System Justification in Authoritarian Regimes

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ABSTRACT

What explains the enduring popularity of authoritarianism and authoritarian leaders? In addition to theories rooted in regime performance, propaganda, and punishment, I propose system justification, a well-established socio-cognitive motive favoring established systems and stability, as a novel explanation for authoritarian support. I theorize the relationship between system justification and political behaviors in authoritarian contexts and test this in data from two original surveys of Egyptian citizens. After validating that the system justification scale reflects needs for certainty and structure in an authoritarian political setting, I show it is strongly associated with preferences for authoritarian governance. An embedded experiment shows that security, infrastructure, and identity systemic threats mobilize high system justifiers, further increasing support for authoritarian governance. Finally, additional analyses reveal that system justification predicts attitudinal and behavioral support for a specific authoritarian regime. The findings suggest a central role for individual psychological motivation in authoritarian persistence.

Keywords: System Justification, Authoritarian Regimes, Egypt, Political Psychology

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Introduction

Popular support is central to the survival and durability of authoritarian regimes (Buckley et al. 2023; Geddes and Zaller 1989; Hale and Colton 2017). While some degree of public approval for repressive governments and compliance with them is undoubtedly performative (Wedeen 1999), studies using various social science measurements to differentiate between reported support driven by social desirability bias and more accurate estimates find high levels of seemingly real support for authoritarian leaders across the world (Abadeer et al. 2022; Brooke and Nugent 2020; Chen and Dickson 2008; Dickson 2016; Frye et al. 2017; Li 2004; Nugent and Brooke 2023; Truex and Tavana 2019). Political scientists tend to rationalize support for non-democratic leaders by proposing a strategic logic for individual behavior rooted in material interests (Blaydes 2010; Chen and Dickson 2008; Gandhi 2008; Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Kim and Gandhi 2010; Magaloni 2006; Mesquita et al. 2005; Pepinsky 2017; Posner 2005; Reuter and Robertson 2015; Svolik 2012; Treisman 2011, Rosenfeld 2020). Existing research contends that citizens can be bought off, prioritizing material gain over competing concerns for democratic quality, bodily autonomy, and freedoms of choice. Underlying rationalization is an assumption that most people want democratic government if they could only actualize that preference, and so many studies focus on who dissents, interrogating the conditions under which individuals can express and act on a latent preference for democracy. More recent work incorporates political psychology and expands explanations of support for authoritarian regimes beyond performance to include the influence of propaganda and fear of punishment (Dollbaum and Robertson 2023, 20; Hasmath, Teets, and Lewis 2019; Sharafutdinova 2020; Truex 2022; Young 2019). Taken together, the literature largely suggests that individuals who support non-democratic regimes are complicit, duplicitous, or in some sort of involuntary compliance under conditions of manipulated information and threat.

However, as Przeworski (2023, 980) observes, "in the end, just assuming that autocrats cannot enjoy popular support is pure ideology." In this paper, I add to explanations rooted in performance, propaganda, and punishment and propose that support for a non-democratic regime fulfills some individuals' *cognitive* needs. After all, psychology has long established that individuals have complex relational, epistemic, and existential motives. Individuals simultaneously seek to fulfill the multiple and often competing needs

produced by those motives through a host of beliefs and behaviors. Underlying needs produce *ego*- and *group*-justifying motives, meaning that people want to hold favorable attitudes about themselves and the groups to which they belong, respectively, so they seek information and undertake political and apolitical behavior that satisfies these needs (Deci and Ryan 2000; Jost 2019; Jost, Baldassarri, and Druckman 2022).

Cognition can also be influenced by *system*-justifying motives. System justification theory holds that people are motivated to defend, bolster, and justify aspects of existing social, economic, and political systems (Jost and Banaji 1994). Motivated by individuals' underlying and unconscious needs for stability, system justification serves a palliative function in decreasing the threat of sources of discomfort such as uncertainty, threat, and social discord, ultimately increasing satisfaction with the status quo. Consequently, system justification theory explains why people tend to rationalize the social systems in which they live, even at the expense of their individual and group membership-based preferences and material interests. Like other forms of motivated cognition, system justification varies across individuals due to dispositional factors (i.e., individual tolerance of uncertainty, complexity, and related discomfort), cultural factors (i.e., whether and how the culture within which an individual is socialized tolerates uncertainty and complexity), and situational factors (i.e., system threats). The relationship between system justification and political behavior in democratic contexts is well established; high system justifiers support ideologies and candidates that preserve the status quo particularly under conditions of system threat. But the political effects of system justification remain unstudied in authoritarian contexts to my knowledge.

In this paper, I incorporate established findings from psychology to theorize how system justification functions in authoritarian contexts, and to investigate whether and how system justification contributes to the popularity of one particular autocrat. Egypt's current president, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, came to power in a July 2013 coup that decisively ended the country's brief democratic destabilization following the Arab Spring uprisings. The country has been ruled by consecutive authoritarian regimes since 1952, with a two-year interlude of liberalization following its 2011 revolutionary uprising. Since coming to power, Sisi has overseen authoritarian retrenchment of domestic politics on a scale that dwarfs the abuses of all his predecessors. At the same time, the country has faced successive economic and security challenges. And yet, despite these

significant and compounding issues that tend to undermine popular support for rulers across regime types, Sisi is genuinely popular (Abadeer et al. 2022; Truex and Tavana 2019) and has remained so throughout almost a decade of being in power. It is thus an ideal authoritarian case in which to study the effects of system justification on political behavior, and one in which system justification may be at work, given the regime's popularity its poor performance.

The paper's empirics draw from observational and experimental data generated by two original surveys of representative samples of adult Egyptian citizens. Survey A probes the correlates of system justification and included established batteries measuring respondents' personality traits, need for cognitive closure, and perceptions of a dangerous world. Analyses demonstrate that system justification travels well to the Egyptian context and measures variation in respondents' dispositional discomfort with uncertainty, in line with previous research in other contexts. Survey B measures system justification as well as political opinions and behaviors. Analyses reveal that system justification is significantly and positively correlated with support for authoritarian governance. In addition, the instrument includes an experiment priming four system-level threats: economic, security, infrastructure, and identity. The primes were designed to render system threats more salient to respondents, in an effort to test whether the process through which threat mobilizes high system justifiers in democratic contexts also occurs in non-democratic ones. Those who rank higher on general system justification are most affected by the priming of system, infrastructure, and identity system threat, with a corresponding increase in support for authoritarian governance. Finally, I demonstrate that system justification correlates positively with support for the Sisi regime. Additional analyses demonstrate that system justification predicts protest and voting behaviors, both of which are consequential to regime survival and system persistence, in the expected direction as signals of support or opposition to the regime.

Support for Authoritarianism: Existing Explanations

Despite the non-participatory nature of authoritarian regimes, popular support is important for regime survival and durability (Buckley et al. 2023; Geddes and Zaller 1989; Hale and Colton 2017). Research on political behavior in non-democratic contexts has spent significant effort rationalizing support for non-democratic leaders. Puzzled by the fact that most citizens living under authoritarian rule do not rebel, the

literature tests whether individuals "with a personal financial, policy, or professional interest in regime success support the system more" while "those that have been excluded from the regime are prone to discontent" (Truex 2022).[1] This performance-based explanation is validated empirically by higher levels of support for non-democratic regimes by leaders' coethnics, those in regime social and financial networks, and members of political parties, labor unions, and civil society organizations materially benefited by the regime (Blaydes 2010; Chen and Dickson 2008; Gandhi 2008; Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Kim and Gandhi 2010; Magaloni 2006; Mesquita et al. 2005; Pepinsky 2017; Posner 2005; Reuter and Robertson 2015; Svolik 2012; Treisman 2011, Rosenfeld 2020). Findings suggest that citizens can be bought off, and they evaluate the regime on how its performance affects their material well-being.

Underlying this research is an assumption that most people prefer democratic government if they could only actualize that preference. Many studies, then, look for the conditions under which individuals express a preference for democracy and act on it through protesting, voting for the opposition or spoiling ballots in controlled elections, or other subversive behavior. As Przeworski notes, "autocracies are assumed to be inherently brittle, surviving only because people are misled or repressed" (2022, 1). On the one hand, the nature of the media environment (Geddes and Zaller 1989; Huang 2015, 2018; King, Pan, and Roberts 2017; Reuter and Szakonyi 2015), education system (Cantoni et al. 2017; Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2014), or social networks creates a façade of ubiquitous support by indoctrinating, socializing, or pressuring people into supporting the regime, at a superficial level if not deeper (Frye et al. 2017; Magaloni 2006; Mattingly 2019; Treisman 2011; Wedeen 2015). Similarly, regime legitimation strategies stifle the emergence of alternative discourses questioning the validity of the government or criticizing its performance. These strategies range from the development of national curricula that inculcate obedience as a valuable attribute (Paglayan 2022), centralized and highly controlled national media that publicize the regime's preferred version of facts and interpretations (Baggott Carter and Carter 2023; Neundorf et al. 2024) , and "everyday nationalism" that imbues mundane interactions between individuals in public spaces with performance of regime support (Dukalskis and Lee 2020), Alternatively, fear of regime violence in retaliation for actual, perceived, or

[1] See also Kuran (1991) and Slater (2009).

expected oppositional behavior facilitates public demonstrations of compliance and reduces anti-regime action (Amat 2024; Davenport 2007; Fu 2018; Hassan, Mattingly, and Nugent 2022; Pearlman 2013; Rozenas 2020; Young 2019).

Looking beyond explanations rooted in performance, propaganda, and punishment, scholars have increasingly explored how citizens' individual characteristics influence political beliefs and behaviors in non-democracies. Researchers creatively expanded the study of how inate personality traits correlate with political attitudes and behavior by testing established findings from democratic settings (Gerber et al. 2011; Greenstein 2004) in authoritarian ones (Dollbaum and Robertson 2023, 20; Hasmath, Teets, and Lewis 2019; Truex 2022). In addition, scholars of political psychology have investigated the implications of findings on ego- and group-justifying motives from democratic contexts (Achen and Bartels 2017; Bernstein 2005; Condon and Holleque 2013; Druckman and Lupia 2000; Fiorina 2018; Huddy 2001) under non-democratic regimes (Nugent 2020; Young 2019, Sharafutdinova 2020). The translation of ego- and group-justifying motives from psychology into political science has resulted in studies probing the effect of self- and group-interest, not only in terms of relative material deprivation but also safety, status, and power in driving support for non-democratic governance (Geddes and Zaller 1989; Osborne et al. 2023). Findings speak to the generalizability of underlying cognitive and social psychological processes for political behavior across regime type.

System Justification in Politics

Psychology studies how individuals' complex relational, epistemic, and existential motives produce multiple and often competing needs, and how these needs then condition beliefs and behaviors. In addition to ego- and group-justifying motives, meaning that people want to hold favorable attitudes about themselves and the groups to which they belong, individuals also experience *system*-justifying motives to varying degrees. System justification theory holds that people are motivated to defend, bolster, and justify aspects of existing social, economic, and political systems, even if they are harmful to an individuals' self- or group-interests (Jost and Banaji 1994). The theory draws heavily on the socialist-feminist concept of "false consciousness," or "holding beliefs that might sustain one's own oppression" (Jost 1995, 400), which leads to both conscious and nonconscious rationalization of the status quo. System justification is what psychologists call motivated social

cognition, which assumes a relationship between people's beliefs and their motivational underpinnings. In other words, psychological needs drive people's ideas and behavior (Jost et al. 2003, 340). System justification is one type of motivation, which serves a palliative function by simultaneously enhancing the legitimacy of the existing system, increasing satisfaction with the status quo, and decreasing sources of discomfort such as uncertainty, threat, and social discord. System justification directly measures individuals' defense of the status quo but reveals a deeper fundamental psychological need for certainty, security, and social acceptance.

Observable variation in the expression of system justification across individuals stems from dispositional, contextual, and situational factors. In terms of dispositional antecedents, individual levels of "uncertainty avoidance; intolerance of ambiguity, need for order, structure and closure; perceptions of a dangerous world, and fear of death" (Jost and Hunyady 2005, 261) are positively correlated with system justification. Cognitive complexity and openness to experience are negatively associated with system justification. Much of the variation in individual tolerance of uncertainty is biologically determined, but some is also accounted for by learned and acquired emotional and behavioral coping skills (Hillen et al. 2017).

Variation in cross-national, societal levels of system justification is influenced by the cultural context within which an individual is socialized and how that culture deals with uncertainty. Research by Hofstede (1980, 2001) and Inglehart (1971, 1990, 1997) on cross-cultural comparison developed a widely used measurement strategy in which representative surveys of attitudes, values, and beliefs are aggregated at the national level to asses differences, systematically compare, and more accurately determine the effect of culture on human behavior. One dimension along which Hofstede compares cultures is uncertainty avoidance, the degree to which a culture embraces uncertainty about the future, similar to Inglehart's survival variable. Uncertainty creates anxiety to varying degrees for all people, and all societies have found coping mechanisms to deal with that anxiety. Members of national cultures that score high on the uncertainty avoidance index tend to think and behave in a strict manner, valuing structure, rules, and predictability. In contrast, members of cultures that score lower on the index are more tolerant of uncertainty, and more comfortable with unconventional ways of thinking and behaving. Culture is not assumed to be monolithic and unchanging;

instead, individual-level variation in uncertainty tolerance exists within a given national culture, and cultural changes occur over time but are a matter of degree rather than kind, anchored by the previous culture.

Certain proximate situational conditions heighten system justifying processes (Kay and Friesen 2011). Like the relationship between ego- and group-justification on the one hand, and individual- and group-threat on the other, system justification is triggered by system threat, defined as that which may cause harm to the existence, stability, and legitimacy of the system. Threat can include any perceived social, economic, or political threat to the established order of the system., and experimental studies have manipulated system threat in ways as benign as criticism from outsiders (Kay, Jost, and Young 2005) to priming reminders of terrorism and security threats (Ullrich and Cohrs 2007; Willer 2004). The mechanism behind this effect speaks to the psychological need of individuals; admitting that the system has failed "conflicts with the basic psychological need to believe one's system is effective and legitimate" (Kay and Friesen 2011, 361). System justifiers instead double down on supporting the status quo when it is threatened (Napier et al. 2006).

System justification has important implications in the political realm (Jost 2019; Jost et al. 2003, 2014; Jost, Banaji, and Nosek 2004; Jost, Federico, and Napier 2009). Empirical studies of system justification consistently find that individuals' needs for order, structure, closure, and stability predict holding more politically conservative attitudes (Azevedo and Jost 2021; Jost et al. 2017; Jost, Kruglanski, and Simon 1999). In defining and operationalizing the concept, Jost and coauthors differentiate between conservatism's "stable definitional *core*" and "set of more malleable, historically changing *peripheral* associations" (Jost et al. 2003 342; emphasis in original). At its core, conservatism is a preference for traditionalism, a resistance to social innovation, and general resistance to change (Conover and Feldman 1981; Greenwald and Banaji 1995; Muller 1997). In its peripheral associations, it takes the form of supporting specific conservative politicians, parties, or policies, and right skewed self-placement on a left-right scale.

The relationship between system justification and conservatism is particularly robust; meta-studies cite hundreds of samples, hundreds of thousands of respondents, in at least 12 countries since 1958 (Jost 2019; Jost et al. 2003, 2017; Jost, Sterling, and Stern 2017). In these studies, results tend to be more consistent with a system justification explanation, which prioritizes accommodation and rationalization of the status quo

over any individual or group experience of it, than with identity- or interest-based theories, in which individuals optimize their own and their group's best interests which may not be benefited by the ideology of conservatism (Haines and Jost 2000). For voting behavior, system justification does not simply operate as ideological affinity, in which conservative voters support conservative parties. When controlling for ideology, high system justifiers are more likely to vote for establishment candidates than anti-establishment candidates, or those advocating more extensive reforms. System justification thus increases support for politicians for their conservative (here, meaning system-conserving) behavior, not only ideological affinity.

System Justification in Authoritarian Regimes

Evidence on how system justification correlates with political behavior relies on samples capturing important variation in religion and culture, historical experience with socialism and communism, and the formal representation of conservatism in politics and policies. However, it is overwhelmingly drawn from democratic contexts.[2] What about system justification in authoritarian contexts? Linz (1964, 297) defines authoritarianism as "political systems with limited, not responsible, political pluralism, without elaborate and guiding ideology, but with distinctive mentalities, without extensive nor intensive political mobilization, except at some points in their development, and in which a leader or occasionally a small group exercises power within formally ill-defined limits but actually quite predictable ones." While authoritarian regimes diverge from democratic ones in many respects, one fundamental difference suggests system justification may work differently in non-democratic systems. In democracies, the regime is distinct from any specific leader by definition; the system persists through regular leadership change by design. While authoritarian regimes are distinct from totalitarian ones (Linz 2000), they move closer to a personalist institutional configuration in which the regime is more closely linked with the leader or small group that exercises power. As such, regime

[2] See Jost (2019) for a comprehensive list of democratic contexts in which system justification has been studied. System justification has been explored in a number of non-democratic settings, but without theorizing how it relates to support for political authoritarianism. First, Badaan et al. (2018) investigates psychological factors that explain acquiescence to the societal status quo in Lebanon. In addition, Vargas-Salfate et al. (2018) conduct a cross-national analysis of the relationship between a reduced system justification scale and psychological well being, and include samples from China, Estonia, Russia, Turkey, and Ukraine. Finally, Szabo and Lonnqvist (2021) also analyze the predictive effect of system justification on vote choice in Hungary as the quality of democracy declined between 2002 and 2018.

preservation is likely more closely connected with support for a specific leader in authoritarian regimes than in democratic ones.

Despite key differences across regime type, there are several reasons to think that the theory of system justification has explanatory value for political behavior in non-democratic contexts. First, system justification may be particularly important for political behavior in authoritarian regimes because of the defining characteristics of authoritarian political institutions. As articulated by Linz in an authoritarian regime, "political legitimacy [is] based upon appeals to emotion, and identification of the regime as a necessary evil to combat 'easily recognizable societal problems, such as underdevelopment, and insurgency'." In other words, the system – and the regime representing it at a given point in time – presents itself as existentially necessary for combating instability. Existing research summarized above on media environments, education systems, social pressure, and violence in authoritarian contexts suggests institutions aggregate into a system that is continually self-justifying, reaffirming its existence and the necessity of the regime. Second, underlying psychological needs seem pertinent for explaining ordinary citizens' seemingly voluntary deference to regimes that are non-participatory, largely non-responsive to citizen demands, and violent. The central idea of system justification is that individuals' psychological need for stability is intimately connected with conservatism, conceptualized as a preference for the status quo, whatever its nature or quality. For those born, raised, and socialized in an authoritarian system, the status quo is nondemocratic government.

The theory of system justification removes support for non-democratic governments and governance from the realm of rationality and situates it in the realm of innate dispositional intolerance for instability. Strong authoritarian idealogues, then, have these underlying dispositions, rather than the many accounts that talk about the 'rational,' 'strategic', 'transactional,' 'instrumental' models of popular support for authoritarian regimes. Moreover, the notion of false consciousness, "holding beliefs that might sustain one's own oppression" (Jost 1995, 400), seems particularly relevant for explaining why individuals who could plausibly gain politically, socially, and economically from democratization support an undemocratic, unequal, and unproductive regime. The possibility suggested by system justification theory that cognitive motives drive

not only acceptance of the existing order but also a preference for it over other possible systems (Jost, Banaji, and Nosek 2004) is a compelling one, and worth exploring in authoritarian contexts.

Authoritarianism in Sisi's Egypt

Egypt is an ideal place to study system justification, one in which it may plausibly be at work. It is a competitive authoritarian regime, with regularized but uncompetitive elections. The country has been governed by successive authoritarian leaders since its independence: Gamal Abdel Nasser between 1954 and 1970; Anwar el-Sadat between 1971 and 1981, and Hosni Mubarak between 1981 and 2011. The regime has also relied on significant repression of opposition to remain in power. Between 1952 and 2011, the regime used targeted repression of opposition, switching between Islamist and secular opposition by president, and since 2013 has employed widespread repression against all behavior deemed non-compliant. While there have been notable changes in the structure of governance (for example, Sadat added a ruling party, which Mubarak kept, and Mubarak added highly restricted multiparty elections) and the identity of opposition targeted by repression varied by administration (for Nasser and Mubarak, Islamists; for Sadat, non-Islamist), the story of Egyptian politics is one of persistent authoritarianism between 1952 and the present day.

Egypt's authoritarianism experienced a notable but brief destabilization following the 2011 'Arab Spring' uprisings. Inspired by events in Tunisia, 18 days of sustained mass mobilization led to the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak on February 11, 2011 after nearly 30 years in office. Mubarak's resignation initially ushered in a flurry of competitive political activity, resulting in an elected and civilian-led government for the first time in Egypt's history. The Muslim Brotherhood was the longest-standing and most organized opposition to the Mubarak regime, and its Freedom and Justice Party fared well in these contests, its parliamentary candidates winning a plurality in the 2011-2012 elections and its presidential candidate, Mohamed Morsi, claiming the presidency in June 2012. However, polarization between political elites, shaped by legacies of repression and competition during the Mubarak era, quickly resurfaced and deepened (Nugent 2020). On the one-year anniversary of Morsi's inauguration, the youth group *Tamarod* (Arabic for "Rebellion") organized massive anti-Morsi protests with financial and logistical support from elements of Egypt's security apparatus. On July 3, 2013, the military announced Morsi's removal from power, suspended

the constitution, and installed an interim government. The coup brought General Abdel Fattah el- Sisi to power. In 2018, Sisi was reelected in a landslide victory against a hand-picked opponent. Soon after, constitutional amendments were pushed through parliament that could allow him to govern through 2030. The increase in repression and decrease in civil liberties under Sisi is visible in figure 1, as is the fact that hundreds of authoritarian regimes similarly use violence against political threats. Egypt, a clear outlier in the level of physical violence and violation of civil liberties, is a most-likely case for observing the effect of system justification in an authoritarian regime, and thus a useful one for drawing inferences for other authoritarian regimes. Over 70 percent of the world's population currently lives under these types of regimes.

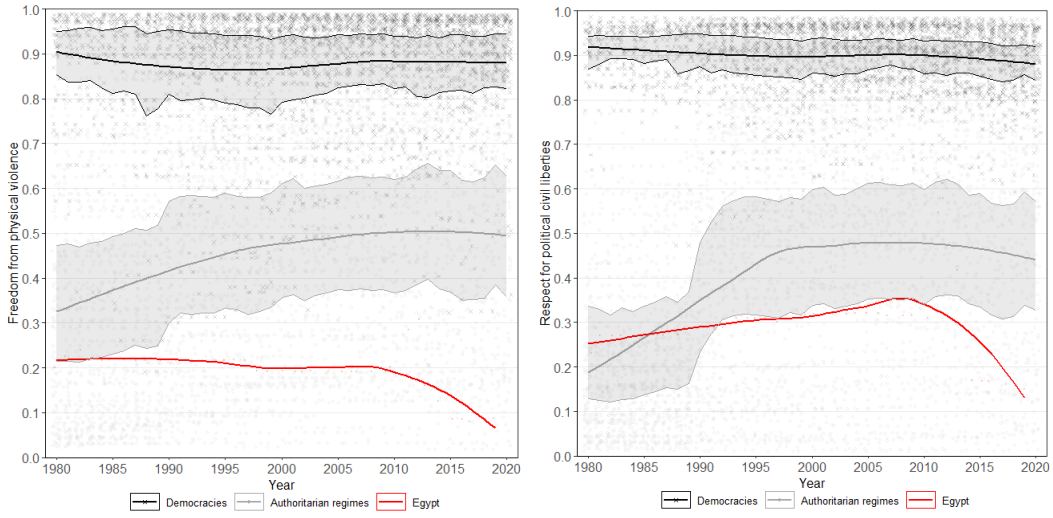

Figure 1: Egypt's Authoritarianism in Comparative Perspective[3]

In addition, persistent support for Egypt's authoritarian regime is an unresolved puzzle. The current president faces compounding crises and yet remains very popular. In addition to overseeing authoritarian retrenchment on a scale that dwarfs the policies of his predecessors, Sisi has also performed poorly. Economically, Egyptians' living conditions are rapidly deteriorating due to chronic mismanagement of public finance. Nearly 58% of public resources goes towards debt and loan repayment, resulting in meager domestic spending on health, education, and other basic social services for the country's 100 million citizens. In 2019,

[3] Panel (a) of figure 1 draws on V-Dem (v. 11.1) data measuring the extent to which citizens are safe from political killings and torture by the government and its agents. Higher scores represent more protection from state violence, while lower scores indicate less protection (i.e., more exposure to state violence). Panel (b) of figure 1 draws on V-Dem (v. 11.1) data measuring the extent to which governments respect individual freedoms of expression and association.

the World Bank reported that 60% of Egypt's population was either poor or vulnerable (World Bank Group: Poverty & Equity 2019). Relatedly, Egypt's rapidly aging infrastructure increasingly puts Egyptians at high risk due to food insecurity, pollution, and poorly maintained roads and public transport systems (Khalil 2017). In the political realm, the regime has paired mass arrests of tens of thousands of Muslim Brotherhood members and supporters with a smear campaign against the organization, painting the organization as an existential threat to the identity of the country.[4] In reality, the regime has effectively sidelined the group through an estimated 40,000 arrests of members, mass trials against known activists, and executions of leadership. The regime intentionally blurs the lines between moderate Islamist organizations, like the Muslim Brotherhood, and violent militant ones, further heightening the security and identity threats by conflating them with real terrorism. Relatedly, Egypt's national security is regularly compromised; the country witnesses terrorist attacks and large swathes of territory remain beyond government control. For the past five years, the Egyptian military has conducted persistent counter-terrorism operations in Sinai against an Islamic State affiliate with the help of billions of dollars in American aid, broadcasting many on national television.

Despite these significant issues, Sisi remains quite popular, and much of this support appears to be genuine. Direct questions measuring approval for Sisi demonstrates a rating of over 80 percent since 2013. Studies using different approaches to account for social desirability and reporting biases similarly find high levels of support (Abadeer et al. 2022; Nugent and Brooke 2023). In one rigorous experiment, Truex and Tavana (2019) find that 58% of a representative sample of Egyptians hold positive implicit attitudes towards the president. The question that inspired this paper and experiment was what might explain Sisi's seemingly legitimate popularity while Egypt faces so many significant economic, security, and political crises. If framed as threats to the system, as Egyptian officials have (Hatab 2020), these crises of governance may actually be driving support for Sisi rather than undermining it, according to a system justification framework.

Finally, Egypt is average on the uncertainty avoidance index developed by Hofstede (see figure 2), referenced above in my discussion of how cultural context shapes system justification dispositions. This score

[4] Wiki Thawra, "Report on the Detained and Prosecuted during the Sisi/Adly Mansour Period." Available at https://wikithawra.wordpress.com/2014/01/09/sisi-mansour-detainees/.

is helpful for the question at hand because it permits the manipulation of system-level threat without ceiling and flooring effects while capturing subnational variation at the individual level. This, in combination with the poor performance of the government and the authoritarian's seemingly unflappable popularity, makes Egypt an ideal place in which to test the role of system justification in shaping political attitudes and behaviors in an authoritarian regime.

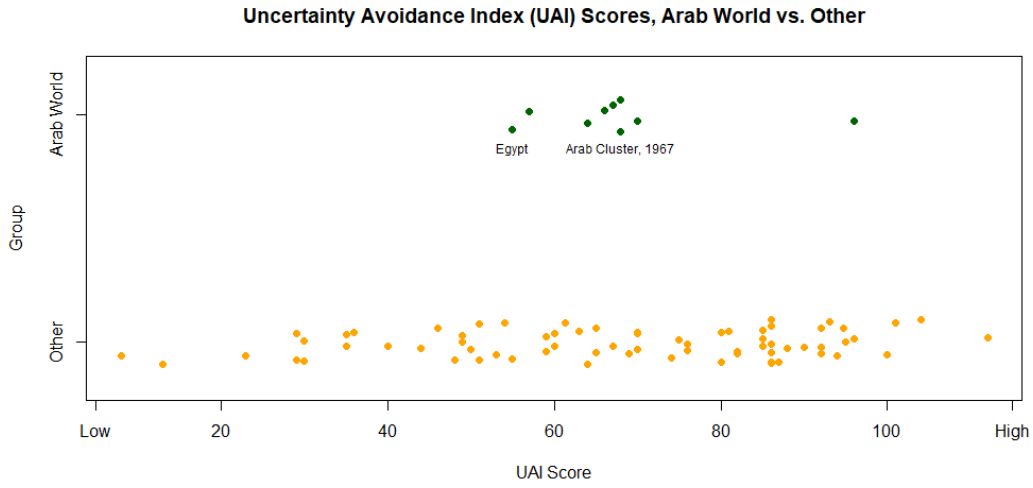

Figure 2: Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI) in Comparative Perspective[5]

Data and Methods

I analyze data from two original surveys. Survey A is a sample of 1,023 Egyptian adult citizens from YouGov's Egypt panel. Survey B is a nationally-representative sample of 2,000 Egyptian adult citizens.[6] Survey A measured individuals' system justification and potentially related dispositions including personality traits, right-wing authoritarianism, social dominance orientation, need for cognitive closure, and perceptions of a mean and dangerous world through established psychology batteries of questions. This survey served to

[5] Figure 2 plots the measurements of 63 countries included in the original Hofstede sample in yellow, combining all subnational measurements. It also plots congruent measurements created by (Almutairi, Heller, and Yen 2021) for seven Middle Eastern countries, as well as the original measurement for Morocco and for the Arab Cluster, in green. According to the latter study, "Hofstede surveyed only seven Arab States from the MENA region – Kuwait, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), Egypt, Iraq, Libya, and Lebanon. The region had 141 respondents in total; 79 respondents in 1969 and 62 respondents in 1972. After the research, however, IBM chose to erase the raw survey data and destroy all data printouts. The only data left pertained to the entire region as a whole, and consequently Hofstede was in essence forced to treat the region as one cluster."

[6] See appendix for additional information on the surveys, samples, and instruments.

validate the concept of system justification and its measurement in Egypt. Survey B included questions measuring respondents' level of system justification and personality traits as well as political behavior and preferences. This survey served to test the relationship between respondents' level of system justification and political behavior.

Independent Variable of Interest

The main independent variable of interest is system justification. I measure system justification through the battery developed by Kay and Jost (2003). Because this battery has not to my knowledge been used in Arabic-language public opinion research, I worked closely with my partner survey firms to carefully translate the items and to confirm their validity during pretesting. The same translation was used for both surveys. Respondents are asked to what extent they agree with the following statements:

1. In general, I find society to be fair.
2. In general, the Egyptian political system operates as it should.
3. Egyptian society needs to be radically restructured.
4. Egypt is the best country in the world to live in.
5. Most policies serve the greater good in Egypt.
6. Everyone has a fair shot at wealth and happiness in Egypt.
7. Our society is getting worse every year.
8. Egyptian society is set up so that people usually get what they deserve.

On each item, respondents could answer "strongly agree," "agree," "disagree," or "strongly disagree." For questions 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, and 8, higher agreement suggests higher levels of system justification. Questions 3 and 7 are reverse coded and were recoded during analysis to be consistent with this interpretation. Principle component analysis shows that all eight questions load onto one factor with high internal consistency ($\alpha = .8$) and so individuals receive one score averaging responses to the eight questions. Because the political outcomes I am interested in measuring may have some level of semantic overlap with two of the system-justification items, I run a reduced form of the index excluding item 2 ("in general, the Egyptian political system operates as it should") and item 5 ("most policies serve the greater good in Egypt") out of an abundance of caution.[7] The reduced form index maintains high internal consistency when analyzing survey B

[7] Thanks to anonymous reviewers for raising this concern.

(α = .7). Survey A, conducted after survey B, only included the reduced battery (questions 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, and 8), and the subsequent index has a high internal consistency (α = .82).

Outcomes of Interest

I analyze how system justification relates to two sets of outcomes in authoritarian political contexts in survey B. The first are regime type or policy preferences, measured by two questions. Respondents were asked, "to what extent do you think the government is responsible for undertaking policy designed to do the following?" with a number of sub-items including whether the government is responsible for creating employment opportunities, keeping prices down, separating religion from politics, and providing security as well as services. One item asked the extent to which the government is responsible for "protecting freedom of speech and assembly." Answers could range from 0, indicating that it is absolutely not the government's responsibility, to 10, indicating that it is absolutely the government's responsibility. A second item asked for the respondent's agreement with the statement, "the violation of human rights committed by a government is justifiable in the name of promoting security and stability." I use these items because while some authoritarian regimes like Egypt have seemingly democratic features like elections (albeit not competitive) and marginal separate of powers (despite *de facto* power concentrated in the executive), they most fundamentally differ from democracies in the way that they respect the right to opposition, and thus the protection of civil liberties and individual freedoms in the name of suppressing dissent.[8] Answers ranged on a four-point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Both questions were recoded coded during analyses so that *higher* measurements indicate *more authoritarian* positions. The experimental outcome questions, discussed in more detail in a later section, similarly measure regime type preferences.

The second set of outcomes measure attitudinal and behavioral regime support. One question reads, "On a scale from 0-10 measuring the extent of your satisfaction with the current government's performance, in which 0 means that you are completely dissatisfied with its performance and 10 means you are completely satisfied, to what extent are you satisfied?" In addition, the instrument asked about a series of political

[8] In the words of Linz (1964, 295): "As Schumpeter has stressed, the element of competition for votes makes the whole gamut of civil liberties necessary, since without them there could be no true free competition."

behaviors: participation in specific events with different meanings in terms of whether they were authoritarian regime-supporting or not. I consider participation in the 2011 revolutionary protest and the 2011-2012 parliamentary elections as anti-regime. In contrast, I consider the 2013 counterrevolutionary protests and elections after 2014 (none of which have been competitive) to be pro-regime.

Covariates

I control for age, gender, and level of education, all of which are important in predicting political behavior and attitudes in authoritarian regimes (Dollbaum and Robertson 2023; Greene and Robertson 2017) and specifically in Egypt (Brooke and Nugent 2020b, 10-11). I also account for whether respondents live in urban or rural localities, which may influence their ability and propensity to undertake certain kinds of political activity, and for economic stability through a subjective measure of whether a respondent's household income covers its expenses, a more reliable measurement of financial precarity than direct income questions in contexts like Egypt. In addition, I include a control for level of agreement with the statement, "The government and parliament should enact laws in accordance with Islamic law," a proxy indirectly measuring partisan support for Islamist parties and politicians like the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood, which could not asked explicitly, in the final set of regime support analyses. All included controls account in some way for the competing explanations outlined in the literature review. Economic precarity accounts for an individual's material alignment with the regime, while partisanship accounts for the respondent's stance towards the regime. Education controls for individual exposure to regime propaganda and the ability to resist it. Gender and Age account for social vulnerability that perhaps renders individuals more susceptible to falsifying regime support. By controlling for these variables, I can make a stronger claim that system justification matters above and beyond the factors scholars have established are significant in predicting support for authoritarianism and authoritarian regimes.

Experimental Intervention: Does Threat Mobilize System Justifiers?

Recall that authoritarian regimes are designed to self-justify, per Linz (1964). To test whether, how, and among what population threat mobilizes system justification in an authoritarian context, I embedded an experimental intervention towards the end of survey B. The experiment included a pure control and four

treatments designed to promote different threats that are realistic and salient to the Egyptian context: economic, security, infrastructure, and identity. I included these specific threats because Egyptians consistently rank these issues highly when asked about national challenges on public opinion polls. In the fifth wave of the Arab Barometer, conducted in the same year as survey B, respondents were asked the most important challenge facing Egypt today. The issues included in the primes were the four highest-ranking concerns among Egyptians: 35.6 percent of respondents listed the economic situation (indicating poverty, unemployment, and price increases), 18.4 percent named terrorism, 14.7 percent listed public services, and 6.1 percent listed religious extremism.

The experiment was intended to subtly and ethically prime different kinds of threats among respondents in a conversational but thorough manner, to render them more salient in the moment. I constructed treatments to be consistent in the description of each threat, including quantitative statistics and qualitative descriptions of the specific threat and how people might experience it, and in length. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of the five treatment conditions, with each treatment group totaling 400 individuals. The randomization of the treatments succeeded with respect to pre-treatment covariates and observables.[9] Respondents were read one of the following paragraphs:

> **Control:** No text.
>
> **Economic Threat:** As you may know, Egypt has experienced a national economic crisis in recent years. Poverty rates have soared, reaching 60 percent in some governorates, and inflation of the Egyptian pound rose as high as 35 percent in 2017. Unemployment has remained very high at above 10 percent. In addition, prices for basic commodities such as bread, oil, public transportation, and electricity have nearly doubled. This economic crisis threatens the country.
>
> **Security Threat:** As you may know, Egypt has experienced a national security crisis in recent years. Terrorism rates have soared, reaching 1700 attacks in the Sinai, and 225 attacks and 877 civilian fatalities at the national level in 2017. Almost 1000 police officers and soldiers have been killed while fighting extremists and insurgents. In addition, the number of attacks in urban centers has increased dramatically. This security crisis threatens the country.
>
> **Infrastructure Threat:** As you may know, Egypt has experienced a national infrastructure crisis in recent years. Infrastructure accidents have soared, reaching 11,098 incidents and 3,747 fatalities related to poor road conditions at the national level in 2017. The number of collapsed buildings due to poor maintenance exceeded one per week. In addition, the number of accidents involving the

[9] See table A2 in the paper's appendix.

Egyptian National Railways increased by nearly a third. This infrastructure crisis threatens the country.

Identity Threat: As you may know, Egypt has experienced a national identity crisis in recent years. Violent sectarian incidents have soared, reaching 77 major attacks in 2017. While recent public opinion data suggests that the majority of the country acknowledges Egypt as a civil-secular state that respects Islamic tenets, as many as one fifth of Egyptians want the government to adopt more strict and literal interpretations of Islam. In addition, the number of Egyptian citizens who use an adjective in their self-description, such as *Muslim* or *Christian* Egyptian, has grown in recent years. This identity crisis threatens the country.

Two post-treatment questions measure regime type preferences, or support for non-democratic governance. Responses were coded as 1 for the more authoritarian option (option a for both questions) and 0 otherwise. Answer order was randomized across respondents. Because of high interitem correlation ($\alpha = .73$), results presented in the main text of the paper use a dependent variable that averages responses to both questions.

Which of the following two options is closer to your opinion?

a. "A non-democratic government can be preferable under some circumstances."
b. "A non-democratic government is never preferable under any circumstances."

Which of the following two options is closer to your opinion?

a. "During times of crisis, it is important to have a strong leader decide the best policies."
b. "During times of crisis, it is important to have the people vote to decide the best policies."

Hypotheses

I summarize here my guiding hypotheses, organized by the outcome variable of interest and with the type of data used to test it in parentheses:[10]

Regime Type Preferences

- H1: System justification is significantly and positively correlated with support for authoritarian governance (observational data).
- H2: Those primed with system-level threats will report higher-level support for authoritarian governance relative to the control (experimental data).
- H3: Those who rank higher on system justification will be most affected by the priming of system-level threats (i.e. heterogenous treatment effects by pre-treatment reporting of system justification) and report the highest level of support for authoritarian governance (experimental data).

[10] I pre-registered several hypotheses prior to data collection and the report is included in the appendix. As the reader will see, the framing of the research question changed between 2018, at which point I was interested in exploring authoritarian fear-mongering, and the date of publication. The initial survey was intended as preliminary data collection to study the psychology of support for authoritarian regimes, and my thoughts have since evolved considerably. I pre-registered that I was interested in exploring heterogenous experimental treatment effects by respondent level of system justification but did not center system justification as the primary object of interest. The experiment is now included as a mechanism test rather than the primary analysis, as it was featured in the pre-analysis plan.

Sisi Regime Support

- H4: System justification is significantly and positively correlated with support for the Sisi regime (observational data)
- H5: System justification is significantly and positively correlated with regime-preserving political behaviors (observational data).

Results

Concept and Measurement Validation

Before introducing system justification as an independent variable, I explore the dispositional correlates of system justification, an exercise in validation that provides evidence this measurement operates correctly in the non-democratic context of Egypt. In existing studies, system justification is positively correlated with an individual's need for order, structure, and closure; perceptions of a dangerous world; and death anxiety, and negatively correlated with openness to experience (Jost and Hunyady 2005, 261). Data generated by survey A demonstrates that the expected relationships between system justification and various dispositions largely hold. I include the question wording and full regression analyses in appendix table A5, and represent the relationships in table 1 below. System justification is positively and significantly correlated with individual need for closure, order, and structure. It is also positively correlated with perceptions of a dangerous world and negatively correlated with openness to new experiences, though not at a statistically significant level. Moreover, system justification is significantly and positively correlated with social dominance orientation and right-wing authoritarianism, similarly established findings in existing literature. The one area in which the results differ is with respect to death anxiety; existing studies find death anxiety is positive correlated with system justification, but it is instead negatively correlated in my sample. This may be due to a different cultural understanding of death in Egypt in comparison to the other populations analyzed in previous system justification studies.[11]

[11] Egyptian society is highly religious and one which is predominantly Sunni Muslim. In this tradition, as in other religious traditions, death is not necessarily something that is feared or conceptualized as punishment. Instead, it is the beginning of an afterlife in which many are rewarded for their deeds and their suffering in this life. As a result, it is possible that death anxiety is simply not a salient concept and thus not a relevant correlate of system justification. In my sample, those who are the least religious are the least system justifying *and* the most afraid of death (demonstrated in the appendix). In Egypt, it appears that individuals with stronger system justification tendencies may be less afraid of death due to the palliative function of close subscription to existing social and belief systems

Table 1. Antecedent Correlates of System Justification		
Antecedent	**Existing Studies**	**Egypt Sample (2025)**
Needs for order, structure, closure	+	+
Openness to experiences	-	-
Perceptions of a dangerous world	+	+
Death anxiety/mortality salience	+	-
Note: + indicates that the variable is positively associated with system justification. – indicates that the variable is negatively associated with system justification.		

System Justification and Support for Authoritarianism

I now explore the relationship between system justification and regime type preferences, i.e. support for authoritarian governance. Because of low interitem correlation ($\alpha = .14$) I analyze each outcome variable separately. Both dependent variables were highly skewed, and were thus logged for analysis and retransformed when computing expected values. First, I analyze the relationship between system justification and the extent to which the respondent does not think government is responsible for protecting freedoms of speech and assembly (Table 2, columns 1-2). Second, I analyze the relationship between system justification and the respondent's level of agreement that violation of human rights by a government is justifiable in the name of promoting security and stability (Table 2, columns 3-4). System justification is significantly and positively correlated with each outcome, including in specifications with controls. In moving from the least- to most-system justifying in my sample, respondents agreed significantly more with the statement that government is *not* responsible for protecting freedoms of speech and assembly: 2.06 among the lowest system justifies compared to 3.45 for the highest system justifiers (on a scale of 0 to 10). There is a similar statistically significant increase for agreement with the statement that government violations of human rights are justified in the name of national security; however, substantively this change only moves the average response closer to "disagree" within the "strongly disagree" category.[12]

[12] See appendix table A6 for full regression results, and figure A1 for visualization of predicted probabilities.

Table 2. System Justification and Regime Type Preferences

	Linear Regressions[13]			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Variable	No government responsibility to protect freedoms of speech, assembly		Government violation of human rights justified for national security	
System Justification Index	0.248***	0.172***	0.197***	0.175***
	(0.0410)	(0.0437)	(0.0196)	(0.0210)
Controls		✓		✓
Constant	0.106	0.189	-0.202***	-0.136*
	(0.0951)	(0.121)	(0.0455)	(0.0582)
Observations	1,491	1,491	1,489	1,489
Pseudo R-squared	0.023	0.046	0.063	0.071

Standard errors in parentheses *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Experimental Results

In the experimental results, respondents were significantly more supportive of authoritarianism in the economic and infrastructure threat treatment groups, and marginally so in the identity treatment group (p = .11). The security threat treatment group was indistinguishable from the control. These results remain in specifications that control for a pre-treatment measurement of system justification. Additional analyses reveal that respondents with higher system justification scores were most affected by the security, infrastructure, and identity primes; there was no significant interaction with the economic treatment.[14]

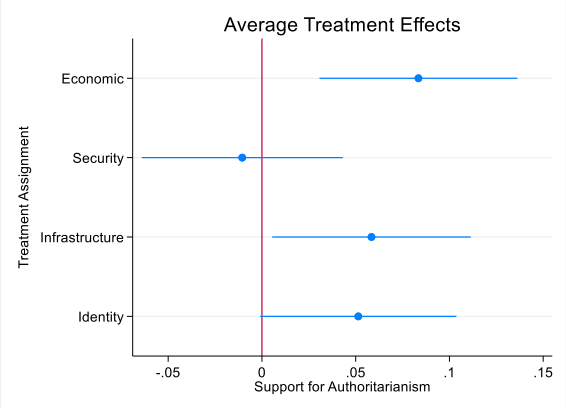

Figure 3. Average treatment effects on support for authoritarianism (90% confidence intervals)

[13] The outcome variables are log transformed. See appendix for more detail.
[14] The corresponding table for these visuals is included in appendix table A7. See also figure A2 for treatment effects on each outcome component.

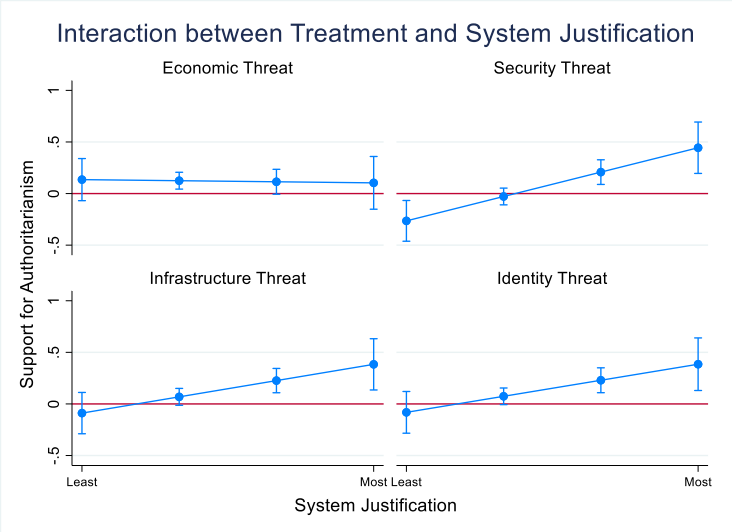

Figure 4. Average marginal effect of treatment by system justification index on support for authoritarianism (90% confidence intervals)

System Justification and Support for the Regime

Next, I analyze the relationship between system justification and support for the Sisi regime, reported in table 3. Levels of system justification are positively correlated with evaluations of the regime, even in specifications that control for other predictors of these attitudes. This includes support for Islamism, a proxy for partisanship. As noted above, those who support Islamism are likely to be those in strongest opposition to Sisi, as he has eliminated their preferred political ideology and party from the Egyptian political scene.[15]

Table 3. System Justification and Regime Support

	OLS Regressions		
Variable	(1) Regime Support	(2) Regime Support	(3) Regime Support
System Justification Index	3.313***		3.184***
	(0.117)		(0.129)
Support for Islamism		-0.181**	-0.183***
		(0.0704)	(0.0631)
Controls			✓
Constant	-1.967***	6.111***	-1.813***
	(0.272)	(0.198)	(0.399)
Observations	1,490	1,803	1,419
Adjusted R-squared	0.350	0.003	0.355

Standard errors in parentheses; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

[15] See appendix table A8 for full results. I also include two additional models controlling for regime type preferences (the dependent variables in the previous section), and system justification remains positively and significantly correlated with regime support.

Finally, I explore whether underlying system justification motives predict political *behavior,* which may be regime-supporting or regime-opposing. In table 4, I present the results of regressions in which the dependent variable is participation in a series of protests and elections.[16] Because of Egypt's 2011 revolution and 2013 counterrevolution, I am able to measure political behavior under varying conditions. Revolutionary protests in 2011 that overthrew Mubarak were anti-regime (column 1), whereas counterrevolutionary protests in 2013 that sought to restore a version of the previous regime were pro-regime (column 2). Likewise, electoral participation in the 2011-2012 competitive elections was anti-regime (column 3), supporting a transition from the established authoritarian system, whereas participation in later and future uncontested elections was pro-regime (columns 4-5), supporting the re-consolidation of authoritarian power.[17]

Table 4. System Justification and Political Participation

	OLS Regressions				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Variable	2011 Revolutionary Protest	2013 Counter-Revolutionary Protest	2011-2012 Elections (Competitive)	2014-2016 Elections (Non-Competitive)	Vote in Future Elections (Non-Competitive)
System Justification Index	-0.0265**	0.0290**	-0.0833***	0.137***	0.247***
	(0.0134)	(0.0139)	(0.0123)	(0.0215)	(0.0275)
Islamism	0.00941	-0.00255	0.0411***	-0.0448***	-0.00956
	(0.00656)	(0.00683)	(0.00601)	(0.0106)	(0.0135)
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Constant	0.0783*	-0.0747*	0.0563	0.421***	-0.0673
	(0.0414)	(0.0430)	(0.0380)	(0.0668)	(0.0854)
Observations	1,425	1,427	1,439	1,439	1,439
Adjusted R-squared	0.023	0.028	0.060	0.088	0.095

Standard errors in parentheses; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

[16] See appendix for question wording and additional explanation of events.

[17] See appendix table A9 for full results. Appendix table A10 presents the results of regression specifications that includes regime type preferences (the dependent variables in the previous section), and system justification remains significantly correlated with political participation, in the same direction as models presented in table 5 in the main text and A9 in the appendix.

Discussion

The results presented in the previous section demonstrate that system justification is significantly and positively correlated with support for authoritarianism. High system justifiers are more likely to think the government does not have a responsibility to protect freedoms of assembly and speech, and that government violations of human rights are justified in the name of national security. The experimental results presented above also demonstrate that certain system-level threats mobilizes system justifiers. Respondents who received the economic and infrastructure system threat treatments were significantly more supportive of authoritarianism, as were those in the identity system threat treatment, though only marginally. Interestingly, the security treatment did not have a discernable treatment effect in the aggregate. Instead, system justification conditions the treatment effect; those who measured higher on the system justification index were more effected by the treatment. Results similarly demonstrate that higher system justifiers were more affected by the infrastructure and identity system level threat treatments. In contrast, there is no significant interaction between the economic treatment and system justification index, suggesting that economic system level threats affect everyone similarly, regardless of system justification. In a perceived economic crisis, it is possible that everyone becomes more conservative. In contrast, security, infrastructure, and identity threats appear to affect high system justifiers most significantly, suggesting low system justifiers may refrain from defensively adopting more conservative positions under these threat conditions. Taken together, the observational and experimental evidence demonstrate that high system justifiers are always more supportive of the authoritarian status quo, but particularly so under conditions of system threat.

I believe these results demonstrate the utility of testing system justification in non-democratic contexts, and that there may be something about the nature of the authoritarian political context that trigger system-justifying motives. In the words of Jost, Federico, and Napier (2009), citing Tyler (2006), "from the point of view of political elites, system justification is beneficial insofar as it contributes to the stability of the social system and increases voluntary deference on the part of ordinary citizens." While all political systems rely on compliance from the populace, a non-democratic regime relies on compliance *without* robust accountability or participation. There are also less checks on what an authoritarian leader can say and how he

can say it. If all leaders seek to maximize mass compliance, perhaps certain rhetorical devices that are prevalent in non-democratic contexts (approximated by what I incorporated into the experimental treatments) help them to do so. A question that is beyond the scope of my analyses is whether attribution of threat, or being able to assign it a specific cause whether foreign, domestic, from nature or from other humans – might condition the effects of system-level threats as it does individual and group threats .

The results discussed so far are confirmatory of existing literature drawn from democratic contexts: high system justifiers are more supportive of conservative policies on a left-right continuum, particularly under conditions of system threat. What my study of system justification in authoritarian contexts adds is that system justification is significantly correlated with pro-regime attitudes and behaviors. In the case of Egypt, system justification is positively and significantly correlated with support for the Sisi regime. I note that Egypt has been subjected to similar authoritarian governance since 1952 but has become increasingly personalistic under Sisi. Support for a specific author leader may diverge from authoritarian regime support in other context where authoritarian power is less personalized. In addition, the effects of system justification on political behaviors are large and complementary, depending on how the event relates to the regime (i.e., whether it is an act of system preservation or opposition). Holding all other variables at their means, moving from the lowest to the highest scores of system justification in the sample decreases the likelihood of participation in 2011 revolutionary protest from 8.6 percent to under 1 percent and increases the likelihood of participation in the 2013 counterrevolutionary protest from 2 to 11 percent. System justification is also highly consequential for voting. With other variables at their means, moving from the lowest to the highest observed scores of system justification decreases the likelihood of participating in the 2011-2012 competitive elections from 15 percent to indistinguishable from 0, increases the likelihood participation in the non-competitive 2014-2016 elections from 65 percent to nearly 100 percent, and increases the likelihood of prospective voting from 32 percent to near certain participation in future contests.

Compliance is critical to the survival of authoritarian regimes (Geddes 1999; Hellmeier and Weidmann 2020; Martinez i Coma and Morgenbesser 2020; Nugent and Brooke 2023). In both revolutionary and counterrevolutionary situations, the number of participants is important for determining whether a

protest is deemed threatening enough, and condemnatory enough, to warrant regime change by actors including military and foreign governments. In authoritarian elections, leaders seek high levels of turnout as a demonstration of their strength. Egypt's high system justifiers were significantly less likely to participate in the 2011 revolutionary protests and competitive elections, while they were significantly more likely to participate in the 2013 counterrevolutionary protests and non-competitive elections since 2014, than low system justifiers. The behavioral outcomes also have important implications for the success of democratic transitions, in Egypt and elsewhere. Uncertainty – the "imprecision with which actors are able to predict [the] future" (Lupu and Reidel 2012, 1344) -- is a key, institutionalized component of democracy (Przeworski 1991). Democratic transitions are moments of heightened unpredictability in which it is clear the status quo is under threat but unclear what comes next (O'Donnell and Schmitter 2013 (1986), 1-4; Stinchcombe 1999). My study demonstrates that during Egypt's democratic transition and the related political, social, economic, and security destabilization following the 2011 revolution, high system justifiers sought to return to some sense of normalcy and did so by behaving in ways that preserved the authoritarian status quo.

Sisi consistently invokes system threat in his official rhetoric and to explain away his regime's mistakes, failed policies, and the difficulties it could reasonably be held responsible for within Egyptian society. Under Sisi, references to conspiracies involving bad actor foreign countries like the United States, Iran, Qatar, and Turkey, the Muslim Brotherhood, and general "terrorists" as the reason for various infrastructure, economic, and security problems in Egypt have significantly increased in state-run *Al-Ahram* newspaper (Koehler-Derrick, Nielsen, and Romney n.d.). The way in which the regime describes the Muslim Brotherhood is particularly illuminating. Successive Egyptian regimes have linked the organization with terrorism, conflating a political opponent with the very real security threats posed by Jihadi groups in the Sinai, and Sisi has "revived Mubarak's rhetoric about the danger the Muslim Brotherhood poses to Egyptian security" (Zollner 2019). In 2021, Sisi said the Brotherhood had eaten away at "the mind and body of Egypt for 90 years" and "warned against allowing countries to be destroyed from within, creating millions of refugees and generations of extremists, releasing untold damage on the wider region for decades to come" (Abu Zaid 2021). Repressing the Brotherhood is an essential component of regime support (Lachapelle

2022), and may be particularly effective because the regime presents it as a threat to the system. Moreover, while promising reforms that are rarely implemented, Sisi asks Egyptians to bear austerity measures and make individual-level solutions. For example, as inflation has made healthy food prohibitively expensive for poor Egyptians and international loans have required the government rollback subsidies on food staples, Sisi called on obese Egyptians (who tend to be poor) to diet and exercise to address a systemic problem, as articulated by his opponents (Associated Press 2018). In this way, Sisi has been direct about the challenges facing the country under his leadership. A theoretical framework focused on individual and group interests would predict that this combination of identifying threats and lambasting Egyptians would diminish his support, but it has not. Instead, his rhetoric may be activating system justification and shoring up support among those who are most system-justifying.

Conclusion

This paper explored whether system justification helps to explain support for non-democratic governance and leaders, building on systematic evidence that system justification leads people to support existing systems in democracies, even at the expense of their material self-interest. Results demonstrate that system justification does indeed predict support for authoritarian governance and the Sisi regime in two samples of Egyptian adult citizens. Those who rank higher on the system justification scale are more supportive of authoritarianism and most affected by the priming of system threat. Additional analyses demonstrate that system justification predicts support for the Sisi regime and pro-regime political behaviors of immense consequence for the survival of the regime and the persistence of the authoritarian political system. While political scientists have incorporated the rich literature in psychology on ego- and group-justifying motives into studies of political behavior, additional research is needed into how system justification motives function in different contexts, not only the varied cultural contexts explored in existing literature but also non-democratic political contexts. This study is intended to be a first step towards that goal.

The findings might lead the reader to ask whether Egypt's population is particularly system justifying, having lived and been socialized under an authoritarian regime of some sort since 1952. More generally, this begs the question of whether the level of societal system justification is endogenous to government behavior

and thus regime type. Jost, Pelham et al. (2003) theorize that in systems with more civil liberties, protesting against the status quo is not as risky as in those where there are less, suggesting that a higher democratic quality may produce a less-system justifying population. However, cross-national comparison finds no relationship between regime type and system justification. Brandt (2013) finds no statistically significant correlation between the Civil Liberties subscale of the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index and societal levels of system justification in a sample of 151,794 respondents in 63 countries. Similarly, Valdes et al. (2024) finds that country-level freedom and civil liberties, measured by a country's 2018 Freedom House score, does not significantly explain country variation in levels of system justification in a sample of over 24,000 participants in 42 countries. This is evidence that system justification is, in fact, exogenous to regime type. Authoritarian regimes are effective at activating it in how they govern by emphasizing threats, but leaders in democratic regimes can and do use similar tactics to similar effect, as the existing system justification research demonstrates. However, political scientists should keep in mind that epigenetic studies suggest this could change over time, when measured across generations. Populations subjected to the trauma of prolonged instability, perceived threat, and significant violence carry biological indicators that they pass on to their children (Mulligan et al. 2005). It has yet to be determined whether this then has implications for cognition, and more research is certainly needed on the long-term effects of regime type on multi-generational citizen psychology.

My findings challenge researchers to think carefully about how we interpret support for non-democratic regimes and leaders, inspired by Przeworski's recent critique (2023). As I have noted throughout the piece, most existing studies assume that anyone living under non-democratic governance is complicit, in that they actually prefer non-democratic regimes for a host of rational reasons; duplicitous, in that they may actually want to resist but cannot for a number of reasons; or in a sort of involuntary compliance under conditions of manipulated information and threat. What my study of system justification in authoritarian contexts reveals suggests something different: the average individual, of average political interest and cognitive capacity, gains cognitive benefits from stability, and thus many are served psychologically by the

stability of keeping the status quo in place, regardless of its democratic quality. As such, this must be considered an authentic preference and treated accordingly.

The way in which system justification relates not only to preferences for authoritarianism but also pro-authoritarian protest and voting behaviors in my analysis provides empirical support for an important if uncomfortable observation by the originators of system justification theory. While it is innate that people want to live in a world they feel is just, stable,

> there are also social and political costs of system justification, insofar as people who rationalize the status quo are less likely to improve upon it. Many people who lived under feudalism, the Crusades, slavery, communism, apartheid, and the Taliban believed that their systems were imperfect but morally defensible and, in many cases, better than the alternatives they could envision. Popular support helped prolong those regimes (Jost and Hunyady 2005, 261).

Political science is not devoid of normative commitments, and the discipline tends to argue that democracy is the least bad system of government conceived of by humans based on a variety of political, social, and developmental outcomes. But if democracy is the institutionalization of uncertainty, and a democratic transition is a moment of heightened uncertainty, those interested in interventions intended to deepen democratic practices must account for the psychological affinity for stability and attachment to the status quo in the places democratization is most needed. Even if it objectively improves democratic quality, political change may produce a sense of destabilizing threat and generate backlash among system justifiers. Future research might explore how democratic reform can be framed to minimize the threatening nature of change, by emphasizing the temporary nature of the disruption, or by providing material and immaterial support for high-system justifiers to weather the cognitive load of great uncertainty generated during moments of transition. People might also be encouraged to imagine the stable institutionalization of more-egalitarian political outcomes as the reward for tolerating uncertainty, or led to do so through art and literary narratives (Martin 2018) At the very least, scholars of authoritarian persistence must incorporate an understanding of how people perceive uncertainty and the underlying psychological motivation that lead substantial portions of the population to authentically support authoritarian regimes, alongside explanations rooted in performance, propaganda, and punishment. Without system justification, scholars cannot fully understand why individuals support the persistence of non-democratic governance at their own material expense.

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