Buying Time: Temporary Concessions & the Politics of Economic Reform in Authoritarian Regimes*

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Abstract

How do authoritarian regimes implement unpopular economic reforms without triggering destabilizing unrest? Prevailing theories suggest that governments must either repress dissent, concede through meaningful policy reversals, or ignore unrest and risk backlash. This paper introduces the concept of *temporary concessions:* short-term, strategic policy reversals later re-implemented to demobilize protest while maintaining reform and regime stability. I argue that regimes deploy temporary concessions when repression is costly or externally constrained, and ignoring protest risks escalation. By disrupting protest momentum and introducing a collective action problem among protesters, temporary concessions make demobilization the individually rational choice. Evidence from subsidy reforms in Jordan and Egypt, combined with a nationally representative survey experiment, shows that these tactics defuse unrest even when citizens doubt their durability, challenging prevailing models of authoritarian responsiveness and resilience under economic liberalization.

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1 Introduction

Neoliberal reforms that reduce state benefits are among the most unpopular policies governments can pursue. Their implementation poses an acute challenge to authoritarian rulers, who prioritize maintaining stability above all else. Across the world, subsidy cuts have triggered destabilizing protests and, in some cases, regime collapse. Yet in other authoritarian settings, governments have implemented these painful measures without losing control. What explains why some autocracies manage to push through unpopular reforms while others face destabilizing unrest?

Subsidies in authoritarian regimes have long been seen as especially difficult to reform. Because the so-called "authoritarian bargain" is predicated on the provision of cheap goods in exchange for political quiescence, scholars have argued that if regimes were to renege on their commitment to lower prices, the agreement would collapse and citizens would rebel (Desai, Olofsgård, and Yousef 2009). The events of the past few decades have cast doubt on this theory as many authoritarian regimes have begun to dismantle their welfare states and, contrary to expectations, they have largely remained stable (Cammett and Diwan 2016; Rudra 2002). Although early price liberalizations in the 1980s and 1990s at times led to violent upheavals, governments quickly learned and adapted new strategies to ease implementation and avoid unrest.

This paper introduces the concept of *temporary concessions* as one of these key strategies: short-term policy reversals that create the appearance of responsiveness but are quietly undone once protest subsides. Temporary concessions allow regimes to demobilize unrest without permanently retreating from reform, offering a strategic alternative to repression, genuine concessions, or inaction. They are most likely when repression is costly or externally constrained, and when protest poses a credible threat to stability. Temporary concessions work by disrupting protest momentum and altering coordination dynamics among citizens. Once the government appears responsive, citizens face a collective-action problem: they may expect that the government's reversal is temporary, yet simultaneously expect that others will stop protesting. The result is that demobilization becomes the individually rational response.

This logic helps explain why temporary concessions are especially useful in contexts where coercion is costly or externally constrained. This is the case in both Jordan and Egypt, where interconnectedness with the international community raises the cost of repression, and where Jordan's deep dependence on the West makes it especially costly. By examining cases in Egypt and Jordan, a high- and low-repression context, I show that this strategy enables different types of regimes to buy time, reduce opposition momentum, and preserve their broader reform trajectory. This approach reframes how we understand authoritarian responsiveness, revealing that concessions can be used as a tool to manage political dissent without forcing the government to sacrifice its policy priorities.

This puzzle—how governments can roll back popular benefits without instability—is especially visible in the Middle East and North Africa, where subsidies have played a central role in the governance of authoritarian regimes. For decades, regimes have used subsidies to stabilize the prices of essential goods like bread and fuel, ensuring economic security for citizens while reinforcing an implicit social contract: economic welfare in exchange for political quiescence (Eibl 2017; Hertog 2022; Waldner 1999).

However, this system is increasingly under strain, particularly in lower- and middle-income autocracies, where governments have found that subsidies pose an unsustainable burden on constrained state budgets, and have thus faced international pressure to cut back on these expenditures. Over the past few decades, governments in the region have implemented sweeping price liberalizations (Cammett, Diwan, et al. 2017). Contrary to popular expectations that reneging on the social contract would lead to large-scale upheaval, these countries have largely remained stable. I argue that deploying temporary concessions is one of the factors that enables regimes to remain stable amidst economic liberalization.

To evaluate the logic and effects of temporary concessions, I adopt a mixed-methods approach that combines in-depth qualitative process tracing with original survey experimental evidence. I pair case studies of subsidy reform episodes in Jordan and Egypt with a nationally-representative survey experiment in both countries. By choosing Egypt and Jordan, two authoritarian regimes with different political systems and levels of re-

pression, I introduce variation on key regime characteristics. Identifying similar protest management strategies across these settings increases confidence in the generalizability of temporary concessions as an authoritarian tool.

In the first part of the analysis, I examine two episodes where governments deployed temporary concessions in response to unrest: Jordan in 2022 and Egypt in 2017. Each case demonstrates how governments used short-term policy responses to defuse protest, only to later reinstate the reforms once mobilization dissipated. While Egypt's more repressive regime tends to rely on coercion, I show that even in such settings, temporary concessions can serve as a critical tool when repression risks backfiring or jeopardizing international relationships. In Jordan, where the regime is more constrained in its use of force, temporary concessions appear more frequently and are often paired with rhetorical framing and selective repression. They allow the government to suppress protests without deploying heavy-handed repression. In each case, I draw on a range of primary and secondary sources, including administrative data, Arabic and English-language media reports, and over 90 elite interviews with policymakers, journalists, and civil society actors.

In the second part of the analysis, I test how citizens interpret and respond to government concessions using an original survey experiment fielded in Egypt and Jordan. This experiment explores a key dimension of my theory: whether concessions are effective at demobilizing protests, even when citizens may not find them to be credible. Respondents were presented with a hypothetical reform and protest scenario, followed by information about a government concession. I then randomized credibility cues from civil society actors to assess how cues about government trustworthiness shape perceptions of concession effectiveness and durability.

I find that temporary concessions are less effective at demobilizing protests when government credibility is low. Yet, paradoxically, civil society cues highlighting the government's low credibility reduce the extent to which citizens expect it to renege on its concession, suggesting that citizens perceive these organizations as capable of holding the government accountable. The results also show that while citizens generally doubt

the durability of concessions, they nonetheless believe such concessions can stop protests. This points to a collective-action problem: citizens expect others to stop protesting once the government appears responsive, making demobilization rational.

Acemoglu and J. A. Robinson (2000) argue that authoritarian governments cannot credibly commit to concessions without introducing democratizing reforms that would guarantee implementation. Yet in practice, authoritarian regimes frequently deploy concessions that successfully demobilize protest, even without institutional guarantees or lasting reforms. Existing literature has also struggled to explain how these regimes have managed to update their social contracts, which traditionally exchanged welfare provision for political acquiescence, in an era of fiscal austerity and declining state intervention. Lacking explanations for sustained stability amid welfare retrenchment, scholars have primarily pointed to rising repression as the dominant mechanism for enforcing reform (Bellin 2012). In line with Heydemann (2007), I argue that authoritarian regimes have innovated coercive strategies, beyond traditional repression, that enable them to implement unpopular economic reforms while maintaining stability.

Other theories suggest that when opposition to these reforms emerges, rulers must either repress dissent, concede through meaningful policy reversals, or ignore and hope that protests will fade (Bishara 2015; Opp and Roehl 1990; Aytaç and Stokes 2019). This paper introduces temporary concessions as a distinct category of authoritarian response, a fourth option beyond repression, genuine concession, or inaction. Temporary concessions allow regimes to appear responsive, buy time, and suppress mobilization without altering their long-term reform trajectory or making costly policy reversals. In doing so, I challenge assumptions that authoritarian responsiveness necessarily signals weakness or concession. Rather, I show that responsiveness can function as a strategic, repressive tool.

In doing so, this paper advances three debates in the literature. First, it explains how governments can violate the authoritarian social contract, reneging on distributive promises, without provoking instability. Second, it shows the utility of concessions in responding to economic unrest, even when they are not considered credible. Third, it

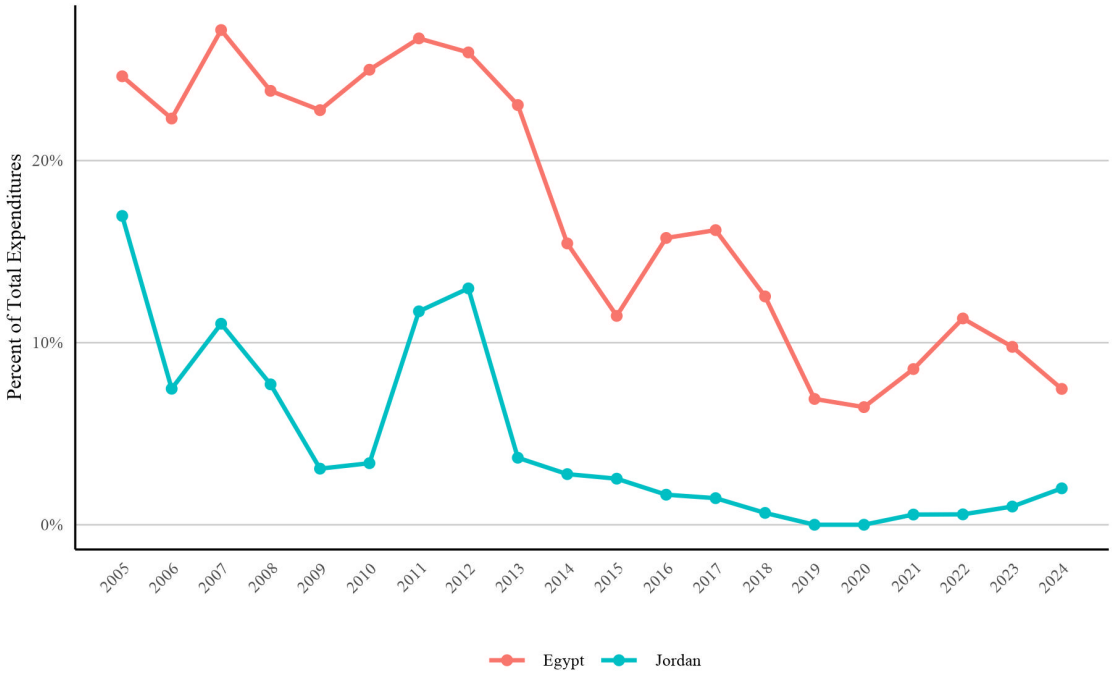
identifies the microfoundations of this strategy: temporary concessions create a collective-action problem that makes demobilization the rational individual choice. Together, these contributions explain how authoritarian regimes sustain political stability under fiscal constraint, challenging dominant theories that link welfare retrenchment to regime fragility.

2 The Puzzle of Economic Reform under Authoritarianism

Subsidies have long been viewed as a cornerstone of the authoritarian social contract in Middle Eastern countries: an implicit arrangement in which regimes provide economic benefits such as public sector jobs and cheap commodities in exchange for political acquiescence and limited civic participation. This bargain helps maintain regime stability by securing public compliance and reducing dissent (Crystal 1990; Herb 1999). Because subsidies on consumer commodities like fuel, electricity, and food are seen as central to this exchange, reforming them is often considered politically unfeasible. Removing such benefits risks undermining the regime's legitimacy and provoking unrest (Bienen and Gersovitz 1986). And yet, many governments have managed to implement such reforms, prompting a reevaluation of the existence of the implicit social contract.

Over the past few decades, governments in the region have implemented sweeping price liberalizations. Take Jordan, for example. In 2012, the government faced a seemingly insurmountable challenge: fuel import costs were soaring after the sabotage of an Egyptian gas pipeline the previous year. Politically, the timing was fraught. In the wake of the Arab Spring, regional governments feared that any misstep, especially an unpopular move like raising fuel prices, could spark unrest or even revolution. Despite these hostile conditions, Jordan liberalized fuel prices by the end of 2012. Subsidy spending subsequently dropped from 13% of government expenditures to just 2%, with the remaining subsidy expenditure composed primarily of food subsidies. Egypt followed a similar trajectory, reducing subsidy spending from 27% of total expenditures in 2012 to just 8% by 2024 (Figure 1). Remarkably, both countries have remained largely avoided instability, despite drastic cuts to subsidies.

Figure 1: Expenditures on Food & Fuel Subsidies as a Percentage of Total Expenditures



Source: Ministries of Finance, Jordan and Egypt

This is not to say that subsidy reform carries no risk. In 2014, a sharp increase in fuel prices in Yemen led to violent protests. The attendant mobilization ultimately fostered the conditions for the Houthi movement to seize on the unrest and expand their control. In Iran, the government's decision in 2019 to raise fuel prices set off nationwide civil protests. The movement only ended when the government deployed massive force, including firing on protesters, as well as a country-wide internet blackout. Both incidents proved to be considerably destabilizing, in Iran contributing to erosion of the government's legitimacy, and in Yemen, aiding in the toppling of the transitional government. These outcomes underscore the inherently destabilizing potential of subsidy reform, raising the question of how regimes like Jordan and Egypt managed to implement similar reforms without triggering similar levels of unrest.

3 Rethinking Concessions & Coercion

These events complicate established theories of authoritarian concessions. Acemoglu and J. A. Robinson (2000) argue that autocratic regimes, when confronted by mass protest, cannot credibly offer concessions without institutional mechanisms to guarantee their enforcement. According to their framework, only concessions accompanied by structural, democratizing reforms, such as the extension of voting rights, are likely to succeed in demobilizing unrest. Further literature has argued that because autocrats cannot credibly commit to reforms and concessions often fail to fully address citizens' demands, such concessions tend to beget additional protest (Leuschner and Hellmeier 2024; Rasler 1996). Accordingly, concessions under authoritarianism should not demobilize protest.

Yet, empirical evidence suggests otherwise. When the government of Jordan faced protests following fuel price hikes in September 2012, they responded with concessions, before again raising prices that November, this time, for good. Protests eventually subsided without further concessions. In many authoritarian settings, governments have effectively quelled protest through targeted, temporary concessions without undertaking meaningful political reform. These instances should reshape our understanding of how authoritarian regimes respond to protest. I argue that while it may be true that authoritarian regimes cannot credibly commit to implementing concessions made in response to protest, concessions can still serve to demobilize by disrupting protest momentum and creating collective action problems, even when citizens do not find them to be credible.

Existing research suggests that authoritarian regimes use concessions to defuse protest and that such gestures can be effective in quelling dissent (de Vogel 2021). While concessions may indeed tamp down unrest, it is a mistake to interpret them uniformly as signs of regime vulnerability or genuine policy shifts. I argue that what are often labeled as concessions under authoritarianism can instead be temporary and tactical, designed to quiet dissent in the short term while allowing the regime to maintain its broader policy goals. Temporary concessions allow regimes to appear responsive while ultimately preserving their reform trajectory, enabling them to demobilize opposition without making lasting sacrifices.

3.1 Concessions, Repression & Ignoring

Existing work has presented three options for authoritarian regimes when facing protest: repress, concede, or ignore. Each option carries distinct costs. The government can concede, backtracking on its reform and foregoing reform. Generally, governments will seek to avoid this option because it will leave them back where they started, having spent considerable political capital without making any policy gains. They are thought to select this option only when protests show the potential to be truly destabilizing and they see no other means of demobilizing them, or the costs associated with repressing them would be too high (Acemoglu and J. A. Robinson 2000).

If the government evaluates that the protests do not pose a threat to stability, they may ignore them and move forward with implementation, allowing protests to subside on their own. This tactic has been highlighted by Bishara (2015), who noted that the Mubarak regime in Egypt tended to sometimes respond to protesters in a way that fell short of repression or concession. However, this option carries with it the possibility that protests may spiral out of control if left unaddressed. Finally, if a government estimates that it can safely quash protests with repression, then they will do so. Repression has been considered by some as essential to enforce neoliberal reforms (R. Robinson 2004). However, repression is not failproof, and can sometimes incite further anger, as well as opprobrium from allies (Aytaç and Stokes 2019; Opp and Roehl 1990).

These tools rely on governments making an accurate assessment of the threat level posed by protests, and maintaining the political acumen to respond in a way that demobilizes protests, without sparking a backlash movement. Ignoring protests is typically the preferred first response, as it entails minimal resource expenditure, preserves the regime's policy agenda, and avoids reputational damage if unrest fades on its own. If protests persist, governments may turn to repression, though this risks damaging their international standing and potentially escalating domestic unrest. Concessions are generally a last resort, used when neither ignoring nor repression is likely to succeed. While potentially effective at demobilizing protest, concessions can undermine reform goals and signal weakness, making them politically costly.

Ignoring, concessions, and repression each carry potential costs. In the following, I argue that governments possess a fourth option, which alleviates some of the risk associated with the former options. Governments can make temporary concessions, briefly responding to protest demands, before quietly reimposing the reform. This pause also grants the government time to implement new repressive policies in the interim which make future opposition more legally challenging. This strategy solves the problem of demobilizing protests without having to deploy repression or concede to protester demands. Governments are most likely to opt for temporary concessions when they face credible protests that cannot be ignored, but are unwilling or unable to deploy heavy-handed repression and reluctant to abandon the reform altogether.

4 Theorizing Temporary Concessions

This paper makes key theoretical contributions to the study of authoritarian governance and economic reform by introducing the concept of temporary concessions as a critical tool in authoritarian regimes' repertoires for managing citizen dissent following unpopular economic reforms. I argue that what may appear as meaningful concessions under authoritarianism are often temporary reversals, designed not to abandon a reform, but to pause it until dissent subsides. Temporary concessions are short-term policy responses by authoritarian regimes that appear to address citizen demands during moments of protest, but ultimately prove to be neither enduring nor permanent. These concessions typically involve the reversal, suspension, or delay of reforms, only for the original policy measures to be reinstated after public pressure subsides. For the purposes of this study, I define a concession as "temporary" if it is reversed or rolled back within one year of its introduction.

4.1 Concessions as a Tool of Demobilization

Whether or not citizens believe concessions are permanent, the initial act of reversal fragments collective action, especially in repressive contexts where organizing is risky

and costly. Protesters either 1) view the concession as enduring and stop mobilizing, or 2) expect reversal but struggle to sustain momentum once the government has appeared responsive. In both cases, concessions interrupt the dynamics of collective action, making it difficult for movements to endure. I identify four complementary mechanisms through which concessions operate.

First, concessions disrupt protest momentum. The announcement of a reversal signals responsiveness and fractures collective resolve, especially in repressive settings where coordination is already risky and costly (Pierskalla 2010). Once the state appears to have yielded, organizers lose a clear focal point for continued protest. Second, concessions change expected benefits. Even when citizens anticipate backtracking, concessions alter the perceived costs and benefits of continued activism. Witnessing an initial victory rolled back can convince many that further protest is unlikely to succeed, lowering expectations of gains while highlighting the risks of repression (Kuran 1998). The result is often demobilization, even in low-credibility environments where citizen do not expect that concessions will endure.

Third, concessions buy time for gradual re-implementation. By defusing immediate anger, regimes can later reintroduce reforms incrementally or with less visibility, reducing the likelihood of another mass mobilization (Auktor and Loewe 2022). Finally, concessions deprive movements of the initial "shock" that triggers collective action in the first place (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001). When reforms are reinstated gradually, the absence of a sharp new disruption makes it difficult for opposition actors to remobilize or recapture the same energy.

These macro-level effects are reinforced by individual-level microfoundations. When governments make concessions, potesters face a collective action problem: because they cannot know *a priori* whether a concession will endure, they must also guess whether others will believe it and demobilize in response. I argue that protesters will expect their peers to demobilize in response to concessions (right column, Table 1). Accordingly, even skeptical individuals may stop protesting if they expect others to do so, since continuing alone entails high personal cost and little prospect of success. The result is a coordination

equilibrium in which demobilization becomes individually rational (bottom right, Table 1).

Table 1: Microfoundations of Demobilization

	Others Continue	**Others Stop**
Continue	Possible long-term concession *(high benefit, high cost)*	Repression *(low benefit, high cost)*
Stop	Free-ride if others win *(high benefit, low cost)*	Avoid repression *(low benefit, low cost)*

These dynamics are particularly visible in subsidy reform protests, which emerge in response to sudden price shocks. Temporary reversals interrupt that shock and reset expectations. When governments subsequently reintroduce reforms, they typically do so quietly or in smaller increments, rendering collective action challenging and limiting opportunities for collective action to reignite.

4.2 The Credibility of Concessions

While temporary concessions can disrupt protest momentum, their effectiveness depends, in part, on how they are interpreted by citizens. In opaque authoritarian settings, where governments frequently reverse course or manipulate policy for political gain, citizens may rely on outside information to assess the credibility of government actions. As a result, it is not always clear whether citizens perceive a concession as a genuine policy reversal or as a temporary tactic to suppress dissent. This raises a critical question: can a concession still succeed in demobilizing protest even if citizens suspect it will be reversed?

I argue that temporary concessions work not because they are believed, but because they create a collective action problem that makes demobilization individually rational. Even when citizens expect the government to renege, the mere appearance of responsiveness can lead each protester to anticipate that others will withdraw, undermining coordination and breaking protest momentum. I test this logic by examining whether citizens expect others to demobilize in response to announced concessions, and whether and how perceived government credibility influences this calculation.

5 Data & Empirical Strategy

I deploy a mixed methods approach to address these questions. I first use process tracing to examine instances of reform across both Jordan and Egypt. By demonstrating the presence of this strategy in both a high-repression regime and a lower-repression, liberalized authoritarian regime, this analysis illustrates the broader applicability of the concept across different authoritarian contexts. I then combine this process tracing exercise with analysis of an original survey experiment fielded in both case study countries, designed to explore how citizens understand and interact with temporary concessions. My survey uses an experimental design to test whether citizens expect concessions to demobilize protests and whether they expect those concessions to be enduring, as well as the role perceived government credibility plays in these considerations. In particular, I aim to test my hypothesis that concessions can be effective at stopping protests, even when citizens do not trust that they will be implemented in the long-term.

5.1 Case Selection

The cases of Jordan and Egypt are particularly appropriate for testing this concept due to the varying levels of repression between the two regimes. Repression is typically thought to facilitate unpopular economic reform by neutralizing opposition, both preemptively and responsively. Jordan is a liberalized monarchy with constrained coercive capacity, shaped by its reliance on foreign aid and sensitivity to international scrutiny. The regime maintains stability not through pervasive repression, but through selective coercion and strategic responsiveness (Moss 2014). Whereas the Jordanian monarchy's heavy linkages with the West make it difficult to use heavy-handed repression, Egypt is somewhat less encumbered (Levitsky and Way 2010). Egypt's highly repressive environment has allowed it to pursue reforms with limited organized resistance, as it routinely deploys widespread and targeted mobilization against opposition actors (Sika 2024). This most-different systems design allows me to assess whether temporary concessions function similarly across authoritarian regimes that vary in how freely they repress dissent.

Temporary concessions are especially salient in liberalized authoritarian regimes, where governments are highly attuned to the risks of instability but face significant constraints on the use of repression. In such contexts, like Jordan, authorities are more likely to rely on temporary concessions to manage dissent. Jordan's sensitivity to international scrutiny and reliance on foreign aid make overt repression politically costly, pushing the regime to adopt less coercive strategies. By contrast, Egypt more regularly turns to repression, despite periodic pressure from foreign donors to uphold human rights standards. While these demands exist, they are weakly enforced, allowing the regime greater leeway to suppress unrest.

Within each country, I select a recent episode of subsidy reform that triggered mass protest, followed by a government concession that was later reversed: Egypt in 2017 and Jordan in 2022. These cases are not intended to represent the full universe of subsidy reforms, but rather were selected as positive cases where the use of temporary concessions is clearly observable (Gerring 2007). Each episode meets the conceptual definition: the government rolled back a reform in response to protest, only to quietly reintroduce it within the following year. Focusing on these episodes allows me to trace the strategic use of temporary concessions and examine how they operate in different coercive and institutional contexts.

5.2 Process Tracing Indicators & Measurement

Process tracing is well-suited to contexts where internal regime dynamics are opaque, and where large-N data is unavailable or unable to capture the sequencing, framing, and intent behind policy reversals. Detailed case study analysis allows for the identification of causal processes, the type of evidence necessary to demonstrate how temporary concessions function in practice. In order to conduct this analysis, I collected primary source budget and financial data from Jordan and Egypt's Ministries of Finance, as well as relevant supply and energy ministries. I also conducted over 90 interviews with Egyptian and Jordanian politicians, journalists, civil society actors, and experts. Details on interview recruitment and fieldwork procedures are provided in Appendix F. Finally, I bolster these

narratives with contemporaneous Arabic and English media coverage of commodity price fluctuations, citizen protests, and government responses.

To evaluate the presence and dynamics of temporary concessions, I use a set of indicators that capture both the durability of the policy response and the timing of any reversal. First, I document whether a government policy change introduced in response to protest is subsequently reversed, and if so, under what conditions and within what time frame. Specifically, I track the nature of the concession, such as changes in fuel prices, electricity tariffs, or subsidy eligibility criteria, and assess whether the government later reverts to the pre-concession status quo or proceeds with a modified version of the original reform.

The central measure of interest is the durability of the concession. I operationalize a concession as temporary if it is reversed, either fully or substantially, within one year of its implementation. The one-year benchmark was selected in order to differentiate between permanent concessions, which are incorporated into government budgets, and temporary concessions, which are not. Subsidy policy is typically linked to annual budget cycles. Budgets are proposed, negotiated, and enacted on a yearly basis, meaning that most changes to spending on subsidies are planned, reviewed, or reversed within that cycle. A reversal within a year thus often reflects the government's strategic decision to treat the concession as temporary, declining to incorporate the change into future budgets. If the concession is meant to be permanent, the government will implement it into future budgets, and it will endure for a period surpassing a year. A one-year window allows sufficient time for both the immediate effects of protest demobilization and the reimplementation of reform to unfold, capturing the arc of a typical protest-repression-response episode.

5.3 Experimental Design

The theory developed above suggests that temporary concessions work by disrupting protest momentum, and that even when citizens suspect that such concessions might be reversed, the initial act of reversal may be sufficient to fragment collective action and dampen mobilization. This raises an important question: how do citizens interpret

these gestures of responsiveness, and under what conditions do they expect them to demobilize protest? Understanding citizen perceptions is crucial, because the effectiveness of temporary concessions depends on whether citizens believe these moves will halt unrest.

While the case studies illustrate how regimes deploy temporary concessions in practice, they cannot reveal how citizens understand these gestures or why they may succeed despite widespread skepticism. Observational evidence is limited in its ability to disentangle regime strategy from citizen perception. For this reason, I fielded an original survey experiment in Egypt and Jordan designed to directly test how citizens evaluate government concessions. The experimental design allows me to isolate the mechanism at the heart of the theory: whether concessions are effective at stopping protests, even when citizens doubt their credibility or durability. By randomly varying cues about regime credibility, the experiment provides leverage to identify causal effects that cannot be observed through case study analysis alone.

If the theory is correct, two expectations should follow. First, citizens should expect concessions to demobilize protest, even if they do not expect the changes to be enduring. Second, perceptions of government credibility should shape how citizens view the longevity of concessions and their power to demobilize. Together, these tests assess whether temporary concessions can work as theorized: as a strategy that stops unrest in the short term without requiring enduring commitments. I examine public perceptions of this strategy with a survey experiment delivered face-to-face in Jordan and Egypt with nationally representative samples of 1,200 citizens in each country, for a total of 2,400 observations. Appendix C provides descriptive summary statistics for all variables. Further details on the survey sampling procedure, including sampling frame, eligibility criteria, and allocation, are provided in Appendix E.

The survey experiment was designed to evaluate how citizens interpret and respond to government concessions following unpopular economic reforms. Respondents were presented with a short vignette describing a hypothetical scenario in which the government announced a subsidy cut on butane gas cylinders, prompting protests, and then reversed the decision (the full text of the vignettes is available in Appendix D). This scenario

mirrors real-world subsidy reform episodes in Egypt and Jordan and allows for controlled testing of the mechanisms proposed in the theory.

After reading the vignette, respondents were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: a control group receiving no additional information, a high-credibility treatment in which civil society organizations (CSOs) affirmed the government's sincerity, or a low-credibility treatment in which the same organizations expressed doubt about the government's intentions. Randomization produced treatment groups that were generally balanced across baseline covariates (see Appendix A for pooled and country-specific balance tables). All respondents were then asked how likely they thought protesters would be to stop mobilizing and how likely the government would be to reintroduce the reform within a year. These measures capture perceptions of both the demobilizing power and the expected durability of concessions, providing a direct test of the argument that temporary concessions can defuse unrest even when citizens doubt their credibility.

I use CSOs as the source of credibility cues because in both Egypt and Jordan, citizens often rely on independent actors, such as journalists, opposition figures, or advocacy groups, to help interpret regime behavior given the opaque political environment. The treatment is designed to simulate realistic information with which citizens may update their beliefs about government credibility, and determine the effect of this type of credibility on citizens' views and expectations. I chose butane as an illustrative example of a subsidy because it remains subsidized in both Egypt and Jordan and is heavily relied upon by the poor. Deploying this example is designed to heighten the salience of the treatment and make clear the function of subsidies to citizens who may not have high levels of awareness about them.

The experiment serves two purposes. First, by asking all respondents, regardless of treatment, to assess the likely durability and demobilizing impact of a government concession, I can observe baseline perceptions of how credible or effective such a concession appears. This allows me to gauge whether citizens inherently trust that a responsive policy will hold or expect it to be reversed. Second, by varying the surrounding trust environment through CSO cues, I test whether perceived government credibility shapes

how citizens interpret concessions. Given that temporary concessions tend to occur in low-trust authoritarian settings, this design captures both how citizens evaluate concessions on their own terms and how their expectations shift when credibility is made more or less salient.

Together, this allows me to assess whether temporary concessions are likely to demobilize protest even when citizens suspect they are insincere or short-lived. The first dependent variable, *expected demobilization*, is measured by the question: "How likely would protesters be to stop protesting in response to the government's reversal of its decision?" The second dependent variable, *perceived durability of concessions*, captures respondents' beliefs about whether the concession will endure. It is measured by the question: "If the government reverses its decision to raise prices in response to protests, how likely is it to raise them again within a year?"

5.4 Assessing Intent

While the term "temporary concession" may seem to imply strategic intent on the part of the government, it is difficult, if not impossible, to empirically assess the intention behind these policies. In authoritarian settings, internal deliberations are opaque and public justifications for policy reversals are rarely candid. Instead, I focus on the observable outcome, whether the concession was reversed within one year, as a proxy for strategic temporariness. In some cases, statements or policy design features may suggest a planned reversion, but in others, the government's intent may only become clear in hindsight. Accordingly, I classify a concession as temporary based on its demobilizing function and its lack of durability.

Having laid out the research design, I now turn to the findings from both methods. I begin with case study evidence from Egypt and Jordan, which illustrates how governments use temporary concessions in practice, before turning to experimental evidence that tests how citizens interpret these concessions.

6 Egyptian 2017 Supply Intifada

I first examine Egypt's 2017 "Supply Intifada," an episode of protest that emerged in response to changes in bread subsidy distribution. This case highlights how even a highly repressive regime resorted to temporary concessions when faced with fast-spreading, grassroots mobilization. I then turn to Jordan's 2022 fuel price protests, where the monarchy deployed similar tactics in a more liberalized authoritarian setting. Together, these cases illustrate the cross-contextual use of temporary concessions and provide the foundation for the subsequent experimental analysis.

6.1 Background: Austerity and IMF Pressures

The 2017 protests over bread rations in Egypt offer a rare but revealing example of how even highly repressive regimes can resort to temporary concessions to defuse unrest. Unlike Jordan, where protests occur with some regularity, Egypt's tightly controlled political environment makes public mobilization far less common. Under President Sisi, the government frequently deploys both widespread and targeted repression, arresting activists and criminalizing dissent before it materializes, in an effort to preemptively demobilize opposition (Sika 2024). When poorly communicated changes to the distribution of subsidized bread triggered protests, the government backtracked in order to restore political stability. Despite initially responding to protests with a mix of coercion and concessions, the government subsequently reversed the reform and expanded access to bread subsidies in the immediate aftermath. However, this reversal was short-lived. Within a year, many of the added beneficiaries were removed from the system, and the number of subsidy recipients returned to pre-crisis levels.

These events unfolded amid mounting fiscal and economic pressure on the Egyptian government. By 2016, Egypt faced a severe foreign currency shortage, driven by declining tourism, reduced foreign investment, and a growing trade deficit. To secure a $12 billion International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout, the government agreed to a package of reforms, including a currency float, the introduction of a value-added tax, and energy

subsidy cuts. On November 3, 2016, the government announced an increase in fuel prices and devalued the currency by 48% as a precondition for entering into the agreement with the IMF (IMF 2016). A week later, the IMF Executive Board approved a three-year Extended Fund Facility agreement, lasting through November 2019. The program granted the Egyptian government a $12 billion loan to stabilize the economy in exchange for implementing structural reforms.

The currency float had a painful effect on poor and middle class Egyptians, who were forced to contend with declining purchasing power and rising prices on basic goods. As a condition of the loan from the IMF, the Egyptian government had also cut energy subsidies, which led to increased transportation and production costs. Higher energy costs also fed into increasing food costs; in 2017, food inflation rose by 42% (Egypt Independent 2017). At the time, Egypt's food subsidy system, overseen by the Ministry of Supply, provided ration cards to around 70 million Egyptians, allowing them to purchase essential goods like cooking oil, rice, and sugar at subsidized prices. Each individual received a small amount, worth EGP 21 (about 1 USD) per month to spend at state-licensed grocery stores.

6.2 Bread Subsidy Reform and the Gold Card System

An uneven roll out of the new system and poor communication caused Egyptians to fear losing vital benefits and amplified existing tensions. In 2014, the government introduced a smart card to replace the older paper ration cards to improve efficiency and reduce fraud in the food subsidy system. However, full implementation was delayed, and many continued to rely on the old paper ration cards. As a workaround, to serve those who had not yet received smart ration cards, the government introduced the "gold card" system. Under this system, bakeries were given a daily quota of subsidized loaves to distribute to individuals with paper ration cards, ensuring they could still access their five loaves per person per day. When customers with paper ration cards arrived at bakeries to buy subsidized bread, bakers would swipe the gold card to record the purchase and deduct from the bakery's daily quota of subsidized loaves. However, the system was prone

to misuse and fraud, as some bakeries would inflate their reported sales or sell subsidized flour on the black market.

In March 2017, the government announced that it was reducing the daily gold card quota in order to curb such abuses. While the reform was designed to help the government determine how much waste was in the system and to what degree they could cut the benefits, the measure was poorly communicated by the government. Moreover, because the roll out of electronic cards had not been completed, and many were still dependent on the paper cards and gold card system. In one of Egypt's poorest governorates, Asyut, only around 27% of residents had received smart cards by 2017, despite much of the population being eligible for them (Ketchley and El-Rayyes 2017). One member of Parliament, Ali El-Kayyal, representing the Samalut district in Minya, warned the government that the decision would lead to the discontent of millions of the poor and potentially disrupt security. He urged the government to reverse the decision, stressing that subsidized bread is a fundamental right of the poor and that no one has the right to take it away from them (Abdel Hamid 2017a). The government did not heed his warning.

Instead, the cut to bread subsidies was announced without meaningful advance warning, contributing to significant unrest. On March 6, the Minister of Supply, Ali Moselhy, announced that bakeries' allocations for gold cardholders would be cut to 500 loaves per day, down from 1,000 to 4,000, depending on the number of beneficiaries in the area (Yasser 2017). This reduction led state-registered bakeries to decrease the daily ration for paper cardholders from five to three loaves. The government did little to effectively communicate the reform leading up to its implementation, causing rumors to circulate and leading citizens to feel that their benefits were abruptly being revoked. The Ministry of Supply issued a statement accusing the media of spreading rumors that the per capita quota of subsidized bread had been reduced from five loaves per day to three loaves (Abdel Aziz 2017). While the government had not decreased the individual quota, bakery owners had done so in response to the reduction in allocations for gold cardholders. Many citizens did not hear the news about the cuts ahead of time, reporting that they "were surprised when the bakers refused to give us bread, with the excuse that the Supply

Ministry reduced their rations" (VOA 2017). The sudden cuts made citizens fear that further benefits would be rescinded.

6.3 The 2017 Protests Erupt

The protests that erupted in response to the bread subsidy changes were unusually widespread, driven not by organized opposition, but by ordinary citizens directly affected by the cuts, making the demonstrations particularly alarming to the government. As citizens arrived at bakeries and found that their paper subsidy cards were being refused, protests began to emerge in central Alexandria, Minya, Desouk, and the Imbaba suburb of Cairo (Middle East Eye 2017). These protests represent the first time since Sisi's coup in 2013 that protests had simultaneously appeared across multiple governorates.[1] Demonstrations also erupted outside supply offices in districts such as Asyut, Alexandria, and Giza, as citizens expressed their frustration over the sudden cutbacks. Protests were particularly prevalent in Egypt's poorest districts, which were most impacted by the cuts, and demonstrators used tactics designed to disrupt everyday life, blocking the flow of traffic and disrupting local government offices (Ketchley and El-Rayyes 2017).

Demonstrators clashed with police, blocked roads, and gathered in front of the Ministry of Supply office in Alexandria. Citizens complained that poor families had been left without electronic cards, given that it had become necessary to bribe officials to receive one (Middle East Eye 2017). Protesters chanted "We want bread" and "You take my sustenance, you're trying to kill me" (Ketchley and El-Rayyes 2017). Protests in Kafr Al-Sheikh, a small city north of Cairo, blocked roads and halted train traffic (Egypt Independent 2017). Protesters in Cairo and Desouk blocked railway stations (Middle East Eye 2017). In Giza, residents blocked the entrances to local supply offices, demanding the reinstatement of the full ration. Members of parliament sought to defuse the situation by distributing bread on the street to citizens (Abdel Aziz 2017). The event came to be known as the "Supply Intifada" online, as videos of demonstrations spread across social media.

[1] Interview with Timothy Kaldas, The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, March 2025

Protesters feared that cuts to the bread subsidies would portend further cuts to Egypt's subsidy system. "We are suffering from high prices. We have nothing left to live on but bread and now the government wants to deprive us of it," said an Alexandria resident (VOA 2017). While the government had been transitioning to the smart cards for three years at that point, the transition was slow, leaving many without electronic cards, dependent on the gold card system. According to one protester in Giza, "Most of the families in poor areas have paper cards. We have been trying for years to get the electronic card, but you have to bribe the employees to follow up" (Middle East Eye 2017). With the decreased amount of subsidized loaves, citizens began to find that bakeries were running out of the discounted bread by 10:00 am.

In Egypt's highly repressive political environment, citizens concerned about rising prices have few avenues for collective representation. Independent civil society organizations and opposition movements are heavily restricted, making it nearly impossible to organize around economic grievances. As a result, the 2017 bread protests were not led by civil society organizations, but rather ordinary low-income Egyptians in urban areas such as Alexandria, Kafr al-Sheikh, Minya, and Giza, governorates where reliance on subsidized bread was especially high. Local bakery owners and vendors also joined the unrest, as the sudden policy shift disrupted their operations and profits. With no formal leadership or organizational infrastructure, the protests emerged spontaneously and remained decentralized, fueled by mounting frustration over economic hardship and growing fears of food insecurity.

6.4 State Response: Coercion & Concessions

In keeping with its usual response to dissent, the government deployed security forces, yet repression was measured, and ultimately, the Supply Minister announced concessions in order to quiet the protests. The government called in special forces to disperse demonstrators. In other cities, police officers diverted protesters before dispersing them. In the greater Cairo neighborhood of Warraq, several protesters were arrested (Mada Masr 2017). Police officers and national security agents who were deployed to quell the protests

told protesters that their demands would be met if they stopped protesting (Middle East Eye 2017). In comparison with other domestic movements, the repression deployed on the protesters was less than what is typical. According to one analysis, of the 24 food protests that took place, only four were met with repression, particularly those that took place in the major urban centers of Alexandria and Giza (Ketchley and El-Rayyes 2017). This is likely because these protests in urban centers were viewed as the most threatening to internal stability. In some smaller protests, police officers dispersed protesters or sought to persuade them to stop blocking traffic or railroads.

While the ministry insisted that its decision was final, they responded with some localized measures, issuing new smart ration cards to replace paper cards, increasing the number of subsidized loaves in some districts where protests had taken place. On March 7, the day after announcing the reduction in the quota of subsidized bread allocated to those without subsidy smart cards, the Supply Minister Ali El-Moselhy held a press conference where he rescinded the original plan. He maintained that the purpose of the reform was to root out corruption. In a statement on March 7, El-Moselhy said, "I am proud to have issued the decision to reduce the gold card balance for bakeries to 500 loaves per day, because the extent of corruption has exceeded the limit, and the balances ranged from 1,500 to 6,000 loaves per day." But El-Moselhy also promised to reverse course, saying "I apologize to every citizen, and within 48 hours this issue will be resolved. The maximum limits for the golden cards will be re-examined, and I will not allow a single pound of the citizen's right to be lost" (Abdel Hamid 2017b).

El-Moselhy reaffirmed citizen's right to bread, stating "Every citizen has the right to subsidies and will be an integral part of the system, but they were wronged by the paper card system in the past" (Abdel Hamid 2017b). To address the crisis, the ministry expedited the distribution of 100,000 new electronic subsidy cards across eight governorates, aiming to replace the outdated paper cards and ensure citizens' continued access to subsidized bread. The government also announced that the new quota for bakeries serving those without smart subsidy cards would range from 750 to 3,500 loaves per day (Mada Masr 2017). Moreover, Sisi pledged that the bread quota would not be cut again. Lead-

ing up to the protests, the government had cut 5.4 million beneficiaries from the bread subsidy system. Citizens demobilized on the promise that subsidized bread provision would return to previous levels.

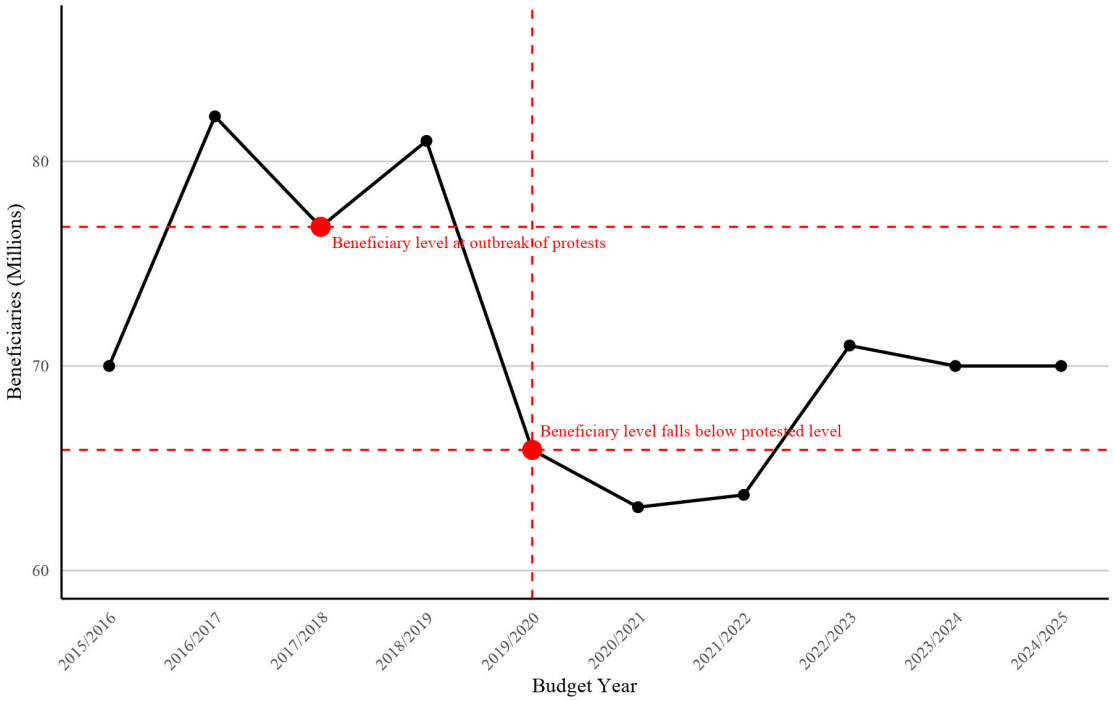
6.5 A Temporary Retreat

In the year following the protests, the Egyptian government expanded the bread subsidy program by adding 4.2 million new beneficiaries, an apparent concession to citizen demands. Yet this expansion proved short-lived. The reversal was framed as permanent, but the rollback of additional beneficiaries the following year confirms its temporary nature. The government reversed course only once it had reestablished control and the protests had faded. In the subsequent budget, over 15 million people were removed from the system, and the total number of beneficiaries eventually stabilized at around 70 million, well below the post-protest peak (Figure 2). This rollback reveals the concession's temporary nature: while the government initially responded to unrest with policy expansion, it quietly reversed course once protests subsided.

Notably, the reversal did not trigger renewed protest. Several factors likely contributed to this: the rollback was gradual and dispersed, the government communicated little about the cuts, and the repressive environment in Egypt had continued to intensify in the ensuing years. Moreover, citizens did not know *a priori* that the concession would be rolled back, making it impossible for them to continue mobilization. Even if some suspected that the government's retreat was temporary, each individual faced uncertainty about whether others would continue protesting once the state appeared responsive. This creates a collective action problem: the perceived success of the protest disrupted coordination, and the cost of acting alone outweighed the uncertain benefit of sustaining mobilization. As a result, the regime was able to demobilize dissent without delivering a lasting or meaningful change to the subsidy system.

Because of the highly closed nature of the Egyptian regime, it is difficult to get a sense of the decisions taking place behind the scenes that shape a decision like this. As President Sisi consolidated power following his coup in 2013, power in Egypt became increasingly

Figure 2: Bread Subsidy Beneficiaries, Egypt



Source: Ministry of Finance, Egypt

concentrated among a small group of individuals. In particular, decision-making authority at this time came to be centralized among key security officials, such as Abbas Kamel, who served as Sisi's Chief of Staff from 2014-2017, before subsequently leading Egypt's General Intelligence Service (GIS). Sisi's son, Mahmoud el-Sisi, also served as a senior officer in the GIS at the time and took an active role in responding to and cracking down on protests (Mada Masr 2019). Officials from the IMF who worked on Egypt stated that their primary interlocutors were counterparts from the Ministry of Electricity and Renewable Energy and the Ministry of Finance. However, the intelligence services and Sisi's associates played a key, though somewhat covert, role in all negotiations.[2] Final decision-making authority, especially on sensitive political and economic issues, was concentrated in the hands of President Sisi and a small circle of elites. Officials in the Ministry of Finance, including the minister himself, lacked the autonomy to finalize loan agreements or override directives from the security establishment.[3]

[2]Interview with IMF official, name withheld by request, February 2025
[3]Interview with Amr Magdi, Human Rights Watch, February 2025

The 2017 Supply Intifada reveals how even highly repressive regimes like Egypt may resort to temporary concessions when faced with credible, fast-spreading protests that threaten to disrupt political order. While the Egyptian government is typically willing and able to rely on repression, this episode presented a unique combination of pressures: the unrest emerged rapidly across multiple governorates, touched bread subsidies, a topic typically considered as a "red line," and was driven by low-income citizens with few political affiliations, making the movement harder to preempt or discredit. At the same time, the government was in the midst of implementing IMF-backed reforms and could not afford a major destabilizing crisis. Under these conditions, the regime temporarily reversed the ration card reforms, expanded access to subsidies, and issued public reassurances, all of which helped defuse the protests. Once the unrest subsided, however, the concessions were quietly rolled back. This case illustrates how temporary concessions can function as a repressive strategy when the government has concerns about deploying repression: a way to buy time, defuse unrest, and maintain control while preserving the broader trajectory of reform.

7 Jordan 2022 Fuel Price Protests

7.1 Fuel Liberalization and Rising Prices

The 2022 fuel price protests in Jordan illustrate how the government responded to unrest with temporary concessions to contain mobilization and preserve its reform agenda. Rising international energy prices placed pressure on the Jordanian government to balance its budget while maintaining political stability. After elevated fuel prices led to strikes and opposition in Jordan's south, the government responded to protests among truck drivers by temporarily freezing prices. While the initial reduction in prices successfully tamped down protests over the long term, it did not prove enduring, and prices again increased in the subsequent months.

In mid-2022, international fuel prices started to rise as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Leading up to the war, fuel prices in Jordan were fully liberalized, and thus

fluctuated with the market. As fuel prices started to rise internationally around February 2022, the government began to worry that the rapidly increasing domestic prices could produce a politically volatile situation, especially during Ramadan, when families were spending more.[4] To prevent unrest, the government temporarily reintroduced fuel subsidies, which had previously been phased out under its IMF agreement. Reintroducing the subsidies allowed to government to avoid passing on a 20-30% increase to citizens (Ersan 2022). While helping to avoid protest, the move ran afoul of Jordan's Extended Fund Facility agreement, prompting renewed pressure from the IMF to return to liberalized prices.

As the costs associated with maintaining the subsidy began to rise, the IMF took notice, pointing out that it was not in line with the government's commitment to reduce untargeted subsidies. In the July 2022 Article IV review of Jordan's Extended Fund Facility agreement, the IMF remarked that "given limited fiscal space, blanket fuel subsidies should be phased out in favor of targeted support for the vulnerable." Moreover, the IMF pointed out that "the temporary reintroduction of untargeted fuel subsidies through freezing prices at the pump for all oil derivatives from February to end-April has cost 0.5 percent of GDP" (IMF 2022). The IMF encouraged the Jordanian government to return to its previous practice of liberalized fuel prices.

The government gradually began to phase out the fuel subsidies in May 2022, and prices increased steadily in the subsequent months as they reached market levels. After peaking in August, international prices started to come down. However, in November, the government announced a small increase in fuel prices for the next month. Prices for kerosene, the fuel commonly used by the poor to heat their homes, also increased (Ersan 2022). After months of price hikes, and moving into the cold winter months when energy consumption increases, Jordanians, and truck drivers in particular, had enough, and protests began in Jordan's south in December 2022. While the government lowered prices in the subsequent two months in response to the protest, by March 2023, prices had again risen beyond the levels that had precipitated the protests.

[4]Interview with Jawad Anani, former Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs, February 2024

7.2 Protest Mobilization and Escalation

Truck and public transportation drivers, those who are most sensitive to the price increases, were the first to respond to the price increases, launching protests in Jordan's southern provinces. The protests began as limited strikes among truck drivers, who launched partial work stoppages and sit-ins, primarily in Jordan's southern provinces. The strikes disrupted traffic and supply chains. The protests were originally focused on demanding that the government reduce diesel prices, as drivers argued that high diesel prices, when coupled with the limited transportation fees that drivers were allowed to charge, cut into drivers' profits. Within a few days, the protests had expanded to include additional sectors, and a general demand that the government lower fuel prices, not just diesel prices. Shops in the provinces of Ma'an, Tafila and Karak closed in solidarity with the drivers.

While triggered by immediate economic pressures, the protests reflected deeper frustrations with drivers' economic marginalization and perceived government indifference. The government promised to look into the drivers' demands, but pointed out that they had already spent a significant portion of their budget capping fuel prices. Most alarming to the government however, was the presence of protests in the south, in communities that had traditionally served as the "bedrock support" for the Hashemite state, but have become increasingly troublesome in recent years (Ryan 1998).

The trucking sector in Jordan has been plagued by mismatches in supply and demand in recent years as Jordan shifts from trucking to trains for the transportation of goods from the Aqaba port to the capital. As demand for trucking has decreased, the government has limited the number of trips that each trucking company can take, in order to ensure that the maximum number of companies is benefitting from the remaining demand. Nevertheless, this shift has frustrated many in the industry, who have seen dwindling profits over the years. Leading up to the protests, many reported that the high cost of fuel limited their profits. But they also complained about other inefficiencies in the sector, including the limited number of trips they were allowed to take and the limited fees they could charge for their services. All of these grievances factored into

the protests, and participants reported that they did not feel that these complaints were adequately addressed by the government.

7.3 Government Response: Coercion, Dialogue, & Concessions

As protests began to spread beyond southern communities, the government responded by sending in reinforcements and confronting protesters, before ultimately conceding and implementing price freezes. In the northeast city of Zarqa, police clashed with youth and fired teargas to quell protesters. Demonstrations occurred in Amman and just outside the capitol, where youths burned tires on the road from Amman to the Dead Sea. Clashes were also reported in the northern city of Irbid between young protesters and the police, where demonstrators threw rocks at the police before being dispersed with tear gas. Anti-riot police were deployed throughout the country, and 44 individuals involved with the protests were arrested (Davis 2022). As videos of the protests began to spread on social media, the government announced a ban on the social media application TikTok, which remains in place today.

As more protesters took to the streets, arguing that their demands had not been met, the movement quickly turned violent. Police clashed with protesters in the southern city of Ma'an, an area historically associated with opposition to the government. In one such clash, the deputy chief of police was killed after being shot in the head by a protester. In the days that followed, the police raided the suspected killer's hideout. Although the suspect was killed in a shootout, three policemen were also killed (BBC 2022). At this point, demonstrators began to fear that the protests would spin out of control, undermining their message. Some truck drivers who took part expressed concern that further protests could jeopardize Jordan's fragile stability.[5] They hoped that stopping the protests would be for the greater good of the country.[6] The language used by protesters referenced concerns about regional instability, not wanting their country to go in the direction of neighbors such as Syria and Iraq, and in fact mirrored some language used by the government used to dissuade protesters from engaging in potentially destabilizing

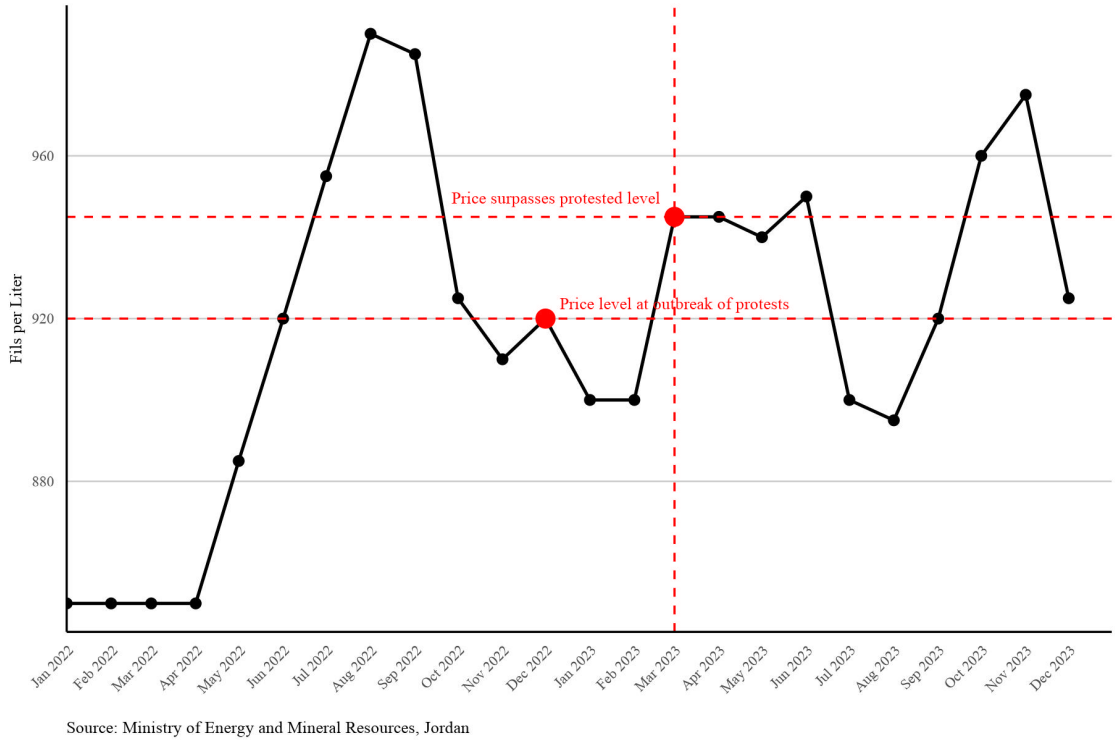
[5]Interview with Saddam Al Haija, truck driver, March 2025
[6]Interview with Naef Al Saudi, truck driver, March 2025

protests.

7.4 Temporary Relief and Strategic Reversal

As unrest rapidly spiraled, representatives of the striking truck drivers signed an agreement with lawmakers to end their 17-day strike. In exchange for returning to work, the government pledged that they would respond to the truck drivers' demands: lower fuel prices and the end of a special tax on fuel derivatives (Omari 2022). However, the government failed to deliver on the latter promise: the tax on fuel derivatives remains in place today (Roya News 2024). Moreover, while fuel prices initially dipped following the protests, they began to rise again just two months later. However, protesters had no way of foreseeing this reversal, and thus agreed with the government to demobilize.

Figure 3: 90 Octane Fuel Prices, Jordan



Source: Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources, Jordan

Fuel prices declined briefly following the agreement, but rose again by March 2023, exceeding the levels that triggered the protests (Figure 3). Protesters noted that the reforms they were promised, including relaxed trip limits and reduced fees, were quietly

rolled back once the movement subsided. This pattern of retreat and reversal, concessions granted under pressure, then rescinded once protests faded, mirrors the strategic use of temporary concessions seen in previous episodes. One advocate for the truckers explained that the government raised the maximum load that truckers were allowed to carry and eased some restrictions around the stamp requirements for Interior Ministry fees. However, he claimed that these concessions were reversed after the protests; in his words, "they trapped us."[7]

By the time the reversals were implemented, it became difficult for drivers to remobilize. Even if some suspected that the government might backtrack, the temporary appearance of responsiveness fragmented the movement: once the state seemed to yield, individual drivers faced uncertainty about whether others would continue protesting. This coordination problem, combined with fatigue and economic vulnerability, made renewed mobilization costly and unlikely.

The 2022 fuel protests highlight the utility of temporary concessions to the government in a liberalized authoritarian regime like Jordan. While the state had the capacity to repress, it faced several constraints: the protests were rooted in economically vulnerable communities, occurred in politically sensitive regions, and coincided with winter and post-pandemic economic strain. At the same time, abandoning reform altogether would have jeopardized Jordan's IMF relationship and fiscal credibility. Temporary concessions allowed the regime to buy time, demobilize dissent, and preserve its broader commitment to subsidy reform.

8 Survey Evidence: How Citizens Perceive Concessions

While case studies show how regimes deploy temporary concessions, they cannot capture how citizens interpret these tactics or whether they expect them to demobilize protest. How do individuals interpret these moments of apparent responsiveness, and what do they expect them to achieve? I deployed a novel survey experiment in Egypt and Jordan in order to better understand how citizens view these strategic moves from

[7]Interview with Saddam Al Haija, truck driver, March 2025

the government, and how concessions can demobilize protests.

To assess these questions, I focus on citizen perceptions, given that actually engaging in a protest is relatively uncommon behavior and, in authoritarian contexts, not often openly discussed. In order to mitigate social desirability bias, respondents were asked to speculate about the protest behavior of others, rather than their own behavior. This approach of measuring citizen beliefs as a substitute for behavior aligns with established practices in experimental and survey research that use attitudinal proxies for political behavior, particularly in contexts where actual protest activity cannot be directly observed or citizens may be hesitant to speak about it directly (Corstange 2016; Bush and Prather 2022).

The survey experiment manipulates government credibility by randomly exposing respondents to either high or low credibility messages about the government from CSOs. I define credibility as citizens' general beliefs about whether the government can be trusted to follow through on policy commitments. Perceived durability of concessions captures expectations about whether a specific concession will hold or be reversed within a year. The two are closely related, as credibility shapes expectations of durability. By experimentally varying credibility cues, I assess whether these general beliefs about government trustworthiness affect how citizens interpret the durability and demobilizing power of concessions.

In the first component of the survey experiment, all respondents were treated with the following vignette:

Imagine that the government has announced that it will cut butane subsidies next month, resulting in a significant increase in prices... Now imagine that protests emerged in response to this announced reform and the government decided to rescind its decision and revert butane gas cylinder prices to their previous level.

Respondents where then treated with one of two credibility messages, or given no further messaging in the control condition:

- Control: (no further messaging)

- T1 - High Credibility: *Civil society organizations praised the government for its decision and said they expect the government to continue to keep butane prices low.*
- T2 - Low Credibility: *Civil society organizations praised the government for its decision but said they do not trust the government would continue to keep butane prices low.*

Respondents were then asked the following two questions:

1. *How likely would protesters be to stop protesting in response to the government's reversal of its decision?*

2. *If the government reverses its decision to raise prices in response to protests, how likely is it to raise them again within a year?*

The first question corresponds to the dependent variable *expected demobilization*, which captures whether respondents believe that citizens will stop protesting if the government rescinds the reform. While this does not directly measure whether protests will stop in a real-life scenario, it serves as a proxy for how persuasive and credible citizens perceive concessions to be. If citizens believe a concession will succeed in ending protest, it suggests that they can indeed serve to dampen protest momentum in the real world. This finding would contrast with Acemoglu and Robinson's expectations that concessions cannot demobilize protests without meaningful democratic reform (Acemoglu and J. A. Robinson 2000).

The second outcome variable in my analysis, *perceived durability of concessions*, captures respondents' beliefs about whether concession is likely to be reversed. This measure is an assessment of whether respondents expect the concession to be temporary and allows me to explore whether citizens view concessions as credible or not. These judgments may also reflect broader political beliefs, such as generalized distrust of government. In authoritarian contexts where access to reliable policy information is often limited, these types of beliefs or priors can help citizens interpret regime actions. Whether citizens' responses reflect larger beliefs about the government or a more narrow view on this policy area, these perceptions shape how concessions are understood and whether they demobilize protest.

Taken together, these measures enable the evaluation of two key puzzles in my theory: 1) whether citizens expect concessions to be enduring, and 2) whether temporary concessions may succeed in demobilizing protest even when citizens expect them to be short-lived. In line with my theory, I expect that citizens will expect concessions to be temporary, and that this expectation will be stronger among those in the low credibility treatment group. Those in the high credibility treatment groups should be more likely to expect concessions to be enduring. I also expect that citizens will generally expect protests to stop in response to concessions, and that this expectation will be stronger among those in the high credibility treatment group, who will be primed to believe that the government's concession is credible. Those in the low credibility treatment group should be less likely to expect protests to stop in response to concessions.

8.1 Model Specifications

The analysis focuses on two dependent variables: (1) perceived durability of concessions and (2) expected demobilization. I estimate both ordered logistic regression models, appropriate for the ordinal outcomes, and OLS models, which treat responses as approximately continuous and facilitate interpretation of average treatment effects. The OLS models serve as a robustness check. The results are also substantively unchanged when estimated separately by country (see Appendix B).

All models include controls for age, gender, education, and income, as well as country fixed effects. Standard errors are heteroskedasticity-consistent (HC1). Missing values were imputed following standard experimental practice; details on the imputation strategy and covariate treatment are provided in Appendix G. The ordered logit model is specified as:

$$\text{logit}\left(P(Y_i \leq j)\right) = \tau_j - \beta_1 T_{1i} - \beta_2 T_{2i} - \mathbf{X}_i\boldsymbol{\gamma} - \delta\,\text{Country}_i + \varepsilon_i \tag{1}$$

Where:

- Y_i: ordinal outcome of interest for respondent i (expected demobilization or perceived durability)

- j: ordinal response category (from 1 to 5), with the model estimating the probability that Y_i is in category j or below
- T_{1i}, T_{2i}: treatment indicators for high and low credibility conditions (control group is the omitted reference)
- $\mathbf{X}_i$: vector of pre-treatment control variables: age, gender, education, and income
- Country_i: fixed effect for country
- ε_i: error term
- τ_j: threshold parameter estimated for each response category j

8.2 Baseline Results: Concessions Demobilize Protest

Table 2: Effect of Government Credibility on Durability and Demobilization

	Durability (Ordered Logit)	Durability (OLS)	Demobilization (Ordered Logit)	Demobilization (OLS)
T1 High Credibility	-0.079	-0.049	0.079	0.057
	(0.090)	(0.054)	(0.091)	(0.054)
T2 Low Credibility	-0.316***	-0.183***	-0.217**	-0.118**
	(0.100)	(0.059)	(0.097)	(0.058)
Num.Obs.	2,404	2,404	2,404	2,404
Control mean (DV)	3.12	3.12	3.19	3.19

Notes: Entries are coefficients with heteroskedasticity-consistent (HC1) robust standard errors in parentheses. Dependent variables are (1) **Durability**, a 5-point ordinal measure of how likely respondents believe the government will reintroduce the reform within a year, and (2) **Demobilization**, a 5-point ordinal measure of how likely respondents believe protesters would stop protesting following a concession. Higher values indicate greater likelihood. All models include country fixed effects, and control for age, gender, education, and income. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. Country-specific estimates are reported in Appendix Table A.1.

I first establish the baseline perceptions in the control group, which provide evidence for my central argument. Examining whether citizens believe a government concession is likely to be reversed within a year captures the perceived durability of concessions. Respondents in the control group generally expected that concessions would be temporary: the average belief that the government would reintroduce the reform was 3.12 out of 5, with the most common response being that it is "somewhat likely" (3) that the government will raise prices again within a year (Table 2). While this expectation could reflect citizens' awareness of patterns of government backtracking, it might also stem from other

factors, such as perceptions of IMF influence, international pressure, or general distrust in government policy. Future work should analyze the exact reasons why citizens in this context tend to expect that the government will backtrack on its policy commitments. Nonetheless, the finding underscores that many citizens view concessions as potentially short-lived.

After establishing that citizens do not generally expect concessions to be enduring, I test how this belief impacts protest behavior. The second outcome measures whether government credibility affects expectations about whether protesters will stop protesting after a concession. Overall, citizens appear to believe that a concession will lead to demobilization. In the control group, the mean response was 3.19 on a 5-point scale, and the modal response was that protesters would be "somewhat likely" (3) to stop protesting in response to the government's reversal (Table 2). These results underscore a central finding of this paper: concessions are widely viewed as effective in demobilizing protest, despite citizens doubting their durability. This highlights the demobilizing power of temporary concessions, which can succeed in halting unrest without lasting policy change.

This combination of beliefs helps explain why temporary concessions can be an effective protest management tool. Even when citizens suspect that a government will reverse course, they still view concessions as sufficient to halt protest in the short term. This suggests that the perceived sincerity of concessions is not a prerequisite for effectiveness. Instead, concessions work by interrupting protest momentum: once initial demands appear to be met, mobilization becomes harder to sustain and pressure dissipates. In this sense, temporary concessions can serve a strategic function for regimes, buying time and allowing the state to reassert control without fundamentally altering the policy trajectory. This provides strong evidence for my central argument: temporary concessions are effective in demobilizing protest even when citizens expect them to be short-lived.

8.3 Perceived Durability of Concessions

Turning to the experimental results, I first analyze whether credibility cues affect perceptions of how durable concessions are likely to be. I find that only the low-credibility treatment had a significant effect, although in the opposite direction of the intuition, which would have predicted that cues suggesting low government credibility would increase skepticism about the durability of concessions. Instead, responses suggest that even when civil society actors express mistrust, citizens may become more likely to believe the government will uphold the concession. Meanwhile, the high-credibility treatment did not significantly influence expectations of durability, although the coefficient is negative, which is directionally consistent with the hypothesis (Table 2). The muted effects here suggest that durability perceptions may be less malleable, as citizens already tend to expect concessions to be short-lived.

One possible explanation is that respondents interpret civil society scrutiny as evidence that the government will be held accountable, and therefore less likely to renege. This interpretation depends on how citizens perceive civil society actors, a factor not directly measured in this survey. While CSOs are often seen as watchdogs from the outside, in some authoritarian contexts, they may be viewed with suspicion or seen as co-opted by the state. Civil society actors were selected for the credibility treatments because they are among the few visible, quasi-independent actors in authoritarian regimes who comment publicly on government policy. This points to the need for further research on how trust in civil society mediates the interpretation of credibility signals in low-trust environments. Regardless, the results suggest that cues that highlight CSO skepticism about the government's commitment to enduring reform meaningfully shift citizen expectations about durability.

8.4 Expected Demobilization

Finally, I examine how credibility cues shape expectations that concessions will demobilize protest. Similar to the perceived durability results, I find that the effect of the low-credibility condition is statistically significant. Respondents who were told that civil

society actors did not trust the government were significantly less likely to believe that protesters would stop protesting in response to a concession. As expected, this suggests that low perceived government credibility reduces the expected effectiveness of concessions in demobilizing protests. This result is in line with the intuition that when citizens trust the government less, they will be less likely to view concessions as sufficient to end a protest.

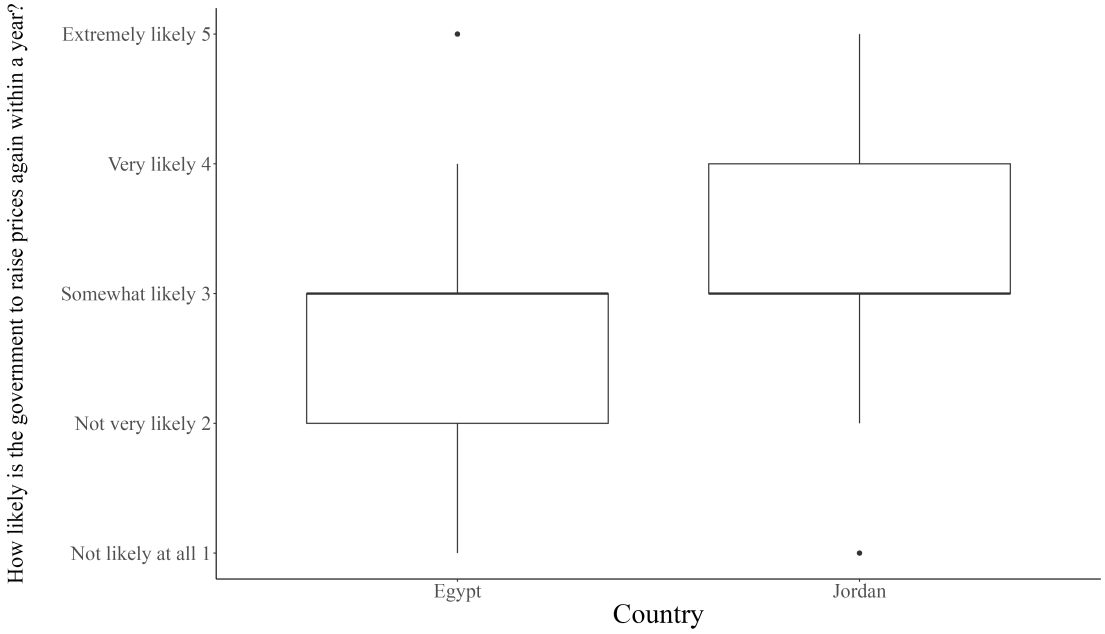
The high-credibility treatment, by contrast, did not significantly increase expectations of demobilization. However, the coefficient is positive, as hypothesized, suggesting that the effect is directionally consistent with the theoretical expectation. These results, as well as the lack of impact of the high-credibility treatment on the first dependent variable, indicate the difficulty of portraying the government as more trustworthy on this issue. While it appears that citizens are open to messaging that may confirm their priors that the government is not credible on this issue, they may find messaging that the government is highly credible less believable. This is particularly the case when it comes to subsidies, where decades of increasing prices on consumer commodities have largely been pinned on the government.

These findings reinforce that concessions are generally seen as demobilizing, but that their perceived effectiveness is weakened in low-credibility environments. Taken together, these results highlight an important asymmetry: citizens expect concessions to be temporary, yet they still believe they will demobilize protest in the short term. This pattern provides strong evidence for the argument that authoritarian regimes can "buy time" with temporary concessions, halting unrest without making enduring policy commitments.

8.5 Perceptions of Temporary Concessions in Jordan & Egypt

To assess how repressive context shapes perceptions, I examine control-group responses in Jordan and Egypt separately. On durability, Jordanians are more likely than Egyptians to view concessions as short-lived. While the median respondent in both countries judged it "somewhat likely" that prices would be raised again within a year,

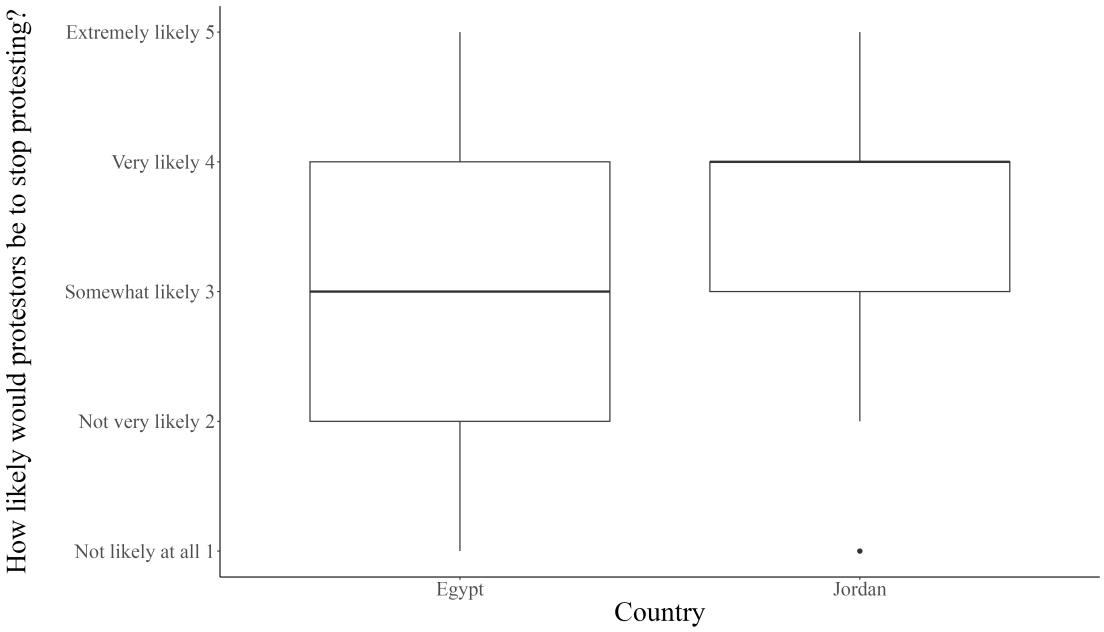
Figure 4: Perceived Durability of Concessions (Control Group)



Jordanian responses clustered more heavily around "very likely" and "extremely likely," whereas Egyptian responses were more dispersed, with most gravitating toward "somewhat likely" and a notable share selecting "not likely at all" (Figure 4). This pattern likely reflects that temporary concessions are more commonly deployed in Jordan. The Jordanian regime appears more reliant on this strategy, given its need to use indirect methods of protest management, whereas the Egyptian regime faces fewer constraints on the use of overt repression.

On demobilization, Jordanians were also somewhat more likely to see concessions as effective. The median respondent in Jordan said that it was "very likely" that protesters would stop following concessions, whereas the median respondent in Egypt said that it was "somewhat likely" (Figure 5). These results may reflect that concessions are deployed more frequently by the Jordanian regime, given that it cannot easily deploy heavy-handed repression. As a result, Jordanian respondents might be more accustomed to this choreography, in which citizens protest, the government concedes, and protests subside. Meanwhile, in Egypt, where the regime is less frequently obligated to deploy concessions to protests, because repression is more easily deployed, respondents seem a bit more uncertain about how protesters might respond to concessions.

Figure 5: Expected Demobilization from Concession (Control Group)



Interestingly, on average, Jordanian respondents both find it more likely that concessions are temporary as compared to their Egyptian counterparts, and at the same time, see it as more likely that concessions will demobilize protest. This result points to the striking paradox of temporary concessions: that they can serve to demobilize protest, even when they are not believed.

Conclusion

This paper introduces the concept of temporary concessions—short-term, reversible policy retreats—and illustrates how they generate collective action problems that effectively demobilize protest. Drawing on original case study evidence from Jordan and Egypt and a novel survey experiment, I show how authoritarian governments deploy concessions to defuse unrest without abandoning their long-term policy objectives. Contrary to prevailing theories that concessions must be accompanied by democratizing reforms or that they inevitably provoke further mobilization, I find that temporary concessions can bring protest to a meaningful end.

Across two case studies, I demonstrate that both high- and low-repression regimes use temporary concessions when repression is costly and genuine reversals are infeasible.

Governments temporarily suspend reforms, reintroducing them once the threat of protest has subsided. In Jordan, this strategy is used to balance fiscal adjustment with political stability; in Egypt, it appears even within a highly coercive regime facing grassroots opposition to the rollback of core welfare provisions.

The survey experiment further reinforces this logic and reveals how perceptions of credibility shape citizens' expectations. On average, respondents viewed concessions as likely to demobilize protest even when they expected the government to reverse course later. The low-credibility treatment significantly increases the perceived durability and decreases effectiveness of concessions in demobilizing protest, showing that skepticism toward the regime dampens, but does not eliminate, their capacity to halt unrest. Temporary concessions thus work not because citizens believe them, but because they disrupt coordination and weaken the collective resolve necessary to sustain mobilization.

These findings have important implications for policymakers, civil society actors, and international donors engaging with authoritarian regimes undergoing economic reform. While temporary concessions may quell unrest in the short term, they risk reinforcing cycles of instability and public distrust. Citizens who anticipate backtracking may disengage from meaningful political participation or reject reform altogether. For external actors such as the IMF and donor governments, the results underscore the need to promote transparency and sustained engagement rather than interpreting calm as a sign of reform success.

In advancing this concept, the paper contributes to broader debates on authoritarian responsiveness, welfare retrenchment, and protest politics. Existing scholarship has struggled to explain how autocracies maintain stability while dismantling welfare commitments once central to the authoritarian social contract. I show that regimes are not limited to repression, inaction, or genuine concessions, but instead possess an additional option: temporary concessions that halt protests without incurring the political or fiscal costs of sustained compromise. As authoritarian governments confront mounting fiscal pressures, understanding how such strategies enable them to implement unpopular reforms will be key to explaining their enduring resilience.

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Appendix

A Randomization Balance

Table A.1: Baseline Balance Across Treatment Arms (Pooled Sample)

	Means / Proportions by Arm			Balance Test
	Control	T1 High Cred.	T2 Low Cred.	p-value
Female (=1)	0.483	0.484	0.501	0.730
Age (years)	39.217	39.831	40.326	0.393
Education (0–7)	4.339	4.479	4.281	0.050
SES (1–4)	2.179	2.031	2.122	0.036
Gov. trust (1–4)	3.009	3.087	2.910	0.005
Perceived protest risk (1–5)	2.572	2.585	2.449	0.150
N	700	1,008	696	

Note: Some covariates show differences across arms at conventional significance levels; such imbalances are expected by chance under random assignment. All models include these covariates as controls, and results are robust to their inclusion. The difference in treatment group sizes is due to a randomization error in Jordan (see Appendix Table A.3).

Table A.2: Baseline Balance Across Treatment Arms (Egypt Sample)

	Means / Proportions by Arm			Balance Test
	Control	T1 High Cred.	T2 Low Cred.	p-value
Female (=1)	0.487	0.453	0.494	0.466
Age (years)	37.461	37.940	38.517	0.593
Education (0–7)	4.234	4.506	4.253	0.015
SES (1–4)	2.536	2.563	2.531	0.927
Gov. trust (1–4)	2.970	3.033	2.791	0.011
Perceived protest risk (1–5)	2.406	2.457	2.194	0.035
N	396	419	389	

Table A.3: Baseline Balance Across Treatment Arms (Jordan Sample)

	Means / Proportions by Arm			Balance Test
	Control	T1 High Cred.	T2 Low Cred.	p-value
Female (=1)	0.477	0.506	0.511	0.643
Age (years)	41.500	41.163	42.606	0.435
Education (0–7)	4.474	4.460	4.317	0.496
SES (1–4)	1.733	1.663	1.625	0.375
Gov. trust (1–4)	3.058	3.123	3.054	0.510
Perceived protest risk (1–5)	2.753	2.661	2.716	0.647
N	304	589	307	

Note: Treatment arms are not perfectly balanced in size in Jordan due to a technical error in the randomization protocol implemented by the survey firm. The error was corrected prior to fielding in Egypt. Covariates remain well balanced across arms in both countries, and all models include covariates as controls; results are robust to their inclusion.

B Robustness Check

Table B.1: Ordered Logit Results by Country

	Durability (Pooled, Ordered Logit)	Durability (Egypt, Ordered Logit)	Durability (Jordan, Ordered Logit)	Demobilization (Pooled, Ordered Logit)	Demobilization (Egypt, Ordered Logit)	Demobilization (Jordan, Ordered Logit)
T1 High Credibility	-0.054 (0.088)	0.057 (0.107)	-0.197 (0.124)	0.101 (0.082)	0.173 (0.145)	-0.016 (0.107)
T2 Low Credibility	-0.302*** (0.096)	-0.302** (0.151)	-0.342*** (0.102)	-0.218** (0.095)	-0.244** (0.111)	-0.264* (0.148)
N	2,163	1,032	1,131	2,176	1,030	1,146
Control mean (DV)	3.12	2.78	3.52	3.18	2.74	3.68

Note: Entries are ordered logit coefficients with cluster-robust (HC1) standard errors in parentheses, clustered by enumerator. Pooled models include country fixed effects; country-specific models exclude them. Dependent variables: **Durability** (likelihood the government will reintroduce the reform within a year; 1–5) and **Demobilization** (likelihood protesters would stop after a concession; 1–5). Covariates: age, gender, education, and income. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

The pooled and country-specific ordered logit models indicate that the low-credibility cue makes respondents significantly more likely to view concessions as durable across both countries, with a stronger effect in Jordan. Respondents exposed to the low-credibility prompt are less likely to believe that the government would raise prices again within a year. The same cue also significantly shifts perceptions of demobilization, leading respondents in both countries to view it as less likely that protesters would stop in response to a concession.

C Summary Statistics

Table C.1: Summary Statistics (Egypt Sample)

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max	N
DV: Demobilization (1–5)	2.77	1.21	1.00	5.00	1056
DV: Durability (1–5)	2.74	1.20	1.00	5.00	1054
Female (=1)	0.48	0.50	0.00	1.00	1204
Age (years)	37.97	14.20	18.00	80.00	1196
Education (0–7)	4.34	1.50	0.00	7.00	1191
Socioeconomic status (1–4)	2.54	1.24	1.00	4.00	1155
Government trust (1–4)	2.93	1.10	1.00	4.00	1120
Perceived protest risk (1–5)	2.36	1.39	1.00	5.00	968

Table C.2: Summary Statistics (Jordan Sample)

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max	N
DV: Demobilization (1–5)	3.65	1.05	1.00	5.00	1153
DV: Durability (1–5)	3.40	1.12	1.00	5.00	1137
Female (=1)	0.50	0.50	0.00	1.00	1200
Age (years)	41.62	15.83	18.00	85.00	1199
Education (0–7)	4.43	1.93	0.00	7.00	1197
Socioeconomic status (1–4)	1.67	0.96	1.00	4.00	1195
Government trust (1–4)	3.09	0.99	1.00	4.00	1161
Perceived protest risk (1–5)	2.70	1.43	1.00	5.00	1167

D Full Vignettes

Base concession scenario (shown to all arms)

Imagine that the government has announced that it will cut subsidies on butane gas cylinders next month, resulting in a significant increase in prices. Now imagine that protests emerged in response to this announced reform and the government decided to rescind its decision and revert butane gas cylinder prices to their previous level...

Control

No additional messaging

High Government Credibility (T1)

...Civil society organizations praised the government for its decision and said they expect the government to continue to keep butane prices low.

Low Government Credibility (T2)

...Civil society organizations praised the government for its decision but said they do not trust the government would continue to keep butane prices low.

E Survey Sampling

E.1 Sampling Frame and Eligibility

- **Frame:** The survey was implemented face-to-face by One-to-One Research and Polling, using a nationally representative sampling frame of adults residing in Egypt and Jordan. The frame was constructed to cover both urban and rural regions, and sampling quotas were based on census figures for age, gender, and governorate.
- **Eligibility:** Respondents were required to be at least 18 years old and citizens of the country in which they were surveyed. Interviews were conducted in Arabic.

E.2 Design and Allocation

- **Stratification:** Randomization was stratified by governorate, gender, and age group to ensure balance across key demographic characteristics. Quotas within each stratum were based on national census distributions.
- **Randomization:** Treatment assignment was carried out at the individual level, with respondents randomly allocated to one of three arms (Control, T1, T2) in equal proportions (1/3 each).
- **Sample Size:** The target sample size was 2,400, split evenly across Egypt and Jordan. The achieved sample size was 2,400, with 1,200 respondents in Egypt and 1,200 respondents in Jordan. The design was powered to detect minimum effect sizes of approximately 0.18 standard deviations at $\alpha = 0.05$ with 80% power.

F Qualitative Fieldwork

Fieldwork was conducted during several extended visits to Jordan between 2021 and 2025, alongside multiple visits to Egypt in summer 2024. While most interviews in Jordan were conducted in person, those concerning Egypt were primarily carried out over Zoom, as many interviewees were based abroad or preferred remote interviews for security reasons. Follow-up Zoom interviews relating to Egypt continued through late 2024 and into early 2025.

Interview subjects were recruited through purposive snowball sampling and were primarily political, bureaucratic, and policy elites. Accordingly, most interviews were conducted in English, though a minority took place in Arabic. Particular effort was made to speak with individuals possessing firsthand knowledge of the episodes analyzed in the process-tracing exercise.

Interviewees included former politicians and bureaucrats, members of civil society organizations, activists, trade union members, journalists, academics, diplomats, employees of international financial institutions, researchers, and humanitarians. To contextualize and triangulate the interviews, I also relied on academic and journalistic accounts of the events under study.

In total, I conducted 57 interviews on Jordan and 35 interviews on Egypt. Securing interviews in Egypt was considerably more challenging given the security environment, and I took every precaution to safeguard the security of my interlocutors. This research received IRB approval from Harvard's Committee on the Use of Human Subjects in Experimental Research (Protocol #IRB22-0459).

As a U.S.-based researcher affiliated with Harvard University, I was generally perceived as an outsider in both Jordan and Egypt. While this status often helped in securing interviews with elites accustomed to engaging with foreign researchers, it also introduced dynamics of power and privilege. I sought to mitigate these dynamics by clarifying the aims of my research, protecting confidentiality, and keeping in mind how my identity and institutional ties may have shaped the narratives shared with me.

G Missing Data

To address missing data, dependent variables were imputed using the pooled sample mean, which avoids mechanically creating treatment effects. Independent variables were imputed within treatment arms: numeric covariates (age, education, income) were replaced with the mean of their respective treatment group, and categorical covariates (gender, country) with the modal category within group. This preserves covariate balance across treatment arms and prevents "leakage" of information between conditions. After imputation, numeric covariates were standardised (z-scores) and entered into the regression models as both main effects and in interaction with the treatment dummies, following the procedures in Green and Gerber (2012). Gender and country were included as main effects only.