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978-1-107-02571-4 - Democracy Prevention: The Politics of the U.S.-Egyptian Alliance

Jason Brownlee

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## Democracy Prevention

### *The Politics of the U.S.-Egyptian Alliance*

When a popular revolt forced long-ruling Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak to resign on February 11, 2011, U.S. president Barack Obama hailed the victory of peaceful demonstrators in the heart of the Arab World. But Washington was late to endorse democracy – for decades, the United States favored Egypt’s rulers over its people. Since 1979, the United States had provided the Egyptian regime more than \$60 billion in aid and immeasurable political support to secure its main interests in the region: Israeli security and strong relations with Persian Gulf oil producers. During the Egyptian uprising, the White House did not promote popular sovereignty but instead backed an “orderly transition” to one of Mubarak’s cronies. Even after protesters derailed that plan, the antidemocratic U.S.-Egyptian alliance continued. Using untapped primary materials, this book helps explain why authoritarianism has persisted in Egypt with American support, even as policymakers claim to encourage democratic change.

Jason Brownlee is Associate Professor of Government at the University of Texas at Austin. He has been traveling to Egypt and conducting research there for seventeen years. In addition to his previous book, *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization* (Cambridge 2007), Professor Brownlee’s writings have appeared in *Current History*, the *Journal of Democracy*, and numerous scholarly journals. In 2010 and 2011, he was a Visiting Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

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“This book offers a fascinating look inside the U.S.-Egyptian alliance and its consequences for democracy. It shows how U.S. foreign policy goals helped cement a relationship with Egypt’s autocratic rulers that persisted throughout the Arab Spring and continues to hinder democratization. Challenging the widely held view that the United States was a broadly pro-democratic actor in the post-Cold War era, Brownlee demonstrates that U.S. officials repeatedly concluded that their geopolitical goals in the Middle East required autocratic governments that could undertake policies that ran counter to domestic public opinion. *Democracy Prevention* offers important new insights into the international dimension of regime change. I recommend it not only to students of politics in the Middle East but also to anyone interested in how external forces shape regime trajectories.”

– Steven Levitsky, Harvard University

“Drawing on an impressive array of sources and writing jargon-free prose, Brownlee demonstrates convincingly that the U.S.’s overriding objective in Egypt has been to capitalize on its geostrategic assets. By so doing it has undermined the very democracy promotion it has supported and profoundly contributed to perpetuating authoritarianism, which it continues to do even after the fall of Mubarak. This, then, is the most well-documented, insightful, and compelling interpretation of American-Egyptian relations available.”

– Robert Springborg, Naval Postgraduate School

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*University of Texas, Austin*



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*To Joan and Eleanor*

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Even if one supposes that the visible misgovernment of Egypt, in its bearing on the life of the inhabitants, did impart some unselfish element to our conduct, no one would suggest that as an operative force in the direction of our imperial policy such motive has ever determined our actions.

– John Atkinson Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study*

America allies itself with dictatorships because it is easy to deal with despots, while it is difficult to work with democratic states. . . . America spends years negotiating with democracies, while it can reach agreement with an autocrat in just a few minutes. But what America gains quickly, it loses just as fast!

– Moustafa Amin, *Mirthful America . . . Long Ago*

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## Preface and Acknowledgments

On June 16 and 17, 25 million Egyptians – half the electorate – selected the country’s first president since a popular uprising deposed Hosni Mubarak. On the top of the ballot was Ahmed Shafiq, a retired air force general who had served as Mubarak’s last prime minister and had edged out two major revolutionary candidates in initial voting on May 23 and 24. Next came Mohamed Morsi, of the Muslim Brotherhood and head of its Freedom and Justice Party (FJP). Morsi had topped the field in May, and his candidacy in the runoff offered Egyptians an unprecedented chance to choose a civilian leader from the opposition. With 51.7 percent of the vote, Morsi prevailed – only to be encircled by Egypt’s military oligarchy, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF).

The narrative of this book concludes with the parliamentary elections of 2011–2012. During the first half of 2012, Morsi’s FJP and other parties began establishing popular sovereignty for the first time in the history of the Egyptian republic. The SCAF and its clients, however, manipulated Egypt’s pliable institutions and, in a dizzying set of decrees, obstructed the electorate’s will. On June 13, two weeks after the decades old State of Emergency had expired, the Ministry of Justice gave soldiers and security personnel the right to arrest civilians. On June 16, after Egypt’s highest court declared the country’s chief electoral law unconstitutional, the SCAF dissolved the main chamber of parliament. The generals then usurped legislative authority and claimed sweeping influence over the country’s constitutional assembly.

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Opposition leaders called it a coup. Finally, as polling stations closed on June 17, the SCAF amended its own Constitutional Declaration from March 30, 2011, effectively stripping the president of authority over national security and foreign affairs. Although Egyptians had voted, the leaders they chose could not steer the ship of state.

Many colleagues, friends, and family members selflessly responded to this project as it developed. I am deeply indebted to them.

My father, Mac, who died suddenly in April 2010, lovingly encouraged my writing and research. While creating this book, I fondly recalled our discussions of politics. I have also cherished the guidance I received from the late, brilliant Mohamed El-Sayed Said. Mohamed introduced me to the problems this study covers and the courage Egyptians have shown addressing them.

Robert Vitalis has been my most patient and generous colleague, reading countless manuscripts from the inception of this book to its completion. My friend and periodic partner in the field, Joshua Stacher, provided invaluable suggestions over months of phone calls and e-mails. Robert Jensen advised me as I sought to write a book for political scientists and general readers. Gary Freeman and my home department at the University of Texas at Austin kindly sponsored a manuscript workshop in the spring of 2011. Laurie Brand, Clement Henry, and Robert Springborg took part in the workshop and made this project far more fruitful than it otherwise would have been.

While bearing sole responsibility for any errors that remain, I express my sincere gratitude to the numerous individuals who lent a hand or an attentive ear, invariably improving this book in the process: Jon Alterman, Jonathan Argaman, Matthew Axelrod, Mahmoud Al-Batal, Kirk Beattie, Joel Beinin, Eva Bellin, Catherine Boone, Nathan Brown, Abhishek Chatterjee, Noam Chomsky, Yoav Di-Capua, Mohamed Elmenshawy, Tulia Falleti, F. Gregory Gause III, Ellis Goldberg, Gretchen Helmke, Steven Heydemann, Donald Horowitz, Susan Hyde, Saad Ibrahim, Marcia Inhorn, Amaney Jamal, Melvyn Leffler, Ellen Lust, Tarek Masoud, Patrick McDonald, Pete Moore, Nagla Mostafa, Ami Pedahzur, Anne Peters, Jim Rigby, Hesham Sallam, Matthew Schroeder, Jeremy Sharp, Julia Simon, Hillel Soifer, Joel Suarez, Chantal Thomas, Eric Trager, David Waldner, Lucan Way, Lisa Wedeen, Sean Yom, Marilyn Young, and audiences at Case Western Reserve University, Cornell Law School, the

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Middle East Studies Association, Princeton University, the University of Pennsylvania, and Yale University.

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While researching and producing this book, I undertook no consulting work with U.S. or foreign intelligence agencies.

This study of the U.S.-Egyptian alliance was immeasurably helped by Albert Nason and the staff of the Jimmy Carter Library, Paul Rascoe of the Perry-Castañeda Library at the University of Texas, and Dagne Gizaw, Michelle Kamalich, and Janet Spikes at the WWICS Library. Matthew Buehler, Allyson Hawkins, Rachel Sternfeld, and Philip Wiseman provided timely and careful research assistance. Steven Brooke was indispensable during the last stages of production. At Cambridge University Press, Lewis Bateman shepherded the manuscript from précis to finished work. I cannot thank him enough. Two outside readers provided thoughtful and incredibly constructive comments.

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To my mother, Becky, who has supported me studying Egypt and politics since college, I give heartfelt thanks. Finally, my wife, Joan Asseff, and our daughter, Eleanor, shared their boundless love and energy with me while I pursued this project, sometimes away from home for weeks. I dedicate this book to the two of them with all my love.

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