

TAREK MASOUD. *Counting Islam: Religion, Class, and Elections in Egypt*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014. xxii + 225 pages, bibliography, index. Paper US\$29.99 ISBN 978-0521279116.

Why does Islam seem to dominate Egyptian politics? Under what conditions do Islamists triumph in the ballot booths? Tarek Masoud sets out to answer these questions with an engagingly-written and well-researched examination of the changing political fortunes of Egypt's Islamists, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, in the Mubarak and post-Mubarak eras. Using a wide range of evidence, Masoud makes a convincing case that the Brothers' organizational and informational advantages enabled them to reach out to voters in ways unavailable to their leftist and secular rivals—ultimately contributing to landslide electoral victories that dwindled in size as these advantages began to disappear.

Although the book's title highlights Egypt's religious politics, a central component of the narrative compares Brotherhood successes against the failures of the left and other secular forces. The first half examines the constraints faced by all elements of the opposition during the Mubarak era that affected them differently. The "tragedy of the left," as chapter 2 argues, is that the mass of poor Egyptian voters—unorganized in the agricultural and informal service sectors—voted for the ruling party's small but tangible patronage payoffs rather than the promises of programmatic redistribution made by leftist parties that stood no chance of winning. Although many scholars have argued that the Brotherhood wooed poor voters with high-quality social services, Masoud shows, in chapters 3 and 4, that the Brothers provided only limited services to the poor, and focused instead on cultivating middle-class support: the very people who were not poor enough to be moved by the ruling party's patronage, but not rich enough to benefit from its corruption, either. Indeed, the book makes a contribution to our ongoing efforts to understand the dynamics of clientelism under electoral autocracies and transitional democracies; readers can find broadly similar patterns elsewhere in the Arab world as well as in a number of Latin American cases such as Mexico and Argentina.

The second half of the book lays out an explanation for Islamist success at the ballot booths in the post-Mubarak era, arguing that people voted on the economy rather than religion—but that the Islamists were in a better position to make their case to voters than were rival parties. Chapter 5 provides evidence that, while most Egyptians "pay an easy lip service to *shari'a*" (138), the dominating concern for most people was the state of the economy and the desire for the activist, redistributive policies one would

ordinarily associate with the left. It also documents that Egyptians lacked the information they needed to understand which parties stood for what—including the great irony that many people placed the Islamists on the left of the economic spectrum and the actual leftists on the right. As Masoud quips, “what is remarkable is less that voters *may* be getting Islamist economic positions wrong and more that they are *certainly* getting leftist ones wrong” (152).

The problem, as chapter 6 explains, is that the Brothers could use their links to religious institutions to make a case directly to voters for why they represented the best stewards for the Egyptian economy; the left, in contrast, lacked these organized networks to disseminate its message in light of the weakness and small size of the country’s labor unions. Masoud therefore provides a compelling riposte to the “stupidity hypothesis” that the secular opposition failed because they were inept and out of touch with what voters wanted (165–6): as far as economic policy was concerned, they *were* what voters wanted, but structural factors beyond their control hampered their ability to disseminate this message to the electorate. Buttressing this claim, chapter 7 provides evidence that the Brotherhood, and Islamists more generally, began to hemorrhage support almost as soon as they got into office: the combination of an observable Islamist track record on the economy and expanding information networks enabled people to update their beliefs about the policies they were likely to get under different parties. Morsi’s overthrow in 2013 and the reimposition of an authoritarian regime, however, leave us (and Masoud) to speculate on what might have been and whether this information would have brought non-Islamists to power through elections.

Masoud uses a wide variety of evidence to make his case, including elite interviews, mass attitude surveys, district electoral returns, and content analyses of electoral programs. Most scholars laud multi-method research in the abstract; to his credit, Masoud has actually carried it out in a country where studying politics is a nontrivial challenge. Indeed, given the difficulties of conducting social scientific research in Egypt, he almost certainly did it out of necessity: the evidence available was, and is, fragmentary and imperfect. The unfortunate aspect is that none of these data sources can easily stand on their own. The positive point, however, is that the fragments are stronger put together than the sum of the individual parts.

One empirical criticism of the book is its use of ecological evidence—here, inferring individual behavior such as vote choice from aggregate outcomes such as district electoral returns. The book uses this type of data at a number of points, as, for example, by plotting support for the ruling party, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the 2011 constitutional referendum according to district-

level illiteracy rates in order to support claims about poor voters. To be clear, Masoud acknowledges the inferential challenge explicitly whenever he introduces ecological data; one worry is that such cautionary notes could be overlooked by readers who are unfamiliar with the problem and will dismiss them as standard academic hedging. It would have been hard to accept the book's conclusions had they been based primarily on this type of data. Fortunately, the ecological evidence is just one of several types of data employed; when combined, they make a compelling case that none alone could make.

Ultimately, Masoud makes no claims to having the last word in the debate over whether Islamist successes are due to material, ideational, or organizational factors. The information-based story he offers is persuasively argued and supported by a mix of evidence that, while containing no smoking guns, does build a strong circumstantial case for his claims. This book is, therefore, a compelling addition to an ongoing, and always improving, conversation about elections in Egypt and the developing world more generally. ✂

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RONALD A. MESSIER AND JAMES A. MILLER. *The Last Civilized Place: Sijilmasa and Its Saharan Destiny*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015. xiv + 279, acknowledgements, note on transliteration, notes, glossary, index. Cloth US\$55.00 ISBN 978-0-292-76665-5.

The Last Civilized Place is an unusual and engaging volume, weaving together archaeological and historical information about the southern Moroccan city of Sijilmasa, generally acknowledged as one of the earliest Muslim urban foundations in the region and a hugely important entrepot in the trans-Saharan trade for nearly a millennium. Although known to scholars working on Morocco, Sijilmasa has frequently been cast into shadow by the prominence of Fes, Marrakesh, Rabat, and Meknes, the so-called “imperial cities” on the modern tourist trail, and the abandonment of the medieval city for its modern successor, Rissani. However, for many centuries, Sijilmasa was probably the largest and most important city in the western Maghreb, rivalled only by Ceuta on the Straits of Gibraltar. It was the place where the founder of the Fatimid dynasty sought refuge from his eastern rivals, the first city captured by the Almoravids when they emerged from the