In Pursuit of Legitimacy: The Muslim Brothers and Mubarak 1982-2000

Hesham Al Awadi
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In his book *In Pursuit of Legitimacy*, Hesham Al Awadi sets out to explain Egyptian president Mubarak's dramatic shift in his treatment of the Muslim Brothers (Al Ikhwan Al Muslimin), from toleration of the outlawed group to severe repression, over the first two decades of his regime. Standard explanations for this shift, as Awadi points out, have a state-centric bias in which

the state is the primary actor responding to the threat posed by the Muslim Brothers to the regime, either by providing social services when the state's capacity to do so was hampered, or by challenging the legitimacy of an authoritarian regime. The author acknowledges these factors, but then offers a substantially different narrative in which he skillfully traces the political dance of power between the outlawed group and the regime. The move to repression, in Awadi's rendering, can be better explained by the responsive relationship between the Muslim Brothers and Mubarak than by understanding either power or legitimacy solely in terms of the state.

Awadi argues that the driving force behind Mubarak's crackdown in the mid-1990s was a cyclical competition between the president and the Muslim Brothers for political legitimacy, which began with his regime's accession following Sadat's assassination in 1980. In his analysis, the author states that this conflict's brutal 1995 climax, during which a number of Muslim Brothers were convicted at a military trial, was by no means a foregone conclusion. Rather, it was the result of a highly responsive relationship between the regime and the increasingly powerful opposition organization. Moreover, it could have evolved differently had the Muslim Brothers made different choices about how to best pursue their program.

However, Mubarak's unwavering refusal to grant legal recognition to the group provoked its members to become increasingly fixated on achieving precisely that recognition. This preoccupation, which the author terms the "politicization of legitimacy," began in the 1990s, after a decade of Mubarak's rule. As Awadi's interviews with members from December 2000 through 2002 reveal, the decision to seek legality and seats in Parliament was viewed as a choice that crossed the line from popular legitimacy to an unacceptable level of political legitimacy. Finally, Awadi contends that Mubarak's confrontation in 1995, even if conditioned by other events, was primarily a function of "the Brothers' preoccupation with legitimacy, and their insistence on competing with the regime on its political terrain, despite the risks of an authoritarian response" (p. 177).

While making this argument, the author offers an intriguing study of political legitimacy as an iterative concept. His implicit model assumes that different parties seeking legitimacy in the same sociopolitical landscape shape their agendas and actions through their mutual interactions. As his analyses of Mubarak's interactions with the Muslim Brothers show, Mubarak's own search for legitimacy shaped his responses to them.

This was true even in the 1980s, a period of relative tolerance during which Mubarak sought regional credibility by becoming warmer to other

Arab states and somewhat cooler toward the United States and Israel than Sadat had been. At home, he claimed that he was committed to the rule of law and political pluralism. At some point, perhaps 1983 according to one of Awadi's interviewees, the Muslim Brothers decided to enhance their own legitimacy by participating in parliamentary elections. This decision was not arrived at easily among the members of this officially outlawed organization. Nevertheless, under the direction of Umar Tilmesani, the General Guide (*al-murshid*) and with a new commitment to nonviolence, the organization expanded its power base by reaching into universities and urban professional syndicates, as well as into other local institutions in more provincial areas. By establishing investment companies and banks, they were able to fund activities and provide social welfare services at precisely the moment when recession made the Mubarak regime less capable of doing so. These advances were made clear, as political legitimation, when the Muslim Brothers won 36 of the 454 seats in the 1987 National Assembly.

Despite their increasing power, Mubarak maintained his posture of tolerance because his own legitimacy, in the eyes of international and local observers, required it. Among other factors, an atmosphere of political pluralism was required to sustain American economic aid. Only later, when the Muslim Brothers challenged the regime more directly, did Mubarak respond harshly.

In Pursuit of Legitimacy, based on Awadi's doctoral research, is not an introduction to the Muslim Brothers. Although there is a brief historical overview of the relationship between the movement and the state, readers should look elsewhere for more comprehensive accounts of its history or ideological or philosophical groundings. However, for readers already knowledgeable about the context, the author's study succeeds in placing this relationship in a complex field of domestic, regional, and international economic, social, political, and even natural events. Tightly focused and lucidly expressed, it provides a provocative explanation of how political legitimacy is obtained in the Egyptian context.

Finally, Awadi provides an intriguing and dynamic model of political legitimacy as a creation of reciprocal relationships between competitors for the same political territory. This may prove a useful springboard for understanding other authoritarian contexts, in which popular legitimacy plays only a limited role, or indeed in any environment in which state legitimacy is a contested sphere. In the wake of parliamentary wins by Muslim Brothers-backed candidates in Egypt's elections last autumn, as well as the

recent victory of Hamas in the Palestinian elections, frameworks that help provide insight into state-opposition dynamics are likely to be increasingly in demand.

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