

## THE ARAB SPRING: U.S. DEMOCRACY PROMOTION IN EGYPT

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The Egyptian uprising was wholly unexpected by journalists, policy makers and scholars. But while it is too early to write the history of that still-unfolding event, we can certainly explain how so many Egyptians ended up in the street starting on January 25, 2011. On the surface, Egypt appeared to be part of a wave of dissent that took shape first in Tunisia with the shocking overthrow of Zine El-Abadine Ben Ali. The temporal proximity of the two revolutions appears to give credence to “wave” theories of democratization, whereby citizens in authoritarian regimes may emulate the actions of successful uprisings in neighboring states.<sup>1</sup> This may make for a nice story, but it is only partially satisfactory as an explanation. Egypt’s revolution did not appear out of thin air as a result of Tunisia’s uprising. It is best to think of the Tunisian case as the proximate cause and to carefully consider the sequence of events that led millions of Egyptians into the streets to challenge their authoritarian rulers. While the dramatic ouster of Ben Ali in Tunisia certainly inspired the Egyptian protesters — as indicated by the heartfelt thanks to Tunisia offered on sites like Facebook and Twitter after Mubarak’s resignation — the uprising itself could never have progressed

this far without a series of important developments in recent Egyptian politics. The main cause is the nearly simultaneous emergence, starting in 2004, of digital activists using what Diamond calls “liberation technologies,”<sup>2</sup> independent journalists wielding press freedoms, organized laborers staging nationwide uprisings, and opposition groups normalizing protest politics — separate movements that have nevertheless managed to mount a frontal challenge to the Egyptian regime. Significantly, none of these critical developments appears to have been substantially affected by U.S. democracy-promotion efforts. By reviewing the history of these efforts, we hope to offer policy makers and scholars a new path forward for democracy promotion in Egypt, one that combines the lessons of the past with the opportunities of the future.

### NEGOTIATING STABILITY AND DEMOCRACY

Most analyses of U.S. democracy promotion in the Middle East tend to focus on the last decade. The roots of U.S. funding for democracy in Egypt, though, extend to the early 1990s, when the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) first began to integrate aid for de-

mocracy into its traditional development-assistance program. Democracy aid was then a new component of development assistance, and enthusiasm for its promotion grew following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of communism in Eastern Europe. Symbolically, the events seemed to represent both the triumph of liberal democracy and the superiority of the U.S. model. Efforts to promote democracy assistance were thus buoyed by not only a sense of moral conviction, but of national interest, to capitalize on momentum generated by such developments in order to fill the ideological vacuum left by the disappearance of communism.

Against this backdrop, USAID began plans to integrate democracy aid into its traditional assistance program. The former director of the agency's democracy and governance office relayed to Erin Snider that Egypt, as well as Pakistan, Nigeria and Indonesia, were the focus of initial efforts, due to their respective importance regionally, and the agency's perception that serious stakes for democracy existed in all of them.<sup>3</sup> USAID's initial democracy programs focused on four areas: elections and political participation, civil society, rule of law, and governance. Of these, much of the aid distributed in the first half of the 1990s to Egypt fell under aid for the rule of law and civil society. In the latter part of the decade, programs were expanded to include assistance for governance and media programs. Spending for democracy averaged \$20 million per year, a minute portion of the nearly \$2 billion given annually by the United States to Egypt.<sup>4</sup>

Examining the negotiation and construction of programs since that time relays several bureaucratic, diplomatic and programmatic challenges that have beset U.S. efforts to promote democracy in

Egypt. These challenges are a testament to obstacles inherent with democracy promotion, particularly in authoritarian states. Initial reports published by USAID in the early 1990s relay the hope that democratic developments in Eastern Europe might extend to Egypt. A strategy report issued in 1992, for example, cites such changes, saying that they "represent a 'wake up' call for the traditional power structure" in Egypt and alludes to signals of cooperation from the government of Egypt for the launch of a democracy program, noting "there is some indication that the message is being heard."<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, cooperation between Egypt and the United States would prove tense regarding democracy programming.

One of the fundamental tensions in executing democracy assistance in authoritarian states, as Thomas Carothers has noted, concerns how to challenge and change the structure of power in states opposed to such endeavors. That challenge is amplified further when the recipient government is a strategic ally, as in the case of Egypt. For the donor government, therefore, the room for engagement can be narrow. Tensions between the government of Egypt and USAID in negotiating development assistance were already exacerbated by the terms of the 1979 peace treaty between Egypt and Israel. In recognition of diplomatic relations between the two countries, the United States rewarded both with significant military and economic assistance packages. Since 1979, Israel has received an average of \$3 billion in assistance annually, with Egypt receiving nearly \$2 billion. Israel's aid consists of direct cash transfers to the government, while Egypt's must be directed towards specific programs agreed upon by both the United States and the government of Egypt.

Given the varying terms of this arrangement, Egyptian ambivalence towards reform, specifically that falling into the category of democracy assistance, was thus not unexpected. As part of its bilateral agreement with USAID, the government of Egypt must approve all development programs. Resistance towards elements of democracy programs often resulted in the dilution of objectives, diminishing their original intent. In the end, the imperatives of maintaining the bilateral relationship prevailed — to the detriment of programs. As a former USAID official recalls:

The [USAID] Mission had to deal with their reality, which was an Embassy which didn't want to have Egyptian ministries complaining about AID all the time, and an Egyptian bureaucracy which had a very, very fundamentally different view of how this money should be used. Their attitude seemed to be 'a deal is a deal. Give us the money. What is all this bureaucratic nonsense? Why should we talk to you about policy?'"<sup>6</sup>

Programs launched during this time were similar in that they were framed in terms of their benefit to the economy and ongoing economic-reform programs supported by the Egyptian government. An Egyptian project manager working with USAID in the mid-1990s recalled that debates among staff members revolved around market reforms and privatization.<sup>7</sup> At that time, he notes, both USAID and the World Bank focused on privatization. No one in the office questioned the logic of this approach, nor did they consider that improper management might be the problem, or that workers' rights should be incorporated into a democracy strategy. Indeed, as a current employee with USAID

noted, "When you read the project papers at this time, they were all geared towards improving the investment and economic climate in Egypt."<sup>8</sup>

This dynamic is reflected, for example, in USAID's description of its Administration of Justice Support (AOJS) project. Launched in 1994, the project aimed to reduce caseload backlog in the civil court system and improve judicial education through training programs for judges and lawyers. A second phase of the program began in 2004, focusing on the modernization of court systems through information management. Projects focusing on the rule of law, like AOJS, were, in the words of a USAID employee, "the flavor of the 1990s in Egypt."<sup>9</sup> The project framed its expected benefits to democracy in Egypt in economic terms. For example, USAID states that "an improved court administration, and an informed judiciary are essential elements without which democracy will falter and economic growth will be thwarted."<sup>10</sup> Further, USAID notes, "as Egypt enters a period of economic restructuring and privatization, there is a pressing need for an efficient, predictable, and timely administration of justice."<sup>11</sup> In explaining the logic underlying the program's construction, USAID references past experiences undertaking judicial reform in Latin America and mentions that the views of the private sector were solicited in interviews as part of the program's assessment process. These interviews were conducted with members of the Chamber of Commerce and the Cairo Businessmen's Association, all of whom indicated "a strong interest and support from the private sector for judicial reform in procedures and regulations that adversely affect growth of private enterprise.... [T]heir comments are a positive indication of political commitment

to reform.”<sup>12</sup> Absent from the program’s descriptions are whether other views from society were solicited, giving the impression of both a narrow element of Egyptian society seen as beneficial for democracy as well as a narrow conception of democracy supported by the United States.

Other programs executed in the late 1990s and beyond were described in similar terms, often focusing on the efficiency they aimed to bring to administrative functions. The aims of USAID’s Egyptian Decentralization Initiative (EDI), for example, relay this dynamic. Launched in 2006, EDI falls under the umbrella of governance reform and focuses on decentralization in three areas: administrative, fiscal and political. The political area, though, is not referred to publically as such, but as “decentralization of decision making,” to limit possible objections from government counterparts in Egypt.<sup>13</sup> The initiative aims, first, to expand local own-source revenues that are used more effectively and transparently; second, to support greater public participation in decision making about the generation and expenditure of those revenues; and third, to develop legal, regulatory and institutional structures that support decentralization and enhance capacity.<sup>14</sup>

Given the challenge of supporting democracy assistance in authoritarian states, some practitioners have cited decentralization programs as a way to encourage reform in a way that is not perceived by the recipient state as overly political. The basic idea underlying decentralization programs, as the aims of USAID’s project suggest, is the devolution of power from the center to the periphery. If the main prerogative of an authoritarian state is the preservation of its power, why would officials in a state like Egypt cooperate with such programs? As mentioned above,

activities described internally within USAID as “political” are often defined differently to government counterparts. A USAID employee working on the project explained to Erin Snider that the program was pitched to government counterparts as a way to ease the state’s administrative burden. Additionally, USAID emphasized the economic benefits of implementing such programs, citing their utility in helping to improve development rates throughout the country. Coherence and efficiency in government are unobjectionable aims in themselves; as part of a democracy strategy in an authoritarian state, however, they are problematic. They place undue faith in a regime’s willingness to concede eventual political liberalization in the future.

## **DEMOCRACY ASSISTANCE BEYOND 2001**

In the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001, democracy promotion was elevated as a national-security priority for the first time, and aid for democracy was cast as a critical tool to combat extremism and, hence, terrorism. Pursuant to this goal, the Bush administration expanded funding dramatically for democracy promotion, from \$500 million per year in 2000 to more than \$2 billion by 2005.<sup>15</sup> USAID continued to administer the bulk of democracy-assistance funding. In 2002, the Bush administration also launched the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) as an expression of its commitment to democratic reform in the region. The initiative is a small-grants program managed by the U.S. State Department and addressing four areas: political, economic and educational reform, as well as reform to enhance opportunities for women.

As the most populous state in the Arab world and one regarded for its cultural im-

portance and leadership role in the region, Egypt became the focus of the administration's new efforts to promote democracy. For decades, the imperatives of maintaining a good relationship with a strong ally in the region and one supportive of peace with Israel frequently overshadowed concerns for democracy and human-rights issues. The administration's initial efforts, though, suggested a new resolve to pressure the regime in Egypt. In 2002, for example, President Bush criticized the Mubarak regime for its prosecution of Saad Eddin Ibrahim, a professor, activist and founder of the Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies.

Ibrahim was convicted and sentenced to prison on what many regarded as trumped up charges of embezzlement, tarnishing Egypt's image abroad

and receiving foreign funds without government authorization.<sup>16</sup> Bush's criticism was followed by a refusal to extend additional foreign assistance to Egypt beyond that already allocated, in a move Human Rights Watch called "the most significant step the United States has ever taken to defend human rights in the Arab world."<sup>17</sup>

In the State Department, efforts were also underway to re-examine U.S. assistance projects in Egypt as well as to launch the MEPI. Members of Congress were also pressuring the administration to adopt a firmer line with the Mubarak regime. Prior to 2004, no mechanism was in place to ensure that the Egyptian government used U.S. funds for democracy

assistance.<sup>18</sup> An amendment sponsored by Senator Sam Brownback (R-KY) in that year, however, gave USAID's mission in Cairo full oversight of funds allocated for democracy, removing the power of the Egyptian government to determine how such funds would be spent.<sup>19</sup> The reverberations of these developments and the manner in which they were executed were significant in Cairo.

The administration's desire to push democracy programs accompanied efforts to reorganize and centralize foreign-assistance decision making within the State Department. While USAID was empowered to

control funds for democracy in Egypt vis-à-vis the Egyptian government, institutional tensions resulting from this change were apparent in discussions

between the U.S. embassy and the USAID mission in Cairo about the democracy portfolio. A USAID employee working on the democracy and governance portfolio in Cairo recalled frustration with what was perceived as an aggressive approach from Washington relayed through embassy counterparts, who thought, "We weren't doing sexy enough activities."<sup>20</sup> Demonstrative of this change, the employee relayed, was the suggestion to translate the Magna Carta as an element of a democracy program. The employee also remarked that Elizabeth Cheney, then director of MEPI, thought past USAID programs were ineffective and criticized projects focusing on basic-services provision as merely "orga-

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nizing people to collect trash.”<sup>21</sup> Such incidents during this stage indicate that while there was enthusiasm for democracy aid in Egypt, it seldom reflected an understanding of political context.

While extra funding for democracy assistance in Egypt came through MEPI, which was managed from the U.S. embassy, this did not result in a more cohesive strategy overall with USAID’s pre-existing program. If anything, staff at the USAID mission and U.S. embassy in Cairo indicated that confusion had developed initially over which elements of democracy aid to pursue and how. An Interagency Working Group on Democracy was initiated during this time in order to bring staff from MEPI and the U.S. embassy together with representatives working on democracy and governance within the USAID mission.<sup>22</sup> The meetings are now held every other week and are an attempt to coordinate efforts and avoid duplication. An embassy official who attends the meetings remarked that they are often called “the ambassador’s self-help fund” for small projects of less than \$400,000.<sup>23</sup>

Many activists in Egypt welcomed Bush’s aggressive approach to reform, seeing it as instrumental in pressuring the regime to respond to calls for increased political reform. Others, however, saw it as an extension of an imperial project associated with regime change in Iraq and doubted the U.S. commitment, given its historical relationship with Egypt. In 2006, those doubts were confirmed. The United States tempered its rhetoric and its willingness to challenge the Egyptian government following gains for the Muslim Brotherhood in parliamentary elections, the victory of the Islamist group Hamas in Palestinian parliamentary elections, and the escalation of conflict in Iraq. Actions thereafter served

to confirm that the old imperatives of stability and security governing the U.S.-Egyptian relationship would trump those of democracy, damaging the credibility and legitimacy of U.S. efforts.

### **KEFAYA AND THE NORMALIZATION OF PROTEST POLITICS**

One of the groups that refused U.S. democracy-promotion assistance precisely because of this crisis of legitimacy was Kefaya, and it may actually have been the most important opposition group to emerge during this period. Kefaya, also known as the Egyptian Movement For Change, was founded in 2004. In Egyptian Arabic, “Kefaya” means “Enough”; the group was dedicated to ending Egypt’s emergency rule and reinstating pluralist, constitutional politics. While Kefaya appeared suddenly, it had actually been the product of years of deliberation<sup>24</sup> by older figures involved in opposition politics. It emerged out of a frustration with the pace of democratization in Egypt, which had slowed to a standstill. Despite U.S. democracy assistance, the 1995 and 2000 parliamentary elections were mostly showcases for electoral violence, vote-rigging and the continuation of the status quo. It was Kefaya demonstrators who pioneered some of the slogans being recited by today’s crowds in Egypt, including chanting “Down with Mubarak!” and “Batel!” (Illegitimate) to attack the legitimacy of the regime.<sup>25</sup> It was Kefaya that transformed public attacks on the president and his rule into routine events, and it was Kefaya that first called for Mubarak to step down. This previously unheard-of demand, once punishable with prison time, became so routine on the streets of Cairo as to be unremarkable.

Kefaya demonstrators perfected a sort of game. The group would call for

protests, in Tahrir Square, for instance, and the government would surround these medium-sized groups of protesters (rarely more than 1,000 demonstrators, often substantially fewer) with hundreds of black-clad riot troops. You could always tell when one of these protests was about to happen, because the streets of downtown Cairo would be lined with the unmistakable green trucks carrying the troops. The protests would proceed, with the occasional arrest or beating, and everyone would return to business as usual. The group was rarely able to meet its targets for participation in these actions, and thus was generally dismissed as a fringe group with no real influence.<sup>26</sup> It did not help that the regime employed gender-repression tactics that included sexual assaults on female protesters, making subsequent protests largely male-only events and justifying even more brutality against those who dared to show up. One of the most infamous of these instances occurred on July 26, 2006, when prominent human-rights advocate Aida Seif El-Dowla was brutally beaten, along with several female journalists at the scene of a Kefaya protest in Tahrir Square. As the blogger Issandr El Amrani wrote after a protest, “One (female) friend who wanted to join the demo hesitated outside, nervously eyeing the waiting thugs. Many will have similar doubts before joining a demo now, unfortunately.”<sup>27</sup>

But while the immediate impact of Kefaya was probably quite limited, the group pushed the boundaries of acceptable dissent and, more important, made the sight of demonstrators on the streets routine. This would have important psychological ramifications when the opportunity for a direct confrontation with the regime emerged in January 2011. The demonstrations themselves brought a younger

generation of Egyptians into the streets and inducted them into an ongoing struggle against the regime, taught them protest tactics, and forged new intergenerational and cross-ideological bonds. Finally, it was Kefaya that first invested Tahrir Square with its revolutionary significance, making it the single most important place of contestation between the regime and its opponents. It was not by accident that Tahrir Square turned into the “Republic of Tahrir” during the uprising, a direct result of years of organization and risky action by Kefaya leaders and their followers. But it is important to remember that Kefaya’s leadership refused all offers of assistance from American democracy promoters. This was done partly to maintain the legitimacy of the movement as authentically Egyptian, and partly because Kefaya’s politics included a strong rejection of American foreign policy in the region. Kefaya stands as an important reminder of the limits of U.S. democracy assistance.

Another critical development during the Bush administration, which also took place largely outside the sphere of American democracy promotion, was the development of an independent print-journalism sector. While American democracy promoters were funding and working with the government-run press, an entirely different movement was taking shape. At about the same time that Kefaya was taking off, changes in the Egyptian print-journalism environment were ensuring broader coverage of the protests. The independently owned daily *Al-Masry Al-Youm* was founded in 2004; *Al-Dustur*, also independent, was reconstituted that same year, first as a weekly, and then in 2007 as a daily.<sup>28</sup> Their publication followed changes in the press laws that ended the government’s monopoly on the news. Today, these two newspapers

are among the most influential independent newspapers in Egypt. They were willing to carry frank criticism of the Mubarak regime and have tended to cover stories that the government papers would not touch. They, too, contributed to an environment in which Egyptian voices (not just the correspondents of *Al-Jazeera*) were criticizing the Egyptian regime. Their pioneering pieces of investigative journalism exposed the corruption and

brutality at the heart of the regime and lent a voice to younger Egyptians who didn't see themselves or

their interests represented on the pages of *Al-Ahram* and the rest of the government media. For the first time in a generation, it was possible to pick up a newspaper in Egypt and see the truth printed in its pages. It was these outlets that gave coverage and voice to the Kefaya protesters.

The independent press would play a critical role in publicizing another parallel development, one for which U.S. democracy promoters can claim some credit, albeit indirect. Starting in 2006, the Egyptian labor movement underwent an awakening. For decades, Egypt's workers had been organized into a single trade union, the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF). This was (and remains) a corporatist arrangement, with the leadership of the ETUF working closely with the regime to implement policy, and relegating workers' rights and compensation to a distant second priority. However, economic reforms implemented since 1991 had left Egypt's

industrial working class in an increasingly precarious position, and the value of the workers' already paltry salaries plummeted.

In 2006 and 2007, there were hundreds of strikes and other labor actions. In contrast to Kefaya, organized labor, operating without nearly the kind of attention devoted to Cairo-based movements, was able to convince many more people to participate in collective action. Between 2004 and

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2008, nearly 1.7 million people participated in organized work stoppages.<sup>29</sup> While the government largely ignored the

strikes, the newly assertive independent press, including *Al-Masry Al-Youm* and the now-defunct leftist *El-Badeel*, covered them widely. While the state media ignored the growing unrest, independent newspapers sent actual reporters to bring back real news about what was going on in provinces and cities distant from Cairo — particularly in the Delta, where much of the labor activity was concentrated. Most of these actions were wildcat strikes not authorized by the national labor federation. This development was critical; it has splintered the Egyptian labor movement and made the breakaway groups major players in protest politics. Last year, after a long struggle, tax collectors formed the first independent trade union since the 1952 revolution, called the Independent General Union of Real Estate Tax Authority Workers (RETA), representing 55,000 Egyptians.<sup>30</sup> Other public employees, including teachers, followed suit.



The best known of these wildcat strikes took place on April 6, 2008, when textile workers in Mahalla Al-Kubra, north of Cairo, staged a strike that turned violent over the course of the day as the regime and strikers squared off (and as the strikers squared off against their own leadership, which had called off the action under pressure from the regime). In a preview of what happened in early 2011 on the streets of Cairo, the regime sent in squads of uniformed security forces mixed with a small number of plainclothes thugs to break up the strike. The struggle lasted for days, and while the workers were granted some concessions to end the standoff, the whole movement appeared to be infused with the spirit of Mahalla.

Some American democracy promoters appear to have been involved with this movement. The AFL-CIO's Solidarity Center has received grants from both USAID and the National Endowment For Democracy (NED) to work with Egyptian labor organizations. The NED's 2009 grant of \$318,757 was intended to "advocate for and defend worker rights, strengthen respect for the rule of law, and build bridges between Egyptians and other labor movements."<sup>31</sup> While a previous Solidarity Center project between 2001 and 2003 (funded by USAID) appeared to work exclusively with the state-aligned ETUF, it appears that later incarnations of this work have supported the drive for labor unions independent of the state, and the AFL-CIO itself prominently supports this goal. While one would not want to attribute causality to these programs, they do demonstrate that U.S. democracy promoters correctly identified potential challengers to regime supremacy and undertook programs designed to empower them.

## THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The growing strength of the labor movements offers insight into one more important contributing factor to the Egyptian uprising. Workers clashing with the regime on April 6, 2008, might have been an isolated labor event in Mahalla except for a parallel development. A few weeks before the strike, a movement emerged on Facebook dedicated to a sympathy strike with the textile workers. Within weeks, this group had 70,000 members (at a time when fewer than 500,000 Egyptians were on Facebook), and the regime started to take them seriously a few days before the strike.<sup>32</sup> Government workers were warned that they would be fired if they stayed home, and the regime engaged in a campaign against Facebook itself, belatedly recognizing the threat to its authority posed by the social networking site. The sympathy strike went viral, taking advantage of Facebook's vast networking capabilities.

While the real action on April 6 was in Mahalla, Cairo was also thrown off kilter, as many people stayed home, out of either sympathy or fear, and demonstrations erupted downtown. A sandstorm descended on Cairo; much of the city was both eerily quiet and shrouded in darkness during the day. In the afternoon, there were protests downtown, but they did not diverge substantially from the Kefaya template. Yet as a result of the day's events, the Facebook organizers became international sensations, while the on-the-ground labor organizers in Mahalla were marginalized. The press inverted the importance of the two groups in terms of what transpired on the streets.

When a follow-up strike a year later, organized by what was now known as the

April 6th Youth Movement, failed quite publicly, they were dismissed as naïve or even worse, as dangerous distractions from the real work of organizing opposition. They were also impugned for allegedly accepting democracy-promotion funding from groups like Freedom House. The summer of 2009 was surely the nadir for the movement. But commentators may have missed the importance of the nexus between organized labor — which could put people in the streets in huge numbers, especially in secondary cities — and Cairo’s young, tech-savvy middle class. Malcolm Gladwell has criticized organizing on social media because ties between networked individuals tend to be weak.<sup>33</sup> But he misses the point: while those ties might have been weak, the fact that young, elite Cairenes were making common cause with workers in the factories meant that there was a broad-based, if nascent, movement in the making.

The emergence of Facebook activism grew directly out of a strong digital-activist community. This community was initially led by English-language bloggers, who were soon joined by a dedicated core of Arabic-language blogger-activists. This digital-activist core was initially deeply associated with Kefaya, and the two developed in tandem, with bloggers often using their platforms to spread word of and support for the protests, and Kefaya giving those same bloggers a *raison d’être*. As Rania Al Malky argues, the two movements “developed symbiotically.”<sup>34</sup> Some, like Wael Abbas and his *Misr Digital* site, ran virtual one-person media empires on a shoestring and were instrumental in breaking stories of police abuse, harassment and torture. Others, like Hossam El-Hamalawy of *3arabawy*, played a crucial role in the labor movement. Digital activists became

pioneers in the practice of “sousveillance,” by which the watched turned the tables on their watchers by recording acts of violence, brutality and corruption.

It became common for citizens to record and circulate videos of brutality committed against Egyptian citizens by agents of the state, some taken by the perpetrators themselves, as in the case of the tortured bus driver Emad El-Kabir. In cases like these, the concurrent developments of digital activism and press assertiveness are most important. The journalist who broke the El-Kabir story, Wael Abdel Fattah, was from the independent newspaper *El-Fagr*,<sup>35</sup> further underscoring the importance of cooperation between digital activists and traditional media practitioners.<sup>36</sup> In a shocking development, two of the officers responsible for the graphic torture of El-Kabir were actually sentenced to prison, thanks to the work of investigative journalists and digital activists.

The campaign against police abuse and torture gained an even higher profile last summer, when police seized a young man named Khaled Said from an Internet café and beat him to death in front of horrified onlookers. His crime had been to post to the Internet a video of police divvying up a drug bust. The We Are All Khaled Said movement, which emerged out of disgust with his death and the ridiculous attempts of police to pin the blame on Said himself, put protesters on the streets all summer and into the fall and presaged the larger revolt that swept the country in January. The Khaled Said group is now Egypt’s largest Facebook group, and his death provided one of the many rallying cries of the January 25 protesters. One of the administrators of that group, Wael Ghonim, became an inspirational figure during the revolution, when he returned to

Egypt from Dubai, was arrested and gave an inspirational, tearful interview to Dream TV when he was released.

With newfound vigor, civil-society organizations also joined the contestation, and sometimes won victories. They did this by using the courts for their intended purposes, which El-Ghobashy has called “mobilizing the constitution.”<sup>37</sup> Legal groups like the Hisham Mubarak Center filed suit on behalf of tortured citizens and occasionally won victories. Others, like the Egyptian Center For Women’s Rights, forged coalitions between feminists and digital activists and greatly raised awareness of the problem of sexual harassment on the streets of Egypt. Still others, like the Arab Network for Human Rights Information, compiled damning reports of torture and other extra-constitutional practices. While none of these struggles greatly changed the day-to-day experience of authoritarianism for ordinary Egyptians, they contributed to a climate of confrontation between the regime and its citizens. None of these developments, save for connections between democracy promoters and independent trade unionists, seemed directly influenced by American democracy assistance. That reality is sobering but should not lead the United States to abandon the project altogether. It would be better to learn the lessons of the past and build partnerships with the most vibrant actors in the new political order.

#### **A NEW PATH FOR DEMOCRACY AID**

Democracy promotion in the Middle East has had a significantly lower profile thus far under the Obama administration. Observers describe the approach as an attempt to both reset policy and distance the president from the legacy of his predecessor. The result has often been mixed

signals about the administration’s commitment to reform. Obama has maintained MEPI, for example, increasing its budget to \$65 million during his first year in office. Expectations rose as well that efforts to promote democracy would expand in the region following his inspiring 2009 speech in Cairo calling for strengthened relations between the United States and the Muslim world. Instead, funding for democracy and governance programming in Egypt was cut from \$50 million in 2008 to \$20 million in 2009. If efforts to promote democracy have been hesitant thus far, Egypt’s popular uprising provides a critical opportunity to restore American credibility.

In a May 2011 speech, President Obama announced his administration’s intention to support transitions to democracy in the region, particularly in Egypt. As part of that support, the United States promised to relieve up to \$1 billion in debt and guarantee up to \$1 billion in borrowing to aid job creation and finance infrastructure.<sup>38</sup> This is a critical step towards restoring confidence in the economy and providing encouragement to investors abroad in the short term, following demonstrations. Aid amounts have also been increased for democracy assistance, yet little suggests a fundamental change in the way the United States conceptualizes its democracy aid in Egypt. Up to \$65 million for democracy and governance support have been made available through USAID for the coming year in addition to \$100 million for economic transition support. USAID Egypt’s website indicates that the majority of aid awarded thus far has been for elections and political-process support. Rethinking the orthodoxy underlying America’s past efforts to promote democracy, though, will be key for any nascent democracy strategy that emerges in the coming years. As de-

scribed in the first section, the diplomatic, bureaucratic and programmatic challenges of democracy promotion in Egypt over the last two decades resulted in an impotent strategy aimed more towards enhancing the state's efficiency and coherence than in challenging the status quo. This focus reflected both an institutional preference for a market-oriented democracy, as well as a way to engage a government already embarking on neoliberal reforms. If the conception of democracy guiding strategy in the past has been oriented in this way, then the question of the quality of democracy promoted in supporting this mode of reform warrants attention.

In the protests that brought down Mubarak, demands for bread, freedom and social justice featured prominently on posters and banners and were echoed by thousands in Tahrir Square. Such expressions testify to the sense of frustration and desperation that has escalated in Egypt as economic inequality has grown. They are a powerful reminder of an important component often mentioned yet neglected as part of the U.S. democracy strategy in Egypt and vital for future efforts. In interviews conducted over the last four years in Egypt, activists, development contractors and USAID employees have questioned the absence of a developmental approach to democracy that incorporates aspects of social justice and human development. Indeed, an Egyptian who has worked on USAID's democracy programs expressed frustration to Erin Snider that significant time was spent on conferences discussing concepts like civil society without realizing that "the poor don't have the energy to focus on these things, given deteriorating socioeconomic conditions."<sup>39</sup>

Such an approach addresses the developmental challenges inherent in

middle-income countries like Egypt and sees investments in education and efforts to inculcate civic culture as necessary steps towards ensuring both the quality and sustainability of democracy. If democracy is regarded as a generational project, such investments are as justified, if not more so, than investments to improve governance and reform parliaments. Emphasis should not be confined to institutional reform, but enhancing the capabilities of citizens staffing them in the future. While support for education is not a panacea, there is a strong connection with civic engagement to suggest its importance in enhancing participation and opportunity. A 2009 cable from the U.S. embassy in Cairo released by WikiLeaks relays U.S. recognition that deficiencies in the public-education system are an impediment to democratization: "One cannot speak of democracy or sustained economic growth in Egypt without bumping up against the constraints of the educational system."<sup>40</sup>

USAID has an education program in Egypt, and the cable acknowledges the agency's work in assisting reform to improve the quality of teaching, among other things. There is no reason education could not be conceptualized as part of the agency's democracy and governance strategy. Initiatives focusing on improving access to education, supporting school expansion, and high-school exchanges between the United States and Egypt would relay the long-term U.S. interest in aiding reform as well as cultivate stronger relations between the two countries. Efforts should also build on recent media-reform initiatives sponsored by the United States to develop a truly independent media sector and support information technology. The voices of bloggers, activists and independent journalists have long been an instru-

mental force in challenging the Mubarak regime's human-rights and rule-of-law practices. Such voices will continue to play a critical role in the post-Mubarak era. Finally, the United States should build on existing linkages between American and international labor groups and the nascent Egyptian trade federations. Fortunately, with the Mubarak regime now replaced by what appears to be a more democratic order, democracy promoters will no longer be faced with the choice of either challenging the regime by supporting groups that are not approved by the regime or working with compromised actors like the ETUF or government-run newspapers. Democracy promoters should now be free to seek and support legitimate, grass-roots actors.

The mechanisms to implement such changes to democracy aid are already in place. As a small-grants program, MEPI is well placed to deliver assistance rapidly in response to shifting needs and changing political circumstances. As a development agency, USAID plays an important role implementing programs that necessitate a longer time horizon. Together, MEPI and USAID are complementary tools working

towards the same objective. In the past, bureaucratic dissonance between Washington and Cairo resulted in redundant programs often working at cross-purposes. In order for programs to succeed, closer coordination between the State Department and USAID will be crucial.

These suggestions serve as a starting point for supporting democracy in Egypt and repairing America's image as a credible partner in reform. In 2007, a civil-society activist expressed her frustration with what she felt were dictates then coming solely from Washington: "We [civil society] did not participate in selecting the strategic planning of USAID's [democracy] program.... It was a completely American agenda."<sup>41</sup> The credibility of any democracy-assistance strategy rests ultimately with how well it supports local demands and reflects local aspirations. The bravery and tenacity shown by protestors throughout Egypt indicate a desire for substantive democratic reform. As such, efforts to construct a new democracy strategy must be guided by Egyptians in close coordination with both governments.

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Huntington, "Democracy's Third Wave," *The Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1991): 12-34.

<sup>2</sup> Larry Diamond, "Liberation Technologies," *The Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (2010): 69-82.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Gerald Hyman, former Director of the Office of Democracy and Governance, USAID, Washington, D.C., July 7, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Michele Dunne, "Integrating Democracy Promotion into U.S. Middle East Policy," in *Carnegie Working Papers*, ed. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> "Egypt Strategy Review," United States Agency for International Development [USAID] (1992).

<sup>6</sup> Oral history interview with Bradshaw Langmaid, head of development planning for the Near East Bureau, 1976-80, Georgetown University Library, July 14, 1998, 51.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Tamer Meehy, former project manager, Office of Institutional Development and Support, USAID/Cairo, July 14, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with anonymous Egyptian employee, Office of Democracy and Development, USAID/Cairo, May 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.



- <sup>10</sup> “Administration of Justice Support Project Identification Project,” USAID (1994), 8.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.
- <sup>13</sup> Interview with anonymous USAID employee, Cairo, May 2, 2007.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>15</sup> Thomas O. Melia, “The Democracy Bureaucracy: The Infrastructure of American Democracy Promotion,” Paper prepared for the Princeton Project on National Security Working Group on Global Institutions and Foreign Policy Infrastructure (2005).
- <sup>16</sup> For an insightful account of the politics surrounding Ibrahim’s conviction, and conflicting views among Egyptian intellectuals and activists, see Mona El-Ghobashy, “Antinomies of the Saad Eddin Ibrahim Case,” *MERIP* online (2002).
- <sup>17</sup> Peter Slevin, “Bush, in Shift on Egypt, Links Aid to Rights,” *The Washington Post*, August 15, 2002.
- <sup>18</sup> Office of Inspector General, “Audit of USAID/Egypt’s Democracy and Governance Activities,” ed. United States Agency for International Development (2009), 3.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>20</sup> Interview with Anonymous USAID employee, Cairo, May 2007.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>22</sup> Interview with Anonymous U.S. Embassy official, Cairo, July 14, 2009.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>24</sup> Manar Shorbagy, “The Egyptian Movement for Change—Kefaya,” *Public Culture*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (2007): 175-98.
- <sup>25</sup> “Understanding Kefaya: The New Politics in Egypt,” *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (2007): 39-60.
- <sup>26</sup> Rabab El-Mahdi, “Enough! Egypt’s Quest for Democracy,” *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 8 (2009): 1011-39.
- <sup>27</sup> Issandr El Amrani, “A Little More About Yesterday’s Demo,” in *The Arabist* (Cairo 2005).
- <sup>28</sup> Jeffrey Black, “Egypt’s Press: More Free, Still Fettered,” *Arab Media and Society* 4 (2008).
- <sup>29</sup> Joel Beinin, “Justice for All: The Struggle for Worker Rights in Egypt” (Washington, D.C.: The Solidarity Center, 2010).
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>31</sup> “Where We Work: Egypt,” National Endowment For Democracy, <http://www.ned.org/where-we-work/middle-east-and-northern-africa/egypt>.
- <sup>32</sup> David Faris, “Revolutions without Revolutionaries?” *Arab Media and Society* 2 (2008).
- <sup>33</sup> Malcolm Gladwell, “Small Change: Why the Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted,” *The New Yorker*, October 4, 2010.
- <sup>34</sup> Rania Al Malky, “Blogging for Reform: The Case of Egypt,” *Arab Media and Society* 1 (2007).
- <sup>35</sup> Heba Saleh, “Fears for Egypt Torture Victim,” BBC News, January 16, 2007.
- <sup>36</sup> Wael Abdel Fattah, “Officer from Qism Al-Haram Torture Video Arrested,” *El-Fagr*, November 27, 2006.
- <sup>37</sup> Mona El-Ghobashy, “Constitutional Contention in Contemporary Egypt,” *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (2008): 1590-610.
- <sup>38</sup> Remarks by President Obama on the Middle East and North Africa on May 19, 2011, Department of State, Washington, D.C., <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/19/remarks-president-middle-east-and-north-africa>.
- <sup>39</sup> Interview with Anonymous Egyptian employee, USAID/Cairo, May 2007.
- <sup>40</sup> “Education Reform in Egypt,” Unclassified cable from the U.S. Embassy in Cairo, February 19, 2009, from the Wikileaks cable viewer: <http://213.251.145.96/cable/2009/02/09CAIRO302.html>.
- <sup>41</sup> Interview with Amani Qandil, Executive Director of the Arab Network for NGOs, Cairo, June 4, 2007.