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Politics of Social Entrepreneurship in Egypt*

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The 2011 uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa sparked extensive research on civil society and grassroots mobilizations, deepening our understanding of their relationships with regional regimes. Despite these contributions, the debate on civil society in the region has largely overlooked its evolution amid the resurgence of authoritarianism. This article addresses this gap by examining Egypt's social enterprise sector as a significant element of civil society in the post- uprising context. By analyzing social enterprises, the study argues that in countries such as Egypt, where the aspirations of democratic resistance forces have been abruptly curtailed by a return to authoritarianism, social enterprises can transform into political spaces that extend beyond their traditional and conventional functions. This approach to social enterprises can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of Egyptian civil society in the current authoritarian context.

Keyword social enterprise, civil society, Egypt, resistance, MENA

I. Introduction

The 2011 uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have led to the proliferation of studies on civil society and collective mobilizations with particular focus on their anti-systemic features and their relationships to the regimes. A main theoretical approach deployed by scholars was (post)Marxism that unpacks the inherent contradictions within the capitalist systems in the region and highlights macro-level factors shaping or constraining grassroot mobilizations. In the context of Egypt, several

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studies have drawn on a Marxist approach tracing the trajectory of workers' movements and the revolution (Alexander and Bassiouny, 2014). De Smet (2015), on the other, deployed Gramscian notions in making sense of both the potential and limitations of bottom-up mobilizations and revolutionary movements in Egypt. These approaches to civil society and mobilizations have largely privileged structuralist understandings and have been keen to answer the question of 'why things had (and will have) to happen or not happen' (Han, 2023: 12). Challenging structure-oriented accounts of collective actions in the region, a growing number of studies have directed attention to micro-level interactions, strategic actions, framing, and repertoires of contentions observed in processes of evolutions, transformations and/or demises of grassroot movements (Pilati, et al., 2019). Instead of asking why questions, these studies were keen to address how questions, in what ways previously antagonistic groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and leftists were able to overcome the historically accumulated distrust and form, albeit temporarily, a trans-factional network against the dictatorial regime.

While their foci vary, the structuralist and more agency-oriented approaches do not need to be in contradiction and, combined together, they can help us understand the ways in which structural and strategic factors interact with one another with specific political and social effects. Acknowledging this, growing studies have emphasized the usefulness of combining macro- and micro- level analyses in the study of dynamic power relations in MENA (Bayat, 2017; Beinin and Vairel, 2013). Beinin and Vairel (2013)'s edited volume, for instance, attempted to go beyond instrumentalist uses of social movement theories in the MENA context by integrating processual and historicized approaches into mobilizations and contestations. Such approach has also contributed to our understanding of the interactions between previous marginalized groups such as women, on the one hand, and dominant cultures and power structures, on the other, in the period of the

revolutions (Allam, 2018).

The aforementioned studies on the post-2011 bottom-up challenges, state buildings, and their potential to bring about alternatives have contributed to our understanding of civil forces in the region. In this sense, it is unfortunate that not sufficient attention has been paid to civil society and social movements *in an increasingly authoritarian context* beyond analyses on the limitations of grassroot movements, regime suppression and their demises. In his evaluation of the revolutionary moments and their consequences in the region, Bayat (2017) argues that, while having had the potential to play significant roles in post-uprising state building processes, protesters in the region lacked concrete visions and strategies for structural changes and failed to take advantage of the transformative moments. When it comes to the Egyptian context, since the military violently removed the Muslim Brotherhood from the high politics and enhanced its grip on the society, growing attention has been given back to authoritarian resilience, an old and enduring subject in the region.

This article attempts to fill this gap through its engagement with the literature looking at macro- and micro dynamics of contentious politics in the region. Specifically, it examines the post-2011 civil society in Egypt by directing attention to the social enterprise sector. Social enterprise is usually defined as an organization that aims to achieve social value while generating sustainable revenue. As such, social enterprises are generally understood not as forces opposing the dominant regime but as forces striving for social development by pursuing feasible changes within the system (Blackwood, 2012; Thompson & Doherty, 2006). However, this article argues that in countries like Egypt where the aspirations of democratic resistance forces have been abruptly curtailed by a return to authoritarianism, social enterprises can transform into a political space beyond their traditional and conventional function. Also, understanding Egyptian civil society—as

broadly understood as a ‘crucial battleground for recovering citizen control of public life’ (Cox, 1999: 27)—through social enterprises helps us move beyond the mainstream discourse of viewing civil society through the lens of democratic resistance forces and instead explore its trajectory as well as dynamics in the post-2011 context.

II. Social entrepreneurship as a contentious space

While scholarly debate on social entrepreneurship and social enterprise emerged in the 2000s, various types of non-state actors—such as cooperatives and charities—have historically played roles in the provision of social services and development, dating back to the nineteenth century in Western Europe. However, the rise of civil society organizations and grassroots movements in the 1960s and 1970s, along with the failure of welfare states and markets to resolve social issues in the 1980s, led these third parties to take on a larger role in social provision and development (Defourny and Nyssens, 2010: 34). In the UK, for instance, community based non-state actors responded to the perceived failure of the top-down approaches to urban policies in the 1980s (Haughton, 1998). According to Parkinson and Howorth (2008: 291), it was since Thatcherism, which is characterized by the idea of small state and free market, was aggressively introduced that the discourse of social enterprise radically shifted to emphasize business values and cultures in addressing social issues. Like in the context of the UK, the withdrawal of the welfare state and the reduction of public spending in the 1980s in the US led many cooperatives and even nonprofit organizations to rely increasingly on commercial activities as the alternative to government funds and subsidies (Defourny and Nyssens, 2010: 38). The emergence of big institutions and associations supporting social enterprise also contributed to

its rapid growth.

Despite their varying foci, scholars agree that social enterprises need to be agents working towards positive social changes. Also, their notions of social enterprise implicitly or explicitly distinguish it from initiatives demanding radical and structural changes. In Blackwood (2012: 8)'s terms, 'instead of acting against the system, social entrepreneurs, aided by their deep knowledge, use the forces within the system to achieve change by searching for the smallest and simplest possible impulses and rules'. Understood in this way, social entrepreneurs as 'organizations seeking business solutions to social problems' (Thompson & Doherty, 2006: 362) are encouraged to empower themselves in accordance with values such as self-sufficiency, innovation and sustainability.

However, a growing literature has criticized the tendency that postulates social entrepreneurship as a remedy for the state and market failures. Scholars have pointed to the overemphasis on the role of individuals in the dominant discourse of social enterprise (Holmquist, 2003; Pearce, 2003; Parkinson & Howorth, 2008), which has wittingly or unwittingly sidelined the importance of collectives in making social changes and promoted a kind of elitism. It does so in the sense that the portrayal of social enterprise as individuals who make small changes through their everyday activities within the system, rather than seek to change the system, reduces the role of civil society to fixing and managing social problems. By detracting from more political and contentious functions of civil society, the dominant discourse of social enterprise 'disarms the "third sector" of radical approaches to civil society and maintains the distance between state and parts of society served by social entrepreneurship' (Parkinson & Howorth, 2008: 292). Existing studies have shown that even this reduced function of civil society in the name of social enterprise have not really worked well. The promotion of both social and commercial values simultaneously is viewed as essential to the definition

of social enterprise, but, in practice, they often end up prioritizing organizational survival and revenue over social missions and values (Fowler, 2000; Weisbrod, 2004; Jones, 2007).

While the aforementioned problems exist in both Global North and Global South, the situation in low-income countries is reportedly even more challenging. However, international development and donor organizations have prescribed social entrepreneurship as a solution to various social problems in the Global South such as job creation and the provision of social service (Anderson & Ronteau, 2017). In the Middle East and North Africa, social enterprise practices are often perceived to be embedded in the political and economic conditions characterized by authoritarian resilience and neoliberalism driven by crony capitalism. Scholars have argued that, in such context, social entrepreneurship has been functioned as a governing tactic to neutralize bottom-up challenges (İşleyen & Kreitmeyr, 2021). By analyzing social entrepreneurship networks in Jordan and Morocco, for instance, Kreitmeyr (2019) showed how they (consisting of mostly well-educated elites) were co-opted with, maintained and enhanced authoritarianism and neoliberal governance simultaneously.

The critical appraisals on social enterprises in the MENA partly reflect the growingly pessimistic views on civil society actors in the region that emerged not long after the political upheavals. The perceived return of authoritarianism has led to the return of weak civil society narrative. However, the overemphasis on authoritarian resilience risks overlooking less obvious, less visible, covert, and ambiguous forms of bottom-up efforts for changes. The tendency to conceptualize resistance as an act of *overt* opposition has made it difficult to capture everyday forms of resistance that are ‘quite prosaic’ and happen in the context where ‘open defiance is impossible or entails mortal danger’ (Scott, 1989: 34). Despite (and perhaps because of) the increasing surveillance and repression over civil society activities, Egyptian civil

society actors have sought to find ways through which they can continue to 'advocate democratic and social change, defend human rights, challenge economic and social inequalities and provide legal services for activists' (Mirashak, 2019: 703) in much less confrontational ways and in spaces outside the authority's control.

In this regards, Mirashak (2019) made an important intervention by analyzing seemingly non-political and non-oppositional forms of civil society activities that are nonetheless crucial to promoting social justice and development in post-2013 Egypt. Whereas most studies inspired by Gramscian notions of hegemony have focused on opposition movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood and labor movements, her work sought to go beyond 'the scope of a subaltern bloc under the hegemony of the working-class' (Mirshak, 2019: 706). While having drawn on a Gramscian notion of hegemony, the author's interpretation of hegemony views civil society as a space in which convoluted relations between the state and society manifest leading to 'various fronts of politics' for social antagonisms and hegemonic contestations (*Ibid*.: 703). Understood in this way, hegemony becomes not what the state imposes and society passively accepts. Rather, hegemony consists of a set of hard and soft (involving consent in Gramscian senses) mechanisms that are exercised, resisted and transformed by both political and civil society.

This article argues that Mirashak (2019)'s conception of Egyptian civil society as a multifaceted force that has the potential to be able to uphold and, at the same time, challenge the dominant regime can also be applied to social entrepreneurship practices. Studying the variety forms of subtle civil participations in authoritarian Egypt can benefit by taking more seriously the notion of contingency of hegemonic discourse. Laclau and Mouffe's post-Gramscian approach can be useful in this regard. They critically develop Gramsci's notion of hegemony by emphasizing the contingent nature of hegemony (Arditi, 2007: 206) or what they call 'the relative and precarious

forms of fixation' (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 96, 98, 111). According to them, hegemony is never fixed given the existence of surplus of meanings that subvert any attempts to stabilize the meaning of a hegemonic discourse.[1]

The post-Gramscian approach enables us to conceive covert, subtle and even seemingly counter-revolutionary forms of civil society's actions as always involving (however trivial) political and disruptive effects. A hegemonic discourse is never fully fixed and always subject to contestations in the sense that articulatory practices are performed not only by those governing but also by those seemingly governed (Han, 2023). When applied to the field of social entrepreneurship, this means that, while social enterprise might be articulated as a governing tool, it can also be used and articulated in different ways disrupting and challenging the dominant meaning of social enterprise. Before illustrating such dynamic interactions, the next section provides the context within which social enterprise emerged and developed in Egypt.

III. The emergence and development of social enterprise before 2011

Social enterprise has been increasingly recognized by both the Egyptian government and the international community as an engine for development in the post-2011 context. However, its emergence goes back to the nineteenth century (Elsayed, 2018: 823). As with Christianity in the western context, the traditional form of social enterprise in Egypt was deeply associated with

[1] While discourse is often conceived to be non-material, Laclau and Mouffe emphasize the material nature of discourse. According to them, there should be no distinction between linguistic and non-linguistic insofar as objects cannot constitute themselves outside ideas, knowledges, and discourses, see (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985: 108).

Islamic doctrines and institutions such as the waqf system, which operated through voluntary donations for community support. Waqf funds were used not only for building and maintaining mosques and religious schools but also for various public services and social cares. The vast majority of social organizations in Egypt in the nineteenth century operated on the basis of 'humanitarian commitment or simple business rationale' (Wickham, 2013: 25). Only a few organizations were linked to political Islam and even fewer were related to Islamists' radical political activities (Bayat, 2000: 18).

This began to change with the emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood. Founded by Hassan al-Banna in 1928, the Muslim Brotherhood was initially one of several religious groups promoting Islamic values against the spread of Western influence (Wickham, 2013: 25). Its activities for social services and businesses had a political motivation. Rather than seek to make changes within the system, the Brotherhood's goal was a systematic change, that is, bringing about the end of the British rule and western values. While the Brotherhood by no means represents social organizations in Egypt as a whole during that period of the time, its rapidly increasing membership, particularly within the middle class, reflects its influence over the society. As of around 1950, it grew to have about 2,000 branches across the country and its members reached between 300,000 and 600,000 Egyptians (Munson, 2001: 501). The Brotherhood became the most powerful political force in Egypt with its grassroots approach and social enterprise activities performed by educated middle class such as those working as doctors, lawyers, teachers and engineers.

Given its anti-system stance, the Muslim Brotherhood initially welcomed the military coup in 1952 and the new regime led by Gamal Abdel Nasser. However, its popularity and call for the application of Islamic law soon led the organization to become subject to harsh repression by the government. The Brotherhood was officially dissolved in January 1954. A

Brotherhood member's failed attempt to assassinate Nasser further justified the government' crack down of the organization. Many of its members were 'deprived of basic necessities and repeatedly subjected to brutal acts of torture, while those not caught up in the regime's security net fled into exile or were forced underground' (Wickham, 2013: 28).

Nasser's successor Anwar Sadat introduced the infitah (opening in Arabic) policy. While the focus of such political and economic agenda was mainly on the integration of the Egyptian market into the global one, some degree of political freedom was also given to the society. Between 1971 and 1975, Sadat also released many imprisoned Brotherhood members and allowed the organization to resume its activities. This decision was made so that Sadat could use the organization as a counter force against his predecessor's supporters and leftists. Not long after, however, Sadat's 'tactical alliance' (*Ibid*.: 31) with the Brotherhood became fragile and the organization again was subject to repression as it vocally criticized the government's liberal economic policies as well as his decision to make peace with Israel. A similar pattern was also repeated under the Mubarak government that reigned Egypt until it was toppled down in the 2011 Revolution.

Contrary to the common perception, the Muslim Brotherhood did not transform from a religious charity campaign and social enterprise to an explicit political force. It assumed the two roles simultaneously. Individuals and groups affiliated with the Brotherhood pursued their businesses mostly targeting the middle class while voluntarily providing poor populations with basic needs. At the same time, it evolved into the most influential political force. The Brotherhood case indicates that drawing a sharp line between social enterprise and political (or anti-systemic) force risks overlooking the mutually constitutive relationship between the two in the authoritarian context.

IV. Social Enterprise in the post-2011 context

The 2011 Uprising in Egypt provided civil society actors and social movements with unprecedented political opportunities that they had never experienced since the independence of the country. With the experience of overthrowing a dictator with their hands, many youths felt that they were capable of making significant social, political and economic changes. They used the language of human rights, social justice and democracy in proposing a number of new initiatives that were deemed to be necessary for Egypt to develop economically and politically (Yefet 2020). The bottom-up desire for changes also contributed to the rapid growth of the social entrepreneurship sector. Young populations who had not been satisfied with both the government-led and private sector-led development began to use their revolutionary spirit, creativity, innovation as well as their social media and communication skills to make changes in fields such as education, arts, technology, environment and healthcare.

Also, the ecosystem and platforms for social entrepreneurship began to develop by domestic and international institutes that recognized the potential of bottom-up initiatives, thereby supporting young people, particularly university students, who were attracted to launching their own enterprises with aims to make social changes (Seda and Ismail, 2020:165). Several foreign universities in Egypt began to provide courses on social entrepreneurship. For instance, the Faculty of Management and Technology at the German University in Cairo launched a research cluster called "Business and Society" whose focus includes sustainability, marketing ethics and social entrepreneurship.[2]

The efforts of international development organizations and development

[2] https://mgt.guc.edu.eg/en/faculty_and_research/

agencies from advanced countries stood out. The global development trend has shifted from providing grants and loans to governments for infrastructure development to emphasizing the role of the third sector and encouraging bottom-up development. In Egypt, too, social enterprise was considered to be an alternative way of doing development assistance given the perceived incapacities of the government. The belief that the youth should be the main driver of development in Egypt partly stems from concerns that large-scale youth unemployment could lead to political instability similar to that seen in 2011. According to the estimate made by British Council (2023: 13), about 500,000 higher education graduates and 340,000 university graduates enter the labor market each year, but their access to jobs remains precarious. Nearly 70% of workers, excluding those in the agricultural sector, engaged in the informal economy. Given the economy's heavy reliance on the informal sector and the insufficient capacity to provide adequate formal employment, entrepreneurship emerged as a viable solution to overcoming the post-revolution unemployment crisis.

Surveys indicate that Egyptian youth have a relatively high entrepreneurial spirit. According to the 2017/18 Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) report, approximately 76% of Egyptians viewed entrepreneurship as a desirable career choice, and 55.5% expressed a desire to start their own business (British Council, 2023: 14). In this context, development-related lending institutions like the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the European Investment Bank (EIB) have provided funds to Egyptian banks to support loans for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Egypt since 2011. The Egyptian government also announced a loan program in 2016 to support youth entrepreneurship, capping interest rates at 5%.

The UN related agencies were also deeply involved in boosting social enterprise in Egypt. One such example is the "Hayat" (Life) project which

was jointly undertaken by UNIDO, ILO, UN Women, UN-Habitat, and IOM with the aim to enhance human security through inclusive socio-economic development. This project was implemented in Minya, a poor rural governorate in Egypt. The Hayat project was designed to address high poverty rates, limited employment opportunities, low social capital and cohesion within communities, low entrepreneurial spirit among youth, social inequality and various forms of discrimination, weak capacity of the public sector for service provision, and unmet social service needs (ILO, 2017: 14). Youth were portrayed to be central to this project. Hayat aimed to support young people in becoming successful social entrepreneurs, improve awareness related to trust, cooperation, and gender equality, enhance access to affordable social services for vulnerable groups, and improve young people's access to job opportunities (*Ibid.*). Several successful stories such as opening a daycare facility with the International Agencies' support and microfinance were introduced (*Ibid.*: 16) as the evidence that shows how the aspirations of young people to develop society in a better direction can lead to entrepreneurship, drawing interest and investment from international development organizations.

Support for social enterprises has also been actively pursued domestically in Egypt. Centers such as Bedaya (Start in Arabic) and Fekretak Sherketak (Your Idea, Your Company in Arabic), established by the Egyptian government, function as incubators providing various supports to young people aspiring to start social enterprises. In the private sector, various social enterprises and supporting incubators have emerged since 2011. For example, Ahead of the Curve, a social enterprise headquartered in Cairo, has been promoting sustainable management and social innovation in the Middle East and North Africa region since its establishment in 2012. Meanwhile, Rise Egypt, a global nonprofit social enterprise, started its Egyptian branch in 2013. This social enterprise aims to promote entrepreneurship for social development

in Egypt by creating a platform that fosters collaboration among entrepreneurs, investors, experts, and researchers, with a particular focus on the environment and education sectors (British Council, 2023: 24).

While the number of social enterprise has dramatically increased since 2011, those involved in this sector have encountered several challenges. Firstly, the concept of social entrepreneurship itself was not well received by the society. This is indicated in several studies on social enterprise in Egypt. Seda and Ismail (2020: 169)'s interviews with social entrepreneurs in Egypt, for instance, show how they felt that the society lacked 'social entrepreneurship culture' and there existed a 'psychological barrier' because of the absence of education on relevant subjects. This observation is interesting in the sense that, historically, several organizations including the Muslim Brotherhood committed themselves to such initiatives as illustrated above. One possible explanation on why social entrepreneurship was conceived as an alien concept might be that it was intentionally or unintentionally (re)defined and promoted in the post-2011 context as an *alternative* model of making social changes distinguished from traditional civil society initiatives that were closely associated with religion.

Also, the return of the military regime after the removal of the Muslim Brotherhood regime has increased its control of civil society organizations to prevent any potential threat to the regime from taking place. The new NGO law severely restricted their activities, monitored foreign funds, and often persecuted them on charges of receiving foreign funds with the aim to harm national security (Mikhail, 2014). Although social enterprises can register as for-profit entities, their activities are also subject to the supervision of the Ministry of Investment and monitored by relevant laws, such as the investment law 72.

V. Contentious politics of social enterprise under the military regime

Whereas the above challenges are some of the issues that existing studies on social enterprise in developing contexts typically point to, the hegemony approach helps us see social entrepreneurship as a space where power struggles take place. From this perspective, social enterprise in Egypt is not merely restricted by the regime. Rather, it is, on the one hand, managed and even encouraged by the regime so as to perform particular political, economic and social functions. In other words, it has been mobilized as a technology of government. One such example can be found in the Egyptian constitution that was revised in 2014. The new constitution removed Article 17 of the 2012 constitution, according to which 'the state fosters small and handicraft industries',[3] and instead added Article 36 which states that the state 'shall motivate the private sector to undertake its social responsibility in serving the economy and society'.[4] As Elsayed (2018: 824) rightly points out, the emphasis on social responsibility and the national economy delimits the terrain of social entrepreneurship to what the regime considers to *appropriately* fulfill market logics and social welfare functions. Moreover, the El-Sisi regime itself has actively supported and invested in social entrepreneurship. According to Seda and Ismail (2020: 174), the government' s heavy control of NGOs for political and social changes came in parallel with its direct involvement in and creation of new social entrepreneurship initiatives and projects through several ministries such as that of planning, the central bank, and government-sponsored research institutes.

Beyond the domestic level, the promotion of social entrepreneurship in

3 https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Egypt_2012

4 https://sschr.gov.eg/en/the-egyptian-constitution/

an authoritarian way in Egypt also needs to be understood in the global context where social changes have been increasingly revolved around self-empowerment and self-governance in accordance with market logics. As discussed earlier, studies have pointed to potential tensions arising in social enterprises' hybrid mission combining social and market values. A key concern has been that, while social entrepreneurs are encouraged to create both social and financial values in principle, they can easily risk 'losing sight of their social missions in their efforts to generate revenue' (Ebrahim et al., 2014: 82). From a hegemony perspective, this is less an inevitable consequence of the otherwise well-meaning development model and more a symptom of social enterprise embodying neoliberal welfare logics, which transform matters that were previously perceived to require state-led structural changes into matters that need to be resolved through individual efforts and self-governance. The neoliberal function of social entrepreneurship has been in place not only in democratic countries, but also in democratizing or hybrid-democratic countries such as Egypt where experienced mass mobilizations for structural changes in political, social and economic sectors. In addition to making use of coercive means in cutting off yet another bottom-up pressure, the post-revolution (or counter-revolution) regime has also relied on more soft mechanisms, the main function of which has been to make civil society and social movement actors *voluntarily* choose non-radical forms of social activism. Social enterprise in this sense has contributed to the domination of the regime and its attempts to govern and manage bottom-up desire for changes.

Equally importantly, however, the hegemony approach also enables us to conceptualize social enterprise as a space for resistance and meaningful social changes. This is particularly the case in authoritarian contexts like that of Egypt where individuals and groups that seek political, social and economic changes have to carefully navigate through and maneuver

repressive environments. For civil society actors in Egypt, social enterprise can function as a platform for a war of position in Gramscian senses.

First and foremost, social entrepreneurship provides civil society actors with a safer or less dangerous space in which they can continue activities that would be nearly impossible in overtly confrontational settings. Many social enterprise groups in Egypt register as for-profit entity which then come under the monitoring of the Ministry of Industry and Trade to avoid unnecessary hassles for profit making as well as to escape, however limited, the regime's surveillance in the name of national security. As Mirshak (2019: 712)'s work on social entrepreneurship under the el-Sisi regime indicates, carrying out social works in the form of non-registered Mobadrat (*initiatives* in Arabic) is another way to render these organizations to be less visible to the authorities thereby making it more difficult for the regime to intimidate or persecute them. According to an Egyptian activist working for a social enterprise initiative who was interviewed by Mirshak (*Ibid.*), it 'enables us to move around without being hindered, or them [the state] being able to hold anything against us. This means that we will have more flexibility'.

Contrary to the common view that the increasingly authoritarian atmosphere hampers social enterprise activities, closer observation on its activities on the ground indicates that the regime's paranoia about grassroots movements itself has the effect of rendering it as a political space. Many civil society and social movement actors who stood against the dictatorship and demanded structural changes during the revolutionary moments have resumed their activities under the umbrella of social entrepreneurship (Elsayed, 2018: 825). In addition, the language of creativity, innovation and self-governance as well as the ways in which the regime and external actors promote social enterprise in Egypt suggest that it is largely embedded in the global and neoliberal development discourse. However, this does not preclude thinking and acting as a social entrepreneur in ways that differ to what those in power expect

them to work.

According to an Egyptian social entrepreneur interviewed by Mirshak (2019: 703), working in the field of social enterprise by using the mainstream language 'requires us to broaden our understandings of resistance and the variety of forms it takes'. This narrative invites us to broaden what we mean by the notion of resistance. Several scholars have documented how, not only visible collective actions such as strikes and street marches, but also mundane and covert practices exposed and challenged the fragility of the authoritarian regimes in the pre-uprisings period (Tripp, 2012). Wedeen (1998: 518)'s field work in Syria before the 2011 Uprising indicates that even acts of compliance and obedience can sometimes open 'opportunities for subtle mockery or even outright rebellion'. In the language of Elsayed (2018: 823), 'Egyptian social entrepreneurs worked to redefine civil society in terms that were ostensibly innovative and profit-oriented to a state that was suspicious of everything social, all while resuscitating politics by other means'.

Also, social enterprise provides what Elsayed (2018: 820) called a structured ambiguity that enables discursive struggles over the meaning of civil, social and political through everyday practices. SE actors strategically take advantage of the tension arising from SE's dual purpose. Elsayed's work on social entrepreneurship in Egypt through participatory observations shows that many social enterprises advertised on social media as profit-generating initiatives were in fact advocacy campaigns and community-based programs that did not create financial values. From the mainstream perspective, social enterprises that do not produce profits are considered to be unsustainable and, in brute terms, do not fit the category of social 'enterprise'. From the perspective of hegemony, however, weighting on social aspects (whether intended or not) of social enterprise can be seen as having the discursive effect of rearticulating and thereby disrupting its dominant meaning. It

does so by revealing the inherent tension within the global discourse of social enterprise according to which social changes are reduced to a matter that requires individual efforts rather than structural changes and making social changes and making profits are, however difficult, supposed to be achieved simultaneously. Evidence on the ground also suggests that many Egyptian social entrepreneurs challenge the logic of competition embedded in the neoliberal trend of development by seeking to cooperate with each other, exchanging knowledge and forging partnership and alliances in order to overcome organizational and financial limitations (Mirshak 2019: 714). Although there exist various obstacles, this form of doing social enterprise differently has the potential to re-build the fragmented networks of civil society and social movements by nurturing the sense of collective.

VI. Conclusion

This article has explored Egyptian civil society with particular focus on the role and dynamics of the social enterprise sector in the post-2011 context. The 2011 uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa prompted a surge in scholarly interest in civil society and collective mobilizations, often emphasizing their anti-systemic nature and their interplay with existing regimes. While existing studies contribute to our understanding of bottom-up challenges and state-building efforts, there remains a gap in examining how civil society and social movement actors navigated through the increasingly authoritarian contexts. This is particularly the case with Egypt where the desire for democracy have been effectively stifled by the military regime and thus authoritarian resilience and weak civil society narratives have returned to the foreground.

By analyzing the social enterprise sector, this article has shown how, despite limitations, social enterprises have adapted to the restrictive political climate by focusing on socially beneficial activities that can be framed within the existing system. This adaptation allows them to pursue social change in a manner that is less confrontational and more aligned with the regime's tolerance levels, thereby creating a space for civil society activity in an otherwise repressive context. The examination of social enterprises in post-2011 Egypt provides a valuable perspective on the resilience and adaptability of civil society within an authoritarian context. It highlights the need to move beyond traditional frameworks that view civil society solely through the lens of democratic resistance. Instead, it calls for a broader understanding of the diverse forms and functions of civil society actors, particularly in environments where direct political opposition is fraught with risk.

The case of Egyptian social enterprises also underscores the importance of hybrid models of civil society that blend social and economic objectives. These enterprises not only contribute to social development but also provide insights into the potential for creating politically significant spaces within authoritarian regimes. They challenge the binary perception of civil society as either oppositional or compliant, highlighting the nuanced ways in which social organizations can influence societal change. By acknowledging and analyzing these hybrid forms, we can gain a deeper appreciation of the complex and dynamic nature of civil society in the contemporary Middle East and North Africa. This approach not only enriches our theoretical understanding but also offers practical insights into fostering social development and resilience in authoritarian settings.

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