INTRODUCTION

Since January 2011, the world has witnessed the greatest expression of popular mobilization in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) for over 30 years. In a number of countries, social movements encompassing broad sections of society have played a major role in mobilizing popular dissent against corrupt and dictatorial regimes. They have done so despite enduring intense state repression and chronic political and economic crisis. Mass demonstrations and strikes in Egypt forced Hosni Mubarak to step down. Mubarak’s fall led to the opening up of political space in the country and allowed social forces to push for far-reaching change. However, analysts have been divided on the outcome of the uprising in terms of achieving real transformative change in Egypt. On the one hand, the structures of power and the dominance of political and military-business elites remain in place. Having benefited enormously from the Mubarak regime and US military funding, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) remains in control of the country. On the other hand, Egypt has witnessed an unprecedented level of social struggle over the last decade in which Muslims and Christians, young and old, workers and students united together overthrowing of one of the region’s most well-funded and well-armed dictators. Despite facing many difficulties, these social forces continue to call for a transformation of the status quo, in the name of independence, social justice, dignity, and equality.
In this chapter, I consider the major factors underlying the political crisis in Egypt and the rise of social movements as a force for change in the country. The changing nature of the Egyptian state, the consequences of neoliberal economic reform, and the experience of contemporary imperialism have created massive social and political tensions and led to the rise of diverse social movements. The political crisis faced by Egypt is also experienced by other countries in the region and is reflective of global political currents.

Reshaping the State

Arab and Middle Eastern states have undergone distinct historical formations and developments while sharing in the historical experience of colonialism and political and economic domination by the West. These states and economies have been under the control of Western as well as indigenous elites. Theorists who propagate notions of Middle Eastern “exceptionalism” have argued that societies in the region have been shaped by factors such as culture or religion. For example, Bernard Lewis purported that Islam as a “civilization” failed to modernize and thus became the antithesis of Western ideals of democracy and individual liberty, while others have contended that the Islamic world lacked the values, social formations, and institutions that led to the growth of civil society and democracy in Europe. A number of recent works have challenged culturalist and essentializing analyses of Muslim-majority societies while recent events demonstrate that the assumption that Middle Eastern societies are conservative and static is fallacious. In addition, empirical evidence demonstrates that a huge majority of Arabs and Muslims surveyed are in favor of democracy. Numerous studies published by the Arab Human Development Report as well as the World Values Survey found that the population of major countries in the region hold a strong preference for democracy and are opposed to authoritarianism. In 2006, a study conducted by the Arab Barometer Survey Project revealed that democracy was strongly supported by individuals regardless of their religiosity. Moreover an overwhelming majority thought that Islam was compatible with pluralism and democracy.

Regimes in the Middle East have been strongly shaped by neoliberalism and the policies of foreign governments, particularly the United States. Since the 1970s, the Egyptian state has undergone a number of transformations. Gamal Abdul Nasser (1952–1970) instituted a “populist-authoritarian” state that generated a contradictory legacy of Arab nationalism, economic and social reforms, and