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Competing Rather than Collaborating: Egyptian Nongovernmental Organizations in Turbulence

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Abstract: This article examines how the Egyptian government produced a legal, regulatory, and operational environment designed to “divide and throttle” the country’s NGO sector. We identify a two-pronged government strategy toward the NGO sector – namely, flooding the field and bureaucratic overload – the effect of which was to fragment and weaken the sector and prevent it from forming an effective oppositional bloc. We furthermore argue that this government strategy promoted competition rather than cooperation among NGOs. Organizations espoused competing strategic visions for the sector that divided organizations into camps of “charity,” “development,” and “advocacy.” The ultimate consequence of this competition was a sector of NGOs that, instead of valuing pluralism and building upon diverse comparative advantages to create sector-wide strength, belittled each other and failed to coalesce. Egypt’s NGO sector became a tool of the state rather than a force for collective empowerment or a voice for societal change.

Keywords: nonprofit competition, NGO, state-NGO relations, Egypt

1 Introduction

For decades, the Egyptian state pursued policies that divided, constrained, and controlled Egypt’s non-governmental organization (NGO) sector.¹ While the precise policies pursued by successive Presidents – Nasser, Sadat and

¹ Egypt’s NGO sector consists of both associations and foundations. The distinction between them is both legal and practical. Associations, to which this paper refers as NGOs, are established based upon membership and engage in charitable, development or advocacy activities. Foundations are established with a financial endowment. While most foundations are operational, many also are grant-making.

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Mubarak – each had their distinct nuances, the end result was a weak and fragmented sector. The Egyptian state saw a strong and cohesive NGO sector as a threat to state power and control, and used both official policy tools and unofficial intimidation tactics to divide and debilitate the NGO sector. Throughout Mubarak’s rule, legal and regulatory oversight limited the activities that NGOs could legally pursue, and also constrained their ability to communicate, coordinate, and collaborate. Informal oversight by the State Security Services (SSI) injected fear and anxiety into the sector and exacerbated a lack of transparency among organizations. While the number of organizations proliferated, the power of the sector and ability to bring about change was notably limited.

This article argues that the Mubarak regime produced a legal, regulatory, and operational environment designed to “divide and throttle” Egypt’s NGO sector.² The regime’s strategy can be broken down into two primary tactics: flooding and bureaucracy. First, the regime encouraged the proliferation of many small organizations. This flooding of the sector forced NGOs to compete for funding and prestige, and an informal but widely understood ban on large organizations and organizational collaborations ensured that the sector remained weak and divided. Second, the regime bureaucratically overloaded the sector, requiring organizations to make regular and detailed reports to the Ministry of Social Solidarity (MOSS) regarding all aspects of organizational operations. This formal oversight was accompanied by informal surveillance by the SSI and produced a sector that was too busy filing reports and too fearful of government repression to act collectively in an oppositional capacity.

The regime’s divide and throttle strategy resulted not simply in a weak and fragmented sector but also produced a high level of competition among Egyptian NGOs. Organizations espoused competing strategic visions for the sector: charity, development, and advocacy. While nonprofit sector lifecycle/generation theory sees the professionalization and evolution of the sector as natural and pre-determined (Korten 1990), in Egypt the sector did not simply professionalize and evolve from charity to development to “advocacy” as a linear advancement. Rather, these sub-sectors did not replace one another and continue to coexist. The ultimate consequence of this competition was a sector of organizations that, instead of valuing pluralism and building upon diverse

² While we are inspired by Brumberg’s (2003) concept of “divide and rule” to describe authoritarian regimes’ efforts to weaken the NGO sector, we use the term “throttle” instead of “rule” because it better reflects the Egyptian context. We assert that the Mubarak regime did not rule per se through the NGO sector but, rather, simply worked to keep the image of a freely operating sector while ensuring the sector remained weak and fragmented.

comparative advantages to create sector-wide strength, belittled each other and failed to coalesce. Egypt's NGO sector became a tool of the state rather than a force for collective empowerment or a voice for societal change.

The article proceeds as follows. It begins by introducing the theoretical framework, in which we contrast the dominant literature that frames NGOs as sites of collective empowerment with regionally oriented scholarship that highlights the ways in which rulers of autocratic states use policy tools to divide and weaken NGO sectors. The article then introduces the concept of “divide and throttle” and explains the strategies of field flooding and bureaucratic overload. After laying out the data and methodology, we offer an overview of the NGO sector in Egypt. Next, the article examines the effects of “divide and throttle” on NGO competition, and argues that competition manifested between organizations with divergent strategic visions. The article concludes with a discussion of the post-2011 operational climate for the NGO sector.

2 Theoretical Framework

The dominant literature on NGOs frames these organizations as sites of collective empowerment, where numerous groups gather to advance their interests. From the perspective of mostly Western theorists, NGOs are thought to represent citizen interests in policy spheres, serve as watchdogs over the government, hold public officials accountable, cultivate norms of civic engagement among members, and, through their very proliferation, foster a culture of pluralism (Tocqueville 2003; Diamond 1997; Putnam 1993, 2000; Diamond 1994). The fulfillment of these roles is in turn thought to enhance democratic government. However, in order to carry out these democracy-building roles, NGOs require a degree of independence from the state. In Western contexts, such independence is typically enshrined into law and rigorously enforced. While NGOs may complement or substitute for the state in providing services (Young 2000), or serve as government contractors (Pettijohn et al. 2013; Smith and Lipsky 1993), they nonetheless enjoy relative independence.

In non-Western contexts, the political environments within which NGOs work are far more complex (Lewis 2001; Dunn and Hann 1996). NGOs must navigate a host of legal and regulatory obstacles, and are therefore far less likely to be independent of the state to the same degree as their counterparts in advanced liberal democracies (Gash and Rutter 2011; Hoffman 2010; Sharma and Gupta 2006). While many NGOs do serve a complementary or substitutive role, NGOs in autocratic and semi-autocratic states are generally either co-opted

by the state or fully repressed by it (Heurlin 2010; Najam 2000; Coston 1998). As a result, these NGOs are unable to fulfill the democracy-building roles of their counterparts in the West.

Researchers of NGO-government relations in China, Russia, and the Middle East, for example, argue that the proliferation of NGOs in these regions has not led to a corresponding movement toward democracy. On the contrary, ruling regimes have co-opted NGOs, forcing them to complement or collaborate with the state in providing social welfare services and preventing them from mobilizing oppositional forces (Hsu 2010; Liverani 2008; Jamal 2007; Albrecht 2005; Abdelrahman 2004; Brumberg 2003; Balzer 2003; Wiktorowicz 2002). In doing so, these regimes have not only prevented NGOs from acting as agents of democratization but also used NGOs to bolster their legitimacy and consolidate their hegemonic rule.

Scholars have identified a number of strategies autocratic rulers use to co-opt and control organizations, including, most importantly, formal regulation and oversight. Strict NGO laws relegate organizations' activities to social and economic development realms, prohibiting activities that could be deemed political, and imposing hefty fines on organizations that venture into areas of oppositional politics or advocacy (Herrold Forthcoming; Agati 2007). Bureaucratic red tape, including time-consuming registration and reporting requirements, constrain organizations' time and resources and give ruling regimes a window into, and control over, organizational processes and fundraising activities (Atia 2013; Balzer 2003; Wiktorowicz 2000).

A second strategy of co-optation and control occurs informally. Members of the state security forces infiltrate organizations, showing up unannounced on NGO premises and at board meetings, and screening organizations' phone calls and emails (Atia 2013; Abdelrahman 2004; Ibrahim 2002). In addition to providing the government another stream of insight into, and control over, NGO activities, this surveillance and NGOs understanding that they are being watched, serves to inject fear and a culture of secrecy into the sector.

While bureaucratic regulations and government monitoring serve as proverbial "sticks" in autocratic regimes' co-optation strategies, rulers also incentivize NGO acquiescence through the "carrot" of clientelism (Howell 2015; Hsu 2010; Jamal 2007; Balzer 2003). In these contexts, NGOs that cooperate, and indeed even collaborate, with the ruling regime are granted access to resources and benefits that their less cooperative counterparts are denied. Cooperative and collaborative organizations, while still monitored, are often subject to less restrictive surveillance as trust is established between the organization and the regime.

In addition to formally and informally monitoring and regulating independently-formed NGOs, many autocracies create their own government-led NGOs

(GONGOS) to manage debates on politically sensitive issues such as human rights and women's empowerment (Lewis 2013; Stacher 2012; Heurlin 2010; Sharma 2006; Yom 2005; Balzer 2003; Wiktorowicz 2000). Such organizations allow regimes to control policy discussions on issues that they deem potentially threatening while simultaneously crowding out other organizations from working on these topics.

Autocratic rulers use the aforementioned strategies to not only control NGO sectors, but also to fragment and further debilitate them. Brumberg's "divide and rule" strategy is particularly pertinent to Middle Eastern contexts. We build on the "divide and rule" concept but argue that in addition to ruling, the Egyptian state sought to debilitate the sector by pursuing a "divide and throttle" approach. We further argue that a precise component of this strategy was the promotion of competition among organizations.³ Despite "impressive" growth in the size of the sector, organizations competed with one another and were prevented from cohering into a vibrant oppositional force or adopting democracy building roles.

3 Data and Methodology

Our analysis is based upon data from nearly 200 interviews and focus groups conducted over ten years with leaders within Egypt's NGO sector. Data collection began in December 2005 and continued through January 2015. Interviews were conducted with representatives from approximately 110 unique organizations. Of the 200 interviews conducted, approximately 60% were pre-2011, with the majority of pre-uprising interviews conducted in 2006 and a majority of post-uprising interviews conducted in 2011–2012. Interviews were conducted every year between 2005 and 2014.

Semi-structured and structured interviews were conducted with: directors and support staff of the most active Egyptian NGOs and foundations, ministerial staff/government employees, consultants in the NGO sector, and international donors to Egyptian NGOs. A focus group was conducted with five philanthropic foundation directors and two additional focus groups were held with NGOs. Organizations were guaranteed anonymity in order to protect their identities in a time of political uncertainty.

³ We do not assert that Egypt is exceptional because its NGOs and foundations compete, but rather that the fostering of competition was a key axis of state policy towards the sector.

4 Egypt's NGO Sector: A Brief Overview

Egypt has a long history of voluntary sector activity, with conservative estimates of 40,000 registered NGOs working across eighteen different fields of activity. Officially, NGOs in Egypt are classified as *gam'iyyat*, or associations, and *mu'as-sasat*, or philanthropic foundations. Interviewees distinguished between three types of associations, to which they generally referred to as "NGOs": charitable, developmental, and advocacy.⁴ Charitable NGOs were thought to constitute the vast majority of the NGO sector due to their historic significance as welfare service providers and their reliance on individual donations. These organizations offered goods and services that helped individuals to meet their basic needs. Development NGOs were generally goal-driven, and claimed to be working towards systemic and sustainable solutions to socio-economic challenges. Advocacy NGOs worked primarily at the policy level, focusing their efforts on public policy advocacy and legal aid. Whereas charitable NGOs relied primarily on local donations for support, development and advocacy NGOs often received significant funds from international donors.

Interviewees identified three types of philanthropic foundations operating in Egypt: corporate foundations, private foundations, and community foundations.⁵ Corporate foundations usually began as a socially responsible business department affiliated with a parent corporation. In recent years many of these departments splintered off into independently registered corporate foundations. Private foundations received their grantmaking budgets from wealthy individuals, families, or corporations. Unlike corporate and independent foundations, community foundations sought donations from members of the communities that they served and targeted their grantmaking to the communities in which they were based.

The state both drove and tightly controlled the proliferation of NGOs and foundations in Egypt, crafting a sector that would assist in welfare provision and pose no significant threat to state power. The primary tool that Presidents Nasser, Sadat, and Mubarak used to control NGOs was Egypt's Law of Associations. First enacted in 1956, the Law has been regularly amended to consolidate state power over the NGO sector (see Atia 2013, 45). The current law, Law 84 of 2002, created a new legal category for foundations while giving the government the jurisdiction to regulate organizations' registration, activities, fundraising, governance, and dissolution. The law forbids military or political

⁴ It should be noted that these categories are not officially designated in the law, but were discussed by interviewees across the sector, including NGOs, foundation directors and ministerial staff.

⁵ Again, these are not legal categories.

activities, acts threatening national unity, breaking general order or ethics, and activities that discriminate among citizens. The vague, sweeping language of the law allows for wide government discretion in applying its mandates. Egypt's Ministry of Social Solidarity is responsible for administering Law 84 of 2002, however the State Security Services is also well known for infiltrating NGOs' activities and correspondences and provides another mechanism for government oversight and control.

Despite the stringent legal and regulatory environment, Egypt's NGO sector experienced rapid growth under the reign of President Hosni Mubarak, doubling in size from 14,000 in 1993 (Sullivan 1994) to around 40,000 in 2014 (International Center for Not-for-Profit Law 2016). As the Sadat and Mubarak regimes promoted private investment and scaled back the state's role in welfare provision, NGOs and philanthropic foundations filled the gap. One might wonder why NGOs proliferated in such a hostile environment, yet for decades participation in the NGO sector or religious establishments was one of the few ways in which citizens could participate in their society. In recent years, some NGOs working on sensitive issues like human rights registered as civil companies as ways of evading bureaucracy and repression, and the rise of social entrepreneurship has also opened up new avenues for participation. The more recent establishment of so-called social enterprises is in part a product of the hostile operating environment for NGOs; thus young people seeking to bring about innovation and change seek alternative regulatory forms. Nonetheless, the legacy of NGO creation is strong, and this institutional form continues to be most prevalent.

5 Divide and Throttle: State Policy and the Weakening of the NGO Sector

The “divide and throttle” strategy involved two primary tactics: 1) flooding the field with many small organizations, and 2) overloading organizations with bureaucratic red tape. Combined with the stringent legal environment, it resulted in a sector that was fragmented and weak vis-à-vis the state. Not only were NGOs fearful of collaborating, they also considered each other to be competitors and rivals.

5.1 Flooding the Field

The NGO sector was a crowded one, consisting of many small and inactive NGOs that lacked influence and often duplicated services. While Law 84 of 2002 does

not officially limit the size of NGOs or foundations, it was commonly understood within the sector that large organizations would be targeted and harassed by MOSS and the SSI. As a result, NGO leaders felt that they had to be careful not to allow their organizations to become too large or too influential, and engaged in self-policing. “The problem with large scale is that you become influential and a threat. As long as you’re small no one bothers you. When you show you can influence people, have direction, make a difference, change, then [government officials] get threatened,” explained the leader of one organization (Anonymous Interview, 28 November 2006). Other NGOs echoed this sentiment. One said “We have less than 30 members, when we get any larger the state starts to feel threatened” (Anonymous Interview, 3 December 2006).

The result of this government harassment of large organizations was a field rife with duplication, inefficiencies, and inter-organizational rivalries. The proliferation of many small NGOs created fierce competition for funding and for recognition as the preferred provider of a particular service. The director of one of Egypt’s private foundations lamented, “We have 43,000 NGOs in Egypt and I partner with NGOs but too many don’t have an impact. They might consolidate. But at the end of the day there are only a few foundations. There is an inequality between supply and demand [for funding]” (Anonymous Interview, 24 June 2014). An NGO founder noted that this imbalance between the number of NGOs seeking funds and the amount of money available created, “a competitive field in which if others gain you lose” (Anonymous Interview, 7 February 2012). Indeed, NGO employees indicated that their organizations “fought each other” and “isolated themselves” from each other, and that organizational leaders often begrudge each other (Anonymous Interview, 26 October 2011). As one organizational leader told us, this was especially true amongst the larger organizations “The larger organizations, though, they don’t want to cooperate. Everyone wants credit. You know [names of organizations], they don’t want to work together. They are using charity as a public relations tool because advertising and marketing pages in newspapers are up to 2,000 Egyptian pounds now” (Anonymous Interview, 15 November 2006).

NGO leaders recognized the inefficiencies of this isolation and competition, and many expressed a desire to coordinate activities and collaborate on various initiatives and projects. Like large organizations, however, NGO collaborations were seen as potential threats to government dominance due to their wider scope for influence in society. Thus the government discouraged collaboration among NGOs through the same harassment it used to prevent NGOs from growing large. A youth-empowerment NGO leader explained, “The biggest obstacle to cooperation between organizations is that when people get influential the government shuts them all down. On an organizational level the biggest

issue we have, and this is the same for most NGOs around town, is a lack of commitment, planning, organization, and coordination” (Anonymous Interview, 6 December 2006).

The government also encouraged the creation of GONGOs designed to control the agenda and manage debates on potentially contentious topics such as human rights and women’s empowerment. While these GONGOs lacked policy-making power, they created a facade of government interest in democracy and the improvement of human rights. GONGOs steered debates away from radical ideas or initiatives that might threaten government hegemony and bring about democratic political reform and also created divisions within activist NGO communities between those who supported, and served as members of, the GONGOs and those who saw GONGOs as illegitimate tools of the state (Heurlin 2010; Stacher 2012). It also introduced a culture of suspicion, and encouraged small cliques to form within the sector.

5.2 Bureaucratic Overload

The second prong of the government’s strategy to divide and throttle Egypt’s NGO sector consisted of a multi-layered monitoring system that included both formal and informal oversight. Formally, the government produced immense red tape for NGOs and foundations, requiring them to make regular and detailed reports to MOSS on nearly all of their activities. This bureaucratic overload served as a concrete, regular reminder to organizations that the government was watching them. One interviewee explained that MOSS officials regularly visited the organization to review its records, often arriving unannounced. “We must tell the Ministry of Social Solidarity about everything we do. We keep notebooks of all of our activities and finances. Every NGO must do this. We have a notebook for board meeting minutes, for the budget (every revenue and expense), for donations, for capital and assets. It is illegal to do anything without the Ministry knowing. It takes a lot of time and stops our work” (Anonymous Interview, 6 February 2010).

Burdensome reporting requirements and government oversight were common complaints of interviewees. One NGO leader grumbled, “Whenever you need permission from the government it takes a very long time. In the last few weeks we have had an auditor from the Ministry of Social Solidarity here to review all of our files since 2001. They have been working for five weeks to review all of these files” (Anonymous Interview, 15 May 2012). Adding to the strain, interviewees felt that there was very little they could do without first receiving government permission. “Control is the word,” explained the director

of an umbrella organization. “You have to get permission to do anything” (Anonymous Interview, 21 February 2010).

Formal oversight by MOSS was only part of the government surveillance that NGOs faced. Members of the SSI were also known to keep a close watch over the NGO sector. SSI representatives showed up unannounced at meetings, phoned NGO employees to let them know that “big brother is watching” (Anonymous Interview, 6 August 2014), and were assumed to screen employees’ phone calls and emails. “We are all under surveillance, we are watched. By the government, by the intelligence, we don’t know who is watching whom,” explained the director of one organization (Anonymous Interview, 24 June 2014). This led many NGOs to “keep their heads down, not wanting to be exposed” (Anonymous Interview, 22 October 2011). Another director of an organization said, “We all know that there is a member of SSI who sits in on our meetings and keeps the state informed of our work. It’s just part of NGO life” (Anonymous Interview, 3 December 2006).

The predominant sentiment among interviewees was that this government oversight produced a climate of fear and distrust within the NGO sector that discouraged collaboration. An active donor to mosques complained, “There is no cooperation between mosques – each one is operating in a desert island. This is because they can’t transfer funds between wealthier and poorer mosques, because of the rules around monitoring of accounts and the fear of national security” (Anonymous Interview, 15 October 2006). Others echoed this sentiment, “In terms of coordination, well no one talks to anyone so there is none. No trust and a fear of government are serious handicaps to coordination,” explained an NGO consultant (Anonymous Interview, 25 October 2006). Numerous interviewees described Egypt’s NGO sector as “fragmented,” explaining that neither NGOs nor foundations engaged in, or actively promoted, collaborations, partnerships, or even coordination. When asked what the biggest obstacle to the sector’s success was, many NGOs stated it was the lack of collaboration and coordination. The fear of being targeted and shut down by the government for engaging in such collaboration, however, overpowered organizations’ desire to work together.

6 Manifestations of NGO Competition

While there are numerous nuances to the strategic position of NGOs, the organizations included in this study generally espoused one of three strategic visions for Egypt’s NGO sector: charity, development, or advocacy. NGOs defined themselves as operating within one of the three categories, and criticized the work of

organizations working in the other two fields. While there is no legal basis for a distinction between charity NGOs, development NGOs, and advocacy NGOs, interviewees held clear notions of what type of work was done by organizations in each group and stressed that their own strategic vision embodied the way that the NGO sector as a whole should operate. Rather than supporting the concepts of pluralism and specialization of NGOs within the sector, organizations advocated for their own strategies and sought to undermine other strategies across the sector. Charity and development NGOs had competing visions about how to best advance Egypt's economic and human development, while development and advocacy NGOs had competing visions about how to best advance Egypt's political and social development.

6.1 Economic and Human Development: Competition between Charity and Development NGOs

Development NGOs, along with philanthropic foundations that support development work, were quick to distinguish and distance themselves from the concept of charity. Interviewees whose organizations worked in development described charity as providing handouts to the poor, and they often connected the notion of charity to the religious obligation of *zakat*, or alms giving. By contrast, they described development as an effort to build the capacities of individuals and communities to sustainably support their own growth and development. A number of interviewees used a familiar proverb to illustrate the difference between charity and development. Charity, they said, was giving a man a fish to eat. Development was teaching the man how to fish (Atia 2013).

The work of charity NGOs generally centered on providing services to needy populations. Orphanages, soup kitchens, and health clinics were commonly cited examples. Development NGOs also provided services, but with the aim of building the capabilities of beneficiary communities to ultimately provide for themselves. The focus of these organizations was most often on education, skill upgrading, job training and job creation, microfinance and microenterprise and the promotion of civic engagement. Nearly all of the Egyptian philanthropic foundations included in our study indicated that their funding supported development activities and development organizations.

The criticisms that development NGO and foundation officials levied against charity NGOs fell into two major categories. First, they claimed that charity was not “sustainable.” A program officer at one of Egypt's private foundations said, “Charity is only giving money to people. It is not sustainable. After people spend

the money, the money is finished. Development is if you give a product or service or project that people can develop and keep running. This is more beneficial than charity” (Anonymous Interview, 9 February 2012). A program officer from a different foundation echoed this view. With charity, she said, “people are getting food and blankets but their lives aren’t changing. A cancer hospital was built entirely on charitable giving. There were TV ads and the First Lady marketed it. Now there are sustainability problems because there is no plan” (Anonymous Interview, 28 January 2010). Yet another interviewee was even more blunt. “From day one we are not for charity and we will not change” (Anonymous Interview, 31 January 2010). These three foundations worked in different areas – the first in literacy, the second in community development, and the third in job training – but all stressed that their work was contributing lasting solutions to social problems. A youth-oriented NGO director stated, “I am a firm believer in development over charity. Five to ten years from now, civil society development organizations will play an even larger role in society” (Anonymous Interview, 31 October 2006).

The second major criticism that members of development organizations levied against their charitable counterparts surrounded the concept of empowerment and self-sufficiency. They criticized charity NGOs for perpetuating a culture of dependency and for stagnating social progress. A leader of a philanthropic foundation explained,

“We have the power to work with NGOs and change the way they are doing business. We give them money to shift their services from charity to development. The charity is killing [beneficiaries’] dignity. We use grant making to influence how [NGOs] do their business. We try to change relations between women and NGOs. [The women] become partners because they get loans, not handouts. There is a change of power relations. Women no longer need handouts” (Anonymous Interview, 14 July 2011).

Many scholars of Egypt’s NGO sector also looked down upon charity work. “The charitable model of civic engagement is problematic because it reinforces stereotypes and there is little taken away beyond the immediate situation. There is little change in the living and thinking of society,” said a researcher of civil society at a prominent think tank (Anonymous Interview, 22 February 2006). The government also actively encouraged development over charity work. As an employee at the Ministry of Social Solidarity told us, “The Ministry’s encouragement for organizations to shift from charity to development was based on the largest problem that our country and society faces. The solutions must address poverty. We have seen growth in the sector fueled by development organizations working in development, small and medium enterprises, loans, computer training centers, etc.” (Anonymous Interview, 3 October 2006).

On the other hand, charities often criticized development work for its bloated budgets, overly professionalized staff and a lack of compassion or commitment to those most in need. Many charity leaders argued that their organizations were far better “able to reach excluded groups or neighborhoods more effectively” and some religious charities argued that by combining methods they were able to be more effective at development. “We combine charity with religious lessons, which has a big effect on human development” (Anonymous Interview, 15 March 2006).

6.2 Political and Social Development: Competition between Development and Advocacy NGOs

A second sphere of competing strategic visions was found in the political realm. Here, the division occurred between organizations that provided or funded development services and those that focused primarily on advocacy. The development and advocacy NGOs included in this study, along with the philanthropic foundations that supported development work, espoused a vision for more individual liberties in Egyptian society as well as a more democratic Egypt. They diverged sharply, however, in their views on how to bring about democratic political reform. Advocacy NGOs worked primarily at the level of national public policy and human rights. They issued policy briefs, provided legal aid to human rights activists, hosted conferences and issued press releases on topics of public policy such as environmental conservation, consumer rights, citizen advocacy etc.

Advocacy NGOs criticized development NGOs for being too cozy with the government and unwilling to take on the risks associated with public policy advocacy. “At our organization we hire human rights lawyers. Egyptian foundations won’t fund this. They won’t fund you to promote ideas against the government philosophy ... they don’t want to deal with human rights issues,” claimed an advocacy NGO staff member. He went on to say that Egyptian development NGOs believed that economic development must be achieved before political reform could proceed, and that he and his colleagues disagreed with this philosophy. “The idea that economic development must come first was the official argument of the Mubarak regime,” he said. “These people [(staff members of Egyptian development NGOs and foundations)] don’t know democracy” (Anonymous Interview, 28 July 2011).

Other advocacy NGO staff members concurred with this view. They accused development organizations of being too cautious and “not yet at a stage where they will be bold” (Anonymous Interview, 7 February 2012), insinuating that this

caution stemmed from development organizations' friendly relations with the government (Anonymous Interviews, 14 November 2011; 31 January 2012; 7 February 2012). There was also an ideological dimension, as advocacy organizations believed that development NGOs largely took an apolitical approach and that local funders preferred this. "At the local level there are no grant-makers for human rights organizations," said an advocacy NGO staff member. "The cost is too high. That funding would be against the government and the government would put restrictions on the grant maker's work" (Anonymous Interview, 14 November 2011).⁶

The staff of development NGOs countered that they were "not against money for democracy and human rights" (Anonymous Interview, 26 February 2012) or fundamentally opposed to advocacy efforts. They believed, however, that "Advocacy and talk don't do anything. Working with people on the ground makes a difference" (Anonymous Interview, 8 March 2012). Leaders of development organizations criticized advocacy NGOs' strategic approach of working at the national policy level as being exclusionary and out of touch with beneficiary populations. "People in the Sinai don't care about that. We do women's rights but we don't call it that. People need education and health. If you are hungry do you care about politics?" (Anonymous Interview, 12 March 2012). Development NGO staff also criticized advocacy organizations for adopting human rights discourse as a Western paradigm and therefore as having a negative impact. "We work towards inclusive governance and giving people a voice, but as soon as you call that human rights you lose your audience," said one development NGO staff member (Anonymous Interview, 3 June 2012).

Thus instead of directly addressing issues of politics and policy, development NGOs wove political education and civic engagement efforts into their development projects. Their leaders claimed that democracy would be built not by issuing reports and hosting conferences but by cultivating the capacity of "ordinary Egyptians" to participate in community-based decision-making and to make collective demands on government officials. They indicated that in the context of an authoritarian regime, such a rights-based approach aimed at citizen development was a decidedly political act and a more effective approach to political reform than advocacy efforts at the national level.

⁶ Many foundations were established with proceeds from private companies that benefitted from the regime's neoliberal policies and were thus hesitant to fund anything that challenged the government or its policies.

7 Strong State, Weak Sector

NGO leaders were not proud of the fragmented state of their sector, and most lamented their inability to communicate and collaborate with organizations working in a similar arena. They felt resigned to working individually, but felt that the lack of coordination limited their impact as a sector. The Egypt office director of an international think tank explained that in his view,

“One of the biggest handicaps to the system is the lack of cooperation. This might stem from the fact that each person and organization wants credit for their work, it could be about tradition, or because the law prohibits it in many ways. It could also be that the administrative entity is not reliable, so there isn’t a clear indicator of what needs to be addressed (other than that set by the Human Development Report). Then coordination, well there isn’t an organization in charge of organizing. The individuals as a result end up doing what will benefit him and society but there are no measurements, no focus on some key major issues” (Anonymous Interview, September 27, 2015).

NGO staff also felt that their organizations’ incapacity to unite prohibited the sector from serving as a government watchdog or as a check on government power. The leader of a development NGO said, “Another challenge is the weakness of NGOs against the government. The government attacks organizations. The system weakens the role of civil society. The role of civil society is very weak. It is not like in the EU for example where civil society is strong.” (Anonymous Interview, 24 April 2012).

The deleterious effects of this lack of coordination became particularly clear in the wake of the 25 January 2011 uprisings, when Egypt’s NGO sector failed to coalesce around a shared approach to political reform or respond as a bloc to the transitional government’s campaign against NGOs. Beginning in the fall of 2011, Egypt’s transitional government – the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) – launched a crackdown on the NGO sector that would escalate over the ensuing months and years. Through investigations and raids of NGOs, along with travel bans and criminal charges imposed on NGO employees, the government made it clear that it would not tolerate an NGO sector that challenged its increasingly authoritarian approach to governance in post-Mubarak Egypt.

The bulk of Egypt’s NGO sector failed to respond in any cohesive way to this crackdown, and instead became increasingly cautious and secretive about their activities. Noting this, the founder of a development NGO said, “The way civil society stands now, with a lack of a response to the crackdown, has negatively affected civil society at large ... It shows how weak and fragmented civil society is. NGOs are victims of the past regime’s strategy of divide and rule” (Anonymous Interview, 7 February 2012). A program officer of a major

international donor agreed. “[The NGO sector] is not connected in order to form coalitions in front of the government or to talk in one voice. It is fragmented,” she said (Anonymous Interview, 27 February 2012). Added another program officer from an international aid agency, “Coordination is a huge issue ... Anything goes, and [the NGO sector is] not effective or coordinated. And this is worse after the revolution” (Anonymous Interview, 28 February 2012). While the philanthropic sector was making significant strides at professionalization and transparency before the uprising, foundations generally stopped publishing their annual reports and only one foundation had its annual report up on its website. Many organizations were more hesitant to respond to our requests to meet and there was a general sense of wariness across the sector.

Advocacy NGOs were a notable exception to the sector’s increasing fragmentation after the 2011 uprisings. These organizations banded together quickly to fight the government’s crackdown on NGOs and its increasing record of human rights violations. “We are working together now,” said a program manager at one advocacy organization. “Our organization is convening NGOs. We are coordinating. We are in solidarity together. There is definitely coordination now, but unfortunately this came only in a time of disaster” (Anonymous Interview, 14 November 2011). Another advocacy NGO staff member said, “I believe that networks are becoming more solid after the revolution because what we are facing now is more dangerous” (Anonymous Interview, 20 February 2012). From 2011 to 2012, several advocacy NGOs echoed this optimism regarding the potential for future collaborations. Ultimately, however, this collaboration and sign of strength is almost certainly one reason for the post-2011 crackdowns that have swept Egypt’s NGO sector.

8 Conclusion

While we witnessed optimism and potential for collaboration during the year immediately following the 2011 uprisings, the climate quickly deteriorated following the election of President Mohamed Morsi and continued to decline in the ensuing years. A draft NGO law sought to create an even more rigid operating environment, imposing tighter restrictions on activities and fundraising. While some advocacy organizations were able to fly under the radar during the Mubarak years, under the current regime of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi all organizations were required to register with the Ministry of Social Solidarity⁷ and

⁷ As opposed to, for example, law firms or civil companies.

thus fell under the law's jurisdiction. Directly after the ousting of President Mohamed Morsi, numerous organizations were closed or their assets were frozen. Raids of NGOs continued at the time of this writing, and the mood among NGO employees was marked by despair. On a recent visit to Egypt, advocacy NGO employees told us, "Our prison bags are packed. It's not a matter of if, but when" (Anonymous Interview, 6 August 2014). Many activists argued that the current climate for NGOs was worse than under Mubarak.

We argue that the divide and throttle technique implemented under Mubarak succeeded in choking the then nascent NGO sector and thus contributed to subsequent governments' capacities to disable and dismantle Egypt's NGO sector. NGOs' inability to grow to scale and collaborate with each other meant that they were unprepared to band together after Mubarak's fall in order to advance democratic political reforms or mount a credible fight against government crackdowns. The hostile environment for NGOs also produced a greater role for social enterprises that enabled organizations to evade the NGO law by registering as other for-profit legal entities. Under the rubric of sustainability, these organizations proclaim that not-for-profit status inhibits their work and are allowed to prosper because this frame is simpatico with the government's desire to see the private sector play a larger role in the development sector.

We expect to see a continued rise in the number of social enterprises in Egypt as the government launches increasingly harsh crackdowns on civil society and encourages corporate social responsibility and corporate social development efforts. However we argue that the confluence of Mubarak-era policy ramifications and increasing imprisonment of organization leadership and staff and the implementation of draconian policies on the sector writ large will ultimately limit the ability of NGOs and foundations to be agents of change. As the director of a development NGO recently told us, if the current situation continues we could soon witness the "death of civil society" in Egypt (Anonymous Interview, 6 August 2014). As Egypt's NGO sector struggles to stay afloat, the culture of suspicion, lack of communication among NGOs and a culture of scarcity and competition continue to plague the sector.

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