COMPARATIVE POLITICS

Elections and Distributive Politics in Mubarak's Egypt.

By Lisa Blaydes. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 288p. $81.45.
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— Jason Brownlee, *University of Texas*

Even in retrospect, the tenure of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak was remarkable. He was 82 years old and had ruled for nearly 30 years before a popular uprising and military coup deposed him on February 11, 2011. In his wake, Mubarak leaves a legacy of repression. The institutions that sustained his writ may continue to bedevil Egyptians.

For these reasons, Lisa Blaydes's *Elections and Distributive Politics in Mubarak's Egypt* remains as topical today as when it appeared in fall 2010. The book addresses the growing scholarship on whether elections strengthen dictatorships. Through 10 empirical chapters that draw upon interviews, Egyptian newspapers, government data, and an extensive secondary literature, Blaydes contends that Mubarak's elections indeed bolstered his regime. Moreover, they were the site of generally unrecognized intraelite competition. The book covers other ancillary topics, including splits in the opposition and US foreign policy toward Egypt, but its focus, and hence the focus of this review, is electoral clientelism. And because the author discusses the Mubarak regime in the present tense, in my discussion of her book I will do the same.

Blaydes's thesis is that clientelism during elections strengthens the Egyptian regime by shifting costs normally borne by the state to would-be parliamentarians. Legislative office seekers parcel out resources to needy constituents in exchange for their support, thus alleviating the distributive burden of a fiscally constrained regime. "Highly contested elections," she writes "are a decentralized distribution mechanism that aids authoritarian survival by regulating intra-elite competition, while at the same time outsourcing the cost of political mobilization and redistribution" (pp. 8–9). Competitive elections keep elites invested in the system, extending their time horizons beyond a single defeat (pp. 49, 57, 63): "[A]bsent these elections, the regime would not be so durable" (p. 237).

These are novel claims. Earlier studies of Egyptian clientelism, such as Diane Singerman's groundbreaking *Avenues of Participation* (published in 1995) and Maye Kassem's exposé *In the Guise of Democracy* (1999), did not find that Mubarak's elections were significantly competitive or redistributive. Recent theories about authoritarian durability focus on core organizations, the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP), and the security apparatus, rather than on elections. Analysts of Egyptian politics have also tended to argue that patrimonialism extends down from the president through loyal subordinates to ordinary Egyptian citizens. By contrast, Blaydes sees nepotism at the peak of the regime but not in its lower tiers: "This book will show that promotion decisions within the party and state structure are made on the basis of performance and revealed competence" (p. 6). Politicians show their competence, she explains, by collecting votes.

Comparativists never classified Mubarak's regime as "competitive authoritarian" (Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War,* 2010). After all, the NDP controlled 70% or more of the Egyptian parliament, a typical sign of electoral hegemony. Blaydes maintains, however, that the party's dominance belies vigorous competition: "Electoral manipulation takes place in a limited number of cases (usually aimed at the opposition Muslim Brotherhood), and, as such, the majority of the 444 electoral contests are genuinely competitive" (p. 53). She also contradicts reports of rampant election rigging: "For the majority of districts . . . contests between NDP and NDP independent and, very often, NDP-affiliated and independent or opposition candidates are conducted without regime-orchestrated fraud" (p. 165).

Rather than being dictated from above, elections are governed internally by "a kind of market mechanism helping to resolve disputes between various groups and individuals operating within Egypt's broad class of political elite" (p. 63). The main mechanism is cash, which candidates allegedly pour into their districts to reap votes. Individual self-promotion then brings material advancement for the populace: "Mass mobilization of voters at the local level thus leads to considerable economic redistribution during election years as a result of transfers from the political elite to the masses via vote-buying schemes" (p. 58). In these electoral bidding wars, the candidate who pays off the most voters walks away with a seat in parliament.

Such revisionist claims call for sturdy evidence, which Blaydes does not always present. Seeking to show electoral competitiveness, she reports that reelection rates in parliament were between 19% and 42% during the previous five elections (p. 57). This is an interesting aggregate finding—over half the faces in parliament were not in the prior session—but it does not reveal what happened to individual members. What portion of those not "reelected" had retired or chosen to back a successor in their stead? Among the remainder, how many lost to rival regime loyalists? Finally, and most importantly for the thesis, did their opponents actually outspend them? These links are missing, denying readers a tight causal chain.

The book's treatment of redistribution raises similar questions. Blaydes notes that the price of campaigning has

soared. In 2000, candidates reportedly spent a total of 10 billion L.E. (nearly US$3 billion) running for parliament (p. 56). This is a stunning figure, equivalent to nearly 3% of the GDP that year. Such capital could buoy many lower-income families, if it ever reached them. Blaydes does not establish, though, what portion of funds went into voters' hands, as opposed to the wallets of campaign staffers, regime cronies, state officials, and media executives.

Judging by turnout, which is among the lowest in the developing world, no more than a sliver of the population was bought off through electoral clientelism. Under Mubarak only half of adult Egyptians even registered to vote. Among those registered, even official government numbers (often inflated) show that just over six million, less than 25%, turned out in 2000. Even if all votes were "sold" to candidates at the informal market price of 20 L.E. (almost US$6 then), they would have constituted 1.2% of the US$3 billion spent on campaigning. In short, there is little reason to believe that exorbitant campaigns brought "mass mobilization" or "considerable economic redistribution." The opposite is more likely the case. A dearth of voters points to a lack of broad benefits. Had candidates competitively appealed to their constituents' pocketbooks, more Egyptians would have participated.

Blaydes knows the Egyptian politics literature well. In another section on clientelism, she discusses how candidates often buy votes with edibles, offering "communal suppers," "bags of sugar," "sacks of foodstuffs," and free chickens (p. 88). Egyptians "live 'better' in election years," she surmises, because per capita daily caloric intake rose by 1%–1.5% (30–45 calories/day) in those years (pp. 95–96). Here again, the data provided inflate the likely magnitude of redistribution.

Political handouts were unlikely to drive a surge in national intake, for two reasons. First, rather than consume extra meals, needy families presumably saved the donations to free up resources for other essentials. Second, even if the donations augmented voters' normal diets, for electoral clientelism to cause a 30 calorie/day increase in national intake would require a feast of epic proportions. In 1995, the population was approximately 64 million, of which 10 million Egyptians reportedly voted. Even if all tallied voters—not just the regime's lower-income partisans—had gorged themselves on a daily basis for the entire one-month campaign period, they would have needed to devour 5,260 calories each day, 175% the norm, to cause a 1% rise in the country's caloric intake. Anecdotes abound of Egyptian voters being courted with food. These payouts, however, did not produce cycles of national bounty. During the 25-year period discussed by Blaydes, only one parliamentary election year (2000) ranks among the top five years in caloric consumption.

In a third section on clientelism, the author applies statistical modeling to establish that illiterate Egyptians are especially susceptible to material pressures and more likely to vote. To estimate individual voting behavior, she runs government turnout figures of 24%–45% through Gary King's ecological inference program (pp. 116–20). The findings support the book's thesis, but they are overshadowed by questions of data reliability. Official turnout figures are known to be highly inflated, a problem Blaydes half acknowledges: "Although the regime has a record of overstating political participation, it does so more frequently for Shura council [upper house] elections and referendum turnout figures than for recent elections of the lower house" (p. 116). But following a footnote to Robert Springborg's *Mubarak's Egypt* (1989) on the same page, one learns: "All of these [turnout] figures [upper house and lower house] are exaggerations of a significant magnitude. . . . Probably the most accurate official reports on an election were those issued for the Alexandria by-election of 4 January 1984. . . . Less than 10 percent of registered voters went to the polls." Contrary to Blaydes's assertion of accurate data, single-digit turnout rates were likely doctored substantially.

Ecological inference also drives Blaydes's curvilinear claim that spoiled ballots are most prevalent in Egypt's least- and best-educated governorates (pp. 122–24). Given the dubious quality of Mubarak's numbers, it is hard to have much confidence in the regression. A simple table ranking the governorates by literacy and showing rates of spoilage across several elections would be more persuasive. Lack of compelling descriptive statistics reinforces the null hypothesis established by Springborg: "The relative uniformity of the rate of spoiled ballots across constituencies suggested that it was not a function of illiteracy" (*Mubarak's Egypt,* 164).

Chapter 7 ("Elections and Elite Corruption") sheds light on the reasons for such meager turnout. Blaydes uses a wealth of material from Egypt's muckraking press to document official malfeasance under Mubarak. Elections "serve as a façade for a tacit alliance between the regime and rent-seeking elite," the bridge toward plundering state resources (p. 147). Parliament, she then shows, is a nest of swindlers. Once in the legislature, crony capitalists advance their pet projects while enjoying legal immunity. It is therefore unsurprising, given the embezzlement and tragic neglect of public services presented by Blaydes, that the mass of Egyptians, and eventually even the co-opted political parties, rejected Mubarak's electoral façade. Rather than scrambling for electoral handouts, they took to the streets. Beginning in 2006, the country witnessed an unprecedented rise in blue- and white-collar workers' protests that dwarfed anything the NDP had mustered at the polls.

Because understanding where Egypt is headed requires knowing what just ended, political scientists will continue to learn from studies of the Mubarak regime. *Elections and Distributive Politics in Mubarak's Egypt* displays extensive fieldwork and familiarity with the literature. It poses intriguing hypotheses about the political and material implications of Egyptian elections. Limited evidence in some areas,

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though, may reinforce prior theories rather than revising them. With respect to debates about authoritarian durability, it is difficult to know whether elections strengthened Mubarak's regime or just embellished it.

Allies of the State: China's Private Entrepreneurs and Democratic Change. By Jie Chen and Bruce J. Dickson. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010. 232p. $45.00.

In Search of Paradise: Middle-Class Living in a Chinese Metropolis. By Li Zhang. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010. 272p. $79.95 cloth, $23.95 paper.
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— William Hurst, *University of Toronto*

Over the past six decades, China has changed more than perhaps any other society in the modern era. Researchers have puzzled over many aspects of this transformation, but the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) authoritarian stability and the rise of a new Chinese middle class and disenfranchised new urban poor have attracted special interest. Although they employ different methodologies and very different disciplinary and analytic perspectives, both of these books probe shifting micro-level dynamics of social stratification and subnational differentiation in Chinese urban politics. In *In Search of Paradise,* Li Zhang, an anthropologist, focuses on the construction of class through the consumption of housing, while in *Allies of the State,* political scientists Jie Chen and Bruce J. Dickson look primarily at entrepreneurs' political identity and behavior.

Zhang's primary argument, rooted in a rich ethnography of the private housing market in Kunming from 2000 to 2006, is that the spread of new kinds of private housing has both generated a new class system and given it a medium of expression. As work unit–funded "welfare housing" disappears, a new cycle of land acquisition, sales, construction, and conspicuous consumption of private housing has supplanted the last vestiges of Maoist residential organization. Class becomes "spatialized" as individuals' positions in the social hierarchy are increasingly correlated with where—as well as how—they live. Exclusivity and the protection of private goods, rather than the provision of public ones, dominate the new urban Chinese political, social, and economic landscape. Meanwhile, working-class families are displaced to distant suburbs, legions of rural migrants throw up new apartment towers under poor conditions, and thousands of young women scramble in dead-end—often subtly sexualized—jobs to sell as many units as possible to wealthy potential buyers. The general arc of this story is familiar, but Zhang's is the first book to delve so deeply into the details of all the processes at work.

Zhang's concept of spatializing class (pp. 108–27) is also an important innovation. Urban Chinese living space has become stratified such that residents cluster into upscale "gardens," mid-range neighborhoods, and low-income "salary communities." Families are increasingly atomized within communities, as they spend more time in their individual units and interact less in public areas. The effect is both to segregate class across space—people from different social strata rarely encounter one another—*and* depoliticize class across the social spectrum. This has been encouraged by the CCP in its use of the ideological rhetoric of *jieceng* ("stratum") to replace the old language of *jieji* ("class"), confirming the ideational terms of China's political-economic realignment.

Chen and Dickson examine data from an impressive original survey of entrepreneurs and private business people across five coastal provinces in order to give readers a snapshot of the political behavior of the new economic elite in late 2006 and early 2007. Drawing on this trove of quantitative information, they employ multivariate regression analysis, along with other basic statistical techniques, to assess the degree and character of Chinese entrepreneurs' political embeddedness, the extent of their support for democratic change or political reform more broadly, the factors behind their support for the CCP regime, and their choices regarding various modes of political action or activism. Just a few years after Jiang Zemin's controversial "July 1 Speech," roughly one in five entrepreneurs in Chen and Dickson's sample were members of a legislative or consultative political body. More than 60% belonged to government-sponsored trade associations, underscoring the Chinese middle class's very high level of political embeddedness (pp. 52, 59). While entrepreneurs favor some basic political reforms, they clearly do not support systemic political change or any substantial move toward democratization. Finally, the authors found strong support for the CCP regime among most entrepreneurs—with the exception of those outraged or frustrated by corruption. Moreover, this support was rooted not in political embeddedness, or participation, but in subjective values: The less liberal or democratic a person's leanings and beliefs, the stronger his or her support for the regime. There was also substantial regional variation in regime support that Chen and Dickson note but do not sufficiently explain.

Neither book breaks fundamentally new substantive ground for its authors, who all have published widely and deeply on closely related topics. But, taken together, these two books give readers an invaluable window into the dynamics of social change in Chinese cities—offering in the process several clues as to why China's "social volcano" (Martin King Whyte, *Myth of the Social Volcano: Perceptions of Inequality and Distributive Injustice in Contemporary China,* 2010) may exist but has not erupted. Urban Chinese society has been substantially reordered by reform. State-sector workers have lost benefits and status, entrepreneurs have gained material wealth and been incorporated into the polity, and migrants have borne the heavy burdens of building the new order while remaining in the social and political shadows. The local state, meanwhile, facilitates this process at key points, in exchange for the