and distributing political power such as formal rules on the extension of suffrage, the introduction of the secret ballot, of the institutionalization of the accountability of the executive branch, which have been important in the long-run development of democracy in the Anglo-Saxon countries and in Western Europe, we extend the analysis to institutional *arenas* encompassing the regulation of the economy and of civil society, both of which have been identified by MENA scholars as critical forums of contestation effecting broader political development in the region. The result is a novel theoretical framework that incorporates key insights of both literatures: We argue that analyzing the *episodes of asynchronous change* of the institutional arrangements regulating the political, economic, and civil society arenas over the long run offers a fresh perspective on the process of regime change currently unfolding in the region. This perspective at once allows us to make analytically tractable the impact on institutional change of the structural determinants often emphasized in the literature on the region, and provides new insights for theorizing democratization processes in other areas of the world.

The article is organized as follows: we first discuss how developments in the MENA region have been analyzed in the light of traditional theories of democratization; in the subsequent section, we discuss our theoretical approach, which draws on the so-called “historical turn” in the study of democratization but modifies it with important insights deriving from the literature on the region; in the section that follows, we provide a brief illustration of how aspects of the “historical turn” approach could be used to analyze the contradictory process of regime change in Egypt; the conclusion summarizes our main points and offers general remarks on the implications of our analysis.

### Democratization Theory and the MENA Region

Different approaches to democratization have been put forward over the past half century, each emphasizing different determinants and characteristics of the processes of democratization. One tradition of analysis, which includes modernization theory<sup>3</sup> and classic macro-sociological analyses<sup>4</sup> but which

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3 Seymour M. Lipset, “Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy,” *American Political Science Review* 53 (March 1959); Daniel Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East* (New York: Free Press, 1958).

4 Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966); Gregory Luebbert, *Liberalism,*

stretches to recent influential political economy approaches,<sup>5</sup> emphasizes structural determinants of democratization: democracy is seen as endogenous to specific sets of social conditions such as levels of economic development or of economic inequality, which engender class alliances and distinct paths of political development favoring or not favoring a democratic outcome. An equally important tradition of analysis in the field instead focuses on democratic transitions: democracy is seen as the outcome of strategic interactions between key actors after a crisis of an authoritarian regime.<sup>6</sup> Political interactions in phases of high uncertainty, effort at institution building and the unavoidable contingency that characterizes these processes in many countries are seen as more important than structural conditions, although the impact of the latter is by no means neglected by analysts in this tradition.<sup>7</sup> “Transitologists” have mainly concentrated attention on post-1970 cases of democratization, the so-called “third wave” in which democratic institutions were introduced in contexts where the structural factors emphasized by previous literature were not always present.<sup>8</sup>

While these general works largely ignored the Middle East, a rich body of scholarship emerged to explain why the third wave of democratization had seemingly left the Arab world behind.<sup>9</sup> Consistent with the structuralist

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*Fascism, or Social Democracy: Social Classes and the Political Origins of Regimes in Interwar Europe* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991); Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Evelyn Huber Stephens, and John Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992).

- 5 Carles Boix, *Democracy and Redistribution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Carles Boix, “Electoral Markets, Party Strategies, and Proportional Representation,” *American Political Science Review* 104, no. 2, (2010): 404-413.
- 6 Guillermo O’ Donnell and Philippe Schmitter eds., *Transitions from Authoritarian Rules* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); Samuel Huntington, “How Countries Democratize,” *Political Science Quarterly* 106, no. 4 (1991): 579-616.
- 7 Terry Karl, “Dilemmas of Democratization in Latin America,” *Comparative Politics* 23, 1 (1990): 1-21.
- 8 Of course, the more recent political economy “neo-structuralist” literature also considers more recent cases as driven by structural conditions. For a critique of the claims of this literature, see e.g. Stephen Haggard and Robert Kaufman, “Inequality and Regime Change: Democratic Transition and the Stability of the Democratic Rule,” *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 3 (2012).
- 9 It should be noted, however, that some have challenged this narrative, demonstrating the prevalence of democratic practices and strong cultures of contestation in MENA countries. See for example, Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination* (Chicago: University of Chicago

approaches found in the broader literature, early explanations of this democratic deficit in the MENA region focused on the absence of various cultural, social, and economic factors necessary for democratization, often painting a picture of marked regional exceptionalism. For those focused on cultural determinants, religion has been the most fiercely debated issue. Following Huntington's influential and controversial claims of incompatibility of Islam and democracy,<sup>10</sup> scholars have analyzed the relationship between Islamic values and democratic institutions, and have come to essentially mixed results, ranging from the identification of a negative impact of Islam on the chances of democratization,<sup>11</sup> to analyses that find greater ambiguity in the statistical evidence.<sup>12</sup> Other scholars working within the same "pre-requisites" school have identified the source of the democratic deficit in the endurance of traditional social structures, such as patrimonial and tribal allegiances, which inhibit the development of broad-based national parties and civil society organizations, considered as important building blocks of democratization.<sup>13</sup> In addition, the dominance of certain sectarian groups in many MENA countries has been identified as a hindrance to democratization as it creates a strong divide between regime elites and outsiders.<sup>14</sup> Related to this, some have focused on the dynamics of the *rentier state* as a constraint on the emergence

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Press, 1999) and Jillian Schwedler, *Faith in Moderation: Islamist Parties in Jordan and Yemen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

- 10 Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997).
- 11 Michael Ross, "Does Oil Hinder Democracy?" *World Politics* 53 (April, 2001): 325-61.
- 12 Steven M. Fish, *Are Muslims Distinctive? A Look at the Evidence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Others still have questioned the utility of speaking of Islam and democracy in such broad terms, maintaining that they can be found to be compatible or incompatible depending on which features are examined. See for example, Asef Bayat, *Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the Post-Islamist Turn* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).
- 13 Hisham Sharabi, *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Bassam Tibi, "The Simultaneity of the Unsimultaneous: Old Tribes and Imposed Nation States in the Modern Middle East," in *Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East*, ed. P. Houry and J. Kostiner (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990); Charles Tripp, "Long-Term Political Trends in the Arab States of the Middle East" in *Politics and International Relations in the Middle East*, ed. Jane M Davis. Aldershot (Brookfield: Edward Elgar, 1995), 17-36; Volker Perthes, *Arab Elites: Negotiating the Politics of Change* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2004).
- 14 Examples include the Alewites in Syria ruling over a primarily Sunni population, the Hashemites in Jordan ruling over a majority Palestinian population, and the Arabs of Morocco ruling over a primarily non-Arab majority.

of democracy in the region. The availability of valuable resources – oil in particular – has obviated the need for states to extract large amounts of revenue from the population, thus removing what has historically been a focal point for social mobilization in the process of democratization.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the rentier state dynamic often results in very wealthy regime elites ruling over very poor populations, adding a significant class cleavage to the elite-mass divide. Even for those countries that are not resource rich, moreover, other forms of rent persist (the most significant of which is foreign aid), perpetuating the logic of “no representation without taxation”.

Following the emergence of the “transitions” approach to democratization, a new wave of scholarship on MENA countries has sought to move away from the emphasis on pre-requisites and the sense of regional exceptionalism which it engendered. While focusing on elite bargaining, however, much of the scholarship in this vein has challenged the (often implicit) expectation of transition theory that liberalization will lead to democratization. Many saw the liberalization taking place in MENA countries as essentially a façade whereby authoritarian elites conceded the bare minimum necessary to appease critics.<sup>16</sup> Though some maintained that elites may not be able to control the openings that they created,<sup>17</sup> as time wore on, it appeared that the authoritarian regimes that liberalized were becoming *more* stable, not less. The adoption of liberal institutions, it has been argued, was part of a process of “authoritarian upgrading” where regimes responded to social and economic pressures by changing their modalities of control.<sup>18</sup> Focusing especially on the role of elections under

15 Lisa Anderson, “The State in the Middle East and North Africa,” *Comparative Politics* 20 (October, 1987): 1-18; Jill Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Giacomo Luciani, “Allocation vs. Production States: A Theoretical Framework,” in *The Arab State*, ed. Giacomo Luciani (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). Recent scholarship has argued that oil production was promoted primarily to defuse democratic claims advanced by workers’ movements; see Robert Vitalis, *America’s Kingdom: Myth-Making on the Saudi Oil Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006) and Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (New York: Verso, 2010).

16 Raymond Hinnebusch, “Liberalization without Democratization in “Post-Populist” Authoritarian States,” in *Citizenship and the State in the Middle East*, ed. N. Butenshon, U. Davis, and M. Hassassian (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 123-45; Daniel Brumberg, “The Trap of Liberalized Autocracy,” *Journal of Democracy*, xiii (2002): 56-68.

17 Marsha Pripstein-Posusney, “Multi-Party Elections in the Arab World: Institutional Engineering and Oppositional Strategies,” *Studies in Comparative International Development* 36, no. 4 (2002), 34–62.

18 Steven Heydemann, *Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Arab World* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, October 2007).

authoritarianism, scholars have argued that some forms of liberalization may in fact strengthen authoritarian regimes, managing economic pressures and diffusing public anger.<sup>19</sup> Often, elections initially adopted as a concession to democratizing forces have quickly been incorporated into the logic of the regime, serving an important role in the management of internal conflict and in the distribution of patronage among the ruling elite.<sup>20</sup> Building on this line of inquiry, others have sought to add greater nuance by taking seriously the extensive institutional variation found among these regimes, exploring the consequences of different constitutional designs, electoral systems, and party systems for the prospect of democratic transitions.<sup>21</sup> While this literature has been more optimistic about the prospects for transition under certain institutional arrangements, its findings also generally ran counter to the received wisdom of the transitions school, showing that more liberalized and inclusive polities were more likely to endure. Some have argued that the Arab Spring in fact represents a continuation of this pattern and that rather than thinking of it as a rupture in the historical progression of these regimes, we would do well to look at the enduring institutional features that may be overlooked in the effort to explain the anticipated transitions.<sup>22</sup> As will be discussed below, these themes have important implications for our theoretical framework.

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- 19 Schwedler, *Faith in Moderation*; Malik Mufti, "Elite Bargains and the Onset of Political Liberalization in Jordan," *Comparative Political Studies* 32, no. 1 (1999): 100-129.
- 20 Marsha Pripstein Posusney, "Multiparty Elections in the Arab World: Election Rules and Opposition Responses," in *Enduring Authoritarianism: Obstacles to Democracy in the Middle East*, ed. Marsha Pripstein Posusney and Michelle Penner Angrist (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2005); Ellen Lust-Okar, "Elections under Authoritarianism: Preliminary Lessons from Jordan," *Democratization* 13, no. 3 (2006): 456-471; Lisa Blaydes, *Elections and Distributive Politics in Mubarak's Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
- 21 Ellen Lust-Okar, "Opposition and Economic Crises in Jordan and Morocco", in *Enduring Authoritarianism: Obstacles to Democracy in the Middle East*, Marsha Pripstein Posusney and Michelle Penner Angrist, eds. (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2005); Michelle P. Angrist, "Party Systems and Regime Formation: Turkish Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective," in *Enduring Authoritarianism: Obstacles to Democracy in the Middle East*, ed. Marsha Pripstein Posusney and Michelle Penner Angrist (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2005); Michael Herb, "Princes, Parliaments, and the Prospects for Democracy in the Gulf," in *Enduring Authoritarianism: Obstacles to Democracy in the Middle East*, ed. Marsha Pripstein Posusney and Michelle Penner Angrist (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2005); Jason Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
- 22 Rex Brynen, Pete W. Moore, Bassel F. Salloukh, and Marie-Joëlle Zahar, *Beyond the Arab Spring: Authoritarianism and Democratization in the Arab World* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2012).

## Theorizing the Arab Spring

Given the wave of political change spreading through the Middle East, the time is ripe to re-evaluate our theoretical frameworks for understanding democratization in the region. A more recent scholarship in the analysis of democratization processes, labeled the “historical turn in democratization studies” has developed an approach that in part bridges the insights of structuralist accounts and transition analyses, with primary reference to the historical Western European experience.<sup>23</sup> The historical turn approach focuses on asynchronous change within key institutional arenas of the political system, and seeks to relate each episode of (actual or attempted) reform to subsequent episodes of reform in the same or in connected institutional arenas over the long run. In general, this approach adopts an explicitly historical view of causality, reading history “forward” and not “backwards”.<sup>24</sup> Rather than explaining democratization by looking at outcomes at a single moment in time and their relationship with their contemporaneous correlates, or retrospectively explaining contemporary variations, the advice is to go back and investigate the moments when fights over democratic openings took place, and undertake a thorough analysis of the ideologies, resources, and legacies shaping the choices of actors involved in struggles over institutional change.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, the fights over such democratic openings are often shaped by the values, incentives, and resources of key actors that themselves have deep historical roots. Past experiences of successful or failed democratization (from other countries as well as within the same country) arm democracy’s opponents and proponents with competing causal narratives or “lessons” from the past, thus significantly shaping their behavior. The above suggests that our analytical focus should be directed at those corporate actors (parties and other political organizations, the military, religious establishments) that actually fight the fights over institutional reforms, rather than the social classes or groups that are sometimes cast as directly driving regime change.<sup>26</sup> As a consequence, the historical turn approach to democratization requires, first, that the *temporalities* of democratization be revisited and second, that the theoretical focus shift from the whole regime to the analysis of its *internal institutional variety*.

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23 Capoccia and Ziblatt, “The Historical Turn in Democratization Studies”.

24 Marc Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft* (New York: Knopf, 1954); Paul Pierson, *Politics in Time: History, Institutions, and Social Analysis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

25 Capoccia and Ziblatt, “The Historical Turn in Democratization Studies,” 939.

26 See for example Boix, *Democracy and Redistribution* and Acemoglu and Robinson, *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*.



*Recasting the Temporalities of Democratization*

Capoccia and Ziblatt underscore that it is important to adjust our theorization of the temporalities of democratization to make better sense of both the “slow moving” processes that characterize social, cultural, and economic transformation, and “fast moving” political dynamics that may define institutional change.<sup>27</sup> The critical junctures when key institutions of democracy are fought over are moments in which different choices are possible and different social coalitions can form, potentially shifting away from past equilibria. At the same time, past developments endow actors – to adapt Toynbee’s old metaphor of international history – with a good or a bad “hand” to play in the political struggle over new political institutions.<sup>28</sup> The resulting institutional “collage” of a democratic or quasi-democratic regime is therefore both a function of how key actors – themselves selected and given their political identity by the previous struggles on democratic reform – play their “hand”, and of the “cards” that they have in their hand in each round of struggles over democratic institutions. To understand the former we need to focus on the strategic interaction of key actors in fighting over institutional innovations; to understand the latter, we need to give due attention to historical legacies.<sup>29</sup>

Socioeconomic conditions and cultural inclinations in the mass public typically change very slowly and often provide crucial background conditions for social and political change. Scholars have illustrated the long-run continuity of important socio-economic and cultural factors and their impact on contemporary political outcomes such as voting alignments<sup>30</sup> or institutional performance.<sup>31</sup> A related body of literature shows how socialization processes through mass education<sup>32</sup> or religious communities<sup>33</sup> can preserve private

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27 William H. Sewell, Jr., “Three Temporalities: Towards an Eventful Sociology,” in *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences*, ed. Terrence J. McDonald (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 245-280.

28 Arnold Toynbee, *Civilization on Trial* (Oxford, Oxford University Press 1948).

29 Herbert Kitschelt, “Accounting for Postcommunist Regime Diversity: What Counts as a Good Cause?” in *Capitalism and democracy in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Grzegorz Ekiert and Steven Hanson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 49-86.

30 Keith Darden, “Imperial Footprints,” Paper presented at the Conference of Europeanists, Barcelona, June 2011.

31 Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson, and James Robinson, “The Colonial Origins of Comparative Development: An Empirical Investigation,” *The American Economic Review* 91, no. 5 (2001): 1369-1401.

32 Keith Darden and A. Grzymala-Busse, “The Great Divide: Literacy, Nationalism, and the Communist Collapse,” *World Politics* 59, no. 1 (2006): 83-118.

33 Jason Wittenberg, *Crucibles of Political Loyalty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

attitudes and values that can be mobilized politically when external conditions change. However, the *political effects* of such structural continuities are contingent on the institutional constellation and the political interactions at each moment in time. In other words, macro-structuralist analyses cannot provide a *full* explanation of the variety of institutional configurations necessary for democracy to exist and survive in different historical contexts. By definition, the analysis of institutions is about situations in which more than one behavior are physically and structurally possible.<sup>34</sup> This means that *different* institutional configurations are compatible with a stable or slow-changing social underlay. Hence, it is necessary to focus on the *politics* of institutional and democratic change and the role that structural constellations play in the political interactions that lead to the creation or reform of democratic or proto-democratic institutions. The temporality of politics, however, is different from that of socio-economic and cultural conditions, being sensitive to factors such as the electoral cycle (in democracies as well as in authoritarian systems where elections are held), the succession of political leaders, and exogenous international or domestic events. Moreover, the political actors that interact when political change is possible generally have a short-term political horizon, acting *in primis* to maintain or enlarge their personal power or that of their organization. Thus, we need to consider consequences of the superimposition of punctuated short-run political dynamics aiming at reforming the institutional setup of a polity on an underlay of socio-economic and cultural conditions slowly changing in the long run. In this view, the long-run in the process of democratization is best conceived as “a sequence of big and small episodes of reform” in which pre-existing structural conditions and events, decisions, and contingencies interact to reach a new stage of institutional equilibrium.<sup>35</sup>

### *Contradictions of Democratization*

Importantly, this approach also suggests that the institutional landscape at every point in time may contain unresolved ambiguities and contradictions. It is therefore crucial to take seriously, in our analysis of democratization

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34 Douglass North, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

35 Capoccia and Ziblatt, “The Historical Turn in Democratization Studies,” 941. See also Jon Elster, Claus Offe, and Ulrich K. Preuss, eds., *Institutional Design in Post-Communist Societies: Rebuilding the Boat at Sea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Ian Shapiro and Sonu Bedi, eds., *Political Contingency* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); Giovanni Capoccia and R. Daniel Kelemen, “The Study of Critical Junctures: Theory, Narrative and Counterfactuals in Historical Institutionalism,” *World Politics* 59, no. 3 (2007).

processes, the *internal institutional variety* of political regimes at each point in time. Analyses of democratization have generally concentrated attention on the regime as a whole as a unit of analysis, considered dichotomously (as democracy vs. non-democracy, at times with the addition of an intermediate class, dubbed “partial democracies” or similar). This view presupposes, among other things, that the internal institutional configuration of democratic regimes is of little consequence.<sup>36</sup> By contrast, an important insight of the historical turn approach is that many institutional features that appear inconsistent with democratic reforms may in fact be essential for regime stability. In particular, it shows that important institutional features of authoritarian regimes often constitute part of the complex institutional collages that emerge from clashes over democratic institutional reform in important arenas. More often than not, the outcome of an episode of democratic reform is the combination of reformist institutions with institutional safeguards that protect pre-democratic elites who would otherwise oppose democratic openings.<sup>37</sup> Unelected upper chambers, institutional privileges to the military or the clergy,<sup>38</sup> dependence of the judiciary on the executive,<sup>39</sup> independent central banks protecting business interests,<sup>40</sup> limits on land or property restitution,<sup>41</sup> biased electoral systems,<sup>42</sup> and other institutional arrangements are often

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- 36 An important exception is an important part of the literature on democratic consolidation, which has typically paid attention to the importance of changes within the so-called “partial regimes” as a crucial aspect of the process of consolidation (see Philippe Schmitter, “The Consolidation of Democracy and the Representation of Social Groups,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 35 (1992): 422-449, and idem, “Some Basic Assumptions on the Consolidation of Democracy,” in *The Changing Nature of Democracy*, ed. T. Inoguchi, E. Newman, J. Keane (Tokyo: United Nation University Press, 1998), 23-36. We discuss our intellectual debt to this literature below.
- 37 Samuel P. Huntington, “How Countries Democratize,” *Political Research Quarterly* 615 (1991).
- 38 Richard Robison and Vedi Hadiz, *Reorganising Power in Indonesia: The Politics of Oligarchy in an Age of Markets* (London: Routledge, 2004).
- 39 Marcelo Pollack, *The New Right in Chile 1973-97* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1999).
- 40 Delia M. Boylan, “Preemptive Strike: Central Bank Reform in Chile’s Transition from Authoritarian Rule,” *Comparative Politics* 30, no. 4 (July 1998): 443-462.
- 41 Ruth Hall, “Reconciling the Past, Present, and Future: The Parameters and Practices of Land Restitution in South Africa” in *Land, Memory, Reconstruction, and Justice*, ed. Cheryl Walker, Anna Bohlin, Ruth Hall, and Thembella Kepe (Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 2010), 20-21.
- 42 Barbara Geddes, “Initiation of New Democratic Institutions in Eastern Europe and Latin America,” in *Institutional Design in New Democracies: Eastern Europe and Latin America*, ed. Arend Lijphart and Carlos Waisman (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 15-42; Sarah

crucial in making possible the democratization of other institutional arenas (such as competitive elections and universal suffrage). In some cases, such institutional safeguards may be temporary and ultimately give way in subsequent waves of reform. In other cases however, they may become entrenched in the system, forming a permanent part of a new politico-institutional order.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, the historical turn approach underscores that although the episodes of institutional reform refer to the development of particular institutions, friction or complementarity between different institutional arenas,<sup>44</sup> or the different timing in their development, may have important consequences for democracy as such, generating different types of democracy and different levels of regime stability.

Before we expand on this point, two important clarifications are in order: first, we certainly do not mean to say that MENA countries can only attain “diminished” or stillborn democracy, marred by institutional arrangements that protect the inextirpable power of anti-democratic traditional elites. On the contrary, the presence of institutional safeguards at each beat of the syncopated process of institutional change that characterizes the conflicted and protracted construction of democratic regimes is typical of many democracies that today we consider “models” of democratic quality and stability – not least the Western European ones. Second, we certainly do not mean to say that *all* institutional safeguards are equally “democratic” in a normative sense. Some of them clearly are not, at least according to most conceptions of democracy. Rather, our point is merely empirical: institutional safeguards that are *initially* put in place as protections in favor of segments of traditional elites, with time may become essential parts of the immensely varied institutional landscape of democratic regimes.

Hence if we take a long-run view and we abandon the focus on the regime as a whole, the central role of institutional safeguards in making democratization possible by inducing pro-authoritarian actors to “buy into” the new democratic regime becomes apparent. As such, the introduction of such safeguards should be considered as part and parcel of the process of democratization and cannot always be seen as authoritarian backsliding or anti-democratic backlash. At the same time, we should not fall into the teleological trap of thinking that all safeguards will eventually give way to the irresistible force of

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Birch, Frances Millard, Marina Popescu, and Kieran Williams, *Embodying Democracy: Electoral Systems Design in Post-Communist Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002).

43 Amel Ahmed, *Democracy and the Politics of Electoral System Choice: Engineering Electoral Dominance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

44 Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek, *The Search for American Political Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

democracy. Some will; others may come to be “converted” to new functions<sup>45</sup> and incorporated in the new democratic order; and others still may prove impregnable bastions of authoritarianism. Further theorization and empirical analysis is needed to firm up the distinction between those safeguards that stand in the way of genuine democratization and those that may not. For now, we propose one general provisional criterion to distinguish between safeguards that are more or less safe for further democratization: the extent to which they inhibit democratization in other arenas of politics. For example, electoral safeguards that make representative assemblies reflect extant power relations among social groups have often left room for future adjustments in the direction of further democratization.<sup>46</sup> By contrast, safeguards that consolidate power in the hands of a single branch of government or lead to the political disenfranchisement of large groups may hinder the ability of actors to fight battles in other arenas and undermine prospects for further democratization in the future. In this view, what is crucial is less a certain status quo that reflects (or not) wholesale democratization, but the continued ability of social and political actors to fight battles for democratization in various institutional arenas. While this perspective may at times challenge our normative sensitivities, the experience of historical democratizers tells us that democracy can withstand such ambiguity and in fact may in some cases even thrive because of it. We return to this point in our discussion of the Egyptian case.

To sum up at this stage: the main implication of the historical turn is that we need to make more room for *politics* – and in particular the politics of institutional change<sup>47</sup> – in our understanding of democratization over the long run, while giving due importance to structural legacies. Such politics generally consist of struggles over institutional arrangements. Once institutional reform is achieved (and even when reform may be narrowly missed), this sets the stage for the next struggle on democratic reform, empowering certain actors and disempowering others, favoring the formation of certain social coalitions over others, and providing both “winners” and “losers” with powerful narratives to mobilize their supporters. In the continuous reshaping of the internal institutional collage of democratizing regimes, which is best conceived as a long-run

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45 Kathleen Thelen, *How Institutions Evolve* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen, “A Theory of Gradual Institutional Change,” in *Explaining Institutional Change: Ambiguity, Agency, and Power*, ed. James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1-36.

46 Ahmed, *Democracy and the Politics of Electoral System Choice*.

47 Giovanni Capoccia, “Historical Institutionalism and the Politics of Institutional Change”, typescript, University of Oxford.

process punctuated by moments of change of different institutions, the introduction of, and the fight over, elite safeguards may play a crucial role in regime stabilization.

### *Multiple Arenas of Contestation*

As important as these insights are in potentially fostering our understanding of democratization processes, they don't warrant mechanical application to other regions. The historical turn approach can be adapted to the analysis of democratization in different regions – and be developed in the appropriate way in the process. To be sure, some socio-economic and cultural legacies have been shown to hinder democratization in several contexts – e.g. the prevalence of large uncommercialized landholdings in the economy<sup>48</sup> or the absence of mass media.<sup>49</sup> Here, however, we share the approach of those scholars who have analyzed the impact of historical legacies by concentrating attention on *regional*, rather than global, factors.<sup>50</sup> In other words, different factors may hinder or favor the establishment and consolidation of democratic institutions in different regions of the world. This obviously does not mean that we should abandon comparison. On the contrary, it means concentrating on those legacies that may have an impact on the politics of democratization in a certain spatial and temporal context, which allows structured-focused comparisons and at the same time avoids the dangers of “conceptual stretching.”<sup>51</sup> Thus, instead of considering the Arab Spring as a potential “fourth wave” in a global process of democratization, we propose to ground comparative analysis in the region and concentrate on the modalities of contestation and the socio-political cleavages common to most countries in the region, while being sensitive to different national pathways of regime change.

Besides bounding the scope of comparison and generalization, such regional specificities introduce important adjustments to the historical turn approach itself. As discussed in the previous section, MENA specialists have underscored the importance for understanding democratization of a view that takes into account the multiplicity of institutional arenas – and in particular the institutional frameworks regulating the economy and civil society – that

48 Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*; Boix, *Democracy and Redistribution*.

49 E.g. Jan Teorell, *Determinants of Democratization: Explaining Regime Change in the World, 1972-2006* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

50 Grigore Pop-Eleches, “Historical Legacies and Post-Communist Regime Change,” *Journal of Politics* 69, no. 4 (November 2007): 908-926; Darden and Grzymala-Busse, “The Great Divide”.

51 Giovanni Sartori, “Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics,” *American Political Science Review* 64, no. 4, (December 1970): 1033-1053.

are mobilized to bring about political change. Ellen Lust has argued that “the answer lies in shifting our focus from a search for immediate causal factors to a greater recognition of micro- and meso-level transitions—that is, gradual, interrelated changes in political, economic, and social spheres that, like slowly moving tectonic plates, eventually create the conditions conducive to earth-shattering events.”<sup>52</sup> In a similar vein, Lust and Ndegwa have argued for a framework which sees change as “the cumulative result of intricately interrelated political, economic and social changes (rather than simply additive effects of discrete reforms).” Such a framework would require us to move beyond the traditional understanding of what represents significant political change as well as the unidirectional arrows of causality. What elsewhere they have referred to as “micro-transitions”<sup>53</sup> can occur in the social, economic, or political sphere, forming a complex web of intuitional change. This is because, as they point out “economic crises fostered economic reform, but also political and social change in response; social changes-including increased urbanization and demographic shifts-created economic and political pressures (*e.g.*, on welfare regimes) as well as the impetus for further changes in the policy landscape (*e.g.*, rise of welfare NGOs); and political changes have both resulted from and created catalysts for transformation in all three spheres.”<sup>54</sup>

The importance of taking seriously institutional change in the economic and civil society realms for processes of democratization has been noted by a number of scholars. Regarding the economic sphere, scholars have sought to understand the impact of economic liberalization on the organizational capacity and independence of business elites. Though the expectation is that economic liberalization produces a strong and independent business class capable of challenging the state, the extent of state-sponsorship of business throughout the region has been shown to stifle this potential.<sup>55</sup> Noting variations in the level of independence, some have pointed to pre-reform conditions, as the key to understanding the impact of reform on business elites.<sup>56</sup>

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52 Ellen Lust, “Why Now? Micro-Transitions and the Arab Uprisings,” *Comparative Democratization Newsletter* (Fall 2011).

53 Ellen Lust and Stephen Ndegwa, “The Challenge of Governance in Africa’s Changing Societies,” in *Governing Africa’s Changing Societies: Dynamics of Reform*, ed. Lust and Ndegwa (Boulder, CO: Lynn Rienner Publishers, 2012).

54 Ellen Lust and Stephen N. Ndegwa, “Governance Challenges in the Face of Transformation,” *Middle East Law and Governance* 2 (2010): 114.

55 Eva Bellin, *Stalled Democracy: Capital, Labor, and the Paradox of State-Sponsored Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002).

56 Melani Cammett, *Globalization and Business Politics in Arab North Africa: A Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Others have identified the role of western donors in allowing business elites some distance from their reliance on state contracts.<sup>57</sup> Within the civil society arena as well, scholars have shown the importance of institutional change for understanding broader political patterns. Often these changes have gone hand-in hand with economic liberalization.<sup>58</sup> As the state recedes from the public sphere under pressures of privatization and austerity, other actors, especially Islamist organizations, have increasingly taken on important roles in the provision of social goods.<sup>59</sup> This has also opened the door for secular organizations to assert their presence, especially in philanthropic and professional circles. And beyond the realm of formal civil society, some have looked to changes within the public sphere which facilitated the rise of protest and contestation within authoritarian regimes to show increasingly diverse forums of popular deliberation and advocacy.<sup>60</sup> The proliferation of civil society organizations is not taken to uniformly favor democracy. For example, it has been shown that such associations when embedded in the clientelistic networks of authoritarian governments often served to reproduce rather than contradict the logic of the regime.<sup>61</sup> Thus what is important in this context is not the proliferation of organizations *per se*, but that changes to the regulation of civil society have served to mobilize certain actors and marginalize others, potentially contributing to broader political change.

These perspectives underscore a potential weakness of the historical turn approach when travelling from the original context (Western Europe) to other contexts and areas: namely that the original focus of the approach on the formal institutions of democracy may be insufficient, and that if this framework

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57 Diane Zovhigian, "The Politics of "Good Governance," in Mubarak's Egypt: Western Donors and SME Policies Under Authoritarian Rule" in *Business Politics in the Middle East*, ed. Steffan Hertog, Giacomo Luciani, Marc Valeri (London: Hurst Publishers, 2013).

58 See for example, the collection of essays in Augustus Norton, ed., *Civil Society in the Middle East* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2001).

59 Alan Richards and John Waterbury, *A Political Economy of the Middle East* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996); Jane Harrigan and Hamed El-Said, *Economic Liberalization, Social Capital, and Islamic Welfare Provisions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Melani Cammett, "Partisan Activism and Access to Welfare in Lebanon," Article in special issue of *Studies in Comparative International Development* on Non-State Actors, States and Citizens and the Provision of Social Welfare in the Global South, 46, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 70-97.

60 Lisa Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press 2009); Rabab Al Mahdi, *Empowered Participation or Political Manipulation: State, Civil Society and Social Funds in Egypt and Bolivia* (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2011).

61 Amaney A. Jamal, *Barriers to Democracy: The Other Side of Social Capital in Palestine and the Arab World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).



is going to be useful for the study of political change in the MENA, the theoretical view needs to be expanded to institutions regulating the economy, on the one hand, and civil society, on the other. MENA scholars have emphasized the importance of these arenas for broader institutional change. And although the insights of the historical turn discussed above can prove useful in understanding the role of structural conditions and political interaction in the protracted and difficult regime change in the MENA, the approach must complement the analysis of asynchronous change in the political realm with the analysis of similar episodes of institutional change in the regulation of the economy and civil society. Hence, while keeping the analytical tools for the study of the temporalities of democratization and of the internal institutional variety of regimes, we broaden our view to the study of such change and variety not at the level of single political-constitutional institutions but at that of whole *institutional arenas*, distinguishing between changes in the regulation of the economy, of civil society, and of the political regime.<sup>62</sup> While it would be tempting to see these institutional changes as building progressively towards a democratic tipping point, the perspective advanced here seeks to move away from overly broad claims of wholesale regime change, to a view in which democratization is understood to happen in the various moments of institutional change whether they happen during the “authoritarian” or “democratic” stage. In other words, the institutional changes in question – elections, liberalization of the economic realm the loosening of civil society regulations, etc. – are not understood to lead up to democratization; they are rather best understood as episodes of democratic reform. Such an approach seeks to move past the binary oppositions of regime type in order to appreciate the complexity of authoritarian and democratic institutional arrangements.

Below, we illustrate the combination of insights of the MENA literature with the historical turns’ view of political change in a single theoretical framework through the discussion that charts institutional change within the political, economic, and civil society arenas over successive historical episodes in Egypt. Applied to the case of Egypt’s ongoing political transformation, this analysis

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62 In democratization theory, a similar unpacking of the regime is attained in analyses of democratic consolidation, which focuses on developments in so-called “partial regimes”, defined as sites for the representation of social groups, and which include various state agencies as well as self-constituted units of civil society (Schmitter, “The Consolidation of Democracy,” 427 ff.). In our analysis, we bring the insights of this disaggregated approach to the analysis of institutional change in the long run rather than of democratic consolidation. As such, we focus on a smaller number of arenas deemed important for political development in the literature specializing on the region.

helps to make sense of the ambiguities and contradictions that characterize this process.

### **An Empirical Illustration: The Un-Ended Transition in Egypt**

On Feb 11<sup>th</sup> 2011, after weeks of demonstrations and an 18-day occupation of Tahrir Square by an unprecedented mix of social actors, a leaderless revolution displaced one of the strongest leaders of the Middle East. A number of factors came together to bring an end to Hosni Mubarak's 30 year reign: a genuinely grassroots democracy movement that had been gaining momentum in the past decade, the Islamist organization of the Muslim Brotherhood which had established itself as the primary vehicle of regime opposition, the support of labor union activists who declared their independence from the official state-run governing body, and finally, military leaders that refused to repress the uprising. Events leading to this moment began with a familiar protest on the occasion of police day (January 25<sup>th</sup>), a national holiday established by Mubarak in 2009 to commemorate the death of 50 police officers killed resisting British orders to evacuate a police station in 1952. This day had become a focal point for human rights and democracy activists who wished to draw attention to the abuses of Mubarak's police. On previous occasions, the regime had tolerated such protests because of their marginal impact.<sup>63</sup> In 2011, however, protests steadily grew throughout the day, bringing in bystanders and ordinary citizens with no connection to the organizing groups. By the end of the day 75,000 protestors had gathered in Tahrir Square. Demonstrations organized for a few days later drew out even more protesters and also a more drastic response by state officials who used a combination of violent repression and a blanket media blackout to put down the uprisings.

This confrontation took place against a backdrop of contention within the regime, in particular between Mubarak and the majority of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) on the one hand, and the military establishment on the other, respectively supporting and opposing the succession of Mubarak's son, Gamal, to the office of the presidency. Fears that such a succession would establish a tradition of dynastic rule were compounded by the clear threat posed by Gamal Mubarak's plan to modernize the Egyptian economy, which included a scheme to dismantle many of the military's industrial holdings. When protests broke out in 2011, the military took advantage of the

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63 Khalid Ali, "Precursors to the Egyptian Revolution," *IDS Bulletin* 43, no. 1 (January, 2012): 16-25.

opportunity, seeking to distance itself from the Mubarak regime and ally with civil society organizations, joined now by the Muslim Brotherhood and newly formed independent labor unions, forming a coalition that the Mubarak family and the NDP had little power to resist.

The two prevalent schools in democratization studies would likely have very different readings of the dynamics of the democratic opening. The prerequisites approach would look at changes in material conditions, from increases in per capita income to the proliferation of social media, as pivotal in undermining traditional affiliations and leading to higher levels of mobilization. The transitions approach would look instead at the strategic interaction of key players, beginning with the split within the regime over succession to the presidency, and ending with the low-intensity coup that ultimately displaced the elder Mubarak. Evidence can be found to support both perspectives: the role of economic conditions is certainly crucial, and the role of social media was important in overcoming collective action problems;<sup>64</sup> similarly, one could tell a compelling story about the democratic opening that begins on January 25<sup>th</sup> 2011.<sup>65</sup> However, we are unlikely to capture adequately the determinants and dynamics of political change in Egypt unless we ask *how* the NDP, the military, civil society organizations,<sup>66</sup> the Muslim Brotherhood, and labor unions came to play their roles in the events of Tahrir Square and their political fallout? How could civil society organizations exist and operate under a restrictive authoritarian regime? How did the military accrue such power within the regime? How did embattled labor unions come to occupy such a strong position in the reform movement? Last but not least, how did the officially banned Muslim Brotherhood emerge as such a dominant force on the scene? Approaches focusing either on macro-trajectories or on short-term strategic interactions have difficulties in answering these central questions of the Egyptian political transition. A more fruitful approach is to place the 2011 uprising in the context of past episodes of institutional change that created space

64 Zeynep Tufeki, "New Media and the People Powered Uprisings," *Technology Review* (August 30, 2011), <http://www.technologyreview.com/view/425280/>.

65 Paul Amar, "Why Mubarak is Out," *Jadaliyya.com*, February 1, 2011, <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/516/>; Mariz Tadros, "The Pulse of the Arab Revolt," *IDS Bulletin* 43, no. 1 (January, 2012): 1-15.

66 These organizations included, among others: the April 6<sup>th</sup> movement (a loose network of activists originally organized to support striking industrial workers in a labor dispute in *Mahala al Kubra*); the *Kifaya* movement (a more explicitly political organization that fielded a candidate to run against Mubarak in the first open presidential elections in 2005); and the association "We Are All Khaled Said" (an advocacy group which aimed to draw attention to human rights violations by Egyptian police).

for the empowerment of these actors over time. To that end, we identify several pivotal episodes of institutional reform over the past decades: First we consider the implementation of neo-liberal economic reforms or “*Infitah*” under Anwar Sadat from 1974 to 1979. This episode is often identified as the beginning of political liberalization in Egypt; we emphasize its multifaceted consequences in laying the foundations for successive episodes of institutional change, each containing both democratic and undemocratic features. A second political initiative that led to important episodes of reform in different institutional arenas is the 1984 institutionalization of multi-party competition that emerged from the political confrontation between the regime and the Wafd Party. Furthermore, the implementation of a World Bank restructuring program in the 1990s also led to consequential episodes of institutional change. Another important episode of institutional change resulted from the introduction of more competitive elections for the presidency and parliament in 2005. Finally, in this perspective, 2011 is to be considered not as a moment of wholesale regime change, but as yet another struggle that brings about important institutional change, with contradictory consequences.

Below, we discuss these long-term developments focusing, on the one hand, on the asynchronic patterns of change in different institutional arenas, their interconnections, and their role in inducing actors to enter “atypical” social coalitions, and on the other hand, on the institutional safeguards that characterize each stage of the punctuated and open democratization process.

### *Asynchronic Institutional Change: Five Episodes, Three Arenas*

We distinguish between institutional change in the regulation of the economy, civil society, and political society (see Figure 1), focusing both on “big” changes (such as Sadat’s *Infitah*) that affect all three arenas, and smaller episodes crucial for single institutional arenas. Different institutions develop at different times and for different reasons, hence institutional change of the type considered here has an asynchronic character. Regarding economic institutions, Sadat’s *Infitah* inaugurated a broad range of neo-liberal reforms designed to dismantle Nasser-era statist economic institutions and strengthen the private sector in order to attract foreign investments.<sup>67</sup> Although these reforms did not “democratize” the economy – indeed they kept economic power in the hands of a small elite group – they did initiate a process whereby economic power shifted away from the NDP towards a new class of businessmen whose allegiance to the regime was regularly rewarded with exclusive contracts.

67 John Waterbury, “The “Soft State” and the Open Door: Egypt’s Experience with Economic Liberalization, 1974-1984,” *Comparative Politics* 18, no. 1 (October, 1985): 65-84.

		Episode of reform				
		Sadat's <i>Infitah</i> (1974–1979)	Wafd Party Lawsuit (1984)	World Bank Restructuring (1990s)	Electoral Reforms (2005)	“Arab Spring” (2011)
Institutional arena	Economic institutions	Neoliberal reforms decrease the state's influence on the economy. Empower business elites and military. More repressive regulation of labor unions.	n/a	Greater privatization leading to "the government of business men".	n/a	Labor union independence, with some state encroachment.
	Civil Society regulation	Loosening of state's grip on some religious and secular civil society organizations.	n/a	n/a	n/a	Strengthening of activist networks. Some restrictions of NGO activities.
	Political institutions	Electoral reform: Greater tolerance of competition; Strict regulation of party formation. Parties favored over independent candidates.	Expanded multi-party competition	n/a	More permissive electoral rules allowing competitive presidential elections and loosening the regulation of party formation. Both undercut by restrictions regarding “qualified candidates”	Competitive elections. Civilian rule. Curtailment of some political rights.

FIGURE 1 – *Institutional change in the economy, civil society, and political regime in Egypt.*

The military establishment, and particularly its professional cadres, was also enlisted in Sadat's effort to transform the economy. They were offered lucrative contracts which supported a proliferation of both defense and civilian industries. By the late 1980s, military industries produced everything from arms to refrigerators and were valued at hundreds of millions annually.<sup>68</sup> The cause of

68 John Waterbury, *Exposed to Innumerable Delusions: Public Enterprise and State Power in Egypt, India, Mexico, and Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 105.

neo-liberal reform was further advanced in the 1990s with a new wave of IMF restructuring programs, which further empowered business elites with ties to the regime. The rise of the so called “government of businessmen” signaled the emergence of a new cadre of business elites who sought more direct political influence.

At the same time, neoliberal economic reforms required a curtailment of the rights of workers, and during this period, unions experienced unrelenting repression. The labor law of 1976 established the Egyptian Trade Union Council (ETUC), a national association of syndicates and labor’s governing body, which worked more to control labor than to represent its interests.<sup>69</sup> Efforts to organize independent unions were stymied and labor actions deviating from the ETUC’s platform were often met with violent repression. In the 1990s, a World Bank economic restructuring program reinforced neo-liberal policies through a new wave of privatization and stricter austerity measures. Unlike the 1970s however this wave of neo-liberal reforms emboldened the workers’ movement, mainly due to the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood, which began running candidates in syndicate elections as of the 1980s (see below). Labor activists began openly flouting ETUC directives and organizing strikes and work stoppages, which grew steadily in the following decades.<sup>70</sup> Thus, when protests broke out in 2011, labor was in a position to quickly respond by forming several independent unions and mobilizing in support of democratic reforms.<sup>71</sup>

The neo-liberal reforms of the 1970s also had important consequences for the *regulation of civil society*. In the effort to impress new allies in the West that motivated his economic reforms, Sadat reduced state control in the social sphere, thus creating space for a variety of non-governmental organizations. NGO activity flourished producing over the following years a robust associational life that included business associations, cultural organizations, student

69 Joel Beinin, “Egyptian Workers and January 25<sup>th</sup>: A Social Movement in Historical Perspective,” *Social Research: And International Quarterly* 79, no. 2 (Summer, 2012): 323-348.

70 Between 1988 and 1993, there was an average of 27 strikes per year; between 1998 and 2003 the average per year was 118. In 2004 there were 265 strikes (Beinin, “Egyptian Workers and January 25<sup>th</sup>”).

71 It remains to be seen what the conditions for organized labor will be in the post-2011 developments. Despite a dramatic rise in activism, there has in fact been a curtailment of NGO activity and labor unions remain embattled under the new regime. Although there has been a rise in independent labor unions since the revolution, the state has tightened its grip over the ETUC, replacing top officials with individuals more sympathetic to the new Islamist government.

unions, and a varied advocacy network focusing on everything from promoting civil rights to preserving cultural heritage.<sup>72</sup> This included both Islamist and secular organizations to whom the state increasingly ceded authority over a number of social services<sup>73</sup> provided they did not directly challenge presidential authority.<sup>74</sup>

Like the economic reforms, the openings to civil society had important ramifications, not always necessarily positive, for the prospects of the prevalence of pro-democratic forces, in particular for its consequences on *political institutions*. The 1970s saw the beginning of an electoral process in Egypt and the rise of new political actors. Most notable among them was the Muslim Brotherhood, which after decades of political exile and persecution, was brought back to political life by Sadat, who found in them allies in his fight against the Nasserists and Socialists within the regime. This opening however was accompanied by a strict regulation of parliamentary competition, from which the Muslim Brotherhood was excluded (only three parties were allowed). Independent candidates were also allowed to contest elections, but the electoral system in force heavily favored the established parties. Another important episode of institutional change came in the 1980s when the Wafd party, one of Egypt's oldest parties, which had also been banned from political competition, challenged the ban in a lawsuit and won. Thus, the elections of 1984 saw the beginning of more open multi-party competition. The Wafd party formed an electoral alliance with Muslim Brotherhood individual candidates, and won 58 seats in parliament – the largest showing for any opposition parties at the time.<sup>75</sup> Finally, another episode of institutional change in 2005 ushered in an important wave of political reforms. The first important change was to the law governing elections to the presidency, which previously was restricted to a member of the NDP. An amendment introduced by Mubarak opened elections to “qualified candidates” from other established parties. Though the definition of qualified candidate was highly restrictive, practically eliminating independent candidates and candidates from smaller parties who could not collect the requisite number of signatures, the changes to the law did in fact lead to the first multi-candidate presidential elections in the country's history, with Ayman Nour of

72 Kirk Beattie, *Egypt During the Sadat Years* (New York: Palgrave, 2000).

73 Sheri Berman, “Islamism, Revolution, and Civil Society,” *Perspectives on Politics* 1, no. 2 (2003): 257-272; Vickie Langohr, “Too Much Civil Society, Too Little Politics: Egypt and Liberalizing Arab Regimes,” *Comparative Politics* 3, no. 2 (Jan, 2004): 181-204.

74 Mustapha Al Sayyid, “A Civil Society in Egypt?” *Middle East Journal* 47, no. 2 (1993): 227-242.

75 Blaydes, *Elections and Distributive Politics in Mubarak's Egypt*, 68-9.

the Ghad party receiving 10% of the vote.<sup>76</sup> Changes to the laws governing the formation of parties in this year also opened up competition in parliamentary elections. Although these changes were also undercut by restrictions introduced post-hoc, the reforms resulted in important electoral shifts. In the 2005 parliamentary elections, the Muslim Brotherhood, whose members still operated as independents, won 20% of the seats, by far the strongest showing for any opposition group in Egypt's history.<sup>77</sup> The impact of these institutional changes was limited, as the elections were quickly followed by a regime crack-down on outside competitors. Within our framework of analysis, however, their significance lay in the fact that they mobilized new actors in the political arena whose impact would be felt several years later during the revolutionary uprising of 2011.<sup>78</sup>

The events of 2011 have had the greatest impact in the political arena, leading to fully competitive elections and the establishment of a civilian government, after the military stepped aside in the summer of 2012. However, the passage of a constitution that has been criticized as hindering the rights of women and religious minorities, undermining the independence of workers, and limiting speech through censorship laws meant that democratic reform of political institutions following the 2011 uprising, like previous episodes of reform, also produced several ambiguities and contradictions. The significance of events after 2011, and especially the coup which displaced the first democratically elected government will be discussed below, but for now, we wish to emphasize that within this framework, 2011 is not seen as *the* watershed moment for democracy, but rather as another episode of institutional change that produced both democratic reforms and institutions in need of reform.

### *Structural Legacies, Strategic Interactions and Social Coalitions*

An important consequence of these interconnected changes in different institutional arenas is to *shape the social coalitions* that in turn push for further institutional change. For example, the *infitah* was driven by imperatives having to do with the state of the economy, but Sadat's response to these conditions

76 Issandr El Amrani "Controlled Reform in Egypt: Neither Reformist nor Controlled. Middle East Report Online. December 15, 2005; Nathan Brown and Amr Hamzawy "Can Egypt's Troubled Elections Produce a more Democratic Future?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Policy Outlook no. 24, December 2005.

77 Mona El-Ghobashy, "The Metamorphosis of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 37 (2005): 373-395.

78 For a discussion of the new movements that emerged out of this period of competition, see Yoram Meital, "The Struggle Over Political Order in Egypt: The 2005 Elections," *The Middle East Journal* 60, no. 2 (2006): 257-279.



was anything but structurally determined, enlisting the help of businessmen, which might be expected, but also of the Muslim Brotherhood, long understood to be enemies of the regime. These conservative forces were seen as important counterweights to the Nasserist and Socialist influences within the regime that represented obstacles to change. Furthermore, the political realignment of this period enabled acts of political creativity in later episodes and empowered actors to seek further institutional change. In the 1980s, the Muslim Brotherhood sought to advance its political status through another unholy alliance with the left-leaning Wafd party. Though structural cleavages may have suggested an alliance with other conservative forces, the MB, deprived of an official legal status, identified an important political opportunity. In a situation in which independent candidates were heavily disfavored by the PR system in place at the time, by working with the Wafd Party, the Muslim Brotherhood could enjoy many of the privileges of party status. At the same time, the Wafd Party, which due to years of political exile could not count on broad popular support, found it advantageous to enter into such an alliance as it would enable them to overcome the 8% threshold imposed by the electoral law. The union, though short-lived, proved useful for both parties and ushered in a period of limited multi-party competition and unexpected success of the opposition,<sup>79</sup> which, some have suggested, undermined a psychological barrier to political contestation.<sup>80</sup>

The implementation of a new package of neo-liberal reforms in 1991 reflects the consequences of prior episodes of institutional change in related institutional arenas, but the consequences of these reforms demonstrate the interaction of structural conditions and agency in the generation of political change. Following the economic liberalization and reductions of controls on private associations discussed above, important business organizations such as the Egyptian Business Men's Association, The Egyptian-American Presidential Council, and the American Chamber of Commerce, were established with the goal of promoting liberalization and strengthening ties to foreign investors, particularly in the United States.<sup>81</sup> The implementation of a new wave of neo-liberal reforms in 1991 reflected the strength of these actors over the Egyptian

79 In the 1985 elections, the Wafd/ Muslim Brotherhood alliance garnered 15%, the Labor party 7% and the Tagammu party 4 %. Blaydes, *Elections and Distributive Politics in Mubarak's Egypt*, 68; See also Noha el-Mikawy, *The Building of Consensus in Egypt's Transition Process* (Cairo, American University in Cairo Press, 1999).

80 Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization*.

81 NINETTE FAHMY, *The Politics of Egypt: State- Society Relationship* (Routledge Curzon Press: London, 2002), 170-175.

economy, and ushered in a period of more direct political involvement, for which the rise of multi-party competition in the 1980's had created greater opportunities. Increasingly business elites sought public office as a means of gaining greater access to rents.<sup>82</sup> However, the entrance of segments of business elites into politics was in no way a given: as recently as 2002, a survey revealed that 70% of businessmen in Egypt preferred to stay out of politics entirely.<sup>83</sup> The political ascendance of important businessmen was less an outgrowth of their economic power than the work of a particularly entrepreneurial set of actors who sought to advance their interests through direct political participation, for the most part through the ruling NDP, but also successfully contesting elections as members of the Wafd party and as independents.

By 2005, government excesses and the capture of the NDP by business interests elicited a strong reaction from labor. Seeing this government-business nexus as a threat, some labor leaders pushed for a break with the regime. Long under the restrictive control of the state, beginning in the 1990s, organized labor sought greater independence from the ETUC, becoming more forceful in their demands and their tactics.<sup>84</sup> The strength of the embattled labor unions can be linked to the ascendance of the Muslim Brotherhood within their ranks in the preceding decades – another atypical social coalition dictated largely by the constraints and opportunities that the pre-existing institutional landscape provided for these actors. In what some have suggested was a substitute strategy, the Muslim Brotherhood began running candidates in syndicate elections in the 1980s. Though leadership of the ETUC remained within the control of the NDP, by the 1990s Muslim Brotherhood candidates were winning overwhelming majorities in the five largest syndicates.<sup>85</sup> Though in later years, the Muslim Brotherhood would come to play a repressive role over labor, for a time, it was critical in strengthening the labor movement, lending it much needed organizational resources. In the following years, labor would join forces with other civil society organization calling for democratic reforms and

82 Blaydes, *Elections and Distributive Politics in Mubarak's Egypt*; Joel Beinin, "A Workers' Social Movement on the Margin of the Global NeoLiberal Order, Egypt 2004-2009," in *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Joel Beinin and Vairel Frédéric (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011) 186.

83 Fahmy, *The Politics of Egypt*, 172.

84 Marsha Pripstein-Pousney, *Labor and the State in Egypt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Beinin, "A Workers' Social Movement," 187-190.

85 In 1995, the Muslim Brotherhood controlled 20 out of 25 council seats in the Doctor's syndicate, 45 out of 61 in the Engineer's syndicate, 12 out of 25 in the Pharmacist's syndicate, 17 out of 25 in the Scientist's syndicate, and 18 out of 25 in the Lawyer's syndicate. See Fahmy, *The Politics of Egypt*, 143.

together they would come to represent the core of the revolutionary movement in 2011.

### *The Role of Institutional Safeguards*

As is evident from the discussion above, episodes of institutional change often bring together contradictory impulses which combine inclusionary reforms and exclusionary safeguards aimed at protecting the vital interests of pre-democratic elites. Such countervailing forces are not unique to the Egyptian case but constitute a historically very common facet of democratization processes. Existing theory offers few tools to help understand the role of safeguards in the process of democratization, even less to distinguish which safeguards are in fact dangerous and which are acceptable and maybe even helpful to furthering democracy. However, a crucial insight of the historical turn approach is that elite safeguards have *always* been a part of the process of democratization in every part of the world.<sup>86</sup> In this view, democratic transitions (even “revolutionary” ones) rarely constitute a total break with the past – nor is such a break necessary for successful democratization. Indeed, the idea of a full break from the past does not reflect the reality of historical democratizers for whom democratization proceeded with many institutional contradictions, some of which were remedied in successive waves of reform, while others became a permanent part of the new democratic order, only in some cases undergoing transformations that altered their original function. As mentioned above, the historical turn framework does not subscribe to an unduly relativistic “anything goes” view of democracy. However, it does suggest that we need to relax our assumptions about democratization moving toward a singular endpoint of greater inclusiveness where non-democratic institutions are progressively stripped away. Overall, the institutional landscape after each episode of reform involving only particular arenas is likely to be *contradictory* from the point of view of democratic inclusion. Hence, we need more nuanced ways of discerning what safeguards are detrimental to the endurance of democratic government and what safeguards can be accommodated in the democratic regime or its future evolution.

Clarifying which safeguards are “safe” for democracy or even favorable to development in the direction of further democratization, and which are likely to constitute continuing impediments to it is a theoretical frontier in democratization research, and we don’t aim to settle the issue in this context. Here, we

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86 Barbara Geddes, “A Comparative Perspective on the Leninist Legacy in Eastern Europe,” *Comparative Political Studies* 28 (1995): 239-74; Ahmed, *Democracy and the Politics of Electoral System Choice*.

propose a provisional criterion: the extent to which they inhibit democratization in other arenas of politics. In the Egyptian case, analysts have decried the heavy manipulation of the electoral system which took place in anticipation of the first parliamentary elections.<sup>87</sup> However, while such actions are normatively undesirable, they are one way in which important political actors shape the system such that it reflects extant power relations. Historically, electoral safeguards that make representative assemblies reflect extant power relations among social groups have often left room for future adjustments in the direction of further democratization.<sup>88</sup> In the Egyptian context this was the case with Islamist parties, Liberal parties, and former regime officials all taking part in the great deal of horse-trading that led to a heavily gerrymandered system that also suffered from significant malapportionment. The development of the Egyptian political system in the direction of fuller democracy is likely to require at some future stage the adoption of a fairer electoral system. However, to reject the current safeguards as simply undemocratic would fail to recognize that democratization is not a technical exercise, but a deeply political process. Its success rests above all on its ability to reflect political conditions such that they are deemed legitimate by all relevant political actors – at least those that would be in a position to unsettle the democratic regime. In some cases, this will require *ad hoc* minority protections to ease the anxieties of particular social groups that might otherwise opt out; in others it may require safeguards to ensure that pre-democratic elites do not fight against the new regime.

Of course, not all safeguards are likely to be compatible with further democratization in Egypt. For example, President Morsy's decree in November 2012 that put his decisions above judicial review, had it become permanent, would have posed a serious risk to democracy, effectively creating an excessive concentration of power in the presidency, which would have likely constituted an obstacle to future struggles for democratic inclusion. More generally, safeguards that consolidate power in the hands of a single branch of government or lead to the political disenfranchisement of large groups are likely to hinder the ability of actors to fight battles in other arenas, and to undermine prospects for further democratization. Even if it had just been a temporary measure, as the president insisted, the use of such extra-legal measures to overcome institutional hurdles and political opposition would have set a dangerous precedent.

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87 Andrew Reynolds, "Egypt's Doomed Elections," *The New York Times*, November 22, 2011; Ashraf Khalil, "On the Fast Track to an Electoral Train Wreck," *Jadaliyya.com*, November 25, 2011, <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/3273/>.

88 Ahmed, *Democracy and the Politics of Electoral System Choice*.

### *A Note on Recent Events*

The popularly backed coup which ousted Egypt's first democratically elected president represents another important episode of institutional change. Though it is too soon to offer a robust theoretical account of this turn of events, we do wish to indicate the ways in which the analysis we offer speaks to these developments. Existing theories can only explain this as authoritarian backsliding. Indeed the removal of a democratically elected president and subsequent crackdown against his supporters cannot be defended on democratic grounds. However, such a view does not adequately capture the complexity of the situation and in particular the unexpected alliances of pro-and anti-democracy actors that brought down the Morsy administration. It was a coalition of liberal elite actors represented by the National Salvation Front and old regime loyalists from within the "deep state" including, of course, the military that joined forces to oust Morsy. While the latter could be dismissed as opportunists seeking a way back to power, few would doubt the democratic credentials of the former, many of whom played a pivotal role in the 2011 uprisings.

The liberal-conservative alliance that has emerged in Egypt may seem unusual, but in fact such coalitions are not uncommon in the history of democratization. In the face of mass democracy, liberals have often turned to conservatives out of fear the very democracy they helped to established would eventually wipe them out.<sup>89</sup> To dismiss this as authoritarian backsliding however would be a mistake; in many cases it was these coalitions that helped to stabilize democracy. Indeed the liberal-conservative alliance represents an essential part of the political dynamic we describe above, and has emerged as a result of the both the long term resources actors have brought to the table, and the short term dynamics of previous episodes of institutional change. The immediate post-transition period which effectively eliminated the NDP as an organizational focal point in Egyptian politics also eliminated the only force that would have been able to compete with the Muslim Brotherhood, leaving the latter as the dominant political force in the country and really the only organization capable of engaging in electoral politics. The Muslim Brotherhood's domination of both houses of parliament as well as the presidency, combined with the absence of elite protections within the constitution meant that a small but powerful segment of the population never "bought in" to the established democratic order. Unable to make any progress in their effort to contain the Muslim Brotherhood, the liberal elite sought out remnants of the old

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89 Andrew Gould, *Origins of Liberal Dominance: State, Church, and Party in 19th Century Europe* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999); Ahmed, *Democracy and the Politics of Electoral System Choice*.

regime to block the Muslim Brotherhood. This could be seen at several junctures – the liberal parties stood by and in some cases sanctioned the supreme courts' dissolution of Parliament. They also had little to say when the public prosecutor decided not to pursue cases against former regime leaders.

This alliance, which has been developing since the Muslim Brotherhood take-over, saw its natural conclusion on June 30<sup>th</sup> as millions poured into the streets calling for an end to a democratic order in which they had been excluded. Their grievance however was not with democracy itself, but with their exclusion from the process. To be sure, the two are related and we are likely to see stronger institutional safeguards protecting the liberal forces as well as old regime elites. However, we are also likely to see a great deal of institutional continuity because what we are witnessing is not a fight over the virtues of democracy; it is a fight over who will have a seat at the democratic table. This process does not always conform to the normative expectations of democratic competition, but it is this very struggle, and the resolution of these meta-political questions, that make familiar democratic institutions such as “free and fair elections” possible. To be clear, we are not saying that the current path will necessarily lead to a stable democracy, only that it does not preclude it and may in fact produce the political consensus necessary for the stability of a democratic regime.

### Conclusion

The Arab Spring offers an important opportunity to test existing approaches to the study of democratization and to break new theoretical ground. In this essay we draw on the “historical turn” in democratization studies as well as recent scholarship on political change in the MENA countries, in the belief that the history of democratization holds important insights for its future. This emerging body of scholarship has taken its lead from re-examining the dynamics of democratic development among early democratizers. Because the experience of these historical cases has in many ways, implicitly or explicitly, informed theories of democratization, the historical turn approach has offered important correctives to the received wisdom on democratic development. Based on the insights of this body of scholarship, in our approach we focus on institutional change in successive historical episodes and across multiple institutional arenas. This approach emphasizes two important points: The first is the need to adjust the temporalities of democratization so as to incorporate the importance of long term structural factors as well as more proximate actor-centric dynamics. While the existing literature tends to focus

on one or the other, we find that an accurate understanding of democratization requires that we acknowledge the ways in which the enduring structural conditions and the strategic interaction of key players both contribute to shaping the dynamics of democratic development. The second important dimension is that the asynchronous and uneven institutional change of different institutional arenas that results from the mobilization of actors in the context of existing structural conditions and institutional constraints provides a more compelling theoretical image of democratization than the one offered by established approaches. The outcome, at every point in time, is likely to be one of institutional arrangements that include democratic and anti-democratic features side by side in the same regime. Historical analysis shows that the contradictions resulting from this process of institutional change are a necessary part of the democratization process, as inclusionary democratic reforms are often accompanied by exclusionary safeguards. Not all institutional safeguards for pre-democratic elites need necessarily be removed to further democratization. While some will have to give way to inclusionary reforms in order for democracy to take hold, others may persist and be converted into a permanent part of the new democratic order. Further scholarly inquiry is necessary to determine more precisely which safeguards in different historical contexts may be compatible with further democratization and which may not. Recasting the temporalities of democratization and shifting the analytical focus from the whole regime to interconnected developments in multiple institutional arenas, our analysis helps to explain some of the unexpected coalitions and institutional arrangements that often emerge in the process of democratization.

Applied to the case of the Egyptian transition, this approach helps to make sense of the current transitional phase and offers important insights into the prospects of future democratization. We focus on critical episodes of institutional change across three institutional arenas. In looking back to earlier episodes, our goal is not to reveal the “roots” of the Egyptian transition, but to offer a different way of conceptualizing it, which is neither limited to a single moment in time, nor bound by expectations of wholesale regime change, nor founded on structural determinism. We need to make room in our theoretical frameworks for the role of actors and the roots of their power, strategies, and ideologies, and account for the ambiguous and often contradictory nature of the process of uneven institutional change that constitutes democratization. The revolutionary uprising of 2011 will no doubt stand out as an important juncture in Egypt’s political development, but it is neither the beginning nor the end of the story.