

PREFACE

THE COUNTRYWIDE PROTESTS of January and February 2011 are the largest uprising in Egypt since the 1919 revolution against the British occupation. The country is finally reaching the autumn of its patriarch, Hosni Mubarak. When Mubarak first came to power in 1981, few Egyptians would have believed that Mubarak, the ex-commander-in-chief of the Air Force, would become the country's longest ruling leader in the twentieth century. It was not that the man was without abilities. Indeed, Mubarak had had an excellent career in the armed forces. Well known for his discipline and hard work, he had a reputation as a good officer and a discreet man with matters of national security. Yet compared to his three predecessors, Muhammad Naguib, Gamal Abdel Nasser, and Anwar Sadat, he had a much lower political profile and much less direct political experience. Naguib, Nasser, and Sadat, all military officers themselves, had gained political experience within the ranks of the many political movements that swept Egypt in the 1930s and 1940s. Nasser and Sadat could ably address the public and frequently appeared in the media. They showed an ease in public speaking, with both prepared and extemporaneous remarks. As for Mubarak, he could barely face the public except with the aid of a prepared written text.

The story of how Mubarak would go on to impose his rule for thirty years over the most populous and strategically important country in the Arab world deserves to be told. It is almost a universal law that authoritarian regimes live by the carrot and the stick; that is, by distributing some material benefits to select segments of the population and using harsh repression whenever necessary. This book analyzes how the Mubarak regime did just this, efficiently using public money to impose political stability. This was not done without

consequences, and Egypt has literally been paying the price over the decades of Mubarak's rule. The regime's security logic that underpins their management of public finance has had disastrous effects on the Egyptian state.

I have had a long-standing interest in the state, mainly due to my concern with the various problems facing Egypt that are centered on or related to the state; namely the problems of the failing economic development, the endurance of political authoritarianism, the deep social inequality, and the increasing level of sectarian conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims, especially Copts. I am convinced that in order to deal with these problems, it is vital to reform the Egyptian state. A strong state capable of enforcing the law and public order, ruled by a democratic regime and subjected to its society, and accessible to all its citizens regardless of their gender, social origin, and religion is the main path to overcome these issues. Egypt has one of the oldest, if not the oldest, state in history. Founded in 3200 B.C. with political borders similar to those that exist today, the state in Egypt is almost unavoidable. It is both a mark of Egyptian civilization and one of the major sources of Egyptian malaise.

Today in Egypt, one cannot help but notice that the state is weakening. One does not need to be a specialist or to have empirical knowledge to observe this. It is sufficient to pass by Egypt to note the deterioration of its public transportation, public hospitals, and public schools. In fact, the word *public* in Egypt today is synonymous with *mediocrity*. The weakening of the Egyptian state and its consequent failure to deal with many challenges facing the country has been the main driver behind my choice of that state as an object of research. While this study focuses on the fiscal crisis of the state, the issue of public finance is only a window through which the state is dissected and analyzed.

This book started as a scholarly publication written in French.¹ However, it was never meant to be material for social scientists and academics only. My intention from the beginning was to offer intellectuals who are interested in Egyptian public affairs a tool to understand the functioning and the problems of the Egyptian state. Thus, I was keen to put it in the hands of the Arabic reader.² The Arabic version was not a literal translation of the French; although the analysis and arguments were the same, the tone was less cold and more engaging. I am now proud to present a version for the English reader. This English version is an updated and modified translation of the third Arabic edition published in 2006.³ This preface is intended to give the English reader a

note on the Egyptian context of the study and an idea of how it was received in its earlier versions.

One of the main takeaways of this book is that the authoritarian, bureaucratic, and narrow-based regime of Hosni Mubarak has been the main source of the state's weakening. This book's earlier version was published in the middle of increasing political dissatisfaction and opposition to the existing regime during 2004 and 2005. The number of political dissidents was increasing, and some public figures abandoned the circles of the regime and joined the opposition, including Dr. Ossam al-Ghazali Harb, the editor in chief of the monthly *al-Siyassa al-Dawliya* [Foreign Policy], published by the prestigious government-owned al-Ahram, who used to be a member of the Policies Committee of the National Democratic Party headed by the president's son. The harsh critiques of the regime, previously limited to the government and not aimed at the president, finally reached home, directly attacking Mubarak and his family. The demonstrations in Cairo in 2005 were the first to target Mubarak and his son Gamal, the potential successor to his father. Bloggers and Internet activists were engaged in denouncing torture and oppression and were unrestrained by the traditional media restrictions. The Kefaya movement and other unofficial political groups calling for an end to Mubarak's rule were formed.

The messages of the book were welcomed by some circles of Egyptian opposition and independent media, which found in it a scientific grounding for their critique of the regime. I believe that the main service this book has offered the rising democratic movement in Egypt is its analytical distinction between the state and the political regime. The study clearly intended to send this message: the opposition to Mubarak and his regime is not necessarily a rejection of the Egyptian state or a challenge to its authority. On the contrary, the book argues that the weakening of the state, manifested in the deterioration of public services and the low level of law enforcement, is a result of the inflation of the security machine and logic needed to reproduce political authoritarianism. I have never adopted the simplistic neoliberal wisdom that the problem in Egypt is the strength of its state and the weakness of its society. The crisis rather, as explained in this book, is the weakness of both the state and civil society. The way out of the crisis is to equally strengthen both.

This distinction and suggested opposition between the state and the Mubarak regime was most challenging to the security apparatus. The Reuters review of the book stated that "Soliman dealt with one of the Ministry of Interior's branches, namely the State Security Department, saying that its name is

not providing a precise definition of its mission which is to secure the regime, not the State. For when that department refrains from following the corrupt public officials because they are politically loyal to the authoritarian regime, it is therefore contributing to the deterioration of the efficiency of the State apparatus.”⁴ This citation earned the Arabic publisher an “invitation” to visit the State Security Department, where the officer was keen to stress that he and his colleagues are the servants of the state, not the regime.

The fiscal crisis of the Egyptian state is exerting increasing pressure on the political regime, while the capacity of the ruling bureaucracy to use money and public services to buy the consent of some segments of the population has dramatically shrunk, resulting in a metamorphosis of the social constituency of the regime. The social origin of the ruling coalition is no longer limited to the bureaucracy, specifically the military and security, but increasingly comprises some of the tycoons of the business community. The uprising that swept across Egypt at the beginning of 2011 is challenging the underpinnings of political authoritarianism. I am content that the English edition of this work will reach English readers interested in Egyptian and Middle Eastern politics at this critical time in the history of Egypt.