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Learning in Revolution: Perspectives on Democracy from Egypt's UK-based Diaspora Activists

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Abstract
This article explores the impact of the 25 January protests in Egypt on a specific group of people who continue to struggle for social and political change: the UK-based Egyptian diaspora. Through an exploration of diaspora politics, the article sheds light on how UK activists challenge dominant approaches to democracy and democratisation. I argue that this case of diaspora politics calls for a continued inquiry into what democracy is and how it is imagined, particularly in transnational contexts.

Keywords: Democracy; Democratisation; Diaspora politics; Egyptian revolution; learning.

Introduction

Five years on from the 18 days of uprisings that ended Hosni Mubarak's 30-year rule, Egypt remains economically, socially and politically unstable. In 2012, Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohammed Morsi narrowly won the presidency. Mass demonstrations on 30 June 2013 saw him detained and, after a violent and bloody summer, Egypt's return to military rule was underway. Under former defence minister President El-Sisi, elected in June 2014, opposition activists remain committed to various aspects of Egypt's struggle and continue to engage in practices of contentious politics and social action in Egypt and abroad, despite increased risk (Dunne 2015). Some of the personal accounts that emerged in the aftermath of 25 January such as those by Ahdaf Soueif (2012) and Wael Ghonim (2012) highlight the participation of UK-based Egyptians in Egypt's political sphere before and during the 18 days. But, while their participation during the 18 days has been evidenced in academic scholarship (see Fawzy 2012; Ramadan 2013) and online anecdotal contributions, there are few detailed and in depth analyses of diaspora mobilisation for social and political change.

This article examines the particular case of Egyptian activists in the UK, arguing that diasporas are important actors within the global polity. Through continued learning and reflection on democracy and through participation in social action, they shape politics in their place of origin. This study of diaspora demonstrates the complexities of transnational political activism and presents a challenge to post-nationalism and cosmopolitanism. These positions argue that, alongside globalised markets and universalising norms such as human rights, the nation-state has become less relevant (see Habermas 1998; Soysal 2000). Responding to many of the questions raised by globalisation, proponents of cosmopolitanism also question the relevance of the nation-state as the focus of democratic theory, arguing for a rethinking of democracy as operating within and across borders (Held 1999). While there is traction in such lines of inquiry, diasporas, with real and 'imagined' (Anderson 1983) connections to more than one place, complicate understandings and processes of politics and democracy in the globalised world.

Although the material realities of globalisation, such as migration, present a contemporary global political context that is transnational, networked and dynamic, this case shows that 'politics remains fundamentally about local issues even while political processes are increasingly globalized' (Lyons and Mandaville 2010: 125). Diasporas are political actors with multiple and dual identities (Klandermans 2014), consciously identifying with more than one territory or nation-state and having various interests, views and positions that shape their engagement and participation in social and political change. These identities are also subjective and dynamic in degree, shade and strength (Huddy 2001). Despite the various complexities associated with social and political identities, diasporas' participation in the politics of the homeland is, in part, motivated by 'connectedness' (Gilroy 1993) to the 'imagined community' (Anderson 1983). This case shows that, as well as having sub-identities (for example, leftist, secular, nationalist, anti-coup or Islamist…) that shape their participation and learning, the connection to Egypt remains central to why people mobilised in this moment, in that context: to some extent, identification with and 'connectedness' to the nation-state can explain *why* people participated, while the sub-identity explains *how*.

Accepting the important debates around definitions of diaspora, this article's focus on activism adopts a definition that stresses intentionality and conscious engagement in the politics of the homeland, where diasporas are "generated out of politics…as political effect rather than a social given" (Lyons and Mandaville 2010: 125). Understanding diasporas as created through their mobilisation (Sökefeld 2006) emphasises the dynamic and complex nature of contemporary transnational political activism and activists' political identities (Simon and Klandermans 2001). Similarly, in line with Bayat's (2002:3) understanding of activism as 'the antithesis of passivity', diaspora, in this article, refers specifically to Egyptians living in the UK, whether temporarily or permanently, who have been or continue to be mobilised and actively engaged in transnational politics related to social and political change in Egypt. I intentionally utilise the term 'struggle' to indicate that there are many ways in which people perceive, experience and seek to create change Kandil argues that the protests of 25 January are 'one of many episodes of struggle' (2012:4). Indeed my interlocutors agree with this view: *"for many of us, it is an ongoing revolution… we haven't reaped the fruit of the revolution yet"* (Amira, *40s*, Egyptian, UK 10+ years, secular).

This article will show that activists' understandings of democracy – frequently reflecting an affective dimension so often ignored in democratic theory - sit uneasily between (and sometimes contrary to) the dominant Western liberal, representative democracy and alternatives informed by notions of direct democracy. It is within and through this space of unease that the argument is advanced: as activists' learning about and engagement with democracy continues to evolve, so should inquires into what democracy might mean - for whom, in what form, in what ways, with what goal. In her critique of post-politics' 'end of ideology' thesis, Mouffe (2005) argues against consensus-based politics that have removed conflict from 'the political', subsequently repressing alternatives and other democratic possibilities. Her agonistic framework challenges the dominance of Western liberal democracy and warns of the dangers of reifying forms of democracy that diffuse and deflect rather than expose and reconstitute power relations. 'Egypt seems to be moving towards greater

consolidation of the security agenda and populist politics' (Salamey 2015: 121), a context where neither consensus nor compromise is imminent. The paper, therefore, suggests there is a need for more theoretical and empirical exploration of the continuing process of struggle that utilises and seeks alternative understandings of democracy. Such inquiries provide a counter to dominant analyses of the Egyptian struggle that are framed within Western liberal theories of democratisation and democratic transition. In order to contribute to this conversation, this analysis takes into account dominant and alternative approaches to democracy. It recognises the necessity for continued reflection on what democracy (and therefore democratisation) means in the contemporary political context in which diasporas are political actors whose positions are informed by experiences of and reflections on both liberal 'democracies' and authoritarianism.

Methods and Context

The paper draws from a UK-based study of diaspora activists, which took place over the period of nine months in 2014. This project investigated how Egyptian activists engaged with processes of social change in Egypt, particularly focusing on what and how they learned through their participation in movements and at protests and demonstrations. Through qualitative methods, I explored activists' understandings of and attitudes towards various aspects of politics and social change, examining how and why they changed or developed in particular ways.

Quotations are taken from some of the 28 extended interviews conducted in the UK in English (some Arabic terms were explored) with Egyptian activists who I met at demonstrations and via snowball sampling through contacts within the activist and Egyptian networks, including people I knew prior to the research through my previous work in the region. The study also draws on participant observation at demonstrations and protests and in online spaces such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, where I observed the interactions and conversations between activists.

Egyptians in the UK reflect the same divisions and tensions in Egypt, and the three dominant perspectives aligned to the nationalist / security, Islamist and secular agendas (see Dunne 2015; Grand 2014). Yet, the labels used to align an activist with a particular group may not be so clear-cut. Beneath the apparently defined groups are significant areas of tension that warn against homogenising or simplifying accounts of a highly complex context. Therefore, I acknowledge that many of the terms associated with the struggle - for example, 25 January, 30 June, anti-coup, Islamist, revolutionary socialist, leftist, secular or nationalist - are problematic but also recognise that, at this stage, they afford some scope for delineation within a brief analysis. When these labels are used, they reflect general leanings and should not be regarded as definitive. For example, some activists shifted in their perspective within the course of the research because of particular moments such as Morsi's detention or El-Sisi's election, while others sympathised with more than one position simultaneously.

As well as providing the activists' general position (secular, anti-coup, nationalist…) in the text, I note the approximate number of years that a person had been living in the UK or their status in relation to Egypt/UK (e.g. UK 4+, dual citizenship). In response to requests for anonymity and taking into account the relatively small number of

activists mobilising within the UK, this information, along with their age, is kept vague and all names are pseudonyms.

The research took place between February and November 2014, in the run up to El-Sisi's election and its aftermath. This period followed the 30 June protests, Morsi's detention on 3 July, the massacre at Rab`a, and civil unrest during the summer of 2013. The majority of interviews were undertaken with activists aligned to leftist/secularists and anti-coup/Islamists. The anti-coup activists, though small in number, held regular demonstrations and protests, while leftist / secular opposition activists were engaging more individually. Interviews suggest 2014 was an important period of reflection for the latter. During the presidential elections in May 2014, I particularly interviewed and observed supporters of El-Sisi, generally referred to as nationalists.

Finally, it must be noted that this paper refers specifically to Egyptian *activists* and draws on their reflections on their experiences. Findings cannot be generalised to Egyptians across the UK as a whole; in-fact, participant observation and interviews suggest significant numbers of Egyptians living in the UK did not participate in any form of active engagement during or since 25 January.

Diaspora politics and the Egyptian revolution

Studies of diaspora and migration are arguably dominated by analyses of the economic relationship between migration and development rather than the important dimension of their political and social contribution. This is not to diminish the role of diaspora in economic development - remittances are significant to Egypt's economy, with over $17 million sent to Egypt in 2013, for example, amounting to 6.6% of the GDP (World Bank 2014) – but diasporas offer more than just economic support to their place of origin. Diasporas have been important actors in contemporary wars (Kaldor-Robinson 2002) and contribute in many ways to domestic and transnational struggles for social and political change (see Lyons and Mandaville 2012), thus influencing politics in both 'home' and 'sending' countries (see Sheffer 2003).

What interests my article is a direction yet unexplored: how does mobilising for political change in the home country shape the engagement of diasporas living in a 'host' country, including understanding of and participation in politics in both contexts? Literature on Arabs in Britain suggests that while they become economically integrated, they reportedly do not 'integrate on the political and cultural levels' (Fawzy 2012:48) and display a low level of political engagement and participation in UK politics (Atlantic Forum 2009). Indeed, Aly observes how local councillors respond to this narrative and thus call for more Arabs to 'get involved in British politics' (2015:11). Two related findings emerge in my study. First, prior to 25 January, some secular and anti-coup activists were previously engaged in Egyptian politics, though interviewees who identified with secular and revolutionary views were more likely to report being active in their political engagement *before* the 18 days. Few, however, were particularly engaged in British politics. Second, three politicising phases emerged that significantly shaped activists' political engagement and understanding vis-à-vis both Egypt and the UK: (1) 25 January (referencing the 18 days of protests that culminated in the resignation of autocrat Hosni Mubarak), (2) 30June/3July (denoting the mass protests against the Muslim Brotherhood President,

Mohammed Morsi, which were followed by his detention by the army and a summer of violence, including the massacre of hundreds of Morsi supporters at various sit-ins such as Rab`a) and (3) the election of former defence chief, El-Sisi, in 2014 (regarded by his opponents as signifying the return to military rule). After the 25 January events, activists from all groups report becoming generally more politicised and interested in Egyptian politics. Interest in US/UK foreign policy, on the other hand, increased among Egyptian diasporas *after* 30June/3July. Some anti-coup activists (predominantly, females in the 18-25 age group) revealed a new engagement in British politics as a consequence of what they regard as the UK government's (non)response to the 2013 'coup' and Rab`a massacre, and the subsequent British support for El-Sisi's presidency.

Sheffer (2003) explores how and why diasporas participate in politics at 'home and abroad', thus creating and influencing politics within various spaces. As political actors emerge out of an increasingly global and transnational context, diasporas illustrate how 'networks of influence that transcend both the territorial and the formal are crucial features of contemporary politics, although they are often overlooked' (Lyons and Mandaville 2010: 135). Because diasporas are connected to more than one space, they can be viewed as transnational agents of different social movements related to those spaces (Clifford 1994; Della Porta 2005). The flow of ideas across transnational space can also encourage members of the diaspora to offer financial and political support to fund struggles in the 'homeland' (Adamson 2005). Diasporas, therefore, represent a globalised context where actors with varying histories and identities participate in diverse processes of social change, locally and globally.

This paper builds on literature that defines diasporas as those who mobilise for political change in their homeland (see Sökefeld 2006; Lyons and Mandaville 2010). In this sense, diaspora, conceptually and empirically, 'does not so much *describe* the world as seek to *remake* it' (Brubaker 2005:12 emphasis in original). While diaspora does invoke notions of national consciousness (Kaldor-Robinson 2002), home, collective identity, shared solidarity and physical migration from one place to another (Sheffer 1986), people within diasporas take on many identities (Hall 1990) and, particularly within the global context, form and reform (Cohen 2009). Much of the terminology around diaspora politics is debated, so when I use 'home' and 'place of origin' to refer to the Egyptian ancestral connection, I do so acknowledging that diasporas often have complex family histories (for example, one activist in this study was born in Saudi Arabia, raised between the UK and UAE and holds an Egyptian passport) and that they are not homogenous with fixed characteristics (Cohen 2009). Arabs in London, as Aly (2015:11) illustrates, cannot be understood through terms such as first or second generation because 'Arabness…is a moving target'. In sum, I understand diaspora as people (including short/long-term migrants) who are conscious and active in their connection to and solidarity with the 'imagined community' (Anderson 1983) and, importantly, who are transnational political agents (Adamson 2012). Furthermore, this paper stresses active and sustained political engagement and mobilisation (Sökefeld 2006; Lyons and Mandaville 2010) to focus attention on diasporas' participation in processes of transnational politics. The remainder of this section provides a brief overview of how Egyptian diaspora engaged in the struggle from and within the UK before I go on to explore their perspectives on democracy.

Egyptians[1] generally rely on annual holidays, phone calls and remittances to retain their connection to Egypt from the UK (Fawzy 2012). This changed for many during the 25 January revolution. Despite being in the UK, diasporas participated in Egypt's struggle and, particularly when communications became difficult, found a role that fitted with being part of a transnational network where they *'could be the voice coming out of Egypt'* (Faoud, *20s,* Egyptian, UK 4+ years, secular). Many decided to participate in the uprisings, even virtually: as well as those that returned 'home', Egyptians in the UK clicked '*attending*' on the 'We are all Khaled Said' Facebook page, used Twitter and Facebook to distribute photos, videos and logistical support, and gathered outside the embassy in London to show their solidarity with demonstrators in Egypt. There were also demonstrations around the UK, for example outside the former BBC building in Manchester and in public spaces in Birmingham and Edinburgh. The experience of active participation during 25 January prompted some to not only attend but also take leading roles in the continued action in the UK. In the months that followed, diasporas gave speeches at demonstrations and organised various events. For example, they held talks and workshops to explore various aspects of the continuing struggle such as the 2012 constitutional referendum and presidential candidates, possibly inspired by the 2011 resolution that granted expatriate Egyptians the right to vote in elections (ElBaradei et al 2012).

For the majority of activists, the 18 days remain the catalyst for a newfound engagement with Egypt's social and political development that was often described through terms such as *'transformational'* and *'life-changing'*. Predominantly, 25 January signalled their first experience of contentious politics: '*We got together and decided to have a demonstration or some kind of sit-in out of solidarity with the Egyptian revolution. And for the first time in my life, I organised political action'* (Ayesha, *40s,* Egyptian, UK10+ years, leftist/anti-coup). As well as generating the moments and processes through which activists learn about democracy and social change, the continued participation of Egyptians, who had not been actively engaged in Egyptian politics prior to the 18 days, suggests that the revolution was a 'critical event' that created an imagined transnational community (Sökefeld 2006). Mobilised diasporas continued to return to Egypt to attend sit-ins during the summer and winter of 2011 when the world's media had largely disappeared from Tahrir Square and protesters were being attacked during their demands for presidential elections. Some diaspora activists travelled to Egypt in the period after 25 January when Egypt was controlled by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), under the leadership of Field Marshall Tantawi. Dina explains that she and her friend travelled to Egypt to attend demonstrations during the post-Mubarak period, when they felt most needed. Having fewer people in the squares made demonstrating dangerous and the presence of more people was therefore necessary:

> *They can only attack you if you're a small group because if you are a witness no-one can protect you, but if you are a bigger group they won't attack you and they have to play smart, so I called a friend (in the UK) who went back with me, once with [against] SCAF, the previous army head, and once*

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[1] ONS census data (2011) puts the figure of Egyptians living in the UK at less than 30,000 whereas Karmi (1997) and Fawzy (2012) cite estimates of 100,000-250,000. Egyptians reflect "all forms of religious, professional and social diversity" (Fawzy 2012:48) and have not settled in a particular place or region (Karmi 1997). Therefore, terms such as 'community' must be approached with caution when talking about Egyptians in the UK.

[against] *Morsi* (Dina, *30s,* Egyptian, UK 6+ years, secular).

Despite the significance of the 18 days to the formation of an active Egyptian diaspora in the UK, other periods such as the sit-ins in 2011, the 2012 elections and 30June/3July also prompted diaspora mobilisation, though the numbers of Egyptians attending and holding demonstrations in the UK reduced considerably after Mubarak's resignation. The drop in numbers appears to substantiate claims made in this study that attitudes and activism of Egyptians in the UK mirror those in Egypt: 25 January was a moment when Egyptians came together in a 'utopian' display of national solidarity, but divisions between three key positions (Islamist, secular, nationalist) shaped the kind of mobilisation that followed. Across all groups and periods of change, the overwhelming justification for participation was solidarity: to show Egyptians within Egypt they were not alone in their demands for social and political change and to highlight this solidarity to government officials in the UK and to the British media (Underhill, 2016). Fouad explains,

> *We started writing letters to MPs, telling them this is what is happening in Egypt and you have to put pressure on the [British] government not to support the Egyptian regime. Trying to think of any way of doing something that we can be sort of the voice of the people in Egypt* (*20s,* Egyptian, UK 4+ years, secular).

One of the points to draw out from this section is the continued centrality of the nation-state to diasporic groups, despite the analytical critique of this concept. Participating in the struggle has broadly strengthened diaspora activists' identification with Egypt. The formation of specific groups in the UK (such as those lobbying for or against the 'coup') and the presence of British-Egyptians in Egypt during the protests (at Rab`a protests, for example), if anything, confirm that diasporas are formed through multiple identities that intersect and intensify with changing contexts. That they mobilise specifically in relation to Egypt demonstrates the continued relevance of the nation-state and the notion of the 'imagined community' (Anderson 1983).

Having offered a brief glimpse of UK-based activism in the Egyptian case, the remainder of the paper explores the connection between diaspora mobilisation and understandings of democracy.

Rethinking and learning in revolution: diaspora perspectives on democracy

This study finds that activists learn through a continuing process of observation, reflection, new or reinterpreted understandings, new inquiries and, crucial for critical learning, action (see Freire 1970, Allman 1999, 2001). As studies of social movement learning demonstrate (see Foley 1999; Hall and Turay 2006; Hall et al 2012), important learning happens informally and incidentally when engaging in activism. Focusing on what diaspora activists learned about democracy through their engagement and participation enable a closer examination of the connection between activism and democratisation by foregrounding the perspectives of the people who are at the centre of the calls for change. At the heart of activists' mobilisation was a complex discourse of democracy that warrants investigation; activists in this study reflected on democracy, questioned its meaning and reinterpreted it in light of the events in Egypt (and the global response). Connecting this to the diaspora perspective highlights the importance of rethinking democracy for the contemporary global

political context. Through their participation and engagement - in the UK, Egypt and online - in the four years following 25 January, diaspora activists gained new knowledge, skills, insights and perspectives about themselves, the world around them and their role in creating change (Underhill 2016; in press). Although this paper is predominantly informed by critiques of liberal democracy and consensus-based politics, the established discourses on democracy (and subsequently, democratisation and democratic transition) are foundational precisely because of the ways in which they emerge within the activists' reflections. Attention to these discourses complicates our understanding of the location of diasporas within global politics and the need to incorporate diaspora politics in the theorisation of democracy.

Within mainstream scholarly literature and among the broader public, understandings of democracy have been dominated by liberal notions of an 'end-point' (Grugel and Bishop 2014), where democracy is reduced to a set of implementable processes and institutions. Concepts such as nation, state and citizen determine a person's legitimacy as a political actor within a given context. Theories of democratisation and democratic transition, in the liberal sense, represent democracy through the language of freedoms, equality, legal justice, institutions, electoral processes and control of the military, and do so in ways that can be empirically observed and measured (see Diamond 2008). Transition-based paradigms are predominantly guided by liberal, rational and materialistic approaches where democratisation is represented by 'not only free and fair elections but also the creation of democratic institutions and an accompanying democratic political culture' (Grand 2014: 22). Predominantly based on empirical analyses from Europe and the US (Munck 2001), 'transitologists' emphasise elites, leadership and state actors, while other non-state actors (such as social movements and activists) are marginalised (Della Porta 2014).

These liberal, administrative and technical dimensions of democracy featured heavily in activists' reflections on the Egyptian struggle, despite often going on to explore the importance of 'people based politics.' They debated referendums, constitutional reforms and elections, political parties and leaders, and issues of governance, policies and programmes. For many, these were new experiences that prompted significant shifts in understanding the institutional and procedural aspects of democracy. For example, Salma noted,

> *My first time ever to read the constitution was the Egyptian one. I don't think I have ever sat down and read one. I don't see myself understanding all these things but in the first Egyptian constitution I actually read everything and followed the whole six-month process, watching videos, and I was critical and reading all of the different things put in the constitution. Because they had this thing for expats to write down what they think and I was sending in my opinion'* (Salma, *20s,* dual-nationality, anti-coup activist).

Such engagement with the procedural dimensions of democracy is not unusual. In the lead up to referendums and presidential elections, Egyptian diasporas discussed and disseminated the constitution online, held lectures and events in London for other Egyptians (for example, to discuss the presidential candidates), and travelled to Egypt during periods of voting to discuss which way to vote with friends and family. Activists reflected a belief that - in 2012, at least - these formal processes held the potential for democratisation, suggesting an underlying outcome/end-point understanding of democracy. However, it is important to note Salma's reference to

the consultation process of the 2012 constitutional referendum where the participatory dimension of democracy was brought to the fore: she suggests that the inclusion of 'expats' encouraged her participation. By being part of the process, she sought new knowledge, reflected on the content and implications of the constitution, and discussed it with family and friends. Although people like Salma uphold formalistic approaches to democracy, sometimes unquestionably, they alert us to the importance of locating democracy in new spaces. Democracy, from this perspective, could be viewed as existing in processes of political learning that navigate and balance the mechanisms of liberal democracy with the direct participation of society.

Activists learned through broader 'bottom-up' understandings of democracy that emphasise the role of people in social change. In this sense, approaches such as participatory or deliberative democracy present a challenge to the hegemony of 'top-down' approaches by taking aim at the unequal power relations that liberal democracy deploys and preserves. The Egyptian protests were a case in point. The popular slogan of the revolution, 'Bread, Freedom and Social Justice', reflected on state-society relations and the composition of Egyptian society as a whole. As well as alluding to the 'Bread Riots' of 1977 that followed the withdrawal of state subsidies for staple foods, the slogan captured anger and frustration of Egyptians at rising living costs, increasing inequality and police brutality (Achcar 2013). 'The people' encapsulated their grievances with the state, highlighting the struggle of those who were oppressed, marginalised and excluded, economically, politically and socially.

During 25 January, activists engaged in debates about the ideas behind the slogan, though generally fell short of discussing how to bring about such change, as various interviewees agreed. These discussions of change were nevertheless pivotal for activists who had not previously participated in political or social action and felt they were gaining new insights into notions of revolutionary change and struggle, particularly when they engaged with experienced opposition (leftist/secular) activists. For many, these discussions enabled them to learn how power permeates society and to contemplate their role in creating change. Despite the return of the military with El-Sisi, the experience of participating in the revolutionary moment empowered many opposition activists who *'started to believe more in people-based politics because of the revolution'* (Ayesha, *40s,* Egyptian, UK10+ years, identifies with leftists *and* anti-coup positions). Therefore, an important dimension for considering the prospects of democratisation in Egypt is to consider what this 'people-based politics' means and how it manifests in processes of social change. This is only possible through coming to terms with people's understandings and perspectives of the kind of change they seek and the ways they contribute.

One of the most important perspectives that contribute to this article's quest to animate 'democracy' is the manner in which democracy is believed to transcend formal politics. Despite often referring to electoral processes and institutions, activists also understand democracy as the ways in which people within a society relate to each other, often through language that highlights the affective dimension of politics. 25 January was often described (by activists who went to Egypt as well as those demonstrating and participating within the UK) as *'utopia'* and a time and space where people from all backgrounds *'were living democracy'* (Amira, *40s*, Egyptian, UK 10+ years, secular). Diasporas reflected on the civility they perceived to be emerging during this time, particularly for British-Egyptians and long-term migrants,

one which contrasted with previous experiences of life in Egypt. Ahmad noted, for example, *'I only heard three words from the 28th [of January] to the 11th [of February, during the 25 January protests]: sorry, excuse me, thank you. Sorry, excuse me, thank you. [It was] the first time in my life to hear this in Egypt'* (Ahmad, *40s*, UK 10+ years, dual citizenship, anti-coup). Similarly, Mona travelled to Tahrir from the UK with her father and brother to attend the demonstrations and recalls the following,

> *Arriving at the airport it was all the same Egypt but when you got to Tahrir everyone trusted each other and it was a safe Egypt. You could just go into the square and have conversations and talk with anyone and everyone about everything and it was a whole different Egypt. You know, Egypt had gotten worse with people not trusting each other and society had changed in the last few years but in Tahrir it was completely different* (Mona, *20s*, dual citizenship, anti-coup).

These 'utopian' reflections 'privilege' civil society (Grugel and Bishop 2014:41) and reveal understandings of democracy as part of an everyday lived-experience where difference is accepted and society is trusting, open and safe. They sit in contrast with rational and instrumentalist understandings of the *'ballot-box democracy'* (in the words of various interviewees), which many of the activists themselves critiqued. These views suggest an important but often-overlooked dimension of democracy that concerns *how* we live together. Broader conceptualisations of democracy, therefore, provide a lens through which to understand state-society relations. For example, witnessing violent crack-downs by the police and military against protestors (in person or through online video footage and photographs) provided material evidence of the ways in which 'the state exerts power *over* civil society' (Mann 1984:190 emphasis in original), which activists had been aware but not fully cognisant of before the revolution (Underhill, In press). The brutality of the murder of Khaled Said by the police (Ghonim 2012), for example, mobilised many activists. But the violence directed towards protesters by state-apparatuses during 'the 18 days' deepened activists' understanding of the relationship between the Egyptian state and its citizens and even fuelled their continued participation.

> *On February 2 we had the infamous Battle of the Camel and I was 30 yards away from it, seeing people who were there being trampled and seeing police, disguised police officers, waving their batons around. That changed everything for me and it was something I was physically seeing right in front of me and I didn't... I wasn't going to buy that this was just some random Egyptians who wanted the protests to stop, no. This was the police and this was done by the state. They may not have been police officers but they would certainly [have been] sent by the state for hire or whatever. So that changed me and that's when I thought no, we need to carry on* (Nour, *20s*, dual citizenship, secular).

Nour shows people become politicised by witnessing, observing and reflecting. As the struggle continued, conversations became debates. Families and friends would discuss, argue and analyse the reasons for and implications of various events and the role of various actors in different moments of change. 25 January signified the beginning of a continuing process of experiential learning about the relationship between the state and its citizens.

Activists' perspectives on democracy changed by reflecting on the relationship between the state and its citizens. This highlights the centrality of power within democratic theory and shows that critical engagement with democracy requires an interrogation of structures of power and oppression. In the aftermath of 30June/3July, activists who were engaged in opposition before 25 January inquired into the relationship between Egypt's regime, elite, judiciary and media. They reflected on the ways in which state-endorsed media controlled rhetoric, created fear of the 'other' (Muslim Brotherhood, Salafi, terrorist, foreigner, activist…) and circulated, reinforced and legitimised the judiciary's actions that, for example, enabled detention and imprisonment (often without charge), death sentences and impunity for police officers who had been witnessed committing violent assaults. Such inquiries were transformative even for activists who were highly engaged in opposing military rule before the struggle: *'I mean even [in] these pre-revolutionary years you might think that you knew a lot but after the revolution you discovered that there is a huge amount of things that you had no idea existed - how the country was run, the dynamics within the ruling elites and stuff…'* (Fouad, *20s*, Egyptian, UK 4+ years, secular).

Reflecting on these relationships generated learning about the institutional mechanisms through which the *ancien regime* and elites retain their power, restricting avenues for democracy in both top-down and bottom-up senses, controlling institutions and society from the top and excluding civil society participation from below. Furthermore, observing SCAF's abuse of power brought home the militarised national identity constructed around Egypt's colonial and revolutionary past. However, *'It was very difficult for a lot of people to acknowledge that it is the army who are one of the factors of why we are where we are. Still, most people are in denial. Even among the activists they could not say "Down, Down with military rule" easily'* (Ayesha, 40s, Egyptian, UK10+ years, socialists and anti-coup). For many Egyptians, their perspectives on democracy are constrained by powerful historicised forces that foreclose 'unlearning' (Foley 1999) about the locus of power and oppression, in this case, the value of the military.

The bloody dispersals of sit-ins and demonstrations throughout 2011-2013, sectarian violence, draconian anti-protest laws and the response of global powers such as the US and the UK have led some to conclude that a 'ballot-box democracy' is not compatible with Egypt. The proponents of this position corroborated it by citing history, culture, location and level of education as barriers. With connotations of Middle Eastern exceptionalism (Salamey 2015), some elements of nationalist and secular diaspora appeared to reject the possibility for democracy in Egypt and settled into a pro-security narrative that Egypt needs a 'just' or 'benevolent dictator'. But this 'anti-democracy' view was particularly derided by activists within the anti-coup movement: '*They have come up with this term called 'Dictatorship democracy' [laughs] and I feel like, "Are you for real?!" Sometimes in Egypt they never fail to amuse…*' (Salma, *20s*, dual citizenship, anti-coup activist).

However 'utopian' the 18 days were, the events that followed presented a challenge for activists on all sides as they continue to struggle with what democracy is and could mean in the Egyptian context. Citing the removal of 'an elected president' (Morsi) and the subsequent response from Western powers (notably US and UK governments), activists on both sides perceived democracy to be '*a sugar-coated lie*'

(Ali, *20s*, dual citizenship, secular) and a *'facade'* (Rana, *18,* dual citizenship, anti-coup). Although anti-coup campaign materials used in the UK included slogans such as 'Pro-Democracy' and 'Democracy is Our Right', this was arguably a repertoire used by this movement to draw attention to the 'undemocratic' nature of Morsi's removal and to suggest to the British public that support for the coup (and, subsequently, El-Sisi) contradicts the West's own narrative of liberal democracy (Underhill, 2016).

The narratives uncovered within this project show that activists' understandings of democracy are dynamic and subjective. While democracy as an idiom remains powerful, many activists reflected on the liberalised version perpetuated by 'the West' to put forward understandings of democracy that emphasise power. They struggle with what they perceive to be contradictions between how democracy is conceptualised and its material reality.

Conclusions: democracy, learning and 'the political'

As students of democracy argue, 'democratization rarely follows a linear path… there are likely to be stunning advances and heartbreaking reversals' (Grand 2014: 176). The tumultuous events in Egypt can certainly be viewed in those terms: from Mubarak's unexpected resignation in February 2011 to the massacres at Rab`a (and others) in August 2013, Egyptian diasporas mobilised during an emotional and exhausting period of change. But despite their continued endeavours, the perspectives of those who are supposed to be part of the democratisation process are often missing from many analyses. This paper sought to present some of the ways the UK-based diasporas participated in Egypt's revolution and their perspectives during this important period of change.

This case of Egyptian mobilisation shows that diasporas cannot be ignored in discussions of contemporary politics and democracy. Acknowledging diasporas as part of a nation's social and political landscape raises questions for conceptions of democracy that are bounded by notions of the nation state; diasporas live within, between and beyond more than one nation and their perspectives are informed by globalised experiences and identities. As one activist who grew up in the UK revealed, '*living in a so-called [British] democracy we have a different perspective and we should be able to talk with people in Egypt and tell them what they are missing*' (Mona, *20s*, dual citizenship, anti-coup). Although their perspective might be regarded as resulting from a different diasporic experience, some migrant activists suggested they learned about democracy by '*being far away, from the outside looking in, I can see things more clearly…more sane[ly]…*' (Heba, *50s*, UK 5+ years, secular). Physical distance, it appears, can compel some diasporas to return home during a period of change. It also provides space for reflection and learning. Although turnout at elections has been low since the vote was granted to expatriates (ElBaradei et al 2012), by participating in the struggle through their varied practices and locations of activism, Egypt's UK-based diasporas have situated themselves within Egypt's polity, bringing with them understandings and perspectives that are informed by a globalised view of the world.

The voices in this paper show that understandings of democracy are dynamic and continue to be shaped by different moments, new insights and experiences: activists

learn through the many processes of struggle, seeking new knowledges, developing new skills and coming to terms with their own actions and the actions of others. The 18 days, for those who travelled to Egypt, like many locals, represent an alternative understanding of democracy as Egyptians connected with others from different backgrounds. This enabled an imagining of possibilities for an alternative future: in this moment, democracy became acceptance and tolerance in difference. However, to some extent, democracy can also be divisive as responses to the events of 2013 illustrate; Egyptians became divided and polarised as Zakaria – who, since 30June/3July, has struggled to identify with any group - commented: '*On 30th of June, people did discuss that we should accept that this [Morsi] is what democracy brought - that we have to learn how to respect the system. In this point we get polarised…*' (Zakaria, *30s,* UK 2+ years). The emotions associated with the struggle created an impasse by closing down the opportunity for debate and contestation and by preventing a coherent narrative of opposition to military rule. Adel, a British-Egyptian who travelled to participate in the sit-in at Rab`a, like others in the anti-coup movement, admitted that since the massacre, '*before I talk to someone, I check that they think like me'* (Adel, *30s*, dual citizenship, anti-coup).

Mouffe's (2005) conception of passions within the political is useful for interrogating this impasse: democracy can be deepened through the affective dimension of politics because of the collective identities that can be formed. However, in the Egyptian case, collective identities have been constructed around fear of the other that enables the populist narrative of 'security and stability' to prevail over and divert attention away from an alternative narration of an emancipatory struggle of power, social justice and social change. Essentially, a populist, securitised and affective narrative of 'the people' as a collective identity (Mouffe 2005) has silenced and marginalised the struggle for 'Bread, Freedom and Social Justice'. The consequence is that, '*people tend to think [democracy] is the obvious thing - that it is about having multiple candidates and going to the ballot box. That's not it for sure. For me, democracy [means] we need to have more than a country with 40% illiteracy and 50% extreme poverty…'* (Dina, *30s*, UK 5+ years, secular). Although it remains illusive within the rationalist discourse of liberal democracy, 'the affective dimension of politics is…crucial for democratic theory' as it realigns the struggle with 'hope for the future' (Mouffe 2005: 25) and highlights the emancipatory conception of politics as conflict and struggle (see Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014; Mouffe 2005). The activists' voices in this study offer some scope to exploring the affective dimension of politics; the voices of Egypt's revolution show that - despite intense frustration and division - hope for change endures, while the division between them reminds us that alternative approaches to politics and democracy are important and necessary for shared hope to become a reality.

The Egyptian revolution has politicised a diaspora who are questioning notions of democracy and politics and are shaping politics within and across national borders. Participating during and since the 18 days has opened up opportunities for discussion and thinking that many activists had not experienced before. Similarly, observing the events unfold in the months and years that followed, and paying attention to the response nationally and globally, has prompted new questions, understandings and perspectives of the many actors and processes involved in politics and processes of 'democratisation'.

Diasporas are transnational global actors and agents (Adamson 2012) whose participation in the politics of 'home' manifests in many ways from many locations. Their participation exposes the limits of democratic theory that is centred on the nation-state, both where nation and state are bound together and where this emphasis is rejected, as with cosmopolitanism. Bringing together the notions of democracy, diaspora and learning exposes limitations of the dominant approaches within democratic theory and global politics precisely when they emphasise change: to interrogate their connections, and to keep learning, rethinking and reinterpreting our own conceptualisations of democracy and social change seems to be our own necessary and urgent struggle.

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