

Ruling by Wife: First Ladyship in Mubarak’s Authoritarian Playbook

Abstract:

Research on the powers or roles of the first ladies in authoritarian Arab states suffers from two gaps. First, there are always attempts to *homogenize* women under which the president’s spouse is simply subsumed as part of categories such as “Arab women,” “Muslim women,” or “Egyptian women.” Second, literature explaining the dynamics of authoritarian durability has mainly focused on what is *institutional*, e.g., the army, legislature, and political parties. This article seeks to focus on a single woman as part of the toolbox authoritarian leaders use to maintain power and as part of their political expediency. It uses quantitative and qualitative methods to track the progression of the roles of former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak’s wife, Mrs. Suzanne Mubarak, and the manifestations of these roles in the state media throughout Mubarak’s 30-year rule (1981-2011). The frame analysis of 1,339 articles found this progression to be *linear*, i.e., Mrs. Mubarak gradually and systematically moved from playing traditional ceremonial roles in the 1980s to policy-oriented ones in the 1990s to political roles under which she even acted as “co-president” in the 2000s. Through interviews, the data-based findings are contextualized within different historically conditioned challenges facing the regime, such as relations with Islamists from co-optation to confrontation, the adoption of neoliberal economic policies and their social ramifications, attempts to control and centralize mushrooming NGOs, and Mubarak’s frail health in the final years of his rule.

Key Words

Egypt, Women, Authoritarianism, Arab Spring, Suzanne Mubarak

“I am not involved in politics, and I do not think the wife of a president should be. It is not her role. She is not elected”, a statement by Suzanne Mubarak (quoted by Sullivan 1986: 98).

“*Hukm al-abb batel! Hukm al-umm batel! Hukm al-ibn batel!* [The rule of the father is void, the rule of the mother is void, the rule of the son is void], Chants by anti-regime protestors in

January-February 2011

Introduction

Literature shows a wide interest in exploring the roles of first ladies as part of the toolbox of authoritarianism in different countries (e.g., Primitovo, 1976, Navarro 1977, Marinković, 2017). Interest is less clear in the Arab region for a number of reasons. First, the first lady is mostly subsumed within the “women” category instrumentalized by leaders and their policies in projects such as “state feminism.” The latter constructs women as a homogenous group targeted by top-down plans to implement gender equality but also guarantee the state’s control over them (see Hatem 1992, 233). Scholars inevitably support the trend by adopting an “orientalist lens” (El-Mahdi 2011), thus creating units of analysis such as “Arab women,” “Muslim women,” or “Egyptian women” (Abu-Lughod & El-Mahdi 2011, 683). This homogenization ignores the roles played by singular members of the category, with a few exceptions (e.g., Sullivan 1986; Baron 2005, 135_160; Yessayan 2015). Literature on authoritarianism contributed to the under-exploration with attention predominantly focused on *institutional* perspectives (Bank, Richter and Sunik 2013) related to “geostrategic” elements such as external support of global powers (Brand 1995), rentierism based on revenues from natural resources (Luciani 2009; Beck 2012), repression (Bellin 2004; 2012), or legitimation via religion or ideology (Hudson 1977; Schlumberger 2010). Accordingly, scholars premised the authoritarian durability on key “organizations” properly structuring “elite relations” (Brown 2007: 2) or on “patronage-based economic liberalization” (King, 2009: 4). They thus missed the basic point that authoritarianism is “personalistic” by practice and “familial” by origin (Adorno et al.: 482–484), where actions and practices of (re)distributing power are based on “trust” and “loyalty” (Frantz 2018: 51; Wintrobe 2007).

I fill in these gaps by seeking to disaggregate the “women” category and singling out one of them, i.e., the first lady who, I argue, has been an instrument of authoritarianism in Egypt under the rule of Hosni Mubarak. I systematically track patterns and trajectories of this instrumentality over the three decades of Mubarak’s rule (1981-2011) and Suzanne

Mubarak's first ladyship. Using quantitative and qualitative methods, I trace a *linear* and *well-choreographed* progression of instrumentality where Suzanne Mubarak's agency evolved from being a minor adjunct to her husband in the 1980s to one who branches out to take on broad "policy" issues to do with education, housing or health in the 1990s, and then to politically charged roles that amount to her serving as "co-president" in the 2000s. Ultimately, the article contextualizes the events in 2011 in which Mrs. Mubarak was a "focal point of discontent" (Brand, Kaki and Stacher 2011) during the protests which swept Egypt against the rule of Mubarak's regime. Accusations included abusing her political power to accrue illegal profits and being an "ardent booster" pushing her son, Gamal, to succeed his ailing father (*Wikileaks* 2009a). The article thus traces a journey of the first lady moving between two extremes symbolized in the two quotes at the opening of the article. Furthermore, believable as they could be, all these allegations are still drawn from unsubstantiated anecdotal evidence, claims of unknown sources, and speculations built by behind-the-scenes tales. The article thus investigates Mrs. Mubarak's journey of agency through more publicly available, concrete evidence, i.e., articles published in *al-Ahram* newspaper, and primary sources, including interviews with those involved in the process of producing her image as Egypt's first lady.

The next section explains the research design and method. The section that follows introduces the findings of analyzing texts with some tables and descriptive data. It is followed by a discussion and analysis of the data, relying on interviews with those involved in the agency-production process. The analysis is conducted with the caveat that the first lady is constructed as a top-down tool for legitimating authoritarianism and not as a token of de-legitimation by the counter-discourses mainly constructed by non-state media outlets and opposition forces, a task reserved for other stages of the project which comparatively

approach the first ladies of authoritarianism in other countries of the region such as Syria, Tunisia, and Jordan.

A First Lady of Authoritarianism: Conceptualization

There are many different ways of defining or measuring authoritarianism, and many of them go beyond how far a regime holds free and fair elections or how it includes “authoritarian” elite members driven by a desire for domination or hunger for power (Glasius 2018: 516). Still, most of them share the trait of being what Adler and Pouliot describe as “practices” based on “patterned actions that are embedded in particular organized contexts” (2011: 5). The instrumentalization of a leader’s wife can thus be situated in these practices that aim to consolidate a leader’s authoritarian rule. This instrumentalization is partly based on “gender stereotypes” as a structured set of beliefs related to the expected behavior or public perceptions of women and men (Chao, Zhang and Li, 2108, 555). Scholars traced the value of the first lady based on her complementary roles as a *woman* in relation to her husband’s roles as a *man* (Sullivan 1986: 99), part of an oppositional relationship in which he stands as the “national father hero” (Bank, Richter and Anna 2013; Ben Dor 1983), a “symbol of familial honour and purity” (Rajakumar 2014: 127), an instrument of “production” by giving birth to heirs to the throne in the case of dynastic monarchies (Herb 1999), a token of “modernity” as was the case in projects of state formation and development by western colonialism and national liberation movements setting their battles along the binaries of the East and West or tradition and modernity oppositions (Sukarieh 2015: 577; Charrad 2011; see Mohanalakshmi’s analysis on the former first lady of Qatar Sheikh Moza 20114), and part of a “rhetorical commitment” (Henderson and Ganguly 2015: 45) to values combining women’s rights and democracy. These functions take shape within “patriarchal” social and political structures drawn on gender stereotypes. These stereotypes, in the political context, can include “personal attributes,” such as feminine traits of warmth and morality set

against masculine traits of decisiveness and aggression (Gordon et al. 2003, 37), or “issue positions,” such as women’s rights, poverty reduction or child welfare against manly topics such as defense or military affairs (Chang and Hutchinson, 2004). I combine these two categories as constituents of the agency-making of the first lady. Agency is defined at the two levels of the “capacity to act” and the “manifestation” of this capacity (See Davidson 1963; Brand 1984) as constructed by the regime as part of its practices of authoritarianism. The “capacity to act” is traced in specific roles which the first lady is allowed to play, and the “manifestation” in the levels of visibility through which these roles are communicated or mediated to the public under the control of the ruler’s regime.

On the basis of analyzing other first ladies across the world, scholars set role typologies also based on these gender-biased stereotypes. Gutin (1989) and Shoop (2010) outlined “hostess” roles where the first lady mainly limits herself to being a housekeeper with ceremonial presences. Erickson and Thomson conceptualized such roles as “escorts,” i.e., escorting their husbands abroad, “aesthetes”, i.e., “performing courtship gestures that enchant foreign officials and publics,” “surrogates”, i.e., traveling abroad to non-political events or ceremonial proceedings (2012: 244-46). Winfield explored roles such as “nobeless oblige,” focusing on “charitable and good works concerned with orphanages, the homeless, or the poor, which represents a natural expansion of women’s volunteer work in the community.” (1997, 167). These typologies set a continuum where agency can allow a further capacity to act with roles such as what Weckin (2000) named a “courtesan,” i.e., a gatekeeper to the political elite, a “consigliere,” i.e., the leader’s confidante and counselor on most or all aspects of statecraft, a “regent” acting in place of the leader (2000, 607), a “shadow president,” vying with the president for his powers, or even a “co-president”—a role under which she is acknowledged even by the president as being his “policy partner” (2000, 608). In an authoritarian context, a woman can move across these roles depending on the needs and

requirements of the regime in power and shifts in domestic and external politics. Still, these roles partly establish the first lady's agency as an object acted upon or a "reserve army" (Bruegel 1979) rushed in for help at times of need as part of a "combination of responsibility and powerlessness" (Fye 1983: 9). However, they also offer women opportunities or "points of resistance" to gain autonomy or accrue further benefits for oneself as part of an "occupation with the self" (Hafez, 2003: 4; Mahmood 2005). Still, all these benefits are gained and maintained within the confines of mostly centralized authoritarian practices and are "geared towards the same goal of all authoritarian leaders, that is staying in power" (Ibrahim, pers. Comm. November 28, 2021; Hatem 1992). The article traces the top-down instrumentality of the first lady within the authoritarian playbook without denying the potentiality of resisting it.

Methodology and Sampling

I am using a mixture of quantitative and qualitative frame analysis. Frames are quantitatively identified in the texts of *al-Ahram* newspaper, are manifested "by the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotype images, sources of information" (Entman 1993: 52). The framing process is based on what Entman (1993: 52) calls "salience and selection" (Entman 1993), that is where some linguistic manifestations are selected and highlighted by repetition and frequency or coherence with other manifestations building the same thematic constructions or resonance. Framing is based on resonance with the surrounding environment or "background" knowledge (Woodly 2015: 97) that can stabilize or destabilize meanings by (de)emphasizing them.

The frames are predefined against the typologies of above-mentioned roles identified in the texts under analysis, a method adopted by other scholars (e.g., Winfield 1997; Chao, Zhang and Li, 2018). I group the frames/roles into three master frames, these are

“traditional/ceremonial” roles, including meeting other first ladies,¹ “policy” roles to do with interest in policy issues such as education and health, and “political” roles defined by a number of practices having “identifiable political issues” (O’Conner, Nye and Assendelft 1997) such as attending official meetings or lobbying state institutions.

Roles as frames are discerned from the *content* of each item of the *al-Ahram* sample and the issues which this item focuses on. The roles are mainly traced more on the basis of issues rather than attributes such as those related to the first lady’s elegance, fashion or feminine traits of expressiveness and gentleness (see Chao, Zhang and Li 2018 on China’s first lady) or beauty and youth as a marketing part of this instrumentality (Baloch 1992 on Imelda Marcos; Courtney 2010 on Eva Peron). This has to do with limited space, the requirement for different methods to measure women’s bodies as the arena for the struggle for legitimacy, and the need to adopt a more comparative approach setting stereotypically feminine traits or values against masculine ones, such as strength and toughness, independence, confidence or knowledge and how far the first lady can move among them as an approach adopted by other scholars (Chao, Zhang and Li 2018).

Part of the framing is tracing the “manifestation” of this content on which roles are drawn. The manifestation is about visibility, that is “everything a newspaper does to present the look” of content (Nerone and Barnhurst 2001: 3). The coding sheet thus includes questions about the place of items and how far they enter the front page, dominantly reserved for the news and activities of the president and taken as the most read and thus significant page in each issue. The sheet also traces the size of articles, a criterion which can relate visibility to “newsworthiness” (Bel 1991: 155), or the design of graphic elements such as photographs and how much agency they carry, especially if they are styled either as a profile

¹ Traditionalism is defined by its opposite, modernity, ‘defined to mean many things: access to modern education, relinquishing traditional customs that were perceived as irrational; an embrace of a way of life that was largely modelled on western values and culture; and the reformation of religion), El-Sadda, 2011, 88.

picture of Mrs. Mubarak or a picture in which she appears with others including the president himself.

I selected *Al-Ahram* as it valuably shows the dynamics of the regime's internal politics, "often hidden from the public," and compensates for the lack of reliable data that is "hard to come by" (Frantz 2000: 4) as official documents on Mubarak's regime are still classified. The value of the newspaper, as biased or distorted its content may be, is the fact that it is part of the "authoritarian" press model under which the press and the state are one, and *Al-Ahram* thus acts as one of the state's "instrumentalities operating within the state" (Siebert et al. 1956: 26) and advancing its objectives. As Table One shows, the sample includes 1,339 articles from *al-Ahram*. As Mubarak controlled power for 30 years, I divide the period into "authoritarian spells" (Frantz 2018: 6-10). I choose all articles from each of the two years in every decade, with five years apart. The years selected are 1982, 1987, 1993, 1998, 2005, and 2010. The selection can thus be more representative, especially as it includes the first year and last year of Suzanne Mubarak's ladyship, as well as years of presidential referenda or elections in each decade (1987, 1993, 2005) to trace, or perhaps neutralize, any possible ruptures or ups and downs in the spotlight thrown on the first lady over the 30 years.

Articles are selected in the sample if they mention the name "Suzanne Mubarak" or her titles, such as the "president's wife" or "Egypt's first lady," in the headline of the lead paragraph across all the pages of the newspaper. The one-year coding (2018) was conducted via SPSS and with the help of three main research assistants among my students, whom I trained for two weeks. Another assistant recoded 10 percent or 120 articles of the coded material. The intercoder reliability, calculated by the percentage of variation, was high on most questions, 96 percent, and did not go below the 88.5 percent threshold on any of them. I use the word "article" to simplify and refer to all items, such as interviews, editorials, or advertisements. The inclusion of all mixed material makes sense as the state-controlled

newspaper mixes what is informational and promotional (for example, ads paid by private sponsors are still censored and edited, see Menshawy 2017). The fifteen in-depth interviews were conducted in 2020 on a snowballing basis after the end of the coding. The list includes *al-Ahram* journalists covering or editing the news of Mrs. Mubarak, aides to the first lady supervising the production and dissemination process, and officials influencing her access to the media. The interviews are explanatory, i.e., help corroborate, explain, and, more significantly, source the patterns identified in the texts.

Measuring Roles and Visibility: Gradual and Systematic

The roles and levels of Mrs. Mubarak’s visibility across the three decades are gradual and systematic. For example, the number of articles on Mrs. Mubarak increased from 80 articles in the 1980s, which only amount to 6 percent of the whole sample over the three decades, to 383 articles in the 1990s (29 percent of the whole sample) and then to 876 articles in the 2000s (65 percent). The increase was also gradual and systematic across the two years in each decade, as Table One shows

TABLE One: The number of articles on Suzanne Mubarak by year (*al-Ahram*).

Year	Frequency	Percent
1982	16	1.2
1987	64	4.8
1993	50	3.7
1998	333	24.9
2005	503	37.6
2010	373	27.9
Total	1339	100.0

The visibility is also judged by how far Mrs. Mubarak made it to the front page. Analysis shows only 11 percent (7 articles) of the annual sample in 1987 appear on the front page, but it increased to 24 percent (80 articles) in 1998 and then to 32 percent (159 articles) in 2005. Visibility also goes up with the increase in the size of articles. For example, articles

of 501-1000 words went up from 6 percent (5 articles) of all those published in the 1980s to 33 percent (41 articles) in the 1990s before going down to 23 percent (77 articles) in the 2000s. In the “1000-word or more” category, as shown in Table Two, the 1980s show zero percent (0 articles) of all published articles in the decade, against 5 percent (18 articles) in the 1990s and then 8 percent (70 articles) in the 2000s. Visibility is also traced by the placement of Mrs. Mubarak’s name in the headline, going up from zero percent (0 article) of the whole annual issues in 1987 to 32 percent (16 articles) in 1993 to 61 percent (306 articles) in 2005. In the 1980s, Mrs. Mubarak was mainly referred to as “President Hosni Mubarak’s wife” without her name mentioned or cited in most articles of the newspaper.

Table Two: The articles mentioning the name, the placement on front page and word count (by number and percentage)

Year	Mrs. Mubarak’s name in headline (% within year)	Mrs. Mubarak on the front page (% within year)	Word counts (1000 words or above) (% within year)
1982	1 (6%)	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)
1987	0 (0%)	7 (10.9 %)	0 (0 %)
1993	16 (32%)	11 (22.0 %)	3 (6.0 %)
1998	204 (61%)	80 (24.0 %)	15 (4.5 %)
2005	306 (60.8 %)	159 (31.6 %)	39 (7.8 %)
2010	184 (49.3 %)	47 (12.6 %)	31 (8.3 %)

As Mrs. Mubarak’s agency is also relational, her visibility is traced against that of Mubarak himself within the same categories. The name of “Hosni Mubarak” or “Mubarak” appeared in 72.5 percent (58 articles) in the 1980s, against 13 percent (55 articles) in the 1990s and 12 percent (104 articles) in the 2000s. Pictures reflect this coupling and decoupling of visibility with Mubarak. Pictures showing Mrs. Mubarak alone (i.e., headshots) went up from 4 percent (3 articles) in the 1980s to 21 percent (79 articles) in the 1990s to 52 percent (463 articles) in the 2000s.

Visibility gains value from the content or topics discussed within these items gradually and systematically increasing across the three decades. For example, the low visibility of the 1980s correlates with the traditional and ceremonial roles played by Mrs. Mubarak in that decade. They are mostly to do with “protocol” duties under which the activities of the first lady were limited to attending social or diplomatic ceremonies. For example, 19 percent (15 articles) of all articles of the 1980s were dedicated to Mrs. Mubarak meeting other first ladies. Her roles in the articles of the 1980s also include “nobeless oblige” roles with 62 percent (21 articles) of the sample from the whole decade being dedicated to her activities regarding charities and taking care of disadvantaged segments of the population, such as the elderly and disabled.

In the 1990s, the medium visibility correlated with a decrease in traditional and ceremonial roles carried out by Mrs. Mubarak. For example, her “nobeless oblige” role, measured by her charitable, went down from the 26 percent in the 1980s to 14 percent (53 articles) in the 1990s. Her interest in issues of people with disabilities went down from 6 percent (5 articles) in the 1980s to 4 percent (16 articles) and her interest in issues of the elderly also plummeted from 4 percent (3 articles) in the 1980s to 0.3 percent (one article) in 1990s. The “protocol” roles also witnessed a similar decrease; the articles of her meeting other first ladies receded from 19 percent (15 articles) of the entire sample published in the 1980s to 3 percent (10 articles) in the 1990s. In other words, the decrease in the traditional roles of Mrs. Mubarak came despite the increase in her visibility marked by her larger presence on the front page or the longer articles covering her activities.

Rather, the 1990s are marked by Mrs. Mubarak assuming “policy first lady” roles, measured by scholars such as Watson (2014) in other cases of first ladies by how far the presidential wife is “identified with a policy issue,” such as housing, development, or health (Watson 2014). Mrs. Mubarak’s interest in housing was 0 percent in the 1980s but it went up

to 5 percent (19 articles) in the 1990s; the environment went from 0 percent in the 1980s to 2 percent (8 articles) in the 1990s; and education from 6 percent (5 articles) in the 1980s to 9 percent (34 articles) in the 1990s. The expansive roles also correlated with Mrs. Mubarak's interest in women's issues rising from 12.5 percent (10 articles) in the 1980s to 16 percent in the 1990s.

The 2000s are marked by a further decrease in traditional or ceremonial roles. Articles to do with meeting other first ladies went down to 8 percent (71 articles); articles about her roles regarding people with disabilities barely made up 3 percent (23 articles); and those about the elderly dramatically plummeted to 0.2 percent (2 articles). Mrs. Mubarak's interest in the public policy issues of the 1990s also decreased. Housing went down from the 5 percent of the 1990s to 4 percent (35 articles) in the 2000s, and education from 9 percent to 7 percent (59 articles). On the contrary, articles to do with the category of political roles went up. As mentioned above, political roles are traced by how far they refer to "identifiable political issues," such as "travelling alone on behalf of the president," "attending official meetings," or directly "lobbying the state institutions" (O'Conner, Nye and Assendelft 1997). The coverage shows this politicization of role-taking as Mrs. Mubarak was more of a "shadow president," based on vying with her spouse for visibility and influence, or even a "co-president" where she has more resources and whose support is further "needed" by the president (Wekkin 2000: 607). For example, Mrs. Mubarak's interests expanded to issues such as peacemaking that has long been reserved for Mubarak himself and on which he built his legitimacy. The interest in peacemaking is judged by articles referring to Suzanne Mubarak's activities in this field and which went up from 0 percent in the 1980s to 1 percent (5 articles) in the 1990s, then rocketed to almost 10 percent (83 articles) of all articles in the 2000s. This is a striking shift from traditional roles of the 1980s marked by Mrs. Mubarak's preoccupation with "petty projects" (Watson 2014: 204) she championed in the past and

which were mainly “socially oriented” and “politically noncontroversial” (ibid) into fully politically derived projects such as peacemaking. The co-presidency came as Mrs. Mubarak carried out some of her husband’s presidential activities at times such as the national crisis of floods sweeping the southern governorate of Aswan in 2010. During the flood crisis, *Al-Ahram* came up with a headline that would have been unthinkable in the 1980s and 1990s: “The president follows up the affairs of those affected by the floods and Suzanne Mubarak is in Aswan today” (Shukri, January 26. 2010). While the president is given a position of inaction, albeit at the level indicated in verbs of saying, i.e., the statement that he merely “follows” the updates from a distance as he was in Cairo, some 800 kilometers away from Aswan, Suzanne Mubarak was in the governorate. The newspaper described her activity in articles detailing what she did with verbs such as “visiting,” “meeting,” “instructing,” “ordering,” or “leading.” Relatedly, tracing the verbs of leadership indicates this radical change in roles corresponding to a maximum level of visibility. The coding sheet traced verbs of leadership referring to Suzanne Mubarak as her “leading,” “heading,” and “presiding”. These “verbs of leadership,” as categorized in the coding sheet, quadrupled from 5 percent (4 articles) in the 1980s to 22 percent (91 articles) in the 1990s before going up to 39 percent (252 articles) in the 2000s.

The politicization of roles also includes how far Mrs. Mubarak’s roles of the 2000s were imbued with some practices of her husband’s “personalist” authoritarian rule, such as image magnification based on glorifying her personality and aggrandizing her activities and their impact. For example, articles mentioning groups or movements named after Mrs. Mubarak went from 0 percent in the 1980s and 1990s to 10.5 percent in 2005 and 9 percent in 2010. In 2005, 10 percent of articles referred to groups or movements carrying her name, 2 percent mentioned awards named after her, another 2 percent referred to “Suzanne Mubarak hospitals,” and 2 percent to the “Suzanne Mubarak Museum.” This phenomenon contrasts

with the 1980s, a time in which even Mrs. Mubarak's name was withheld, and her title was limited to "President Mubarak's wife," even when the names of other women were mentioned in the same articles. The naming-after frame also coheres well with other frames feeding into the same sense of image glorification. Articles dedicated to news that Mrs. Mubarak is given an award by a domestic body hit 16 percent of the annual sample in 2010 (60 articles), a massive increase from 0 percent in 1982 and 2 percent in 1993 (1 article). The articles referring to awards given to her by a foreign body also rocketed to 11 percent in 2005 (40 articles) from 0 percent in 1982 and 2 percent in 1993 (1 article). This shift also manifests in images. In 1982, there is not a single headshot in the articles of Mrs. Mubarak, let alone any mentions of her name, while her headshots and names were part of every single article about her, i.e. 100 percent, in 2010.

Changing Needs and Conditions

In this section, I explain the data described above by relating them to contextual elements and circumstances related to the three decades of Mubarak's rule.

The 1980s: The "Jehan Complex" and Coopting Islamists

The limited traditional and ceremonial roles of Mrs. Mubarak, combined with low levels of visibility in the 1980s, can relate to three historically conditioned developments during Mubarak's rule. First, Mubarak began his rule in late 1981 by distancing himself from the regime of his predecessor, Anwar Sadat. The latter had been widely criticized by the opposition and non-state press for allowing his wife a visible enough role to draw press titles such as "Jehan Sadat wants to rule Egypt" and "her husband does anything she says" (Sadat 1987: 395). Fully aware of this public discontent, Mubarak ordered *al-Ahram*, a few weeks after taking over the presidency, to "completely prohibit the publishing of photographs of the president's wife without express permission" (Amin 2011: 113_14; Hammad, pers. Comm.,

September 7, 2020). The order resonates with my findings as there is not a single picture published of Mrs. Mubarak in the whole sample of articles from 1982 and 1983 (before this would limitedly change across later years. In 1987, 36 of the 64 articles sampled for the year carry pictures of Mrs. Mubarak, although most of them show her in the presence of others, mainly Mubarak himself as abovementioned figures demonstrate). The limited roles and low visibility can thus relate to “the Jehan complex and Mubarak’s political calculation,” said Mustafa El-Fiqi, Mubarak’s influential aide and his Secretary of Information during from 1985 to 1992 (pers. Comm., October 10, 2020).

Second, Mubarak adopted a form of distributive politics as he began his rule with a grace period towards the opposition, once severely repressed by Sadat (Brownlee 2007: 124). He relaxed Sadat’s red lines governing political activism and allowed the press more freedom. Within this relaxation or a period of calm as a “tactic of governance” (Osman 2010: 117-171), Mubarak was fully cautious to keep his wife from possible criticism by the press and opposition which he gave limited powers or showed leniency towards. Furthermore, he was also keen to appear democratic after he was elected in the referendum-like vote in 1981 following Sadat’s assassination (especially as he won with 98.5 percent of the vote and a considerable 81 percent voter turnout). Mrs. Mubarak helped build this situation with statements such as the wife of the president “should not be involved in politics. It is not her role. She was not elected” (quoted in Sullivan 1986: 98).

Third, Mubarak adopted a different relationship with Islamists. He gave space to Islamists in the 1980s, fully aware that Mrs. Sadat’s public presence and her “active participation” had triggered “battles” with “fundamental Islamists” (Sadat 1987: 260). Limiting his wife’s agency would thus cater to religious Islamist sentiments and their “gender standards” equating women’s roles with the private sphere of home and family. The experience of seeing Sadat assassinated right in front of him by fundamental Islamists

instilled in Mubarak “a focus on security” (Osman 2010: 171), evidencing a sense of “fear for his life and for his family” (El-Fiqi, pers. Comm., October 10, 2020). In a country where modernity or traditionalism has “been proportionate or commensurate with the modernity or traditionalism of its women” (Elsadda 2011, 88), Mubarak thus sought to keep his wife away from the spotlight as part of his strategy of coopting Islamists, especially as she is half-British, unveiled unlike many Egyptian women affected by Sadat’s waves of Islamization, got her university degrees from the American University in Cairo, and with hobbies such as “studying ballet” (Sullivan 1986: 99). *Al-Ahram* reflected this calculation as it covered Mrs. Mubarak’s activities of inaugurating projects by Islamic charities (e.g., Mehanna 1987). Islamists kept a strong presence at Parliament as well, and this “further discouraged the state and its ruling National Democratic Party from supporting women’s issues and/or the election of women representatives” (Hatem 1992: 232). Whereas in the 1984 elections women held 33 out of a total of 448 seats in the People’s Assembly (Parliament), the 1987 elections brought only 18 women to the Assembly.

These limits on Mrs. Mubarak’s public presence do not correspond to her personality as she always discussed politics with her husband “more than ordinary couples” (Gamarekian 1988) and always “demonstrated eloquence and intelligence” (El-Fiqi, pers. Comm., October 10, 2020). It was a choreographed restriction which she mentioned in a rare interview with the *New York Times* in 1988: “I know my role very well... I know my limits and what people expect of me” (Gamarekian, 1988). She considered her disappearance from *al-Ahram* an attempt to “calm things down” (quoted by Sullivan 1986: 96) in the wake of criticism of Mrs. Sadat’s frequent media appearances. During her MA studies at the American University in Cairo, she kept a low profile to the extent that “she refused to publish her thesis, which she defended in 1982, even though it explores a non-controversial topic related to poverty reduction activities in urban Cairo” (Ibrahim, Pers. Comm. November 28, 2021). Saad Eddin

Ibrahim, her MA thesis supervisor, remembers how she was keen to heed Mubarak's order to "keep her under the radar" (Ibrahim, Pers. Comm. November 28, 2021). She did not attend the graduation ceremony, "preferring to receive the degree in absentia" (Sullivan 1986: 96).

The 1990s: *The Earthquake, NGOs, and Neoliberalism*

The 1990s, which spelled medium visibility and public policy roles for Mrs. Mubarak, can be situated within a number of shifts in Mubarak's politics of authoritarianism. The president put political parties and the opposition under strict control, and the ruling party consolidated its dominance as elections were marked with fraud, force, and intimidation. Press freedoms were curtailed with the Press Law of 1996, which gave the government vast authority to control journalists through heavy jail sentences if they were involved in defamation or libel. Mubarak thus no longer feared the criticism and lampooning of both the press and the opposition which once constrained his wife's presence in the 1980s.

Another shift is the regime's confrontation with Islamists. Mubarak "felt the Islamist threat" after a strong earthquake in 1992, which killed dozens and injured thousands, leading to a "turning point" in Mrs. Mubarak's roles and visibility (Dessouki, pers. comm., March 10-15, 2020). The Muslim Brotherhood "outran the regime" in offering efficient emergency support and organized services to those affected by the earthquake (Dessouki, pers. comm., March 10-15, 2020). The regime was in bad need for "improving service delivery in the areas of health, education, social services, transportation and housing in an effort to mitigate the influence of the Brotherhood's informal yet effective social safety net services" (Wikileaks 2009b). That was the time Mubarak or parts of his regime realized that he "could fill in the gap via his wife" (Dessouki, pers. Comm., March 10-15, 2020). By then, Mrs. Mubarak had already gained Mubarak's trust as someone who "can deliver," an expression repeated by several interviewees (e.g., Khattab, pers. comm., August 25, 2020; Gabr, pers. comm.,

August 13, 2020), and “knew to move things forward” (Ragab, per. comm., November 5, 2020).

NGOs became one of the instruments filling the gap, and again Mrs. Mubarak’s support proved vital. The decade saw the advent of an Egyptian civil society or what Lila Abu-Lughod calls the “NGO-ization” of human rights in general and women’s rights in particular (Abul-Lughod and Mahdi 2011: 685). The state allowed “thousands” of NGOs to operate at the time (Albrecht 2007: 61), and many of them mushroomed to reach 14,000 in 1999, including many targeting women (Zuhur 2001, 78). Mubarak coordinated, chaired, or sponsored most of them, thus serving the regime’s target for these organizations “not to instigate or inspire change, but rather to control and manage it” (Hamid, October 2010). Sherifa Zuhur argued that the state’s attempts at the time dually “produced a certain degree of official sponsorship along with aspects of control and manipulation” (Zuhur 2001: 78). The president’s wife proved more fitting for the task in her gendered capacity; many NGOs offered services to women as “social groups and interests not represented by the incumbency” (Albrecht 2007: 62). Many NGOs were preoccupied with lobbying and appealing to those in power rather than trying to build a grassroots constituency around their demands and “creating pressure from below” (Abu-Lughod and El-Mahdi 2011: 66). In this sense, both Mrs. Mubarak and NGOs contributed to an “elitist form of feminism” mainly meant to stabilize the social or political landscape by not introducing any “disruptive social change regarding gender roles or women’s status” (Zuhur 2001, 80-83). NGOs also served the regime’s battle with Islamists, especially as many of them shared a “secular orientation” (Al-Ali 2002 14) and a concern about growing Islamist militancy as well as opposition to any “religious frameworks” (Al-Ali 2002 14) for their struggles.

The growing agency of Mrs. Mubarak can also be situated within Mubarak’s adoption of neoliberal policies and reforms dictated by the IMF-prescribed structural adjustment and

privatization (Brownlee 2007: 132). The state moved from the “social welfare mode of regulation” to a “neo-liberal mode of regulation,” and many state-owned enterprises were privatized. Female employment had been concentrated in the civil service and public sector, and, as government budgets decreased, female unemployment rose throughout the region (Singerman 2013: 4-5). As more social groups became affected by high unemployment and higher poverty levels, Mrs. Mubarak jumped in to help deal with the ramifications. Her noticeable interest in the 1990s in issues such as housing or some sectors of society, such as the elderly, the disabled, and youth, came as her “targets expanded to include every Egyptian citizen in need of getting better state services” (Gabr, pers. comm., August 13, 2020) or part of what one of her office managers called “a wider vision of social inclusion” (pers. comm., Interview. Samir, August 20, 2020).

Having said that, Mrs. Mubarak’s roles also included accelerating neoliberal policies as they favored rent-seeking elites supportive of authoritarian rule in return for using state resources. She cultivated sets of allied interests with “private-sector capitalists,” many of whom turned to politics and joined the ruling party (see King 2009). Mrs. Mubarak’s adoption of a market economy is evident in the projects she took over as part of her expanded interest in issues such as education. She pushed for the “need for strong private financial support and engagement in school-based reform” (*Wikileaks*, 2009b). Her policy-oriented roles can thus be understood within the context of her “links between businessmen, on one hand, and the regime seeking to cover its failure to improve social services” (Dessouki, pers. comm., March 10-15, 2020). The links are reinforced in the name of “corporate social responsibility,” as many businessmen financially supported Mrs. Mubarak’s NGOs and social service projects as part of seeking benefits from government contracting and other forms of “favoritism” necessary for their survival (Yerkes and Wittes 2004). All this relates to

Mubarak's authoritarian durability as the regime can ensure those elites' "continued allegiance" (Brownlee 2007: 3) while sharing in their profits.

Part of the unique value of *al-Ahram* is reflecting and even creating these links and related shifts in role-making. When Suzanne's aunt died in May 1998, paid advertisements offering condolences flooded the newspaper. The aunt, named Hikmat, had no social or political roles and was unknown to most Egyptians at the time. But *Al-Ahram* published 38 paid advertisements with the name of their sponsors mentioned at the end of each of them as they directly addressed their condolences to Mrs. Mubarak. Sponsors included big businessmen-turned politicians such as Ahmed Ezz, a leading figure in the ruling NDP. Remarkably, condolences represented 12 percent of all material published in relation to Mrs. Mubarak during the whole year (against, e.g., only 6 percent, 19 items, focusing on Mrs. Mubarak's interest in the housing issue).

As many NGOs were connected to foreign bodies by funding, sponsorship, or cooperation, Mubarak's regime found an opportunity to use these organizations to add another layer of "robustness of authoritarianism" built on external networks of support (see Bellin 2004) or perhaps networks of entanglement. "Many foreign NGOs were eager to meet Mrs. Mubarak to use her influence to push forward implementing their projects in Egypt," said Desouki, who was then working for a German NGO as well (Pers. comm., March 10-15, 2020). Through this external exposure, Mrs. Mubarak presented herself as a force of modernization mainly via advancing women's rights and also by epitomizing such an advancement through her behavior, or as a *New York Times* reporter described her as "poised and articulate, speaking in slightly accented English" (Gamarekian 1988). She played a dominant role in organizing the UN Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo in September 1994. Preparations for the event included workshops held across Egypt with women from different backgrounds to address previously taboo subjects, such as

abortion, domestic violence, and reproductive rights, or to discuss issues of common concern, such as equality before the law, structural adjustment and the Personal Status and nationality laws, (al-Ali 2002 11). *Al-Ahram's* articles in the 1990s are full of references highlighting Mrs. Mubarak's activities of modernization, including those in the cultural sphere, such as the "Reading For All" project which was launched in the early 1990s, and introducing computer technology to schools.

In this sense, Mubarak's is not different from other authoritarian regimes, where the first ladies' roles include winning international standing and exerting a positive influence on world opinion towards the regime via claims of modernization, such as in the case of Imelda Marcos in The Philippines and her megaprojects, such as The Cultural Center inaugurated in 1969. Partly funded by a grant from the US Congress, the Cultural Center project also obtained the financial support of renowned businessmen who had to contribute to the project through "extortion" (Lico 2003, 91). The project was championed by Mrs. Marcos to feed the "feelings of being modern and international by being progressive" (Flores 2017, 15). It is part of a process of "internationalization and modernization" under which The Philippines First Lady boasted in front of foreign delegates that the state is "negotiating the challenging transition from a traditional order to a progressive humanist society" (Maramag 1973: 57).

Celebrating the roles of Mrs. Mubarak as the foremost champion of issues of modernity, such as improving education, defending women's rights, or standing against fundamentalists, and the recognition she obtained through foreign awards, as mentioned above, cohere with Mubarak's attempt to build a picture of himself as the "sole guardian of the commitment of Egypt to modern values in the battle against the rising power of Islamists" (Elsadda 2011, 93). This legitimates his authoritarianism, long based on fearmongering, under which Mubarak and other authoritarian leaders have warned the West that the absence of power was a recipe for the rise of violent Islamic radicals (Pearlman 2013, 393) and the

backsliding on issues such as women's rights. Indeed, some of the initiatives or legal reforms on women's rights which Mrs. Mubarak lobbied for were directly framed by the state as part of its battle against Islamists (Zuhur 2001).

Political Roles: The Absent Mubarak

Mrs. Mubarak's maximum visibility and political activism roles in the 2000s occurred during political shifts in Mubarak's rule. The first shift had to do with Mubarak's deteriorating health. He fainted while giving a speech in Parliament in November 2003 and had surgery in Germany in June 2004. His health kept deteriorating over the years, especially with the death of his grandson Mohammad in 2009, a "big blow that led him to collapse" (Dessouki, pers. comm., March 10-15, 2020). Family-wise, Mrs. Mubarak moved up as she was "more steadfast and became the backbone of the whole family" (Dessouki, pers. comm., March 10-15, 2020). Politically, her agency evolved as she became her husband's gatekeeper, updating the world on his health, and even "arranging his appointments" (Gabr, pers. comm., August 13, 2020). She also filled in his absent roles, meeting with cabinet ministers, "giving them orders and setting them deadlines for the tasks they should do" (Samir, pers. comm. August 20, 2020). Ali Dessouki, a family friend and her advisor at the time, summed it up, "The whole atmosphere fed one impression: Mrs. Mubarak both acted and was treated as co-president" (Dessouki, pers. comm., March 10-15, 2020).

Mrs. Mubarak's expansive roles and visibility took shape as she adopted a sense of authoritarian self-glorification. She was described as "more patronizing and controlling than consultative and participative" (Wikileaks, 2009b), "tough with ministers and state officials enough that they were scared of her more than they were scared of the president" (Saraya, pers. comm., July 23, 2020), and "attending some of these meetings, I saw how the prime minister, then Ahmed Nazif, treated her with utmost respect and reverence" (El-Shoubashy,

pers. comm. August 10, 2020). She became a political force in her own right and developed what Wekkin (2000: 607) would call a “power corona and orbital pull all her own.” This included having loyal cabinet ministers and being “responsible for appointing the minister of information,” according to US intelligence reports (*Wikileaks* 2009a). She justified her involvement in Mubarak’s exclusive roles or areas of interest such as peace initiatives by such statements as “I talked to the president and he is ok with it” (Quoted by Gabr, pers. comm., August 13, 2020). The president’s wife pushed for a media presence that suited her expansive roles, asking journalists covering her activities to “do more to draw attention to her work” (Mustafa, pers. comm., August 10-15, 2020).

Mrs. Mubarak’s growing roles and visibility were further boosted by her access to more of the state’s financial resources (Hosny, pers. comm. November 10-15, 2020). Resources were now channeled via more institutionalized forms, especially after the creation in 2000 of the National Council for Women (NCW) by a presidential decree, thus bypassing parliamentary opposition and “casting another shadow of authoritarianism” (Hatem 1992: 24). The NCW enjoyed an “autonomous entity” and became the “spoilt child” (Elsadda 2011: 86) of state institutions. The council helped in the “governmentalization” as well as “centralization” (Abul-Lughod and Mahdi 2011: 685) of women’s rights. Chaired by Mrs. Mubarak herself, the council “monopolized speaking on behalf of all Egyptian women” (Elsadda 2011: 93). Furthermore, the NCW’s activities and goals further normalized, legitimated, and justified Mrs. Mubarak’s political roles and high levels of visibility. On its website, one of the NCW’s goals was set as “promoting women’s empowerment” in different fields including politics (“Women’s Political Participation”, 2018). In “direct and regular coordination with the ruling National Democratic Party” (El-Sherbiny, Pers. Comm., August 11, 2020), as both institutions were located in the same downtown Cairo building, the NCW set up working groups in various governorates to support women’s candidates in the 2000

elections. One hundred and twenty women ran for Parliament and seven women (two more than in 1995) won seats (Zuhur 2001). The NCW lobbied for laws approved by Parliament, and MPs repeatedly expressed their appreciation of Mrs Mubarak's "benevolence towards Egyptian women" (Tadros 2014:11). The impact of these laws and activities is not clear as some activists suspect they were meant only to serve the repositioning of Mrs. Mubarak's visibility and roles (Azzi, 2011) and to legitimate the regime by allowing "the political project of a corrupt and discredited regime" (Elsadda 2011: 93) to masquerade behind the cause of advancing women's rights. That was the general public reaction as many Egyptians "pejoratively dismissed [these new laws] as "the Suzanne laws" (Abu Bakr, per. comm. October 4, 2020). Scholars also observed a decline in women's rights in Egypt in comparison with other Arab countries, such as Morocco or Tunisia (Tripp 2019). Internationally, Mubarak appeared more democratic as he and his wife created the impression that they were "benevolent patrons who change policy in response to their recognition of the people's needs" (Tadros 2014: 11). As these activities and laws were heavily covered by *al-Ahram*, the grim reality of violence against women, for instance, which "63 percent of women in Egypt have experienced," was "intentionally underreported" according to a 2009 survey (USAID/National Council for Women). Strikingly, the survey found that media outlets such as *al-Ahram* mainly prioritized issues of women's "political participation," a demand that fits in with the politics of access that Mrs. Mubarak enjoyed as part of her expansive roles and high levels of visibility. That 2009 survey was conducted in the same year that the Parliament approved a law to add a quota of 64 seats, for which only women could compete in the 454-seat parliament.

The context can also explain some variances in the data identified in the tables. For example, the only slide in data appears from 2005 to 2010, when the number of articles on Mrs. Mubarak went down from 503 in 2005 to 373 in 2010. Her name in the headlines went

down as well from 306 (61 percent) to 184 (49 percent) out of the annual sample in each year. The decrease does not correlate with a decline in Mrs. Mubarak's activities, especially as she was fully involved in more activities, as those around her, including journalists and her aides, confirm. The socio-political context can explain the decrease. Mubarak won the 2005 elections, the first to feature more than one candidate. Mrs. Mubarak played a key role in the campaign through her expanding roles and visibility. For example, in the first row at the event launching his campaign in the capital city of the governorate in which he was born, al-Munufiyya, sat Suzanne and Gamal Mubarak alongside government ministers (Meital 2006: 271). Although Mubarak won the elections after securing 89 percent of the vote, the demonstrations against his rule escalated as citizens aired their economic and political grievances (Ghobashy 2010), and as chants targeted Suzanne Mubarak as the one plotting Gamal's alleged succession to power "in the face of Mubarak's reluctance" (Amin, pers. comm., November 5, 2020; El-Fiqi, pers. Comm., October 10, 2020). She was explicitly named and shamed in the protests with chants such as "*Ya Suzanne, Ya Suzanne, libis Mubarak il-fustan*" [Hey Suzanne, Mubarak Put on a Dress]. Some private newspapers joined the campaign, feeding a public perception that Mrs. Mubarak was a "symbol of everything that was wrong with the Mubarak regime" (Brand, Kaki and Stacher, 2011). "The ruling regime thus realized that she became more of a liability than an asset" (Saraya, pers. comm., July 23, 2020). People started describing her as another Jehan Sadat "through patterns of their clear involvement or interloping into politics. One can say that she fell into the same fault of her predecessor" (Ibrahim, pers. Comm., November 28, 2021). The decrease in covering Mrs. Mubarak and her activities in 2010 was thus more "tactical" (Saraya, pers. comm., July 23, 2020; El-Sherbiny, Pers. Comm., August 11, 2020) to allay public fears. It is against this background that we can understand how Mrs. Mubarak almost disappeared from

the pages of *al-Ahram* when protests erupted on January 25, 2011, with many protestors chanting against both the president as his wife as indicated in the quote in the epigraph.

Conclusion

The article answers one main question: How had Mubarak *instrumentalized* his wife to maintain his power? The answer lies in a process tracing Mrs. Mubarak's agency through the roles she played showing her "capacity to act" and the levels of visibility she enjoyed as "manifestations" of this capacity. The analysis of *al-Ahram* articles finds a systematic process under which specific roles and levels of visibility mark each one of the three decades of Mubarak's rule. It was a linear progression from traditional roles and low visibility where the newspaper even stayed away from mentioning Mrs. Mubarak's name, with only references to her as "President Mubarak's wife," in the 1980s to policy-oriented roles where she gained visibility as an advocate of issues such as education or housing in the 1990s to political roles where she ended up replacing the president himself on some occasions in 2000s. The article also describes and explains points of rupture under which a decrease of agency was adopted by Mubarak at a time of heightened external pressures to democratize especially after 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq. Still, the linearity was not considerably affected as the decrease was minimal. The article helps clear the controversy on Mrs. Mubarak by drawing analysis from concrete, public, and state-produced evidence, namely *al-Ahram* newspaper.

The analysis does not mean that Mrs. Mubarak was passive or a powerless tool available for use and manipulation as part of her husband's political expediency. The process of agency-making shows moments of submissiveness, denying her the mention of her name, to moments of influence and image-glorification as Mrs. Mubarak acted as "co-president." Part of her powers emanates from monopolizing the representation of "Egyptian women," especially in the international arena, and from coordinating the regime's relations with NGOs

or with economic elites seeking access to Mubarak's clientelist politics. My argument in the article is based on situating these powers and entitlements within Mubarak's dynamics of survival and legitimation. Another part of my research is meant to correlate this process of producing frames on the first lady by the state, a top-down level of framing, with another process based on contesting, renegotiating, or falsifying these frames as part of Egypt's contentious politics leading to the forced resignation of Mubarak on February 11, 2011, after protests portraying Mrs. Mubarak as more than guilty by association or an accomplice in a corrupt regime.

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