CENSORSHIP AS A POPULIST PROJECT: 
THE POLITICS OF MANAGING CULTURE IN EGYPT

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ABSTRACT

While the Arab political rebellions around 2011 grabbed the world’s attention, much ensuing scholarship focused on the short-term dynamics of contentious politics rather than the deeper authoritarian legacies that shaped political trajectories throughout the Middle East. Addressing this lacuna, my dissertation examines how longstanding structures of semi-authoritarian governance facilitated “re-autocratization” in Egypt. In particular, this dissertation traces the lasting legacies of state censorship policies from the Mubarak era until 2014. It examines how independent media can support reactionary as well as revolutionary politics. I argue that the military’s success at legitimating a new and even more repressive form of governance following the ouster of Mohamed Morsi in 2013 hinged in part on the role of semi-independent media personalities and intellectuals. Many prominent public intellectuals and members of the cultural elite served as more credible defenders of reactionary politics than official state mouthpieces. I also compare the decentralized media environment of Mubarak’s Egypt with the draconian censorship policies of Bin ‘Ali’s Tunisia where the media was directly controlled by the ruling family. The case of Egypt illustrates how limited media liberalization under autocracy can be a double-edged sword for leaders, potentially both justifying repression and enabling contentious politics.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION: THE LEGACIES OF LIBERALIZED MEDIA UNDER AUTHORITARIANISM

How does the liberalization of media impact politics under authoritarianism? How do authoritarian states attempt to manage media and cultural production when they allow at least some dissident narratives to be publicly aired? In the final years of Hosni Mubarak’s presidency in Egypt, representations of political dissidence were ubiquitous in state-approved media outlets. Amidst increasing labor unrest (Beinin 2007 and 2009; Beinin and El-Hamalawy 2007; Beinin and Vairel 2011), campaigns of anti-regime activism (El-Mahdi 2009; Albrecht 2013), and a rise in political blogging (Lynch 2007; Faris 2013), dissident narratives also became ubiquitous in state-sanctioned mass media. Private and state-affiliated newspapers reported on abuses of state power; movies and television serials represented Islamist politics, protest movements, and citizens’ ordeals dealing with state corruption and decay. Censors and regime pundits during the Mubarak era did not simply attempt to silence public representations of dissent, but attempted to contend with, respond to, and shape oppositional narratives.

While a popular account of the January 25, 2011 uprising against Mubarak focuses on the “revolutionary” role of the media (Ismail 2011; Vargas 2012), counterrevolutionary narratives portraying protests as, alternately, effete or dangerous proliferated under Mubarak and continued in remarkably similar form after his ouster (Armbrust 2012a; Lindsey 2012). While not dominated by a single political narrative and often genuinely contentious, state-approved representations of political and social contestation also offered justifications for government abuses of power, and sometimes
put a pro-status quo spin on phenomena such as Islamist politics and leftist activism. Indeed, narratives about political dissidence became so commonplace in Mubarak’s Egypt that they made their way into iconic genres of commercial entertainment. Even vocally pro-regime figures participated in poking fun at life under a dysfunctional authoritarian state.¹

How are such state-approved narratives produced and popularized, and how are they relevant in an age of satellite television, social media, and blogging? What role do reactionary portrayals of political dissidents play in shaping the state’s relationship with the mass public? And how do the legacies of censorship, co-optation, and limited liberalization shape identity conflicts in the wake of mass mobilization?

In this dissertation, I examine these questions by studying how censorship and state-approved cultural production operate in Egypt from the Mubarak era through 2014. During this period, Egypt experienced dramatic political changes as large-scale protests unseated Mubarak, the military temporarily took control, a Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated politician became president for a year until he, too, was unseated in a military coup. Following Mohamed Morsi’s ouster in summer of 2013, the regime of former army chief Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has repressed protestors and political dissidents more brutally than during Mubarak’s 30 years in power. During this time, successive leaders attempted to gain control of the media in order to legitimate their rule.

¹ For example, the national comic icon ‘Adil Imam played characters representing the plights of “ordinary” citizens facing state institutions (Armbrust 1998a; Andeel 2013a), even while he proclaimed his admiration for Hosni Mubarak in media interviews. For an example of ‘Adil Imam professing his support and even “love” for Hosni Mubarak, see “Al-Za‘im ‘Adil Imam fi Hiwar Sarih l-Masry al-Youm” (2010).
Based on two and a half years of fieldwork in Egypt between 2010-2014, detailed interviews with censors, scriptwriters, directors, producers, and journalists, and analysis of Arabic-language media, I look at how state-approved culture is controlled, contested, and debated in times of dramatic political transformations and national trauma. I argue that by addressing phenomena such as Islamist activism and political protest for decades before Mubarak’s ouster, state-approved private media provided ready-made narratives that continue to shape representations of state violence in post-Mubarak Egypt. I also compare Egypt with post-Bin ‘Ali Tunisia. As a country with one of the highest levels of censorship in the world prior to the 2010-2011 uprising, Tunisia offers a stark contrast to the relatively liberalized media environment of late-Mubarak Egypt.

I make four key arguments about the impact of the “liberalized” but constrained media environment of Mubarak’s Egypt upon politics after his ouster: (1) State-approved media and cultural production (and censorship of it) were decentralized under Mubarak. There is no highly capable and centralized state apparatus that coherently manages media and cultural production. Media production and censorship of it remained decentralized even amidst a massive security crackdown in the wake of the July 2013 military coup that ousted then-President Mohamed Morsi. (2) Political narratives from the Mubarak era (e.g., about the danger of Islamists and futility of protests) have staying power. After Mubarak’s ouster, they served as ready-made frameworks to explain unexpected and often troubling events. (3) The liberalized but constrained media environment of the Mubarak era created a political economy in which it was marketable to be a “dissident,” even for those working in state-sanctioned media. This encouraged constrained criticism, but also promoted a consensus about being anti-Islamist, and valuing modernist national
development. This helps to explain why many public intellectuals and media figures supported the military coup against Mohamed Morsi and the subsequent brutal crackdown on dissidents of various stripes.

Finally, I argue that liberalized media under authoritarianism can help reconsolidate a security state following mass uprisings. However, this is not due to a coherent regime plan. Rather, it is precisely the contentious and decentralized character of private media that enables counterrevolutionary narratives or justifications of censorship to gain traction and credibility. Media consumers discredit narratives they identify as propaganda. Thus, censorship and propaganda are most effective precisely when publics and state-approved cultural producers do not recognize them as such.

As I argue in the concluding chapter, Mubarak’s Egypt was a dramatic case of decentralized state control over the media. It stood in stark contrast to contexts such as Bin ‘Ali’s Tunisia where the ruling family directly controlled both state-run and privatized media. However, while it is an extreme example of contentious media under autocracy, the case of Egypt illustrates some of the challenges that other autocrats face in trying to balance state control with popular credibility amidst globalization.

The Politics of Mass Media under Authoritarianism

The recent uprisings and subsequent political violence in the Arab world are mediated through an increasingly cacophonous media sphere in which it is difficult to sort out truth from falsehood. Politics and political violence occur “in a market-oriented, information-awash era in which various forms of sovereignty—both personal and collective—are threatened not only by violence but also by new forms of disorientation
and uncertainty” (Wedeen 2013, 851). Struggles for political control in the wake of unexpected mass mobilization occur through media battles—various interest groups attempt to enlist public intellectuals, television personalities, and movie stars to support their stance (Armbrust 2012a, 2013 and 2014; Lindsey 2012; Wedeen 2013, 856-857). That is, political expression is often not simply banned, but crowded out in environments oversaturated competing media messages.

Questions about how authoritarian states manage media and cultural production are also relevant to broader questions in political science about how authoritarian regimes adapt to the challenges of globalization and manage new forms of political and social contestation. Since the early 2000s, political scientists shifted from studying what drives authoritarian regimes to democratize to examining how they maintain a monopoly on political power while adapting to change. Thus, scholars recognized that autocrats could liberalize or allow limited forms of political competition without “transitioning” towards institutional democracy (Brumberg 2002; Carothers 2002; Heydemann 2007; Levitsky and Way 2010). Instead, scholars have focused on how autocrats can use elections, co-optation of opposition groups and civil society, and neoliberal reforms to maintain power (Wiktorowicz 2000; Lust-Okar and Jamal 2002; Heydemann 2004; Langohr 2005; Lust-Okar 2005; Posusney 2005; Brownlee 2007; Jamal 2007; Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009; Blaydes 2010; Haddad 2011; Stacher 2012; Albrecht 2013). Overall, according to this line of scholarship, globalization and modernization do not presage democratic reform or serve as hindrances to authoritarian governance, but regimes adapt in order to maintain hegemonic political power.
However, the primary focus of most of scholarship on authoritarianism is on elite political contestation—that is, how authoritarian regimes structure their ruling coalitions, manage political opponents, and manipulate institutions such as elections to maintain power. This literature neglects questions about how authoritarian regimes engage with their publics. The relevance of how non-elites engage with politics under authoritarianism is especially clear in the wake of mass uprisings across supposedly resilient regimes in the Arab world beginning in late 2010 (Howard and Walters 2014a, 2014b, and 2015).

Examining in detail how censorship and media management under autocracy works addresses questions about how authoritarian leaders attempt to present themselves to the mass public. Just as autocrats engage in elections and allow political opposition groups to operate, in many countries today governments attempt to control media in a highly vibrant and critical public sphere that seems nearly impossible to micromanage. As Marc Lynch puts it, “Is control over information and the flow of opinion and images essential to the capacities of the authoritarian state, or is losing such control something to which such regimes can adapt” (Lynch 2011, 308)?

One strategy that autocrats use to control the media is overt violence. However, this often proves to be self-defeating for regimes attempting to bolster their hold on power. Another strategy is to try to centrally manage information flows. However, this is

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2 For example, prior to the Orange Revolution, Ukrainian journalist Georgy Gongadze was abducted and beheaded after setting up a website dedicated to exposing high-level corruption (Committee to Protect Journalists 2016). In Egypt in 2004, prominent oppositional columnist Abdel Halim Kandil was kidnapped, gagged and blindfolded, beaten, stripped, and dumped on a desert highway. His abductors (likely state security) told him to “stop talking about important people” (El Amrani 2004). In such cases, thug-like violence may have been more an indication of state weakness than strength. Unable
often not a tenable or comprehensive strategy, even for states with massive economic, technological, and bureaucratic resources. While many countries still overtly block Internet content (e.g., Bahrain, China, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, Syria, Thailand, and Uzbekistan) (Freedom House 2012), an emerging literature on censorship suggests that many such countries also co-opt or otherwise attempt to use independent journalists and cultural producers to bolster state power (Egorov et al. 2009; Stockmann & Gallagher 2011; Lorentzen 2014; King et al. 2013). Even in states with massive technical and political capacity to block and otherwise censor media, such as China, vitriolic criticism of the government and individual officials is widespread and sometimes sanctioned by the state (King et al. 2013). It is no longer feasible for most states to rely on an official political narrative or hegemonic propaganda apparatus.

In short, centralized government control of media and political discourse becomes increasingly difficult as new technologies spread, and access to an array of local and global media outlets becomes difficult to curb. Thus, understanding how censorship works in media environments that are repressive yet liberalized is important to questions about power relations under authoritarianism.

In addition to building off of work on politics under authoritarianism, this project engages with recent work on the politics of censorship and state-approved political discourse amidst the political upheaval and violence following anti-regime uprisings (Della Ratta 2012; Wedeen 2013). This project also further develops work on censorship from disciplines such as anthropology and cultural theory (Foucault 1977; Bourdieu to effectively censor political criticism from behind the scenes, brutal tactics often create a backlash when publicized, giving even more fodder for a decentralized and diverse media environment.

**Why Egypt? Media Management under Liberalized Autocracy**

Egypt is an exemplary case of authoritarian-managed liberalization of the media and cultural production. With a population of over 80 million, Egypt is not only the most populous country in the Arab world, but also one of the most politically and culturally important for the region. Additionally, electoral authoritarianism in Egypt under Mubarak represented “the modal authoritarian regime that exists in the world today” (Blaydes 2010, p. 21). Thus, rather than being an “outlier,” Mubarak’s Egypt represented a class of electoral autocracies that were becoming increasingly prevalent in the post-Cold War era (Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009). Controlled liberalization of media and cultural production went hand-in-hand with managed political reform (Sakr 2013). The case of Egypt may thus serve as a bellwether for how liberalized media functions under authoritarian states that have difficulty controlling media and cultural production in a highly centralized fashion.

Large-scale protests beginning on January 25, 2011 eventually unseated Hosni Mubarak who was president since Islamist militants assassinated Anwar al-Sadat in 1981.
Following Mubarak’s ouster, a transitional government headed by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) ruled amidst continued protests and state violence. The SCAF relinquished formal control when the Muslim Brotherhood candidate, Mohamed Morsi, narrowly won the presidency. Morsi presided over a constitution writing process that many non-Islamist politicians and activists viewed as highly uninclusive.

Amidst continuing protests, and political conflicts between the Brotherhood and other political groups, in November President Morsi issued a decree giving himself sweeping new powers and freeing the presidency from judicial oversight. This led to further anti-Brotherhood demonstrations, which culminated in organized large-scale protests beginning on June 30, 2013—the one-year anniversary of Morsi’s presidency. On July 3, 2013, the military arrested Morsi, and subsequently killed hundreds of pro-Morsi demonstrators as it disbursed large sit-ins in August. Following an interim period, during which Adly Mansour, the Chief Justice of the Egyptian Supreme Constitutional Court (SCC), temporarily held the presidency, former military chief Abdel Fattah al-Sisi won presidential elections deemed unfair by international observers in May 2014 with more than 95 percent of the vote (Kirkpatrick 2014). Al-Sisi’s regime has continued to brutally repress both Islamist and non-Islamist activists, and has also cracked down on the media.

Studying censorship from the Mubarak era through al-Sisi’s takeover provides the opportunity to examine the political effects and unintended consequences of liberalized media under autocracy. In Egypt, oppositional media and arts have historically flourished even as the state used massive coercion against journalists, activists and cultural producers. As a case of a country with a vibrant media environment that the state is
unable to effectively control from the top down, Egypt may represent an emerging modal form of authoritarian image control. Unable to censor content on a huge scale (like China) or dramatically restrict information flows in quasi-totalitarian fashion (like North Korea), political forces in Egypt must co-opt, constrain, or otherwise vie with dissent, whether it takes the form of critique on satellite television, over the Internet, or mass demonstrations on the street.

Thus, studying in detail how censorship works in Egypt could potentially give insight into broader trends in how repressive regimes without a high capacity to centrally manage media (like China or Russia) deal with globalizing media. For example, in Ukraine media coverage of state repression and social media networking played a role in both the Orange Revolution protests in 2003-2004 that prevented Viktor Yanukovych from winning the presidency, and in the 2013-2014 Euromaidan protests that led him to flee the country (Goldstein 2007; Dyczok 2009 and 2014; Tucker et al. 2014). Similarly, censorship practices in Egypt may also reflect broader trends in contexts where a relatively vibrant media sphere operates amidst widespread state violence against journalists, as in the contemporary Philippines (Freedom House 2015b; Izadi 2016).

In late-Mubarak Egypt, oppositional media and arts were ubiquitous, even as the state attempted to manage its image amidst globalization and the attendant profusion of non-official narratives via satellite television, the Internet, and other new media. This was part of a broader regional trend in the Middle East, which experienced rapid expansion of access to satellite television and Internet-based social media in the 2000s. With the biggest blogosphere in the Middle East (Etling et al. 2010), Egyptian media transformed more dramatically than other countries in the region. This changing media environment
transformed the nature of regional political discourse, and posed new challenges to regimes in Egypt and elsewhere that employed high levels of censorship, and had initially low rates of Internet penetration (Lynch 2006; 2011, 304). As the media sphere in the Arab world became increasingly vibrant and difficult to control, many states (such as Egypt, which was the historic center of media and culture in the Arab world) had to rely on new forms of image management. The increasing vibrancy of the Egyptian public sphere coexisted with continued political censorship, arrests, and occasional brutal violence against media personalities.

Given the vibrancy of oppositional discourse in even state-sanctioned media under Mubarak, many previous explanations for the dynamics of quiescence and dissent in repressive conditions do not fit the case of Egypt, in which both repression and visible political critique are commonplace. Unlike in contexts such as Hafez al-Assad’s Syria (Wedeen 1999) or the former Soviet Union (Havel 1991), citizens in Mubarak’s Egypt were generally not required to act “as if” they believed in regime cults of personality or empty slogans. Unlike rural publics in Rafael Trujillo’s Dominican Republic (Derby 2009), citizens in Mubarak’s Egypt generally did not believe in the magical powers of their dictator. While dissent may have always been expressed by oppressed groups, in Mubarak’s Egypt this no longer mostly occurred behind the scenes, in “hidden transcripts” of resistance (Scott 1990).

Authoritarian interventions into a liberalized and oversaturated media landscape are not unique to late and post-Mubarak Egypt. For example, in Syria, the overtly authoritarian means of social control used by Hafiz al-Assad fundamentally shifted under Bashar al-Assad, leading to the profusion of new forms of politically edgy media
(Wedeen 2013, 851). Even amidst massive violence, state-co-opted intellectuals living in relative material comfort sometimes buttress the regime by displaying loyalty in media interviews (Wedeen 2013, 856-867). They also assist the Assad regime by producing state-approved comedies in which “both ruler and ruled have become buffoons, and the critique of the regime is matched by a diagnosis that situates ‘the people’ at the heart of the problem” (Wedeen 2013, 866). Similarly, in the late Soviet Union numerous forms of satire challenged the status quo without necessarily attempting to critique broader socialist values or present clear political alternatives (Yurchak 2006).

Such ambiguous interplay between intellectuals and the state is more longstanding, and likely more dramatic, in Egypt. Since the 1990s, the state sanctioned, and sometimes actively sponsored, anti-Islamist films and television serials as part of a public relations campaign as the security forces combated militant groups, and the state aimed to use fears of Islamist radicalism to buttress popular support (Armbrust 1998a and 2002; Abu-Lughod 2005). These films and television programs generally demonized Islamists with a broad stroke, and presented a strong state (and security apparatus) as the only barrier to chaos and mass violence. In late-Mubarak Egypt, state-sanctioned movies and television serials continued to tell anti-Islamist narratives that identified Islamists as separate from the neoliberal dreams of “ordinary” citizens (Armbrust 2012b). Even as films targeting regime corruption, brutality, and lack of services for the poor became common, others lampooned protesters and youth activists, creating genres of conservative (in the sense of pro-status quo) discourse that would later resurface during and after the 2011 mass uprisings that unseated Mubarak (Armbrust 2012a).
Following the January 25th uprising, various actors—such as the Muslim Brotherhood, the military and security forces, other elites from the old guard, liberal activists, and anti-Islamist media personalities—all vied to control how dramatic events were represented to the public. Studying censorship and media control during times of political turbulence and rapid executive turnover presents an opportunity to assess the staying power of authoritarian media institutions, the legacies of pro-regime discourse (e.g., about the ineptitude of youth protestors and the threat posed by Islamists), and the evolution of intellectuals’ relationships with the state.

While political scientists have recently addressed how the formation of ideological fissures between Islamists and liberals was a key strategy of the Mubarak regime (Blaydes 2010, 171-191; Shehata 2010), precisely how the regime attempted to form these cleavages and manipulate public fears is both understudied and of renewed importance in the wake of the violent identity politics currently playing out in post-Mubarak Egypt. As Walter Armbrust argues, decades of fictionalized representations of identity conflict in media, such as film and television serials, help explain how anti-Muslim Brotherhood animosity rose and solidified so quickly. Genres of fictional political narratives persisted from the Mubarak years, provide “ready-made rhetoric for opposing Islamism” (Armbrust 2014, 853). In short, institutional and discursive legacies from the Mubarak regime’s simultaneous liberalization and manipulation of national media play a crucial role in setting the framework for how politics is debated even in the wake of unexpected and turbulent political changes following Mubarak’s ouster.
The Impact of Liberalized Media under Authoritarianism: Existing Theories

1. Liberalized Media Destabilizes Authoritarian Regimes

One popular explanation for the Arab uprisings beginning in 2010 focuses on the role of new media in sharing information about highly local events, such as the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi, a 26-year-old fruit and vegetable seller in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, which is widely credited with sparking the uprisings across the Arab world. Social media and satellite television can certainly change how potential social movements communicate information. However, journalistic clichés about Facebook or Twitter revolutions (Shapiro 2009; Vargas 2012) and the emancipatory potential of pan-Arab media outlets such as al-Jazeera are problematic for their teleological bent, and their narrow focus on the democratizing potential of new media.3

Such narratives assume that private media is an inherently “revolutionary” and democratic force capable of challenging regime hegemony, and that pro-state propaganda loses credibility as alternative narratives are aired. It ignores the fact that reactionary as well as revolutionary groups can use new media, and that autocrats can monitor and manipulate social media (Lynch 2011; Morozov 2011). In short, optimistic clichés about

3 For example, one media commentator wrote: “The advent of Al Jazeera was like a media earthquake that opened up the gates of freedom of expression and democracy” (Ismail 2011). Such characterizations of new media outlets as inherently liberatory are tied to a broader trend linking mass mobilization under autocracy to an embrace of democratic norms and culture. For example, the sociologist Jeffery Alexander characterizes the January 25 uprising in Egypt as “the most important democratic movement in the history of the Arab world.” According to Alexander, “participants in the revolution were motivated by a broadly encompassing, civil and universalistic solidarity, rather than by narrower, primordial, and more particularistic concerns” (Alexander 2011, xii; 8-9).
the political potential of social media are problematic because there is nothing inherently
democratic or liberal about “new media,” and not only democrats use it.

While eschewing forthright technological determinism and recognizing that
technology is merely a tool used by people and governments, some academics have also
focused on the liberating potential of new media (Diamond 2010; Alexander 2011;
Shirky 2011). This line of argumentation ties into a broader strand of academic theories
that problematically view the experience of life under authoritarianism as driven by a
sense of public dissimulation and private truth. Scholars commonly make the assumption
that resistance to authoritarian regimes satisfies an innate psychological need to be true to
oneself, or to recognize oneself as part of a broader community that secretly shares
similar grievances.

For example, Timor Kuran (1991) argues that in quasi-totalitarian environments,
like the late Soviet Union, citizens are forced to publicly falsify their preferences in order
to survive. This exacerbates collective action problems for participating in mass protests,
since would-be participants do not know what others really think. Such logic does not
apply to contexts such as late and post-Mubarak Egypt, where activists and media
personalities had been publicly voicing political criticism and engaging in acts of
dissidence for decades (Lynch 2011, 305; Pearlman 2013, 390). Opposition, in such
contexts, does not occur through “hidden transcripts” of resistance (Scott 1990), or
recognition that we are all acting “as if” we believe in patently false regime slogans or
iconography (Havel 1991; Wedeen 1999). Oppositional politics in Mubarak’s Egypt was
less characterized by a stark contrast between official state propaganda and unified
opposition to it than by a constrained yet contentious media environment in which
various forms of conservative and oppositional narratives were constantly being aired and debated. The expression of “dissident” views itself was not inherently destabilizing to the status quo, or reflective of a widely shared alternative political consensus. Indeed, as I argue in more detail in Chapter 3, artists and media personalities faced incentives to present “dissident” political narratives in order to be commercially popular. Thus, “dissident” intellectuals held a variety of political views, and some of them played a crucial role in legitimating military repression following Mubarak’s ouster.

2. Liberalized Media Stabilizes Authoritarian Regimes

Another line of thinking views liberalized media as something that autocrats can manipulate to stabilize their hold on power. Given the adaptability of many authoritarian regimes to managed political and economic liberalization over the past decades (Brumberg 2002; Carothers 2002; Lust-Okar 2005; Brownlee 2007; Heydemann 2007; Blaydes 2010), political scientists have begun to study how media “might function as a reactionary force to stabilize authoritarian regimes” (Stockmann & Gallagher 2011, 437). Just as managed elections (Brownlee 2007; Gandhi 2008; Blaydes 2010) or co-opted opposition groups and civil society organizations (Wiktorowicz 2000; Langohr 2004; Jamal 2009) can stabilize authoritarian regimes, autocrats can use constrained private media as a tool to adapt to challenges to their rule and placate critics of human rights abuses by demonstrating how they permit “free” debate. In short, permitting constrained forms of supposedly dissident media can be part of a broader strategy of managed liberalization that allows authoritarian regime to adapt to challenges.

For example, autocrats can selectively use censorship to limit expression that they
find particularly threatening, such as calls for collective action, even while permitting harsh political criticism (King et al. 2013). Authoritarian regimes can also benefit from independent media by using it, for example, to encourage citizens to participate in the legal system (Stockmann & Gallagher 2011), provide information about local bureaucrats’ performance (Egorov et al. 2009), and improve governance through watchdog journalism (Lorentzen 2014). In short, “new media” can be a tool employed by both dissidents and autocrats (Morozov 2011; Gunitsky 2015).

Another set of arguments contend that constrained “dissident” media serves as a safety valve, which allows authoritarian regimes to both let people blow off steam and to gauge public sentiment (Cooke 2007, 72). Others argue that authoritarian regimes can co-opt journalists and cultural producers, and incentivize them to make products supportive of the maintenance of the status quo. Thus, even seemingly edgy political comedy can have undertones that dissuade people from embracing radical change (Della Ratta 2012).

All of these approaches problematically assume tremendous foresight and centralization on the part of authoritarian regimes. Political scientists, in particular, tend to treat state censorship and management of the media as authoritarian tools, emphasizing the benefits they have for autocrats instead of looking at how acts of censorship actually occur and are locally debated and interpreted. James C. Scott criticizes functionalist accounts that treat irreverent spectacles, such as carnival rituals in repressive political contexts as regime-orchestrated attempts to release social tensions and restore public order. Such explanations, while partly true, risk “confusing the intentions of elites with
the results they are able to achieve” (Scott 1990, 178). By ignoring the actual history of carnivals, functionalist accounts miss the real political significance of such events.4

Similarly, Lisa Wedeen argues that political scientists problematically tend to treat cultural production as either good or bad for a regime. This misses the ways in which “[a]rtistic transgressions are the site of politics, of the dynamic interplay between the regime's exercise of power and people's experiences of and reactions to it” (Wedeen 1999, 89). Along similar lines, work in disciplines such as anthropology and cultural history show how processes of censorship are often decentralized, creative, and not necessarily perceived as an authoritarian abuse by important segments of the publics actually subject to censorship (Foucault 1977; Bourdieu 1991; Fish 1993; Darnton 1995; Steiner 1995; Boyer 2003; Freshwater 2003; Comaroff and Comaroff 2004; Yurchak 2006; Mazzarella 2013). In the case of Egypt, as I detail in Chapter 2, state censors often have good relationships with artists, and view themselves as defenders of artistic freedom in the face of less “enlightened” forces in other government organizations, religious institutions, and among the public. Indeed, the very “independence” of state censors is part of how censorship decisions are publicly debated and justified.

The Argument

In contrast to the two approaches discussed above, in this dissertation I argue that liberalized media is neither an inherently pro-democratic force, nor simply a tool that is tailor-made to stabilize a particular regime. Rather, liberalized media can be

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4 Such complex social events “cannot be said to be simply this or that as if it had a given, genetically programed, function. It makes far greater sense to see carnival as the ritual site of various forms of social conflict and symbolic manipulation, none of which can be said, prima facie, to prevail” (Scott 1990, 178).
decentralized and politically dangerous, yet provide unique opportunities for authoritarian reconsolidation. Even if liberalized but authoritarian-controlled media provides opportunities for authoritarian adaptation, it can also prove contentious and difficult to micro-manage.

The cases of late and post-Mubarak Egypt illustrate how liberalized media and cultural production (and censorship of them) can be decentralized and not under the control of a single state apparatus. The proliferation of private media outlets enabled diverse narratives and gave rise to new economic and reputational incentives to make media popular. These incentives could both threaten and reinforce the political status quo. Private media can genuinely challenge authoritarian regimes by publicizing abuses and offering alternatives to official state narratives. At the same time, private media provides the government with a cadre of genuinely popular media personalities and cultural producers, some of whom support the status quo, or at least have a vested interest in continuing to work within the system. While some media and cultural producers may be directly on the government payroll or collude with security forces, others may simply share common values (such as fear of Islamists), or have a vested economic and reputational interest in continuing to be able to work within mainstream media or state-approved cultural outlets. Thus, following the ouster of Mohamed Morsi in a July 2013 military coup, Egypt’s new military-backed government has brutally culled the media of dissidents. At the same time, they used well-known figures that were famously oppositional under Mubarak (such as the journalist and media personality Ibrahim Eissa)\(^5\) as mouthpieces to support a violent crackdown on Muslim Brotherhood supporters and

\(^5\) For background on Eissa, and his transformation into a pro-military pundit, see Afify (2014b).
other activists. Such dynamic media personalities (with credibility among some segments of the public) likely would not exist in highly state-dominated media.

Overall, I argue that the liberalized but constrained media environment that evolved under Mubarak created institutions and narratives that helped to undermine Islamists’ political ambitions and supported the re-establishment of a new security state after Mubarak’s ouster. However, this was largely an unintended consequence of the evolution of state involvement in media and cultural production. The state-approved media and cultural spheres were not co-opted monoliths that were under the complete control of any given leader or centralized state apparatus. Thus, they potentially could both threaten and reinforce the stability of the political status quo. I expand upon these points through four key arguments that I develop in detail in Chapters 2-4:

1. Censorship Can Be Decentralized, Contested, and Experienced as Creative

In Egypt, cultural production is decentralized, and, thus, often chaotic. Censorship is also decentralized and haphazard. Most members of state-affiliated cultural institutions (artists, censors, etc.) do not view themselves as mere state functionaries or regime pawns. Rather, many artists and censors see themselves as “dissident” intellectuals and defenders of freedom of expression, even when they are formally tasked with controlling cultural production. Additionally, many established cultural producers, such as scriptwriters and directors, are personal friends with state censors, who are often writers, directors, or critics themselves. In my interviews, current and former censors working for the Ministry of Culture frequently expressed how they came into conflict with other bureaucracies, such as the Ministry of Interior, the Prime Minister’s office, or religious
institutions. Working for “the state” or creating media within the bounds of what it views as permissible does not mean subscribing to a rigid ideological vision or promoting a particular set of policies. Activists and ideological opponents of authoritarian state institutions may view the constrained debate among state-sanctioned artists and cultural bureaucrats as transparently phony and propagandistic. However, such constrained debate provides a venue for both cultural producers and some members of the public to view even acts of censorship as part of a genuine debate. Censors legitimate acts of censorship by arguing that they align with nationalist values or a moral consensus.

2. Conservative Mubarak-Era Narratives about Dissidence Have Staying Power

Conservative narratives about dissidence from the Mubarak era have served as ready-made frames to depict political transformations after his ouster. I define “conservative narratives” as representations of political life that stoke fears about the prospect of radical change. For example, genres of political comedy in late-Mubarak Egypt (such as films starring the comic superstar, national icon, and vocal Mubarak supporter ‘Adil Imam) poked fun at Islamists, leftists, and the very idea of ordinary citizens being ideologically engaged (Armbrust 2012a). During the Mubarak years, national media lampooned real-life opposition figures (Lindsey 2012). Additionally, negative fictional representations of Islamists (Armbrust 1998a and 2002; Abu-Lughod 2005) and activists of other stripes (Armbrust 2012a) were widespread in movies and television dramas. Many of these same motifs were employed in the wake of Mubarak’s ouster, and stand as ready-made narratives through which to discredit the desirability of political activism, highlight threats to national reputation, and express and foment public
anxiety about radical change (Armbrust 2014). In the wake of Mohamed Morsi’s ouster in the summer of 2013, pro-military media figures employed these pre-existing political narratives to legitimate a massive crackdown on dissidents.

3. Established “Dissident” Intellectuals Face Incentives to Support National Stability

The progressive development of state-sanctioned private media under Mubarak produced an environment in which it was marketable to be a “dissident” figure. At the same time, commercial media institutions operating within authoritarian constraints created intellectual communities and economic incentives that made it risky to be too radical. Common values, such as anti-Islamism, nationalism, and modernism created elective affinities between intellectuals with otherwise disparate political views (e.g., disagreement over the presidency of Hosni Mubarak and his plans to have his son succeed him).

Many of Mubarak’s fiercest mainstream critics became staunch supporters of the military coup against Mohamed Morsi and the subsequent security crackdown against both Islamist and non-Islamist dissidents. I argue that the political economy of media production during the Mubarak era produced a cadre of staunchly anti-Islamist public intellectuals who dominated the cultural scene. Commercial media and entertainment institutions under Mubarak largely excluded Islamists, and promoted secular visions of nationalism.
4. Liberalized Media Creates Unique Opportunities for Authoritarian Reconsolidation after Mass Uprisings

While decentralized and partly independent, under some circumstances liberalized media can lend support to authoritarian leaders. By comparing the cases of post-uprising Egypt and Tunisia, I argue that liberalized media can help to support the reconsolidation of an authoritarian regime following mass uprisings in ways that would be impossible if the state had historically dominated the media. Tunisia had one of the highest levels of censorship in the world under Bin ‘Ali. Thus, it presents a stark contrast to Egypt’s liberalized and relatively dynamic media landscape. Bin ‘Ali’s Tunisia with its highly centralized control over the media, lacked the characteristics described in the three points made above, or experienced them to a lesser extent. Following mass mobilization in Tunisia, Ben-Ali era media was largely discredited, since it was so directly under the control of the ruling family itself.

Counterintuitively, Egypt’s decentralized and cantankerous media environment provided opportunities for authoritarian reconsolidation that were absent in the much more centrally managed media sphere of Tunisia. In Egypt conservative pundits, and some state censors, had credibility as “independent” public intellectuals. In Tunisia, on the other hand, regime-sanctioned media was more discredited. Additionally, anti-Islamist media narratives were less developed in Tunisia than in Egypt, which perhaps helped to facilitate reconciliation instead of violent identity conflict.

Methods and Theoretical Motivation

This dissertation is based on two and a half years of fieldwork in Egypt between 2010-2014, and a month of fieldwork in Tunisia in October 2014. I conduct case studies
across time in Egypt and cross-nationally between Egypt and Tunisia. Additionally, I situate the cases of Egypt and Tunisia by briefly putting them in comparative perspective with authoritarian media management strategies in Russia and China. In Egypt, my case studies are based on interviews with censors, prominent intellectuals, and analysis of cultural products such as political films. My aim is twofold. First, in my case studies of Egypt, I trace how the liberal-but-constrained media and cultural environment of the Mubarak years impacted national discourse and identity politics in the wake of unexpected mass uprisings. Studying the impact of liberalized but constrained media following Mubarak’s overthrow provides an opportunity to examine the staying power of cultural institutions and prevalent narratives about Islamism, protest, and the security state in the wake of leadership change and violent political struggles.

Second, I compare Egypt with Tunisia in order to begin to explore the possible differing impact of legacies of liberalized versus highly centralized media in the wake of mass uprisings. As a country with one of the highest levels of censorship in the world under Bin ‘Ali, the case of Tunisia offers a stark contrast to Egypt. It is an example of media under highly centralized state control prior to protests ousting a dictator. Additionally, I compare how two very different censorship contexts shaped narratives about similar issues such as Islamist politics and the value of continued contentious politics amidst regional security threats and economic downturn.

The comparison between Egypt and Tunisia allows me to further explore how processes of censorship occur in different types of liberalized autocracies, and (2) to inductively develop a theory of the possible effects of liberalized media in the wake of

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6 For comparative rankings of freedom of the press in 2011, see Freedom House (2011a).
mass uprisings. The aim, however, is not to test the causal impact of liberalized media globally, but to carefully examine its effects under particular historical circumstances. Questions about the global applicability of the dynamics I find present in Egypt could be examined in future research.

In my case studies of Egypt, I focus in particular on fictional political narratives in commercial movies. As the most highly censored forms of media in Egypt (Jacquemond 2008, 39-40), film provide a lens through which to examine what types of political criticism regimes find threatening, and how they react to such threats and address them. In contrast, books and print media published in Egypt are not subject to pre-publication review by censorship boards. While I discuss censorship of various forms of media, I focus largely on the film industry, because the approval process for movies involves multiple levels of censorship. Censorship of film reveals the different types of actors who are involved in making often conflictual censorship decisions, ranging from officials legally charged with censorship duties in the Ministry of Culture to extra-legal interventions from politicians and the security services.

Moreover, since Ministry of Culture censors are public figures who often appear in panel discussions and television talk shows, I was able to talk directly with current and former censors in extended interviews. In contrast, I was unable to meet with military or security officials who do not operate transparently. Thus, by focusing on the film industry, I get a limited but fairly in-depth picture about how some censorship decisions are made in Egypt.

Additionally, fictional political narratives may be reflective of broader trends in how mass media narrates particular forms of identity politics to the public. As the
anthropologist Walter Armbrust (2014) argues, dominant forms of fictional portrayals of
Islamists in Egypt since the 1990s helped to generate oversimplified anti-Islamist
discourse following Mubarak’s ouster, which contributed support for the coup against
Mohamed Morsi, and subsequent massive security crackdown against Muslim
Brotherhood supporters and other opponents of the military-backed government. In
Chapters 2-4, I examine such dynamics in detail.

Theoretically, I critically engage with insights from interpretivist political science,
anthropology, and cultural studies on censorship and authoritarian control of media and
cultural production. Through my case studies of Egypt, I challenge assumptions about
how publics experience life under authoritarianism and what this implies for revolt and
authoritarian reconsolidation.

I also attempt to make insights from interpretivist social science speak to debates
in political science on authoritarian adaptability and mass mobilization. Focusing on how
censors and artists view their role vis-à-vis “the state” and rival institutions allows me to
examine how much control central state authorities actually have over the censorship
process, and even over how pro-state propaganda is made. It also allows me to examine
how censors, cultural producers, and viewers experience state intervention in cultural
production rather than simply assuming that censorship is experienced as an authoritarian
abuse or violation of a human right to free speech.

**Organization of the Dissertation**

This dissertation is divided into six chapters. In Chapter 2, “Seeing Like a Censor:
Creativity, Constraint and Populism in Post-Mubarak Egypt,” I discuss how Ministry of
Culture censorship officials working from the late-Mubarak era till the present view their role amidst dramatic political change. I also discuss rival theoretical approaches to censorship in more detail, and make a case for studying censorship practices as decentralized, creative acts rather than simply as highly instrumental authoritarian abuses. In Chapter 3, “Pop Culture and Pro-Military Propaganda in Post-Mubarak Egypt,” I conduct case studies of three prominent Egyptian public intellectuals, and examine how their “oppositional” discourse under Mubarak evolved into support for a security crackdown in the wake of the coup against Mohamed Morsi in July 2013. I argue that the political economy of “dissident” mainstream media under Mubarak created a cadre of like-minded intellectuals whose shared ideals of anti-Islamism and nationalist modernism helped to shore up support for military leaders in post-Mubarak Egypt. In Chapter 4, “Political Satire as Propaganda in Post-Mubarak Egypt,” I discuss the merits of rival theories of satire and propaganda formation under authoritarianism through case studies of two parodies of the January 25, 2011 uprising.

In Chapter 5, “State-Managed Media after Mass Uprisings: Censorship and Identity Conflict in Egypt and Tunisia,” I compare the post-uprising trajectories of Egypt and Tunisia. I argue that the liberalized but constrained media environment that was a legacy of Mubarak’s Egypt provided opportunities for the reconsolidation of a security state not present in the highly centralized media environment that was a legacy of Bin ‘Ali’s Tunisia. Liberalized and contentious media and cultural institutions in Egypt produced cadres of genuinely popular media personalities and public intellectuals with more credibility than those working in antiquated state-run outlets. While “liberalized” media under autocracy does not create single-minded propaganda or necessarily
perpetuate quiescence, it does create institutional and discursive legacies that help explain how post-uprising security crackdowns are sold to the public. In my conclusion, Chapter 6, “Balancing Populism and State Control under Autocracy,” I put my case studies of Egypt and Tunisia in global perspective by briefly discussing how they compare to more “successful” cases of authoritarian media management in Russia and China. I argue that Egypt and Tunisia lie on opposite ends of the spectrum of decentralized versus centralized state control of the media. Both models can have unintended political consequences. I also outline some possible questions for future research and the policy implications of my argument.

Conclusion

In late-Mubarak Egypt, as labor unrest and protest movements became more active, the state did not attempt to eliminate information about such events. Rather, images of corruption, state decay, protest movements, and Islamist politics were commonplace even in highly censored media outlets, such as commercial movies and television serials. However, while state-approved media frequently represented dissidence, it often dismissed it as inconsequential, placing blame upon citizens for their problems, or raising the specters of Islamist violence, sectarian conflict, and chaos if the status quo were to be radically challenged.

I argue that the case of Egypt is illustrative of global trends in how authoritarian regimes increasingly must deal with media environments that are not subject to centralized state control. Unable to simply block critical media or sustain a singular state-approved political narrative, autocrats must work with independent media outlets, and co-
opt intellectuals and cultural producers in order to survive. Even while liberalized media can pose dangers to authoritarian regimes, it also has unintended legacies that impact politics following mass uprisings, potentially enabling authoritarian reconsolidation.

The case of state media management in Bin ‘Ali’s Tunisia provides a dramatic contrast to Mubarak’s Egypt. Whereas in Egypt the media sphere was cantankerous and decentralized, in Tunisia state control of the media remained highly centralized with private outlets owned by Bin ‘Ali’s family members and close associates. Additionally, in contrast to the relative vibrancy of the Egyptian media sphere, Tunisia under Bin ‘Ali had one of the most rigid censorship regimes in the Arab world. Egypt’s cantankerous media environment both helped to undermine Mubarak amidst mass mobilization and provided unique opportunities for capture by reactionary figures after Mubarak’s ouster. In Tunisia, on the other hand, Bin ‘Ali’s centrally controlled media institutions were brittle in the wake of mass protests. Representing the interests of a single-family network, it lacked credibility.

From the perspective of autocrats seeking to use the media as a tool for shoring up regime stability, the cases of Egypt and Tunisia were both failures. They represent opposite types of imbalances (hyper-decentralization versus hyper-centralization), which states such as Russia and China are trying to avoid.

The contrast between Egypt and Tunisia also highlights counterintuitive challenges to and opportunities for promoting democracy, freedom of expression, and rule of law. Namely, liberalization of media under authoritarianism does not necessarily promote democratic politics or values. Political context matters.
CHAPTER 2
SEEING LIKE A CENSOR: CREATIVITY, CONSTRAINT AND POPULISM IN POST-MUBARAK EGYPT

On September 20, 2014, the American University of Cairo (AUC) hosted a panel discussion about cinema and censorship featuring the Ministry of Culture’s former chief censor, Ali Abu Shadi, and several film critics (Walid Saif and Kamal Ramzy). This event took place amidst a widespread security crackdown, which featured mass killings, the closure of numerous media outlets, and the arrest of journalists and activists of various stripes. In such a context, it was remarkable both that such an event could be held at all, and that it almost entirely avoided discussing these dramatic events that were so relevant to the state of censorship in Egypt.

What role do state censors play during times of radical political change? How do individual censors attempt to remake themselves? And how do censors attempt to justify their work to the public amidst state repression? In this chapter, I address these questions through interviews with current and former Egyptian censorship officials who worked during the Mubarak years and in the wake of his ouster. In doing so, I examine how

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In August 2013, amidst the turmoil surrounding the ouster of Mohamed Morsi from the presidency, and the subsequent military-led takeover of the government, Egyptian security forces killed over 1,150 demonstrators as they violently cleared pro-Morsi sit-ins and cracked down on other protesters (Human Rights Watch 2014; for a first-hand account of the Raba’a al-‘Adawiyya protest camp before the disbursal, see Moll 2014). While under Hosni Mubarak the number of political detainees in Egypt peaked at around 14,000, after the summer 2013 coup, the Egyptian security forces detained over 41,000 people (Teti, Matthies-Boon, and Gervasio 2014). For information about recent crackdowns on the media, see, for example, Malsin (2013). For some more recent examples of the crackdown on the media in Egypt, see Afify (2014a). For an account of Egypt as “the third-deadliest country for the press” in 2013, see Committee to Protect Journalists (2013).
censors view their work, the relationship they have with artists, and how they explain their decisions to the public.

Many accounts of censorship in political science and elsewhere treat it as an authoritarian tool, implying that censors are at the beck and call of a centralized state apparatus. Relatedly, human rights organizations define censorship as a violation of a universal human right to free speech.\(^8\) In doing so, they treat the concept of “free speech” as relatively straightforward and uncontested, the violation of which could only be interpreted as an authoritarian abuse. However, by treating censorship as an authoritarian negation of freedom of expression, such approaches tacitly assume that censored artists, media figures, and publics view it as such. Using this commonsensical notion of censorship risks treating artists and intellectuals as closeted liberal democrats, inherently at odds with censors and a repressive state. I argue that such approaches are incomplete, and do not accurately describe how censorship operates in Egypt today where calls for censorship come as often “from below” as they do from top-down state actors. As an alternative, I draw on approaches from disciplines such as anthropology and cultural studies that view censorship as a creative process rather than simply an instance of free speech negated by authoritarian dictate. Censorship is creative insofar as its success often

\(^8\) For example, according to the Index on Censorship: “Free expression is vital to humanity and the foundation of a free society. At the most basic level, without free expression ideas cannot be tested. Free speech creates the space for the exchange of ideas in the arts, literature, religion, academia, politics and science, and is essential for other rights such as freedom of conscience and freedom of assembly. Without this, individuals can’t make informed decisions and fully participate in society” (Index on Censorship 2016). This is in line with article 19 of the United Nation’s 1949 Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers” (United Nations 1948).
depends upon segments of the public perceiving it as a necessary good, or a productive action, rather than as a mere authoritarian constraint.

Through interviews with Egyptian censorship officials from the Ministry of Culture, I make three claims about how censorship operates in Egypt today. First, censorship is a decentralized and often conflicted process. Various bureaucracies and individual officials are frequently at odds with one another, and have divergent or colliding interests and ideals. Second, censors view themselves as creative intellectuals and part of a larger cultural community that carries on important traditions of Egyptian artistic production. Third, public debates about censorship (e.g., on talk shows and panel discussions) create ethical spaces in which censors, like-minded intellectuals, and some segments of the public can “freely” debate—on a theoretical level—issues such as freedom of expression without broaching politically dangerous questions about ongoing crackdowns on the media, political violence, or mass arrests of dissidents. While some of my interlocutors simply dismissed such “free” debate as cynical and propagandistic, others viewed it as part of a genuine dialogue.

Overall, censors and their milieu may be part of a broadly authoritarian consensus that, for example, demonizes Islamists or condones the reestablishment of a security state (if not by active endorsement, by largely ignoring it). However, many Egyptian censors do not view themselves as mere regime pawns. Likewise, the public does not uniformly perceive acts of censorship as authoritarian violations of their right to free speech. Indeed, censorship is often justified as a response to public demands, or as a means to protect national reputation and identity. The fact that censorship is decentralized and publicly debated helps to make it effective. By being part of a contentious and public
process, censors (like other pro-government intellectuals) have the opportunity to gain credibility as “independent” voices. At the same time, the decentralization of censorship reveals bureaucratic and ideological fissures that can constrain aspiring leaders and complicate the process of creating propaganda or a new official political narrative.

In Egypt, control over media and cultural production falls under the purview of numerous institutions. Since different organizations’ authority is often overlapping, they can act at odds with one another, and acts of censorship are frequently conflictual processes rather than straightforward policies or top-down decisions. In Mubarak’s Egypt (and even after his ouster), as the media environment became increasingly privatized, decentralized and diverse, formal censorship laws did not markedly change. Given the vagueness of censorship laws, nearly any content could legally be banned. Additionally, various branches of the government, religious organizations, trade syndicates, and complaints launched by members of the public could all play a role in censorship. Thus, the institutions formally charged with censoring particular products (e.g., the Ministry of Culture’s censorship office is responsible for films and theatre) often find themselves under pressure from or working at odds with other organizations.

The diagram below illustrates some of the major institutions at play in making censorship decisions. It reflects how formal censorship bodies in the Ministries of Culture, Information, and Education are subject to pressure or pushback from external

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9 Laws governing censorship in the Egyptian Penal Code have largely remained the same since the mid-1950s (Ezzat, al-Haqq, and Fazulla 2014, 11, 19-22).
organizations, political figures, and legal cases. While this diagram is not meant to be comprehensive, it indicates why censorship decisions in Egypt are often contentious.\(^\text{10}\)

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\(^{\text{10}}\) This diagram of major overlapping censorship authorities in Egypt is based on the following literature on censorship policies in modern Egypt: Stagh (1993); Jacquemond (2008); Mehrez (2008); and Ezzat, al-Haqq, and Fazulla (2014). For background on censorship policies during the Mubarak years, see Kienle (2001). For a detailed history of state control of television, see Abu-Lughod (2005). For a discussion of cases launched by members of the public against purported offences to public morals (hisba cases), see Agrama (2012). For a recent account of the process of getting a film past censorship, see Elkashef (2015). For examples of recent acts of censorship within the Ministry of Education, see “Education Ministry: School Curriculum Free from Violence Starting Next Year” (2015) and Galal (2015). For Arabic-language sources on the history of censorship in Egypt and censors’ accounts of their work, see Mumtaz (1985); Fu‘ad (1999); Baiumy (2002); Farid (2002); ‘Ali (2004 and 2008).
In the sections below, I first discuss three different approaches to studying censorship: (1) as an authoritarian tool, (2) as a violation of a human right to free speech, and (3) as a decentralized and contested process. I argue that the first two approaches are incomplete, and that studying censorship as a decentralized process helps to understand how censorship occurs and is received in contemporary Egypt. Next, I apply this theoretical discussion by looking at how four Ministry of Culture censors who worked from the late-Mubarak era till the present understand censorship and their roles in enacting it. Since the Ministry of Culture’s role in censorship is limited to certain products (primarily theatre and film), my aim is not to give a comprehensive portrait of all censorship activity in Egypt. However, while the Ministry of Culture is not responsible for censoring media such as talk shows (which fall under the purview of the Ministry of Information), understanding how these censors view their role may be reflective of broader trends and tensions within bureaucracies responsible for dealing with culture and media.

I conclude by arguing that because it is a decentralized and publicly debated process, the public does not uniformly view censorship as an authoritarian abuse of power. Thus, the very fact that aspiring leaders do not always control censorship processes in a highly centralized fashion gives censors and aligned intellectuals credibility they might not have if they were simply state mouthpieces.

As the title of this chapter suggests, the Egyptian censor occupies a fundamentally different position than the modernist state planner described in James C. Scott’s *Seeing Like a State* (1998). According to Scott, the centralization of modern authoritarian state administration has led to disastrous experiments, such as China’s Great Leap Forward,
collectivization in Russia, and compulsory villagization in Tanzania, Mozambique, and Ethiopia (Scott 1998, 3). In contrast, censorship in Egypt does not occur in such a well-coordinated, top-down fashion. Reflective of a broader weakness of the state vis-à-vis society (Migdal 1988), 11 censors work within fragmented institutions that, counterintuitively, may sometimes be “effective” at constraining dissident speech precisely because of their decentralization. However, censorship decisions are also sites for frequent debate, contestation, and bureaucratic infighting, making it difficult for political leaders to easily channel or redirect discourse. Members of the censorship office in Egypt’s Ministry of Culture are public figures who debate their decisions in forums such as live television talk shows. Censors justify their work to themselves and some segments of the public by posturing themselves as independently minded intellectuals. At the same time, this independent posturing reveals tensions between different bureaucracies and officials, which sometimes act at cross-purposes.

Three Models of Censorship

In this section, I go into more detail about the three models of censorship outlined above. First, I discuss the related approaches of political scientists who focus on censorship as a tool autocrats use to bolster their power and human rights advocates who view censorship as a violation of an inherent right to free expression. In contrast to these two related approaches, I discuss an alternative conceptualization of censorship as a contentious and decentralized process, rather than simply the negation of free speech. In contemporary Egypt, even amidst a dramatic security crackdown, censorship processes

11 For another account of systemic state weakness in Egypt, see Soliman (2006).
are still contested, reflecting the importance of institutional legacies, and the disunity of bureaucrats and government agencies. As publicly justified and often contentious acts, censorship in Egypt today is often legitimated in populist terms of protecting national security and reputation, rather than as a top-down imposition. Studying censorship as an authoritarian tool or straightforward violation of human rights fails to address how acts of censorship are sometimes actually carried out and publicly debated in authoritarian contexts with a complex, marketized media spheres.

**Censorship as an Authoritarian Tool or Violation of a Right to Free Speech**

Political scientists, human rights activists, and pro-democracy advocates share a commonsensical notion of censorship as an act of negation. In this view, censorship curbs politically dissident speech and limits a fundamental human right to freedom of expression. This focuses on the supposed function that censorship performs, rather than on understanding processes of censorship themselves. Such approaches are limited insofar as they deemphasize questions about how censorship actually works and is interpreted locally. They also define censorship as the antithesis of a conceptually vague and ideologically fraught notion of “free speech” that may not be universally shared by censored publics.

In many contemporary autocracies, censorship and regime image management occur within the context of media environments that are relatively pluralistic, with publics having access to numerous media outlets and sources of information. Thus, even most forms of draconian contemporary censorship generally cannot aim to silence all forms of dissent, or maintain a single official narrative about political events.
Given the adaptability of many authoritarian regimes to managed political and/or economic liberalization over the past decades (Brumberg 2002; Carothers 2002; Lust-Okar 2005; Brownlee 2007; Heydemann 2007; Blaydes 2010; Stacher 2012; Albrecht 2013), political scientists have begun to study how media “might function as a reactionary force to stabilize authoritarian regimes” (Stockmann & Gallagher 2011, 437). For example, autocrats can selectively use censorship to limit expression that they find particularly threatening, such as calls for collective action, even while permitting harsh political criticism (King et al. 2013). Authoritarian regimes can also benefit from independent media by using it, for example, to encourage citizens to participate in the legal system (Stockmann and Gallagher 2011), provide information about local bureaucrats’ performance (Egorov, Guriev, and Sonin 2009), and improve governance through watchdog journalism (Lorentzen 2014).

In the context of the Middle East, the rapid spread of satellite television and Internet-based social media in the 2000s changed the nature of regional political discourse, and posed new challenges to regimes that employed especially high levels of censorship, and had initially low rates of Internet penetration (Lynch 2011, 304). As the media sphere in the Arab world became increasingly vibrant and difficult to control, many states (such as Egypt) had to rely (successfully or unsuccessfully) on new forms of image management. In late-Mubarak Egypt, activists and media personalities had been publicly voicing political criticism and engaging in acts of dissidence for years (Lynch

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12 For accounts of the spread and impact of new media technologies in the Middle East, see, for example, Anderson (2003); Eickelman and Anderson (2003); Eickelman (2005); Lynch (2006, 2007, and 2011); Wheeler (2006); al-Malky (2007); Hafez (2008); Bunt (2009); Aday et al. (2010); Howard (2010). For a discussion of the relationship between the modern Egyptian state and national media, also see Kandil (2012).
2011, 305; Pearlman 2013, 390). The Mubarak regime attempted to shape public debates in such a way as to make radical political change seem dangerous, for example, by exacerbating ideological fissures between Islamists and non-Islamists of various stripes (Blaydes 2010, 171-191; Shehata 2010; Brumberg 2013).

In short, political scientists have examined in detail how autocrats need to manage globalizing media environments (and other forms of modern change) in order to survive. However, treating censorship primarily a tool that authoritarian regimes employ to bolster their hold on power leaves open questions about how processes of censorship are actually carried out by various bureaucracies, and how they are publicly debated and interpreted. As I argue below, this portrait of censorship as an authoritarian tool does not always describe how censorship decisions are made or the public response to them.

A related approach to viewing censorship as an authoritarian tool is to study it as the antithesis of free speech and a violation of a basic human right to unhindered expression. The notion of censorship as the negation of free speech is commonly employed in the definitions of international organizations. Conceptualizing freedom of expression as a human right also makes censorship a matter of international concern, financing, and policing that is often directly tied to democracy promotion efforts.¹³

¹³ For example, Freedom House explains its efforts to promote freedom of expression in the following terms: “Within individual countries, Freedom House employs advocacy, financial support, and technical assistance to support efforts by local free expression advocates to oppose or overturn media laws that restrict journalists’ ability to cover crucial issues, including through criminal insult, defamation or libel laws. Freedom House also organizes and participates in delegations of experts to countries that have recently implemented or are drafting legislation limiting free expression” (Freedom House 2016). Other organizations that engage in global advocacy to promote freedom of expression include PEN (https://pen.org/defending-free-expression), Amnesty International (http://www.amnestyusa.org/our-work/issues/censorship-and-free-speech),
Like political scientists’ emphasis on censorship as an authoritarian tool, viewing censorship as the negation of free speech focuses on the outcome of censorship, rather than how it is carried out, how it changes the content of media and cultural production, and the local debates surrounding this process. Additionally, free speech advocacy is often directly tied to political scientists’ study of censorship, since organizations such as Freedom House and the Index on Censorship provide global data on acts of censorship. This helps to create an elective affinity between social scientists seeking to understand censorship practices and international organizations campaigning to stop them. Anti-censorship advocacy organizations also share political scientists’ focus on censorship primarily as a feature of authoritarian regimes, lining up nicely with research agendas focused on democratization, or, the reverse side of the coin, “authoritarian persistence.”

Viewing censorship as a clear-cut violation of a human right to free speech implicitly assumes both that censorship in autocracies operates in fundamentally different ways than media dynamics in democracies and that censored publics uniformly experience censorship as an authoritarian violation of their rights. Yet, as I argue in more detail below and in subsequent chapters, even in the wake of the brutal crackdown following the July 3 2013 military takeover in Egypt, leaders have been working with public intellectuals to justify censorship and political repression in populist terms.

Human Rights Watch (https://www.hrw.org/topic/free-speech), and the Committee to Protect Journalists (https://www.cpj.org/campaigns/press-freedom-for-development/).

14 For a critique of political scientists’ overemphasis on questions of democratization and the related notion of “authoritarian persistence,” see Howard and Walters (2014a).
Focusing on censorship as an abuse ignores how it is sometimes supported by segments of the public.\textsuperscript{15}

In short, political scientists, human rights activists, and pro-democracy advocates share a commonsensical notion of censorship as the negation of free speech. In this view, censorship both curbs political dissidence and violates a fundamental human right. Thus, whether the analytic focus is upon the political work that censorship does (to stabilize autocracies) or the normatively condemnable role it plays in undermining basic human rights, the focus is on the function that censorship performs. However, such approaches are limited, insofar as they de-emphasize questions about how censorship actually works and is interpreted locally. They risk assuming from the outset that censored publics experience censorship as a condemnable authoritarian abuse.

**Censorship as a Populist Project**

Speaking of free speech as a clear-cut category risks presenting the world in Manichean terms in which there is an obvious line between grassroots democratic truth and authoritarian falsehood (Darnton 1995, 40; Fish 1993, 114). This risks ignoring how censors sometimes view their own work, and how they interact with cultural producers. As I detail in my discussion of interviews with current and former Egyptian censorship officials, censors in the Ministry of Culture are members of the artistic community, and close personal friends of many of the artists whose work they censor.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{15} Even in established democracies, calls for censorship can sometimes have populist appeal. For example, the US Congress has at times pressured the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) not to fund “obscene” art (Steiner 1995).

\textsuperscript{16} A similar dynamic in which censors viewed themselves as creative intellectuals who facilitate artistic expression rather than hinder it also operated in other contexts, such as
Moreover, processes of censorship do not simply work to prohibit incendiary speech, but can play an active role in defining the parameters of what is sayable, “normal,” or proper. For example, censorship can take the form of marginalizing alternative narratives, so that even though they arise, they are not taken seriously. As Pierre Bourdieu argues, censorship is most effective when it is not perceived as being imposed from above or as a constraint, but is rather seen as an affirmation of social order and belonging (Bourdieu 1991, 138). Thus, when studying censorship in authoritarian regimes, the question is not simply how effective they are at silencing or controlling media narratives, but how these acts are publicly justified and debated.

Additionally, censorship can be more than an authoritarian abuse or negation of free speech insofar as acts of censorship can be generative by creating excitement around a certain set of “red lines” or banned texts. By prescribing what is “obscene,” a threat to national security, national unity, etc., censorship identifies its own loci of conventional

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East Germany (Boyer 2003) and pre-revolution France (Darnton 1995). In East Germany, many censorship officials viewed their role as creative insofar as it was aimed at fostering intellectual critique of the pathologies of modern capitalist society, and to educating a broader community. Thus, they viewed themselves, similarly to critical or nationalist Western intellectuals, as practitioners of a vocation self-consciously tied to a system of national values (Boyer 2003, 537). In both East Germany and pre-revolution France, writers were often friends with “enlightened administrators” who helped to bend what were in theory inflexible rules, enabling vibrant creativity to exist within repressive political contexts. As Robert Darnton puts it, while sometimes the history of censorship “leads through the Bastille and the gulag” most often it is marked by cultural contention and collaboration between censors and censored authors (Darnton 1995, 59).

17 As Bourdieu puts it: “Censorship is never quite as perfect or as invisible as when each agent has nothing to say apart from what he is objectively authorized to say: in this case he does not even have to be his own censor because he is, in a way, censored once and for all, through the forms of perception and expression that he has internalized and which impose their form on all his expressions” (Bourdieu 1991, 138). For another discussion of censorship as productive and generative, rather than simply a restriction, see Butler (1997).
contestation—or “standardized sites of transgression” (Mazzarella 2013, 217). It thereby invites (and perhaps defangs) particular forms of dissent (Foucault 1977, 34). For example, drawing caricatures of Mubarak could be seen as transgressive, but its actual political meaning was sometimes ambiguous.  

Finally, focusing on censorship as a phenomenon largely limited to authoritarian contexts is problematic since censored publics do not always perceive or debate acts of censorship as authoritarian violations of their rights. Treating censorship largely as an authoritarian phenomenon fails to account for the diversity of cultural content that is sometimes allowed or even promoted by repressive states (Yurchak 2005, 6). Moreover, speaking of censorship as a simple act of authoritarian constraint sometimes veers close to assuming that most artists, public intellectuals, or media figures are closeted liberal democrats.

Just as liberals can approve limiting the purview of acceptable or “normal” speech and encourage censorship of content they view as particularly dangerous, some members of publics living under autocracy may also view certain limits on speech as normal or desirable. Viewing censorship as a normatively condemnable practice of authoritarian regimes ignores the question of whether local viewers share this interpretation. It overlooks the genuine appeal that some authoritarian practices,

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18 For an extended discussion of the ambiguous politics of dissent under Mubarak, see Chapter 4. In particular, I discuss the politics of caricature through a case study of the famous cartoonist Amr Selim.

19 For example, established democracies censor explicit language on the radio, nudity on television, and restrict the types of pornography that are permissible and how it can be consumed. Some established democracies also ban “extremist” or racist speech; they classify information for reasons of national security (which sometimes encompasses national embarrassment), and can put gag orders on journalists.
institutions, and values sometimes have or the “elective affinity” that sometimes exists between governments and intellectuals (Della Ratta 2012). Desire to protect national security, morals, or reputation; supposed states of emergency or crisis; xenophobic nationalism; and race baiting can lead some segments of publics to support repressive policies in both autocracies and democracies.\(^{20}\) Thus, studying the politics of censorship in authoritarian contexts could potentially be revealing of analogous dynamics in established democracies where issues such as inequality and systematic oppression are sometimes masked in the media.

Of course, going too far in comparing restrictions to acceptable speech in established democracies with political censorship under autocracy risks blurring important distinctions (Freshwater 2003, 233). For example, it is important not to conflate extreme violations of human rights (e.g., mass political imprisonment and killings coupled with censorship of coverage of these facts) with acts such as the refusal of grant money or a negative review of an academic article (Freshwater 2003, 242). However, comparing censorship practices (broadly conceived) across regime type highlights the ways in which even brutal autocrats attempt to legitimate censorship decisions in quasi-democratic ways. In a globalizing world, authoritarian regimes increasingly rely on populist credentials. Additionally, censorship under autocracy is not always a centrally managed process.

In the context of Egypt, focusing on how individual censorship decisions occur illustrates the ways in which censorship is part of a broader political economy of cultural

\(^{20}\) See, for example, Comaroff and Comaroff (2004) for an account of the “post-Foucaultian” desire for security and stability in the contexts of post-apartheid South Africa.
production, which not only bans particular content, but also supports a world of cultural producers acting within a framework of similar norms and constraints. Thus, even though following the ouster of Mohamed Morsi, the regime of former armed forces head, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, has been using censorship in its bluntest sense (such as killing and arresting journalists, and closing down oppositional media outlets), this does not mean that censorship is not also operating in subtler ways. Viewing censorship in al-Sisi’s Egypt simply as an authoritarian tool misses how censorship and crackdowns are marketed to and defended by some segments of the public. It also ignores how leaders are dependent upon existing media personalities, public intellectuals, and political discourses to justify their actions.

In the wake of mass mobilization, aspiring leaders are not given a cart blanch to remake the political and social world they seek to control. Even in amidst a widespread crackdown, acts of censorship generally do not simply occur with the click of a button, or a direct command. Rather, institutional and discursive legacies shape how censorship occurs and how it is interpreted. In order to examine how acts of censorship are viewed and debated by those actually engaged in making censorship decisions, in the following section I discuss how Ministry of Culture censorship officials describe the character of censorship in Egypt and their role in administering it.

**Four Egyptian Censors on Censorship**

When I first started interviewing prominent players in the Egyptian cinema industry and censorship officials from the Ministry of Culture in the autumn of 2012, I expected that the two would be locked in perpetual conflict. Not knowing much about
how censorship actually worked in Egypt, I imagined the censor as an iron-fisted bureaucrat whose aim in life was to prevent anything too incendiary or politically risky from being said. In other words, I succumbed to the Manichaeism Darnton (1995) cautions against—assuming artists to be the wellspring of dissident thought and the censor their antithesis. In a still politically vibrant and hopeful Egypt, I assumed that artists would be vanguards of the revolution, and the censor at the forefront of the counterrevolution.

What I found was more complicated. What surprised me most was that many prominent directors and scriptwriters did not see censorship as a major challenge to their work. Indeed, many of them were personal friends of current or former censorship officials. Everyone I spoke with had stories to tell about censorship. However, many did not seem incensed by the limitations this imposed on them, or that state censorship was a major hindrance to their creative expression.

Part of this may have been generational. Scriptwriters and filmmakers whose best work was done in the 1980s-90s, and were now living materially comfortable lives and enjoying their status for past accomplishments, are probably not the most likely to support radical socio-economic change. Censors and many well-established members of the film industry were part of the same milieu. Their relationship was marked more by shared interests and values than by conflict. They went to the same cultural events, had mutual friends, and seemed to share similar values about the role of artists vis-à-vis the security state.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{21} For example, I first was introduced to censorship officials through the prominent scriptwriter Bashir al-Dik. He is famous for writing the scripts to acclaimed films that fall
Indeed, many young filmmakers (in their 20s and 30s) I talked to expressed disdain for old-guard cultural bureaucrats who thrived in government positions during the Mubarak years. Many of these younger interlocutors (who had benefited less and had less at stake in forming a cozy relationship with state-supported culture) viewed this old guard as complicit with the Mubarak regime, and some of its vanguard filmmakers as pro-regime propagandists. However, many of the young filmmakers I talked to still did not necessarily view the official censorship process as their biggest hurdle. This is not because they necessarily shared similar values or political commitments with the censors (as some older filmmakers seemed to), but that they simply did not feel compelled to make the types of films that would get censored.

For example, the directors Hala Lotfy and Ahmad Abdalla both emphasized how easy it is for them to avoid problems with the official censorship board. Instead, they emphasized bureaucratic red tape and difficulties in getting permission to film on location as much bigger problems than formal censorship of the content of their films.22 Moreover, these and other filmmakers I spoke with did not necessarily view the most politically or socially important types of expression as matching up with what censors would view as “red lines.”

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22 Interview with Hala Lotfy, Cairo, June 10, 2014; interview with Ahmad Abdalla, Cairo, May 21, 2014.

into the “new realist” genre that began in the 1980s. For a discussion of “new realism” in Egyptian cinema and Bashir al-Dik, see Shafik (2007), 142-143.
Censors against Censorship

One key theme that emerged during my interviews with current and former censorship officials from the Ministry of Culture was that many of them position themselves as champions of the artistic community and freedom of expression. The Ministry of Culture’s chief censors are generally involved in the arts themselves (film directors, script writers, and critics), not lifelong professional bureaucrats, party apparatchiks, or retired military officers.

For example, the film critic Ali Abu Shadi, who served as the head of the Ministry of Culture’s censorship office from 1996-1999 and 2004-2009, describes himself as a “censor against censorship.” In the context of post-revolution Egypt, I would have expected one of Mubarak’s long-serving chief censors to be defensive about working for an ousted autocratic regime. Instead, Abu Shadi postured himself as a prescient champion of the January 25, 2011 revolution.

In my discussions with him, Abu Shadi focused on what he depicted as his own heroic role in allowing political films (such as Youssef Chahine’s final film, Chaos [2007], and The Yacoubian Building [2006] starring comedic icon ‘Adil Imam) to get past the censorship process. Abu Shadi described these films as some of the most audacious political films of the Mubarak era, which exhibited tremendous bravery for criticizing the Mubarak regime while he was still in power.25

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23 For a discussion of Youssef Chahine’s Chaos, see Gordon (2013).
24 For a discussion of The Yacoubian Building, see Armbrust (2012).
25 While Abu Shadi lauded his role in promoting “dissident” films, as I discuss in more detail in chapters 3-4, many of the movies he cited had conservative undertones. Indeed, the comic superstar ‘Adil Imam has famously a Mubarak supporter despite becoming famous for political satire.
When discussing *Chaos*, Abu Shadi claimed that he helped to get the film released without any cuts or changes to the script, though Youssef Chahine’s fame and national stature also made it difficult for politicians to block the film. Abu Shadi stated that three lower-level censors who were responsible for commenting on the script turned in 50 combined suggested changes to him. Abu Shadi claimed that if all of these changes were made, there simply would be no film left. In response, he wrote that he agreed with all of these comments, even though he knew that Chahine would not make the suggested changes. Thus, even while legally bound to request draconian censorship of what most knew would be the last film of Egypt’s most famous living director, Abu Shadi interpreted his actions as tacitly siding with the artist against less-enlightened politicians and bureaucrats. Abu Shadi felt emboldened to support the film partly because he knew that no one could challenge it once it was already made. Given Chahine’s stature and old age, “no one would bury that coffin.”

Likewise, Abu Shadi valorized his role in enabling the release of *The Yacoubian Building*. Abu Shadi claimed that he wants everything to be expressed with minor limits, because of political restrictions. For example, direct critiques of Mubarak would be going too far. There were also many censors’ comments on the script for *The Yacoubian Building*. As with *Chaos*, Abu Shadi claims that he told the filmmakers to go ahead with filming, even while technically approving the lower-level censors’ extensive recommended cuts and changes.

Abu Shadi claimed that his reason for tacitly facilitating these films’ release was that he was genuinely excited about them. Abu Shadi compared *Chaos* and *The Yacoubian Building* to scathing late-Nasser-era political films such as Tawfiq Salih’s *The
Rebels (1968). Abu Shadi claimed that he respects such direct criticism of the current regime, since it takes great courage to criticize a living president. “Egypt is not like America where such criticism is easy to do.”

Similarly, during my interview with current president of the Ministry of Culture’s censorship board, Abdel Satar Fathi, he presented himself as a censor against censorship. As he put it to me, “artists are happy that I am the chief censor, because I am one of them.” When I met Fathi at his office in downtown Cairo, a group working on a television series came into his office to protest the censors’ decision not to allow a song that was in the script. After arguing with the crew, Fathi told them that it is out of his hands. As he explained to me after the aggrieved serial producers left, he supports great latitude for freedom of expression, but “the law has me against the wall.”

Fathi went on to justify his work as a censor by claiming that every country censors public media (e.g., America and France label some films as for “adults only”). Thus, he did not view his role as censor as politically compromising. Like Ali Abu Shadi, Fathi lauded his role in permitting films that would have previously been unreleasable. As a self-identified intellectual, Fathi depicted himself as a vanguard of the revolution who was being held back by Islamists and other regressive political and social forces to which he attributed the continuation of draconian forms of censorship. His own role in the censorship process is out of his hands, since he is beholden to an imperfect set of laws.

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26 Interview with Ali Abu Shadi, Cairo, January 13, 2013.
27 Interview with Abdel Satar Fathi, Cairo, June 2013.
Ahmed Awaad, who briefly served as chief censor from September 2013-April 2014, also presented himself as a censor against censorship in its current form. Awaad claimed that he was one of the leaders of the sit-in at the Ministry of Culture that began on June 5, and that he got requested to serve as chief censor there. Awaad cited as one of his key achievements his attempt to replace elements of the censorship process with a rating system that would categorize films’ appropriateness for viewers of different ages.

Like the other chief censors I spoke with, Awaad lauded his role in permitting what he described as unprecedentedly edgy films. I asked Awaad about the difference between the political films permitted during the late-Mubarak era and those he allowed. He described the politics of censorship under Mubarak as a political game with only certain types of criticism permitted, mostly by filmmakers with established clout and connections. Awaad described the climate for cultural producers under Mubarak as a “fake democracy” that allowed only the empty shell of opposition. The space for freedom of expression was tight, and politicians let artists talk a bit, but this had no political impact.

Awaad contrasts this with his experience as censor during which he permitted films such as Amr Salama’s *Excuse My French* (2014) that had previously been blocked by the censors, and politically critical films such as Hazem Metwaly’s *After the Flood* (2012) and Ahmad Abdalla’s *Rags and Tatters* (2013). According to Awaad, the January 25 revolution rejected the constraints upon freedom of expression of the Mubarak years, bringing about a nascent generation of revolutionary films that could not have been released prior to the uprising. Awaad defended the increased freedom of post-

28 For Awaad’s account of his role in permitting controversial films during his time as censor, also see Zoller (2014).
Mubarak Egypt even though he resigned from the censorship office “out of self-respect.” Awaad quit his post as censor following a controversy in which the Prime Minister, Ibrahim Mehleb, personally banned the movie *Sweetness of Spirit* (2014), starring Lebanese actress Haifa Wehbe, which Awaad had already approved for release.29

I met with Awaad on the day that results from Egyptians abroad were coming in for the presidential elections pitting former army chief Abdel Fattah al-Sisi against Hamdeen Sabahi. Despite the recent security crackdowns, Awaad was rooting for an al-Sisi landslide, and kept checking his smartphone for the latest results. When I asked him about the current political climate, he did not backtrack on his optimism about free expression being better than under Mubarak.

Hosni Mubarak is not going to come back again. Those who say that Hosni Mubarak’s regime is still here are wrong. Those who say that al-Sisi will bring back Mubarak’s regime are wrong. . . . Over the past two years, you have the best people in the world put two presidents in prison [Hosni Mubarak and Mohamed Morsi]. Is it possible that the army could put al-Sisi in power against the people’s will? You saw how many people went to the streets on June 30 with your own eyes, right? The Culture Ministry sit-in [which Awaad claims to have participated in] was a crucial part of June 30 [the date of the mass uprising against then-President Morsi].30

In short, all of the chief censors I spoke with described themselves as champions of freedom of expression. Whether working under Mubarak, Morsi, or al-Sisi, they describe themselves as champions of the arts rather than as mere government functionaries. While some of this is clearly empty swagger, it may also reflect genuine fragmentation among different government institutions responsible for censorship in Egypt.

29 For coverage of the controversy surrounding the movie *Sweetness of Spirit*, see Magid (2014) and “Prime Minister Orders Suspension of Provocative Film” (2014).

30 Interview with Ahmed Awaad, Cairo, May 19, 2014.
The Censor as Victim

A related theme that censorship officials consistently focused on was the attacks they faced from other individuals and institutions. The Ministry of Culture’s censorship decisions can be challenged by religious institutions (al-Azhar or the Coptic Church), the military and security services, powerful politicians, or subject to lawsuits from the public. Thus, in their role as “censors against censorship,” officials such as Ali Abu Shadi, Abdel Satar Fathi, and Ahmed Awaad all portrayed themselves as champions of freedom backed against the wall by arcane laws, less enlightened government agents, and pressures from society.

For example, Ali Abu Shadi claimed that in response to his defense of political films critical of the Mubarak regime, the Interior Minister sent an angry letter to former Minister of Culture, Farouk Hosny, demanding that he remove Abu Shadi from his position, accusing him of wanting to make a revolution. However, Farouk Hosny (whom Abu Shadi lauded as an excellent Minister of Culture and defender of the arts) shielded him from this pressure, and never forced him to act against his conscience. Similarly, Abu Shadi claimed that he came under attack from the powerful official from Mubarak’s National Democratic Party (NDP), Kamal al-Shadhili, who felt that the film The Yacoubian Building had lampooned him personally. In a meeting, al-Shadhili accused Abu Shadi of permitting the film to be released even though it depicted a character al-Shadhili took to be a representation of him taking bribes.32

31 For background on Farouk Hosny, see Winegar (2006).
32 Interview with Ali Abu Shadi, Cairo, January 13, 2013.
Similarly, Abdel Satar Fathi expressed feeling trapped in his role as a post-revolution censor by the military on the one hand and Islamists on the other. In particular, he expressed fear that the Muslim Brotherhood might appoint one of their supporters as chief censor. Fathi also cited the example of the documentary film *Jews of Egypt* (2013), which state security tried to block, but was released “under my personal responsibility.”

Censors Should Censor: Protecting Public Morals and National Reputation

During the September 20, 2014, AUC panel discussion on cinema and censorship that I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Ali Abu Shadi and the film critic Kamal Ramzi criticized national controversies over films, such as Darren Aronofsky’s biblical epic, *Noah*, which al-Azhar recommended be banned but was approved by the Ministry of Culture’s censorship committee. Abu Shadi and Ramzi claimed that fears over public outrage over such movies were overblown. In reality, people are smart enough to judge these things for themselves, and they will not burn down cinemas over a Hollywood blockbuster as some fear. Ramzi recounted viewing the film in Beirut with Abu Shadi, and the theatre was empty. Far from being a dangerous incitement of the masses, it was a non-event.

This example highlights how some censorship officials and aligned intellectuals attempt to frame themselves as enlightened defenders of free speech. Such posturing stands in contrast to the censor employing the specter of the unruly masses as a

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33 Interview with Abdel Satar Fathi, Cairo, June 2013.

34 For background on this controversy, see “Weekly Spotlight on State Culture: ‘Noah’ to be Screened in Egypt” (2014).
justification for censoring mass media.\textsuperscript{35} This differentiation between enlightened intellectuals and unruly masses tends to present the current state of affairs as particularly liminal and dangerous. In this way, censorship is legitimated because of a perpetual sense that things are in a state of emergency (Mazzarella 2013, 17).

A similar notion of censorship as a means to protect the unruly or unenlightened masses exists in Egypt. For example, during the question and answer period, a member of the audience who identified himself as on the Ministry of Culture’s board of censors of foreign films stood up and expressed indignation at the notion that critics and censors would permit films that are deemed morally or religiously suspect. In other words, he defended elements of Mazzarella’s censors’ justifications for banning content dangerous to the masses. He seemed to view the posturing of “censors against censorship” as both dangerously liberal and disingenuous. He argued that the job of censors is, after all, to censor, and that some affronts to religion simply should not be shown to mass audiences.

When I met this censor for coffee in downtown Cairo a few weeks after the panel discussion at AUC, he was even more blunt in expressing his outrage over what he viewed as the hypocrisy of claiming to be “a censor against censorship.” He listed several historic censorship officials who worked from the 1960s onwards who went on to become (disingenuous) liberal critics of censorship policies. “They claim to be against

\textsuperscript{35} As the anthropologist William Mazzarella shows, this argument was used to justify censorship in India from colonial times to the present. The censor tends to posture her or himself as part of an enlightened intellectual elite who are immune to the dangers that mass media can pose to the masses. Indian censors tend to not only reason that “censorship should be abolished—but not yet,” but also that “censorship is, for now, necessary—but not for me.” In doing so, they differentiate between the enlightened public and unruly crowd at the movies (Mazzarella 2013, 18).
censorship, but then why do they accept the position of censor? . . . The contradiction makes me furious.”

This censor’s incredulity partly matched up with an ethos of intellectuals protecting the susceptible and dangerous masses. He did at times distinguish between “intellectuals” and ordinary viewers, assuming (pace Mazzarella’s Indian censors) that the former can safely watch films that could dangerously incite or undermine the morals of the latter. For example, he told me, “there is a difference between intellectuals and ordinary people. If you end a movie saying there is no God, it will shock the people. If the main point of the movie is to say there is no God, it will shock the majority, even if the elites understand.” Thus, he argued that censorship of commercial movies could only be decreased gradually. For example, if religiously incendiary movies were released now, people could be incited to acts such as burning down cinemas or Christian neighborhoods.

In contrast, “there is no danger for elites to watch anything.” Thus, festival boards should simply choose the films that will be shown at film festivals (which have a limited and purportedly “elite” audience). He argued that the only reason that festival heads want to go through the Ministry of Culture’s censorship board is to use the government censors as scapegoats if anything should go wrong. Similarly, he argued that it was acceptable for *The Da Vinci Code* to be available as a book in Egypt, since novels have a limited readership. However, the movie version, which “millions would see” in theatres, was appropriately banned. Likewise, “curse words are also only appropriate for elites who could understand the context and enjoy it.”

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36 Interview with censorship official for foreign films, Cairo, October 2014.
Other censorship officials also sometimes described the censor’s role in elitist terms despite being self-proclaimed “censors against censorship”. Abdel Satar Fathi, for example, contended that “the role of the censor is to protect the people,” implying a gap between “the people” and the censor and his milieu. Ahmed Awaad claimed that while political and social criticism should not be curtailed, “with moral matters, there are some things that society says that it cannot bear—they can bear it up to a certain degree, and not more than that.” In short, Egyptian censors do sometimes distinguish between enlightened publics and dangerous crowds, and justify tough censorship practices by invoking the notion of the present as a state of emergency.

However, this narrative was not always the dominant one. In my discussion with the censor of foreign films, he more frequently and emphatically stressed the actual dangers (and inherent offensiveness) of certain creative products, not just for the unruly masses, but also for himself. In particular, he emphasized how certain books, movies, and television programs offend Egypt’s national reputation and moral values. While the censor must (almost by definition) think of her or himself as somehow immune to the dangers of the material being censored, this does not necessarily mean that censors always make a clear-cut distinction between the dangerous effects a work could have if viewed by the public and the inherent repulsiveness of the works themselves.

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37 Interview with Abdel Satar Fathi, Cairo, June 2013.

38 Interview with Ahmed Awaad, Cairo, 19 May 2014.

39 Think, for example, of police tasked with monitoring child pornography or violent extremist websites. The fact that the individuals see themselves as professional enough to “safely” view the content does not mean that they do not see it as inherently dangerous or offensive.
Regarding morally dangerous films, the censor claimed that you cannot ridicule sacred beliefs. He emphasized respect for both al-Azhar and the Coptic Church, and claimed that he thought that the Ministry of Culture’s censorship boards should not have an adversarial relationship with either of these religious bodies. “Why would you release something that would offend all Christians or all Muslims?” He also emphasized that as a religious man, he finds some movies personally offensive. For example, regarding the film *Noah*, the censor claimed that he found the movie shocking “because it presented God as bloodthirsty. He wants to destroy all of mankind, except for Noah and the animals. In the movie, God incited Noah to kill his grandsons.” Thus, he claimed that he would have banned *Noah* as al-Azhar recommended. “You cannot abolish censorship until there is a real enforceable law to prevent the majority from seeing inappropriate content.”

Likewise, in my discussions with other censorship officials, they sometimes veered from emphasizing the danger that controversial topics pose to the broader public to issues that they personally found offensive. For example, Abdel Satar Fathi expressed discomfort with how homosexuality was represented in *The Yacoubian Building*, arguing that as something inherently “unnatural,” it should only be represented in the context of comedy or else must be presented as a psychological problem.

Similarly, during my discussion with the censor of foreign films, he emphasized the need to protect Egypt’s national reputation, not only for the sake of the uneducated masses, but also for himself. For example, he brought up the topic of Bassem Youssef’s

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40 Interview with censorship official for foreign films, Cairo, October 2014.

41 Interview with Abdel Satar Fathi, Cairo, June 2013.
wildly popular satirical talk show that had recently been taken off the air. As he put it, “[y]ou have to accept that the majority of people favor al-Sisi. People are not ready for [extreme forms of critique] like Bassem Youssef. [Such criticism] should be introduced gradually….There is a need to hold back, even if the current regime is not fully respecting liberty. One can only express liberty when it does not offend others. You need to filter what people can accept without being shocked.”

He went on, “Bassem Youssef trespassed the red line. He was out of ideas. He ridiculed the army, which is respected by everyone. If he does this, what is next? We have been saved by the army, and now he is making fun of them….People are hanging on to their last hope, and now Bassem Youssef is making fun of that. You can ridicule the President, but it is [a matter of] timing.” The censor went on to differentiate between criticizing a president and ridiculing his very reputation. The latter, the censor argued, is beyond the pale of what should be acceptable, whether the president in question is Anwar Sadat, Hosni Mubarak, Mohamed Morsi, or Adly Mansour. That is, one should never defame a president’s reputation, even if you adamantly disagree with the president’s policies or view his performance as bad. Thus, according to the censor, Bassem Youssef did not only go too far when he poked fun at al-Sisi, but even his satires of Morsi (whom the censor loathed) went beyond the pale of acceptable speech.42

This censor’s opinions are reflective of arguments I heard from numerous acquaintances about Bassem Youssef’s humor “going too far” or it not being “the right time” for hard-hitting political satire following Morsi’s ouster. Thus, the public does not uniformly condemn even such hard-nosed arguments in support of censorship. Rather,

42 Interview with censorship official for foreign films, Cairo, October 2014.
such discourse is part of a populist reaction to collective fears about instability that while actively promoted in pro-government media also speak to real public anxieties.

**Room for Interpretation: The Pliability of “Taboos”**

Despite their differences, all of the censors I spoke with described their job as creative—as driven by the need for the censor to actively look at “texts” as a whole in order to ascertain the value or dangers of a work. Given the vagueness of many written censorship laws, almost anything could potentially be banned.43 As Ali Abu Shadi put it, “The law is there, but the chief censor can change things based on his mentality and interpretation.”44 Similarly, the censor of foreign films whom I met at the AUC event emphasized that he did not view his job as the rote cutting of scenes based off of a list of controversial issues, but as synthetically looking at the overall messages of films and determining whether they are truly immoral or dangerous to the public.45 Thus, censors need to work creatively in order to interpret and contextualize the law, and balance their own politics and aesthetics with the pressures they face from other individuals and institutions.

A common theme that censors and some critics and artists repeated in their discussions with me was the cliché that censorship centered around the “three taboos” of politics, sex, and religion. What is interesting is that these purportedly “taboo” subjects constantly appear in Egyptian cinema. Indeed, without movies about politics, sex, and

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43 See Ezzat, al-Haqq, and Fazulla (2014) for an overview of Egypt’s censorship laws.

44 Interview with Ali Abu Shadi, Cairo, January 13, 2013.

45 Interview with censorship official for foreign films, Cairo, October 2014.
religion, there would be very few Egyptian films at all (including many of the classics of Egyptian cinema). Thus, all of the censors I spoke with depicted their work as creative and even as a form of activism, whether liberal or conservative. This is true for the “censors against censorship,” as well as the censor who viewed the notion of attempting to battle censorship from the inside as hypocritical.

Overall, whether censors postured themselves as “dissidents” or guardians of public order, they consistently talked about themselves as creative members of the artistic community, not as its foes. This is how censors present themselves in their numerous appearances in public colloquia and on television talk shows. Censorship is not always experienced or presented as authoritarian, and this is partly what makes it successful.

**Conclusion: Censorship, Crackdowns, and Authoritarian Reconsolidation**

Many accounts of censorship in political science and by human rights organizations tend to privilege a liberal notion of what free speech is, what its political effects are, and assume that “censored” publics overwhelmingly share these ideals. This risks making unwarranted assumptions that particular liberal interpretations of free speech are somehow both universally accepted and are a democratizing force in their own right. Treating censorship as a simple authoritarian tool or negation of free expression also sidesteps questions about how acts of censorship take place, and the institutional legacies and bureaucratic conflicts that they often entail. Dismissing censors as mere instruments of authoritarian regimes ignores the actual content of what is censored, how censors attempt to manipulate or change this content, and how acts of censorship are justified and debated locally.
In Egypt, censorship is a disjointed process rather than a well-oiled machine capable of carrying out the orders of a unitary authoritarian state. Paying close attention to how censorship processes occur and how they are received is particularly important, since debates over censorship often happen in public view with censorship officials justifying their decisions in forums such as talk shows. While Ministry of Culture censors may partly be acting disingenuously when they posture themselves as champions of freedom of expression, conflicts between government ministries do exist, often making censorship more of a battle than a unified decree.

While not an authoritarian tool that any given leader completely controls, the decentralized nature of state attempts to intervene in cultural production may itself make censorship more effective. By making censorship seem like a response to public demands rather than an imposition from above, censors and state-aligned intellectuals can gain credibility among some segments of the public as independent figures rather than as mere state functionaries. It also makes it possible for regime-aligned artists and intellectuals to work within state institutions without necessarily seeing themselves as culpable for its abuses. Thus, they can sing the praises of Mubarak’s Minister of Culture, Farouk Hosny, posture themselves as vanguards of the revolution, or ignore (if not celebrate) mass killings and political detentions. In this way, censorship and propaganda campaigns are intertwined. They are both part of a populist process to redefine the norms of what Egyptian national identity means and who has the right to represent and protect it. There is no mastermind that enacts them at the behest of an ideologically coherent centralized state.
Public debates about censorship within the relatively “safe” parameters of discussions about the limits of film and cultural expression create an ethical space in which censors, aligned intellectuals, and segments of the public can experience debate about freedom of expression even amidst a brutal security crackdown. The decentralized nature of censorship in Egypt provides opportunities for cultural bureaucrats to deflect blame, and even view themselves as creative intellectuals and champions of artistic expression. It makes it possible to hold panel discussions about censorship without mentioning an ongoing crackdown on the media, and perhaps to not even think about how ironic that is.
CHAPTER 3
POP CULTURE AND PRO-MILITARY PROPAGANDA IN POST-MUBARAK EGYPT

In the previous chapter, I examined how some Egyptian censors view and publicly justify their role amidst times of dramatic political upheaval. I argued that in Egypt, censorship is a decentralized process, and that censors often legitimate themselves as “independent” thinkers and defenders of artistic creativity. In this chapter, I focus on the role that public intellectuals who were well-known dissidents under Hosni Mubarak played in justifying military repression after his ouster. In particular, I explore the ways in which their status as “dissidents” has helped a class of well-known anti-Islamist intellectuals to support state killings and mass imprisonment.

More broadly, this chapter examines how cultural producers in authoritarian contexts can gain credibility because of their purported independence from the state, and how they can be crucial to legitimating political repression. Ironically, autocrats can find themselves in need of public intellectuals whose popularity is partly based on their status as well-known oppositional figures.

Following the Egyptian military’s ouster of Mohamed Morsi from the presidency in July 2013, there has been a resurgent security state in Egypt that is more closed and repressive than under Mubarak. This has occurred through a series of brutal crackdowns involving mass killings and arrests. It has also been enabled through a wave of pro-military populism. After the coup, Egypt’s emerging leaders quickly cracked down on dissident media. At the same time, state-affiliated and sympathetic private media outlets have vociferously supported the military takeover and subsequent repression of
demonstrators and opposition figures. The military and General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi were also celebrated in jingoistic pop songs, and by oversized television personalities dedicated to the counterrevolution.

Many prominent Egyptian artists and intellectuals have publicly supported this new wave of repression and populist reverence for the security state. For example, the renowned novelist Alaa Al Aswany called al-Sisi “a national hero” (Azimi 2014). The famously politically independent novelist Sonallah Ibrahim, along with numerous other prominent artists and intellectuals signed a petition after the coup demanding that the Muslim Brotherhood be declared a terrorist organization (Colla 2014). Various essays and symposia by Egyptians and outside observers have expressed shock at this authoritarian turn by many previously politically irreverent intellectuals.

Why would so many previously dissident public figures support an authoritarian crackdown? One explanation is that the threat of Islamists monopolizing politics drove “liberal” intellectuals to reluctantly support renewed dictatorship. This is in-line with an argument that Lisa Blaydes made prior to the 2011 uprising that unseated Mubarak. Blaydes contended that liberal intellectuals in Egypt were “reluctant democrats” who were unlikely to support pro-democracy mobilization against Mubarak only because of

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46 For details about the crackdown on dissident media and the subsequent support for al-Sisi in the remaining media outlets in post-Morsi Egypt, see Elmeshad (2015).
47 For more on pro-military pop songs in post-Mubarak Egypt, see Carr (2014).
48 For example, see Armbrust (2013) for a detailed portrait of Tawfik Okasha, a well-known Glenn Beck-like Egyptian media personality and conspiracy theorist.
49 For example, Fadl (2013); Azimi (2014); and Colla (2014).
50 For an overview of one such symposium, see Rossetti (2014).
their fears that competitive multiparty politics could bring Islamists to power who would censor their work (Blaydes 2010, 172-173).

As I discuss in more detail below, given the Muslim Brotherhood’s non-inclusive approach to politics following Mubarak’s ouster, many non-Islamists’ tangible fears of Islamists dominating politics were realized. However, I argue that reducing identity conflict in Egypt to rational competition between opposed political interest groups cannot fully explain the new wave of populist nationalism that helped to justify the military takeover. Treating non-Islamist intellectuals as “reluctant democrats” obscures the central role of public intellectuals’ support for egregious military repression in the wake of Morsi’s ouster for four key reasons:

First, many Egyptian intellectuals were not passive observers of identity conflict, but took an active role in shaping it. Rather than simply accepting the military takeover as a necessary evil, many well-known artists, public intellectuals, and media figures have forcefully defended brutal security crackdowns, draconian legislation, and the electoral window dressing of a regime more closed than Mubarak’s. Second, in supporting the military crackdown, some prominent intellectuals and media personalities have justified the repression of both Islamist and non-Islamist dissidents. That is, rather than simply opposing Islamists, they have endorsed a broader project of political restabilization and call for public order. Third, many prominent “liberal” intellectuals played a key role in demonizing Islamists for decades. Thus, they actively shaped how the Islamist “threat” was narrated and debated in public discourse under Mubarak. This influenced the character of identity conflict, and shaped public perceptions of Islamists after Mubarak’s ouster.
Finally, treating non-Islamist intellectuals as “reluctant democrats” assumes that anyone who expressed “dissident” views about corruption, economic woes, or police abuse under Mubarak was a proponent of democratic reforms. This ignores the unique position that being a “dissident” occupied in Mubarak’s Egypt. Just as the Mubarak regime allowed and even encouraged limited forms of political opposition in the form of political parties and civil society groups (Albrecht 2013), the regime also tolerated and even worked with cultural producers who satirized the political status quo. As I argue in more detail below, many prominent public intellectuals became famous precisely because of their status as famous oppositional figures. Expressing “dissident” views had value to cultural producers as a way to gain popularity and remain relevant, regardless of their political views. Thus, public intellectuals with a variety of relationships to the Mubarak regime—ranging from principled leftist opponents (such as the novelist Sonallah Ibrahim) to those plausibly working with the security forces (such as the scriptwriter Wahid Hamid) made careers out of being “dissidents.”

In this chapter, I elaborate upon the above claims by examining how three prominent Egyptian intellectuals (the scriptwriter Wahid Hamid, the journalist Ibrahim Eissa, and the cartoonist Amr Selim) describe their shift from being famous “dissident” figures to embracing the new military regime. In doing so, I explore both why authoritarian populism might sometimes be appealing, and how the legacy of fictional representations of Islamists under Mubarak impacted identity politics in the wake of his ouster. While these three public intellectuals are by no means representative of Egypt’s broader media or cultural spheres, they are all household names and represent important
examples of how some anti-Islamist intellectuals attempted to rebrand themselves amidst dramatic political transformations.

A “Post-Foucaultian” Moment: Fantasies of a Strong State

The desires for stability and appeal of authoritarian pageantry are not unique to Egypt. For example, Jean and John Comaroff (2004) show how fear of crime in post-apartheid South Africa manifested itself in a public longing for the theatrics of state power. They describe this desire for dramatic state intervention to restore public order as a “post-Foucaultian” moment in which public fears of crime and chaos supersede anxieties about being constrained by the disciplinary mechanisms of the state. Thus, in times of crisis, the public seeks to reassure itself of both its physical security and the stability of national identity through visible signs of state control over violence, such as a strong police presence.

Scholars often treat the state (and especially the authoritarian state) as fundamentally in opposition to the public. However, this problematically ignores the role that populist politics often have in supporting authoritarian practices. As Comaroff and Comaroff put it, “there is plentiful evidence in popular fantasy of a nostalgia for authoritative, even authoritarian government” in which a popularized “metaphysics of disorder…comes to legitimize a physics of social order to be accomplished through effective law enforcement” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2004, 824).

51 On the fetishization of state power and pageantry in contexts such as Venezuela and the Dominican Republic, see Coronil (1997) and Derby (2009). On the reification of the abstract idea of “the state,” see Mitchell (1991).
Another reason not to treat Egyptian intellectuals’ embrace of re-autocratization as somehow incomprehensible is that the conservative yearning for order is very much present in established democracies. For example, public obsession over crime and a desire for a visibly strong state are politically influential in contexts such as the US and the UK. “Moral panics” over issues such as crime, terrorism, or immigration can pressure governments to publicly flex the muscles of the state. Rare forms of violence, such as serial killing and terrorism, become ubiquitous as fictional objects of entertainment, as do fantastic images of state power (e.g., in police, war, or counterterrorism movies and television dramas).

Thus, Egyptian intellectuals’ embrace of heavy-handed tactics to reestablish order and conduct its own “war on terror” is not “anti-democratic” in the sense that it reflects a tendency that is only present in authoritarian regimes or transitioning states. Moral panics, the longing for a strong state, and exclusionary visions of what constitute safety and modernity are very much present in established democracies. Thus, regardless of their individual motivations, public intellectuals’ embrace of authoritarian crackdowns and a reinvigorated security state draw on insecurities and fantasies of national identity that are not unique to Egypt.

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52 On moral panics and calls for tougher policing, see, for example, Hall et al. (1978). See Goode (2000) for a review of approaches to the concept of moral panics.

Excluding Islamists from “Modern” Egypt

In Egypt, the media’s representation of the Islamist “threat” is tightly related to its embrace of the pageantry, symbolism, and overt violence of the state. Of course, fears of Islamism in Egypt can partly be explained in terms of very tangible conflicts of interest between ideological and political factions. It is also partly the result of the Muslim Brotherhood’s own political mistakes during Morsi’s year in office.

In the wake of the January 25, 2011 uprising and the presidency of the Muslim Brotherhood’s candidate, Mohamed Morsi, non-Islamists were given more tangible reasons to fear Islamists’ domination of national politics. The 2012 constitution writing process was notoriously non-inclusive, and tensions came to a head when Morsi declared supra-constitutional powers in November 2012 (Kirkpatrick and El Sheikh 2012; Alim 2013; El-Sherif 2014) Morsi’s time in office was also marked by censorship of and even violence against non-Islamist cultural producers. For example, during Morsi’s time in office, defamation cases were launched against the wildly popular satirist Bassem Youssef. Even more dramatically, the firebrand Salafi preacher and politician Sheikh Hazem Salah Abu Ismail led a blockade of a major media production center outside of Cairo, which targeted anti-Islamists media figures (Fahmy 2012). This ideological fragmentation played out in the national media, where news outlets became increasingly ideologically balkanized and vitriolic (Freedom House 2013).

However, treating “secularists”/“liberals” and “Islamists” as fixed, clear-cut categories misses the vagueness of these terms and the malleability of the groups they are

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supposed to refer to. Additionally, it ignores the work that some Egyptian intellectuals and mass media outlets have done to actively shape identity politics for decades.

Since the 1990s, Egyptian films and television dramas have treated Islamists as a threat to national unity, and as antithetical to idealized depictions of a modern, thriving Egypt (Abu-Lughod 2005; Armbrust 2012b). This took the form of both overt demonization of Islamists as backwards militants, and subtler depictions of Islamists as outside of and antithetical to modernity. For example, movies such as The Terrorist (1994) starring ‘Adil Imam, overtly demonized Islamists by depicting them as backwards militants who were “strictly…enemies of modernity, and largely ignorant of its effects” (Armbrust 2012b, 357). Such fictional accounts went along well with media campaigns that attempted to drum up moral panics about the looming threat of Muslim Brotherhood militancy, which continued into the 2000s (Shehata and Stacher 2007).

In addition to overt propaganda campaigns that sought to equate Islamism with backwardness and militancy, fictional dramas also attempted to exclude Islamists in more subtle ways. Movies tended to present whitewashed images of Egyptian public spaces that removed depictions of public piety. For instance, there is a sharp distinction between the number of women who actually wear the hijab in contemporary Cairo and the much smaller number of veiled women depicted in most commercial movies (Armbrust 1998b, 421; Armbrust 2012b). Thus, in conventional cinematic representations, Islamists became a foil to the good life in an imaginary modern, neoliberal Egypt, conventionally “treated

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55 On neoliberalism in Egypt, see Denis (2006); Armbrust (2011). On the concept of “neoliberal autocracy” in which the “good life” of consumerism serves as a substitute for political engagement, see Wedeen (2013).
as the functional equivalent of ‘dirt’”—something unsightly that should be ignored or wiped away (Armbrust 2012b, 370-371).

In short, mass media fictions about Islamists often employed “a language of half-truths, outright lies, and exaggeration” that was highly politicized (Armbrust 2014, 853). Such fictional representations of sectarian or religious identity can be politically important, since mass media narratives (such as in cinema and television) play a role in constituting that group’s very existence for the mass public.

As the anthropologist William Mazzarella puts it in the context of India, “cinema—like any other mass medium—does not simply represent communities; it helps to make them. The critical question is therefore not just the accuracy or fairness of images but, more fundamentally, the ways they make community identifications publicly imaginable and communicable in the first place” (Mazzarella 2013, 139).

Moreover, the politicized use of offensive depictions of a group (like intentionally incendiary Muhammad cartoons in the West) can be used as a weapon precisely because the group in question takes offense. Again, in the context of India:

When Muslims protested against unflattering film portrayals of, say, Mughal emperors, their annoyance would be used as evidence of a regressive Muslim inability to accept historical fact (e.g., that Emperor Jehangir drank alcohol) in a continent manner. . . . Muslim complaints became symptoms of a regressive form of spectatorship that, in its inability to mediate public affect, threatened to retard India's progress toward secular modernity (Mazzarella 2013, 149).

Likewise in Egypt, Islamists’ reactions to demonizing portrayals of them in the media could be used as evidence of their irrationality and incompatibility with modern culture. Following Mubarak’s ouster, movies and television dramas continued to use demonizing portraits of Islamists from the 1990s as canned genres. The persistence of
Mubarak-era anti-Islamist narratives in films and television dramas during Morsi’s presidency served as “a barometer of just how little the Muslim Brotherhood’s influence extended into social spheres that had been long dominated by non-Islamists. There has never been such a thing as an Islamist television serial. . . . The television industry seems to have been barely touched by Muslim Brotherhood rule” (Armbrust 2014, 852).

The fact that creative industries were largely closed to Islamists helps to explain how public rhetoric against the Brotherhood emerged so quickly in a fully articulated form under Morsi. Established anti-Brotherhood mass media fictions enabled cultural producers to draw on “ready-made anti-Islamist rhetoric that had been elaborated for decades in the media, and which could be pulled ‘off the shelf’ and used performatively, as a rhetorical resource, by the Muslim Brotherhood’s political and social opponents” (Armbrust 2014, 842).

In order to examine how this narrative reappropriation occurred in more detail, I look at three prominent Egyptian intellectuals who were all extremely influential in shaping how Islamists and other political opposition groups were portrayed in the mass media under Mubarak. I look at how they viewed their roles as famous “dissidents” before the January 25, 2011 uprising, and how they explain their subsequent backing of the military takeover following Morsi’s ouster, and what it means to them in terms of their life and work.
Three “Dissident” Intellectuals Turned State Spokesmen

In this section, I discuss three particularly well-known Egyptian public intellectuals who were household names as anti-Mubarak dissidents, and later became vocal supporters of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi’s repressive military regime.

Within the context of limited media liberalization under Mubarak, being oppositional could lead to money, fame, and status. Thus, there are widespread accusations that some “dissident” intellectuals were really on the government payroll all along. This reveals confusion about what it meant to be a dissident or a collaborator within the context of state-approved cultural production during the Mubarak era. Regardless of their individual motivations for supporting a renewed security state, all of the intellectuals I discuss were famous as oppositional figures under Mubarak. This status as independent thinkers lent credibility, at least among some segments of the public, to their turn to pro-military nationalism in the wake of Morsi’s ouster.

1. Wahid Hamid: A Pioneer in Political Comedy

As one of Egypt’s most famous contemporary scriptwriters, Wahid Hamid is particularly well known for his movies starring the megastar comedian ‘Adil Imam. Under Mubarak, Hamid was at the epicenter of a new genre of commercial political films that lampooned the political and social status quo. As the Egyptian state was engaged in combating Islamist insurgents during the 1990s, Hamid also penned some of the first television dramas and movies that directly portrayed Islamists. Following Morsi’s ouster, like many other public intellectuals and media personalities, Hamid vocally supported the
coup and subsequent crackdown. Currently, the Egyptian media sometimes portrays Hamid as an expert on the Islamist threat, since he had been warning of the Muslim Brotherhood’s duplicity for decades. In short, Hamid has been a pioneer in depicting Islamists and politics to the Egyptian public.

Hamid is also a well-known example of a public intellectual who faced plausible accusations (which he denies) of colluding with the Mubarak regime, even as he poked fun at elements of it in his films. Thus, Hamid represents a class of anti-Islamist public intellectuals who gained credibility through their purported independence and status as dissidents, even as their true relationship to the state was ambiguous and publicly contested.

**Making Anti-Islamist Films under Mubarak.** In iconic political comedies from the 1990s, Wahid Hamid movies starring ‘Adi Imam poke fun at both Islamists and corrupt or incompetent state officials. For example, in *Terrorism and Kabab* (1992), Imam plays a man trying to transfer his children to a public school closer to home. This leads him to the infamous seat of government bureaucracy, the *mugamma* administrative building in downtown Cairo, where Imam tries to track down a perennially absent employee. This leads to antics as Imam searches for him in the upscale bathrooms of Cairo’s five-star hotels and the Arab League. Fed up, Imam gets into an altercation with a bearded bureaucrat who spends more time praying than working. When a soldier tries to intervene, Imam accidentally sets off his gun, unwittingly becoming a “terrorist” and taking over the government building. After comic exchanges between Imam and the

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56 For example, Hamid attended a meeting between President al-Sisi and Egyptian intellectuals, after which Hamid praised al-Sisi for listening to the attendees’ questions and characterized him as a heroic and foresighted anti-Mubarak figure (Ali 2014).
bumbling Minister of Interior (who believes that Islamists must be responsible for the takeover), Imam and his “hostages” end the standoff, and the movie concludes with government employees going back to work the next morning.

Released amidst a real Islamist insurgency, *Terrorism and Kabab* and other ‘Adil Imam political comedies from the 1990s mock pseudo-religiosity, the government’s response to security crises, and the everyday travails of citizens’ interactions with both the authoritarian state and emerging forms of political and social conflict they do not fully understand. This genre of fictional depictions of Islamists’ conflicts with the state was a new phenomenon. Prior to the early 1990s, censors generally did not permit fictional depictions of Islamists in movies or television. Then, a series of movies and television dramas about Islamists were released as part of a state-led public information campaign as the Mubarak regime battled a low-level Islamist insurgency (Abu-Lughod 2005; Armbrust 1998a).

With the release *Terrorism and Kabab* and other work, such as the Ramadan television drama *The Family* (1994), and subsequent films such as *Birds of Darkness* (1995), Wahid Hamid played a central role in the state’s information campaign against Islamism (Armbrust 2002 and 2012b; Abu-Lughod 2005, 163-191). In the media, Islamist commentators criticized Hamid’s work as propaganda seeking to defame Islamists writ large through inaccurate generalizations that tie all forms of political Islam to violent militancy.57

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Yet, the political meaning of these movies was still ambiguous for some viewers. On the one hand, they seemed like daring critiques of corruption, inadequate government services, swollen bureaucracy, and bumbling security officials. Even though released to coincide with state-approved information campaigns against Islamists, it would probably be inaccurate to characterize mass media creations, such as famous Hamid-Imam political comedies, as mere propaganda. As Lila Abu-Lughod (2005) argues, Egypt’s creative elite during the time was marked by a degree of independence and contentiousness, even as some artists also collaborated to an extent with the state.58 On the other hand, many of Hamid’s “oppositional” films and television dramas arguably have plot twists that offer a conservative message of social comity (Armbrust 1998a).59

This made “oppositional” art ambiguous to many viewers. For example, the well-known young Egyptian cartoonist and writer Andeel describes how his own reaction

Brotherhood responses to The Organization include a book titled, A Calm Response to the Serial “The Organization” and to the Fabrications of Wahid Hamid (Shamekh 2010).

58 “[T]he intelligentsia, who produce television, film, theatre, and literature, must be understood as having a certain independence from the state and laboring to a large extent in their own cultural fields. That some writers used praise for... [Hamid’s 1994 anti-Muslim Brotherhood] serial The Family as a way to attack censorship is one index of the oppositional nature of the relationship between intellectuals and the state” (Abu-Lughod 2005, 189). This is true, according to Abu-Lughod, even though this serial is a prime example of collaboration between intellectuals and the state in its fight against Islamists. State censorship officials also used the existence of such state-approved “oppositional” mass media to lionize themselves. See, for example, former Ministry of Culture chief censor Ali Abu Shadi’s account of how anti-Islamist Egyptian films from the 1990s broke taboos about depicting religion in film (Abu Shadi 1998, 106).

59 As Walter Armbrust puts it in a discussion of Terrorism and Kabab, the movie has the ingredients to make “a Western audience feel hip” (Armbrust 1998a, 296) as viewers imagine that that they are getting an insider’s view at the filmmaker’s delicate balancing act of mocking both Islamist militants and an authoritarian regime (Armbrust 1998a, 284). Rather, his interpretation is that films such as Terrorism and Kabab “attempt to engineer a kind of social harmony that had been subdued in Egyptian cinema for some time (Armbrust 1998a, 297).”
towards Hamid’s work changed after the 2011 uprising. Andeel characterizes Hamid movies such as *Terrorism and Kabab* as “opposition art in the time of a dictatorship that is trying to look democratic.” Having grown up watching Wahid Hamid movies, he used to think of Hamid as a clearly oppositional artist. However, after the revolution, he began to see things differently. “The movie told me that I could laugh at the government for as long as I want but at the end of the day it's the government's game.”60 In other words, despite lampooning some government officials, by constantly representing protest as both ordinary and ultimately incapable of changing the overall order of things, movies like *Terrorism and Kabab* helped to defang the idea of political opposition.

Such shifting reactions to Hamid’s movies reflect an ambiguity that many friends and acquaintances have also expressed. Some despise Hamid as an anti-Islamist propagandist or as a regime co-opted figure. Others admire him as an artist. Still others recognize that while he is known for exaggeration in his caricature of Islamists, events after Mubarak’s ouster proved him right. In short, Hamid’s political satire occurred within a somewhat ambiguous narrative framework that, for some, made it difficult to clearly distinguish between political collusion and critique. Indeed, public debates over the political status of public intellectuals, such as Hamid, itself formed an important locus for political contestation.

**A Post-Mubarak Terrorism “Authority.”** Despite accusations that he colluded with the Mubarak regime and the security forces, for some members of the public Hamid still represents an important “independent” cultural figure. Indeed, Hamid’s status as an

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60 This is from Andeel’s October 14, 2014 response to a reader’s online comment to Andeel (2013a), accessed March 2, 2015, http://www.madamasr.com/content/censorship-ship-out-it.
independent critic of Islamists in politics is a large part of what lends him credibility as a contemporary pro-government spokesperson. Following Morsi’s ouster, media outlets hailed Hamid as an expert on the Islamist threat. They invoked his films and dramas on Islamists from the 1990s as prescient harbingers of what was to come. For example, in an interview with Hamid, the cultural journal *Roz al-Youssef* praises him for being prescient for combating terrorism in the 1990s through movies about the duel threat of Islamists and Mubarak’s old guard, as in the movie *Birds of Darkness*. All of this, the journal claims, gives him credibility for analyzing current affairs, such as the threat of the Islamic State.

In this interview, Hamid takes the hyperbolic depictions of Islamists in his films to new conspiratorial heights. He explains that the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic State are essentially the same, all part of a Western (and especially American) plot to divide the Arab world. Hamid praises al-Sisi’s response to the Islamic State, claiming that “Egypt is the only state that is standing steadfast in the face of this satanic plot” by America, Britain, and the Muslim Brotherhood to divide the Arab world.61

In an interview with me (about a month prior to Morsi’s ouster) and in various appearances in the Egyptian press, Hamid defended himself against accusations that he worked with the security forces under Mubarak to demonize Islamists.62 Rather, he presented his work as driven by his own conviction that Islamists posed a threat to Egyptian civilization, a point he claims has been vindicated by recent events: “I am with

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62 For an example of such accusations, see al-Jamal (2013).
the people, with the Egyptian people, and the interests of the nation (Khuwasik 2011).”

Hamid reiterated this point in an interview with me:

> When I wrote the serial [The Organization], I wrote it...without anyone commissioning it, but [from a sense of] patriotism. I wanted the new generation in Egyptian society to know the truth about the Brotherhood... [T]here are people who are not from the Brotherhood who attacked me as well and said that I was going too far [in defaming Islamists]. But after they saw what the Brotherhood did [after Morsi came to power], they started to apologize to me... 63

Hamid goes on to insist that he was right to depict Islamists (writ large) as a threat: “I think that the Islamist movement is completely extremist and that it employs all of its energy against human civilization. They don’t care about art or culture, and just play politics.”64 He accused Sadat and Mubarak of political naiveté for attempting to work with the Brotherhood, thereby “underestimating the enemy.” Likewise, he accuses the US administration of working with the Brotherhood rather than embracing “the Egyptian people.”65 Hamid emphasized that he felt vindicated that journalists began praising his work from the 1990s as prescient:

> I sit here and I feel a sense of satisfaction... The people now talk about these films that you were just discussing... the Arabic papers... they all talk about Birds of Darkness, they all talk about Terrorism and Kabab [realizing that] they predicted what happened. Not just one or two or three people, but all of those who follow the Brotherhood are writing this. And they apologize, and they send me greetings. So I feel relaxed... [L]ook at the commentaries of all of the people. The Egyptian people are a clever people, a smart people, an intelligent people. And it is not possible that they will forget [how Hamid got Islamists right since his well-known films from the 1990s]. 66

63 Interview with Wahid Hamid, Cairo, May 25, 2013.
64 Interview with Wahid Hamid, Cairo, May 25, 2013.
65 Interview with Wahid Hamid, Cairo, May 25, 2013.
66 Interview with Wahid Hamid, Cairo, May 25, 2013.
**Freedom of Expression under Mubarak.** Hamid contrasts the restrictions he faced under Morsi with the relative freedom he had making his work under Mubarak. When I asked him why the planned sequel for his Ramadan serial *The Organization* (2010) about the Muslim Brotherhood was stalled, he said that the Minister of Information issued an order banning the first installment of the series from being rebroadcast, and that a general sense of fear had begun to permeate the entertainment industry. “There is no freedom of thought, no freedom of opinion, no [freedom of] anything. Things are changing for the worse . . .”

In contrast, Hamid deemphasized the limitations placed on him by censorship authorities under Mubarak, denying that he (or other important members of the Egyptian film industry) were politically restricted in meaningful ways:

I’ll tell you something. [Prior to Mubarak’s ouster] there weren’t any problems . . . the censors only objected to two things and nothing else. Two things that are the opposite of one another: Explicit sex and religion. But there weren’t any political objections. . . . There are very important films that the censors allowed to pass without any interference, such as films by Youssef Chahine . . . Atef al-Tayeb, Daoud Abdel Sayed, Sherif Arafa, and Samir Seif. Important names. The censors didn’t oppose them. They only opposed nudity and religion. But some directors resorted to a commercial trick—they would promote their films by saying that the censors opposed their film. But the censors opposed what? Are you with me? You have to know what they were opposed to. Maybe they were opposed to a sex scene or something like that. No, but they didn’t forbid it [the entire film] in the true sense of the word.

Hamid also downplayed the dissident character of his political comedies. In particular, he denied that scenes that lampooned members of the security forces were meant as a broader indictment of the security state. Rather, he claimed that sometimes

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67 Interview with Wahid Hamid, Cairo, May 25, 2013.

68 Interview with Wahid Hamid, Cairo, May 25, 2013.
police characters were simply necessary for the plot. At the same time, he denied that ‘Adil Imam’s vocal pro-Mubarak politics played a role in shaping his films. “Look, Adil Imam is an actor. He has personal positions as an individual, but when he acts in a film he represents what the scriptwriter and director want him to. And all actors are like this. . . They all work, and that’s it.” 69

Calling for the Return of the Security State. In the interview with Roz al-Youssef mentioned above, in addition to framing himself as a staunch backer of al-Sisi’s “war on terror,” Hamid also calls for a broader return to law and order. For example, Hamid warns against jumping to conclusions in assigning blame for the January 24, 2015 shooting of Shaimaa al-Sabbagh during a peaceful march in Cairo. Rather, Hamid suggests, for all we know, it could have been the Muslim Brotherhood who shot her, but he will leave that up to the official state investigators. 70 In an interview with the Egyptian daily newspaper al-Masry al-Youm, Hamid again portrays himself as a strong proponent of law and order. He criticizes the government for not addressing the chaos of post-Mubarak Egypt by providing order in the streets, for example by fixing traffic congestion and preventing itinerant salespeople from crowding the squares (Badwi 2014).

Overall, what matters is not whether Wahid Hamid worked directly with state security (as some of his critics claim), or whether he genuinely believes that the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic state are part of an American-British plot to divide the Arab world. As one of the key pioneers of depicting Islamists for mass media audiences in

69 Interview with Wahid Hamid, Cairo, May 25, 2013.

Egypt, Hamid helped to set up the conditions under which such accounts might be believable. Hamid is not merely a “reluctant democrat.” Rather, he has played a key role in shaping identity politics and promoting public acceptance of a security state. Additionally, Hamid’s defense of his independence amidst accusations that he colluded with the Mubarak regime reflects the importance of some intellectuals’ status as “dissidents” for maintaining credibility. This remains the case even as they openly support a renewed state crackdown on opponents from across the ideological spectrum.

2. Ibrahim Eissa: A Trailblazer in Oppositional Journalism

The journalist Ibrahim Eissa is an oversized personality who has been incredibly influential in shaping a new generation of Egyptian journalists. Under Mubarak, Eissa pioneered a new genre of irreverent independent journalism. The recipient of international awards as a brave pioneer of free expression under Mubarak, Eissa posed himself as the embodiment of Egypt’s revolutionary spirit after Mubarak’s ouster. A fierce critic of Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood, Eissa eventually became one of the most outspoken supporters of the military takeover, the crackdown on dissidents, and al-Sisi’s bid for the presidency. In short, Eissa represents one of the most dramatic cases of a purportedly “pro-democratic” intellectual using his credentials as an independent thinker to shore up public support for a renewed security state in Egypt. Even more directly than Hamid, Eissa uses his reputation as an anti-Mubarak dissident to lend credibility to his support for the al-Sisi government and its use of massive repression.

After working as a journalist at the prestigious cultural journal *Roz al-Youssef*, Eissa became the editor of the privately owned newspaper *al-Dustour*, first in 1995 until
Eissa lampooned Hosni Mubarak in his regular cover op-eds, pieces written by contributors, and through cartoons lambasting the president, phony elections, and the marginalization of the poor. Written in colloquial Arabic, “[r]eaders felt al-Dustour spoke to them in their language and uncovered the secrets of the wealthy, unreachable ruling elite” (Afifi 2014b). Tabloid-like, “populist and trashy,” al-Dustour still opened up a new place in journalism and served as a venue for opposition groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Kefaya, and April 6 to get coverage before other privately-owned dailies, such as al-Masry al-Youm and al-Shorouk, came out and eventually superseded al-Dustour in popularity.\footnote{Interview with Heba Afifi, Cairo, May 3, 2014.}

At al-Dustour, Eissa brought in young talent, many of whom became some of the most respected journalists in Egypt today, such as Belal Fadl, Omar Taher and Mohamed al-Garhy (Afifi 2014). According to the journalist Tamer Abuarab, who used to work with Eissa at al-Dustour, the paper “was a school for all of the most prominent journalists working now. This is true whether or not you agree with Ibrahim Eissa. New journalists got experience at al-Dustour and then moved on to other outlets.”\footnote{Interview with Tamer Abu Arab, Cairo, 28 April 2014.} In addition to his work as an editor, Eissa became famous for penning numerous novels and books on issues such as Islamism (which Eissa sharply criticized), and hosting television talk shows.

Under Mubarak, Eissa became the darling of the Western media as the embodiment of a brave liberal critic of dictatorship. In 2008, Eissa was sentenced to jail for reporting on Mubarak’s health. Although Mubarak pardoned Eissa, who never had to
serve any time in prison, such events helped to further magnify his fame as a true dissident.

Prior to the uprising against Mubarak in 2011, the novelist Alaa Al Aswany (another famous public intellectual who switched from being a “dissident” under Mubarak to a vocal supporter of al-Sisi and the military coup) described Ibrahim Eissa as the vanguard of Egypt’s pro-democracy opposition: “Ibrahim Eissa did not oppose the government; he opposed the system. . . . He called for real democratic change through free and fair elections and regular change at the top.” In al-Dustour, “a newspaper for all Egyptians,” Eissa defended “the truth without fear or favor” (Al Aswany 2010). Eissa, not one for humility, agreed with this type of characterization: “I represent the true opposition” (Lepeska 2010).

Following Mubarak’s ouster, Eissa postured himself as a vanguard of the revolution. In 2011, he won an Index on Censorship Freedom of Expression Award. In the award announcement, the Index on Censorship characterized Eissa as a “one-man barometer of Egypt’s struggle for political and civic freedom.” Upon accepting the award, Eissa characterized himself as an embodiment of Egypt’s revolutionary spirit, stating, “I consider this to be a prize for Tahrir Square” (Butselaar 2011).

After Mubarak’s ouster, Eissa launched numerous media projects, including a new newspaper and a television channel (both named al-Tahrir). He continued to posture himself as a dissident and brave opponent to the powers that be (whether Mubarak, the interim military council, or the Brotherhood). Yet, after Morsi’s ouster, Eissa became one of the most vocal supporters of the military coup and al-Sisi’s takeover of power, railing against activists of all stripes and calling for a return to public order. That is, after
Morsi’s ouster, “Eissa’s rhetoric has become perfectly aligned with the state” (Afifi 2014). On hours-long talk shows (such as Eissa’s program 25/30 on ON TV)
73 and in op-eds, Eissa not only defended state violence against Islamists, but also against non-Islamist demonstrators, turning on the young dissidents he embraced in the immediate wake of Mubarak’s ouster. This led some of his previous supporters to feel betrayed. “Now people who worked with him are embarrassed to have worked with him, since they were proud to be in the opposition.”
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Eissa (along with television anchor Lamis al-Hadidy) also conducted the first interview with al-Sisi as a presidential candidate. 75 He then used his platform as television host to rally the public to vote. Eissa has also enraged many of his previous fans for giving court testimony that Hosni Mubarak did not order the use of force against protestors during the 2011 uprising. 76 In short, Eissa quickly transformed from a symbol of dissidence to one of the most prominent defenders of Egypt’s resurgent security state.

As the journalist and scriptwriter Belal Fadl 77 put it: Eissa “found his new audience in the ‘hezb al-kanaba’ (‘couch potatoes’) who are too ashamed to watch

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73 The title of Eissa’s television program, “25/30” is a reference to the January 25, 2011 uprising against Mubarak and the June 30, 2013 mass mobilization that paved the way for a military coup against Morsi.

74 Interview with Tamer Abu Arab, Cairo, 28 April 2014.

75 See “Sisi in First TV Interview: We Will Not Let Protests Destroy the Country” (2014).

76 See “Ibrahim Eissa Gives Vague Testimony of 'Friday of Rage' in Mubarak Case” (2014).

77 Fadl worked with Eissa at al-Dustour and al-Tahrir TV, but is now a vocal opponent of al-Sisi and the media sycophancy surrounding his takeover.
Tawfik Okasha. He gives them the same ideas but in a chic manner, told with stories from history with anecdotes and lines of poetry” (Afifi 2014).

As an al-Sisi supporter, Eissa has continued to be an outsized personality. As a television host, he gives his political views in hours-long monologues. He has also recently starred in several new entertainment television series. In the reality show *The Boss*, Eissa mentors young Egyptians in the art of journalism, and is given a platform to flaunt his persona as “godfather of the local media scene” (Afifi 2014). During Ramadan 2014, Eissa stared in a primetime program, *The School of Trouble Makers*, in which he played a teacher lecturing in front of a classroom of uppity “students.” This gave Eissa another public venue to instruct the nation on history, religion, politics, and whatever else he fancied.

**Opposition Figure or Opportunist?** In retrospect, some journalists who worked with Eissa prior to his recent pro-military shift argue that he was never really a principled opposition figure, but an opportunist. For example, the journalist Mostafa al-Husseiny wrote that Eissa “plays the role of the fighter, but behind closed doors he would talk about Mubarak as a close friend, who he has some minor differences with that can be overlooked. The reality is not the one that his articles depict, which makes Mubarak into a devil and Eissa into an angel” (Afifi 2014). Another long-time collaborator of Eissa’s

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78 For background on the well-known conspiracy theorist and populist media personality, Tawfik Okasha, see Armbrust (2013).

79 For more on Eissa’s *The School of Troublemakers*, See “Bi-l-Sur…Ibrahim Eissa Yadkhil ‘Madrasat al-Mushaghibin’ fi Ramadan” (2014). The television program borrows its title from a famous 1972 comedic play in which ‘Adil Imam made his breakout as a famous actor. Imam plays the wildest of a group of undisciplined students. For background about the original *School of Troublemakers*, see Armbrust (1998a, 290-291).
described him as an opportunist who used an oppositional voice for self-advancement. “People are overestimating him by considering him someone with a mission. He is an ambitious journalist who is willing to take any position to be number one” (Afifi 2014).

According to Tamer Abuarab, “Ibrahim Eissa loved fame, and this was one of the reasons that he opposed the current power under Mubarak….There was not a pure opposition under Mubarak. Eissa wanted to be famous through opposition for opposition’s sake.”

Several other journalists I spoke with were confident that Eissa had a close relationship with important figures in the Mubarak regime. Thus, they argue that under Mubarak Eissa was a tolerated opponent at best, and perhaps more directly co-opted by elements in the regime. For example, some journalists who worked with Eissa speculated that he was a backer of Omar Suleiman, and perhaps even in charge of a 2010 poster campaign promoting the intelligence chief to run for president. Others contend that Eissa was close to top regime figures, like Mubarak’s chief of staff, Zakaraya ‘Azmi.

Overall, the case of Ibrahim Eissa dramatically illustrates the ambiguous place of “dissident” media personalities under Mubarak, and their legacies after his ouster. Regardless of Eissa’s personal motivations, his ability to quickly switch political tacks reflects the ambiguous character of state-approved oppositional media under Mubarak. Yet, Eissa’s contentious and independent persona are likely crucial to his ability to maintain an audience now, even as he takes a radically pro-government stance.

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80 Interview with Tamer Abu Arab, Cairo, 28 April 2014.
3. Amr Selim: A Trendsetting Political Cartoonist

A former close colleague of Ibrahim Eissa’s, Amr Selim is one of the most influential cartoonists in contemporary Egypt. As chief editor of caricature at the independent newspaper *al-Dustour* (edited by Ibrahim Eissa), beginning in 2005, Selim mentored a new generation of irreverent cartoonists (Guyer 2013). He also became famous for being one of the first to draw caricatures of Hosni Mubarak in the Egyptian press.\(^{81}\) *Al-Dustour* featured cartoons throughout the paper, including embedded in articles and full-page series’ of cartoons with narrations. Selim later headed the caricature departments at the popular independent dailies *al-Masry al-Youm* and *al-Shorouk*. While famous for being irreverent under Mubarak, the interim military council, and Morsi, Selim came out as a vocal supporter of al-Sisi after Morsi’s ouster, and supported his bid for the presidency.\(^{82}\) He also defends Ibrahim Eissa against accusations of being politically inconsistent.

I spoke with Selim about his career, and how he views his role as a “dissident” cartoonist now that he is coming out in support of the government despite its repressive tactics. As in the cases of Hamid and Eissa, Selim’s career highlights how being a “dissident” under Mubarak can be critical for gaining popularity as a cultural producer. However, Selim’s current skepticism about the capacity of artists to impact political change and cynicism about the concept of democracy highlight that making oppositional art under dictatorship (e.g., drawing cartoons of Hosni Mubarak) is not necessarily tied to a particular vision of political reforms.

\(^{81}\) See, for example, Figures 2-3.

\(^{82}\) See, for example, Husni (2014) and Haftih (2014).
Fostering Creative Dissidence under Mubarak. Selim described the audaciousness and youthful talent in the caricature department at *al-Dustour* as key to its popularity. He also highlighted how the perceived bravery of drawing edgy political cartoons was key to his and the newspaper’s commercial success:

> When I started working at *al-Dustour* in 2005, I was encouraged to draw the ruler [Mubarak]—while he was still alive, not after he died. Me, Ibrahim Eissa, and all of the others at *al-Dustour* had this desire. That this god [Mubarak] must be broken . . . I established the caricature department at *al-Dustour*, and was in charge of a cadre of new young cartoonists that were just starting out. There were around 8-9 new cartoonists that were working for the first time. They weren’t afraid of drawing Mubarak. This is what distinguished caricature at that time. . . . In 2005, everything was different from today. It was very difficult then for people to imagine that Mubarak would be drawn like that. . . . They [the Mubarak regime] left us to do what we wanted. Maybe the public was surprised. ‘What’s this bravery? What will they do to you?’ But nothing happened. ⁸³

Later in our discussion, we returned to Selim’s experience at *al-Dustour*, and the journal’s impact on political caricature in Egypt. Selim described how the centrality of irreverent political cartoons in *al-Dustour* started a new wave of caricature in the Egyptian press, with other newspapers attempting to mimic what made *al-Dustour* so popular:

> At the time when *al-Dustour* came out [in 2005] caricature had decreased in the papers. . . . When *al-Dustour* came out, and Ibrahim Eissa contacted me, and requested that I become the head of the department, we depended upon caricature primarily. I remember that in one edition of *al-Dustour*, there were 70 cartoons. 70! I was happy. . . . As soon as *al-Dustour* circulated, all of the national papers decided that it was necessary for them to have a caricature department. And it was necessary to respond to what was drawn in *al-Dustour*. . . . [C]aricature had a renewed presence on the Egyptian streets, in the press. . . . Whenever cartoons made a commotion or there was a brave cartoon, people believed in the idea of caricature more. This was very important. ⁸⁴

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⁸³ Interview with Amr Selim, Cairo, May 12, 2014.

⁸⁴ Interview with Amr Selim, Cairo, May 12, 2014.
Representing Islamists at al-Dustour. In both its editorials and cartoons, al-Dustour simultaneously lampooned Islamists and presented itself as uniquely open to their participation in politics. However, given that the possibility of meaningful democratic reforms was highly unlikely under Mubarak, it is unclear what calling for Islamist participation in democratic politics meant at the time. In his discussion with me, Selim deemphasized his and Eissa’s roles in critiquing Islamists at al-Dustour, and focused on their openness to an inclusive political system.

Selim emphasized that as the editor in chief of al-Dustour, Ibrahim Eissa allowed the Muslim Brotherhood to express themselves in the paper. Thus, Eissa’s (and Selim’s) current stance against the Brotherhood is not the product of a longstanding bias against the group, but a reaction to the Brotherhood’s recent failings and attempts to grab power after Mubarak’s ouster:

They [the Brotherhood] were allowed to write for it [al-Dustour], and that is one of the reasons for Ibrahim Eissa’s strong attacks against the Brotherhood. Ibrahim Eissa attacks the Brotherhood . . . because of their policies. But there is [also] . . . a sense of bitterness. “How is it that I, as the editor in chief, had confidence in you? How did I let you publish articles? How could I have believed in you as a political faction? . . .” That made Ibrahim Eissa bitter, and made him attack them more. This became something personal. It was not mere politics. No.

Selim goes on to claim that he also was open to the Brotherhood under Mubarak when he encountered them during his time at al-Dustour. Like Eissa, Selim claims that he felt personally affronted by the Brotherhood’s ingratitude and duplicity:

The Brotherhood, when they are not ruling, are very calm, and very peaceful. They would come up to greet us. Essam al-Erian85 and al-

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85 Essam al-Erian is a senior member of the Muslim Brotherhood. After Mubarak’s ouster, he served as Vice President of the Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party.
Baltagy\textsuperscript{86} would smile, and you’d say “how wonderful it would be if they were to rule, they would be angels. How is it that the government—those sons of bitches—don’t understand you?” As soon as they sit in the seat [of power] it’s a different matter. They become the Hulk. You know the Hulk? The Hulk, before he is transformed, is normal. . . . The Brotherhood is like this. . . . This transformation doesn’t occur unless they are in the seat [of power]. Like the Hulk, it’s not possible to mess with them. And then once they leave power, they go back to normal. . . . Before the revolution, I drew Essam al-Erian as a cat. After the revolution, I drew Essam al-Erian as a lion. . . . [A]fter June 30, I drew him as a cat. This is their way.\textsuperscript{87}

Selim also passionately denied that Ibrahim Eissa has been politically inconsistent, and portrayed Eissa’s current stance and pro-military posturing in the media as commendable. When I asked Selim if he still views Eissa as an oppositional figure, he replied:

Let me ask you a question. In your opinion, what is the opposition? [Being in] the opposition means that you oppose anyone, or do you have to intend to make Egypt better? This is the problem. This is our problem. The generation of Ibrahim Eissa and I, we were the most severe opponents of Mubarak, and the most severe opponents of the Military Council, and the most severe opponents of Morsi. But we want [to work for] the interest of our country. . . . [W]e think that now a hero named al-Sisi . . . came and rid the country of this [Muslim Brotherhood] rule, this failed dictatorial rule that wanted to transform Egypt into a completely different country…. Why would we oppose him now? He is a hero. He saved Egypt. Egypt could have become a second Iran. So, why would we oppose him? If there were someone that was worth opposing, I would oppose him. I wouldn’t be afraid. We were not afraid under Mubarak or Morsi. There is no change that happened to Ibrahim. Ibrahim is like he was.\textsuperscript{88}

In short, when describing the Brotherhood as two-faced, Selim depicts himself and Ibrahim Eissa as having been genuinely open minded about the inclusion of the Muslim Brotherhood in politics under Mubarak, and later being shocked by the

\textsuperscript{86} Mohamed al-Baltagy is another leading member of the Muslim Brotherhood.

\textsuperscript{87} Interview with Amr Selim, Cairo, May 12, 2014.

\textsuperscript{88} Interview with Amr Selim, Cairo, May 12, 2014.
Brotherhood’s attempt to grab power. However, this narrative ignores the frequently negative portrayal of Islamists and the Brotherhood in *al-Dustour* for years, particularly in its cartoons.⁸⁹ Thus, even while *al-Dustour* occasionally published interviews or letters to the editor that gave the Brotherhood a voice, such articles appeared within the context of a paper littered with demonizing caricatures of Islamists, and tabloid-style op-eds about the Islamist threat.

**Fear of Islamists and the Role of Dissidence after Mubarak.** Like Wahid Hamid, Selim presented his days working as a “dissident” artist under Mubarak as something of a golden age of freedom compared to Morsi’s year as president, despite the fact that he opposed Mubarak politically:

> The difference between Morsi and Mubarak was that in the days of Mubarak, if you draw a cartoon, you are in the opposition. But in the days of Morsi, you are an infidel. . . . I was very much opposed to Mubarak, and I hoped that Mubarak would leave power. But when I talk in all honesty, Mubarak was much better than Morsi . . . much better than Morsi.⁹⁰

Selim conceded that the media had more leeway, in some respects, under Morsi than under Mubarak. However, he argued that this was simply because Morsi was under too much pressure from the opposition to immediately gain control over the media. Any such gains were temporary, and would have been squashed had Morsi remained in office for only a bit longer. Selim partly described his fears of Islamists in post-Mubarak Egypt as anxiety about his personal safety. For example, he mentioned the attack on Dustour Party spokesperson, Khaled Daoud, as he drove by a Muslim Brotherhood

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⁸⁹ For examples of depictions of Islamists in cartoons in *al-Dustour*, see Figures 4-7.

⁹⁰ Interview with Amr Selim, Cairo, May 12, 2014.
demonstration.\textsuperscript{91} “When I was in opposition to Mubarak nothing like this ever happened. This could happen to me now, this could happen to Ibrahim Eissa. We are more threatened.” Selim elaborated:

In the days of Mubarak, I was in the opposition, and I turned the world on its head, but I knew that I could sleep at my home in peace. I knew that he [Mubarak] was reasonable—he won’t attack me with a rifle and kill me. But them [the Brotherhood], no. They are ignorant. They are ignorant, stupid, armed. This is the problem. That is the difference. You can work with people that understand. But them [the Brotherhood], no.\textsuperscript{92}

However, in addition to describing his fears of being attacked by Islamists because of his role as a well-known anti-Brotherhood artist and public figure, Selim also described his fears of the Brotherhood in terms of what they might do to Egyptian identity:

My problem with Morsi was not the he might win the elections or that he was from the Brotherhood, no. My problem with him was that he tried to change Egyptian identity. . . . What happened in Egypt is exactly what happened in Iran. . . . It was the liberals who made the Iranian revolution, the liberals and the left. The Islamist groups stole it for Khomeini. What happened in Egypt was exactly [the same]. The only difference was that the Egyptian military was with the people. If the Egyptian military were with Morsi, we’d already have become like Iran. You’d find me with a beard down to here [gestures how long the beard would be], or you’d find me in prison. You’d find women walking around dressed in black. It would become unlike Egypt. This is not the identity of Egypt. When you walk in the street, you hear music playing, and there are people dancing in the streets, people are happy, people laugh, and some people pray and others don’t. This is the character of Egypt. . . . He [Morsi] is in prison now, and all of the people are happy. . . . We as a people decided that they [the Brotherhood] are traitors, that they don’t have any place among us, and they don’t resemble us. So it’s over—they are in prison and the people will decide what they want.\textsuperscript{93}

\textsuperscript{91} On this incident, see “Constitution Party's Khaled Dawoud Stabbed by ‘Pro-Morsi Protesters’” (2013).

\textsuperscript{92} Interview with Amr Selim, Cairo, May 12, 2014.

\textsuperscript{93} Interview with Amr Selim, Cairo, May 12, 2014.
Selim also mixed describing his tangible fears of bodily harm or loss of freedom of expression with anecdotes about why Morsi was simply too vulgar to represent the Egyptian state. For example, he brought up the often-repeated story of Morsi inviting guests to the presidential palace, and eating meals of fattah and mutton while sitting on the ground. Selim was disgusted at the idea of bringing such lowbrow practices to what should be a refined setting for Egypt’s head of state.

No Longer a Time for Dissidence? In line with his rejection of the notion that Ibrahim Eissa is politically inconsistent to endorse the ongoing security crackdown, Selim argued that now is not the time for continued dissidence. “I am for the right to protest, and I participated in protests my whole life. But now we must know when to protest, and whose interest the protest will serve. . . . If the country were to become stable, then we could protest. But now, why?”

Selim depicted his continued artistic role as an irreverent artist as still important, however, he claimed that the place of the “dissident” artist should be to help strengthen the state, not fundamentally challenge it: “[A]t the present time, there is a need for opposition in cartoons, why? Because you have poverty, you have unemployment, you have corruption. . . . There needs to be a strong opposition, and a strong state that listens and sees what the suggestions are, and what are the mistakes.”

Thus, Selim argues that it is important to allow satirical caricatures of al-Sisi, even though he views him as a national hero. However, by focusing on issues such as poverty and other longstanding social problems, Selim does not even mention the possibility of criticizing al-Sisi for brutally cracking down on opposition groups. With

94 Interview with Amr Selim, Cairo, May 12, 2014.
regard to the crackdown on Islamists, this is simply part of what makes al-Sisi, following in the footsteps of Nasser, attractive. As Selim put it, the historical repression of the Muslim Brotherhood by former Egyptian President JamalʿAbd al-Nasir “makes the people like ‘Abd al-Nasir more.” With regard to the repression of non-Islamist protestors (such as the April 6 movement and the Revolutionary Socialists), Selim says that while the members of such groups are all his friends, they are “political teenagers” unable to see that they would simply benefit the Brotherhood by continuing to protest.

Selim went on to express more general skepticism about the idea of democracy itself and artists’ ability to seriously impact politics. He opined that democracy is something illusory, “a phantom” that is never achieved in practice. He argued that there is a tension between (1) protests (which may counter the results of elections); (2) most people’s daily lives, which are not politicized; (3) artistic work, which may address but cannot really affect politics; and (4) the machinations of rulers who make the real political decisions. Attempting to bridge such disparate facets of life simply does not work in practice, in Egypt, America, or anywhere else: “Art is art and politics is politics, and rulers are rulers, and the people are people. But is there democracy? There isn’t.”

While not as outsized a personality as Ibrahim Eissa, Selim is an important “dissident” intellectual who made a seemingly abrupt conservative turn during Morsi’s presidency. Like Wahid Hamid, Selim helped to normalize negative fictional portrayals of Islamists under Mubarak, providing a ready-made format to lampoon the Brotherhood when they came to power. Also like Eissa and Hamid, Selim’s status as an irreverent critic of government corruption and abuse of power made him an especially credible

95 Interview with Amr Selim, Cairo, May 12, 2014.
advocate for aspiring autocrats riding a wave of xenophobic nationalism and public fears of disorder.

**Using “Dissidents” to Sell a Crackdown**

Rational choice based explanations for why “liberal” intellectuals might reluctantly support autocracy as a means to prevent an Islamist takeover cannot fully explain the situation in Egypt today. Non-Islamist intellectuals did have very tangible reasons to fear Islamists dominating politics. However, simply focusing on the Muslim Brotherhood’s missteps and attempts to exclude other groups following Mubarak’s ouster underplays the role non-Islamist public intellectuals have played in promoting divisive identity politics in the mass media for decades. Additionally, assuming that such intellectuals are “reluctant democrats” (who hope for democracy, but support authoritarian rule as the better of two evils) ignores the very positive draw that fetishized images of the strong state can have. Rather than reluctantly accept a new strongman, many intellectuals actively embraced and promoted al-Sisi as a folk hero, helping to generate a new hyper-nationalist fervor in the media. Moreover, the self-presentation of some of these intellectuals as independent thinkers, and their status as famous “dissidents” under Mubarak, gave them and their new political stance credibility among some segments of the Egyptian public.

Presenting non-Islamist intellectuals as liberal democrats (in principle) who grudgingly support authoritarian politics underplays their role in shaping identity politics. It presents them as above the fray, rather than as influential participants who directly shape the trajectory of authoritarian politics. Additionally, the very framing of conflict as
between “Islamists” and “liberals” risks problematically equating “Islamism” with a pro-
Muslim Brotherhood political stance. This not only ignores the ideological diversity of
Islamic social and cultural movements in Egypt (Moll 2014, 39), but reifies a narrative
that some of the very “liberal” intellectuals in question are perpetuating.

In short, Egyptian public intellectuals played a central role in shaping the
color of authoritarian politics in Egypt. Some pro-military cultural producers
promoted overly simplistic and demonizing narratives about Islamists for decades. This
believes their claims that they were neutral observers who simply reacted to the unique
threats posed by Brotherhood rule following Mubarak’s ouster. However, given the
important role that moral panics, xenophobia, and calls for robust policing often play in
democratic politics, perhaps some intellectuals’ embrace of the symbolism of a strong
state should not seem too exotic or shocking.
Figure 2. Cartoon by Amr Selim published in *al-Dustour*, September 1, 2005, p. 5.
Mubarak: “And in the next 6 years, I plan to…”
Citizen: “First tell me what you did in the last 24 years!!”
(This image was photographed by the author at the American University in Cairo library.)
Figure 3. Cartoon published in *al-Dustour*, October 5, 2005, p. 27.
(This image was photographed by the author at the American University in Cairo library.)
Figure 4. Cartoon by Amr Selim published on the cover of *al-Dustour*, November 12, 2005.

“Do you think that one is worse than the other...corrupt power or reactionary power?!!”
(This image was photographed by the author at the American University in Cairo library.)
Figure 5. Cartoon by Amr Selim published in *al-Dustour*, November 12, 2005, p. 3. “…The Brotherhood is Coming.”
(This image was photographed by the author at the American University in Cairo library.)
Figure 6. Cartoon by published on the cover of *al-Dustour*, November 23, 205. “The Brotherhood is Victorious.”
(This image was photographed by the author at the American University in Cairo library.)
Figure 7. Cartoon by Amr Selim published on the cover of *al-Dustour*, November 30, 2005.

Politicians: “Scoundrel!” “Terrorist!”

Citizens: “One day you’ll both get what’s coming to you, Lord.

(This image was photographed by the author at the American University in Cairo library.)
In the previous two chapters, I examined how the legacies of a decentralized censorship apparatus and state acquiescence to (and, at times, encouragement) of “dissident” intellectuals during the Mubarak years impacted politics in the wake of his ouster. Counterintuitively, the independence and contentiousness of cultural production in Egypt acted as a double-edged sword. It both helped to undermine Mubarak amidst mass mobilization, and subsequently provided unique venues for aspiring autocrats to justify repression. In order to examine how pro-military propaganda is actually made and debated in post-Mubarak Egypt, I examine two commercial comedies that lampooned the anti-Mubarak uprising and the political turmoil that occurred in its wake. By looking in detail at examples of reactionary entertainment in the wake of Mubarak’s ouster, I explore the unintended consequences of autocrats relying on independent artists to produce propaganda.

I choose to look at examples of satire because it is a longstanding form of political expression in Egypt. Additionally, while much attention is paid to the liberatory or democratizing potential of political satire under autocracy, less attention is given to how authoritarian leaders enable and sometimes attempt to co-opted political satire. Why do some autocracies permit or even actively support political satire in national media? And what types of political impact can the widespread use of satire have?

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96 For accounts of the liberatory potential of political satire, see, for example, Scott (1990) and Freedman (2008). In the Western media, a focus on the democratic potential of satire in Egypt is evident in coverage of figures such as Bassem Youssef, often referred to as “the John Stewart of the Middle East.”
Political satire is a mode of expression that is not only often employed in authoritarian contexts, but is sometimes actively encouraged by the state. Current theories about the role of satire in repressive contexts posit that political humor can potentially support revolt (Scott 1990), quiescence (Cooke 2007), or perhaps both (Yurchak 2005; Wedeen 2013). However, such approaches are generally driven by evidence from cases in which state control over the media is extremely high and centralized (as in Syria under the Assads or the Soviet Union), and comedy is one of the only forms of tolerated public dissent. In Mubarak’s Egypt, on the other hand, satire was not only ubiquitous, but the political relevance of various comedies was often publicly debated.

Part of a longstanding commercial entertainment industry, Egyptian political comedies were often debated in public forums, such as on talk shows. Thus, in Egypt, interpreting and delimiting the appropriate limits of political criticism historically did not simply fall within the purview of government officials, but was (like censorship institutions discussed in Chapter 2) part of a populist process, in which media pundits call on the public to protect national reputation, morals, and the image of the state.

In this chapter, I examine two cases of political satire made in the wake of the political turmoil of the anti-Mubarak and anti-Morsi uprisings of 2011 and 2013. I make two key points. First, political satire under autocracy can be reactionary. It can support authoritarian politics and state repression, and mock the idea of grassroots political activism. In Egypt before and after Mubarak’s ouster, both regime challenging and regime-affirming forms of satire existed, and played important political roles. Second, following Mubarak’s ouster, aspiring leaders were dependent upon commercial media to produce pro-military and anti-activist propaganda. Like censorship, propaganda
formation in Egypt is also decentralized, idiosyncratic, and contentious. Thus, in Egypt today, even amidst a dramatic crackdown on the media, authoritarian leaders are forced to work with independent media personalities. They can potentially benefit from the popularity of commercial artists, but are also subject to the idiosyncrasies of the private cultural producers upon whom they depend. In short, state-approved Egyptian political satires, and public debates about them, reveal the limitations of government propaganda campaigns.

In the following sections, I first outline theories of political satire under authoritarianism, and how late and post-Mubarak Egypt fits into these explanations. Second, I discuss two Egyptian comedic films about mass mobilization: one that came out in the wake of the January 2011 uprising, and another that came out after Mohamed Morsi’s ouster in July 2013. Third, I discuss media debates about film, national reputation, and the limits of both freedom of expression and pro-military punditry. I conclude by arguing that state-approved satire in post-Mubarak Egypt reflects both possibilities for utilizing independent media as propaganda for a resurgent security state and the difficulty of establishing a new official narrative about national identity in the wake of mass uprisings.

Theories of Satire under Authoritarianism

Scholars have theorized the role of satire in oppressive contexts as, alternately, a means of resistance against authoritarian regimes, a way of bolstering their power, or as ambiguous (or “double edged”) and potentially having both functions. I argue that accounts of double-edged political satire that can potentially both undermine or bolster
the power of authoritarian regimes are the most applicable to the case of Egypt. However, the established and cantankerous commercial media environment of Egypt is markedly different from more closed authoritarian contexts, such as such as Hafez and Bashar al-Assad’s Syria or the Soviet Union, upon which many theories of political satire are based.

Unlike in such quasi-totalitarian settings, in late and post-Mubarak Egypt, many forms of political satire were not only condoned by state censors, but became the subject of intense media debates about politics, national reputation, and who has the right to speak for the nation. In other words, state-permitted political comedies are not only political because of their content, but because of the political debates they generate. This was especially true in the wake of the January 25, 2011 uprising that unseated Mubarak, when political control and narratives about it were in flux and being fiercely contested. Even following the military crackdown beginning in the summer of 2013, political satire and its reception has proved difficult to control.

1. Satire as Resistance

Some scholars analyze political satire and other indirect forms of critique as a means of subaltern resistance against the powerful. For example, James C. Scott argues that we can “interpret the rumors, gossip, folktales, songs, gestures, jokes, and theatre of the powerless as vehicles by which, among other things, they insinuate a critique of power while hiding behind anonymity or behind innocuous understandings of their conduct” (Scott 1990, xiii). Scott’s account of the comic as a quotidian form of resistance is problematic when applied to mass media under autocracy. Unlike the types of groups Scott focuses on (e.g., peasants and slaves), mass media audiences do not necessarily
share similar economic, class, or even political grievances. Treating political jokes as a radical critique of the powerful also ignores the ways in which autocrats sometimes co-opt humor, and the multiple ways in which satire can be interpreted.

2. Satire as a “Safety Valve”

Indeed, others contend that political satire and other forms of (sometimes state-approved) political critique can bolster the power of authoritarian regimes. For example, some scholars argue that autocrats may permit or even commission criticism in order to lend their regime a democratic façade, as well as to serve as a “safety valve” that allows people space to breath and express their discontent in a controlled way (Cooke 2007, 72). While perhaps often operative at some level (given that humor is inherently cathartic), the safety valve explanation for state-approved political critique under autocracy is problematic for several reasons. It assumes a high level of coordination and knowledge on the part of the regime as to exactly what types or quantities of criticism are dangerous. As Miriam Cooke puts it in her analysis of “commissioned criticism” in Syria: “The regime gauges how much criticism to release to maintain atomization, acquiescence, and apathy, while curbing any tendency toward insurgency” (Cooke 2007, 72). This makes out regimes to be nearly omniscient entities, which can gauge the psyches of its citizens, and how they will react to a given critique. “Safety-valve” approaches to satire under authoritarianism also assume away agency on the part of artists and other cultural
producers, and treats them as government pawns, rather than potentially savvy actors who attempt to negotiate the various constraints they face (Joubin 2014, 11).  

A related approach emphasizes satire as a means of strengthening regime support through co-opting cultural producers and the message of their work. For example, analyzing contemporary Syria, Donatella Della Ratta argues that there is an “elective affinity” between materially comfortable cultural producers and the neo-liberal state. Both share a vision of a select group of elites facing a backward society, which needs to be “enlightened,” and they collaborate toward this end (Della Ratta 2012). In this view, cultural producers do not complain about battling with the censors, because their work is largely shaped by values they share with political elites. Similarly, as I discuss in more detail elsewhere in this dissertation, work on cinema and television drama in Mubarak’s Egypt points out how film and drama makers demonized Islamists beginning in the early 1990s when the regime was waging a counterinsurgency campaign against militant groups. Such depictions often portrayed the security services in a positive light (Armbrust 2002; Abu-Lughod 2005). Additionally, in late-Mubarak Egypt, some comedic films poked fun at the idea of youth protests, even explicitly lampooning the notion of a “Facebook revolution” shortly before the January 25, 2011 uprising occurred (Armbrust 2012a).

97 For a more extensive critique of “safety valve” theories of dissent, see Scott (1990, 178-182); Wedeen (1999, 89-92).
3. Satire as Double Edged

While acknowledging that satire can sometimes serve the interests of authoritarian regimes, another approach focuses on the ambiguity of satire, and how it can be interpreted and employed in multiple ways. For example, one feature of some political satire is that it simultaneously takes aim at both the regime and its opponents, making it unclear who is to blame for underlying social and political problems. In the context of the late Soviet Union, anthropologist Alexei Yurchak discusses how this genre of political humor became widespread at a time when official ideology was no longer taken at face value, but radical change seemed impossible. By making fun of both ruler and ruled, tyrant and dissident, political humor made it more comfortable to live within ethical “spaces and zones that traversed the boundaries between support and opposition” (Yurchak 2005, 281). Similarly, Lisa Wedeen points out that in some recent state-approved Syrian comedies, “both ruler and ruled have become buffoons, and the critique of the regime is matched by a diagnosis that situates ‘the people’ at the heart of the problem” (Wedeen 2013, 866) By simultaneously invoking citizens’ sense of subjugation and complicity, such satire “is almost always dual, inducing complacency among some but also laying the groundwork for potentially new disruptive publics” (Wedeen 2013, 873).

Importantly, double-edged humor is not necessarily strategic or the result of direct collaboration between a regime and cultural producers. As Yurchak shows in the case of the late Soviet Union, political satire was often produced in milieus that were neither full of “dissidents” nor state apologists (Yurchak 2005, 77-157).
The Case of Egypt

In contemporary Egypt, some political comedies are similar to genres described by Wedeen and Yurchak insofar as they simultaneously poke fun at both ruler and ruled. As I discuss in more detail below, even some movies that were expressly intended as pro-military propaganda employ longstanding jokes about authority figures, such as the police, which makes their intent potentially ambiguous to audiences. However, the Egyptian case has important differences with contexts in which state-sanctioned media is produced by government institutions. Egypt both has a longstanding commercial entertainment industry with relative autonomy from the state, and a vibrant media sphere in which issues such as censorship and the appropriateness of particular fictional narratives about politics are publicly debated. Thus, Wedeen and Yurchak’s focus on the ambiguity and “double-edgedness” of political satire is highly relevant but incomplete for understanding the context of contemporary Egypt. Emphasizing the ambiguity of particular satirical tropes themselves ignores how these are actively debated, and how their creators are public figures subject to criticism themselves. As I discuss in more detail below, in Egypt the media and fictionalized political narratives operate in a feedback loop. That is, fictional works and their creators are debated and criticized in the media, and these debates then eventually make it into fictional satires, and so forth.

Unlike the more restricted media environments of Syria and the Soviet Union, in Egypt debates about censorship, satire, and national reputation often happen largely in public view. Additionally, while pre and post-production censorship of media such as film exist in Egypt, censorship is not controlled by a single government entity. For example, as discussed in Chapter 2, while a censorship committee under the Ministry of
Culture is formally responsible for reviewing films, other government entities (such as the security services, religious institutions, the presidency, and the Prime Minister’s office) frequently intervene in censorship decisions, sometimes in extralegal ways. Additionally, citizens are legally allowed to raise court cases against artists they perceive as defaming religion or the state. This decentralization in how content is censored makes debate about what is politically scandalous or deleterious to the nation a matter of public concern.

In addition to many Egyptian comedies being ambiguous in their political content (i.e., subject to different interpretations), debates about them reveal disunity among government institutions, media pundits, and artists. Thus, Egyptian commercial entertainment is not only political because it often addresses political subject matter, but because commercial media occupies a contested space over which power struggles are continually taking place to define national identity and who has the right to speak for it. In post-Mubarak Egypt, this is especially evident and important, since contestation over media, censorship, and narratives about the revolution and national identity are central to the project of political restabilization. Debates about fictional narratives of the revolution reveal the difficulties of establishing a homogeneously pro-state media on the ruins of a relatively pluralistic and vibrant one, even as it illustrates the continuity of reactionary rhetoric from the Mubarak years till now.

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98 For an overview of Egypt’s censorship laws, and how the government often exceeds these (already restrictive) laws, see Ezzat, al-Haqq and Fazulla (2014).

99 For a detailed account of the principle of hisba in the Egyptian legal system—petitioners’ right to file complaints to the court against supposed threats to religion and morals in Egypt—see Agrama (2012).
I next discuss two comedic films about the revolution, one released in the wake of the January 25, 2011 uprising, and the other released after the July 3 coup against then-President Mohamed Morsi. Debates about these films by censors, media pundits, and journalists reveal that they are more sites of political contestation than effective “counterrevolutionary” propaganda. They reveal pluralism among entertainment producers and the government officials tasked with overseeing their work. This highlights the difficulties of establishing a coherent official pro-state narrative, even as Egypt’s new rulers are brutally attempting to level the media sphere, and suppress dissident voices.

**Satirizing January 25: Revolutionary Anxiety from the Margins**

Several early commercial Egyptian films about the January 25, 2011 uprising and its aftermath focused on anxieties about political participation, a security vacuum, and how national turmoil would affect “ordinary,” non-politicized citizens. These narratives stand in sharp contrast to triumphalist accounts of the revolution that portray young pro-democracy activists both as heroes and reflections of the broader publics’ aspirations. Some of these post-revolutionary depictions of activism and threats to national security after Mubarak’s ouster were foreshadowed by remarkably similar cautionary motifs in late-Mubarak era cinema.

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100 For examples of “triumphalist” accounts of the January 25 uprising as a youth-led pro-democracy movement, see the documentary *The Square*, and Alexander (2011). For critical reviews of *The Square*’s portrait of the Egyptian uprising, see Barthélémy (2013). For a critical reflection on the idea of “revolutionary purity,” see Sallam (2014), and for a critical account of the notion of “pro-democracy” uprisings, see Howard and Walters (2015).
In this section, I discuss one example of this—the movie *Haz Sa‘id* (*Good Luck/Sa‘id’s Luck*, 2012)\(^{101}\)—an early comedic depiction of the January 25 uprising. The movie draws on a theme of some Mubarak-era movies by poking fun at activists, and presenting them and the ideologies they espouse as alien to ordinary citizens who encounter oppression in their daily lives, but are not politicized. By lampooning both ruler and ruled, *Haz Sa‘id* shares similarities with genres of “double-edged” satire discussed by Wedeen and Yurchak. However, in addition to being ambiguous in content, comedies such as *Haz Sa‘id* are directly debated and criticized in the mass media. Thus, the political innuendo of the satire itself is not as shrouded as it might be in contexts where the media is largely under state control. The most saliently political element of such films may be how their political representations are debated, rather than as political texts in their own right. This was particularly true in early post-Mubarak Egypt, when the media scene was becoming unprecedentedly (if temporarily) vibrant.\(^{102}\)

**Parodying the Revolution**

*Haz Sa‘id* is a comedy about the January 25 revolution. It parodies an ordinary man’s encounter with political upheaval, and contrasts the everyday dreams of the decent, simple citizen with the ideological convictions driving revolutionaries. *Haz Sa‘id* purports to speak to the un politicized, silent majority who only encounter extraordinary political events by chance. Comedian Ahmed Eid plays Sa‘id, an unofficial salesman near

\(^{101}\) An earlier version of my analysis of *Haz Sa‘id* was published in *Muftah*. See Walters (2013).

\(^{102}\) For an overview of media developments in the wake of the January 25, 2011 uprising in Egypt, see Sakr (2013).
the pyramids who constantly encounters trouble in his everyday life. During repeated
visits to the police station, Sa‘id is beaten to the sound of Hosni Mubarak’s televised
speeches in the background. Before the revolution, Sa‘id is both oppressed by the corrupt
status quo and an unwilling participant in it. Under pressure from his fiancé and with no
other options, Sa‘id agrees to help the corrupt businessman who unfairly bid on and won
control over the government-owned property Sa‘id was supposed to move into.
Grudgingly, Sa‘id persuades others in his neighborhood to sell the businessman rights to
their apartments.

Sa‘id is surprised by the protests on January 25, and is forced to go to Tahrir on
the “Day of Rage,” Friday January 28, to bring his revolutionary sister back home. Sa‘id
assumes this will be easy, since downtown should be empty on a Friday afternoon, but
finds out, to comic effect, that he is wrong. Throughout his experience with the uprising,
Sa‘id is dumbfounded by what is going on around him, including clashes with police, the
arrival of the army, and looting thugs. In a pivotal scene in the movie, Sa‘id ’s newfound
revolutionary friend sends him to a tent in Tahrir Square to meet with different stripes of
revolutionaries. He hopes that Sa‘id will finally learn what the revolution is all about.
Sa‘id talks to proponents of democracy, liberalism, Muslim Brotherhood-style Islamism
propounding Islamic democracy, Salafi-style Islamism in which democracy is
incompatible with Islam, and secularism. When Sa‘id leaves the tent his sister and friend
ask him how it went; he passes out from confusion-induced exhaustion.

Sa‘id takes part in the revolution in multiple ways, but always by chance. He
plays the part of a liberal revolutionary, a looting thug, a Muslim Brother, a salesman on
the square, a hired counterrevolutionary demonstrator, and (almost) a violent infiltrator.
The recurring punch line of the film (and a point emphasized by the cast in television interviews)\(^{103}\) is that Sa‘id is not any of these things; he is just an ordinary person struggling to lead a better life. Politics is an alien and an unwanted annoyance for him.

**Antecedents: Lampooning the Opposition Under Mubarak**

*Haz Sa‘id* follows a tradition of political comedy in late-Mubarak Egypt that lampooned protests and dissidence, making the idea of revolution seem absurd. For example, Ahmed Eid’s previous film, *Rami the Protestor* (2008), was a comedy mocking protests led by online youth activists.\(^{104}\) Rami, a pot smoking rich kid, unwittingly organizes a political movement online to impress a girl. He creates a Facebook group, which, to his surprise, garners media attention and results in a sit-in in front of the Prime Minister’s office, demanding to change the Egyptian national anthem. After various comic interludes, the protest ends in clashes between groups with competing ideological and class interests, and the movie reaffirms the need for national stability and unity under the banner of neoliberal development.

Walter Armbrust points out that *Rami the Protestor* anticipates several themes of counterrevolutionary discourse that were used by regime supporters during and after the January 25 revolution. For example, the theme of “foreign hand” conspiracies, and bribing participants with free fast food, beer, and drugs. According to Armbrust, because of such parallels to counterrevolutionary rhetoric during and in the wake of the January

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\(^{103}\) See, for example, these television interviews with the cast of *Haz Sa‘id*, accessed August 7, 2013, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zf5M26q2Ooc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zf5M26q2Ooc); [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oGKLheOddZg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oGKLheOddZg).

\(^{104}\) For a more detailed summary and analysis of this film, see Armbrust (2012a).
25 uprising, *Rami the Protestor* “may tell us more about the fate of the revolution than progressive films about the revolution or than pre-revolutionary films about its underlying conditions” (Armbrust 2012a, 147).

However, while post-uprising movies such as *Haz Sa‘id* continued to lampoon activists and the revolution itself, these were not necessarily simply counterrevolutionary or consciously intended as pro-regime propaganda. *Haz Sa‘id* addresses anxieties about instability that also appear in other commercial media, such as the new genre of post-revolution movies and television dramas about *baltagiyya* (thugs).\(^{105}\) It also expresses reservations about political activism, and a sense that activists are alienated from ordinary citizens who are merely trying to get on with their lives. Such anxieties about the uprising were genuinely felt by many of my Egyptian friends and acquaintances who expressed similar misgivings in the three years following the January 25, 2011 uprising. Thus, to the extent that *Haz Sa‘id* is successful as comedy, it gives voice to widely felt misgivings about activism and the uncertainties of sudden political change.

**Reception and Related Comic Motifs**

*Haz Sa‘id* does have the potential to offend. Commentators in the Egyptian press critiqued *Haz Sa‘id* for attacking the revolution (al-Razaq 2012); for its allegedly bad script, acting, and direction (Ramzi 2012); for mocking the counterrevolutionary rants of actor Talaat Zakaria;\(^{106}\) and for insulting the Muslim Brotherhood (Abdallah 2012). In an

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\(^{105}\) On the phenomenon of “thug” films in Egypt following the January 25, 2011 uprising, see, for example, Yossef (2013); Mustafa (2012).

\(^{106}\) See “Tala‘at Zakaria Yuhajim Film ’Ahed ‘Aid l-Isti’anatahu b-Fidiu Taharash al-Thawra” (2012).
interview with the Egyptian daily *al-Shorouk*, Eid claimed that both supporters and opponents of Mubarak prevented the crew from filming on the streets, because both camps feared that the film might portray them negatively.\(^{107}\) Indeed, the film potentially offends everyone, including revolutionaries, Islamists, film critics, and *felool* (remnants of the Mubarak regime). However, the diversity of those who criticized the movie may itself illustrate that the movie’s satire was not very effective if it was mainly intended as political propaganda. Perhaps since Haz Sa‘id’s humor was able to potentially offend everyone, it thereby did not insult anyone too harshly. Indeed, I watched and discussed the movie with Egyptian acquaintances of diametrically opposed political persuasions, and many of them found it funny, even when the characters being poked fun of could have conceivably been caricatured versions of themselves.

According to Eid, Haz Sa‘id simply draws on the over-the-top comedic material provided by everyday politics. As he put it in a media interview, “we are living in a truly comic age, and I wouldn’t be exaggerating if I said that those who are applying to run for the presidency, and their numbers are increasing every day, are the biggest competitors with my film. Seeing their faces, following the programs that host them, or watching parliamentary sessions [shows us that] we’re living through a farcical period—the pinnacle of comedy and satire.”\(^{108}\)

Comedic representations of political dissidence, such as Haz Sa‘id, take aim at both the horrible conditions ordinary citizens face in a spent autocracy and at the absurdity of many new, aspiring political players. Haz Sa‘id is also transgressive in


\(^{108}\) Abdallah (2012). The translation from the Arabic is my own.
breaking with hagiographic accounts of the Revolution, and the euphoria of revolutionary cohesion and sacred spaces such as Tahrir Square. By simultaneously mocking the old guard and the revolution, *Haz Sa’id* targets the viewer’s own ambiguous feelings about the revolutionary present and worries about the future.

Thus, *Haz Sa’id* fits well within the genre of double-edged humor discussed above. For example, Yurchak relates the following late-Soviet era joke: “A big crowd of people is quietly standing in a lake of sewage coming up to their chins. Suddenly a dissident falls in it and starts shouting and waving his hands in disgust: Yuk! I cannot stand this! How can you people accept these horrible conditions?! To which the people reply with a quiet indignation: ‘Shut up! You are making waves!’” (Yurchak 2005, 278).

Such humor bites because it not only mocks the dissident, but also the majority, including the laughing audience. Although living in impossible circumstances, they are afraid of change, since it risks creating even worse problems. By not wanting to make waves, they are guaranteed to live mired in filth. The humor lies in the pain of living through hard times, and the seeming absurdity of radical change. Accounts of revolution that present a simple dichotomy between revolutionary truth and reactionary dissimulation miss the joke.

Anxiety about the revolution and its aftermath was a key feature of Egyptian commercial fictions in the years following the uprising. While these sometimes employ “reactionary” motifs about political activism that first appeared under Mubarak, it would be a mistake to simply dismiss them as unambiguously counterrevolutionary. Commercial satires of the revolution, such as *Haz Sa’id*, represent very real anxieties, divisions, and ambiguities about revolutionary movements and their aftermath. The film
not only depicts latent tensions between various factions temporarily united in the revolutionary moment, but also the potentially ambiguous relationship between revolution and counterrevolution, and the authoritarian undertones of much revolutionary discourse.

Satire about ordinary peoples’ relationship to activism, the state, and historic national events can be employed for various purposes. Many fictional narratives about revolutionary Egypt in commercial media and television tended to focus on anxieties about the nation's future, rather than inspirational or triumphalist accounts of the uprising itself. Media debates about these narratives also reflect anxiety, and a battle to shape narratives about what the revolution means, and how citizens should view and relate to the state in its wake. Thus, satiric portraits of revolutionary Egypt can be used for various political ends: ranging from backing a return to the old status quo to supporting radical change, and everything in between. While the continuity in reactionary satire before and after Mubarak’s ouster may have provided an opening for aspiring leaders to justify a return to the political status quo, it is also difficult to direct.

Making a Pro-Military Satire

_Haz Sa’id_ is an example of the staying power of some forms of Mubarak-era political satire. However, in media interviews, the filmmakers repeatedly attempted to distance themselves from any particular political allegiance. Other post-revolution political comedies attempted to use entertainment as a means to present a more directly reactionary interpretation of ongoing political conflicts. In this section, I analyze one such film, how its director explained his political aims in making it, and media debates
surrounding it and the filmmakers’ battle with the censors. This example illustrates how processes of censorship and the creation of pro-military propaganda take place in a contentious environment, even as the post-Morsi government attempted to control the media and use it as a tool to bolster its power. Debates surrounding this movie show how entertainment made explicitly as pro-government propaganda can be interpreted in multiple ways, and be contentious—even among different government institutions or state-approved media outlets. It reveals the difficulty of establishing a new official narrative about the revolution, political conflict, and the state on the ruins of what was once a relatively vibrant media environment.

As discussed in Chapter 3, following the ouster of Mohamed Morsi in a military coup in the summer of 2013, the new military-led government has put intense efforts into controlling the media, and silencing nearly all dissident voices. Exploiting collective fears of instability and popular fervor against the Muslim Brotherhood and other activists, the military-led government shut down oppositional TV stations and newspapers. It allowed pro-military media commentators and pundits to talk politics to the exclusion of nearly everyone else. The remaining national media outlets nearly unanimously presented the military as the only institution capable of saving the nation from chaos, even amidst government killings and arrests. Pro-military fervor also made its way into pop-culture, for example in viral music videos praising the military as national saviors.\footnote{For an overview of some recent Egyptian pro-military pop songs, see ElNabawi (2013); Andeel (2013b).}

However, even in this increasingly oppressive context, some pro-government narratives are still contested. For example, as I discuss below, censors still publicly battle
artists in forums such as live television talk shows. Also, hyper-nationalist pundits are still lampooned for being too over-the-top, and are sometimes forced to defend their extreme and non-inclusive versions of national authenticity. I argue that such media battles illustrate the difficulties of controlling what was once a pluralistic media sphere through brute force, and the ways in which satire may be a medium that is especially difficult to control or instrumentalize to disseminate a particular interpretation of politics. When idiosyncratic independent cultural producers are responsible for making propaganda, the value or appropriateness of their work is often publicly contested and interpreted differently by various members of the public.

Kill Them Again: Zombifying the Opposition

*Al-Dassas* (2014) is an Egyptian haunted house film in the genre of *Scary Movie* with clear political undertones. The director, Hany Hamdy, characterizes *al-Dassas* as the first Egyptian horror-comedy since the days of Ismail Yasin, an iconic comedian who appeared in films from the 1940s to the 1970s (‘Ibrahim 2014). Hamdy also describes his motivation for making the movie as political: “The idea of a horror-comedy . . . also came to me because of the political situation we are living in. After the events of January 25, people were afraid for the country, that it would be destroyed . . . with the Brotherhood . . . it was a period of terror. But people were putting sarcastic comments on Facebook, so it also became a comedic time. . . . [W]e were living in fear, but laughing. So, the idea of a horror comedy came to me from here.”

110 An earlier version of my analysis of *al-Dassas* was published in *The Cairo Review*. See Walters (2014).

111 Interview with Hany Hamdy, Cairo, June 29, 2014.
The movie depicts the Muslim Brotherhood as zombies aligned with the April 6 youth movement\textsuperscript{112} (they rise from the dead on that date every year). \textit{Al-Dassas} literally dehumanizes the Muslim Brotherhood; they cannot speak for themselves or be reasoned with, since they are the undead. In the film, four trivialized and belittled representatives of Egyptian youth are recruited by text message to participate in a reality show in which they have to spend the night in an abandoned house (haunted, of course). Locked in for the night, the characters learn the identity of the demonic owner—Hasan al-Dassas, a parody of Muslim Brotherhood founder Hasan al-Banna. Dropping limbs and drooling blood, the zombies paw at the contestants. Hurling together, they learn they are blood relatives, decedents of a military officer murdered by al-Dassas. With the help of the police officer brother of the only female contestant, the youths defeat al-Dassas. The people and the police unite, and together save the day as they realize their common military heritage.

\textit{Al-Dassas} was a commercial failure.\textsuperscript{113} However, it is a particularly dramatic example of the insertion of pro-military and anti-activist propaganda into commercial entertainment. Looking at how it was debated in the media and among censors may be reflective of broader trends in how new forms of propaganda are being created by independent cultural producers. The idiosyncratic nature of \textit{al-Dassas} as a piece of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{112} For background on the April 6 youth movement and other opposition groups in Egypt, see Albrecht (2013).
\item \textsuperscript{113} \textit{Al-Dassas} brought in ticket sales worth only 205,049 Egyptian Pounds (about $25,000 USD). Other movies released in 2014 made up to more than 35 million Egyptian Pounds, and many other films sold millions of Egyptian pounds worth of theatre tickets. These figures are from ticket sales data found on the elCinema.com website for revenues listed for the last week that \textit{al-Dassas} was in theatres, accessed September 21, 2014, http://www.elcinema.com/boxoffice/2014/30/.
\end{itemize}
political propaganda reflects some of the possibilities and constraints facing aspiring autocrats attempting to justify brutal crackdowns and reestablish public quiescence.

**Satirizing the Opposition**

According to Hamdy, the youths’ experience in the haunted house is meant to symbolize the revolution, which, in his view, was a disaster set to fail from the outset. “When the old regime left, they said it’s either us or the Brotherhood, and then the Brotherhood came. Every revolution that Arabs made destroyed their countries…. There’s no such thing as a popular revolution. If instead of a revolution on January 25, there was a coup, then state institutions would be left intact, and everything would be alright.”

Hamdy claimed that he chose each of the main characters to represent different types of youth involved in the January 25 uprising: A weakling who considers himself a hero, a character who only participated in the uprising intermittently, a wannabe artist, and a wannabe intellectual. He added that many of those who participated in the uprising only did so in the hope of improving their economic well being, and this is why his characters participated in the haunted house reality show in the hope of winning a cash prize.

There were people who went to Tahrir because they really had ideas, but there was another segment that was affected by the media about the revolution, by Facebook, and who wanted to see themselves as heroes. I brought these two types together in the film. The revolutionary girl, and the *felool* (remnant of the old regime) and those who want to see themselves as heroes.

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114 Interview with Hany Hamdy, Cairo, June 29, 2014.

115 Interview with Hany Hamdy, Cairo, June 29, 2014.
Hamdy also explained his rational for portraying the Muslim Brotherhood as zombies. “The Brotherhood is a terrorist group, but they have two faces. One is the smiling face for TV. The second face is violence and accusing others of being heretics. The zombies represent the military wing of the Brotherhood—the militia of the Brotherhood.” Hamdy also claimed that he intended the arch villain of the movie, Hasan al-Dassas, to symbolize the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hasan al-Banna.116

**Battling the Censors in Public View**

In Egypt over the past few years, debates about censorship have often happened in public forums. Aggrieved artists and producers appear on talk shows to accuse the censors of inappropriately cutting or postponing the release of their work, and censorship officials frequently respond live on air. The makers of *al-Dassas* employed this tactic, perhaps using the censorship process as a publicity stunt. However, while defending the appropriateness of their own work, they argued against broad freedom of expression and in favor of strong government control. They called for censors to only approve work that is morally, artistically, and politically pure, as if the three are clear-cut criteria that can go hand-in-hand. Thus, the case of *al-Dassas* illustrates how artists sometimes battle government censors from the right.

In April 2014, the makers of *al-Dassas* went on a media campaign when the censors delayed releasing the film, under then head of censorship, Ahmed Awaad.117 They accused the censors of stalling the film for political reasons, and of not being

116 Interview with Hany Hamdy, Cairo, June 29, 2014.
117 For background on Ahmed Awaad, see Zoller (2014).
cultured enough to appreciate artistic value or discern what content is dangerous to the public. On talk shows and on a Facebook page, they focused on Awaad. They accused him of playing into Islamists’ hands, and of being unqualified to serve as chief censor, given his work as a director of commercial films purportedly of low artistic value.

When the Prime Minister, Ibrahim Mehleb, went over Awaad’s head on April 16, 2014 to ban the film *Sweetness of Spirit* starring Lebanese actress Haifa Wahabi, the *al-Dassas* Facebook page applauded this decision. The sit-in announced on the *al-Dassas* Facebook page called to save the public from morally dangerous material and from work of low artistic value (see Figure 8 for one of these announcements). Rather than defending their own film by calling for less censorship, the administrators of the *al-Dassas* Facebook page called for purging the censorship office to bring it in line with their own political and moral standards. They cheered Awaad’s resignation on April 18, 2014 following the controversy over *Halawet Roh*. A few weeks later, the new head of censorship, Abdel Sattar Fathi, gave final approval for *al-Dassas*’ commercial release.

Hamdy claimed that he did not encounter any problems when he submitted the script to the censors, because at that point, the script did not have much political content. He also remarked that the censors did not understand the political references that were in the script. Hamdy also claimed that, in Egypt, getting approval for a script is fairly routine. However, when he submitted the completed film, Hamdy stated, “the censors

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119 See “Prime Minister Orders Suspension of Provocative Film” (2014).

120 For background on this controversy, see Leila (2014).
delayed it, since one censor sympathized with the Muslim Brotherhood, and Ahmed Awaad sympathized with April 6. “\textsuperscript{121}” Hamdy elaborated on the connection between the Muslim Brotherhood and the April 6 movement, which featured in the movie:

April 6 and the Brotherhood are the same thing in my opinion. If you follow the events of January 25 till Morsi fell, you can see this. April 6 supported Morsi against Shafiq [the two candidates in the final round of presidential elections in the summer of 2012]. Then they didn’t support June 30 [the first day of planned mass mobilization against Morsi and Muslim Brotherhood rule in 2013], since they said they wouldn’t go down [to the streets] with \textit{felool} [remnants of the old regime]. Then they called for boycotting the post-Morsi constitutional referendum. They also boycotted the recent presidential elections. Everything they did was in the interest of the Brotherhood. Awaad is not [a member of] the Brotherhood or April 6, but the ideas of April 6 influenced him. This led him to stand with the Brotherhood in delaying the film. There was also a censor who was pro-Brotherhood who wanted to ban it for portraying Hasan al-Banna. Awaad never viewed the film personally. After the problem with \textit{Sweetness of Spirit}, Awaad stepped down and Abdul Sattar permitted the film. It’s normal for films to contain political criticism, and this isn’t a problem—like \textit{Terrorism and Kabab} (1992) and \textit{Birds of Darkness} (1996) [two famous Mubarak-era films starring comic superstar ‘Adil Imam, which criticize Islamists, and also poke fun at political and social problems faced daily by Egyptians]. \textsuperscript{122}

Hamdy did not defend \textit{al-Dassas} from the censors by calling for expanded freedom of expression, but by arguing that the current censorship authorities were unable to distinguish between good and dangerous art. He launched a campaign “from below” to challenge the authorities’ political and moral judgment, attacking them for releasing (what he considered to be) trashy movies while defending his own. In doing so, Hamdy aligned himself with songwriter, singer, and xenophobic hyper-nationalist pundit Amr Mostafa. Quick to publicly accuse others of damaging Egypt’s image abroad or undermining national values at home, Mostafa became famous (or infamous depending

\textsuperscript{121} Interview with Hany Hamdy, Cairo, June 29, 2014.

\textsuperscript{122} Interview with Hany Hamdy, Cairo, June 29, 2014.
on who you ask) for his televised rants against the January 25 revolution as it was unfolding.\textsuperscript{123} He also released a pro-Mubarak music video shortly after the uprising,\textsuperscript{124} and Hamdy directed several pro-military music videos that Mostafa wrote music for.\textsuperscript{125} Mostafa has a cameo in \textit{al-Dassas} (discussed below), and supported the movie against the censors on television talk shows and social media (Zakaria 2014).\textsuperscript{126}

Mostafa is a strange ally to have in a battle against censorship. He is a dramatic and well-known example of “grassroots” attempts to curtail freedom of speech, and only allow propagandistic narratives that align the nation with the state and particularly its coercive edge. In numerous talk show appearances, Mostafa accused various popular Egyptian films, plays, and television dramas of destroying Egypt’s reputation and morals. In one interview, he called for a 10-year moratorium on freedom of expression, and supported taking Russian President Vladimir Putin’s harsh stance towards critical media as a model for Egypt.\textsuperscript{127}

The rhetoric and tactics of Hamdy and Mostafa’s defense of \textit{al-Dassas} is reflective of broader trends in Egyptian media today. The prominence of “popular” calls

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{123} See, for example, this video clip, accessed September 21, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hba5BE_WDvg.
  \item \textsuperscript{124} See, for example, this video clip, accessed September 21, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Knpl9GLtKUB8.
  \item \textsuperscript{125} For pro-military music videos made by Mostafa and Hamdy, see the following video clips, accessed September 21, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L54RBcRwa6Q; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ow6A70MtPR0.
  \item \textsuperscript{126} Also see, for example, the following video clip, accessed September 21, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3GmoTGEYO4w.
  \item \textsuperscript{127} See the following video clips, accessed September 21, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1LDEoeIxi2Q#t=622; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J6FylcCgikw.
\end{itemize}
for censorship “from below” in post-Mubarak Egypt is important, because it reflects the state’s need to legitimate its repressive measures. It also illustrates that the state is willing to tolerate some forms of debate even amidst a major crackdown on political activism and freedom of expression.

Disparities between Intent and Reception

While Hamdy claims that he intended *al-Dassas* to be “against” the January 25 revolution and supportive of the military’s new role in politics, several people I watched and discussed the movie with did not view it along these lines. Some saw the political elements of the movie as “just gags” that should not be taken too seriously. Others were not sure whether the movie’s political allusions should be taken at face value, or whether they were tongue-in-cheek jokes about new forms of pro-state propaganda.

Indeed, several political spoofs in the movie leave it potentially unclear to viewers who they are supposed to be laughing at. For example, the female contestant’s police officer brother is made out to be bumbling and incompetent. Drawing on a longstanding comic portrayal of police officers in Egyptian cinema, he is both authoritarian in his interactions with his inferiors, and a buffoon. His character—Mohsin Mohsin Mumtaz—is a joke about a recent Ramadan drama’s spoof of a character from the famous multi-series spy drama *Ra’fat al-Hajan*, which began airing in the late 1980s.\(^\text{128}\) Thus, it is possible to view these scenes as a critique of authority figures, or merely as a joke about references to previous jokes from well-known television dramas.

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\(^{128}\) The original spoof on the intelligence agent from *Ra’fat al-Hajan* was in Episode 1 of the Ramadan 2011 iteration of comedian Ahmed Mekky’s serial *al-Kabir Awy (The Really Big Guy)*.
Hamdy claimed that he intended his caricature of the police officer to be a story of incompetence and ultimate redemption: “Before June 30, the police really were idiots, since they were afraid of the people. But they came back after June 30 to protect the people, and disbursed the Raba’a sit-in with force. It’s the same story in the film. If they weren’t able to come back, they wouldn’t have been able to save the people.”129 Hamdy also emphasized that while he poked fun at the police, he never criticized the military. The officer killed by al-Dassas (who turns out to be the young participants’ ancestor) is meant as a tribute to Hussein Tantawi, former head of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces and de facto ruler of Egypt following Mubarak’s ouster in 2011.130

Hamdy claimed that he intentionally distinguished between the police and the military, and that he was careful to make the character an ordinary detective, not an intelligence officer (like the character’s namesake).131 However, it would be easy for someone of a different political persuasion to interpret the officer’s misadventures as an indictment of state institutions that Hamdy claims to revere. Thus, by drawing upon longstanding genres of Egyptian political satire, Hamdy may have blunted the force of his political message.

Another example of potentially ambiguous satire in the film is the cameo of composer and counterrevolutionary pundit, Amr Mostafa. Mostafa was famously the subject of several long monologues by the satirist Bassem Youssef (who turned the

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129 For an account of the violent disbursal of Pro-Morsi sit-ins during the summer of 2013, in which Egyptian security forces killed over 1,150 demonstrators, see Human Rights Watch (2014).

130 Interview with Hany Hamdy, Cairo, June 29, 2014.

131 Interview with Hany Hamdy, Cairo, June 29, 2014.
exclamation “hey Amr” into a nationally famous insult). Mostafa’s well-known claim that images of anti-Mubarak protestors being killed by security forces during the January 25 uprising were “Photoshopped” made it into a 2012 Ramadan drama, *The Escape*, written by the well-known scenarist, columnist, and media personality Belal Fadl. In his cameo in *al-Dassas*, Mostafa repeats the Photoshop line, and then rants about masonic symbols.

The fact that Mostafa supports a film that gently pokes fun at some of his wilder claims also highlights how *al-Dassas* sometimes uses satire in ways that could potentially expand the audience that could find it funny. Hamdy described the cameo as giving Mostafa an opportunity to make light of the line that everybody makes fun of him for. I asked Hamdy whether he thought that members of his audience might interpret his film in different ways. He replied that while this is possible, he had a clear agenda of showing that April 6 is serving the interests of the Brotherhood, and that both groups were dangerous to the country.

In short, the director of *al-Dassas* intended to create a pro-military propaganda film. It is an example of how callousness over security crackdowns is making its way into mass entertainment and fictionalized narratives about political conflict. However, it is not clear whether this message always comes across unambiguously to the audience. Part of

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132 See the following video clip, accessed September 21, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nMHUBtU8c4g.

133 See the following video clip, accessed September 21, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-6T5inyGb3o.

134 Interview with Hany Hamdy, Cairo, June 29, 2014.
the reason for this may be the inherent multivalence of satire as a genre. This could both help and hurt cultural producers intending to make propaganda.

On the one hand, the ambiguity of political satire makes the political message of the movie less clear. Viewers may separate out the comic spoofs from the director’s attempt to incorporate these into a broader pro-state political narrative.

On the other hand, to treat some political jokes as “just gags” itself represents an active stance towards what is normal or acceptable political discourse. By representing the Muslim Brotherhood and April 6 activists as zombies amidst major security crackdowns against them implies a callousness that is disturbing to treat as just a joke. It is hard to imagine, for example, that someone who lost friends in the violent dispersal of pro-Morsi protest camps in the summer of 2013 would find the idea of Muslim Brotherhood members as zombies funny. Thus, the act of laughing at the movie’s gags, and not taking its politics too seriously itself entails distancing oneself from recent political traumas. Viewing movies such as *al-Dassas* as “just comedies” normalizes demonization of the political opposition at the very moment when the state is engaging in a harsh campaign of real-life repression against them. If a viewer comes out of the movie thinking that it was just a light comedy, the filmmakers may have politically accomplished a lot. At the same time, televised debates between the filmmakers, censors, and media personalities illustrate that the acceptability of such political representations are still being contested, even in a highly constrained political and media climate.

Politicized entertainment products, such as *al-Dassas*, illustrate the ways in which Egypt’s aspiring leaders must often rely on independent cultural producers to sell their message. While garnering support from private artists and media personalities can help
bolster aspiring autocrats’ image, they are also subject to the idiosyncrasies and mishaps that contracting out propaganda creation entails.

**National Reputation and Censorship “from Below”**

The phenomenon of censorship as a populist project in which citizens take it upon themselves to protect the nation’s reputation is not new in Egypt. Under Mubarak, independent intellectuals also took it upon themselves to protect (a narrow version of) national identity. This is part of a skewed modernist vision in which non-romanticized representations of poverty are seen as threatening. For example, as Reem Saad put it when discussing scandalized reactions to a documentary about a lower class Cairene women: “The forces of ‘civil society’ may indeed be gaining ground, but the result is not a corresponding expansion in the space of freedom and tolerance…. What we are getting instead is the privatization of repression” (Saad 1998, 402).

While not new, popular calls for censorship and the need to protect Egypt’s reputation from being tarnished have taken on a manic pace in Egypt after the ouster of Mohamed Morsi and the violent suppression of both Islamist and various non-Islamist opposition groups. In this section, I discuss how this new emphasis on national reputation is discussed by some of its self-proclaimed defenders, and by artists who feel threatened by it. Calls in the media for Egyptians to be watchful and to take censorship into their own hands by being on the lookout for “foreign agents” puts the government in the role of a relatively tolerant protector of the arts in the face of a volatile population. It also illustrates how Egypt’s post-coup government relies on populism in addition to sheer coercion to reshape a once relatively pluralistic media sphere in its favor.
Recent debates about the arts’ potential to harm Egypt’s national reputation reflect not only different standards for what counts as acceptable speech, but also contrasting narratives about what the nation is and how it relates to the state. When the media and pop-culture outlets depict the military as the incarnation of the nation-state, it becomes difficult to criticize a military regime. Like other pro-military artists in post-Mubarak Egypt, Amr Mostafa and Hany Hamdy worked together to create entertainment that portrays the military as the nation. In their music videos, they present the military as an object of emulation for children; it is what unites Christians and Muslims, preventing sectarian strife; and it excludes Islamists from the ambit of who could potentially participate in the national project.135

While Hamdy claimed that he does not oppose all forms of political and social criticism, he distinguishes “between criticism and insult.” He elaborates, “films that get prizes abroad have certain agendas. Films that defame the country get prizes.” Hamdy further claims that there is a big difference between the political sarcasm of his film and ‘Adil Imam comedies, and what he interprets as films with harsher portraits of Egypt’s social and political problems. Such “dangerous” films do not resolve critiques with an ending in which “you are left with hope and the state is intact….There is a difference between defaming a regime (nizam) and the state (dawla).”136

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135 For pro-military music videos made by Mostafa and Hamdy, see the following video clips, accessed September 21, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L54RBcRwa6Q; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ow6A70MtPR0.

136 Interview with Hany Hamdy, Cairo, June 29, 2014.
In contrast, the award-winning director Ahmad Abdalla expressed frustration with such accusations of defaming Egypt in his work. Abdalla denied the “myth” that festivals demand a critical political stance in order to win awards. He discussed being subject to accusations about defaming Egypt’s image through reactions to his recent film about an escaped prisoner’s experiences on the margins of the January 25 uprising:

When I screened *Rags and Tatters* [2013] in Abu Dhabi, I had a lot of Egyptian critics and Egyptian movie stars . . . invited to attend the Abu Dhabi film festival, and all of them kept saying, ‘of course, you are going to get the biggest awards here, because you are showing rubbish, you are showing trash, and the festivals like to see Egypt in this way. They like to see trash. This, it is a myth. This is not true.’

Abdalla added that one critic stood up during the Q &A after the film, and complained about the scenes filmed in Cairo’s slums and cemeteries, asking “Is this the Cairo you know?” Abdalla described his experience with Egyptian critics at Abu Dhabi as “a disaster,” and as a war waged by Egyptian critics against his film. He attributes the critics’ reactions to a combination of hypersensitivity to “negative” portrayals of Egypt (such as unromanticized depictions of poverty), and to artistic choices that many Egyptian critics were unaccustomed to, such as the lack of a fixed script, little dialogue, and long silences. This follows a longstanding trend of popular calls for censorship, which are often simultaneously driven by ambivalence towards the poor, and Egypt’s position vis-à-vis the West that some view as actively seeking to tarnish Egypt’s image (Saad 1998, 406).

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137 For background on Ahmad Abdalla and his movie *Rags and Tatters*, see “Breakfast with Mada: Discussing ‘Rags and Tatters’” (2013).

138 Interview with Ahmad Abdalla, Cairo, May 21, 2014.

139 Interview with Ahmad Abdalla, Cairo, May 21, 2014.
Abdalla also complained that after the revolution, such attacks on his work by Egyptian cultural elites were joined by newfound suspicions of filmmakers by bystanders on the street.

[T]he main problem now is the people, not only the government. . . . So, [for example] somebody [says] ‘what are you doing? Are you from al-Jazeera?’ This is the first thing you hear when you take [out] your camera. For the last year, if I take my camera anywhere, [I am asked] ‘are you from al-Jazeera? Are you guys from al-Jazeera?’ And they grab you . . . [and take you] to the nearest police officer. Actually, the police officer is the more supportive element in this situation. . . . So, now it is getting very hard because…of all of this foreigner phobia we are starting to develop in Egypt. Now it is very hard. . . . So, such problems for me [are] 10 times, 20 times bigger than . . . censorship. I mean, I can handle them [the censors]. If you don’t like this scene, I have 10,000 ways to speak my mind and say the same thing, and everyone will understand it. If you don’t like it, if you don’t like this, I have 10,000 other ways. But if you don’t want me to film now on this street, and this is the street I want. . . .

Abdalla illustrates this point by comparing his experience filming in Alexandria before and after the January 25, 2011 uprising. While filming in a lower middle class neighborhood before the anti-Mubarak uprising, Abdalla said that the local residents were quick to defend his crew’s right to film against individuals who had objections. However, after Mubarak’s ouster, when filming in the same neighborhood, Abdalla claimed that residents violently forced him and his crew to leave as soon as they got out of their van with cameras, and accused them of being foreigners with malicious intentions:

“Why are you filming here? Why do you want to film in this area? Why don’t you go film in the corniche? Why are you coming to film in a small alley? Go away, go away. . . . You want to present Egypt as rubbish? You want to film this rubbish on the street?” That explains the danger. This is the same area, and you can see the changes. It is totally the opposite . . . four years after the revolution. So, this is bad. This is . . . censorship. This is the real censorship I am facing, not Ahmed Awaad, or [whoever] they

140 Interview with Ahmad Abdalla, Cairo, May 21, 2014.
have right now. I can handle those guys. It is not a big deal for me. But what I cannot handle is what is happening on the street now.\footnote{Interview with Ahmad Abdalla, Cairo, May 21, 2014.}

Abdalla attributes this new wave of xenophobic nationalism and extreme concern for Egypt’s reputation to television propaganda. Reactionary pundits, such as the quirky hyper-nationalist Tawfik Okasha,\footnote{For more about Tawfik Okasha and Egypt’s new wave of xenophobic nationalists in the media, see Armbrust (2013).} make explicit calls for citizens to protect Egypt’s national reputation with their own hands (e.g., by questioning people with cameras). By turning censorship into a populist project, media pundits make censorship part of being a good citizen. This takes blame away from the government for oppressive tactics and paves the way for future constraints on freedom of expression. As Abdalla puts it: “I think this is the new wave of censorship, and this will build a much stronger official censorship later on.”\footnote{Interview with Ahmad Abdalla, Cairo, May 21, 2014.} In other words, censorship from the “bottom up” driven by xenophobic hypernationalism can both be more constraining than and enable official state censorship.

**Conclusion**

Calls for the public to actively engage in censorship and the emergence of pro-military propaganda in pop culture illustrate how the new military-led government is attempting to employ hypernationalist populism to marginalize dissidents and establish a new narrative of national identity and the role of the state. However, aspiring authoritarian leaders are still dependent upon the (often idiosyncratic and cantankerous)
national commercial entertainment industry to create and disseminate propaganda. The examples of political satire discussed in this chapter illustrate how even pro-military mass media can be produced, debated, and interpreted in ways that are outside of central government control.

Rather than serving as clear-cut touchstones for political ideology, post-revolution Egyptian commercial comedies represent sites of anxiety and confrontation over national identity and who deserves to represent it. This is manifested in (often televised) battles between artists, censors, and media pundits. Even cultural products explicitly intended as pro-military propaganda by its creators can have unintended effects in how they are received. Like censorship, propaganda formation is a decentralized process in post-Mubarak Egypt. It is not carried out through a highly coordinated process or well-oiled political machine, but through often-idiosyncratic figures in commercial entertainment. Both censorship and propaganda formation are taking place as legacies of a liberalized media environment. While this provides opportunities for emerging autocrats to exploit reactionary sentiment “from below,” it also reveals ideological fissures and contestation over the meanings of the revolution and national identity.
Figure 8.

“28 April: Sit-in in front of the censorship building, near Radio Theatre on Talaat Harb Street:

No to low art!
No to opportunistic commercial films!
No to nude and thug films!
Together against cultural decline!!”

Advertisement for a protest on the “In solidarity with the al-Dassas film” Facebook page, 18 April, 2014. Available at https://www.facebook.com/eldasasmovie.
CHAPTER 5
STATE-MANAGED MEDIA AFTER MASS UPRISINGS:
CENSORSHIP AND IDENTITY CONFLICT IN EGYPT AND TUNISIA

As I argued in the preceding chapters on Egypt, a raucous media environment developed under Hosni Mubarak and censorship of it was decentralized. This had several unintended consequences. Independent national media outlets and public intellectuals helped to undermine Mubarak during the 2011 uprising. Yet, following a summer 2013 military coup, anti-Islamist intellectuals and media pundits also helped to legitimate a new wave of repression much more brutal than anything seen during Mubarak’s three decades in power. In short, Egypt’s liberalized media environment was a double-edged sword. That is, cantankerous national media contributed to calls for Mubarak’s ouster amidst grassroots mass mobilization. At the same time, decentralized media outlets were not uniformly pro-democratic. Independent commercial media also gave rise to genuinely popular public intellectuals whose shared anti-Islamism and hypernationalism helped to legitimate the summer 2013 military takeover and subsequent repression, and created a cult of personality around general-turned-president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi.

In this chapter, I contrast Egypt’s relatively decentralized control over the media with the case of Tunisia, which had “one of the worst media environments in the world” under Zayn al-ʿAbidin bin ʿAli (Freedom House 2011b). According to Freedom House data, freedom of the press continuously decreased in Tunisia between the 1980s up to Bin ʿAli’s ouster (Freedom House 2015a). In 2010, Tunisia was ranked 17th out of 19 Middle Eastern countries in terms of media freedom, behind only Libya and Iran, while Egypt was ranked number 6. Globally, Tunisia’s ranking for media freedom in 2010 was
equivalent to China’s and just above that of the petro-dictatorship Equatorial Guinea (Freedom House 2011a). While neither Mubarak’s Egypt nor Bin ‘Ali’s Tunisia were models for freedom of speech, Egypt’s censorship policies were decentralized and relatively lax. In Tunisia, in contrast, the ruling family and its close associates directly controlled the media. In fact, “[i]n the decade that Egypt was somewhat loosening controls on aspects of expression, Tunisia was tightening them” (Webb 2014, 59).

Succumbing to popular uprisings in quick succession, Tunisia and Egypt have taken highly divergent political trajectories. Egypt saw the emergence of an even more repressive authoritarian government than under Mubarak, including the killing or imprisonment of thousands of opposition activists of various ideological stripes. Tunisia, in contrast, is so far the only democratic success story of the “Arab Spring” with Islamist and various non-Islamist factions participating in a pluralistic political process marked more by bargaining than systematic violence.

I argue that these different political outcomes were impacted by and mediated through the different media environments in those countries. This is not to claim that the media was the only or even the most crucial difference between Egypt and Tunisia’s authoritarian legacies. For example, Tunisia had a less politicized military than Egypt (Bellin 2012, 133-134). However, while not determinative, different national media environments in Egypt and Tunisia affected how contentious politics was narrated to the public, and helped shape public discourse over issues such as the Islamist threat, the goals of the revolution, and the wisdom of trading liberties for purported security. While in Egypt reactionary pundits had decades to establish credibility as important “independent”
arbiters of national debates, in Tunisia Bin ‘Ali’s highly centralized media system proved more brittle in the face of leadership change.

Below, I first lay out the similarities and differences between the Egyptian and Tunisian media spheres and the legacies these differences created in the wake of mass mobilization. While the media in both Egypt and Tunisia underwent a process of marketization, in Tunisia this was much more centrally controlled than in Egypt. Second, I discuss how Tunisian cultural producers discuss the possibilities for free expression in post-Bin ‘Ali Tunisia based on interviews I conducted in Tunis in October 2014.

While free speech gained dramatic legal protections since the uprising, many of the cultural producers I spoke with expressed feeling shut out by the absence of an established commercial entertainment industry and state-run cultural institutions that have been slow to change. Thus, in Tunisia, many artists felt more hindered by the absence of vibrant commercial media and entertainment industries than by formal state censorship, which decreased dramatically after Bin ‘Ali’s ouster. Moreover, many artists expressed frustration at a system they felt is still dominated by cultural bureaucrats and artists who were prominent under Bin ‘Ali.

Such observations illustrate how different the legacies of authoritarian media management have been in Tunisia and Egypt. In Egypt, decentralized state control over national media proved both dangerous for regime stability and provided unique opportunities for authoritarian capture following mass mobilization. In Tunisia, on the other hand, hyper-centralization of state control over the media created a vacuum following Bin ‘Ali’s ouster, which provided both unique opportunities for political
expression and frustration over the lack of financially viable means of entry for less established cultural producers.

Another important difference between the legacies of authoritarian media control in Tunisia and Egypt was that anti-Islamist discourse was much more widespread and prominent in Egyptian media and among Egyptian cultural producers. Indeed, many of those I spoke with in Tunisia cited Egypt as a cautionary tale. Even many staunch secularists rejected the rhetoric of a zero-sum struggle between Islamism and national stability. In Egypt, in contrast, the media presented Islamists as homogeneous and as a potentially existential threat to the nation for decades. Such established anti-Islamist narratives were used to justify authoritarian crackdowns after Mubarak’s ouster.

Finally, I conclude by briefly comparing the experiences of Egypt and Tunisia with state media control in other authoritarian contexts: Russia and China. Those cases illustrate the global importance of balancing populism with state control of the media for autocrats operating in a globalizing world. Egypt and Tunisia represent opposite types of failures in this regard (from the perspective of authoritarian leaders seeking survival). Mubarak’s Egypt erred on the side of uncontrollable decentralization while Bin ‘Ali’s Tunisia erred on the side of highly centralized (but non-credible) media production. Authoritarian states such as Russia and China strive to avoid these pitfalls by supporting national media that is simultaneously popular and under regime control.

**Similarities between Tunisia and Egypt: Media Marketization under Autocracy**

As in Mubarak’s Egypt, Bin ‘Ali’s Tunisia was marked by the gradual diversification of national media outlets and the rise of privately owned platforms. Before
2003, all Tunisian radio and TV broadcasting was state-owned. Between 2003 and 2010, new private radio stations (such as Radio Mosaique FM, Radio Jawhara, the Islamic station Radio Zitouna, Shems FM and Express FM) were granted broadcasting licenses. During this same period, private TV stations (such as Hannibal TV and Nessma TV) entered the market (Haugbølle and Cavatorta 2012, 101). Liberalizing the media was likely a strategic choice by Bin ‘Ali to serve as a venue to communicate with Tunisians increasingly able to access news from pan-Arab and European outlets (Haugbølle and Cavatorta 2012, 104).

While highly censored and owned by those close to the regime (including Bin ‘Ali’s son in law, daughter, and others with direct ties to the ruling family), new private media outlets in Tunisia did give more opportunity for novel forms of debate than older state-owned media. While state-owned media outlets largely broadcast in Standard Arabic, new private outlets like Radio Mosaique used more accessible Tunisian colloquial (Haugbølle and Cavatorta 2012, 107). Private Tunisian media outlets also introduced new forms of debate with a wider range of Tunisians appearing on shows or calling in. This gave rise to an increasingly visible diversity in what social groups appeared in the media and the types of views they presented. This included discussions of sensitive social issues, such as sexuality, AIDS, and housing problems (Haugbølle and Cavatorta 2012, 106). Additionally, marketization of the media introduced new forms of advertising to Tunisia, such as billboards (Haugbølle and Cavatorta 2012, 103), and gave rise to battles for viewership between private and state-run outlets. These commercial rivalries helped to enliven media outlets across the board and led to the introduction of unprecedented forums on public television, such as government ministers responding to
audience questions on the air (Haugbølle and Cavatorta 2012, 108).

In short, media marketization in Tunisia had some parallels with trends in Mubarak’s Egypt. In both countries, new privately owned media outlets emerged in the 2000s. This led to increasingly vibrant public debate in national media outlets. However, given the higher levels of centralized state control of the media in Tunisia, these dynamics occurred there in a more muted form than in Egypt.

After the ouster of Bin ‘Ali and Mubarak, the media in both Egypt and Tunisia initially exploded with new outlets and unprecedentedly vibrant debate. However, in both countries, the legacies of media systems that were under various degrees of control by authoritarian regimes left a dearth of journalistic professionalism and presented opportunities for re-capture by powerful interest groups, including members of the old guard (Lynch 2015, 94).

The development of political pluralism has fared much better in Tunisia than in Egypt, and this has been met with parallel developments in guarantees for freedom of speech. For instance, in 2012 Tunisia introduced a new regulatory body to oversee media freedom, and the transitional government introduced unprecedented protections for freedom of expression in the 2014 Constitution. However, as in Egypt, the media in post-Bin ‘Ali Tunisia has at times fomented polarization (el-Issawi 2012, 1). Old guard figures continue to dominate state-owned TV and radio, and private media outlets often serve as venues for their owners to promote personal agendas or are owned by rival political parties. Amidst political crises in 2013 when Tunisia’s democratic transition nearly broke down, the media helped to provoke hysteria and spread sensationalized anti-Islamism. This led President Moncef Marzouki to characterize the media as “sleeping remnants of
the old party” and to call state TV a “lying and corrupt media that does not have the right to speak in the name of Tunisians” (Lynch 2015, 95-96).

Thus, capture of elements of the media by the old guard and polarization accentuated by media outlets controlled by rival political parties fueled tensions in both post-uprising Egypt and Tunisia. However, as I argue below, these dynamics were much stronger in Egypt where politicized commercial media had existed for much longer and was far more vibrant that in Tunisia.

**Differences between Tunisia and Egypt: The Brittleness of Centralized Media**

While there are similarities between the spread of media marketization in Mubarak’s Egypt and Bin ‘Ali’s Tunisia, the dramatic differences in how each of these states attempted to control media messaging led to very different political consequences. Egypt had “a diverse and cantankerous political press” under Mubarak (Lynch 2015, 92). However, as discussed in the previous three chapters, not all popular media personalities had progressive or pro-democratic visions. After the 2011 uprising, emergent leaders were able to simultaneously repress dissident voices and work with public intellectuals whose anti-Islamist and pro-stability narratives were well established during the Mubarak years. This helped leaders from the military to demonize the Muslim Brotherhood and justify the repression of both Islamist and various non-Islamist opposition activists. In Bin ‘Ali’s Tunisia, the state centrally controlled the media with high levels of censorship “run directly from the palace” (Webb 2014, 69). This high level of centralized state control over the media discredited it in the eyes of much of the Tunisian public. In other words, high levels of state micromanagement of the media under Bin ‘Ali made old guard
media figures seem like obvious regime puppets. In Egypt on the other hand, the relative independence of many private media outlets produced a raucous media sphere that was more popular and credible.

Thus, even though commercial competition during Bin ‘Ali’s last years in office may have produced a simulacrum of liberalized discourse in national media, many Tunisians saw through this. The combination of ostensible liberalization with de facto concentration of ownership among Bin ‘Ali’s family and close associates resulted in no one paying “much attention to national media as a news source” (Webb 2014, 67). Tunisian national media’s lack of credibility was evident in how anti-regime uprisings were narrated in Tunisia versus in Egypt. In Egypt, mainstream national journalists played an important role in shaping information flows (forming a symbiosis with bloggers and social media). In Tunisia, on the other hand, citizen journalists and the international media played a much larger role than Tunisian media professionals in narrating the uprising (Webb 2014, 68; Lotan et al. 2011).

In both Egypt and Tunisia, national media sometimes played a destructive role for political development, succumbing to “political capture, the marketing of fear, and polarization” (Lynch 2015, 91). However, these trends were more dramatic in Egypt where conservative state-sanctioned media outlets had more institutional inertia and independence from a single ruling family (Webb 2014, 72; 87). In Tunisia, on the other hand, a small clientelistic power network centrally managed both state-owned and private media outlets. Once Bin ‘Ali fell, this entire structure of media management shattered, leading to “an almost complete collapse of the old machinery of control” (Webb 2014, 87). This collapse of an authoritarian media apparatus potentially paved the way for
significant legal reforms, even as it posed challenges for national journalists’ credibility and the ability to establish journalistic professional standards (Webb 2014, 72).

**Cultural Production in Tunisia and Egypt: Different Institutional and Narrative Legacies**

Based on my interviews with Egyptian cultural producers and officials from the Ministry of Culture, I argued in previous chapters that there was a high degree of continuity in media production in Mubarak and post-Mubarak Egypt even in the face of dramatic political shifts. While there was a brief opening of the media following Mubarak’s ouster, this was followed by unprecedentedly draconian restrictions on freedom of expression with the 2013 military takeover. Throughout this period, there was a high degree of narrative continuity in some movies and talk shows, which rehashed anti-Islamist and pro-“stability” narratives from the Mubarak years. Many prominent media personalities and cultural producers reinvented themselves several times over in attempts to capture viewership amidst dramatic political and social reversals. As the military undertook a massive crackdown on dissident media figures, well-known Mubarak-era public intellectuals and pundits succeeded in remaining prominent “independent” arbiters of the news, often shaping national debates in ways flattering to the military.

In Tunisia, on the other hand, there has been more of a clean break with Bin ‘Ali’s media. This both presented new opportunities for political expression, and difficulties for gaining entry into media and culture industries that were dominated by a small group of elites tied to Bin ‘Ali’s family. Indeed, in my discussions with Tunisian cultural producers in October 2014, my interlocutors expressed dissatisfaction with the post-
uprising status quo. Many of those I spoke with expressed feeling shut out of a cultural system still largely controlled and funded by the state. Even while guarantees of freedom of expression gained ground legally (while the opposite was happening in Egypt), many Tunisian cultural producers expressed frustration at the absence of a robust commercial media infrastructure (like Egypt’s) that would provide opportunities for entry.

These structural differences between the media infrastructures in Tunisia and Egypt are tied to divergent narratives. Whereas in Egypt numerous public intellectuals and media figures supported military rule and justified massive repression of Islamists and other anti-military activists, most Tunisians I spoke with used more moderate political language and went out of their way to vaunt their revolutionary credentials and distance themselves from the old regime. Even Tunisians I spoke with who were virulently opposed to Ennahda and Islamist politics in general used less incendiary anti-Islamist language than was common in Egypt. Moreover, almost everyone I spoke with in Tunisia raised the specter of Egypt as a horror story that Tunisians want to avoid.

**Shut Out of the System: The Persistence of State-Managed Cultural Institutions**

In Egypt, a relatively vibrant commercial media and entertainment industry still exists, even in the face of recent crackdowns. In Tunisia, in contrast, new freedoms are being institutionalized, yet the legacy of media and cultural industries run almost entirely by the state (or regime-affiliated entrepreneurs) makes it difficult for aspiring media and cultural producers to gain entry.

Overall, there was a consensus among those I spoke with in Tunisia on the legal improvements protecting freedom of expression in post-Bin ‘Ali Tunisia. Human rights
advocates claimed that there has been “a huge improvement” in freedom of expression since the fall of Bin ‘Ali.\textsuperscript{144} Others cited the dramatic contrast in everyday freedoms between Tunisia before and after the uprising, as well as between contemporary Tunisia and Egypt. For example, one young human rights researcher claimed that unlike in Egypt, you can now criticize the Tunisian president and post critical political comments on Facebook without fear.\textsuperscript{145}

Many of those I spoke with in the Tunisian film industry emphasized the explosion of documentary films after the uprising, which would have been impossible to make under Bin ‘Ali. As one director and union representative put it, political documentaries are “a new post-revolution phenomenon.”\textsuperscript{146} Another member of the film industry claimed that there are now “no limits on our freedom in making documentaries” except those coming from the social conservatism of Tunisian society.\textsuperscript{147} As the actor Mohamed Ali Ben Jemaa put it, “The positive thing about the revolution was the chaos it created in the cultural sphere. Many artists made documentaries, and their weapon was the 5D camera. Many short films and documentaries had an ethos of promoting

\textsuperscript{144} For example, Saloua Ghazouan Oueslati from the freedom of expression advocacy organization Article 19 expressed this view in an interview with me in Tunis on October 8, 2014.

\textsuperscript{145} Interview with human rights researcher who preferred to remain anonymous because s/he is not authorized to officially speak on behalf of her/his organization, Tunis, October 11, 2014.

\textsuperscript{146} Interview with Jihad Ben Slimane, film director and Secretary General of the Fédération Tunisienne des Cinéastes Amateurs (FTCA), Tunis, October 30, 2014.

\textsuperscript{147} Interview with Mondher Ben Ibrahim, director and Secretary General of the Association des Cinéastes Tunisiens (ACT), Tunis, October 17, 2014.
change.” In contrast, prior to Bin ‘Ali’s ouster, government censors only tolerated indirect, philosophic critiques of politics, as in the films of well-known directors like Nouri Bouzid. As the actor Lamine Nahdi put it, in trying to make politically relevant art under Bin ‘Ali, “I was breathing with only one lung.” Direct critiques of the ruling family, or support for Islamists, was impossible. As one member of the Tunisian film industry said, supporting Islamists was Bin ‘Ali’s “biggest red line.”

With legal restrictions on freedom of expression dramatically diminished, my interviewees focused on the continued barriers of Islamist attacks on the arts and a more general cultural conservatism that can make it dangerous to make overly salacious or controversial media. For example, discussing cases of attacks on cultural centers in response to controversial films, one director said, we face “violence and accusations that cinema is heretical, that cinema is sex, that cinema is alcohol.” Controversial films risk causing a broader backlash against cultural production if released “when people were not ready” for them. In such cases, they can be “used to inflame people.” As the producer Dora Bouchoucha put it: “Now, it is the people who will censor you, not the government. Under Bin ‘Ali, criticizing him or his wife was a red line; now it is religion and sex.

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148 Interview with the actor Mohamed Ali Ben Jemaa, Tunis, October 21, 2014.
149 Interview with Mondher Ben Ibrahim, director and Secretary General of the Association des Cinéastes Tunisiens (ACT), Tunis, October 17, 2014.
150 Interview with the actor Lamine Nahdi, Tunis, October 10, 2014.
151 Interview with Chebbi Mohamed Salah, President of the Union des Cinéastes Académiciens en Tunies (UCAT), Tunis, October 7, 2014.
152 Interview with Jihad Ben Slimane, film director and Secretary General of the Fédération Tunisienne des Cinéastes Amateurs (FTCA), Tunis, October 30, 2014.
Now, the government will not ban anything, but the people will because we don’t want to have a riot.”153

However, even more than the threat of Islamists to the arts, my interlocutors consistently emphasized problems with funding and the absence of a well-established commercial entertainment industry as the biggest barrier facing freedom of expression in Tunisia today. As one director put it: “The biggest threat to the Tunisian film industry is that the Ministry of Culture is not taking initiatives to fund the cinema industry.”154 Along similar lines, an actor claimed: “The situation of culture in Tunisia is getting worse. Cinemas and theatres are closing. Right now, people care about making lucrative investments, and they don’t consider cultural ones. The owners of cinemas just want to make money, and sometimes they decide to close down.”155

The lack of an established national commercial entertainment infrastructure prevents national productions, like films, from being seen. For example, the dearth of cinemas and the poor quality of those that do exist make going to the movies unattractive. As one actor put it: “Sometimes when I share a status on my Facebook page about my role in films, people want links, since they don’t want to go to theatres. When I ask them why they don’t want to go, they say that they’re not comfortable with the infrastructure of the cinemas (for example, the poor sound quality). Tickets are cheap. So, it’s not a

153 Interview with Dora Bouchoucha, film producer and director of the 2014 Carthage Film Festival, Tunis, October 8, 2014.

154 Interview with Jihad Ben Slimane, film director and Secretary General of the Fédération Tunisienne des Cinéastes Amateurs (FTCA), Tunis, October 30, 2014.

155 Interview with the actor Hamdi Hadda, Tunis, October 29, 2014.
question of money, it’s a question of infrastructure. Also, all of our films are
philosophical, and they are not interesting to people like films in Morocco and Egypt.
Tunisian films are focused on festivals. In Egypt, you have comedies and action films
that people want to see…. In Morocco, they have modern multiplexes with cafes,
restaurants, and bowling, but here the biggest cinema only has two screens.”

While many of those I spoke with in the Tunisian cinema industry took pride in
the artistic quality of Tunisia’s relatively few state-sponsored auteur films, they all
lamented the absence of a commercial industry. While they lauded the superior
production value and artistic quality of Tunisian films compared to commercial Egyptian
or Bollywood movies, they expressed envy of the commercial infrastructure in such
countries. As the producer Dora Bouchoucha put it, “There is no comparison between
Egypt and Tunisia. In Egypt, there is a real film industry, but Tunisia follows the French
model” with state sponsorship of the arts. As a cinema union representative put it:
“Here we had no commercial film industry. But I consider Tunisian films more creative,
artistic, and philosophic than Egyptian films.” The actor Hamdi Hadda claimed that
there could potentially be a balance between a commercial film industry and auteur films.
For example, there could be 10 films playing in theatres and two of them could be auteur
films. This way the commercial entertainment industry could support filmmakers while

156 Interview with the actor Hamdi Hadda, Tunis, October 29, 2014.
157 For example, Interview with Mondher Ben Ibrahim, director and Secretary General of
the Association des Cinéastes Tunisiens (ACT), Tunis, October 17, 2014.
158 Interview with Dora Bouchoucha, film producer and director of the 2014 Carthage
Film Festival, Tunis, October 8, 2014.
159 Interview with Chebbi Mohamed Salah, President of the Union des Cinéastes
Académiciens en Tunisie (UCAT), Tunis, October 7, 2014.
still enabling high quality artistic production. As another actor put it: “Quality artistic products need money. To make a film costs millions, and it needs support from the Ministry of Culture. The problem, in my opinion, is that everything depends on businessmen who don’t invest in art. They invest in football, not art.”

Nearly everyone I spoke with in the Tunisian cultural industry lamented the continued difficulty of getting funding through the Ministry of Culture. However, they differed as to whether this is largely due to a simple lack of funds or to politics. As a cinema industry union representative told me, while it is now much easier to get filming permits than under Bin ‘Ali, you still need to get the approval of a committee at the Ministry of Culture to secure government funding. These are the same officials who were there prior to the uprising, and they still fund the same people: “The cinema sector is dominated by a lobby, which makes it difficult for newcomers to work.” Another cinema union representative expressed similar frustrations: “[W]ith respect to funding, nothing has changed. The Ministry of Culture is not giving financial assistance to anyone except for to the few same families who are like a gang. They are the ones who worked and got assistance under Bin ‘Ali.” Yet another cinema union representative claimed that funding arts through the Ministry of Culture was originally instituted as a means for the state to secure political control over the arts, and it is still being manipulated in this

160 Interview with the actor Hamdi Hadda, Tunis, October 29, 2014.
161 Interview with the actor Mohamed Ali Ben Jemaa, Tunis, October 21, 2014.
162 Interview with Chebbi Mohamed Salah, President of the Union des Cinéastes Académiciens en Tunisie (UCAT), Tunis, October 7, 2014.
163 Interview with Mondher Ben Ibrahim, director and Secretary General of the Association des Cinéastes Tunisiens (ACT), Tunis, October 17, 2014.
way: “Until now, nothing has changed following the so-called Tunisian revolution…. You no longer receive blatant rejections from the Ministry of Interior or the Ministry of Culture. Instead, they just say that the deal didn’t go through for logistical reasons.”

While different film industry members agreed on this problematic state of affairs—a dearth of state funding and the absence of a commercial industry—they attributed different political reasons for this. Some blamed Islamists, while others blamed members of the old guard. For example, I met the director Fadhel Jaziri on the set of a film he was working on about the threat of terrorism in Tunisia. In addition to working as a film director, he represented the anti-Islamist and old guard-affiliated political party Nidaa Tounes. He blamed the lack of funding for the arts in post-Bin ‘Ali Tunisia on the Islamist party Ennahda’s supposed scorn for culture. “They don’t believe in culture or cinema, so they don’t try to advance culture.” He contrasted this with Nidaa Tounes’ purported plans to expand investment in the arts.

In contrast, the comedian Hedi Ouled Baballah (who was imprisoned for his satirical impersonations of Bin ‘Ali prior to the uprising) expressed being marginalized by the broader media establishment, which he claims is still controlled by Bin ‘Ali-era officials. “Nothing has changed within the Ministry of Culture…. The actors who benefited from the former regime are getting a lot of money. The Ministry of Culture should be supporting artists who were persecuted by the previous regime, but this is not happening. The government did not institute policies to support artists marginalized

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164 Interview with Marouene Meddeb, director and president of the Association Des Cinéastes Tunisiens Indépendants (ACTI), Tunis, October 20, 2014.

165 Interview with Fadhel Jaziri, director and actor working on the electoral campaign of Nidaa Tounes, Tunis, October 19, 2014.
under Bin ‘Ali, and I have not seen any support from the Ministry of Culture after the revolution…. People who used to be poor under Bin ‘Ali’s regime are now even poorer.” He then joked, “Maybe we need to bring Bin ‘Ali back.”

In short, regardless of their political differences, all of the Tunisian cultural producers I spoke with expressed frustration with the state of the national culture industry, and the absence of change within the Ministry of Culture. The legacy of state-dominated artistic production and entertainment left few opportunities for less established figures to enter the market. Thus, despite greater legal protections for freedom of expression, many still viewed the system as rigged against them—economically, culturally, and politically. This state of affairs forms a strong contrast to Egypt with its longstanding (and comparatively independent) commercial entertainment industry that provided various avenues for expression despite political repression and censorship.

**Vaunting Revolutionary Credentials**

Another indication of Tunisian cultural producers’ attempts to distance themselves from the status quo under Bin ‘Ali was the tendency of my interviewees to trumpet their status as revolutionary figures. Unlike in Egypt where numerous public intellectuals began to rally around the military and a renewed security state following the ouster of Mohamed Morsi in the summer of 2013, in Tunisia all of the cultural producers I spoke with attempted to outdo one another in emphasizing their revolutionary credentials. This was true despite their political differences, various degrees of success

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Interview with Hedi Ouled Baballah, a comedian famous for his impersonation of Bin ‘Ali prior to the uprising, Tunis, October 9, 2014.
working under Bin ‘Ali, and their ties to the old regime. As one human rights researcher put it, “Everyone now wants to make themselves out to be a revolutionary hero” despite their past politics or current ideological alignments.\(^{167}\)

Union representatives presented their organizations as fiercely independent.\(^{168}\) Actors claimed that in their work they sent subtle messages of resistance under Bin ‘Ali.\(^{169}\) Others presented themselves as unique revolutionary heroes. For example, one singer and music producer claimed that he was maybe “the first [Tunisian] to sing about politics, [and to write] satiric songs. . . . I love being banned. I disturb authority. . . . I live with trouble. I need trouble to work.”\(^{170}\) Similarly, the comedian Hedi Ouled Baballah contrasted his own anti-regime credentials with artists who took less overtly oppositional stances: “I was the only one who criticized Bin ‘Ali and his family personally. Nobody before me imitated high up political personalities. . . . I never collaborated with the regime. I was the only one from the intellectual community who was well covered by \textit{al-Jazeera} and other international outlets. But within the Tunisian media, I was

\(^{167}\) Interview with human rights researcher who preferred to remain anonymous because s/he is not authorized to officially speak on behalf of her/his organization, Tunis, October 11, 2014.

\(^{168}\) Interview with Jihad Ben Slimane, film director and Secretary General of the Fédération Tunisienne des Cinéastes Amateurs (FTCA), Tunis, 30 Oct 2014; Interview with Marouene Meddeb, director and president of the Association Des Cinéastes Tunisiens Indépendants (ACTI), Tunis, October 20, 2014.

\(^{169}\) Interview with the actress Leila Chebbi, Tunis, 6 October, 2014; Interview with the actor Lamine Nahdi, Tunis, 10 Oct 2014; Interview with the actor Mohamed Ali Ben Jemaa, Tunis, October 21, 2014.

\(^{170}\) Interview with the singer and music producer Bayrem Kilani—aka Bendir Man, Tunis, October 6, 2014.
marginalized.”¹⁷¹ Even representatives of the old guard party Nidaa Tounes presented themselves as revolutionary vanguards. For example, the director and actor Fadhel Jaziri described his work as “resistance cinema” in which he is “trying to express the situation of the country.”¹⁷²

Whereas in Egypt many prominent public intellectuals actively defended renewed state repression and aligned themselves with the military, in Tunisia most of the artists I spoke with who did not laud themselves as part of the revolutionary vanguard defended themselves as being apolitical. For example, some artists known for working with the Ministry of Culture under Bin ‘Ali defended themselves as mere artists, not regime apologists. As the singer Sonia M'barek (who became Minister of Culture in 2016) put it: “I work as an artist to represent Tunisia no matter what. I was never a member of the RCD, and now I do not have a political alignment. . . . There was no such thing as an artist against the regime. In the end of the day, artists did not play the political game. There is also confusion between the regime, and the state. There’s an idea that if you work with the Ministry of Culture, you work for the Bin ‘Ali regime. But artists did not understand it this way. Artists are simply pawns in the political game. They just want to live.”¹⁷³

¹⁷¹ Interview with Hedi Ouled Baballah, a comedian famous for his impersonation of Bin ‘Ali prior to the uprising, Tunis, October 9, 2014.

¹⁷² Interview with Fadhel Jaziri, director and actor working on the electoral campaign of Nidaa Tounes, Tunis, October 19, 2014.

¹⁷³ Interview with Sonia M'barek, singer and director of the 2014 International Festival of Carthage, which is sponsored by the Ministry of Culture, Tunis, October 17, 2014.
Egypt as Cautionary Tale

Another contrast with Egypt is that all of the Tunisian cultural producers I spoke with cited the anti-Islamist rhetoric and violence in Egypt a warning about what Tunisia should avoid. Even those who expressed hostility towards Islamists in politics cited the need for a political solution to identity conflicts rather than the re-establishment of a security state.

Like in Egypt, many Tunisian cultural producers viewed Islamists in politics as a threat, and they sometimes used hyperbolic language in expressing themselves. For example, as one singer and music producer put it when talking to me in the weeks before the 2014 parliamentary elections: “For me, all the Islamist parties are sons of bitches. All of the parties that use religion are very dangerous. . . . Now we’re preparing the war.”174 As the producer and director Dora Bouchoucha put it: “‘Modern’ and ‘Islamism’ are not compatible. The choice shouldn’t be between choosing between a dictatorship and religion. I don’t believe in the idea of ‘modern Islamism.”175 Similarly, the comedian Hedi Ouled Baballah claimed, “[w]e cannot have political Islam—it has no place in our government. There needs to be a total separation between religion and politics. Islam needs to be put in one place and politics in another. Political Islam has no place in Tunisia.”176 This mirrored the language of some secularist politicians. For example, a

174 Interview with the singer and music producer Bayrem Kilani—aka Bendir Man, Tunis, October 6, 2014.

175 Interview with Dora Bouchoucha, film producer and director of the 2014 Carthage Film Festival, Tunis, October 8, 2014.

176 Interview with Hedi Ouled Baballah, a comedian famous for his impersonation of Bin ‘Ali prior to the uprising, Tunis, October 9, 2014.
secularist parliamentary candidate exclaimed during a rally in Tunis: “We have never and never will cooperate with Ennahda!”

Others blamed Ennahda for not preventing Islamist attacks on cultural festivals and the US Embassy: “It’s like a father who doesn’t intervene when his son attacks the neighbors.” Other artists accused Ennahda of being directly responsible for violence, or for attempting to censor their work and defame them. As a cinema industry union representative put it: “If Ennahda wins in the next elections, we as cultural producers would be destroyed.” A recurring motif was that Ennahda is no different from the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood ideologically, but is smarter.

However, while many of the Tunisian cultural producers I spoke with expressed extreme fear about the prospect of Islamists playing an important role in national politics, they also often cited the experience of post-Mubarak Egypt as a horror story that Tunisia needs to avoid. Additionally, they tended to describe Tunisia’s political and cultural environment as more conducive to inclusion than Egypt’s. In contrast to many Egyptian public intellectuals’ embrace of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi’s military takeover and brutal

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177 Samir Taïeb made this statement at a rally I attended for the secularist political coalition Union Pour la Tunisie, Tunis, October 15, 2014.
178 Interview with the actor Hamdi Hadda, Tunis, October 29, 2014.
179 Interview with the actor Mohamed Ali Ben Jemaa, Tunis, October 21, 2014.
180 Interview with the actress Leila Chebbi, Tunis, October 6, 2014.
181 Interview with Marouene Meddeb, director and president of the Association Des Cinéastes Tunisiens Indépendants (ACTI), Tunis, October 20, 2014.
182 For example, Interview with the singer and music producer Bayrem Kilani—aka Bendir Man, Tunis, 6 October, 2014; Interview with Dora Bouchoucha, film producer and director of the 2014 Carthage Film Festival, Tunis, October 8, 2014.
repression of activists, all of my Tunisian interlocutors portrayed al-Sisi as a joke—a tin pot dictator whom Tunisians would be too sophisticated to embrace.

As one freedom of expression advocate put it, “Ennahda changed its tactics after July 2013, and is afraid of the Muslim Brotherhood’s experience in Egypt. All of its actions are being scrutinized within Tunisia and from abroad…. In Tunis, there is also a divide between pro and anti-Ennahda camps [like the divide between pro and anti-Muslim Brotherhood camps in Egypt]. But we learned from the Egyptian experience. This led people to support compromise and a technocratic government. What happened in Egypt had a positive impact on Tunisia.”183 Likewise, the film director and secularist politician Salma Baccar told me that the “Egyptian experience had a positive effect on Tunisian politics.”184

An Ennahda politician agreed with this assessment: “There is no comparison [between Egypt and Tunisia], because in Egypt Islamists wrote the constitution without including other political factions. This was the tragedy of Egypt. In Tunisia, we wrote it together. Is it right to only write the Egyptian constitution for the Brotherhood? No—it must be for all Egyptians.”185

Even virulently anti-Islamist Tunisian artists I spoke with expressed disdain for anti-Muslim Brotherhood political violence in Egypt:

183 Interview with Saloua Ghazouan Oueslati from the freedom of expression advocacy organization Article 19, Tunis, October 8, 2014.

184 Interview with Salma Baccar, film director and producer, member of the Constituent Assembly, and parliamentary candidate running with the Pôle Démocratique Moderniste (PDM), Tunis, October 15, 2014.

185 Interview with Hajer Azaiez, Ennahda politician and member of the Tunisian Constituent Assembly, Tunis, October 13, 2014.
What happened in Egypt was a coup. Morsi made a lot of mistakes, and was an extremist. But the people, not the army, needed to address this. And the media needed to address al-Sisi’s ridiculous mistakes. . . . This repression of Islamists is what will lead to an explosion in Egypt . . . I’m not with the Islamists. But al-Sisi is ridiculous. . . . And he has no [political] background—he’s just a military leader. . . . A regime of state terrorism is coming back. Mubarak’s regime is coming back, which is against the aims of the revolution.  

Likewise, an anti-Islamist human rights researcher told me: “Invoking fear of Islamists and Salafis is not based on facts, it is based on emotion. We cannot compare Tunisia to Egypt now, because Egypt is not democratic.”  

While bringing up the contrast between Egypt and Tunisia, many of those I interviewed described Tunisia as more tolerant than other countries in the Middle East, including Egypt: “Until now, Tunisia has been a model. It is not like Egypt, Yemen, or Syria. There is a great social and political climate here compared to those countries.”  

The actor Mohamed Ali Ben Jemaa emphasized that he welcomes everyone to the cultural center he runs, including Islamists and members of the community who are culturally conservative: “People with all ideologies and backgrounds come here.”  

Similarly, the actress Leila Chebbi expressed pride in Tunisians’ tolerance, even for Islamists: “Tunisians are tolerant and accept others. We are not extreme either way—not too conservative and not too liberal. We’re not Saudi Arabia, Iran, or Egypt…. The Tunisian revolution was in essence not a religious revolution, but a revolution of civil liberties.”

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186 Interview with the actress Leila Chebbi, Tunis, October 6, 2014.

187 Interview with human rights researcher who preferred to remain anonymous because s/he is not authorized to officially speak on behalf of her/his organization, Tunis, October 11, 2014.

188 Interview with Noureddine El Ati, actor and stage director who founded the cultural space and cafe Théâtre de L’Étoile du Nord in 1997, Tunis, October 30, 2014.

189 Interview with the actor Mohamed Ali Ben Jemaa, Tunis, October 21, 2014.
society for freedom. The remnants of the old regime use the threat of extremists and social strife as a means to scare the people and regain power.”

The Political Irrelevance of Egyptian Media

In addition to citing Egypt as a cautionary tale for what Tunisia should avoid, many of the Tunisian cultural producers I spoke with emphasized that Egypt was so different from Tunisia that Egyptian political satire was not even viewed as incendiary by the Bin ‘Ali regime. Several Tunisian cultural producers I spoke with claimed that Egyptian political films did not have problems with Tunisian censors, because Tunisians viewed them as being about problems specific to Egypt, not reflective of shared problems of living under dictatorship in the Arab world. This reinforces the idea of a widely shared belief in Tunisia in a cultural gap with Egypt.

Under Bin ‘Ali, the subject of Islamism was taboo in national mass media. Yet, Egyptian commercial entertainment that satirized Islamists and life under Mubarak’s incompetent bureaucracy and police state were widely shown in Tunisia, since they were largely viewed as mere entertainment:

‘Adil Imam films were shown normally in cinemas. And they were shown on TV [along with his plays]. . . . We don’t struggle with same problems as those ‘Adil Imam dealt with, so people just thought that it was funny, but didn’t take it seriously. We have a better standard of living than in Egypt. We don’t have overcrowding, or the same economic problems. It

190 Interview with the actress Leila Chebbi, Tunis, October 6, 2014.
191 Interview with Saloua Ghazouan Oueslati from the freedom of expression advocacy organization Article 19, Tunis, 8 Oct 2014.
192 As mentioned earlier, ‘Adil Imam is an Egyptian comic megastar who famously lampooned Islamists and the incompetence of the police state, especially in his films from the 1990s.
[broadcasting Egyptian political satire] used to help Bin ‘Ali’s regime by showing how Tunisia is doing much better in terms of development than Egypt. ‘Adil Imam’s comedies helped to show people how the poverty found in Egypt did not exist in Tunisia. 193

Along similar lines, the producer and international film festival director Dora Bouchoucha pointed out that Egyptian political films were not subject to strict censorship under Bin ‘Ali. For example, she cited the example of Egyptian director Ahmad Abdalla’s 2010 film Microphone about Alexandria’s underground music scene. While the movie discussed state censorship and police brutality, Bouchoucha claimed: “Microphone was not controversial at all. It could have been shown in theatres.” 194

In short, Tunisians of various ideological stripes expressed pride in distinguishing Tunisia from Egypt. Moreover, even staunch anti-Islamists wanted Tunisia to avoid the type of severe repression of Islamists occurring in al-Sisi’s Egypt. While many anti-Islamist Egyptian public intellectuals lauded al-Sisi as a national savior, most Tunisians I spoke with treated him as a joke.

**Conclusion**

The case of state media management in Bin ‘Ali’s Tunisia provides a dramatic contrast to Mubarak’s Egypt. Whereas in Egypt the media sphere was cantankerous and decentralized, in Tunisia state control of the media remained highly centralized with private outlets owned by Bin ‘Ali’s family members and close associates. Additionally, in contrast to the relative vibrancy of the Egyptian media sphere, Tunisia under Bin ‘Ali had

193 Interview with Chebbi Mohamed Salah, President of the Union des Cinéastes Académiciens en Tunisie (UCAT), Tunis, October 7, 2014.

194 Interview with Dora Bouchoucha, film producer and director of the 2014 Carthage Film Festival, Tunis, October 8, 2014.
one of the most rigid censorship regimes in the Arab world. Egypt’s cantankerous media environment both helped to undermine Mubarak amidst mass mobilization, and provided unique opportunities for capture by the military after Mubarak’s ouster. In Tunisia, on the other hand, national media under Bin ‘Ali proved to be brittle in the wake of mass protests. Representing the interests of a single-family network, it lacked credibility.

Moreover, in Egypt anti-Islamist narratives had been popularized in mass media and commercial entertainment for decades. Such narratives helped to inflame identity conflict in the wake of Mubarak’s ouster, and ultimately justify large-scale state violence against Islamist activists. The fact that anti-Islamism was more muted in the media during the Bin ‘Ali years may have helped to make political compromise tenable in Tunisia, as did the cautionary example of political violence in Egypt. Overall, comparing Egypt with Tunisia highlights some of the ways in which different legacies of authoritarian media management can impact politics in the wake of mass uprisings.
The cases of Egypt and Tunisia may reflect global trends in authoritarian media management. In an era in which totalitarian-style propaganda is difficult to maintain, authoritarian states must balance making national media simultaneously popular and in-line with state-approved narratives. Mubarak’s Egypt and Bin ‘Ali’s Tunisia represent opposite extremes of the potential perils facing autocrats seeking to use the media to bolster their hold on power in a globalized age. Egypt’s media environment was too raucous and fragmented to reliably produce a unified narrative controlled by the state. In Tunisia, on the other hand, a single kleptocratic family controlled the media so tightly that national media became discredited. Thus, neither regime was able to balance populism with state dominance in order to reliably bolster stability. Other authoritarian states, such as Russia and China, are trying to achieve this equilibrium between populism and state control of media narratives.

In this concluding chapter, I examine some ways in which the dynamics I discussed in Egypt and Tunisia may be instances of broader global trends. I first briefly outline how contemporary Russia and China could be viewed as “successful” cases of authoritarian media management. In both of these countries, authoritarian leaders have managed to reach a delicate balance between controlling media messaging while allowing the media to retain a veneer of independence. Thus, the cases of Mubarak’s Egypt and Bin ‘Ali’s Tunisia are reflective of opposite perils that other autocrats face—allowing independent media to get out of control versus controlling it so tightly that it
loses popularity. I conclude by briefly discussing possible avenues for future research and the policy implications of my findings.

**Conservative Populism in Putin’s Russia**

In post-Soviet Russia, Vladimir Putin has been able to simultaneously consolidate control, limit freedoms, and gain tremendous national popularity. With the rise of natural energy-related economic growth, Putin sold a narrative that democratic gains needed to be sacrificed “on the altar of stability and growth.” This tactic seemed to work, and by the end of Putin’s first two terms in office between 2000-2008, his approval ratings were around 80 percent (McFaul and Stoner-Weiss 2008, 68). This is part of a broader trend in post-communist Eurasia where “popular autocrats” tend to survive while unpopular ones are eventually unseated (Dimitrov 2009, 78). Given the importance of populism for regime stability and the danger of international condemnation for using blatant tactics such as assassinating journalists, Putin instead chose to establish state control over nearly all national media. Putin’s tactics are analogous to but subtler than those in countries such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan where regimes attempt to use the media to create Stalinist-style cults of personality (Dimitrov 2009, 80).

As in Egypt, in post-Soviet Russia the media is often controlled as much through self-censorship as through formal restrictions (Webb 2014, 97). Also, as in al-Sisi’s Egypt, pro-Putin pundits are often genuinely popular and present themselves as independent political commentators, not official spokespersons of the Kremlin. Analogous to idiosyncratic populist media personalities who emerged in post-Mubarak Egypt in support of the military takeover (Afify 2014; Armbrust 2013; Elmeshad 2015;
Fadl 2013), in Russia conservative political commentators lauded Putin as a hero and put “Russia at the center of an anti-Western, socially conservative axis—Russia as a bulwark against a menacing America” (Remnick 2014).

In contemporary Russia, the imagery of Putinism is ubiquitous on television and paired with “ominous warnings against political chaos and outside interference” (Remnick 2014). With airwaves “filled with assaults on the treachery of Russian liberals and American manipulations” (Remnick 2014), conservative Russian pundits’ “apocalyptic rhetoric” and conspiracy theories outdo larger than life American TV personalities like Bill O’Reilly and Glenn Beck (Remnick 2014). Also as in post-Mubarak Egypt (Armbrust 2014; Walters 2014), narratives in popular Russian entertainment buttress support for a strong state. For example, Putin funded film production to ensure that movies could be made that “correspond to the interests of Russian society and the strategic objectives for the country’s development” (Liñán 2010, 174).

While populist conservative public intellectuals play important roles in both contemporary Egypt and Russia, in Russia they operate in a media environment that is under more centralized state control. That is, in Putin’s Russia, the state is much more adept at managing a raucous media environment while employing less overt violence than in al-Sisi’s Egypt. In his first two terms in office from 2000-2008, Putin “took complete control of the main television channels and neutered any opposition political parties” (Remnick 2014). While events such as political scandals still make their way into Russia’s vibrant social media sphere and are much discussed, the state is able to manage
and redirect public outrage via other outlets, such as state-controlled television (Toepfl 2011, 1301).

In short, in both Putin’s Russia and al-Sisi’s Egypt, populist public intellectuals play a crucial role in establishing and maintaining cults of personality and justifying state restrictions on freedoms. However, in Russia this process is managed more adeptly, and is orchestrated with less overt violence that could be embarrassing to the regime. Additionally, pro-Putin pundits have more credibility as “independent” thinkers than media personalities working for outlets directly controlled by Bin ‘Ali’s family in Tunisia.

**State-Managed Media Marketization in Contemporary China**

Like Russia, contemporary China serves as an example of a “successful” case of authoritarian media management (Stockmann and Gallagher 2011, 438) that contrasts with the failures of Mubarak’s Egypt and Bin ‘Ali’s Tunisia. As in Egypt and Tunisia, China underwent a process of media marketization—deregulation, commercialization, and privatization (Stockmann 2013, 7-10). This was partly a response to the need to make national media genuinely popular in a global, information-awash age. It also reflects the need of authoritarian states to be responsive to citizens. While most accounts of state-society relations in authoritarian regimes focus on how states either coerce or buy off citizens’ compliance, China serves as a case of “responsive authoritarianism” (Stockmann 2013, 5) or “populist authoritarianism (Tang 2016). China’s experience with media marketization, in particular, illustrates how communication between citizens and the authoritarian state can occur in both directions (Stockmann 2013, 6). That is, the
government not only tries to control media messaging, but also learns from and adapts to citizens’ reactions to the media.

Borrowing from Western models of mass persuasion, the Chinese state has updated traditional methods of establishing control over media content (Brady 2012, 1). Marketized media allows the state to simultaneously gain feedback about public opinion and respond to it (Stockmann 2013, 7). In allowing independent media outlets to operate, the government walks a “fine line between toleration and control” of new media spaces. In doing so, it still aims to create news products that are roughly uniform and in-line with state policy (Stockmann 2013, 14). Indeed, giving the public access to national media is so important to the Chinese government that it even launched a national project to distribute TVs with portable satellite dishes and solar generators to nomads (Brady 2012, 194).

Like in contemporary Egypt, in China independent media outlets can serve “as a reactionary force to stabilize authoritarian regimes” (Stockmann and Gallagher 2011, 437). However, unlike in Egypt or Tunisia, the Chinese government has been successful at simultaneously maintaining control over the messaging in marketized media and keeping it popular and credible (Stockmann and Gallagher 2011, 436). As in Putin’s Russia, state-managed media in China helps to make authoritarianism popular while reducing the need for coercion (Brady 2012, 183-184; Stockmann 2013, 240). In China, “the commercial wrapping of media creates the image of a more credible information outlet that represents people rather than political leaders” (Stockmann 2013, 245). At the same time, as a one-party regime, the Chinese government has the cohesive centralized bureaucratic power to effectively manage media narratives, which many other
authoritarian states, such as Egypt, lack (Stockmann 2013, 14-15; 252). In other words, media marketization can only stabilize authoritarian regimes that have the capacity to monopolize information and orchestrate relatively uniform messages across media outlets; otherwise media marketization can destabilize leaders (Stockmann 2013, 238).

**A Delicate Balance Between Credibility and State Control**

From the perspective of autocrats seeking to use the media as a tool for shoring up regime stability, the cases of Mubarak’s Egypt and Bin ‘Ali’s Tunisia were both failures. They represent opposite types of imbalances (hyper-decentralization versus hyper-centralization), which states such as Russia and China are trying to avoid.

**Figure 9.**
Authoritarian Media Management: Balancing Control and Popular Credibility

Overall, controlling the media in an age of globalization and increasing access to information poses new challenges to autocrats. In order not to be destabilized by the flow of information, authoritarian regimes must achieve an equilibrium between populist appeal and state control of the media. The cases of Egypt and Tunisia highlight the difficulty of achieving this balance, and the unintended consequences that can ensue from state intervention in partially liberalized media spheres.
In my three chapters on Egypt (Chapters 2-4), I examined in detail how the legacies of authoritarian control of the media can impact politics when censorship is decentralized and marketized media is vibrant. I did this by (1) looking at how censorship officials from the Ministry of Culture viewed themselves and their work, (2) exploring how famous “dissident” figures under Mubarak justified their pro-military turn in the wake of the military coup against Mohamed Morsi, and (3) analyzing political satires about mass mobilization in post-Mubarak Egypt. Through these case studies, I argued that censorship in Egypt was decentralized and often chaotic. Moreover, successive regimes have been beholden to independent cultural producers to justify repression and produce pro-state media. This is risky for authoritarian leaders, since even regime-aligned pundits are idiosyncratic and often work at cross purposes with one another and various state institutions.

From the perspective of autocrats seeking survival, this type of media environment is dangerous. In Egypt, cantankerous national media helped to undermine Hosni Mubarak amidst mass mobilization, and subsequent leaders have resorted to draconian (and internationally publicized) crackdowns on dissident media outlets and personalities. At the same time, vibrant media under autocracy is not inherently or uniformly pro-democratic. As I discuss in detail in Chapter 3, many public intellectuals who were famous as “dissidents” under Mubarak provided crucial support for military crackdowns a few years after his ouster. The credibility garnered by independent media personalities can cut both ways.

Even as aspiring authoritarian leaders have used commercial media outlets to gain public support in post-Mubarak Egypt, my case studies of censorship battles and
propaganda creation also reveal the difficulty of establishing a coherent national political narrative on the ashes of what was once a vibrant media sphere. That is, while gaining the support of popular independent media producers can lend authoritarian leaders credibility, this also means that they are beholden to idiosyncratic and cantankerous commercial media outlets that are difficult to micromanage.

More broadly, Egypt serves as an especially dramatic case of the unintended consequences that can occur when national media operates outside of tightly managed centralized government control. In an age of globalization, censorship and propaganda are most effective when large segments of the public view them as expressions of popular sentiment rather than as authoritarian abuses. Thus, authoritarian media management requires a delicate balancing act between state control and allowing the media enough independence to maintain credibility. While authoritarian leaders in Russia and China have managed this better than Mubarak, the case of Egypt reveals some of the perils they potentially face. Additionally, state management of media in Egypt may have parallels with other countries in which private media outlets operate in a context of state violence against journalists, such as in Ukraine and the Philippines.

**Avenues for Future Research and Policy Implications**

In this dissertation, I analyzed of how state media management worked in Egypt from the Mubarak era through 2014. In doing so, I was able to analyze in detail how some censorship processes work, and how censors and censored artists talk about them. I argued that Egypt is a case of low state capacity to centrally manage an especially vibrant
private media sphere. Future research could conduct case studies of other countries to determine whether my findings in Egypt might really be generalizable to other contexts.

First, more detailed cross-national case studies could identify whether my findings have global applicability. While I contrasted Egypt with a brief shadow case study of Tunisia, which had much centralized censorship institutions under Bin ‘Ali, more detailed comparative work is needed to identify the political impact of variation in censorship policies. Additionally, detailed case studies of other countries that—like Egypt—have limited state capacity to manage the media could help to determine how idiosyncratic the Egyptian case is.

Second, while I make suggestions about the potential political impact of censorship practices, I do not address in detail how censorship institutions matter in light of other potentially important factors such as regime type, professionalization of the military, histories of political violence, or levels of socio-economic development. Detailed comparative case studies and large-N analysis could help to identify the impact of censorship in light of such factors. In doing so, future work could test the global impact of censorship policies on major political outcomes, such as regime survival or authoritarian reconsolidation after mass uprisings.

Overall, this dissertation aimed to give a better understanding of how censorship works in repressive environments with vibrant, globalizing private media outlets. From the perspective of policymakers seeking to promote democratic reform abroad, the case of Egypt illustrates how liberalized media under autocracy does not necessarily promote democratic values. The privatization of media, and even permissiveness towards “dissident” voices can lead to both anti-regime activism and support for state repression.
Private media under autocracy operates amidst regime threats and co-optation, as well as conflict between various ideological factions and interest groups. Thus, liberalized media does not have a single, clear-cut political function.

From the perspective of autocrats seeking to maintain power, successful censorship involves a precarious balance between controlling media messaging and allowing it to be independent enough to remain popular. Moreover, different models of censorship (ranging from allowing decentralized and cantankerous media to tightly managing content from the top down) can produce legacies that impact politics in the wake of mass mobilization and executive turnover. State media management strategies can have unintended consequences that outlast the leaders who employed them.
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