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| GVpt484: government and politics in africa |
| Repression, Alienation, Information and Communication |
| the liberating effects of communication technologies in Egypt |
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| **12/9/2010** |

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There is an aura of impending revolution about recent scholarship published on the subject of modern Egypt. A quick search of the book department on www.amazon.com turns up titles like “Egypt on the Brink”, “Inside Egypt: The Land of Pharaohs on the Brink of a Revolution” and “Egypt: The Moment of Change” (all published since 2009)[[1]](#endnote-1). The Egyptian masses certainly have cause for grief. Since Independence, with the 1952 Revolution, the wealth divide in Egypt has been mounting, while quality of life has been deteriorating for the majority of the population. Economic liberalization, which has been implemented more strongly by every successive regime since 1952, has, if anything, exacerbated these problems, as it has developed in an environment marked with wide-spread and pervasive repression, corruption and crony capitalism. For decades Egyptians have had to grin and bear persecution and alienation. Sure, there have been a fair share of attempted revolts and jailed activists, but time and time again Egyptian leadership has been effective at quelling or pacifying any serious dissent; that is, until recently. Popular dissent and aggravation have been boiling for decades, but now, with the rise and proliferation of information and communication technologies, political leaders find it harder to control the spread of information, and dissidents are able to organize more readily and effectively. As a result, there has been a “snowballing” of effectiveness of social movements.

In an environment of repression and alienation, which has plagued the Egyptian masses since and long before independence in 1952, Egypt has been experiencing increased mobility and effectiveness of opposition groups over the past decade, largely due to the development and spread of information and communication technologies. In what follows I will first lay out the context in which the developments we see today emerged, tracing Egyptian history, briefly, from Independence to Mubarak taking office. I will then take a closer look at Mubarak’s regime, highlighting continuity with regards to authoritarianism, repression and alienation. I will then focus on the transformations we are seeing today, specifically, what Rabab El-Mahdi refers to as “Cycles of Protest”[[2]](#endnote-2). Here, I will explore important overarching characteristics of Egypt over the past decade, as well as detail significant events that have had distinct impacts on the transformations we are seeing in Egypt today. I will then explore the drivers of this transformation, which are rooted in the development and spread of information and communication technologies, and unpack their influence in the country. Finally, I will discuss policy implications based on my research, and discuss the lessons we can learn from Egypt that can be applied more generally over time and space.

CONTEXT

In *A History of Egypt: From the Arab Conquest to the Present*, Afaf Lutfi Al-Sayyid Marsot sets out the theme of her book in the first sentence: “alienation of the population of Egypt from their rulers.”[[3]](#endnote-3) The people of Egypt were marginalized under foreign occupation until the Revolution of 1952, at which time a “handful of young officers”, capitalizing off of activist efforts and social movement, organized a *coup,* which successful coerced King Faruq out of power.[[4]](#endnote-4) With the fall of King Faruq and the rise of a republic lead by General Muhammad Naguib and, subsequently, Gamal Nasser, Egyptians had reasons to hope that their persistent alienation would come to an end. Unfortunately, according to Al-Sayyid Marsot, “the governments that came after 1952 were too insecure to adopt a truly representative government, and so opted for authoritarian and repressive rule which ended by representing vested interests rather than the interests of the majority such has been the characteristic of all successive governments.”[[5]](#endnote-5) Naguib, who had been a figurehead for the Revolution of 1952 and had subsequently been elected president of the Egyptian republic, was outmaneuvered by Nasser and his faction, and ended up under house arrest as Nasser took on the presidential office himself. Under Nasser repression and corruption were commonplace. Surely his most unfortunate legacy, he established enduring practices and institutions that lacked continuity and accountability. According to Al-Sayyid Marsot:

“While the normal bureaucracy went through the motions of administration, the real administration was carried out through exceptional decrees, through patron-client, through appeals to individuals in power. Who you knew in power was of greater consequence than the merits of a case. Rule by vested interests, or even by caprice and whim, was more often the case than rule by law and by justice”.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Nasser’s approach was nationalist, anti-imperialist, and pan-Arabist. While many aspects of his regime were oppressive and rife with corruption, he did create a welfare state that raised the living standards of millions of Egyptians. Unfortunately, this legacy is now not but nostalgia, while the legacy of corruption, repression and personal rule never died. Indeed, Al-Sayyid Marsot’s above quote describes the two subsequent regimes to the letter.

In 1967 Nasser suffered defeat against Israeli forces in what is referred to as the *Six-Day War*. This event, described by Al-Sayyid Marsot as the “beginning of the end for Nasser”[[7]](#endnote-7), took an enormous amount of resources and left the Egyptian military devastated, which lead Egypt’s leaders to look abroad for funding (which it received readily from the Saudis). Subsequent agreements left Israel occupying territories from which Nasser had hoped to drive them.[[8]](#endnote-8) These developments (Egypt’s incurring debt and Israeli occupation) led to mild economic liberalization which “sowed the seeds” for further liberalization under Anwar Sadat, who took power after Nasser’s death by heart attack in 1970.

Sadat’s leadership in the October War in 1973 commanded respect, though his course was not pursued without criticisms. Al-Sayyid Marsot speculates that Sadat may have initiated the October War with hopes to provide a secure atmosphere for multinational investors, thus paving the way for economic liberalization.[[9]](#endnote-9) Regardless of intention, the War preceded the implementation of Sadat’s “*infitah”* or “open door” policies. The policy moved away from Nasser’s socialist policies, and was intended to attract and encourage private investment, through implementation of incentive manipulators, such as taxes and import tariffs.[[10]](#endnote-10) Unfortunately, economic liberalization did not come hand in hand with political liberalization. According to Ahmad El-Sayed El-Naggar:

“Infitah paved the way for traditional capitalism to operate in all fields of economic activity. As the capitalist class of the colonial period had been greatly reduced by nationalization, the first capitalist groups to take advantage of new opportunities in the 1970s were those engaged in illicit activities such as the sale of antiquities, drugs and weapons, or in unofficial currency exchange. Others quickly accumulated wealth through connections with bureaucrats and government officials who sold state-owned agricultural land and real estate at low prices in return for huge commissions.”[[11]](#endnote-11)

Under Sadat’s *infatah* policies Egyptians could get rich either through crony capitalist connections or by migrating to job opportunities in nearby countries, as evidenced by the massive migrations of workers out of Egypt after liberalization[[12]](#endnote-12). A new class of Egyptians arose, characterized by extremes of wealth, and criticized for lavish spending on luxuries and consumer goods, which does little to provide jobs or otherwise improve conditions of the masses. Galal Amin argues that these behaviors were less attributable to perversion, and more a result of unusual social mobility, as Sadat’s reforms allowed many (not most) who had previously belonged to the lower class to accrue wealth abroad, and return with higher socioeconomic status than they had before. According to Amin, “what is commonly referred to as an increase in corruption, lack of discipline, and the spread of consumerism and materialistic values, could be little more than the reflection of an excessive inclination to capture new opportunities, to adapt to new circumstances or to avoid a rapid decline in social status.”[[13]](#endnote-13)

While Amin may be overly sympathetic (to some extent, corruption is corruption and consumerism is consumerism, regardless of *why* it comes about), this contribution is still valuable, as it elaborates on the public perception of the state. During Nasser’s rule, the state provided some level of welfare and financial security. After liberalization under Sadat, most Egyptians were negatively affected by high rates of inflation and those who benefited either had to have close contact with Egypt’s corrupt elite or go abroad for success. When pursuing success means either turning to foreign employers or turning to corruption, how could one not feel alienated from their state?

Needless to say, Sadat’s *infitah* was largely unpopular, and his signing of the Camp David Accords, which were unpopular among many Arabs, notably the Egyptians, breed further political animosity. Sadat was known for ignoring the advice and desires of his cabinet (let alone the people of Egypt), and over time disdain for the man swelled.[[14]](#endnote-14) These factors, in combination with Sadat’s oppressive tactics lead to his assassination in 1981, shortly after he had rounded up and arrested 1,500 citizens in a crackdown against radical dissident groups.

MUBARAK’S REGIME: STATISTICS

Hosni Mubarak served as Vice President under Sadat, and was groomed to take over after his death. With regards to authoritarianism, corruption, alienation and cronyism, Mubarak isn’t doing much different than his predecessors.

GDP growth rate since Mubarak took office has fluctuated around 4.88% compared to 2.8% globally. GDP growth over the first five years of Mubarak’s time in office averaged 6.76%, and over the last five years has averaged 6.06%.[[15]](#endnote-15) Inflation, measured off of the GPD deflator, over Mubarak’s regime has averaged 10.18% compared to the global rate of 6.18%. Over the first five years inflation averaged 7.78% and over the past five years it has averaged 9.84%.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Egypt’s debt had been gradually accumulating when Mubarak took office, at which total external debt stocks amounted to $22.08 billion in US$. Debt continued to accumulate at a steady pace until 1988, at which time it was just over $46.12 billion. This accumulating debt was significant because it pushed Mubarak to further liberalize the economy and agreeing to stipulations made by Western debtors. After 1989 external debt fell sharply to under $33 billion. External debt has remained between $27.97 billion and $33.48 billion since 1989.[[17]](#endnote-17)

While indicators such as these are telling, the conclusions that can be drawn from them are limited, as wealth disparities and alienation of mass populations are not accounted for. Steady GDP growth may sound good, but it may (and does) indicate a growing crony class that has served to further espouse corrupt practices at the expense of the masses. In 1991 the wealthiest 20% controlled 40.8% of the national income and in 1996 the wealthiest 20% controlled 39.9% of income. In 2000 and 2005 these percentages had raised to 42.1% and 41.5% respectively.[[18]](#endnote-18) Meanwhile, in 1991 and 1996 the lowest 20% controlled 8.6% and 9.5% of the national income, respectively, and in 2000 and 2005 this 20% controlled 9.0% of national income.[[19]](#endnote-19) More data is required to confidently apply these statistics, but in combination with my more qualitative research this seems to suggest that the wealth divide has been continuing to widen, or at the very least has not been in decline.

Fortunately, the adult literacy rate has been steadily on the rise, increasing from 44.4% in 1986 to 71.4% in 2005 (although there was a sharp drop to 66.4% in 2006).[[20]](#endnote-20) The primary school completion rate has also risen dramatically since 1980, although there was a decline between 1999 and 2002, and another between 2005 and 2006.[[21]](#endnote-21) Life expectancy has also been rising steadily, and even surpassed the global average in 1996. Today the average life expectancy for an Egyptian at birth is 70.1 years of age.[[22]](#endnote-22)

Transparency International publishes the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) annually. This index draws on assessments and business opinion surveys to compile an index in the interest of ranking and comparing countries with regards to perceptions of corruption in the public sector. Surveys inquire about bribery, embezzlement, and strength and effectiveness of anti-corruption efforts, among other things. According to the CPI, Egypt ranks 98th in the world (the lowest rank being Somalia, ranked 178) and 12th in the region (the region being the Middle East and North Africa; the lowest ranking country being Iraq, ranked 19) with a score of 3.1 (this score potentially ranging from 0 to 10, 0 being “highly corrupt” and 10 being “very clean”). Egypt shares this ranking with Mexico and Burkina Faso. Egypt ranks better than its North African neighbors Sudan (ranked 172 with a score of 1.6) and Libya (ranked 146 with a score of 2.2), and worse than its Middle Eastern neighbors Israel (ranked 30 with a score of 6.1), Saudi Arabia (ranked 50 with a score of 4.7), and Jordan (also ranked 50 with a score of 4.7). For further comparison, Egypt ranks lower than the United States (ranked 22 with a score of 7.1) and China (ranked 78 with a score of 3.5).[[23]](#endnote-23) Egypt’s CPI score today is the same as it was in 2000. Since, it has reached a high of 3.6 in 2001 and a low of 2.8 in 2008 and 2009.[[24]](#endnote-24) Based on this indicator, it seems that corruption indicators have fluctuated, but have not necessarily, and certainly not significantly, improved over the past decade.

Similarly, the World Bank publishes statistics on what it calls Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI). This data is collected in the interest of understanding governance in countries around the world. According to the World Bank WGI website: “Governance can be broadly defined as the set of traditions and institutions by which authority in a country is exercised. This includes (1) the process by which governments are selected, monitored and replaced, (2) the capacity of the government to effectively formulate and implement sound policies, and (3) the respect of citizens and the state for the institutions that govern economic and social interactions among them.”[[25]](#endnote-25) The six indicators include: Voice and Accountability, Political Stability and Absence of Violence, Government Effectiveness, Regulatory Quality, Rule of Law, and Control of Corruption. These data on these indicators was collected every two years from 1996 until 2002, and has been collected yearly since 2002.[[26]](#endnote-26)

With regards to voice and accountability indicators, Egypt ranked in the bottom 19.6% globally in 1996. This rank has fluctuated within the bottom quartile in the years since, reaching a high in the bottom 23.6% in 1998 and 2000, and a low of 13.5% in 2007. In 2009, Egypt was in the bottom 15.2% globally. With regards to political stability indicators, Egypt ranked in the bottom 16.8% globally in 1996. This rank has fluctuated within the bottom two quartiles in the years since, reaching a high in the bottom 34.1% in 2000, and a low of 19.7% in 2004. In 2009, Egypt was in the bottom 24.5% globally. With regards to government effectiveness (the quality of public services, the quality of the civil service and the degree of its independence from political pressures, the quality of policy formulation and implementation, and the credibility of the government's commitment to such policies) indicators, Egypt ranks slightly better, and ranked in the bottom 60.2% globally in 1996. This rank fluctuated within the second lowest quartile in the years since, reaching a high in the bottom 44.7% in 2000, and a low of 30.1% in 1998. In 2009, Egypt was in the bottom 44.3% globally. With regards to regulatory quality (the ability of the government to formulate and implement sound policies and regulations that permit and promote private sector development) indicators, Egypt ranked in the bottom 61.0% globally in 1996. This rank fluctuated within the second lowest quartile in the years since, reaching a high in the bottom 49.3% in 2008, and a low of 34.6% in 2003. In 2009, Egypt was in the bottom 48.6% globally. With regards to rule of law indicators, Egypt ranked in the bottom 55.7% in 1996. Since, Egypt has fluctuated within the middle quartiles, with a low of 49.0% in 2007 and a high of 54.7% in 2009. With regards to control of corruption indicators, Egypt ranked in the bottom 56.8% globally in 1996. Since, it has fluctuated in the second lowest quartile with a low of 29.0% in 2008 and a high of 43.2% in 2002. In 2009 it ranked in the bottom 41.0%.[[27]](#endnote-27)

These indicators suggest that Egypt has been below average in the world with regards to voice and accountability and political stability. It has fared average to below average with regards to government effectiveness, regulatory quality and control of corruption, and has fared about average with regards to rule of law. It seems by these indicators that the government is capable of being somewhat effective (relative to other countries), and repression is pervasive. Change in these indicators over the last decade has been shaky and uneven, but the patterns that do emerge suggest that, generally, features of governance seem to have been getting worse relative to the rest of the world.

The African Development Bank Group publishes the Country Policy and Institutional Assessment (CPIA). This assessment “is a system designed to assess the quality of a country’s present policy and institutional framework, in terms of how conducive such a framework is to ensuring the efficient utilization of scarce development resources in the pursuit of sustainable and poverty reducing development.”[[28]](#endnote-28) In an amalgam of the fields of focus for the above assessments, various criteria are used to rate countries in terms of Economic Management (more specifically: Macroeconomic Management, Fiscal Policy, and Debt Policy), Structural Policies (more specifically: Policies and Institutions for Economic Cooperation, Regional Integration and Trade, Financial Sector, and Business and Regulatory Environment), and Policies for Social Inclusion/Equity (more specifically: Gender Equality, Equity of Public Resource Use, Building Human Resources, Social Protection and Labour, and Environmental Policies and Regulations). Countries are rated between 1 (meaning “very weak for 2 years or more”) and 6 (“very strong for 3 years or more”) for all of these categories and subcategories.[[29]](#endnote-29)

The latest assessment was published in 2009. Based on this assessment, with regards to Economic Management, Egypt was tied with Cameroon, Ethiopia and Mozambique with a rating of 4.00, leaving these countries tied for rank 22 out of 52 countries in Africa. With regards to Structural Policies Egypt received an average rating of 4.17, ranking it among the top 11 in Africa. With regards to Social Inclusion/Equity Egypt is tied with Mali, Mauritania and Malawi, with a rating of 3.80, leaving these countries tied for rank 16 out of 52 in Africa.[[30]](#endnote-30) All of these ratings are higher than they were in the 2005 Assessment, but the ratings are based off of certain “benchmark countries”, and thus this comparison is of limited value. These data suggest that, compared to the rest of Africa, Egypt is doing above average, but is not a leader in the region by any measure.

CONTINUITY: REPRESSION AND ALIENATION

The picture with regards to economic progress is uneven. While there has been consistent growth, this growth has been “hesitant and uneven” and has proceeded while “traditional core industries”, such as textiles, have been falling by the wayside, negatively impacting millions.[[31]](#endnote-31) Importantly, liberal and crony capitalist policies have led to significant deterioration in the agricultural industries. This has lead to increases in agricultural imports, and in turn increases in the national debt, which leads to more liberalization and reliance on the West.[[32]](#endnote-32)

Repression and corruption have wavered and fluctuated over the past decade, but certainly have not diminished significantly. When Mubarak took office, in the wake of Sadat’s assassination, he declared a “state of emergency” that has persisted to this day, and has been further justified in recent years with the intensification of the “war on terror”. According to Aida Seif El-Dawla, this state of emergency “provides police and security agencies with powers to prohibit demonstrations, censor newspapers, monitor personal communications, detain people at will, hold prisoners indefinitely without charge, and send defendants before special military courts to which there is no appeal.”[[33]](#endnote-33) A report by Amnesty International published in 2009 alleges that “grossly unfair trials” continue, “torture and other ill-treatment” are systematic, death in custody is not rare, “clampdown on political opposition” persists and has even intensified, “repressive laws that clamp down on criticism and dissent” endure, and discrimination against homosexuals and religious minorities are commonplace.[[34]](#endnote-34)

Furthermore, alienation of the masses persists. Corruption and cronyism are commonplace. Bribery and perverse relationships with officials are not simply convenient practices, but the framework within which different sectors of the economy and society interact. In his chapter in *Egypt: The Moment of Change* El-Sayed El-Naggar quotes Carr, “corruption has become a system of law in Egypt organising relations between citizens and public officials, and between workers and employers in the private sector”.[[35]](#endnote-35) In the face of massive amounts of debt that were inherited when he took office and accumulated consistently until the late 1980s, Mubarak set out to diminish the economic role of the state. In 2004-5 Mubarak’s administration passed taxation, monopoly and tariff laws that “favour private capital” at the expense of the Egyptian masses. Tax laws have facilitated tax evasion by private-sector companies, encouraging an “inverted pyramid” of taxation with the middle classing bearing the bulk of taxation. Tax reform made some necessary changes, such as raising the limit of tax exemption for the poor, exempting savings from taxes to enhance savings levels, and removing exemptions and tax breaks for foreign direct investment (FDI). However, other reforms were not so legitimate. Some aspects of reform, such as implementation of exemptions for stock and bond profits, effectively encouraged ‘hot money’ transactions (speculation in the interest of making exceptional profit, discounting the stability of the economy), and unfairly served the interests of the upper class, while intensifying the burden on small investors and micro-enterprises. El-Sayed El-Naggar submits, “This demonstrated a vulgar bias towards the upper class; it also lacked the minimum consideration of fairness evident in most states.”[[36]](#endnote-36)

Anti-monopoly laws passed in 2004 paint a similar picture. The Egyptian Competition Authority (ECA) is “nothing more than a fact-finding and monitoring entity affiliated to the executive authority of the state,”[[37]](#endnote-37) allowing, if not inviting abuses. Furthermore, fines, if pursued and charged, are too low to be a deterrent to monopolists. In short, legislation is weak, and implementation even weaker.[[38]](#endnote-38) If these reforms weren’t perverse enough, tariff laws have followed in step. Taxes on imports were reduced by 9% in 2004, and the number of taxable categories was cut from twenty-seven to just six. El-Sayed El-Naggar clarifies, “legislation failed to specify the profit margin for importers by means of coordination between the state’s economic administration and the General Union of Chambers of Commerce—a necessary step to ensure that reduction of duties would lead to lower prices on imported goods,” and continues, “The outcome of reform was to confirm and solidify the influence of traders and of commercial networks, which have long played a key role in supporting the regime.”[[39]](#endnote-39)

TRANSFORMATION: *KIFAYA!*

Mubarak has allowed political parties to form, save religious parties, since 1984, but he, himself, is still tasked to choose the prime minister and the cabinet, rather than parliament owning that duty. Mubarak has been the sole candidate in every election save the last one in 2005, in which suppression of dissent was evident and Mubarak came out with around 80% of the vote.[[40]](#endnote-40) Repression and alienation seem to be as pervasive a cultural characteristic of the Egyptians as are the pyramids. For decades the people of Egypt have had to silently bear the burden of the state or flee, that is, until this last decade.

In September 2000 the world witnessed the start of a uprising by Palestinians that lead to a period of intense Israeli-Palestinian violence.[[41]](#endnote-41) As Rahab El-Mahdi described this event as “the start of a new era of Egyptian street politics,” and continues:

“[T]housands of students took to the streets, breaking an iron rule of the regime that their voices should never be heard outside the walls of their campuses, if at all… [T]he solidarity movement provided an opportunity for broad sectors of the Egyptian masses, especially students, to practice expression of disenchantment towards the regime through demonstrations, on-campus activities and boycott campaigns directed against Israel and its American ally.”[[42]](#endnote-42)

Mubarak has been generally supportive of Israel, largely (if not entirely) due to incentives and pressures having to do with the United States. Like much of the rest of the Arab world, Egyptians overwhelmingly support Palestine. This is not the only time in Egypt’s history since independence that pressure from the United States and the West have contributed to popular alienation in Egypt. Sadat, for example, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his involvement in the Camp David Accords, which were enormously unpopular with Egyptians.[[43]](#endnote-43) Sadat’s opening of the Egyptian economy can be understood to be the result of external pressure from Western democracies, IGOs and NGOs, and the way it was done was devastating for most Egyptians. El-Sayyid Marsot asserts that when Sadat was assassinated, Egyptians couldn’t have cared less, but officials from the United States felt they had lost one of their own.[[44]](#endnote-44)

These initial protests subsided until 2003 when “a new mobilization took place”, as 40,000 people gathered in Tahrir Square to protest the invasion of Iraq. Riot police were present, but relatively passive, as Mubarak’s regime was fearful that a violent response might “generalize” the demonstration.[[45]](#endnote-45) Also in 2003, a series of strikes carried out by employees at the Egyptian-Spanish Asbestos Company achieved a partial victory for the workers.[[46]](#endnote-46) Relations at the workplace in Egypt have typically been hierarchical and employer-employee relationships are reminiscent of citizen-elite relationships in Egyptian society and government. The Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF), formed in the 1950s, was but another arm of the state. Workers’ strikes were “legalized” in 2003, but legal strikes simply do not occur, and when allowed are stiflingly limited.[[47]](#endnote-47) In Joel Beinin’s words, the partially successful strikes in 2003 “set the tone for many that followed in the public sector.”[[48]](#endnote-48)

Thus began what El-Mahdi calls the “cycles of protest” that is apparently “far from over.”[[49]](#endnote-49) In 2004 a movement emerged which has proven to be like nothing before it in Egyptian history; the Egyptian Movement for Change, more popularly referred to by the moniker *Kifaya*, an Arabic word meaning “enough”. Kifaya, along with the Popular Campaign for Change, was among the first of groups out rightly calling on Mubarak to cease to seek reelection. El-Mahdi could hardly have articulated Kefaya!’s origins better:

“*On 12 December 2004 Kifaya held its first—silent—demonstration… The movement went on to organise a host of public activities—demonstrations, campus rallies, meetings and marches. Its strategy of political disobedience meant that activists risked arrest and abuse, and police tactics sometimes isolated demonstrations so completely that they went unseen and unheard… Nonetheless, a year after its establishment, Kifaya had accumulated some 1,800 signatures on a founding statement—a significant index of support in a society in which public expression of dissent has long implied close attention by the security services.”[[50]](#endnote-50)*

This movement has been so significant because it has incorporated various and diverse opposition groups that had theretofore been effectively suppressed, in an environment where protests have been gaining momentum, and becoming more and more effective with the passage of time. Democratic movements since 2004 have borrowed leadership and structure, and energized shared communities of protest from earlier movement in a way that cannot be observed in decades past. As El-Mahdi puts it, “A cycle of contestation had emerged in which each phase of activity was related to earlier actions and to the responses of the state. The democratic movement should therefore be understood in the context of a series of mutually reinforcing initiatives within which shared networks and overlapping leaderships grew in confidence, learning strategy and tactics and developing a space in which they could overcome their ideological differences.”[[51]](#endnote-51) Resistance movements, at long last, have been gaining momentum and effectiveness. Egyptians are finally able to say “enough!” with some hope of being heard if the face of repression and alienation that has persisted for decades. The question begs, why now?

THE DRIVER: FURS’HA KHA’LAS!

Perhaps the Egyptian Movement for Change could be more appropriately dubbed Furs’ha Kha’las![[52]](#endnote-52) (Opportunity, Finally!). It would be naïve to assume that the Egyptian masses hadn’t had “enough” long ago, in the face of such pervasive marginalization they have been experiencing for so long. If one were to argue that popular discontent had been slowly culminating until it reached its boiling point in the 2000s they would simply be wrong. Egyptian frustrations have been boiling rapidly for decades, with an iron lid tightly affixed atop the pot. Money from the West has been flooding in to build the corrupt pyramids atop which Egypt’s elites have long been able to silence and otherwise ignore the rapid boiling dissent on the ground. To the eyes of the world, a closed pot looks peaceful, whether the solution contained is still or boiling furiously.

Data suggests that Mubarak’s iron fist is nothing new. His repression doesn’t seem to have intensified much, as it didn’t need to. He simply followed in a long line of alienating self-seeking rulers that have disregarded the Egyptian masses for eons. The Egyptians have had “enough” for centuries. What is different now?

In a word: technology.

With the rise of information and communication technologies (ICTs) we are witnessing a shift in international dynamics and paradigms comparable (perhaps surpassing in immensity of effects, certainly in rapidity of effects) to the invention of the printing press. Like never before, people are able to communicate and share information that they would never have had access to in the past. In *Agency and Space: the political impact of information technologies in the Gulf Arab states* Emma Murphy discusses the role of ICTs in stimulating political liberalization in Arab states in the Gulf. She argues that “modern ICTs have demonstrated the potential to expand the existing public sphere, and to create new opportunities for liberal political activity.”[[53]](#endnote-53) In the conclusion she asserts, “ICTs have indeed had some part to play in opening up the public sphere in the Gulf Arab countries, through the expansion of political space within which citizens may debate and contest the state. Citizens have access to a wider range of information, have the opportunity to interact with new political communities, and have the means to express political demands more freely.”[[54]](#endnote-54)

In *Protest in an Information Society* R. Kelly Grant reviews a variety of literature from a diversity of disciplines that analyze the role of ICTs in protest, and how ICTs are “changing the ways in which activists communicate, collaborate and demonstrate.”[[55]](#endnote-55) Grant reviews the ways in which ICTs are affecting mobilizing structures (“the mechanisms that enable individuals to organize and engage in collective action”), opportunity structures (“conditions in the environment that favor social movement activity, and include factors such as the relative accessibility of the political system, the stable or fragmented alignments of elites, the presence of elite allies, and the state’s capacity and propensity for repression”) and framing processes (“strategic attempts to craft, disseminate and contest the language and narratives used to describe a movement”).[[56]](#endnote-56) While a focus on clarity for the argument at hand forbids a more in depth analysis of these factors, it is important to note that ICTs influence all three of these factors in a way that benefits both elites and activists in different ways. ICTs increase efficiency and effectiveness of both elites and activists; it is all a matter of who has access to what. Murphy asserts, “regimes have had to accommodate [ICT related] developments, either by allowing greater freedom of the media and supporting improved professionalism, or by facilitating the expansion of the infrastructure which provides the platform for such ICTs. They do so because of their awareness of the developmental potential of the ICTs and as a result of demands coming from allied commercial classes. However, it is notable that the expanded or new space has been generated principally by a commercial imperative, not as a result of pressing public demand for political liberalisation.”[[57]](#endnote-57) Leaders, regardless of how selfish, have strong incentive to invite technological development, as it reduces transaction costs, attracts investment, and invites financial prosperity in other ways as well. Once ICTs are well-rooted enough in a society, it is easy for these technologies to evolve out of elite’s control. From personal experience, it seems that anything can find its way onto the internet, no matter how censured or forbidden.

LOOKING FORWARD: ACCESS!

In *Open Networks, Closed Regimes,* Shanthi Kalathil and Taylor C. Boas submit, “compared with other countries in the region, Egypt is unusual in the enthusiasm with which it has actively extended Internet connectivity without overt efforts at Internet censorship.”[[58]](#endnote-58) The number of internet users in Egypt as a percentage of total population more than tripled (from 7.0% to 21.1%) from 2006 to 2009, and increased by more than 60% (from 12.9% to 21.1%) in just one year, from 2008 to 2009.[[59]](#endnote-59) A survey published by the United Nations in 2005 posits that Egypt “posts one of the greatest advances among countries of the world,”[[60]](#endnote-60) with regards to e-governance and internet accessibility, and Egypt’s rankings have since improved.[[61]](#endnote-61)

According to World Bank data, the number of internet users per 100 people in Egypt has increased exponentially since the turn of the century, in step with the rest of North Africa and the Middle East. The number of internet users per 100 people increased more than 300% between 2004 and 2008 (from 5.2 to 16.6).[[62]](#endnote-62) Similarly, the number of fixed broadband Internet subscribers per 100 people has also been steadily increasing in step with the rest of North Africa and the Middle East over since 2002. In 2002 and 2003 there were 0.1 broadband internet subscribers per 100 people. This number had doubled by 2005, and had increased nine-fold in 2008.[[63]](#endnote-63) The number of mobile and fixed-line telephone subscribers per 100 people has also increased nearly 300% between 2004 and 2008, from 22.6 to 65.3.[[64]](#endnote-64) Data on telecommunications revenue, secure internet subscribers, and population covered by mobile cellular network paint a similar picture (the population covered by a cellular network being surprisingly high in Egypt, with over 92% covered since 2005, and rising; higher than the rest of North Africa and the Middle East, and significantly higher than the rest of the world).[[65]](#endnote-65)

CONCLUSIONS: GENERALIZABILITY, IMPLICATIONS AND HOPE

There are many more issues to unpack with regards to challenges Egyptians face today, including but most certainly not limited to issues having to do with the Muslim Brotherhood, water quality, and discrimination. Space has only permitted a focus on the most salient and pervasive issues, which directly bear on many other challenges Egypt faces.

The policy implications are simple yet demanding. In short, open access to information and communication technologies needs to continue to proliferate. How exactly this should happen is not something that can be fully addressed at this juncture, but perhaps I may say a few words on how this should *not* be pursued. The United States government and other similar foreign powers should stay out of it. External involvement in the country has done enough damage. Alienation and corruption have been directly inflated by involvement by the United States, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. Perhaps there is *something* these entities *could potentially* do to help the Egyptian masses, but there is little reason to expect this to happen if these institutions continue on the ravaging path they have traversed over the past several decades. For now, the leaders of the world could serve the Egyptian people best by offering advice, words of encouragement, and willingness to help should their services be explicitly requested by the people of Egypt.

Egypt’s future, just like America’s, must lie with its people. As ICTs continue to proliferate through the region it must be in response to local demand. Perhaps measures should be taken to subvert or circumvent elite obstruction (like Google has tried to do in China, although their actions are controversial, and not necessarily the right way to tackle these issues), but regardless, ICTs need to spread in reaction to local demand.

The generalizability of the themes at hand is obvious. Repression and alienation plague communities everywhere, and the solution is in no way unique to Egypt. Sure, Egypt has its own distinct issues, but the liberating effects of ICT can be and have been felt globally. Yes, it does matter whether or not a country is at civil war, whether or not a country has a functioning democracy, whether or not citizens can expect their basic civil rights to be protected, but it is unlikely that the policy implications and role of foreign actors presented above would not prove beneficial in all societies. Yes, these factors bear down on what it takes to propagate access to ICT and the effects that such proliferation might have, but ICTs don’t seem to be the kind of thing that “fall into the wrong hands” and have disastrous effects, especially if they spread as a result of free market incentives and consumer demand.

Things have finally been looking up for the Egyptian people. A people who have been marginalized and disenfranchised for centuries had the opportunity to participate in the first multi-party presidential election in Egyptian history in 2005. While voters and would be voters experienced harassment and intimidation, and opposition parties still were not given a fair chance, this election was far from meaningless. In *The Struggle over Political Order in Egypt: The 2005 Elections*, published earlier this year, Yoram Meital responds to cynicism in response to this historic election:

*“Great importance must be assigned to the revival of the public discourse in Egypt, the increasing expectations for the acceleration of political reform, and the public expression of protest against the continuation of Mubarak’s government. All are true challenges for the continuation of the existing political order. The possibility of contending for rule of the government between different presidential candidates and the parliamentary elections raised the dissidents' level of expectations for change (both domestic and external). Criticism of Mubarak and his government persists. Even after the final curtain of the 2005 elections, the protests against the government have not ceased and every day in the opposition's newspapers and the Arab media the president and the government party are profoundly criticized. Against a background of external demands to allow greater political freedom and democratization, the Egyptian government prevented the aggressive oppression of the opposition's protest.”[[66]](#endnote-66)*

History has shown us time and time again that the hearts and wills of the masses are capable of overcoming even the strongest beasts of oppression and alienation. What is more, never before in human history have human beings been connected like they are today. A literal network of human hearts and minds more powerful and effective than any cartel or regime has ever been now exists and is evolving exponentially by the year, and changing the way humans interact faster than any invention we have witnessed in the past. With this network, the Egyptian people are finding a voice. The spirit of the masses finally has the power and the opportunity to truly say, “kifaya”.

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5. *Ibid.* 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
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