



## Book Review

**Catherine E. Herrold**, *Delta Democracy: Pathways to Incremental Civic Revolution in Egypt and Beyond* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

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In only three years, from 2011 to 2013, Egyptians experienced a mass uprising that ended the thirty-year reign of President Hosni Mubarak; navigated a transition that led to the country's first democratic presidential elections and the victory of an Islamist candidate, Muhammad Morsi; saw Morsi's presidency overthrown by then General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi; and watched as Sisi assumed power, captured the presidency, and ushered in a full-blown restoration of brutal authoritarian rule. Sisi's rise marked the end of Egypt's halting and contentious transition to democracy. It seemed to foreclose possibilities for meaningful political change and the realization of popular demands for voice, inclusion, and dignity.

The apparent fragility of Egypt's transition raises urgent questions both for scholars of democratization and for pro-democracy practitioners and activists who struggled to gain traction under Mubarak, worked diligently to support Egypt's transition, then watched in anguish as their efforts collapsed after 2013. Not least, as Catherine Herrold demonstrates in her incisive and compelling account, Egypt's trajectory requires us to reexamine many of the core assumptions that have shaped the practice of democracy promotion, especially with respect to two sets of critical actors: civil society and the philanthropic sector. Her findings challenge both civil society cheerleaders, the Tocquevillians who view civic sectors as inherently democratic, as well as civil society skeptics who dismiss its potential to advance democratic change in authoritarian settings. Instead, her fieldwork leads her to an appreciation for how non-advocacy, local development NGOs that do not define their work in terms of democracy building, can nonetheless strengthen attributes of civic-ness within underserved communities.

In making this case, Herrold's book is a significant contribution to our understanding of how nonprofit and foundation sectors that focus on economic and social development can cultivate democratic norms and practices. At the same time, however, her work poses questions about the limits of these alternative strategies. She thus points us towards new research agendas that will need further attention before we can draw conclusions about the efficacy of indirect and incremental pathways to democratic change.

Carefully researched and drawing on extensive first-person interviews, Harrold takes effective advantage of the opportunity her fieldwork offered to conduct a thorough “before-during-and-after” analysis of Egypt’s still-nascent foundation sector, its modest pro-democracy NGO sector, and local development NGOs. The narrative is organized chronologically, critically assessing relations between the foundation sector and the state prior to the uprising, the struggles of foundations and NGOs to respond to Egypt’s short-lived period of democratization, and the effects on both of Sisi’s crackdown following the coup of July 2013. Her interviews confirm the role of Egyptian foundations prior to the uprising as extensions of the Mubarak regime, dominated by regime cronies and functioning to advance its priorities. They also confirm the precarious position of the advocacy NGO sector, dependent on foreign funds, largely led by elites, and lacking local buy-in and legitimacy. She highlights the caution and risk aversion of foundations after Mubarak’s fall, notwithstanding the newfound willingness of their leadership and staff to rethink the role of philanthropy in a society in transition. She also documents how quickly foundations retreated from support for pro-democracy groups following Sisi’s coup, and how vulnerable these beleaguered groups were in the face of the regime’s relentless campaign against them.

However, even while Sisi moved quickly to clamp down on democracy promotion work—with advocacy NGOs, democratic activists, and foreign donors all subject to crippling regulations and severe repression—local, grass-roots NGOs that integrated training in citizen participation, decision-making, and effective claims making into community-level economic development programs emerged as pathways for the cultivation of democratic norms and practices. These NGOs, forced to build local constituencies and secure local funding—including from Egyptian philanthropies—developed programming that responded to regime constraints. In doing so, they created spaces in which citizens were not simply exposed to strategies for improving their economic conditions, but to participatory, bottom-up training in identifying problems, negotiating community priorities, and developing consensus-based responses. All of these experiences, Harrold argues, can aggregate over time to produce an “incremental civic revolution,” a form of democratization that happens obliquely, indirectly, and beneath the regime’s radar.

Harrold links these claims to a sharp critique of US and Western approaches to democracy promotion. She argues that by defining it too narrowly, as explicit advocacy in support of democratic reform, and by focusing too intently on interventions designed to strengthen democratic practices within formal institutions, donors and practitioners have missed important opportunities to develop sustainable, locally-legitimate models that hold promise of building democratic practices within underserved communities. In the book’s final chapter

Herrold addresses the policy implications of her research, offering recommendations to practitioners to learn from the experience of local development NGOs, broaden their conceptions of what constitutes democratization, and support new programmatic tools better designed to advance indirect, incremental interventions that strengthen democratic norms and practices at the local level.

In doing so, Herrold gives important empirical support to those both within and outside the “democracy bureaucracy” who are keenly aware of its many shortcomings. As effective as her critique is, however, it also underscores unresolved questions about the indirect, incremental strategies of the local development NGOs at the heart of her study. Perhaps most important, we have little evidence of the efficacy of the approaches she highlights, the durability of their impact, or whether participants in such programs experience significant changes in their attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs. Also important, we have little evidence that they led to meaningful improvements in outcomes for communities. Similarly, whether Egyptian authorities responded to the proposals generated through participatory exercises by citizens is unclear. There is ample evidence from other, similar cases to be wary about how officials reacted to citizen initiatives. Within the NGO literature (and in my own experience as a grant-maker), we find little evidence that individual participation in small-scale training programs can aggregate to produce broader processes of social transformation. Further, there is an awareness that interventions that take place within regime-defined boundaries, and observe what are often regressive and undemocratic social norms in local communities—including deeply-embedded patriarchal hierarchies—may be doing more to enable than to challenge existing structures of power.

Herrold’s work affirms that conventional approaches to democracy promotion have not worked, at least in the Arab world. Thanks to *Delta Democracy* we now have a possible alternative. Yet to address unsettled questions about the efficacy, sustainability, and impact of indirect strategies for strengthening civic life, scholars of civil society and philanthropy should pick up where Herrold’s impressive research leaves off, provide a clearer picture of where, when, and under what conditions pathways to incremental civic revolution might exist, and explore how the US and Western donors can best support them.