



Balancing "Protective Disguise" with "Harmonious Advocacy": Social Venture Legitimation in Authoritarian Contexts

Journal:	<i>Academy of Management Journal</i>
Manuscript ID	AMJ-2020-0517.R3
Manuscript Type:	Revision
Keywords:	Case < Qualitative Orientation < Research Methods, Institutional theory < Theoretical Perspectives, New venture strategies < Entrepreneurship < Topic Areas, Organization and management theory (General) < Organization and Management Theory < Topic Areas
Abstract:	This paper seeks to advance understanding of how new social ventures can gain legitimacy in authoritarian contexts. Through a study of a new disability rights organization in post-revolutionary Egypt, we theorize how authoritarianism poses distinct challenges for social ventures that require different legitimation strategies than those commonly reported in the literature. Specifically, we use our case study to build a theoretical model that suggests social ventures need to achieve optimal assimilation by balancing protective disguise with harmonious advocacy. By explicitly theorizing social venture legitimation in authoritarian contexts, we advance the budding literature on social venture legitimation that has so far predominantly considered legitimation in more democratic contexts. Moreover, our study shows that organizational legitimacy may need to be conceptualized differently when examining social ventures—and indeed other forms of organization—in authoritarian regimes.

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Balancing “Protective Disguise” with “Harmonious Advocacy”: Social Venture Legitimation in Authoritarian Contexts

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We are grateful to Tammar Zilber and three anonymous reviewers who contributed immensely to the development of our work. We are also thankful for feedback and support from Sébastien Mena, Magda Hassan, Rodrigo Canales, Helen Haugh and Michael Smets. Finally, we are deeply indebted to the many individuals in Egypt who were willing to share their insights and experiences with us. Funding support for this research was provided from the Economic and Social Research Council.

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3 **BALANCING “PROTECTIVE DISGUISE” WITH “HARMONIOUS ADVOCACY”:**
4 **SOCIAL VENTURE LEGITIMATION IN AUTHORITARIAN CONTEXTS**
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7 **ABSTRACT**

8 This paper seeks to advance understanding of how new social ventures can gain legitimacy in
9 authoritarian contexts. Through a study of a new disability rights organization in post-
10 revolutionary Egypt, we theorize how authoritarianism poses distinct challenges for social
11 ventures that require different legitimation strategies than those commonly reported in the
12 literature. Specifically, we use our case study to build a theoretical model that suggests social
13 ventures need to achieve *optimal assimilation* by balancing *protective disguise* with *harmonious*
14 *advocacy*. By explicitly theorizing social venture legitimation in authoritarian contexts, we
15 advance the budding literature on social venture legitimation that has so far predominantly
16 considered legitimation in more democratic contexts. Moreover, our study shows that
17 organizational legitimacy may need to be conceptualized differently when examining social
18 ventures—and indeed other forms of organization—in authoritarian regimes.
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22 While there is a growing literature that has considered how new social ventures can obtain
23 support from key constituents, most of the studies to date have been set in developed democracies
24 where ventures benefit from significant institutionalized liberties (e.g., Lee, Ramus & Vaccaro,
25 2018; Ruebottom, 2013; Tracey, Phillips, & Jarvis, 2011). Yet, social ventures frequently operate
26 in authoritarian contexts where such liberties are lacking. These contexts are rarely the subject of
27 study in organization and management theory, but they are prevalent: more than 50 countries are
28 governed by “authoritarian regimes” according to the Economist Intelligence Unit (2019). In such
29 settings, creating a social venture can be outright dangerous: where the venture’s agenda is seen
30 to clash with government interests, it risks censorship and political aggression (El-Sadany, 2017;
31 Howell, Fisher & Shang, 2019). As a result, the extent to which existing theory on legitimation
32 applies to social ventures in authoritarian contexts is unclear. Given the radically different nature
33 of democratic and authoritarian regimes, there is good reason to believe that social ventures in
34 authoritarian contexts may need to take a distinct approach if they are to gain legitimacy, and
35 ultimately to succeed in serving their intended beneficiaries.
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3 Through an in-depth, qualitative study of the establishment and initial evolution of a new
4 social venture in post-revolutionary Egypt, we take a first step in addressing this issue.
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6 Specifically, we explore how a social venture named Amal (pseudonym) gradually built support
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8 from key audiences while operating in a context where social activism risked exposure to political
9
10 aggression. Our findings suggest that the venture gained legitimacy by enacting two overarching
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12 strategies: protective disguise and harmonious advocacy. Protective disguise, which was more
13
14 prominent early on, involved Amal deemphasizing or “cloaking” its social change agenda and
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16 deliberately taking the appearance of an innocuous organization while limiting public advocacy to
17
18 avoid exposure to political aggression. When the venture was perceived as non-threatening to key
19
20 audiences, the emphasis switched to harmonious advocacy: in order to obtain support for its
21
22 mission, Amal needed to carefully move to a more overt approach that involved throwing off some
23
24 of its protective disguise while engaging in constructive forms of advocacy and reactive
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26 campaigning that were perceived to support the interests of political elites. In doing so, Amal
27
28 effectively balanced the need to be perceived as non-threatening with the need to promote its cause
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30 so that it was deemed worthy of support. This was evidenced by the increasingly positive
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32 evaluations of Amal that we encountered across multiple audiences and by the growing number of
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34 corporate and public sector partnerships in which it was engaged.
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42 Based on our case analysis, we develop two contributions. First, we build a theoretical
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44 model that reveals the specific strategies that social ventures in authoritarian contexts use to gain
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46 legitimacy. In democratic contexts, social ventures typically advocate overtly for positive social
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48 change and often use confrontational framing to position themselves as protagonists vis-à-vis
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50 identifiable antagonists (c.f., Lee et al., 2018; Ruebottom, 2013). By contrast, social ventures in
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52 authoritarian contexts need to avoid the dangers associated with explicit opposition to the status
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3 more or less dichotomous and relatively fixed property (Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002), scholars are
4 increasingly adopting a more nuanced conceptualization. For example, Deephouse et al. (2017)
5 argue that the evaluation of an organization by its audiences can produce four “states” of
6 legitimacy: illegitimate (the organization is deemed inappropriate), debated (the organization’s
7 activities or values are questioned), proper (the organization is actively evaluated as acceptable),
8 and accepted (the organization is passively taken for granted). From this perspective,
9 organizational legitimacy is “continually unfolding” as different audience evaluations ebb and
10 flow over time. Legitimation is therefore a dynamic process and organizations can move closer to,
11 and further from, acceptance through their life course (Suddaby, Bitektine, & Haack, 2017).
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24 Gaining legitimacy can be especially challenging for new social ventures. Not only do they
25 suffer from a “liability of newness” like any new venture (Dacin, Dacin & Tracey, 2011: 1207;
26 Stinchcombe, 1965: 148), they also need to engage with a diverse set of audiences to craft social
27 problems and solutions in a way that audiences feel are worthy of support (Lawrence & Dover,
28 2015). In doing so, many social ventures cannot avoid engaging with audiences who have an
29 interest in maintaining the status quo and who are likely to challenge their “very right to exist and
30 operate” (Ruebottom, 2013: 99). Thus, to gain legitimacy, social ventures frequently need to
31 grapple with political opposition and resistance to their mission (O’Neil & Ucbasaran, 2016).
32 While commercial ventures may similarly face resistance from incumbents or elites (e.g., Gurses
33 & Ozcan, 2015), the potential opposition faced by social ventures can be more vigorous, and
34 indeed threatening, when it rests on perceived clashes in belief systems or political interests (cf.,
35 Hampel & Tracey, 2017; Vaccaro & Palazzo, 2015).
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51 A growing body of research has developed important insights into how new social ventures
52 can gain legitimacy (Nicholls, 2010; Ruebottom, 2013). This work has emphasized the role of
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3 symbolic action and rhetorical framing. For example, research has described how social ventures
4 use storytelling (Margiono, Kariza, & Heriyati, 2019) and create symbolic alliances with already
5 legitimate actors that lend credibility to their social goals (Desa, 2012; Tracey et al., 2011). These
6 strategies have also been shown to apply to the legitimation of commercial ventures (e.g., Ansari,
7 Garud, & Kumaraswamy, 2016; Fisher, Kuratko, Bloodgood, & Hornsby, 2017).

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15 Another set of studies has provided insights into how social ventures may navigate the
16 concerns of heterogenous audiences which frequently occupy different social positions or have
17 divergent worldviews. This has been most vividly described for social ventures that use market-
18 based solutions to address social problems (e.g., Dart, 2004; Grimes et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2018).
19 Research has suggested that it is crucial for such ventures to craft tailored frames that can
20 accommodate the concerns of their various audiences, such as activists and beneficiaries on the
21 one hand, and donors, investors and customers on the other hand (Dacin et al., 2011). This was the
22 case in Lee et al.'s (2018) study of an anti-mafia social venture in Sicily, which engaged in a
23 sophisticated form of "frame brokerage" to garner support from both activists and customers.

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35 Previous research has also shown how the distinct nature of the problems that social
36 ventures aim to address adds another dimension to how they position themselves symbolically:
37 they need to somehow confront those they deem responsible for the creation or perpetuation of a
38 particular problem, while drawing sufficient support from a varied set of audiences that may
39 endorse, or even benefit from, existing arrangements. For example, Ruebottom (2013) described
40 how ten Canadian social enterprises deliberately constructed divisive frames to deal with this
41 challenge by drawing on recognizable narratives to rhetorically position themselves and their allies
42 as "heroes" while constructing opponents as "villains". This appeared to create an effective
43 strategic tension that persuaded specific audiences to offer their support. And Grimes et al. (2018)
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3 use the term “positive deviance” to describe how social ventures – in their case B Corps –
4 positioned themselves as promoters of deviant norms and values, but did so in an “honorable way”
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6 that also emphasized conformity to key aspects of their institutional environment (see also Gehman
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8 & Grimes, 2017; Parhankangas & Renko, 2017; Hampel & Tracey, 2017; Zhao et al., 2017).
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12 While these studies have advanced a specific theoretical understanding of the unique
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14 legitimation strategies that social ventures may engage in, they appear limited for an important
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16 reason: there has been a predominant focus on democratic contexts characterized by institutional
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18 liberties – such as the right to free speech and the right to engage in civil society organizing – that
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20 are broadly supportive of social entrepreneurship. This is not to say that researchers have ignored
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22 social entrepreneurship outside of democratic regimes: there is important work on social ventures
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24 in a range of settings (e.g., Mair & Schoen, 2007; Rivera-Santos, Holt, Littlewood, & Kolk, 2014;
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26 Seelos & Mair, 2009). However, we lack explicit theoretical attention to legitimation processes in
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28 such contexts. Specifically, the literature has paid limited attention to situations in which social
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30 ventures need to gain legitimacy in authoritarian regimes – which appear to pose a very different
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32 set of legitimation challenges than democratic contexts.
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38 This bias in the literature is perhaps unsurprising as “work in the area of legitimacy
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40 originated largely in the West” (Ahlstrom & Bruton, 2001: 74) and studying authoritarian contexts
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42 presents significant additional difficulties (Ahram & Goode, 2016). It also relates to a general,
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44 longstanding concern in the organizational literature (Hofstede, 1993; Muzio, 2021), but one that
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46 is important to address if we are to broaden the relevance and applicability of our theories.
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49 **Social Venture Legitimation in Authoritarian Contexts**

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51 While authoritarian contexts are not homogenous and can be distinguished by a variety of
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53 ideologies and forms of political organization (Cavatorta, 2013), they do appear to share several
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55 core traits. Most importantly, authoritarian contexts are characterized by a strong concentration of
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3 political power in the hands of elites (Linz, 2000). These political elites tend to be intolerant of
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5 dissent, govern with limited transparency, and place limits on individual freedoms (Howell et al.,
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7 2019). Instead, they display a strong preference for social order over the social “chaos” that they
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9 associate with democratic systems (Lewis, 2020). This justifies the authoritarian regime’s grip on
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11 power which is further maintained through a number of mechanisms, including control of the
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13 security services and judiciary, control of the media, and public censorship (Linz, 2000).
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17 Another important feature of authoritarianism is its association with social conservatism.
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19 While the precise relationship is debated, “evidence of an affinity between authoritarianism and
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21 conservatism is strong” and political scientists accordingly speak of an “authoritarian-
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23 conservatism nexus” (Nilsson & Jost, 2020: 148). Socially conservative societies tend to idealize
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25 the past through ritualistic adherence to traditions and seek to maintain ‘authentic’ social and
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27 cultural values that are often rooted in religious beliefs (Feldman, 2003). Authoritarian regimes
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29 tend to espouse and promote these values to bolster their legitimacy in the eyes of citizens (Geddes
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31 & Zaller, 1989). At the same time, such social conservatism is characterized by respect for
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33 hierarchy and formal authority which acts as a brake on protest and dissent, thereby helping to
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35 protect and maintain authoritarian rule (Dean, 2002).
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41 Authoritarianism has potentially far-reaching implications for the legitimization of social
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43 ventures, which appear to require a different approach than the set of strategies described by
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45 previous research discussed above. First, laws governing civil society, the key resource space for
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47 social ventures, are typically restrictive: the process of registration can be bureaucratic and
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49 intrusive, and the types of activities that they are allowed to engage in are often strictly controlled
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51 (Howell et al., 2019). The consequences of being accused of undermining government interests
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53 may be extremely serious, particularly where links with foreign governments are suspected,
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3 potentially leading to forced closure, arrest and imprisonment (El-Sadany, 2017). As a result,
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5 legitimate social venture activity in authoritarian contexts is often “limited to topics and
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7 approaches that reinforce the status quo, or at least pose no threat to it” (Odora, 2008: 81). Thus,
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9 government actors represent a very different kind of audience for social ventures in authoritarian
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11 contexts than in democratic contexts.
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15 Second, the social conservatism that typically bolsters authoritarian regimes can create
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17 additional hurdles. Specifically, socially conservative contexts are naturally more resistant to
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19 change than socially progressive contexts (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). This can
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21 be problematic for social ventures whose agendas clash with established cultural norms, beliefs
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23 and customs (Kibler, Salmivaara, Stenholm, & Terjesen, 2018). Moreover, there may be deeply
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25 institutionalized expectations among audiences about how beneficiaries should be supported, and
26
27 some types of beneficiary may be deemed ‘unworthy’ of support at all. As Wry and Haugh (2018:
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29 567) point out, “legitimacy challenges become acute for social enterprises when prevailing cultural
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31 beliefs cast doubt on the value of helping their target beneficiaries”.
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36 This is not to say that social ventures cannot succeed in authoritarian contexts. Indeed,
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38 many authoritarian regimes rely heavily on social ventures to provide a range of services that are
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40 perceived to be consistent with national interests (Toepler, Zimmer, Froehlich, & Obuch, 2020).
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42 Yet, the legitimacy challenges that these social ventures face, and the approaches needed to
43
44 overcome them, are clearly not the same as those in the more democratic contexts that have
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46 typically been studied to date. In authoritarian contexts such as post-revolutionary Egypt, the
47
48 setting of our study that we will introduce below, the legitimation strategies identified in the
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50 existing literature appear fraught with risk and may place new social ventures and their founders
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52 at risk of harm. As such, we find that current theory does not fully account for new social venture
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3 legitimization dynamics in authoritarian settings. We therefore seek to answer the following research
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5 question: *How do new social ventures gain legitimacy in authoritarian contexts?*
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8 **RESEARCH SETTING: THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A SOCIAL VENTURE IN**
9 **AUTHORITARIAN POST-REVOLUTIONARY EGYPT**
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11 To answer this question, we conducted an in-depth case study of Amal (Arabic for “hope”), a
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13 social venture created in post-revolutionary Egypt. Following the Egyptian Revolution that started
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15 with mass protests on 25 January 2011, there was a major increase in social entrepreneurship in
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17 the country (Younis, 2015). However, social ventures faced steep legitimization challenges rooted
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19 in the authoritarian context in which they operated. As we will discuss, these challenges were both
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21 specifically political and more broadly cultural in nature.¹
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25 Amal became highly successful in spite of these challenges. It was founded in 2011 by
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27 Rania and Ayman², two students who started the venture as a university initiative with a mission
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29 to fight for the rights of people with disabilities. Although disabled people make up nearly 15% of
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31 Egypt’s population according to the World Health Organization, they have long faced
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33 discrimination and exclusion³. Rania and Ayman had seen during their studies the inequity that
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35 disabled students encountered in their everyday life, including limited physical accessibility of the
36
37 public infrastructure and the demeaning stereotypes that were attributed to them. They also learned
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39 that disabled graduates faced substantial challenges to enter the labor market.
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43 While Amal adopted the legal form of an NGO, it positioned itself as a consulting firm
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45 offering accessibility services to improve the integration of disabled people in the workplace and,
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47 more generally, public life. For Amal, disability included both physical and mental disabilities,
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52 ¹ Egypt ranks 137 of 167 countries on the Economist Intelligence Unit democracy index (2019). It is one of 58
53 countries classified as “authoritarian”.

54 ² The names – Rania (female co-founder) and Ayman (male co-founder) – are pseudonyms.

55 ³ To compare, the incidence of disability in the population is 12.8% in the US (American Community Survey,
56 2016).
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3 although most of its beneficiaries were people with physical disabilities. Only in later years, once
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5 Amal had gained support for its services from government and other key audiences, did the venture
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7 begin to engage in more overt activism by publicly advocating for the rights of disabled people
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9 and their integration into Egyptian society. Over time, Amal thus gradually evolved into a social
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11 venture with a visible public presence. In the national media, Amal was recognized for
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13 “revolutionizing Cairo's urban landscape, from malls, to factories, to public spaces” (CairoScene,
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15 2016). By 2020, the organization had established over 1,000 corporate and public sector
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17 partnerships, conducted over 1,000 accessibility audits, and organized a high-profile national
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19 conference on inclusion. Crucially, it was increasingly accepted and praised by its key audiences:
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21 private sector companies, non-disabled employees, and government authorities.
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26 Table 1 provides an overview of key events during Amal’s history. Our analysis considers
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28 how Amal’s strategies from 2014 onwards, when Amal had transformed from a student project
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30 into a nascent social venture by registering as an NGO, allowed it to gain legitimacy. The story of
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32 Amal represents an extreme case (Siggelkow, 2007) of a social venture that successfully managed
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34 to secure support from key audiences in a challenging context marked by authoritarianism.
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38 --- Insert Table 1 here ---

39 **METHODS**

40 **Data Collection**

41 We collected rich qualitative data on Amal, its audiences and the broader context through deep
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43 interaction with the field, which included two 14-day visits to Egypt by the first author in February
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45 and April 2018. The first author is an Arabic speaker, which facilitated the collection of high-
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47 quality data. Our final dataset included 45 interviews with actors in Egypt, archival material
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49 consisting of 93 media texts and 12 public speeches and interviews, and notes from observations
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51 made during two the field visits (see Table 2).
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3 Our data collection served two purposes. First, we wanted to understand the context in
4 which Amal operated and to theorize the legitimation challenges posed by an authoritarian context.
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6 Second, we sought to understand how Amal had dealt with these challenges over time and
7
8 seemingly gained legitimacy in the eyes of key audiences. To these ends, we conducted semi-
9
10 structured interviews with relevant actors. Interviews with key members of Amal, including one
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12 of the co-founders (two interviews) and other senior officials (six interviews), helped us get
13
14 extensive insights into the evolution of the venture since 2014 and how Amal interacted with
15
16 various audiences over time. In addition, interviews with experts on disability inclusion and social
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18 entrepreneurship in Egypt (six interviews) enabled us to gain insights into the difficulties of
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20 working in the area of disability inclusion and human rights in the country. To gain a more specific
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22 understanding of the legitimation challenges Amal faced and the effects of its evolving strategies,
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24 we also interviewed representatives of different audiences, including corporate employers (four
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26 interviews), (former) government officials (four interviews), and people with disabilities (six
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28 interviews). Finally, we interviewed representatives of other social enterprises (four interviews)
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30 and NGOs (six interviews) working on disability inclusion in Egypt. This proved essential to our
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32 understanding of Amal's evolution and achievements. For example, we learned about the
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34 unsuccessful efforts of another social entrepreneur to set up a venture to address the
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36 marginalization of disabled people in Egypt.
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44 In addition to the semi-structured interviews, we drew upon rich archival material to give
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46 us additional insight into the authoritarian context in which Amal operated, Amal's legitimation
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48 strategies, and the responses of its key audiences. This included academic and other material on
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50 the political situation in Egypt in the aftermath of the 2011 revolution. In addition, we obtained 93
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52 news articles about Amal that appeared in national and international media between 2012 and
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3 2020, and supplemented them with public engagement materials, including radio interviews with
4 Amal representatives on *Nile.fm*, a popular English-language radio station in Egypt.
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8 Finally, while interviews and archival material were our primary data sources, we also
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10 relied on field observations by the first author. These observations took place during multiple visits
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12 to Amal's premises, as well as to offices and factories of private companies in Cairo and Giza,
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14 between February and April 2018. Visiting the companies' premises helped us to gain a better
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16 understanding of the manifestations of and different perceptions pertaining to (in)accessibility and
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18 disability in the workplace, including those of employers as well as disabled and non-disabled
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20 employees, whom the first author met during these visits. Observations were recorded in a field
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22 diary shared with the other authors. It contained: (1) descriptive information about the observations
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24 and (2) impressions of interactions between non-disabled people and people with disabilities.
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28 --- *Insert Table 2 here* ---
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30 **Data Analysis**

31 While our analysis was iterative, we report our analytical steps sequentially for sake of clarity.
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33 Consistent with our conception of social venture legitimation as dynamic and ongoing (Suddaby
34
35 et al., 2017), we followed Langley's (1999) recommendations for process research. During a *first*
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37 *step*, we focused on acquiring a deep understanding of the focal context. This involved reading
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39 about the general situation in post-revolutionary Egypt, considering specific data on disability in
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41 Egypt, and analyzing interviews with a variety of actors working on disability inclusion in the
42
43 country. We also compiled a detailed timeline of Amal's history and relevant events in its
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45 environment (summary provided in Table 1). Building on the event table, we captured how Amal's
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47 activities morphed over time. Moreover, we identified the key audience groups that Amal worked
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49 to secure legitimacy from to realize its mission (government actors, private sector companies, non-
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51 disabled employees). This initial step allowed us to engage in "process-tracing" – in this case,
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3 inductively generating new theoretical insights into social venture legitimation in authoritarian
4 contexts based on the events that we observed (George & Bennett, 2004).
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8 In a *second step*, we developed grounded theoretical constructs that were directly related
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10 to our research question. This involved reading across the interview transcripts, archival material,
11 and field notes to generate categories that were close to the data. Here, we firstly focused on
12 theorizing the distinct legitimation challenges that Amal faced as a result of operating in an
13 authoritarian context. Part of this process involved considering how authoritarianism manifested
14 itself in the interests of the different audience groups. In particular, we identified political
15 manifestations of authoritarianism, which were related to audiences' (most visibly government
16 actors') emphasis on national obedience as vital for the economic development of the country,
17 with human rights activism portrayed as threatening national unity. There were also cultural
18 manifestations of authoritarianism in the sense that socially conservative cultural beliefs and
19 practices were deeply entrenched in society and seemed to perpetuate inequalities, including the
20 exclusion of disabled people from the workplace and society. While we interacted with all
21 audience groups and carefully considered their evolving perceptions in our data analysis, the
22 challenges posed by authoritarianism were most clearly manifest in the views of government
23 actors, corporate employers and non-disabled employees. Thus, in our analysis, we focused
24 primarily on how Amal's strategies impacted the perceptions of these key audiences while
25 acknowledging the important role of beneficiaries (we present beneficiaries' role and involvement
26 in Amal's activities throughout our findings).
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49 In a *third step*, through open coding (following Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013), we
50 worked to identify how Amal's strategies seemingly built legitimacy in ways that addressed the
51 different authoritarianism-related challenges it faced. We grounded our concepts by clustering
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3 similar first-order categories into second-order themes that appeared to indicate different ways in
4 which Amal gained legitimacy. In doing so, we used the social venture legitimacy and social
5 entrepreneurship literatures as guides but remained open to emerging phenomena. In particular,
6 we identified four sets of actions that Amal engaged in to support its legitimation. For instance,
7 we found that members of Amal spent substantial effort on concealing the venture's social mission.
8 To do so they highlighted how organizational activities focused on enhancing the accessibility of
9 workplaces or public infrastructure could boost economic growth – aligned with the goals of the
10 government – but (at least initially) avoided discussion of how improved accessibility advanced
11 the human rights of disabled people. We labelled this finding “cloaking social mission under
12 rhetorical alignment”.

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26 At the same time, we also noticed that Amal sought to promote its social goals by
27 emotionally engaging audiences and building empathy for disabled people. For instance, Amal
28 made use of the established practice of organizing “community days” in the workplace to draw
29 attention to the issue of disability inclusion and allow audiences to learn more about and directly
30 experience situations faced by disabled people in their everyday lives. Following Toubiana and
31 Zietsma (2017), we looked for keywords that captured the emotion-laden reactions of audiences
32 who had participated in such activities in order to support our emerging interpretations – for
33 instance, participants stated that they were “inspired”, “touched” and able to “put themselves in
34 the shoes” of people with disabilities – and we paid close attention to the context in which these
35 words were used. Importantly, we noticed that audience reactions contrasted sharply with the
36 emotional register evident in the broader discourse about disability in Egypt: our data suggested
37 that people in Egypt often “pitied” people with disabilities because they were perceived as “weak”
38 and “needy”. This led to our observation that a crucial element of how Amal ultimately built
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3 support for its mission was through the “experiential construction of social problems”, enabling
4 audiences to experience the inequality faced by disabled people on a daily basis. Importantly,
5
6 however, we also noted how, in contrast to social ventures in democratic contexts, Amal engaged
7
8 in more cautious and reactive forms of campaigning that avoided political criticism and explicit
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10 demands for social or political reform. Overall, by looking across Amal’s evolving strategies, we
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12 identified “protective disguise” and “harmonious advocacy” as aggregate dimensions to describe
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14 the two overarching strategies that the venture used to gain legitimacy.
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19 In a *fourth step*, we investigated how the strategies of protective disguise and harmonious
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21 advocacy related to key events in the environment throughout the period of our study. We noticed
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23 that while the venture had focused effort in its early days on appearing as non-threatening, such as
24
25 by positioning itself as an innocuous service provider, Amal shifted course later on once initial
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27 audience support had been secured. At this point, Amal seemed to start focusing more on advocacy
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29 for its mission. In particular, we noticed during two key events (discussions in parliament on a new
30
31 disability law in 2017, and the announcement of the “year of people with disabilities” by the
32
33 Egyptian President in 2018) that Amal’s advocacy on behalf of its beneficiaries became more overt
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35 and explicitly focused on the rights of disabled people. Additional supporting data for our
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37 constructs is presented in Table 3.
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42 Finally, in a *fifth step*, we drew together the key elements from our analysis to construct a
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44 theoretical model which conceptualizes social venture legitimation in authoritarian contexts as
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46 underpinned by a continuous balancing of our two overarching strategies – which we label
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48 “optimal assimilation” – rather than as a process that unfolds over discrete phases (see Figure 1).
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50 To ensure the trustworthiness of our findings we asked one of Amal’s founders for feedback on
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52 the key ideas and concepts from our analysis and carefully incorporated his thoughts.
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5 ***Ethical considerations.*** As we analyzed our data, we were acutely aware of the dangers
6 facing social entrepreneurs in Egypt who are perceived as undermining the government, and of
7 our obligations to protect the welfare of our informants. We therefore used pseudonyms for the
8 focal organization and its members. In light of the sensitives involved, we were also very careful
9 with the data we present in the section of the findings where we consider the legitimation
10 challenges posed by political authoritarianism. At the same time, we did not gloss over the
11 politicization of the social sector in Egypt and the significant legitimation challenges facing social
12 ventures. In particular, to support our analysis of these issues, we relied on and predominantly
13 included quotes from informants that were close to Amal but not part of the venture, such as its
14 international advisors, as well as secondary data on civil society in post-revolutionary Egypt. In
15 addition, we sought the founders' feedback to ensure they felt comfortable with our case analysis.
16 Finally, we sought advice from an Egyptian academic who had previously published research on
17 organizations addressing societal inequality in Egypt. She advised us to ensure that we were not
18 perceived as political actors so as to avoid attracting the attention of the government authorities.
19 In practical terms, this meant being particularly careful about our engagement with human rights
20 NGOs. For example, when conducting interviews, the first author was careful not to visit NGO
21 premises, which were frequently inspected by the police.
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44 **SOCIAL VENTURE LEGITIMATION IN AUTHORITARIAN CONTEXTS:**
45 **THE CASE OF AMAL**
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47
48 Our analysis offers an account of how Amal progressively gained legitimacy in the eyes of key
49 audiences. In addition to the intended beneficiaries – people with disabilities – Amal's key
50 audiences were (1) government actors, which had been actively monitoring and policing the social
51 sector in the aftermath of the revolution, (2) private sector companies, key customers of Amal that
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3 had disabled people on the payroll without including them in the workforce, and (3) non-disabled
4 employees of the companies that Amal engaged with, many of whom appeared to hold negative
5 stereotypical views about disabled people but whose support was crucial for workplace inclusion.
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10 These audiences' concerns were tied to political and cultural manifestations of
11 authoritarianism, introduced above. Our analysis indicated that these aspects of authoritarianism
12 presented distinct legitimation challenges for Amal, to which the venture responded by engaging
13 in two overarching strategies that we label protective disguise and harmonious advocacy, gradually
14 leading to positive audience evaluations. For clarity we consider the legitimation dynamics
15 associated with political and cultural authoritarianism separately but are careful to explain the
16 relationship between them as our case analysis progresses. To indicate the origins of the data
17 presented, we label interview quotes as "Int.," quotes from archival data as "Arch.," and notes
18 from field observations as "Obs."
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30 **POLITICAL AUTHORITARIANISM AND SOCIAL VENTURE LEGITIMACY**

31 **Legitimation Challenge: Social Activism Perceived as Threat to National Interests**

32 Our analysis showed that social activism was viewed as a potential threat to national interests and,
33 as such, could be met with political aggression. Egypt was a divided country following the 2011
34 revolution and a subsequent military coup that saw General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi assume the
35 presidency. The country witnessed multiple episodes of "collective violence, mass mobilization
36 and repression" in the ensuing years (Ketchley, 2017: 2). In the wake of these events, the Egyptian
37 government became preoccupied with the maintenance of social order and its own authority.
38 Rights-based activism was increasingly seen as threatening national stability, and political leaders
39 were concerned that civil society could undermine the legitimacy of the government. As a
40 consequence, the state engaged in the close monitoring and control of social ventures.
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3 In 2015, a new terrorism law was passed which, according to critical observers, used a broad
4 definition of terrorism that also included social activism. For example, individuals could be
5
6 accused of orchestrating peaceful demonstrations to mobilize anti-government efforts (Sadek,
7
8 2014). After a terrorist attack in northern Sinai in 2017 that killed more than 300 people,
9
10 restrictions were tightened again. The National Intelligence Service announced:
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15 “This heinous crime is an alarm to all organizations that trade in raising high the banners of
16 ‘human rights and freedoms.’ It is time for them to become aware that their fabricated reports
17 that are teeming with exaggerations and false information would render these organizations
18 ‘partners’ in giving an excuse, albeit inadvertently, to these crimes and their perpetrators”
19 (Arch., Chick, 2017).
20

21 Furthermore, government officials often argued that activists’ focus on human rights was
22
23 distracting from the far more important need to achieve economic prosperity: “it’s all very well to
24
25 talk about human rights in Egypt, but what about the millions of Egyptians who face hardships
26
27 every day?” (President El-Sisi, BBC interview, 2015). In 2017, the president passed a law that
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29 required all NGOs to report their activities and funding sources, and banned them from publishing
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31 research findings. It also allowed for steep penalties, including imprisonment. Critical observers
32
33 claimed that Egypt was “erasing civil society” (Najjar, 2017). As one of Amal’s advisors put it:
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37 “The Cairo government is really tightening the screws. It’s getting harder and harder...
38 especially the NGOs are feeling it... Their argument for tightening the screws was to try to
39 clamp down on anti-government efforts.” (Int.)
40

41 Importantly, the new laws presented a considerable threat not only to organizations fighting
42
43 for politically contentious issues, such as freedom of speech, but any NGO and social venture that
44
45 promoted social reform. Such organizations were often perceived as “anti-government” (Int.), as
46
47 one of Amal’s advisors explained. Although Amal’s founding team did not openly share concerns
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49 with us regarding possible legal consequences resulting from their actions, their international
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51 advisors told us about their fear of “getting deported” (being forcefully sent out of the country) if
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3 they advocated for the human rights of disabled people. This concern was understandable given
4 that simply voicing mild criticism of the government could lead to imprisonment.⁴
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8 While the concerns of government actors shaped to a large extent the political implications
9 of authoritarianism for Amal, the concerns of Egyptian companies were also highly salient.
10 Companies represented a key audience for Amal because workplace discrimination was one of the
11 critical issues facing people with disabilities. The relationship between Egyptian companies and
12 the government was a complex one. The Egyptian government viewed a thriving private sector as
13 key to the country's economic prosperity and engaged in neo-liberal economic reforms designed
14 to "fulfil its development goals and generate economic growth" (Joya, 2017: 349). At the same
15 time, it had pushed through a series of initiatives to "reinforc[e] the state's centralized control over
16 the economy" (Khalil & Dill, 2018: 588). A number of businesses that were deemed insufficiently
17 aligned with government interests had been closed down (Adly, 2017). As a consequence, a
18 "culture of suspicion" (Herrold & Atia, 2016: 392) had emerged and companies were often
19 reluctant to be associated with social ventures that were viewed – or could be viewed – as
20 subversive. Some foreign-owned MNCs had more developed (disability) inclusion policies, and
21 these firms represented a potential opportunity for Amal. However, the founders were unsure how
22 they would react to working with a social venture given the political climate at the time.
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42 In sum, a considerable challenge for Amal – and indeed any social venture – was a politicized
43 social sector in which activism was viewed as subversive, and as a consequence social ventures
44 and their partners were closely monitored and controlled.
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55 ⁴ For a detailed report by Human Rights Watch (2019), refer to: [https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-](https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/egypt)
56 [chapters/egypt](https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/egypt)
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Legitimation Approach: Protective Disguise

To gain legitimacy in this highly politicized – and dangerous – environment, Amal engaged in a strategy that we label *protective disguise*. This strategy was particularly prominent during the first years of its operations when Amal’s social goals remained largely covert, but continued to be evident even as its approach gradually became more overt. While Amal’s primary goal was to advance the rights of disabled people, this was not (at least initially) how Amal’s founders promoted the organization’s mission. As highlighted earlier, and unlike in democratic settings, social ventures in authoritarian contexts cannot advocate overtly for reform and social change (cf., Grimes et al., 2018; Ruebottom, 2013) without putting themselves at risk. Amal therefore needed to find an alternative path forward. One of Amal’s advisors, a disability consultant who had worked with various organizations across many countries, described the situation as follows:

“The entry point with organizations in Egypt is not the same as the entry point [in other countries]. I can talk about ideology and human rights much more [elsewhere]. (...) So [in Egypt] I talk about standards [of accessibility]. [This is] the entry point and we will work from there. (...) For me, it's quite practical and pragmatic as to where you might start.” (Int.)

Our analysis suggested that Amal’s “entry point” for supporting disabled persons’ rights involved *cloaking the social mission under rhetorical alignment* and *camouflaging social action through an innocuous organizational design* in order to present itself as non-threatening to key audiences – especially the Egyptian government, but also companies that Amal sought to work with.

Cloaking social mission under rhetorical alignment. First, the venture cloaked its potentially contentious social mission to advance the human rights of disabled people by rhetorically aligning its purpose with the objectives of Egypt’s authoritarian regime. Rather than framing its mission as being about human rights issues, which was likely to be viewed as politically subversive (Tadros, 2009), Amal rhetorically constructed congruence – or “functional overlap” (cf., Lewis, 2013) – between its goals and those of the government. This meant emphasizing how Amal’s efforts to support disabled people helped promote social stability, economic prosperity,

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3 and national interests, rather than social reform. As such, articulating a social mission in the context
4
5 of political authoritarianism may involve concealing the venture's 'true' purpose.
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8 One issue that Amal sought to address was the physical inaccessibility of many places in
9
10 Egypt. During public engagements, Amal's founders, Rania and Ayman, were careful to describe
11
12 a lack of accessible infrastructure as a burden to many citizens. As Rania stated during a radio
13
14 interview: "when we approach the problem, we see it as an opportunity for any shop, any place [to
15
16 become accessible]. All of us have grandparents, parents who are growing old" (Arch., Nile.fm,
17
18 2018). In addition to elderly people, the founders mentioned "women with strollers, women who
19
20 are pregnant, [accessibility] would help anyone" (Arch., Business Socialista, 2018). By describing
21
22 accessibility as a feature that supported many groups in society, rather than solely a minority who
23
24 were not being adequately protected – Amal avoided having to address human rights and disability
25
26 discrimination: "[Accessibility] is a topic that makes everyone happy." (Int.). Furthermore, Amal
27
28 portrayed the enhanced accessibility of major venues as an opportunity to boost the economy:
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33 "The root of all problems in Egypt is accessibility. People with disabilities here cannot go to
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35 school, they cannot access entertainment venues, they cannot have a normal social life; and this
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37 is a huge part of the economic failure because they represent a big percentage of the population,
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39 both as consumers and for productivity" (Arch., Cairo Scene, 2015).

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41 After all, disabled people represented almost 15% of the population – a "big market segment
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43 [with] a great value for the economy" (Arch., My Salaam, 2017). Another area in which this
44
45 argument was employed by Amal was tourism. Egypt's tourism sector had declined since the
46
47 revolution in 2011 and reviving it was at the top of the government's agenda. Amal explicitly
48
49 picked up on this:

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51 "Tourism that is targeted to disabled people is very popular, and many countries
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53 benefited greatly from it. There are around 15 to 20% of the world's population that has some
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55 kind of disability, so focusing on this is a good way to attract a lot more tourists and help the
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57 economy" (Arch., public speech, 2017).
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3 In 2016, Amal organized a conference to which it invited international experts on accessibility, as
4 well as Egyptian government actors and private sector representatives. A considerable part of the
5 agenda focused on rebuilding the tourism sector by making major sites more accessible.
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10 Members of Amal did not explicitly say that they avoided the topic of human rights in order
11 to evade government suspicion. However, one of Amal's international advisors was more candid:
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14 “[It is not] human rights with capital letters. [We] just have to accept that and have to say ‘okay,
15 where can we start, what can we do?’ and then do that. (...) Egypt is forever hoping that it
16 would be able to rebuild its tourism industry. And the people who have money for travel are
17 older people, so you need accessibility, you need disability friendly facilities and services. So
18 there's a lot of sense in that.” (Int.)
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21 ***Camouflaging social action through an innocuous organizational design.*** Cloaking the
22 venture's social mission under rhetorical alignment allowed the founders to articulate their purpose
23 in an uncontentious way, but the venture also needed an organizational form to deliver this mission.
24 Crucially, although Amal was formally registered as an NGO, it could not visibly take the form of
25 a human rights organization as this could undermine the cloaking of its mission. Amal therefore
26 adopted the outward form of a commercial provider of accessibility services, which meant that its
27 social actions were camouflaged through an innocuous organizational design and the provision of
28 uncontroversial services. This suggests that engaging in social action in the context of political
29 authoritarianism involves not only cautious rhetorical framing, but also careful organizational
30 design work.
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44 First, when approaching government actors, Amal positioned itself as a consultancy with
45 expertise to make public spaces and tourism accessible. Between 2015 and 2020, Amal drastically
46 expanded the services it offered to local governments to support them in building an accessible
47 public infrastructure (e.g., improving access to metro stations, universities, and popular sites). The
48 aim was to “creat[e] a catalogue of diverse product solutions to transfer knowledge to governmental
49 decision-makers” (Arch., Startup Scene ME, 2017). Ayman described Amal's work as follows:
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3 “We work a lot with Giza Governorate. We signed a protocol in 2016 to have the first accessible
4 street in Egypt. We helped the Governorate to know how it can execute an accessible street;
5 how to have a route for people with physical impairment. (...) We are working with Luxor
6 Governorate to have different accessible streets. We are also working with the Ministry of
7 Antiquities to expand to monumental areas. The ministry is very interested” (Arch., Hassan,
8 2017).
9

10 A major project in 2018 in partnership with the Luxor government focused on making the Karnak
11 Temple, an important tourism site, accessible through the installation of ramps and tactile paving.
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14
15 Amal not only camouflaged social action when promoting its activities to the government; in
16
17 2015, the co-founders started reaching out to private companies including venue owners, event
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19 organizers and retailers to persuade them to “make their environment more customer-friendly to
20
21 avoid losing potential revenue” (Arch., My Salaam, 2017). For example, Amal supported a
22
23 company organizing a major technology exhibition by improving venue accessibility and training
24
25 staff to attend to the needs of disabled visitors, making the event “available to all” (Arch., Dotmsr,
26
27 2018). Amal became a partner of the exhibition organized under the auspices of President El-Sisi.
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31 In an effort to grow its accessibility services, Amal launched a mobile phone application that
32
33 allowed users to list accessible places in Cairo and publicly “associate their brands with positive
34
35 work through disability services such as [accessible] parking spots, washrooms and ramps” (Arch.,
36
37 Startup Scene ME, 2017). Approaching customers with an application-based solution “moved
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39 [Amal] to be more like [a] business to get around the issue [of civic engagement]”, according to
40
41 one of Amal’s advisors (Int.). As such, Amal’s protective disguise was not about limiting its
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43 noticeability; rather, it was about concealing its ‘true’ identity of a human rights organization.
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47 Finally, as well as making places more accessible to disabled members of the public, Amal
48
49 was focused on supporting disabled employees in the workplace. As described in more detail
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51 below, disabled staff in many Egyptian firms were paid to stay at home – employed only on paper.
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53 In 2015, Amal began to offer services to companies that were designed to make workplaces more
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3 accessible and inclusive for disabled people. It also offered job-related training to the companies'
4 disabled staff.⁵ To do so, Amal approached companies – initially subsidiaries of multinationals
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6 with existing (albeit seldomly enforced) policies concerning workforce inclusion – and calculated
7
8 the losses they were effectively making by paying salaries to ‘employees’ who did not actually
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10 contribute. Ayman told us: “we always like to talk why it [employment of disabled people] is good
11
12 for the people with disabilities, for the company and why it is good for the whole economy.” (Int.)
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17 At the same time, focusing on the relatively narrow but important issue of (workplace)
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19 accessibility also helped Amal to involve beneficiaries, who found that the venture set itself clear
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21 and tangible objectives, compared to other organizations following a much broader set of goals.
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23 One beneficiary argued: “Amal doesn't set themselves goals that they cannot achieve.” (Int.)
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27 The co-founders did not openly discuss the fact that they camouflaged as an innocuous
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29 service provider. However, one of Amal’s advisors was more forthcoming to us:
30

31 “They are doing something for profit that a lot of people wouldn’t necessarily perceive as first
32 of all being charitable. It’s interesting because they have chosen this path to adjust to the new
33 NGO regulations.” (Int.)
34

35 **Legitimation Outcome: Venture Perceived as Non-threatening**

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37 Our analysis indicated that Amal’s strategy of protective disguise had important effects on how it
38
39 was evaluated by government and corporate audiences: it allowed Amal to gain recognition as a
40
41 service provider rather than a human rights NGO. In other words, through protective disguise Amal
42
43 was able to support disabled people and raise awareness about disability, while at the same time
44
45 avoid suspicion that it was a threat to national interests – which would have subjected it to the
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47 monitoring and control experienced by many human rights NGOs. Crucially, we noticed that
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49 government actors began to describe Amal as fulfilling an important function in the Egyptian
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55 ⁵ In addition, training was offered to unemployed people with disabilities seeking employment. Amal advertised this
56 service to potential beneficiaries on social media and during public events.
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3 economy. In 2016, following Amal's conference on accessibility in the tourism sector, the
4
5 Governor of Giza stated that "the country is sitting on immense untapped potential" and "people
6
7 with disabilities [are] possible saviors of Egypt's tourist economy" (Arch., BeCause, 2016).
8
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10 Importantly, we learned that:

11
12 "The government is looking at [Amal's services as] they are service receivers and [they need]
13 partners in developing the country, to build the economic status." (Int., Egyptian disability
14 consultant)
15

16
17 In 2016, Amal won the third place in Africa's "Total Startupper of the Year" competition. A
18
19 minister commenting on Amal's accessibility projects stated that the venture was very
20
21 "professional" and had "improved so many places" and their mobile phone application was "very
22
23 valuable" (Arch., Amal promotional video, 2017⁶). Indeed, over time, government authorities
24
25 started to refer to Amal as an exemplary organization that supported government interests. For
26
27 instance, at the completion of the Karnak Temple project in 2018, a government representative
28
29 remarked: "this project is part of the participation of civil institutions to serve the community and
30
31 it helps the Ministry of Antiquities to develop services in archaeological areas for people with
32
33 special needs, which will result in doubling the number of visitors" (Arch., Wantani Net, 2018).
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37 Another minister stressed that:

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39 "Amal is a very professional organization that works in a professional way. And it has
40 accomplished, although it was launched not so long ago, ... profound progress so far that
41 would make any organization pleased to become their partner" (Arch., Amal promotional
42 video, 2017).
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45 As one of Amal's international advisors remarked:

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47 "The government likes [Amal]. The government understands that Amal is doing the work that they
48 don't have the money or the ability to do." (Int.)
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55 ⁶ Amal produced short promotional videos after major events, such as the completion of accessibility projects with
56 government and corporate partners and corporate 'community days' (described further below), which included
57 detailed statements from audiences about their experiences of learning about and working with Amal.
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3 Reactions from private sector audiences also highlighted the value of its services. For
4 instance, the owner of a restaurant chain remarked: “we're excited to work with them again very
5 soon on many other projects to take further steps to make our restaurants accessible for all” (Arch.,
6 Khalil, 2017). Another company’s executive stated: “Amal works with a venue’s team to customize
7 effective solutions to meet international standards” (Arch., Karikkandathil, 2017). Given that
8 companies in Egypt are often reluctant to be associated with NGOs for fear of attracting negative
9 attention, this indicates that Amal was not evaluated as a human rights NGO.

10
11 Overall, the reactions of audiences indicated to us that the venture was perceived as non-
12 threatening: Amal had managed to avoid eliciting perceptions that it engaged in social activism.
13 Rather, it came to be evaluated as a commercial service provider supporting a range of economic
14 goals aligned with national interests. As such, it avoided the scrutiny that human rights
15 organizations experienced. It was also able to create a revenue stream that provided the resource
16 platform needed to grow. Yet, Amal’s mission required it to be more than ‘just’ a service provider:
17 to achieve its inclusion agenda, the venture needed to challenge deep-rooted cultural practices
18 surrounding disability in Egypt – tied to cultural manifestations of authoritarianism.

19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 **CULTURAL AUTHORITARIANISM AND SOCIAL VENTURE LEGITIMACY**

39 40 41 42 **Legitimation Challenge: Entrenched Beliefs and Practices Devalue the Human Rights of Marginalized Groups**

43 In addition to a complex – and dangerous – political environment, Amal operated in the context of
44 culturally entrenched beliefs and practices that structurally devalued the human rights of
45 marginalized groups, including disabled people. Key audiences – government actors, private
46 companies, non-disabled employees – tended to uphold views that appeared to oppose Amal’s
47 mission; from their perspective, disabled people were already cared for sufficiently. Underpinning
48 these beliefs was a religious charity model of disability support that formed a prism through which
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3 Amal's audiences viewed disabled people. The custom of charitable giving is "deeply rooted in
4 Egyptian society" (Herrold, 2015: 307). It is linked to the Islamic concept of *takaful* – or social
5 solidarity (Ibrahim & Sherif, 2008) – with social provision funded through a type of charitable
6 endowment under Islamic law known as *awqaf* (Kuran, 2001). Religious leaders in Egypt equate
7 philanthropic giving with "realizing human rights of the poor" and vulnerable (El Daly, 2006).
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15 This religious charity model of addressing social issues has traditionally been supported by
16 political regimes in Egypt and other parts of the Arab World with a view to protecting national
17 interests and the status quo (Schlumberger, 2007).⁷ Indeed, longstanding cultural beliefs about
18 charity and social solidarity have shaped how successive governments had legislated to support
19 disabled people in Egypt. The 1975 Rehabilitation of Disabled Persons Act, which obliged
20 companies with more than 50 employees to hire 5% of their workforce from the disabled
21 population, was rooted in the Islamic custom of charity. Commitment to this law was re-affirmed
22 in the 2014 constitution, but according to the US State Department (2016) the law was not enforced.
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24 Crucially, the law appeared to maintain, rather than improve, the position of disabled people in
25 Egypt because it framed them as dependent on the non-disabled. A disability consultant told us:
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38 "The way we [Egyptians] look at persons with disability is mainly based on the charity
39 approach. The services are not sufficient at all. (...) Until lately, vocational education was not
40 permitted for persons with disability. (...) People consider persons with disability as weak and
41 needy people. And accordingly, they support them with a charity approach. They do not
42 consider persons with disability as part of the normal community and that they have rights, like
43 other citizens." (Int.)
44

45 Other experts described to us how disabled people tended to be seen as "weak", "dependent"
46 and "not equal" (Int.), and that these prejudices applied in the workplace as much as in society at
47 large. At the same time, Amal's disabled beneficiaries repeatedly told us that they were often not
48 taken seriously at work or simply ignored. From their accounts, we learned that:
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55 ⁷ We visualize this important relationship – linking political and cultural manifestations of authoritarianism – as part
56 of our theoretical model (Figure 1).
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3 “Some of the religious giving is the worst type of charity. (...) They give you a charitable
4 donation (...) because [they feel sorry for you] and that just sort of keeps the social
5 [inequalities] in place.” (Int.)
6

7 Overall, some audiences appeared to feel pity towards disabled people to the extent that they
8 actually dehumanized them. This had profound implications for Amal: workplace inclusion had
9 increasingly become central to the venture’s agenda. Companies and their non-disabled employees
10 were key audiences, but both questioned why enhanced workforce integration was needed, given
11 the institutionalized system governing the role of disabled people in the workforce, rooted in the
12 1975 law. Amal’s business development manager told us that companies hired them and paid them
13 to stay at home and that this practice was widely “considered as charity” (Int.) as it supported
14 disabled people who would otherwise struggle to find employment to sustain themselves. A factory
15 manager further explained that paying ‘salaries’ to disabled employees was often perceived as
16 leading to “some kindness from God” (Obs.). Indeed, a lack of commitment to supporting the
17 inclusion and equal rights of disabled people was sometimes justified on religious grounds, based
18 on a belief that “it is God’s role to distribute His wealth” (Arch., El Daly, 2006).
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35 Finally, even if Amal persuaded companies to recognize the skills of disabled people and
36 harness their talents, workforce integration would not be possible unless non-disabled employees
37 also came to view their disabled colleagues in a new light – the non-disabled staff in these
38 companies therefore represented an important audience in its own right. Many of them held
39 negative stereotypes of disabled people, and often sought to exclude them. Indeed, disabled people
40 have long been stigmatized in Egypt. Some Egyptians even regard disability as a form of “divine
41 punishment” (Arch., McGarth, 2010). One of Amal’s advisors explained to us that “having a child
42 with disability means that you did something wrong (...) that God is punishing you” (Int.). A
43 disabled beneficiary also told us that at school he had often felt looked down upon by his teachers
44 and other students. Furthermore, during a visit to a factory, the first author noticed that disabled
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3 employees often worked in separate areas and sat at separate tables during lunchbreaks, having
4 very little interaction with their non-disabled colleagues. On another occasion the manager of a
5 factory compared helping disabled people with giving food to a stray dog: “you feel better” (Obs.).
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10 Thus, a second core legitimation challenge facing Amal was a set of deeply entrenched
11 cultural beliefs about the worth and rights of disabled people, and the role of charity as a religious
12 and social duty to support them, which contributed to the persistent marginalization of disabled
13 people. These beliefs were evident across Amal’s three main audiences – government, companies,
14 and non-disabled employees – which made it difficult for Amal to garner support for its mission.
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21 **Legitimation Approach: Harmonious Advocacy**

22 In light of the highly politicized nature of the environment facing social ventures in Egypt, Amal
23 was initially very careful in how it advocated for the rights of disabled people. Indeed, through
24 protective disguise, the venture went to considerable lengths to cloak its mission under rhetorical
25 alignment and to camouflage as an innocuous organization. However, this approach had strategic
26 limitations as it did not allow Amal to gather concerted audience backing for its mission of
27 disability inclusion, which hindered its ability to tackle this social issue and ultimately to build
28 support for the venture itself. For instance, in 2016, a number of disabled people who had been
29 employed at Amal’s partner companies left their jobs. One of Amal’s founding team members told
30 us that many found it difficult to work in an environment where they were often excluded. As such,
31 while Amal was able to make various places accessible, important struggles for disabled people,
32 rooted in stigma and negative stereotypes, remained. The venture therefore risked losing support
33 from its audiences, including disabled people.
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51 However, once Amal had established itself as non-threatening in the eyes of key audiences,
52 it had an opportunity to engage in somewhat more overt advocacy to address the discrimination of
53 disabled people in the workplace and society. As Ayman put it, “maybe in the beginning it was
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3 difficult, but when you have big companies on your [side]... that makes it much easier” (Obs.).
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5 Similarly, the founders felt increasingly confident about “working with the Government” on
6
7 accessibility projects (Int.). However, Amal’s advocacy for its mission took a different form than
8
9 is often evident among social ventures in democratic contexts: rather than confront powerful actors
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11 with their shortcomings (cf., Ruebottom, 2013), its arguments were framed at all times in a way
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13 that avoided attributing them with blame or overt criticism. To this end, Amal engaged in a strategy
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15 that we label *harmonious advocacy*. This entailed two sets of actions: the *experiential construction*
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17 *of social problems* and *reactive campaigning for the social mission*.
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21 ***Experiential construction of social problems.*** Even before Amal registered as an NGO,
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23 when it was still a student initiative, the founders placed great emphasis on describing the life
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25 experiences of disabled people to their non-disabled counterparts in order to “fix people’s
26
27 prejudices” (Arch., The Cairo Post, 2013). Intriguingly, however, Amal did not lecture audiences
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29 on the structural injustice experienced by people with disabilities. Rather, the venture followed an
30
31 alternative, ‘indirect’ approach whereby it enabled its audiences to ‘see’ and experience the
32
33 circumstances and struggles of its disabled beneficiaries themselves, thereby engaging in a special
34
35 form of “consciousness-raising” (McCarthy & Moon, 2018) as we describe below. In authoritarian
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37 regimes, “any initiatives to promote discursive public spheres are likely to provoke oppression by
38
39 the state” (Lewis, 2013: 333). However, through the experiential construction of social problems,
40
41 social ventures can enable audiences to ‘discover’ these problems themselves and foster empathy
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43 with those affected through a better understanding of and sensitivity towards the situations they
44
45 face – changing the emotions of audiences by affecting the way they *feel* about disabled people –
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47 while avoiding public “democratic claims-making” (Spires, 2011).
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3 Specifically, to address audiences' perceptions of disabled people as "lesser" people and to
4 break down persistent stereotypes in the workplace, Amal focused on eliciting empathy for disabled
5 staff who were nominally employed by the companies it had partnered with. The founders, having
6 worked with several large companies on accessibility projects, realized that they had become
7 "famous in the community of business" (Int.). This allowed the venture to draw upon the corporate
8 network it had built to target two key audiences: companies and their non-disabled employees.
9 Crucially, Amal worked with its beneficiaries – many of whom served as "ambassadors" for the
10 venture – in spreading messages about the exclusion of disabled people, but also their ability to
11 overcome barriers. Amal's work with ambassadors was significant, as it allowed the venture to
12 include beneficiaries in the delivery of its services. This resonated positively with them; one
13 ambassador stated: "Other organizations, when they try to help, they don't see [our] skills." (Int.)
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28 More specifically, Amal organized "community days" that leveraged a local annual custom
29 whereby employees get time off work to contribute to a social cause. During these events,
30 ambassadors spoke vividly about their ambitions to pursue higher education, excel in sports and
31 progress in their careers – narratives that did not correspond to traditional stereotypes of disabled
32 people as weak and needy. Mostafa, one of Amal's ambassadors who was paralyzed after a traffic
33 accident and later became a wheelchair tennis champion, told community day participants during
34 one event: "after a lot of effort I got into the national team. I was ranked number three player in
35 Egypt. After two years, I ranked second." (Arch.) Afterwards, one of the participants who had
36 heard Mostafa's story approached Ayman, who told us: "the sales manager said that [Mostafa]
37 managed not only to prove us all wrong, but he made the team [feel] pressured. When you see
38 someone with disabilities working in the same department, and he's achieving much more..." (Int.)
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3 Ambassadors' stories were used to evoke a feeling among non-disabled people of having
4 important aspirations in common with people with disabilities, despite the widespread negative
5 stereotypes about them. As Rania remarked during a radio interview: "They're human [beings]. At
6 the end of the day they need everything that we do" (Arch., Nile.fm, 2018).
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12 Furthermore, Amal used the community days to try to deepen employers' and non-disabled
13 employees' understanding of the conditions faced by disabled people. Community days included
14 playful activities, such as sitting volleyball (on wheelchairs) and blind basketball (with a
15 blindfold), which allowed participants to experience firsthand situations encountered by disabled
16 people – "making them feel the same" (Int.). One of these activities was described to us as follows:
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23 "We ask them [participants] to enter a fully dark room, and we put a blindfold on their eyes, to
24 be sure that they will not see anything, exactly like blind people. And we will ask them to stay
25 in the room for 45 minutes. In these 45 minutes, we have our colleagues, both of them are blind,
26 (...) guide them on a 45-minute journey, and they will tell them how they can live in the dark.
27 So from this experience you make them feel the same feeling that blind people [experience].
28 And you have a blind person guiding them, so now a blind person becomes stronger." (Int.)⁸
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31 Amal also started to offer elements of its community day activities as part of public events,
32 giving the venture the opportunity to reach a broader audience. One occasion was the 2018 World
33 Youth Forum in Sharm-El Sheikh, during which attendees were able to participate in activities such
34 as walking through a parcours in the dark. Overall, Amal's aim was to capacitate audiences to feel
35 empathy for disabled people and support the venture's mission. As Rania explained, moving
36 beyond charity required audiences to *understand* the situation of disabled people:
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44 "With the culture in Egypt, people really want to do good. At least from my perspective, (...) I
45 think people are really good in general. I really believe in the goodness of people. (...) It's
46 just sometimes that when people don't understand what's happening, it's pretty normal that
47 people will not react the way you want them to" (Arch., Facebook live interview, 2020).
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53 ⁸ This activity was similar to one that Rania had participated in during a semester abroad in Germany when she visited
54 the Museum for the Blind and which had left a big mark on her. Upon her return to Egypt she decided that "anything
55 should be done to help [disabled people]" (Arch., Arabic Post, 2019).
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3 ***Reactive campaigning for social mission.*** In addition to its work with companies to support
4 the experiential construction of social problems, Amal also engaged in public campaigns to raise
5 awareness about disability rights. However, it did this in a way that was largely reactive by
6 leveraging conducive events that happened in its institutional context – i.e., events organized by or
7 developments initiated by the authoritarian regime with the potential to support disabled rights –
8 in order to carefully advocate for and further its mission. This contrasts sharply with social ventures
9 in democratic settings that tend to engage in more proactive campaigning, such as organizing
10 protests. Through Amal’s reactive campaigning, the venture walked a fine line by advocating on
11 behalf of its beneficiaries – many of whom actually felt that “the government was not helping
12 [them]” (Obs.), as the first author found out during a visit to Amal’s premises – while continuing
13 to nurture its image of being non-threatening and aligned with national interests. As we will show,
14 Amal’s use of conducive events enabled the venture to convince government actors to back its
15 mission, while also building support for the venture’s more confrontational activities in the eyes of
16 other audiences. As Amal also continued to engage in protective disguise, its campaigns ultimately
17 appeared to bolster, rather than challenge, the government’s image.

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19 The practice of community days, described above, provided one means of reactive
20 campaigning. While Amal organized them with an explicit focus on workplace inclusion, it also
21 invited government representatives (from the Ministry of Social Solidarity) to these events. This
22 gave Amal an opportunity to connect its workplace engagement to its accessibility projects with
23 government actors, using existing government support to legitimate its mission – “we say please
24 come and do that because you will be our backbone” (Arch., Facebook live interview, 2020).

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26 At the same time, Amal engaged in more public forms of advocacy. In doing so, Amal
27 carefully made use of conducive events, such as moderate changes in the country’s legal system,
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3 to engage in campaigning on behalf of its beneficiaries in alignment with national interests. During
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5 2017, the Egyptian parliament started to discuss a law concerning new rights of people with
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7 disabilities (passed in December of the same year). The law included a more rigorous enforcement
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9 of the employment law from 1975 and new rights to education. Members of Amal used the
10
11 opportunity to raise awareness about disability discrimination more broadly. During public events
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13 they mentioned, for instance, that “there are no equal opportunities for disabled persons in the
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15 education sector” (Arch., public speech, 2017), and Amal’s ambassadors emphasized that “the law
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17 for people with disabilities needs to be applied on the ground in order for us to be able to obtain
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19 our full rights” (Arch., Akhbarak News, 2019). Interestingly, calls by Amal to strengthen legal
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21 protections were carefully positioned to avoid offending government interests. Its advocacy
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23 typically included observations that “the government is actually trying to do a lot of things. There
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25 are still some gaps [but] there are a lot of good steps” (Arch., Business Socialista, 2018).
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31 Another notable event was “the year of people with disabilities” that the president
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33 announced in late 2017. Ayman told us that it “got a lot of attention towards persons with
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35 disabilities” (Obs.). Although an Egyptian disability consultant described it as “very easy to critique
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37 in terms of [it being] a charitable approach that [tokenizes] a social agenda in the interest of
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39 maintaining the state” (Int.) – and indeed oppression of human rights activism continued – Amal
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41 used the event to further expand its harmonious rights-based advocacy, calling for further changes
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43 in the law:
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47 “it is necessary to issue a law requiring any place to provide facilities that help people with
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49 disabilities. (...) No government school should be established without having specifications for
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51 people with disabilities” (Arch., Nogoum.fm, 2017).

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52 Towards the end of 2017, Amal launched its largest awareness campaign – a short video that was
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54 widely shared on social media, which an online magazine described in the following way:
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3 “the short video opens with a man sitting [in his wheelchair] and stating that, before leaving
4 his house, he has to ‘think about it a million times.’ It then cuts to a visually impaired woman
5 who says, ‘many things that are considered easy and simple by everyone else can be life-
6 threatening for us.’ The video then goes back to the man, who adds, ‘If you were to live our
7 experience, you would understand our suffering’” (Arch., My Salaam, 2017).
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10 The video received over 8 million views. Awareness campaigns such as this one started to gradually
11 shift Amal’s image from that of a service provider to more of an activist social venture. Amal also
12 started to use more far-reaching rights-based discourse, publicly declaring that “everyone should
13 know the rights of people with disabilities” (Arch., Akhbarak News, 2019).
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19 While these data provide evidence of Amal’s growing advocacy for disabled rights, the
20 venture continued to refrain from explicit criticism of reform efforts. In the aftermath of the
21 revolution, some Egyptians complained that the goals of the revolution had not materialized,
22 arguing that “the government needs to do more” to support marginalized groups (Arch., The Arab
23 Weekly, 2019). However, Amal’s co-founders decisively condemned this emerging attitude:
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30 “They complain [and] then they don’t do anything about it. (...) You just need to work hard
31 and you need to work smart as well, and prove to the [government] representatives, that you
32 understand the problems they face. And you start making them feel like you’re not attacking
33 them, that you’re there to support them” (Arch., Facebook live interview, 2020).
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36 As this quote indicates, the venture went as far as shielding the government against criticism from
37 civil society. Instead, the co-founder’s statement suggests that Amal sometimes portrayed activists
38 – not the government – as potential “villains” (cf., Ruebottom, 2013) hampering greater social
39 good. Interestingly, Amal also avoided positioning itself in the role of “hero”, most likely because
40 it wanted to avoid attracting scrutiny from the government – social ventures in authoritarian
41 regimes that receive too much attention risk being seen as a threat. This tight association with, and
42 sometimes defense of, the political elites who are partly responsible for the situation a social
43 venture is trying to change may therefore be a particular feature of social venture legitimation in
44 authoritarian contexts. Indeed, social ventures in democracies that position themselves very closely
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3 to political elites risk losing legitimacy among key audiences because they are likely to be seen as
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5 pawns of the state (Brown, 2008).
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8 All in all, harmonious advocacy comprises two distinct, but intertwined, components.
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10 Through the experiential construction of social problems ventures create empathy for beneficiaries
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12 among audiences. And through reactive campaigning for a social mission, social ventures react
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14 strategically to conducive events in their environment to engage in non-confrontational advocacy
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16 – which becomes more assertive as it becomes clear that the venture is not viewed as a threat.
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19 **Legitimation Outcome: Venture Perceived as Worthy of Support**

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21 Amal's harmonious advocacy increasingly resulted in the venture being considered as worthy of
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23 support. Turning first to non-disabled employees, we noticed that many of those who participated
24
25 in community days left feeling moved and inspired. Importantly, rather than feeling pity for
26
27 disabled people or indeed thinking of them as "lesser" people, they remarked that the stories shared
28
29 by Amal's ambassadors had enthused them. A non-disabled staff member observed:
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32 "Today was a day of hope. I met beautiful people that had dreams, wanted to be models
33 and computer geniuses and athletes. It was incredibly touching and, I would say, life
34 changing" (Arch., Amal video on community day, 2018).
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37 Indeed, non-disabled employees started to show a deeper understanding for the situation of
38
39 disabled people and appeared inspired to change their views. For instance, one community day
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41 participant confessed that she "never saw" disability as created by society – she had "never really
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43 taken that step" of engaging with the topic of disability (Arch., Amal video on community day,
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45 2018). Another said: "the thing that marked me the most today was when they said that disabled
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47 people are disabled because of able people" (Arch., Amal video on community day, 2018).
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51 As a result, support for Amal also appeared to grow. According to a participant: "I am
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53 leaving very inspired, very touched and I am happy to see that organizations like this exist in
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55 Egypt" (Arch., Amal video on community day, 2018). Another participant remarked:
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3 “Something that I have learned today is that for humans with a disability, disability is not in
4 them, disability is in us as a society, because we are not accommodating to their needs. I would
5 never intentionally sit in a wheelchair to try it out, but Amal gave me this opportunity to step
6 into someone else’s shoes and I think this is very important for me to clearly understand what
7 they go through, how it feels. I am very thankful for this opportunity” (Arch., Amal video on
8 community day, 2018).
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10 We also observed how empathy for the situation of people with disabilities changed the approach
11 of companies towards their disabled employees. For example, the chairman of a large Egyptian
12 company described how his organization had changed course after a community day: “we basically
13 put ourselves in their [disabled people’s] shoes and we inspected their demands and worked upon
14 that” (Arch., Amal promotional video, 2017). He further explained how the activities he had
15 participated in during community days had helped him to place himself “into the position of
16 disabled employees”. As a result, he was able to understand the barriers they faced at work and
17 felt motivated to help overcome them. Corporate partners also signaled their support of Amal’s
18 mission. For instance, a manager of another Egyptian company remarked:
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31 “Amal is our partner in success. We are proud of them and their efforts to change the
32 perception of the community towards people with disabilities and providing a convenient
33 environment for them” (Arch., Amal promotional video, 2017).
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36 By the end of our observations, Amal had established over 1,000 corporate partnerships and
37 been contracted to conduct over 5,000 corporate training sessions, including community days and
38 smaller events organized for corporate executives.
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42 Finally, we noticed that government representatives increasingly expressed explicit support
43 for Amal’s mission. For instance, one minister stated that the venture had not only improved access
44 to many places, but also contributed to “changing mind-sets” concerning people with disabilities
45 which she regarded as even “more important” (Arch., Amal promotional video, 2017).
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50 Furthermore, the Governor of Giza emphasized the role of Amal in “caring and providing
51 integration for [people with disabilities] in addition to providing smart and creative solutions that
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3 help them solve their problems” (Arch., Hatla, 2017). Crucially, Amal also started to engage in
4 projects with government entities that were more explicitly focused on the rights of disabled people
5 (rather than operating under the ‘disguise’ of promoting economic growth). For instance, the
6 venture started to work with the Ministry of Higher Education on creating disability centers on the
7 campuses of Egypt’s five largest universities to support and advise disabled students. Moreover,
8 by the end of 2020, Amal had conducted over 1,000 accessibility audits across the country, many
9 of which had been commissioned by and executed in cooperation with local government partners.
10 As these data indicate, government actors not only perceived Amal as non-threatening to their own
11 agenda and interests, but also actively supported its mission.
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24 Overall, as evidenced by the reactions of community day participants (both non-disabled
25 employees and the companies they worked for), the evaluations of government representatives, and
26 enhanced interorganizational cooperation, our analysis suggests that Amal’s harmonious advocacy
27 increasingly resulted in the *venture being considered as worthy of support* by its key audiences.
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32 33 **SOCIAL VENTURE LEGITIMATION IN AUTHORITARIAN CONTEXTS:** 34 **A MODEL OF OPTIMAL ASSIMILATION** 35

36 Our findings outline the legitimation challenges, corresponding strategies, and resulting audience
37 evaluations for social ventures in authoritarian contexts. In this section, we draw on the concepts
38 we have identified to present a theoretical model (Figure 1) of how new social ventures build
39 legitimacy in authoritarian regimes, outlining the relationships between the key concepts.
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45 The model starts with the obstacles associated with social venture legitimation in
46 authoritarian settings, rooted in both political and cultural manifestations of authoritarianism, that
47 combine to present a very challenging environment in which to gain legitimacy. Politically, *social*
48 *activism is perceived as a threat to national interests*, which means that social ventures are subject
49 to close monitoring and control by authorities. Culturally, deeply *entrenched beliefs and practices*
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3 *devalue the human rights of marginalized groups*, which are associated with persistent negative
4 stereotypes of social venture beneficiaries, making it difficult for ventures to convince audiences
5 to support them. Moreover, in many authoritarian regimes these political and cultural challenges
6 are intertwined (Schlumberger, 2007); one cannot be resolved without also attending to the other.
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12 To address these distinct legitimation challenges, social ventures engage in two overarching
13 strategies – *protective disguise* and *harmonious advocacy*. Protective disguise addresses the
14 challenge of political authoritarianism. It comprises two mutually reinforcing, and simultaneously
15 enacted, components. First, by cloaking its social mission under rhetorical alignment, the venture
16 articulates its goals so that they are compatible with those of the political establishment. This
17 allows the venture to frame its purpose in uncontentious and “purely functional” (Lewis, 2013)
18 ways that are acceptable to political elites. Second, by camouflaging social action through an
19 innocuous organizational design, the venture adopts an organizational form that is unlikely to
20 arouse unwanted attention and through which it can deliver its cloaked purpose. The two
21 components of protective disguise are therefore interconnected: cloaking the mission provides the
22 venture with a purpose and associated vocabulary – a way of talking about itself – that allows it to
23 evade scrutiny from an authoritarian regime; camouflaging social action provides the
24 organizational vehicle – a structure and set of practices – that allows it to achieve this purpose.
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42 Harmonious advocacy addresses the challenge of cultural authoritarianism (while at the same
43 time avoiding negative political evaluations as much as possible). It also comprises two mutually
44 reinforcing, and simultaneously enacted, components. First, through the experiential construction
45 of social problems ventures seek to build empathy for beneficiaries by giving others a sense of
46 what it is like to ‘walk in their shoes’; in other words, to attempt to change the “emotional register”
47 (Toubiana & Zietsma, 2017) of audiences. Second, through reactive campaigning for a social
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3 mission, social ventures can strategically take advantage of key events in their institutional context
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5 in order to introduce an alternative discourse about beneficiaries and advocate on their behalf in a
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7 ‘safe’ way. Like protective disguise, the two components of harmonious advocacy are therefore
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9 interconnected: the experiential construction of social problems supports reactive campaigning by
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11 ‘softening’ the emotional landscape and providing fertile ground through which carefully crafted,
12
13 aligned campaigning can take root.
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17 Together, the two legitimation strategies enable ventures in authoritarian regimes to build
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19 support in a complementary manner. Protective disguise allows ventures to be *perceived as non-*
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21 *threatening*. This is a crucial part of the social venture legitimation process in authoritarian
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23 regimes, because the political establishment will quickly shut down social ventures that are viewed
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25 as threatening to national interests. Harmonious advocacy, by contrast, allows ventures to be
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27 *perceived as worthy of support* not just by government, but by a range of audiences whose backing
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29 they need to achieve their mission. Crucially, protective disguise and harmonious advocacy need
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31 to be delicately balanced and may require adjustment over time. This dynamic underpins a distinct
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33 approach to new venture legitimation that we label *optimal assimilation*. Specifically, disguise is
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35 necessary because, while social ventures need to draw attention to a social problem, they cannot
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37 be confrontational as this could evoke negative audience reactions – in particular from government
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39 actors. Yet, social ventures cannot realize their mission if they are unable to sufficiently act on it
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41 and draw positive attention from key audiences. Hence, they will also need to engage in advocacy
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43 to convince audiences that their work is worthy of support – while carefully avoiding criticism of
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45 existing institutional arrangements.
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52 As such, the ways in which social ventures gain (and maintain) legitimacy in authoritarian
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54 contexts is characterized by a unique temporal process shaped by two factors. First, social ventures
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3 need to emphasize disguise early on so that they are evaluated in a non-threatening way by key
4 audiences – especially, but not only, government actors. Any advocacy needs to be performed in
5 an extremely low-key manner at this early juncture given the dangers involved. As ventures come
6 to be perceived as non-threatening, it becomes progressively safer for them to advocate more
7 openly for their beneficiaries, which enables them to scale back some of their disguise. In other
8 words, disguise forms a platform from which they can engage in advocacy. Indeed, ventures can
9 likely build on relationships established with audiences through protective disguise for their
10 advocacy work, and even involve them in campaigning on behalf of beneficiaries: once audiences
11 have bought into a social mission, albeit a cloaked one, they are more likely to be receptive towards
12 a venture's efforts to alter their perceptions of a problem and those affected by it. It is important
13 to note that the platform provided by protective disguise requires ongoing work in order to
14 maintain it as ventures' emphasis switches towards advocacy, albeit comparatively less than at the
15 point of venture creation.

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33 Second, the balancing of disguise and advocacy needs to take account of broader
34 developments in the authoritarian context. There may be periods of heightened crackdowns – such
35 as new laws that intensify pressures on human rights NGOs – when governments perceive a need
36 to reinforce their authority (Lewis, 2013). This could require social ventures to temporarily
37 augment their disguise and scale back their advocacy. There may also be more benign periods
38 characterized by conducive developments – such as when governments promote social welfare to
39 bolster their own legitimacy or promote particular goals (von Soest & Grauvogel, 2017). This
40 could allow social ventures to push their advocacy faster and scale back their disguise. Thus, the
41 progression from a relative emphasis on disguise to a relative emphasis on advocacy may be less
42 linear than we observed in our case (and as it is depicted in our theoretical model); rather, social
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3 ventures may need to continuously pivot back and forth between the two, depending on the broader
4 political dynamics at play. While this aspect of our theorizing is tentative, the idea that human
5 rights NGOs need to adapt to political tensions in their institutional context is well documented
6 (Lewis, 2013), and we believe that it is likely to be transferable across authoritarian contexts.
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12 --- *Insert Figure 1 here* ---

13 14 **DISCUSSION**

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16 Our study began with the question of how new social ventures gain legitimacy in authoritarian
17 contexts. While such contexts appear to pose unique legitimation challenges, we lacked dedicated
18 theory to understand how social ventures may navigate them. To address this, we examined how
19 a new social venture in post-revolutionary Egypt progressively gained support from key audiences.
20 We visualized our findings in a theoretical model – described above – that paints a distinct
21 legitimation trajectory for social ventures born into these environments. In this section, we abstract
22 from our findings to present two theoretical contributions: the first to scholarship on social venture
23 legitimation, and the second to scholarship on organizational legitimacy more broadly.
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34 **Social Venture Legitimation Strategies in Authoritarian Contexts**

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36 Our main contribution is to conceptualize the process of social venture legitimation in authoritarian
37 contexts. At the core of our model is a distinct set of legitimation strategies for new social ventures
38 in these contexts: protective disguise and harmonious advocacy. The strategies are enacted in
39 response to particular legitimation challenges which are rooted in the political and cultural
40 manifestations of authoritarianism.
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47 It is the political manifestation of authoritarianism that is typically most salient for social
48 ventures early on: in an environment where government authorities view human rights
49 organizations as threats to their own authority, avoiding their scrutiny immediately becomes a key
50 strategic priority. This is especially important for organizations like Amal that work with corporate
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3 partners, which themselves can be accused of threatening national interests simply by associating
4 with an NGO. While previous literature has explored social entrepreneurial activity outside of
5 democratic regimes (e.g., Mair & Schoen, 2007; Riviera-Santos, Holt, Littlewood, & Kolk, 2014;
6 Seelos & Mair, 2009), this research has primarily focused on the challenges posed by what political
7 scientists conceptualize as cultural authoritarianism – social and cultural beliefs and practices that,
8 for example, marginalize particular groups in society. While this work has generated important
9 insights, it does not pay explicit attention to the political aspects of authoritarianism.

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12 We identify protective disguise as a strategy that social ventures use to overcome the
13 legitimization challenges of political authoritarianism. It comprises two sets of related actions:
14 cloaking the venture’s social mission under rhetorical alignment so that it is consistent with the
15 goals of the authoritarian regime, and camouflaging social action through an innocuous
16 organizational design to avoid the contested image of a human rights NGO. This strategy is critical
17 because the consequences of being evaluated as threatening by the government in authoritarian
18 regimes include not only the forced closure of the venture, but potentially also arrest and
19 imprisonment. Social ventures therefore need to assimilate and avoid overt confrontation early on.

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22 It could be argued that protective disguise is simply an appeal to the Aristotelian notion of
23 “logos”, a common framing strategy identified in existing work (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005).
24 For example, making the business case for a social issue (Ruebottom, 2013) or positioning the
25 venture as business-like to align with “promarket” values of political elites (Dart, 2004), have been
26 identified as important elements of social venture legitimation in democratic contexts. However,
27 protective disguise differs from this type of framing strategy in two ways. First, in democratic
28 contexts the goal of these frames is conceptualized as the pursuit of positive audience evaluations
29 (e.g., Tracey et al., 2011). By contrast, protective disguise is focused on avoiding negative attention
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3 rather than the construction of messages that “resonate” with audiences (cf., Giorgi, 2017). It first
4 and foremost protects social ventures and their founders from the real dangers of forced closure,
5 imprisonment, or even torture.
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10 Second, protective disguise involves presenting the venture as a different *type* of organization
11 to escape unwanted scrutiny: the social venture adopts an inconspicuous organizational form in
12 support of its cloaked purpose. While the precise nature of such a design could take different forms
13 depending on the issue(s) addressed by the social venture, it will likely be based around the
14 provision of services or products that can be positioned as directly supporting government interests.
15 In our case, Amal adopted the outward form of a commercial provider of accessibility services
16 rather than a social venture or NGO. It is important to emphasize that protective disguise is not
17 about hiding; i.e., limiting a venture’s noticeability. Rather, it encompasses both cautious rhetorical
18 framing and careful organizational design work aimed at allowing the venture to be recognized as
19 an innocuous organization. When it becomes apparent that a venture is not viewed as a threat, it
20 can be more explicit in how it seeks to achieve its goals. Thus, protective disguise lays the
21 groundwork for more ‘positive’ legitimacy building.
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37 Specifically, our analysis suggests that protective disguise is a necessary, but not sufficient,
38 component of social venture legitimation in authoritarian contexts: ventures also need to convince
39 key audiences to back their social goals, which cannot be done if they are ‘fully disguised’. Rather,
40 social ventures need to explicitly advocate for their cause in order to mobilize support. However,
41 the cultural manifestations of authoritarianism make this task very demanding because they tend
42 to reinforce deeply entrenched beliefs and practices that devalue the human rights of marginalized
43 groups and help to perpetuate negative stereotypes that stigmatize them (Dean, 2002). Indeed, the
44 dynamics of marginalization often manifest in more extreme ways in authoritarian contexts
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3 because regimes may tacitly support – or at least fail to confront – prejudice against stigmatized
4 groups (Scior et al., 2020). With regard to disability, this includes common misconceptions rooted
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6 in cultural and religious beliefs such as that disability is the fault of disabled people, their ancestors,
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8 or a punishment from God (Rohwerder, 2018). These insights apply beyond disability to a range
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10 of groups who are stigmatized, for example, on the basis of sexuality (Arreola et al., 2014), gender
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12 (Layne, 2006), and religion (Nisan, 2002). The result is that the prejudice and stigma facing
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14 beneficiaries may be very deeply engrained, and audiences may not believe there is actually a
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16 ‘problem’ to be addressed. These challenges are reinforced by political authoritarianism, which
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18 means that social ventures cannot be seen to publicly criticize existing institutional arrangements.
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24 We identify harmonious advocacy as a strategy that social ventures use to overcome the
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26 legitimization challenges of cultural authoritarianism. It comprises two sets of related actions:
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28 engaging in the experiential construction of social problems, and the reactive campaigning for a
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30 social mission. It is these actions that allow the social venture to more explicitly promote its goals.
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32 First, because overt campaigning is risky, social ventures work on changing the emotional register
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34 of audiences by enabling *them* to experience some of the conditions faced by marginalized groups.
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36 The aim is to encourage audiences to revise their existing views of a venture’s beneficiaries and
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38 begin to acknowledge the social problem in question. In our case, we saw that key audiences
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40 initially believed that disabled people were already adequately cared for and did not view disabled
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42 rights as an issue that required or deserved attention. In response, Amal organized “community
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44 days” that provided a “safe space” (Gamson, 1996) where audiences were brought together to think
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46 about disability in a radically different way and develop empathy with disabled people.
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51 Amal also started to advocate publicly for disabled rights and changes to the law, but only
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53 in response to conducive events organized by the authoritarian regime, which the venture then
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3 used to advance its own agenda – such as when disabled rights were discussed in the Egyptian
4 parliament. It was also careful to acknowledge progress where it was made, and even defended
5 political elites from criticism on occasion. This kind of reactive campaigning appears to be a
6 distinct aspect of social venture legitimation in authoritarian regimes; social ventures in these
7 settings can only thrive when they unambiguously acknowledge the supremacy of the state
8 (Toepler & Froehlich, 2020). Thus, while successful social ventures in democratic contexts
9 sometimes use confrontational or even divisive framing that vilifies antagonists or criticizes
10 existing institutional conditions (Lee et al., 2018; Ruebottom, 2013), such an approach is too
11 hazardous in authoritarian contexts like Egypt where advocacy needs to remain ‘harmonious’.
12 Similarly, the political science literature has shown that human rights organizations typically
13 deploy contentious framing strategies designed to shame and force elites into action, and to
14 “convert information about rights abuses into action against abusers” (McEntire, Leiby & Krain,
15 2015: 407). For instance, there is a long history of direct action on the part of disabled rights
16 organizations in the UK – action designed to call out shortcomings in national laws and to fight
17 overtly, and sometimes even violently, for disabled people’s equality (Ryan, 2015). This approach
18 is not feasible in authoritarian regimes.

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40 It is important to acknowledge that the literature on social venture legitimacy has also
41 examined contexts that present profound legitimation challenges. For example, the Sicilian anti-
42 mafia social venture that Lee et al. (2018) studied was undoubtedly operating in a dangerous
43 environment. However, Italy has a well-developed set of institutions that enshrine rights to found
44 and belong to NGOs, a scenario unlike that in post-revolutionary Egypt. In a very different setting,
45 Hampel and Tracey (2017) showed how Thomas Cook, the world’s first travel agency founded to
46 empower working class people, was stigmatized by elites who believed that it threatened the social
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3 order of Victorian England. The venture responded with an aggressive strategy to “isolate” its
4 detractors by “attacking” their character (p. 2191). This option was not available to Amal, which
5 risked severe sanctions if it openly criticized political elites. As such, while legitimation was
6 clearly extremely difficult in these cases, the precise nature of the challenges and the strategies
7 available to overcome them were not the same as in our case. Overall, our contention is not that
8 the process of social venture legitimation in democratic contexts is ‘easy’ compared with
9 authoritarian contexts, but that the two differ in key respects.

19 **Addressing the Democratic Society Bias in Organizational Legitimacy Research**

20 Legitimacy is a cornerstone of institutional theory. Scholars have used the concept to build new
21 theory about institutional processes across a range of organizational forms, and the ideas associated
22 with it continue to evolve and be refined. Intriguingly, however, while drawing on legitimacy
23 helped us to understand and explain important aspects of Amal’s distinct trajectory, our analysis
24 revealed that some of its core assumptions do not transfer directly to authoritarian contexts. In this
25 section we highlight two key areas where our understanding of legitimacy is challenged when we
26 consider legitimation processes in authoritarian settings.

37 First, the literature on legitimacy in democratic contexts emphasizes that organizations’
38 primary legitimacy concern is to balance the need to conform to existing institutional arrangements
39 (so that they ‘make sense’ to audiences), with the need to differentiate themselves from these same
40 arrangements (in order to convince audiences that they have delineated a viable competitive
41 position). This dynamic is known as “optimal distinctiveness” (Zhao et al., 2017) when applied to
42 for-profit firms and has been labelled “positive deviance” (Grimes et al., 2018) when applied to
43 social ventures. Here the challenge for organizations is to show that they are both similar and
44 different “enough” in relation to accepted organizational entities; for new ventures, this means
45 starting out “as different as legitimately possible” – staking a claim for distinction and then
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3 justifying it in relation to the competitive landscape (Deephouse, 1999: 147).
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5 Intriguingly, the notion of optimal distinctiveness does not appear to explain the trajectory
6 that we observed in our case. In authoritarian settings, organizations have limited rights to speak
7 and act freely, and even hints of dissent can land them and their founders in serious danger. Their
8 primary legitimation concern is thus to avoid any negative attention in a politicized organizational
9 landscape. In such contexts, organizations must be seen to be fully aligned with the agendas of
10 political elites. In our case, Amal viewed strategic alignment with government interests as crucial
11 for its survival early on and sought to mask its ‘true’ purpose. While this made it difficult to gather
12 support for its cause, it only scaled back some of its disguise to reveal and work towards its goals
13 when it considered that this was safe to do. As such, we argue that organizations in authoritarian
14 regimes have a primary strategic orientation toward being *as unobtrusive as strategically possible*.
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28 In particular, as ‘standing out’ politically is generally perceived as extremely negative in
29 authoritarian settings, organizations’ strategic emphasis lies on ‘fitting in’ with government
30 priorities – particularly during the early stages of an organizational life-cycle – so that initial
31 audience support may be secured by construing a non-threatening image. This is in contrast to
32 democratic settings where ‘standing out’ politically can have inherent evaluative benefits for
33 organizations seeking to make social change (Pateisky, 2021). Importantly, ‘fitting in’ in
34 authoritarian contexts can involve a public departure from organizations’ core purpose because it
35 is focused on adopting a rhetoric and organizational form that *obscure* the essence of their mission.
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37 By disguising their ‘true’ identity, organizations can thus work towards accomplishing their
38 mission while staying ‘under the radar’, thereby nurturing the perception that they do not pose a
39 threat. This is especially important because, unlike in democratic settings, failed organizational
40 legitimation in authoritarian regimes can have dangerous consequences for organizational actors
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3 by threatening their safety and freedom; hence the continuous projection of unobtrusiveness.
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5 At the same time, extreme alignment with existing arrangements has strategic limitations
6 as this makes it challenging for organizations to pursue unique social missions or market strategies.
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8 Indeed, there are limits to what can be achieved by organizations when operating “from behind a
9 mask” (Claus & Tracey, 2020). In our case, we saw that it was difficult for Amal to promote
10 disabled rights without confronting established beliefs and practices. It therefore needed to
11 cautiously engage in advocacy for its cause. This was only possible once initial audience support
12 had been secured. However, through its advocacy, the venture still did not want to stand out as
13 threatening in any way: its primary aim was to secure support for its goals without compromising
14 its image of being ‘politically harmless’. Indeed, social ventures like Amal often feel that they
15 need to back government agencies or conformist NGOs with a similar mission and approach.
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28 Overall, instead of striving to be “as different as legitimately possible”, as it is the goal of
29 most organizations in democratic settings, we suggest that the core aim for organizations in
30 authoritarian regimes is to be as unobtrusive as they can strategically afford to be. Thus, they need
31 to continuously balance their disguise with cautious advocacy for their goals – a process that we
32 label *optimal assimilation*. Optimal assimilation is distinct from optimal distinctiveness in its core
33 strategic dimensions and the challenges that are being addressed through the organization’s
34 legitimation approach (see Table 4 for a summary comparison). It thus conveys the key
35 distinguishing features of legitimation in authoritarian contexts.
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49 Following from this central observation, our findings also add important nuance to the
50 depiction of organizational legitimation as a progression through four “states” (Deephouse et al.,
51 2017) – from illegitimate, to debated, to proper, to accepted. Specifically, our case revealed that,
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3 in authoritarian contexts, political elites can use their authority to bestow and withdraw legitimacy
4 in a way seldom seen in democratic contexts. They can do so, in part, because they exert direct
5 control over the key levers of state power – in particular the judiciary, the media, and the security
6 services – to a much greater degree than in democratic contexts, and are therefore comparatively
7 less constrained. And unlike in democratic contexts, there is no expectation that they should protect
8 citizens’ freedom of speech or ability to self-organize and protest. This places civil society in a
9 precarious position: authoritarian governments can arbitrarily monitor and question organizations,
10 crack down on those with agendas or activities they find threatening, and choose to ‘accept’ only
11 those whose missions are in alignment with their own interests.
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24 These dynamics have profound implications for processes of legitimation. In particular,
25 while organizations in democratic contexts can start from a position of illegitimacy (i.e., be deemed
26 as inappropriate) and recover to gain legitimacy (Hampel & Tracey, 2017), the same cannot be
27 said in authoritarian contexts. Indeed, organizations in authoritarian contexts that begin life as
28 illegitimate in the eyes of government are unlikely to be viable as they face the prospect of forced
29 closure (or, indeed, more dangerous consequences). Thus, ‘illegitimate’ organizations are unlikely
30 to have an opportunity to challenge their initial evaluation and move towards the next “state”.
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40 At the other end of the spectrum, organizations in authoritarian regimes are seldom
41 accepted (i.e., taken for granted). Rather, they are likely subject to some form of continuous
42 surveillance by the state; monitored for potential transgressions (Chang & Lin, 2020). Where
43 apparent transgressions are identified, organizations are exposed to the risk of serious sanctions,
44 even where they have a long track record and have not previously attracted unwarranted attention.
45 This is why Amal was careful to retain some elements of its protective disguise even once it had
46 started to secure explicit support from government actors – it was mindful of ongoing government
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3 crackdowns on human rights NGOs and the risk of being caught up in them.
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5 As a consequence, we argue that organizations in authoritarian contexts typically find
6 themselves in a liminal zone between debated (i.e., core activities questioned) and proper (i.e.,
7 core activities deemed acceptable). Our analysis suggests that to move from debated and towards
8 proper, organizations need to be seen as non-threatening to government interests. This not only
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10 frees them from political scrutiny, it also enables them to build relationships – as in the case of
11 Amal, audiences are reluctant to engage with organizations that have fallen foul of the political
12 establishment for fear that they too will come under scrutiny. The role and power of political elites
13 in authoritarian regimes therefore makes them a uniquely influential stakeholder, one that arguably
14 changes the very notion of what it means for organizations to become (and remain) legitimate:
15 ‘illegitimate’ organizations cannot survive in these settings and few organizations are ‘accepted’.
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28 Given the immense reach and scope of the authoritarian state, it is interesting to consider
29 what keeps governments in these contexts from cracking down even further than we saw in our
30 case or even eliminating human rights NGOs. Part of the answer is that there are always limits to
31 state power: authoritarian governments’ own legitimacy is not automatic and “even very coercive
32 regimes cannot survive without some support” (Geddes, 1999: 125). In addition to making claims
33 about their role in guaranteeing national security and protecting cultural heritage, an important
34 way that they do this is through carefully curated, often temporary, social welfare initiatives (von
35 Soest & Grauvogel, 2017). Thus, authoritarian regimes encourage non-profit (and private) sector
36 involvement in social service provision, but preclude any from political activity (Tadros, 2009). In
37 this regard, human rights NGOs can be useful to authoritarian regimes and political elites may
38 therefore bestow support on organizations deemed sufficiently ‘loyal’ to the regime in an effort to
39 improve the effectiveness of welfare initiatives.
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3 While these insights emerged from our case of a social venture, they have relevance to any
4 organization in an authoritarian context that operates outside the confines of the state. It has
5 frequently been alleged that authoritarian regimes, including those that govern Egypt (Osman,
6 2020) and China (Shih, 2018), strategically arrest leaders from business and the media to assert
7 their control and suppress dissent. Interestingly, tech ventures in China have recently faced sudden
8 government monitoring and control that appears rooted in concerns that their growing influence
9 represents an “affront” to the Communist Party (Zhong, 2020). For example, Alibaba founder Jack
10 Ma was placed under house arrest following a speech that was critical of government regulators
11 (Yang & Shepherd, 2021). Thus, while social ventures and other human rights NGOs may be
12 particularly vulnerable to, and need to be acutely aware of, unwanted attention and scrutiny from
13 political elites, our arguments apply to organizations in authoritarian contexts more broadly.
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28 **Critical Reflections, Scope Conditions and Future Research**

29 We see a number of ways in which the findings of our study could be challenged and extended.
30 First, we wonder to what degree the social issue that Amal addressed – disability – played a role in
31 the dynamics we observed and the success of the venture. Had Amal focused on a more politically
32 contentious issue such as the right to free speech, or a more culturally contentious issue such as
33 homosexuality, it may have been more difficult for it to avoid unwanted attention from government
34 audiences. While we think that the core of our model – the evolving balance between disguise and
35 advocacy – would apply to such cases, future research is needed to explore this further.
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46 Second, while we believe our model has relevance for authoritarian contexts beyond Egypt,
47 authoritarian regimes are far from homogenous, which clearly has implications for our findings.
48 We wonder if a comparative analysis would bring to the fore important nuances between social
49 venture legitimation processes in different authoritarian, or otherwise less democratic, contexts.
50 For example, would social venture legitimation in contemporary China, Russia or Saudi-Arabia
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3 follow a different path than in post-revolutionary Egypt given the political and cultural differences
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5 between them? What about so-called “hybrid regimes” (Wigell, 2008), such as Albania and
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7 Nigeria, that combine aspects of democratic and authoritarian political governance?
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10 Third, we have theorized what we believe is a plausible path for new social ventures to
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12 gain legitimacy in authoritarian contexts. Whether this constitutes the ‘best’ path is a normative
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14 question that is more difficult to answer. Under specific circumstances, strong social venture
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16 alignment with authoritarian regimes could be regarded as morally and ethically objectionable
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18 because it helps to sustain them. Moreover, while the strategies described here may support social
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20 venture legitimation in authoritarian contexts, they could simultaneously produce negative
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22 perceptions among audiences based in other contexts, thereby harming potential international
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24 collaboration or expansion of the venture (cf., Claus & Tracey, 2020).
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28 Fourth, an intriguing aspect of our case is that Amal adopted a commercial rather than a
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30 social orientation in order to appear less threatening. By contrast, NGOs in democratic regimes
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32 that adopt a commercial orientation may actually be seen as more threatening, as reflected in recent
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34 debates about the infusion of neo-liberal ideas into non-profit organizations in the US (Ganz, Kay
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36 & Spicer, 2018). Here the concern is that the profit motive might undermine the integrity of civil
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38 society and deflect organizations from their core focus on supporting beneficiaries. Future research
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40 could therefore usefully explore how social ventures balance a social versus a commercial
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42 orientation under different regimes.
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46 Finally, our findings highlight the way that government actors can influence the legitimacy
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48 judgements of other audiences. It is striking that current theories on organizational legitimation do
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50 not sufficiently account for the role of the state and, relatedly, for the state’s interdependency with
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52 other audiences. But even in democratic regimes, the state may influence audiences’ legitimacy
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3 evaluations of organizations in various ways, for example through governmental subsidies or other
4 incentives provided for particular types of innovations, or legal sanctions issued against the trade
5 of certain products. Thus, our findings encourage scholars of organizational legitimacy to more
6 adequately account for the role of political factors in processes of organizational legitimation in
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12 *any* context.
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14 **CONCLUSION**

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16 Social ventures play a key role in addressing deep-rooted social issues around the world. Gaining
17 legitimacy is crucial for these ventures if they are to meaningfully support their beneficiaries. A
18 growing literature has broken new ground to conceptualize processes of social venture
19 legitimation, but the insights it offers do not transfer neatly to authoritarian contexts. We have
20 sought to address this issue and to build new theory about the political and cultural legitimation
21 challenges facing social ventures operating in authoritarian regimes, the strategies they can enact
22 in response, and the corresponding legitimation outcomes. While our results are based on a single
23 case of a social venture created to promote the human rights of disabled people in Egypt, we
24 believe that the core insights are transferable to social ventures in authoritarian contexts beyond
25 Egypt and to social issues beyond disability exclusion. We hope that other researchers will
26 challenge and extend our findings, and in so doing deepen understanding of this important topic.
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Table 1: Key Events in Amal's History and Broader Environment (2011-2020)

Year	Key events in Amal's history	Key events in broader environment
2011	Rania and Ayman, two students from Cairo, establish a graduate student club, Amal, to raise awareness for the issue of disability inclusion. They start to organize events on campus.	<p>Mass protests on Tharir Square on 25 January mark the beginning of the Egyptian Revolution. Young activists coordinate protests that endure for more than two weeks.</p> <p>In February, Hosni Mubarak resigns. Mohamed Morsi becomes Egypt' first democratically elected President.</p>
2013	For a university project, Rania and Ayman conduct research on the employment conditions for people with disabilities in Egypt. They find out about their difficulties of entering the labor market due to persistent negative stereotypes and a lack of accessible infrastructure in the workplace and public life at large.	<p>President Morsi is ousted by the military. The military chief Abel Fattah el-Sisi takes over as Egypt's leader.</p> <p>When violent clashes occur in the aftermath of Morsi's overthrow, the military regime cracks down on activism through assembly laws and prison sentences.</p>
2014	Amal is registered as an NGO.	El-Sisi wins Egypt's presidential election.
2015	<p>Amal begins to offer accessibility services to the government (for the design of accessible public infrastructure) and companies (for accessibility assessments and designs of accessible shops, venues and workplaces, including factories and offices).</p> <p>The founders are now able to financially sustain working for Amal full-time, as they are charging for their consulting services.</p>	A new anti-terrorism law is passed for crimes that fall under a broad definition of terrorism, which includes social activism – in an effort to prevent anti-government efforts that could threaten national security.
2016	<p>Amal signs a protocol with the Giza Governorate to design the first accessible street in Egypt.</p> <p>The venture launches a mobile phone app that lists accessible venues in Cairo.</p> <p>Community Days, featuring “Disability Ethics Workshops” and “Disability Equality Training”, for companies are established as a platform to offer consulting services and raise awareness among employers and non-disabled employees for the situation of people with disabilities.</p> <p>First national conference on the matter of accessibility and disability inclusion is organized by Amal and attended by government representatives and 85 corporate CSR and HR managers.</p>	International observers increasingly report on political aggression of the Egyptian Government against human rights activists. In one high profile case, the Egyptian government is accused of the torture and murder of Giulio Regeni, an Italian PhD student, who conducted research on labor unions and social movements in Egypt.
2017	<p>Projects with Cairo University and Giza Governorate to make university campus accessible through installing tactile blocks.</p> <p>“One Click to Move” Campaign, raising awareness for the situation of people with disabilities in Egypt, reaches over 8 million views on social media and raises 4,000,000 EGP.</p>	<p>President el-Sisi introduces a new law that requires NGOs to report their activities to and gain approval from the government for any funding they receive. The law also bans domestic and foreign groups from engaging in political activities that can threaten national security.</p> <p>The Egyptian parliament starts to discuss a new law concerning the rights of people with</p>

		disabilities (including a more rigorous enforcement of an employment law from 1975 and new rights to education for disabled people), which is passed in December of the same year.
2018	<p>Project in partnership with Luxor Governorate, sponsored by Vodafone Foundation, in making the Karnak Temple, a major Egyptian tourism site, accessible.</p> <p>Work with governmental stakeholders now also includes collaboration with two governmental ministries.</p>	President el-Sisi launches the “year of people with disabilities”, shortly after the new law concerning the rights of disabled people had been passed in parliament.
2019	Amal campaigns for a more forceful enforcement of the rights of disabled people and is recognized in the national media for promoting their “equal rights”.	
2020	Amal expands its engagement with governmental authorities, which now also includes work with the Ministry of Higher Education on creating disability centers on the campuses of the five largest universities in Egypt. The purpose of the centers is to support disabled students and advise them on all matters concerning accessibility.	The political climate remains volatile. The Egyptian government continues to face criticism from international human rights watchers.

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Table 2: Data Sources and Use in Analysis

Data source	Type of data	Use in analysis
<p>Semi-structured interviews</p> <p><i>45 interviews; 4 rounds; between 20 minutes and 2 hours long</i></p>	<p>8 interviews with representatives of Amal.</p> <p>13 interviews with experts including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 interviews with disability experts; • 9 interviews with social enterprise experts. <p>14 interviews with key audiences, including: 4 with corporate employers, 4 with former government officials and 6 with beneficiaries.</p> <p>10 interviews with peers, including 4 with other social enterprises and 6 with other NGOs working on disability inclusion in Egypt.</p>	<p>Main source used to familiarize with organizational history and activities, particularly focusing on legitimacy-building related activities. Verify major organizational audiences.</p> <p>Understand issue area and challenges related to disability inclusion in Egypt. Conceptualize legitimation challenges.</p> <p>Understand social entrepreneurship landscape in Egypt and general challenges faced by social entrepreneurs. Conceptualize legitimation challenges.</p> <p>Investigate audiences' requirements for legitimacy and conceptualize legitimation challenges.</p> <p>Contextualize Amal's activities for legitimacy building by comparing it with those of other organizations in Egypt addressing the same issue. Support theorization of Amal's legitimation strategies.</p>
<p>Archival data</p> <p><i>12 recorded interviews/speeches; 93 media texts; 3 academic texts</i></p>	<p>Marketing material produced by Amal.</p> <p>4 radio interviews and 8 public talks given by officials between 2014 and 2020.</p> <p>93 articles on Amal in national and international online media published between 2012 and 2020.</p> <p>3 academic studies and books on social entrepreneurship in Egypt and the MENA region.</p>	<p>Familiarize with organizational context and activities.</p> <p>Support evidence from interviews with representatives of Amal regarding historical legitimacy-building activities and positioning in front of audiences.</p> <p>Familiarize with key events in organizational history and activities since foundation, as well as judgments made of Amal over time. Support evidence from interviews with audiences regarding nature of legitimacy judgments.</p> <p>Support evidence from expert interviews regarding developments in social entrepreneurship space and related challenges for social ventures.</p>
<p>Observations</p> <p><i>2 field visits; approx. 12 hours of observations in total</i></p>	<p>Field notes from visiting Amal's premises and informal discussion with officials (3 visits between Feb-Apr 2018).</p> <p>Field notes from visiting offices and factories of corporate employers (3 visits between Feb-Apr 2018).</p>	<p>Familiarize with organizational space, clarify uncertainties regarding organizational activities and timeline, and support emerging interpretations.</p> <p>Understand the manifestations of inaccessibility for disabled employees and investigate the perceptions of and interaction between disabled employees, managers and non-disabled employees in work settings.</p>

Table 3: Selected Evidence for Legitimation Challenges and Amal's Legitimation Strategies

Codes	Illustrative excerpts from interviews and archival material
Legitimation Challenges in Authoritarian Context	
1. Political manifestation of authoritarianism: Social activism perceived as threat to national interests	
<p>A. Government: Rights-based activism threatens national stability</p> <p>B. Government: Focus on human rights is distracting from prevailing objective of achieving prosperity</p>	<p>A1. Human rights advocates claim that the [NGO] law challenges freedom of expression by giving the government authorities the right to use the broad definition of terrorism to arrest individuals who write statements, reports, and articles in newspapers criticizing the performance of the regime. They also say that the Law violates freedom of assembly for peaceful protest because it could be used to accuse individuals calling for protests of harming social peace and national security. (<i>Sadek, 2014</i>)</p> <p>A2. "In Egypt, we are careful to support citizens and protect them (...). Just imagine the extent of the extremism and terrorism that we are facing in Egypt. Look at the situation in other countries where terrorism has caused the displacement of tens of thousands, even millions of people. I am responsible for the security and safety of 100 million Egyptians. Where are the human rights of the soldiers who have been killed, the martyrs, their families, their mothers, their widows?" (<i>France 24 Interview with President El-Sisi responding to international accusations of activists being detained for threatening national security, 2017</i>)</p> <p>B1. "Why don't you ask me about the right to a good education in Egypt? We don't have good education, I'm telling you. Why don't you ask me about the right for good healthcare in Egypt? We don't have good healthcare. Why don't you talk to me about the right to employment in Egypt? We don't have enough employment. Why don't you ask me about housing? I just want to say we don't try to escape the topic of human rights. But we are not in Europe with its development." (<i>President El-Sisi during a press conference, 2019</i>)</p> <p>B2. Mindful of the fact that discontent among Egypt's youth had led to the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak's longstanding regime, al-Sisi has been trying to address the needs of young people to head off more protests. There are now youth-related social and economic programs, including housing, health care, and assistance to young businessmen. With a firm belief that the 2011 revolution destroyed the country's economy and brought religious extremists out of the woodwork, al-Sisi has emphasized stability and economic prosperity at all costs, even if that meant less freedom and democracy. (<i>Inside Arabia, 2020; available at: https://insidearabia.com/the-state-of-human-rights-in-egypt-under-president-al-sisi/</i>)</p>
2. Cultural manifestation of authoritarianism: Entrenched beliefs and practices devalue the human rights of marginalized groups	
<p>C. Engaging in charity to support marginalized citizens in need, including disabled people, is a religious and social duty</p> <p>D. Moral duty to engage in charity does not include responsibility to work on integration of disabled people</p>	<p>C1. Most Egyptians believe that giving is not a charitable donation for which they should be thanked for. Rather, for them, it is a religious duty that should be cordially practiced, and what is called 'the right of God' (<i>haq Allah</i>) and 'the right of the poor' (<i>haq al faqir</i>) must be given to those in need, out of one's income. (...) For religious leaders, their engagement in channeling philanthropy to the poor is part of their mission in realizing human rights to the poor, especially <i>zakat</i> is perceived is perceived by them as 'the human rights of the poor'. (<i>El Daly, 2006</i>)</p> <p>C2. "Some people here believe that due to having these [disabled] people working for us, we [will receive] some kindness from God. (...) Like if you find a small dog that is homeless and you offer him food or milk, you feel better." (<i>Interview with corporate employer, 2018</i>)</p> <p>D1. "People don't expect much from disabled people. And that is because the common perspective [of a] charity and care approach given to disabled people. We are giving them money, we are giving them pensions. We are not expecting much from them as an equal partner in society." (<i>Interview with Egyptian disability consultant, 2018</i>)</p> <p>D2. "The mindset of sustainability is not really widespread in Egypt. People start to be more aware about it. But a lot of people deal with persons with disabilities as if they are helpless. They cannot really feed themselves – so why don't we just get them every month some money to sustain their lives rather than helping them to be productive and to be independent?" (<i>Interview with disability NGO staff, 2018</i>)</p>
Amal's Legitimation Approach: Protective Disguise	

3. Cloaking social mission under rhetorical alignment	
E. Enhanced accessibility benefits many groups in society, not only disabled people	<p>E1. "If any one of us is going on a vacation with the family, grandma has to go too. Grandma needs certain accommodations too, it's not only the disabled [people] that need them." (<i>TedX Youth talk by Rania, Maadi Narmer School, Cairo, 2017</i>)</p> <p>E2. "[Accessibility] will actually be beneficial for the entire country. (...) Many people, even those without disabilities, like the elderly, pregnant women, families with toddlers ... they all need accessibility." (<i>Interview with Ayman, American University of Cairo, 2017</i>)</p> <p>E3. "[Our services are for] elderly people, and maybe also mothers with strollers. Mainly what we do also helps the whole community to be safer and to make their life easier every day. By making it easy for persons with disabilities, you make it easy for everyone." (<i>Interview with Amal's marketing specialist, 2018</i>)</p>
F. Enhanced accessibility of major sites and venues can contribute to Egypt's economic growth	<p>F1. "[Amal] brought facts that ought to make every Egyptian prick up her ears: more than one in four travelers with disabilities travelled internationally in the past five years, and individually spend an average of \$2,500 on their own travel. Furthermore, globally, the world's ageing population is increasing enormously, so the tourism market needs to adapt to their changing abilities, which often includes a disability late in life. (<i>Article on Amal's conference on inclusion, BeCause, 2016</i>)</p> <p>F2. "Around one in seven Egyptians has some sort of disability; that is a significant portion of the consumer market. [Amal] promotes that businesses accommodate the spectrum of people with disabilities by making their environment more customer-friendly to avoid losing potential revenue. We try to show how such a big market segment cannot just be neglected but rather be used as a great added value for the economy." (<i>Ayman, My Salaam, 2017</i>)</p>
4. Camouflaging social action through an innocuous organizational design	
G. Amal operates as a professional service firm that supports companies in reaching more customers and improving their bottom line	<p>G1. "That's what we do with [Amal] Consultancy: we help businesses. We go there. We send our professional team to provide a report of accessibility measures: what is wrong, what needs to be changed, how to change it, and how much it would cost. So we basically do all the hard work for them. All they have to do is to decide on their priorities, what they want to start with, and then [we] would make the amendments." (<i>Radio interview with Rania on Nile.fm, 2018</i>)</p> <p>G2. "We offer client companies consultation so that they can change their infrastructure to become accessible." (<i>Ayman, quoted in Cairo Scene, 2015</i>)</p> <p>G3. "We convince companies by calculating how much money they are losing [by not employing disabled people]. We need to wear the corporate hat. You can't talk charity. And that's not actually our direction, it's not actually for charity." (<i>Interview with Ayman, 2017</i>)</p>
H. Amal operates as a professional service firm in partnering with local governments	<p>H1. The entrepreneurs, who were listed last year as one of CairoScene's 15 real influencers of 2015, are now creating a catalogue of diverse product solutions to help people with disabilities advocate for themselves and create the best practices to transfer knowledge to governmental decision-makers. "We work with the support of the Egyptian Ministry of Social Solidarity, so we are helping transfer knowledge and advance the role of accessibility for all." (<i>Startup Scene ME, 2017</i>)</p> <p>H2. "[We established] a partnership protocol with the Giza governor [for the first accessible street] and then we started with a pilot of the area around the university (...), it's not very a big part in this big city. But it was a good model and that's how the governor promised to do more projects with us. So (...) you have to prove yourself first and do [a pilot], and then they will see that you have good knowledge and that you're very serious about [the work]." (<i>Interview with Amal's business development manager, 2017</i>)</p> <p>H3. "We work alongside governments on big projects. Right now, we have a project to make Karnak Temple in Luxor, Luxor's museum, and the main streets of Luxor itself as accessible to tourists as they can be. There's a potential of one billion tourists that may come to visit Egypt and benefit us." (<i>Rania, speech at Egypt Career Summit, 2018</i>)</p>
Amal's Legitimation Approach: Harmonious Advocacy	
5. Experiential construction of social problems	

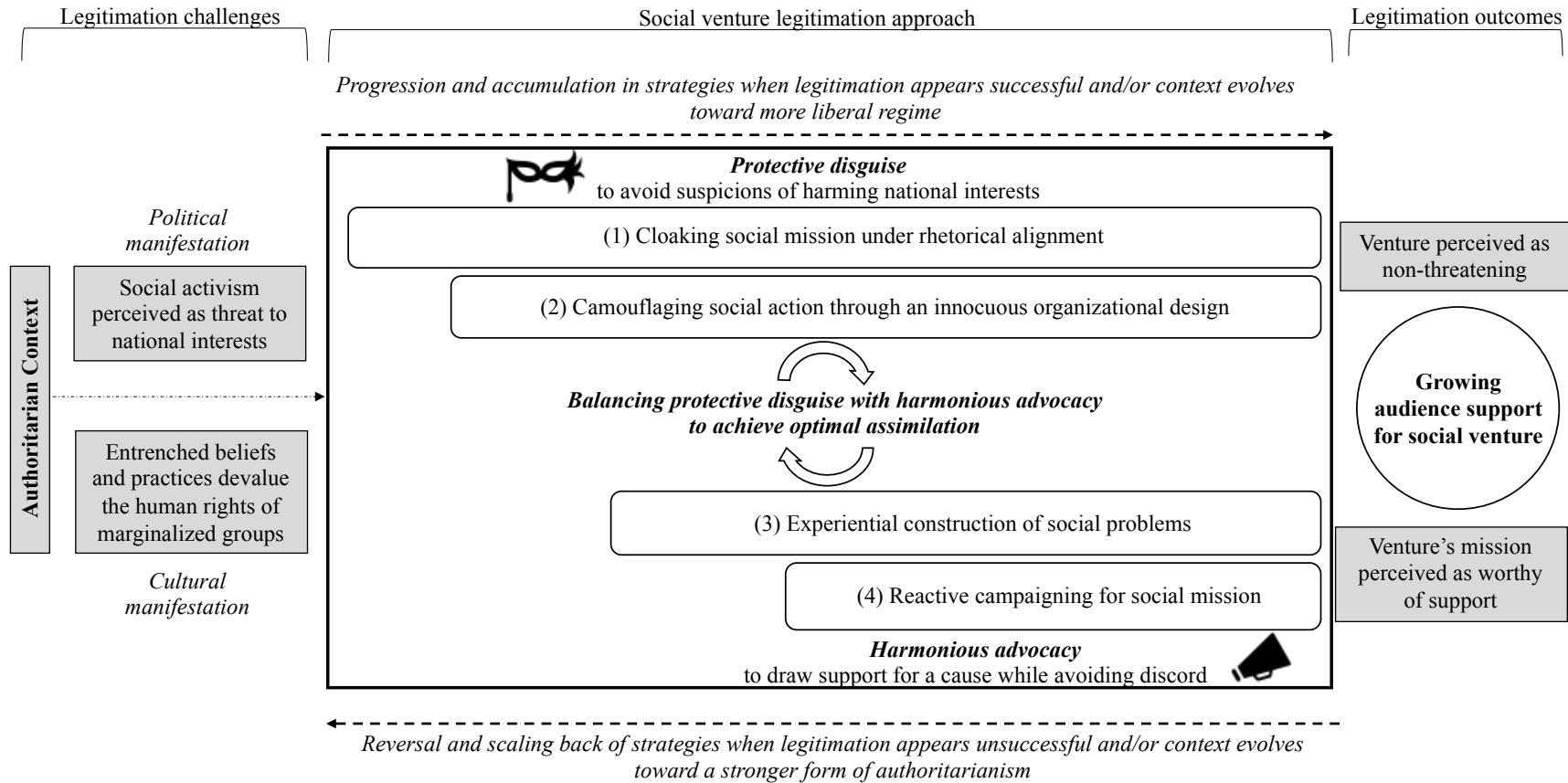
<p>I. Amal representatives and ambassadors share messages about ambitions and achievements of people with disabilities</p> <p>J. Amal creates opportunities for employers and non-disabled employees to deepen their understanding of and directly experience situations faced by people with disabilities</p>	<p>I1. "One of our team members, he is an ambassador. He invented and created tools [for quadriplegics] that are available now in Egypt. For example, he [has a tool that he can put] in his hand and then he can type. He's actually a programmer. (...) And now he can do his job. He works in one of the biggest telecom companies and he's been promoted since he was hired. We have a lot of examples [of people like him] who all need little accommodations or tools that would help them to implement their work." (<i>Radio interview with Rania on Nile.fm, 2018</i>)</p> <p>I2. At the beginning of the day, Hossam Maghawri, a disabled, said that disability is an examination from God, and it must be accepted and you should not to give up, revealing the details of amputation of his legs after an accident. Maghawri continued that he returned to practice his normal life after the installation of a German device that enables him to stand and walk again, pointing out that he [had invested] a lot of effort and patience to be able to continue his life and succeed in his job in a bank. He completed his speech, by giving advice to people with special needs to accept themselves, trusting God in the choice for this affliction, and seeking self-realization, whatever the circumstances and challenges are. (<i>Article on Amal's community day, Nosaed, 2019</i>)</p> <p>I3. Omar Hijazi, the Paralympic swimmer, said that when his disability occurred, he was between two options, either to challenge and fight his disability or to give up, so he chose to challenge and fight, so he practiced the sport he loves, which is swimming, and went swimming from Egypt to Jordan, pointing out the importance of promoting Egyptian tourism around the world. (<i>Article on Amal's community day, Vetogate, 2018</i>)</p> <p>J1. "We put barriers in their way and make people sit in wheelchairs and tell them: please try to walk. They aren't able to walk in this place because there are barriers, barriers like the ones found in the streets. To tell them that if you had all these barriers in front of you, you would not be able to travel. We also do activities that involve being blindfolded and we tell them to eat something or use their smartphone with a screen reader (...) so that they can see how it is like for disabled people." (<i>Interview with Amal ambassador, 2018</i>)</p> <p>J2. "The workshop consisted of activities simulating the various disabilities during which the individuals inside the hall went through a real experience for a certain period, which was coexistence with some kind of disability, such as blindness, or motor disability in order to transmit the feeling of disable people with different disabilities to the normal people. A member of [Amal] participating in the session said that there are more than 15 million people with special needs in Egypt. (<i>Article on Amal, Nosaed 2019</i>)</p> <p>J3. "It change[s] their [community day participants'] mind set about disability. (...) It's [about] instead of [seeing] the problem is within them [people with disabilities] because they have some kind of impairment, it's actually (...) the environment [that] is the one disabling him." (<i>Interview with business development manager on Amal's community days, 2017</i>)</p>
<p>6. Reactive campaigning for social mission</p>	
<p>K. Founders explicitly express their support for the government while engaging in mild criticism of existing institutional arrangements</p>	<p>K1. "The government is actually trying to do a lot of things. The president stated that 2018 is the year of persons with disability. We are trying to focus on disability policy, change laws... There're a lot of good steps but we are a bit slow. The parliament now, for the first time ever, has 8 members with a disability in the parliament. This has never been the case. So, we have people with disabilities that have a voice in the parliament. That is a good step. We also have a new disability law, which is actually really good but [not always enforced]. Even the previous law, it had its gaps, but it is still really good by the way. Again, people would find ways not to pay the fine or just hire people on paper for when the government comes to [inspect]. There's still some gaps [but] there are a lot of good steps." (<i>Interview with Ayman, Business Socialista, 2018</i>)</p> <p>K2. "The law in Egypt is actually good. However, the problem is implementing the law (...). Different companies will find a way to maneuver around the law and just not implement it. So when it comes to hiring people with disabilities there's a 5% quota. Any company that has more than 50 people should hire 5% of their people from people with disabilities. However, what happens is sometimes companies will just pay the fine, which is nothing, a very small amount, around maybe like 8 dollars a month. So I think any company that has more than 50</p>

<p>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60</p> <p>L. Amal capitalizes on conducive events in the environment to carefully expand rights-based discourse</p>	<p>people [employed] can actually pay the fine and they won't be worrying about the fine." (<i>Interview with Ayman, 2017</i>)</p> <p>K3. "Sometimes people just keep pointing [at the Government] and just attack [them]. Yes, sometimes people [talks about government actors] do mistakes unintentionally (...). But I think it proved the point across the years that if you give [them] the opportunity to support [you] and ask them in the right way and show them the way – yes, sometimes you might think oh, I should not be doing that, it's not my role, but it is what it is. I think if you look at the goodness of people, they give you [something] good [in return]. Life is not perfect, nowhere is perfect (...) there are countries that are more advanced than ours. Acknowledging that and learning from that [is important]." (<i>Facebook live interview with Rania, 2020</i>)</p> <p>L1. "Last Sunday, which coincides with the international day of disabled persons, [they] started discussing the new disabled persons law in parliament. Hopefully, that law will mean more rights, and more severe punishments for breaking the law. It will also provide things that were never written into law like accessibility, the right to education, and other things. If those things get accepted into law, and are applied correctly, this will have a great and powerful effect for disabled people. Right now, our current law states that if a company has more than 50 employees, 5% of them should be disabled people. Unfortunately, what actually happens is that companies will just hire people, pay them a very small salary, and tell them not go to work at all and stay at home, or they would just sign-in to work and do nothing all day. Therefore, they are not part of the workforce. One of the reasons why this is happening is education. There are no equal opportunities for disabled persons in the education sector. If someone can't get out of the house, can't get into public transport, can't find ramps in the streets... All of these reasons won't allow people to even go to work, let alone find a job." (<i>Amal ambassador, public speech, 2017</i>)</p> <p>L2. Rania stressed: "The best thing is that there is a strong interest in the problems of people with disabilities. Recently there was conference of the Ministry of Communications and Technology on how to help people with disabilities. They focused on listening to their demands and there was a strong tendency in all ministries to care for people with disabilities. It is necessary to issue a law requiring any place to provide facilities that help people with disabilities. It is assumed that no government school should be established without having specifications for people with disabilities." (<i>Article on Amal, Nogoum.fm, 2017</i>)</p>
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Table 4: Comparing Organizational Legitimation in Democratic and Authoritarian Contexts

Context	Democratic	Authoritarian
<i>Distinguishing features</i>	Contexts that are liberally regulated, open and where change is generally welcomed.	Contexts that are strictly regulated, closed and where stability is generally prioritized over change.
<i>Institutional conditions for legitimacy building</i>	Organizations are able – and have the right – to engage in “democratic claims-making” (Spires, 2011) in order to position themselves competitively.	Organizations have limited or precarious rights afforded to them with regard to freedom of speech and action (Howell, Shang & Fisher, 2019).
<i>Primary legitimation challenge</i>	Attracting positive attention in a competitive organizational landscape.	Avoiding negative attention in a politicized organizational landscape.
<i>Dominant legitimation approach</i>	Optimal Distinctiveness	Optimal Assimilation
<i>Description</i>	Organizations strive to be “ <i>as different as legitimately possible</i> ” (Deephouse, 1999: 147).	Organizations strive to be <i>as unobtrusive as strategically possible</i> .
<i>Key assumptions</i>	<p><u>‘Standing out’ as positive:</u> Being different or (politically) confrontational has inherent evaluative benefits as organizations are primarily evaluated based on the degree to which they can demonstrate positive distinctiveness.</p> <p><u>Failed organizational legitimation as posing limited dangers to individuals:</u> Complicates the organization’s ability to acquire resources, but generally does not have serious consequences for the freedom and safety of individuals involved.</p>	<p><u>‘Standing out’ as negative:</u> Being different or (politically) confrontational is inherently dangerous as organizations are primarily evaluated based on the degree to which they can demonstrate unobtrusive alignment with political interests.</p> <p><u>Failed organizational legitimation as potentially dangerous for individuals:</u> Can have very serious consequences for organizational founders and the freedom and safety of associated individuals.</p>
<i>Process over organizational life-cycle</i>	Prioritize distinctiveness over conformity during early stage of life-cycle when new organizations have “fewer institutional expectations and fewer parties to disappoint” (Zhao et al., 2017: 106). Gradually blend into environment by increasingly conforming to institutional expectations to widen the support base, while vigilantly projecting image of distinctiveness.	Prioritize disguise over advocacy during early stage of life-cycle to appear as non-threatening and secure audiences’ initial approval. Cautiously move towards advocacy (revealing core organizational mission) to realize organizational goals, while vigilantly projecting image of unobtrusiveness.

Figure 1: Process of Social Venture Legitimation in Authoritarian Contexts



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