Clancy-Smith on Sufis in Algeria, Joel Beinin and Zachary Lockman on workers in Egypt, Philip Khoury and Lisa Wedeen on Syria, and Richard P. Mitchell and Carrie Rosefsky Wickham on Islamists in Egypt.

NICOLE F. WATTS, *Activists in Office: Kurdish Politics and Protest in Turkey* (Seattle, Wash.: Washington University Press, 2010). Pp. 214. $70.00 cloth, $25.00 paper.

REVIEWED BY GÜNEŞ MURAT TEZCÜR, Department of Political Science, Loyola University Chicago, Chicago, Ill.; e-mail: gtezcur@luc.edu
doi:10.1017/S0020743813001529

The persistence of the Kurdish nationalist insurgency in Turkey, a country that holds regular competitive elections, may appear to some as a paradox. Why does the Kurdish nationalist movement pursue armed struggle when less risky avenues for political participation are available? In her original book, *Activists in Office*, Nicole Watts offers the first systematic study of Kurdish nationalist electoral participation in Turkey, and demonstrates that, in fact, there is no such paradox at all. She skillfully documents how Kurdish politicians and activists who have chosen the electoral path have faced a wide array of repressive measures ranging from judicial harassment to extrajudicial killings (Chapter 4). Moreover, the actions of those who gained office have been highly restricted because of Turkey's exceedingly centralized governance. Electoral politics has therefore never emerged as an effective alternative to armed struggle as pursued by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). More broadly, Watts argues that a challenger movement's participation in semidemocratic institutional politics does not necessarily result in the moderation of its discourse and tactics. Turkish state coercion, while not always coordinated and consistent, contributed to the PKK's efforts to control the Kurdish movement and helped to generate a dynamic of radicalization (p. 103). As Kurdish politicians and activists were victimized at the hands of the state, arguments in favor of armed struggle continued to have wide currency among the Kurdish population. An important implication of *Activists in Office* is that, given current political conditions, it is unrealistic to expect elected Kurdish politicians to emerge as legitimate and powerful alternatives to militants.

Yet Watts approaches the question of Kurdish nationalist participation in elections from a different direction, asking: "[g]iven these decidedly difficult circumstances and the less-than-obvious rewards of working within the system, why did Kurdish activists use formal politics to promote their cause?" (p. 4). She provides a compelling answer to this question based on extensive empirical research. When elected to offices, Kurdish politicians and activists produced discourses, symbols, and rituals that effectively ended the Turkish state's hegemony over representing the Kurdish question. As popularly elected politicians, they gradually gained access to resources and audiences—at both the domestic and international levels—not available to militants (Chapter 5). Furthermore, they constructed a new mode of governance in municipalities under their control that significantly limited the Turkish state's ability to rule over its Kurdish subjects (Chapter 6). Finally, and more implicitly, electoral participation provided avenues of mobilization at lower risk and cost, which enabled the Kurdish movement to reach broader segments of society. After all, only a small segment of society could participate actively in armed struggle given its life-threatening risks and huge demands.

The capture of the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan and the revitalization of Turkey's EU admission process made 1999 a critical year for the Kurdish movement. The post-1999 period was characterized by a significant decline in the intensity and scope of political violence, limited democratic reforms, and greater Kurdish nationalist success at the ballot box. Kurdish

electoral politicians and activists gained more power, publicity, and prestige, while Kurdish municipalities "built nationalized and 'Kurdified' public spaces" (p. 165). Watts provides plenty of examples to show how Kurdish nationalist municipalities achieved limited self-rule, which in turn contributed to the rise of a "new Kurdish subject." They named and renamed parks, streets, and buildings "as a means of Kurdifying space," promoted Kurdish language to challenge the hegemony of Turkish in public spaces, sponsored artistic expressions of Kurdish culture, and rediscovered Kurdish history. Building on Michel Foucault's notion of governmentality, Watts argues that Kurdish municipalities not only undermined the Turkish state's authority, but also redefined what it means to be a Kurd. Ironically, in its emphasis on "secular high culture [and] modernization, [as well as its] tendency toward standardization (if not homogenization) of language and experience," their nationalism had strong similarities with hegemonic Turkish nationalism (p. 159).

Activists in Office would have benefited from more explicit comparisons to other opposition movements that also pursued armed struggle and participated in electoral politics simultaneously. Primary examples of such movements include the IRA-Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland and the ETA-Herri Batasuna in Spain. As Watts aptly argues, Kurdish electoral politicians had to satisfy several audiences with opposing expectations and demands. Their attempts to achieve legitimacy in the eyes of the Turkish state, public opinion, and international actors were not always compatible with their desire to remain faithful to their core supporters and to the PKK leadership (p. 91). A comparative study would have provided a more in-depth understanding of the conditions under which political challengers using the electoral path may offer a way out of political violence.

Watts utilizes a rich array of sources, including in-depth interviews with politicians and activists, participant observation of political events, newspapers and magazines in Turkey, and party programs. She does not consult Kurdish language sources, but this does not prove a major issue given the fact that Turkish has remained the working language of the Kurdish nationalist movement. However, she should have looked at PKK periodicals (i.e., *Serxwebûn* and *Berxwedan*) in order to get a better sense of how the insurgency's perspective on electoral participation evolved over time. It is not entirely clear, for instance, why the PKK espoused a boycott of local elections in 1995 (pp. 107–9) only to let the Kurdish nationalist parties participate in subsequent elections. Another issue concerns the presentation of the empirical evidence. It is clear to astute observers that many Kurdish activists perceived that the Kurds' existence as a distinct ethnic group would have faced extinction in Turkey if not for PKK violence. Such perceptions of threat seemed to persist despite reforms undertaken by successive Turkish governments since the capture of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1999. With this point in mind, it would have been illuminating for Watts to bring Kurdish perceptions to the forefront of her narrative through direct quotes from, and more frequent references to, her interviews. As Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly argue in *Dynamics of Contention* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), a book that shapes Watts' approach, shared perceptions of threat and opportunities are central to the patterns of mobilization. What might appear to outsiders as an opportunity, those engaged in political struggles can see as a threat.

The clandestine relationship between the PKK insurgency and Kurdish electoral parties also needs more elaboration. Watts remains mostly silent on the topic due to the obvious difficulties of collecting reliable data. Nonetheless, important questions could have been addressed more directly with the data that is available to the public. We know, for example, that the PKK was primarily active in rural areas, while the Kurdish nationalist parties received more votes from urban centers than from villages (p. 166). How can we make sense of this discrepancy, especially given the considerable overlap between the PKK base and voting support for the Kurdish nationalist parties? Perhaps the Kurdish electoral parties actually managed to appeal

to many Kurdish citizens who remained outside the orbit of the insurgency. Watts also could have looked at the question of how the dynamics of PKK violence relate to the performance of the Kurdish nationalist parties. Was there a connection between the PKK's formal decision to reignite the guerilla war in June 2004 and the Kurdish nationalists' rather poor performance in the March 2004 local elections? Did the PKK decide to return to arms only when it was disappointed with the election results? The renewal of armed conflict between the Kurdish insurgency and Turkish security forces in turn limited the scope of action by Kurdish electoral politicians and activists (pp. 119–21). The introduction of a highly restrictive antiterror law in 2006 was instructive in this regard. If there is a negative relationship between electoral success and armed struggle, one can only hope that proviolent tendencies within the Kurdish nationalist movement would weaken as Kurdish electoral parties gained control of more parliamentary seats, municipalities, and ministerial positions.

In conclusion, *Activists in Office* will be of particular interest to scholars of ethnic politics and social movements as well as of contemporary Turkey.

HUSSEIN AGRAMA, *Questioning Secularism: Islam, Sovereignty, and the Rule of Law in Modern Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012). Pp. 288. $85.00 cloth, $27.50 paper.

REVIEWED BY AMIRA MITTERMAIER, Department for the Study of Religion, University of Toronto; e-mail: amira.mittermaier@utoronto.ca
doi:10.1017/S0020743813001530

Since the military's ouster of Muslim Brotherhood affiliated president Mohamed Morsi in July 2013, Egyptians (and many non-Egyptians) have once again been puzzling over Egypt's future: What should be the place of Islam in the Egyptian constitution? Can Islamist parties be accommodated or should they be outlawed? And more fundamentally, what is the proper relationship between religion and politics? These questions, which have been asked persistently since the making of the Egyptian nation-state, lie at the heart of Hussein Agrama's *Questioning Secularism*. Yet, far from providing answers, this book brilliantly calls into question the questions. Drawing on extensive fieldwork in Cairo carried out during the lead-up to the 2011 uprising, as well as careful analysis of laws, legal reforms, and court proceedings, Agrama offers two critical interventions: he unravels the workings of secular power, and he offers insight into what he calls the "asecular." As such, this book does not simply contribute to the study of secularism; it deconstructs the very questions underpinning much literature on the subject.

The book's key intervention is to show how the secular relentlessly entangles us in questions about the proper line between religion and politics. M. C. Escher's lithograph on the book's cover illustrates this point. It locks the viewer's gaze onto a set of stairs that at first sight seem interconnected but upon closer inspection are not. The image compels us to keep looking at it in order to solve a puzzle whose solution is deferred indefinitely. Using the image as a metaphor, Agrama argues that "secularism's power may lie more in the underlying question it continually provokes and obliges us to answer than in the normativity of the categories it presupposes" (p. 29). While continuously compelling us to ask about the line between religion and politics, secularism simultaneously inscribes the state as the ultimate arbitrator, entrenching it ever more deeply in the social fabric and intimate domains of everyday life.

While Agrama engages many fields of literature—among them the anthropologies of secularism, Islam, and Islamic law—his arguments are firmly grounded in ethnography. The book