

UC San Diego

MELA Notes

Title

El-Ghobashy: Bread and Freedom: Egypt's Revolutionary Situation

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8z30h05h>

Journal

MELA Notes, 96(1)

ISSN

0364-2410

Author

Kurgan, Sarp

Publication Date

2024-09-13

DOI

10.5070/M7.35412

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

his multi-faceted career. The selection has only rare glimpses into the mind of the great novelist, a man of his time. A suggestion for further inquiry, perhaps for translation, would be *Kırk Yıl* (Forty Years), his autobiography encompassing his childhood, education, and endeavors in the literary world, which is full of information about the urban daily life in the late Ottoman Empire.

DUYGU COŞKUNTUNA

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

Bread and Freedom: Egypt's Revolutionary Situation. By Mona El-Ghobashy. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021. Pp. 392. \$25 (paperback) ISBN: 9781503628151.

Egypt's Tahrir Uprising of 2011, which toppled down a seemingly stable dictatorship, has received tremendous popular, intellectual, and academic attention. Mona El-Ghobashy's *Bread and Freedom* offers a new account of the revolution and aims to "show how the unexpected uprising opened up several possibilities for how Egypt would be governed" (p. 28). Moving beyond conventional analyses that try to uncover "what went wrong," El-Ghobashy reexamines the uprising as a "concrete political phenomenon" by utilizing the Leninist concept of a "revolutionary situation," where "rulers and ruled cannot go on as before but a new political order is by no means assured" (p. 30). This concept focuses on the political struggle that intervened between the initial breakdown of the old regime and the consolidation of a new one. Instead of causal origins, the author traces trajectories and asks: "how did an unlikely contest for state power emerge in a durable authoritarian state, terminating with the victory of a counterrevolutionary coalition" (p. 35). El-Ghobashy takes interactions as the unit of analysis and relies on documentary by-products of Egypt's revolutionary situation such as official fact-finding reports, court rulings, legislation, constitutional assembly deliberations, election returns, campaign manifestoes, slogans and couplets, tweets and Facebook posts, leaflets, Human Rights organizations' reports, autopsy reports, personal narratives, petitions, commemorations, prison letters, photos, and videos. The author argues that the concept of the revolutionary situation illuminates more of the many interlinked events and controversies of Egypt's upheaval

than the concepts of revolution or democratic transition offer on their own. El-Ghobashy places uncertainty at the center of the analysis and focuses on what political institutions look like during intersecting, opaque, and confounding circumstances. She takes Egypt's revolutionary situation as a "synoptic device" that allows "seeing it altogether" to make sense of the analytically separable kinds of politics that are common in uprisings such as elections, judicial politics, parliamentary contention, mass protests, and constitution-making (p. 42). Revolutionary situations facilitate periods of contested sovereignty by multiple actors, which produces, in Trotsky's words, a dual power, where revolutionaries and counterrevolutionaries strive to overcome the anarchy of twofold sovereignty (p. 92). She emphasizes that the key trait of a revolutionary situation is "genuine confusion about the balance of power between old and new groups" (p. 108). In Egypt's revolutionary situation, the old regime had been dealt a major blow but did not die.

In consecutive chapters, El-Ghobashy deals with how Egypt's revolutionary situation has unfolded into a "nonrevolutionary outcome." Chapter 1 critically reviews the literature that reads Egypt's revolutionary situation in terms of "praise and blame." Chapter 2 deals with mounting pressures on Hosni Mubarak's regime until 2011, with a focus on elections, administrative court litigations, and street protests. She stresses that a defining feature of the Mubarakist political order was the government's careful management rather than outright banning public political opposition, which was not an inherent attribute of his regime but developed through repeated confrontations, bargains, and settlements. Chapter 3 confronts the ambiguity after Mubarak's fall. The competing sovereignties in this period were between military generals with their self-entitled claim to "protect the revolution" and the Tahrir movement's *milyuniyya* (million-man rally) assemblies, which did not coalesce into a united front against the military council. The chapter emphasizes that military tutelage over the political process was not the brainchild of generals alone but a joint construct of civilian politicians, jurists, cabinet ministers, and the military. Chapter 4 shows how the arrangements for transferring power to civilians in 2012 constituted the maximum moment of conflicts in Egypt's revolutionary situation and analyzes the seating of legislative power as a new phase of multiple sovereignty. It deals with the rapid erosion of conditions for compromise between Islamist and secularist revolutionaries. Chapter 5 reconstructs Muslim

Brotherhood-affiliated Mohammad Morsi's presidency. Unlike conventional narratives that blame Morsi, El-Ghobashy claims that Egypt's first elected president faced a common situation (previously experienced by Chile's Allende and Iran's Mosaddeq) that cannot be reduced to an ideological disposition or decisive fatal mistake. This chapter identifies a new bipolar alignment between the Morsi government and a wide range of popular and elite groupings that transcend a simplistic Islamist-secularist divide. Chapter 6 shows how the military rump of the Mubarak regime reconquered the state with a popularly supported coup. It argues that the presidency of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi is not an authoritarian restoration but a counterrevolution that directly targeted the fragmentation of state powers made possible by the revolutionary situation. The counterrevolution eventually adopted *haybat al-dawla* (state prestige) as its weltanschauung, which promoted a world without contending interests or multiple solutions and preached a "metaphysical conception of the state as an integrated unity, rising above the divisions and parochial identities of fractious civil society" (p. 248).

El-Ghobashy's book is accessible both for academic and general readers with little to no prior knowledge on the subject. The book particularly appeals to the academic fields of revolutions, political history, and authoritarianism. *Bread and Freedom* would be a valuable addition to any library, while it particularly appeals to libraries with a notable Middle East and North Africa section. *Bread and Freedom* is well-written and thoroughly researched, and it utilizes a wide range of secondary sources. El-Ghobashy revives an old concept but pushes the reader to rethink revolutions by focusing on uncertainty. Her argument that focuses on uncertainty through the concept of a revolutionary situation holds up to the evidence. While the argument might seem too simple at first glance, her review shows that it is a point largely omitted by most accounts. She thus encourages the reader to understand revolutions and their aftermath not as pre-determined events but as unpredictable competitions among multiple sovereignty claims that strive to end revolutionary situations. As El-Ghobashy puts, "a claim to sovereignty is not only a bid for authority, it is an argument about political paramountcy, or ultimate power" (p. 260).

SARP KURGAN

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA BARBARA, GLOBAL STUDIES
DEPARTMENT