Watermelon Democracy: Egypt's Turbulent Transition by Joshua Stacher (review)

Drew Kinney

The Middle East Journal, Volume 74, Number 3, Autumn 2020, pp. 467-468 (Review)

Published by Middle East Institute

able to small landholders at affordable rates. In reality the Agricultural Bank regularly failed small holders, closed on them, and put their properties up for sale, most of which large landholders purchased. Indeed, during the occupation, in spite of British propaganda, the wealthy took advantage of the ample credit available to substantial landowners to increase their holdings at the expense of the rest of the population.

Two chapters stand out from the rest: "Gilded Speech" (Chapter 4) and "The Many Agents of Azmah" (Chapter 5). The first deals with an issue that other historians have treated extensively. What makes Professor Jakes's treatment superior is the extensive use of the Egyptian press on the Dinshaway incident. A group of British soldiers were hunting pigeons in Manufiyya Province in 1906 and encountered peasants in the village of Dinshaway, where villagers protested the British soldiers' intrusion on their village and the killing of their pigeons. In the ensuing encounter, one of the soldiers perished, and the British, believing that the countryside was full of brigands and had turned against their rule, punished the villagers severely by forcing them to watch some of the ringleaders be hanged. Even the pro-British newspaper *al-Muqattam* condemned the British, and the author provides ample readings from the Egyptian press as well as from the British parliament and the press to reveal that this was indeed a turning point in the relationship between the Britons and their colonial subjects.

More original is the author's treatment of the financial crisis of 1907, which began in San Francisco, where an earthquake, of all things, caused a panic in world markets that were overextended. The financial turmoil reached all the way to Egypt, where the country's reputation as a veritable financial El Dorado had brought heavy investment and inflated stock market values and land prices. The crash, taking place just as Cromer's tenure as consul-general was coming to an end, provided another stain on Britain's reputation for good governance and its belief that a purely economic approach to Egypt's population would prevent the kind of nationalist discontent that was troubling India, Britain's most important imperial territory.

This magisterial account is surely to be a candidate for one of the several Middle East Studies Association's best books of the year awards.

Robert L. Tignor, Princeton University

Watermelon Democracy: Egypt's Turbulent Transition, by Joshua Stacher. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2020. 288 pages. $75 cloth; $29.95 paper.

Reviewed by Drew Kinney

During his fieldwork, Joshua Stacher encountered a clever child who described Egypt's new regime as a "watermelon democracy," meaning a democratic facade that (as watermelon-eaters are familiar) looks ripe and delicious on the outside, but inside is a dud. Stacher frames his new book around this concept. He argues that while mass mobilization in Cairo's Tahrir Square achieved "incumbent ejection" — a concept that should be useful to those who research authoritarian persistence and regime change — the rest of the transition was deeply flawed. In the wake of President Husni Mubarak's rule, new and old faces in the ruling elite attempted "to forestall, elide, or divert popular demands for democratization, better economic opportunities, and social justice" (p. 1).

Chapter 1 explains how "incumbent ejection" was a tactic that Egyptian elites used to demobilize protesters in order to reestablish order. After removing Mubarak from the presidential palace, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) began negotiating with the "systemic opposition" (i.e., the Muslim Brotherhood) at the expense of the "antisystemic opposition" that had organized the street protests and put elites on their heels. This was a form of divide and conquer that split the opposition even before the establishment of a new electoral law.

Each of *Watermelon Democracy*'s remaining chapters are organized thematically to showcase the various practices that Egypt's elites used to thwart revolutionary demands under a democratic facade. The post-Mubarak elections, as Chapter 2 argues, "marginalized" and "contained" voices from

the "antisystemic opposition" and amplified the by-then state-aligned Muslim Brotherhood. "Transitional elections in Egypt were disempowering," Stacher writes, "because they structured a narrow choice, which allowed autocracy to be replicated even as they became a mechanism for incorporating segments of the systemic opposition" (p. 57).

Chapter 3 is about state-based violence. Stacher demonstrates that elites use (1) little violence when patterned institutional relations exist between the state and the governed, (2) more violence during protests but specifically in a "reactive and preservationist" manner, and (3) "constitutively," i.e., in a way that constitute new rules and procedures, after the opposition is divided and demobilized. The main takeaway is that state elites use violence during "revolutionary atmospheres" neither randomly nor constantly. Repression intensifies and changes forms depending on the moment.

In Chapter 4, Stacher turns his attention to the transition's political economy. Military, Inc., he argues, is cornered: neoliberalism will continue to undermine the legitimacy of Egypt's bloated post-1952 state. At the start of the transition, SCAF's circulated capital around the Defense Ministry and those investors connected to it. After 2013, Military, Inc., has — with help from transnational capital — ventured into "the expensive business of regime-building" (p. 22). This includes "profit-losing" schemes to form alliances with the business class and job-creation efforts aimed at Egypt's chronic unemployment (p. 22).

All the book's constituent parts move toward a conclusion that confronts outcome-driven understandings of transitions (democracy versus autocracy). Stacher avoids an outcome-driven analysis by centering on "what a new autocracy keeps from the past, what aspects it abandons, what challenges it faces when navigating and establishing a new regime, the new constituent parts it incorporates, and the new practices and routines it strives to develop with the governed society" (p. xv). Stacher urges his readers to eschew the idea that transitions are hurled toward "democratic" or "autocratic" *outcomes* and to reconceptualize "transitions" as *processes* of volatile interactions between revolutionary streets, pushing demands of economic and social justice, and elites discarding and retaining aspects of the ancien régime out of preservation.

Readers will struggle to find criticisms for *Watermelon Democracy*. While useful for students and observers of Egyptian and Middle East politics, the book is an exciting contribution to discussions in transitology, democratization, and authoritarian persistence. Stacher offers keen insights into a variety of sub-threads of literature on authoritarianism (elections, state violence, and political economy) while making a straightforward argument: Egypt's revolutionary era has been and is an ongoing *process*. With elites in 'Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi's Egypt still jockeying for power, the country's transition remains unfinished.

One question that came to mind while reading this book was about the difference between elite *intentions* versus the outcome of their actions. Stacher does suggest at various points in the book that each subtype of elite (security, economic, and political) *reactively* rather than *proactively* pursued self-preservation via elections, constitutive violence, and a reorganized political economy. There nevertheless seemed to be unexplored tension between, on the one hand, scared and confused elites at the height of revolutionary mobilization and, on the other, elites cleverly manipulating the masses through electoral institutions designed to demobilize Tahrir Square. Rather than use elections to demobilize the street, for instance, it may be that SCAF's officers merely sensed an advantage in the Brotherhood-backed candidate Mohammed Morsi and thus decided at the last minute not to interfere with his campaign and vote tally. Using Sisi's regime as a metric, might we ask if Egypt's post-Mubarak rulers are simply flying by the seat of their fatigues?

Unfortunately for this minor criticism, it may be a compliment. All that it reveals is that Stacher's *Watermelon Democracy* achieved its purpose by drawing scholarly inquiries toward the *process* of Egypt's transition, instead of reproducing arguments about its *outcome*.

Drew Kinney, Tulane University