

The New Mamlukes: Egyptian Society and Modern Feudalism

Amira El-Azhari Sonbol

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Amira El-Azhari Sonbol has written an outstanding socio-politico-economic analysis of the Egyptian government and society over the last three centuries. This book brilliantly debunks the oriental despot model of analysis that has been imposed on scholarly studies of Muslim societies. She achieves this with the aid of a “study of popular discourse.” She emphasizes the need to relearn what culture is all about by examining how Egyptians see themselves and their own relationships. She finds that Egyptian society has not been static, waiting to be transformed from the outside, but dynamic, following its own cultural evolution. Along the way, she notes the importance of distinguishing Islamic revival from radicalism and terrorism.

Sonbol argues that eighteenth-century Egypt has been misunderstood, forced into the absolutist mold that more properly characterizes today’s Egypt. Eighteenth-century Egypt reflected “social maneuverability” and the “rule of law.” In the 19th and 20th centuries the Egyptian state sought, with partial success, to establish itself as the “active creator” of law and order. A new form of mercantilism emerged that went beyond the mere control of imports and exports to the manipulation of all aspects of production and exchange to the benefit of the elites. In the Nasser era, elements of socialism and nationalism were employed in the advancement of what was actually a form of state capitalism, in which the elites sought to extract rent from their hold on power. It was a feudal compact, in which the state’s “right” to political allegiance was “reciprocated by the state’s ‘duty’ to guarantee the security of the nation and provide its people with” the necessities of life.

Sonbol critiques the translation of *khassa* as elite and *`ammah* as general public. The *khassa* are the people of power, wealth, and distinction, only one part of which retains hegemony at any given time. The *khassa* are too diverse (ruling elites, the military, and the business classes) to be considered an aristocracy. From time to time the ulema, the intellectuals and the professionals have been their allies in legitimizing their power. The so-called modernization of the Arab world has only been a strengthening of patriar-

chal structures in modern dress. The various revolutions in modern Egypt have been nothing but different components of the *khassa* taking turns at seizing power from the others.

The *`ammah* defends itself and its property from the predatory practices of the *khassa* with the aid of religion and culture. There is a distinction between the official economy under the control of the *khassa* and the informal economy which is a de facto free market. Although the *khassa* do not control the informal economy, they have increasingly been taking part in it. The informal economy in Egypt continues to grow despite the government's best efforts to control it, signaling the breakdown of Egypt's mercantilist–feudal structure.

I was impressed with the lucidity of Sonbol's explanation of mercantilism and why and how it differs from liberalism. Both regulation and selective deregulation serve to benefit particular groups. While Muhammad Ali Pasha, Egypt's ruler from 1805 to 1848, made mercantilism official policy, it was already in effect under the Mamluks (1250–1517) and has been retained by all Egyptian rulers since, justified by appeals to nationalism, but driven by the interests of the elites. The slogans under which these policies were justified kept changing (patriotism, nationalism, unity, or Islam), but the policies were essentially the same.

Egyptian elites sought to develop culture by educating the masses in “world art and literature,” perceiving their culture as backward because it did not exhibit European cultural values. The modern era in Egypt was the era of the growth of the coercive power of the central state. The people are reacting to this transformation imposed from above. The influence of liberal or leftist intellectuals on the masses has been limited, though, to the degree to which they may influence the Islamist intellectuals through the effective use of Islamic terminology.

What is described today as Islamic revivalism is part of the ongoing process by which Egyptian society is becoming more homogeneous, and the cultural gap ... between the traditional and the western is being narrowed.

As an Egyptian-born American scholar, Sonbol is well-placed to make the deep critical analysis found in this excellent volume. She is able to employ a large number of diverse sources in many languages. She proves her case of the dynamism of pre-nationalist civil society in Egypt, including refuting stereotypes about women in Islam by counter-examples from the numerous court cases litigated by women. She also documents the flex-

ibility of the legal system, under which many disputes never made it to court, having been arbitrated by other means such as the guilds (associations formed to protect the mutual interests of their members).

Sonbol clearly shows the role played by tax-farming in the establishment of a feudalistic structure in Egypt; how Muhammad Ali Pasha bureaucratized the ulama; and how the government's ham-handed attempt to limit inflation by price-fixing drove products into a black market where even the producers of the products could not afford to consume them. Sonbol argues that such policies, although coercively imposed, could not be sustained by coercion alone. Muhammad Ali Pasha depended on his land-tenure reforms' winning over the support of the peasantry. Only at the end did the peasants realize that the net effect of the new mercantilist system was to their own detriment.

An essential element of Sonbol's analysis is her concept of "duality." She balances the stereotyping of the Arabs by the French with the stereotyping of the French by the Arabs. But if the Egyptians were initially revolted by what they perceived to be the French immodesty and lack of hygiene, the *khassa* desired to adopt the values of the conquerors once they perceived themselves to be no longer at the summit of the society. One startling example is how prostitution, under the influence of the cultural shift, became official, so that the women resigned to that activity would be regulated to the benefit of the *khassa* and the male population.

The status of women declined in other ways during this process. For example, in the eighteenth century the flexibility of the legal system allowed women to elect to have their marriages governed by the Maliki school, with its sensitivity to women's issues. The state did not impose any particular school or interpretation on marriage contracts, giving women a choice. With the 1876 reforms, the expanding Egyptian state replaced the litigant-driven selection of *qadis* with one in which a state bureaucracy selected the *qadis*. The effect was the replacement of a choice of *madhhab* with the imposition of a state-sanctioned interpretation of the Hanafi *madhhab* and the imposition of rules that gave women less protection from abusive husbands. Sonbol opines that this change was facilitated by the fact that the upper classes erroneously presumed that wife-beating was solely an issue for the lower classes, but I would suggest that perhaps the fact that the state was male-dominated also played a role. In contrast, the women of Medina played a major part in relating the *ahadith* that influenced the Maliki school.

Another element of duality, instituted in the twentieth century, was the division of crimes into two classes: social and political. This gave the state the power to crack down on the political opposition. Even the public space was divided “into areas of usage by particular classes.” The one exception was, of course, the mosque, which set the stage for the Islamic resistance. The economic interests of the *khassa* always predominated, colored by the slogans of the particular movements of the moment. Sonbol quotes Milovan Djilas’ characterization of Tito’s Yugoslavia as equally appropriate to Nasser’s Egypt, that “socialist ownership” is really “ownership by the political bureaucracy.” A segment of the *khassa* had implanted itself in that bureaucracy and thus, it was no wonder that in economically stagnant Egypt entrance into the civil service was perceived as the path to upward mobility. Similarly, Sadat’s “liberalization” was not to undermine Egyptian socialism, but simply “to facilitate the *khassa*’s trade monopoly with the outside world.”

Ultimately, Islam has an indispensable role in the cultural effort to end the duality in Egyptian society. It was the pressure from the Muslim Brotherhood that forced the nationalist parties in Egypt to communicate in Arabic rather than French or English. Today, Sonbol concludes, Egypt has established a versatile civil society that can no longer be ignored by its political leaders. I would propose that the Islamic movement in Egypt, and elsewhere, must not waste this opportunity, and must avoid the trap of employing Islamic jargon to mask a continuation of mercantilist policies and feudal structures.

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