The Global Contextualization of Egyptian Populism(s): Comparing the Rhetoric of Western and Egyptian Political Actors

Abstract

Sahar Khamis and Randall Fowler

University of Maryland, College Park

With the rise of Donald Trump, Brexit, Alternative for Germany, Marine Le Pen's National Front, Victor Orban in Hungary, and other right-wing political movements, numerous scholars and media commentators have articulated concern that the Western-led liberal democratic order is under siege from a resurgent, transnational wave of populism. According to this narrative, liberal democratic systems of government are uniquely susceptible to populist distortion due to a confluence of factors including the rise of social media, increased racial conflict, and economic weakening of the lower classes. For those who hold this opinion, populism is detrimental to the political health of a society specifically because it erodes the public’s capacity for democratic deliberation in accordance with liberal political norms, leading to more populist politicians who further erode democratic norms.

This qualitative, critical, analytical research study complicates that narrative about populism by closely examining a counterfactual case study from the Arab World: Egypt. Adopting a definition of populism as a political style, we examine the competing populist narratives advanced by three key actors in Egyptian politics: the democratic revolutionaries, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the military. Using a deep textual analysis of the mediated content produced by these different political players, whether through social media platforms, such as Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, or blogs, or through other forms of communication, such as mainstream media or street graffiti, we provide specific examples illustrating how and why the rhetorical strategies and narratives deployed by these actors differed, and the effects and implications of such differences. In doing so, we highlight the similarities and differences between Egyptian and Western liberal democratic forms of populism. For example, we analyze how President Sisi’s regime and its political and media allies deployed populist appeals to aid the passage of constitutional reforms that removed democratic constraints on Sisi’s rule, arguing that these rhetorical strategies echo many of the stylistic and argumentative features of populism seen in the West at the present moment. We conclude our paper by discussing what these prominent similarities and differences between Egyptian and Western liberal democratic forms of populism tell us about the current phase of political communication, both globally and regionally. In doing so, we draw particular attention to some of the dynamics of negative populism, such as fear appeal and exaggerated persona construction, and their complex implications.