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Egyptian Cotton is the Fabric of Democracy: An Exploration of Labor, Democratization, and the Egyptian Revolution

**Introduction**

In late January 2011 millions crowded around TV sets the world over to witness the phenomenon dubbed the “Arab Spring” firsthand. Egypt had become the certified media darling by the American twenty-four hour news cycle; with every moment of the revolution captured by a cameraman and a pundit from every network offering their own diagnosis of the events at hand. Unlike so many stories coming out of the region, what was transpiring in Egypt was genuinely encouraging. Protests were largely peaceful, and the pleas for democracy and free speech rung true for American ears. Issues discussed in the now iconic Tahrir Square included corruption of public officials, police brutality, the extended state of emergency, and high food prices. The topics of low wages and high unemployment received less attention and even less being made of the strikes at factories across Egypt. Labor mobilization, which had been active in fits since Gamal Nasser, was accelerating, putting even more pressure on Mubarak to surrender power. In July of 2013, the media spotlight was again on Egypt, only this time, the prospect for democracy was far bleaker. Mohammed Morsi, Egypt’s first democratically elected president had been deposed in a coup d'état and General Abdel Fattah El-Sisi installed as the new leader of Egypt.

The Egypt of 2013 had effectively defied the expectations of 2011, with many questioning what had gone wrong with a once promising revolution. While there were certainly several other factors at play in the failure of the Egyptian revolution, of particular importance is the aforementioned labor movement. Organized labor, an extension of civil society, is a factor that can affect transitions to democracy. This paper will attempt to answer the question under what conditions a labor movement threatens or enables democratization. The paper will begin with a summary of democratization theory, then establish the historical context in which the failed democratization took place. It will then look at how the policies of Mubarak and Morsi shaped the labor movement, analyze the composition of the labor movement including size, centralization and activity. Then, the paper will close with an evaluation of the labor movement’s effect on the transition. I hypothesize that a strict and closed authoritarian regime, a weak and decentralized labor movement, and an abrupt break between the two actors is likely to threaten democratic change.

**Literature Review**

Popularized by Samuel P. Huntington, democratization theory is a topic hotly debated among scholars. In the book The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century Huntington claims that states across the globe move to and from democracy in waves. Huntington believes that there is neither a single factor that can sufficiently explain the development of democracy nor one that is necessary to the development of democracy. Democratization then occurs due to a variety of factors creating a combination unique to a particular transition. The titular third wave, Huntington argues, began in 1974 with the Carnation Revolution in Portugal, carried on through the 1980’s in Latin America and Southeast Asia, and continued in Eastern Europe after the fall of the USSR. While scholars debate the validity of Huntington’s theory that international movements toward democracy are connected, many have experimented and identified an endless number of causal factors. Adam Przewowski theorizes that economic development increases the chances democratization in his article Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Well-Being in the World, 1950-1990. Another theory is the resource curse theory, introduced by Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson in their piece Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy. It suggests that states with abundant natural resources will resist democratization due to elites’ ability to rely on the wealth from resources, such as oil. Other factors scholars have identified as having an effect on transitions include: population density, settlement patterns, internal mobility, warfare, religious conflict, emigration, land ownership, languages, and ethnic stratification.

The broad factor worth highlighting for the purposes of this paper is civil society. Civil society is defined by Larry Diamond as “the realm of organized life that is voluntary, self-generating, (largely) self-supporting, autonomous and bound by a legal order or a shared set of rules.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Civil society is seen by many as being important for democratization due to its ability to organize individuals and institutions as well as prepare citizens for democratic participation and fostering mutual trust and cooperation throughout a population. Authoritarian regimes will often try to suppress civil society, compelling people to disassociate with a shared public identity. With civil bonds broken the regime is able to secure itself as the lone political actor. In Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Prospects for Democracy authors Guillermo O’Donnell, Philippe Schmitter, and Laurence Whitehead identify how authoritarian regimes depoliticize public issues, manipulating people through physical repression, ideological manipulation and selective encouragement. When the regime lessens its control on collective action or encounters a crisis, mobilization of civil society is likely to occur. The previously obscured common ideals and collective identification are reawakened, and the process which they call the “resurrection of civil society” begins. Labor mobilization, an extension of civil society is an important agent in democratic transitions and a critical component of this paper. J Samuel Valenzuela highlights labor mobilization in his essay Labor Movements in Transitions to Democracy: A Framework for Analysis. Valenzuela makes a similar claim as O’Donnell, Schmitter and Whitehead that as the regime lowers the cost for collective action, mobilization will increase. Valenzuela adds that if mobilization is at its peak at the time of liberalization, the new democratic government is likely to fail to consolidate. In this period, Valenzuela emphasizes the importance of restraint for the labor movement in order to stabilize the democratic transition. The likelihood of the labor movement to demonstrate restraint can be determined along four sources of variation. The source of variation include: the relative strength or weakness of the labor movement and the economic context of the transition, the centralization or decentralization of the labor movement, the government’s policy towards labor, and modalities of the transition. Strength of a labor movement is determined by the movement’s ability to participate in negotiations, high union membership, or successful changes in the industrial relations system. The centralization of a labor movement refers to the organization of the movement, such as the existence of multiple labor unions, or cooperation among groups. Government policy may take either an inclusive or exclusive approach to suppressing civil society, incorporating unionization into the government itself or taking steps to limit the effectiveness of the movement. Lastly, the modalities of the transition are how the transition unfolds, whether gradually or abruptly. These four sources of variation will serve as the basis for this paper’s investigation of transitions to democracy.

**Resurrection and Variation**

As previously established, there is a nearly endless number of reasons why a democratic transition may occur. It is imperative to note that no single factor can be responsible the initiation, completion or termination of a democratic transition. Rather, it is a collection of various factors working together that compel a democratic change. However, as highlighted by O’Donnell, Schmitter, and Whitehead in “Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Prospects for Democracy” civil society can be an important and diverse agent of democratic change. Under an authoritarian regime, civil society is repressed, either through force, ideological manipulation, or the promotion of select groups or ideals. The goal of this repression is to force people to think privately rather than as a collective, pursuing individual goals instead of identifying themselves as a public and political identity. During a transition, O’Donnell, Schmitter and Whitehead argue, civil society experiences a “resurrection”. What the resurrection actually involves is the “generalized mobilization”[[2]](#footnote-2) of civil society, featuring increased action and the reawakening of the long-obscured civic and political identities. This resurrection occurs once the authoritarian regime indicates a lower cost for collective action either due to a crisis of the authoritarian regime or liberalization.

As a result of heightened mobilization, the repressive force required to return to exclusionary authoritarianism is greater. This allows two types of responses by the authoritarian regime. Soft-liners, fearing a loss of control over social forces may permit hard-liners to engage in oppressive tactics to corral the social movement. In this case, the strict or repressive tactics of the authoritarian regime raise the cost for inaction, and the cost for collective action will be perceived as reduced. The opposite response to heightened mobilization occurs when soft-liners, either unwilling or unable, avoid the massive repression necessary to deter the movement and pursue a process of liberalization. Liberalization may involve the loosening of constraints on public demonstrations, pacts made with the labor union allowing for more autonomy, or the perceived possibility for greater gains to be made (therefore lowering the relative cost for collective action). As an extension of civil society, labor too will experience a resurrection. Valenzuela claims that this consists of “a sharp increase in labor movement activation through strikes and demonstrations, usually in conjunction with a broader upsurge of mobilization by a wide variety of groups.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Though experiencing a resurrection alongside other factors, labor mobilization possess features that distinguish it from other aspects of civil society and enhance its importance in understanding transitions.

Labor is unique in its ability to affect transitions. Its capacity for effective and widespread mobilization of large groups of people with common interests, as well as organizing other groups cements its significance in transitions. Additionally, labor has the distinct ability to disrupt the economy through work stoppages such as strikes or sit-ins. For these reasons, labor attracts substantial attention from the authoritarian regime. Valenzuela identifies two approaches authoritarian regimes may employ to stagger the collective identification of workers, corporatist and market strategies, though notes that there is often some overlap between these two. Corporatist strategies are defined by state-created worker organizations, mandatory membership, leadership of labor unions by state officials, state controlled collective bargaining, and strict boundaries for how workers are able to voice their concerns. This inclusive approach to workers organizations limits their ability to advance their agendas by constraining the avenues for demands to be made, and placing them under state control. Conversely, market strategies are entirely exclusive, weakening labor mobilizations in any way possible. This includes the complete decentralization of collective bargaining, restrictions on when strikes may occur, preventing the use of union funds in organizing work stoppages, voluntary union membership, and promoting the formation of many labor unions to increase union pluralism. Authoritarian regimes are able to employ these strategies by diffusing industrial relations to prevent strikes, discrediting union leaders, weakening unions at the plant level (unless they are government affiliated), and suppressing opposition parties related to labor unions. Once liberalization occurs, and civil society is resurrected, labor unions gain abilities to combat the authoritarian regime.

Liberalization, or “the process of redefining and extending rights”[[4]](#footnote-4) creates new opportunities for workers to overcome the controls of the authoritarian regime. Ideally, labor mobilization accelerates to the point where democratization is possible but not yet adopted by elites, other popular sectors join in mobilization, union leaders are allowed to create, recreate or extend their organizations and demand changes to laws and worker relations systems, and political parties establish a link to labor organizations. Soft liners and moderates may perceive full democratization as the only viable solution to the crisis as hard liners are prevented from action due to the changing laws and government offices created, or cannot manage the level of repression necessary to impact the transition. Therefore liberalization of the authoritarian regime would no longer a sufficient response and full democratization required. Coinciding with liberalization, the newly empowered labor organizations should demonstrate restraint regarding worker’s demands. By deferring to the democratic process, the movement signals democracy is a viable alternative to achieve greater social and political order, rather than more instability or revolution. This process need not be without conflict as groups are likely to be more tolerant of conflict at this stage of the transition and new institutions and rules may exist for labor to organize and make demands. However, these are the ideal conditions for a labor movement to affect transition. The perfect coincidence of all noted factors leading to full democratization is rare. In cases where transitions deviate from this generalized template, labor mobilization may hinder democratization.

Valenzuela has called labor mobilization a “double-edged sword”[[5]](#footnote-5) stating that while labor working alongside many different social factors may accelerate transitions to democracy, in some cases mobilization can threaten democratization. The long-unanswered calls of the movement can overwhelm the capacity of the economy to accommodate workers’ demands or exceed policymakers’ or employers’ willingness to respond. Labor leaders in particular can ostracize themselves from the political process with calls for rapid and radical changes to labor laws and collective bargaining. As beneficiaries of the authoritarian regime, employers may re-align with the hard-liners as the movement’s demands escalate. Conservative and moderate political leaders as well as military officers may consider labor leaders dangerous or radical and press for ending the democratization effort. Competition amongst labor leadership groups is also problematic for democratization as it muddles the agenda of the movement and may force other groups to pursue their particular economic, organizational and political goals irrespective of the goals of the transition. All these aspects could contribute to the exclusion of the labor movement or an affiliated political party from the transition coalition, thus limiting the movement’s influence in the new government. As the transition comes to a close if certain critical demands remain unmet, labor leaders are unable to represent workers, and the labor-affiliated political parties are incapable of securing sufficient power within the new political structure, the labor sector is likely to become a source of semi-loyalty or disloyalty to the new, questionably democratic regime. As shown, labor movements can help, or hinder democratic change. Still unanswered however, is the question of under what conditions labor is may encourage or threaten democratic change.

**Four Sources of Variation in the Relationship between Labor and Democratization**

Valenzuela offers a valuable analytic framework for diagnosing labor mobilization’s effect on democratization: the four sources of variation. The aforementioned “four sources” include: the strength of the labor movement, the centralization of the labor movement, the authoritarian regime’s treatment of the labor movement and the ways in which the transition unfolds, or the modalities of the transition. Though fairly self-descriptive, it is important to clearly define the ways in which the transition is affected by the sources of variation, as well as how they are measured.

**Strength**

Strength would appear a clearly important trait for a labor movement to possess when undergoing a democratic transition. Valenzuela determines that a strong labor movement is noteworthy due the fact that it is more likely to demonstrate restraint at that crucial juncture where democratization is indicated but not yet adopted by elites. This is because a strong labor movement is likely to establish strong labor institutions in the democratic regime, which in turn is more likely to deliver on the demands of the movement. When institutions are proven capable of responding to worker’s concerns, it contributes to the perception that democracy as a whole is a viable platform for labor representation. Conversely weaker labor movements are less likely to create strong institutions or any institutions at all. This may lead to the movement doubting the validity of the new government, producing more radical leaders, or generating anti-system parties. For these reasons, even a weak labor movement can be a source of long-term instability for the new regime to overcome. There are of course numerous ways in which a labor movement may be called “strong”. More elusive is what exactly constitutes a strong movement in the sense that it is more likely show restraint when democratization is possible.

The criterion for labor movement strength as identified by Valenzuela[[6]](#footnote-6) are: the density of union affiliation in the total labor force, the density of union affiliation in key areas of the economy, historical characteristics, the industrial relations system, the link between unions and one or more political parties, and the relative weakness of employers. Valenzuela notes that “all of the recent cases of redemocratization have, by world standards, medium to low levels of union density” with the highest being 30% in Argentina and a low around 10% in the Philippines, most falling around 15-20%.[[7]](#footnote-7) Labor therefore is not powerful enough to subordinate the transition to its purposes, but still has a presence in the economy. High density of union affiliation in key areas of the economy can in some cases compensate for low overall weakness in unionism. Valenzuela notes the “near universal” unionization levels in Chile’s copper industry despite only 15% unionized labor force overall. Geographic location is also significant, as labor movements located in capital cities have an ability to paralyze government through general strikes and protest. Attention should also be paid to a union organization’s historical characteristics, such as if the movement had been heavily subjected to the state, divided between ideologies and political allegiances, and/or constantly underfunded. These factors can give observers an impression of the movement’s ability to fight off the authoritarian regime over time. On the industrial relations system, what Valenzuela determines is significant is “the degree to which unions can indeed organize collective pressures to alter their respective labor markets.”[[8]](#footnote-8) These are indicated by how capable the labor institutions that do exist within the authoritarian regime are able to respond to demands of workers. Affiliation with a political party can lend a significant amount of strength to a political party. The affiliated political party may have a wider agenda than labor, which enables it to appeal to a broader social base than workers or union members, such as socialists or communists. Finally, relatively weak employers can enhance the strength of a labor movement. Employers may be poorly organized, reliant on the state, or closely identified with the authoritarian regime. In these cases, the labor movement’s strength is greater. One or more of these criterion is likely to elevate the labor movement in the democratization process.

**Centralization**

Due to a similar process, centralization is also a factor that contributes to the stability of a democratic transition. A highly centralized movement would empower a small number of labor leaders to participate in the transition process and satisfy labor movement goals leading to an overall satisfaction with democracy and government institutions, as was the case with strength. Measuring centralization comes down to two aspects, the makeup of the labor movement, and the political affiliations of labor groups. A distinction must be made whether a movement consists of a few, large unions in the industrial branch or along occupational categories and movements consisting of many plant level unions. Naturally, movements with many smaller plant level unions are more decentralized than larger ones. In these cases labor leaders may perceive their actions to have little impact on the economy or on the transition as a whole, are often incredibly weak in negotiations individually, and are less likely to be engaged by state elites and employer organizations due to the number of local labor leaders. In such cases, decreased mobilization is due to worker’s perceptions that there is little to gain through job actions and they cannot impact the transition in a meaningful way. Exceptions to this rule are workers located in “strategic axes”[[9]](#footnote-9) of the economy, where influence on the economy would be apparent. Conversely, cases in which the scope of unions are larger indicate greater centralization. Workers in large industrial braches or occupational categories are bound to sense their impact on their labor markets and the economy as a whole, and due to their size are also highly capable of doing so. State and business elites are also bound to seek leaders of larger unions who are fewer in number, and have separated themselves from smaller worker organizations.

Additionally, instances with only one political party historically linked with a labor movement indicates greater centralization and more likely to engage in the mobilization-restraint sequence most conducive to a stable democratic transition. When ideological differences exist between labor groups, the period following the liberalization of the authoritarian regime is more likely to be followed by a scramble to secure and expand rank and file support, rather than movement’s effect on the transition. In an attempt to appeal to a wider base of workers, labor leaders will often present different demands, increasing mobilization, rather than restraint. Surprisingly, when the authoritarian regime applies harsher, stricter corporatist policies on labor, decentralization can increase. This creates an environment where new, accepted union leaders are promoted and previous leaderships are excluded, leading to divisions among the labor movement. Hence, the decentralization of a labor movement creates greater competition between groups. This competition causes increased mobilization as new concerns are presented by labor leaders in an attempt to expand their base of support.

**Policies of the Authoritarian Regime**

The effect of the authoritarian regime on a labor movement is not limited to centralization. Valenzuela observes that because authoritarian regimes may suppress some parts of the labor movement while allowing others to exist “they mold the kind of labor organizations that will be in place when the possibility of a transition to democracy arises” (457).[[10]](#footnote-10) Therefore, to an extent, the authoritarian regime defines the demands of the labor movement and determines the degree of organizational building necessary for the labor movement to establish itself in the democracy. Because of this, distinguishing between corporate and market strategies is insufficient for determining the regime’s impact on the labor movement. For this, it is necessary to diagnose the harshness or mildness of the authoritarian regime, as well as the political “space” available to the labor movement. Harshness or mildness refers to “the extent to which the authoritarian regime limits the channels for the expression of collectively formulated worker grievances, for labor actions, and for effective labor input into the process of collective bargaining.”[[11]](#footnote-11) In other words, this can be understood as the approach the regime takes to combat the efforts of the labor movement to organize and collectively bargain. Knowing this, corporate strategies can either be classified as harsh or mild, while market strategies can only be harsh as the nature of these policies is to prevent collective action from having any effect on labor markets. On the other hand, political space can be classified as open or closed, and refers to “the degree to which the authoritarian regime has, or tolerates, arenas for political activity by identifiably different groups”[[12]](#footnote-12) (457). Political “space” can best be understood by the existence of elections (even if not completely free), press freedom, and differing political views within the inner circles of the authoritarian regime. Cases where such factors exist may be determined open, while cases with power concentrated in the head of state, corrupt and meaningless elections (or none at all), rubber-stamp legislatures or the absence of one, and autonomous local governments all indicate a closed regime.

In cases where the authoritarian regime has taken a harsh approach to the labor movement, workers’ demands and resentments will have accumulated in greater number. When liberalization occurs or is indicated, or the authoritarian regime encounters a crisis, these demands will be expressed in a “singularly strong wave of strikes and demonstrations” (458).[[13]](#footnote-13) A harsh regime is also likelier to develop union leaderships more willing and accustomed to overstepping legal bounds to defend workers’ rights. There is therefore a greater chance for the movement to produce more politically engaged or radical leaders (looking for greater change to the existing socioeconomic system). Under capitalist authoritarianisms it is normal for the new socioeconomic system to be anti-capitalist. Rank-and-file workers are generally more inclined to support politically committed leaderships which benefit from the absence of leadership in other sectors and the reputation of standing up to the authoritarian regime. As time goes on, this dynamic may reverse with support switching to moderate sectors with the memory of the authoritarian regime less fresh in the minds of workers. In a mild regime mobilization and labor conflict will still occur with liberalization, but the activation will be less extensive. Workers’ demands will not have been as ignored as in a harsh regime and it is more probable for the movement to produce moderate leaders. The implications of a closed political spaces are similar to those of harsh authoritarianism towards the labor movement.

In closed authoritarian regimes, leaders are again more likely to overstep the bounds of legislation for the defense of workers’ rights, often resorting to strikes, public demonstrations, boycotts. As the transition escalates, leaders may lobby for the international isolation of the authoritarian regime and in extreme cases resort to armed insurrection. If the transition becomes militarized the balance of power amongst labor groups shifts in favor of those with the greatest military capabilities. Strikes, demonstrations, and boycotts become far less effective and the chances for a democracy to emerge become rarer. In situations where the authoritarian regime has come about through military action in a civil war or proto-civil war, the opposition is less likely to see armed insurrection as a viable strategy. On the contrary, when the authoritarian regime has come to power by suppressing an unmilitarized political force, the movement is more likely to pursue an armed option. In open cases, the moderate political leaders that emerge will seek the political space provided by the authoritarian regime such as plebiscites, elections, and local governments to convince the regime that authoritarianism is not sustainable due to a lack of legitimacy and that democratization is the best course of action. As a result, open regimes will typically democratize following a *reforma* model (which will be expanded upon later). Valenzuela concludes that for a regime to be open, it “must allow political leaders who can draw labor movement support to participate in its political “spaces.””[[14]](#footnote-14) There are then four types of authoritarian regimes, each type with a distinctive effect on the transition and democratization; harsh-closed, mild-closed, harsh-open, and mild-open regimes.

**Harsh-Closed Regimes**

A regime that is both “exclusionary of worker demands and intolerant of all opposition political activity” may be defined for the purposes of this paper as harsh-closed. In cases where a regime is harsh-closed, the political and labor leaderships will be closely tied under the authoritarian regime before splitting during democratization. For political leaders, worker demonstrations, strikes, and protests will be the principle means of applying pressure on the authoritarian regime. Labor will then become a focal point of the transition, being adopted by opposition forces. As the opposition tends to radicalize, labor too will demonstrate more radical demands from rank-and-file workers, an effect felt by local level labor leaders. With a typically abrupt indication towards democratization, the interests of these two groups will split. Using the new, more democratic political context continue to mobilize, workers will produce increasingly radical demands. Local and plant level leaders will stimulate increasing radicalization of workers’ demands in order to establish support and introduce new industrial relations institutions as quickly as possible. However national party leadership will take a position of “a mixture between political prudence and an effort to project an image of “responsibility”” (460) seeking to moderate the demands of the labor movement in order to increase public order and economic growth. This is done so as not to allow hard-liners from using labor mobilization as an excuse to reassert authority and secure their identity as a viable political and bargaining force. In cases where labor affiliated political parties are included in the transition coalition, they too may adopt the same “responsibility” position. In such cases conflict is likely to emerge between levels of the labor movement as rank-and-file workers and local level leaders mobilize regardless of the attitudes of the top leaderships of the labor movement.

**Mild-Closed Regimes**

A mild-closed regime is one that “has been mild in terms of allowing a relatively effective voice in collective bargaining by representative union leaderships and channels for workers to prevent their grievances but has closed all political arenas to party leaderships somehow associated with the labor movement.”[[15]](#footnote-15) In other words, this is a regime that has given unions the ability to organize and collectively bargain but denied them all political rights. A mild-closed regime will also produce tension between labor leaderships, in this case between local and national leaders and the party leadership. The mildness of the authoritarian regime produces union leaders guided by the immediate demands of rank-and-file workers rather than by political strategies. These leaders are in turn empowered, occupying important and visible positions negotiating with employers and the state. The local and national labor leaders are therefore likely to be hesitant in subordinating to party leadership and their own political goals. The most empowered leaders will tend to detach themselves from the rest of the labor movement as party leadership attempts to inspire the unity of labor movement to broaden their base of support and accumulate influence.

The attitudes of political party leadership have considerable implications for the effect a mild-closed regime will have on the democratization process. Specifically, how the political leadership perceives the transition’s value and its importance within the transition. If the political leadership does not value the transition it is likely to adopt a militant attitude in support of the demands of rank-and-file workers in order to gain the support and control over labor rather than respond to indicated democratization with restraint. Conversely, if party leadership values democratization and is committed to the transition, it will not adopt a militant attitude for workers’ demands. Instead the party will respond to the political situation appropriately, despite the insecure control over the labor movement. While more beneficial to democratization than a political party opposed to the transition, tension is likely to exist between political leadership and local and national labor leaders.

**Harsh-Open Regimes**

Harsh-open regimes, like previous authoritarian regime types are likely to produce tension between the different levels of leadership. Harsh-open regimes are ones which the regime has been uncompromising with the labor movement, suppressing their demands, but open within political sectors, providing some political rights to the opposition which has some link to labor. In these cases, political elites are afforded more maneuverability than labor leaders, provided the political leaders do not organize labor in opposition to the authoritarian regime. Political leadership will take advantage of this, urging restraint on the part of the labor movement, while doing nothing to respond to workers’ demands. As a result, labor leaders will act more independently and become a more radical sector of the opposition. Labor leaders will attempt to maximize mobilization while political leaders press for continued restraint and remove themselves from labor conflicts, seeking gradual change towards democracy. However, political leaders are likely to be ineffective in their attempts to guide the transition as labor leaders assume active political roles contributing to greater political divisions in the labor movement.

**Mild-Open Regimes**

In some cases, the authoritarian regime will be both mild in its repression of labor and open to political expression. These characteristics are most likely to be found in a more permanent form in populist authoritarian regimes. Normally, the labor movement will be officially sponsored, with smaller, independent opposition groups competing (usually unsuccessfully) with the official organization. Labor is also typically represented in governing circles of the authoritarian regime in mild-open cases. Naturally, in this state, any possible democratization process is questionable to labor leaders and rank-and-file workers, as drastic change is likely replace current authorities with a new elite unrelated to the labor movement, who may look to change economic policies to the detriment of workers. In any case mobilization will increase with potential democratization, but in mild-open regimes, this mobilization is directed to warn the new elite not to reverse the policies of the past. Labor leadership will support and foster labor mobilization to establish itself in the new democratic setting. While some transitions may arrive at a point resembling a mild-open authoritarian regime provided there is a long liberalization process, these periods are usually instable and too short-lived to alter the effect the regime has on a labor movement. Therefore these cases should not be considered a mild-open regime.

As shown there is a degree of variety to an authoritarian regime’s approach to a labor movement. In all cases there is an identifiable factor potentially damaging the prospects for a stable transition. However there are degrees to the extent which the authoritarian regime can impact democratization, with harsh-closed and mild-open occupying opposing poles of harmful and beneficial to the transition, respectively. Frequently this paper has discussed how the strength and centralization of the labor movement or policies have affected how the transition is orchestrated. However, still unexplained are the effects of the orchestration of the transition on the prospects for democracy. For that explanation, this paper will discuss the fourth and final source of variation; the modalities of the transition.

**Modalities of the Transition and the Relationship between Labor’s Political Leadership and Transition Elites.**

Identified by Valenzuela, the fourth source of variation in transitions to democracy are the modalities of the transition. This is best understood as an examination of the nature of the relationship between the labor movement’s political leaders and the main transition elites, and how the two groups manage the transition. As history has shown, transitions to democracy can unfold abruptly or gradually, resulting in a complete break with the authoritarian regime or a steady series of pacts and agreements which blend the regime into a democratic one. In cases where the break is abrupt, a transition is said to be a *ruptura,* in cases where it is gradual is called *reforma* though transitions contain elements of both*.* Generally, a *reforma* transition is more conducive to democratic change. With *reforma*, mobilization may surge and workers’ demands become partially answered prior to the actual democratization process. At this point, the cost for workers’ restraint would be diminished making it more likely for workers to concede their immediate concerns to the democratization process as a whole. Likewise, in *reforma* routes, a greater sense of uncertainty exists, causing labor’s union and political leaders demonstrate caution to ensure democratization occurs. More problematic are transitions following the *ruptura* route.

With *ruptura,* unless preceded by periods of liberalization, the outbreak of social mobilization coincides with the beginning of the democratization process. At this time workers perceive a sudden dramatic change to the authoritarian regime and their freedoms, more so if a regime was particularly harsh, causing mobilization to soar. Generally *ruptura* transitions will be seen as more secure than *reforma* transitions, having “apparently broken the back of the discredited proauthoritarian regime forces”[[16]](#footnote-16) though this is not usually the case. From a regime that has been singularly narrow and repressive, social groups, including the labor movement, are likely to emerge poorly organized. Organizational goals will then become the top priority of the social groups’ leaders, who have to juggle “the resolution of pent-up labor and other social conflicts, the recreation of union organizations, the reestablishment of links to parties, and the pressures for a revamping of labor-management relations”[[17]](#footnote-17) at the same time as the creation of new political institutions. Tensions that exist due to the other sources of variation are heightened in a transition *ruptura* route as a result. The leading or rising groups of the transition will seek to mold political institutions that fortify their position in the new government, detracting from the legitimacy of their political institutions among opposition groups. These institutions may persist as a source of significant conflict if they are not properly altered.

Another layer to the modalities of a transition is the labor movement’s relationship with the principle political agent leading the change. Valenzuela identifies four possible situations that may occur concerning this relationship: First, labor parties or political parties affiliated with labor become the central force in the transition government. Second, a labor-linked party or parties may be included in the transition coalition and occupy a position of the government, but only as a junior partner. Third, the labor party is included in the transition coalition, but is not formally a part of the government. Instead, a trusted group exhibiting a good working relationship with labor fills these positions. Fourth, the labor movement, while sympathizing with the transition, deeply distrusts the main political group leading the transition. Of these four options, Valenzuela determines the third type of relationship most beneficial to a smooth transition. As part of the transition coalition, labor leadership will be pressed to restrain or accelerate mobilization at the appropriate junctures of the democratization process. By not being formally included in the new government, the labor party is also protected from becoming identified with unpopular economic policies, allowing it focus on expanding the labor organization instead. Additionally, it will also prevent the labor party from crafting industrial relations legislation that is highly favorable to labor, but unacceptable to the private sector which may have long-term consequences as a source of instability. Finally, with trusted working partners in government, restraint for the sake of the transition would not result in the neglect of labor’s demands or rights. In the first scenario, it is probable that given labor’s position in government, the industrial relations system created by the movement will be very difficult for private sector to accept. In cases such as these, pacts and agreements are the best way to ensure the private sector’s acceptance of legislation. In the second situation, labor as only a junior partner in government may not have the capacity to press for the views and programs of workers. With efforts to secure these views and programs that are ineffective, and the necessity to demand restraint from the labor movement, tensions are likely to develop between local and plant level leaders and high-level political leadership in government. In the fourth scenario, labor will likely fear that the new elites will change the current policies to the detriment of workers. In response labor leaders will try to muster the “strongest possible confrontational labor organizations” (465)[[18]](#footnote-18) as constant warning to the leading political elites. In this situation also pacts between labor and the government become unlikely and the long-term perception of legitimacy of the democratic regime suffers. Sometimes in this fourth scenario there may be a segment of the labor movement that does support the leading political elites, in which case transition elites may become involved in the labor conflict by supporting and promoting favored groups, while the other segment of labor mobilization attempts to stimulate mobilization and build its organization.

As has been shown, civic identification can have a tremendous impact on transitions. As these political and societal identifications are reawakened, either as a result of a crisis of the authoritarian regime or liberalization, the subsequent mobilization puts pressure on the authoritarian regime to democratize. Authoritarians may employ two strategies to prevent these identifications, to various degrees of harshness and openness. Labor movements may either be strong enough to assume an important role in the transition, or too weak to establish a place in the resulting government. However, even a strong movement may be dangerous to transitions to democracy when it is without a cohesive message and agenda between its constitutive parts. Equally important is the course the transition takes, whether through a gradual separation or an abrupt break with the existing regime. As the new democracy takes shape, labor ought to be in consideration of the transition coalition, but not included in it as it may be a source of tension during consolidation and beyond. Thus, labor mobilization reveals itself as a double-edged sword in regard to securing a successful transition to democracy. Analysis of a current transition may more completely illustrate the presented concepts, as well as contribute another layer to the understanding of the role of labor as it applies to democratization.

**Case Study: Egypt**

At first glance, Egypt may seem an unusual choice for the analysis of labor movements. The primary causes typically offered as explanation for the outcome of the Egyptian Revolution include youth movements, the military, social media, political developments within the country, or its part in a transcendent wave of democratization labeled the Arab Spring. While it is true that the tech savvy youth of Egypt, looming Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF), machinations of the Muslim Brotherhood and developments in regional neighbors influenced Egypt’s transition, none can lay claim to taking part in the revolution nearly a decade before anyone knew it had started. Labor can, particularly the textile workers of Ghazl al Mahalla. Analysis of the Egyptian revolution therefore begins in El-Mahalla El-Kubra, an industrial town North of Cairo in the Nile Delta. Since the mid-2000’s, workers of Misr Helwan Spinning and Weaving Company (used interchangeably with Ghazl al Mahalla) had been a source of vocal opposition towards Hosni Mubarak’s nearly thirty year old regime, though the reasons for which date back to the 1970’s. Protests at Ghazl al Mahalla came in response to the threat of the advancing neoliberal agenda, symbolized by the installation of Ahmed Nazif and the “government of businessmen” in 2004. Their strikes in 2006 and 2007 resonated throughout the country, inciting strikes at factories throughout Egypt. In 2008, as the demands of workers shifted from the immediate economic conditions of workers to include broader political concerns, protestors in Mahalla were met with the repressive apparatus of the Mubarak regime. Arrests and beatings were doled out by Central Security forces from April 3-8 in response to a strike planned for April 6th, but never happened.

The failed April 6th Strike inspired cyber activists and members of other opposition parties to politicize the issues raised by workers, no longer was this purely a labor movement, it had become a social movement. Laborer’s won victories in 2009 when the state-run Egyptian Trade Union Federation authorized a strike for the first time in decades and recognized the formation of Egypt’s first trade union. The authoritarian regime had effectively invited the proceeding wave of strikes and movements that followed, culminating in the removal of President Mubarak in 2011. The Muslim Brotherhood emerged as the victors of the Egyptian Revolution, winning a majority of seats in parliamentary elections and the presidency, held by Mohammed Morsi. Due to historical and ideological differences, this ostracized the labor movement from the democratization process and the construction of new institutions in government to advocate for workers’ rights. Morsi’s labor policies as president attacked labor, who responded in turn with protests. Unable to consolidate authority, Morsi was chased from office by the SCAF led by Abdul Fatah al-Sisi concluding the attempted democratic transition period.

To be clear, the chronological frame of this transition begins with the installation of Ahmad Nazif and the “government of businessmen” in 2004, and closes with the coup d’état launched against Mohammed Morsi June 3rd, 2013. However, the motivations of laborers originate earlier than the transitional frame provided. Therefore, the case study of Egypt will begin by contextualizing the labor movement in history to determine the cause of the crisis of the authoritarian regime. Then, the labor movement and transition will be charted according to O’Donnell, Schmitter, and Whitehead’s phases of transitions to democracy. The Egyptian transition will then be analyzed according to Valenzuela’s four sources of variation in order to determine labor’s role in the transition. Criticisms of the observed theories will then be presented, including what Egypt might add to the discussion of labor and democratization. Finally, personal conclusions regarding research will be offered.

**The Legacy of Stability**

The history of modern Egypt begins with Gamal Abdel Nasser and Arab Nationalism. In 1952 Nasser and the Free Officers, a covert group within the military, led a coup against the British backed monarchy of King Farouk. In 1956 Nasser assumed the presidency. Nasser sought to end Egypt’s dependence on foreign countries, and he did so through a commitment to industrial development and social welfare. Nasser’s power was built on stability through coalition building, nationalizing the economy and repressing the opposition. In 1957 Nasser established the Egyptian Trade Union Federation, a state-run labor relations institution that enabled Nasser to offer worker representation, and silence voices of dissent.[[19]](#footnote-19) In 1960 Misr Helwan Spinning and Weaving Company became the first nationalized industry[[20]](#footnote-20) in Egypt. Nasser’s progressive reforms such as rent controls, land redistribution, labor regulations, subsidies and education and job guarantees “created a degree of social mobility and helped to contain the potential for social antagonism.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Those who did oppose Nasser’s policies; the Muslim Brotherhood, Islamists, and communists, among others, were “brutally repressed”[[22]](#footnote-22) The regime of Nasser has been labeled as “nationalitarian” described as “a system that defied neat labels, like capitalism and socialism, and where the state acted as the representative of all “popular forces” and independence was a central objective.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Despite his undemocratic tendencies, Nasser was worshipped by many in his time, in Egypt and throughout the Arab world. When he died in 1970 his funeral procession through Cairo was attended by five million people. The success of Nasser’s Arab Nationalism did not last long after his death. When Anwar Sadat succeeded Nasser, he was faced with a balance of payments crisis and military defeat in the October War.

Anwar Sadat changed the course of Egypt’s trajectory. Launching the “intifah” program Sadat opened the doors to the neoliberal reform proposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the US government. Egypt and the other Arab countries adopting neoliberal reform were recognized as success stories by the IMF despite growing inequalities between crony capitalists and a majority of the population. The adoption of the proposed cuts to subsidies for basic consumer goods was met with widespread riots January 18-19, 1977, the so-called “Bread Riots”. The subsidies were reinstated, growing immensely over the next thirty years to pacify popular forces, especially public-sector employees, who were uneasy with the increasingly unequal society.[[24]](#footnote-24) Gradually, cuts were applied, but subsidies for food and fuel remained central elements of the program.[[25]](#footnote-25)

In the 1990’s the ETUF accepted of the Economic Restructuring and Stabilization Package with the IMF requiring Egypt to sell off its public enterprises. Egypt’s energy policy then became a process of “funneling dirt-cheap oil to well-connected oligopolists”[[26]](#footnote-26) who had entrenched themselves in Egypt’s energy-intensive industries, such as cement, steel, fertilizers and aluminum. For many years Egypt could afford these subsidies. But as oil production diminished and domestic oil consumption increased, Egypt could no longer export fuel. Culminating in 2005, when the Egyptian General Petroleum Company (EGPC), a government body created to monitor public industry, began to operate at a loss and 2007, when the US Energy Information Administration reported had Egypt had become a net importer of oil.

For years Hosni Mubarak, who assumed Egypt’s presidency after the assassination of Anwar Sadat in 1981, employed a strategy of “the carrot and the stick” to execute his neoliberal agenda.[[27]](#footnote-27) Institutions like the EGPC played the role of the carrot, granting small concessions and support to the poor; just enough to earn a degree of loyalty, but hardly enough to improve conditions. The state security apparatus portrayed the stick, ready to step in when small concessions were not enough to quell mobilization. Another instrument of the regime was ETUF, which had remained in place to subdue mobilization and give the illusion of worker’ representation.

Thus sets the stage for the emergence of labor mobilization. The critical trends to observe are the state’s tactics for ensuring stability, and the advancing neoliberal agenda. In the cases of Mubarak and Nasser, the regime applied intense pressure on opposition through the state security apparatus, while also employing corporatist strategies to quell labor mobilization. However, Nasser was able to achieve a more stable rule with a nationalized economy under his control, and especially because of his capacity to provide Egypt’s poor through social programs. Due to Mubarak’s neoliberal policies, his ability to affect the economy was weaker, despite some remaining nationalized industries. Ballooning inequalities highlighted the failures of his policies, and disenfranchised Egypt’s working poor. As a result, Mubarak resorted to the carrot and the stick, subsidies and security, to maintain stability. Compounding the economic problems, by the mid-2000’s, Egypt’s net energy production was in the red, forcing Mubarak to exchange loans from international financial institutions (IFI’s) to finance oil subsidies. Clearly, Nasser’s claim as spokesman of “the people” was more secure. His ability to ensure social welfare and willingness to incorporate segments of society as well as deliver on their demands earned him a place in the consciousness of Arabs and Egyptians for decades to come. However, Mubarak too was able stabilize Egypt and maintain his position in it for decades. Explanation for the emergence of oppositional mobilization is therefore required.

**Inciting the Desperate**

Discontent had been brewing among Egypt’s labor force since the presidency of Gamal Nasser, though would not fully be expressed until the mid-2000’s after Ahmed Nazif was installed as Prime Minister in 2004. In 1991 ETUF leaders accepted the IMF and World Bank’s ERSAP package, a plan that would directly harm the workers the ETUF claims to protect. This act undermined the legitimacy of the institution as a representative for workers’ rights. In response, beginning around 1998, workers began challenging the authoritarian regime as strikes gradually increased from year to year. In 2004, the ETUF’s lack of credibility would again be exposed by expressing no objection to the installation of Prime Minister Nazif and the “government of businessmen” an administration chosen to execute the neoliberal policies propsed in ERSAP and sell off the public sector. The impact of this decision is best revealed in the number of collective actions that occurred in Egypt. As previously stated mobilization had been steadily growing since 1998. From 1988 to 1993 the average collective actions per year was 27. From 1998 to 2003, the average was 118 per year. In 2004 alone there were 265 collective actions[[28]](#footnote-28). Beinin observes that this was more than double the average from 1998-2003, with 70 percent occurring after Nazif assumed office in July. Beinin also notes that the spike in collective action took a more militant character, with strikes instead of sit-ins. This phase is also characterized by longer strikes, sometimes lasting months. At this stage, strikes had mainly occurred in the public sector, which was being sold off as per ERSAP. Central to the movement was the textile industry, which exercised its might in 2006.

The strikes orchestrated at Ghazl al-Mahalla in 2006 and 2007 initiated a wave of strikes across Egypt and significantly contributed to the cultivation of the labor movement, and therefore can be identified as the beginning of civil society’s “resurrection”. While it is true that a growing number of collective workers’ actions had occurred since 1998, this may be understood simply as a reaction to the negative effects of neoliberal policy on the economy and the liquidation or sale of public industries. The reasons for the strike in 2006 were twofold; the absence of promised benefits and fraudulent elections for trade union leadership. On March 3rd Ahmad Nazif promised workers a bonus of two months base pay at the end of the year. In November State Security Officials denied 12,000 candidates from entering their names for nomination for union office. Unsurprisingly, in December, workers received paychecks without their promised bonus applied. Initiating the strike, thousands of women left their posts before moving through the factory town to gather the male workers, who then joined the strike. Given the size and prominence of Ghazl al Mahalla in Egypt’s economy, state representatives were forced to act quickly and decisively with the elected strike committee comprised of candidates who had been prevented from running for office. After four days of protest, workers were promised 45 days of bonus pay and conditional bonuses based on company profits. The deal was “a serious political defeat and a loss of legitimacy for the ETUF and the regime.”[[29]](#footnote-29) The events that followed the 2006 strike illustrate just how big of a blow the regime was dealt.

The labor movement that had begun in 2004 underwent rapid and drastic changes in 2007. In March, 13,000 Ghazl al-Mahalla workers petitioned the General Union of Textile Workers, who had been elected in the overwhelmingly fraudulent elections of 2006, a demand which was rejected by the ETUF. Strikes sprung up in textile mills throughout Egypt having witnessed the potential results their collective actions could bring. In April workers were prevented from travelling to Cairo. In September, when Ghazl al-Mahalla management failed to deliver on the deal that was struck following the 2006 strike, struck again, this time framing their protest as a political struggle.[[30]](#footnote-30) However, the movement in 2007 was not limited to textile workers alone, it had grown, encompassing “virtually every industrial sector”.[[31]](#footnote-31) The biggest victory of 2007 was won, not by textile workers, but government employees for the Real Estate Tax Authorities (RETA). Several times RETA workers mobilized, striking, and refusing to accept tax payments in order to achieve wage parity with their equivalents in the Ministry of Finance. After a ten day protest outside the Ministry of Finance in December RETA workers won a 325 percent wage increase. What is to be gleaned from these developments is the emerging political nature of the demands and methods of labor. Previous demands had been concerning wages or working conditions, things specific to a particular sub-group of the labor movement. But petitions for a representative union, the perceived national implications for labor activism in Ghazl al-Mahalla, and the highly visible display of protest from RETA workers indicate a changing dynamic. The authoritarian regime that had once faced an isolated and particular labor movement now encountered one with substantive political demands, and would require different tactics to combat.

On March 8th, 2008 at a celebration for International Women’s’ Day male and female labor leaders gathered to plan a national strike for April 6th. The strike never managed enough momentum to be undertaken. Nevertheless, security forces assembled at the Ghazl al-Mahalla factory in preparation of a strike. At the same time, state representatives negotiated with the strike committee granting their demands, leading the committee to call off the strike. The “carrot and stick” had apparently worked. However violence soon broke out as a group of women assembled in the main square in protest were met by hired thugs and Central Security Forces. The crowd continued to grow, burning banners of candidates. Protestors were beaten with batons and bombarded by rocks and tear gas. The violence continued on April 7th, when a poster of Mubarak was destroyed by protestors. On April 8th Prime Minister Nazif and a delegation of high officials arrived to negotiate. Bonuses, bakeries, transportation facilities, and new medical facilities were all promised, but not one political demand was granted. In the end, 332 people were arrested, hundreds beaten, 9 were critically wounded, and one boy was shot dead[[32]](#footnote-32).

April 6th is significant in three regards; the first, which will be expanded upon later, is the effect of the crackdown on the movement’s organization. Second is the response of the Mubarak regime and lastly, the national attention it received. Previous responses to mobilized labor from the Mubarak regime have been described as “a mixture of indifference, toleration, and concessions.”[[33]](#footnote-33) Clearly the reaction to a labor movement was different that had come before, displaying how the Mubarak regime would deal with the politicization of labor issues. Part of the reason for the harsh crackdown may be how high-profile the strike had become. Some cyber activists had spread word of the strike, calling for a national strike in solidarity with the workers at Ghazl al-Mahalla[[34]](#footnote-34). Others like Esraa Abdel Fattah warned Egyptians to stay home as a form of civil disobedience on April 6th via Facebook, unwittingly creating the now famous April 6th Youth Movement. The workers’ struggle was now a prominent national issue, and had motivated popular support for the movement that extended beyond workers, and into society. However, while April 6th may have introduced workers’ struggles to the national stage, the repression exerted by Mubarak has been hard to overcome. The repression clearly came as a result of the political coordination that was attempting to organize and the political nature of the demands of workers. After April 6th it was clear that while protests for particular, local interests would be tolerated, politicization of labor would not.

**If You Give a Mouse Some Liberty…**

Despite the failure of the April 6th strike, protest continued across Egypt with victories still to be had in 2009. In late May, the ETUF authorized a five-day strike at Tanta Flax and Oil Company, only the second strike to be authorized in the institution’s history. The strike extended well past the five day deadline, reaching almost five months in length. Also in 2009, the long battle between the RETA workers who had struck for wage parity and the Mubarak regime culminated with the recognition of Egypt’s first independent trade union. Following the successful strike that had won them a 325 percent wage increase, members of the committee leading the strike decided to remain and build on their success, organizing 30,000 members to endorse the formation of the Independent General Union of Real Estate Tax Authority Workers (IGURETA). On April 21, with the support of 300 union members the Constituent Assembly of INGURETA negotiated with the Minister of Manpower and Migration (MoMM) to recognize the union. Reports say that it was due to a personal feud between the ETUF president Hussein Megawer and MoMM Aisha Abd al-Hadi, who had been allegedly been embarrassed at the 2008 International Labor Organization conference.[[35]](#footnote-35) Whatever the reason for the decision, workers responded with 700 protests in 2009, the highest amount yet[[36]](#footnote-36).

The reason for the ramped mobilization is due to the liberalization of the regime. Having indicated that independent trade unionism was possible, the regime lowered the cost for collective action by raising the gains. If the repression of the April 6th strike was to deter mobilization, the liberalization in 2009 invited it. By 2010 the legitimacy of the Mubarak regime was under question. In May hundreds of workers assembled outside parliament to protest the government’s failure to respect a court order for raising the minimum wage. Protestors chanted for the resignation of PM Nazif and his government, and removal of Hosni Mubarak. This was one of the first times a highly visible demonstration would link their economic woes with demands for regime change in Cairo.[[37]](#footnote-37) Street clashes between locals and police had become common in 2010, with all of Egyptian society roused in anger. As labor had done in 2008, “two signal events embedded these local patterns of friction into a national framework”[[38]](#footnote-38) the killing of Khalid Sa’id by plainclothes police officers in June and the fraudulent elections in November-December which returned 97 percent of seats to Mubarak’s party the National Democratic Party (NDP). The outrage of Egyptians would be expressed with Egypt’s “day of rage” on January 25th.

**Civil Society Resurrected**

The January 25 uprising and subsequent resignation of Hosni Mubarak could only have been orchestrated with the broad support of Egyptians from all sectors of society. With that said, the fingerprints of the labor movement that had rallied for bread and back pay in 2004 littered the 2011 Egyptian revolution. Protesters marching towards Tahrir Square had been organized by the April 6th Youth Movement. Industrial towns like Tanta and Kafr al-Dawwar blockaded highways and assembled outside government buildings. Mahalla, drawing significant attention from security forces, saw its two demonstrations put down violently with 11 arrests.[[39]](#footnote-39) Union activists from across Egypt gathered in Tahrir, announced the formation of the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU). The unions that had been organizing since 2008; RETA workers, medical technicians, teachers, and retirees, consisted the core members as some ETUF-affiliated unions soon joined. On February 8th the newly-minted EFITU called for a national strike, tens of thousands from roughly 60 districts answered the call. Beinin claims that the protests were “very likely a factor in the decision of the SCAF to push Mubarak aside”.[[40]](#footnote-40) In March the EFITU reconvened and demanded that the SCAF replace the ETUF treasurer with Ahmad Hassan al-Bura’i. Al-Bura’I was appointed and began drafting a new trade union law that would recognize the EFITU. In August, the fraudulent 2006 ETUF elections were nullified, dissolving twelve of the twenty-three constituent unions, a decision that “cleared away a large space for independent trade unions to operate and gain strength.”[[41]](#footnote-41) However, with the Mubarak ouster, the labor movement would encounter new problems as the process changed from the destruction of the old regime into the creation of new one.

**Democratization and Consolidation**

Democratization presented challenges to the labor movement, both external and internal. At the end of 2011 trade unionists split between the EFITU and the Center for Trade Unionists and Workers Services (CTUWS), an NGO that has existed in Egypt for decades. This split comes as a result of both the personal tension of the leaders of the federations (Kamal Abbas of the CTUWS and Kamal Abu Eita of the EFITU) as well as their strategies to obtain independent trade unionism in Egypt. This split has undermined the labor movement’s capacity to organize under one coherent strategy, or present one agenda. Workers came face to face with this problem in the 2011-2012 parliamentary elections with labor failing to make many gains and the pro-business Muslim Brotherhood emerging as the ascendant group leading the democratization process. However, this defeat is not due to a lack of drive, as mobilization skyrocketed after the revolution and continued with the election of Mohammed Morsi[[42]](#footnote-42) in 2012.

Under Morsi, labor was again under fire. The trade union law crafted by al-Bura’i was never authorized by SCAF. Reports of physical and legal attacks againsts laborers increased since Morsi’s election. Workers strikes or sit-ins have been labeled as “fi’awi” essentially “special interest” and denotes that workers are seeking to exploit a time of weakness for personal gain, and as a result challenge Egypt’s economic growth. Also, the ETUF remained as an administrative arm of the government and pursued policies that would deter current members from leaving the organization. Even worse for workers, Morsi’s November decrees granting himself “virtually dictatorial powers” allowed him to punish workers for participating or inciting a strike, and by removing all members of the ETUF board over 60, install as many as 150 Muslim Brotherhood appointees through the MoMM[[43]](#footnote-43). The constitution that was put into effect on December 26th 2012 includes clauses that further infringe on workers’ rights. These decisions by Morsi and the elected leadership incited workers once again, resulting in 1,961 strikes in 2012.[[44]](#footnote-44) In June 2013, millions of Egyptians once again took to the streets to overthrow a ruler. The protests were supported by both the EFITU and the Egyptian Democratic Labor Congress (EDLC, formed as a result of the 2011 EFITU/CTUWS split), and the CTUWS. Though joined alongside many others, labor had once again flexed its muscles in its capacity to undermine a regime. It is uncertain what role labor will have in securing independent trade union representation and liberty for Egyptians going forward.

**Diagnosing Labor’s Role in Egypt’s Transition**

In adherence to Valenzuela’s rule, mobilization should increase at critical moments of the breakdown of the authoritarian regime, when democratization is possible, but not yet adopted by elites. At which point, labor leaders and rank-and-file workers should exercise restraint in favor of democratization to ensure a stable democratic transition. When applied to Egypt, this ought to have occurred following the resignation of Hosni Mubarak on February 18th, 2011. As has been shown, in the aftermath of Tahrir Square labor (and social) mobilization increased, rather than decreased as the democratization process began. However, labor is neither the lone culprit for the toppling of Egypt’s first democratically elected president, nor principally responsible for its own role in the transition. As will be shown, understanding a labor movement within the process of democratization is a matter of circumstance; labor movements are shaped by a political environment as much as they shape one. Analysis of the sources of variation in the relationship of labor movements and the process of democratization is therefore required to diagnose the role of labor in Egypt’s transition.

**Strength of Egypt’s Labor: No Brains, Just Brawn**

Few would consider the labor movement that began in Egypt around 1998 and continues to this day weak. In fact, the movement has been called “the largest and most sustained Arab civil social movement in over half a century”[[45]](#footnote-45) by scholar Joel Beinin. Nonetheless, examining the nature of labor’s strength is essential to understanding its role in the transition. The factors determining labor movement strength are again: density of union affiliation in the total labor force, the density of union affiliation in key areas of the economy, the industrial relations system, historical characteristics of union organizations, and the link between unions and one or more political parties. However, due to the ETUF’s monopoly on trade unionism in the Mubarak era, we must adjust these determinants. To accommodate for workers who may have engaged in collective action but were alienated from ETUF membership, determining the closest approximate will require a more qualitative approach.

The two factors contributing the strength of Egypt’s labor movement are the scope of the movement and the relative weakness of employers. In the decade preceding the ouster of Hosni Mubarak’s ouster Egypt witnessed 3,400 collective actions involving well over 2 million Egyptian workers[[46]](#footnote-46). The epicenter of Egypt’s labor movement, Ghazl al Mahalla is the largest factory in Egypt’s largest industry, textiles. Certainly this strategic location increases the labor movement’s significance. Nevertheless, by 2007 the movement had extended into almost every one of Egypt’s industries. These facts justify Beinin’s statement on the importance of labor and illustrate the massive scope of the movement. Contributing to the labor movement’s strength is the relative weakness of employers. As has been stated, by 2004 Egypt’s economy was struggling to balance its budget and extend subsidies for food and fuel. Misr Helwan Spinning and Weaving is just one of several textile companies owned by the state, and being connected to an authoritarian regime that was breaking down enhances labor’s strength by proxy. Despite these measures of strength there are criticisms that may be leveled at the labor movement that contribute to the case that Egypt’s labor movement is weak.

The three factors weakening Egypt’s labor movement are the lack of a link to political parties, the industrial relations system and the historical characteristics of union organizations, with the latter going hand in hand. Since its establishment in 1956 until the revolution of 2011 the ETUF, Egypt’s industrial relations system, has had a near monopoly on labor representation. Throughout its history, the ETUF had been utilized to restrain worker representation and limit workers’ capacity to organize and collectively bargain, significantly weakening the movement as a whole. It should come of no surprise then to learn that political parties linked to labor were likewise prohibited. In the 2000’s only two organizations worked on workers’ rights, and these organizations employed half a dozen people with “several”[[47]](#footnote-47) volunteers. Clearly in certain regards Egypt’s labor movement was weak.

Considering the two cases for the strength and weakness of Egypt’s labor movement produces a dilemma. While Venezuela rules that “given one or more of the above mentioned attributes [labor movements] are likely to occupy a significant place beyond the effects of this mobilization in the politics of the transition”[[48]](#footnote-48) he offers little insight on how the nature of labors strength affects transitions. Given the large number of labor activists and collective actions, as well as the relative weakness of employers, labor possess strength in terms of its capacity to mobilize and confront either employers or the state. Conversely, labor is weak in its political power, with no legitimate labor-affiliated political parties and an industrial relations system designed to constrain labor representation as it has since its inception. Therefore, labor was very likely to secure an important role leading up to the dissolution of the Mubarak regime, but it is no surprise that it had struggled to establish an effective political voice in the democratization process. Another factor that may explain labor’s struggles to develop a coherent political agenda is the decentralized nature of labor movements.

**Centralization of Egyptian Labor: Islands in the Desert**

Centralization of a labor movement is critical to the inclusion of labor in the political process. Unfortunately, Egypt’s labor movement is unquestionably decentralized. The two biggest hurdles for a decentralized labor movement are the development of coherent, national agenda and coordination and cooperation among labor organizations. Egypt struggles with both. While it is true that later in the transition workers began to formulate their demands as part of a greater national political process, this was only in exceptional cases. Too often, demands were expressed as immediate economic issues such as bonuses, improved working conditions or wage increases. A result of decentralization is that when the authoritarian regime liberalizes or falls, there is likely to be a scramble between groups over rank and file support. This competition then provides two strategies for labor leaders; stimulate worker mobilization to rally support and extend control over the movement, or advocate restraint for acceptance into transition coalition and to ensure the success of the transition. These two strategies are evident in the two main labor organizations in Egypt, the EDLC and the EFITU. The EDLC promotes a bottom-up grassroots approach, training workers in the practices of democratic trade unionism and believing that only through a long-term integration process can labor guarantee its efficiency. The EFITU on the other hand practices a top-down approach, seeking integration into the political arena as a way of securing workers’ rights. What is frustrating is that while the particular strategies of the organizations differ, they are not mutually exclusive. Additionally, both organizations advocate essentially the same things; fair wages and independent trade union representation. However, as a result of the split, the organizations are both underfinanced and underrepresented, yet still they compete amongst each other for popular support. While labor was able to overcome decentralization with a large capacity for mobilization and organization through social media, the democratization process remains an insurmountable challenge for a movement without a clear method or agenda. As has been alluded to earlier, both the strength and centralization of a labor movement is in large part out of the hands of labor leaders. The authoritarian regime’s treatment of a labor movement molds the type of organizations that will be in place given the possibility of a democratic transition.

**The Authoritarian Regime’s Treatment of Egyptian Labor: The Carrot and the Stick**

The authoritarian regime’s treatment of labor is perhaps the single most important factor influencing democratic transitions. The authoritarian regime affects the strength of the labor movement through the historical treatment of labor, the political party links that are allowed to be made, and the labor relations system available for the labor movement. It similarly affects the centralization of the labor movement by influencing the degree of organization that will be required as a result of targeted repression. Authoritarian regimes are classified according to two determinants; the harshness or mildness of the regime and the political “space” provided. Mubarak’s regime may be classified as a mild-closed regime. As has been stated many times before, Mubarak’s regime has been described as the carrot and the stick. For that reason, the authoritarian regime is identified as mild. Because while the threat of repression in the form of security, police and military forces was always looming (the stick), in the 2000’s Mubarak rarely resorted to violent tactics to suppress labor uprisings. Instead, the regime would dangle the potential of bonuses, wage increases and other prizes (the carrot) in return for collective actions. While repression in Egypt in the 2000 may have been relatively mild, political “space” was certainly closed. Highly fraudulent elections (culminating with the 2010 national legislative elections which returned 97 percent of seats to Hosni Mubarak’s National Democratic Party amid widespread protest of the Mubarak regime), an industrial relations system dominated by the regime, and power concentrated in the head of state did not give opposition many opportunities to have their voices heard. The movement’s reliance on protest techniques outside legal bounds such as, strikes, boycotts, street demonstrations and public protests also indicate a closed political environment. As a result of the authoritarian regime’s treatment it is predictable that a labor movement developed with poor democratic acumen and little organization. But before the assumption is made that the fate of the labor movement was sealed before the revolution had even begun, analysis of the modalities of the revolution is required.

**Modalities of the Revolution: Brotherhood of Rivals**

The final factor determining labor movement’s effect on the democratic transition are the modalities of the revolution, or how the revolution unfolds. Unfortunately the development of the revolution did not progress favorably for the labor movement. While perceived as a more secure transition at the time, the abrupt, explosive nature of the revolution or ruptura was difficult to overcome. With the fall of the Mubarak regime, labor leaders were tasked with resolving the pent-up demands of workers, creating union organizations, establishing links with political parties and revamping the labor relations system at the same time that new democratic institutions were being built. Meanwhile the Muslim Brotherhood was emerging as the political group leading the democratization process. The Muslim Brothers are a pro-business organization that was looking to continue the neoliberal policies and privatization of state industries that had incited labor in the first place. Mobilization reached its highest point at least partially in response to the advancing neoliberal agenda of the Muslim Brothers. Several decisions made by the Muslim Brotherhood certainly compound problems, such as the rejection of new trade union laws and the decrees in that came in late November 2012. Worth noting again the CTUWS, EDLC, and even the politically oriented EFITU supported the coup that removed Morsi in 2013. An unfortunate result for such a promising revolution.

Through analysis of these sources of variation it is evident that the labor movement emerging from the Mubarak regime contributed to the failure of the democratization, though the blame can be shared with many. While possessing a great mobilized force, it was less strong in qualities that would have assured it a place in the transition coalition. Rather, the movement lacked political strength and a clear, coherent agenda which contributed to the struggles labor encountered when it came time to construct new institutions as part of the democratization process. However the roots of the disorganization and political weakness can be attributed to labor’s treatment by the state. The state was neither harsh enough to deter workers uniting at the plant level, nor open enough to have their concerns effectively addressed. With the rupture of the authoritarian regime, newly liberalized workers expressed their demands in force, reaching the highest mobilization levels seen yet. Even worse, the leaders of the new government were of a group whom labor distrusted, ostracizing workers from the democratization process, and contributing to the levels of discontent that ultimately overthrew the new government.

**Conclusion**

After fermenting under an authoritarian rule a labor movement was able to form. The regime permitted a degree of unruliness, however workers still could not adequately express their needs and have them responded to by the state. Instead the state actively sought to silence their voices, hoping that with the promise of a pay raise and the threat of physical oppression would be enough to keep labor quiet. The increasingly incensed and desperate workers could only react, in a plea for the bare minimum; food, decent pay, a life free from poverty. As a result, no group could successfully channel the frustrations of laborers which piled up by the day. When leaders promised democracy would bring an end to their suffering, it failed them, delivering another autocrat looking to continue the policies responsible for their condition. Wallowing in discontent and fearing their moment had passed, workers again took to the streets with the same passion as they had in 2011. Unfortunately, the prospects for this revolution are not so bright, as it remains to be seen whether Egyptians will receive the rights they have fought so hard for.

However, the lessons to be learned from Egypt need not be so bleak, for they prove the civil society can in fact be reawakened. Imagine society is soil. Though dormant in the winter of authoritarianism, the seeds of citizenship grow with the change of global seasons. Only by basking in the warm glow of liberty will the seeds begin to germinate. In the case of Egypt, cotton seems the most appropriate result. Like cotton, citizenship must be cultivated before it can be plucked into activism. As the workers of Ghazl al Mahalla must know too well, cotton from the plant is raw, and must first be processed through the clumsy machine of government before it can be woven with all the separate threads of civil society into the fabric of democracy, Egyptian cotton.

**Reflections**

As I’m sure is a common feeling among political science students, when approaching my Senior Inquiry project, I expected a lot of answers, and instead left with more questions. While I can say without doubt that the efforts of Egyptian workers did affect Egypt’s transition there are so many unaccounted variables at play to ever say definitively what killed January 25th. Beyond the obvious question of “What happens next?” I wonder what effect social media and internet will have on transitions in the future, particularly the nature of how networks are formed. Will social media prove a valuable tool with its ability to connect people from anywhere in the world, or does a dose of isolation and ignorance do well in situations where people are so informed of every development, and so enraged by any transgression?

Another question I formed was the validity of neoliberal policies. Certainly Egypt lends to the argument that they often make things worse for countries, but is this due to the policies themselves, or the dogmatic application of policies demanded by the IMF and World Bank that keeps countries from responding to crises? Another question to be leveled at the IMF and World Bank is what are the ethical consequences of the dynamic between the IMF, World Bank and the UN. Specifically, where the IMF and World Bank supply funds to autocrats who can sustain and extend their rule, using funds to repress their people, while hiding behind the dogma of state sovereignty preached by the UN. Certainly there is a better way of doing things that ensure the observance of human rights and a state’s right to govern itself.

My final question applies to Egypt, and I suppose all of history. While I spent my entire paper investigating “Under what conditions does labor impact democracy?” so much of the Egyptian revolution seems like it was determined by coincidence. What if Esraa Abdel Fattah doesn’t tell Egyptians to stay home April 6th and incidentally create one of the most important organizations for the execution of January 25th? What if a personal disagreement doesn’t split the CTUWS and EFITU and labor is more successful organizing? What if Morsi isn’t elected president of Egypt? When the course of history changes by the day how can we predict the future, and is it worth trying?

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