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# Modeling Mechanisms of Democratic Transition in the Arab Uprisings

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*While the Arab uprisings triggered momentous historical change, in many Arab countries the transition to more comprehensively democratic rule is unfinished or has stalled. Most explanations for the dynamics and the difficulties of democratic transition focus on a number of determinants, such as social, cultural, religious, and economic causes, combined with generalizations on empirical uniformities and actors' propensities. An approach focusing on causal social mechanisms, including environmental, cognitive, and relational ones, promises to provide more complete explanations of how relevant factors interact, why democratic transition does or does not proceed, and what could be done to promote it more successfully. This article critically examines the fruitfulness of modeling democratic transition, for the case of Egypt, using the framework of causal social mechanisms.*

**Keywords:** Arab uprisings, democratization, institution, mechanism, transition

The Arab uprisings triggered momentous historical changes, but transition to more comprehensively democratic rule is unfinished or has stalled in those Arab countries that experienced political protests and uprisings in 2011. Most explanations for the dynamics and the difficulties of democratic transition focus on a number of determinants, such as social, cultural, religious, and economic causes, combined into generalizations on empirical uniformities and actors' propensities.

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However, in order to explain democratic transition properly, more than just a list of relevant factors is needed. In particular, analysts and scholars have paid far too little attention to the actual interaction and interdependence of factors pertaining to both more general and persistent conditions (such as social, cultural, religious, and economic conditions) and to more contingent, time-, place-, and actor-specific details (such as changes in public perceptions of political issues, extent of mass mobilization, election results, or decisions by elites or crucial actors).

An approach focusing on causal social mechanisms, including environmental, cognitive, and relational ones, promises to provide more complete explanations of *how* relevant factors interact, *why* democratic transition does or does not proceed, and *what* could be done to promote it more successfully.

The core questions of this article include: What are the causes of revolutions and transitions? In what patterns do they occur? What is stable and recurrent in these patterns? And what is unique and contingent? In characterizing a process as “transition,” the implicit assumption is that *something* is *changing*, e.g., towards more or less authoritarianism or democracy. Hence, the questions are: Which mechanisms, under which conditions, are promoting change; which ones impede change; and which ones maintain a status quo? I propose in this article to examine critically the fruitfulness of modelling democratic transition, for a selection of the Arab countries, using the framework of causal social mechanisms. The main questions to be addressed are: First, which general and robust mechanisms of a broader scope involving common and durable factors can be identified that are fostering or impeding democratic transition? Second, how are these mechanisms modulated by country- and episode-specific influences? Third, how can more general and more specific mechanistic accounts be combined to give more comprehensive explanations of revolutionary and transitional episodes? The first section will review the relevant underlying ideas on mechanisms in social systems in general and in contentious episodes and democratization in particular. The second section will review mechanisms of democratization, as well as mechanisms supporting and stabilizing authoritarianism. The third section will attempt to reconstruct a selection of crucial mechanisms at work during the Arab uprisings in 2011 and will discuss how these mechanisms might allow conjectures on likely future perspectives for the Arab countries.

## **Beyond Factors: Mechanisms**

In trying to understand the events and outcomes of the Arab uprisings, one possible strategy is to correlate results with potentially relevant factors. A number of such factors favoring democratization commonly have been acknowledged, including a more prosperous and developed economy, a higher rate of economic growth,

a more equitable distribution of income and wealth, low internal social cleavages, more ethnically and religiously homogeneous societies, lesser dependence on petroleum, natural gas, other natural resources, a history of previous attempts at democratization, an absence of civil war, threatening neighbors and alliance constraints, and a shorter period of previous autocracy.<sup>1</sup>

These endeavors are certainly important and fruitful, but while any of these factors might have been established convincingly, one crucial element is missing: Convincing and fruitful *explanations* or *explanatory hypotheses* concerning the *dynamics* of transition, i.e., the causal factors *and* their interplay with the relevant structures and actors; more specifically, *how* they interact within causal networks, including both more stable, durable and robust factors, and more contingent or transient, time- and place-specific details. The core question thus moves from “*What* are the correlates of democratization?” to the question “*Why* is X a factor for democratization?” These considerations suggest carrying out analyses within a mechanism-based framework.

The concept of “mechanism” increasingly is being regarded as a fruitful tool for the social sciences.<sup>2</sup> Among its attractive features is that it goes beyond purely statistical and correlational methods, aims at genuine causal explanations of outcomes, and does not rely on strict covering laws.<sup>3</sup> Mechanisms may be characterized as causal processes starting from some cause or producing some effect of interest, while mechanism statements are causal generalizations about such recurrent processes. The specification of causal chains distinguishes propositions about mechanisms from propositions about correlations. Mechanismic models explain of what entities a mechanism is composed, and how their activities and relations produce an effect, thus providing a causal explanatory account.<sup>4</sup>

Mechanism-based explanations may be of two kinds, either explaining particular empirical facts, or classes of processes and episodes, thereby generalizing and transcending particular historical accounts. Examples of such general *mechanisms* in social systems are attribution of threat and opportunity, brokerage, category formation, certification, competition for power, diffusion, radicalization, repression, social appropriation, or suddenly imposed grievances; these may in turn be parts of *processes* such as contention, democratization, nationalism, and revolution, as well as actor constitution, mobilization, polarization, political identity forma-

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1 Philippe C. Schmitter, *Ambidextrous Democratization and Its Implications for MENA* (Manuscript, Florence: European University Institute, 2012), pp. 3–4. Available at: <http://www.eui.eu/Documents/DepartmentsCentres/SPS/Profiles/Schmitter/AmbidextrousDemocratization.pdf>, accessed November 1, 2013.

2 See Mario Bunge, “Mechanism and explanation,” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 27, 4 (1997), pp. 410–411; Renate Mayntz, “Mechanisms in the analysis of social macro-phenomena,” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 34 (2004), pp. 252–256.

3 Mayntz, “Mechanisms in the analysis of social macro-phenomena,” p. 240.

4 Peter Machamer, Lindley Darden & Carl F. Craver, “Thinking about mechanisms,” *Philosophy of Science*, 67, 1 (2000), pp. 21–22; Bunge, “Mechanism and explanation,” pp. 419–420; Mario Bunge, “How does it work? The search for explanatory mechanisms,” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 34, 2 (2004), p. 203; Mayntz, “Mechanisms in the analysis of social macro-phenomena,” p. 244; and Peter Hedström & Petri Ylikoski, “Causal mechanisms in the social sciences,” *Annual Review of Sociology*, 36, 1 (2010), pp. 50–52.

tion, and scale shift.<sup>5</sup> All of these mechanisms and processes represent core problems in the social sciences. What is partly lacking, though, is a more comprehensive elaboration and categorization of social mechanisms with the aim of providing a systematic inventory.<sup>6</sup>

Five core ideas are essential for describing and analyzing mechanisms: composition, environment, and structure; macro and micro levels; the relation of sketches to schemas to instantiation; the role of top-down, bottom-up, forward tracking, and backward chaining strategies; and the methodologies of comparison and of process tracing.<sup>7</sup>

Mechanistic explanations can provide explanations of particular empirical facts and are undoubtedly a promising method for analyzing complex causal structures when only a few cases are available for study. A problem, however, arises when either the selection of cases or their temporal extension are circumscribed too narrowly. In particular, contentious episodes such as revolutions and uprisings often are not well defined, and are reconstructed as narratives only after the fact.<sup>8</sup> Thus, analyses should focus less on superficial episodes but rather on *general* underlying mechanisms and processes:

Contentious episodes such as revolutions, nationalist mobilizations, and democratizations do not have essences. They are mostly the result of similar kinds of social processes and thereby illustrate the fact that the same mechanisms can produce different outcomes in different circumstances. For this reason, comparative studies should focus on these basic processes and mechanisms rather than on large-scale episodes whose classification is mostly a product of retrospective categorization.<sup>9</sup>

Hence, mechanism-based analyses of the events during the Arab uprisings should try to identify general mechanisms not limited to any singular constellation, episode, or country.

Successful general mechanisms should be able to explain the varied outcomes, taking into account the diverse initial and boundary conditions. Inventing mechanisms ad hoc, however, must be avoided, although one fruitful strategy is initially to consider conjectural mechanistic accounts sketching “how-possibly” some outcome has been generated. Ultimately, however, one needs to aim for well-tested “how-actually” accounts.

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5 See Doug McAdam, Sidney G. Tarrow & Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001), pp. 24–28, 92, 67–70, 310, 316.

6 Mayntz, “Mechanisms in the analysis of social macro-phenomena,” pp. 252–256.

7 Bunge, “Mechanism and explanation,” p. 441, 458; Machamer, Darden & Craver, “Thinking about mechanisms,” pp. 13–16; Lindley Darden, “Strategies for discovering mechanisms: Schema instantiation, modular subassembly, forward/backward chaining,” *Philosophy of Science*, 69, S3 (2002), S359–S363; Alexander L. George & Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), pp. 67–72; David Collier, “Understanding process tracing,” *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 44 (2011), pp. 824–828.

8 Charles Tilly, “Mechanisms in political processes,” *Annual Review of Political Science*, 4 (2001), pp. 36–38.

9 Hedström & Ylikoski, “Causal mechanisms in the social sciences,” p. 56.

Moreover, general social mechanisms not only should identify the action logic of individual actors, based on beliefs and desires, and considerations of cost and benefit, but also the interaction structure of genuinely *social* mechanisms, and the constitutive roles played by formal and informal institutions, including rules, norms, expectations and behavioral patterns.

One highly general typology of social mechanisms illustrating this distinguishes situational, action-formation, and transformational mechanisms. All three typically play a role in “macro-micro-macro” mechanisms interconnecting macro- and micro-levels of social systems: Cause-effect relations on a macro level can be explained by invoking *environmental* or *situational mechanisms* by which social situations and environments on the macro level shape individuals’ beliefs and desires on the micro level; *cognitive* or *action-formation mechanisms*, by which individuals’ actions are generated based on their beliefs and desires; and *relational* or *transformational mechanisms*, by which the actions and, in particular, the interactions of individuals, in an interplay with situational or environmental constraints, generate social outcomes on the macro level.<sup>10</sup>

## Transition in the Arab World

Now, the approach of analyzing social systems in general, and authoritarianism and democratization in particular within a mechanism framework provides some leverage for explaining the events of the Arab uprisings in terms of more robust mechanisms and institutions that can be traced in combination with specific circumstances, thus reinforcing the general idea that the systematic exploration of mechanisms should be central to the study of democratization. The main question for this section is: What are the mechanisms of democratic transition that can be reconstructed from the events of the Arab uprisings, in particular in Egypt?

We also need to consider latent variables playing an important role, e.g., not only actual persistence of regimes but also their latent stability, and not only actual eventual mass mobilization, but also the superficially silent discontent with and eroding support for regimes that preceded it.

First, the mechanisms stabilizing and reproducing neopatrimonial systems will be considered. Neopatrimonialism is characterized as a mixture between old-style patrimonial and legal-rational rule. The term “clearly is a post-Weberian invention and, as such, a creative mix of two Weberian types of domination: a traditional subtype, patrimonial domination, and legal-rational bureaucratic domination.”<sup>11</sup> Key structural features of

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10 Ibid., p. 59, distinguish situational, action-formation, and transformational mechanisms; analogously Tilly, “Mechanisms in political processes,” p. 24, lists *environmental mechanisms* describing the causal influences brought about by the system’s environment, *relational mechanisms* altering connections between people, groups, interpersonal networks, and *cognitive mechanisms* altering individual and collective perception.

11 Gero Erdmann & Ulf Engel, “Neopatrimonialism reconsidered: Critical review and elaboration of an elusive concept,” *Common-*

neopatrimonial systems thus include both “classical” patrimonial elements, including strong personal leadership, patronage and clientelism, predominantly informal influence paths, and extensive bargaining<sup>12</sup> as well as, at least nominally, rational-legal elements and institutions based on an impersonal order, i.e., a bureaucracy and a separation of private and public areas. This results in a system where public rules, laws, and norms are formal, but their implementation is informal, and personal elements play an essential role. In other words, “power comes first, and institutions are constructed to preserve it.”<sup>13</sup>

Neopatrimonial political systems are typically dominated by a ruler superior to all political elites, recruiting members of the political elite based on personal loyalty rather than performance, and installing them in leading positions of political institutions, bureaucratic administrations, business enterprises, or consulting bodies. These elites in turn install their followers within the organizations they are heading, leading to bureaucratic clientelism. In a system of personalism, political power “flows” from autocrat to elite to clients of the elite to local politicians and functionaries – with the autocrat ultimately steering these systems. With a number of sectoral elites – traditionally court, military, administration, and religious elites, recently augmented by elites from business and societal organizations – a pluralism of elites and competition among factions of the elite results, with the autocrat acting as an arbitrator.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, (neo-)patrimonial systems only function if autocrats stay autonomous in their choices. Autocrats thus need to avoid establishment of power centers independent from themselves by ensuring a balance of power. As a result, such a system may exhibit high complexity, adaptability, flexibility, and capacity for innovation – at the price of systematic “insecurity about the behaviour and role of state institutions (and agents).”<sup>15</sup>

Now, the complex and adaptable mechanisms or “pillars” providing stability to authoritarian neopatrimonial political systems can be identified as *legitimation*, *co-optation*, and *repression*.<sup>16</sup> Leaders such as Mubarak in Egypt from 1981 on, Ben Ali in Tunisia from 1987 on, and Saleh in Yemen from 1990 on for many years skillfully developed and balanced the three mechanisms and thus created political constellations that appeared exceptionally stable in spite of numerous challenges.

While mechanisms of legitimation, co-optation, and repression can be characterized as stabilizing authoritarian systems in particular, more universal mechanisms (or processes as combinations and sequences of mechanisms) have been identified as promoting democratization in general (or, in reverse, de-democratization): “The

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*wealth & Comparative Politics*, 45, 1 (2007), p. 104.

12 Peter Pawelka, *Herrschaft und Entwicklung im Nahen Osten: Ägypten* (Heidelberg: Müller, 1985), pp. 22–39.

13 David Art, “What do we know about authoritarianism after ten years?” *Comparative Politics*, 44, 3 (2012), p. 361.

14 Peter Pawelka, “Der Staat im Vorderen Orient: Über die Demokratie-Resistenz in einer globalisierten Welt [The state in the Middle East: On resistance to democracy in a globalized world],” *Leviathan*, 30, 4 (2002), p. 435.

15 Erdmann & Engel, “Neopatrimonialism reconsidered,” p. 105.

16 See Johannes Gerschewski, “The three pillars of stability: legitimation, repression, and co-optation in autocratic regimes,” *Democratization*, 20, 1 (2013), p. 14.

fundamental processes promoting democratization in all times and places [...] consist of increasing integration of trust networks into public politics, increasing insulation of public politics from categorical inequality, and decreasing autonomy of major power centers from public politics.”<sup>17</sup> None of these processes had advanced in the Arab states, and the authoritarian mechanisms of legitimation, co-optation, and repression can be made responsible: Widespread clientelistic trust networks had not been integrated into public politics, since systems of personal ties and selective co-optation provided advantages for the regimes; not much progress had been made in insulating public politics from categorical inequality, again used for selective co-optation and repression; and major power centers, in particular the military and business elites, maintained considerable autonomy from public politics.

However, since the early 2000s each of the legitimation, co-optation, and repression mechanisms was beginning to show weaknesses: Formal legitimation based on presidential and parliamentary elections existed, but the growing perception that none of the elections changed anything for the better considerably weakened legitimacy of the regimes. The regimes tried, in part, to compensate for declining electoral legitimacy with an ideology and propaganda trying to legitimize their regimes as providers of security and stability. At the same time, legitimation of the regimes in terms of subsidized benefits for the whole population was functioning less and less well due to economic difficulties. Consequently, the attempts at economic liberalization without democratization led to the (unintended) effect of creating wealth mostly in the hands of a very small business elite.

In the case of Egypt in particular, the component of legitimation based on co-optation of larger parts of the middle class by providing jobs and economic benefits, something that had contributed crucial support for the regime’s stability for decades, was eroding as fast as the wealth of the new business elites grew. On top of that, legitimation by co-optation of the middle class in the form of exemption from the kind of repression and brutality usually reserved for the lower classes collapsed in public perception, as demonstrated by the killing of Khaled Said in Egypt. His case showed that a well-educated middle-class blogger was not untouchable, as had been widely believed. Finally, repression, while apparently ever-present, partly could be evaded by transferring the expression of discontent and opposition activities to social networks, and by inventing or adopting new types of opposition, not affiliated with political parties or religion, and engaging in innovative, decentralized, and non-violent forms of protest.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, shortly before and during the Arab uprisings in 2010 and 2011 a situation had developed where *co-optation* had become patchy, in that the material and immaterial co-optation of the middle class with regard to

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17 Charles Tilly, *Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007), p. 23.

18 Patricia Bauer & Bertold Schweitzer, “The Egyptian revolution 2011: Mechanisms of violence and non-violence,” in Bert Preiss & Claudia Brunner (eds.), *Democracy in Crisis: The Dynamics of Civil Protest and Civil Resistance* (Wien: Lit, 2013), pp. 316–322.

both economic benefits and partial exemption from repression had been shaken considerably.<sup>19</sup> co-optation of the military still seemed robust, though eventually its leaders turned out to be more loyal to the system itself rather than the person of the incumbent.

Official propaganda continued to attempt *legitimation* of the regime by perpetuating a narrative depicting the regime and in particular the military as indispensable defenders of the state and its citizens. In Egypt, propaganda kept highlighting Mubarak's military background and successes for legitimation. At the same time, however, this strategy created problems for legitimizing Mubarak's expected successor, his son Gamal, who, in addition to being perceived as a proponent of pitiless economic liberalization and a crony of the widely despised business elite, had never made a military career. Input legitimation was further weakened by the fact that parliamentary elections in Egypt in late 2010 resulted in even fewer seats for the opposition than in the previous parliament, leading to widespread frustration concerning the prospects for any kind of change. The output component of legitimization was massively weakened by economic hardships for huge parts of the population seeing chances for improvement further reduced. Regimes continued to emphasize their role as providers of security, both internal and external, but though many Western governments continued to support authoritarian regimes for precisely this reason, this argument began to appear less convincing to Arab citizens asking themselves whether their security apparatuses guaranteed or rather endangered their security.

Even *repression*, by intimidation and coercion, began to erode in a situation where an increasing number of citizens adopted views like "my life cannot possibly get worse, so why *not* protest", "they cannot shoot and kill *all* of us", or "I need to do something; it probably won't change anything for me, but hopefully it will for my kids."<sup>20</sup>

In the light of this account of mechanisms which, though weakened, still functioned both in mutually supporting themselves and in stabilizing authoritarian systems, one of the crucial questions is how Arab regimes, in particular the Egyptian one, collapsed so suddenly and unexpectedly. The answer is that, combined with the more persistent mechanisms sketched so far, during the uprisings in 2010 and 2011 a number of more locally or temporally limited mechanisms played a significant role. Among these are mechanisms of preference falsification, and of virtual and physical mobilization. Depending on environmental and cognitive conditions, these mechanisms can either provide stabilization or promote sudden change.

*Preference falsification* is a mechanism based on the fact that under repressive conditions, parts or all of the populace tend to conceal their genuine political preferences, hence masking a desire for change, thus indirectly stabilizing regimes. Specifically, people are apt to hide their real preferences for change as long as

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19 Hazem Kandil, "Why did the Egyptian middle class march to Tahrir Square?" *Mediterranean Politics*, 17, 2 (2012), pp. 206–211.

20 Interview with an Egyptian activist, Cairo, February 17, 2011.

the perceived costs of openly supporting the opposition are high in terms of imperilment.<sup>21</sup> Preference falsification is based on cognitive mechanisms, in particular perceptions of the relative strength of regime and opposition, and ensuing personal cost-benefit considerations that tend to discourage individuals to express discontent or to take part in political action. Once perceptions start changing, either prompted by further deteriorating political or economic conditions, or triggered by contingent events – for example, in Tunisia, the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi; in Egypt, the killing of Khaled Said, or Asmaa Mahfouz' video blog calling for action that went viral<sup>22</sup> –, preference falsification begins to erode. Since it involves threshold mechanisms, preference falsification may collapse speedily once a critical number of people start voicing their actual preferences, often leading to revolutionary “surprises.”<sup>23</sup>

In Egypt, as elsewhere, most public political opposition had been silenced and repressed during Mubarak's presidency. A few public demonstrations of discontent did occur (for example, the bread riots of 1977, or the April 6, 2008 protests in El-Mahalla El-Kubra) but most critical opinion regarding the regime was kept private, leading to an appearance of high stability of regimes. Even though social media were teeming with voices of discontent, this does not seem to have been perceived as a genuine threat to regime stability, neither by those engaged in online discussions nor by security forces trying to monitor these. In Egypt, not even bloggers themselves expected discontent to turn into widespread physical political action, not even after protests in Tunisia had gained pace.<sup>24</sup> In a situation where average citizens continued to consider public protest to be either too risky or not worthwhile, not even the organizers of the 25 January protests initially expected success; still they decided to protest, disregarding their personal risk.<sup>25</sup> However, once the protests gained pace, and hundreds of thousands started rallying publicly, widespread preference falsification in Egypt crumbled, accelerated by two events on January 28, 2011 considered to show first signs of weakness on part of the regime, starting with the shutting off of internet and mobile phone services in the morning, and culminating in the withdrawal of police forces from the streets in the evening. These events brought preference falsification in Egypt to a definite end – in any case, for the time being.

Mechanisms of preference falsification are strongly connected with *mobilization* mechanisms. These include virtual mobilization mechanisms, in particular via social media as well as physical mobilization mechanisms

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21 Timur Kuran, “Sparks and prairie fires: A theory of unanticipated political revolution,” *Public Choice*, 61, 1 (1989), p. 14.

22 Asmaa Mahfouz, “Video blog, 18 January.” Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZhbKN9q319g>, accessed March 17, 2011.

23 Timur Kuran, “The inevitability of future revolutionary surprises,” *American Journal of Sociology*, 100, 6 (1995), p. 1528.

24 As one Egyptian activist put it, “the news from Tunisia is interesting but nothing of the sort will happen in Egypt; Mubarak could rule Tunisia with one hand, nay, with one little finger” (interview, Cairo, December 27, 2010; all interviews were conducted in confidentiality, and the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement).

25 Mona El-Naggar, “Equal rights takes to the barricades,” *New York Times*. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/02/world/middleeast/02iht-letter02.html>, accessed March 11, 2011; interview with an Egyptian activist, Cairo, October 21, 2014.

for direct political action. During significant time periods before the uprisings, *virtual mobilization* mechanisms worked as self-reinforcing positive feedback mechanisms, in particular due to the instantaneous nature of the medium but also the widespread – though naive – assumption that the security forces were focused on the Muslim Brotherhood rather than young people from the co-opted middle class, so users of social media could or would not be targeted.<sup>26</sup> Thus, virtual mobilization was much less affected by the mechanism of preference falsification than physical mobilization would have been.<sup>27</sup>

Still, even strong virtual mobilization alone does not mean that political action is taken out on the streets. Thus mechanisms of mobilization require *physical mobilization* mechanisms, too. However, to the extent that physical mobilization was planned by opposition elites, they took into account the virtual mobilization already achieved, and scheduled demonstrations accordingly. Again, this time on the street, self-reinforcing positive feedback mechanisms were at work: Once a small, but critical mass of demonstrators perceived to be so numerous as not likely to be immediately dissolved and taken into custody by security forces had taken to the streets, their presence and number motivated ever-increasing numbers of additional residents and bystanders to join the protests.<sup>28</sup> The conscious planning by opposition leaders included making use of the fact that after Friday prayers significant numbers of people, predominantly men, already had assembled, and of the strategy of leading protest marches through backstreets first until a critical mass of demonstrators had come together.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the mobilization mechanism gained traction by the association of middle class activists with lower class people, the latter much more exposed to and experienced with police violence. This generated a massive impact on mobilization, also due to the fact that it counteracted preference falsification by providing a feeling of safety in numbers and reduced vulnerability.

In addition, mechanisms for promoting de-escalation during demonstrations were used: Protesters employed pacifying strategies, including activists calming the hotheads among the demonstrators, displaying pacifying signs and even gestures of affection toward members of the security forces, and showing national symbols, meant to emphasize national *unity*, to establish a link to and pacify security forces.<sup>30</sup> In effect, these strategies embodied negative feedback mechanisms whereby opposition activists consciously cooled down potential escalations or eruptions of violence. In turn, the interplay between successful de-escalation that kept the

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26 Some opposition activists exercised more caution, though: The leaflet *Kayfa tathour bi-hadaa'ia: Ma'aloumaat wa-taktikaat haamma* [How to protest intelligently: important information and tactics] (Cairo, January 2011). Available at: <http://info.publicintelligence.net/EgyptianRevolutionManual.pdf>, accessed March 6, 2012, used for preparing street protests contains warnings against transmitting the leaflet's content via Twitter and Facebook, claiming these "are being monitored" (p. 1, 26), though it recommends, somewhat incongruously, distributing it by email in addition to printing and photocopying.

27 See also Derek Gregory, "Tahrir: Politics, publics and performances of space," *Middle East Critique*, 22, 3 (2013), pp. 236–237.

28 Interview with an Egyptian activist, Cairo, February 17, 2011.

29 This meticulous planning is captured in the leaflet *Kayfa tathour bi-hadaa'ia*, pp. 4–8, including diagrams and maps.

30 *Ibid.*, pp. 21–22; see also Bauer & Schweitzer, "The Egyptian revolution 2011," pp. 316–322.

positive feedback mechanisms of physical mobilization going, and growing numbers of demonstrators who compensated for violence by sheer numbers led to the result of making demonstrations both peaceful and powerful.

What followed, is well known: After eighteen days of protests Mubarak resigned as president, handing power over to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, who in fact managed to remove the momentum from the hands of the revolutionaries. Parliamentary elections from November 2011 to January 2012 resulted in a clear majority for the Freedom and Justice Party and the Al-Nour Party. Presidential elections were held in May and June 2012, with the Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mohammed Morsi winning by a narrow margin over Ahmed Shafik, Mubarak's last prime minister. From the point of view of the revolutionaries, the second round of the elections pitted two equally unattractive alternatives against each other, representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood and the old regime, thus nearly silencing the original voices of the protests. During Morsi's presidency, a rapid adoption of policies along familiar authoritarian patterns could be observed, culminating in Morsi's November 2012 declaration immunizing his decrees from any challenge. Renewed mass protests in June 2013 demanded early presidential elections, and led, after Morsi chose to ignore an ultimatum by the military calling for the resolution of his differences with opponents, to Morsi's overthrow, variously described as coup d'état, or the second Egyptian revolution. Since then, the regime of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's, commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces and Minister of Defence at the time of Morsi's overthrow, then elected president in May 2014, strongly resembles a new edition of Mubarak's system.

Considering the central mechanisms of neopatrimonial authoritarianism, we have to realize that the overall framework has not been substituted by any alternatives. As it turned out, the short-term mechanisms that were efficient in toppling the Mubarak and Morsi regimes have worn out with subsequent developments. In ambiguous phases between early 2011 and mid-2013, symptoms of fatigue on the part of the revolutionaries periodically alternated with renewed intensity of protests. At the time of writing, however, preference falsification has reappeared as a universal phenomenon, and mobilization, both virtual and physical is apparently at a low ebb again.

Hence, the long-term mechanisms of neopatrimonial authoritarianism, in place from Mubarak to SCAF to Morsi to al-Sisi have gained importance again, in combination with the general de-democratizing mechanisms involving trust networks not embedded in public policy, inequality being instrumentalized, and the persistence of largely autonomous power centers such as the military. More specifically, however, al-Sisi's policies can be interpreted as attempts at reconstruction of the three mechanisms of neopatrimonial rule, legitimation, co-optation, and repression, with renewed and, compared with his predecessors, at times exceptional effort. New projects such as the expansion of the Suez Canal mirror a Nasserist (or should one say, Pharaonic?) approach,

clearly aimed at legitimization by creation of jobs and stimulation of the economy.

The extent of the effort to obtain legitimization is mirrored by the extent of repression of all kinds of real or assumed opponents or critics of the regime, currently at an all-time high, and now also directed against the middle class. Cooptation now partly consists in accepting the amount of repression in exchange for economic advantages. Similarly, security issues and the campaign against terrorism (a label which includes political opponents) are used to create a legitimating narrative. The escalation and amalgamation of repression and legitimization efforts culminate in depicting the regimes's measures as the "heroic" fight against terrorism by the champions of the "second Egyptian revolution."<sup>31</sup>

Even so, the current regime's extensive efforts towards re-establishing authoritarian structures may not only be interpreted as a reimplementation of what worked for Mubarak and other authoritarian rulers for many years but at the same time as an indicator of both a fundamental lack of vision, and a fear that the mechanisms supporting authoritarianism might break down again just as rapidly as then did in early 2011 should situations arise that allow revolutionary mechanisms to gain traction again. It is open to debate whether the current reissue of the system is built on sand from its start.

## Conclusion

This analysis has tried to call attention to the advantages of a mechanism-based approach to analyzing and explaining the networks of causal factors promoting or inhibiting democratic change and to highlight that an adequate explanation of democratic transition requires mechanism-based accounts of actual causal interaction and interdependence of factors, including general and persistent conditions such as social, cultural, religious, and economic conditions as well as contingent, time-, place-, and actor-specific details such as changes in public perception of political issues, extent of mass mobilization, election results, or decisions by elites or crucial actors. Hence, the mechanistic framework provides a systemic approach focusing less on single causes but on their interconnectedness and interaction.

The case study on Egypt has shown how mechanisms of legitimization, co-optation, and repression have stabilized an authoritarian system, but also how environmental and cognitive influences altered and weakened these mechanisms over time, and how "revolutionary" mechanisms, given favorable conditions led to the toppling of Mubarak's presidency. The re-establishment of authoritarian structures under Morsi and even more so under al-Sisi also shows their considerable power of persistence, rooted in structural, institutional and

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31 Interviews with retired senior officials from the Egyptian Foreign Ministry, Cairo, 21 October 2014.

cognitive entrenchment. In particular, the post-revolutionary developments in Egypt demonstrate that the “revolutionary youth” did not succeed in establishing an alternative model providing legitimation to a liberal democratic political system.

With regard to future development, one of the key advantages of this mechanism-based approach is that, beyond merely identifying future trends it allows the formulation of if-then statements. For example, *if* the efficiency of mechanisms supporting authoritarianism, i.e., legitimation, co-optation, and repression is decreased, *if* preference falsification can be overcome, and *if* mass mobilization can be achieved, *then* revolutionary overthrow of a regime is possible. The current regime, it seems, is well aware of these if-then’s, and acts accordingly – but mechanisms, in particular social mechanisms are not machines, and (revolutionary) surprises remain possible.

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