

DISCURSIVE CO-OPTATION AND STRUCTURAL DOMINATION IN THE RECONSOLIDATION OF AUTHORITARIANISM IN EGYPT AFTER THE ARAB SPRING

Sangidu^{1*}, Imam Wicaksono², Sherif Sa'ad Al-Gayyar³

^{1,2}Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia

³Beni Suef University, Egypt

*Corresponding author: sangidu@ugm.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Keywords:
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Arab Spring Egypt.

This study aims to analyze the failure of Egypt's democratic transition after the fall of Hosni Mubarak, emphasizing the dynamics of authoritarian resilience and discursive co-optation in shaping the pseudo-legitimacy of the post-revolution regime. Integrating Gramsci's theory of political hegemony with the Egyptian context as the novelty of this research, it also addresses how democratic symbols were reappropriated to sustain authoritarian control an issue significant for understanding democratic backsliding in the Global South. Employing a qualitative, historical-critical case study, this library-based research systematically reviews academic literature, media archives, and international reports. Data were analyzed through Gramscian-themed coding and critical discourse analysis to uncover mechanisms of dominance and ideological manipulation. The findings reveal that although the revolution succeeded in overthrowing Mubarak's regime, the entrenched structures managed to reclaim control through structural repression and the co-optation of discourse. The implications highlight the importance of interpreting democratic backsliding as a multidimensional process that combines material control with symbolic domestication.

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الكلمات المفتاحية:
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الربيع العربي.

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل فشل التحول الديمقراطي في مصر بعد سقوط حسني مبارك، مع التركيز على ديناميات الصمود السلطوي والاستيعاب الخطاب في تشكيل الشرعية الزائفة للنظام ما بعد الثورة. وتتمثل جدة هذه الدراسة في دمج نظرية الهيمنة السياسية لأنطونيو غرامشي في السياق المصري، حيث تبحث في كيفية إعادة توظيف الرموز الديمقراطية لدعم السيطرة الاستبدادية، وهي قضية ذات أهمية لفهم التراجع الديمقراطي في دول الجنوب العالمي. تعتمد الدراسة على منهج نوعي ضمن إطار دراسة حالة تاريخية نقدية، إذ تستند إلى مراجعة منهجية للأدبيات الأكاديمية وأرشيفات وسائل الإعلام والتقارير الدولية. وقد تم تحليل البيانات باستخدام الترميز الموضوعي المستند إلى فكر غرامشي وتحليل الخطاب النقدي للكشف عن آليات السيطرة والتلاعب الأيديولوجي. تكشف النتائج أنه على الرغم من نجاح الثورة في إسقاط نظام مبارك، فإن البنى الراسخة استطاعت استعادة السيطرة من خلال القمع البيوي واستيعاب الخطاب. وتشير الدلالات إلى أهمية تفسير التراجع الديمقراطي بوصفه عملية متعددة الأبعاد تجمع بين السيطرة المادية والتطويع الرمزي للحفاظ على استقرار النظام السلطوي.

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INTRODUCTION

The central phenomenon examined in this study is the failure of Egypt's democratic transition after 2011, shifting from the aspirations of public politicization to the re-consolidation of authoritarianism, which underscores the structural conflict between demands for political justice and the persistence of ruling elites (Menshawy, 2021a). This issue is significant because it highlights how state mechanisms, the military, and patronage networks suspended popular demands for participation, thereby obstructing the consolidation of deliberative democracy in a post-authoritarian context (Russell, 2023). Empirical evidence shows that the post-Mubarak period was marked by the intervention of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) in the transition process and the 2013 coup that overthrew the elected civilian government, a turning point in Egypt's democratic trajectory (Blouët, 2022). Practically, the post-2013 regime institutionalized elections with pseudo-legitimacy while simultaneously restricting media, civil society organizations, and online activism, effectively emptying democratic discourse of substantive meaning (Lutscher & Ketchley, 2023). Thus, this study is highly relevant to re-examining public discourse and the narrowing of political spaces in post-revolutionary Egypt.

The literature indicates that studies of Egypt's political transition after the Arab Spring have highlighted the dynamics of political actors, the role of the military, and the limitations of public participation in democratization (Lavie & Yefet, 2022). However, prior research has predominantly focused on formal institutional aspects without adequately addressing the resistance of entrenched power structures to democratic aspirations. This gap necessitates further analysis that emphasizes both structural and discursive dimensions. Moreover, scholarship on democratic failure in Egypt is often detached from comparative perspectives with other Global South countries, even though patterns of democratic backsliding reveal cross-regional similarities (Csicsmann, 2025). While earlier studies have examined the role of media and public discourse during political change, they largely concentrate on the initial phases of the 2011 revolution without exploring how such discourses were later repressed under the post-Mubarak regime (Ayyad & Lugo-Ocando, 2023). Similarly, analyses of political parties after 2011 have emphasized electoral configurations without assessing their long-term implications for deliberative democracy (Hussein, 2021). Against this background, this research provides an original contribution by examining Egypt's failed democratic transition through the integration of structural and discursive dimensions, thereby explaining how authoritarianism can be restored despite the revolutionary overthrow of the old regime.

This article aims to analyze the failure of Egypt's democratic transition after the fall of Mubarak, while also investigating how discourses of justice and democracy were repressed and appropriated by the new authoritarian regime. In doing so, it addresses the limitations of earlier studies that primarily emphasized formal institutional dynamics while neglecting the cultural-political resistance of entrenched elites (Kubbara, 2023; Basir & Datta, 2024). To respond to these gaps, Gramsci's theory of hegemony is employed, as it explains how power operates not only through coercive structures but also through the production and domination of discourse that shapes social consent (in Amasha, 2023). The concept of cultural hegemony, for instance, enables an examination of how the military and old elites-maintained dominance by appropriating democratic symbols, such as elections, while stripping them of substantive deliberative meaning (Lavie, 2021). Similarly, Gramscian co-optation sheds light on how the regime subordinated popular demands under narratives of "stability" and "national security," thereby obstructing political redistribution (Badr, 2021). In this sense, the theory of hegemony offers a more powerful framework than conventional democratic transition theories, as it reveals the interaction between structural dominance and discursive control, making it highly relevant to the research problem and the central argument.

The failure of Egypt's democratic transition after Mubarak's fall demonstrates how entrenched power structures maintained political hegemony through co-optation, repression, and discursive control, effectively foreclosing pathways to genuine democratization (Al-Rousan et al., 2024). This article specifically examines how Gramsci's concept of hegemony elucidates the resistance of old elites to power redistribution and the transformation of democratic discourse into an instrument of regime legitimacy (Hanafi, 2024). The first hypothesis posits that structural dominance by the military and bureaucracy reflects political hegemony that blocked popular participation, thereby producing patterns of democratic regression comparable to those in other Global South states (Deng et al., 2024). The second hypothesis argues that the absorption of democratic symbols by the al-Sisi regime represents discursive hegemony, which emptied democracy of deliberative meaning and recast it as rhetoric of stability (Younas, 2023). Accordingly, this study tests these two hypotheses and advances Gramsci's theory of hegemony as an analytical lens to engage with the broader literature on post-Arab Spring authoritarianism.

Previous studies on the concept of authoritarian resilience have developed from discussions of how authoritarian regimes are able to survive political and social pressures. Klocek et al., (2023) demonstrate that resilience is sustained not only by repression but also by the regime's adaptive capacity in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. Utvik (2022) emphasizes the ideological dimension that enables Islamist actors to negotiate authenticity while maintaining relations with ruling structures, thereby reinforcing political stability. From this perspective, authoritarian resilience is understood as a multidimensional process that combines repression, adaptation, and ideological co-optation, providing a framework for understanding how democracy may weaken amid the euphoria of transition.

This framework can then be operationalized into institutional, cultural, and discursive dimensions. Selmi (2025) highlights that bureaucratic and military control constitutes an institutional variable that restricts the penetration of civilian actors. Keinan-Cohen et al. (2025) identify cultural variables such as monarchical, territorial, and tribal identities that sustain political cohesion. Mansour et al., (2021) demonstrate how public health accreditation instruments were deployed as tools of state legitimacy. These variations indicate that authoritarian resilience functions through complementary mechanisms, forming an essential basis for analyzing the dynamics of democratic backsliding.

The literature on democratic backsliding refers to the gradual erosion of democratic institutions through incremental mechanisms rather than sudden military coups. Desrues & Gobe (2024) show that democratic decline often unfolds through the restriction of protest spaces and the control of political discourse. Selmi (2024) observes that Tunisia's regression was driven by tensions between political consolidation and economic policy, underscoring the structural complexity of backsliding. Thus, backsliding can be viewed as a consequence of authoritarian resilience, which diverts transitional energy into new, more subtle forms of control.

These consequences are reflected in electoral, legal, and participatory indicators. Shiddieqy et al. (2024) stress that post-Arab Spring electoral politics were marked by fragmentation and legitimacy dilemmas. Bania (2025) highlights institutional variables in the resurgence of Islamist fundamentalism within North African political systems before and after transition. Keinan-Cohen et al., (2025) add that shifts in political and religious identities serve as critical indicators of democratic decline. This diversity of indicators confirms that backsliding cannot be separated from the discursive co-optation employed by regimes, which reveals the more subtle dimensions of power control.

The literature on discursive co-optation explains how regimes absorb democratic

symbols while stripping them of their substantive meaning. Elsayed (2021) illustrates that political humor on Facebook, originally functioning as a tool of critique, was redirected into satire that reinforced regime legitimacy. Abouelenin (2022) adds that gender discourse has often been framed within the morality of the state rather than as a space for emancipation. Accordingly, discursive co-optation operates in alignment with backsliding since democratic symbols are no longer openly rejected but instead domesticated to support authoritarian narratives.

The dimension of discursive co-optation can be observed through mechanisms of media, identity construction, and political narrative production. Edam et al. (2024) finds that both Arab and international media frequently portray women as symbols of modernity without opening spaces for substantive equality. Baalbaki (2024) demonstrates how tourism imagery absorbs political crises into cultural revival narratives to defuse criticism of the state. Berger & Gallagher (2022) show that political interventions are framed through shared values rather than particular interests. These findings confirm that discursive co-optation constitutes an integral component of sustaining authoritarian resilience while simultaneously accelerating democratic backsliding.

After reviewing the existing literature, this study identifies a significant gap: most analyses of Egypt's post-2011 political transition has overlooked the dual role of entrenched power structures and discursive co-optation in shaping the failure of democratization. The position of this research is to offer an integrated analysis that combines a structural approach that focusing on military and bureaucratic dominance, with a discursive approach grounded in Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, in order to explain how pseudo-legitimacy is constructed not only through coercive force but also through the production of cultural consensus. In contrast to earlier studies that primarily emphasized formal institutions and electoral dynamics, this research examines in detail how democratic symbols such as elections and narratives of stability were reproduced as instruments of cultural co-optation, effectively silencing the public deliberative sphere. The second, and more original, contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that the combination of structural dominance and discursive co-optation after 2013 produced a form of "pseudo-legitimacy" or democracy as performance, underscoring the novelty and originality of this research.

The new direction of this study is to center its analysis on the intersection between structural and discursive dimensions, employing Gramsci's theory of hegemony as the primary analytical tool to reinterpret authoritarian resilience after the revolution, specifically how democratic symbols were transformed into instruments of regime legitimacy. This approach is crucial because, after 2013, structural repression and discursive co-optation converged to close spaces for public deliberation, making the study highly urgent in the context of current democratic backsliding across the Global South. Accordingly, the first research question explores the extent to which military and bureaucratic dominance reproduces patterns of resistance to popular participation similar to democratic decline observed in other Global South countries. The second question investigates how the regime absorbed, sterilized, and hollowed out discourses of justice and democracy as part of a strategy of discursive co-optation that weakened deliberative democracy. The significance of this research is therefore threefold: it contributes theoretically by extending democratic transition studies through a Gramscian framework; it provides empirically grounded insights into the Egyptian case with comparative relevance to broader patterns of authoritarian resilience; and it offers universal benefits for global policy debates by highlighting the need for strategies that are sensitive to the interplay of structural dominance and discursive control in safeguarding democratic governance worldwide.

The unit of analysis in this study is the cultural and social dynamics of Egypt in the

aftermath of the Arab Spring, with particular emphasis on the transformation of values, social practices, and patterns of relations between civil society and the state since the fall of Hosni Mubarak. The cultural and social domains were selected as the primary focus because they represent the main arenas in which the meanings of democracy and legitimacy are negotiated both symbolically and in everyday life, domains often overlooked by formal institutional analyses. The temporal scope of this study is limited to the period between 2011 and 2018, thereby capturing the trajectory from revolutionary euphoria to the reconsolidation of authoritarianism. Within this scope, the study examines shifts in public discourse, community participation practices, symbolic representations in the media, and transformations in the social networks of activists. This focus is crucial as it allows the exploration of how democratic values were internalized and co-opted in everyday life, shaping the sustainability of political reform.

Based on this focus, the research employs a qualitative design using a historical-critical case study approach, as this design enables the tracing of long-term socio-cultural changes while also explaining contextual causal relationships. Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony is employed as the primary analytical framework, as it is particularly effective in uncovering how power is reproduced not only through material control but also through the production of cultural consent rooted in social practices. Core Gramscian concepts including hegemony, consensus, resistance, organic intellectuals, and passive revolution, serve as the basis for categorizing data to deconstruct mechanisms of democratic value co-optation. These concepts are operationalized through technical steps such as thematic coding of literature data, chronological mapping of symbolic and discursive shifts, and tracing connections between social practices and the construction of legitimacy discourses. The combination of a historical-critical case study design and a Gramscian theoretical lens enables both deep interpretive analysis and the formulation of analytical generalizations relevant to broader Global South contexts.

The data sources for this research are entirely literature-based, including peer-reviewed academic journal articles, scholarly books, dissertations, international research reports, and digital media archives documenting Egypt's socio-cultural dynamics after the Arab Spring. Such sources were chosen because they allow for a longitudinal examination of discourses and social practices, while also providing empirically verified evidence that enhances the validity and rigor of the analysis. To address the first research question, sources include studies on changes in civil society structures, activist social networks, and state-society relations during the transition period. To address the second question, the analysis draws on studies of the construction of democratic symbols, rhetoric of stability, media representations of popular movements, and human rights reports on discursive repression. These academic sources ensure credibility, historical depth, and the capacity to connect socio-cultural dimensions with mechanisms of power.

Data collection was conducted through systematic literature review, drawing from internationally and nationally recognized academic journals, as well as digital databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, ProQuest, and university library catalogs. This method was chosen because it provides access to a wide, credible, and well-documented corpus that can be critically analyzed without encountering political restrictions or fieldwork limitations in Egypt. The initial step involved developing thematic keywords, setting the temporal range (2011–2018), and retrieving relevant articles, books, and reports, which were then grouped according to cultural and social themes. The next step involved filtering sources based on journal reputation, peer-review processes, bibliographic completeness, and theoretical relevance, before organizing the data in a reference manager for subsequent analysis. This technique ensured comprehensive, replicable, and transparent data collection while safeguarding the reliability of the analytical material.

Data analysis was carried out qualitatively through integrated thematic classification and critical discourse analysis to identify patterns of meaning in Egypt's cultural and social representations after the Arab Spring. This method is appropriate because it combines close textual analysis with tracing causal relationships among social events that shaped the emergence of a new hegemony. The first technique involved coding texts according to Gramscian categories such as hegemony, consensus, resistance, co-optation, and stability narratives, operationalized through symbolic indicators, actors, and temporal contexts. The second technique applied genealogical discourse analysis to track the transformation of meanings from the revolutionary moment to authoritarian consolidation, including shifts in narratives across media, institutional reports, and academic studies. The combination of thematic coding and critical discourse analysis provides the dual advantage of uncovering mechanisms of meaning production and linking them to socio-cultural dynamics, thereby strengthening the validity, analytical depth, and theoretical contributions of this research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Failed democratic transition

The findings of this study demonstrate that the failure of Egypt's democratic transition following the fall of Hosni Mubarak primarily reflects the structural resistance of entrenched power to the redistribution of popular political participation. This result underscores that the dynamics of democratization are not solely determined by mass mobilization or the holding of free elections but are fundamentally shaped by the ability of old elites to preserve institutional control. The first evidence emerged in the immediate aftermath of Mubarak's downfall, when the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) assumed power and managed the transition through procedural measures without implementing substantive structural reforms, thereby locking the trajectory of democracy within the interests of the military. The second evidence is observed during the presidency of Mohammed Morsi, where attempts to establish a civilian government collapsed due to the dominance of the military and the weakness of civil institutions. This culminated in the 2013 coup and the subsequent consolidation of a new authoritarian regime. The empirical data supporting these findings are presented in the table below.

Table 1. Empirical data

No	Event Stage	Main Actors	Actions / Dynamics	Effect on Democratic Transition	Implications
1	2011 — Fall of Mubarak	People (Tahrir movement), Mubarak Regime	Mass mobilization to overthrow Mubarak	Opened opportunities for democratic transition	Democratic euphoria and high expectations for civil participation
2	2011-2012 — SCAF Government	Military (SCAF)	Seized power, controlled the transition process	Maintained continuity of the old power networks	Procedural democracy without structural reform
3	2012-2013 — Morsi Government	Civilian President (Morsi), Parliament, Military	Elected through free elections, but became isolated and failed to build a coalition	Unable to challenge state structures controlled by the military	Weak civil institutions strengthened the military's position
4	2013 — Coup & Sisi Regime	Military, Old Elites	Coup overthrew Morsi,	Ended democratic transition,	Systematic democratic

			repression of the opposition	established a new authoritarian regime	backsliding
2014–Present		Military, security	Media control, restrictions on	Closed space for	Symbolic
5	Consolidation of the Sisi Regime	apparatus, state institutions	NGOs, crackdown on the opposition	public participation	democracy without deliberative substance

The first phase recorded in the table (2011 — Fall of Mubarak) illustrates the moment when the Egyptian people forced political change through massive mobilization in Tahrir Square (Blouët, 2022; Abdulla, 2023). This collective action opened the initial space for democratization that had long been sealed by authoritarian rule. The first piece of evidence is reflected in the scale of demonstrations that transcended social, political, and religious boundaries, producing pressure the regime could no longer ignore (Ayyad & Lugo-Ocando, 2023). The second evidence emerged from Mubarak's resignation, which created an opportunity for the emergence of new, though unstable, political structures. His fall generated democratic euphoria and raised high expectations for popular participation, laying the foundation for subsequent transitional dynamics (Menshawy, 2021a).

This euphoria was quickly confronted with new realities, as reflected in the second phase (2011–2012 — SCAF Government), when the military, through the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), assumed control of the state. This dominance demonstrated that the old structures persisted and even entrenched themselves during the transitional period (Russell, 2023). The first evidence is seen in SCAF's maneuvering to manage the transition procedurally while avoiding substantive reform (Kubbara, 2023). The second evidence lies in the continuity of the old power networks, which remained intact under military control, reducing democracy to a mere formalistic exercise (Lavie & Yefet, 2022). Thus, the authoritarian legacy was reproduced, severely limiting the substantive meaning of political opportunities that had briefly opened.

These limitations became more pronounced in the third phase (2012–2013 — Morsi Government), when Mohammed Morsi, the country's first civilian president, was elected through free elections but immediately faced political isolation. This condition underscores that electoral legitimacy without robust institutional support was insufficient to challenge military dominance (Hussein, 2021). The first evidence is found in Morsi's failure to construct a broad political coalition capable of sustaining his government, which left him without a strong power base (Amasha, 2023). The second evidence concerns the weakness of civil institutions, such as parliament and political parties, which failed to function as effective checks on power (Utvik, 2022). These shortcomings paved the way for deeper military intervention that decisively shaped the course of the transition (Klocek et al., 2023).

This intervention culminated in the fourth phase (2013 — Coup & Sisi Regime), when a military coup ousted Morsi and effectively closed the door on democratic transition. This event marked the restoration of full control by the old elites through systematic repression (Lutscher & Ketchley, 2023). The first evidence is the coup itself, which terminated civilian government and ended the democratic trajectory (Badr, 2021). The second evidence lies in the harsh repression of both Islamist and liberal opposition groups, silencing the space for political competition (Younas, 2023). This phase highlights Egypt's shift toward a new authoritarian regime, one that was more consolidated and further removed from the democratic aspirations of 2011 (Al-Rousan et al., 2024).

The consolidation of authoritarianism deepened further in the fifth phase (2014–present — Consolidation of the Sisi Regime), as Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's government

expanded control over public space. This process illustrates how structural resistance was institutionalized systematically through state apparatuses (Lavie, 2022). The first evidence is reflected in the strict control of media and restrictions imposed on NGOs, which curtailed the articulation of civil society (Baalbaki, 2024). The second evidence lies in the systematic arrests of political opposition, eliminating the possibility of alternative power bases (Elsayed, 2021). As a result, Egyptian democracy became merely symbolic, devoid of deliberative substance, with popular aspirations increasingly marginalized (Abouelenin, 2022).

Taken together, the trajectory from the first to the fifth phase reveals a consistent pattern: while mass mobilization succeeded in toppling Mubarak, the entrenched power structures led by the military ultimately subdued democratic aspirations. From the initial euphoria to the emergence of a new authoritarian regime, the evidence demonstrates that the resistance of the old elite not only obstructed but also institutionalized democratic regression, rendering Egypt's transition a clear example of failed democratization in the Global South.

Repression, subordination, and co-optation

The findings reveal that the discourse of social justice and participatory democracy championed by the Egyptian popular movement in 2011 did not endure but was instead repressed, subordinated, and ultimately absorbed by the new authoritarian regime. This result is significant as it demonstrates how emancipatory narratives, initially intended to dismantle authoritarianism, were diverted into instruments of regime legitimacy. The first evidence is observed in how the post-Mubarak regime framed demands for social justice and political participation as threats to "stability" and "national security," followed by the arrest of activists, restrictions on opposition parties, the banning of independent unions, and the closure of critical media outlets. The second evidence appears in the strategy of the Sisi regime to appropriate democratic symbols through elections, while hollowing them of deliberative substance, as these contests were held under highly repressive conditions and yielded landslide victories, with the public sphere tightly controlled. Consequently, democratic discourse was transformed into a tool of authoritarian legitimation, as summarized in the table below.

Table 2. Repression, subordination, and co-optation

No	Elements of the 2011 People's Movement Discourse	Initial Goal	Regime's Response Strategy	Mechanism of Repression or Subordination	Consequences for Deliberative Democracy
1	Social Justice	Eliminate economic inequality and patronage	Regime labeled this demand as a "threat to stability"	Arrests of activists, banning of independent labor unions	Aspirations for social justice removed from the public agenda
2	Popular Political Participation	Inclusive democratization after Mubarak	Replaced with the narrative of "national security"	Restrictions on opposition parties and NGOs	Citizens' participation narrowed and co-opted
3	Clean Government	Eliminate systemic corruption	Adopted symbolically, but without substance	Elite corruption tolerated, low transparency	Public legitimacy declined, but criticism silenced
4	Civil Liberties	Build an open public sphere	Replaced with rhetoric of the	Closure of independent	No autonomous space for public

			"threat of radicalism" Symbolized through elections, but tightly controlled	media, strict internet control Elections without real competition (Sisi winning >90%)	deliberation Democracy transformed into a tool of regime legitimacy
5	Participatory Democracy	Design a new political order			

The first row of the table demonstrates that the issue of social justice—originally intended to eliminate economic inequality and patronage—was labeled by the regime as a “threat to stability” (Basir & Datta, 2024). This framing indicates that popular demands were positioned not as a reform agenda but as a source of political disruption. Empirical evidence is found in the arrests of activists, the banning of independent labor unions, and the restriction of workers’ avenues for political articulation (Mansour et al., 2021). These repressive practices not only disregarded the substantive meaning of social justice but also excluded inequality from public debate. Consequently, popular aspirations for justice were removed from the deliberative arena, leaving democracy without a strong social foundation.

The exclusion of social justice concerns is reinforced in the second row of the table concerning popular political participation. The original agenda of building an inclusive post-Mubarak democracy was replaced by the regime with the narrative of “national security,” which framed civic engagement as a threat to state stability (Menshawy, 2021). Evidence of this substitution is visible in the systematic restrictions imposed on opposition parties and NGOs, which obstructed the consolidation of alternative political forces (Klocek et al., 2023). As a result, citizen participation was narrowed and co-opted, transforming the deliberative sphere from an open arena into one controlled by the regime. The consequence was the erosion of participatory energy necessary to reinforce democratic legitimacy (Selmi, 2025).

This strategy of repression continued in the third row of the table, which addresses the demand for clean governance. The popular call to eradicate systemic corruption was met by the regime with symbolic adoption but without substantive reform (Bania, 2025). Empirical evidence lies in the tolerance of elite corruption and the maintenance of low governmental transparency, which prevented the establishment of political accountability (Edam et al., 2024). This situation illustrates how reformist symbols were employed merely to preserve appearances while substantive governance remained under the control of entrenched oligarchic interests. As a result, public legitimacy eroded while channels of criticism were silenced, eliminating the possibility of social correction (Elsässer, 2025). Thus, deliberative democracy was obstructed as mechanisms of public oversight lost their effectiveness.

The exclusion of citizens’ aspirations in matters of social justice, politics, and governance intensified in the fourth row of the table concerning civil liberties. The original aim of creating an open public sphere was distorted by the regime through the rhetoric of a “radicalism threat,” reframing the discourse of freedom as a danger to national security (Amasha, 2023). Concrete evidence can be seen in the closure of independent media, strict internet controls, and the shrinking of spaces for public discussion (Lutscher & Ketchley, 2023). The regime not only curtailed freedom of expression but also closed deliberative channels through which society could hold politics accountable. As a result, no autonomous public deliberative space remained, and democracy lost its dialogical function.

This pattern of repression culminated in the fifth row of the table, addressing participatory democracy. The public demand to design a new political order was reduced

by the regime to a symbolic exercise through elections that were tightly controlled (Russell, 2023). Clear evidence is provided by Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's electoral victories of over 90 percent, which revealed the absence of genuine competition (Lavie, 2022). Such practices hollowed out democracy of its deliberative substance, reducing it to a mere instrument of regime legitimation (Desrues & Gobe, 2024). Participatory democracy was thus redirected—not as a mechanism of popular sovereignty, but as a tool for consolidating authoritarian rule.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that every element of the 2011 Egyptian people's movement discourse—social justice, political participation, clean governance, civil liberties, and participatory democracy—was co-opted, repressed, or distorted by the regime into narratives of security and stability. These mechanisms not only erased the substantive content of democracy but also closed the public deliberative sphere, which should have served as a platform for socio-political correction. Consequently, the post-Mubarak transition did not yield a more inclusive political system but instead consolidated a new authoritarianism in which democracy functioned merely as a symbolic instrument of legitimacy.

The failure of Egypt's democratic transition is explained by the reduction of discourses on social justice, civil liberties, and participatory democracy into instruments of legitimizing a new authoritarian regime. This failure can be understood through the simultaneous operation of structural repression and symbolic co-optation in controlling the public sphere. Following Mubarak's fall, military dominance not only foreclosed the possibility of civilian democracy but also redirected popular discourse toward narratives of stability and security. Elections and democratic symbols were preserved, yet stripped of deliberative substance, reflecting what scholars describe as "reconstituted authoritarianism" under the Sisi regime. Thus, democracy born of popular revolution was reabsorbed by authoritarian power, losing its emancipatory potential.

The relationship between coercive structures and discursive strategies reveals a distinct pattern of democratic regression. Repression of opposition constrained participation, while the co-optation of symbols reduced democracy to a political performance. This mechanism is evident in the strict control of media and public spaces, as well as in the labeling of social demands as threats to stability. The regime's invocation of national security reframed democracy as procedural rather than deliberative. Such a pattern highlights that deliberative democracy did not fail organically but was deliberately redirected into an instrument of regime hegemony.

The originality of this research lies in its focus on symbolic co-optation as a central mechanism of authoritarian reconsolidation. Previous studies have emphasized economic factors or open conflict (Assaad et al., 2023; Deng et al., 2024), whereas this study demonstrates that the manipulation of democratic discourse itself can function as a primary strategy. The preservation of democratic symbols was used strategically to suppress opposition legitimacy. Comparative cases suggest variations in this pattern: Turkey exhibits similar tendencies through electoral rhetoric reinforcing the regime, while Tunisia illustrates regression through executive interventions that curtailed parliamentary independence. In Egypt, however, the pattern is more pronounced: the state retained the formal apparatus of democracy, such as elections and constitutions, while hollowing out their institutional substance (Csicsmann, 2025). This offers an analytical innovation in understanding democratic regression in the post-Arab Spring context.

Interpreting the findings uncovers the social and ideological meanings of reduced democracy. Democracy no longer functioned as a deliberative arena but as an image manufactured to mask regime hegemony. Socially, repression fostered political apathy and weakened civic mobilization, while ideologically, anti-radicalism rhetoric was used to

justify restrictions on freedom. This aligns with observations that even satirical media were forced to submit to state repression. These realities reveal how elections and democratic symbols were transformed into effective instruments of political control.

The implications of these findings are broad and critical for other post-authoritarian states. The study emphasizes that without strong institutions, deliberative democracy remains vulnerable to elite co-optation. Egypt's political regression demonstrates how popular demands were rapidly redirected into regime legitimacy. This process has produced significant economic and social consequences, including labor market decline and curtailed civil rights. The contribution of this research is to caution the global community that democracy cannot be assessed merely through formal procedures but must be safeguarded substantively through institutional protections and a culture of deliberation.

Based on these findings, concrete steps are needed to prevent the co-optation of democratic discourse and to strengthen spaces for public participation. Building the capacity of independent civil organizations is essential to withstand military dominance. Simultaneously, electoral systems must be preserved through transparency and multi-layered oversight to ensure they are not reduced to symbolic exercises. Engagement from both domestic and international actors is crucial to keeping democratic spaces open. If pursued consistently, such measures can help restore democracy not as a mere procedure but as a substantive mechanism for articulating the interests of the people.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the downfall of an authoritarian regime does not automatically pave the way for genuine democracy, as entrenched elites may sustain their dominance through symbolic co-optation. The findings hold global relevance by underscoring the vulnerability of deliberative democracy in post-authoritarian contexts, where it can be reduced to a mere instrument of legitimacy. The first empirical finding addresses the initial research question: the structural dominance of the military and bureaucracy in Egypt reproduced resistance to popular participation, as evidenced by the interventions of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) and the 2013 coup. The second finding responds to the subsequent research question: democratic symbols were appropriated by the Sisi regime through formalistic elections devoid of substantive deliberation. Collectively, these findings confirm the hypothesis that symbolic co-optation and structural repression converge to construct a façade of legitimacy that accelerates democratic regression.

The contribution of this study lies in advancing the concept of “pseudo-democratic legitimacy” as an extension of Gramsci's theory of hegemony with global implications. The validity of this concept can be integrated into broader theoretical frameworks, as it demonstrates that power is reproduced not only through coercive domination but also through the domestication of democratic symbols recognized internationally. The first variable, structural military dominance, operates by maintaining institutional control that restricts civic articulation and obstructs the redistribution of power, thereby reinforcing authoritarian logic within the theoretical framework. The second variable, discursive co-optation, functions by absorbing popular demands into the rhetoric of stability, which in turn integrates democratic symbols into cultural hegemony. Accordingly, this research expands the application of Gramscian theory across regions and offers conceptual insights for analyzing contemporary authoritarianism on a global scale.

Nevertheless, this study has limitations, particularly in its focus on Egypt's cultural-political domain, without exploring the broader economic dimension or conducting wider regional comparisons. This limitation opens avenues for future research. It is crucial to

note that the absence of an analysis of international aid relations, which have supported regime consolidation, constitutes the first limitation. Such dynamics are highly relevant within the framework of post-Arab Spring democracy. The second limitation is the lack of systematic comparative analysis with other Global South countries, which could strengthen the validity of generalizations. Future research should therefore adopt cross-regional comparative approaches and multidisciplinary integration to deepen our understanding of the global mechanisms underpinning democratic decline.

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