

## Civil Society and Democratic Transformation in Contemporary Egypt: Premise and Promises

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### Abstract

*This paper offers specific insights into certain types of civil society organizations and their role in the democratization process seen as an open-ended continuum in contemporary Egypt. Loosely structured civic movements were particularly effective in building social capital and transforming it into political mobilization while NGOs' role was limited to exposing human rights violations. Professional associations transformed public protests from spontaneity into organized political actions. While the Federation of Egyptian Workers, an umbrella of all trade unions in Egypt, was presumed paralyzed as a result of cooptation, the individual trade unions played significant roles in political mobilization and dissent. Freedom of association even in controlled environment as in Mubarak's Egypt can be a seed for unforeseen social upheavals. Broadly, this paper argues that social networks, as tools, are broadening the meaning of social capital and suggests that certain types of civil society organizations can be a true democratizing element in society.*

**Key Words:** Democratization, Social Capital, NGOs, Civic Movements<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Background and Context

For more than 50 years people in Egypt have been ruled by emergency law, whether enforced or as part of the nature of the political system by design. Since the free officers took over power in 1952, basic civil liberties were confiscated (Langohr, 2004; Kassem 2004). Freedom of association has been limited to the ruling party. Economically, Egypt entered the new millennium during a serious financial and economic crisis (Mitchell, 2002). A sociopolitical and socioeconomic state of underdevelopment prevails in Egypt. According to the latest Human Development Index (HDI), Egypt ranked 113 out of the 187 countries included in the report (Human Development Report 2011). The HDI looks beyond GDP to ascertain a broader definition of well-being, offering a composite measure of three dimensions of human development: life expectancy, adult literacy (measured by adult gross enrollment in education), and standard of living (measured by purchase power parity, or PPP income).

Since January of 2011, Egypt has been experiencing tumultuous political events that led to the collapse of Mubarak's regime and the beginning of a democratic transition that has been witnessing multiple of twists and turns. During Mubarak's reign, most citizens avoided interacting with the police for even the most routine of matters even though dealing with law enforcement agencies is unavoidable in a modern society. But in Mubarak's Egypt, the police force has become a source of everyday brutality. Here, the discussion is not about basic human rights such as freedom of expression, conscience or association, but another basic right, safety in public spaces. As a result some questions became relevant more than ever, these include: what it means to be a citizen of a state and what rights should be accorded to them; what institutions need to be in place to protect those rights; and what procedures need to be followed in order to ensure that these institutions function properly. This paper attempts to shed light on those questions by employing democratization as medium for negotiating a new social contract in Egypt. The reason for using democratization to approach these issues lies in accountability of public institutions, for only through democratization of public decision-making can citizens hold their public institutions accountable. In a nondemocratic state, it is not likely for citizens to know what goes on behind the scene in their public institutions nor will they have the tools to hold these institutions accountable or bring them to justice when they act inhumanely as always the case in absence of basic freedoms. In studying the state in the Middle East context, there have been two major schools of thought: Social Constructivism and Orientalism.

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<sup>1</sup> The author elected to use the term civic movement to capture the essence of emerging advocacy groups that operate outside the legal framework imposed by the state. They differ from social movements by having loose organizational structure and collective leadership.

While Social Constructivists employ multiple approaches to study the region, Orientalists focus on cultural specificity and historical differences as they look at how states form (Abdelrahman, 2004). Using the cultural specificity model, some Orientalists contend that the region cannot embrace democratic values. The common generalization perpetuated by scholars from both schools about the Middle East is that democratization is unlikely to occur without pressure from the West, particularly the United States. Consequently, to analyze the political behavior of Mubarak's regime, scholars tend to look to Washington in explaining political developments in Mubarak's Egypt. The major shortcoming of such analysis is that it pays little attention to the Egyptian people's agency. Agency here refers to the desire and ability to change one's social reality against many odds, such as oppression and marginalization. As result, researchers and social commentators appeared to be baffled by seeing millions of people in Tahrir Square in 2011 during what came to be termed as the Egyptian Revolution. Consequently, in analyzing people's agency, this research paper examines the contributions of three types of civil society organizations in preparing the ground for the events that came to be known as the January 25<sup>th</sup> Revolution.

There is no doubt that during Mubarak's rule, dysfunctional governance and institutionalized political corruption hampered economic development (Freille, 2007). Most of these issues, especially poverty, institutional inertia and overpopulation, have been framed as aspects of socioeconomic underdevelopment and Third World backwardness; few efforts have been initiated to conceptualize these problems in a broader framework to account for the role of systematic failure of governing institutions, usually referred to as a *failed state*, which brings us to the concept of good governance

### ***1.1. Is Democratization a Recipe For Good Governance?***

In the 1960s and 1970s, apologetic social theorists justified the existence of a developmental authoritarian model of governance by claiming that an authoritarian developmental state can lead to better economic development than nascent democracies (Robinson and White, 1998). It was argued that developmental authoritarian regimes are better equipped to build the economy and prepare society for democracy. This is no longer considered viable as many nations have tried that model and failed as Larry Diamond (1992: p. 453) asserts "As expected the mean development level increases substantially each step toward stable democracy" in his critique of Lipset's (1959) controversial essay "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy". Under authoritarian developmental state praised in the 1960s many nations have seen little light of modernity while continuing to pay the price of enduring authoritarianism and its irrationalities. In the case of Egypt, the peaceful popular protests watched by millions of viewers worldwide speak to the point.

In the discourse on contemporary governance, government is just one actor in society- and not necessarily the most important one (Sullivan, 2001). In this sense, government, civil society and the private sector are expected to partner with one another to address the wellbeing of the society. Good governance has been given some weight in understanding the scale of the problems in developing countries and in generating lasting, sound solutions. As Nanda (2008) puts it

The term "good governance" is unsettled in its meaning. Through the 1980s and 1990s, donor countries and institutions trended to make aid conditional upon reforms in the recipient country, which was found largely ineffective in encouraging real policy changes. More recently, donors (...) are increasingly insisting upon performance and good governance as a prerequisite for aid, a practice called "selectivity." This is a means of requiring a recipient state to demonstrate the seriousness of its commitment to economic and social reforms. (...). High levels of poverty and weak governance are linked, making selectivity difficult to implement. For reforms to succeed, domestic support, ownership, and commitment are crucial, as are the recipient's cultural context and history (p. 317).

The change in this thinking has managed to situate problems of underdevelopment, traditionally conceptualized as third-world backwardness, in larger context that take into account issues such as resources management and mobilization, public participation, policy formulation, representation and political leadership. All of these issues are closely tied to the concept of democratization. Amrtya Sen's work, the renowned Nobel-laureate, has contributed a great deal to this new approach. In his widely celebrated book, *Development as Freedom*, Amartya Sen (1999) challenges the dogma of international economics theory of the last quarter of the 20th century.

He contends that the conventional wisdom of development theory translated into economic policies, focusing entirely on economic growth, which served as a vehicle of freedom for a minority of the population while ignoring the sufferings of the majority. According to Sen, human wellbeing should be placed at the center of development efforts. In this sense, wellbeing is seen as the goal of and means for development, not simply a byproduct.

Moreover, Sen (1999) notes that freedoms are not only the primary ends of development, they are also among its principal means. Development should be seen as a process of expanding freedoms because “If freedom is what development advances, then there is a major argument for concentrating on that overarching objective, rather than on some particular means, or some chosen list of instruments” (Sen, 1999: p. 25). Achieving development, he maintains, requires the removal of poverty, tyranny, lack of economic opportunities, social deprivation, neglect of public services and the machinery of repression. Hence, public participation in the policymaking process should no longer be regarded as a managerial decision that leads to effective policies, but rather a mark of freedom and as a priority of development. Of course, people cannot have much say in the policymaking processes if they lack the very right to choose their system of governance.

## ***2. Democratization: A Concept and an Analytical Tool***

The concept of democratization is used by many scholars to refer to the process of transformation from authoritarianism to democratic governance. Since transitions are slow and gradual, scholars tend to use the term differently in order to refer to any of the stages along the continuum. Transitions, according to O’Donnell and Schmitter (1986) mark “the interval between one political regime and another” (p.6). Gunther, Diamandouros and Puhle (1995) suggest that transition begins with the breakdown of an authoritarian regime and leads to the establishment of a democratic regime characterized by free elections. Scholars do not agree on what constitutes transitions nor do they agree on what constitutes consolidation (Schedler, 1998). Linz and Stepan (1996) suggest that democracy is consolidated when there is an acknowledgement that it is “the only game in town” (p.6) and all players agreed to play by the rules. Hence, to identify transitions, we need to take a glance at the essence of democracy.

In his celebrated book, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, Samuel Huntington (1991) regards democratization as the process of transition from authoritarian rule to multiparty liberal democracy. Huntington emphasizes the role of the middle class during the process of democratization without paying much attention to the process itself. Writing about the future of civil society and democratization in the Middle East, Norton (1993) states

Some political leaders have been willing to liberalize, but none has been willing to democratize comprehensively. Liberalization here refers to reformist measures to open up outlets for free expression of opinion, to place limits on the arbitrary exercise of power, and to permit political association. In contrast, democratization, namely, freely contested elections, popular participation in political life, and – bluntly - the unchaining of masses, has not yet occurred. (p .207)

Norton views democratization as a static concept without paying attention to the stages of the process which produce “the unchaining of the masses” at the end of the continuum. This is a contentious issue among scholars concerned with the study of the phenomenon of democratization. Another perspective on democratization and liberalization is demonstrated by Huntington’s (1991) view

If popular election of the top decision makers is the essence of democracy, then the critical point in the process of democratization is replacement of a government that was not chosen this way by one that is selected in a free, open, and fair election. The overall process of democratization before and after that election, however, is usually complex and prolonged. It involves bringing about the end of the nondemocratic regime, the inauguration of the democratic regime, and the consolidation of the democratic system. Liberalization, in contrast, is the partial opening of an authoritarian system short of choosing governmental leaders through freely competitive election.

Liberalizing authoritarian regimes may release political prisoners, open up some issues for public debate, loosen censorship, sponsor elections for offices that have little power, permit some renewal of civil society, and take other steps in democratic direction, without submitting top decision makers to electoral test. Liberalization may or may not lead to full-scale democratization. (p. 9)

Unlike Huntington, Norton equates democratization with full-scale democracy. Nevertheless, Norton and Huntington share the same views on the variation between liberalization and democratization, yet one can argue that liberalization exists somewhere within the continuum of democratization process. In other words, democratization is unlikely to occur without liberalization. In a strange twist, the ambiguity characterizing the definition of democracy itself reflects the very conceptualization of democratization.

How will we know democratization when we see it? There are three overlapping definitions of democracy. First, democracy is viewed as substance, which emphasizes qualities of human experience, i.e. freedoms of all sorts. Second, the constitutional view of democracy, which focuses on legal procedures such as elections: Huntington's approach appears to fit this model. The third definition suggests democracy is a political process, which emphasizes interactions among political actors. If democracy is seen as more than the sum of procedures and functions, what else can provide a tangible evidence of its essence? Reducing democracy to procedural practice is contested by many scholars because it is misleading. Sharing this worry, Hood (2004) calls on scholars to go back to political philosophy to avoid reducing democracy to procedures. He contends that the essence of democracy is lost in this approach because of the failure to see "democracy as a regime that encompasses more than simply sphere of government and political struggle" (p.147).

McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (2001) present a definition that aligns with the conceptualization of democratization in this paper. They define a democratic regime as a regime that "maintains broad citizenship, equal and autonomous citizenship, binding consultation of citizens at large with respect for government activities and personnel, as well as protection of citizens from arbitrary action by governmental agents" (p. 265). In this definition, the tenets of democratic regimes are employed to view democratization as a continuing process as shown in Figure 2.1.

Yet, political realities on the ground are not as neatly definable as seen by either Norton or Huntington. For instance, what constitutes the beginning of a breakdown of an authoritarian regime as suggested by Gunther et al. (1995)? What if elements of both liberalization and democratization exist side-by-side in the same political system? A regime of this nature could be described as both a liberalizing and a democratizing authoritarian regime. There does, however, seem to be an agreement among scholars who study democratic transition in the developing world about how democratization is conceived of and used. Rudebeck, Tornquist, and Rojas (1991), Hollifield and Jillson (2000), Robinson and White (1998), and Crotty (2005), all use democratization as a concept to refer to an open-ended process that includes liberalization (as described by Norton and Huntington), which may lead to a full-fledged democratic practice, as seen in mature democracies.

Nevertheless, it is arguable that information revolutions enhanced by technological advances- represented by internet, cell phones, privately owned TV and radio stations- have made liberalization inevitable, as it has become impossible for authoritarian regimes to censor, track or monitor what citizens say and do. Speaking to this point, the former Citicorp chair, Walter Writson (1997), asserted that "the virus of freedom... is spread by electronic networks to the four corners of the earth" (p.173). Along these same lines, journalist Robert Wright (2000) stated that "resistance to the internet's political logic will plainly be futile within a decade or two" (p.4). Kalathil and Boas (2003) go even further, noting that proponents of the new technology see the internet "leading to the downfall of authoritarian regimes, but the mechanism through which this might occur are rarely specified" (p.2). The mechanism is liberalization, no longer a negotiable option for authoritarian regimes if they choose to be part of a global community. North Korea is the only totalitarian regime that still keeps its entire population behind the bars of state-fed information, but even it is not entirely successful.

Throughout this paper the term democratization is used to refer to the continuum process of democratic transformation, encompassing partial openings under authoritarianism at one end and full-fledged democracy at the other (see Figure 2.1). Holding elections in a sociopolitical context lacking in freedoms guaranteed and safeguarded by the rule of law is not likely to reflect people's true will.

In other words, will submitting top decision-makers to a rigged electoral test meet the criteria of democracy as described by Huntington? Experiences in Kenya, Zimbabwe and other new, fragile democracies indicate that the concept of free election is relative, suggesting that democracy is bigger than just procedures and functions. Yet, should we consider holding elections as the beginning of the breakdown of an authoritarian regime, regardless of how free such an election might be? If not, what constitutes the beginning of the end of authoritarianism?

Of much relevance is the Putnam's social capital thesis. Robert Putnam's work focuses on social capital in terms of trust and cooperation as a means of promoting democratic performance. Social capital in forms of civic virtues, trust and cooperation is undoubtedly an important dimension of democracy even though as a concept it comes close to assuming that civil society is all good, another contentious notion among social theorists. One of the major theoretical challenges to this approach is that it is seen to leave out the complex conflicting interests in the society (Rudebeck and Tornquist, 1998). Nonetheless, there is an international dimension to the thesis of civil society as autonomous entity from the state. Globalization and international support for human rights undermine authoritarian rule and promote democracy, especially when geared through civil society organizations at both ends.

O'Donnell et al (1986) analyze the actual transition from authoritarian rule as an open-ended process of liberalization. Such transition reflects struggle and conflict between hardliners and soft-liners within the authoritarian rule during political conjectures characterized by economic and ideological crises, and institutional decay. One shortcoming is that scholars of this school fail to rule out the fact that experiences vary from country to country. Nonetheless, their common framework is that the bourgeoisie regard the authoritarian regime as expendable either because it has laid the foundation for further capitalist development or because it has demonstrated its incompetence for doing so. The framework includes some aspects of civil society. Elites may deem the regime expendable at some point, leading to some sort of democratization.

Huntington (1991) assigned some weight to stable political institutions during the transition. The logic behind this approach is that various components of the new middle class, such as professional organizations, seeking to protect their own rights and integrity as professionals connect with broader popular demands and efforts. Such process is said to inevitably push for further democratization. We see aspects of this type of connection and networking in Egypt during Mubarak's rule, but the process of connecting with popular demands was evidently observed during the protests and after the collapse of Mubarak's regime.

Nonetheless, it noteworthy to point out that theories of democratization provide analyses explaining the democratization processes based on what has been experienced by certain societies, which some theorists assume valid and replicable in other societies. Yet, the reality of democratic transformation suggests "multiplicity of theories and the diversity of experiences" (Huntington, 1991: p.38). To this end, in Egypt, as in many other countries, there are many factors contributing to the slow process of democratization which culminated in popular protests that overthrew Mubarak's regime and working to install a new democratic regime. The deepening of civil society, free market, international pressure, globalization, demonstration effect, socioeconomic changes and regime survival strategies are among some of the factors responsible for the democratization process. As for how to democratize there is not a ready prescription that can remedy authoritarianism immediately.

Many scholars argue that elements of liberalization witnessed in Mubarak's Egypt were tools of manipulation rather than a response to internal pressure to democratize. There are two problems with this argument, constituting the theoretical gap this research attempts to bridge. First, this argument tends to dismiss the role of internal social forces, social dynamics and human agency in these changes. The world has seen these very things projected on TV screens during the public protests of January- February 2011. Second, this argument fails to provide a sufficient explanation for the regime's political behavior, such as introducing a presidential election in 2005 and enlarging the margins of freedom. The international pressure alone cannot account for such changes since the international community supported the regime even while it was outright authoritarian. The question which begs an answer here is to what extent was the international community concerned with democratization of Egypt to exert pressure on the Mubarak regime to improve civil liberties or hold presidential elections? This is not to suggest that the presidential election was nothing more than a farce, but rather to make the point that the democratization process cannot be carried out by pressure without locally growing demands, human agency. To this end, the empirical part of this paper explores the realm of agency by focusing on a set of selected civil society organizations.

In the Egyptian context, civil society organizations have become sites of resistance, providing platforms to challenge the state hegemony and creating spaces for public participation (Fahmy, 1998, 2002; Qindil 2004). During Mubarak's rule, civil society organizations struggled to bring about civil liberties, personal freedoms and human rights, all elements on the continuum of the democratization process. For Walzer (1992), and Foley and Edwards (1996), it is through civil society - or more accurately, the third sector- that individuals are able to establish and maintain relational networks. Voluntary associations connect people with each other, build trust and reciprocity through informal, loosely structured relationships, and consolidate society through altruism without obligation. These constitute the sources of social capital, which necessitates a glance at what Walzer (1992) called "the civil society argument" (p.1).

### ***3. Civil Society: An Ambiguous Horse of the Democratization Race***

The notion of civil society appears to be one of the most contentious ideas within political theory. The history of the modern concept of civil society can be traced back to John Locke, Adam Ferguson, Hegel and de Tocqueville- that is, roughly back to 1850 (Gibbon, 1998). However, the 20th century history of the concept started with Gramsci, before disappearing as an open topic of discussion for 50 years, and then reappearing in Eastern Europe in the late 1970s (Gibbon, 1998).

Research by Taylor (1991) shows that Locke's view of modern political order depends upon associations of free citizens, who are defined in terms of their multiple, distinct and separate economic interests. Hegel went a step further, viewing civil society as the sphere of pluralism with historically produced corporate and ethical life (Taylor, 1991). The Hegelian version of civil society also includes business and professional associations, and a realm of public debate. Montesquieu (1689-1755) and de Tocqueville (1805-1859) elaborated on the role of professional associations and public debate as mediators between individuals and the state. De Tocqueville (1969) noted that people

Can imagine a society in which all men, regarding the law as their common work, would love it and submit to it without difficulty; the authority of the government would be respected as necessary, not as sacred: the love felt toward the head of state would be not a passion but a calm and rational feeling. Each man having some rights and being sure of the enjoyment of those rights, there would be established between all classes a manly confidence and a sort of reciprocal courtesy, as far removed from pride as from servility. Understanding its own interests, the people would appreciate that in order to enjoy the benefits of society one must shoulder its obligations. Free association of the citizens could then take the place of individual authority from the nobles, and the state would be protected both from tyranny and from license. (p.14)

Marx (1843-4) critiqued Hegel's position and adopted a different view. He described the separation of the state from civil society as "pantheistic mysticism" (Marx, 1843a, p.62). Criticizing Hegel's thesis that the state possessed a genuinely representative role even in the absence of a public elective mechanism, Marx (1843) contended that in the absence of a democratic system, civil society constitutes only individualized and privatized entities, failing to generate forms of citizenship driven by general social interests or forms of government. He finds two reasons for this view. First, the transition from feudalism to capitalism which produced civil society as a realm distinct from the state involved a struggle in which social relations were depoliticized. Second, apolitical civil societies necessarily tend to produce authoritarian forms of state. However, Marx's views do not make much sense outside the context of his worldview; according to him, struggle exists within any form of social interactions, thus civil society and bureaucracy are intertwined because

Bureaucracy is the state of civil society... Bureaucracy must exist to safeguard the imaginary universality of particular interest... the state must be a corporation as long as the corporation wishes to be a state... The individual corporation has this same desire for its particular interest against bureaucracy, but desires bureaucracy against the other corporations, against the particular interests. Therefore, bureaucracy, being the completion of the corporation, has the victory over the corporation, which is the incomplete bureaucracy. (Marx, 1843a: p. 68)

Within that Marxist worldview, however, lies Gramsci, who is credited with revitalizing the debate about civil society.

Writing in the aftermath of the failure of the communist revolutions in central Europe during 1918-21, Gramsci, a communist himself, suggests the concept civil society was part of an effort to understand the qualities and characteristics which enabled Western and Central European states to remain strong in the face of both an economic collapse and an armed insurrection. To Gramsci, civil society is nothing but a bourgeoisie façade that aborted the rise of the masses because

in the case of the most advanced states... civil society has become a very complex structure and one which is resistant to catastrophic incursion of the immediate economic element (crises, depression, etc.). The superstructures of civil society are like the trench systems of modern warfare. In war it would happen that a fierce artillery attack seemed to have destroyed the enemy's entire defensive perimeter; and the moment of their advance and attack the assailants would find themselves confronted by a line of defense which was still intact. (Gramsci, 1971: p. 235)

Gramsci suggests the revolutionary wave was quelled because of a combination of bourgeois state and bourgeois civil society. Gibbon (1998) notes that although Marx did not advocate the destruction of civil society, he agreed with Gramsci that changes to civil society were produced despite the principles of differentiation and exclusivity that govern the dynamics of class struggles and social relations. True to his Marxist ethos, Gibbon (1998) argues that the nature of politics reproduced by civil society is no more than the bourgeois social division of labor. Hence, civil society is a form of the capitalist division of labor in civic guise because “the transition from feudalism to capitalism which created civil society was one which in effect removed the political-collective aspects of feudal social relations and substituted legal-individual entities for the old seigniorial ones” (Gibbon, 1998: p. 38).

The general supposition in these discussions, from Locke to Gramsci, is that civil society is conceptualized as having a single indivisible historical role or meaning, which serves philosophically as its essence. Marx and Gramsci might agree that civil society is an entity; however, they clearly believe it is concomitant of capitalist production relations, according to Gibbon (1998). Nonetheless, civil society is assigned distinctive inherent principles, marking clear directions and meaning, that distinguish it from other entities. The relevance of these philosophical views to the discussion of civil society and democracy lies within the concept of pluralism; since pluralism and democracy are equated, it is believed that democracy cannot function without pluralism. Hence, an active civil society is seen as a mechanism for democratization and effective democratic practice. But in Marxist views, the cultivation of civil society is a recipe for de-politicization, producing bureaucracy, constitutional authoritarianism and an absence of democratization.

To this end, Gibbon (1998) contends that the dominant understanding of the notion of civil society is the one that emerged from civil society traditions described by de Tocqueville, which was later incorporated into the mainstream social theory before reappearing in some versions of liberal political thought. Moreover, Gibbon (1998) suggests that the use of civil society, as a concept, is still being dictated by Neo-liberal theorists. Thus, the general theme of contemporary civil society as a realm of autonomy and freedom leads to the reproduction of these values in political practice at the expense of the state and its various apparatuses, similar to the case of East European countries.

Arato (1982) summarizes the characteristics of the dominant contemporary views of civil society in the following ways: founding claims to collective rights on individual ones, not on private property; recognizing and cultivating the significance of particular interests as opposed to general ones; expanding the public space by weakening the existing institutional structures by facilitating new solidarities; and incorporating transparency and participatory forms of self-development.

Similar to the discussion about the essence and meaning of civil society, there is another debate about what constitutes civil society and what it means to be included within the realm of civil society. The mainstream discourse tends to conceive of civil society as member-based organizations, treating these organizations as vibrant, effective vehicles for political mobilization. But some Feminists and other scholars contest the mainstream conceptualization of civil society. Singerman (2006) and Armony (2004) argue that civil society must be expanded to encompass families, social ties and all forms of informal organizations. Armony (2004) goes a step further to argue that civil society cannot always be linked to benign and good virtues.

According to the generally accepted definition, civil society has been around in Egypt for over a century (Ben Nafissa and Qindil, 1994). This manifests as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and several professional associations. Despite their existence before the emergence of the modern Egyptian state, NGOs are still referred to by scholars as if they are new products imported from the West. Comparing civil society in developed countries to its counterpart in developing countries does not seem to offer much practical knowledge. In the developed world, civil society organizations evolve independent from the state as part of bigger social movements, whereas some modern civil society organizations in the developing world evolve not only as part of the state's apparatuses but also as an indicator of the state failure (El-Gammal, 1994).

#### ***4. People's Agency in the Egyptian Revolution***

This section provides an analysis of empirical data gathered before and during the tumultuous events that came to be known as the Egyptian Revolution in 2011-2012. The effort aims at examining theoretical premises regarding the role of civil society in democratization process. For the sake of comparison, the data focused on three professional associations: Judges Club, Journalists Association, and Lawyers Association, three civic movements: Kifaya Movement, the April 6 Movement and the National Association for Change and Cairo Institute of Human Rights Studies, the only registered NGO. The logic behind this design is to highlight similarities and differences among three different types of civil society organizations, offering a test to the thesis that all civil society is good for democratization, a notion that has been consistently contested by a number of scholars as noted earlier.

##### ***4.1. Voices of Egyptian Civil Society: an Empirical Case***

During Mubarak's reign, the Judges Club primarily focused on issues concerning judges and their profession in various judicial institutions. Egyptian Judges did not play a significant role in revitalizing associational life or creating venues for public participation. Egyptian judges confronted Mubarak's regime when they demanded complete independence of the judiciary system from the executive branch and when they claimed their rights to monitor parliamentary elections as stipulated in the constitution. Judges' strike in 2005/2006 after the first presidential election marked a new era in their political role in Egypt. As an organization independent from the state, judges sometimes used their club as a site of resistance to make political statements, providing a broad legal umbrella for reformists and activists. In post-Mubarak Egypt, this reality helps to explain the pull and push between the judicial institutions and President Mursi.

In Mubarak's Egypt, most of the professional associations, including Lawyers Association, were dominated by opposition groups, but largely by the Muslim Brothers because the Brotherhood was banned from civil life. These organizations became safe heavens as well as platforms for the Brotherhood. As a result the Muslim Brothers were keen to have some of their members elected to executive councils of these organizations. The Lawyers Association was more involved in associational life and public participation compared to the Judges Club. When direct political activism became almost impossible during Mubarak's rule, like other professions lawyers used their association as a political platform to isolate the regime's supporters and to make the association's executive council election a season for political statements. For many years, the Lawyers Association has called and demanded the complete separation of the judiciary institutions from the executive branch.

Unlike the Judges Club and Lawyers Association, the Journalists Association was more politically engaged in public life during Mubarak's era. The Journalists Association became a venue for public participation and a physical location for protests organized by various groups. Even though, the regime's supporters partially controlled the executive council through allegiance of journalists working for the state-owned newspapers, the Journalists Association became a site of resistance and open venue for activists. The Federation of Egyptian Workers, as an umbrella for trade unions, has been passive and uninvolved throughout the confrontation between individual trade unions and the authorities. On the contrary, the Federation of Egyptian Workers was used continuously by Mubarak's regime to defeat workers' demands for living wages and sustainable employment (The Administration of Independent Trade Unions Services, 2011).



Speaking to Alfardeen TV channel on September 27, 2011, the president of Hulwan Trade Union Abdulrahman Khier, who was a leading figure in Mubarak's Federation of the Egyptian Workers described the revolutionary groups as "cockroaches and stray dogs"<sup>2</sup>. In response to this comment, the Administration of Trade Union Services issued statement demanding that Mr. Khier to be held accountable for his statement. During the past five years various trade unions organized over 400 strikes and protests (Kausch, 2009). During these strikes, the Federation remained passive and its leadership aligned with the authorities when the government started privatizing public enterprises without attending to workers' rights and needs. It is true that most of the protests and strikes organized by trade unions were demand-specifics, but the action in itself presented two valuable lessons for activists in the country. The first lesson was that the suffering of millions of workers and their families was an excellent cause for mobilizing people around social justice. The second lesson was that organized mass protests can break the regime's machinery of oppression.

Based on the passive role the Federation of Egyptian Workers played in relation to privatization and economic changes introduced during Mubarak's rule, many scholars and experts- such as Al-Sayyid 1993, Kasim 2004, and Fahmy, 2002- argue that trade unions were completely co-opted by Mubarak's regime and should not be expected to be a threat. What we learned in the past decade is that as long as the plights and issues facing workers are not addressed, cooptation will only work for a limited time. Controlling the leadership of the Federation only created a gap between leaders and workers as constituents. As a result more localized leadership, represented by committees of individual trade unions, took leadership role and confronted the regime, which produced hundreds of workers protests.

As for breaking the machinery of oppression, Mubarak's regime as an authoritarian type of rule, has to rely heavily on various forms of oppression in absence of sociopolitical legitimacy. When the prime role of the state becomes silencing dissidents, waves of protests can exhaust the machinery of oppression and at some point the regime loses control, which will only result in more protests and lack of order. This is exactly what happened to Mubarak's regime after a week of protests.

The National Movement for Change, Kifaya, has been instrumental in the struggle for democratic transformation in the country. As a civic movement, Kifaya was born during a time of political stagnation when Egyptian people lost hope in the possibility of change and young people preferred facing the waves of the Mediterranean on small boats to confronting the political realities of Mubarak's Egypt. Kifaya revitalized associational life and created a glimpse of hope that change is possible. The movement started by organizing protests that at their best were attended by a few hundred. However, Kifaya must be credited for staying the course of change and continuing to believe in people's ability despite then rampant apathy. Kifaya's founders and leaders have paid huge personal price and given sacrifices for their cause, but their reward was that what they started prepared the ground and showed the way for other civic movements and youth groups.

April 6 movement has truly blazed the trail for the Egyptian youth. Before April 6 appeared in the political scene and public life in Egypt in 2008, political activism was an undertaking mostly dominated by older generations. What April 6 has done was extraordinary in showing young people that they can do something to change their realities given that Egypt is one of the countries that have a younger population; age group 15-40 constitutes about 45 per cent of the total population. In such conditions, engaging youth became a path rich with promises for change not only because they are energetic and their future is at stake, but also because they make the biggest bulk of the country's population. Moreover, April 6 movement has done what Kifaya failed to do, appealing to younger generations and using the cyber space effectively to preach and organize. In this regard, April 6 can truly be credited for involving youth groups who eventually became the backbone of the January 25 Revolution.

Furthermore, April 6 movement recruited and organized youth in all Egyptian governorates. Taking political activism to other cities and towns was another significant tactic used by April 6 because civil society organizations have always concentrated their work in the greater Cairo. April 6 movement must also be credited for using the cyber world for preaching and organizing youth groups.

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<sup>2</sup> Speaking on behalf of Egyptian workers, Mr. Abudlrahman Khier issued a number of statements during the 18-day protests expressing trade unions' support of President Mubarak. There were some allegations that he mobilized some of the thugs who attacked protesters in Tahrir Square. The Administration of Trade Union Services, who quickly aligned with the revolutionary forces after the fall of Mubarak regime responded to Mr. Khier statement.

In April 2008, April 6 called for and popularized the idea of civil disobedience through Facebook and text messages sent to random cell phones. Today when we read through the pages of the Egyptian Revolution, it would be impossible not to mention the importance of social networks in popularizing the cause and clearing many misconceptions about people's right to change their political system. In this regard, April 6 has shown the way to other youth groups that social networks can be effective tools if used correctly.

The National Association for Change has built on the efforts started by Kifaya and April 6 movement. The unique characteristic of civic movements in general was that unlike political parties, civic movements complement each other rather than competing with one another. The National Association for Change called onto the Egyptian living abroad to be involved in the political process in their country and use their economic power as leverage to demand political change. The NAC also used the one-million-signature campaign as a battle to make some noise so as to shake the stagnant political environment. The campaign was conducted online as well as through hard copies. Activists from the NAC reached towns and villages all over the country. Unlike April 6, the National Association for Change went even step further by attracting a charismatic figure like Mohamed ElBaradei. By doing so, the NAC appealed to youth, elites and people from different social backgrounds.

By having a charismatic leadership while maintaining loose hierarchical structure, the National Association for Change was instrumental in the struggles for democratic transformation through constitutional amendment and free elections. A common factor among the three studied civic movements was that they have always maintained clear vision and remained biased towards action throughout the process of combating authoritarianism. While all of them have liberal leaning, they never adopted or declared a political ideology, so their working agenda have always been the vision for change not a political ideology. Kifya, April 6 and the NAC have people with different ideological backgrounds, so instead of preaching a party's doctrine they preached the vision for change.

Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies played a limited role in areas of activism and advocacy because the Law 84, 2002 prohibits NGOs from engaging in any form of political activism. Nonetheless, the CIHRS contributed to enhancing associational life, articulating public demands and providing a venue for public participation through organizing workshops, seminars and conferences. In Mubarak's Egypt, permission from the state security was needed for all public activities, so CIHRS must be credited for providing opportunities for activists to debate public issues, participate in public life and network with other organizations.

## **5. Conclusion**

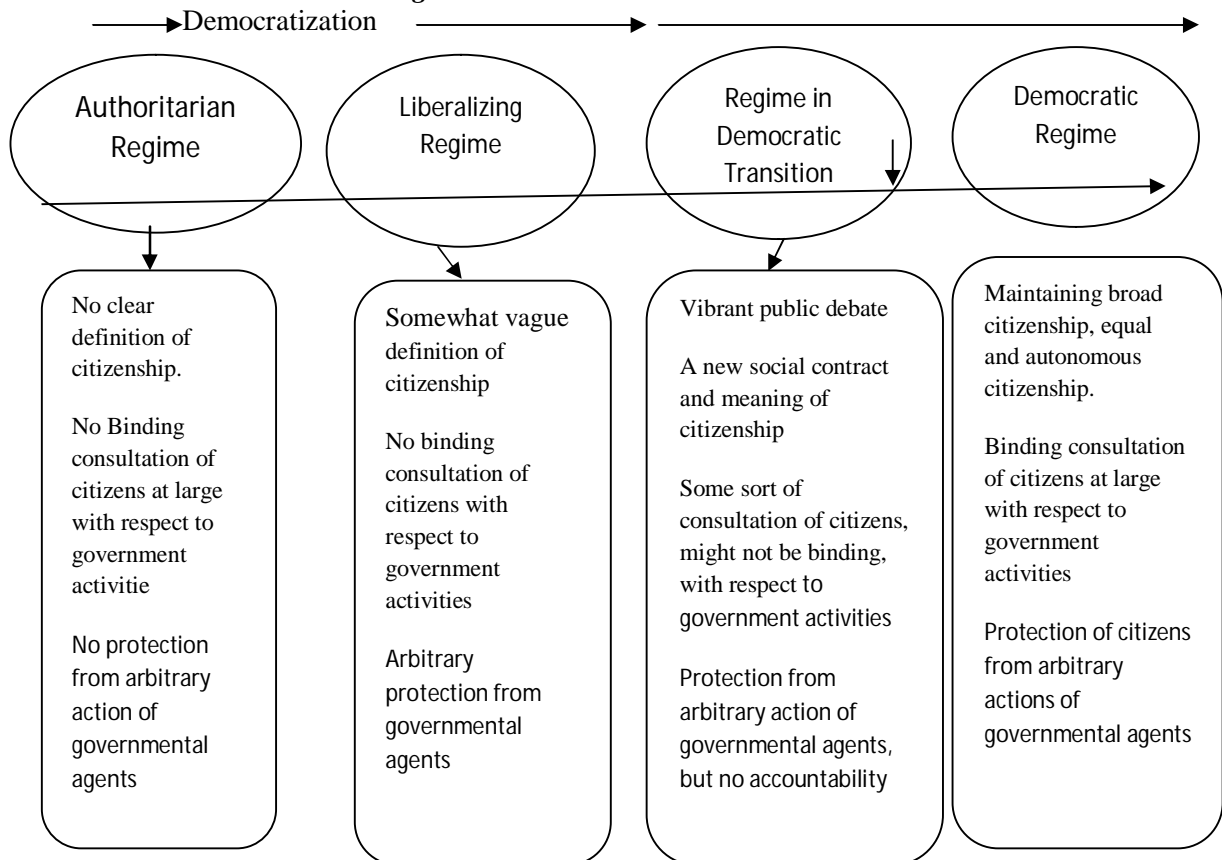
As we have seen so far, differences among the studied organizations determine their role in the democratization process in general and in political events in particular. Professional associations and trade unions are more driven by member-specific demands in order to involve in broader public issues. Theoretically speaking, in their search for their own good, professional associations and trade unions intersect with demands of other social groups. The Egyptian experience shows that the point of departure for professional associations and trade unions is the vital interests of individual organization. For example, journalists were more involved because the status of freedom of speech during Mubarak's rule affected their professions and judges demanded separation of the judiciary system from the government because continuous intervention of government officials in their rulings affected how they do their job. The same might be true about doctors association. This result is logical and should be expected. However, oppression of opponents and degradation of political space are responsible for politicizing professional associations and to less extent trade unions and transforming them into political spaces and sites of resistance.

The situation is very different for civic movements and NGOs. The role of Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies in public life was limited by legal barriers and bureaucratic arrangements regulating works of NGOs. Loosely structured civic movements with no singular leadership have shown that they were better equipped to mobilize and reach various social strata. Not having a rigid organizational structure and singular leadership were characteristics that safeguarded these movements from hijacking, cooptation and domination, which helped them to maintain a revolutionary tone throughout Mubarak's period and prepared them to be actively involved in the protests and transitional period that followed the fall of Mubarak's regime. More importantly, contrary to Putnam's (2000) conclusion that the technological "individualizing" of leisure time via television, internet and eventually virtual reality helmets" (p. 39) are responsible for eroding social capital in the U.S., the cyber world created space for real freedom of speech and freedom of association in Egypt.

The point is that what Putnam has seen as a distraction from building social capital because social capital is a local phenomenon based on trust and cooperation, findings of this study suggest that the cyber world is not only effective in building social capital, but also crucial for building social capital in nondemocratic countries. In modern democratic countries the cyber world has become the normal mode of socialization and communication. In Egypt, youth groups advocated and preached political agenda, debated public issues and reached an agreement on identifying the root causes of social problems plaguing their country. It is true that if youth groups had not physically taken the streets, not much would have been changed. Equally true is that without the space to debate and preach, one would wonder where Egypt would be at the moment.

It is discussed earlier that a democratic transition begins when a regime’s legitimacy is in question, economic and social policies are characterized by failure, leadership is seen as unable to deal with the socioeconomic challenges. All of these elements were easily detectable in Mubarak’s regime. Probably the demonstration effect has also contributed to the Egyptian Revolution. Mohamed Bouazizi, a young man, who set himself on fire to protest police brutality in front of the municipal building in Sidi Abou Zied, a small town in the south of Tunisia. Bouazizi has shaken the public conscience, which resulted in nationwide protests that led to ousting President Ben Ali, who ruled Tunisia with an iron fist for 23 years. It must be noted here that the incidence of people burning themselves in public in Egypt was not something new. In this regard, it appears that Malcolm Gladwell’s (2000) vaguely articulated social theory “Tipping Point” has some relevance. Gladwell never attempted to establish causal relationship between a phenomenon and countless factors that can be responsible for its occurrence, but he made the point that for a product (Hush Puppies) or a social phenomenon (fast decrease in crimes rate in NYC) there must be “a moment of critical mass, the threshold, the boiling point” (p. 12) in order to become a big event. Thus, unlike other incidences, Bouazizi’s burning of himself happened to represent the beginning of a boiling point that led to massive popular protests that swept the region.

Figure 2.1. Democratization Continuum



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