Music and the Politics of Belonging in Revolutionary Episodes

Egypt since 1952 from a Comparative Perspective

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> Always flowing, music is continuous, unbounded, unboundable [...] uncountable. Unlike language, music knows no impassable social barriers; being intangible and semantically ambiguous, it is the globalizable expressive substance par excellence.
> *(Frishkopf 145)*

Music can be political and may thus be considered as a powerful instrument for expressing emotions, raising awareness, and inspiring change. It may shape collective memories and act as a repository for shared experiences that may foster or challenge these feelings of a group identity (Adorno 185ff.). In other words, music offers a space of resonance for a politics of belonging. The semantics of a politics of belonging encompasses a wide range of emotional attachments to being part of a group that shares a collective we-identity. This sense of belonging can refer to a nation, national identity frameworks, or other forms of group identities, both within and beyond national borders.[1] It often coincides with specific localities or regions within the territory of the nation-state (Zenker 772), including categories beyond citizenship such as gender, class, religion or alternative narratives of identification, and emotional affiliation in opposition to "state-centric affiliations" (ibid. 778).

Similar to other world regions, music has always played a significant role in the formation and preservation of collective memories and national identities

1 This rather narrow understanding of "politics of belonging" is aware of the rich and diverse corpus of literature in Social and Cultural Anthropology on the genesis of "politics of belonging" (Yuval-Davis).

in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).[2] In contrast to many essentialist readings that project the region as exceptional and part of an "orientalist narrative" (Said), numerous scholars have shown how Middle Eastern music has been entrenched with the global evolution of music and has acted both as a transmitter and receiver of musical trends, genres, and formats. At the same time, MENA music features diverse forms of political legacy. The socio-political role and function of music includes many aspects: It may encompass artwork aligned with a ruling regime that is fostering a national identity in the name of the state or an element that is conveying subversive messages for the sake of criticizing or even fundamentally challenging the existing political order. This does not suggest a binary logic; rather, it evokes a continuum in which music disseminates narratives of belonging as vividly seen in the broad spectrum of religious music covering the whole range from Islamic hip-hop to *nashid* music with its material and lyrics referring to the broad corpus of Islamic normativity. In all cases mentioned above, music is a medium of memory, protest, self-ascription, and wishful thinking. It is like a "transmission belt" with regard to how a society remembers collectively and how this is embedded in various forms of historiography. It is a complex system that allows, mobilizes, and inculcates emotions and different modes of feeling.

This contribution is focusing on the role of music in Egypt since 1952 with the founding of the Arab Republic of Egypt (official declaration 1953) after the revolution of the "free officers" and the breakdown of the monarchy. This implies that any study of the various forms of music and their role in politics in Egypt is situated in the face of the absence of democracy as all five presidencies since then have fostered different types of autocracies that have entrenched themselves along all political, economic, and social layers from the central government level to local politics. Scholarly literature is rich when dealing with the modes, practices, and agency of autocratic regimes in their techniques to manipulate collective memory of the historical past as an instrument to legitimize

2 There are competing definitions of the region including the discussion about the Eurocentric character of the term itself. In this contribution, I refer to the 22 members of the Arab League plus Turkey, Israel, and Iran as constitutive elements of the Middle East and North Africa, widely described under the acronym as the MENA region. However, this shall not be conceived as a closed container but rather as embedded in a transregional density of ties. It is inspired by the broad corpus of literature in the field of Area Studies, translocality, and transregional spaces (cf. Derichs).

their grip on political power. This can encompass national museums, material sites, visionary narratives of a blossoming future but also forms of media and arts for disseminating the respective content (Hellmann 659). In this field of study, music still seems a bit underrepresented if we consider the relevant scholarly debate. Hence, the core argument of this contribution tries to show how music offers various pathways toward a politics of belonging aimed at fostering collective we-identities that are either in support of or against an existing political order. This truly deserves more scholarly attention, also in view of a gap in MENA Political Science or closely related disciplines (for exceptions, cf. El-Rashidi 2024; Asfour; Frankford).

In the MENA region, emotional and affective repertoires in literature and music have a long tradition, whereby the common dominating language of Modern Standard Arabic—despite the diversity of dialects and other languages of the MENA region (such as Turkish, Farsi, Hebrew, Kurdish, Amazigh etc.)—opens up a unique space for cultural exchange of emotions and identification beyond national borders. In the 1950s, there was a window of opportunity to promote a progressive political and societal model known as Nasserism under the leadership of President Gamal Abdel Nasser. By successfully shaking off the legacies of British imperialism and neocolonial paternalism, Nasser became the figurehead of national sovereignty while also "playing on the keyboard" of Pan-Arabism (i.e., the notion of one Arab nation). In this article, the iconic example of Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum, whose song *Wallah Zaman Ya Selahy* became the national anthem of Egypt in 1960, shows how music captured the ideals, struggles, and aspirations of a nation during the early days of state- and nation-building.

The analysis of this revolutionary time is complemented here with a case study from another revolutionary episode six decades later. In 2011, the regional order of the MENA region faced a tremendous change. Unprecedented mass protests erupted in the province of Tunisia, served as source of inspiration for other protesters, and eventually led to the fall of some autocratic regimes and the consolidation of others. In Egypt, after the forced resignation of long-term President Mubarak, the country entered a bumpy path of democratic opening with two military interventions once again paving the way for a setback towards autocratic restoration. For this second revolutionary episode, Egyptian hip-hop serves as a showcase for how music processes these changes, embodies agency, and features the way society is adapting to a changing political and societal setting. Both examples in this diachronic comparison illustrate a permanent fusion of traditional and modern musical forms in the MENA re-

gion and depict the travelling of various musical repertoires and genres within a globalizing music sphere. They also highlight the ongoing dialogue between the past and present and offer a narrative in which memories and national identities are continuously reshaped and reimagined. Due to the focus on a restricted sample that, however, contains very prominent and salient cases of Egyptian music from different genres and historical episodes, the scope of a study like this can only be limited. Yet, the connection with the regime's politics and the analyzed actors still allows for the formulation of some substantial arguments about how music is a space of resonance for a politics of belonging that includes modes both for regime survival and contestation.

The remainder of this contribution is structured as follows. The next section locates the research endeavor of this essay in the wider literature on autocratic regimes and situates it in the debate on feelings, emotion, and affect that shall help provide a conceptual framework for the study of sentimentality in the respective artwork. This leads to a tentative heuristic to analyze the selected songs, lyrics, and video material in the analytical section with the diachronic analysis of the 1950s/-60s and the 2010s, both episodes connected by their revolutionary character.

Conceptual Reflections on Music as a Space of Resonance

This study is embedded in the wider literature on authoritarianism since it eventually assumes a regime relevant role of the arts, either in challenging or fostering the respective order (Hellmann; Frankford). It is also situated in the rapidly evolving literature on non-material sources of autocratic regime survival (Greene/Robertson) that is incorporating all kinds of emotions and modes of feeling in the analysis of autocracies and their strategies of regime stability. Meanwhile, a plethora of works on emotions and affective behavior have developed and included this in current debates either on the crisis of democracy and the role of identity politics therein (Fukuyama) or in debates on the role of emotions in various autocratic regime survival games (Greene/Robertson). At the same time, the various terms of and around emotion, such as feeling and affect, not only differ historically (Frevert et al.), in different languages (Wassmann), and cultures (Scheve et al.) but also in various disciplines (Engelen), making it even more challenging to understand the role of emotion in politics in a cross-regional and cross-cultural comparative perspective. There is certainly a consensus that, on the one hand, emotion can be taken as an um-

brella category with different subcategories that requires a careful reconstruction and disentanglement of linguistic-historical linkages. On the other hand, a cultural hermeneutic approach is indispensable to avoid hidden or implicit normativities of the key concept of emotion when operationalizing it in different cultural and linguistic settings (here: the MENA region with Arabic being the dominating language). This contribution offers a more fine-grained take on politics of belonging by reconstructing sentimental repertoires of the past in order to show how they generate feelings of being part of a felt and imagined we-identity today.

The use of sentimentality in autocratic contexts allows manipulation of past narratives to serve present objectives.[3] The essential meaning of sentimentality in this study is inspired by Bens and Zenker who argue that sentiments may connect "cognitive processes of forming opinions and judgments with affective and emotional dynamics" (ibid. 96). At the same time, "sentiments do not only seem to exist on the individual but also on the collective level" (ibid. 96). In other words, by using sentimental repertoires, meaning-making on a collective level is possible and thus "sentiments can potentially transport structures for meaning-making through time and space—and can sometimes travel with great historical depth" (ibid. 97). The politics of belonging in autocracies as it is understood in this contribution goes one step further as it transcends the temporal dimension of the past and the present. Sentimentality is a relational code of communication that is not only oscillating between the presence and the past. It may also include an offer, in some cases even some kind of a script for the future (Paul). Various future visions in the resource rich MENA states—such as the Saudi version of a Vision 2030—vividly illustrate that. In other words, by relying on such a broad understanding of sentimentality, one may broaden the analytical focus and go beyond the scope of the works in the field of nostalgia (Becker) or retrotopian thought (Bauman).

Sentimentality may regulate what and how people feel about the meaning of a given context and thus contribute to making sense of the world around them (Bens/Zenker 98). When affective stimuli—for example while listening to music—encounter our stock of emotional knowledge, sentiments are generated. They represent the key category to understand how these stimuli are pro-

3 This section is based on Demmelhuber and Thies' concept of how autocratic regimes work with non-material sources, i.e., sentimental leadership strategies, for the sake of regime consolidation.

cessed, not only altering our understanding of the world but also our emotional conditioning, for example on how we will affectively respond to similar or related stimuli in future events. Sentiments are relevant in this respect for another reason: They outlast the incidents in which they are produced (Bens et al. 209). Thus, they generate a bridge from past events to the present and thereby transfer meaning. Such processes may happen in various kinds of media as well as in different spaces from sports venues to monuments and heritage sites (including the contest about the content, cf. Bsheer). This can happen in the field of ritualized behavior of a group of people sharing a common feeling, for instance, in a football stadium when singing the club's anthem, when remembering the sorrow of defining losses or the glory of victories, when singing the national anthem at public holidays, or in religious sites around ritualized confessional practices. It may happen in the field of politics when actors offer a narrative of unity and identity by relying on events of the past.[4] It may also be found in the media, in consumerism, or branding and can be manifested along a material dimension, such as spaces, places, monuments, or traditional clothing, but also through music. In all cases, the feeling of sentimentality attached to a past event can be shared without having been a witness to it.

This mobilizing effect of sentimentality is useful for political actors. It allows them to create a unifying narrative in order to initiate shared feelings and memories and to use them as an intended instrument to foster an emotional bond of the same we-identity. More recent research has shown that this goes well beyond a reciprocal mechanism between the past and the present; it may also transcend the present by outlining features of a future order or an imagined future setting for the we-identity (Demmelhuber/Thies).

This multi-layered conceptual approach provides a broader phenomenological scope than the literature on "rally around the flag" momentums (Hellmann). It goes beyond event-driven references with its narrow and explicit focus on moments of nationalism and unity of the nation. Strategies of sentimental leadership build on a broad set of emotional repertoires already existent within the targeted audience and are then purposefully and selectively activated for political ends. Since these practices of sentimentality can be traced in different fields, the fostering of these various forms of we-identity can be achieved in rather subtle terms. This does not mean that ritualized practices around national unity days or holidays are something different; they also manifest shared practices and memories. Yet, practices of sentimentality may also

4 A broad spectrum of works in this field exists (cf. Hellmann; Zubrzycki/Woźny).

happen in a more subtle way, unbound by space and time, while having the same objective. They are supposed to have a mobilizing effect, in other words to be an instrument of social engineering that allows for a definition of who is part of the in-group and who is not. This temptation does not only apply to autocracies that are still fostering national identity structures due to a more recent state-building. It is also used by autocratic regimes that face regime-threatening episodes for example because of a poor regime performance or regional instability. Within these diverse forms of non-material sources of regime stability, music fulfills a relevant processing, transmitting, and filtering function.

When dealing with music and song lyrics, this research takes its cue from musicology and develops a heuristic for analyzing music contributions in terms of their political and societal contextualization, including implicit or explicit political narratives (Nieper/Schmitz). This contribution differentiates between a (1) material dimension, (2) a social dimension, and (3) an affective dimension. The *material dimension* encompasses all aspects of spatial elements and looks for visual references to repertoires of the past that create an affective atmosphere. What kind of material storylines are selected for conveying the respective content? The *social dimension* refers to different types of agency including references to group identities, various narratives of belonging, selected target groups, and in- and out-group dynamics. The *affective dimension* focuses on codes and stimuli, looking at how the reproduction of such codes, norms, values, and/or repertoires of the past are employed to stimulate a mode of feeling, i.e., a form of sentimentality in a politics of belonging.

Egyptian Music during Revolutionary Episodes

Any comparison asks for justification, a diachronic comparison even more so. This article compares music of the 1950s/60s with the 2010s. Both periods—no matter how different they are in terms of genre, context, and (political) motives—deal with revolutionary episodes. In the 1950s, it was the aftermath of the revolution of the free officers in 1952 that led to the fall of the monarchy and the founding of the republic that was built around a strong sense of Egyptian nationalism, national sovereignty, and socialist-inspired societal transformation. Gamal Abdel Nasser, Egyptian President until his death in 1970, was the charismatic leadership figure that mobilized the people both in Egypt but also in the whole Arab World. In 2011, it was the revolutionary momentum after the breakdown of the Mubarak regime, in which millions of Egyptians from all

strata of society took to the street to fundamentally challenge the formal and informal pillars of the political order and ask for freedom and justice.[5] Both episodes share a critical juncture in which the people faced a time of sorrow and trauma as well as one of confidence and belief in a better future. Both historical events are cases in which the nucleus of a politics of belonging was fostered, i.e., by the manifestation of a strong national bond, an invincible unity of the Egyptian nation, vividly expressed in the iconic speech of Nasser that announced the nationalization of the Suez Canal Company to overcome the century-long humiliation of the Egyptian people under European imperialism.

In these troubled times, Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum (1898–1975) had become the most popular singer in Egypt and is still considered one of the most famous female singers of the 20th century, with her songs being regarded as a national cultural heritage with 80 million sold records. As a songwriter, singer, and actress, she was renowned for her powerful voice and emotive performances on stage. Umm Kulthum knew how to use a sentimental mode in combination with religious and political codes to affirm an affective bond with the nation. Her songs combined a past and traditional Arab style with a cautious incorporation of modern elements and stood for two related we-identities: on the one hand, a collective feeling of being one grand Arab nation and, on the other hand, the dominating identity of the Egyptian nation. This may sound contradictory but truly reflects Egyptian politics during the 1950s in which both narratives served as mobilizing powers that strengthened each other.

During the Egyptian Revolution of 2011, hip-hop emerged as a powerful voice for the protest movement and a tool for political expression and social change. This period saw a surge in the popularity and impact of Egyptian hip-hop, as artists used their music to convey the frustrations, hopes, and demands of a generation yearning for change, with an Egyptian specific hip-hop subgenre emerging, called *Mahraganat*. El Rashidi describes it as being inspired by figures like Snoop Dogg, Tupac, and Eminem while borrowing from the history of the genre. It often features socially and politically charged lyrics, grounded in "personal, political, sexual, and socioeconomic realities—most everything the government would prefer citizens not to speak about" (El Rashidi 2024, 17f.). Key figures in Egyptian hip-hop in the years after 2011 included artists like Ramy Essam, MC Amin, or Arabian Knightz,

5 It culminated in the shared chant: "The people want the fall of the regime" (*Ash-sha'b yurid isqat an-nizam*).

whose lyrics addressed themes of oppression, corruption, and the quest for freedom and justice. Hip-hop provided an accessible and immediate means for articulating the collective sentiment and demands of the revolution. Songs such as "Rebel" by Arabian Knightz became anthems of the uprising's early days in January and February 2011, capturing the spirit of resistance and the belief in a better future. The music videos and lyrics, often shared widely on social media platforms, galvanized protesters and offered a sense of solidarity and empowerment. By voicing the unfiltered realities of life under a repressive autocratic regime, Egyptian hip-hop played a critical role in the country's bumpy political transformation process.

Umm Kulthum, the Egyptian Nation, and the Era of Decolonization

For the analysis of Umm Kulthum's music and the disseminated elements of a politics of belonging therein, two songs are taken as examples: first, one of her most successful songs *Enta Omri* ("You are my life") and, second, *Wallah Zaman Ya Selahy* ("It has been a long time, my weapon") that later became the national anthem of Egypt (1960–1979). *Enta Omri*, with lyrics by Ahmed Shafiq Kamel and music composed by Mohamed Abdel Wahab, is often interpreted as a profound declaration of love and appreciation. It also features a distinct material dimension of how she combined a past and traditional Arab style with a cautious incorporation of modern elements in her stage performances, for example the way the electronic guitar is located within the accompanying orchestra. The social dimension is at first glance murky. Its primary theme is romantic love, but it also carries political elements and references to national unity, explicitly reflecting the *zeitgeist* of Egypt during the revolutionary times of the 1950s. *Enta Omri* is an almost one-hour long song[6] expressing deep affection and gratitude. The lyrics speak to a profound emotional connection, capturing the essence of finding a soulmate or experiencing a life-changing love. The song is divided into eight sections, all oscillating between the hardships of the past and the confidence of the present, translated into a hope for a better future. The song's romantic sentiment offers various affective stimuli and has resonated widely with the audiences. The broader socio-political context of the 1960s, when the song was released, adds various layers to deconstruct

6 Over the years, different recordings were made leading to various lengths of the song existing until today (most of the recordings are between 40 to 60 minutes).

these affective stimuli. Egypt was undergoing a significant transformation under President Nasser. Umm Kulthum—a known supporter of Nasser's political and societal vision for Egypt as the leader of the Arab World—and her music often reflected the nationalistic fervor of that era. While *Enta Omri* does not explicitly mention Nasser or political themes, its release in 1964 coincided with a period of renewed hope and national pride in Egypt. Throughout the lyrics, Umm Kulthum refers to the past times that shall help overcome bitterness and pains of the past. At this point, the song's affective dimension can be read as a code featuring a tribute to the spirit of the nation and its grand leader who is taking it into a new era with a better future, one the nation has been yearning for so long. This all embodies the collective sentiment of love and devotion to Egypt, as personified by Nasser's leadership. Although *Enta Omri* is often regarded as a love song, its cultural and historical context allows for a constellation of love and loyalty to Nasser and the Egyptian nation that transcends its romantic narrative, reflecting national pride and unity of the Egyptian people and giving sense to the suffering, sorrow, and challenges of the past and the present.

In contrast to the implicit references to the Egyptian nation, *Wallah Zaman Ya Selahy* is much more explicit in tone and lyrics. *Wallah Zaman* is nationalistic in its nature and has a clear-cut material dimension by referring to crucial events of the country's shaking off of any form of imperial penetration. It was composed by Kamal Al Taweel with lyrics by Salah Jahin and was written around the time of the Suez Crisis (i.e., war) in 1956 that followed the proclaimed nationalization of the Suez Canal Company by President Nasser. One section gets to the heart of the matter: "Who shall protect Free Egypt? We shall protect her with our weapons. Land of the revolution, who will sacrifice themselves for her sake? We will, with our souls" (The Arab Republic of Egypt—Presidency, translation T. D.).

These founding years of the republic in the 1950s were marked by the struggle against the legacies of European imperialism and the assertion of its national sovereignty. The lyrics of *Wallah Zaman* are direct and stirring, invoking a sense of pride, resilience, and readiness for the battle, indicating a revival of the fighting spirit and a call to arms. Key themes in the lyrics' social dimension include a strong sense of nationalism with references to the homeland and the collective spirit of its people. It emphasizes the determination and strength of the Egyptian people, ready to defend their nation against any threats from outside and from within. The lyrics call for unity among Egyptians, portraying the weapon as a symbol of collective resistance and power and a sentimental

bond between the past and the present. The song became the national anthem of Egypt until it was replaced by *Bilady, Bilady, Bilady* ("My country, my country, my country") in 1979.

In sum, the lyrics and context of its creation make *Wallah Zaman* a significant piece of political and cultural history in Egypt. Unlike *Enta Omri* which can be interpreted through a romantic or nationalistic lens, *Wallah Zaman* is unambiguously a patriotic anthem, a hymn to the nation, directly linked to the spirit of resistance and the *zeitgeist* under Nasser's leadership. To a different degree, both songs offer a sense of belonging in times of multiple upheavals, refer to the challenges, sorrows, and traumas of the past, and generate the strength of a we-identity that shall prevail over space and time.

Egyptian Hip-Hop, a Divided Nation and the Yearning for a Better Future

During the Egyptian uprisings of 2011 and the following revolutionary episodes, hip-hop became a vehicle for political expression and the demands of the youth involved in the uprisings. Several factors contributed to the emergence and influence of hip-hop as a powerful symbolic representation of defiance and non-conformity: First, the uprisings were essentially driven by young Egyptians of different social backgrounds who were frustrated by the lack of perspectives and the harsh reality of oppression at the hands of the police and security apparatus. Second, the Arab uprisings were a prime example of how the protests led to emulation and imitation among each other. As the protesters learned from one another, hip-hop artists drew on this tradition and used social media platforms to bypass traditional state-censored media outlets. Third, Egyptian artists wrote lyrics that were grounded in deeply personal, political, sexual, and socioeconomic realities, in El Rashidi's (2023) words, "everything the government would prefer citizens not to speak about, and the kind of material that citizen patrols love to report." And fourth, it also boosted a merger with Egyptian traditions of oriental music that developed into a genre of its own, the *Mahraganat* music (previously called "electro-shaabi," with *shaabi* meaning "from the people"), which gained much prominence in the late 2000s as a music of the streets, in particular around weddings in the poor urban neighborhoods of Cairo. The main instrument in *Mahraganat* music (coming from the word *mahragan* meaning "festival") is the computer, with the keyboard providing the strings with which it is played

(Naji 2023). Rather than mimicking Westernized electronic music, it synthesizes oriental rhythms and beats into its melodies (Naji 2021) and provides a "mixture of styles inspired by techno, rap and traditional Arab music" (Rabie).

Probably the best-known hip-hop voice of the 2011 events is Ramy Essam whose song *Irhal* ("Leave") became the anthem of the protest movement demanding the immediate resignation of President Mubarak. It played a significant role in mobilizing protesters, channeling the hardship and frustration of ordinary citizens under the autocratic regime. Later in 2011, Essam expanded and adapted the lyrics by reiterating the ideals of the revolution against the rising actorness of the Egyptian military (Essam). With similar prominence, Arabian Knightz with *Ehna Al Hokoma* ("We are the government") were claiming a new sense of sovereignty that rests with the people: "We are the government, we are the voice. [...] We will fight, we will fight our rights. Even if we die, we will stand up and fight. We are the government" (Arabian Knightz, translation T. D.). Another—even more stunning example of how the lyrics re-define the social dimension of the people's identity—comes from MC Amin with *Ezzay* ("How") in which he rallies around the importance of Egyptians coming together, regardless of their differences, in order to fight for a common cause, a better future with dignity and justice for all citizens. In 2014—after the second military intervention and the beginning of the autocratic restoration in Egypt under the leadership of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi—MC Amin returned powerfully with the song *Mabrouk ya Sisi* ("Congratulations to Sisi") by referring to the revolutionary spirit. He starts with: "By the way, I won't leave anything for tomorrow. [...] And tomorrow, uncle, the revolution will rise without any stars. The revolution will return once more. You'll run and hide and you won't be able to sleep!" (MC Amin). Eventually, he ends with the threatening chiffre "[t]he third wave is coming! Congratulations, ya Sisi" (ibid., translation T. D.).

Meanwhile, with the re-autocratization of the Egyptian political order, the spaces for hip-hop's contentious agency including *Mahraganat* music have shrunken significantly. Hip-hop became too prominent, as Nashed writes for the year 2017:

> [...] lack of mainstream attention even enabled some artists to push the boundaries of censorship. And while their music was gaining traction, it wasn't popular enough to invite a crackdown from the state. But in today's Egypt, where thousands of youths are in jail for criticizing the regime, rapping about politics is riskier than ever. (Nashed)

Many artists of Egypt's hip-hop scene have since ended up in jail or have left the country.

The official gatekeeper of Egyptian music, the Musician's Syndicate, does not recognize Rap, hip-hop, or *Mahraganat* music, leaving performing singers in a gray area and at the mercy of the state's arbitrariness. Some musicians were able to gain membership in the syndicate by registering as DJs and not as singers. In 2020, the Musician's Syndicate tried to ban *Mahraganat* music, justifying this as a necessary step in the fight against "kitsch and indecency" (Rabie). This is surprising because initially the singers of *Mahraganat* music had been (more or less) tolerated. This changed when they became more outspoken in criticizing the regime and their art was consequently perceived as a threat to those in power. The regime reacted with repression and the promotion of pro-regime musicians, in the words of Rabie, the "government wants to contain *mahragana* while at the same time using its success to praise its achievements [. . .]. Singers now have to avoid topics such as poverty, violence and politics if they want to continue singing" (Karawia in Rabie).

The autocratic regime is using the full spectrum of repression and cooptation to either regain control or co-opt certain parts of the scene in order to avoid any regime threatening dynamic. However, regime actions to stop this dynamic in the country's music production is facing obstacles in view of artists' creativity leading to an ongoing "hit and run with the authorities" (Naji 2021).

Yet, despite this bottom-up inspired political scenery of Egyptian rappers in the *Mahraganat* scene coming under increasing regime scrutiny, one may not disregard the fact that the rising popularity of Egyptian hip-hop has also led to a further mainstreaming of artists with less explicit political outreach. With tremendous popularity in Egypt and the whole MENA region, these artists have left behind the discourse on specific events, hardships, or sorrow. They do not target any grievances but appear rather conducive to the existing political order and the underlying autocratic regime. Mohamed Ramadan serves as a good example: He gained massive popularity as an actor, singer, and rapper in Egypt and the Arab World with over 32 million followers on Instagram (2024). His work often blends traditional Egyptian music with contemporary rap and pop elements, making him a prominent figure in modern Arabic pop culture. While most of his music touches on social themes, it does not feature explicit political content and when doing so, it is in subtle support of a widely shared societal consensus (for instance in support of the Palestinian people). It rather features narratives of a national bond for the sake of Egyptian unity or narratives of a common national and ethnic descent, as is convincingly shown by his profile

subtext on Instagram featuring him as "Egyptian, Arab and African". The lyrics of his 2024 song "Arabi" are a stunning example of how he exploits rather simple affective stimuli to foster a feeling of belonging among Arab people vis-à-vis an allegedly hostile environment outside the Arab World (Ramadan 2024).

However, once the existing political order is facing stress factors in view of protests in the past, Egyptian rappers serve as an instrument of the regime. It was in 2019 that Mohamed Ramadan came up with a rap video alleging that Egyptian protesters incited chaos (Ramadan 2019). This strong narrative of "stability vs. chaos" is a well-known and widely used framing of regime legitimation. The lyrics of the video convey the clear and simple message to regime critical voices that they want nothing but chaos, show disrespect to the allegedly great role of the security forces, and are rather decoupled from the reality of society. It is amazing to see how he pretends—with his typical stunning "larger-than-life personality"—that he knows the hardships of the people. This material dimension has remained a constant element in his social media activities, showing him in luxury vehicles cruising through the streets of Cairo while pretending accessibility and empathy with the people in the street.

Ramadan's appeal largely stems from his ability to connect with fans through simple themes and his charismatic personality built on hyper-masculinity and a staged accessibility for this fan base. His content on social media features unlimited luxury and materialism and is reminiscent of the genre's roots in overcoming hardship and celebrating success. This "larger-than-life cult" but also the reference to the self-made success let him appear similar to U.S. rappers such as Ludacris or 50 Cent. The latter provide a particularly strong basis for comparison due to their significant achievements in both music and acting, as well as their confident heroizing image. This stands in stark contrast to the much more bottom-up related performance of *Mahraganat* actors with less dominance of materialism but a staunch focus on group-related aspects of belonging with increasing creativity in developing alternative affective stimuli that remain well under the radar of an expanding autocratic regime.

Conclusion and Future Avenues of Research

There is an increasing scholarly consensus regarding the role of soft power discourses as sources of legitimation when it comes to explaining the durability

of autocratic regimes. With respect to its political implications, music must be factored in as both a resource of regime consolidation and a stress factor for the incumbents. In times of upheaval in particular, music processes and translates the challenges for politics and societies and may be instrumentalized for different reasons. In all cases, music is a medium of memory, protest, demands, and wishes as well as a "transmission belt" on how a society remembers and how this is embedded in historiography. It is a complex system that allows, initiates, and enshrines emotions and different modes of sentimentality to create a feeling of belonging with different underlying motives and with different reference groups. The semantics of such a politics of belonging comprise a broad spectrum and go well beyond the traditional we-identities of a nation. This contribution has shown the role of music in the playbook of a politics of belonging including both a top-down perspective (e.g. sentimental leadership strategies) and a bottom-up perspective that contests the existing order. In other cases, as the example of Mohamed Ramadan has plausibly shown, it develops into a strategy of regime consolidation. At the same time, the much more differentiated role of music as a provider of narratives of identification along diverse categories such as class, gender, religion, ethnicity, and others must also be taken into consideration.

While there is a substantial stock of knowledge in literature on the role of music and the arts in protest and social movements, we still do not know enough to understand the strategies and mechanisms of how music is part of the playbook of regime survival. Different strategies of adaptation, repression, infiltration, and appropriation apply. Music production around national holidays—just to pick out one example—shows what a powerful tool it may be to foster a feeling of national unity and provide a narrative of an even brighter future under an existing leadership. Numerous research avenues—that must include inter- and transdisciplinary approaches in order to deconstruct the studied artwork more systematically—are lying ahead as the options and pathways of production and dissemination are multiplying. This playbook needs more scholarly attention, the journey has just begun!

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