Bernard Rougier and Stéphane Lacroix (eds.), L’Égypte en révolutions (Egypt’s Revolutions)


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Egypt’s ‘revolutionary’ transformation from 2011 to 2013 is one of the more intensely described events in recent Arab domestic political history. Over the past five years academics, journalists, intellectuals and activists have produced much documentation, analysis and many opinion pieces about this extraordinary event. Is there room for yet another book about that topic?

Bernard Rougier and Stéphane Lacroix’s L’Égypte en révolutions proves that there is always room for additional analysis as long as it is creative and innovative. The 320-pages co-edited book provides a rare series of new insights into and interpretations of Egypt’s domestic affairs in the years between the revolt in 2011 and the military coup in 2013. The book brings together 15 scholars and experts from France, Egypt and the US who all have an affiliation with the French research institute in Cairo, CEDEJ (Le Centre d’Études et de Documentation Économiques, Juridiques et Sociales). Over 18 individually authored chapters that the editors have divided into three sections, the book portrays the convoluted and complex transformations of key aspects of Egypt’s political and social life in the years immediately following the toppling of President Mubarak.

Bringing together authors from a variety of subfields of the social sciences this is not a book that engages directly with theory building – or for that reason with any specific theory or methodology. Rather it is a book that excels in covering vast empirical ground. It spans Egypt’s macro economic policies, its political party scene, its electoral processes, its judiciary, its political institutions, its religious and social movements, and its workers’ unions and even provides five biographies of high-profiled political figures. What brings the diverse contributions together into a coherent book manuscript is that all contributors have made an explicit effort to describe and explain the changes their object of study underwent in the period after the uprising in 2011. This provides a deeply empirical picture of a country in fast and profound transformation.

While the fast-paced and well-narrated introduction in which the two editors provide an excellent synthesis of the convoluted and complex transformation of Egypt’s internal state and society is a great read, the core contribution of the book lies in the extraordinary quality of some of the individual chapters. Most of the articles
address interesting issues and provide convincing data to back their arguments and analysis. Some are, frankly speaking, quite brilliant.

Patrick Haenni’s analysis of the governance strategy of the Muslim Brotherhood between 2012 and 2013 is one of these pieces. In this intriguing chapter, Haenni contends that the failure of the Muslim Brotherhood was an outcome of its own governance strategy. Based on searching interviews with senior members of the organisation’s political party, the Freedom and Justice Party, Haenni demonstrates how the Brotherhood’s pragmatic focus on stabilising the economy and ensuring financial growth made the party neglect the political factor. Its pragmatic alignment with Egypt’s business elite and its pressure on the country’s workers’ unions and movements was not compensated by strong alliance-building with other political parties, grass roots and state institutions. This business-inspired mode for making politics ended up marginalising the party and rendering it unable to govern. As Haenni concludes, the Brotherhood strangely underestimated the classical work of political parties despite its clear political pragmatism. In many ways this is a new and more convincing explanation of Morsi’s inability to sustain his presidency: that Morsi’s fall from power was an outcome of the Brotherhood’s inbuilt authoritarianism, its ideological conservatism, its eagerness to dominate the state bureaucracy (the alleged “ikhwanization” strategy), or its inability to impose itself on a fundamentally hostile group within the state-bureaucracy – the so-called ‘remnants’ (fulul) from Mubarak’s ‘deep state’ – an argument that the Brotherhood itself tends to favour. In Haenni’s analysis it is the Brotherhood that holds the key responsibility for its own failure. But the intriguing aspect of it is that its main mistake consisted in a perhaps too pragmatic rather than a too radical approach to politics.

Another highlight of the book is Nathan Brown’s chapter on the Egyptian judiciary. In alignment with his previous writings, Brown demonstrates that the Egyptian judiciary in its fierce power struggle with President Morsi first and foremost aimed to preserve and if possible expand its institutional autonomy. Brown’s analysis is a substantial contribution to our understanding of the core motives behind the judiciary’s highly politicised conflict with the Muslim Brotherhood since 2012. Yet, what makes Brown’s article in this volume particularly interesting is his further argument that the judiciary’s quest for expanding its institutional autonomy vis-à-vis the presidency may jeopardise the efficiency and integrity of the Egyptian state itself. Rather than strengthening the state apparatus, Brown argues, the judiciary’s quest for independence and autonomy from the executive may eventually destabilise and weaken the state itself by fracturing (of “balkanising”) it from the inside.

The book also contains a number of chapters whose empirical documentation is in itself a contribution to the academic literature. Stéphane Lacroix and Ahmed Zaghloul Chalata’s fascinating analysis of the development of the revolutionary salafi movement in Egypt after 2011 is one of these. Over the recent past a number of studies have appeared of several types of salafism – the apolitical da’wa salafiyya, the party-political salafists organised in the political parties like Hizb al-Noor and Hizb El-Watan, and the militant jihadist salafists in for example Beit al-Maqdis og Islamic State. In contrast, very few scholars and experts have so far published about the new salafi movement that emerged in Egypt in the second half of 2011: the revolutionary salafists. The chapter provides a detailed analysis of the emergence of this movement in Egypt in late 2011 under the charismatic leadership of sheikh Hazem Salah Abu Isma’il who preached the simple but mobilising message: revolution now, sharia
now. In their analysis Lacroix and Chalata explain the movement’s rapid collapse after initially growing into a mass movement that in 2012 looked as an actor that would seriously compete in the presidential elections, as an outcome of repression and lack of institutionalisation due to the supporters’ dual antipathy towards institutional politics and their lack of experience. The documentation and analysis of the revolutionary salafism in Egypt is not only interesting because it is so little known. It is also a contribution that is likely to have an impact on our understanding of the origins of Egypt’s continuing Islamist revolt since some of the activists engaged in the armed struggle against Egypt’s military government may very well originate from this movement.

Another example of such empirical and analytical contributions is Ismail Alexexandrani’s excellent chapter on the causes behind the armed uprising in the Sinai Peninsula. While the origins and ramifications of Egypt’s urban revolt at Tahrir have been intensely documented, analysed and debated, there are surprisingly few academic publications about the armed uprising in Sinai. The development of this conflict over the past four years into a key security issue that public and private media are banned from critically investigating, combined with the recent creation of a ‘province’ of the Egyptian branch of the jihadist group, Islamic State, is likely to complicate further any searching documentation of the conflict in the years to come. In his detailed analysis of the micro-dynamics behind the uprising in Sinai in the period from 2011 through 2013, Alexandrani demonstrates that the key driver in the rebellion is neither ‘islam’ nor ‘anti-secularism’. Writing from the perspective of the local Bedouin groups that inhabit northern Sinai, Alexandrani stresses two factors: first, renewed repressive tactics adopted by the Egyptian police and military in Sinai in the wake of Sisi’s military coup in July 2013, and second, the continued marginalisation of Sinai’s local Bedouins from executive decision-making within the civil administration in Sinai, which is in the hands of bureaucrats appointed by and originating from Cairo and Egypt’s Delta region.

While these and a number of the other individual chapters make this book into a strong contribution to the existing academic literature on the transformation of Egypt, the book is, of course, not without its challenges and minor flaws. There is the eternal problem in academia, that at the very time of publication of an analytical book of this strength, the object of study changes. As the editors point out in the introduction there are many reasons to be interested in what happens in Egypt— including the fact that changes in its domestic political and social development tend to have an impact on the wider Middle East and European development and security. In that regard the book may already present a picture of a disappearing order: The fast-paced change that it documents between 2011 and late 2013 is today mainly a background for the latest restructuring of state and society under the populist military rule of former general President Abdelfattah Sisi. Of course this does not nullify the book’s academic merits or its broader contextual importance. Nor is there anything that authors, editors or publishers could have done to change it.

They could, however, have been a bit stricter in the editorial process. There are too many repetitions and overlaps between individual chapters of the book – for example, between Patrick Haenni’s and Amr Adly’s two analyses of the Muslim Brotherhood’s policies towards Egypt’s business-elite. And the editorial strategy behind the division of the book into thematic sections is rather confusing with a chapter on urban planning finding its way into a section on ‘Social actors and
protests’. They could also have cut down on the tendency to give salience to empirical data that does not directly serve an analytical point. While only a small number of the main chapters of the book display such tendencies, the entire short section four (IV: Quelques itinéraires) is based on an encyclopaedic editorial logic rather than the analytical one. The five short biographies of important political figures such as the current president Abdelfattah Sisi and deposed president Mohammed Morsi provide little analysis and might perhaps be better suited to the website of CEDEJ than to a printed academic book.

*L’Égypte en révolutions* is an interesting and a fascinating read. It provides compelling analyses and intriguing suggestions as to how we may understand the fast-paced transformation of Egyptian domestic politics and society between Mubarak and Sisi. The two editors have managed to put together an excellent team of scholars, some of whom have authored articles that are contributing new insights. It is a book that is likely to remain a key reference for the study of contemporary Egypt for quite some time.