Elite-led Protest and Authoritarian State Capture in Egypt

By Neil Ketchley, Brasenose College, University of Oxford

When unruly protests in Tunisia inspired ebullient scenes of 'people power' in Egypt and elsewhere in 2011, many scholars and observers of the MENA region drew some measure of hedonistic pleasure at the sight of ordinary people challenging calcified autocracy. In the enormous output of academic and journalistic writing that followed, a great deal of attention has been paid to the ways in which economically and politically disenfranchised actors – secular activists, trade unionists, Islamists, and local residents – banded together to challenge old regime powers and prerogatives from below. By comparison, the role of state actors in stimulating and orchestrating street-level mobilization to roll back the gains of 2011 remains less well understood. This reflects a more general problem for students of social movements and collective protest: while political process models of contentious politics routinely depict mass mobilization as the work of "challengers" making claims on established "members" of the polity, this occludes episodes in which powerful institutional actors facilitate and impel street protest for their own ends.

In what follows, I briefly survey three such episodes of 'elite-led' protest in Egypt in the three years leading up to the July 3, 2013, coup that ousted Islamist president Mohamed Morsi.1 An examination of these episodes, and the events surrounding them, can help to illuminate the ways in which old regime holdovers in Egypt instrumentalized mass protests on June 30, 2013, in a bid to reverse new forms of civilian democratic oversight and legitimate military takeover.

"Who loves Egypt, doesn't destroy Egypt"

Even during the height of the January 25th Revolution, street protest was never solely the domain of anti-Mubarak activists and protestors. Members of Mubarak's National Democratic Party (NDP), alongside pro-regime thugs, trade unionists and police officers, also staged a series of marches and sit-ins in an attempt to bolster support for Egypt's embattled dictator. The first recorded pro-Mubarak protest occurred on January 28, when NDP parliamentarians and local bosses held a sit-in in the city of Damietta. Such protests grew in size and frequency in the days that followed, peaking in early February after the "Battle of the Camel," when NDP parliamentarians and thugs launched a sustained assault on protestors occupying Midan al-Tahrir. Indeed, many of these protests were timed to coincide with anti-regime marches and sit-ins, thus providing cover for Mubarak's supporters to harass and repress the president's opponents. This, after a wave of anti-police violence, which began on the Friday of Anger, degraded the Interior Ministry's repressive capacity in several key governorates.

The epicenter of the pro-Mubarak counter-mobilization was in front of the Mustafa Mahmoud mosque in Muhandiseen in Giza, where several thousand Mubarak supporters staged a sit-in. The choice of location was strategically significant and symbolically important. The square in front of the mosque had been, until that point, an important staging area for some of the largest anti-Mubarak marches heading to Midan al-Tahrir. Interestingly, it was outside of Mustafa Mahmoud that several counter-revolutionary chants and performances were first trialed, including "Who loves Egypt, doesn't destroy Egypt." These and other slogans would go on to feature in the post-Mubarak democratic transition, invoked by state and private media personalities whenever protestors re-occupied Midan al-Tahrir.

Midan al-Abassiyya

A second round of elite-led protest took place in late November 2011 during the events of Mohamed Mahmoud

1 These episodes are discussed in much greater detail in chapter 5 of my forthcoming book, *Egypt in a Time of Revolution* (Cambridge University Press).

Street, this time in support of the Supreme Council for the Armed Forces (SCAF). With revolutionaries returning to Midan al-Tahrir in numbers to demand that the military to cede power to a civilian-led national salvation government, pro-SCAF protestors staged sit-ins in Cairo and Alexandria. The focal point of the pro-SCAF counter-mobilization was in Midan al-Abassiyya, a public square located close to the Ramses train station and the Ministry of Defense.

The Midan al-Abassiyya sit-in is notable for being the second time old regime forces mimicked the repertoire of contention pioneered by anti-Mubarak protestors during the eighteen days of mass mobilization in January-February 2011. Despite being eclipsed by the much larger anti-SCAF protests in Midan al-Tahrir and elsewhere, the Abassiyya sit-in appears to have followed a similar logic to the NDP counter-mobilization during the 25th January Revolution: faced with anti-systemic opposition in Egypt's streets and public squares, powerful elites counter-mobilized in an attempt to simulate popular support for old regime interests. As one keen-eyed scholar of Egyptian society observed after visiting the Abassiyya sit-in, many of these pro-SCAF protestors appeared to be off-duty police officers and soldiers (see Armbrust 2013).

June 30, 2013

If the episodes described above were essentially defensive mobilizations, designed to counter pressure from below, then the role of the Interior Ministry and the military in orchestrating the protests that paved the way for the 3 July 2013 coup points to a qualitative shift in the dynamics of elite-led contention in post-Mubarak Egypt. In those early exchanges, elite-led protest emulated but was unable to match the scale of anti-systemic contention. This changed on 30 June 2013, when Mubarak-era figures and erstwhile members of the 25 January revolutionary coalition came together to form a broad front against the fumbling and divisive presidency of Mohamed Morsi. Here, the increasingly well-documented linkages between Egypt's security ministries and the leadership of the Tamarrod petition campaign, who spearheaded calls for Morsi's ousting, suggest that by early 2013 old regime holdovers had come to see street-level mobilization as a possible vehicle for state capture.

In retrospect, what is especially remarkable about the June 30, 2013, protests is the manner in which they were organized. In contrast to the protests of January 25, 2011, there was no attempt to conceal the targets and the timings of the protests, or evade security forces. The departure points and routes of anti-Morsi marches were well publicized in national newspapers. Each march was assigned a named Tamarrod activists; information that was widely disseminated and easily accessible online.

This formed part of a broader pattern in which state forces, and in particular the military and the Interior Ministry, openly courted the anti-Morsi opposition. In the weeks before the 30 June protests, security officials issued almost daily statements committing not to disperse anti-Morsi protests; they also refused to protect Muslim Brother headquarters and offices that came under attack, and stood by as anti-Morsi activists occupied government ministries and local government buildings. Senior and mid-ranking police officers would also stage protests of their own, calling on the military to intervene and remove the president. Needless to say, no subsequent protest movement in Egypt has mobilized with such impunity, or with anything resembling this degree of coordination with the country's security ministries, in the years following the coup.

When large crowds took to the streets on June 30, Ministry of Defense officials and former members of the state security apparatus actively lobbied local and international news media to report wholly unrealistic protest numbers. In one memorable episode, Sameh Seif El-Yezzel, a former head of military intelligence and the future leader of the pro-Sisi electoral list in the 2015 parliamentary elections, appeared on CNN to claim that 33 million Egyptians had taken to the streets in opposition to Morsi. These numbers would be repeated by Morsi's opponents in the days and weeks following the coup. The size of the protests in Midan al-Tahrir and outside of the presidential

palace, these individuals insisted, invalidated Morsi's electoral mandate. In reality, of course, participation in anti-Morsi protests was only a small fraction of the votes cast for Morsi in the 2012 elections. Tellingly, a counter-mobilization by Morsi's supporters, who staged large protests of their own in opposition to the coup, was dismissed as the work of extremists, brutally repressed and quickly forgotten (see Ketchley 2013; forthcoming: ch.6).

Conclusions

Exploring the trajectories of elite-led protest in Egypt suggests two important, and frequently overlooked, dynamics contributing to the failure of the post-Mubarak democratic transition. Firstly, progressives and revolutionaries never possessed a monopoly over the repertoire of protest pioneered in early 2011. The strategy of staging marches and occupying public squares was not only a means of deepening the democratization process – it could also be harnessed and redeployed by old regime actors. Secondly, and inter-relatedly, the centrality of the June 30 protests in the political discourse of the post-coup, military government suggests that mass street protests can also serve to legitimate authoritarian state capture. In this, the anti-Morsi mobilization would provide the basis for a convenient, but ultimately misleading, myth: that Egyptians spontaneously rose up, unaided and embraced a full-blown return to military rule.

Neil Ketchley is the Hulme Research Fellow in Sociology and Fellow of Brasenose College at the University of Oxford.

References

Armbrust, Walter, 2013, "The Trickster in Egypt's January 25 Revolution," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 55, 4: 834-864.

Ketchley, Neil, 2013, "The Muslim Brothers Take to the Streets," *Middle East Report* 269 (Winter): 12-17.

Ketchley, Neil, forthcoming, *Egypt in a Time of Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).