

Review Essay: Beyond Authoritarianism: Rethinking Egypt's 'Long Revolution'

by Adam Hanieh, SOAS University of London

The mass uprisings that spread so dramatically across the Arab world through 2011 and 2012 constituted the most significant wave of popular mobilisation the region has seen in five decades. The rapid diffusion of political slogans and forms of mobilisation across every country in the region – coupled with the initial euphoria surrounding the successful overthrow of entrenched autocratic regimes in Tunisia and Egypt – presented a profound challenge to long-established patterns of political and economic rule. Not since the anti-colonial struggles of the mid-20th century has the Middle East been marked by such a shared commonality of language and political expression. The implications of these uprisings remain an indelible part of the present political moment – their still-contested legacy will continue to shape the region well into the future.

For scholars concerned with the Middle East, the uprisings presented a more prosaic but no less profound challenge to dominant perspectives for interpreting the region. For many years, academic approaches have been largely framed by the Arab world's so-called authoritarian resilience (Albrecht & Schlumberger, 2004; Anderson, 2006; Schlumberger, 2007) – the persistence of autocratic regimes that appeared to resist the waves of democratisation spreading throughout much of the rest of the world from the late 1980s onwards. For many social scientists, explaining this durability of authoritarianism usually began with a schematic of two ideal-type state forms: authoritarian monarchies (the Gulf Arab states, Morocco, Jordan), and authoritarian republics (Egypt, Syria, Algeria, Yemen, Tunisia) (Angrist 2010). Thousands of pages have been devoted to explaining the underlying differences and similarities between these ideal-types, focusing on issues such as an alleged political culture based upon religious referents or the supposed obedience to authority of the 'Arab mind' (Patai 1973; Bill and Leiden, 1984; Huntington 1991); the skill of leaders in manipulating intra-elite divisions (Anderson 1991; Lucas 2004; Heydemann 2007); the presence of oil rents (Ross 2001); the weakness of civil society (Wiktorowicz 2000); the specific role of the military within different Arab states (Geddes 1999); and the clever exploitation of electoral processes and laws (Posusney 2002).

There are numerous problematic aspects to this theoretical fixation on authoritarianism and the related claim of Arab 'exceptionalism'. Much of the literature has been marked by Eurocentric approaches towards Arab society, and carried normative undertones that were sometimes explicated openly – Arab authoritarianism, for example, has been contrasted to the so-called democratic exceptions: Israel, Turkey, Iran, Lebanon, and Iraq (following the 2003 US invasion), states which were all said to possess varying degrees of democracy (Angrist 2010). The Weberian categorisation of ideal-types has also reinforced a methodologically nationalist bias, which confines social and political forms within the borders of separate nation-states and under-theorises the role of imperialism (Hanieh 2013). The assumed antimony between capitalist markets and authoritarian states has also been used to justify neoliberal development policies under the guise of 'democracy promotion' – neatly captured in George W. Bush's pithy summation of US Middle East policy as one based on "free elections and free markets" (Bush 2004). But perhaps most significantly within all of this – and symptomatic of a wider lacunae of social science – has been the relative absence of analyses that move beyond the dichotomy of state versus civil society as the theoretical framing of authoritarianism, to take seriously the political economy of class dynamics within the Arab world.

In this context, the Arab uprisings have spurred a new interest in critically tackling the political economy of development in the Middle East, with a range of recent monographs attempting to map the relationship between neoliberal development models, authoritarian state forms and the uprisings (Haddad et al 2011; Achcar 2013; Hanieh 2013); the significance and rich history of labour struggles in places such as Egypt and Tunisia (Alexander and Bassiouny 2014; Beinín 2015); and processes of agrarian reform, economic marginalisation and changing class relations (Bush and Ayeb 2012).

Within this emerging body of literature, Maha Abdelrahman has produced a book that will shape the ways in which the Egyptian uprising is understood for years to come. Over six chapters, Abdelrahman lays out an original account of the political economy of the Egyptian uprising, which views the authoritarian form of the Egyptian state as inseparable from its class and social differentiation. Throughout the book, her engaged scholarship and deep personal experience with various Egyptian activist struggles comes through in lucid and gripping prose.

Abdelrahman makes three key contributions in her book. The first is that the roots of the uprisings had complex political economy roots that had been years in the making. In contrast to superficial approaches that locate the causes of the uprising in elite contestation or the imminent prospect of Hosni Mubarak transferring power to his son, Gamal Mubarak, Abdelrahman emphasises the profound impact that neoliberal reform had on Egyptian class structure and state power. Neoliberal reform was strongly backed by international financial institutions, with the World Bank pointing to Egypt as the ‘World’s Best Reformer’ in 2008. These processes vastly accelerated through the early 2000s, and the familiar litany of policies such as privatisation, labour market deregulation, rural dispossession, and trade liberalisation acted to enrich a narrow base of the Egyptian elite. Simultaneously, the majority of the working classes were marginalised and excluded from the economic growth that did take place over the last decade.

Within this analysis, Abdelrahman sets out a distinctive theoretical approach to how we understand the nature of the Egyptian elite. Much of the existing literature views Egypt’s political economy as a struggle between three sets of rival actors – the Mubarak regime, the Egyptian private sector, and the military; in contrast, Abdelrahman points to a ‘state-capital’ nexus (p.26) that brings together these three spheres as a single dominant, albeit differentiated, class. It was this class that drove the neoliberal project and benefited from its implementation. She shows in some depth how this unity of class interests took institutional form within the National Democratic Party (NDP), in which private businessmen, state and military officials, were enmeshed and moved seamlessly between public and private roles. Of particular note here is Abdelrahman’s analysis of the Egyptian military. While clearly mapping the “octopus”-like nature of the military, whose “tentacles spread to every niche of the polity, economy and society” (p.20), Abdelrahman resists the temptation to ascribe an all-powerful “dominance of politics” to the military. Instead, she insists that the upper echelons of the military are part of how we must understand the nature of the Egyptian capitalist class itself; the analytical challenge is to map “the way in which [the military] has been involved in the reproduction of the regime and the establishment of a neoliberal order through its activities” (p.21).

The second related contribution of Abdelrahman’s book is her careful tracing of the political and social movements that arose around these changes to Egypt’s political

economy. Throughout the book, she reminds us regularly that political and social mobilisation has been a consistent feature of Egyptian life, and that the experiences of these movements over the decade prior to the 25 January uprising are essential to understanding why the uprising could happen when it did. In this emphasis, Abdelrahman highlights that contentious politics often relies upon a diverse series of political contingencies – among numerous struggles she describes the impact of protests against the 2003 Iraq War, the mobilisation of students in support of the Palestinian Intifada in the early 2000s, the 2006-2008 strikes of textile workers in the sprawling complex of factories in Mahalla, and the protests by judges in support of greater judicial autonomy. All of these movements had an additive effect of expanding the space for mobilisation and political contestation. Although the participants involved did not necessarily realise the ways in which their actions had a mutually reinforcing impact, the accumulated experience of these movements helped to widen the ability of people to take to the streets and challenge the legitimacy of the regime. Much of Abdelrahman's discussion of these precursors to 2011 is based upon her own experience and direct interviews with participant activists.

One of the most fascinating elements to this discussion of Egyptian contentious politics is Abdelrahman's detailed exploration of the political debates on the Egyptian Left regarding cooperation with the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). Throughout the Nasser and Sadat eras, regime attitude towards the MB oscillated between repression and permissive tolerance. At several junctures, the MB was viewed as a counter-weight to the left and as a way of heading off wider social discontent, a role that the Islamist movement was more than willing to embrace. During the January 1977 Bread Riots, for example, in which thousands filled the streets in protest against the removal of subsidies on basic commodities, the MB took the side of the Sadat government and condemned the protestors as part of a 'communist conspiracy' (p.97). At the same time, much of the Left viewed the MB as fascist, and through the 1980s and 1990s tacitly endorsed the repression directed against its members by the Mubarak regime. Within this fraught relationship, there was little space for tactical cooperation or joint work.

By the 2000s, however, this had begun to change. Some parts of the left – notably the Revolutionary Socialists – began to adopt an analysis that saw the MB as resting upon a complex and differentiated social base, parts of which could be won towards a progressive left politics (p.100). Strategically, this meant adopting a position of political independence from the Islamist movement, but at the same time being prepared to engage in joint work and campaigns around specific joint concerns (including state repression, regional issues such as the Palestinian struggle, and the expansion of democratic space for protest). This collaboration was highly controversial among much of the left and secular opposition, but received support among youth and student activists who found themselves working alongside MB activists in their daily campaign activities. Indeed, Abdelrahman's narrative helps to correct the overly leadership-focused bias of many accounts of Egyptian politics, pointing instead to the importance played by inter-generational differences and rank-and-file initiatives in pushing for patterns of joint mobilisation across traditional party lines (p.95). Significantly, this pressure from below was also felt inside the highly hierarchical MB, with its youth wing (*Shabab el-Ikhwan*) forcing the leadership to at least tacitly permit joint initiatives with non-Islamist parties.

Such a detailed exposition of these debates has not appeared in English before, and Abdelrahman has performed a great service in making them available to a wider audience. One feature of this debate, however, that receives less attention in her narrative

unfortunately, is an assessment of how the MB's particular class orientation should be understood in relation to any temporary political alliances. In a later chapter, Abdelrahman notes quite rightly that the MB leadership represents a particularly dense network of corporate ties that "constitute a significant segment of Egyptian capital [and] have a keen interest in reproducing existing patterns of capital accumulation developed under Mubarak" (p.129). This was certainly confirmed through the period of MB rule in the post-Mubarak period, with a raft of anti-labour legislation and an economic programme that differed little from that of the Mubarak era. It would have been interesting to hear how such an assessment plays out within the Egyptian debates on alliances. Abdelrahman's emphasis on explaining the political expediency of working alongside the MB in certain tactical conjunctures tends to obscure the more difficult question of how to also oppose the right-wing nature of these movements (and particularly their leaderships) over the longer period. Such a dilemma is posed very sharply today in Egypt following the overthrow of the MB in a military coup in July 2013. How to, in other words, be willing to stand in defence of basic democratic rights for MB opponents of the current military government, but simultaneously articulate a line of political independence?

Rethinking the Political and Economic

The third important contribution of Abdelrahman's work is her core argument that the political and economic spheres of Egyptian society cannot be thought of as separate or disconnected. She points to the problematic way in which Egyptian social and political movements tended to bifurcate around these two sides of the struggle: "Workers, farmers and other protesting citizens were portrayed by most of the rest of society, including the pro-democracy movement, as being engaged in narrowly focused struggles for economic demands such as salary increases and access to social provisions. On the other hand, pro-democracy activists were seen, and saw themselves, as striving for political liberties and rights" (p.117). This conceptual division has been deliberately accentuated by those who control the Egyptian state – in this regard, she points to the experiences under Mubarak, as well as the discourse of the Muslim Brotherhood through their time in government, which disparaged 'economic demands' as peripheral and even a threat to the success of the uprising itself.

In place of this division, Abdelrahman notes how even the most basic economic struggles inevitably confront the political nature of authoritarianism in Egypt. Struggles for improved work conditions and better social provision necessarily push the state and the boundaries of what is politically permissive. The repression directed against such movements helps to expose the nature of the Egyptian state, its modes of governance, and in whose interests it acts. Labour strikes through the 2000s, for example, moved rapidly from questions of wages and working conditions to tackling the ways in which the leadership of the official trade union movement was basically an extension of the Mubarak regime (p.120). The struggle of workers was thus shown to be directed against the "state-capital nexus and its institutions. The more workers became involved in the fight for their rights in an immediate sense, the more their cause became political." (p.120).

This is a critical observation that provides us with powerful key to moving beyond the sterility of the 'resilience of authoritarianism' debates noted above. At a theoretical level, scholars engaged in these debates have tended to implicitly accept the conceptual division of the political and economic spheres. Instead of seeing the ways in which the

nature of the state is an outgrowth of the forms of capital accumulation in Egypt, most particularly in its neoliberal phase, authoritarianism is seen as a consequence of contingent factors such as political culture, religion, resource endowment or leadership styles. Abdelrahman's approach affirms that authoritarianism is not antagonistic to neoliberal capitalism, but rather an indelible feature of how capitalism actually functions in Egypt (see Hanieh 2013 for further general discussion of this point).

Moreover, this approach has important political implications for future revolutionary struggles in Egypt. Abdelrahman notes that the reluctance and inability of the myriad of movements in Egypt to link the 'political' and 'economic' explains the fundamental weakness of the revolutionary process itself. The inability to overcome this division has meant that movements have been undermined and diverted into a narrow constitutionalism. This has widened the gap between workers, farmers, and the poor, on one side, and the pro-democracy movements on the other. The demands for 'bread' and 'social justice' that rang out loudly across all Egyptian cities in 2011 have been portrayed, at best, as secondary – and, at worst, as a diversion – from the struggle to change the political leadership of the Egyptian state.

Paths Forward

Despite the enormous repression facing the Egyptian people today – and the seeming collapse of the hopes embodied in the massive protests in 2011 – Abdelrahman's work reminds us that the Egyptian revolutionary process is far from over. The accumulated experiences of the millions that were drawn into action during the ousting of Mubarak cannot be so easily put back in the box. There has been no solution to the primary reasons underlying the uprisings; in fact, the intertwining of neoliberal economic policy and state repression has deepened through successive Egyptian governments, including, most recently, under the military-led rule of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi.

This book provides a powerful entry point for future comparative work on issues facing the contemporary Middle East. Most pertinently, the regional resonance of the uprisings through 2011 and 2012 indicate that the experience of neoliberalism was by no means unique to Egypt alone. Egypt may have been held up by IFIs as an exemplary role model for neighbouring countries, but market-led development models were hegemonic across the entire Middle East, and they continue to be promoted by the World Bank and IMF as the only solution for unemployment, inequality, and other social ills (Hanieh 2015). Middle East scholars need to refocus attention on exploring the class dynamics of these processes, and move away from the misleading dichotomy of 'authoritarianism vs. democracy' as the sole analytical lens for understanding Arab societies.

The forces confronting the popular aspirations of 2011 and 2012 have also been increasingly organised at a regional level. One clear indication of this is the striking political and economic weight of the Gulf Arab states – notably Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates – in the affairs of other Arab countries. Egypt provides one of the clearest examples of this trend. Unprecedented levels of financial support from the Gulf states have been central to the survival of the Sisi regime following the July 2013 coup. At the same time, Gulf business conglomerates – both state-owned and private – have extended their influence over key economic sectors such as Egyptian real estate, agribusiness, banking and finance. In this sense, the dynamics of Egyptian neoliberalism – in both its political *and* economic aspects – needs to be seen as part of a re-alignment of regional relations of power.

This enmeshing of the regional and national scales is essential to understanding the contemporary politics of all Arab states, and raises important questions that deserve further consideration. For one, why, given the rapid mimesis of the uprisings across the Middle East in 2011, have there been almost no cross-regional linkages built between progressive and Leftist political movements? The parties and movements described so vividly by Abdelrahman have been almost entirely Egypt-focused, and have largely failed to build any effective regional relationships, nor been able to generalise the important political lessons drawn out so clearly in the book. This is true even in relation to Tunisian social movements, where, similar to the Egyptian case, the role of labour unions and other protest organisations played a fundamental role as precursors to the uprisings of 2011.

Of course, the one movement that has consciously attempted to build across borders and to emphasise the cross-regional experiences has been the Islamic State (IS), which now has affiliates of varying size and influence across virtually all countries in the region. Abdelrahman does not deal with the rise of IS in the book, naturally enough given the almost complete absence of the organisation and its forerunners from the Egyptian uprising and the post-Mubarak Egyptian political scene (at least until the appearance of IS in Sinai in 2015). IS has been one of those forces that came to reap the fruits of defeat and counter-revolution in the wake of the uprisings, particularly given the devastating repression and mass displacement of millions in Syria and the explosion of sectarian violence cultivated by rulers across the region. How this will play out in the context of Egypt remains an open question, but Abdelrahman's conceptual framework provides a potentially fruitful approach to tracking these dynamics.

By fully grounding the events of 2011 in processes of political and economic change, and taking seriously the attempts of millions to create a better future, Abdelrahman's work provides grounds for hope amidst the prevailing bleakness. She reminds us that 2011 was the culmination of processes decades in the making, not simply the inchoate outburst of a frustrated mass. The coming few years will undoubtedly be decisive in shaping the fortunes of Egypt's social and political movements. In this context, Abdelrahman's work is much more than a book about past events; rather it constitutes a guide for the future – an invaluable map to understanding the possible paths of this 'long revolution'.

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