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Executive Summary

The United States and Democracy in Egypt:

a discourse-historical approach to the Obama

administration's statements before, during and after

the 2011 Uprising

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On January 25, 2011, in the context of spreading mobilizations through the Middle East and North Africa, revolts emerged in Egypt demanding an improvement on the precarious social, economic and political conditions endured for thirty years in Hosni Mubarak's autocratic regime.

Because Mubarak had been performing to the "best satisfaction of American interests" (Selim, 2013, p. 255), as demonstrations peaked and started demanding his resignation, the Obama administration found itself at a junction between safeguarding its interests of stability and security (Brownlee, 2012), and a longstanding discourse of liberalism and democracy promotion (Atlas, 2012; Ottaway, 2016).

This work focuses on the discursive dimension of the United State's reaction to the Egyptian Uprising of 2011, and aims at analyzing how this tension between values and interests was navigated in discourse. The objective is also to explore changes in narration in relation to context, answering the following research question: how did the U.S.' discourse on democracy evolve during and after the Uprising? Research works on the hypothesis that, although the administration's discourse was reactive and adapting to events, when a military regime that served U.S. interests was again established, statements recovered discursive strategies and themes similar to those employed in Mubarak's time.

The purpose of studying the U.S.'s discursive reaction to the Egyptian Uprising responds, first, to the void in academic literature regarding the discursive dimension of the American management of the revolts. On the other hand, the importance of filling that void resides in the need to further detangle the role of the U.S. in what Brownlee calls "co-constitution of authoritarianism" (Brownlee, 2012). In analyzing discourse, that means studying how grammar was used to create images and meanings that legitimized the U.S.' stance in the Egyptian Uprising, and also that of the elites that served American interests in the country.

To assess the hypothesis, this analysis takes a Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), which is a distinct mode of textual analysis embedded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Wodak et al., 2009). CDA's theoretical framework assumes the existence of connections between language, ideology, and

power. It also takes language as a constructing and constituive element of social life, and aims, in summary, at seeing how it is used to mediate ideology and produce meaning in specific contexts.

The corpus of data selected here includes 48 statements released by the State Department and the White House, between 2009 and 2017 (the Obama administration), and featuring Egypt as theme of the statement. Borrowing concepts from the DHA and CDA, the analysis is structured following Fairclough's (2003) three dimensions of meaning-making through grammar (Action, Identification and Representation), and subdivided temporally following events that might have triggered change in discourse.

Results show that, before the Uprising, the employment of grammar in statements referring to Egypt created an image of democracy as existent but as being "flawed". Addressed "concerns" were de-agentialized in statements, omitting authorship and creating an image of certain implicit chaos. Also, parataxis held the government and the people equally responsible for "improvement". As revolts started, discourse adapted, and statements shifted from calling for "reforms" of Mubarak's regime to acknowledging people's "aspirations" for "change". Before the immediate fall of Mubarak and after its resignation, statements came in the form of abstract, idealistic commentary based on liberal-democratic value statements, referring to a "transition" that needed to be completed. After the immediate aftermath of Mubarak's resignation, statements became progressively more focused on economic aid and partnership. When al-Sisi seized power and a military regime was again established, texts became colder and Mubarak-like, focusing again on "flaws" rather than in "transition" and "progress".

Results therefore confirm the initial hypothesis, though a close look at discourse reveals two other findings. On the one hand, a clear distinction can be observed, in statements, between the explicit assertions made in favor of democracy and the implicit images built through grammar. Though the administration seemed to support the Uprising, meanings strengthening legitimacies in alignment with American interests were still constructed in most commentaries. On the other hand, it was through the

construction of one of these meanings (a certain idea of achieving democracy as an internal, shared responsability) that the administration dissolved the apparent tension between American values and interests faced in the Uprising. If Egypt's "problems" and the "failed transition" were portrayed as the Egyptian people's own struggle, upholding the democratic rhetoric and defending interests was no longer in contradiction. Since it did not have to renounce to its historical democracy-promotion discourse, the Obama administration then employed it to narrate events abstractly, to soften the opposition between actors, and also to build up American Soft Power.

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