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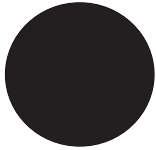

Supply and Demand Democracy in Egypt

Charles Onians

Cairo is a city of contradictions, from its Pharaonic architecture dominated by satellite dishes to its increasingly conservative inhabitants, who at once desire and scorn Western lifestyles. Take a walk around the city's smog-covered downtown and you'll see women in full-length, Saudi-style *hijab* walking past shop windows filled with racy lingerie, while rubbish collectors sit on donkey carts chatting on their mobiles, holding up the advance of an armada of Mercedes.

Unmarried couples holding hands in the street draw scathing looks, yet the city's reputation for ready prostitution pulls in thousands of Gulf Arab tourists every summer. And while more and more young women wear headscarves, they also increasingly wear tight-fitting jeans. Escape the downtown hubbub in a twilit doorway and you're likely to find a young man selling pirated videos. Here, alongside *The Matrix* and other Hollywood staples, you'll find one of last year's most sought-after items—secretly filmed footage of renowned singer and belly dancer Dina enjoying intimate moments with her husband. As Cairenes snapped up the bootlegs, the gossip press homed in on the real scandal—the couple may not have been married, and that, it was said, would be unacceptable.

Fascinating as Cairenes' ability to resolve these apparent contradictions is, a creeping increase in conservative religious behavior in recent years reflects a more ominous competition for moral authority between the government and political Islam. The government changes its moral tone not only to please the people but also to placate those calling for democratic reform, and so the warp and weft of contradiction and compromise continues to hold the country together—in religion, culture, and politics.

Gamel Abdel Nasser's 1952 revolution and its subsequent socialist-cum-Arab nationalist ideology attempted without success to eliminate burgeoning political Islam and replace it with a nationalist identity. Popular Islamic groups had been around in Egypt since the early twentieth century, when they emerged largely as a reaction to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and to the secular policies of such leaders as Turkey's Kemal Atatürk. Groups like the Muslim Brotherhood were initially more concerned with religious education than with politics and sought a return to Islamic values in the face of encroaching secularization, but as they gained popular support they became increasingly politicized. By the late 1940s, the Muslim Brotherhood was seeking the implementation of Sharia (Islamic) law as the law of the land.

After the Muslim Brotherhood was banned in 1954, an attempt on Nasser's life by one of its members led to a harsh clampdown. Over 4,000 members were arrested and thousands more fled into exile. Moreover, Nasser's secular pan-Arabism, which had wide appeal from Baghdad to Algiers, helped push political Islam to the margins. Egyptian society during this period was tolerant of liberal lifestyles and even atheism.

In the 1970s, Nasser's successor, Anwar Sadat, gave the Islamists considerable freedom to organize themselves after years of

clandestine activity in the hope that this would reduce the power of the Left, which had set the political agenda after Nasser's death. Sadat promised to implement Sharia law, and Islamist organizations wrested control of trade and student unions from the Left. Ironically, Sadat was assassinated by Islamists in 1981 after making peace with Israel. Widespread corruption, economic inequality, and Sadat's failure to consult with either his people or other Arab states over peace with Israel meant that few mourned his death.

Before Sadat's death, the inflow of conservative religious ideas had already begun. The Egyptian leader's so-called open-door policies that brought consumerism to the country also allowed thousands of Egyptians to go to work in the Gulf states during the oil-boom years, from where an influential few returned with money in their pockets and a Wahhabist ideology. Wahhabism, which is the official religious doctrine of Saudi Arabia, takes its name from the eighteenth-century religious thinker Ibn Abdul Wahhab, who sought to return Islam to its roots, based on a literal interpretation of the Koran. Wahhabism forbids many practices widespread elsewhere in the Muslim world, such as celebrating the Prophet Mohammed's birthday. Wahhabist-influenced Egyptians returned from the Gulf to form a new, conservative bourgeoisie with a surprising penchant for Western fashions.

Sadat's successor, President Hosni Mubarak, has been in office for over 20 years. He released many Islamists imprisoned in the wake of Sadat's assassination and has since striven to find a low-key middle way between the policies of his two predecessors. Presidential elections are one-candidate referendums. Parties wishing to oppose the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) need to apply to the government for approval, and while about a dozen have that approval, they cannot draft laws and are essentially powerless. Of the 444 elected seats in the People's Assembly, 88 percent are held by the NDP, 8 percent are held by independents (including the members of the Muslim Brotherhood), and 4 percent are held by the legally approved opposition. Mubarak rules under emergency laws in force since the 1970s and has controlled political dissent through such repressive measures as arbitrary detention of opponents and tight control of the media as well as by positioning the government as the guardian of morality. When an Islamist organization issues an opinion on a moral issue, such as whether a book should be banned, the government also announces its position, thus reminding people that they do not have to turn to Islamic bodies in order to lead a morally correct life.

The Muslim Brotherhood

Both Cairo and Washington see political Islam as manifested by the banned Muslim Brotherhood as the biggest threat to Mubarak's regime. Founded in 1928 by school teacher Hasan al-Banna, the Brotherhood draws its members from the professional and working classes, and operates through a network of mosques, trade unions, and charitable organizations. While the Brotherhood has officially renounced violence, it condones suicide bombers in Iraq and Israel, and it has spawned various other groupings over the years that advocate the violent overthrow of the government, such as the Gamaa Islamiya, which carried out a number of deadly attacks on tourists in Egypt in the 1990s. The Brotherhood is perceived by impoverished Egyptians as being responsive to their needs and their grievances. Thus, while the government-sponsored al-Azhar Mosque issues religious opinions on everything from abortion (which is banned) to what books may not be read, much of the population pays more attention to what the Brotherhood has to say on such matters. Provided the Brotherhood sticks to moral or religious questions and avoids political criticism, its views are published even in the government-controlled media.

Thus, while the government suppresses the Brotherhood, it also gives tacit permission for the dissemination of its ideas. This is because if the Brotherhood did not exist, the moderate Islamic parties—which the Mubarak regime sees as a political threat—would gain greater public support. The Wasat Party, for example, which has a flexible approach toward Sharia law and even has Coptic Christian members, has been trying to get legal recognition for years. Its leaders say that the party has been unable to do so because it offers an Islamic alternative that would make it more popular than the Brotherhood. The fact that all religious political parties are banned has not prevented the Brotherhood getting 17 deputies elected to the 454-member parliament, where they sit as independents and constitute by far the largest opposition bloc.

Following the death of the Brotherhood's leader, Maamoun al-Hodeiby, last January, Egyptian newspapers ran stories headed "Egypt's Largest Opposition Group Appoints New Leader" alongside stories about Brotherhood members detained on charges of "trying to revive the banned movement." Thus the government conducts its delicate balancing act, acknowledging the organization's existence while holding it up as a threat. As one left-wing activist told me, "If there were free elections tomorrow, the Brotherhood would win 60 percent of seats—and that's what Mubarak wants people, especially the U.S., to think. You choose: me or the Islamists." Most other commentators say the Brotherhood would win 20 to 30 percent of the vote—enough to enter a coalition, with either the Left or the NDP itself.

Another reason for the government's carrot-and-stick approach with the Brotherhood is to distract from a widespread feeling that the NDP has no real ideology of its own. Ask Egyptians about Mubarak's policies, and the most common response is: well at least he hasn't taken us to war. Officially, the NDP's policy is to "be in line with religious values, traditions, and customs, derive legislation from Islamic Sharia, and to strike deep roots for democracy." But "there is no ideology," Milad Hanna, a commentator on Coptic Christian affairs, told me. "The NDP is not right or left or anything. As a result, different ministers have different ideas about morality, democracy, and economic liberalization. Mubarak rules by conducting this orchestra and raising the tunes played by certain ministers according to what he thinks is needed, at home and abroad."

Yet the Brotherhood is also criticized for lacking policies beyond advocating the implementation of Sharia law. Its programmatic pronouncements appear to be limited to changing the morals of society rather than to changing society itself. While, for example, the organization's views on the role of the family in society are clear, no one seems to know what its economic policies might be.

Multiple Identities

For many Egyptian intellectuals the increasing influence of conservative Islam is a tragedy, as Islam in Egypt has usually been characterized by tolerance. Not only do the country's Copts—estimated at 10 percent of a population of 70 million—generally live peacefully side by side with Muslims, but the largely Sunni population has traditionally tolerated Shia Muslims.

The most popular mosque in Cairo is that of al-Hussein (the son of Ali, after whose followers Shiism is named) while the city's al-Azhar University, probably the best-known Islamic university in the world, was set up by Shia scholars in the tenth century. But as Wahhabism has taken hold in the Egyptian context, its judgment that the Shia are worse than infidels has gained ground among the population. An Egyptian woman drinking tea next to me in a Cairo café last winter while watching the devastation of the Bam earthquake on the news asked God to have mercy on the Iranians. Then she said, "This has happened because

they're Shia, they're bad Muslims. And this immoral country is next."

Egypt's Pharaonic identity has also contributed to social cohesion. The festival of Sham el-Nessim, celebrating the arrival of spring, dates from Pharaonic times and is celebrated by all creeds. When he accepted his Nobel Prize for literature in 1988, the Egyptian author Naguib Mahfouz proudly said that he was the product of two civilizations: the Pharaonic and the Islamic. A few years later, Mahfouz was stabbed in the neck and nearly killed by Islamists for his allegedly anti-Islamic writings.

While problems arise when someone converts from Islam to Christianity or vice-versa, the country's two religions share surprising common ground. Both use the same name for God (Allah), and Muslims and Christians dress alike, worship on the same day (Friday), have the same word and standards for what is socially forbidden (*eib,* or shame), and visit each other during their respective religious festivals.

In order to get into a church in the slum district of Wiley, I have to pick my way through members of a Muslim congregation praying in the street due to lack of space in their mosque. Once inside, people tell me that they have no problem with their Muslim neighbors, "although they do tend to want to build several mosques as soon as one church is built." When the subject of the war in Iraq comes up, the priest says, "George Bush is a liar. He lied so he could get into Iraq. He hates Muslims, and I hate people who hate people." Copts are steadfast in their solidarity with the Iraqis and with the Palestinians—and not only because they would be in trouble if they had any other opinion.

Milad Hanna says that when he gives interviews on the situation in Iraq he is excessively critical of U.S. policy. "But the U.S. and British ambassadors here realize that I have to do that to preserve cohesion between Copts and Muslims." Egypt is fortunate to have these different identities to draw on, Hanna says, and should be wary of focusing on a purely Islamic identity: "The individual who concentrates on a unique sense of belonging is driven to bigotry, and is capable of drifting toward violence and terrorism."

Morality and Censorship

Ironically, the same Gulf Arabs who exported Wahhabist Islamic conservatism to Egypt in the 1970s and 1980s today come to what they perceive as liberal Egypt for the kind of good time they have difficulty finding in their own countries. Every summer, Cairo's many five-star hotels overflow with tourists from the Arabian Gulf who can be seen breakfasting with the young Egyptian male and female prostitutes they have rented for the night. One taxi driver claimed his specialty was satisfying sexually frustrated women from the Gulf in exchange for hard currency. During the summer season, Cairenes rent their apartments for five times the normal price to people they refer to simply as "Arabs."

While the behavior of "Arabs" provide Cairenes with an opportunity to sneer at their supposedly zealous Muslim neighbors from across the Red Sea, they must also confront the contradictions in their own society. Last year, the American import *Matrix Reloaded* was banned, ostensibly because the film "tackles the issue of the creator and his creations, searching the origin of creation and the issue of compulsion and free will," according to the state-run film censorship committee. "Such religious issues, raised in previous times, caused crises [and] screening the movie may cause troubles and harm social peace." But many believe that the ban was political, as the hero's home in the film is a place called Zion. According to the Egyptian critic, Wael Abdel Fatah, "The press launched a campaign to stop showing the movie, saying that it reflects Zionist ideas, and promotes Jewish and Zionist beliefs."[1] Dislike and distrust of Israel unites Egyptians.

"Everyone here has someone in their family who was killed or injured in wars with Israel," one army officer told me. He went on to say that there will be another war with Israel, so long as "that country's flag continues to represent the Zionist dream of a greater Israel, with two blue lines representing its extent, from the Euphrates to the Nile, and the Star of David in the middle."

Meanwhile, the *Passion of the Christ* is shown to packed theaters, despite the fact that Islam forbids the depiction of any of the prophets, including Christ. A professor of media at al-Azhar University said that the government had allowed the film to be shown because "it withholds from Jews their claims that they are innocent of the Christ's blood," while a member of al-Azhar's Islamic Research Council said that it would have been inappropriate to interfere with a movie that concerns the Christian faith and not Muslims.[2]

Another film, last year's *Sahar al Leyali* (Sleepless Nights) was a hit because it dealt with social issues rarely confronted today, although their depiction was commonplace in the 1960s and 1970s. According to one Cairene, the film was important because it dealt with the issue of a woman who is attracted to a man other than her husband. "We never usually talk about this," he told me. "If a married woman is attracted to a man other than her husband, we kill them. That's not religion, that's tradition."

The world of publishing fares little better. The government's policy is to allow religious conservatives to ban "immoral" books and harass secular thinkers in an effort to preserve its role as moral arbiter. Nevertheless, books banned by al-Azhar are no longer necessarily prohibited by the government, which now considers the university's opinion "consultative." And, not surprisingly, there is evidence that banning a book often increases its sales.[3]

While government and opposition newspapers proliferate, self-censorship is the norm, and certain subjects remain taboo, in particular the role of the army, relations between Copts and Muslims, and corruption within the president's family. People read the papers but don't necessarily believe them—there's even a popular expression *kalam garayid* (newspaper words) to deride someone's conversation as grossly exaggerated or ridiculous.

The recently appointed head of the State Information Service, Taha Abd El-Aleem, vaunts press freedoms: "There are no restrictions about writing on any subject, even Israel."[4] But then the government is not the only censor. Egypt's Press Syndicate says it will blacklist members who interview Israeli officials. El-Aleem dismisses this as "moral pressure." But the English-language *Middle East Times* had enough of being censored at press time and having to publish blank pages, so its editors now present the paper to the authorities before printing. (Surprisingly, the articles cut by the government are available on the Internet.[5])

In March, the law allowing jail terms of up to two years for libel was repealed. Before this, journalists and editors were regularly hauled into criminal court for allegedly libeling politicians, which proved an effective means of stifling criticism. But calls for greater press freedoms have been ignored. As elsewhere in the Middle East, the Egyptian government defends its censorship policies by saying that they reflect the popular will. This past January, the government banned several Arab pop videos it deemed too seductive, citing viewers' complaints. It is not clear exactly who complained to the authorities, but as such videos are regularly criticized by religious authorities, it is thought that the government was once again trying to gain the moral high ground.

Meanwhile, progress on human rights has been uneven. Nongovernmental organizations that work to bring to justice police officers accused of the all-too-common practice of torture are applauded. But few are willing to take on such issues as women's

rights or gay rights because this encroaches on Islamic territory. The government's clampdown on Cairo's gay community over the last few years is widely seen as an attempt to appease Islamists. In 2001, some 50 men were arrested at a boat party on the Nile and accused of "habitual debauchery." Ironically, the ensuing trials were held in the military courts usually reserved for trying alleged Islamic fundamentalists.[6] The contradictions inherent in the prosecution's accusation that the organizer of the boat party was guilty of "proselytizing homosexuality, engaging in devil-worship, and being an Islamic fundamentalist" went unnoticed.[7] Some Egyptian human rights groups refused to support the accused lest they be seen as advocating homosexuality. "Sometimes you have to make tough decisions," said Hisham Kassem of the Egyptian Organization of Human Rights. "It would kill the concept of human rights in Egypt."

Democratic Pressures

Most Egyptians appear to care little about political reform, being far more concerned about the depressed economic situation. "Under Sadat food was cheap, under Mubarak you get nothing for a pound," one worker told me. The Egyptian pound has lost almost half its value since it was floated in January 2003, which has led to huge price increases even for basic foodstuffs. While there have been mass demonstrations against the war in Iraq and the assassination of Palestinian Hamas leaders, most commentators say that Egyptians will not take to the streets over economic conditions because they simply do not believe they can change anything. "Individuals think there is no such thing as a collective solution," says one local journalist. "People think the government is unaware of their problems." The poor economic situation also propels people toward religious conservatism, he says. "People feel pressure from all sides, they feel economic hardship, they feel that the U.S. is controlling them and that they cannot fight for themselves. They feel that nothing is of their choice, and that's when you turn to religion."

As elsewhere in the region, Washington's Greater Middle East Initiative is looked on with great skepticism. The likelihood that U.S.- or European-sponsored democratic reform in the region will, paradoxically, lead to those most ideologically opposed to the West coming to power is not lost on Middle Eastern regimes keen to stay in control.

The recent Alexandria Conference on Human Rights in the Middle East produced a far-reaching declaration of aims that, according to the *Economist*, "could have been drafted by Thomas Jefferson."[8] The conference called for constitutional reforms to enshrine the separation of powers, free elections, free speech, freedom to form parties, administrative transparency, and respect for fixed terms of office. Human rights activists are not optimistic about the possibility of reform, however. "The Alexandria Conference made everyone temporarily happy," one activist told me. "Now Mubarak can tell Bush that his son Gamal is going to take over and will be even more obedient to U.S. policy than him."

While Sadat and Mubarak both served as their predecessors' vice presidents, Mubarak has so far resisted calls for him to appoint a vice president and presumed successor. Many Egyptians believe that the 76-year-old is grooming 40-year-old Gamal, his youngest son, for the job. The heir-apparent is an advocate of political and economic reform, but many Egyptians feel that creating a dynasty such as exists in Syria would be against the 1952 revolution's republican ideals, in which many still believe.

Likewise, such apparently progressive gestures as the creation, earlier this year, of the government-sponsored National Council for Human Rights (NCHR) under the headline-catching leadership of former U.N. secretary general Boutros Boutros-Ghali and the anticipated abolition of the country's

emergency laws are seen as sweeteners leading up to Mubarak handing power to his son. But, activists point out, the government doesn't need emergency laws to arbitrarily detain people and suppress opposition. Even as the NCHR was promising to ask the government to repeal the emergency laws, Boutros-Ghali warned that "the fight against terrorism complicates the fight for human rights."[9] Many expect tough new antiterrorism laws such as those introduced in the United States and elsewhere after 9/11 to be introduced in Egypt after the "traditional" emergency laws are repealed.

But Mubarak's son is not the only possible successor to the president. Some believe that Egypt's intelligence chief, 68-year-old Gen. Omar Suleiman, is next in line. Suleiman organized the suppression of Islamic militants in the early 1990s and may therefore be a smarter choice when it comes to restraining political Islam—but probably not when it comes to increased democracy.

Given the climate of religious conservatism in Egypt, moderate voices find it increasingly difficult to be heard. "Society is in crisis when the people are on the far right or far left or very religious as is happening now. The current international situation [in Iraq and the Palestinian Territories] does not help moderates. You cannot go for moderate thinking when you feel humiliated every day," says one liberal.

Islamists have so far been able to push the idea that Western ideals of freedom are nothing but a cynical bid to rip apart Egypt's moral fabric, while the government encourages the popular belief that calls for democratic reform, particularly those coming from the United States, are nothing more than a smokescreen to hide neo-imperial ambitions. The United States, it is popularly thought, wants to take control of the Middle East and its natural resources. For most Egyptians, the war in Iraq provides proof of this.

The pervasive sense of malaise, the feeling of drifting in the doldrums, albeit with the sense of menacing currents below—all this is very different from the Cairo brimming with great plans and bold initiatives in the heyday of Nasser and Sadat. Then senior Foreign Ministry officials would remark to visiting correspondents, with a touch of weary condescension, "You must understand that Egypt is the only true nation in the Arab Middle East—the rest are but tribes with flags." It would appear that with a weary government's give-a-crumb-to-everybody policy Egypt's own form of tribalism is resurfacing, adding a new element of uncertainty to a fissionable region. ●

Notes

1. "Egypt Bans 'Too Religious' Matrix," www.bbcnews.com, June 11, 2003.

2. Charles Levinson, "Arab Censors Giving 'Passion' Wide Latitude," *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 1, 2004.

3. Gabrielle Menezes, "The Art of the Ban," *Cairo Times*, January 1, 2004.

4. Cam McGrath, "Interview with Taha Abdel Alim," *Egypt Today*, January 2004.

5. See www.metimes.com/cens/censored.htm.

6. "In a Time of Torture: The Assault on Justice in Egypt's Crackdown on Homosexual Conduct," Human Rights Watch report, March 2004.

7. Issandr El Amrani, "Morality on Trial," *Cairo Times*, November 22, 2001.

8. "Freedom Calls, At Last?" *Economist*, April 1, 2004.

9. "Egypt Rights Body to Demand End to Emergency Laws," Reuters, April 8, 2004.