

Egypt and the Contradictions of Liberalism: Illiberal Intelligentsia and the Future of Egyptian Democracy. Edited by Dalia F. Fahmy and Daanish Faruqi. London: Oneworld Publications, 2017, pp. 400, ISBN: 978-1-78074-882-5.

Reviewer: Mohammad Hossain, Department of History and Civilization, International Islamic University Malaysia. E-mail: mohot786@gmail.com

Following Fareed Zakaria's 1997 *Foreign Affairs* article decrying the rise of the phenomenon of illiberal democracy, a study by political scientists Yascha Mounk and Roberto Stefano Foa in January 2017 created quite a stir, for they inferred that liberal democracies around the world were at a serious risk of decline. Illiberal tendencies are on the rise worldwide, whether in democracies or authoritarian states, and the failure of liberals to live up to their very own standards has had a major role to play in this regard. It is based on this thesis that the book under review critically examines the rather idiosyncratic liberal legacy of Egypt. Exhaustive in its depth in the examination of the illiberal proclivities of Egyptian liberalism (p. 9), the book, consisting of twelve chapters and set out in four main sections, is a much-needed interdisciplinary collaborative contribution towards a critical understanding of the legacy of liberalism in the 21st century.

The introduction, in clearly highlighting the contradictions of liberalism in Egypt vis-à-vis the intellectual and the institutional legacy of the early Liberal Age from which it derives (p. 18), contextualizes well the argument that is resonated and debated throughout the book. Liberal intellectuals and activists such as Ibrahim Eissa, Saad Eddin Ibrahim, Alaa al-Aswany and Mohammad Abol Ghor, despite their well-documented reputation for championing democracy, civil society, and human rights during the Mubarak years, ultimately reneged on those commitments in the aftermath of the events of June 2013, and lent support to the coup against democratically elected Morsi, and to the authoritarian order under Sisi, to the point of supporting his practices of illiberal oppression (p. 3). The writers contend that the legacy of such liberals and their predecessors can be understood via two factors: the commitment of the liberals to secularism through the rejection of religion as a legitimate basis of political action (p. 14), and the centrality of institutions to the legacy of the liberals in Egypt, whether in the form

of political parties, the court, the media, think tanks, or NGOs. It is on the premise of this framework that the entire book is built upon.

“Egypt’s Structural Illiberalism”, by Dalia Fahmy, and “Nasser’s Comrades and Sadat’s Brothers,” by Hesham Sallam, are complementary chapters setting out to explore the structural weakness and illiberalism embedded in the political framework, and how consecutive administrations under Nasser and Sadat had exploited them. Fahmy argues that since the start of electoral rule in Egypt in 1952, structural and institutional constraints that were felt among liberals, leftists and Islamists had fundamentally compromised the development of a strong body politic (p. 52). In this regard, political participation in formal institutions such as the parliament in an authoritarian context has only given rise to greater social control (p. 36), leading to democratic decay, considering the deficit of democratic consolidation in Egypt (p. 35). The dynamics of such developments are brilliantly placed by Sallam, as he identifies, with meticulous historical depth, the role played by significant state interventions in the 1960s and 70s in setting the Islamist and leftist currents onto divergent yet asymmetrical paths of institutional development – an organized, autonomous, electorally dominant Islamist current, versus a fragmented, state-co-opted left with little electoral agility (p. 56) – which he argues have limited the viability of credible pact-making between the two currents in Egypt’s post Mubarak transition.

Sahar F. Aziz challenges the depiction of the Egyptian judiciary as a relatively liberal institution within an otherwise illiberal political context (p. 87) in the next chapter, highlighting how the illiberal proclivities of a critical mass of Egyptian judges have sustained authoritarian rule, despite the liberal roots of the judiciary. In this regard, state intervention by Nasser in the courts since 1969, followed by Sadat’s successful manipulation of fringe benefits and financial incentives to co-opt the judiciary amidst a weakened education system, ensured that the judiciary was largely de-liberalized and subservient to the state apparatus, laying the seeds for it being an integral site of the counter-revolution post January 25.

In the next section, Ann M. Lesch, Mohamad Elmasry and Abdel-Fattah Mady, in consecutive chapters, explore the aspects of the civil society, the media and the student movement. Lesch, in her focus on

how state intervention in civil society has constrained the activities of the latter, employs a neo-Tocquevillian view of liberal civil society, which limits her analysis to a narrative of NGOs in an article replete with often unnecessary sources. Elmasry, with a discursive and factual analysis of the role of the media and press, focuses on how the media has been instrumental in the vilification of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in the post revolution period through the uncritical propagation of myths to set up discourses - that the MB was disloyal to Egypt (p. 182), and that it was anti-revolutionary (p. 189). Mady, in his piece on student activism, focuses on the site of the university as a space of civic debate and protest. However, much of his analysis is redundant as compared to a more comprehensive analysis of the same in Chapter 3 by Sallam, which had focused on the dynamics and interactions of political players in a theme based approach, unlike Mady's factual hegemony vs. action-based narrative.

Section 3 begins with a polemic piece by Khaled Abou El Fadl, a damning account of the stance taken by Egypt's secularized intelligentsia vis-à-vis their obsession with legitimacy. He explains that they imagined themselves as the true possessors of legitimacy, not because they possess sovereign will, but because they alone possess the civilizational and intellectual values necessary for Egyptian democracy (p. 241); hence their paradoxical stance regarding Morsi, and pandering to Sisi. Chapter 9, "The Truncated Debate", is arguably the most well-constructed chapter in the book, as it draws upon meticulous analyses of thought trends and philosophical underpinnings behind the fundamental paradigm of ideological statism inherent in both Islamists and liberals, explaining the superficiality of the political visions of both camps in post-revolutionary Egypt. Stressing upon the common intellectual liberal pedigree of both groups (p. 256), modern Egyptian liberals like AbolGhar and Alaa al-Aswany, in their desire to reconstruct Egyptian identity, have strayed far from their predecessors in their antagonism towards religion (p. 257), while Islamists such as al-Banna and Qutb, on the other hand, have been limited by their ambivalent intellectual and moral attitude towards Western modernity (p. 266). The author opines that liberals and Islamists, in their ideological statism, have only differed in the former's excise of Islam (p. 273), and have currently fallen into a state of post-statism (p. 281).

Fourth section of the book is dedicated to an analysis of Egyptian liberal intellectuals amidst a crisis of liberalism. Emran El-Badawi discusses the comparative legacies of Egyptian liberal figurehead Ghaber Asfour and Syrian opposition leader and first president of the SNC, Burhan Ghalioun, both of whom particularly differed in their attitudes to political Islam during the Arab revolutions. While employing contentious labels to describe Islamists, El-Badawi clearly draws out the limits of Arab liberalism in serving the authoritarian state and antagonising Islamists. Joel Gordon, in the next chapter, follows with a critical examination of two powerful voices among Egyptian liberals – author and editorialist Alaa al-Aswany, and popular satirist and comedian, Bassem Youssef.

The final chapter by former elected member of the Egyptian Parliament and scholar Amr Hamzawy highlights a rather depressing state of the liberal project in Egypt, and focuses on five grand anti-democratic deceptions that liberals have resorted to – sequentialism, the ‘necessary postponement of democracy’, notion of national necessity, hypocritical interplay of religion and politics, and the deception of the supremacy of the state, in a quest to dehumanize opponents and serve military autocracy. The conclusion of the book is written by Emad El-Din Shahin, who focuses on the need for liberals to abandon their project of removing religion forcibly (p. 368). Furthermore, they need to disengage from the authoritarian state (p. 370) and overcome their liberal elitism (p. 373), barring which any democratic process is only bound to further alienate them (p. 374).

While it is important to acknowledge the crucial contribution that this work brings in understanding the limitations of 21st century liberalism amidst an existing trend towards problematizing Islam and glorifying liberal legacies, the book has its shortcomings. Despite being well positioned to carry on the legacy of Albert Hourani’s magnum opus *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, and Abu Rabi’s *Intellectual Origins of Islamic Resurgence in the Modern Arab World* in terms of analysis of thought trends, the broad focus of the work means that it has missed this opportunity. The insights of contemporary scholars such as Abdul Wahhab El-Messiri and Talal Asad, both of whom are well published on liberal and secular trends in the Arab world, are also missing from the narrative. Moreover, the collaborative nature of the work has led to redundancy in terms of narration of events, which detracts from the

readability of the book. Having said that, the initiative deserves the utmost praise for the academic rigour and boldness in addressing a topic that many in academia have consistently shied away from, and is well placed to be considered essential reading on the topics it addresses.