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Review – Watermelon Democracy

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Watermelon Democracy: Egypt's Turbulent Transition
By Joshua Stacher
Syracuse University Press, 2020

President Biden's recent meeting with the Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi at the sidelines of the Arab summit in Jeddah saw the leaders and allies discuss a wide range of topics. Egypt under its current leadership has been attempting to re-engage with the world and to become a significant regional player as it was under General Nasser. This quixotic quest has come with an enhanced grip of authoritarianism and weakening of democratic norms in the country. This transition is explored in Joshua Stacher's *Watermelon Democracy: Egypt's Turbulent Transition*. The book starts with an inside look at the ground realities of parliamentary elections in the Egyptian city and capital of Dakahlia Governorate, Mansoura, which included Muslim Brotherhood (MB) candidates in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. Then, Stacher succinctly goes on to describe the various facets of public mobilization, whose advent came after the downfall of Hosni Mubarak and encompassed a wide-ranging array of activities such as the Egyptian Movement for Change, or *Kifaya*.

The author of the book is intrinsically familiar with Egypt through his education at the American University in Cairo, his almost a decade of familiarity with the country as a resident, and his ability to speak Arabic. He has notably written another book exploring the Egyptian political system, titled *Adaptable Autocrats*. These myriad experiences have offered him an opportunity to examine the country from multiple perspectives, and therefore he successfully entangles various viewpoints to provide a coherent explanation of today's political system in Egypt. Stacher also emphasizes his collaboration with regional experts throughout the years, which was essential to his comprehension of the various forces and events that have impacted the Egyptian political arena prior to and post-Arab Spring. This dedication was likewise highlighted in the bibliography and citations that extended to be more than 70 pages in the book, and provide a rich source for analysts around the globe.

Watermelon Democracy is comprised of four extremely detailed chapters that endeavor to track the "refashioning and reconstituting" of "an authoritarian regime after revolutionary moments" (p.xvii). The author subsequently evaluates key areas such as the connection between widespread protests and factions in power; the role of elections in the evolution of a country in transition; the employment of state-sponsored, state-financed or state violence in the aftermath of the descent of an authoritarian leader; and the diminuendos in the political economy of the country at various periods of time.

Gradually, as the reader begins to comprehend the intricacies of the Egyptian political system and political forces, the title of the book emerges to be an extremely apt choice. In Egypt, it is commonly held that the contents of a watermelon are a mystery regardless of the richness and vibrance of its appearance, and the fruit only reveals its veracity when it is opened. Hence, its outward appearance may nurture expectations that in due course may be exposed to only be full of unfilled promises. Such was the scenario in Egypt after 2011, wherein the aspirations of the people were subject to a 'watermelon democracy' as their aspirations far exceeded the end result.

The author also focuses on various power bases, the most prominent amongst them being the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) that has utilized "existing opposition divisions, elections, state violence, and political

economy" to halt mass protests in order to stop the democratic change that would have stripped them of their power and coveted position in society (p.xvii). A further point of contention for the military continues to be the "structural contradictions and challenges" that the SCAF has had to contend with, such as the rise of the MB in the popular milieu in Cairo (p.9). The SCAF has had to prioritize dealing with boycotts that were organised to draw attention to the electoral design and candidates that were not viewed favorably by the electorate.

Thus, Stacher explores the various choices that were presented to the voters from different parties and their ascendancy. He also underscores the motivations that shaped the political parties and the candidates they fielded. The book covers a particular candidate in depth during the election process, who went on to become the head of state – Mohamed Morsi, sometimes referred to as 'President Asterisk' due to his acquiring power without the consent of the parliament and being aided by the unconstitutional workings of the military (p.82).

Stacher's research scrutinizes the various declarations, actions and decisions in a "polarizing process rather than democratic empowerment", that allowed the military to retain power even as a candidate from the MB rose to the highest office in the land (p.88). This was done through controlling the "infrastructure of news coverage, liaison officers with bags of cash, and national, governorate, and district coordination" (p.91). The evolution of state violence facilitated by the military under Mubarak and under the current president, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, plays a major part in the progression of the book. The author wisely propounds that the "use of violence necessitates more repression to counter evidence of its crimes as well as baits violent responses from society" (p.119). Sisi remains at the helm with an inevitable aptitude at "overseeing and managing competition" amongst the factions in the state (p.105). This was the result of the military and the MB pushing Egypt in the territory of "ideological displacement" (p.110). Stacher also endeavors to unravel the economic situation of Egypt under the military, "the only state institution that survived the 2011 uprising intact" (p.151), in a chapter appositely named "An Uprising against Neoliberalism?" (p.133), wherein the delivery of the promise of the guiding philosophy has only been partially successful. These developments have resulted in a "brittle" state and counting of Egypt as one of the "precarious autocracies" (p.179).

The book's attempt to divert attention to the scantly highlighted Egyptian electoral infrastructure enriches the existing scholarship, by utilizing important theoretical underpinnings that are tempered with a thorough understanding of the country's social and cultural contexts. Notably, *Watermelon Democracy* challenges the narrative of there being neither political choice nor grassroots advocacy in the country. Stacher is successful in shifting the lens and presenting the perspective of Egyptian voters and political participants at a particularly transformative period in the country. This makes *Watermelon Democracy* a standout from other books that have attempted to tackle the same subject matter.

Despite this scholarly contribution, the book has some limitations in that it requires an already deep understanding of the subject matter by the reader, in order to benefit from its contents. Moreover, the piece still suffers from some gaps, and notably fails to offer a comprehensive explanation of the major parties' voter mobilization machines in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, as well as of subsequent strategy changes that the uprising entailed.

Nevertheless, the bearing of the book is amplified by the frequent use of historical parallels that are strewn throughout the piece, and that accompany inferences gleamed through impressive and extensive fieldwork by the author, sometimes even in the face of danger. Intermittently throughout the text, Stacher also offers insightful policy recommendations that help the book move beyond a reactive inlet of information. Overall, the way that Stacher presents the democratic process is fresh in its narrative energy and capacity. *Watermelon Democracy* paves the way for further analysis of innumerable planes of the polity that decide the extent of control for Egyptian powerbrokers.

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