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Title: Appropriating Democratic Discourse in North Africa

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Abstract

Political actors across the globe often use the language of democracy, but they do not all use the same language. Drawing on content analysis of 1,935 speeches given between 2000 and 2010, this study examines how five North African autocrats appropriated the global discursive form of democracy by altering its content. These leaders proposed that the special circumstances of each country preclude any one-size-fits-all global definition of democracy, whose imposition in their countries, they claim, would be inappropriate, ineffective, or dangerous. Through their speeches, these rulers redefined democracy by engaging in active ideological work, weaving together discourses that combined global norms, state interests, and local values. This suggests that, in addition to being a benchmark by which to measure modes of governance, “democracy” is also a language game played between actors on a global stage. By synthesizing theoretical frameworks drawn from world polity and social movement studies traditions, this study shows that peripheral actors may adapt global discourses purposefully and strategically rather than encountering them as passive participants in a purely mimetic cultural diffusion process. This has implications for a wide range of global norms that are open to appropriation by local actors drawing on domestic and external political developments and experiences.

Key words: Global culture, appropriation, democracy, North Africa, content analysis, political discourse

Introduction

In the early 21st century, it is rare to find opposition to democracy *per se*. The World Values Survey, which has been conducted in 87 countries over the past two decades, has found that over 90% of respondents think that democracy is a “good” or “very good” system, and more than 85% of respondents “agree” or “strongly agree” that, despite its problems, democracy is “better than any other system.” Even groups who once openly opposed democracy are now keen to associate themselves with it. For example, Muslim Brotherhood spokespersons repeatedly and emphatically describe the organization as committed to democracy (Muslim Brotherhood, 2014) despite the fact that its founder, Hassan al-Bannā’, denounced parliamentary democracy a half-century earlier (Al-Bannā’, 1978).

Almost anyone, it seems, can claim to act in the name of democracy. Western leaders routinely justify intrusions into the domestic politics of developing countries by invoking democracy (Von Hippel, 2000) and long-standing autocrats frequently use the language of democracy in official communications despite their severely limited democratic credentials. While mainstream scholarship tends to focus on democracy as a political outcome rather than a definitional struggle, the near-universal use of the language of democracy suggests that, in addition to being a benchmark by which modes of governance are measured, “democracy” is also a language game played between actors on a global stage. This study argues that political actors with little commitment to democratic governance actively labor to develop “appropriated discourses” that *appropriate* the global norm of democracy in accordance with their political interests, redefining it in ways they present as contextually *appropriate*. This project compares discourses of democracy in nearly 2,000 speeches given by heads of state from five North African countries – Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt – between 2000 and 2010 to

illustrate how actors around the world purposefully adapt globally-normative terms like “democracy.”

Global Norms and Appropriating Democracy

Whether due to increases in global economic development (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005; Lipset, 1994), American ideological hegemony (Fukuyama, 2006), or the spread of international institutions (Meyer et al., 1997), scholars note a trend toward increasing global isomorphism in political discourses – such as discourses of democracy – beginning in the twentieth century. While scholars in the world polity tradition point to this isomorphism as evidence of an “overarching world culture” (Boli and Thomas, 1997: 172) that reflects “putatively universal principles” (Meyer, 2010: 14), it is clear that the world has not become entirely isomorphic; it is common for actors to adopt global discursive forms in an attempt to retain legitimacy without implementing their underlying norms (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Meyer et al., 1997; Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Many scholars identify this practice as “decoupling,” whereby local institutions pay lip service to global cultural forms – such as democracy (Furman, 2010; Smith and Wiest, 2005; Torfason and Ingram, 2010) – without enacting their content in practice (Lim and Tsutsui, 2012). One common characteristic among studies of decoupling is their limited view of potential adopters’ agency. As in much of the literature on diffusion, receptability is largely cast in terms of structural characteristics said to determine a potential target’s “threshold of adoption” (Linos, 2011; Wejnert, 2005). This conceptualization theorizes global cultural diffusion as a mimetic process in which potential adopters of global models are essentially passive.

Other scholars working in world polity and related traditions argue that potential adopters engage with global norms and policy scripts through a more agentic imitation process in which peripheral and semi-peripheral actors play a role in diversifying the content of global cultural forms (Adams, 2008: 616–617; Halliday, 2009; Halliday and Carruthers, 2007; Napolitano and Flores, 2003: 90–91). Here, these actors engage in decoupling because aspects of a given global norm are lost in the process of its “translation” into local terms (Boyle et al., 2001: 524; Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996; Sahlin-Andersson, 1996: 92). While this strand of scholarship allots more agency to potential adopters of global norms, it focuses primarily on actors it considers to be earnestly committed to implementing them. As in the mainstream world polity tradition, scholars in this area devote relatively little attention to the intentional and strategic adaptation of global norms by actors with no discernable intention of adhering to them (e.g., Czarniawska-Joerges, 1997: 172).

The sociological literature on framing provides a framework for understanding this strategic discursive adaptation. Drawing on Goffman’s (1974: 21) concepts of frames, or “schemata of interpretation” that enable people to “locate, perceive, identify, and label” objects and experiences, framing refers to the intentional ways that actors attempt to construct their self-presentations to gain the support of prospective constituents and actual or prospective resource providers (Snow et al., 1986). Here, as in the world polity and related literatures, autocratic elites use the language of democracy because it is culturally resonant with international institutions, powerful global actors, and local populations (Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Sen, 1999). However, an influential branch of the framing literature adds that some actors attempt to challenge hegemonic discourses (e.g., global-cultural discourses) by articulating frames that explicitly contradict them (Ferre, 2002, 2003; McCammon et al., 2007). I argue, additionally, that autocrats use a specific

framing tactic – appropriation – to discursively identify themselves with democracy while simultaneously avoiding substantive democratization.

Appropriation refers to the adoption and adaptation of foreign concepts, practices, or symbols with the goal of asserting authentic ownership over them (Jansen, 2007; Leavy, 2007). Central to this process is resignification, or investing cultural forms with new, adapted content that is often far-removed from their “original” content (Schneider, 2003: 224). Scholars typically theorize appropriation in one of four ways: as exploitation, dominance, exchange, or transculturation (Rogers, 2006: 474). The first two usages, exploitation and domination, imply the theft of cultural or intellectual property of one group by another. The exploitation approach focuses on the commodification and incorporation of elements from subordinated cultures by hegemonic or imperial groups (Rao and Ziff, 1997). The dominance approach, on the other hand, theorizes appropriation as a potential site of resistance on behalf of oppressed groups (Hall, 1980). The exchange approach understands appropriation as a mutually-beneficial, reciprocal exchange of symbolic and material resources between heterogeneous parties of approximately equivalent power (Büyükokutan, 2011). Finally, the transculturation approach proposes that appropriation is a central feature of all cultures, hybridity is the “normal” condition of culture, and culture itself is a product of contact between peoples (Pratt, 2008).

Despite the wide variety of theorizations of appropriation, one theme ties all of them together: actors need not be committed to a given cultural object in order to appropriate it. In fact, the exploitation and domination approaches maintain that potential appropriators are emphatically not committed to the content of the cultural objects they seek to appropriate. This quality of appropriation makes it particularly useful tool for understanding autocrats’ use of the language of democracy. As a global norm, democracy is widely promoted and discussed; its

meaning, however, is particularly unstable. Some have called it a “floating signifier waiting to be appropriated by different political forces” (Munck, 2002: 11) whose “meaning [is] different in liberal, radical, anti-fascist and conservative anti-communist discourses” (Laclau, 1996: 208). While the mainstream global definition of democracy advanced by Western countries and international organizations focuses on elections and political representation – as stated in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which enshrines the right of citizens “[t]o vote and to be elected at genuine periodic elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret ballot, guaranteeing the free expression of the will of the electors” (United Nations, 1996: Article 25b) – democracy is among the most deeply contested and least precisely defined concepts in the repertoire of global norms (Moghadam, 2013: 64-67, 97-98; Tsutsui, 2009). The definition and measurement of democracy is even a source of conflict among scholars who study it as a political outcome (e.g., see: Bollen, 1990; Schumpeter, 1950; Wolin, 2008; Zakaria, 1997). These competing claims as to which sociopolitical configurations count as cases of democracy suggest that, while the linguistic form of democracy is indeed global, its definitional content is quite diverse.

The present study makes no claims as to the “real” definition of democracy, but rather investigates debates over its definition using appropriation as a theoretical framework. This is illustrated through the adoption and adaptation of the global concept of “democracy” by North African autocrats in the first decade of the 21st century. These rulers seemed to be preoccupied both with identifying themselves with the global concept of “democracy” and also with explicitly redefining the concept to make it appropriate for their blatantly undemocratic methods of rule and political interests. King Mohammed VI of Morocco, for example, called his country the oldest Arab democracy, but also derided unfettered electoral competition as “inappropriate” for

Moroccans (Mohammed VI, 2007). Algerian president ‘Abdul‘aziz Butefliqa said that democracy “is, thank God, rooted in our country, but only after a hard and bitter experience that nearly caused the collapse of the state. Among the reasons for this was its novelty... It was forced, without taking into account the necessary evolution of things and our specific environment, without taking into account [its] *appropriateness*” (Butefliqa, 2000).

Appropriateness, these and other North African rulers argued, is gained through reconceptualizations of democracy that allow it to solve local problems and serve local interests – primarily the interests of the rulers. Investigating this active “ideological work” (Berger, 1981) provides insight on how peripheral actors engage with and contribute to global cultural norms via appropriation – the vehicle through which global norms are reconciled with the interests of actors who have no intention of adopting them. The case studies that follow examine this process.

Data, Method and Global Themes

While it common practice for autocrats across the globe to talk about democracy, the question of how they do so is particularly acute in the Arab world, a region that has long stood out for its lack of democratization (Diamond, 2010) despite enthusiasm for democracy among Arabs (Tessler et al., 2012) and Arab rulers’ frequent promises of political liberalization (Al-Azmeh, 1994; Bishara, 1998; Ghalyūn, 1991, 1992; Huwaidi, 1993; Ismail, 1995; Sadiki, 2004). This project analyzes every speech given between 2000 and 2010 by heads of state from five North African countries – King Mohammed VI of Morocco, President ‘Abdul‘aziz Butefliqa of Algeria, President Zin al-‘Abedin Ben ‘Ali of Tunisia, Colonel Mu‘ammar al-Qadhafi of Libya, and President Husni Mubarak of Egypt – to illustrate how autocrats appropriate democracy. I chose these cases because they constitute a contiguous geographical region, share membership in

three overlapping international communities (the Arab, Islamicate, and African), and all five were governed by a single autocratic ruler during the first decade of the 21st century.

The source material for this study consists of an exhaustive corpus of 1,935 speeches in English, French, and Arabic I gathered from official government archives in late 2010 and early 2011. (Since Libyan leader Mu‘ammar al-Qadhafi’s website archived relatively few of his speeches, I included his *Green Book* in his speech corpus. Qadhafi often read from his *Green Book* during public appearances (Tremlett, 1993), and it was so closely linked to Qadhafi that copies of it were publicly burned by demonstrators during the 2011 uprising). Of these, I identified 878 relevant speeches (45%) using a set of search terms based on the word “democracy” and its derivatives (democ-/démoc- in English/French and *dimuqrāt*- in Arabic, excluding proper names). I then extracted 1,630 excerpts based on a qualitative reading of where the discussion of democracy began and ended (see Table 1).

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

I coded these excerpts to investigate how North African autocrats defined democracy in their official speeches using a custom computer program written in Perl designed to minimize contextual information during the coding process.¹ I developed codes based both on concepts anticipated prior to reading the speeches drawn from relevant scholarly literatures as well as on repeated articulations encountered during coding, with randomly-selected excerpts revisited to ensure consistency. I then agglomerated an initial list of 31 categories² into seven major emergent themes: overall evaluations of democracy,³ evaluations of “global” models of democracy, corporatism, security, neoliberalism, historical legitimacy, and direct democracy. I

coded every excerpt for positive and negative mentions of each theme, though only three – overall evaluations, evaluations of global models, and neoliberalism – had non-trivial amounts of negative mentions [NOTE4]. Codes are not mutually exclusive: any excerpt can contain multiple themes as well as both positive and negative mentions of any theme. Table 2 presents an exhaustive list of the discursive categories that make up the seven major themes relevant to the current study.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Of the seven major themes identified above, North African autocrats invoked two with relatively similar frequency. First, they spoke overwhelmingly positively about democracy; this theme appeared in 92% (Mubarak) to 97% (Ben ‘Ali) of the excerpts, with positive mentions outnumbering negative mentions by 74% across the corpus (see Figure 1). For example:

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Tunisia resolutely pursues the course of change, and continuously strives to reinforce democracy and political pluralism, to consecrate freedoms, and to provide broader opportunities for participation to the various components of society, within a context governed by the rule of law, the protection of human rights, and the values of solidarity and mutual assistance. (Ben ‘Ali, 2002)

In addition, all five leaders repeatedly emphasized the presence of democracy – as they defined it – in their countries:

Today we proceed with a renewed vision. A vision that completes the construction of the constitutional foundations of our democratic experience.
(Mubarak, 2005)

Second, all five North African autocrats were considerably less enthusiastic about the universal applicability of global models of democracy. Positive mentions of this theme appeared in 7% (Qadhafi) to 67% (Ben ‘Ali) of the excerpts, with positive mentions outnumbering negative mentions by only 9% across the corpus (see Figure 2). These leaders offered numerous reservations about one-size-fits-all approaches to democracy. Since globalization threatens cultural identity, according to one speech, “it is imperative to develop solutions to preemptively reconcile what is universal and what is national” (Mohammed VI, 2008a). Algeria’s Butefliqa similarly argues that “although it does not meet international standards for representative political democracy, the Algerian political system... constitutes an authentic democratic experiment” (Butefliqa, 2006) that is “in no way the result of external pressure or an imitation that neglects our values and realities” (Butefliqa, 2004).

In many speeches, these leaders take aim at the most common features of global models of democracy having to do with representation, pluralism, and elections. Libya’s Qadhafi, a vociferous critic of global models, often derided representation as inherently undemocratic:

Having real democracy means that... [t]he people are the master. The sovereignty of the people must not be usurped and placed in the hands of a few individuals called the government or the representatives. The theory of representation has deceived the peoples of the world. No one can represent the people.

Representation is falsification. (Qadhafi, 2007)

While Qadhafi was clearly an outlier, even the more mainstream leaders articulated direct challenges to these central aspects of global definitions of democracy. For example, Morocco's Mohammed VI lamented that, without the "necessary limitations," elections could be manipulated into "unnecessary and inappropriate competition" (Mohammed VI, 2007). Similarly, Algeria's Butefliqa argued that single-party hegemony was a democratic system because "Algerian society does not consider [it] oppressive or despotic," while noting that this "could seem confusing" to outside observers because of their "erroneous approaches" to understanding democracy (Butefliqa, 2005b).

These tendencies indicate that North African autocrats felt compelled to invoke and associate themselves with the global norm of democracy, although all of them challenge what they see as an inappropriate global model. But how did these rulers reconfigure the content of the global discursive form of democracy?

Appropriating Democratic Discourse

In addition to the global pro-democracy, anti-universal themes discussed above, each ruler also offered a distinct localized model of democracy, sounding themes specific to each country. These themes illustrate how democracy and related concepts may be appropriated by

autocrats in non-democratic settings: how they are made to appear appropriate in ways defined by rulers who wish to pre-empt challenges to their democratic credentials. Table 3 tallies positive mentions of these themes in speeches given by North African rulers. As indicated by the “none” category, these are not the only themes present in these rulers’ discourses, nor do they exclusively differentiate rulers’ discourses from one another; however, the dominant themes in the discourses tend to vary from ruler to ruler.

[TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

Tunisia: Corporatist Democracy

Former Tunisian president Zin al-‘Abidin Ben ‘Ali came to power on November 7, 1987 by ousting his predecessor, Habib Bourguiba, in a bloodless coup that Ben ‘Ali called “the Change.” Among Ben ‘Ali’s stated commitments from the beginning of his reign were the promotion of political pluralism, the elimination of presidency-for-life, and democratization (Sadiki, 2002b). While some observers were initially optimistic about the potential for political change in Tunisia (Anderson, 1991), more recent scholarship argues that the only transition that has taken place since 1987 “has been from single party rule to ruling party hegemony,” with many Bourguiba-era practices remaining in place, cloaked in discourses of pluralism and representation (Sadiki, 2002b). Table 2 illustrates this tendency by showing that Ben ‘Ali is the most outspoken of these five rulers in his emphasis on centralist corporatism, an ideology emphasizing the *avant-garde* role of the ruling party and an integrated, hierarchical, non-competitive socio-political system (Western, 1991).

The Rassemblement constitutionnel démocratique (RCD), Ben ‘Ali’s ruling party, played a central role in Ben ‘Ali’s discussion of democracy:

[W]e continue to endeavor to make of the RCD a school for democracy, both as a matter of thought and practice. Since the beginning of the Change, we have relied on the RCD to be an avant-garde party, the party of democratic choice which is one of our national constants and one of the foundations of our reform project.

(Ben ‘Ali, 2008)

Here we see a continuation of two Bourguiba-era discursive formations: *l’État-patron* (state as tutelary) and *l’État-parti* (state as party) (Belkhodja, 1998: 131). Democracy, pluralism, and political maturity are all said to emanate from the center – occupied by Ben ‘Ali and the RCD. While Ben ‘Ali permitted opposition parties, he did not allow movements with significant social support to register (Albrecht and Wegner, 2006: 129), and the RCD regularly garnered more than 80% of the vote in parliamentary elections (Brownlee, 2009; Sadiki, 2002b: 497).

Still, Ben ‘Ali claimed that the existence of multiple political parties was evidence of Tunisian democracy. These legally-recognized minor parties owed their political survival to Ben ‘Ali and the ruling RCD (Sadiki, 2002a: 122), who controlled them via parliamentary quotas and state subsidies:

Since the Change, we have made successive initiatives... to consecrate our democratic choice in daily life and reinforce pluralism in our constitutional institutions. We have encouraged political parties, provided support to them and

to their press, offered them the possibility to obtain seats in the Chamber of Deputies. Had it not been for our initiatives, this would never have been possible. (Ben 'Ali, 2004a)

Ben 'Ali developed similar mechanisms for civil society organizations: allowing professional associations, trade unions, and other organizations to exist, but ensuring that they posed no threat of independent action (Sadiki, 2002b: 506). He characterized this corporatist model as institutionalized interest representation and consultation (Ben 'Ali, 2004b). As with political parties, interest representation in Tunisia was limited to monopolistic, hierarchically administered units created or approved by the state (Sadiki, 2002b: 510). There was no room “for the setting up, in the name of public liberties, of illegal bodies that style themselves as associations, organizations or committees” (Ben 'Ali, 2000). Legally-recognized bodies enjoyed both state subsidies and formal representation in governing institutions – specifically the Chamber of Advisors, where representatives of these corporatist units were allotted one third of the seats (Majlis al-Mustashariin, 2011). The regime also worked to co-opt Tunisia’s historically-powerful labor federation, the Union générale tunisienne du travail (Hibou, 2011).

Vanguard centralism and corporatism made democracy appropriate for Tunisia, according to Ben 'Ali. He argued that this system deepened cooperation between Tunisians of differing backgrounds, affiliations, and professions – a sort of representative democracy that also constituted a locally-appropriate method for addressing the problem of economic underdevelopment. This appropriated discourse allowed Ben 'Ali to claim that Tunisia’s political system was pluralistic while maintaining control of political parties and civil society groups (Ayubi, 1996; Levitsky and Way, 2002).

Algeria: Security First

Current Algerian president ‘Abdul‘aziz Butefliqa came to power in April of 1999 following a widely-boycotted election (Quandt, 2002). Compared to the other rulers in this study, there was not much Western enthusiasm around his rise to power; he was the candidate endorsed by the military (Bouandel, 2003), which had been heavily involved in Algerian politics since the cancelled elections that began the decade-long civil war in 1991. Since then, Butefliqa has been re-elected three times: twice in what Parks (2005: 99) called “the fairest and freest [elections] held in the Arab world” before the Arab Spring, and again in 2014.

The 1991-2002 Algerian Civil War is recognized as one of the most violent in recent history, resulting in an estimated loss of life approaching 200,000 individuals. Some explanations for this extreme bloodshed point to Algeria’s pre-colonial social fragmentation and the subsequent French colonial strategy, which set out to destroy existing kinship networks to exact control over the Algerian population (Charrad, 2001: 132). Due to this violent history, Butefliqa’s discourse tended to depict democracy as dangerous; he emphasized the need for security in order to ensure the successful functioning of democracy (see Table 2). According to Butefliqa, the failed “democratic experiment” in 1991 was a result of colonialism, forced underdevelopment, and a departure from appropriate methods of governance, which prompted the military to intervene “in a patriotic and republican desire to halt the absurd drift that led the democratic experience astray” (Butefliqa, 2005b).

Following Butefliqa’s election in 1999, he publicly dedicated himself to ending the civil war and ameliorating the security situation (Holm, 2005: 122). To this end, he introduced a policy of “civil concord,” offering amnesty to former insurgents who would agree to renounce

violence (Quandt, 2002: 19). The policy was put to a referendum in September of 1999 and passed overwhelmingly. As a result, the level of violence was substantially reduced (Quandt, 2002: 18), to Butefliqa's credit on the domestic and international scenes (Holm, 2005: 119; Mortimer, 2006: 162). Butefliqa himself was keen to emphasize the success of civil concord, citing increased security as a vital prerequisite for democracy:

Fully mobilized to overcome and restore peace and security, we initiated a project of political renewal and economic recovery, in a process of civil concord with which the people have massively agreed, and which has enabled Algeria to gradually recover its unity and stability and boost ... political life on a democratic basis. (Butefliqa, 2001)

The improved security situation increased Butefliqa's popularity among Algerians. He won re-election in 2005 despite serious challenges and even opposition by the military, largely relying on the civil concord policy as his crowning achievement (Mortimer, 2006: 155; Parks, 2005).

Butefliqa suggested that his security-first, democracy-second approach also applied to Africa and the rest of the Third World:

[B]ecause we are a pioneer of democracy in our region that so desperately needs it, our country can serve as an example. This is doubly true because we are driven by the desire to extinguish the conflict zones throughout Africa and to promote peace. (Butefliqa, 2002)

If the vital prerequisites of social harmony and peace are not met, the results of premature democratization could be worse than Algeria in the 1990s:

[T]he failure to assimilate and integrate the issues of capitalism, nationalism, and democracy... has resulted in destructive wars and excessive settlement projects, annihilated the entire southern area of the Earth, and gave rise to racist ideas, fascism, and Nazis who were responsible for two world wars suffered by humanity in its entirety. (Bouteflika, 2005a)

Algeria, Bouteflika argued, felt the riskiness of democracy first-hand, and the need for an incremental, guided transformation was preferable to the threat of bloodshed. In his speeches, Bouteflika extrapolated this experience to the rest of the developing world, where security must be achieved before democracy can safely be implemented.

Morocco: Historical Legitimacy

The Moroccan King Mohammed VI ascended to the throne in July 1999 after the death of his father, King Hassan II, and is widely seen as a reformist modernizer, although many scholarly observers argue that the tentative political liberalization under Mohammed VI “has been used to allow the crown to regain a firm hold on power” (Cavatorta, 2009). The centrality of the monarchy plays a similar role to that of ruling parties in party-hegemonic regimes such as Ben ‘Ali’s Tunisia and Mubarak’s Egypt (Cavatorta, 2009; Maghraoui, 2002), with co-optation required for participation in the political sphere and the monarch playing the role of supreme arbitrator (Charrad, 2001: 156–158).

Mohammed VI's discourse relied heavily on notions of the historical legitimacy of the Moroccan 'Alaoui dynasty and religious language, as illustrated in Table 2. The Moroccan constitution designates the King as both *al-Mumathil al-Asamā li-l-Umma* (the Supreme Representative of the Nation) and *Amīr al-Mu'minīn* (Commander of the Faithful), titles which identify him as both the ultimate religious and political authority of the country (Cavatorta, 2009; Maghraoui, 2002). Mohammed VI insisted that "under the Moroccan constitutional monarchy, religion and politics meet only at the level of the person of the King, the Commander of the Faithful," and must be kept separate in other institutions (Mohammed VI, 2004). On one hand is "the political sphere, the quintessential domain of democratic expression of differences of opinion"; on the other hand, "religious issues are treated within the '*Ulama*' Council and other appropriate authorities" (Mohammed VI, 2004). Here Mohammed VI used the historical title of *Amīr al-Mu'minīn* to traditionalize concepts of democratic governance. Figure 3 illustrates the prolific use of religious language and imagery in the Moroccan context.

Mohammed VI also emphasized historical continuity in a way that was largely absent in the discourses of the other leaders (see Figure 3). He drew on the Moroccan history of political independence from Ottoman rule (Charrad, 2001: 103) and the removal of the Spanish from the Western Sahara (Maghraoui, 2002: 26) to justify the politically-active role of the Moroccan monarchy. In fact, he argued, the historical continuity of monarchy separated Morocco from the eastern Arab lands:

[FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

With regard to the Moroccan constitutional monarchy, today I would like to emphasize its fundamental elements, namely Islam and democracy. For fourteen centuries, [...] our ancestors have built a civilization and Islamic state independent of the eastern caliphate, distinguished by its commitment to the single commander of believers (Mohammed VI, 2003)

Mohammed VI appealed to this historical continuity in declaring himself a citizen-monarch, inexorably linked to all Moroccans through the inter-generational social contract of *bay'a* (allegiance):

[M]y crown is like a crown on the head of every Moroccan, and that custody lies within each [of us]. You will find, dear people, in your first servant, a citizen-king, attached to your cause and dedicated to serving our beloved country, in keeping with the pact of *bay'a* that binds us to each other. (Mohammed VI, 2005)

The citizen-king was not simply a figurehead but an active leader: “In Morocco, the King does not merely reign. I reign and work with my government in a constitutional framework that clearly defines the responsibilities of each” (Mohammed VI, 2001). The monarch’s responsibilities included the right to set the agenda for the nation:

Faithful to the unbreakable link of *bay'a* and reciprocal commitments that follow from it, we’ve worked, since our accession to the throne, to define the essential outlines of our proposed democratic and developed society, while leaving it up to

constitutional institutions, political parties and other national forces to implement these guidelines on the ground. (Mohammed VI, 2004)

By contrast, the responsibilities of elected officials, in his view, were largely technocratic in nature, limited to ensuring “good governance” (Mohammed VI, 2008b). This appropriated discourse, which defines the centralization of power in the hands of an unelected monarch as democracy, represents a marked departure from models that emphasize competition as a means of holding rulers accountable.

Egypt: Neoliberal Democracy

Former Egyptian president Muhammad Husni Mubarak assumed office on October 14, 1981, following the assassination of his predecessor, Anwar El Sadat. Like Ben ‘Ali, Mubarak was initially hailed as a potential liberalizer (Brownlee, 2007: 1), although history has shown his intent to retain control over political parties, elections, and civil society (Brownlee, 2007: 93). Unlike Ben ‘Ali’s Tunisia, Egypt under Mubarak was a “triple hybrid” regime, with elements of military, party-hegemonic, and personalistic rule (Geddes, 2003).

Mubarak’s discourse stood out in that he identified neoliberalism and privatization as key components of democracy. In terms of defining neoliberalism as a component of democracy and a public good, we can see in Figure 4 that Mubarak, Algeria’s Butefliqa, and Morocco’s Mohammed VI invoked this discourse nearly as often as one another, while Ben ‘Ali and Qadhafi did so less often. Mubarak was unique, however, in his unreserved enthusiasm for neoliberalism and privatization – Butefliqa and Mohammed VI were much more likely than Mubarak to argue that neoliberal economic policies are inherently undemocratic.

[FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE]

While world polity scholars might attribute Mubarak's endorsement of neoliberalism to a desire to conform to global culture or as a result of globalized competition (Fourcade, 2006), area experts explain this endorsement in terms of shifts within Egypt's political elite. Brownlee (2007: 132) identifies this discursive shift as the product of an internal struggle within the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) between the Nasserist/Socialist "old guard" and the businessman-politicians of the "new guard" led by Gamal Mubarak and his allies in the business community. Mubarak's speeches linking democracy and neoliberalism rose significantly after 2003, the year of intraelite turmoil in which the NDP old guard was "compelled to adopt Gamal Mubarak's reform discourse at the party's annual conference" (Albrecht, 2005: 381). The time series in Figure 5 illustrates this discursive shift by comparing net positive articulations of neoliberal democracy in Egypt to its North African peers.

[FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE]

Noting in 2002 that Egyptian institutions recently "had to learn for the first time to deal with adversity in a market-based system, driven by the private sector" (Mubarak, 2002), the post-2003 era shift in Mubarak's speeches is apparent:

As we proceed towards further political reform and completing the structure of our democracy, we have to proceed daringly and bravely with more economic

reform and economic liberalization. Our national economy has already overcome years of slowdown, recovering its ability to attract more foreign, Arab and Egyptian investments. (Mubarak, 2006)

The only negative reference to neoliberalism in the corpus occurs in mid-2000, with Mubarak stating that “the current trends of the world economy [do] not help realize humanity's sublime target,” leaving four-fifths of the world’s population impoverished (Mubarak, 2000).

Mubarak’s appropriation of democracy via neoliberal notions of economic freedom reflects not only the prevailing global ideology, but also a shift in domestic politics. Economic liberalization, Mubarak argued, was an appropriate means to increase personal freedom and develop the national economy. This appropriation allowed Mubarak to claim both that he was the ultimate source of democracy in Egypt and that Egypt was indeed a democratic country, as evidenced by increases in economic growth and capital investment. The fact that Mubarak’s appropriation emphasizes economic liberalization had the additional benefit of corresponding with the ideological orientations of powerful global actors like the IMF and the United States (Brownlee, 2007: 132; Brownlee, 2008: 73).

Libya: Direct Democracy

The late Libyan leader Mu‘ammar al-Qadhafi came to power in September 1969 in a military coup d’état, overthrowing King Idris I who had ruled Libya since independence in 1951 (St John, 2008: 91). Qadhafi’s reign, which ended in 2011, was one of the longest surviving non-monarchical regimes in the world. Often depicted as irrational and inconsistent (Totman and Hardy, 2009), Qadhafi’s revolutionary political philosophy married the ideas of Arab

nationalism and socialism at a time when these garnered widespread support across the Arab world. This is in contrast to the other leaders in this study, all of whom came to power at a time when Arab nationalism was on the decline (Dawisha, 2003) and neoliberal economic hegemony was on the rise (Williamson, 1989).

One key element of Qadhafi's appropriated discourse on democracy was that he rejected any political model developed outside of the Arab-Islamicate context on ideological grounds (Hinnebusch, 1984: 61), resorting to blatant historical revision when necessary:

Democracy is a composite Arabic word. It is made up of two words; "demo" which means people and "cracy" which means chairs or seats. It means that the people must always occupy the seat of power. Having real democracy means that the people must be the sole occupant of the seat of power. (Qadhafi, 2007)

The word used by Qadhafi in this speech is a replication of democracy as pronounced in English, possibly because it sounds similar to the Arabic terms *dīmu* (keep / retain forever) and *kursī* (chair). The word for democracy in Arabic – *dimuqrāṭiyya* – is in fact a borrowing from Greek (Ayalon, 1987: 107).

One of the most consistent themes in Qadhafi's discourse was the concept of direct democracy, as illustrated in Table 2. Qadhafi had actively been working on implementing his envisioned form of direct democracy before publishing his political manifesto – the *Green Book* – in 1975 (St John, 2008: 94). He called it *jamāhīrī* democracy – an Arabic neologism drawn from the same root as the word "republic" (*jumhūriyya*), in the plural form – which can be roughly translated as "of the masses."

Qadhafi described *jamāhīrī* democracy as system of popular rule without political parties or representatives (Qaddafi et al., 2005), which he banned as “dangerous and unnecessary” (Qadhafi, 2002). To Qadhafi, this political ideology is the only truly democratic system:

Democracy has but one method and one theory. The disparity and dissimilarity of the systems claiming to be democratic is evidence that they are not democratic in fact. The people’s authority has only one face and it can be realized only by one method, namely, popular congresses and people’s committees. No democracy without popular congresses and committees (Qaddafi, 1983: 29).

In practice, however, Qadhafi used the unspecified nature of his theorized *jamāhīrī* system to consolidate autonomous and arbitrary governance through informal politics and demobilize the Libyan population (Vandewalle, 1998; Vandewalle, 2006). Qadhafi justified this by arguing the need to ensure the proper revolutionary orientation of society (Hinnebusch, 1984: 68).

Qadhafi described his role not as a political ruler, but as a “Leader” or “Guide,” a prophetic “law-giver” and “teacher-leader” who was above everyday politics (Hinnebusch, 1984; St John, 2008). In a direct challenge to global-cultural definitions of democracy, he refused to create the majority of the structures prescribed by global cultural norms as necessary features of modern nation-states (Meyer et al., 1997; Vandewalle, 2006) and rejected all other political systems as undemocratic: “there is no democracy at present” in the world, save Libya (Qadhafi, 2002). Despite his palpable disdain for foreign definitions of democracy, Qadhafi’s discourse does not amount to a rejection of the global norm; of all of the leaders in this study, Qadhafi

seems to have undertaken the greatest amount of ideological work in appropriating the global discursive form of democracy by altering its content.

Conclusion

Much scholarship that investigates the diffusion of global norms, including scholarship in the world polity tradition, tends to focus on structural factors affecting the adoption, decoupling, or rejection of global norms without accounting for intentional adaptations. The results of this study show that, rather than either slavishly copying or rejecting global models of democracy, every North African autocrat actively labored to adapt the global discourse about democracy and make it appropriate to their societies, international positions, and particular methods of rule.⁵ By bringing sociological theories of framing to bear on the question of global cultural diffusion, this study emphasizes that global norms such as democracy should be understood not only as firm benchmarks by which to judge forms of governance and policy effectiveness, but also as a language game played between international organizations, national leaders, social movements, and other political actors.

In addition to the discourses of the leaders examined in this study, there is suggestive evidence that many discourses of the Arab Spring uprisings that emerged in the region in early 2011 adopted elements of the autocratic discourses they were looking to replace. In Tunisia, for example, the Progressive Democratic Party embraced Ben ‘Ali’s corporatist approach to democracy – though not his authoritarian centralism – by calling for a Senate “elected by representatives of civil society groups” like trade unions rather than popular elections (Progressive Democratic Party, 2011). Similarly, counter-revolutionary forces, such as the subset of critics who supported a coup d’état against Egypt’s first freely elected president Mohamed

Morsi in July 2013,⁶ were keen to redefine democracy in ways that appropriate elements of both global and domestic discourses. Shehab Wagih of the liberal Free Egyptians party, for example, welcomed the coup as a manifestation of a new “city square democracy” (Beach, 2013). ‘Abdul Fattah al-Sisi, the military general and architect of the coup who now serves as president of Egypt, has likewise insisted that Morsi’s ouster was democratic by appropriating key elements of the democratic discourses used by anti-Mubarak activists during the 2011 uprising (Sisi, 2014). Future research building on this study might explore the continuity of appropriated discourses, investigating how and why specific elements of discourse survive the delegitimization of their articulators.

Similarities between North African autocrats’ discourses of democracy and those of their revolutionary opponents raise the question – do the mechanisms of appropriation used by autocratic political elites create a discursive opportunity structure that opposition activists can use to press for reform? Historical studies show that, during the colonial period, North African nationalists used French liberal discourses of liberty, equality, and fraternity to critique colonial rule (e.g., Malley, 1996) and some area experts argue that the 2011 uprisings may have been a direct result of the dissonance between leaders’ democratic discourses and their autocratic practices (e.g., Hibou, 2011; Ritter 2015). However, given the long history of social movements in the Arab world agitating for democracy and the historically high rates of support for democracy among Arabs (Chalcraft, 2016; Tessler et al., 2012; Thompson, 2013), it is possible that the North African leaders’ appropriated discourses and the 2011 uprisings were both results of ongoing pressure from local populations. A full investigation of the relationship between autocrats’ appropriation of global norms like democracy and mass mobilization in pursuit of

these norms is beyond the scope of this study, but researchers interested in this topic may benefit from examining the interplay between global, authoritarian, and oppositional discourses.

The results of this study's analyses suggest that both external factors, such as foreign sponsors and international organizations, as well as internal factors, such as domestic interest groups, local culture and customs, and domestic regime type, have profound effects on the specific definitional content that appropriated global discursive forms take. Given that the data employed in this study are limited to five cases, however, precisely when and how these factors combine to produce specific appropriated discourses remains unclear. For example, the evidence presented in this study indicates that Mubarak's embrace of neoliberal democracy coincided with a tactical ideological shift within the Egyptian ruling party in late 2003; yet, it is probable that the Egypt's international position as a highly embedded member of the world polity and close ally of the US and pressure from domestic political groups like the Kefaya Movement also influenced Mubarak's appropriated discourse of democracy. Future research may systematically evaluate the processes by which internal and external factors interact to result in specific appropriated discourses of democracy using a broader collection of cases.

This study presents appropriation as a theoretical tool for understanding how actors may reconfigure global discourses for their own purposes via an investigation of North African autocrats' active adaptation of the global norm of democracy in their official speeches. Results show that, rather than adopting or rejecting global models of democracy wholesale, all five North African autocrats engaged in ideological work to alter the definitional content of the global discursive form of democracy to suit their interests. By synthesizing framing and world polity theories, the current study brings agency into the literature on global cultural diffusion, which tends to focus on structural factors affecting the adoption, decoupling, or rejection of global

discourses without accounting for intentional adaptations. This theoretical contribution has implications well beyond the cases at hand: it is likely that many actors around the globe work to appropriate a broad range of global norms – including human rights, environmentalism, science promotion, racial and religious tolerance, and women’s rights – by drawing on domestic and external political developments and experiences. By treating peripheral actors as agents involved in diversifying the content of global discursive forms, the current study represents a step toward a fuller understanding of global cultural diffusion.

Notes

1. Specifically, this program presented excerpts for coding at random without speech titles, dates, speaker name, or country name. However, contextual information could still be inferred from the text in many instances: for example, a reference to “the kingdom” would clearly identify Morocco’s Mohammad VI as the speaker.
2. Due to the granular coding scheme I employed (totaling 84 unique codes), the majority of the codes are not used in this study because they were either too rare or irrelevant to the analysis at hand. Full data are available from the author upon request.
3. I also coded for “neutral” mentions of democracy as well as “decoupling” – stating that democracy exists but offering no further explanation. These themes appeared in very few speeches (less than 1%).
4. Negative references to corporatism and security forces appeared in 0.5% and 1.6% of the speeches, respectively. Likewise, there were zero negative references to historical legitimacy or direct democracy in the corpus.
5. While the specific appropriated discourses crafted by the North African leaders under consideration are unique, they are not unique in their efforts to appropriate global norms like democracy; appropriation is a universal phenomenon (Jansen, 2007; Pratt, 2008; Rogers, 2006).
6. Not all anti-Morsi actors were counter-revolutionary. Many Morsi critics who called for early presidential elections or the establishment of a transitional civilian ruling council rather than a full military takeover have been imprisoned since the 2013 coup d’état.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1: Source Material

Ruler	Ben 'Ali	Butefliqa	Mohammed VI	Mubarak	Qadhafi	
Country	Tunisia	Algeria	Morocco	Egypt	Libya	Total
Number of Speeches in the Dataset	452	712	298	425	48	1935
Number of Speeches Mentioning Democracy	170	356	162	171	19	878
Percent of Speeches Mentioning Democracy	38%	50%	54%	40%	40%	45%
Number of Excerpts Mentioning Democracy	267	599	373	304	87	1630

Note: This table describes the data employed in the current study, collected from official government archives. Because Libyan leader Mu‘ammar al-Qadhafi’s website archived relatively few of his speeches, the Qadhafi corpus includes three volumes of his *Green Book* included as three separate speeches.

Table 2: Theme Aggregation Summary

Theme	Sentiment	Codes
Evaluation of Democracy	Positive	Democracy is good
	Negative	Democracy is bad
Global Models of Democracy	Positive	Representative democracy is universally applicable; Elections are democratic; Party pluralism is democratic; Representation is democratic; Referenda are democratic
	Negative	Democracy must be indigenous; Elections are undemocratic; Party pluralism is undemocratic; Representation is undemocratic; Referenda are undemocratic
Corporatism	Positive	Democracy exists within the ruling party; Ruling party as vanguard of democracy; Corporatist units are democratic; Participation by unions/syndicates is democratic
Security	Positive	Democracy requires peace/stability; Democracy requires defeating terrorists; Military as vanguard of democracy; Police as vanguard of democracy; Avoiding setbacks on the path to democracy; Democracy is difficult to implement; Democracy is dangerously anarchic/chaotic
Neoliberalism	Positive	Neoliberalism / privatization is democratic
	Negative	Neoliberalism / privatization is undemocratic
Historical Legitimacy	Positive	Self-determination is democratic; Ruler is implementing democracy according to cultural and/or historical specificities; Rulers is building on democratic progress of previous rulers; Monarchy is democracy (Morocco only); Republicanism is democracy (all others)
Direct Democracy	Positive	Direct democracy is democratic.

Note: Negative sentiment occurs only in the “Evaluation of Democracy,” “Global Models of Democracy,” and “Neoliberalism” themes.

Figure 1: Evaluations of Democracy

Note: This figure displays the percentage of speech excerpts from each ruler that depict democracy in either negative (light) or positive (dark) terms.

Figure 2: Evaluations of Global Models of Democracy

Note: This figure displays the percentage of speech excerpts from each ruler that describe global models of democracy – focusing on representation, elections, pluralism, etc. – in either negative (light) or positive (dark) terms.

Table 3: Local Themes on Democracy

	Ben 'Ali	Butefliqa	Mohammed VI	Mubarak	Qadhafi	
Country	Tunisia	Algeria	Morocco	Egypt	Libya	Total
Corporatism	50%	5%	12%	17%	6%	16%
Security	31%	60%	53%	52%	26%	50%
Neoliberalism	7%	16%	21%	22%	0%	17%
Historical Legitimacy	11%	19%	42%	10%	10%	35%
Direct Democracy	0%	0%	0%	0%	41%	2%
None of the above	24%	23%	17%	27%	11%	22%

Note: This table illustrates the percentage of each leader's excerpts that contain positive mentions of each theme. Because the themes are not mutually exclusive, column totals sum to over 100%.

Figure 3: Use of Religious Language in Excerpts and Mentions of Previous Leaders

Note: This figure displays the percentage of speech excerpts from each ruler that include explicitly religious language (light) and mentions of previous leaders (dark).

Figure 4: Positive and Negative Mentions of Neoliberalism

Note: This figure displays the percentage of speech excerpts from each ruler that depict neoliberalism and privatization as either anti-democratic (light) or an intrinsic component of democracy (dark).

Figure 5: Time Series Comparing Net Positive Articulations of Neoliberal Democracy between Mubarak and Other North African Leaders

Note: This time series displays 9-month moving averages of net percentage of positive mentions of the neoliberal democracy theme, comparing Mubarak's speeches (indicated by the solid line) with the speeches of the other leaders (indicated by the dashed line). Due to missing data, Qadhafi's speeches are removed. The figure shows that the content of Mubarak's speeches was similar to that of the other leaders until around September 2003 (marked with the dashed vertical line), after which he was more likely to invoke this theme than his peers.