

Book Review: Hosni Mubarak and the Future of Democracy in Egypt

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Hosni Mubarak and the Future of Democracy in Egypt gives a detailed account of the degree of corruption, nepotism, and NDP-monopolized politics prevalent in Egypt until 2009. The insights provided in the book may assist in understanding the grave structural developments and shortcomings of the political system, which ultimately pushed the Egyptian people to the streets and explain why the Egyptian revolution has so far been considered unfinished, writes **Inez von Weitershausen**.

Hosni Mubarak and the Future of Democracy in Egypt. Alaa Al-Din Arafat. Palgrave Macmillan.

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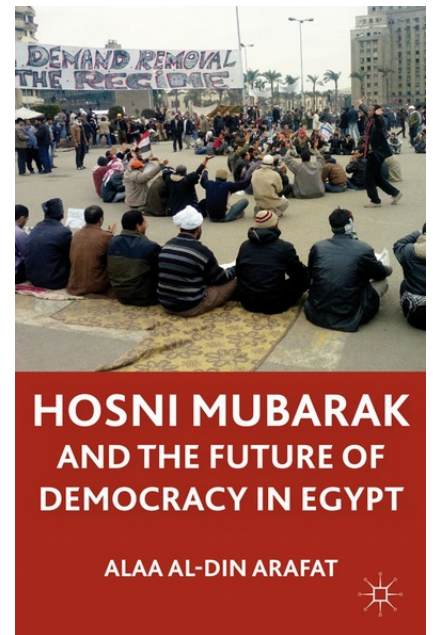
The so-called “Arab Spring” is a phenomenon whose particular form, timing, and dynamics have taken many politicians, analysts, and observers by surprise. Failing to predict the events, a multitude of authors from all backgrounds and disciplines have since engaged with the topic and produced academic, semi-academic, and journalistic works aiming to explain particular aspects of the uprisings, suggest policies, or forecast future developments. While the title of the book in focus here might lead us to think along these lines, the work does not actually belong to this category, and the author’s interest and expertise in Egyptian politics precedes the uprisings.

Originally published in 2009 in anticipation of the 2011 elections, the content of *Hosni Mubarak and the Future of Democracy in Egypt* has not been significantly altered or adapted to the post-uprising situation.

Rather, the preface of the updated edition seeks to place it into a contemporary context – pointing out the remaining unpredictability as to how the situation in the country will develop.

Alaa Al-Din Arafat’s concluding reflections on the future of Egypt, suggesting that “the robust Mubarak might outlast those who today seem likely to succeed him” (p.202), were subsequently proven wrong with the end of the Mubarak regime after nearly 30 years. Nevertheless, the book gives a detailed account of the degree of corruption, nepotism, and NDP-monopolized politics prevalent in Egypt until 2009, and hence it has significant explanatory value regarding structural conditions which may have led to or facilitated the uprisings.

In the introductory chapter, Arafat lays out the dominant issue which he argues has shaped Egyptian politics since 1866, namely a “functionalist strategy” to ensure survival and legitimacy of the respective regimes through reshaping the state’s institutions by “establishing new political bodies and new parasitic elites”(p.2). He elaborates on this strategy and “mentality of patching” by proposing a framework of five features which he applies to the regimes of Gamal Abdel Nasser, Anwar Sadat, and Hosni Mubarak: establishing a new ruling class, seeking influential supporters for short-lived alliances, instrumentalising parliament, manipulating elections, and disempowering opposition parties.



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Following the clear theoretical framework set out in the introductory chapter, one would expect at that point also an outline of how the book will proceed. Yet the structure remains rather unclear and throughout the book the reader is left wondering whether the ten chapters follow a thematic or chronological approach (or both), if and how they build on each other, and how they relate to the features set out in the beginning. While the chapters do indeed cover topics such as organizational development of the NDP and the roles of businessmen and powerful political individuals, a little bit more guidance and connection between the chapters would facilitate the reading.

Due to the limited context it provides regarding historical events, such as the circumstances under which regime change has taken place or the background of essential political personnel such as the “Big Four Faction”, the book demands some previous knowledge of the Egyptian political system from its reader and is therefore more suitable for a well-informed academic audience than for the general reader whose interest might have developed mostly in the context of the uprisings. At the same time, however, academics might wonder to what degree some of the suggested comparisons with Poland or Portugal hold (p.18), and whether a more regional approach might have offered different insights. As the title indicates, however, the book is solely concerned with the case of Egypt and does not aim at explaining regional dynamics – even though many of them, such as one-party rule, authoritarian leadership, and Islamic movements could well be discussed in a comparative manner.

An exception is provided in the final chapter and epilogue, reflecting on possible modes of succession. Here the author briefly considers how the Syrian succession model might have influenced Hosni Mubarak in both circumventing the Egyptian people as well as opposing parts of the political establishment, in order to ensure that his political mission will be maintained by his youngest son. For that purpose the chapter traces the changes made to the constitution, the rise of Gamal Mubarak in the NDP as well as his domestic and international “marketing” as a saviour of the Egyptian people or liberal reformer for the West. Unfortunately the author’s considerations of the role of the United States as well as Egyptian public remain on a rather superficial level, supported by little evidence.

Topical books always bear the risk that by the time of publishing parts of it will have become outdated, that speculations have proven to be incorrect, and that the information provided is incomplete or inaccurate. Nonetheless, these books can constitute an important effort to explain and evaluate a given situation. Arafat’s book does so for pre-revolution Egypt, providing a detailed analysis of Egyptian domestic politics until 2009 for the informed reader. Given the current state of Egyptian politics – with Mubarak being retried after the original verdict against him was overturned, political transition being subject to contestation, society as well as political parties fragmented, and violence on-going – the title *Hosni Mubarak and the Future of Democracy* is likely to be misleading. Yet the insights provided in the book may assist in understanding the grave structural developments and shortcomings of the political system, which ultimately pushed the Egyptian people to the streets and explain why the Egyptian revolution has so far been considered unfinished.

Inez von Weitershausen is a PhD student and member of staff at the LSE’s International Relations Department. Her doctoral research concentrates on European foreign policy with a special focus on crisis response and the Southern Neighborhood. She holds degrees from Bucerius Law School Hamburg and University of Bonn, Germany. [Read more reviews by Inez.](#)