

Mariz Tadros, *The Muslim Brotherhood in contemporary Egypt: democracy redefined or confined?*, (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 196.

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In an important, early contribution to the literature on post-2011 Egyptian politics, Mariz Tadros attempts to unpack the socio-political debates surrounding the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (henceforth MB) under an informed contextualisation of internal power realignments. Her professional background as a journalist for Al-Ahram during the later years of Hosni Mubarak's rule, and as an Assistant Professor at the American University of Cairo, allows for an astute analysis that largely eschews the reductionism that often accompanies studies of Islamist movements in favour of an issue-based examination into this multifaceted, ever-evolving organisation.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, her self-reflexivity as a non-Muslim Egyptian endows the text with a critical tone that is somewhat atypical of the recent literature on Islamists' processes of 'moderation,' a field populated by sympathetic readings of movements' integration into state politics.

In her thematic approach, Tadros argues that the MB's evolution needs to be comprehended in the context of *Al-Siyassa al Shari'yya* (legitimacy politics), an area of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) that differs from general politics in that the former is not based on human normative frameworks that are subject to change, but is based on decrees and ordinances of God' (p. 2). Within this framework, Tadros tracks the movement's stance on four select areas: the concept of *marja'iyya* (a civil state with an Islamic reference); political opposition

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<sup>1</sup> The term Islamist is broadly employed to describe actors who emphasise Islamic symbols, discourses, and practices in their critical stance against any aspect of modernity, political or otherwise.

and pluralism; the protection of non-Muslim minorities; and, finally, the question of gender relations.

The timeliness of these debates is unquestionable, with Tadros offering well-documented, enlightening insights into the current Egyptian political context. She argues that the MB's historical emphasis on *shari'a* since the times of Hassan El Banna has recently come into sharp contrast with a necessary aspect of governing, namely the need to ensure pluralism and the protection of human rights. This has resulted in the use of 'qualifiers:' each of the four areas is featured in the MB discourse under a nominally liberal framing that does not hold to scrutiny, since it is consistently undermined by deeper normative commitments to the full agency of a divine power. For the author, the movement's increasing recourse to metaphysical truths is bound to become more prominent in the post-2011 era of *tamkeen* [empowerment], for it is during the periods when the movement historically flourished that a 'conservative' rather than a 'reformist' agenda was adopted (Ch. 8).

Underlying the author's argumentation is the crucial point that the MB needs to be consciously disassociated from Islam; for Tadros, the realisation that a critical analysis of the MB does not equate a religious condemnation would enable more accurate mappings of the organisation, which have, instead, been stymied by the movement's 'instrumentalisation of religion to justify its political agenda and quest for power' (p. 163). Yet, whether the abundance of such sympathetic perspectives should be ascribed to Islamist machinations or to a broader, diffuse liberal fascination of occidental scholarship with 'moderate' religious actors is debatable; the fact that such approaches can be found across the literature hints at the need to investigate how our biases reinforce artificial, normatively infused taxonomies of 'moderate' and 'radical' Islamists, how they impact upon research design and, ultimately, shape scholarly conclusions. Even if tracing the contours of such epistemological commitments falls outside the limits her study, this does not undermine the author's valid

point that proper contextualisation is essential, both in terms of movements that are far from unitary, and in terms of broader debates on democracy that would aid in differentiating between the latter's procedural and substantive aspects.

At the same time, however, in making this argument Tadros draws attention to her own, somewhat instrumentalist approach to the MB which sheds little light on Islam's appeal as a moral ideal. Her rationalist account of how the movement employs religion to gain power is reminiscent of earlier dismissals of Islam as epiphenomenal which were popular in the 1980s political economy literature on Islamism. In such analyses, the political is accentuated at the expense of the metaphysical: as encapsulated by the functionalist term 'political Islam' that became popular during the same period, Islamists are portrayed as perennially preoccupied with capturing (state) power, whereas Islam is reduced to ideology and, ultimately, strategy. This is evident in the author's analysis of the MB for which 'the Islamisation of society was an end in itself, but also served as a precursor for laying the foundations for the establishment of an Islamic state' (p. 5). Such an interpretation contains a degree of essentialism that is insufficient in accounting for the processes of adaptation and doctrinal (re)interpretation that have arguably shaped the movement's parliamentary record on areas such as economics and international relations, which remain unstudied. Put differently, the extent to which the MB has been willing to embrace, compromise, and collaborate, with liberal Western structures of power both in reaction to the state's budgetary problems and the recent Gaza crisis might not categorically prove an ideological shift within the movement, yet may imply the need for more holistic research on how legitimacy politics shape the MB's agenda. The constraints placed on the movement because of its decision to engage with specific actors (Western or regional) similarly suggest important processes of change, which might impact upon ideological repositioning in ways that need to be addressed.

Ultimately, the book's timeliness is a double-edged sword: by focusing predominantly on events after January 2011, with insights into the 2005-11 period, Tadros produces a highly readable, informative analysis which, perhaps understandably, leaves little space for deeper examination into issues of methodology or historical assumptions. The author's conclusion that 'moderation' has not occurred in the six months following the ousting of Mubarak rests precariously on her definition of moderation (a controversial concept that is never problematized), and falls into a familiar pitfall of the literature, namely an inadequate time period of study. The initial expectation, and inevitable discrediting, that an Islamist movement would undergo not only an ideological evolution, but a significant shift in its internal political dynamics whilst adopting a renewed political agenda (all in a six-month period) might confirm the author's presuppositions, but finds scant empirical support in comparative politics. Extending the time-period under study to encompass earlier decades would necessarily complicate the analysis (with the risk of succumbing to the teleological trap of assuming a linear trajectory in the MB's historical development), yet appears vital for a movement of such long institutional history. In one of the book's quotations, a Salafi leader argues: 'one of the people said to me "you rode the wave" (of the Egyptian revolution). And I said to him "we are the sea"' (p. 29). If anything, the author's conclusions urge for further analysis into the currents of those deep waters.