

ISLAM IN CONTEMPORARY EGYPT

Civil Society vs. the State

Denis J. Sullivan and Sana Abed-Kotob

Islam in Contemporary Egypt

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Denis J. Sullivan
Sana Abed-Kotob



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Islam in Contemporary Egypt

*To JoAnna Noor and Grace Catherine
and
To Husni Shunnar Abed and Naameh Ismail Abed*

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their understanding as we engaged in a project that took us away from them.

This book seeks to put Egyptian society generally in a favorable light, one in which its tradition of openness and tolerance provides hope for the development of a civil society, a progressive society. Still, we warn of the dangers to that tradition that stem from militant factions of Islamists and others who ignore Egypt's culture of civility. We hold accountable the government that is responsible for maintaining Egypt's traditions, its power, its critical position in the Arab world, and its prominence in the international community. We welcome the comments of critical readers, colleagues, and students, and look forward to continuing the debate on Egypt's future.

Note on Transliteration

Many of the works referred to in this study were published in Arabic. In transliterating from the Arabic we used the basic outlines of the system used by the International Journal of Middle East Studies, with minor changes. We used the apostrophe (') to indicate the hamza, and the open single quotation mark (‘) to indicate the ‘ayn. For the purpose of simplification other diacritics were not used. In most cases, we tried as much as possible to approximate the standard Arabic words and names. In a very limited number of personal names, we opted to use spellings that have become common in the English language, such as Gamal Abdel Nasser instead of Jamal ‘Abd al-Nasir, and Muhammad Naguib instead of Muhammad Najib.

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Civil Society and Islamism in Egypt

This book has an ambitious agenda: to describe the various Islamist¹ movements in contemporary Egypt with an eye on their historical evolution; to discuss issues of civil society and the role Islamist groups play in society as a whole; and to examine the conflict between the state and the society it seeks to control, not just govern. To be sure, we cannot fully cover all of these important topics in one short volume. However, neither can we attempt any one of them without including as much analysis of the others as possible. Islamist movements, civil society, and state-society relations are so intertwined that all must be addressed when analyzing contemporary Egyptian politics as well as contemporary Islam in Egypt.

In particular, we examine the pluralism and diversity of contemporary Islamic Egypt. Pluralism suggests multiple parties or institutions within the Islamic trend; by diversity, we mean various ideologies and tactics to achieve Islamic (or Islamist) ends (e.g., spiritual renewal, political power, or economic development). This *plural diversity* must be recognized by anyone interested in understanding politics and society in Egypt at the end of the twentieth century; it is a result of centuries of development and tradition, of progress and retrenchment, of cosmopolitanism and dogmatism² on the part of Sunni Muslim Egyptian Arabs. There is no single Islamist group or movement in Egypt that represents the entire society, even if there is one group, *al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun* (the Muslim Brotherhood), that is more popular than others.

Our focus is on political subcultures³ and countercultures,⁴ primarily those of the Islamist movements, as well as on state-society relations. Our method of investigating Egypt's Islamist movements has not been that of traditional research projects of the political culture genre—that is, there has been no extensive survey research conducted

to ascertain the beliefs, values, and attitudes of contemporary Egyptians—because the Egyptian government discourages such efforts.⁵ Although many Egyptian scholars have been allowed to conduct such research, government control continues to limit both Egyptian and international scholars' efforts in this realm. Some efforts (by us and others) have been made in the past to ascertain public opinion, attitudes, and beliefs, but these are largely unrepresentative of society as a whole and are thus not generalizable beyond their limited samples or populations.⁶

Therefore we base our analysis of civil society on (1) extensive field research and interviews (open-ended, oral) conducted by both authors over the past decade; and (2) content analysis of the written works of leading Egyptian philosophers, intellectuals, activists, and policymakers.⁷ Egyptian scholars have engaged in civil society and political-culture studies, and these too have been important sources.⁸

Research Questions

This book seeks to address, and to answer as much as possible, the following questions:

- What is civil society?
- Who or what make up the “Islamist movement(s)” in Egypt?
- Are Islamists a part of civil society in Egypt?
- Even if the constituent parts of civil society exist and attempt to work toward a liberal experiment, can a civil society exist if the governing forces sufficiently restrict these efforts?
- What is the nature of the conflict between the state and some Islamist (and other) groups in Egyptian society?

Implicit in all these questions is the assumption that “civil society” is an appropriate concept and framework of analysis to apply to Egypt. We argue that this is a valid assumption. In reading sociological, political, and philosophical analyses of civil society, the public sphere, and the state, it is clear that Egypt fits solidly within this framework.

Augustus Richard Norton applies the framework to the Middle East generally. Civil society is found in the public sphere “where a melange of associations, clubs, guilds, syndicates, federations, unions, parties and groups come together to provide a buffer between state and citizen.”⁹ Norton assumes that “a vital and autonomous civil society is a necessary condition of democracy (though not

a sufficient one)"¹⁰ and that "citizenship, with associated rights and responsibilities, is part and parcel of the concept. Citizenship underpins civil society. To be a part of the whole is a precondition for the whole to be the sum of its parts. [But] [c]ivil society is more than an admixture of various forms of association, it also refers to a quality, civility, without which the milieu consists of feuding factions, cliques, and cabals. Civility implies tolerance, the willingness of individuals to accept disparate political views and social attitudes; to accept the profoundly important idea that there is no right answer."¹¹ Egypt is no democracy, and its people are more like subjects than citizens, but it is a viable candidate for boasting a civil society based on other reasons. Its vibrant public sphere and thousands of associations, clubs, publishing houses, presses, and other groups serve as a buffer between society and state. Also, Egyptian culture does value civility and tolerance.

Despite these characteristics, many scholars reject Egypt's designation as a "civil society" primarily on philosophical grounds. Such scholars—Western and Eastern, Northern and Southern—characterize the civil society concept and analytical framework as a Western (i.e., alien) notion that is inapplicable to Egypt or other non-Western societies.¹² Some Western scholars argue this case by asserting that non-Westerners simply cannot develop along European trajectories. Many scholars from the South share this conclusion, but for different reasons. For them, the concept stems from the provincialism of European social philosophy, which cannot account for social groups or institutions that form the basis of non-Western societies. This does not mean that Western and Eastern societies cannot be compared; it does mean that scholars must expand their frameworks and theories. Chatterjee, for example, argues that although civil society is quite limited to the Western experience, it is nevertheless "a particular form of a more universal concept": community.¹³ As we expand our theories of political development, we can advance and revitalize political thought with new insights, new evidence that we bring from studying non-Western states. This is far more interesting and productive than simply trying to incorporate the evidence we find in "non-Western" settings into preexisting categories (developed largely from Western experience) and arguing whether they fit or not.

In addition to the need to be more expansive in our frameworks and views of state-societal interactions, especially to include the more general role of "communities," it also is important to question how much "civil society" has evolved in the Western experience (or elsewhere). There is no doubt that civil society developed within and is applicable to that experience, but there are doubts about whether it has been achieved. Examine the claim that

civil society already exists in the West. Yes, there is in Western societies a web of autonomous associations, independent of the state, and these have an effect on public policy. But there has also been a tendency for these to become integrated into the state, the tendency towards what has been called . . . "corporatism." . . . But in fact what occurs is an interweaving of society and government to the point where the distinction no longer expresses an important difference in the basis of power or the dynamics of policy-making. Both government and associations draw on and are responsive to the same public. . . . So the idea that civil society is something we have in the West needs to be nuanced. In one sense we do, in another sense this is a goal which has to be striven for against the grain of modern democratic government.¹⁴

Mindful of the limitations of the civil society concept in the Western context, we acknowledge further the arguments against its application to Egypt and the Middle East.

Carrie Rosefsky Wickham suggests that "recent developments in Egypt and several other Arab states do not fit comfortably within the democratization paradigm. [Rather] they suggest an alternative trajectory, one that reveals the specificity of the democratization model and challenges its utility as a general model of political change."¹⁵ She demonstrates the emergence of Islamist social, economic, and political activities independent of Egypt's authoritarian state but shows that this is "not the same as the emergence of civil society, at least not in its liberal conception. . . . Civil society is not merely a sphere outside government but rather one endowed with a legally mandated autonomy, involving legal rights and protections backed by the law-state." Islamists who struggle to attain power and transform state and society "aim not to establish a civil sphere separate from and coexistent with the secular state, but gradually to extend the Islamic domain until it encompasses the state itself."¹⁶

If qualification for participating in civil society is limited to secularism, Islamists by definition would be excluded.¹⁷ We contend, however, that such disqualification and exclusion of Islamists or other politically active religious groups are as inappropriate for academics as they are dangerous for governing officials. Secular attitudes are but one attribute of civil society, which encompasses a variety of concepts, including civility as well as citizenship, civil liberties, and *civisme*, a participant culture of activism, reason, and political engagement.¹⁸ *Civisme* also suggests to many the notion of secularism. Questioning whether Islamists are (or can be) part of "civil society" seems to arise when *some* Islamists turn to violence to demonstrate opposition to a regime.¹⁹ For if a group, especially one representing a majority of society, is not tolerant of other groups, or at least

respectful of others' rights to participate (even if the group competes against these others), then there can be little hope for the effective, long-term functioning of civil society as a whole.

Even though we appreciate this concern over appropriate conceptions and theory building across cultures, a concern that seems as much about continuing Western cultural imperialism as it is about good social science, we nevertheless employ civil society as a conceptual framework and apply this term to nonviolent religionists and secularists alike.²⁰

"Civil society"²¹ not only helps frame an argument for social scientists, but may also help students, journalists, politicians, and the lay public better understand political systems and social networks in Egypt, the Arab world, and beyond. Students and others are more likely to "connect with" (and understand) Arab, Turkish, Persian, Kurdish, Berber, Israeli, and other publics when they can relate to the feminist movements, business associations, human rights organizations, labor unions, professional associations, charitable works programs, religious activities, student organizations, and other social networks thereof.

Eva Bellin tells us that the term should be used, indeed *embraced*,

because it focuses our attention on despotism in all its incarnations and because it captures an ideal that Middle Easterners are actively struggling over (and for) themselves. . . . By retaining the term civil society we will combat the tendency toward Middle East exceptionalism and invite comparative, cross-regional analysis of this dynamic process.²²

Egypt is an especially important, significant, and useful case to focus on in bridging the Middle East to other regions in that comparative analysis.

There is one last, perhaps best, reason to employ this concept: an increasing number of Egyptian scholars and political activists rely on it in their own communications. As Egyptian human rights workers and leaders of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) seek legal reform, an end to government repression and torture, and a general liberation from state control over private and nonprofit activities, they do so under the rubric of "setting civil society free."²³

With a more universal understanding of civil society, public space, and "communities," we continue this analysis with a historical sketch of Egypt's political and social evolution. It is clear that Islamic reform efforts of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries continue to influence the course of contemporary Egyptian society and politics.

Political Occupation and Societal Independence

Egypt has been conquered all too frequently by outside powers since Alexander founded his city on the Mediterranean in 331 (332) B.C., centuries before Cleopatra's suicide precipitated Rome's occupation in 30 (27) B.C. Yet Egyptians themselves, while falling victim to untold numbers of outside conquerors and occupiers, have maintained their own culture and traditions—and are known for having far greater influence on their conquerors than vice versa. Romans, Greeks, Byzantines, Arabs, Shi'ites, Turks, British, French, Israelis—all have come and all are gone.²⁴ And even as Egyptians are part of the Arab world, they identify themselves as Egyptians first, Muslims or Copts second, and then as Arabs.²⁵

This combination of rich history and tradition, invasion and occupation, and a keen sense of national identity are crucial elements in the political culture of contemporary Egypt. What we seek to examine are the qualities of Islamic Egypt and how they manifest themselves in a variety of ways: from accommodationist reformism (Muhammad Abduh; Muslim Brotherhood) to antistate militancy (*Jihad; al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya*); from cosmopolitan secularism (Faraj Fuda; "the left") to chauvinistic Islamism (*al-Takfir wa al-Hijra; al-Shawqiyyun*); from apolitical to antipolitical Islamism (Sufism and liberal Islamists such as Judge Muhammad Said Al-Ashmawi). We seek to demonstrate that there is an abiding and perhaps unresolvable alienation between ruled and rulers, between Egyptian society and the state controlling it. This alienation has not ended just because Egyptians are once again ruled by fellow Egyptians. Writing before Egypt won its independence from Britain, Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid (1872–1963), a disciple of Muhammad Abduh and a professor of philosophy, criticized the Egyptian ruling class and Egyptian government officials when he characterized

the relationship of the government to the nation [as] that of the predator to the victim. We are convinced that it is impossible for such a relationship to create anything between these two sides but perpetual distrust. The strength of the nation reveals itself under the guise of crude social behavior, while its weakness disguises itself with the mask of peacefulness and submission to force. And so distrust of the ruling class on the part of the nation has become one of its permanent characteristics.²⁶

State-societal conflict remains a basic element of the contemporary political landscape.

Yet, alongside this alienation, which is certainly not unique for the vast majority of Middle Eastern communities, Egyptian national identity is a powerful and enduring reality. This sense of identity with

a historical, political entity known as Egypt is a rarity among national communities in much of the world, and especially in the Middle East, where national boundaries and their resulting identities are in most cases a twentieth-century phenomenon. Combining these themes with a look at the evolution of Islam in Egypt, this book focuses on the multifaceted nature of Islamic Egypt as well as on the “uniqueness” of Egyptianized Islam. In paraphrasing Rifa’a Tahtawi (1801–1873), the liberal-reformist Islamist, Albert Hourani, maintains that

Egypt is part of the Islamic *umma* [community], but she has also been a separate *umma*, in ancient and modern times alike, and as such is a distinct object of historical thought. Although Muslim she is not exclusively so, for all who live in Egypt are part of the national community.²⁷

For Tahtawi, there is a “national brotherhood” between Egyptians “over and above the brotherhood in religion. There is a moral obligation on those who share the same *watan* [nation; country] to work together to improve it and perfect its organization in all that concerns its honour and greatness and wealth.”²⁸

Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid also recognized an Egyptian patriotism above all other affiliations: Egyptians’ “love for Egypt must be free from all conflicting associations, and their self-sacrifice in its service must take precedence over every other consideration. . . . Let no one think that we are calling for any division among the various elements which form the bloc of the Egyptian population.”²⁹ The appeal is generally directed toward Jews, Lebanese, Syrians, and Greeks—all important parts of the Egyptian nation in years past—plus a reassurance to Coptic Christians that Egypt is big enough for all of these communities as long as they commit themselves to the “fatherland.”

This patriotism and nationalism is an important element in understanding Egyptian politics across time, whether during periods of occupation, anticolonialism, postcolonialism, or the current epoch. It is as important to secular nationalists as it is to Islamists, as demonstrated by a similarity of visions shared by the diverse likes of Tahtawi, Muhammad Abduh, Ahmad ‘Urabi, Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid, Sa’d Zaghlul, Hasan al-Banna, Malak Hifni Nasif, Huda Sha‘rawi, Gamal Abdel Nasser, and Anwar Sadat, among others.

Islamic Egypt: The Arab Conquest, Muhammad Ali, and the Reformist Movement

Egypt’s Pharaonic past and especially its Coptic-Christian community are important to the country’s social fabric. Still, Egypt remains over